

The Working-Class Experience in Contemporary Australian Poetry

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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Declaration of Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

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Acknowledgements

Before the conventional thanking of individuals who have assisted in the writing of this thesis, I want to acknowledge my class background. Completing a PhD is not the usual path for someone who has grown up in public housing and experienced childhood as a welfare dependent. The majority of my cohort from Chingford Hall Estate did not complete school beyond Year 10. As far as I am aware, I am the only one among my Estate peers to have a degree and definitely the only one to have attempted a PhD. Having a tertiary education has set me apart from my peers in many ways, and I no longer live on the Estate (although my mother and old neighbours are still there). But when I go back to visit, my old friends and neighbours are interested in my education and they congratulate me on my achievements. When I explain that I'm writing about people like them – about stories they can relate to, they are pleased. The fact that I can discuss my research with my family, old school friends and neighbours is really important. If they couldn't understand my work there would be little reason for me to continue.

My life has been shaped by my class. It has affected my education, my opportunities and my outlook on life. I don't look back at the hardship with a fuzzy sense of nostalgia, and I will be forever angry at the class system that held so many of us back, but I am proud of my working-class family, friends and neighbourhood. Regardless of my current educational and potential occupational status, I am still working class and, at heart, the same person who lived in the council flat on Chingford Hall Estate and dreamed of a life surrounded by books.

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“‘Worth Our Salt’”: Australian Working-Class Women’s Poetry’ *Hecate* 32.1 (2006): 36-48

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‘The Invisible Force: Working-Class Voices in Contemporary Australian Poetry’ *Overland* 165 (2001): 21-28

‘Interview with Geoff Goodfellow’ *Overland* 165 (2001): 35-41

‘Rap Rhymes: Lyrics as Working-Class Poetry’ *The Colonial Present, Australian Writing for the Twenty First Century: Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, University of Queensland, July 2007

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‘Perceptions of Poetry by Working-Class Readers’ *Critical Animals: Creative Research Symposium*, This is Not Art Festival, Newcastle, September 2006

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Abstract

The Working-Class Experience in Contemporary Australian Poetry

Contemporary Australian poetry neglects its working-class voices. Literary journals rarely publish poetry that focuses on working-class life and there is little analysis of the poetics of class in contemporary Australian scholarship on poetry.

It may well be argued that notions of class are outdated and no longer relevant in literary criticism; alternatively, working-class poetry might be seen to lack the kind of literary merit and linguistic innovation that invites scholarly review. It may even be the case that working-class poetry is seen as closer to propaganda than art. However, this thesis takes a different view. It argues that there is a strong and vibrant body of contemporary Australian working-class poetry that merits greater public attention and more incisive critical review. We need to know if and how this poetry builds on important Australian literary traditions; we need to evaluate whether working-class poets have earned a rightful place in the contemporary poetry field. We need a poetic for analysing the cultural discourse of the working class.

Therefore, this thesis offers an analysis of the content and poetics of contemporary Australian working-class poetry and of the context in which it has been produced. It presents works that to date have been ignored or dismissed by the literary mainstream. It proposes that working-class poetry can be regarded as a distinctive genre of poetry, distinguished by its themes, use of language and authors' intentions. It argues that working-class poetry is not unsophisticated but rather a specific expressive form that provides important insights into the ways in which class relations continue to reproduce inequalities.

This argument is developed by reference to literature from the discipline of working-class studies in Australia and overseas. It is supported by the literature on class relations in Australia and there is also a small body of scholarship on working-class writing that contributes to the discussion. The main body of the thesis presents the work of individual working-class poets and provides detailed readings of their works that highlight the ways in which the poems exemplify the proposed category of working-

class poetry. In short, this thesis creates a poetic for approaching the academic analysis of working-class cultural discourse.

The conclusions I have drawn from my analysis of poetry and lyrics are that working-class poetry displays significant literary and artistic merit, and functions not only as a way for working-class people to express themselves creatively, but also provides a valuable insight into the ways in which class affects Australians on a daily basis. It is an important cultural achievement to give full and meaningful voice to disadvantaged Australians at a time of political and cultural upheaval where class cleavages and notions of identity are in a state of flux.

Introduction

Is it possible to speak of working-class poetry in an era when the rhetoric of class has all but disappeared? How can one insist that a working class exists at a time when the idea of working-class culture in any form is often dismissed as anachronistic – a throwback to an age of manufacturing and blue collar work? Is it not the case that Australia has reinvented itself from a classed society to one of aspiration and equal opportunity? According to Ian Syson, shifts in the nature of work, and in Australian standards of living have undermined interest in and research about working-class literature, and when support is offered it is usually 'at one remove from the subject'.¹ However, in this thesis I will argue that contemporary working-class poetry is part of the Australian literary canon, and a valuable tool for understanding the impact of class relations on Australian society and culture. The study of working-class poetry can bridge the 'cultural chasm of class'² – offering insights into the everyday lives and culture of working-class people and give voice to their experiences, ideas and values.

An interjection is necessary at this point. One of the key instruments in any examination of society and its culture is a definition of 'class'. Does the term suggest an economic divide? A cultural divide? Inequality of opportunity? Or a combination of such ideas? I will return to these questions in detail later but for the moment it will suffice to offer a brief definition of 'working class'. Following Rick Kuhn and Tom O'Lincoln, the term 'working class' can be understood to refer to the following members of society:

People whose only means of making a living is to sell their ability to an employer. This includes those dependent on a wage, the spouses and children, or workers who are not themselves in paid employment. Unemployed workers...who therefore have to try to survive on meagre social security payments are also part of the working class.³

¹ Ian Syson, 'It Just Isn't Trendy at the Moment: Thinking about Working/Class/Literature through the 1990s,' *Tirra Lirra* (1999/2000): 13.

² Barbara Jensen, 'The Silent Psychology,' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 1- 2 (1998): 214.

³ Rick Kuhn and Tom O'Lincoln, eds., *Class and Class Conflict in Australia* (Melbourne: Longman, 1996) 3.

This group includes clerical and sales workers; those who are engaged in unskilled labour or skilled and semi-skilled labour and those engaged in routine white-collar work, as their only access to money is through the sale of their labour. Recent statistics show that the working class is no longer purely the domain of blue collar workers; a shift away from manufacturing and heavy industry to service industries has led to new working-class occupations such as routine office work and retail. Employment in manufacturing and commodity industries in Australia has been falling since the 1970s and in the 2004-2005 period, the main employers were the retail and service industries.⁴ Diane Fieldes notes that blue collar workers now only count for a small proportion of overall workers and the majority of people are engaged in white collar work, the greatest number of whom can be considered working class.⁵ Most service industry employees do not have a university education and their family background, culture and lifestyle can be considered working class. Therefore, the term can be seen to comprise a combination of the occupations listed above because these workers are likely to share relatively low levels of social, educational, cultural and linguistic capital.

Does this suggest then, that artistic and creative activity is the exclusive domain of the middle and upper classes? This is a topic of considerable controversy. Sociologist Robert Connell notes that not only has 'high art' often been produced by 'skilled workers hired for the occasion', but also that 'cultural production goes on all the time in working-class life too.'⁶ Arguably in this view, the Australian working-class voice has always been present in our cultural discourse, and includes: the protest verse of convicts, ballads of migrant women's working life, the lyrics of contemporary song writers such as Jimmy Barnes or Archie Roach, union songs, rap music, performance poetry and spoken word in urban pubs, stories of hardship on the land in the bush tradition, prison poetry, the deeply political poetry of Aboriginal poets, and poetry dealing with the urban working-class experience, as well as a rich tradition of working-class novels and drama as exemplified by writers including Kylie Tennant, Jean Devanny, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Dorothy Hewett.

⁴ 1301.0 *Yearbook Australia 2006, Chapter Six, Labour*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 10 February 2007 <<http://www.abs.gov.au>>.

⁵ Diane Fieldes, 'From Exploitation to Resistance and Revolt: The Working Class,' *Class and Struggle in Australia*, ed. Rick Kuhn (Sydney: Pearson Education, 2005) 57.

⁶ R.W Connell, 'Democratising Culture,' *Meanjin* 42.3 (1983): 297.

This thesis argues that contemporary working-class poetry forms a substantial body of work that warrants greater attention from both the literary and academic worlds. Cultural historian Raymond Williams posits the voice of ‘a whole class, [that] like whole regions, can be seen as neglected’. Williams argues that this marginality leads working-class culture to lose its ‘status or interest’ and thus be ‘rejected by deliberate selection and emphasis’.⁷ This seems to be the current situation for Australian working-class poetry; it is deemed ‘inferior’ despite its long and complex history, and marginalised from the mainstream literary publications and debates despite its many parallels with other creative forms. Like most contemporary writers, working-class poets tend to work in isolation, sustaining their creative lives with full or part-time work and occasional government grants. Interestingly, in the past, there have also been some working-class writing collectives such as the Realist Writers.⁸

Various questions frame this marginalisation: Why is it that working-class poetry is not given space in mainstream literary publications? Can working-class poetry be considered a separate poetic genre? Where, if anywhere, are working-class poets heard? And why is there so little academic writing and discussion on the subject? An exploration of these questions requires some engagement with various, and sometimes contradictory, theories on class. Erik Olin Wright, for one, argues that ‘class determines access to material resources and thus affects the use of one’s time, the resources available to pursue one’s interests, and the character of one’s life experience within work and consumption.’⁹ John Westergaard, on the other hand, suggests that there are three main ‘faces’ to class division ‘inequality of command over scarce resources...a set of consequent inequalities of conditions and prospects in life...it finds in turn, social, cultural, and political expression in a whole diversity of forms.’¹⁰

There is also the broader question of how best to pursue a class analysis at an historical moment, and in a society that believes itself to be classless. This thesis opts to follow the approach to notions of class that have been developed by the US-based Working-Class Studies Association (WCSA); it draws on a classic Marxist framework coupled with an emphasis on the direct, lived experience of working-class people. The WCSA is a recently formed professional association that promotes the emerging

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983) 233.

⁸ Ian Syson, ‘Working Class Literature Without Class?’ *Social Alternatives* 12. 3 (1993): 25.

⁹ Erik Olin Wright, *Interrogating Inequality: Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism and Marxism* (London: Verso, 1994) 248.

¹⁰ John Westergaard, *Who Gets What? The Hardening of Class Inequality in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) 15.

discipline of new working class studies. There are many aspects of Marx's work that lay a solid foundation for the study of class, especially the opportunity to express the concerns of working-class people and to highlight the inequalities and injustices of an economic system that favours those who own the means of production. Marxism offers an alternative and a resistance to capitalism and gives voice to those that capitalism oppresses. Marx's interest in the living conditions of working class people provides a structure for exploring working-class culture, with the inequalities created by the capitalist system ever-present in the background.

In their manifesto for the WCSA Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo assert,

...new working class studies is not just an academic exercise. Rather we strive to advance the struggle for social and economic justice for working class people...those active in new working class studies constantly ask ourselves two questions: For whom are we engaged in this work? What does it mean to be a socially responsible academic? ...our role must be not merely to interpret the world but to change it.¹¹

This statement about the importance of socially responsible academic research fits with my own views, my working-class background, and my experiences as a working-class poet. Some may argue that this is a difficult position from which to critically engage in the scholarly analysis of working-class poetry. I acknowledge that my position as an advocate of working-class poetry is not without its challenges in this respect. Yet, on the other hand, it is also important to state that this thesis is undertaken with a serious commitment to the kind of socially responsible scholarship that Linkon and Russo identify as central to the emerging discipline of working-class studies.

These new working-class studies are based on the principles of Marxism, evolving into a discipline with a particular focus on the ways in which class has an impact on the lives of working-class people. The movement comes out of research on labour history and owes much of its cultural model to scholars in this field such as E.P. Thompson. Working-class studies has emerged as an international interdisciplinary movement gathering momentum since the mid 1990s. The movement is strongest within the US where it boasts several working-class studies centres, including the Centre for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University, the Centre for the Study of Working-Class Life at the State University of New York and the Chicago Centre for Working-Class Studies. There is also a growing branch of the association in the UK

¹¹ Sherry Lee Linkon, John Russo, 'What's New about New Working-Class Studies?' *New Working-Class Studies*, eds. Sherry Lee Linkon, John Russo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) 15.

where the Working Lives Research Institute based at the London Metropolitan University, continues to build on that country's strong tradition of working-class study. The influence of the discipline is also reaching to other parts of the world, including Australia where the aims and approaches of the working-class studies movement are beginning to penetrate scholarly activity.

The aim of the movement, according to labour historian Jack Metzgar, is to place class within the 'vernacular' of society and to fight the problems caused by its omission, to bring to the fore 'the mistakes and illusions – in politics, policy, economics, and cultural understanding'.¹² The structural theory of class is linked with race, gender, work and structures of power, and is considered to be as important and significant as issues of race and gender in explaining the inequalities within society. Linkon and Russo suggest that working-class studies can also demonstrate that although class does not necessarily supersede race and gender, it does have the potential to bring together otherwise opposed people in the interests of class struggle.¹³

Working-class studies draws on various intellectual traditions, particularly those of economists such as Michael Zweig. Cultural anthropology and ethnography have also provided tools for examining working-class culture from the inside, and for demonstrating how an understanding of the experience of being working class is to be found in a close study of everyday life. Sociology has supplied the means for analysing and interpreting statistical data gathered on working-class life and geography allows scholars to consider the connections between class and place. Together, all these elements are complimentary and contribute to developing a complex and rounded analysis of what it means to be part of the working class in contemporary society.¹⁴

The actual experiences of working-class people are central in new working-class studies and the literature indicates that scholars within this discipline try to ensure that the authentic voices of working-class people are not being obscured by theoretical concerns. There is also extensive discussion of the need for those engaged in working-class studies to remain mindful of scholarship's potential to effect change for working-class people. By placing working-class people themselves at the centre of scholarship, researchers can arrive at new understandings of the diverse nature of the working-class

¹² Jack Metzgar, 'Politics and the American Class Vernacular,' Linkon and Russo 196.

¹³ Linkon and Russo 12.

¹⁴ Linkon and Russo 9 & 11.

experience and develop relevant ways of talking about this experience in the so-called “classless” society of the twenty-first century.

As a movement, then, new working-class studies brings together; ‘scholars, artists, activists and workers...[with a] variety of perspectives, disciplines and theoretical schools, diversity and even contradictory ideas but all ask “how class works, why it matters, and how we can understand it”’.¹⁵ In this respect the WCSA has taken on the challenge from Marxists such as Westergaard who argues that theory requires ‘consonance with reality and insight for explanation and conjecture about the future. Purity or impurity of conceptual origin is of no matter in itself.’¹⁶ Tim Strangleman of the Working Lives Research Institute argues that the stories of working-class people are invaluable tools in understanding working-class culture and how class affects working-class people on a personal level. In these ways, working-class studies challenges those academics who dismiss working-class autobiographies as lacking ‘legitimacy’ because they are ‘assumed to be written by and for a sentimental, nostalgic and uncritical group who lack the sophistication and critical faculties of objective academics.’¹⁷ It may well be the case that working-class narratives typically take the form of autobiographies, oral histories and poems and that these expressive forms are a departure from the traditional academic approach – but they are the forms that provide access to and representation of working class experience and should be valued. Thus, new working-class studies encourages a ‘collaborative’ approach that allows working class people a chance to have their voices heard and their experiences understood.¹⁸ This study of working-class poetry follows this approach in order to investigate and analyse the poetic forms that explicitly talk about the inequities that exist within contemporary Australian society due to class.

Working-class studies have much to offer Australian scholars interested in working-class life, and allow for a cross-disciplinary approach that fosters dialogue, a sharing of idea and the possibility for collective activity both inside and outside the academy. Being aware of how class works in Australia is a necessary first step in understanding why the world of literature and poetry is class-bound. The primary aim of this thesis is to increase understanding of the ways in which class relations shape the reception of working-class poetry and stifle working-class expression.

¹⁵ Linkon and Russo 11.

¹⁶ Westergaard 32.

¹⁷ Tim Strangleman, ‘Class Memory: Autobiography and the Art of Forgetting,’ Linkon and Russo 142.

¹⁸ Linkon and Russo 11& 14.

To date, the limited number of existing studies of working-class literature in Australia have focused on fiction and non-fiction. The work of Ian Syson and Carole Ferrier is therefore exceptional because it both extends the analysis of working-class literature to include poetry, and because both writers are strong advocates of this literary genre. This thesis therefore draws on their exemplary work. Both Syson and Ferrier have an interest in Australian working-class literature and have worked to raise its profile and ensure it achieves a more recognised place within the Australian literary canon. Syson has published numerous articles on working-class writing, with both historical and contemporary foci. He is an outspoken advocate of working-class writing which is realised both through his published articles and through his publishing company Vulgar Press, which is dedicated to the publication of working-class writing. Ferrier has also published on working-class writing and has authored a biography of working class activist and novelist, Jean Devanny. Despite their contributions to the discourse, the literature on Australian studies of working-class poetry is scant. To address the dearth of literature on Australian working-class poetry I have collected the opinions of Australian literary editors on working-class poetry and will discuss the implications of these views later in the thesis.

This thesis has also turned to the writings of American scholars in the working-class studies field, such as Paul Lauter, Janet Zandy, Jim Daniels and Renny Christopher. One of the characteristics of the American studies of working-class literature is the inclusion of personal stories into the studies; these are not distanced, objective analyses but are impassioned arguments for recognition. All of the American writers examine the reasons for the marginalisation of working-class writing and ways in which this literature can be promoted both among working-class communities and within the literary establishment. Their work acknowledges some of the problems and issues that occur when discussing working-class literature, particularly the omissions and exclusions of working-class writing within the literary establishment.

This is a study of the poetics of working-class poetry. The task of defining and analysing these poetics raises many complex and challenging questions that must at least be canvassed, if not resolved, before moving on to an in-depth analysis of the poetry. These questions include the following: How does class operate in Australia? What is its history? Is there any merit in the argument against class analysis?

Chapter one explores the effects of class relations on Australian society, including a sketch of Australian class history. The chapter also examines academic attitudes to class analysis and provides a counter-argument to the 'death of class' claim. Finally, an example

of the impact of class is provided to illustrate the assertion that class continues to be a major source of inequality in the twenty first century.

Chapter two focuses on the poetics of class and explores some of the ways that class affects the production, distribution and reception of literature. I present a model for a working-class poetic here; beginning with an historical account of Australian working-class literature followed by an interjection to describe bourgeois poetic representations of working-class life and then a description of the characteristics inherent in contemporary working-class poetry. Chapter two also presents an analysis of the ways in which working-class poetry has been dismissed and de-valued by bourgeois literary critics due to their notions of 'quality'.

Chapter three takes up questions around audience and the reception of poetry by the reading public in the current literary context. I ask: is there a place for poetry within mainstream Australian culture? Does poetry serve any purpose for working-class readers? Do editors and publishers deliberately exclude working-class poetry, or does their desire for 'quality' poetry simply preclude the work of writers such as Geoff Goodfellow? This chapter surveys the views of literary magazine editors on working-class poetry; it also includes a sketch of the current poetry 'scene' which reveals the ways in which successful and influential poets and editors perceive not just working-class poetry, but Australian poetry in general.

Chapters four to eight present and examine examples of working-class poetry. In Chapter four, the representation of urban and rural working-class life is examined through the poetry of Geoff Goodfellow and Martin Johnson. In chapter five, the idea of dysfunctionality as an aesthetic is explored in relation to Mick Searles' work. Chapter six looks at the feminist polemics found in the poetry of Cathy Young and M.M.L. Bliss, while chapter seven considers ideas of class and Indigeneity through examples of Aboriginal poetry. Chapter eight looks at the links between popular music and working-class expression and explores the relationship between song lyrics with working-class themes and other types of working-class poetry. One question here is whether lyrics lose their impact when removed from the context of the music performance.

This thesis is about class, and how the class system impacts on the daily lives of working-class people. Poetry gives agency to working-class people and provides a site for representation. Through these representations it is possible to see how class affects people directly – away from the theoretical concerns of abstract class analysis. An understanding of these effects is necessary in developing a concern for the oppressive nature of class,

and in turn, an interest in lessening the impacts of class on those whose lives are described in the pages of this thesis.

Chapter One

Defining Class in “Egalitarian” Australia

The British cultural theorist Raymond Williams suggests that the modern usage of class appeared during the Industrial Revolution in late eighteenth century England. Prior to the, ‘decisive reorganization of society’ that occurred during the Industrial Revolution, the more common words used to indicate social standing were, ‘rank’, ‘order’, ‘estate’ and ‘degree’. Williams argues that in the late eighteenth century the change from words that appeared to describe, ‘arranging in rows, belonging to a society in which position was determined by birth’ to the new use of ‘class’ reflected the ‘increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited.’ ‘Class’ eventually made its way into the official language of government and in 1885 there was an act of Parliament called the *Housing of the Working Classes Act* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers other examples of the official use of class in the early eighteenth hundreds.¹⁹ Although Williams saw the development of the term to mean social position, he maintains that ‘class’ remains ambiguous.²⁰

Although scholars may accept that inequalities exist, such inequalities are often detached from class, and explained as the consequences of globalisation or, what Ulrich Beck describes as ‘individualization’.²¹ But a classic Marxist approach recognises the specific conflict created by the relation of the working class to the means of production. Marx viewed the conflict of interest between workers and the bourgeoisie as a class struggle, believing that the way to rid society of these inequalities was through the abolition of private property and the installation of a Communist system of economics. Marx envisioned a time when the capitalist system would collapse under the weight of its own success, and workers would revolt, ‘but not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself, it has also called into existence the men who are to

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 14 March 2003, <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society 2nd Edition* (London: Fontana, 1983) 61-68.

²¹ Ulrich Beck, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2002) 30.

wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians.’²² Marx’s ideological partner Engels, described the bourgeoisie as the ‘class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour’ who maintained control over the ‘proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers having no means of production of their own, [who] are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live’.²³ Despite the changing nature of labour in the twenty first century, the power relations described by Marx and Engels remain and many aspects of Marx’s writings seem particularly appropriate in an increasingly globalised labour market which continues to exploit workers.²⁴ British Marxist Alex Callinicos believed Marx’s ideas were still relevant in the late twentieth century ‘class society arises when a minority establishes sufficient control over the means of production to compel the direct producers...to labour not simply for themselves but also for the exploiting minority’²⁵ I would suggest that the ideas of theorists such as Callinicos remain relevant in the twenty first century.

What does class mean to the individuals? According to EP Thompson's examination of class in Britain,²⁶ individuals are born into their social class and develop a sense of class identity based on common experiences, which can be differentiated from those born into another class. Class therefore embodies an individual's sense of shared values, cultural activities and way of life which is reinforced through day to day contact both with people whose interests are the same, and those who oppose them. This is apparent when observing how people live their everyday lives.²⁷ Working-class people are likely to spend most of their time with other working class friends, neighbours or family members. Working-class people share similar values, and understand each other's experiences (such as work conditions and job insecurity, financial problems, housing concerns and so on). And Bennett et al. suggest that working-class people are likely to spend their leisure time with those from their class

²² Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848, *Marxist Archive*, 12 August 2005 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>>.

²³ Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *Manifesto*.

²⁴ Peter McLaren, V Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, ‘Class Dismissed?: Historical Materialism and the Politics of “Difference”’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36.2 (2004): 184.

²⁵ Alex Callinicos, C. Harman, *The Changing Working Class: Essays on Class Structure Today* (London: Bookmarks, 1987) 5.

²⁶ E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 9.

²⁷ Craig McGregor, *Class in Australia*, 2nd ed., (Victoria: Penguin, 2001) 6.

and participate in cultural activities together.²⁸ This would also be true of middle/upper class people who would probably feel more comfortable socialising with members of their own class. Culture is therefore an essential element of class structure and although economic position is the main determinant of class, most Australians would probably agree that it takes more than money to be upwardly mobile. According to Australian sociologist Hugh Mackay, there are seven factors that Australians use to locate a person's class. These factors are education, occupation, networks such as the 'old school tie', place of residence; the possession of status symbols, family background and social circle.²⁹ And social commentator Craig McGregor states that class is also about 'lived experience...encounters with hostility, deference, snobbery and exploitation'.³⁰ This emphasis on 'lived experience' is important to any study of working class culture. In her study of socialist practice, Ellen Meiksins Wood states that theorists often speak *about* the working class and claim to be writing on their behalf without actually speaking *to* them.³¹ This is particularly true of theorists from the middle/upper classes. And Charlesworth asserts that middle-class people in general are distanced from the experiences of struggle and can therefore feel more comfortable theorising.³² A working-class scholar has the potential to collapse critical distance by including their own class experiences in their work. A study of working-class poetry, I believe, provides a definition of class in action; the poetry shows how class is based on individuals' economic positions but also demonstrates that culture, and a lack of cultural capital are essential elements in understanding how class works.

Why then, do people insist that Australia is classless? Australia has long been viewed by outsiders as an egalitarian nation, without the sort of obvious and rigidly defined class system that exists within Britain. There is a sense that Australia is the land of the 'fair go' where all citizens are provided with equal opportunity, regardless of background. In order to achieve desired goals, all that is required is hard work and determination and this is a concept that historians Greig et al. describe as originating in the Federation era when Australia was considered to be a 'progressive nation leading the

²⁸ Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow, 'Social Class and Cultural Practice in Contemporary Australia,' *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*, eds., Tony Bennett, David Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 195.

²⁹ Hugh Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Class and Status* (Lindfield: Mackay Research) 16.

³⁰ McGregor 53.

³¹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986) 7.

³² Simon J Charlesworth, *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 196.

world community towards social and political equality'.³³ Egalitarian property laws were made to ensure 'fairness' and this helped to foster the belief that egalitarianism had become secured as a national characteristic. Greig et al. also point to examples of 'fairness' in Australian rhetoric, such as 'fair trial', 'fair wage', 'unfair trading' and 'fair rent' that continue today.³⁴ According to Sam Pietsch, in theory there are no 'legal barriers to people moving into the capitalist class'³⁵ and this is sometimes cited as a justification for the capitalist system, but capitalists are aware of the power they wield and the influence they have on government policy, and use this power to maintain a system that privileges wealth over the interests of the majority of the population. Kuhn explains that connections between capitalists and government officials are forged socially through common interests such as schools, churches and clubs attended which then allow a smooth exchange of ideas in an official capacity,³⁶ and Pietsch adds that 'ruling class power does not stop at the factory gate or the office block foyer. It extends throughout society, affecting every kind of political activity.'³⁷

The class system in Britain is sometimes viewed as a 'Pommy hangover'³⁸ by Australians who prefer their country free from the shackles of British culture – as a nation without a 'hereditary' aristocracy; but the best chance of entering the capitalist class is to be born into that class. A general dislike of snobbery is seen as an indication of the egalitarian nature of Australian society,³⁹ as is the connection between Australian identity and working-class ideals – the way in which working-class culture is seen as resisting the 'restraint' of middle-class culture.⁴⁰ But this view avoids the issues of who holds onto the control of power and wealth. Hodge and Mishra posit that it is ironic that a false myth of egalitarianism embraced so completely by the dominant classes should have its origins in the radical working-class ideals of early settlement.⁴¹

McGregor believes that the notion of Australia as a classless society is a persistent myth of egalitarianism and is 'the most damaging of all the legends that Australians hold

³³ Alastair Greig, Frank Lewins and Kevin White, *Inequality in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 160.

³⁴ Greig *et al* 168.

³⁵ Sam Pietsch, 'To Have and to Hold on to: Wealth, Power and the Capitalist Class,' Kuhn 22.

³⁶ Rick Kuhn, 'Illusion of Equality: The Capitalist State,' Kuhn 47.

³⁷ Pietsch 25.

³⁸ McGregor 2.

³⁹ McGregor 2.

⁴⁰ John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) 35.

⁴¹ Bob Hodge, Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990) xiii.

close to their hearts'.⁴² It manifests in an unwillingness to acknowledge the causes of the deep inequalities that permeate Australian society. Such a denial of class contradicts the evidence that suggests class structures exist in all western countries and actually provide the 'basic social structures' for the societies of these countries. McGregor also believes that 'class keeps you in your place' – that it is a force for social control disguised by the idea of Australia as a comfortable nation in which to live.⁴³ But if questioned carefully it is clear that what people want to believe is often far removed from what they actually do believe. Most Australians are aware that their nation is far from being a 'workers' paradise' and there are suggestions that this representation of a 'classless' society is perpetuated by the media. The media avoids using class terms and often creates a picture of Australia as free from class boundaries, with characters in television programs living and interacting socially regardless of class.⁴⁴

Yet, statistics show that contemporary Australian society is vastly unequal, and class divisions are growing. The top 5% of people own more wealth than the bottom 90% put together.⁴⁵ A 2001 study revealed that 13% of Australians were living in poverty, a figure that has been on the increase over the past decade.⁴⁶ There is a growing underclass made up of the long-term unemployed, single parents and those who are unable to work due to disability, addiction or mental health problems. Evidence of this underclass is everywhere, and manifests itself in obvious signs such as homeless people begging in the streets, greater pressure on charities to provide food and shelter, deteriorating neighbourhoods with their associated problems of violence and despair, and a sense of hopelessness among unemployed youth. According to McGregor, these individuals are 'at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, a virtually dispossessed group of outcasts...discard(ed) by society...but who...sometimes wreak a violent revenge upon it.'⁴⁷

Numerous surveys carried out between the 1950s and 1990s revealed that between 80% and 90% of Australians were aware of social class,⁴⁸ but Mackay suggests that

⁴² McGregor 1.

⁴³ McGregor 1 & 29.

⁴⁴ Peter Hiller, ed., *Class and Inequality in Australia: Sociological Perspectives and Research* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 258.

⁴⁵ McGregor 3.

⁴⁶ This figure increases to 17.5% when housing costs are taken into account. Ann Harding, R.Lloyd and H.Greenwell, *Financial Disadvantage in Australia 1990-2000: The Persistence of Poverty in a Decade of Growth* (Sydney: Smith Family, 2001), *Smith Family*, 10 March 2002 <<http://www.smithfamily.com.au>>.

⁴⁷ McGregor 262.

⁴⁸ Chris Chamberlain, *Class Consciousness in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983) 124.

despite these statistics, people often view Australia as possessing a 'class continuum', without rigidly defined classes, which allows people to move along the continuum if they choose.⁴⁹ This is not a confronting picture of class as it provides opportunities to deny the huge gaps between classes with individual examples of class mobility cited to argue the absence of class structures. The way in which Australians position themselves within this continuum is also interesting and contradictory. British sociological studies have shown that despite a general acknowledgement of class inequalities, many people demonstrate 'class ambivalence' when asked to identify their specific class position.⁵⁰ I believe these findings can be applied to Australia, and McGregor has noted that working class Australians are often loathe to identify as such because it suggests that there are others who are 'above' them, who may be 'better'. Australians tend to place everyone into a 'middle class' – an ambiguous group which seems to include everyone who is not suffering poverty or among the very rich.⁵¹ Home ownership, Sargent asserts, is often seen as evidence of middle class membership even if such ownership means possessing a mortgage rather than wealth-creating investments.⁵² This identification as middle class has been explained by Mackay and others as a method of denying the extremes that exist within the class system – believing that the majority of Australians are middle class is more comforting than acknowledging the deep divisions that exist.⁵³ And the Australian notion of middle class can be likened to the U.S. example, where class is also hidden behind the myth of the equalising effect of democracy and capitalism alongside the promotion of individualism and social mobility.⁵⁴ Ashenden et al. state to the contrary however, that the Australian middle class are those who exist as a minority, neither in the working class or upper class and who generally occupy positions as middle management, professionals (such as teachers), technical experts and small business owners.⁵⁵ If Ashenden et al. are right, then many of those who describe themselves as middle class are really working class, and this gives weight to Callinicos' suggestion that a person's class status is 'objective', based on their 'actual place within

⁴⁹ Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1999) 50.

⁵⁰ Clare Grew, Geoff Payne, 'Unpacking "Class Ambivalence": Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Accessing Class Cultures,' *Sociology* 39. 5 (2005): 896.

⁵¹ McGregor 7 & 145.

⁵² Margaret Sargent, et al. *The New Sociology for Australians*, (Melbourne: Longman, 1997) 24.

⁵³ Mackay, *The Mackay Report* 9.

⁵⁴ Janet Zandy, *Calling Home: Working Class Women's Writings An Anthology*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 2.

⁵⁵ Dean Ashenden, et al., *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982) 147.

the relations of production' regardless of which class they personally identify with.⁵⁶ The ambivalence towards class identification found in research could also be due to the manner in which such research is conducted. Grew and Payne argue that when faced with such a conceptually complex notion as class, many respondents become confused by the questions. This does not necessarily mean that they do not possess class identification, but that they are reacting to a 'genuinely multi-faceted concept at short notice'.⁵⁷

If the working class is considered to be a throwback to a previous, industrialised era, what factors lead to its perceived decline? The suggested disappearance of the working class is attributed to an increasingly affluent society, where equal opportunity provides possibilities for upward mobility. Politicians have been keen to describe Australia as a 'meritocracy'. The former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser once stated that Australia is a 'land of equality and opportunity...where the racial, political and class conflicts which divide many less fortunate societies are absent'.⁵⁸ We are a society of people adequately rewarded for our achievements based on merit and where everyone begins on the same footing. However, it can be suggested that those in power avoid admitting to a class system as they have benefited from their privileged positions and are conscious of protecting those positions. Pietsch suggests that the ruling class must do all it can to keep hold of its power and privilege in the face of potential resistance – and that this shows that the ruling class is not 'omnipotent'.⁵⁹ As Connell has asserted, class mobility is not evidence of the absence of class structures⁶⁰ and individual examples of class mobility are not significant as most people remain in the class they were born into.⁶¹ Also there is little discussion of those who are downwardly mobile as this paints a very different picture.⁶² bell hooks speaks of the dangers of believing in a classless society, one negative implication of which is 'the psychological torment it causes everyone who is unable to fulfil endless material longing'.⁶³ US economist Michael Zweig also describes how class mobility in the US is touted as evidence of equal opportunity, with the myth of the American Dream at the centre. This is in contrast to

⁵⁶ Alex Callinicos, Chris Harman, *The Changing Working Class: Essays on Class Structure Today* (London: Bookmarks, 1987) 4.

⁵⁷ Grew, Payne 903.

⁵⁸ Chamberlain 123.

⁵⁹ Pietsch 33.

⁶⁰ Robert Connell, *Ruling Class Ruling Culture: Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 183.

⁶¹ Graham Hastings, 'Students in Classes,' Kuhn 95.

⁶² McGregor 66.

⁶³ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 82.

the reality of classed American society as the majority of people remain in the class they were born into (in much the same way as Australia).⁶⁴

Politicians are fond of using euphemisms to describe the working class, and according to McGregor, they find the word 'class' often 'sticks in their throats'.⁶⁵ Instead discussion tends to focus on issues such as poverty, which considers the symptoms of a class system without looking at the underlying causes.⁶⁶ This 'invisibility of the working class in public discussion', according to Fieldes, makes it difficult for workers to 'develop a consciousness of their collective interests and capacity to act'.⁶⁷ This is arguably reflected in political identity as many working-class people do not align themselves with the left side of politics as shown by working-class support for the conservative Howard government. This apparent contradiction was noted by former Labor leader Mark Latham who accused his party of ignoring 'working-class aspirants' who desired socially mobility.⁶⁸ The complexity of class leads to such contradictions and some working-class people appear to vote against their interests and can be anti-union in their sentiments.

Although class may not be occupy the same place in the consciousnesses of Australians as it does for Britons, I would argue that class does impact on everyday life for Australians, in terms of opportunity, distribution of wealth and general attitudes within society. Despite the popularity of euphemistic terms such as 'battlers', 'ordinary Australians' and 'aspirational workers', there is still a large working class in Australia, and studies have even numbered the working class as making up 60% of the population.⁶⁹

I believe that class is both inherited and made – a child is born into a particular class, but it is the capitalist system that keeps that child from easily changing their class status rather than their genes. The result of centuries of capitalism has set hard the class status for millions of people and it is arguably only the removal of this system that could undo the restricting and oppressive nature of class. As John Clarke states in *New Keywords* (which is an updated version of Williams' glossary of cultural terms)

⁶⁴ Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000) 41.

⁶⁵ McGregor 1.

⁶⁶ Andrew Scott, *Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1991) 8.

⁶⁷ Fieldes 56.

⁶⁸ Sean Scalmer, 'Searching for the Aspirational,' *Overland* 180 (2005): 6.

⁶⁹ Chamberlain 132.

‘capitalism without its classes – and without its talk of class – is unimaginable.’⁷⁰ These factors are all at play when looking at the marginalisation of working-class poetry.

Historical Framework

Certain historical factors were important in shaping the notions of class in Australia, and were responsible for creating the specific attitudes to class and class cultures that are evident in contemporary Australia. From the beginning of settlement in Australia the systems that developed were far removed from the class structure that emerged in the wake of industrialisation in Britain. The Australian nation had to be constructed in a relatively short space of time and, although many aspects of the new nation were modelled on the British system, there were significant differences such as the greater use of force and violence to maintain control over convicts, workers and the Indigenous population.⁷¹ Settlement in Australia was based on a penal authority characterised by slave labour and brutal punishments which gave early Australian labour relations a harsh beginning.⁷² Buckley and Wheelwright state ‘only in Australia...did colonial capitalism begin with the combination of expropriation of the original inhabitants, the forced labour of convicts in a military prison far away, and the transformation of the overseeing officer class into one of the nascent capitalists.’⁷³ According to historian Russell Ward, this meant that class differences between the convicts and their 'masters' was even more pronounced than the class divisions experienced in Britain. Ward also suggests that these beginnings are not often discussed in a public setting ‘Australians often display a certain queasiness in recalling our founding fathers...many prefer not to remember that for nearly the first half-century of its existence white Australia was, primarily, an extensive gaol.’⁷⁴ Although Ward made these comments over forty years ago, I would suggest that the sentiment still applies to contemporary Australians.

Convicts were forced into a variety of labours, often moving around between settlements and the bush. Women convicts, whose labour was generally of the domestic

⁷⁰ John Clarke, ‘Class,’ *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, eds., Tony Bennett, *et al.* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) 42.

⁷¹ Robert Connell, Terence Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History: Document, Narrative and Argument* (Melbourne: Longman, 1980) 32.

⁷² Connell, Irving 45.

⁷³ Ken Buckley, Ted Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers: Capitalism and the Common People in Australia 1788 -1914* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994) 1.

⁷⁴ Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Oxford: Oxford UP) 36 & 14.

kind, could find themselves in the service of settlers in remote areas or in the towns.⁷⁵ As a result it was difficult to produce organised resistance or protest against the terrible conditions they endured – conditions that were often worse for women as they faced physical and sexual assault and were generally held in very low regard by the authorities.⁷⁶ Some convicts did try to improve their situation, and implemented passive forms of resistance such as a go-slow attitude toward work in order to persuade authorities to improve conditions without incurring physical punishment.⁷⁷ Individuals also demonstrated daily resistance through open hostility towards authority, or through lack of cooperation, which demonstrated a sense of solidarity and collective action.⁷⁸ And in 1791, convicts went on strike to demand daily rations rather than weekly rations which led to the introduction of the 1828 Masters and Servants Act of NSW, which made strikes illegal.⁷⁹ More extreme forms of resistance manifested in bushranging and insurrection, but the early settlers were provided with military support to assist in their pastoral expansion, which allowed any resistance either from workers or Aborigines to be put down swiftly and brutally.⁸⁰ According to Ward there was also rebellion from Irish convicts who were more likely to resist authority as they had brought with them a serious hatred of the British.⁸¹

To prevent convicts from dissenting, the authorities mainly kept the educated workers away from the others, and without the communication and dissemination skills of the literate it was difficult for the bulk of the workers to plan and execute resistance.⁸² There were also opportunities for the authorities to develop workers' loyalty through the promotion of a common enemy that needed to be vanquished. Aborigines were seen as a threat to successful settlement and were forcibly removed from their land, with their resistance to invasion used to rally convicts, gaolers and wealthy settlers alike into the fight.⁸³

The nature of early settlement created a system of social division that was not easy to define. Although Ward describes the divisions between settlers, he also suggests

⁷⁵ Connell, Irving 45.

⁷⁶ Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisures: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (Victoria: Longman, 1995) 11.

⁷⁷ Buckley, Wheelwright 54.

⁷⁸ Connell, Irving 47.

⁷⁹ 'About Trade Unions,' *Australian Council of Trade Unions*, 10 March 2002 < <http://www.actu.asn.au/>>.

⁸⁰ Connell, Irving 32.

⁸¹ Ward 49.

⁸² Connell, Irving 47.

⁸³ Hodge, Mishra xiv.

that society was more 'fluid' than Britain.⁸⁴ For the enterprising Australian worker in the towns there was some opportunity to take advantage of the developing capitalist system. Back in Britain there was little chance that a person born into a peasant family could be economically mobile, but in Australia once a convict had been granted freedom there was some opportunity to participate in the developing capitalist system. In general, women were excluded from such opportunities, as they became increasingly 'locked into marriage and domesticity'.⁸⁵ The situation was different in the countryside though, as workers assigned to a farm were little more than slaves and were at the mercy of the pastoralist who 'owned' the land they were working. The pastoralists themselves embraced their position as a 'ruling class', and used their wealth and influence with the magistracy to become very powerful.⁸⁶

During the early periods of settlement, the Australian working class had a rural identity due to the domination of primary agricultural industries rather than the manufacturing which had created an urban industrial working class in the UK, but as the settlements grew, so did a sense of a working class community within the towns. For the working class it was important to create links within the community to provide support when necessary, and by the end of the 1800s urban working-class communities were well established.⁸⁷ However, this closeness did not necessarily translate into labour movements or political action, and although there were some organised movements and successes in workers' demands being met through the 1800s there was not large scale protest or attempts to forcefully overthrow authority, which can be partly explained by the working class population still being transitory as they followed work opportunities.⁸⁸ According to Connell and Irving, this 'relative peacefulness' of the working class in Australia can be explained by the way in which Australia had both developed a capitalist system based on primary industry before industrialisation took hold, and because of the urbanised nature of Australian life which began with early settlement. Therefore, workers were not forced out of a rural setting into the cities, and the changes that occurred as they moved into industrial employment were not quite as sudden or severe as those suffered by their counterparts in other industrialised nations.⁸⁹ During the latter half of the 1800s, Australia enjoyed an image abroad of being a

⁸⁴ Ward 39.

⁸⁵ Connell, Irving 65.

⁸⁶ Connell, Irving 51.

⁸⁷ Connell, Irving 57.

⁸⁸ Connell, Irving 58.

⁸⁹ Connell, Irving 279.

'working man's paradise', a description which was used to entice migrants to Australia.⁹⁰ This was a prosperous time – wages were relatively high and there was plenty of work available.⁹¹ The eight hour working day also helped to make conditions for workers in Australia more attractive than those of Europe.

Despite the 'peacefulness' described by Connell and Irving, the period between 1850 and 1900 saw the development of unions, and these movements laid the path for later participation in politics and union activism,⁹² and working-class intellectuals (mainly Anglo-Celtic men) organised meetings and clubs to disseminate their ideas.⁹³ The Labor Party was formed to provide some needed political weight to working-class causes after workers suffered defeats during shearers and maritime workers' strikes of the 1890s.⁹⁴ The Trade Union Act of 1881 gave workers the right to form unions, but the authorities still used the older Masters and Servants Act to make strikes illegal.⁹⁵ And at the same time as working-class collectives found their voice, the ruling class consolidated their power to ensure they had the more radical elements of the working class under control (such as the Larrikin Push – working-class youth who were anti-authority).⁹⁶ During the 1920s it appeared that capitalism was heading toward crisis point, but instead of a breakdown of capitalism leading to socialism, the ruling classes reconstructed the economy around manufacturing and the economy swung back into action giving capitalists the power once again. This was coupled in the early twentieth century with a nationalist movement inspired by the actions of the AIF during the First World War, which called on Australians to rally together regardless of differences in the spirit of patriotism.⁹⁷

In the first half of the twentieth century, the possibilities of mass working-class action seemed unlikely (even though union membership was growing rapidly). The working class's dependence on the ruling class was reinforced with the advent of a

⁹⁰ Greig, Lewins, White 169.

⁹¹ Buckley, Wheelwright 10.

⁹² Scott 16.

⁹³ Connell, Irving 61. Sandra Bloodworth and Tom O'Lincoln point out that women did participate in collective action and political life, but that their stories have been suppressed or ignored due to the patriarchal structure of unions and the Labor Party, eds., *Rebel Women in Australian Working Class History* (Melbourne: Interventions, 1998) 13.

⁹⁴ Greig, Lewins, White 192.

⁹⁵ ACTU website.

⁹⁶ Connell, Irving 190.

⁹⁷ Connell, Irving 270 & 189.

welfare system, public housing, increased access to public education⁹⁸ and public health.⁹⁹ The movement from the overcrowded and generally squalid inner cities to the new suburbs led to fragmentation of the working class¹⁰⁰ and people lost much of their sense of a tight knit community. In the post-war period, living conditions improved for working-class people, and there was an increased availability of affordable consumer goods. Other factors also affected the structure of the working class such as the post-war arrival of new immigrants, who brought languages, customs and culture that the Anglo working class did not necessarily understand, leading to cultural barriers to collectivism (although immigrants did become involved in industrial action).¹⁰¹ The ruling-class capitalist hegemony was powerful and persuasive and it can be argued that the working class can not be blamed for their inaction – the effects of ruling-class power can not be ignored.

Relevance of Class in Academic Study

Does class analysis continue to have a role in the twentieth century? How have previous studies of class shaped our understanding? Marxism, and therefore the study of class systems that it advocates, was extremely important as a theoretical approach to literary criticism and culture from the late 1920s until the early 1980s. Class based studies of culture abounded from Europe and the UK, with the Frankfurt School's Marxist explanations of the growing phenomenon of mass culture, and the British studies of working-class culture in the 1950s and 1960s proving to be a major influence on shaping the approach to culture and popular culture within a scholarly setting. Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Althusser's concepts of ideology that followed have been pivotal in cultural studies,¹⁰² and the links between class and culture were explored substantially until the 1980s when postmodernism emerged and the study of class became relegated as increasingly irrelevant to studies of twentieth century capitalist society.¹⁰³ The cultural approach to the study of class that had been relevant to the discipline of sociology between the 1940s and 1970s gave way to analyses of class

⁹⁸ According to Connell & Irving, the increased access to education for working class people had divisive effects as these individuals were expected to abandon their working class origins and enter the ranks of the middle/upper classes, 301.

⁹⁹ Greig, Lewins, White 176.

¹⁰⁰ Connell, Irving 298, 300.

¹⁰¹ Migrant workers have been active in union activity and often militant resistance against employers since the 1960s. Phil Griffiths, 'Racism: Whitewashing the Great Divide,' Kuhn 168.

¹⁰² Storey 115.

¹⁰³ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 41.

structure¹⁰⁴ preventing a merge between class-based cultural studies and cultural-based sociology which may have led to a comprehensive discipline in which class could have been considered.

The disappearance of class and Marxism from the humanities radar that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s has continued (with the exception of a small pocket of interest in working class culture emerging in the mid-1990s, and the critiques and ‘death of class’ theses that accompanied it) and class no longer appears to be a popular subject for academic discussion. Charlesworth points to the difficulty of airing issues of class and states ‘within the contemporary university it is seen as a sign of backwardness to have any concern about class and one is met with a mixture of disbelief, ridicule and derision.’¹⁰⁵ Milner describes how the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a replacement of class analysis within cultural studies with alternative examinations of identity, leading to class becoming “‘the least fashionable” of cultural differences’.¹⁰⁶ The focus on gender, race and sexual orientation has certainly resulted in the acknowledgement of discrimination faced by women, people of colour, gays and lesbians, but it is arguably impossible to look at these questions of identity without considering class.

Some scholars such as economists Pakulski and Waters, and sociologist Ulrich Beck view class as an ‘outdated’ concept that is not on the ‘cutting edge’ of research because other aspects of inequality have superseded class as measures of divisions within society.¹⁰⁷ Beck goes as far as stating that class is a ‘zombie category’ because class as an institution exists in rhetoric but not in reality.¹⁰⁸ Pakulski and Waters argue that society is now divided along ‘status’ lines, where people belong to groups or social movements that they identify with, which can vary from those who campaign for the rights of their members (such as ethnic or feminist movements) to those whose main differences are dictated by taste (such as alternative lifestyles, clubs and societies). They also maintain that this interest in identity has emerged from the left side of politics, and that the conservative right have focused their attentions on issues of morality rather than

¹⁰⁴ Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, ‘The Cultural Turn: Sociology and Class Analysis,’ *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identities and Lifestyles*, eds., Rosemary Crompton et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 8.

¹⁰⁵ Charlesworth 14.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Milner, ‘Class and Cultural Production,’ *Arena* 15 (2000): 117.

¹⁰⁷ Jan Pakulski, Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (London: Sage, 1996) vii.

¹⁰⁸ Beck 203.

class.¹⁰⁹ But, according to labour theorist Catherine Casey, social movements cannot be considered outside of the class system as many such movements ‘carry within them an old, familiar bias against working-class knowledge and struggles’¹¹⁰ and sociologist Stephanie Lawler argues that the focus on identity is restricted by an ‘additive’ model that only allows for individuals to possess one identity at a time and ignores the connections between various identities such as class and race, class and gender.¹¹¹

Pakulski and Waters maintain that the old divisions of class that operated within an industrial society are no longer valid, because the concept of class as developed by Marx was really based on economic inequality created by workers' inability to obtain private property – a phenomenon that they suggest is not evident in affluent Western society.¹¹² But the inequalities that Pakulski and Waters dismiss are a reality for many millions of people, as stated by Marxists Balibar and Wallerstein: ‘here will be critics who will question whether there is not some gigantic fraud involved in proclaiming the disappearance of classes at a moment when, against a background of world economic crisis, ...a whole series of social phenomena which, for Marxism, are an effect of exploitation and class struggle are plain to see’.¹¹³

Marxism has been rejected by Pakulski and Waters as irrelevant in contemporary society because Marx’s theories were particular to his era and huge changes seen since the nineteenth century have led to class 'losing its ideological significance and political centrality.' They also contend that economic conditions of the current era have led to a dismantling of class; the evidence for which can be seen in the redistribution of property, an increase in the ownership of capital and the position of consumerism as an indicator of status.¹¹⁴

Critics of Marxism avow that further evidence of its decline can be seen in the collapse of Communism and the withdrawal from socialist politics that has occurred around the world. There are also suggestions that Marxism is no longer able to survive as Marxists themselves have differing ideologies and seem to spend considerable time arguing among themselves. Wright disputes this suggestion though, and claims that this is evidence of Marxism actually gaining strength and evolving rather than declining.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Pakulski, Waters 157 & 1.

¹¹⁰ Catherine Casey, *Work, Self and Society: After Industrialism* (London: Routledge, 1995) 18.

¹¹¹ Stephanie Lawler, ‘Introduction: Class, Culture and Identity,’ *Sociology* 39.5 (2005): 798.

¹¹² Pakulski, Waters 2.

¹¹³ Étienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation and Class* (London: Verso, 1991) 157.

¹¹⁴ Pakulski, Waters 1 & 4.

¹¹⁵ Wright 254.

Wright also offers a Marxist explanation for the failure of Communism, stating that Communism is only supposed to occur as a reaction to the final stage of advanced capitalism, and that it could never have worked in developing nations such as the Soviet Union or China.¹¹⁶

US economist Michael Zweig believes that the 'refusal of modern economics to address issues of class' is disingenuous considering the acknowledgement of class that has occurred throughout the study of economics since the eighteenth century.¹¹⁷ Class was discussed by economists before the industrial revolution, demonstrating that class is not a concept only acknowledged within Marx's period. Marx himself referred to the works of Adam Smith and other economists who had preceded him.¹¹⁸ Thus the opinions of economists such as Pakulski and Waters do not take into account the historical reality of class and the economic significance that class continues to hold.

Economist Jeremy Rifkin suggests that the working class no longer exist in our post-industrial, technological age as there are fewer manual, blue collar workers in contemporary society and that the definition is no longer valid.¹¹⁹ However, this does not acknowledge the changing nature of the working class, and the need to adapt definitions to the contemporary situation.¹²⁰ As mentioned before, the shrinking manual sector is being replaced by a growing service / white collar sector¹²¹ who are still dependent on selling their labour for a wage and who have no control over the means of production, even if they are no longer engaged in manual work. The nature of work has changed dramatically in the past few decades, with more women in the work force, more casual and part-time workers and less job security for working-class people.¹²² The combination of advances in technology which enable businesses to operate with fewer and fewer workers, and cheap overseas labour made available by the growth of globalisation has added to this sense of uncertainty regarding work.¹²³

Pakulski and Waters assert that work is no longer central to people's lives, and that this can also be witnessed in declining union membership.¹²⁴ However others, such as

¹¹⁶ Wright 234.

¹¹⁷ Michael Zweig, 'Class as a Question of Economics,' Linkon, Russo 98.

¹¹⁸ Zweig, *Class* 100.

¹¹⁹ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Work-Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (London: Penguin, 2000) 197.

¹²⁰ Rosemary Crompton, et al. eds., *Renewing Class Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 4.

¹²¹ Scott 17.

¹²² Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 4.

¹²³ Rifkin 189 & 197.

¹²⁴ Pakulski, Waters 85.

labour sociologist Harriet Bradley, claim that work is still an important feature of people's lives especially as people are working longer hours and often have more than one job.¹²⁵ Australian workers appear to be aware of their tenuous positions in the workplace, with union membership on the rise, and unions have been responding to changes in the workforce to ensure that they are relevant to the contemporary worker. This increased union activity is occurring despite the conservative Australian government's attempts to dissolve sites of working-class power, such as the Workplace Relations Act of 1996 which reduces workers' entitlements and limits unions' ability to organise.¹²⁶ A new assault on the rights of workers is currently occurring with the Howard government's changes to industrial relation laws, which further weaken the position of workers and allow employers greater freedom to set conditions in individual contracts and make many workers vulnerable to unfair dismissal. The reactions from workers to these changes such as participation in public rallies suggest that, contrary to Pakulski and Water's views, work continues to be an extremely significant factor in people's lives and the experience of work is akin to Bradley's suggestion that work is often 'characterised by alienation and exploitation rather than harmony.'¹²⁷

Despite the evidence of collective action outlined above, there have been suggestions that people no longer identify as working class because society has become seamless, with plenty of opportunity to move between social groups – and there is a widespread acceptance of the status quo.¹²⁸ People are more interested in participating in consumerism by accumulating material possessions and maximising their leisure time than in opposing inequalities in what labour historian Gareth Stedman-Jones describes as a focus on 'chauvinism, sport or consumerism'.¹²⁹ But Chamberlain believes that the ruling classes have penetrated the working class with their ideologies of individualism and, as a result, the working class have been taken in and the strong sense of class consciousness they may once have shared has been weakened. There are suggestions that this has led to a 'false class consciousness', or 'class confusion' as working-class identity has been undermined.¹³⁰ But there are different ways of defining working-class identity. Marx stated that working class identity is formed through 'the mode of

¹²⁵ Harriet Bradley, *Myths at Work* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) 135.

¹²⁶ ACTU website.

¹²⁷ Bradley 135.

¹²⁸ John Clarke, et al. eds., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchison, 1979) 14.

¹²⁹ Gareth Stedman-Jones, *The Languages of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 86.

¹³⁰ Chamberlain 2, ix, 9.

production of material life' and that consciousness is formed by a person's position in society, and is therefore linked to economic conditions,¹³¹ but scholars involved in working-class studies would suggest that working-class identity does not necessarily change when a person's economic conditions change, and that working class identity can be created consciously and maintained regardless of other social factors – a working-class person may continue to identify as working class even if they achieve a high-paid or high-status occupation.

It is often only Marxist theorists who maintain the significance of class within academic discussion, and it is Marxist studies which demonstrate the changing nature of the working class, and the continuing struggle faced by working-class people. There are of course, non-Marxist examinations of class such as Max Weber's sociological theories of status groups and 'lifestyle' determining class position, and the studies of poverty carried out by conservative scholars such as Peter Saunders who are interested in methods of reducing the numbers of people living in poverty (often through conservative measures such as forcing people out of welfare and into work in a possibly well-intentioned but arguably misdirected attempt to improve people's economic positions).¹³²

Despite the absence of an organised working-class revolution, working-class collectivism has not completely disappeared. Marxists may not be expecting the masses to rise and overthrow the capitalist system but instead see class unrest manifesting in strikes and collective bargaining to improve the conditions of workers in more specific situations. Marxists would argue that their theories are appropriate and relevant as they consider how every aspect of daily life (such as work) is driven by the class struggle.

The 'death of class' argument is not new and has been previously aired in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to growing worker affluence.¹³³ Milner suggests that these arguments are produced in an attempt to protect the class interests of the writers, and that the overly-theoretical style they are often presented in, along with an absence of quantitative data to back up their arguments, is evidence of this bias.¹³⁴ Rosemary Crompton explains that 'class has always been a contested concept. It is also a concept with many different meanings. Thus, when announcements are made as to the "death of

¹³¹ Frederick Engels, Karl Marx, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1976) 41.

¹³² Moyra Haslett, *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 6.

¹³³ Gösta Esping-Andersen, *Changing Classes: Stratification and Mobility in Post-Industrial Societies* (London: Sage, 1993) 7.

¹³⁴ Andrew Milner, *Class* (London: Sage, 1999) 14.

class”, it is important to be explicit as to what particular version of 'class' is in a terminal condition.¹³⁵

Impact of Class

If class exists beyond the theories of Marxists, how does it manifest in everyday life? There are arguably many examples to illustrate the machinations of class, but one way is to examine the difficulties faced by a person from a working-class background entering the university and the ways in which class impacts on educational opportunities for working-class people. This is relevant to a study of working-class literature as the opportunities for working-class people to produce poetry are shaped by their educational experiences, and the classed nature of the academy ultimately affects the reception of working-class writing.

For a working-class person, it is more difficult to accumulate the necessary 'cultural capital' that Bourdieu suggests is required to participate in a middle-class world.¹³⁶ This especially relates to opportunities in education, and a person from a working-class background who is interested in a traditionally middle-class profession may find it difficult to compete with those whose family backgrounds have provided the necessary knowledge and familiarity with the systems required to achieve their ambitions. A person from the working class can find it difficult to feel accepted in a middle/upper-class environment, regardless of whether they have acquired the necessary 'qualifications' or 'credentials' to allow them a place. In his classic study of working-class culture, Richard Hoggart suggested that working-class people who have made 'remarkable efforts' to obtain an education are 'exceptional, in their nature untypical of working-class people...they would be exceptional people in any class: they reveal less about their class than about themselves.'¹³⁷ These individuals must still negotiate class barriers though.

The university is typically a middle/upper-class environment and there are several reasons for this phenomenon. Middle/upper-class people do not usually have to face the many obstacles in the way of a working-class person who attempts to obtain the kind of education that will lead to an academic career. Most middle/upper-class parents place a large emphasis on the importance of an education from the beginning of their

¹³⁵ Crompton, *Class and Stratification* 98.

¹³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 2.

¹³⁷ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958) 14.

child's school career, and the child grows up with a sure sense that education is their right.¹³⁸ The child is encouraged to do well, and is likely to be sent to a 'good' school which can provide the kind of education required for university entrance and beyond.¹³⁹ Helen Lucey *et al.* argue that 'educational pathways' for most middle-class students are 'smooth and similar...almost as if they were on educational "conveyor belts"'; paths not so smooth for working-class students.¹⁴⁰ For children in middle/upper-class schools, these pathways are clearly defined,¹⁴¹ with an emphasis on gaining the required credentials for university placement. It is at school that children learn that individual worth is based on ability, and this focus on individualism provides them with the necessary skills to compete for university places and to later compete within the capitalist system.¹⁴² It is acknowledged in the middle/upper-class family that education is an investment for the future, and parents are often able to assist their children financially through university, while appreciating the intrinsic value of education. There is also a potent belief that higher education can actually make a person more valuable to society, and therefore education is an important way of increasing worth.¹⁴³ The middle/upper-class child accumulates cultural capital which will ultimately distinguish them from their less educated counterparts by providing a sound knowledge of 'high brow' culture such as the arts.¹⁴⁴ Schools for middle/upper-class children also provide opportunities for students and parents to 'network' and build connections that may be useful for future careers and the social networks formed during school years will shape the students' social circles once they become adults.¹⁴⁵ The middle/upper-class person has the advantage of a full and rounded school education that prepares them well for entry into university. The student is equipped with the language of school and is able to accept the role of the teacher and the structure of the institution which ensures that their

¹³⁸ Philip Collins, 'More Downward Mobility Please,' *New Statesman* 131 (2002): 32.

¹³⁹ James Bowen, 'Education, Social Class and Privilege: European Influences and the Australian Response, 1788-1988,' *Discourse* 8.2 (1988) 29.

¹⁴⁰ Helen Lucey, June Melody and Valerie Walkerdine, 'Uneasy Hybrids: Psychosocial Aspects of Becoming Educationally Successful for Working-Class Young Women,' *Gender and Education* 15.3 (2003): 298.

¹⁴¹ Ashenden *et al.* 51.

¹⁴² Jonathan Cobb, Richard Sennett, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 62.

¹⁴³ Renny Christopher, 'A Carpenter's Daughter,' *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, eds., Carlos Lee Barney Dews, Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple UP) 144.

¹⁴⁴ According to Bourdieu, 'official qualifications' must be supplemented with 'social qualifications' in order to supply the required amount of 'cultural capital' 13.

¹⁴⁵ Ashenden *et al.* 147 & 150.

transition to university is smooth.¹⁴⁶ According to Hicks, the young 'absorb privilege into every nook and cranny until they are saturated with it'¹⁴⁷ and although they might not be consciously aware of this at a young age, it does provide them with significant advantages. Due to these educational advantages, the middle/upper-class student can usually communicate effectively with other students and academics. According to linguist Michael Gos, this is because the middle/upper-class person has usually had the benefit of a socialisation both within the home and school that encourages questioning and criticism, as opposed to the working-class individual who is more likely to have experienced an 'authoritarian environment' where they 'have not been taught how to question or to formulate support for contentions...That is, the act of questioning or arguing a position is often considered unacceptable behaviour for children in working-class families. Because authority and legitimacy lie in the source of a statement, not in its metaphysical truth, to question a statement is an attack on the authority figure'¹⁴⁸

The disadvantages for working-class people interested in an academic career begin during their early years. While the middle/upper-class person is accumulating their cultural capital, the working-class person is faced with a very different journey. The school experience is markedly dissimilar for the working-class student, and there are various reasons for this. For the working-class child, school represents everything that is opposed to their working-class sensibility. School is structured towards individual achievement and competition which is completely different from the way working class families organise themselves through 'practices of cooperative coping'. The emphasis on ability and having the 'brains' to succeed individually means that many working-class students feel they have failed when they are unable to operate effectively within this system.¹⁴⁹ To achieve the necessary academic credentials to ensure a place at university, the working-class student is expected to reject much of their working-class identity. They may be faced with the pressures of being singled out as 'smart' which can lead to a sense of alienation from their peers.¹⁵⁰ The working-class child with an interest

¹⁴⁶ Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control: Volume One Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) 29.

¹⁴⁷ Heather J Hicks, 'Paper Mills,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 156.

¹⁴⁸ Michael W Gos, 'Overcoming Social Class Markers: Preparing Working-Class Students for College,' *The Clearing House* 69.1 (1995): 31, 10 June 2003, *Expanded Academic Index*, < <http://find.galegroup.com>>.

¹⁴⁹ Ashenden et al. 122 & 126.

¹⁵⁰ Dave Morley, Ken Worpole, eds., *The Republic of Letters* (London: Comedia, 1982) 107.

in academic learning is marked as different¹⁵¹ – her peers may not understand why she chooses to spend her time reading or studying, and her pursuit of academic achievement may lead to her 'paying a very high price; the suppressing of...parts of...identity.'¹⁵² This can lead to various psychosocial effects as the student becomes isolated from working class family members and draws on 'inner resources' in order to realise educational ambitions. A 'psychic defence' may be constructed in order for the student to cope with the separation from family.¹⁵³

It is difficult for the working-class family to feel connected to the school. The institution of the school may represent authority and 'state intervention'¹⁵⁴ – which can deter working-class parents from contacting or being involved with the school on a regular basis. Connell states that although most working-class parents do have respect for what education can offer, they can be intimidated by the language of the school,¹⁵⁵ and Ashenden et al. assert that such parents consider themselves as lacking the intelligence or education to communicate effectively with the school.¹⁵⁶ The school may misinterpret the silence from parents as lack of interest in their children's education. In her study of class and parenting, sociologist Val Gillies argues that working-class parents may concentrate their focus on equipping their children with the skills needed to negotiate and survive disadvantage rather than investing their time on their child's formal education. But the resourcefulness that working-class parents teach their children is not considered 'good parenting' or useful for 'social improvement' by middle-class educationalists.¹⁵⁷ Working-class parents are generally not equipped to advise their children on higher education choices and, according to Lucey et al. this lack of helpful knowledge, taken for granted by middle-class parents, can lead to deep feelings of shame for working-class parents.¹⁵⁸

In practical terms, the experience of school is one of limited choices for working-class families as they do not generally have the financial resources to choose a

¹⁵¹ Sharon O'Dair, 'Class Matters: Symbolic Boundaries and Cultural Exclusion,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 201.

¹⁵² Morley, *Worpole* 107.

¹⁵³ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 290.

¹⁵⁴ Ashenden et al. 166.

¹⁵⁵ School examination systems can be particularly confusing for parents who have had limited experiences with education, especially the complex system of the university admissions index, R.W Connell, 'Working-Class Parents' Views of Secondary Education,' *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8.3 (2004): 238.

¹⁵⁶ Ashenden et al. 53.

¹⁵⁷ Val Gillies, 'Raising the "Meritocracy": Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class,' *Sociology* 39.5 (2005) 842 & 849.

¹⁵⁸ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 290.

school for their children. The school that working-class children attend is determined by geography as students are designated to public schools through geographical zoning. For the student living in a working-class area, the only viable choice is usually the local public comprehensive school, and economic constraints do not allow families to simply move to a different location to find a 'better' school. Although there are government-operated academically selective schools which operate on an exam entry system, it is most likely that the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds who attend these schools is in the minority. It is also true that many working-class schools work very hard to try and deliver a decent education to their students, but often they must contend with a lack of funding to assist those students who have difficulties or those who are academically gifted, and are faced with a range of social problems that are more likely to occur (or at least to be more visible) within working-class communities.

For a working-class person attempting to pursue an academic career, the disadvantages do not end with the experience of school and, despite the advances universities have made to combat discrimination along the lines of race and gender, the question of class discrimination is rarely acknowledged.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately these barriers are often 'invisible to our colleagues who are not from the working class'¹⁶⁰ and it can be a struggle to convince middle/upper-class peers that the disadvantages are real. Working-class people understand that attending university is linked to class, whereas for middle-class people, getting a degree is to do with 'merit and entitlement'.¹⁶¹

There are many practical impediments such as economic insecurity, fear of debt, lack of physical space to study, and for working-class women, the compounded problems of childcare.¹⁶² There are also the emotional and psychological barriers as working-class students can feel guilty about studying when there is 'real' work to be done.¹⁶³ Working-class people often encounter suspicion of and opposition to their academic aspirations from family members and friends. For many working-class people, the years of study required to reach doctorate level is seen as a waste of time, especially as there is no guarantee of a financially rewarding job once completed. Ironically, the

¹⁵⁹ Christine Overall, 'Nowhere at Home: Towards a Phenomenology of Working-Class Consciousness,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 213.

¹⁶⁰ O'Dair 207.

¹⁶¹ Carolyn Leste Law, 'Introduction,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 5.

¹⁶² Lorraine Biddlecombe, et al., *Learning the Hard Way: Women's Oppression in Men's Education* (London: Macmillan Education 1989) 68.

¹⁶³ Elizabeth A Fay, Michelle Tokarczyk, eds., *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Labourers in the Knowledge Factory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1993) 13.

potential for earning a good salary can be another site of guilt for the working-class academic. She may find it difficult to justify her income and comfortable lifestyle when the rest of her family and friends are struggling financially. As bell hooks explains, the working-class person may worry about 'what it means to have a lot when so many people have so little...those who have so little are my own family and friends.'¹⁶⁴

The working-class academic may be the first person in the family or neighbourhood to go to university, and family and friends may view the university institution as far removed from their daily experience and understanding.¹⁶⁵ There may be a fear that the relative, friend or partner who chooses an academic career will be lost to her community once she has entered academe. The life of an academic appears to be so vastly removed from that of most working-class people that they can not imagine being able to relate anymore to their academic friend. It may be assumed that the person studying will no longer be interested in or may even become ashamed of her working-class roots, and will alienate herself from family and friends through the accumulation of education, new ways of speaking, intellectual activities – a totally different way of life. Although the working class academic's community might be proud of her achievements, they may never fully understand what she actually does, and because of this, certain commonalities may be lost. The working-class academic finds herself increasingly removed from her family and friends, and as she progresses along the academic career path, she leaves her working-class roots further behind. Psychologist Barbara Jensen states that entering the middle/upper-class world entails 'redrawing one's internal map so dramatically that the outer and inner landmarks will never again match up in a way that could lead one home for a visit.'¹⁶⁶

The testimonies of British and American academics from working-class backgrounds reveal that to be a working class academic is to be, as Heather Hicks describes, a living oxymoron. Many people believe that entry into the academic world is a ticket out of the working class. But Hicks challenges this assertion; 'am I still essentially working class despite my proximity to a PhD ...at what point did I stop being working class? When I first read Shakespeare? When I first read Foucault?'¹⁶⁷ Janet Zandy suggests that there is a perception that 'a working-class identity is intended for disposal. In order to "make it" into the dominant society, one "overcomes" the class

¹⁶⁴ hooks pviii.

¹⁶⁵ Mary Cappello, 'Useful Knowledge,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 130.

¹⁶⁶ Jensen 212.

¹⁶⁷ Hicks 157.

circumstances of birth, and moves into the middle and then upper class.¹⁶⁸ As a result, feelings of guilt over 'abandoning' working-class roots are commonplace and extremely difficult to reconcile, as American academic Carolyn Leste Law describes, 'the pride I feel in my academic and professional achievements...is always tempered by the guilt I feel in having chosen a life path that has made me virtually unrecognisable to my kin.'¹⁶⁹ Working-class academics may also become confused when they are informed that it is not possible to be an academic and still maintain a working-class identity, and in many ways, the working-class academic can be seen as an example of successful class mobility – an indication that there is equal opportunity and therefore vindicates those who state that class is not an issue.¹⁷⁰ The assumption that working-class status is left behind is somewhat justified when considering individuals who are able to successfully conceal their working-class identity – this expectation of concealment means that working-class people occupy a different minority status to black people or women (in general), who are not able to mask their race or gender.¹⁷¹ Despite the working-class person's attempts to fit in to the culture of the institution, she is aware that her middle-class creation is false, that it is merely an 'edifice' that is 'always in danger of crumbling'.¹⁷² If she wishes to succumb to a middle-class identity, the working-class person must first forget everything¹⁷³ about her working-class past, which will then aid in the destruction of her true identity, as Leste Law describes, 'education has destroyed something even while it has been re-creating me in its own image'.¹⁷⁴ The hybrid self necessarily created by the working-class student during her educational career can be a burden, and Lucey et al. suggest that such hybridity is 'never lived easily in a psychic economy' due to the 'psychosocial processes' that construct 'complex unconscious defences' which are not acknowledged by mainstream educational systems.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ Janet Zandy, ed., *Liberating Memory: Our Work and our Working-Class Consciousness*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 1.

¹⁶⁹ Leste Law 1.

¹⁷⁰ Diane Reay, 'The Double-Bind of the 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Success of Failure or the Failure of Success,' *Understanding Inequality: The Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Class and Gender*, ed., Barbara Arrighi (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) 77.

¹⁷¹ Leste Law 6.

¹⁷² Eileen Bresnahan, 'The Self-Manufactured Woman: Working-Class Identity in the Academy,' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 1-2 (1998): 96.

¹⁷³ hooks 36.

¹⁷⁴ Leste Law 1.

¹⁷⁵ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 297.

Certain expectations, although undeclared, are made of an individual who enters academe, and the prospective academic must learn how to use academic language or jargon if she wants to be accepted, and must throw off the constraints of collectivism and co-operation in favour of individualism and competition.¹⁷⁶ Lorraine Biddlecombe *et al.* argue that middle/upper-class academics often believe that it is only possible to have an intellectual discussion using middle-class forms of speech – they can be closed to alternative forms of language, expecting instead that their working-class counterparts should learn to use middle-class methods effectively.¹⁷⁷ Working-class people are often not as interested in middle-class 'niceties' as they seem trivial and irrelevant to real life, and the working-class approach is therefore viewed as 'too rough, loud, dirty, direct and undereducated'.¹⁷⁸ The working-class academic is expected to lose the 'crude', 'abrasive' speech of her working-class neighbourhood and adopt a more 'genteel' approach – a new way of speaking that is stripped of the earthy richness of her original speech, as Overall comments 'within academia, I must remember to tone down my expressiveness and exuberance, be sure I know how to pronounce words that I have learned only through reading'¹⁷⁹ In Australia, working-class speech is ridiculed and those who speak in this way are often portrayed as unintelligent and unable to grasp complex concepts.¹⁸⁰ An inability to use academic words correctly is viewed as a lack, and there is little understanding of why the working class person has not had the same exposure to middle-class language, literature and culture.

The working-class academic has to understand the ways in which her middle-class counterparts use theory, and come to terms with how much of this theory is distanced from actual experience.¹⁸¹ As Pelz states colourfully, while academics 'may question the "meaning of life"...they flinch like a vampire in sunlight from a concrete examination of the sources of class oppression.'¹⁸² The way in which middle-class academics are able to engage with theoretical material suggests that they have a far greater 'distance from necessity'¹⁸³ than most working-class people, and this is often most noticeable when academic discussion is finally steered towards class, without

¹⁷⁶ Milan Kovacovic, 'Working at the U,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 235.

¹⁷⁷ Biddlecombe 93.

¹⁷⁸ Zandy, Janet, *Liberating Memory* 2.

¹⁷⁹ Overall 217.

¹⁸⁰ A good example of this can be seen in the television comedy 'Kath and Kim' which ridicules the characters' many mispronunciations and malapropisms, such as Kim stating that she wants to be 'effluent' instead of 'affluent' and so on.

¹⁸¹ Christopher 139.

¹⁸² William A Pelz, 'Is There a Working-Class History?' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 283.

¹⁸³ Charlesworth 196.

considering the real people whose lives are being analysed. This can be more disturbing for the working-class academic than no discussion at all, as it creates an uncomfortable atmosphere where the working-class person is frustrated by 'eavesdropping on a conversation about your life where the fact that "this is your life" is simply not recognised.'¹⁸⁴ According to some critics and commentators on working-class life, such as Hoggart, it has always been the case that even those who claim to understand class struggle, such as Marxists, can be guilty of romanticising or patronising the working class, demonstrating a naïve ignorance of the day to day realities.¹⁸⁵

To speak out about class may be seen as ingratitude if an individual has been able to secure employment within academe,¹⁸⁶ and the working-class person may even feel they have nothing to complain about as their working conditions are much better than those of their family and friends.¹⁸⁷ The problem of being told to 'get over it' is one that many other minority groups or activists have faced, and it has been suggested that to encounter this attitude means that the issue being brought to light is an important one, and the discussion is making others feel guilty about their privilege.

The working-class academic is faced with a dilemma. On one hand she may feel incredibly disloyal to her family and friends, on the other find it very difficult to fit into the academic world. While becoming increasingly distanced from her working-class background, she may see herself as some kind of 'impostor....a misfit...of not being good enough or smart enough to succeed in middle-class academia...being a scholastic fraud, a working-class bull in the university china shop'¹⁸⁸ who is in danger of being 'found out' at any time. She may feel that she does not belong in either world, which can result in a great sense of loss and confusion. This can lead working-class students to drop out¹⁸⁹ and to return to a more familiar site, and Jensen suggests that those who cannot reconcile the two contradictory parts of their lives may find themselves 'gnawing off their own souls to escape the pain', especially if they are unable to come to terms with the fact that 'there is a whole fabric of life that is quite different from the cloth out of which the middle class is cut.'¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ Janice Raymond, 'Class Matters: Yes it Does,' *Class Matters: Working Class Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, eds., Pat Mahony, Christine Zmroczek (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997) 111.

¹⁸⁵ Hoggart 16.

¹⁸⁶ Overall 217.

¹⁸⁷ Leste Law 8.

¹⁸⁸ Overall 215.

¹⁸⁹ Julie Charlip, 'A Real Class Act: Searching for Identity in the "Classless Society",' Barney Dews, Leste Law 38.

¹⁹⁰ Jensen 203.

All of these obstacles must be faced by the working-class academic, and because her presence within academe is usually against the odds,¹⁹¹ she possesses the tenacity to keep going and to overcome the obstacles as best she can. Certain problems cannot be solved completely, and the working-class academic has to realise that she'll never be as fully connected to her working-class community as she once was, but this does not mean that she must turn her back on her working-class self. She can find a way to balance and combine the two parts of her life and draw upon her working-class experience to assist her in her work, and to help in changing the narrow attitudes of those around her. Many working-class academics are not afraid of revealing their origins, and are publicly proud of their roots and make a point of bringing their working-class insights to light. Nancy La Paglia states that 'a possible advantage to my straddling position between the working class and academe is that it can afford a kind of double vision, insider/outsider, if I am careful to look in both directions.'¹⁹² This approach can help to break down some of the 'status hierarchies'¹⁹³ within the institution; and providing she does not romanticise the more negative aspects of her background (such as poverty), she can enrich the institution with language used on her own terms; as Zandy describes, 'for working-class academicians, monologism is not an option....We speak a hybrid language and find linguistic virtue in fragmentation. Paradoxically, it is class consciousness that liberates our multiple tongues.'¹⁹⁴

The working-class academic who is in danger of finding herself 'nowhere at home'¹⁹⁵ can attempt to take the knowledge she has gained back to the working-class community and act as an 'intermediary' to relate knowledge both from and to the working class.¹⁹⁶ The working-class academic has a responsibility to her community that is larger than her individual ambitions, and if she wishes to retain her connections to her working-class background, she must be aware of this during her academic career.¹⁹⁷ As bell hooks has noted, it is possible to obtain a doctorate without losing a

¹⁹¹ For example, in 2003 the number of students at UTS from low-socio economic backgrounds totalled 1, 356 among a total student population of 27, 295 <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education>.

¹⁹² Nancy La Paglia, 'Working-Class Women as Academics: Seeing in Two Directions, Awkwardly,' Barney Dews, *Leste Law* 185.

¹⁹³ Reay, 79.

¹⁹⁴ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 6.

¹⁹⁵ Overall 219.

¹⁹⁶ Charlesworth 13.

¹⁹⁷ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 1.

working-class identity or 'giving up the best of myself...I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact.'¹⁹⁸

If the university is therefore a bourgeois world this has implications for the study of poetry as the majority of individuals engaged in the scholarly examination of poetry are academics. Although there is some discussion of poetry outside the academy, through the pages of literary magazines, most of those who lead such discussions are university-based. Many non-academic individuals read and write poetry, but the study of poetry in a more formal sense is academic-centred. The bourgeois attitudes of academics are therefore likely to influence the kinds of poetry that is studied and promoted. In the chapters that follow I shall describe how class impacts on the production and reception of literature and show how working-class poetry is an important vehicle for both working-class expression and representation. I am claiming that class analysis is essential in understanding the marginalisation of certain cultural expression. Class is, unfortunately, not dead but very much alive and plays out daily in creating and perpetuating oppression and inequality within Australian society.

¹⁹⁸ hooks 37.

Chapter Two

The Poetics of Class

According to Terry Eagleton, the discipline of literary theory is not conducive to studies of class related issues as literary theory is characterised by 'extremism' and 'an obstinate, perverse, endlessly resourceful refusal to countenance social and historical realities'. In a rather scathing attack on university literature departments around the world, Eagleton also remarks that it is 'scandalous' and 'farical' that 'postgraduate students are required to research obscure topics which are frequently no more than sterile academic exercises'.¹⁹⁹ There has been considerable progress in recent years by the Australian literary establishment to include discussion of previously marginalised literatures, and research exists that deals with issues of race, gender and sexuality. This has been an important step but the discussions of identity and how it impacts on the production of literature does not often consider how class is implicated in these forms of identity.²⁰⁰

It is not possible to approach literature without addressing how its production within a class based society influences and impacts upon the works created. Eagleton claims that although critics often argue for the purity of aesthetics, free of the tincture of ideology or politics 'for the aesthetes, the glory of art is in its utter uselessness'.²⁰¹ But literature is more than art created for its own sake — and it can reflect and shape our classed society. It has been suggested that there is a 'dynamic relationship between social conditions and the literary texts that a particular society produces'.²⁰² And Eagleton believes that literature can serve as an accurate marker of the 'social mentality or ideology of an age'²⁰³ and also asserts that the choice of what is discussed and examined within literary theory is an indication of the dominant ideologies that are in

¹⁹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983): 196 & 213.

²⁰⁰ Ian Syson, 'Working-Class Literature Without Class?' *Social Alternatives* 12.3 (1993): 27.

²⁰¹ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 208.

²⁰² David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1991) 111

²⁰³ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976) 6.

operation. It is arguably not possible to engage with any type of theory without considering the political and ideological implications of theory in general. Eagleton declares that 'the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch.' He goes on to say that literary theory often reveals an 'elitism, sexism or individualism in the very "aesthetic" or "unpolitical" language it finds natural to use of the literary text.'²⁰⁴ And Jameson argues for all literary texts to be 'interpreted politically as priority over other approaches'²⁰⁵ suggesting that all canonical texts are related to exploitation due to their usual 'complicity with privilege and class domination'. Jameson also points to the oppressive 'dark underside' of such texts usually obscured by the aesthetic approach to literary criticism.²⁰⁶ Marxist literary critics such as Ruth Robbins argue that the 'social forces'²⁰⁷ that provide the background for the creation of literature must be acknowledged alongside the constraints faced by those not operating from class privileged backgrounds in getting their voices heard. The 'political atmosphere and environment' in which art is created also can not be ignored, according to Bourdieu, as such factors affect the reception of art.²⁰⁸ In the dominant model, working-class texts are less likely to stand alone as iconic works of art – as art for art's sake, because they are generally engaged with reality and the social forces that have created the conditions for their production.²⁰⁹ But rather than being the 'silent class' as described by Barthes,²¹⁰ the working class do have a voice and approaching literature from a class perspective assists in the fight against oppression.

How then does class impact on the production of literature? There are various class-based factors that determine who is able to produce literature and 'economic imperatives'²¹¹ that lie behind the writing and the reception of a text. These imperatives are manifested in practical constraints such as access to resources, and cultural constraints such as the amount of linguistic capital required to produce literature.²¹²

²⁰⁴ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 194-196.

²⁰⁵ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 17.

²⁰⁶ Jameson 299.

²⁰⁷ Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 33.

²⁰⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) 32.

²⁰⁹ Nicholas Coles, 'Democratising Literature: Issues in Teaching Working-Class Literature,' *College English* 48 (1986): 678.

²¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 105.

²¹¹ Robbins 33.

²¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Matthew Adamson and Gino Raymond, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) 61.

The many obstacles experienced by working class writers are rarely considered by those engaged in literary theory and criticism.²¹³ Writing and the production of literature is not only about who has talent but has more to do with 'time, support, confidence and access to the formal means' necessary to get a voice heard.²¹⁴ Due to practical and cultural barriers, working-class literature is 'not located in academe' but is pushed to the margins²¹⁵ and the gaps between the language of academics and literary critics and that of working-class writers is seldom bridged. Valerie Miner states that working-class writing is often dismissed 'unconsciously' by publishers and editors, which is a 'pernicious sort of censorship' because it is 'difficult to document' and therefore redress.²¹⁶

Australian publishers, editors, academics and critics reveal a particular set of literary standards and values through the literature they choose to expose and celebrate and that which they exclude in what Connell calls a 'passive put-down'.²¹⁷ This can be said of cultural institutions in general, as many make little effort to include art of the working class. Although occasionally there are attempts to take 'art to the masses', little is done to question the structure of art institutions or relationship to audiences (and the predominant audience for institutions such as national art galleries and opera/dance/classical music venues are generally middle and upper class). According to critics such as Syson, working-class writing is not getting published because it is 'blocked or declassed'²¹⁸ along the way. Morley and Worpole believe that there is little understanding of the attitudes that working-class writers face including the 'language snobbery...oppression of...language and thought, disbelief by the gatekeepers of the published culture'.²¹⁹ Among the 'select club'²²⁰ of the literary establishment, working-class writers can struggle to find those who Morley and Worpole describe as 'anyone to whom you can show your work in the expectation that it will be read, understood, supported, answered, propagated...without being in some measure stolen from the world that gave rise to it'.²²¹ Charlesworth considers that the lack of publishing

²¹³ Morley, Worpole 88.

²¹⁴ Coles 678.

²¹⁵ Zandy, *Calling Home* 8.

²¹⁶ Valerie Miner, 'Labour Pains: The Loneliness of the Working Class Writer,' *The Village Voice* Jan 5 (1988): 49.

²¹⁷ Connell, *Democratising Culture* 300.

²¹⁸ Syson, *Working Class Literature* 27.

²¹⁹ Morley, Worpole 11.

²²⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field* 77.

²²¹ Morley, Worpole 11.

opportunities for working-class people often means that working-class 'wit, insight or intelligence...go unrecorded and unarticulated'.²²²

The way that a piece of writing is judged to be 'literature' is steeped in ideology as writing is, as Milner explains: 'socially processed...by writers themselves and by readers, publishers, booksellers, literary critics and so on.'²²³ In Australia, the 'gatekeepers' of literature such as universities, schools, publishers, literature fund boards, literature prize boards²²⁴ are examples of the 'custodians of a discourse' that Eagleton describes.²²⁵ Raymond Williams also suggests that there is a fear among the bourgeois that literature must be somehow protected from popularity, because popularity is an indication of lack of aesthetic quality and the gatekeepers prefer work that is 'special and extraordinary'.²²⁶ Literature that engages with the everyday, or is committed to a political message or which explores the inequalities within society can be seen as a threat to the accepted canon of literature which emphasises the role of the individual artist's interior world. Theodor Adorno believes that 'a work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish'²²⁷ and Williams argues for literature as a vehicle for 'communication'²²⁸ – to convey shared human experience. This is true of poetry as well as other forms of literature, which have the ability to 'communicate across all barriers' if produced authentically.²²⁹ In such 'committed' poetry, readers are more likely to discover that they have been represented satisfactorily and in this respect the poetry can 'heighten and share emotions' so that 'readers find their own experiences confirmed in them'.²³⁰ But, although Williams sees communication as 'the crux of art', he describes how middle-class perceptions of art and aesthetics often ignore communication and favour a more passive 'transmission' of aesthetics.²³¹ It is not possible to separate art and aesthetics from politics and society, and even those works of literature that claim to have transcended ideological considerations can be seen as having political implications as the writer is revealing the

²²² Charlesworth 140.

²²³ Andrew Milner, *Literature, Culture and Society* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996) 22.

²²⁴ Ian Syson, "'It Just Isn't Trendy at the Moment'" Thinking About Working-Class Literature Through the 1990s,' *Tirra Lirra* 10.2 (1999-2000): 32.

²²⁵ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 201.

²²⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press 1961) 37 & 158.

²²⁷ Theodor Adorno, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977) 177.

²²⁸ Williams, *Long Revolution* 29.

²²⁹ Muriel Rekeyser, 'From the Life of Poetry,' *Poetry and Politics: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Richard Jones (New York: William Morrow, 1985) 34.

²³⁰ Denise Levertov, 'On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?' Jones 171.

²³¹ Williams, *Long Revolution* 30.

kind of class privilege that allows a distancing from the everyday. Literature is not, as Bernstein asserts, created in a vacuum completely separate from society and therefore, ideology can not help but shape literature.²³²

Eagleton proposes that the bourgeois control of literature has led to much exclusion and to the construction of an accepted, but arbitrary canon,²³³ and this is especially noticeable when examining poetry that gives voice to the experiences of working-class people. The literature of the working class is not often explored by academia, as there has been an assumption that the working class are not interested in, or capable of producing works of literature.²³⁴ The ‘select club’ that Bourdieu describes seems particularly apt for the world of poetry and Eagleton maintains that working-class people have been taught to ‘regard literature as a coterie activity beyond their grasp’.²³⁵ Syson contends that in Australia the term ‘working-class literature’ is seen as ‘dysfunctional’ and is generally avoided or not understood.²³⁶ Working-class culture is viewed as outside of ‘art’ and ‘literature’ and as being the domain of popular fiction, television and sport. Is it then possible, as Bourdieu suggests, that the idea of a working-class aesthetic exists merely as a ‘foil, a negative reference point’ against which other aesthetics can be measured?²³⁷

This view does not take into account the fact that working-class people have always produced literature, and that working-class literature has been fighting for a place alongside the accepted canon for a very long time – adapting and subverting bourgeois forms of literature to create alternatives. There are various historical examples of working-class literature to substantiate this claim, such as the eighteenth century British, ‘peasant’ poets who enjoyed some success and publication. Their poetry dealt with life within the lower classes and included poets such as Stephen Duck (known as the Thresher Poet), and others whose occupations ranged from farm labourers, milkmaids and domestic servants to bricklayers and sailors. These poets faced the dilemmas that some working-class poets face today, as their recognition and popularity among the educated classes created a distance between them and their original communities, and there was pressure for the peasant poets to conform to the

²³² Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 2.

²³³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 11.

²³⁴ Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of 19th Century Working-Class Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1974) 1.

²³⁵ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 216.

²³⁶ Syson, *Just Isn’t Trendy* 5.

²³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 57.

literary tastes of the dominant class.²³⁸ Colonial America also has a history of working-class literature, in many ways paralleling that of Australia – with poems and stories written by convicts, indentured servant and slaves providing vivid accounts of life for working-class people.²³⁹

There is then, a working-class aesthetic despite a denial from both the left and right side of literary criticism, with Marxists often believing that aesthetics can only be a bourgeois activity, and those from the right asserting that the working class can have no aesthetics.²⁴⁰ Marxist critics have also ignored writing by working-class people, often considering such writing to be inferior to the ‘great works of literature’ and preferring instead to produce Marxist criticism of bourgeois forms.²⁴¹ Andrew Milner points to Marxists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as examples of critics who privileged ‘high art’ over more popular forms.²⁴² Tony Bennett argues that such Marxists were influenced by nineteenth century ‘philosophical aesthetics’ which resulted in a ‘bourgeoisification of Marxist discourse’.²⁴³ Theories of literature have been developed by Marxists and other left wing critics, without attempting to analyse working-class literature itself.²⁴⁴ These Marxists seem to forget that the ‘great’ writers were only able to write because their class status and economic position gave them the resources to commit themselves to a writing career.²⁴⁵ Working-class writing, however, demonstrates a working-class aesthetic that can be examined as long as it is not critiqued from the same perspective as bourgeois texts.

The Working-Class Poetic

What is a working-class poetic? Can it be defined? Australia has a long history of working-class poetry from the convict verse of transported poets such as Frank MacNamara, the colonial poems of Henry Lawson and Mary Gilmore, the socialist poets associated with the Communist Party of Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, to the

²³⁸ Haslett 170 & 172.

²³⁹ Nicholas Coles, Janet Zandy, eds., *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) xix.

²⁴⁰ Peter Hitchcock, ‘They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation,’ *PMLA* 115. 1 (2000), *Periodical Abstracts*, 9 May 2000 <<http://proquest.umi.com>>.

²⁴¹ Syson, *Working-Class Literature* 15.

²⁴² Milner, *Literature, Culture* 43.

²⁴³ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (Routledge: London, 1990) 32.

²⁴⁴ Ian Syson, ‘Approaches to Working-Class Literature,’ *Overland* 133 (1993): 68.

²⁴⁵ Ian Syson, ‘Australian Working-Class Women’s Writing: A “Different Manner of Apprehension”’, *diss., U of Queensland*, 1989, 60.

political worker poets of the late 1970s and early 1980s such as π.o who took their poetry to diverse audiences through performance.

In eighteenth and nineteenth century Australia, poetry was not considered to be an elitist activity and was often intended to provide a forum for contemporary issues. Poetry was not separated from politics but was instead seen as a preferred method of putting forward criticisms as it was largely 'unrestrained by the usual conventions of political rhetoric.'²⁴⁶ Most forms of verse during the colonial era were accessible to ordinary readers and were not 'the province of an elite establishment'.²⁴⁷ There were outlets for poetry through the pages of *The Bulletin*, and poets attempted to reach a wide audience by speaking 'the language of the people and expressed popular sentiments so that they found their audience...in a whole nation'.²⁴⁸ Some poets attempted to highlight the struggle of the people within their communities: Henry Lawson wrote about dispossessed and impoverished city and rural dwellers and Mary Gilmore described the harsh lives of working women.

In the nineteenth century, poets represented a wide spectrum of class backgrounds with workers and the upper classes publishing alongside each other. According to literary historians Jordan and Pierce, 'the encouragement poets received in their work was thus a social and cultural one rather than economic' which could fulfil the need to 'write verse that was truly Australian...part of the civilizing of that continent...the fact that even working men and pioneer women felt these needs was in part the result of nineteenth-century education and its stress on the moral value of art.' There was also a poetry community which met to discuss issues and literature of the day which was reasonably diverse in nature and open to poets from across classes and genders²⁴⁹ and the Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts established in the 1800s provided access to books and adult education for the lower classes. During this era Australian poetry was an amateur activity and there was little opportunity to earn income from the craft. Poetry from Britain or America was usually favoured by editors and publishers, and so poets generally wrote as a sideline to their other activities. Much

²⁴⁶ Richard Jordan, Peter Pierce, eds., *The Poet's Discovery: Nineteenth Century Australia in Verse* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1990) 12.

²⁴⁷ Jordan, Pierce 13.

²⁴⁸ Tom Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971) 12.

²⁴⁹ Jordan, Pierce 14 & 16.

of the poetry published in newspapers in the early nineteenth century was political in nature, often satirical verse aimed at politicians and other public figures.²⁵⁰

It is possible that the popular appeal of poetry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was undermined by Modernist poets and publishers from the 1920s onward who considered poetry to be high art. Influential individuals, such as Kenneth Slessor were instrumental in changing attitudes to poetry so that it ceased to be a popular medium accessible to a wide readership, and instead became geared towards the specialised reader who was interested in 'art' and 'literature'. In the 1920s the small magazines that existed alongside newspapers were initially inclusive, providing a public sphere where all types of cultural activity could be displayed and critiqued – both the 'popular' and the 'literary modes' coexisted.²⁵¹ This began to change and by the early 1930s had separated into opposite camps of 'high' and 'low' culture with the former characterised by 'specialisation, minority audiences, aesthetic values, culture as critique and anti-commercialism' and on the other side 'populism, mass markets, public opinion and professional journalism.'²⁵² The separation has continued into the present era, especially in terms of the spaces available in literary magazines to discuss and publish poetry.

As a counter to the growing elitism of Modernist magazines such as *Southerly*, a writing and publishing group called the Realist Writers' Group was formed in 1944 with the intention of providing a forum for working class writing²⁵³ and, in 1952, the Australasian Book Society was founded to publish works by and about working-class Australians.²⁵⁴ Other collectives and presses such as Current Book Distributors in Sydney and the Australian Student Labour Federation of the 1940s and 1950s were dedicated to the publication of working-class writing and volumes of poetry dealing with the lives of workers. These groups were influenced and supported by the Communist Party of Australia, the Socialist Party and trade unions, and the poems and songs they printed were often written with a particular audience in mind. In 1946 a working-class poet called John Graham had a collection of his poems published, and the

²⁵⁰ Jordan, Pierce 12.

²⁵¹ David Carter, 'Magazine Culture: Notes Towards a History of Australian Periodical Publications 1920-1970,' *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere: Refereed Proceedings of the 1998 Conference*, eds., Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon, and Christopher Lee (QLD: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1999) 70.

²⁵² Carter 75.

²⁵³ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 71.

²⁵⁴ Syson, *Just Isn't Trendy* 5.

book focused on the lives of workers, especially miners, as can be seen in his poem *Blood on the Coal*.²⁵⁵

Come down and breathe the dank air, the foul air, the rank air;
Fill up your lungs with coal dust, disease dust, for proof;
Come down and see the cave man, the slave man, the brave man
Risk life to save his mate's life beneath a falling roof.

Learn of the grim disasters, the churned up, the burned up;
Go seek the mining churchyards and count the growing roll;
Weigh justice then, so feted, so treated, and meted
Against the dark stain spreading, the blood upon the coal.

The poem continues with a call for people to support the miners and to assist them in their fight for better conditions. It does not romanticise or caricature the workers, but humanises them and graphically illustrates the appalling conditions under which they worked. For left wing editors, the content of writing was considered paramount and magazines such as the *Realist Writer* concentrated on publishing work that was concerned with the presentation of class struggle.²⁵⁶ There was a tone of escapism though, due to a focus on the past and rural settings²⁵⁷ and, although the intention of the editors was to raise the profile of Australian literature, the main result was to reinforce the image of the Australian 'legend' as the dominant motif of Australian literature at the expense of other forms.²⁵⁸ Intellectuals and writers such as Ian Turner and Stephen Murray-Smith who were involved with *Overland* (which took over from the *Realist Writer* in 1954) eventually severed their ties with the Communist Party of Australia and some distanced themselves from politics altogether. According to Scalmer, some former Communists began to regard themselves as 'intellectuals' and became increasingly conservative in their outlook to the extent of questioning the existence of the working class they had once supported.²⁵⁹

During the early 1980s, π.o and other members of a writing collective to which he belonged organised the publication and distribution of a magazine entitled *925: Poetry for the Workers by the Workers*, and were able to showcase the talents of

²⁵⁵ John Graham, *Blood on the Coal and Other Poems for the People* (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1946).

²⁵⁶ Editorials of the *Realist Writer* demonstrate this emphasis on the content of the poetry published, Frank Hardy, 'Editorial,' *Realist Writer* 1. 1 (1958): 1 & 27, Frank Hardy, 'The Writer and the Labour Movement,' *Realist Writer* 1.2 (1960): 1-2 & 13, Paul Mortier, 'An Introduction to Socialist-Realism in Literature,' *Realist Writer* 1.4 (1960): 29-32.

²⁵⁷ Sean Scalmer, 'Imaging Class: Intellectuals in the 1950s and Insights into the Present,' *Overland* 146 (1997): 24.

²⁵⁸ Scalmer, 23.

²⁵⁹ Scalmer, 24.

working-class writers, such as π.o. himself, Thalia, Bonny Henderson, Tony Birch, Jeltje van Ooij and others through its pages. Most of the poetry published in 925 dealt with the daily grind of work for working-class people as is illustrated in an untitled poem by Thalia²⁶⁰ who describes life as a waitress in a Greek café in Melbourne's inner city suburb of Fitzroy:

By 4.30 the workers come in for coffee
leaving their bags jackets or umbrellas
on the empty coke cases
as they order their coffees after coffee
after coffee
Not hard at all, keep your temper
and ya got the job.
And now the well-dressed groomed gents
make an entrance.
The owner gives them a smile
as he shuffles the cards.

However, π.o claims that this type of poetry was not accepted by the literary establishment, and much of it was dismissed as inferior and therefore discredited, with established literary journals maintaining their preferences for intellectual, metaphysical poetry (925 had disappeared by the 1990s).²⁶¹

Middle-Class Representations of Working-Class Life

Not all writers from bourgeois backgrounds have ignored the lives of 'ordinary' people and there is a long history of writing about the working class from a middle-class perspective, examples of which include the works of George Orwell and John Steinbeck and, in a more Australian setting, A.B. Patterson, John Manifold, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Dorothy Hewett. Such writers have brought a 'seriousness of concern, an acceptance of the subjectivity of the working class...to their presentation of proletarian themes'²⁶² and therefore it is fitting to acknowledge their contributions to working-class writing. Socially conscious writers such as Hewett have chosen to write about working-class life, usually due to particular political convictions (in Hewett's case she was a member of the Communist Party of Australia), and demonstrate a commitment to portraying inequalities. Hewett was aware that she was writing from a middle-class

²⁶⁰ Thalia, 'untitled,' 925: *Poetry for the Workers, by the Workers, about the Workers' Work*, ed., Jeltje (Melbourne: Collective Effort Press, 1999) 29.

²⁶¹ π.o. ed., *Off the Record* (Victoria: Penguin, 1985) 4.

²⁶² H.Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1985) ix.

position, but believed her role to be important stating in an interview, ‘when you come to think of it, in Australia, there haven't been a great number of people coming from the working class who've written about their lives, for obvious reasons. So if you get a ring-in like me, it can be quite useful’.²⁶³ Despite her wealthy family background, Hewett seems to have understood both the lives and culture of working-class people most likely due to her marriage to a working-class man and time employed in a factory. This understanding is particularly evident in her novel *Bobbin Up*, but also manifests in poems such as ‘Darlinghurst Nights’²⁶⁴ which recreates the inner-city, complete with sex-workers and the homeless:

The mafia play Johnny Cash
at the barbecue
the bikies drag their girls
home by the hair
down Wisdom Lane
the molls argue
25 bucks to suck you off
a French letter
because of AIDS
& no kissing
the paraplegics line up
in their wheelchairs
for a fuck

Creeps! she says
You've got no chance
the passing derros
ask Alice for a light

The type of writing produced by Hewett could be described as the ‘committed art’ championed by Adorno; with the potential to change people’s attitudes.²⁶⁵ Committed art is not without its problems though, and American poet and literary theorist, James Scully suggests that rather than demonstrating a sincere desire to represent the lives of oppressed people some poets have been more concerned with their ‘own tender sensibilities’ than the reality of people’s situations.²⁶⁶ Educationalist Julie Wells also points to this tendency and states that not all writing that includes working-class people

²⁶³ Dorothy Hewett, ‘Jill-of-all-trades: Dorothy Hewett talks to Nicole Moore,’ *Overland* 153 (1998) 37.

²⁶⁴ Dorothy Hewett, ‘Darlinghurst Nights,’ *Ulitarra* 8 (1995) 115.

²⁶⁵ Ernst Bloch, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977) 180.

²⁶⁶ James Scully, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice* (Seattle: Bay, 1988) 5.

does necessarily ‘reflect or promote identifiably working-class interests or values.’²⁶⁷ Some well-intentioned writers produce romanticised portrayals of workers, which demonstrate a ‘tourist approach to poverty and working-class life’²⁶⁸. This is the case with writers such as Les Murray who, despite stating that he writes for those he considers to be marginalised from literature, namely the rural poor,²⁶⁹ offers images of romantic, noble rural workers, reminiscent of the bushman ideal. The other accepted representation of working-class people is of low intelligence coupled with powerful physiques, which can be likened to ‘machines and animals’²⁷⁰ such as Les Murray's character Fredy Neptune in his epic poem of the same name. This romanticisation of the working class has always occurred; Wordsworth's poem ‘The Solitary Reaper’ is a classic example of the ‘language of tourism’ being employed as he observes a rural worker from a physical and psychological distance²⁷¹ romanticising the image of the worker singing as she reaps, ‘Behold her, single in the field, /Yon solitary Highland Lass!/ Reaping and singing by herself;/...Alone she cuts and binds the grain,/ And sings a melancholy strain;/ O listen! for the Vale profound/ Is overflowing with the sound.’²⁷² There continues to be an element of the middle class or ‘elite’ who believe they are able to portray or speak for the working class or underclass, but who risk misrepresenting their subject matter.²⁷³ Using the middle-class voice to speak for working-class experience creates a safe distance and the ‘middle-class voice offers itself as a guarantor of class mobility and of middle-class safety.’²⁷⁴

Poems on working-class themes such as those by Bruce Dawe, Robert Gray, Dorothy Hewett and Jennifer Maiden may be written with good intentions, but I would suggest that there is a distance between the poet and working-class subject that is not evident in poetry written by working-class people. The poets listed above are established within the literary mainstream and are in an arguably better position to

²⁶⁷ Julie Wells, ‘The Writers’ League: A Study of Literary and Working-Class Politics,’ *Meanjin* 46. 4 (1987-88):527.

²⁶⁸ Morley, Worpole 11.

²⁶⁹ Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (NSW: Duffy and Snelgrove, 1997) 4.

²⁷⁰ Deb Busman, ‘Representations of Working-Class Intelligence: Fictions by Jack London, Agnes Smedley and Valerie Miner and New Scholarships by Carol Whitehill and Janet Zandy,’ *Women's Studies Quarterly* 1-2 (1998): 77.

²⁷¹ Michael Baron, *Language and Relationship in Wordsworth's Writing* (London: Longman, 1995) 32.

²⁷² William Wordsworth, ‘The Solitary Reaper,’ *Representative Poetry Online*, University of Toronto, 22 July 2007, <<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2370.html>>.

²⁷³ Linda McCarriston, ‘“The Grace of Form”: Class Unconsciousness and an American Writer,’ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 98.

²⁷⁴ Jennifer Campbell, ‘Teaching Class: A Pedagogy and Politics for Working-Class Writing,’ *College Literature* 23 (1996) 120.

publish their poetry than less-known working-class poets. Middle-class poets may provide a less confronting version of working-class life than their working-class counterparts and their work may be accepted as exemplary of working-class poetry to the exclusion of more authentic working-class voices. It is important therefore that in the same way that Aboriginal, ethnic, gay and lesbian writers have fought for the right to tell their own stories; working-class writers should insist that their voices are privileged over the appropriated stories of the middle class.

Current Position of Working-Class Poetry

If working-class poetry is a legitimate body of work, as has been suggested by working-class critics such as Janet Zandy,²⁷⁵ it also begs the question; what is the working-class poetic? It has been suggested that this aesthetic is difficult to define as it does not fit into either a bourgeois or Marxist category since the poetry can be simultaneously individualistic and collective in nature;²⁷⁶ and the individualisation of the working-class writer can arguably force them to contend with the 'mainstream of bourgeois cultural production.'²⁷⁷ Determining a specific working-class poetic may seem difficult since the poetry is 'multivocal'²⁷⁸ encompassing a variety of styles, but I would agree with Zandy's assertion that there are 'common impulses, concerns and strategies' that can assist in its identification.²⁷⁹ These 'impulses, concerns and strategies' include not only recurring themes and stylistic approaches, but also reside in the intentions behind the poetry – the reasons why writers choose to create and publish their poetry. Working-class poetry provides a space for witnessing, validation and celebration of working-class lives. It is written to create agency for working-class people and to challenge and confront those who occupy privileged positions. These factors point to a desire to create something useful; to aim towards what Coles and Zandy call a 'cultural commons'.²⁸⁰ Working-class poetry arguably serves a purpose – to take the reader 'into spaces we are unlikely to have visited'²⁸¹ and by doing so, opens 'the intricate interior world of class

²⁷⁵ Zandy, *Calling Home* 9.

²⁷⁶ Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel 1890 -1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 203.

²⁷⁷ Janet Batsleer, et al., eds., *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London: Methuen, 1985)168.

²⁷⁸ Coles, Zandy xxiv.

²⁷⁹ Zandy, *Calling Home* 10.

²⁸⁰ Coles, Zandy xxiv.

²⁸¹ Paul Lauter, 'Under Construction: Working-Class Writing,' Linkon, Russo 70.

experience.’²⁸² There may be a call to arms for collective action within some working-class poetry, or an argument for socialism,²⁸³ or a demand for acknowledgment but, despite such differing approaches, the objectives remain the same – to create a literature that serves the people it claims to represent. Poet and literary critic Jim Daniels describes these objectives as the ‘three Cs’, to ‘celebrate, condemn and comprehend’.²⁸⁴ Zandy goes further to demand that working-class writers remain mindful that any study of working-class culture is political and ultimately concerned with the ‘means of struggle’.²⁸⁵ And contrary to the ‘death of the author’ position argued by Barthes, the intention of the working-class author is essential to understanding working-class poetry and the ‘political intentions’ of the writer must be ‘reconstructed’.²⁸⁶

Who writes this poetry? Working-class poetry generally emerges from experience – the majority of writers focusing on working-class life have working-class backgrounds. Some write while employed in working-class jobs, and others begin to write as a result of adult education. Regardless of whether they are still engaged in working-class occupations, these poets connect with their class identity through their writing, and generally write with the intention of getting the working-class voice heard, which has been described by Zandy as ‘witnessing for the silenced many’²⁸⁷ – expressing their sense of belonging to a collective of working-class people. However, the audience targeted by the writer can involve some contradictions.²⁸⁸ Being published in a bourgeois literary journal might limit the scope for reaching working-class readers. Although it may be an intention to educate middle-class readers about working-class life, it is probably safe to suggest that working-class poets hope their work will be distributed into working-class communities.

What then are the stylistic and thematic characteristics of working-class poetry? There are a number of defining stylistic factors such as an emphasis on working-class speech. Literary critics Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson state that ‘working-class literature reproduces, in literary form, the conditions of the working class. Working-class writers attempt, in various ways, to record the realistic speech patterns of

²⁸² Coles, *Zandy* xx.

²⁸³ Lauter, *Under Construction* 76.

²⁸⁴ Jim Daniels, ‘Work Poetry and Working-Class Poetry: The Zip Code of the Heart,’ Linkon, Russo 117.

²⁸⁵ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 6.

²⁸⁶ Ian Syson ‘Towards a Poetics of Working-Class Writing,’ *Southern Review* 26 March (1993): 90.

²⁸⁷ Zandy, *Calling Home* 12.

²⁸⁸ Paul Lauter, ‘Working-Class Women’s Literature: An Introduction to Study,’ *Women in Print* 1 (1982): 109.

people who do not speak Standard English nor conduct conversations along intellectually analytic lines'.²⁸⁹ Working-class poets therefore avoid heightened language in a deliberate attempt to prevent alienating their working-class readers and the musicality and 'physicality' of speech often provides the natural rhythm and shape of the poetry.²⁹⁰ Sociologist Claus Mueller describes working-class speech as generally less abstract and more descriptive than middle-class speech²⁹¹ and this is reflected in working-class poetry. Morley and Worpole believe that the representation of working-class speech in poetry can be seen in a wider respect as 'an exploration of class (or gender or race) position'²⁹² with potential to serve as an insight into society as a whole. However, use of working-class argot has been criticised by some writers who claim that dialect is patronising, overtly comic and not appropriate in serious poetry. Les Murray states that using 'comic uneducated spellings' to represent working-class speech is a 'form of ridicule of the poor'.²⁹³ But dialect has the ability to allow the reader to 'inhabit the other's speech'²⁹⁴ and provides legitimacy for forms of speech that are not considered 'standard'. And the notion of the perceived superiority of 'standard' English has been challenged by linguists such as James Gee, who suggests that dialects contain their own rules of grammar and logic in the same way as 'standard' English.²⁹⁵

As well as a dedication to reproducing working-class speech, there is a noticeable absence of metaphor and 'esoteric images and allusions'²⁹⁶ in working-class poetry. The use of poetic metaphor has been described as a luxury afforded to those who do not have the pressing and practical concerns of working-class life to consider;²⁹⁷ as Bourdieu explains, in order to possess an 'aesthetic disposition' it is necessary to be distanced from 'urgency'.²⁹⁸ This does not mean that working-class poets do not use metaphor at all, but the images favoured are often embedded in the everyday rather than

²⁸⁹ Renny Christopher, C. Whitson, 'Towards a Theory of Working-Class Literature,' *NEA Higher Education Journal*, spring (1999): 73.

²⁹⁰ Paul Lauter, 'Caste, Class and Canon,' *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds., Herndl, Diane Price, Robyn Warhol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 134. Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 5

²⁹¹ Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication* (New York: Oxford, 1973) 55.

²⁹² Morley, Worpole 111.

²⁹³ Murray, *A Working Forest* 337. Poet Pam Brown made similar comments during a panel discussion that immediately followed my reading of a poem containing working class dialect at the Sydney Poetry Festival in 1999.

²⁹⁴ Donald Wesling, 'Mikhail Bakhtin and the Social Poetics of Dialect,' *Papers on Language and Literature*, 29.3 (1993) *Expanded Academic Index*, 10 March 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

²⁹⁵ James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996) 14.

²⁹⁶ Lauter, *Caste, Class* 134.

²⁹⁷ Jim Daniels, 'Troubleshooting: Poetry, the Factory and the University,' Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 90.

²⁹⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction* 54.

densely symbolic. Working-class poetry rarely contains abstruse references, although there may be mention of historical events that have had an impact on the working-class. Hoggart proposes that working-class art, in general is a 'presentation of what is known already. It starts from the assumption that human life is fascinating in itself'²⁹⁹ and therefore is less concerned with abstract ideas that do not relate directly to everyday life. Williams suggests that 'to succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is actively re-created not "contemplated", not "examined", not passively received, but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered'.³⁰⁰ This is also the reason why the majority of working-class poetry rejects lyrical forms as there is embedded in the lyrical a 'luxury of contemplation'³⁰¹ that is not usually available to working-class poets – particularly those who write poetry in between work shifts. Having said this, Daniels also argues that, for some writers, poetry offers just such a chance for contemplation, to obtain some escape from the strictures of the workplace.³⁰² However, if workers are using poetry as a way to 'daydream' through their day, the poetry they produce throws the reader straight back into the reality of that workplace and their daily struggle.

As previously mentioned, there are some common themes that run through working-class poetry. These themes, which include work, unemployment, poverty, violence, community and family, have been seen as jarring a middle-class sensibility, which is prone to rejecting such themes as inappropriate concerns of poetry. 'Standard' anthologies of poetry tend to focus on 'love, death and nature',³⁰³ but Stein suggests that work in particular (including women's work inside the home) is a far more relevant subject for poetry than philosophical notions and abstract ideas.³⁰⁴ Writing about work 'makes visible the human labour that invests everything we have and use'.³⁰⁵ This labour is not often recognised, especially in relation to culturally significant objects where the labour used to produce them is rarely acknowledged. According to Syson, work does not often feature in the kind of texts that are chosen for study by academics and the differences in 'themes, motifs and purposes' present in working-class writing need to be

²⁹⁹ Hoggart, 120.

³⁰⁰ Williams, *Long Revolution* 34.

³⁰¹ Daniels, *Work Poetry* 133.

³⁰² Daniels, *Work Poetry* 134.

³⁰³ Peter Oresick, Nicholas Coles, eds., *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990) xxi.

³⁰⁴ Julia Stein, 'Industrial Music: Contemporary American Working-Class Poetry and Modernism,' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 23 (1995): 230 & 237.

³⁰⁵ Coles 669.

taken into account by critics.³⁰⁶ In Australia to date, there has only been one anthology of poems written specifically about work, *925: Poetry from the workers, from the workers, about the workers* which consists of poems that had previously appeared in the small magazine *925*, which was circulated around workplaces with the intention of encouraging working-class people to write about their experiences in their jobs. With the exception of a special edition of *Overland* magazine in 2001 which featured working class poetry, and a section on injured workers in a 2000 edition of *Overland* there have not been any further attempts to anthologise poems about work, and poems that deal with work are not often published in the mainstream journals or anthologies, although a 2005 edition of the ABC radio program *Poetica* featured poems about work and included one working-class author, Cathy Young. This lack of representation can be contrasted with the North American experience where several anthologies of contemporary poetry about work have been published in the past twenty years such as *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990) edited by Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles; Zan Dale Robinson's *The Workplace* (Buffalo: Labor Arts Books, 1992) and *Shop Talk: Vancouver Industrial Writers' Union* edited by Zoe Landale (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1985).

The types of working-class occupations written about by Australian poets are diverse, from the masculine world of labourers, rural farm workers, meat workers and fishermen to the more traditional female jobs of waitresses, barmaids, sex workers, clerks and factory hands. This is the daily grind of work life, and the economic pressures felt when working in a low-paid job. It is the monotony of repetitive work, and the dehumanisation of the factory line. Working-class writers attempt to recreate the 'boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition'³⁰⁷ that characterises many occupations. There are poems that tackle issues of workplace conditions and safety, and depict workers' feelings of powerlessness. Many workers feel dispensable and undervalued and frustrated at how the necessity of long and unsociable working hours can impact on family life and relationships. Hanging over workers' lives is the fear of redundancies and retrenchments, which for many people can be a devastating blow, especially for those who are considered too old or unskilled to find alternative work. All of these issues are addressed within the body of Australian working-class poetry. It is not always a gloomy picture though, as there are individuals who enjoy their jobs, particularly due

³⁰⁶ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 26.

³⁰⁷ Christopher, *Whitson* 73.

to the camaraderie with work mates, and those who take great pride in their work. For many people working in menial jobs, there is satisfaction to be found in the events of daily life and mental stimulation in the possibilities for conversation and observation of their environment.

Abstract themes tend to be made concrete in working-class poetry – ‘nature’ for example may appear, but from the farm labourer’s perspective.³⁰⁸ Ideas of ‘beauty’, ‘love’ and ‘truth’ are woven into the daily experiences of working-class poetry – showing how abstract ideas play out in a working-class setting. People are, therefore, the main focus of working-class poetry and poems created from stories of the poet’s own experience or that of friends, family, neighbours and other members of the working-class community tend to dominate. Despite the autobiographical nature of much of working-class writing it is not necessarily ‘isolated or romanticised individualism’ but is interested in the, ‘fragile filaments and necessary bonds of human relationships’ in a social context.³⁰⁹ Often underlying these themes is a ‘deep, savage, working-class irony’³¹⁰ but, despite the challenges faced by working-class writers, their writing is often about ‘possibility, not despair’³¹¹ and, regardless of the specific approach, all working-class poetry can be considered as ‘resistance’ literature.³¹²

Politics are arguably inseparable from working-class poetry. Literary theorist David Buchbinder argues that ‘the poem is not only a literary fact, but also a social one’³¹³ which suggests that writing from the margin is a political act regardless of whether the poetry contains explicit political content. Some poems focus on a specific political situation, such as a strike or other union activity, or may refer to government policy – but the majority of contemporary Australian working-class poetry maintains an implicit politics in the descriptions of everyday life. Such poetry can be distinguished from the political writing of poets such as Pablo Neruda, whose desire to write for working-class people was born from his political position as a Communist. Whereas Neruda arguably maintained a utopian vision of classlessness and glorified the working class as agents of revolution within his work,³¹⁴ contemporary working-class poets tend to focus on daily life, and are less inclined to offer what may seem unrealistic dreams of a classless future. Australian author Rosie Scott

³⁰⁸ Stein 239.

³⁰⁹ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 5.

³¹⁰ Syson, *It Just Isn’t Trendy* 28.

³¹¹ Zandy, *Calling Home* 11.

³¹² Christopher, *Whitson* 77.

³¹³ Buchbinder 98.

³¹⁴ Mark J Mascia, ‘Pablo Neruda and the Construction of Past and Future Utopias in the *Canto General*,’ *Utopian Studies* 12. 2 Spring (2001): 65 & 70.

describes political writing as ‘accessible, honest, dangerous to the unjust order it reflects and always relevant and inspirational to the lives of ordinary people as well as sophisticated readers, and as such necessarily of high quality’.³¹⁵ This, I believe, is an apt description of working-class poetry.

How does a working-class person fit into the bourgeois world of poetry publishing? Is it possible to maintain a working-class identity and be a successful writer? For working-class poets, there are potential complications in becoming a published author. The working-class poet may be considered an oddity by the literary mainstream, and treated in a patronising fashion, or expected to act as a representative of their class against their will.³¹⁶ The working-class poet may also suffer within their own community, becoming isolated from working-class family and friends due to their literary success. As Worpole explains ‘it is one of the paradoxes of writing, particularly for working-class people that the act of trying to represent the culture and geographical community in which the writer has grown and lived is the first step by which the writer is separated from that life almost irrevocably’.³¹⁷ A working-class writer attempting to understand her culture and position in a classed society might operate from different perspectives which will require her to use multiple voices. She may speak from inside the working-class collective, or from her personal experience, but also needs to distance herself at times from the working-class subject.³¹⁸ Zandy cautions working-class writers to avoid being ‘dominated, corralled or mastered by the bullying voice of theory’³¹⁹ into ‘assimilation into middle-class culture’.³²⁰ But Zandy also claims that a writer can act as a ‘conduit or witness’ for a working-class community and maintain a sense of collective working-class identity.³²¹

Is there a place for working-class writing in Australia? Since the 1980s there has been little organisation of working-class writers or bodies to promote working-class writing in Australia and, according to Syson, the reason that there is no 'canon' of working-class literature is because there are few 'role models, few support networks,

³¹⁵ Rosie Scott, ‘Come and See the Blood in the Streets,’ *Island* 48 spring (1991): 44.

³¹⁶ Morley, Worpole 60.

³¹⁷ Ken Worpole, *Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction* (London: Comedia, 1984) 94.

³¹⁸ Janet Zandy, ‘Editorial: Working-Class Studies,’ *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 1-2 (1995): 5.

³¹⁹ Zandy, *Editorial* 6.

³²⁰ Christopher, Whitson 78.

³²¹ Janet Zandy, ‘The Complexities and Contradictions of Working-Class Women’s Writing,’ *Radical Teacher*, 46 April (1995): 5.

few sympathetic publishing houses'.³²² This has had the effect of 'estranging' working-class writers and readers from working-class literature and writers often work in isolation, unaware that such a body of work exists. Although working-class poets are not working as a collective, they do arguably tend to produce their work in a similar context, as Marxist literary theorist Moyra Haslett describes, 'in place of the author as expressive genius, whose intrinsic talents means that she transcends her own time and place, we have the author as producer who is inevitably part of her own context'.³²³ This may be true, but currently in Australia only the Vulgar Press is dedicated to publishing working-class writing and, since the demise of the self-consciously working-class periodical, *Red Lamp*, there are no magazines. Only one Australian university offers working-class writing as a literature subject and, as far as I am aware, there are no working-class writing collectives, although there may be working-class writers who belong to regional or suburban writing groups. Collective Effort Press publishes non-mainstream works rather erratically, and Cornford Press has published two collections of working-class poetry; *Ravo* by MML Bliss and *The Yugoslav Women and their Picked Herrings* by Cathy Young, both of which will be discussed later.

This situation is in marked contrast with that for working-class writers in the UK and USA who have more opportunities for publication and distribution of their work. In Britain, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers offers a network of organisations dedicated to ensuring that working-class voices are heard. This organisation has been able to achieve many objectives in raising the profile of working-class writing in the UK including several small co-operative presses that assist working-class writers in publishing their work which include the working Press and the Commonword Press. There are also centres for working-class studies in the UK such as the Working-Class Movement Library at the University of Salford. As previously mentioned, in North America several anthologies of working-class writing have been published in recent years, and the Centre for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown University in Ohio provides a forum for academics interested in working-class literature and to assist working-class writers themselves. There are several independent U.S. publishers dedicated to working-class writing, such as Bottom Dog Press and West End Press, and working-class poetry magazines such as *Blue Collar Review*. American

³²² Ian Syson, 'Fired from the Canon : The Sacking of Australian Working-Class Literature,' *Southerly* 57.3 (1997): 87.

³²³ Haslett 8.

working-class poets are gradually gaining exposure and receiving acclaim both from within their working-class communities and among the literary mainstream. Marxist literary critics such as Rivkin and Ryan suggest though, that literature in general will not 'challenge the basic assumptions of the class structure of society' and that when writers do attempt to engage with class issues it is likely that they will be 'silenced or treated with verbal violence' by those in control of the literary canon.³²⁴ Although there has been some progress in gaining the inclusion of other marginalised writing such as that by Indigenous or women writers, this shift in practice rarely recognises working-class writing as a marginalised form, despite the commonalities that exist between these marginalised literatures.³²⁵

Resistance from the Canon

As a contrast to these ideas, the middle-class aesthetic is often far removed from the qualities inherent in working-class poetry. Literature is judged from a position of superiority³²⁶ and those who are in the position of judgement, such as academics and literary critics operate from within a 'customary and damaging elitism'.³²⁷ Such critics feel qualified to create and maintain the 'canon' and criteria of 'proper' literature as they believe they know how and what to read. Eagleton proposes that literary criticism 'selects, processes, corrects and rewrites texts' to fall in line with the current accepted 'norms' of the literary standard.³²⁸ Coles believes that this attitude can be traced back to influential scholars of literature such as F.R. Leavis who maintained that the reading of literature required sophistication and education that was originally only available to the upper classes. An environment of privilege continues today as the literary establishment protects the 'privileged canon' from the influences of the unsophisticated, creating a 'cultural reserve, fenced off from a social world that showed little need for it.'³²⁹ Haslett suggests that notions of 'quality' were developed in the eighteenth century, during which time popular art forms were pushed aside, and accepted measures of 'taste' became synonymous with middle-class art forms.³³⁰ The connection between class and taste has

³²⁴ Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998) 232.

³²⁵ Coles 667.

³²⁶ Vicinus 1.

³²⁷ Coles 664.

³²⁸ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 203.

³²⁹ Coles 664 & 665.

³³⁰ Haslett 156.

also occupied critics since the eighteenth century³³¹ and Bourdieu describes how the tastes of the lower classes have been rejected as ‘coarse, vulgar, venal’ and compared to the ‘sublimated, refined...distinguished’ tastes of the bourgeoisie.³³² These value judgements have become so entrenched that they have been accepted as fact by many critics and theorists, thus creating a narrow and pervasive set of criteria. But such value judgements about literature do not take into account the point that some canonised literature such as the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was originally regarded as inferior.³³³ Vicinus articulates, ‘the overwhelming condescension of scholars toward the literature written by working people arises out of a long tradition of judging art from a position of educational superiority’³³⁴ As a result, working-class writers are constantly under pressure to fit into these criteria in order to have their work treated seriously. They are expected to find ways to adhere to the middle-class norms of literature, and to attempt to do otherwise results in ‘deviant’ and ‘flawed’ results.³³⁵

Working-class poetry is often not considered to be poetry at all as it is ‘crude...naïve... reactionary’³³⁶ or overly political. Hitchcock points to descriptions of working-class literature as ‘too sociological, too political, too realist, too easy...too late’.³³⁷ But Daniels counters, ‘the straightforward quality of this poetry owes a great deal to a certain no-nonsense approach. The poets don’t have the luxury of not being understood. They have something to say. They have stories to tell, and hey, listen up!’³³⁸ The clear, direct nature of working-class poetry is described as ‘simplicistic’ rather than understood as uncomplicated. Zandy suggests that middle-class editors and publishers often think that working-class writing is ‘unappealing and unaesthetic’³³⁹ because it is focused on the ordinary or the unpleasant. It is therefore unliterary, not art, and only useful as examples of social commentary.³⁴⁰ For editors used to the genteel nature of much middle-class poetry, working-class poems can seem out of place – ‘loud... raucous...like cursing in class’³⁴¹ and somehow inappropriate for inclusion. The

³³¹ Jon Cook, ‘Culture, Class and Taste,’ *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Carsell, 2000) 97.

³³² Bourdieu, *Distinction* 7.

³³³ Williams, *Long Revolution* 171.

³³⁴ Vicinus 1.

³³⁵ Campbell 119.

³³⁶ Fox 46.

³³⁷ Hitchcock 20.

³³⁸ Daniels, *Work Poetry* 136.

³³⁹ Zandy, *Calling Home* 8.

³⁴⁰ Laurie Clancy, ‘Worthy Work on the Magazine Rack,’ *The Age*, August 28 2000, The Age Online, 10 October 2000, <<http://www.theage.com.au>>.

³⁴¹ Daniels, *Work Poetry* 91.

themes of working-class poetry may not be seen as worthy of literary status and editors may label such poems as 'thin' and 'feeble'³⁴² – not good enough to be given space in a literary publication. The literary establishment reflects the attitude of the dominant middle-class culture, which, in general, can be quite 'hostile to working-class identities'³⁴³ and writing which does explore working-class life can be seen as 'propaganda' rather than 'art',³⁴⁴ despite the fact that many of the 'great works' of literature were written from a particular ideological perspective.³⁴⁵ Subject matter that deals with the experiences of everyday life for those who are not 'special' (i.e. the working-class, women, Black and ethnic writers) is often 'disqualified from serious consideration'.³⁴⁶

How can these attitudes be challenged? Syson states that many of the aspects of working-class writing that critics perceive as 'faults' are in fact significantly related to actual working-class experience; for example, the use of phonetic spellings of speech and other 'subversions' of 'standard' English may demonstrate a background that has not been shaped by formal education. It is therefore necessary for critics to understand the circumstances of class struggle in which working-class writers are immersed. The critic must also recognise their own position within the class structure, especially when operating from a position of privilege.³⁴⁷ Literary critics need to look at working-class writing from a different perspective because, according to Lauter, 'looking for the timeless and transcendent, for contemplation as an end, for metaphysical complexity of language and for pastel ironies of tone can only obscure or demean the objectives and excellence of working-class art.'³⁴⁸

I would suggest that working-class poetry possesses its own aesthetic that does not necessarily engage with bourgeois ideals of 'quality'. Working-class poetry has a different imperative to bourgeois poetry and attempts to show the human detail of working-class life – sometimes grim and discomfoting, and sometimes a celebration of culture or pride. The aesthetic is in the attention to detail and the faithfulness to language and expression of identity. Notions of beauty are challenged and there can be a conscious exploration of 'ugliness' through descriptions of squalor or the disfiguring

³⁴² Vicinus 1.

³⁴³ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 2

³⁴⁴ McCarriston 98.

³⁴⁵ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 20.

³⁴⁶ Coles 665.

³⁴⁷ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 17, 14 & 25.

³⁴⁸ Lauter, *Working-Class Women's Lit* 115.

effects of physical labour on the body. What criteria should be used then to judge the literary worth of a working-class poem? I would suggest there are several criteria; first – does the poem offer a realistic or empathetic representation of working-class life? Second, does the poet engage with the nuances of working-class language? Third – is the poem merely stating facts or is it presenting the well-crafted content in a dynamic form? The individual poems to be discussed later will demonstrate how such criteria operate.

I believe that academics and critics need to consider the poetics of working-class writing in order to fully understand and appreciate the poetry. The sheer volume of poetry that I have been able to collect can also be seen as an indication that working-class poetry exists as a genre in its own right, rather than a handful of individual poems.³⁴⁹ This working-class canon contradicts the claims of Australian editors such as Glen Murdoch who suggests that working-class poetry does not exist.³⁵⁰ In the following chapter I will outline some of the attitudes towards poetry held by the public and the literary mainstream.

³⁴⁹ Zandy, *Calling Home* 9.

³⁵⁰ See following chapter for Murdoch's comments in full.

Chapter Three

The Australian Literary Scene

In 2001, in an attempt to address the dearth of published commentary and criticism about Australian working-class poetry, I sent questionnaires to twenty nine Australian literary magazine editors to obtain information on how editors select poetry from the submissions they receive. I was also interested in determining their attitudes towards working-class poetry. In the questionnaire, I posed a number of questions:

- Are you aware of working-class poetry as a body of work?
- Can you name any individual Australian working-class poets? (contemporary or historical)
- Do you have a particular idea of what characterises working-class poetry?
- Do you receive submissions of working-class poetry?
- If you have received submissions of working-class poetry, what have your responses been?
- Are you conscious of issues such as class in terms of literature?
- How do you conduct your selection of poetry for your publication?
- Does your publication have a particular agenda and do you seek out a certain type of poetry for inclusion? (for example, language poetry, landscape poetry, political poetry etc)
- How do you measure quality as an editor? Do you follow a set of criteria?
- Do you consider your publication to be representative of Australia's literary community?
- Does your publication have a policy of inclusion? (of minority literature for example)
- Do you consider the content of the poetry you publish to be important?
- What kind of influence, if any, do you think your publication has on the Australian literary scene?

- Do you consider your publication to be part of the 'literary establishment'?
- What are your thoughts on the Australian poetry scene in general?

My research was directed at editors because literary magazines and journals offer some of the few outlets for poetry in Australia, and provide the main forum for poetry criticism, reviews and commentary and are therefore significant sites for the shaping of literary reputations. In her study of such publications, Judith Brett claims that they provide a space somewhere between the populism of newspapers and the intellectualism of academic journals and offer opportunities for new writing and ideas which can then filter through to the mainstream.³⁵¹ Two of the former editors of *Westerly*, Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell believe that literary magazines possess 'a public value and a cultural function' which produces 'invisible literary networks [and the] cultural debate and criticism essential for a context of excellence.'³⁵²

Australia has approximately two dozen journals that publish poetry. General literary magazines such as *Southerly* include fiction, reviews and criticism, while others such as *Overland* consist of commentary and opinion on various aspects of contemporary culture. Some such as *Blue Dog* are exclusively devoted to publishing poetry, essays on poetry and poetry reviews. These magazines vary in their size and quality of publication; some receive substantial government funding from the Arts Council and have a large subscription base, such as *Overland*. Others, including *Famous Reporter* survive on small budgets and do not have resources for high quality production but are considered important within the poetry community. Few such magazines have been able to survive for long due to the financial limitations and expenses of publication, marketing and distribution. Those that have managed to survive often have an association with a university which provides them with the resources required to remain viable. Thus, decisions by funding bodies as to who will receive funding can stir up frictions within the literary community, with some newer magazines complaining that the older established magazines get an unfair share of the available funds, making it almost impossible for the younger magazines to survive.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Judith Brett, 'The Role of Literary Magazines,' *Australian Book Review* July (1995): 18.

³⁵² Delys Bird, Dennis Haskell, 'And More on Literary Magazines,' *Australian Book Review* July (1995): 20.

³⁵³ Cassandra Pybus, 'A Literary Catch 22,' *Voice* 7. 2, (1997): 123.

Only a handful of magazines can boast a long history; *Meanjin*, established in 1940, *Southerly* (1939), *Overland* (1954), *Westerly* (1956) and *Quadrant* (1956). The feminist journal *Hecate* was founded in 1975, *New England Review* in 1978 and *LiNQ* (*Literature in North Queensland*) in 1971, but the minority are more than a few years old. Some journals have ceased producing printed publications and have set themselves up as e-journals on the internet (such as *Cordite*). Moving into an electronic format removes the costs associated with printing and distribution, but still requires the skills and time of those responsible for updating the website. Magazines such as *Jacket* and *Thylazine* began life on the internet and there are also e-magazines or e-zines that encourage poems from young or emerging writers. In general though, the older journals are considered to be the main players on the magazine scene, with each claiming a reputation for publishing quality poetry. Publication within such journals is often sought after by poets, although the amount of poetry from high-profile writers such as MTC Cronin, Dorothy Porter and Martin Harrison published on the internet suggests that e-journals are becoming increasingly popular. The magazines, both online and in print form, contain a benchmark for ‘quality’ poetry and provide a window into current literary fashions.

According to John McLaren, *Southerly* began as an intellectual literary publication, intended to showcase and create an active criticism of Australian literature that was separate from any political agendas³⁵⁴ and in recent times the magazine has posited itself as a creator of literary reputations; the by-line on the *Southerly* webpage reads, ‘it has held a central place in the making of Australian literature’. From its foundation, *Meanjin* adopted a liberal humanist stance and was interested in political and literary commentary which sometimes caused controversy among conservative members of literary society.³⁵⁵ The ideological differences of *Southerly* and *Meanjin* also mirrored the literary divide between Sydney and Melbourne and the vying for literary leadership which continues in the contemporary era. Some magazines began with a more specific agenda; *Overland*, for example, initially intended to provide a forum for working-class expression ‘to give a voice to those who are otherwise marginalised, misrepresented or ignored’³⁵⁶ and *Quadrant*’s aim was to operate as a

³⁵⁴ John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Post-war Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 18.

³⁵⁵ John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974) 85.

³⁵⁶ *Overland* website < <http://www.overlandexpress.org/aboutus.htm>>

defence against Communist Party-funded magazines. The current editors of *Quadrant* deny that their journal has a right-wing, conservative bias, and instead claim that they are adopting a ‘sceptical approach to unthinking leftism, or political correctness and its “smelly little orthodoxies”’ which allows them to be open minded and to encourage freedom of thought.³⁵⁷ Most magazines do not claim to have a particular focus in the type of poetry they select, and mostly state that the poetry they accept is based on quality of each individual poem, though certain magazines do have more direct criteria, such as *Hecate’s* commitment to women’s writing and *Thylazine’s* interest in animal and human rights.

Of the twenty nine questionnaires sent, I received twenty four replies and eighteen completed questionnaires. The five journals that did not reply were *Westerly*, *Southern Review*, *Verandah*, *Going Down Swinging* and *Mattoid*. Some editors replied to my initial request but did not subsequently complete the questionnaires. One editor (Ouyang Yu of *Otherland* which is a Chinese-Australian magazine) sent a reply to inform me that my questions were not relevant to his publication, and the poetry editor of *Quadrant*, Les Murray, sent a reply with the comments, ‘the editorial process is our business’ and ‘the only class is those who believe in classes’. Among respondents were the poetry editors of several of the major magazines, such as *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Heat* and *Jacket*. The editor of *Meanjin* did not complete the questionnaire despite being initially enthusiastic. Three of the magazines have ceased publication since my initial request, *Sidewalk*, *Core* and *Imago* no longer exist and the editor of *New England Review* informed me that her magazine would not be continuing after 2004 due to financial constraints – although the magazine was still in production in 2005.

Of the eighteen respondents, six stated that they were aware of working-class poetry as a body of work, and seven editors were able to name working-class poets – mainly Henry Lawson, although five did mention contemporary working-class poets. The editors who answered ‘yes’ to the question on recognition of working-class poetry represented the journals *Poetrix*, *Jacket*, *Sidewalk*, *Hecate*, *Island* and *Idiom 23*. The editor of *Southerly* stated that his journal had published working-class poetry, but was reluctant to name any such poets as the definitions of the category were ‘tricky’. Several of the editors shared this view, stating that definitions of working-class poetry were ambiguous and that working-class poetry could mean several different things, such as poetry written by working-class people, or poetry about working-class people. I

³⁵⁷ *Quadrant* website <<http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/about.php>>

deliberately did not provide my own definition, as I was interested in what editors would make of this question.

Those who were able to identify working-class poetry were also able to offer their opinion on what characterises such poetry. Sheryl Clarke, the editor of *Poetrix*, a journal of women's poetry, stated that working-class poetry was characterised by 'language, subject matter and voice'. The editor of *Heat*, Ivor Indyk, questioned which class working poets really belong to and initially claimed that working-class poetry is 'an unworkable category', but he went on to describe working-class poetry as 'exhibiting a consciousness, of being written from a working-class perspective'. John Tranter, editor of the online journal *Jacket*, which has an international as well as an Australian focus, suggested that working class poetry would most likely contain 'a focus on day to day working experience of those at low pay rates' although he did not comment on the particular style or forms this poetry might take. The editor of the now defunct journal *Sidewalk*, Richard Hillman, claimed that working-class poetry has a need to 'clarify itself' and contains a 'rigid, fixed mentality' which doesn't allow for self-examination. Hillman also suggested that there are problems with the category especially when considering poets who do not have working-class backgrounds, but who write about working-class life, and those who do not wish to be identified on class grounds. Carole Ferrier of the feminist journal *Hecate* described working-class poetry as 'articulation of a particular relationship to the world in particular a distinctive relationship to the capitalist mode of production with regard to its exploitative and oppressive features.' According to Ferrier, *Hecate* receives up to thirty submissions from working-class poets each year.

The poetry editor of *Overland*, John Leonard, acknowledged that there has been limited study of working-class poetry which is partly the reason for his lack of knowledge regarding the genre. He went on to describe working-class poetry as that probably written by a working-class person and concerned with working-class life, with a form that 'shouldn't be too literary and the language should be ordinary working-class speech or close to it.' *Idiom 23*'s editor noted that it is difficult to describe working-class poetry exactly, but suggested that it may contain themes of 'toughness, honesty, simplicity', and pointed to poems from the bush that depict the harsh conditions of outback life. According to the editor, *Idiom 23* receives and publishes working-class poetry and the editorial committee are excited and enthusiastic about such submissions.

Although many of the editors stated that they were not aware of working-class poetry as a body of work, it seems that the main reason for this is an uncertainty of the category. Some editors were more forthright however, and appeared quite scathing of the idea of working-class poetry. Cameron Lowe, editor of the defunct journal *Core* and the short lived *Ardent Sun*, criticised the performances of working-class poets such as π.o. for being a ‘farce’ and accused some poets of claiming to be working-class in order to ‘carve themselves a niche.’ Lowe’s sentiments were echoed by Glen Murdoch, who also edited *Sidewalk* and the Adelaide-based *Friendly Street Anthology*. Murdoch claimed that there is no published work by working-class writers because those with working-class roots have ‘internalised middle-class values’ once they are published, and therefore Murdoch refused to acknowledge the existence of working-class writers until he saw them in print. He dismissed those who ‘aspire to be working class but ...are generally middle-class Marxists’, and described how he deals with submissions of working-class poetry by telling the poet to stop pretending to be working class.

In terms of selection processes among editors, there seemed to be a general consensus that the journals were looking for ‘quality’ poetry; that which offers something interesting and different for the reader. Most poetry is selected through an editorial committee, although there are some individual editors such as John Leonard at *Overland*, John Tranter at *Jacket* and Carole Ferrier at *Hecate*. Editors claim to use their experience of reading poetry to assist in their selections. They attempt to be objective about different styles and maintain an eclectic system of inclusions. Descriptions of selected poetry as being ‘well crafted’ and consisting of ‘quality’, ‘interesting’, ‘taking risks’, ‘openness’, ‘perceptiveness’, ‘no clichés’, ‘language that is alive and vibrant’, ‘substance’, ‘taste’, ‘publishability’³⁵⁸ were given and some editors stated they will not publish ‘bush stuff’, ‘ballads...or haiku...contrived language poetry....feminist poetry...grandstanding poems’ or that which is simply ‘poor’.³⁵⁹ Apart from *Poetrix* which publishes work by women, none of the editors said that they target a particular form for submissions, and most seem to believe that their magazine is open to a variety of submissions without a particular policy of inclusion of minority literatures, but open to all who wish to submit. Most of the editors also stated that the content of a poem was

³⁵⁸ This list of publishing criteria for poetry comes from Helen Annand of *Centoria*, Glen Murdoch *Sidewalk*, Cameron Lowe *Ardent Sun*, Ivor Indyk *Heat*, Susan McMichael *New England Review*, Richard Hillman *Sidewalk*, Sheryl Clarke *Poetrix*, John Leonard *Overland*,

³⁵⁹ The more negative list is from Susan McMichael of *New England Review*, Richard Hillman of *Sidewalk* and John Leonard of *Overland*.

not necessarily instrumental in its publication but was an important factor, although John Leonard of *Overland* stated that the poetry selected must have ‘some sort of social relevance.’

The editors gave differing answers to the question of how their publication fits into the literary establishment and whether it wields any influence. Two editors, Sheryl Clarke from *Poetrix* and Ralph Wessman from *Famous Reporter* were emphatic in answering ‘no’ to being part of the establishment, while most of the other editors claimed to be a part of the establishment as a whole, because they were participating within it, even if considering themselves as an alternative to the mainstream. Most agreed that their publication had an influence of one kind or another, some such as Ivor Indyk of *Heat*, felt they influenced emerging writers and assisted in establishing reputations. Others, such as Helen Annand at *Centoria* felt they had a regional influence, but most played down the question.

Several of the editors responded to my request for their thoughts on the Australian scene in general; some negatively, others with much more positive comments. Among the negative was Sheryl Clarke who stated that the scene was ‘too male-centred...not enough real opportunities for poets...the establishment reigns, as do the academics’. Clarke also complained that there were too few publishers of poetry and too few readers. Ivor Indyk also suggested that there are many poets who do not gain enough recognition, but also described contemporary poetry as ‘mediocre...much of which is serving a therapeutic interest.’ An allegation that the publishing industry had ‘failed poetry’ was made by Richard Hillman, who also accused poets of being ‘conservative’ and too keen to imitate styles from overseas. Hillman went on to attack performance poets and poets from regional centres and suggested that the only solution to improving the current situation was to have ‘a great big fight in which all the players get to rip each others’ fucking throats out with steak knives. Then poets would have the chance to breathe some life back into this country.’ Glen Murdoch wrote ‘R.I.P’ to Australian poetry, and claimed that alternative voices to the ‘mainstream and exclusive cliques’ were being ‘silenced’, (which seems to contradict his previous comments on working class poetry). This sentiment was echoed by John Leonard who also spoke of ‘feeble conservative literary cliques’ and a culture that is not particularly interested in poetry or literature in general. Again, the editors do not offer specific examples or make suggestions as to what kind of poetry might actually be acceptable.

Positive comments came from Cameron Lowe who believed that ‘great’ poetry was being produced, and Ralph Wessman who described a ‘generous and supportive environment’. The *New England Review* editor, Susan McMichael, pointed to ‘interesting people writing’ and the editor of *Idiom 23* was enthusiastic about an ‘active’ scene with many people interested in writing and reading poetry. The attitudes and opinions outlined above provide a context to the discussion below. As influential figures within the literary scene, the editors’ comments are useful in understanding how poetry factions and literary biases are formed. But before describing further some of the published views of other prominent poets and editors it is necessary to outline the role of poetry in the public consciousness.

Relevance of Poetry

All of this begs the question: does poetry have a function in twenty first century Australia? There is evidence to suggest that poetry’s relevancy is decreasing; poetry has been relegated to very small sections of the shelves of chain store book shops and is not displayed at the front of stores as are works of fiction, biography and common interest non-fiction. But does the lack of poetry in mainstream stores mean that poetry has lost its significance for contemporary readers? Are the book shops bowing to economic pressures by only stocking profitable titles? Bourdieu once declared that ‘from the economic point of view...at the bottom is poetry, which, with a few, very rare exceptions...secures virtually zero profit for a small number of producers.’³⁶⁰ The actual sales of poetry books might be evidence of Bourdieu’s theory, but other factors need to be considered before announcing that poetry is dead.

What is clear is that the Australian general public is interested in reading as an activity, and the history of reading habits in Australia suggests that the public have long been keen library borrowers and book purchasers. Historian Marc Askew noted that colonial Australia was ‘undoubtedly a reading culture’ which was an important market for British booksellers³⁶¹ and Elizabeth Webby has discovered in her studies of nineteenth century readers that reading was a popular activity during this era, with many literary societies meeting regularly to discuss books. Some of these societies were set up

³⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field* 47.

³⁶¹ Marc Askew, ‘Reading the Australian Reading Public: Some Historical Considerations,’ *Books and Reading in Australian Society*, eds., Pat Buckridge, Jock Macleod (QLD: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, 1992) 133.

by wealthy, educated elites, but there were many aimed at those with little formal education that were often affiliated with Mechanics' Institutes and churches. Webby's research reveals that poetry was the most popular genre for literary society members of the 1890s,³⁶² although the majority of authors read and discussed were not Australian, with the exception of the extremely popular Adam Lindsay Gordon. The Australian public's interest in reading increased during the twentieth century, especially with the emergence of mass-produced titles within romance, detective and western genres. Some works of 'literature' were also accessed by a wide readership and managed to cross class lines with Dickens and Shakespeare popular among working-class and middle-class readers alike. There were also radical texts such as those written by Karl Marx that held some appeal for the Australian working class.³⁶³ These reading habits have continued into the twenty first century.

Surveys carried out to measure cultural activity also point to the popularity of reading, with a 2001 survey revealing that seventy two percent of respondents had read books for pleasure in the previous week, and a 1998 survey querying library patronage showed that over ninety percent of respondents considered libraries important institutions that were worthy of public funding. Statistics collected in 2002 demonstrated that forty two percent of adults visited a library that year,³⁶⁴ and previous surveys indicate that the percentage of the population who never buy or borrow books was only around sixteen percent.³⁶⁵ In 1989 a detailed study of Australian reading habits provided statistics (rather dated now, although a more up to date survey would most likely draw the same conclusions) on the kinds of books people borrowed from libraries, broken down by genre, which indicated that the majority of books borrowed were fiction titles, followed by non-fiction and children's books, with poetry collections accounting for less than three percent of titles borrowed.³⁶⁶ The combination of these figures demonstrate that in the contemporary era, reading is still an activity in which many Australians participate, although poetry only accounts for a tiny proportion of what most people choose to read. As has been mentioned before, poetry does not sell

³⁶² Elizabeth Webby, 'Not Reading the Nation: Australian Readers of the 1890s,' *Australian Literary Studies*, 22.3 (2006): 315-318.

³⁶³ Askew 138, 136 & 139.

³⁶⁴ '2001 Year Book Australia,' '4157.0 Public Attitudes to the Arts, 1998', '4114.0 Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, 2002', *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, 5 May 2004, <<http://www.Abs.gov.au>>.

³⁶⁵ Hans Hoegh Guldberg, *Books – Who Reads Them? A Study of Borrowing and Buying in Australia* (NSW: Australia Council, 1990) 4.

³⁶⁶ Guldberg 5.

well in Australia – so what are the reasons for its lack of popularity? If Australians like to read for leisure, but do not choose poetry, is this due to negative perceptions about poetry? Milner has suggested that ‘research has repeatedly confirmed that literature tends to be valued by the more educated, more affluent and more powerful groups ...meaning either that the dominant groups tend to have the better taste in “art” or merely that they have the power to define as “art” whatever it is they tend to prefer’³⁶⁷ And poetry tends to be included in the ‘art’ category. The notion that poetry is only accessible to the formally educated may be due to the way poetry is associated with study (through school) and the particular ways it is taught which often places an emphasis on rather dry analysis of poems. The types of poems taught in schools that are difficult and lack relevance for young people are then seen as representative of poetry in general.

The idea of poetry belonging to an elite is arguably due to the Australian public’s general distrust of the arts which is often manifested in government policies on arts funding. Graeme Turner suggests that the current perception among the public, fuelled by the rhetoric of conservative commentators and politicians is that cultural activity is the domain of an elite group of people who are serving self-interest and little else, without contributing to the good of the nation as a whole.³⁶⁸ Many people have subsequently become suspicious of tax-payers’ money being spent on subsidising the arts. Attitudes towards the arts have been surveyed and analysed, revealing that a significant section of the population considers the arts to be irrelevant to their general lives. A study commissioned by the Australia Council in 2000, for example, found that thirty seven percent of Australian people felt the arts had little or no role in their lives. Most of these people viewed art as an elite activity, irrelevant and often pretentious. As a result many of these people did not place a high value on the arts or on arts funding. In terms of a demographic pattern, the study showed that the majority of people with negative attitudes towards the arts have lower levels of education than those who do value or participate in the arts. This suggests a correlation with class status and interest in the arts, but also raises the question of whether the conservative criticisms of specific art activities in the popular press have influenced public opinion and contributed to the negative perception of the arts.³⁶⁹ There is a tendency in Australia for the public to be

³⁶⁷ Milner, *Literature* 17.

³⁶⁸ Graeme Turner, ‘Australian Literature and the Public Sphere,’ Bartlett, Dixon and Lee 4.

³⁶⁹ *Australians and the Arts: What do the Arts Mean to Australians? A Report to the Australia Council from Saatchi and Saatchi* (NSW: Australia Council, 2000) N.pag.

interested in and supportive of sport but, according to Peter Kell, art is often viewed as a 'meaningless pastime' and this attitude is evident in the media's reception of the Australian of the Year Award, as the choice of recipient has been criticised when awarded to an arts practitioner but never when the recipient is a sportsman.³⁷⁰

Despite this view of the arts, literature and culture in general have been advocated and supported by Australian governments to varying degrees. As Australia progressed as a nation it was considered vital for the character of the nation to have an established art culture, and governments have been willing to support the arts and to encourage the development of a national literature in order to compete as 'modern, civilised and progressive'.³⁷¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, the Commonwealth government established bodies to provide funding for artists, such as the Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1908, which awarded grants for writers throughout the first half of the century and included many poets among recipients.³⁷² Prior to Federation, state governments had already made contributions to culture through the funding of cultural institutions such as art galleries and libraries, and culture was considered an important aspect of Australian life. In 1912 the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board was established to assist artists, but the notion of large scale arts funding did not come into being until the 1940s.³⁷³ In 1946 the Arts Council of Australia was founded in New South Wales with the intention of making art accessible to the public, and in 1964 the Council became a federal funding body. The position of arts funding was further advanced in 1967 with the formation of the Australian Council for the Arts, which would later become a statutory body under legislation introduced by the Whitlam government.³⁷⁴

Throughout the decades, both Labor and Liberal governments have stated their support for the arts but actual art funding has tended to fluctuate depending on the government in power. The Whitlam government set the benchmark for substantial arts funding, but was also criticised for some of the more controversial projects it funded, such as the acquisition of the Jackson Pollock painting, *Blue Poles* in 1973, which was seen by many as a waste of public money. The tabloid press of the time suggested that

³⁷⁰ Peter Kell, *Good Sport: Australian Sport and the Myth of the Fair Go* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000) 115.

³⁷¹ Turner, *Australian Literature* 5.

³⁷² Justin MacDonnell, *Arts Minister? Government Policy and the Arts* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1992) 10.

³⁷³ David Throsby, 'Centenary Article - Public Funding of the Arts in Australia: 1900-2000,' *Year Book Australia 2002*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 19 June 2004, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/>>.

³⁷⁴ MacDonnell 92.

such a large sum of money spent on a painting was a sign of the government's extreme extravagance especially since the country was desperate at the time for improvements to public works. The reaction to *Blue Poles* had extensive ramifications for the public's attitude towards the art and culture in Australia. The painting was attacked for failing to represent anything significant to the Australian people. This public criticism of abstract art influenced public opinion, with many people dismissing such art as inaccessible and a symptom of the tastes of the elite. According to Barrett, the controversy surrounding *Blue Poles* 'illuminated the divisions within Australia's social fabric, and it brought to the fore disputes over the nature and direction of Australian society and culture which would remain unresolved for decades.'³⁷⁵ The negative reaction to the abstract art of Pollock has since filtered through to the arts in general, including poetry. Despite this, governments continue to provide public money to fund the arts, with government support for the arts and culture reaching a peak in 1994.

Although there have been various levels of funding for poetry through the provision of a small number of highly competitive individual grants awarded by the Arts Council (who also provide grants for some literary magazines), and state prizes and grants for poetry such as the NSW Premier's Prize and the Queensland Arts Award, (both of which have categories for poetry), the total funding for poetry falls far short of the number of applicants and prize entrants. There are also a small number of privately-funded prizes for poetry, such as the Broadway Poetry Prize and prizes awarded by not-for-profit organizations often facilitated by an endowment from a literary figure such as the Bruce Dawe Poetry Prize, or funded by entry fees and organized by regional writers' centres and some universities. Prize money varies from several thousand dollars for the major awards to prizes of book vouchers or bottles of wine for the smaller community based ones.

In recent years there has been a backlash of opinion voiced against the arts, and criticism directed at those who are seen as protecting minority, 'special interest' groups.³⁷⁶ Although large numbers of the Australian public enjoy reading, there are many who do not support the idea of publicly funding writers and believe that writers should be expected to fund their own activities. This opinion has been reinforced by literary scandals which have seen large monetary prizes awarded to writers who have

³⁷⁵ Lindsay Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card: Blue Poles and Cultural Politics in the Whitlam Era* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001)19.

³⁷⁶ Turner, *Australian Literature* 4.

produced their work under misleading pseudonyms. This kind of incident suggests to the public that writers are dishonest and that the bodies which award prizes and grants must be fools to have been duped by false identities. There also has been an increase in articles and commentary written by journalists complaining about the elitism of academics, and questioning the role they play as gatekeepers of the nation's literature. Journalists have claimed that the discipline of English literature has been lost under mountains of cultural theory and the politicisation of study.³⁷⁷ The criticism of literary academics is part of a wider attack on academic elites that has emerged in Australia. In their study of anti-elitism, Barry Hindess and Marian Sawer claim that politicians and media commentators have been voicing anti-elitist views which essentially attack intellectuals and academics who are seen as forming a vocal minority, and whose views are considered elitist and harmful to social cohesion. This 'unrepresentative cosmopolitan elite' have been described as the 'new class' and their liberal ideology is dismissed as self-serving and far removed from that of ordinary Australians.³⁷⁸

Such attitudes do not bode well for art in general but, despite the small and specialised audience that poetry attracts, schools still include poetry as a component of the English syllabus, and according to the New South Wales Board of Studies' notes on the English syllabus for years 7-10, poetry as a set text 'reaffirm(s) the creative power of poetry in the lives of young people.' In this curriculum students are expected to study a variety of poems, and are encouraged to explore the creative processes of writing their own poetry as well as read a wide selection outside the prescribed texts. It is also suggested in the teaching notes that poetry has the ability to 'inspire many other aspects of English', and the study of poetry can provide students with the 'confidence to experiment with language, to create new sounds, overturn sense and take risks.'³⁷⁹ The syllabus includes classics such as Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' and Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', but also contains Henry Lawson's 'Faces in the Street' and 'The Man from Snowy River' by Banjo Paterson as well as contemporary poets such as Steven Herrick who writes specifically for children and young adults. There is also Aboriginal poetry such as the collections *Spirit Song: A Collection of Aboriginal Poetry* and *My People* by Oodgeroo and poetry intended for performance,

³⁷⁷ Turner, *Australian Literature* 9.

³⁷⁸ Barry Hindess, Marian Sawer. eds., *Us and Them: Anti-elitism in Australia* (WA: API Network, 2004) 1, 2 & 10.

³⁷⁹ 'English Syllabus Years 7-10,' *NSW Board of Studies*, 9 May 2004, <<http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/>>.

indicating a wide range of styles and genres. The study of poetry also features within the NSW Higher School Certificate English, with students attempting all levels of English expected to study some poetry as part of their courses. Students taking Standard English can choose from a selection of contemporary Australian poets such as Bruce Dawe and Samuel Wagan Watson. Within the higher level English courses, such as English Advanced, the list of Australian poets is much shorter, with an emphasis on classics such as Chaucer, Yeats and Wordsworth, with Gwen Harwood the only Australian poet represented. The English syllabuses of the other states and territories also include various selections of poetry, with a similar mixture of classic British, American and contemporary Australian poets. The Western Australian English syllabus for year 11 students appears to have the largest choice of Australian poetry as prescribed texts. Undoubtedly, poetry is a significant element of the English syllabus, but how this poetry is presented to students varies from teacher to teacher.

Beyond school and university courses, poetry does have a part to play in contemporary culture. Significant numbers of people are amateur poets and write for various reasons; as an outlet for creative expression, or for the cathartic experience of writing about personal problems. For many, poetry becomes relevant and necessary at certain times of their lives; this can occur during bereavement when grieving family members or friends compose or read verse at funeral services and memorials. In this situation, the ability of poetry to express intense emotions becomes an important and powerful part of the grieving process, and the mourner composing a poem for a loved one is able to share something personal and unique with family and friends. Poetry is often used for happier occasions too, with couples choosing to recite poetry as part of their wedding vows, or composing poems to commemorate anniversaries, birthdays and other special occasions. Many people actually choose a greeting card because of the verse inside, and the poetry becomes a method of expressing sentiments that might be difficult to present in any other way. Teenagers write poetry to express the overwhelming feelings they experience during adolescence and school magazines and websites often publish students' work. The continuing relevance of poetry can be seen when looking through popular magazines, especially those aimed at female readers, and which often include readers' poems which are sometimes whimsical accounts of families or misadventure and sometimes more serious poems about losses and overcoming adversity. Poetry also appears occasionally in local newspapers, usually highlighting an event significant to the local community. There are other areas where

poetry appears; supporters of sporting teams often use rhymes and songs to cheer on their team or to display their rivalry with opponents. An episode of the Rugby League television show, *The Footy Show* in 2004 featured a young woman reciting a poem about the various teams in the competition.

Poetry readings still draw audiences, especially in suburban or regional venues where the audiences are not made up of the predominantly middle-class audiences at national literary events such as the Sydney Writers' Festival. This can be seen when attending readings in pubs and regional writers' centres, which attract locals who are interested in listening to poetry as entertainment. The monthly poetry readings at the Friend in Hand pub in Sydney's Glebe or the Poets in the Pub sessions at the Northern Star Hotel in Newcastle attract a diverse audience, some of whom are drinkers at the pub who find themselves listening to the poetry while socialising or playing pool. This creates a lively atmosphere, where heckling is common and where the poets must do their best to capture the audiences' interest. Country readings are also usually very well attended and there is a thriving contemporary bush poetry scene which continues the traditions of the nineteenth century bush poets, while exploring themes of modern day life in the bush.

Divisions within the Australian Poetry Scene

Although many people maintain a relationship with poetry, I would suggest that the general public has little idea of how professional poets operate and what kind of world they inhabit. They may be unaware, for example, that there is a diverse community of poets in Australia divided into various factions. The same people might be even more surprised to know that these 'camps' frequently engage in fiery debates over their particular poetic leanings and these debates have even been described as 'poetry wars'. There has not been, to my knowledge, any violence committed in the name of poetry, despite Peter Pierce's suggestion that 'poetic politics in Australia is the nearest that society approaches gang warfare'³⁸⁰ but there has been name-calling and sniping (or to use a sporting term, 'sledging') among the poetry community and vigorous debate within the pages of literary magazines, arts sections of newspapers and in poetry e-groups on the internet. The 'poetry wars' originated in the 1970s when a new generation of poets embraced post-modernism and turned away from the traditions of pastoral or

³⁸⁰ Peter Pierce, 'Little Magazines in the 1970s,' *Cross Currents: Magazines and Newspapers in Australian Literature*, ed. Bruce Bennett (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1981) 222.

metaphysical poetry. This movement from traditional poetry created a division, with the so-called 'generation of '68' on one side, consisting of poets such as John Tranter, John Scott and Alan Wearne, and on the other traditional side, Les Murray, Geoffrey Lehman and others. The traditionalists criticised the post-modernists for being too experimental and academic and having abandoned the bush and Australian identity in their poetry. The '68ers saw themselves as offering something new, more influenced by American poets than the British tradition.³⁸¹

These kinds of artistic disagreements were not new, and followed on from those of previous generations, such as the 1940s poets who favoured traditional forms, religious and classical Greek or Roman mythologies, compared with those who embraced modernism and experimented with free verse, surrealism and other non-traditional forms.³⁸² The divisions between the 1940s groups culminated in the Ern Malley hoax, when conservatives James McAuley and Harold Stewart created Malley to discredit the modernist poet and editor Max Harris. McAuley and Stewart wrote poems in a modernist style and attributed them to the fictional Malley. These poems were sent to Harris, who subsequently published them. Although the hoax damaged Harris both personally and professionally, it has been suggested that Harris' modernist style has been far more influential and enduring than that of the conservatives.³⁸³ This can be seen in the success of the '68ers such as John Tranter, Alan Wearne and Laurie Duggan and the next generation they have influenced including John Kinsella, Gig Ryan and Adam Aitken.³⁸⁴ The type of poetry advocated by the traditionalists is not as favoured among the literary establishment.

Contemporary Australian poetry seems to be divided into three two main camps; those who produce or advocate poetry that is informed by traditionalism and conservatism such as Les Murray, those who write to be accessible for a wide readership, such as Lauren Williams; and those who prefer language driven, often esoteric poetry such as Alison Croggan. And there are contradictions inherent among each group which I will reveal during this discussion.

The traditionalists are inclined to disapprove of academic influences on poetry, and are acrimonious towards academics in general. Les Murray sees academics as

³⁸¹ David McCooley, 'Contemporary Poetry : Across Party Lines,' *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 161.

³⁸² Lee Cataldi, 'Contemporary Australian Poetry: A Prejudiced Biased Account,' *Overland* 159 (2000): 36.

³⁸³ Cataldi 37.

³⁸⁴ McCooley 167.

responsible for creating an elite poetry clique and for making false claims about the existence of a class system in Australia. Murray feels that the academic influence on poetry has resulted in a loss of readership, 'it does seem that education trains a small public for poetry, but loses us a large one.'³⁸⁵ Murray has also accused universities of spouting 'Marxist fantasies' which allow bad writing to be accepted purely on the basis of its ideological content.³⁸⁶ Academics, according to Murray, exclude his poetry and the readers who do not fit into their atheist, left-biased political framework – 'the literary-intellectual caste...hates my religion, it disdains and patronises my people, it yearns after aristocracy, it marinades its every word in contempt.'³⁸⁷ Murray is suspicious of notions of class though, and when he refers to his 'people' he appears to be describing the rural poor, and does not acknowledge the urban working class or poetry produced by working class people. It is possible that the type of poetry that Murray values is ultimately his own and despite insisting that he is among the marginalised, his poetry is always included in mainstream anthologies of Australian poetry and he has been the recipient of numerous literary awards.

Political correctness is also seen as a negative symptom of academic poetry and conservative critics such as Patrick McCauley believe that many contemporary issues are not being examined in poetry because poets are too scared to write the truth for fear it may offend. Although McCauley states that 'political correctness has no place in a free-thinking poetry'³⁸⁸ and that poets should '...have the courage to write about what they see regardless of race, politics or sex...'³⁸⁹ he does not actually offer any specific examples of politically correct poetry but instead provides a list of contemporary 'problems' that need to be written about including 'homosexuality...feminism, post-feminism stress syndrome...the breakdown of lifelong marriage'.³⁹⁰ McCauley writes for the conservative literary magazine, *Quadrant*, and amid his criticisms of 'abstract, surreal, postmodernist, cleverness' he also attacks female poets who display 'battered victimhood' and who falsely claim to be disadvantaged in 'a literature scene dominated

³⁸⁵ Les Murray, *Blocks and Tackles: Articles and Essays 1982-1990* (NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1990) ix.

³⁸⁶ Les Murray, *Peasant Mandarin: Prose Pieces* (St. Lucia: UQP, 1978) 34.

³⁸⁷ Murray, *A Working Forest* 4.

³⁸⁸ Patrick McCauley, 'Be a Poet and Have Everybody Know it,' *The Weekend Australian* August 31 (2002): 22.

³⁸⁹ Patrick McCauley, 'The Dreadful Orthodoxy,' *Quadrant* September (2002): 65.

³⁹⁰ McCauley, *Be a Poet* 22.

by women', when it is really the men who are the minority and can 'no longer afford to be male if they want to be artists or writers or poets.'³⁹¹

McCauley believes that, due to political correctness, society favours individuals from minority groups and delivers special attention in the form of positive discrimination towards people due to race, gender, sexuality and disability. He states that rewards are not distributed for 'merit or excellence', but are based on identification with minority groups. According to McCauley, universities are the guardians of politically correct poetry, and 'academics and dilettantes' do their best to secure poetry as an elite activity, closed off to anyone who does not share their special knowledge.³⁹² McCauley proposes that this elite group also focuses on 'cleverness and...pretty constructions of their poems' rather than considering the importance of 'coherence, authenticity or meaning.' McCauley also challenges literary magazines, claiming that they are aimed at 'a very small, well educated (professional, influential), loyal readership.' He describes the poetry as 'quite often in language and form which is inaccessible to the ordinary citizen.'³⁹³ He goes on to describe pure language poems as 'postmodernist indulgence' that ignores the needs of its audience.³⁹⁴ McCauley criticises poets whose work can not be read well to an audience, and believes that such poets do not write from lived experience and are therefore unable to connect with an audience, or withstand the 'accountability' of reading to an audience.³⁹⁵ In his attacks on political correctness, McCauley appears to be suggesting that the 'average' Australian, most commonly identified as a white, Anglo-Celtic male, is being discriminated against and missing out on important recognition for his efforts because 'minorities' are being championed by the intellectual do-gooder left. The idea of the 'new class' is evident in McCauley's statements, as he appears to view academic poets as members of the intellectual 'chattering class' described previously. But recent high-profile anthologies of poetry reveal that there are few poets included whose poetry would fit into the 'minority' status described by McCauley. The *Best Australian Poetry 2006* anthology does not contain any poets who could be categorised as a racial 'minority'. A similar anthology, *The Best Australian Poems 2006* contains one Vietnamese poet, one Sudanese poet and two Aboriginal poets among the 106 poets included, thus

³⁹¹ McCauley, *The Dreadful* 64.

³⁹² Patrick McCauley, 'Winners are Losers in Poets' War,' *The Weekend Australian* January 25 (2003): D04.

³⁹³ McCauley, *The Dreadful* 63.

³⁹⁴ McCauley, *The Dreadful* 63.

³⁹⁵ McCauley, *The Dreadful* 65.

contradicting McCauley's allegations of political correctness, and demonstrating 'mainstreamism' in Australian anthologies.

Despite McCauley's conservative views, he does have some allies within the academia he attacks. Sydney academic Martin Harrison, for one, also alleges that the poet's identity has become a prominent factor in publishability, claiming that marketing demands give preference to writers who are 'dying of AIDS' or who might be 'a naïve spokesperson for a threatened minority group.'³⁹⁶ Harrison asserts that some writers believe that criticism of their work is irrelevant because of their 'membership in identity groups which are exotic, or unfamiliar'.³⁹⁷ Such writers, according to Harrison often maintain that the quality of their work is misunderstood by critics who are unaware of the "reality effects" produced by the three gloomy, scissor-wielding sisters: gender, class and identity.³⁹⁸ Harrison also claims that issues of gender, class and identity appear frequently at literary events and have reduced the ability of serious criticism to fully engage with contemporary poetry. Although it is true that publishing companies are keen to tap into the 'cult' of the author if it will assist in marketing a product,³⁹⁹ this has not occurred in the case of working-class poets, who are yet to be groomed by publishers, agents or academic supporters. Despite Harrison's comments to the contrary, in the case of class at least, there is usually very little dialogue on the topic at literary events or within literary circles and university writing programs.

Although not in the conservative camp, Five Islands Press publisher Ron Pretty has publicly lamented the loss of a poetry reading public and blames this partly on the public's perception of poetry as too difficult and intellectual to be accessible, and partly on publishers and book store chains for their failure to print and actively promote poetry books due to the lack of commercial viability. Pretty conveys that 'if poetry is not to become a form of arcane knowledge, the province of the isolated and esoteric few...then it is vital that we continue to produce poetry that speaks to ordinary readers, people who will read the stuff if only (a) they can find it and (b) they can understand it when they do.'⁴⁰⁰ High-profile poet Dorothy Porter has made statements similar to those of Pretty and claimed that if poetry only exists as an academic exercise it is in danger of

³⁹⁶ Martin Harrison, 'The Tenth Muse: Teaching and Writing Poetry,' *Text* 1.1 (1997), Australian Association of Writing Programs, 25 February 2004, < <http://www.gu.edu.au/text/school/art/text/april97/harrison.htm>. p 3>.

³⁹⁷ Harrison, *The Tenth* 5.

³⁹⁸ Harrison, *The Tenth* 5.

³⁹⁹ Anne Galligan, 'Build the Author, Sell the Book: Marketing the Australian Author in the 1990s,' Bartlett, Dixon and Lee 151.

⁴⁰⁰ Ron Pretty, 'The Publisher Regrets,' *Five Bells* 8.4 spring (2001): 20.

becoming 'boring and sterile', devoid of emotion and appeal to the general reader.⁴⁰¹ Porter calls for a poetry that is 'lucid' rather than, 'flaccid and obscure and irrelevant' and suggests that many poets seem content to write for 'an exclusive club just for each other.' For Porter, poetry has the potential to make a difference but not if it 'makes no sense' and she offers the work of poets Judith Wright and Lionel Fogarty as examples of lucid and confronting poetry.⁴⁰² In her own poetry, Porter has managed to successfully blend popular and high culture by employing genres such as crime fiction within her poetry, as in her verse novel *The Monkeys' Mask*. This work was also adapted into a film and performed on stage and has sold very well for a poetry title, (10,000 copies were sold within the first eighteen months of publication).⁴⁰³ Poet James Stuart also points to the negative perception of poetry held by the public and suggests that poetry needs to be 're-branded' to improve its position within the public sphere – to re-market poetry as a cultural practice that is relevant to the general public. Rather than arguing over what may be the 'right' style of poetry, Stewart believes that poets would be better served in raising the profile of their craft.⁴⁰⁴

But poets are often defensive about their attitudes and can be dismissive of criticisms that their poetry has little relevance for potential readers. Perhaps it is as Bourdieu claims: 'authors who manage to secure "high society" successes and bourgeois consecration are opposed to those who are condemned to so-called "popular" success'⁴⁰⁵ Sydney poet, Adam Aitken, describes the criticism of Australia's poetry scene as 'bullying we hear from critics and commentators...that Australian poetry is elitist, out of touch, doesn't speak to the working class, lacks the common touch is PC etc, etc.'⁴⁰⁶ Other poets have offered different explanations for the divisions within the poetry community. Pam Brown for one, suggests that one of the reasons for such divisions is that there still exists 'jealousies and feudings over the spoils...and that there are far too many poets of varying degrees of interest and ability and hardly enough spoils to go around.'⁴⁰⁷ Aitken agrees with Brown's view but also notes that poetry is more complex and diverse than naming factions or speaking of 'wars'. Aitken believes

⁴⁰¹ Dorothy Porter, 'Statements,' *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics*, eds., David Brooks, Brenda Walker (St Lucia: UQP, 1989) 61.

⁴⁰² Dorothy Porter, 'Lucidity: The Poetry of Making Sense,' *Judith Wright Memorial Lecture*, Poets' Union, 7 July 2001, <<http://www.poetsunion.com/papers.html>>.

⁴⁰³ Leigh Dale, 'Canonising Queer: From Hal to Dorothy,' Bartlett, Dixon and Lee 177.

⁴⁰⁴ James Stuart, 'Repositioning Poetry,' *Five Bells* 10.4 spring (2003): 31.

⁴⁰⁵ Bourdieu, *The Field* 46.

⁴⁰⁶ Adam Aitken, 'Line and Space,' *Five Bells* 10. 3 winter (2003) 46.

⁴⁰⁷ Pam Brown, online posting, *PoetryEspresso*, February 2004, <<http://www.topica.com/lists/PoetryEspresso/>>.

that a poet's personal poetics should be revealed only through their poetry rather than any statements they might make on the subject.⁴⁰⁸ Many poets take Aitken's position, with Ken Bolton suggesting that 'it takes a certain sort of personality to be fully devoted to the machinations of poetry politics.'⁴⁰⁹

The idea that poetry somehow should be above any divisions or internal politics is often conveyed by poets who feel that their writing is beyond categorisation due to the 'special' aesthetic of their craft. Alison Croggon has said that she can not understand what politics has in common with 'actual live poems'⁴¹⁰ and Brook Emery believes that 'categories and labels are a lazy substitute for what a poet is actually doing in a poem. Domestic, Personal, Confessional, Political, Linguistic mean nothing, [they] hide and homogenise more than they reveal. They are often used to distance and dismiss.'⁴¹¹ In his introduction to the anthology *Landbridge*, editor John Kinsella declares that 'the anthologist's guide to gender, ethnicity, and class, has been rejected for the linguist's guide to multiple and varied language usage...a less forced and more accurate reading of variety...this isn't a collection of identities but of poems'⁴¹² suggesting again that poetry is elevated beyond the need for categories, but also serving as a contradiction when considering the statements about their poetry written by the poets contained in the anthology (including Aitken). The suggestion that poetry can be left alone to speak for itself without the restrictions of labels or allegiances to various poetic politics seems to belie the fact that numerous poets produce a substantial amount of criticism, commentary, essays and reviews relating to poetry and poetics.

In addition, poets may also believe that their poetry should not be commodified by appealing to a 'popular' readership, as this would indicate an acceptance of the forces of mass marketing and the current status quo which poetry should be resisting. Croggon asserts that poets must consider their position within society when writing, but must also avoid becoming part of the controlling 'cultural machine'⁴¹³ which echoes the theories of Adorno and the Frankfurt School who, despite their Marxist views, appeared to value 'high' culture over the stultifying effects of mass or popular culture. According

⁴⁰⁸ Adam Aitken, online posting, *PoetryEspresso*, February 2004, <<http://www.topica.com/lists/PoetryEspresso/>>.

⁴⁰⁹ Ken Bolton, online posting, *PoetryEspresso*, February 2004, <<http://www.topica.com/lists/PoetryEspresso/>>.

⁴¹⁰ Alison Croggon, online posting, *PoetryEspresso*, February 2004, <<http://www.topica.com/lists/PoetryEspresso/>>.

⁴¹¹ Brook Emery, 'What Are We Thinking and Writing Now?' *Five Bells* 9.1 (2002): 27.

⁴¹² John Kinsella, 'Introduction,' *Landbridge* (WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999)16.

⁴¹³ Alison Croggon, 'The Imaginative Life and the Social Responsibility of Writers,' *The Drunken Boat*, 18 February 2004, <<http://www.thedrunkenboat.com/acessay.html>>.

to Croggon, this 'cultural machine' strips the meaning from artworks and 'neutralises' their potential political power. Croggon goes on to state that poetry is 'doomed' if forced to enter the 'public domain' and that lyrical poetry 'cannot be a commodity'⁴¹⁴ which suggests that she considers her work to be separate from the market-driven worlds of publishing and promotion. However, Croggon has a large body of work published, and has successfully entered her poetry into literary awards and her work has been published by mainstream publishers such as Penguin. There appears to be a contradiction in her desire to be above the 'public domain' while actively engaged in promoting her poetry and poetics.

To avoid the problem of becoming too 'popular' many poets consciously employ linguistic opaqueness, and some state that a poem should not be direct or 'accessible' in meaning. Aitken defends opaqueness in poetry, and claims that communication in poetry does not need to be obvious, suggesting that such directness may not be 'desirable', and that 'what might be more beautiful and politically kinder and more democratic, is indirectness'.⁴¹⁵ The idea of indirect or abstract poetry is not a problem in itself, as there are readers who enjoy this kind of poetry, but it does become problematic when this is the only kind of poetry that is awarded value by the literary gatekeepers. The notion of 'elusiveness' also appeals to Judith Beveridge, and she remarks that 'a poem will resist all but partial meanings'.⁴¹⁶ Beveridge is an admirer of metaphor and believes this device to be a central element to poetry, and feels that poetry that does not employ extensive metaphor is inferior in form. Metaphor according to Beveridge is 'essential' and the use of metaphor not only creates poetry but assists individuals in living a 'more connected, more responsive, more thoughtful, more engaged life, ingredients essential to the potential of our intelligence'.⁴¹⁷ Beveridge speaks of poets needing to possess 'the whole psychic/spiritual interplay that it takes to have a life devoted to writing'.⁴¹⁸ There is an air of superiority in her tone that seems to suggest that writing poetry requires a connection with some form of 'muse' rather than being the activity of 'ordinary' people. While Beveridge acknowledges that not everyone enjoys the privileges she does – 'so many people do not have access to literacy, or to the socio-economic conditions that could make writing a choice for their lives', she further

⁴¹⁴ Croggon 4-5.

⁴¹⁵ Aitken 48.

⁴¹⁶ Judith Beveridge, 'How Poets Work,' *Five Bells* 9. 4 spring (2002):32.

⁴¹⁷ Judith Beveridge, 'Metaphor and Attention,' *Five Bells* 9.1 summer (2002):19.

⁴¹⁸ Beveridge, *How Poets* 31.

elevates herself from such people by stating that poetry is 'sacred'.⁴¹⁹ The act of writing poetry for Beveridge is spiritual and 'finds its parallels with dream, magic, memory, mystical vision';⁴²⁰ she even states that she must 'assume the voice of an angel just to put myself amongst some of the special words of the language.'⁴²¹ In Judith Beveridge's world there seems to be little place for poetry that deals with the mundane or everyday, or with the harsh realities of lives rarely touched by 'magic', which has grave implications for her reception of working-class poetry. Martin Harrison shares a similar view to Beveridge, suggesting that poems begin in the subconscious 'from wordless and inchoate states of mind'⁴²² which then take time to develop sufficiently before the poet is able to 'catch them' and write them down. This conjures the image of the poet engaged in a dream-like state, waiting for moments of inspiration to appear, and discounts poets who choose to write about an experience or event for a specific purpose, such as a working-class writer presenting poems that deal with a particular incident or experience they feel needs voicing.

Other advocates of opaque poetry are those who also favour experimental language poetry and some poets consider such poetry to be resistant to the mainstream. Alison Croggon sees resistance as an essential element of the writing of poetry, which can be accomplished through the 'aesthetic experience of a work of writing, the experience of beauty that writing can offer, may ignite its anarchy'. By utilising language, the poet is able to reach a reader on a 'visceral, emotional level' which lifts the individual from the 'miasma of contemporary mass culture' and returns to people 'the realities of human experience from the many interested powers which seek to conceal and distort it'.⁴²³ The idea that experimentation with language can operate as a form of resistance is also explored by Ann Vickery who suggests that 'language poetry may be seen as collapsing boundaries...Concerned with foregrounding the political nature of the act of writing'.⁴²⁴ Vickery claims that language poetry can question traditional notions of identity in a similar way to feminism and, therefore, challenge the status

⁴¹⁹ Beveridge, in Kinsella 45.

⁴²⁰ Beveridge, *Metaphor* 17.

⁴²¹ Judith Beveridge, 'Statements,' Brooks, Walker 24.

⁴²² Martin Harrison, 'Poetry and Nature,' *Five Bells* 8.3 (2001), Poets Union, 10 July 2003, <<http://www.poetsunion.com>>.

⁴²³ Croggon 3-6.

⁴²⁴ Ann Vickery, 'Poetic Form and Cultural Politics: Protean Linkages between Language Poetry and Feminist Critique,' *The Space of Poetry: Australian Essays on Contemporary Poetics*, eds., Lyn McCredden, Stephanie Trigg (Victoria: University of Melbourne, 1996) 17.

quo.⁴²⁵ But the parallels that Vickery draws between language poetry and feminism do not take into account the fact that obscure forms of poetry and rhetoric often alienate certain sections of the community such as those with limited education, many of whom are of course women. I would suggest that the alternative language employed by working-class writers could also be seen as challenging the status quo.

The discussion above leads to the view that the forces of economic rationalism have contributed to the narrowing of publication opportunities for poets and a reinforcing of the perception that poetry is an elitist activity requiring a liberal arts education. Poetry editors are not helping and Zandy highlights the attitudes towards working-class poetry thus, '[working-class writing] is hidden because it is not located in academe, and in choice of language and subject, it may not be viewed as aesthetically pleasing by middle-class editors and publishers'.⁴²⁶ If poets and editors were more willing to consider all forms of poetry as valid, there would arguably be more chance of reaching a wider readership. To insist that one form of poetry, such as language driven or imagist poetry, is superior to another such as working-class or bush poetry that is equally well crafted is to do poetry in general a great disservice. A potential readership for poetry does exist within Australia and it is the task of those influential in the literary scene to consider ways that this audience may be tapped. This may require poets themselves to reconsider their attitudes towards poetry outside of their framework, and to think of ways to combat the negative perception of poetry that is held by the general public. Incorporating working-class poetry into the current canon may be one way of challenging these perceptions and opening up the sheltered world of poetry to a more diverse and larger audience.

Debate on Working-Class Poetry

An example of how poetic divisions operate and the implication for the reception of working-class poetry can be seen by the volume of dialogue that occurred as a response to a short article I wrote for the journal *Overland* in 2001.⁴²⁷ The resulting debate stretched over six issues of the magazine and revealed some passionate opinions on the subject of working-class poetry. My piece was a response to a review I had received of my poetry collection *Hope in Hell*. In my response I criticised the reviewer, Kerry

⁴²⁵ Vickery 21.

⁴²⁶ Zandy, *Calling Home* 8.

⁴²⁷ Sarah Attfield, 'Working-Class Poets,' *Overland* 163 (2001): 81-2.

Leves, for being unsympathetic towards working-class poetry, and also made a few points about the marginalisation of working-class poetry by the middle-class literary establishment. Printed alongside my piece was a reply from the then poetry editor of *Overland*, Pam Brown⁴²⁸ who defended Leves' review and her own methods of selecting poetry for *Overland*, claiming that she and the magazine could not be considered part of the middle-class establishment. In the next issue of *Overland* (164), the topic was once again aired, this time by Leves, Maurice Strandgard and Michael Farrell. Leves defended his review and stated that labelling some poetry as working-class could be 'over-defining, limiting and schematising'⁴²⁹ Leves also disputed my suggestion that much working-class poetry does not contain metaphor, and this was picked up by Maurice Strandgard who claimed that such a statement was an insult to the working-class poets who do use metaphor. Strandgard also suggested that the reason why working-class poetry is dismissed by editors is because it is not good enough.⁴³⁰ The third set of comments were made by Michael Farrell and were a little more sympathetic to my original piece and drew a parallel between working-class limited education and rural isolation, claiming that the exclusion of metaphor in poetry can be the result of a conscious, intellectual position.⁴³¹

The next issue of *Overland* (165) was a special edition with a focus on working-class poetry, and included a longer article of mine on working-class poetry, an interview I conducted with Geoff Goodfellow and a selection of working-class poems. Another two responses to my initial piece were also included, one from Brad Evans, the editor of *Red Lamp* magazine, which was specifically intended as a forum for working-class, socialist and radical poetry, and poet Lauren Williams. Despite Evans' advocacy for working-class poetry in general he criticised my position as a working-class poet operating from within the middle-class establishment, and suggested I could make more of a difference if I were to produce a magazine for working-class writers and attempt to find more practical solutions to the problems faced by working-class poets. Evans suggested that the establishment will never be interested in working-class writing and there was therefore no point trying to change attitudes from within. He accused working-class writers such as myself and Geoff Goodfellow of only being interested in

⁴²⁸ Pam Brown, 'Reply to Sarah Attfield,' *Overland* 163 (2001): 82.

⁴²⁹ Kerry Leves, 'Working-Class Poetry 1,' *Overland* 164 (2001): 99.

⁴³⁰ Maurice Strandgard, 'Working-Class Poets 2,' *Overland* 164 (2001): 100.

⁴³¹ Michael Farrell, 'Working-Class Poetry 3,' *Overland* 164 (2001): 100.

pursuing individual careers, as having, 'middle-class aspirations' and not being dedicated to the publication and promotion of other working-class writers.⁴³²

Lauren Williams was reluctant to use categories such as 'working class' but did acknowledge that there are large divisions within Australian poetry and that certain types of poetry are undervalued as a result. She roughly divided two main groups within poetry as those who create 'inclusive' poems and those who produce 'exclusive' work. For Williams, the inclusive poets place emphasis on content and language that follows the patterns of actual speech and write poetry that is usually accessible to the general reader. On the other hand, exclusive poetry is much more difficult and can be 'obscure in meaning or goal; uses highly stylised language or heightened poetic "tone", emphasising form over content.' Although Williams acknowledged that such poets are not necessarily intending to exclude certain readers from their poetry, she did suggest that exclusive poetry tends to dominate as the supporters of such poetry are often instrumental in controlling the poetry scene through their positions as prize judges and grant allocaters. She also claimed the exclusive poets are highly critical of poetry that is accessible and look upon it disparagingly, dismissing poems that they consider to be 'lacking in craft/ metaphor/ imagery/ literary awareness; excessive realism/ naiveté; reliance on content; plain language'. According to Williams, the proponents of exclusive poetry dismiss other forms in order to hold onto the privileged positions they enjoy, and are not willing to accept that there is room for both types of poetry, and she stated that the denial of such attitudes from exclusivist poets makes it very difficult to break the barriers such divisions create.⁴³³ The debate continued into *Overland* 166, where Laurie Duggan suggested that working-class poets do not adequately display a 'love of language in its varied forms' and criticised Lauren Williams' defence of 'accessible' poetry. He went on to evaluate the poems included in the working-class poetry edition of *Overland*, criticising them for being didactic in tone 'some poems I'd dearly love to slice off the last third of – I've already got the message.'⁴³⁴ Duggan also suggested that advocates for working-class poetry demonstrate a narrow inflexible view that can be likened to the right-wing certainty of publications such as *Quadrant*. The debate did not end with Duggan's comments and in *Overland* 167, Niall Clugston, who had a poem published in the working-class poetry edition, replied to Duggan, claiming that

⁴³² Brad Evans, 'Working-Class Poetry,' *Overland* 165 (2001): p 70.

⁴³³ Lauren Williams, 'On Working-Class Poets,' *Overland* 165 (2001): 70-72.

⁴³⁴ Laurie Duggan, 'On Working-Class Poetry,' *Overland* 166 (2002):101-102.

Duggan's views were elitist and that poetry was in danger of becoming too self-absorbed and introspective. Clugston suggested that Duggan's views were indicative of a poetry 'monopoly' which only views poetry as a 'dreamy form of self-expression' thus leaving no room for other forms and Clugston defended a certain amount of 'dogmatism' from those advocating working-class poetry as 'useful'.⁴³⁵ The debate on working-class poetry within *Overland* ended with a poem by Lauren Williams, in which she suggested that the kind of elitist attitudes held by Duggan dismissed many valid forms of poetry, especially those which may be popular and accessible to a general reader. Her poem, 'Shakespeare was a Performance Poet', imagines Shakespeare as a contemporary Australian poet '...his penchant for performance sees him accused / of popularity, accessibility / *All, all cry shame against me* / dismissed as entertainment...it's ironic / poets who'd ignore him call him genius / *heaven in my mouth*'.⁴³⁶ In a published diary entry, Duggan complained that the poem he then wrote in response to Williams' was not published by *Overland* and that he risked being labelled as a member of 'gangland' by the magazine's supporters as he had taken the debate 'to the enemy' by allowing his essay to be included in the 2002 *Best Australian Essays* anthology.⁴³⁷

Williams' comments on inclusive and exclusive poetry sparked a fiery debate among the prominent poets who subscribed to the internet e-group, *PoetryEspresso*.⁴³⁸ This e-group provided a forum for discussions of poetry related issues and listed as its members many poets who would fall under Williams' 'exclusivist' school. The individual poets included, Adam Aitken, Jill Jones, Pam Brown, Michael Farrell and Alison Croggon. The first poet to respond to Williams' piece in *Overland*, and to the general articles on working-class poetry was list convenor Cassie Lewis who suggested that Williams' division of poets into two camps was 'simplistic' and stated that poetry cannot be easily categorised as it 'is not paraphrasable, it is not reductive or reducible.' Jill Jones criticised Williams' perception of a division within poetry by stating that to use such terms as 'inclusionist' or 'exclusionist' has 'judgemental overtones...a strategy that leads somewhere towards madness.' Jones also described the arguments presented in *Overland* as 'simplistic' and 'patronising', while admitting that she had not actually read through the articles mentioned. Williams was also accused of having written her

⁴³⁵ Niall Clugston, 'Reply to Laurie Duggan,' *Overland* 167 (2002): 88.

⁴³⁶ Lauren Williams, 'Shakespeare was a Performance Poet,' *Overland* 168 (2002): 88.

⁴³⁷ Laurie Duggan, 'Diary Entries 6,' *Australian Poetry Resources Internet Library*, 10 July 2007, <<http://www.austlit.com/a/duggan/d7-melb-brisb.html>>.

⁴³⁸ All email postings to PoetryEspresso can be viewed in the list archives held by Topica at <<http://www.topica.com/lists/PoetryEspresso/>>.

article purely because she had received a negative review for one of her books by a poet she would consider 'exclusivist', rather than because she wished to raise issues she considered important.

Due to the response of the *PoetryEspresso* poets to the working-class poetry debate, I sent an email request to the list members in March 2004, asking if anyone would be willing to share their views on the current Australian poetry scene, with a particular emphasis on the trends, themes or groups they might perceive through their contact with other poets and their work as practising writers. I made it clear in my request that the views they posted might be used as part of my PhD thesis and all respondents were willing to have their views published in this form. A number of responses were posted to the list and the direction of the list discussion and the content of replies took a rather unexpected turn. One of the first poets to respond to my request was Jennifer Compton, who stated in relation to the current poetry scene that 'ninety percent of everything is bullshit' and her comments set the tone for the following responses. In my initial email I had mentioned a report by Ron Pretty in a Poetry Australia Foundation newsletter in which he reported on a meeting of the Literature Board at which several individuals suggested that much of Australian poetry is mediocre and that only about 10% of published poetry is actually worth reading. Ken Bolton suggested that this figure was quite reasonable and criticised Pretty for not producing poetry that 'would be lifting the national average much.' Laurie Duggan agreed that only a minute percentage of poetry on offer is interesting, with most being 'mediocre' and Chris Mansell went further with her description of most poetry as 'crap' and 'mostly I want to puke.'

These strong sentiments were criticised by others as being unfair as the judgement of quality in poetry is too subjective. Cassie Lewis stated that to suggest that all poetry is crap is 'predicated on the fact that we all think we're excluded from that company'. Jill Jones agreed with Lewis, asserting that it is not right to point the finger at 'others' especially when no one seemed willing to put forward the names of poets they believed fell into the mediocre category. Alison Croggon suggested that poetry was mostly boring, while lamenting the difficulty of finding poetry in bookshops in the first place. Andrew Burke claimed that it was ironic that poets as a group were not only criticising other poets but also attacking the very structure (the poetry scene) that supported them all, 'those saps not only think less of themselves today, but they think less of the pond they swim in!' Chris Mansell responded with the suggestion that the

poetry scene consisted of ‘hierarchies, feuds, schisms, hysterics and blood vendettas’ typical of any grouping of ‘social animals’.

From this point the discussion descended somewhat into chaos as list members began to criticise and launch personal attacks at each other, mainly as a result of postings being misinterpreted and defensive responses fired off rapidly. It seems that some of the poets on the list were confused by other members’ attempts at light heartedness and took offence rather quickly. The emotions that came to the surface during this discussion were very interesting. It was somewhat surprising, though, that the poets, the majority of whom had not actually met each other face to face, but who seemed to consider themselves as part of a poetry community, were willing to insult each other. Although my initial request for thoughts on the current poetry scene was not really addressed, the exercise was useful in providing an insight into some of the sentiments and often belligerent attitudes held by members of that scene.

In April 2004 I posed another question to the list members, asking them to describe who they considered influential within the scene, and the responses I received were interesting and useful. Several of the list members pointed to the role of publishers as the most influential; as they held the balance of power in determining whose work would receive exposure. Publishers of small presses and literary journals were described as being able to build reputations, and therefore holding a crucial role in the development of the poetry scene. Others suggested that individual poets could be influential in terms of their particular style and Laurie Duggan named John Forbes, Les Murray and Dorothy Porter as examples of contemporary poets who have influenced the poetic styles of their contemporaries, although he did not elaborate except to say that Porter had been instrumental in popularising the genre of the verse novel as a form. Andrew Burke suggested that influence is not necessarily obvious and can exist on the margins or ‘underground’ for a long time before being noticed within the mainstream. Burke described this type of influence as ‘subcultural’ and stated that it is often the poets who are overlooked that ultimately end up influencing the following generation. Laurie Duggan suggested that a possible way of measuring influence would be to look at the amount of critical work being written on individual poets to give an indication of who has captured the most interest.

The discussions that occurred on *PoetryEspresso* in 2004 indicate that many poets are concerned with their own position within the literary scene, whether as a poet who is critically acclaimed or one who is able to sell their works. It seems that the

intentions do differ, and certain poets possess a particular agenda which they may or may not reveal publicly. It was an interesting exercise to discover how poets may place themselves within the 'scene' and whether any of the more established poets considered their work to have a particular influence on the scene in general, and which individuals or groups they believed were capable of wielding influence among the poetry community or among the potential readership of poetry. Communicating with the poets via the e-list revealed the kinds of attitudes that are likely to alienate those (such as working-class poets) who may be new to the scene or possess alternative ideas of what constitutes 'good' poetry. Although *PoetryEspresso* no longer exists, most of the poets who were active on the list joined the *Poneme* e-list and continue to regularly post their opinions on the poetry scene.

Chapter Four

Following Lawson: Geoff Goodfellow and Martin R. Johnson

In 1892, the poets Henry Lawson and A.B. Paterson participated in a public debate on the representation of the Australian bush, in which Lawson criticised Paterson for romanticising rural life within his poetry. Paterson in turn disparaged Lawson for focusing on the negative aspects of life in the bush. This debate played out in a series of poems published in *The Bulletin*, and was a lively and entertaining confrontation between peers. Although this public display of attitudes was staged by the poets in order to gain some exposure for their work,⁴³⁹ it revealed an ongoing division between Paterson's romantic representation of the bush and Lawson's exposé of poverty and social problems in rural areas. Lawson was originally from the bush, but was in favour of a 'realistic' depiction of country and urban life. He wrote political poems and rejected the idealization of workers as he believed such representation could have a detrimental effect on workers' potential for collective action.⁴⁴⁰

So we must fly a rebel flag,
As others did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song
And join in rebel chorus.
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting
O' those that they would throttle;
They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle!⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ According to the 'Bush Controversy' website, run by a University of Queensland librarian, Paterson later admitted that the debate was partially staged: 'Banjo Tells His Own Story,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Feb-4 Mar 1939. The poems involved in the debate are also available on this site, <http://www.uq.edu.au/~mlwham/banjo/bush_controversy.html>.

⁴⁴⁰ Christopher Lee, *City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination* (WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004)24.

⁴⁴¹ Henry Lawson, 'Freedom on the Wallaby,' *Penguin Book of Australia Ballads*, eds., Philip Butters, Elizabeth Webby (Vic: Penguin, 1993)200.

Paterson, in contrast, painted a picture of the bushman as the loyal and hardworking epitome of Australian identity as illustrated in 'Clancy of the Overflow',⁴⁴² in which a city gent imagines life away from the squalor of the city:

In my wild erratic fancy, visions come to me of Clancy
Gone a-droving "down the Cooper" where the Western drovers go;
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing,
For the drover's life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know.

Lawson offers a strikingly different image in 'Up the Country'⁴⁴³ – the poem that inspired Patterson to defend his portrayal of the bush:

Desolation where the crow is! Desert where the eagle flies,
Paddocks where the lunny bullock starts and stares with reddened eyes;
Where, in clouds of dust enveloped, roasted bullock-drivers creep
Slowly past the sun-dried shepherd dragged behind his crawling sheep.
Stunted peak of granite gleaming, glaring like a molten mass
Turned from some infernal furnace on a plain devoid of grass.

Both poets have become features of the Australian literary landscape, but it is Paterson's mythical bushman that has come to represent the Australian worker. Lawson's work has also been canonized but en route has been de-politicised; removed from a radical working-class position and re-read from an academic perspective.⁴⁴⁴ This chapter will briefly explore the bush myth and will then consider how contemporary poets such as Geoff Goodfellow and Martin R. Johnson have managed to challenge Paterson's romantic view of the bush and align themselves with Lawson's realism, offering gritty and political poems of urban and rural working-class life.

Class relations in the early settlement of Australia took a different shape to those of Britain, but alongside the harsh reality of life for Australia's early settlers was an emerging idealism about a new society. By the end of the nineteenth century, Australia was a highly urbanised country. As the cities became increasingly crowded, living conditions deteriorated and people began to look fondly at images of the bush as an alternative to high-density urban life.⁴⁴⁵ A romantic ideal of bush life was promoted through stories, poetry and commentary, published in influential and widely read

⁴⁴² A.B. Paterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow,' *The Bulletin* 10.514 21 December (1889):17, *The Bush Controversy*, 7 February 2007, <http://www.uq.edu.au/~mlwham/banjo/bush_controversy.html>.

⁴⁴³ Henry Lawson, 'Up the Country,' *The Bulletin* 12.647 9 July (1892): 21, University of Sydney Library, 7 February 2007, <<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/ozlit/pdf/v00002.pdf>> .

⁴⁴⁴ Lee 150.

⁴⁴⁵ Greig, Lewins and White 174.

publications such as *The Bulletin*. Such a romantic view chose to ignore the many problems faced in the bush during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as drought, a rabbit plague, the practice of overstocking the land, and falling wool prices.⁴⁴⁶ The bush lifestyle was championed as a worthy antidote to squalid city life and a stereotypical ideal was soon born, with the noble bush man emerging as the epitome of a great national identity.⁴⁴⁷ The bush man's lifestyle had many admirable qualities; the most pervasive being that of 'mateship'. Notions of egalitarianism manifested in a setting where all men began on equal footing and were able to make a life from their own toil, and where all men looked out for each other and refused to defer to any individual regardless of his status.⁴⁴⁸ The bushman construct excluded women and Aborigines.⁴⁴⁹ Murrie suggests that mateship, or homosociality, championed within the bushman legend was a way for men to resist the feminisation of family life. Thus the bushman reinforced and legitimised masculine dominance.⁴⁵⁰

The fabled bush man did not defer to authority and remained independent – free from the fetters of controlling powers but always in a manner that was never gratuitously violent.⁴⁵¹ He was defined by 'loyalty...toughness, self-defence, resourcefulness' with a larrikin streak that had been appropriated and recontextualised away from the original depictions of larrikins as urban juvenile delinquents.⁴⁵² During the First World War, mainly due to the reportage of the ANZAC involvement by war reporter C.E.W. Bean, the bushman transformed into the heroic soldier, ready to fight for his country without complaint. This was the invocation of the classless 'digger', whose noble characteristics were formed in the bush and forged in the trenches. The ANZAC was a superman, and those who may have suggested otherwise were accused of being unpatriotic and divisive during such an important time of nation building.⁴⁵³ This fierce nationalism was used as a weapon to dismiss those who continued to point out inequalities within society (such as the ALP).⁴⁵⁴ After the First World War, the

⁴⁴⁶ Richard Waterhouse, 'Rural Culture and Australian History: Myths and Realities,' *Arts* 24 (2002): 87.

⁴⁴⁷ Elaine Thompson, *Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia* (NSW: UNSW Press, 1994) 252.

⁴⁴⁸ Ward 12.

⁴⁴⁹ Michael Ackland, 'Poetry from the 1890s to 1970s,' Webby, *The Cambridge* 74.

⁴⁵⁰ Linzie Murrie, 'The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/Writing "Australian" Masculine,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (1998) 75.

⁴⁵¹ Ward 110.

⁴⁵² Diane Powell, *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993) 107.

⁴⁵³ John F Williams, *Quarantined Culture: Australian reactions to Modernism 1913-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 109.

⁴⁵⁴ J. Williams 120.

bushman myth also provided an escape into a rural fantasy far removed from the realities of depression and poor living conditions in the cities – the romanticised ideal was embraced despite the fact that the majority of Australians had not set foot in the bush.⁴⁵⁵

Contemporary working-class poets have taken these myths of masculinity and reworked them into a modern narrative. The poems that follow reveal a rejection of the bushman idea in favour of a contemporary equivalent to Lawson's 'pallid stream of faces in the street'⁴⁵⁶ in the work of Geoff Goodfellow, while Martin R. Johnson's portraits of rural workers show that it is possible to represent the bush without the romanticism or sentimentalism of Paterson. Both poets resist stereotypes and, in different ways, also serve as examples of 'successful' working class poets. Coles and Zandy argue that working-class writers do not necessarily rely on 'dominant canonical fathers' as precursors for their literary output⁴⁵⁷ and although both Goodfellow and Johnson mention an initial discovery of poetry through Lawson and Patterson, their work has mainly been shaped by the 'events, legacies, histories and actions' that have affected their working-class communities. The poetry of Goodfellow and Johnson also exposes a kind of working-class aesthetic at play, common themes of struggle and survival, a direct, pared-back style and use of working-class speech combined to relate a message to the reader – a message which calls for inclusion and acknowledgement of working-class stories.

Geoff Goodfellow

On the front cover of Goodfellow's first collection of poetry, *No Collars No Cuffs*, there is a photograph of a muscular, tattooed man holding a spade and wearing a blue singlet and scruffy jeans. The man is arguably the stereotypical working-class male – white, engaged in physical labour and anonymous (the photograph is taken from the neck down). The photograph on the back cover however, illustrates a very different kind of working-class man. The man in this photograph has the rugged face and thick hands of a manual worker, but he is sitting at a desk, holding a pen with papers and books in front of him. He is the poet, a cultural worker who offers an alternative to the traditional

⁴⁵⁵ J. Williams 132.

⁴⁵⁶ Henry Lawson, 'Faces in the Street,' *The Bulletin* 9.443 28 July (1888): 17, University of Sydney Library, 7 February 2007, <<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/ozlit/pdf/v00002.pdf>>.

⁴⁵⁷ Coles, Zandy pxxv.

working-class stereotype. On first impressions, Geoff Goodfellow may appear to be the epitome of the stereotypical working-class Australian. He is Anglo-Celtic, left school at fifteen to pursue a trade, and has a strong ‘ocker’ accent. His work shares similarities with US working-class poets such as former autoworker Jim Daniels and, like Daniels, his poetry explores the effects of work on individuals. Goodfellow both plays to the stereotype by presenting a ‘macho’ image and shatters it due to his position as a successful poet⁴⁵⁸ – a role not often taken up publicly by working-class people. How has he achieved this success, and in what domain does this success exist; within working-class communities or the literary mainstream? And how does Goodfellow’s work follow the tradition of Lawson?

Goodfellow appeared on the poetry scene in the late eighties and early nineties and became known as the ‘builder poet’ or the ‘prison poet’ due to his choices of reading and workshop venues. Goodfellow’s poetry is concerned with the lives and experiences of the working class, and contains a range of perspectives from the traditional white, male, blue collar worker, to working-class Aborigines, migrant workers, women, the chronically unemployed, addicted and mentally ill. Goodfellow is a powerful performer of his work and often reads in working-class settings such as pubs, workplaces, prisons and schools in working-class areas. Although Goodfellow’s work has not been the subject of academic study (with the exception of one scholarly article), he has been featured in a large number of newspaper articles, which have coincided with his reading appearances at festivals or highlighted his choice of workshop venues (this was especially the case in the early 1990s when his readings on building sites and in prisons attracted attention), and has had his work reviewed in a number of literary magazines. He has also had his work included on high school English curricula in two states (South Australia and Tasmania) which suggests a growing appreciation for his work.

Goodfellow came across poetry himself almost by accident while recovering from a back injury at home, ‘I was really bored and picked up the first book I came across. It was poetry. Banjo Patterson’s *Selected Verse*. After reading it a couple of times I thought I had something to say and I thought poetry would be a good medium

⁴⁵⁸ Goodfellow has sold a very large amount of his poetry books over the years, for example *No Collars No Cuffs* has recently sold out of its ninth printing of 1000 copies per print run. Goodfellow doesn’t envisage another printing. He is able to make a living from poetry, (through book sales, workshops and readings) and does not often apply for government funding.

for me. It seemed you could say a lot in just a few words'.⁴⁵⁹ Although Goodfellow did not connect with the romantic bush setting of Paterson's verse, he was impressed with the poet's ability to write in an accessible and colloquial manner 'it wasn't really relating to my life...because it was about an Australia that'd long gone, and all that mythology about bushmen, it's shit as far as most Australians are concerned, but we hang on to it...it was the easy way of using language, I suppose, that I saw initially'.⁴⁶⁰ He realised how effective poetry can be in presenting a subject in a powerfully compact form,⁴⁶¹ and he decided he would attempt to write poems that were relevant to him and the people within his community.

Goodfellow is an autodidact and, since his exposure to Paterson he has become an avid reader of poetry and prose, but he remains passionate about the ability to relate stories and messages in accessible ways to audiences who may not possess the cultural capital required for 'high-brow' literature. Goodfellow admires Henry Lawson and has stated that, although Paterson provided him with the initial inspiration to write poetry, it was Lawson's work, especially poems such as 'Faces in the Street', that offered greater relevancy to his experience.⁴⁶² He also cites A.B. Facey and his novel *A Fortunate Life*, as an example of a writer who understands the audience for whom he is writing.⁴⁶³ It could be suggested that Goodfellow is following the tradition of Lawson, due to his interest in ordinary people, his championing of the worker, portrayals of mateship and anti-authoritarianism,⁴⁶⁴ but Goodfellow is not limited by the Australian legend. This is because Goodfellow is aware of how the structure of class has changed; he recognises that there is now a white collar working class and that many working-class people are unemployed. But he states that despite these changing categories, there are still commonalities as a working-class identity has more to do with the kinds of values acquired through family during childhood.⁴⁶⁵ He considers the working class to be made up of 'the battlers and survivors – people who don't have a lot, but have enough to be able to struggle on. Sometimes they do it easy and sometimes they do it hard...that's

⁴⁵⁹ Geoff Goodfellow quoted in Myron Lysenko, 'Interview with Geoff Goodfellow,' *Going Down Swinging* 10-11 (1990): 35.

⁴⁶⁰ Gordon Collier, Geoffrey Davis, 'Geoff Goodfellow Interviewed by Gordon Collier and Geoffrey Davis,' *Kunapipi* 14. 3 (1994): 43.

⁴⁶¹ Lysenko 35.

⁴⁶² Collier, Davis 44.

⁴⁶³ Martin Flanagan, 'Brutal Lyrics by a Working Class Poet,' *The Age Saturday Extra* December 15 (1990): 7.

⁴⁶⁴ Mark Morrisson, 'Performance Poetry and Counter-Public Spheres: Geoff Goodfellow and Working Class Voices,' *Labour History* 79 (2000): 73.

⁴⁶⁵ Sarah Attfield, 'Interview with Geoff Goodfellow,' *Overland* 165 (2001): 35.

the key to working class culture, they are survivors, they can ride through all those adversities.’⁴⁶⁶

How does Goodfellow use his position as an ‘authentic’ working-class man to reach his audience? Goodfellow arguably capitalises on his ‘hard man’ image in order to push his poetry in certain settings (such as building sites and prisons) and to emphasise the hardships he is expressing to non-working-class audiences. Journalist Wayne Crawford describes how Goodfellow affirms this image during a reading: ‘there was a sharp intimidating “whack” as Geoff Goodfellow’s fist connected with the palm of his other hand. “You’ve got these” he says, displaying his fists, clenched menacingly at chest height, pugilist style’.⁴⁶⁷ Descriptions of Goodfellow’s physicality abound in newspaper articles and are often quite vivid ‘the head was one of which a robber’s dog would be proud. The voice was gravel over sandpaper. The delivery sounded like an invitation to come outside and fight’.⁴⁶⁸ This kind of portrayal can be seen as affirming his place as an authentic member of the working class, as a ‘hard man...there are times when his eyes sparkle and dance, but then his mouth sets in a grim line and the warning signs are obvious; this is not a man to be messed with.’⁴⁶⁹ The rough, physical image of Goodfellow, ‘skin toughened by the sun, hair razored short and a fierce expression’⁴⁷⁰ portrayed in feature articles also appears in reviews of his books in newspapers. In a review of *Poems for a Dead Father* in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Goodfellow himself is the main point of interest rather than the poetry ‘he’s tough, loquacious, passionate, angry, funny, foul-mouthed, aggressive, compassionate and a hard-core womaniser...He unnerves many people in the literary establishment’.⁴⁷¹ Journalists are also inclined to attach a ‘tag’ to Goodfellow and he has been referred to as the ‘larrikin laureate’⁴⁷², the ‘people’s poet’ and the ‘workers’ poet’. This physical ‘hard’ presentation of Goodfellow is important when he takes his poetry to traditional working-class venues. The reason he is invited to read, and is accepted by his audiences on building sites, factory floors or in correctional facilities is because he can pass as another worker and this gives Goodfellow the space to present his work. As Patrick Hamilton writes:

⁴⁶⁶ Attfield, Interview 35.

⁴⁶⁷ Wayne Crawford, ‘A Poetic Passion,’ *Sunday Tasmanian* 20 May (2001):18.

⁴⁶⁸ Neil Wiseman, ‘Battlers’ Poet Constructs Words for the Working Man,’ *Courier-Mail*, 5 September (1997): 11.

⁴⁶⁹ Graham Cornes, ‘Velvet Touch of a Hand of Steel,’ *Adelaide Advertiser* 22 June (2002): 38.

⁴⁷⁰ Fran Cusworth, ‘He’s a Jolly Good Poet,’ *Herald Sun* 26 October (2004): 59.

⁴⁷¹ Nikki Barrowclough, ‘Sex and the Single Poet,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 November (2002): 46

⁴⁷² Peter Davis, ‘Poet Goes Where Others Fear to Tread,’ *The Age* 11 November (1992): 4.

With his loud voice and ocker accent, he assaults their eardrums with verse stories about the struggles of rough trade characters just like themselves...within minutes, all fears of an effete poet rhapsodising about trees and clouds have disappeared...afterwards those who had grumbled about having to listen to a poet often finish up buying a volume of poetry.⁴⁷³

The tendency to emphasise physical characteristics is not uncommon in the treatment of working-class people in general, whose physicality is often more noticeable than that of their middle-class counterparts. There are negative and positive connotations in this focus on the body. On the one hand it can be argued that working-class people are often ‘repeatedly portrayed in terms of their physical bodies and lack of intelligence’, and may be praised for having ‘good hands’ within the workplace, but rarely have their intellectual ability on the job acknowledged,⁴⁷⁴ and Hitchcock suggests that this kind of representation provides a method of reducing the complexities of class to a ‘laundry list of perceptions – the clothes, the hair, the voice, the hands’.⁴⁷⁵ Alternatively, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which working-class physicality can provide ‘non-textual expressions’⁴⁷⁶ and the impact that work (and being working class) can have on the body. Zandy suggests that an emphasis on physicality is characteristic of working-class people and the working-class body often enters working-class writing, ‘the use of the body for expression, communication, and as a substitute for abstract language is evident in the literature produced by working-class writers’.⁴⁷⁷ This is noticeable in Goodfellow’s poetry, and the way in which working-class life impacts on the body whether due to the rigours of labour or the presence of violence in a working-class setting is important in his work (and relates directly to the work injury that lead him to writing poetry). In ‘Just Like Pirates Had’, the impact of violence on the body is vividly recounted:

They reckon
it came out as easy as a first tooth
that afternoon
in the pub at Semaphore
& two weeks later
in the same pub
he's half declared himself

⁴⁷³ Patrick Hamilton, ‘Blue-Collar Balladeer Goes Bush,’ *The Australian* 18 July (1997): 13.

⁴⁷⁴ Busman 77.

⁴⁷⁵ Hitchcock 6.

⁴⁷⁶ Janet Zandy, ‘Traveling Working Class,’ *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 1- 2 (1998): 238.

⁴⁷⁷ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 5.

a folk hero

reckons now
he's gunna cop it sweet
the invalid pension
 better than the dole
'cos you don't have to front
the office each week

reckons he'll kick a goal with
compo too
 heaps saw it

the other bloke just drove
two fingers straight in
 ripped it out
& stamped it
 into the front bar lino

so now
 he gets to wear
this real neat eye patch

 just like pirates had.

Despite the apparent nonchalant treatment of this event, the poem highlights the reality of a violent world, where men are measured by their ability to use their fists, or to survive such an attack. Goodfellow is offering an insight into this aspect of working-class culture, without making judgements or prescriptions ‘you’ve got to let people work it out for themselves, you’ve got to tell them what the story is. I’m just trying to tell the narrative without being the judge and jury’.⁴⁷⁸ This is not a purely gratuitous depiction of violence although, as Goodfellow suggests, this kind of scene can be extremely confronting for someone who has never been exposed to first-hand violence;⁴⁷⁹ but the poem is intended as a cautionary tale, and Goodfellow hopes that a young, working-class person who may be heading along the track of aggression may think twice about their actions if they realise that violence breeds violence and that eventually the aggressor may find himself on the receiving end of such hostility ‘they hear a poem like that and they might think: “Well, shit! Some people don’t know any fuckin rules; maybe I’d better pull out of this game!” That’s one of the reasons I want to

⁴⁷⁸ Attfield, Interview 41.

⁴⁷⁹ Collier, Davis 36.

write'.⁴⁸⁰ This operates as an example of the writer's explicit intentions – to represent and educate simultaneously.

Because of the way in which Goodfellow delivers his work at readings, he is often referred to as a 'performance poet'. Reviewers have commented on the performance aspect of Goodfellow's poems, such as Mal Morgan's review of *No Collars No Cuffs*, where he suggests that the poems 'thump out a rocky or blues rhythm. It is first rate performance poetry'.⁴⁸¹ Flanagan writes 'the performances are startling. They are explosions, as red as his short cropped hair'⁴⁸², and Brophy describes Goodfellow's performance style as coming from 'a strong contemporary tradition of performance'.⁴⁸³ The idea of Goodfellow operating as a 'wandering bard'⁴⁸⁴ is also mentioned in reviews, and Goodfellow himself appears to be comfortable with the description as performance poet, and has said 'I perform poetry...I'm always trying to bring those words alive at public readings'.⁴⁸⁵ According to Morley and Worpole, reading poetry to audiences makes it more accessible, and delivering poetry in the language of the working class validates working-class speech which can subsequently impact on poetry in general as rhythms of speech in performed poetry filter through to written poetry.⁴⁸⁶ Poetry readings have a long history among working-class people and literary theorist Peter Middleton asserts that the reading aloud of texts was common practice until after the First World War, and was an important method of creating 'sociality' among communities.⁴⁸⁷ But Maria Damon claims that performance poetry, especially that which reaches a wide audience, has been criticised for lacking 'subtlety and sophistication'.⁴⁸⁸ Mark Morrisson suggests, however, that Goodfellow's style of performance and choice of performance venue have been instrumental in creating a 'self-determined counter-public sphere for groups usually unempowered',⁴⁸⁹ such as the working class. He describes this counter-public sphere as 'discursive spaces that reflect and unify particular communities and contribute to their self-understanding and self-

⁴⁸⁰ Collier, Davis 36.

⁴⁸¹ Mal Morgan, 'Poets Old and New,' *Australian Book Review* 78 Feb/March (1986): 31.

⁴⁸² Flanagan 7

⁴⁸³ Kevin Brophy, 'Poetry Rules Unacknowledged,' *Australian Book Review* 117 Dec/Jan (1989): 44.

⁴⁸⁴ Liz Hall, 'Poetry Readings at Work Lift Morale and Quality of Life,' *The Age* 6 February (1990): 12.

⁴⁸⁵ Collier, Davis 31 & 39.

⁴⁸⁶ Morley, Worpole 91.

⁴⁸⁷ Peter Middleton, 'The Contemporary Poetry Reading,' *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998) 272

⁴⁸⁸ Maria Damon, 'Was that "Different", "Dissident" or "Dissonant"? Poetry (n) the Public Sphere: Slams, Open Readings and Dissident Traditions,' Bernstein 326.

⁴⁸⁹ Morrisson 71.

formation. They embody resistance to the dominant culture and can address oppression specific to the group or more general social and cultural phenomena'. When Goodfellow reads his poetry in working-class pubs, building sites and prisons he is giving his working-class audiences the chance to not only see their lives represented, but also to reflect on the subject matter and interact with the poet through discussion opened up by the poetry. As Morrisson states 'the poet speaks to an audience, the poem speaks to an audience, and the audience members can speak to each other and to the poet' which ultimately provides agency to working-class audience members.⁴⁹⁰

Morrisson also argues that Goodfellow's work demonstrates the role art can play in empowering marginalised people;⁴⁹¹ the reception of audiences at a Goodfellow reading is not passive and his poetry has the power to effect change through performance. This has been evident in the responses Goodfellow's work has received from both individuals and those in charge of institutions. Goodfellow's work has had political implications as he has attracted attention to various issues such as conditions in prisons. And individuals have commented on how they have been affected by listening to Goodfellow read;⁴⁹² many working-class audience members who do not usually attend poetry readings are moved and inspired by Goodfellow's poetry. This may be because working-class audiences relate so well to his characters; as reviewer John Harms describes, audiences 'nod their heads' at the 'real' images within the poems.⁴⁹³ Goodfellow is aware of this impact and has commented on the individuals who have approached him after a reading and has acknowledged the power of his chosen medium, 'I think the readings are very powerful, they're emotive and I'm trying to deliver messages that'll make people think in a very compact form'.⁴⁹⁴

The sites of performance are reflected in poems such as 'Front Bar Closing Time'⁴⁹⁵ which provides a snapshot of a typical working class pub. The culture of the pub is important for many working-class people, as the pub can operate as a refuge or meeting place (especially for men), as a site for discussion and debate of local and world events, a place for leisure and relaxation as well as providing employment for working-class people. In the working class pub the 'normal social order' is inverted,

⁴⁹⁰ Morrisson 71- 83.

⁴⁹¹ Morrisson 71.

⁴⁹² Rosemary Sorensen, 'Review of "Poems for a Dead Father",' *Courier-Mail* 6 April (2002): 5.

⁴⁹³ John Harms, 'A Knockout Collection,' *Overland* 180 (2005): 89.

⁴⁹⁴ Goodfellow, Geoff quoted in Patrick Hamilton, 'Blue-Collar Balladeer Goes Bush,' *The Australian* 18 July (1999):13.

⁴⁹⁵ Geoff Goodfellow, 'Front Bar Closing Time,' *No Collars No Cuffs* (Adelaide: Friendly Street Poets, 1986) 27.

allowing those who may lack power in classed society to express their opinions and assert their values – the language of the pub is vernacular and the emphasis is on ‘reciprocity and sociability’⁴⁹⁶:

time gentlemen time
no use yelling that in this pub
no gentlemen
time time time
finish 'em up
last game on the table sport

no gentlemen in this front bar
just another 10 o'clock empty out
tattooed truckies
plastered subbies
tea leaves knockabouts
& a smatter of ethnic grandfathers
(with 28" bikes chained to the
verandah posts)

‘Front Bar Closing Time’ offers a slice of working-class life without any overt political message, although certain lines reveal aspects of working-class life such as the hope of winning bingo as a way out of hardship ‘& behind/ a sea of dead bingo tickets’, and the economic gap between the drinkers and the publican who is ready to count his daily takings ‘money explodes from/ the registers/ the drinking house/ turns counting house’. The gentle flow of description provides an interesting contrast with the actual objects being described, and creates an alternative picture of the pub away from the usual noisy bustle. Descriptions of pubs are not common in poetry, and portrayals such as this one can arguably validate the marginalised sites of working-class culture or leisure (it is certainly not unusual to read poems set in bourgeois cultural centres such as art galleries).

If Lawson had a particular intention or political agenda behind his poetry, what of Goodfellow? Is he writing poems in an attempt to call workers to action in a similar way to Lawson? Goodfellow maintains that it his intention to try and inspire people to think and act differently through poetry ‘I mean, I try and get them to look at their lives, and I think if we can look at our lives we start to find some answers’.⁴⁹⁷ He wants working-class people to see their lives represented (not only the positive aspects) and

⁴⁹⁶ Julie Lindquist, *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 41.

⁴⁹⁷ Collier, Davis 31.

their experiences valued ‘I think it (poetry) provides dignity for lives that are often very much underrated’ and he also wants working-class people to feel empowered by creating their own poetry – to express themselves on their own terms ‘I want to show those blokes on building sites how poetry can reflect ordinary events in ordinary everyday language’.⁴⁹⁸ His sentiments here echo those of US poet Philip Levine who started writing about his experiences in a car parts factory in an attempt to give ‘value and dignity’ to his life.⁴⁹⁹ Goodfellow considers the act of writing to be empowering because an ability to use language effectively can help to prevent the kinds of frustrations and sense of inadequacy that can ultimately lead to self-destructive behaviour.⁵⁰⁰ Poetry that examines working-class lives and written in the language of the working class also provides people with the opportunity to see themselves represented in a world that often ignores them.⁵⁰¹ According to Goodfellow, his poetry can ‘give dignity to the workers. They help build our cultural centres but never go back to use them because they’ve become elitist and exclusive places...I’m trying to break down the barriers and show that the arts are for everyone.’⁵⁰² For Goodfellow, the workers include service industry employees such as shop assistants who are often treated with disdain by members of the public, and whose experiences rarely find their way into poetry. In ‘The Luxury of Work’⁵⁰³ Goodfellow gives such workers a voice:

yeah it's hard being a shop girl

especially when you know they're out
drinking their lattes
& slagging so-called dole bludgers
you'd have to wonder just what else
they might get away with

i mean it's hard enough holding back
a pee for three or four hours...
let alone your tongue at times
& i mean sometimes you just hope
one of your mates will turn up
to watch the shop while you do go
it's hard on your bladder

it's even harder those times when

⁴⁹⁸ Collier, Davis 45.

⁴⁹⁹ Coles, Zandy 670.

⁵⁰⁰ Sue Williams, ‘Prisoner’s Poet,’ *Daily Telegraph* August 14 (1990): 25.

⁵⁰¹ Morrisson 75.

⁵⁰² Ron Banks, ‘A Working Poet,’ *The West Australian* May 21 (1991): 46.

⁵⁰³ Geoff Goodfellow, ‘The Luxury of Work,’ *Punch On Punch Off* (Victoria: Vulgar Press 2004) 51.

*the till doesn't balance
they make you put in
(as if you don't anyway)
 & some days i've worked for half
my real rate because i didn't check
the balance when i started*

*& yet they tell me i have the luxury
of work.*

The way in which Goodfellow reads, and the choice of subject matter presented in his poetry, challenges the expectations of audience members and can change people's perceptions about poetry – not only those often held by working-class people (that poetry is elitist, too high brow, etc), but also those of middle-class audiences who may not have been exposed to working-class life in poetic form. As Morrisson notes 'Goodfellow shatters the comfortable, institutionalised, distance between poetry reader and appreciative detached audience...in fact, Goodfellow's confrontational and strident performance style...might even be seen as using the traditional "macho" ethos of his blue-collar and often male audiences to force them to confront issues that might undermine that veneer'.⁵⁰⁴ Goodfellow understands that many of his audience members may be initially resistant to listening to poetry as they may be 'people like myself...who ...would never go hear a poet because they think it's poofster stuff'.⁵⁰⁵ But Goodfellow displays what Morrisson refers to as a 'tenacity in the face of resistant audiences' and is not afraid to speak of issues that working-class audiences may find uncomfortable, such as domestic violence, racism or prison and it is the 'interactive' style of his performances that allow his working-class audiences the space for 'self-revelation and reflection and socio-political agency'.⁵⁰⁶ Goodfellow describes how he was heckled by a male working-class audience member during a reading of 'Poem for Annie'⁵⁰⁷ which is about the domestic violence endured by his sister:

they beat her badly in each deal
 or in the middle of the night
& she looked on while friends
got diamond rings
 & learned to hide when she got
black ones...

⁵⁰⁴ Morrisson 81.

⁵⁰⁵ Collier, Davis 45.

⁵⁰⁶ Morrisson 84.

⁵⁰⁷ Geoff Goodfellow, 'Poem for Annie,' *Bow Tie and Tails* (SA: Goodline Press, 1997) 21.

she just lived with him —
'til he jammed a glass
into her face
smashed two teeth
& slashed her lower lip

Goodfellow confronted the heckler and shouted at him to ‘let her off the hook tonight. Don’t belt her’⁵⁰⁸ which not only brought the issue into the open, but also is an example of how Goodfellow uses his macho image to challenge negative macho behaviours. This poetry is therefore about creating a response – regardless of whether the audience has embraced or been threatened by the poetry, Goodfellow wants them to go away and think about the issues raised, ‘it’s breaking down those elitist barriers, barriers that have often been created and perpetuated by educational institutions...it serves to strengthen our culture when Australians see their colloquial language and speech patterns being recorded and published and marketed as literature’.⁵⁰⁹ He states that his aim is to communicate with working-class audiences and readers, to provide a poetry that is relevant to them ‘I want to write poetry that communicates to ordinary everyday people – the people who cut the grass on the median strip, the people who fix the streetlights when they blow. There should be poetry for them just as much as for the people who get honours in English’.⁵¹⁰ Rosemary Sorenson states: ‘he has long been an evangelist for the power of poetry to connect with each and every life in a world saturated with sophisticated noise’,⁵¹¹ and reviewer Samela Harris believes that Goodfellow is ‘demystifying the idea of poetry’ by taking it to the people.⁵¹² If it is true that Goodfellow’s poetry is providing agency for working-class people to explore their lives and create alternatives to the dominant culture, then his work is arguably performing an important social function, and can be used to understand the function of literature in a classed society.⁵¹³ Goodfellow is aware of his responsibility to his working-class readers and his poetry serves as a reflection of their lives and culture, providing a rare opportunity for the working-class reader to see him/herself adequately represented in an art form that they have been alienated from in recent times. This is reflected in his sales and Goodfellow states that a large proportion of his sales are to, ‘non-traditional types;

⁵⁰⁸ Flanagan 7.

⁵⁰⁹ Lysenko 39.

⁵¹⁰ Barrowclough 46.

⁵¹¹ Sorenson 5.

⁵¹² Samela Harris, ‘Review of “Punch On Punch Off”,’ *Adelaide Advertiser* 16 October (2004): s09.

⁵¹³ Morrisson 71.

men and women who may have never bought a book in their life before'.⁵¹⁴ Goodfellow also makes his intentions clear when he states that 'there are many poets who are writing about all these beautiful things...but I want to chronicle, too, the horrors that I've seen, because I think that they can be a catalyst for change'.⁵¹⁵

If Goodfellow is successful within working-class communities – selling large numbers of books at readings – how is this success reflected in his positioning within the literary mainstream? Ali Alizadeh, a reviewer for the online literary magazine *Cordite* stated in a review of Goodfellow's latest collection *Punch On Punch Off*:

Disdain for poetry and versification is projected, most strongly perhaps, via the style of his writing. His pieces are more or less vernacular (as opposed to *writerly*) straightforward representations of their speaker's very common language ... While such colloquial speech may suffice for 'telling a yarn' at the pub – or entertaining workers during their lunch-break on building sites, for that matter – it is hardly challenging, measurable or, in fact, revolutionary.⁵¹⁶

Alizadeh (himself a poet), provides a good example of the kinds of criticism faced by working-class poets. He suggests that Goodfellow's poetry does not contain adequate 'writerly' devices to be considered poetry – and he remarks that such work is better suited to non-literary settings rather than being presented as a published collection. While Goodfellow himself works hard to ensure that working-class people read his poetry, it is dismissive to suggest that the 'common language' he employs is not good enough for the literary world. In contrast, although Alizadeh criticises Goodfellow's use of working-class argot, he offers praise for Alan Wearne's use of middle-class speech in his epic poem *The Lovemakers*, where he states that Wearne employs 'the urban Anglo-Australian vernacular to its fullest capacity',⁵¹⁷ which implies that the vernacular is perfectly acceptable for literary works, providing the vernacular is not that of the working class. Syson argues that there is a resistance to Goodfellow's work within the literary community and states that many poets and academics have been extremely critical of Goodfellow:

They disparage him. They say he's simplistic. One poet I have a lot of respect for once called him "the shouting poet". He thought Geoff was just a vulgar,

⁵¹⁴ Lysenko 35.

⁵¹⁵ Collier, Davis 36.

⁵¹⁶ Ali Alizadeh, 'Reviews Geoff Goodfellow,' *Cordite* June 9 (2005), <<http://www.cordite.org.au/archives/000897.html>>.

⁵¹⁷ Ali Alizadeh, "'The Lovemakers'": Review by Ali Alizadeh,' *Text* 5.2 Oct (2000), <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/oct01/alizadehrev.htm>>.

bullying loudmouth when in fact it's a very complex, authentic act. The idea of a "working-class poet" challenges the whole concept that, to write, you've got to have a middle-class education.⁵¹⁸

An example of the attitude described by Syson can be seen in a review of *Punch On Punch Off* in *Island* magazine. The reviewer, Dennis Oliver, condescendingly commends Goodfellow for his 'single-minded devotion to his subject' but says that Goodfellow's 'assiduously low-key manner' can 'seem merely banal'. At the beginning of the review Oliver states that Goodfellow's poetry is 'well known for its championing of working-class causes' but goes on to suggest that the working class is diminishing and that the lives portrayed in Goodfellow's poetry are 'part myth, part reality' and that Goodfellow's work is really a sentimental longing for the past.⁵¹⁹ This reviewer seems to have missed the poems that deal with the unpleasant aspects of working-class life, and which are firmly set in the present.

But Syson's insistence that Goodfellow has been unfairly treated can be countered by the positive reviews that *Punch On Punch Off* received in *Overland* and the *Australian Book Review*. Here, one reviewer acknowledges the political implications of Goodfellow's poetry and the messages contained within the work 'the poet is a commentator, and agitator, reminding readers of their and his origins, the importance of working-class values and family wisdom in the face of capitalist success and dominance' and this reviewer also describes the work as, 'edgy, ironic, polemical' and refers to the depth behind the work as 'intelligent, multi-layered'.⁵²⁰ Goodfellow has also occasionally crossed over into the mainstream. In 2002, *Poems for a Dead Father* was short listed for the *Age* book of the year award, which suggests that Goodfellow's work has been recognised as having literary merit by the mainstream literary community. I would suggest however, that these positive reviews do not necessarily reveal an acceptance of Goodfellow's work by the literary community, and as an example of this resistance, Glen Murdoch's negative attitude towards working-class poetry (which was presented in chapter two) is revealed once again when he states in a review of *Poems for a Dead Father* that 'the working-class poetical debate, in relation to this book, can go fuck.'⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Barrowclough 46.

⁵¹⁹ Dennis Oliver, 'Poetry Survey,' *Island* 103 (2005): 40.

⁵²⁰ David Gilbey, 'True Believers,' *Australian Book Review* May (2005):54.

⁵²¹ Glen Murdoch, 'Class Act,' *Sidewalk* 10 (2002):35.

Attitudes of editors aside, how does Goodfellow's poetry display the working-class poetic? To begin with, Goodfellow's work is confronting and, like Lawson, he is not afraid to deal with the less savoury aspects of working-class life, 'a lot of stuff I write about is the dark underbelly of Australian society: it's about things we want to push away'⁵²² His work often emulates a 'punch mentality' that he believes exists within many working-class homes. Like many working-class poets, Goodfellow focuses on people; they are central to his work. There are labourers, trades people, barmaids, cops, the forgotten and dispossessed members of society, namely the unemployed, junkies, homeless and the mentally ill. Mark Morrisson states that, for Goodfellow, "working-class" issues, for him, also include women's issues, Aboriginal concerns, and the treatment of the mentally ill and of prisoners.'⁵²³ Goodfellow gives voice to these characters, by making effective use of the cadences of working-class speech. This can be seen in 'Tailor Made',⁵²⁴ which tells the story of a barmaid, and how she manages to deal with the unwanted advances of a drunken customer:

She slid along the bar
 gliding to the clink
 of glasses
 the swish & snap
 of a beer tap
 & knew just what
 that customer wanted
 when he said
 give us a bit of head
 but smiled politely
 as good servants do...

& as she slid across
 his change
 he pulled her closer
 with a wave of his head
 said softly
i'd love to get into y'r pants

her eyes flashed like
 the blinking fluoro above her
 as she replied
 i'm sorry but i've got
one cunt in there already
 i DON'T need another...

⁵²² Frank Gauntlett, 'Building a Following,' *Daily Telegraph Mirror* December 20 (1990): 42.

⁵²³ Morrisson 77.

⁵²⁴ Geoff Goodfellow, 'Tailor Made,' *Bow Tie and Tails* (SA: Goodline Press, 1997) 35.

Goodfellow states that female readers have been impressed with the barmaid's comeback and have indicated that might try it out themselves, 'I know other women who've heard that poem and come up afterwards and said, "that's fucking great, next time someone comes up to me and says something like that I'll use that line, it's a fucking beauty!"'. He also believes that the poem has the capacity to make male readers and audiences reconsider their own sexist behaviour 'I've read that poem in numerous places to men, and it makes men question how they speak to women'.⁵²⁵ This poem demonstrates his spare and pared back style, which helps to create a more direct experience for the reader, without stumbling over heavy poetic devices. According to David McCooey 'the power of "working-class writing" should come from being direct, not overburdened with the "literary"',⁵²⁶ and Goodfellow's poetry certainly fulfils this criterion, although the simplicity of each poem belies the time that has been invested in the drafting of the work. The poems are accessible and it is this aspect of his work in particular which can 'enable readers to immediately empathise with the emotions he conveys.'⁵²⁷ Goodfellow's poems are vignettes of working-class life – usually interspersed with working-class voices, and sometimes written from a first person perspective. Reading through Goodfellow's poetry can take the reader on a journey through the working-class landscape, touching down in a variety of locations and scenarios that range from the darkly humorous to the deeply tragic. Goodfellow is sensitive in his treatment of the everyday – he places an importance on otherwise ignored scenes, and shows how poetry can be created from everyday experiences or familiar places, thus challenging the idea that poetry can only stem from abstract ideas or philosophical reflections.

Goodfellow consciously appropriates people's stories and states that many of his 'subjects' have asked him to write their stories as they do not have access to the means of communication necessary 'they're not going to have their stories heard in the main and often they've asked me to tell their stories for them'.⁵²⁸ Among other marginalised people, he writes about prisoners, and uses his experiences of conducting workshops in correctional institutions to try and portray some of the issues important to prisoners. He has worked with both male and female prisoners as well as young offenders. As already

⁵²⁵ Attfield, Interview 40.

⁵²⁶ David McCooey, 'Review of "Poems for a Dead Father",' *The Age* 24 June (2002), *The Age Online*, 11 November 2004, < <http://www.theage.com.au>>.

⁵²⁷ Christopher Bantick, 'Goodfellow Takes No Prisoners,' *Sunday Tasmanian*, 11 May (2003):

⁵²⁸ Attfield, Interview 41.

mentioned, Goodfellow considers communication to be of vital importance, and language the key to communication. For many of the prisoners he has encountered communication skills have been missing, and he believes this partly explains their criminal behaviour. By providing the prisoners with the ability to use words to express themselves, Goodfellow believes that violent conflict can be avoided, and he stresses how society has disempowered certain people by keeping them uneducated and inarticulate. This situation is explored in 'One Man's Lot',⁵²⁹ a poem that highlights the effect that language can have to bring out even the most hardened man's emotions, and how the lack of this ability landed the man in prison in the first place. There is both pathos and humour in this poem. The pathos occurs as the reader realises that this man has been brutalised in prison, and the difficulty he has in relating his experiences that must be coaxed from him:

The man's a poet I thought
as we first communicated
I got the hamburger
he drawled
placing me
with a careful eye...

months later when he wrote
his emotions
jerked me like the handbrake
of a rolling car
& i stood in evening rain —
droplets lifting blisters
on his page
wiping other from my cheeks

The humour comes from the absurd circumstances that led to the prisoner being charged with murder:

a problem with communication
mate that's what the poor
bastard's in for

he was dealing drugs he said
employed two thugs —
both bull-necked mugs
who'd punch for pay
& three blokes come
one night to score —

⁵²⁹ Geoff Goodfellow, 'One Man's Lot,' *Bow Tie and Tails* (SA: Goodline Press, 1997) 68.

*one with money
two for care
but his price was like
a government cheque
& it was late
& he was tired
& told his hired help*

*I'm doing bizness with THIS one
take these two out*

*& they did
but with a 12 gauge*

This poem also demonstrates the kinds of images, metaphors and similes that Goodfellow chooses – the majority of which are rooted in the familiar for working-class readers.

The poem ‘An Old Bloke’⁵³⁰ from his collection, *Semi Madness: Voices from Semaphore* provides a good example of poetry written from the perspective of a young man suffering from mental illness:

chronic schizophrenia the shrink said...

*had some Pink Rock in me pocket
told 'em it was lollies
but they knew i whacked it up me arm
(they found a pick)*

*makes me think i can jump mountains
that stuff
just love the rush –
& it stops the ducks and drakes
when i'm comin' down...*

*that made 'em squeeze
the bloody bracelets
another notch...*

*it's a hard life on the pension
for an old bloke
of twenty eight*

The tone of the monologue is light hearted but the problems faced by those left to self-medicate and manage their illness are very serious, and this poem gives voice to a

⁵³⁰ Geoff Goodfellow, ‘An Old Bloke,’ *Semi Madness: Voices from Semaphore* (Victoria: Common Ground, 2001) 33.

largely ignored section of society. The character's working-class speech leads to a free-flowing rhythm and the elements of slang used such as "they found a pick", "bloody bracelets" and the rhyming slang of "ducks and drakes" creates ironic images.

Goodfellow also writes poems that deal more directly with his personal experience of growing up in a working-class family and focus on the importance of family and community within this setting. Goodfellow's father was an alcoholic and prone to bouts of violence, but he was also a story-teller and had a profound influence on Goodfellow's own story-telling ability. His father was an oral 'yarn-spinner', and Goodfellow has continued the tradition within his poetry. According to Goodfellow, this oral culture is an extremely important aspect of working-class life and, although the art of story telling may have diminished since his childhood due to the distractions of technology such as television, he believes that this tradition shapes working-class families: 'it's the sort of values that you grow up with that make you working class, the family values. Like old tradition and telling of stories...it was very much an oral tradition – hard drinking, story telling, yarn spinning, life was theatre.'⁵³¹ The exploration of family life and father son relationships is tackled in Goodfellow's collection *Poems for a Dead Father*, which was written for his late father. The collection deals with the adult poet coming to terms with the loss of his father and bittersweet childhood memories. Life was not easy for the Goodfellow family, but the bond of family helped them survive, and Goodfellow continues to place much emphasis on the importance of family. Although this collection deals with childhood memories, it is not sentimental and the negative aspects of Goodfellow's father's life are not glossed over or ignored. There is nothing romantic about living in poverty and although Goodfellow has some warm memories of his childhood he is always aware of the hardship and struggle; the descriptions of his family life offer a slice of working class life both of the era of his childhood, the 1950s, and of the present day. In 'Poem for Johnny',⁵³² Goodfellow introduces the reader to his father through a monologue directed at his dead father, and he highlights some of the values learned from his father:

i can remember a childhood
where you'd often bring home
someone who was hungry
or homeless –

⁵³¹ Attfield, Interview 35.

⁵³² Geoff Goodfellow, 'Poem for Johnny,' *Poems for a Dead Father* (Victoria: Vulgar Press, 2002) 11.

& we'd share whatever
was needed

you walked it like you
talked it John
 you were never a hypocrite

& through that childhood
around the kitchen table
 you showed us how to
act
 sometimes you'd turn it
into the theatre of the absurd
 but you talked a lot of
sense too...

This poem focuses on the generous spirit of the working-class father who was prepared to help those less fortunate despite his family's own lack, and who imparted onto his children a sense of fun, both with words and play:

you'd asked me to meet you
in King William Street outside
a bank at a particular time
 i was early & looked each way
continually
 until our eyes met from
over fifty yards
 & though the street was
crowded
 you shut out everyone
except me

you were stone cold sober
at the time
 but you still made a game
of it
 you crept from hiding
behind one *No Parking* sign –
to the next
 to the next –
advancing on me step by step
in your suit & snap brim hat
 oblivious to bending necks

There is a hint here of the father's alcoholism, with the suggestion that his sober state was unusual, and later in the poem there is a direct reference to the amount he used to

drink; but in this moment, the father is playing with his son, unconcerned about whether he appears foolish, his prime concern is to share his sense of fun with his child. The working-class setting of previous eras can sometimes be treated with a sentimental nostalgia that speaks of ‘the good old days’ when neighbours were friendly and helpful, streets were safe and there was plenty of opportunity for anyone willing to work hard enough. Goodfellow follows Lawson by rejecting sentimentality, and states that there is nothing romantic about poverty and the physical strain of hard manual work: ‘you can’t romanticise hard work and say that hard work is good. Hard work might be good for some bosses who can find the slave who’s prepared to be tortured... Well I say, fuck the “good old days” because they weren’t so good... the majority of times you want to move forward and get away from the struggle... I wouldn’t enjoy having a cut-out cardboard innersole in my shoe these days!’.⁵³³ Nostalgia is also challenged in ‘It all Happened in Copley Street’,⁵³⁴ a poem that begins with a description of some of the apparent ‘good old days’ but then changes tack to highlight some of the less favourable aspects of growing up in 1950s working-class Adelaide:

yeah the good old days
 those days when you’d either
 swelter or freeze in those
 outmoded temporary classrooms
 at the local Tech
 where half your teachers
 wore RSL badges
 & were just as neurotic as most
 of your fathers
 & keen as mustard to punch on
 with you in the classrooms
 or try to pin you to the wall
 of the woodwork room with a chisel...

ah the good old days
 when you left school at fifteen –
 under-educated yet still knowing
 too much...

Goodfellow is able to look back and see these negative aspects clearly: ‘when things get tough for me/ today/ i think back to the good old days – / & i always look forward/ to

⁵³³ Attfield, Interview 40.

⁵³⁴ Geoff Goodfellow, ‘It all Happened in Copley Street,’ *Poems for a Dead Father* (Victoria: Vulgar Press, 2002) 39

tomorrow', this attitude is indicative of working-class people whose means of survival is to maintain hope in a better future for themselves and their children.

Goodfellow is arguably a successful poet; he has been able to make a living from his poetry and has managed to distribute his work in working-class and literary communities. He has developed a reasonably high profile as a poet, and the number of newspaper articles and reviews of his work combined with anecdotal evidence suggests that editors, publishers and critics are aware of his work. However, despite these achievements, his work has attracted little academic analysis. Rather than being acknowledged as a writer following the tradition of working-class poetry as practised and advocated by Lawson, Goodfellow's achievements as a poet may be considered exceptional by some academics and critics; a self-educated, 'special' case as sketched by Hoggart, who has managed to rise above the confines of his (low-brow) class culture.⁵³⁵ On examination of Goodfellow's poetry though, it can be seen that the key to his work is its submersion in working-class culture, rather than a desire to leave his background behind. Goodfellow is not interested in writing about abstract ideas or using a heightened language that offers no relevancy for working-class readers, 'if poetry is going to be written about the birds and the butterflies floating around the oval, it's gotta be written about those real parts of our society too, that sometimes don't get spoken about very much'.⁵³⁶ Goodfellow ultimately resists stereotypes, and he represents the diversity of working-class life – demonstrating an ability to speak from a variety of voices though never from a singular position: as Morrisson suggests, Goodfellow's ability to adopt working-class voices within his poetry is 'not homogenised, but rather conveys some specificity of identity through its own markers of dialect or vocal mannerism'.⁵³⁷ Despite his position as an Anglo, former manual worker, Goodfellow's poetry offers the reader the chance to understand many different working-class perspectives, and he is not afraid to reveal the darker side of working-class life as well as celebrating working-class culture.

Martin R. Johnson

Can Martin R. Johnson's work also be considered a contemporary version of Lawson's unromantic portrayal of the bush? Goodfellow's poetry may epitomize the urban,

⁵³⁵ Hoggart 14.

⁵³⁶ Collier, Davis 36.

⁵³⁷ Morrisson 80.

contemporary working world, but Johnson represents the rural working class with an emphasis on the past.⁵³⁸ His work shares similarities with that of the Appalachian poets of the mountainous eastern United States. Poets such as Jeanne Bryner and Diane Gilliam Fisher write about miners and rural railway workers and often evoke the past to highlight the history of struggle in their region; but there is no sense of glorification of the past or elevation of rural workers to an idealized mythical status. In the same way, Johnson does not tap into the bush myth and there is no sense of the idealized bushman in his poems. Instead, Johnson's poetry offers a realistic insight into the conditions of rural work and this unromantic position is important to Johnson as he wishes to provide readers with the 'clearer view' of the bush, while understanding why rural people are attached to the ideal of the bush as it provides an escape from the reality of hardship.⁵³⁹ Rural Australia is certainly far-removed from any fabricated, romantic picture and studies have shown that rural Australians are generally more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts. Rural people are more likely to suffer from depression, heart disease and strokes; they are educationally disadvantaged and rural unemployment rates are higher than those for urban areas.⁵⁴⁰ It is a grim picture that writers such as Johnson are not afraid to expose. Johnson's intentions are reminiscent of Lawson's aim to reach both rural and urban Australians in the hope that a greater understanding of each other's plight might strengthen bonds and increase possibilities for collective action.⁵⁴¹ Johnson also shows that it is possible to be both working class and a writer as his poem, 'A Woodcutter by Trade'⁵⁴² reveals:

I am a working man
with calloused hands and bearded face,
earning a living with a chainsaw
sharp to the splintery crash
of falling timber. Yet

I am a poet by nature

Johnson writes about his impoverished childhood in a rural work camp settlement and subsequent life spent initially in the navy, followed by work in a brick-making factory and back to the bush where he spent seventeen years as a timber feller in

⁵³⁸ John McLaren suggests that Lawson was locked in the nostalgic past and was unable to look forward, 'Colonial Mythmakers: The Development of the Realist Tradition in Australian Literature,' *Westerly* 2 (1980): 47.

⁵³⁹ Martin R Johnson, Interview with Sarah Attfield, September 2006, unpublished.

⁵⁴⁰ Margaret Alston, 'Social Capital in Rural Australia,' *Rural Society* 12.2 (2002): 94.

⁵⁴¹ Lee 24.

⁵⁴² Martin R Johnson, 'A Woodcutter By Trade,' *Outskirts* (Victoria: Penguin, 1995) 81.

South Australia. His poetry is important for its renditions of life for the men and women who laboured on rural schemes such as the construction of reservoirs, and the impact this kind of dangerous and isolated work had on the workers and their families. It has been suggested that Lawson was keen to show in his poetry how individual experiences can be translated in shared experiences of class oppression, and Lawson's desire to highlight such shared exploitation through the technique of 'parallelism'⁵⁴³ is mirrored in Johnson's poetry. Johnson also writes about non-Anglo migrant workers, and attempts to understand their particular experiences. Often the bush population is represented as predominantly Anglo in nature, and this view does not take into account the many non-Anglo workers who settled in the countryside and who had a large influence in shaping the character of certain areas.⁵⁴⁴ However, Johnson's poetry also tends not to include Aboriginal characters. The representation of timber workers provides an insight into the minds of workers who are often criticised by environmentalists who do not consider why such workers often have little choice but to take such jobs. Johnson provides the reader with the opportunity to understand the mentality and actions of the forestry workers. Although there are contemporary Australian poets such as John Kinsella who write about the bush with a political sensibility, the emphasis tends to be on issues around environmental destruction, and less to do with those who work on, but do not own, the land.

Johnson started reading and writing poetry as an adult. He had not been exposed to poetry as a child or young man, but eventually discovered Spike Milligan and then Henry Lawson and describes how he would write humorous stories about his factory workmates.⁵⁴⁵ In the early 1980s, Johnson decided to go to TAFE, and also met the poet Cathy Young, who introduced him to more poetry. He began writing his own poetry while working as a timber feller and now considers himself an artist and 'cultural historian' with a commitment to portraying the lives of rural working people.⁵⁴⁶ This witnessing of the past may be seen as an element of nostalgia and, in a similar way to Lawson, Johnson often focuses on past events. John McLaren criticises Lawson for an

⁵⁴³ Michael Wilding, *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction* (NSW: Sydney Studies, 1997), *Auslit*, 10 February 2007, <<http://www.austlit.edu.au>>.

⁵⁴⁴ Chris Cocklin, Jacqui Dibden and Bruce Missingham, "'A Multi-cultural Countryside?'" Ethnic Minorities in Rural Australia,' *Rural Society* 16.2 (2006):133.

⁵⁴⁵ Johnson, Interview.

⁵⁴⁶ Johnson, Interview.

inability to look forward,⁵⁴⁷ but an understanding of the past is arguably a powerful method of making sense of the present.

The reception of Johnson's poetry by literary critics bears a resemblance to that of Lawson, who was described as being uncultured and overly focused on grim themes.⁵⁴⁸ Literary historian Christopher Lee suggests that Lawson's work was also considered to be unliterary due to its political and class-based content, and Lawson was seen as displaying 'shortcomings' in his literary ability due to his working-class background and lack of education.⁵⁴⁹ In a review of Lawson's poetry, the critic A.G. Stephens declared that Lawson's 'mental scope is narrow; he is comparatively uncultured; he iterates the same notes, and rarely improves his thoughts by elaboration; he wants harmony and variety of metre, his work is burdened with many weak lines and careless tags'.⁵⁵⁰ Both Johnson and Goodfellow have been described in similar ways by literary critics echoing Lawson's reception. But does negative commentary from literary figures determine whether a poet will be successful? This may depend on how success is measured. Lawson was popular among the general readership, but not well received by the literary establishment. As Lawson desired to represent the working class and to draw attention to their plight, it could be stated that his goals were met and continued to be even after his death as his work took on significance to workers during times of struggle such as the Depression years.⁵⁵¹ The intention of the poet and audience targeted could therefore be used as an indicator of success. If Johnson is able to reach a working-class audience with his work then it might be possible to label him successful. This opens up further questions however, such as why then do poets such as Goodfellow and Johnson continue to seek publication for their work in literary journals?

Johnson's class background and lack of formal education may be seen as detrimental to his ability to create literature. The poems in his collection *Home Town Burial* were described as 'pretty grim reading...he describes the harsh realities of life' and although 'clearly powerful',⁵⁵² the bleak accounts of life were considered by the reviewer to be unrelenting, which appears to be a common criticism of working-class poetry which is expected to 'lighten up' somehow and focus more on the happier side of

⁵⁴⁷ McLaren 47.

⁵⁴⁸ Lee, *City Bushman* 26.

⁵⁴⁹ Christopher Lee, 'An Uncultured Rhymer and his Cultural Critics: Henry Lawson, Class Politics and Colonial Literature,' *Victorian Poetry* 40.1 (2002): 97.

⁵⁵⁰ Lee, *City Bushman* 97.

⁵⁵¹ Lee, *City Bushman* 22 & 178.

⁵⁵² Dennis Oliver, 'Consolations of the Heart,' *Australian Book Review*, April (2004):58-59.

life. Johnson has been accused of creating documents rather than being poetic, in possession of good intentions and commitment to his subjects but lacking in poetic execution.⁵⁵³ Again, this is a common criticism leveled at working-class poetry that is considered sociology rather than art. It can be a patronizing and superior attitude of reviewers to state that a poet is making ‘heartfelt declarations’⁵⁵⁴ rather than writing ‘real’ poetry. In a similar way to Goodfellow, reviews of Johnson’s work by newspaper journalists or reviewers with progressive political views tend to be more sympathetic. *After the Axemen* was described by journalist Larry Schwartz as containing an ‘appeal that promises popular status in a way few poets achieve, or seek’,⁵⁵⁵ Jennifer Maiden, whose poetry often includes working-class characters, states that Johnson’s particular simple style is a ‘literary device’ that he uses to ‘investigate the psychological complexities which dog all easy emotions’.⁵⁵⁶ As Maiden describes, Johnson’s poems are often an examination of emotion and he explores the ways in which the material reality of working-class life can affect how individuals control and display emotions.

In ‘Autobiography’,⁵⁵⁷ Johnson attempts to look past the circumstances of his own life to make sense of his mother’s attitudes by considering how her young life had been shaped by hardship. The mother’s story is an example of how the cycle of poverty and lack of education reduces the opportunities open to following generations. The only way this woman could escape her unhappy childhood was to get married and commit to a lifetime of childrearing and struggle. The notion of ‘fate’ appears here, highlighting the strong pull of fatalism in working-class culture:

my mother’s own sorry tales
she told of neglect
and abandonment.

Her childhood bed a sofa
on the front veranda, open to
the wind and rain. Disowned
and unloved by a mother
who favoured men well
into her 80s father more
a figment of her imagination.

⁵⁵³ Greg McLaren, ‘Those Lines Approaching, Repeating, Appearing, Then Disappearing,’ *Southerly* 63.3 (2003): 172.

⁵⁵⁴ Andrew Sant, ‘Four Poets in “Outskirts”,’ *Australian Book Review* February/March (1996): 32.

⁵⁵⁵ Larry Schwartz, ‘In Verse,’ *The Sunday Age* February 11 (1996): 9.

⁵⁵⁶ Jennifer Maiden, ‘In the Human Way: Persona and Context in Five New Poetry Collections,’ *Hobo* 10 September (1996): 41.

⁵⁵⁷ Martin. R Johnson, ‘Autobiography,’ *Home Town Burial* (Tasmania: Cornford Press, 2002) 2.

First World War soldier who died
of pneumonia working in the rain
digging trenches in the streets
of Gawler.

Brought up by grandparents
set in Victorian ways, the years
of depression, restrictions made
by the second world war which tainted
her sense of fairness
with the bigotry of the times.

‘They should’ve dropped more bombs,’
she’d hiss, pleased to be born
August 6.

Pleased to release the rebellious
side of her nature, at 17
when she married Dad.
When he brought her to Williamstown
and out into the scrub to live.

The next 12 years of her life
spent at a married workman’s camp,
population no more than 40,
not counting the kids. A life deprived
of a chance to better herself.
To live better than the working poor.

A woman
who met what ever fate dished up to her.
Who never amounted to anything more.

If nostalgia is understood as a longing for the past, then Johnson appears to be rejecting the notion in his poetry. His forays into the past allow the reader to understand how class affected his family and provides a sense of continuity for the impacts of class that continue to penetrate in the present. In this sense, the label of nostalgia need not have a negative connotation. Cultural theorist Stuart Tannock suggests that nostalgia can be a powerful tool in the understanding of present struggles and argues against criticisms of nostalgia as inherently conservative, backward-looking and sentimental. The ‘historical continuity of struggle’ can be retrieved through nostalgia and is therefore useful for all marginalized social groups.⁵⁵⁸ The past certainly appears frequently in Johnson’s work and it could be argued that the scenes and events described in poems such as ‘The

⁵⁵⁸ Stuart Tannock, ‘Nostalgia Critique,’ *Cultural Studies* 9 .3 (1995) : 458 & 543.

Football⁵⁵⁹ not only provide an insight into the effects of poverty in a historical context but also connect to the experiences of contemporary poverty. This poem is written from a childhood perspective as Johnson relates the feelings of shame that can occur when children become aware of their poverty:

Out on the road, sockless in shoes
split at the seams, booting the footy
with dust in our hair, holes in our clothes,
and dirt in our skins, our wretchedness hit me
hard as a punt kick in the chest.

I clutched it to me with hands
that couldn't let go. With fingers
coming apart with a sense of shame,
our worn-out, half-flat ball
a symbol of who we were.

Dirty poor boy with miserable lives:

A revelation made
by a bright new football
spiraling like an orange torpedo
high into the sky, kicked by the boys
who lived next door.

Boys with smart black boots, blue
jeans and trendy shirts. Watches
that flashed in the sun, strapped
to clean-skinned wrists. Boys who lived
in a nice brick house.

And like I was seeing it for the first time,
the tin shed in which we lived,
shabby and dull to the eye, stamped
itself on my mind, like a stain
that won't wash off.

There is a sense of the physicality of poverty in this poem with the choice of images such as 'dust in our hair' and 'dirt in our skins' contrasted with the 'clean-skinned wrists' of the better-off boys. The boy in the poem focuses on the aspects of poverty that are significant for children – the lack of material possessions – and there is no impression of anger on the boy's part, only shame as he suddenly becomes aware of this lack. There is no suggestion in the poem that the boys next door are scornful of the

⁵⁵⁹ Martin. R Johnson, 'The Football,' *Home Town Burial* (Tasmania: Cornford Press, 2002) 4.

narrator's poverty, this impression is created in his own mind when he is provided with a point of comparison through the vision of a new football. Despite the fact that the neighbours are obviously better off financially than the narrator's family, they are still working-class people who, to more affluent families, may themselves appear to be poor. This points to the layering of class within society and demonstrates that the working class is not homogeneous, but consists of people with various financial positions, with the lowest rungs of the economic ladder occupied by people living in desperate poverty.

Johnson is committed to recording the lives of the people he has lived and worked with, such as the workers involved in the South Para Reservoir construction during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, who were neighbours during his childhood in the married workmen's camp. These workers were immigrants, itinerant workers and prison labourers and Johnson's collection *The Clothes-Prop Man* is both a historical record and a celebration of lives generally unacknowledged in poetry. Johnson believes that his poetry can 'portray the humanity of the working people' and 'convey a sense of their value', and he also endeavours to create poetry that contains a 'carefully wrought message using words that engage and inform'.⁵⁶⁰ The message that Johnson speaks of is evident in 'Truck Driver'⁵⁶¹ which describes the imperative of work for a man trying to support his wife and nine children. The truck becomes the symbol of survival and stability for the family and there is a sense of pride in his occupation alongside the reality of his family's struggle to survive. This man's priority is his family and there is an irony in his need to work long hours to earn money to feed the children he rarely sees:

I can see him now, kitbag in one hand,
the other wrenching open the truck's door,
bawl of babies a dull ache in his ears,
mobility of his legs, arms and mind
fudged by lack of sleep.

yet his sense of responsibility pulls him inside the cabin.
The sound of the truck's motor coming on echoes out
across the dew wet paddocks, giving voice
to the family's sense of security...

There is a sensuality to the poem with language such as, 'wrenching', 'bawl', 'ache' – the 'dew wet paddocks' and 'echoes' which suggest not only the fatigue the driver

⁵⁶⁰ Johnson, Interview.

⁵⁶¹ Martin. R Johnson, 'Truck Driver,' *The Clothes- Prop Man: Poems from the South Para Reservoir* (SA: Wakefield, 2002) 16.

experiences but also the sensitivity he has for his environment. This man is one of many hundreds who were involved in a project that was to have considerable impact on South Australia but who are not often acknowledged or credited for their part. The truck driver ‘...shaped/ the history of the State in the grip/ of his fingers on the steering wheel.’ Yet despite the possibility that the truck driver may have been aware of the significance of the South Para Reservoir project as a whole, his reason for driving his truck is to provide for his family. The parallelism mentioned earlier is at work here – the daily grind, separation from family, lack of sleep, is a universal experience for many workers, and the individual driver here can be seen as representative of many working-class people. Ultimately the message contained in this poem is a call for acknowledgement of the role played by ‘invisible’ workers on monumental projects, and an understanding of struggle.

Johnson has documented the years he spent working as a timber feller in the Mount Crawford Forest in South Australia and his collection *After the Axe-men: Poems from Mount Crawford Forest*, was mainly composed in his head while he worked in the forest cutting down trees with his chainsaw.⁵⁶² The isolated work gave Johnson the opportunity and mind-space for reflection and creativity and the poems open a door into the hitherto unexplored world of timber felling. ‘After the Axe-men’⁵⁶³ is the title poem and describes the solitary nature of the timber feller’s work:

Preferring his own company,
the modern day wood cutter
works alone, hidden from view
by tall plantations of pine.

And should you turn your motor off,
and wind down the window,
out on the distant highway,
you'll hear the far-off buzz of his saw.

Closer, the indescribable sound
of splinters gargling down the throat
of a falling tree, the sharpened point
of a timber hook going soft

into pale log ends, echoing
strangely as they fall, heavy

⁵⁶² Martin. R Johnson, ‘After the Axe-Men,’ *After the Axe Men: Poems from the Mount Crawford Forest, Outskirts* (Victoria: Penguin, 1995) 73.

⁵⁶³ Johnson, *After the Axe* 92.

with sap, into the heaps,...from where
he makes his way to refuel,

and in the silence that follows,
hears you drive away.

Through a kind of existential alienation, Johnson describes the sound of the tree falling from the worker's perspective and the sharpness of the image brings into focus the reality of the danger of the job; the huge tree falls with such weight into the forest and the worker is alone without colleagues to watch the fall of the tree or provide emergency help if required; the ever-present danger is evoked through the descriptions of the tree as 'sharpened', 'splinters' and 'timber hook'. Although the worker understands the environment in which he works, there is no sense in the poem of environmentalism. This may unsettle the reader who has no experience of working in the bush, as the destruction of trees is often seen as unjustified by environmentalists. However, the poem does not cast judgement on the worker, the poet is attempting to make the worker visible and the nature of his work or the negative environmental impact of tree felling is not examined. The poem problematises the binary between conservation and destruction of the forest.

In this collection Johnson alerts the reader to the dangers and discomforts of the work as well as the changing nature of the timber-felling industry and the instability of the workers' lives as they are employed as piece workers without the security of a regular wage. Changes in the industry culminate in lower wages and loss of jobs and Johnson reveals the pain of job loss, and the way in which working in isolation can prevent the workers from organizing and campaigning for their rights when threatened. Although workers' rights can be protected by unions, and collective action has proven to be a vital tool for change within the workplace, there are situations when workers do not feel confident of their power when faced with a fight against their employer. This situation is described in 'The Big Strike',⁵⁶⁴ which explores the mixed feelings of the workers as they fight their employer for higher wages. The workers are initially confident, but become concerned that they do not have the strength to achieve victory; even when their demands are met, there is a bittersweet sense as they realise that they may have been able to improve their conditions at an earlier time if they had been organised:

⁵⁶⁴ Martin R Johnson, 'The Big Strike,' *After the Axe* 96.

The first beer tasted of success.

The second, doubt. The third, panic
as we took our fight into the bush,
barring trucks from carting our logs
until our demands were met.
A fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

They were all smiles and reconciliation,
accepting our proposals
as if to say, 'We never knew!'...

But the irony haunts. The years
we lost, busting our guts.
Cutting wood
without the courage to claim our rights.

Johnson's collections of poetry provide strong and vivid pictures of rural working-class life and highlight the way in which people struggle to make ends meet while retaining a sense of pride and dignity in their lives despite the harsh conditions. In a similar vein to Lawson, Johnson's work gives the reader valuable insights into life on the land, and shatters any romantic illusions of the bush that continue to appear in contemporary poetry.

Goodfellow and Johnson both write in a realist style which highlights aspects of specific working-class communities while offering universal themes that cut across both rural and urban Australia. Their poetry reveals that life in the bush can be hard, as can life in the city. Arguably, the legacy of Lawson is alive in their work, not the canonised Lawson removed from the working-class experience and heralded as a major contributor to the Australian bush legend, but the politically aware Lawson who wished to reveal the injustices and inequalities faced by all working-class people, whether rural or city dwellers.

Chapter Five

Dirty Realism in the Poetry of Mick Searles

In 1983, Bill Buford who was then the editor of the British literary magazine, *Granta*, wrote an editorial in which he introduced a genre of American fiction writing that he called 'dirty realism'. Buford described the writing as 'unadorned, unfurnished', utilising a 'flat, "unsurprised" language, pared down to the plainest of plain styles...stripped of adornment'. This was the strength of the writing, as the writers included in the magazine delivered 'low-rent tragedies' about 'waitresses...cashiers... construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys'; working class stories that revealed the 'belly-side' of American society. Buford suggested that the writing was political, but not in an overt, calling for revolution style; the politics was evident in the lives of the characters, in circumstances that warranted protest – in their poverty, addiction and moments of despair.⁵⁶⁵ Such writing followed on from the minimalist style of Raymond Carver, and this genre of tales of 'alienated and depressed' people was later described by reviewer Evelyn Toynton as representing the 'working-class arm' of minimalism.⁵⁶⁶

How does the idea of dirty realism fit into the Australian experience? In 1995 a new genre of Australian fiction was proposed, namely 'grunge', a term that had its origins in the American grunge music scene of the early nineties. Grunge literature included the work of a group of emerging 'young' authors whose work exposed the attitudes and behaviours of the so-called 'Generation X'. The novels of writers such as Christos Tsiolkas, Justine Ettler and Neil Boyack were seen to epitomize the despondency, apathy and 'existential ennui' that were a feature of Generation X existence.⁵⁶⁷ Leishman suggests that, in a similar way to the dirty realists, the 'grunge' writers wrote in a 'gritty' style and their stories focused on the lives of 'ordinary' young people who sought refuge from society through drugs, alcohol and sex. Working-class

⁵⁶⁵ Bill Buford, 'Editorial,' *Granta* 8 (1983): 4-5.

⁵⁶⁶ Evelyn Toynton, 'The Granta Book of the American Short Story,' *Commentary* 95.3 (1993):51.

⁵⁶⁷ Paul Dawson, 'Grunge Lit: marketing Generation X,' *Meanjin* 56.1 (1997): 120.

characters were present in these novels, especially in the work of Tsiolkas and Boyack, and the stories revealed the growing inequalities within Australian society, along class, race and gender lines and challenged conservative notions of Australian identity. 'Grunge' as a genre was relatively short-lived in Australia. The writing was criticized and dismissed by many of the 'gatekeepers' of Australian literature as empty and devoid of literary value.⁵⁶⁸ This rejection by prominent critics, despite the commercial success of the novels, pointed to a generational gap between the 'gatekeepers' and their younger counterparts. The harsh realities of life for the younger generation due to increases in unemployment, youth depression and suicide, poverty and homelessness that were examined by writers such as Tsiolkas were undervalued and considered immature due to their extensive use of expletives.⁵⁶⁹ This type of superficial criticism deflected attention away from the issues and concerns dealt with in the books. The authors themselves were reluctant to accept the tag of 'grunge' as they believed they were being unfairly categorized due to a term that had been invented by a critic and subsequently used as a marketing term to sell books.⁵⁷⁰

But Syson suggests that the grunge literature of the 1990s was a manifestation of an Australian literary tradition which has its roots in convict ballads and which has continued to produce literature that speaks for the 'alienated and disenfranchised'. He describes Lawson as one of the original 'grunge' writers due to the 'urban realism' and 'anti-bourgeois' sentiment contained in his work.⁵⁷¹ This gritty realist style with its long history has survived the media hype of 'grunge' fiction and continues in the poetry of working-class writers such as Mick Searles. As well as the common working-class themes of work, unemployment and hardship, Searles' poetry also reveals a sense of despondency, fatalism and isolation characteristic of the dirty realist genre and his work reveals the psychological damage caused by social class. There is also an anti-aesthetic evident in Searles work as his poetry focuses on dysfunctional characters and a portrayal of the abject, creating a grim aesthetic in which moments of happiness or optimism are few: 'the room stinks/ & my writing/ isn't getting any better'.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁸ Kirsty Leishman, 'Australian Grunge Literature and the Conflict between Literary Generations,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 63 (1999) 94, 95 & 101.

⁵⁶⁹ Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999) 130.

⁵⁷⁰ Leishman 94.

⁵⁷¹ Ian Syson, 'Smells Like Market Spirit: Grunge, Literature, Australia,' *Overland* 142 (1996): 23 & 26.

⁵⁷² Mick Searles, 'Writing at Home,' *Overland* 165 (2001): 46.

Despite completing a manuscript in 2001, he is yet to find publication for this collection, but it is unclear whether this is because he has had the manuscript rejected by editors or whether he is yet to submit it to an editor. It should also be noted that to date, there are no reviews or examinations of Searles' poetry apart from my own, but he has had over a dozen poems published in magazines such as *Overland*, *Four W*, *Blast*, *Redoubt* and *Southerly*. In 2000 Searles wrote an article on working-class poetry for *Overland* magazine which provides a clear indication of his views on class and poetry. In this article, he describes the way in which the term 'working class' is avoided, and highlights the euphemisms preferred by politicians of both political parties. He also accuses the Australian Labor Party of losing touch with the working class, arguing that 'within a maelstrom of rhetoric, the Labor party no longer mentions a working class, instead they drone on about 'workers''. According to Searles, this exclusion of the working class from political rhetoric is mirrored in the exclusion of working-class writers from the literary establishment, as the public funding available for writers has been mainly awarded to those who are not working class – whose writing is considered to be 'refined'.⁵⁷³ Searles goes on to accuse publishers of rejecting working-class poetry due to 'subjective personal taste, or simply by the nature of publishing itself.' Publishers are described by Searles as a 'cultural police, defining the literary tastes of a refined elite', and generally preferring to publish 'formless, abstract, post-modern or experimental literature' which 'runs in direct opposition to the general output of most working-class writers' Poetry dealing with working-class issues that is published is little more than 'middle-class angst' and writers are chosen based on the cult of personality, which rejects the less appealing, unrefined working class writer. He claims that working-class poetry has suffered from the politically correct nature of editors who prefer to publish writing from 'Aborigines, Feminists, Homosexuals and other strains of acceptable literary and moral purposefulness'. Although Searles acknowledges that minority groups are also reacting against a system of exploitation and oppression, he criticises the writers for their lack of class consciousness, and suggests that the emphasis on identity politics creates 'further elitism within a class, social, cognitive and literary structure, which excludes the fundamental purpose of genuinely political, working-class art and struggle.'⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷³ Mick Searles, 'General Act of Closure: Vacuous Desire vs. The Working Class,' *Overland* 159 (2000): 117.

⁵⁷⁴ Searles, General Act 117-118.

Ironically, Searles' comments align him with those for whom he has the most contempt, such as establishment poets who also criticise political correctness and whose views I presented in chapter two. Searles concedes that some writers from working-class backgrounds have gained publication, but suggests that these individuals are those who have been groomed by the middle-class system through the accumulation of tertiary education and the ability to emulate the middle class and therefore develop the ability to network themselves into a favourable position. These working-class writers become the acceptable face of the working class for the middle-class establishment, and Searles describes the writing they produce under the approving gaze of the middle class as, 'taking their readership on the long, long journey of vacuous desire'⁵⁷⁵

Searles concludes this article by lamenting the paradoxical position faced by working-class writers who find themselves either alienated from their working-class communities or, if they remain true to their working-class backgrounds, dismissed by publishers due to the confrontational nature of their work and personalities. For Searles there is no solution to the problem, and he suggests that 'exclusion in literature is as rigid now as ever, in any democratic/capitalist economy' and that working-class writers' efforts to agitate simply make them less appealing and publishable to the middle-class establishment.⁵⁷⁶

Such views are not often presented in the literary mainstream and Searles is certainly unambiguous in his condemnation of the 'middle-class' poetry scene, but he remains dedicated to writing about working-class experiences and believes it is still worthwhile submitting his work to publishers as it is 'important for working-class writers to have access to the means of communication wherever and however they may be' and he continues to write poetry because 'no cunt comes between me and the page. I like it.'⁵⁷⁷ This attitude characterises his poetry, which is a realistic representation of life based on his own experiences as a young urban working-class man. Searles manages to include many aspects of working-class and underclass life, and several of his poems cover multiple themes of financial hardship, drug culture, crime, and wasted lives, with despondency as a major motif. The characters that populate his poems are on the lowest rungs of society, and his work is removed from the traditional image of the working class as hard-working and dignified. There is little dignity here in the portrayal of

⁵⁷⁵ Searles, General Act 117.

⁵⁷⁶ Searles, General Act 118.

⁵⁷⁷ Searles, Mick, personal communication, February 2001.

junkies, street kids, petty criminals, alcoholics, the unemployed and the mentally ill. Searles does not shy away from revealing the dark world of the underclass, and his poems are powerful because of their uncompromising nature.

Many of the unpleasant situations he describes are imbued with a dark irony which is a feature of dirty realist writing. Although the term ‘dirty realism’ was initially coined to describe a particular style of fiction, the characteristics of the genre have also been used to describe the work of certain poets such as Charles Bukowski. The world featured in Bukowski’s poetry contains themes of ‘containment and isolation’, and the desire to ‘subvert or oppose rules’ which leads to a contradictory position of challenging the dominant hegemony, through a ‘radical individualism’ which Dobozy calls a ‘pointed hypocrisy aesthetic’.⁵⁷⁸ The descriptions of Bukowski’s work are relevant here as Searles cites Bukowski as a literary influence.⁵⁷⁹ I would suggest that the evidence of this influence is quite clear in the content, style and structure of his poetry. Searles also states that he was introduced to poetry initially through song lyrics, mainly those of the Rolling Stones, The Who, Lou Reed and Bob Dylan. Occasionally the influence of these artists comes through in his poetry, in his use of rhyme and lines such as ‘daddy’s gone out/ mummy’s on a trip’ in ‘Brickyard Boy’. Unsympathetic treatment of women can also be a feature of Searles’ work, which is vaguely reminiscent of the Rolling Stones’ misogynistic lyrics, but Searles does not write about women as sexual conquests, instead the women in his poems are dysfunctional mothers and drug addicts and although he deals with sexual abuse in his work, he does not engage with sexual pleasure or romantic relationships at all. This sets him apart from the ‘grunge’ writers whose novels contained many explicit references to sexual encounters. Since deciding to become a writer – a decision he made based on his inability to remain employed – he lists the poetry of Allan Eric Martin and Jenny Boulton as more recent influences. Despite Searles’ identification as working class, the sense of community and collective interest that invests the work of Goodfellow and Johnson is less evident in his poetry. Searles seems to exist independently of other working-class writers, and his economic position is partly the result of his desire to remain unemployed in order to write.⁵⁸⁰ Could Searles therefore be influenced by the image of the isolated, suffering author as exemplified by the Romantic poets? If so, this would contradict his stated allegiance

⁵⁷⁸ Tamas Dobozy, ‘In the Country of Contradiction the Hypocrite is King: Defining Dirty Realism in Charles Bukowski’s Factotum,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.1 (2001): 49-51.

⁵⁷⁹ Searles, personal.

⁵⁸⁰ Searles, personal.

with working-class values. The sloth and indolence admitted by Coleridge⁵⁸¹ is evident in some of Searles' work, and the Romantic poets considered themselves to be outcasts – necessarily so – as they believed that artistic creation could occur only under conditions of isolation and suffering.⁵⁸² Has Searles embraced such bourgeois attitudes of victimized individualism? I would suggest that rather than attempting to replicate a self-imposed exclusion, Searles' work and his lifestyle demonstrate the involuntary social exclusion experienced by the working class and underclass.

Despondency, the relativity of poverty, social exclusion and the dichotomy of choice over addiction are some of themes evident in 'Economic Rationalism'.⁵⁸³ In this poem Searles describes the financial situation of a person living hand to mouth, and the way in which poverty prevents people from participating fully in society. The influence of Bukowski is quite clear here in the short lines and minimalist language:

i could buy a lounge
or go on a holiday
i could eat
i could get the phone on
pay the electricity
or have the gas
re-connected
i could drink at the pub
or buy a bottle of whiskey...

i could go to the football
i could play cricket
i could buy books
& magazines
or get the paper
every day
i could buy a computer
i could get a haircut
i could buy a video
& have pizza delivered
i could buy carpet
or rugs
or curtains
i could buy toilet paper
i could stop thieving
i could buy cuban cigars
i could buy a gun

⁵⁸¹ Willard Spiegelman, *Majestic Indolence: English Romantic Poetry and the Work of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 59.

⁵⁸² Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge, 2002) 9.

⁵⁸³ Mick Searles, 'Economic Rationalism,' *Overland* 165 (2001):46.

i could get an air-conditioner
or a fan
or a heater

but i can't stop smoking.

Searles uses the list device to build a sense of the everyday through basic budget items such as bills, food, toilet paper, as well as some of the things that most households take for granted, such as entertainment in the shape of the television, sporting events or the occasional take-away. The notion of relative poverty is evident here, as Searles lists not only the essentials of food and heating but also the kinds of items that are considered basic in Australian society such as a bed and lounge. Being poor in Australia does not usually mean facing starvation but is related to the ability to participate fully in society by having access to material possessions that would be considered luxuries in other less-developed societies. To be without these things positions the narrator as impoverished; placing him outside of mainstream society and set apart from many of the readers.

The outward simplicity of the form and language of this poem contrasts with the deeper implications of the content. Although the poem does not explain why the narrator is poor, Searles' own situation as long-term unemployed provides a hint and the narrator conveys a sense of apathy and despondence that can be characteristic of chronically unemployed people⁵⁸⁴ as previous feelings of 'self worth' related to the ability to hold down a job are replaced by inadequacy and resentment toward those in a better financial position.⁵⁸⁵ The 'psychic landscape' of class is evident here, through the feelings expressed by the narrator. Sociologist Diane Reay suggests that social class can have a profound effect on the psyche, leading to feelings such as despair, contempt and ambivalence.⁵⁸⁶ This is related to the relationship between those struggling with poverty and the consumer-oriented society in which they live which creates a contradiction that bell hooks describes as 'psychological torment' to those who are, 'unable to fulfill endless material longings'.⁵⁸⁷ The narrator experiences social exclusion, defined as an inability to participate economically, politically and culturally

⁵⁸⁴ Ed Carson, et al. 'On the Scrap Heap at 45: The Human Impact of Mature-Aged Unemployment,' *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 79.3 (2006): 473.

⁵⁸⁵ Cobb, Sennett 264 & 58.

⁵⁸⁶ Diane Reay, 'Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class,' *Sociology* 39.5 (2005): 913

⁵⁸⁷ hooks, *Class Matters* 82.

within society.⁵⁸⁸ It is the narrator's poverty that is the main cause of his exclusion here, but the hint of dysfunction contained in the lines about budgeting to 'stop thieving' or to 'buy a gun' suggest that he is also involved in a moral exclusion.

But is the narrator implicated in the perpetuation of his poverty? Some conservative commentators such as Peter Saunders assert that there are behavioural reasons for poverty as some individuals make poor choices on how to spend their incomes. He states that such individuals should accept responsibility for their poverty and he points to examples of impoverished people who appear to be able to afford to buy cigarettes and alcohol.⁵⁸⁹ Saunders' views link in with theories of psychology that emerged in the nineteenth century and which were used to classify working-class people's behaviours into those who were responsible for their circumstances and those who were deserving of sympathy.⁵⁹⁰ The repetition of 'i could' certainly suggests that the narrator in the poem has a choice on how to use his income, but the final line, 'i can't stop smoking' suggests that overcoming addiction is not simply a matter of choice. This also raises other issues relating to the health of poor and working-class people and the disproportionate numbers of people from low socio-economic backgrounds addicted to cigarettes and other drugs. Although Searles is not making explicit political statements about poverty and social exclusion, the poem provides an insight into some of the effects of poverty and subsequent alienation.

Searles' grim aesthetic is displayed in 'All Day & All Night',⁵⁹¹ which takes the reader on a tour of housing commission flats and introduces the people who live in the flats through a series of narrative vignettes each of which focuses on a different apartment number. The descriptions of the occupants of the eighteen flats creates a grotesque tableau of dysfunctional lives:

the dope smoking greek woman
belted up her daughter-in-law
a paddy-wagon reversed up
to her front door
4 cops went in
& came out carrying her

⁵⁸⁸ Kathy Arthurson, K. Jacobs, 'A Critique of the Concept of Social Exclusion and its Utility for Australian Social Housing Policy,' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 39.1 (2004): 26.

⁵⁸⁹ Peter Saunders, 'Lies, Damned Lies and the Senate Poverty Inquiry Report,' *Issue Analysis* 46 April (2004): 8, *Centre for Independent Studies*, 10 June 2007, <<http://www.cis.org.au/>>.

⁵⁹⁰ Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: Sexuality, Class and Surveillance* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993) 32-34.

⁵⁹¹ Mick Searles, 'All Day & All Night,' *Overland* 165 (2001): 44.

1 on each arm
1 on each leg
they threw her in
& off to glenside for 2 weeks
she came back & told us all
she'd been to kangaroo island...

she's 2 metres across the hips
& 5 feet tall
she doesn't walk
she rocks from side to side
her tits hang down
to her belly-button
she invited me in for coffee
16 times before i said yes
she said *Oh! excuse the smell*
& carried a 20 litre bucket
full of shit & piss
out of her bedroom
& poured it down the toilet
her bottom lip drooped
to her chin
& in a wave of thick saliva
said *would you like a drink?...*

sit in the lounge room in a circle
put a cassette player in the middle
& play pass the bottle
they throw t.v.'s
bottles, cans, needles & dirty clothes
off the balcony
they helped old # 12 move out
they stole his tumble dryer...

The poem is reminiscent of Bukowski, most notably his poem 'Flophouse'⁵⁹² which takes the reader on a tour of a homeless shelter; 'and 56 men/ squeezed together/ on cots/ with everybody/ snoring/ at once/and some of those/ snores/ so/ deep and/ gross and/ unbelievable/ dark/ snotty/ gross/ subhuman/ wheezings/ from hell/ itself.' And like Bukowski's poem, the scenes sketched in 'All Day & All Night' have a deeply political core, highlighting a concentration of social problems in some housing commission complexes caused by poverty and lack of support for vulnerable people. Housing commission complexes often provide the only housing available to people who are

⁵⁹² Bukowski, Charles. 'Flophouse,' *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 101.

chronically unemployed, suffering from mental illness or physical disability and generally unable to afford the rent and bond money for a private rental home. This ‘last resort’ housing becomes stigmatized and whole areas can be viewed as ‘problem places, even labeled ‘lawless’ due to the association between public housing and increased violence, crime, drug activity and anti-social behaviour.⁵⁹³ The link between ‘poor housing’ and ‘poor social and community outcomes’⁵⁹⁴ is arguably displayed in this poem through the description of the tenants’ dysfunctional behaviour. Australian cities are not usually referred to as ghettos but there are areas within Australian cities that are ‘segregated along class, economic, cultural and ethnic lines...to live in some suburbs is to suffer an equivalent stigma to that borne by people living in the ghettos of Europe’.⁵⁹⁵ This kind of segregation is evident in Searles’ work.

This poem reveals a number of issues affecting housing commission residents, such as domestic violence, mental illness, drug addiction, theft and anti-social behaviour and it is arguably Searles’ intent to confront the reader; to bring into focus people who generally remain invisible. The abject body is evident here too through the descriptions of the obese woman and her bucket of ‘undignified, non-poetic’⁵⁹⁶ excrement, the mentally ill and the bearded woman. Abject bodies feature frequently in Searles’ poetry and are a common inclusion in grunge or dirty realist writing.⁵⁹⁷ The abject body is confronting to the reader as the filth on display represents disorder⁵⁹⁸ and a ‘potential threat to the system’.⁵⁹⁹ Obesity in particular is considered to be outside of the ‘aesthetic domain’⁶⁰⁰ and characters such as the obese woman are usually portrayed as ‘repulsive’ and loathsome’.⁶⁰¹ By including such characters Searles is challenging the tendency to exclude the abject and he subverts the order of aesthetics by focusing in on the ‘unassimilably other’.⁶⁰²

⁵⁹³ Kathy Arthurson et al. ‘Challenging the Stigma of Public Housing: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study in South Australia,’ *Urban Policy and Research* 22. 4 (2004): 411-414.

⁵⁹⁴ Darren Holloway, B. Randolph, ‘Social Disadvantage, Tenure and Location: An Analysis of Sydney and Melbourne,’ *Urban Policy and Research* 23.2 (2005): 174.

⁵⁹⁵ Powell xiv.

⁵⁹⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994)194.

⁵⁹⁷ Karen Brooks, ‘Shit Creek: Suburbia, Abjection and Subjectivity in Australian “Grunge” Fiction,’ *Australian Literary Studies* 184 (1998): 87.

⁵⁹⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984) 2.

⁵⁹⁹ Grosz 192.

⁶⁰⁰ Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 99.

⁶⁰¹ Kim Wilson, ‘Abjection in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction,’ *Papers* 11.3 (2001) 24.

⁶⁰² William Cohen, *Filth, Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) ix.

Searles does not conceal any of the unsavoury aspects of his neighbours' lives, and the reader may be confronted by the depictions of tenants punching through walls in fits of rage, stealing from each other, smashing property during psychotic episodes, poisoning each other's gardens, throwing dirty needles over the balcony and pretending to be disabled, but the writer himself reserves judgment – the reader is left to decide whether the characters deserve sympathy or disgust. Searles manages to avoid pathologising his subjects through the constant reminder that he (the narrator) is present in the scene and interacting with the other characters. The poet is not simply creating a voyeuristic freak show as he is as much a part of the housing complex as those he portrays. The humorous last line of the poem, '& then there's me' implies that the narrator has the potential to be the most deviant person in the block, and he has been implicated in the deviant behaviour by admitting to poisoning plants, 'she's complained/ since the day i moved in/ so i poured weed killer over her roses' and lending a knife to a neighbour who confesses to being a mentally ill fugitive:

he knocked on my door Friday night...
i just checked myself out of the r.a.h.
mental ward/ the police are after me...
can i borrow a knife?

Although Searles' poems are often observations of people and situations, he is never far from the scene (another trope of Bukowski who tended to write autobiographically), occasionally placing himself among a group of characters, and sometimes writing about his own family experience in candid and disturbing detail. Searles has written poems about his abusive father and alcoholic mother and these poems provide some explanation for his own apparent isolation and lack of personal relationships in his work. The poem 'Mum Again'⁶⁰³ is a recount of his mother's alcoholism, which follows on from an earlier portrayal of his mother's alcoholism in which the narrator recounts the experience of watching his mother's self-destructive behaviour and abusive relationships as a child. 'Mum Again' catches up with the mother many years later and demonstrates how the adult child has become the parent's carer. The poem is direct and the emotion is sparse:

her tears stream down the line

⁶⁰³ Mick Searles, 'Mum Again,' *Four W* 9 (1998): 118.

& I wonder
if she's been snorting them
or just drinking again...

I rush round the back
into the kitchen
& it's a crazy cave painting

hand prints all over the cupboards
the phone hanging off its hook
a smashed bottle of brandy in the sink
blood spread like margarine
across the lino
globes of it
among the skid marks
where she slipped & crawled...

it takes her 2 days to tell me
she can't sit down
- she thinks her arse is broken

she'll do it again at Christmas

but she always rings
first.

The metaphor, 'it's a crazy cave painting' and simile, 'blood spread like margarine' force the reader to confront the shocking scene. Again, the abject body appears and the reader is witness to the horror of the mother's physical deterioration through descriptions of her 'globes' of blood and 'broken' 'arse'. The tone of the poem is straightforward, suggesting that this kind of event is not unusual – the narrator is likely to experience the same situation in the future. The son appears to be going through the motions, assisting his mother through a sense of duty rather than love and compassion demonstrating a detachment from emotion that could be a survival tactic: '20 minutes later she's alive/ & thanks me for *caring*/ but that stopped a long time ago'.

Alcohol has long been a feature of literature and the celebration of alcohol has appeared in poetry since the fifth century BC. Literary theorist Marty Roth describes how the 'drink poetry' of ancient Greece influenced generations of poets and led to a tradition of drinking poems in Western lyrical poetry. The image of the writer using alcohol to evoke the muse is a well-utilised one and can be seen in the work of

Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Keats.⁶⁰⁴ Thus a romanticized image of the privileged drinking writer was established even though alcoholism led to the premature deaths of writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Addiction to alcohol and its negative effects did feature in the work of some canonical writers such as Tennessee Williams, but mainly in relation to the heavy drinking of upper-class characters. I would suggest that the ways in which alcohol is linked to poverty and working-class life is treated most effectively by Bukowski, whose poems often dealt with his own experiences as a drunk. Bukowski's approach is modeled by Searles and he does not romanticize the impact of alcoholism in this poem, but offers a frank account – allowing the reader to decide whether the mother's behaviour warrants sympathy.

Working-class masculinity is examined and critiqued through the portrayal of a father figure in 'Never Again'.⁶⁰⁵ While maintaining a sense of constrained anger and ironic tone, Searles provides details of what the father is said to *not have* done. Through this device the reader is given a picture of what he actually did do, and the result is the image of a violent, controlling, psychologically abusive man:

he wasn't violent
he never
punched me in the head
to make me call him
dad
he never
grabbed me by the hair
smashed my face
into the dashboard
& told me
I've only got myself to blame

he never
banned me from using my stereo
so he didn't catch me
playing the stones full blast
& couldn't knock me
to the ground so hard
the neighbours across the street
heard the slap over the music
& they didn't tell me afterwards

⁶⁰⁴ Marty Roth, "'Anacreon' and Drink Poetry: or the Art of Feeling Very Very Good," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42 3 (2000), *Expanded Academic Index*, 10 June 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁶⁰⁵ Mick Searles, 'Never Again,' *Four W* 10 (1999): 186.

they'd never complain again...

The effect continues until the last line, when Searles undoes the negative twist and provides the final blow in a terrifying account of this tyrannical man:

he never
whinged, complained about
or took the things I did have he never
encouraged me to fail
set me up to fail
or showed me kindness

The poem is also suggestive of some of the negative aspects of working-class masculinity, which can manifest in violent acts of racism, homophobia and sexism:

he never
hated chinks, coons or wogs
he actively embraced
poofers, women & cripples

Connell et al. suggest that working-class masculinity is formed in an environment of diminished authority and exploitation.⁶⁰⁶ A subsequent sense of powerlessness leads to acts of aggression as working-class men resort to violence in order to assert a dominant position;⁶⁰⁷ those who are perceived as weaker therefore become the victims, usually women and children but also 'gays and wogs'.⁶⁰⁸ The idea of an aggressive working-class masculinity is linked with the 'centrality of physique' which favours physical strength as a marker of worth⁶⁰⁹ and Hollier states that working-class men continue to develop personalities that are based on the need for 'strength and aggression' in the traditional work setting.⁶¹⁰ As working-class men become marginalised from society due to unemployment or low-status occupations they target those perceived as a threat.⁶¹¹ Certain racial groups are singled out as threatening the livelihoods of white workers due to their perceived willingness to work for lower wages and historians Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus describe such racism as entrenched in the history of the Australian

⁶⁰⁶ Robert Connell, et al. *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982) 181.

⁶⁰⁷ Christine Boman, "'Let's Get Her'": Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary Australian Drama and its Film Adaptations,' *JAS* 76 (2003): 127.

⁶⁰⁸ McGregor 44.

⁶⁰⁹ Rob White, 'Violence and Masculinity: The Construction of Criminality,' *Arena Magazine* 32 Dec – Jan (1997-98): 42.

⁶¹⁰ Nathan Hollier, 'Frank Hardy and Australian Working-Class Masculinity,' *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment*, eds., Paul Adams, Christopher Lee (Victoria: Vulgar Press, 2003) 223.

⁶¹¹ Cobb, Sennett 140.

labour movement.⁶¹² The ‘injuries of social inequality’⁶¹³ lead to violent outcomes, most often directed at the family, as witnessed in Searles’ poem as men lash out due to their lack of control and exploitation within the workplace.⁶¹⁴ The cyclical nature of such violence, the suggestion that ‘brutal conditions breed brutalised people’⁶¹⁵ is challenged by Searles though as the poem’s narrator does not react violently or attempt to seek revenge. In this way Searles is contesting the stereotype of the aggressive young working class male and presenting an alternative working-class masculinity through his poetry. Although Searles contests the negative stereotype in ‘Never Again’, he plays to the stereotype in ‘Dope, Whiskey & Cigarettes’⁶¹⁶ which relates a conversation between the narrator and five friends that includes racist, homophobic language and discriminatory views on the mentally ill:

never trust a wog

barry says

they’re insidious bastards

– *it’s in their history ...*

it’s th same with mental heads

mark says

I don’t mind th bi-polar

or those with anxiety disorders

– *even lunatics need friends*

it’s th ones with

a major underlying

depression

I can’t stand...

& fucken faggots

Jamie said

they swallow flattery

quicker than they’d

suck down a private

schoolboy

in a public toilet

The attitudes of the characters in this poem are not as obvious as initially apparent though and irony within the poem problematises the labelling of working-class men as

⁶¹² Ann Curthoys and A. Markus. ‘Introduction,’ *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, eds., Ann Curthoys, Andrew Markus (NSW: Hale and Iremonger, 1978) xv.

⁶¹³ White 42.

⁶¹⁴ Connell et al. 181.

⁶¹⁵ White 43.

⁶¹⁶ Mick Searles, ‘Dope, Whiskey & Cigarettes,’ *Overland* 172 (2003): 75.

inherently bigoted. The men maintain that they hate ‘wogs’, ‘midgets’, ‘mental heads’ and ‘faggots’ but apart from the racist slur, the reasons for their bigotry are not as might be expected. Dave states that midgets are untrustworthy, but reveals that he has nothing against ‘dwarves’. Why does he single out midgets? It points to the contradictions inherent in working-class people’s views, as they respond negatively to certain groups they consider the ‘other’ but are willing to accept other groups who might also be marginalised by wider society. Dave’s mistrust of midgets is based on his experiences with small dogs that allow themselves to be patted before turning on humans; this seems like an arbitrary link and his likening ‘midgets’ to dogs is disturbing. In a similar way, Mark complains about depressed people, stating that they are ‘two-faced bastards’ and not to be trusted as they ‘don’t even drink/ much’, but he is comfortable with those who are bi-polar or schizophrenic. Jamie hates ‘faggots’ but not because of their sexual activities but because they are ‘yuppies’, and the poem also includes a reference to ‘rich cunts’ which reveals the class position of the characters. Racism and homophobia within the working class is usually attributed to both the structure of class which pits working-class people against each other in order to prevent collective action,⁶¹⁷ and to ignorance which can be thwarted through education and contact with the ‘other’.⁶¹⁸ The poem touches on both of these factors as the characters, who are presumably white, (they have Anglo names and their speech is that of the white working class) reveal a divisive racism, but also a tolerance of certain groups.

The impacts of a harsh and unsupportive childhood and youth are explored by Searles in ‘Brickyard Boy’,⁶¹⁹ which illustrates the effects of homelessness on a neglected child. Hopelessness characterizes this poem, rendered in Searles’ bleak aesthetic:

Ten years old
the walls
getting higher
they’re stacking up
the bricks
daddy’s gone out
mummy’s on a trip
sees his freedom
in the gangs...

⁶¹⁷ Fields 60.

⁶¹⁸ Staughton Lynd, ‘Overcoming Racism,’ *Monthly Review* 51. 9 (2000), *Expanded Academic Index*, 1 June 07, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁶¹⁹ Mick Searles, ‘Brickyard Boy,’ *Four W* 3 (1992):106.

Twelve years old
veteran
of the streets
growing up
on crack
chilling out
on smack
always running
from the dogs
holds no more
feeling
for you folks

Fourteen years old
best friend's
dead
trying
to find his feet
looking
for the path
longing to forget
needs hope
for the future
gets a
gun
toting tutor

The boy leaves an unhappy home for a life on the streets and follows his parents' example by descending into addiction. He seeks out the company of other street kids through gang membership which provides a form of social identity. This identity comes at a cost as gang membership leads to crime and violence. The possibility of hope, though mentioned, is quashed as the boy chooses the path of violence under the wing of a 'gun/toting tutor'; Searles leaves the reader with an image of a street-hardened youth who has lost the ability to care or experience joy. The bricks and the wall in the poem serve as a metaphor for the psychological barrier the boy has created to distance himself from mainstream society, and may also refer to a prison yard – the further the boy descends into gang culture, the less likely he is of finding a way to extricate himself. Homelessness and life on the streets has been documented by other poets, and the sense of hopelessness seems to prevail when dealing with this topic. The difference between Searles' treatment of the topic and that of poets such as Robert Adamson in his poem 'Street Kids' is the directness and minimalist style. Where Adamson employs a

lyrical form for his poem: 'They rehearse for nothing;/ these are the Serapaxed mornings/ of sun burning the blue/ calligraphy of skin tattoos',⁶²⁰ Searles' short, sharp lines seem particularly appropriate in rendering the harshness and general dismissal associated with street kids. Homeless youth are mostly invisible to the general public and are ignored while out on the streets, unless they commit a crime which creates media interest, and their individual lives, emotions and the causes of their homelessness are not usually considered by those outside of the social service industry.

Several of Searles' poems engage with underclass drug culture and the destruction of life that often accompanies addiction. Drug culture is a common theme of 'grunge' literature, with many writers including explicit reference to drug taking; with characters in some grunge works appearing to consider drug intoxication as a normative state. Searles tends to focus on the more negative aspects of drug culture however. His poem 'Hot Shots'⁶²¹ illustrates the despair of existing within an uncaring society that only views addicts as criminals and is which is reluctant to acknowledge the human side of the problem:

HOTSHOTS

found dead
in the cross
crucified
from talking
to the cops

A life of lust
lust turns to rust
A time of power
a burnt out nose
A fix insane
blunt fits
in pain
Money for dope
no change for hope...

Drug addiction has been examined by numerous poets such as Michael Dransfield et al. and observations of junkies appear in the urban landscapes of some poetry, but often through the lens of a middle class poet such as Geoff Page, whose poem 'The Heroin

⁶²⁰ Robert Adamson, 'Street Kids,' *Pictures from an Exhibition*, ed. Paul Kavanagh (New South Wales: University of Newcastle, 1989) 11.

⁶²¹ Mick Searles, 'Hot Shots,' *Blast* 22 (1993): 33.

Anecdotes'⁶²² presents a series of sketches of encounters with addicts, without ever presenting the addicts' viewpoints from the first person. The result is touristic and detached: 'A woman, maybe sixty five, / sees an out-of-it young man/ dishevelled with a five day beard/ stagger to a toilet'. The scenes in Page's poem arguably lack the immediacy of Searles' poem. The hopelessness of 'Brickyard Boy' is also evident here and Searles paints a bleak picture suggesting that this kind of incident will continue long after the reader has left the scene: 'Another junkie's / been murdered / Another life/ Long/ Deserted'. Searles' poetry represents an urban youth culture abandoned by the rest of society and existing on the fringe, with no immediate way out in sight. This world is in sharp contrast with the traditional working-class culture of previous generations, where communities chipped in during difficult times. There is no sense of the working-class community described by Goodfellow or Johnson in poems such as this one; for the junkie or street kid there is no community or family to provide assistance once they have fallen this far and Searles shows how within the working class there are levels of marginality, with the underclass characters he portrays occupying positions as the most vulnerable.

Searles tells stories about working-class people in an authentic way. He is a reliable witness to the events he portrays. His treatment of working-class people is never patronising or romanticised; quite the opposite, he reveals the ugly side of working-class life and the brutality of some working-class environments. Despondency or fatalism is a common theme of his work, as his characters seem to lack a belief in their own power to affect change. A sense of fatalism is common among working-class people, who often believe that they must make the best of the 'hand they have been dealt', rather than becoming empowered to seek alternatives. According to psychiatrists Ger Chen et al. this attitude can lead to a 'greater risk for behavioural and emotional problems...because fatalistic or passive coping is less effective in dealing with life stress'.⁶²³ The particular behaviours of Searles' characters appear to be testament to this theory. Searles has the ability though to take the reader on a journey into his world and he does this through his use of an unaffected working-class language, and a strong narrative that drives many of his poems. The realist nature of Searles' work places him in the same tradition of Lawson but with the contemporary edge of grunge. But whereas

⁶²² Geoff Page, 'The Heroin Anecdotes,' *Time's Collision with the Tongue : The Newcastle Poetry Prize Anthology: 2000*, eds., Peter Boyle, Jan Owen (Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 2001) 38.

⁶²³ Irene Ger Chen et al., 'Fatalism and Risk of Adolescent Depression,' *Psychiatry* 63.3 (2000): 239.

Lawson was hoping for improvements in the lives of working-class people and advocated collective action, Searles' poetry suggests a fatalistic attitude toward life and illustrates that for those living on the margins of society, it is almost impossible to feel part of any community.

Chapter Six

Feminism of the Everyday in the Poetry of Cathy Young and M.M.L. Bliss

Despite generations of Australian women poets struggling to have their poetry taken seriously, a tradition of feminist verse stretches back to colonial times. In the 1800s poets such as Lousia Lawson, Lesbia Harford, Zora Cross and Mary Gilmore wrote about the lives of women and criticized their oppression, challenging the heroic male figure of the outback. They wrote instead of the ways in which women ‘persevered in such unremitting harsh circumstances’ and offered ‘female deeds of heroism’ that were absent from men’s writing.⁶²⁴ Regardless of these early voices, the male domination of publishing and editing throughout the decades often meant that women’s poetry was suppressed despite the continued emergence of strong, talented writers such as Dorothy Hewett, Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood. As a result, women writers needed to produce their own anthologies of poetry. In 1975, at the height of the second wave feminist movement, Kate Jennings compiled the feminist anthology, *Mother I’m Rooted*, which was published in an attempt to counteract the lack of women poets gaining publication. The anthology contained established and unknown poets, and offered various representations of women’s experiences. Jennings included a polemic introduction to her anthology in which she described women’s poetry as an antidote to the ‘posturing, in-group, obscure, tricky, mystified bullshit’ of men’s poetry.⁶²⁵ The anthology was well received and successful, selling over ten thousand copies,⁶²⁶ a major achievement for any poetry anthology. The anthology’s success highlighted the significance of the decade for feminist writing and particularly for women poets in Australia. In 1975 the feminist journal *Hecate* was founded and several feminist publishing houses appeared. Between 1975 and 1985 numerous women poets including

⁶²⁴ Dale Spender, ed., *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women’s Writing* (Victoria: Penguin, 1988) xviii.

⁶²⁵ Kate Jennings, ed., *Mother I’m Rooted: An Anthology of Australian Women Poets* (Victoria: Outback Press, 1975) n.p.

⁶²⁶ Nathan Hollier, ‘Those Wild Colonial Girls,’ *Tirra Lirra* spring (1998) : 24.

Fay Zwicky, Jennifer Maiden, Gig Ryan and Dorothy Porter launched their first collections, and many of them went on to become well-known and successful poets.⁶²⁷

A further, and less controversial⁶²⁸ anthology emerged in 1986, *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, edited by Kate Llewellyn and Susan Hampton, which also attempted to address the gender imbalance of poetry publishing. This anthology has sold over fifty thousand copies since its publication. Llewellyn and Hampton were not strident in their criticism of the male-dominated publishing scene, but did argue that their anthology was published, in part, to question how the judgment of quality was influenced by sexual politics.⁶²⁹ Then, in the 1990s, Susan Lever compiled *The Oxford Anthology of Australian Women's Verse*. By this time, many critics believed that Australian women's writing shared an equal footing with that of men. Lever herself commented at the time that women's poetry was no longer marginalized, and journalist Suzy Baldwin suggested that women poets had gained a 'right to speak in their own voices' as was evident in the volume of women's poetry available for purchase and the treatment of women's poetry by reviewers and scholars. These comments were tempered with an acknowledgment that men still dominated positions as editors and publishers, but Baldwin asserted that the chances of publication (which were slim for poetry as a whole anyway) were equal for women and men, and that poetry was a non-gender discriminating 'equal opportunity unemployer'.⁶³⁰ It could be argued that in the thirty years since Jennings, Llewellyn and Hampton published their anthologies that the situation has improved markedly, with many women poets now published in equal numbers to men, thus answering Hélène Cixous' call for women to 'write about women and bring women to writing. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and history – by her own movement.'⁶³¹

Despite the numbers of women poets and the development of feminist literary criticism, inequalities remain, especially when class is taken into account. Feminist critics have been accused of ignoring the literature of women who do not share their

⁶²⁷ Kate Lilley, 'Between Anthologies: Feminism and Genealogies of Australian Women's Poetry,' *Australian Feminist Studies* 12.26 (1997): 266.

⁶²⁸ Hollie 26.

⁶²⁹ Kate Llewellyn, Susan Hampton eds., *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* (Victoria: Penguin, 1986) 16.

⁶³⁰ Suzy Baldwin, 'On Women's Poetry,' *Voices* 6 .2, winter (1996): 120-121.

⁶³¹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds., Diane Price Herndl, Robyn Warhol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 347.

cultural capital.⁶³² Syson, for example, argues that literary critics must acknowledge the background of social conflict in which literature is created in order to create a class conscious method of approaching working-class writing.⁶³³ To do so would also counteract criticisms that working-class writing, especially that written by women, is too immersed in 'sentimental populism' to be taken seriously.⁶³⁴ Literature that examines the link between gender and class can 'subvert the ideal of literary greatness that is part of the underpinning of current systems of oppression'.⁶³⁵ Therefore, the study of working-class women's poetry can be a powerful tool in understanding how class oppression works.

The gaps in feminist engagement with working-class writing are also evident in wider discussions of class. According to Mahony and Zmroczek, studies of working-class culture have historically omitted the experiences of women, and writing on class has been focused almost exclusively on men.⁶³⁶ In sociological models the male breadwinner defined the family and his working life, leisure pursuits and behaviour dominated the interest of scholars. As sociologist Valerie Walkerdine argues 'women have always been a problem when it comes to class analysis...class schemes were devised in relation to a model of predominantly male employment and often took the occupation of husband and fathers over and above that of the women in the household as defining class location'.⁶³⁷ Defining class in these masculinist terms has failed to take account of women's over-representation 'among wage workers and those dependant on the social wage and the wages of others'⁶³⁸, and also ignores 'the work of mothering [as] deeply class specific and [playing] a major role in producing children as classed subjects'.⁶³⁹ Women's unpaid labour in the home and the contributions they make through reproduction are also often excluded from the sociological spectrum of class analysis.⁶⁴⁰ Connell et al. believe that the link between class and gender is evident in the

⁶³² Carole Ferrier, "'The Inadequacy of the Imagination': Towards a Feminist Literary Criticism,' *The Radical Reader*, eds., Stephen Knight, Michael Wilding (Sydney: Wild and Woolley, 1977) 200.

⁶³³ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 14.

⁶³⁴ Merylyn Cherry, 'Towards Recognition of Working-Class Women Writers,' *Writing on the Line: Working-Class Women Writers*, eds., Sarah Richardson et al. (London: Working Press, 1996) 96.

⁶³⁵ Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 39.

⁶³⁶ Mahony, Zmroczek 2.

⁶³⁷ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 54.

⁶³⁸ Mike Donaldson, *Time of our Lives: Labour and Love in the Working Class* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1991) 2.

⁶³⁹ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine 54.

⁶⁴⁰ Joan Acker, *Class Questions: Feminist Answers* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006) 30.

family as the 'structures of power' that characterise class and gender relations are played out in the structure of the family.⁶⁴¹

The experiences of working-class women can be remarkably different from those of working class men.⁶⁴² Not only do many women work in underpaid jobs but they also often have the added pressures of children and households to run. The reality of everyday life is also compounded by the problems of sexism, racism and homophobia that exist in some working-class communities, where discrimination can be more overt than in middle class communities.⁶⁴³ Working-class women must develop their own strategies to survive in this patriarchal environment – an environment that can pay little heed to the advances made by the women's movement.⁶⁴⁴ Instead, survival skills of 'strength, self-dependence and interdependence' are necessary.⁶⁴⁵

Sociologist Elizabeth Hatton suggests that theories of feminism may be viewed as mere rhetoric with little practical application by women who battle with hardship.⁶⁴⁶ Why does feminism fail to engage with working-class women? Feminists such as Joan Acker acknowledge that feminist theory has traditionally come from a bourgeois position⁶⁴⁷ which has not always considered the specific oppressions faced by working-class women.⁶⁴⁸ Although feminists have been successful in making inroads into oppression, the nature of their successes has tended to focus on achieving equality within education and in career opportunities, which has led to an increase in professional, middle-class women who 'while still subject to the sexist oppression all women face...experience it very differently from women who have to cope with low-paid, insecure jobs and appalling working conditions'.⁶⁴⁹ Radical feminists such as bell hooks have complained that many academic feminists are white middle class; operating from a privileged position and often 'trapped in jargon' that alienates them from their working-class sisters.⁶⁵⁰ Despite their commitment to improving the lives of women, privileged feminists have not always treated working-class women as their equals.

⁶⁴¹ Connell et al. 180.

⁶⁴² Acker 3.

⁶⁴³ Reay 76.

⁶⁴⁴ Tony Cliff, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation: 1640 to the Present Day* (London: Bookmarks, 1987) 191.

⁶⁴⁵ Donna Langston, 'Tired of Playing Monopoly?' *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, 6th Ed., eds., Margaret Andersen, Patricia Hill Collins (California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007) 124.

⁶⁴⁶ Elizabeth J Hatton, 'Questioning Correspondence: An Australian Woman's Account of the Effects of Social Mobility on Subjective Class Consciousness,' Mahony, Zmroczek 222.

⁶⁴⁷ Acker 3.

⁶⁴⁸ Robbins 28.

⁶⁴⁹ Sandra Bloodworth, 'Women, Class and Oppression,' Kuhn 117.

⁶⁵⁰ hooks, *Where We Stand* 102.

Feminists from working-class backgrounds such as Vivyan Adair, suggest that privileged feminists can be guilty of viewing working-class women as the ‘other’⁶⁵¹ – removed from the notions of feminist or political struggle, or as an ‘accessory’ for their own agendas.⁶⁵² They are either romanticised as belonging to another era, or looked upon unfavourably⁶⁵³ as lower examples of life (such as welfare cheats, housing commission tenants, teenage mothers). This may be because privileged women ‘gain from the oppression of working-class women’, and there may be a conflict of interest in representing working class women and wanting to hold onto privilege, which, according to working-class activist, Sandra Bloodworth may result in middle-class feminists becoming ‘unreliable allies when fighting for the rights of working-class women’.⁶⁵⁴ This would explain why the lives and struggles of working-class women are sometimes forgotten in feminist discourse.

Working-class women are also sometimes considered to be unable to recognise their oppression, due to insufficient understanding of feminism. Sociologist Stephanie Lawler describes ‘rigid concepts of masculinity and feminism (that) can be seen to be associated with working-class people, who are then constituted as lacking the “knowledge” about more up-to-date understanding of gender’.⁶⁵⁵ Feminists who believe that such women are somehow implicit in their own oppression may subsequently ignore the ways in which these women demand their rights on a daily basis, and the impact class has on their opportunities. Marxist Tony Cliff suggests that notions of equality can be very different for working class women as ‘a “liberating lifestyle” is determined by the size of the pay packet, the cost of necessities, the housing conditions’,⁶⁵⁶ and the choice to remain at home to take care of children is unrealistic. Feminists have fought for the right to work outside the home, but for working-class women, work outside the home often means low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions. In her studies into the effects of capitalism on women, prominent feminist

⁶⁵¹ Vivyan Adair, ‘Disciplined and Punished: Poor Women, Bodily Inscription and Resistance through Education,’ *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education in America*, eds., Vivyan Adair, Susan Dahlberg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) 27.

⁶⁵² Cliff 194.

⁶⁵³ Steph Lawler, ‘Escape and Escapism: Representing Working-Class Women,’ *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change*, ed., Sally Munt (London: Carsell, 2000) 123.

⁶⁵⁴ Bloodworth, *Women* 117.

⁶⁵⁵ Lawler 124.

⁶⁵⁶ Cliff 194.

Chandra Mohanty urges her fellow feminist scholars to engage with the struggle of women workers.⁶⁵⁷

Critics of mainstream feminism such as hooks believe that middle-class feminists have been guilty of resting on their laurels since achieving 'equal access to class power with their male counterparts' and she demands a return to a radical feminism that would 'root its work first and foremost in the concrete conditions of working-class and poor women'.⁶⁵⁸ But feminism is by definition 'anti-totalising',⁶⁵⁹ and despite such criticisms, it is possible for feminism to change and create new meanings in order to be relevant to women from all backgrounds. Although the feminist debate on class seemed to disappear in the 1980s and 1990s, it has recently re-emerged, with positive implications for the way in which gender and class are considered. In their study of the psychological effects of class and gender, Lucey and Walkerdine point out that scholars of working-class studies have been entering working-class communities and considering methods to merge theory with empirical facts⁶⁶⁰

Working-class women have found their own ways to challenge class and patriarchy through writing. If literature is a tool of resistance, how has it been used? And in what forms? The struggles of working-class women have been documented in fiction, autobiography and non-fiction in Australia. Dorothy Hewett wrote of 1950s female textile workers in *Bobbin Up*, Betty Collins related the story of women's experiences during the 1964-64 Mount Isa miners' strike in *The Copper Crucible* and Jean Devanny's novel *Sugar Heaven* recounts the events of the 1935 Far North Queensland cane cutters' strike through the eyes of a young woman. Non-fiction studies of working-class women include historical accounts of Australian women's involvement in militant class struggles and of the experiences of working-class female migrants to colonial Australia.⁶⁶¹ If fiction and non-fiction can be useful and accessible vehicles for working-class representation why do some writers choose poetry over other genres? Poetry has long been considered a genre of resistance and even revolution in certain cultures. This is exemplified by the revolutionary poetry of Central America

⁶⁵⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests and the Politics of Solidarity,' *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds., Christina Gilmartin et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 367.

⁶⁵⁸ hooks, *Where We Stand* 101 & 109.

⁶⁵⁹ Robbins 3.

⁶⁶⁰ Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 45.

⁶⁶¹ Jan Gothard, *Blue China: Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

which played an important role in mobilising people toward collective action.⁶⁶² In Central America poetry became the main vehicle for political resistance and held a central place in the cultures of countries such as Nicaragua. The figure of the revolutionary poet achieved cult status in the region, and poets such as Nicaraguans Rosario Murillo, Daisy Zamora and El Salvadorian Claribel Alegria consciously used poetry to rally their people. Poetry was seen as a particularly useful medium for spreading political messages as it could be transmitted orally in communities where literacy was not common. There are important differences, however, between the Central American poets and the poets discussed in this chapter. Although the revolutionary poets and contemporary Australian working-class poets arguably hope to reach ‘ordinary’ people through their poetry, the Australian poets are not necessarily writing a call to arms into their work, but are calling for an understanding of their struggle and a willingness to acknowledge class divisions. Also, the majority of revolutionary poets (at least in the Central American context) came from wealthy families and were in possession of the full amount of cultural and social capital to begin writing and publishing poetry, even if their politics led them into exile or dangerous confrontations with authorities.⁶⁶³ Poets such as Cathy Young, who comes from a working-class background, started her writing career from a less privileged position but it is this background and experience of working-class life that informs her poetry, and creates resistance.

Does poetry particularly lend itself to the expression of resistance, both from a feminist and class perspective? What does poetry allow that other forms do not? I would suggest that poetry can appear to be the least intimidating form of expression for writers who do not possess high levels of formal education. Writing poems may initially seem less time-consuming and more achievable than attempting to structure a novel, and poetry also provides opportunities for poets to disseminate their work through local readings. Audre Lorde states that poetry has often emerged as the form of literature most likely to be harnessed by minority groups⁶⁶⁴ and possesses the ability to show women’s experiences, and to illustrate the pervasive effects of class on women’s lives. Creativity offers a panacea for social barriers, and women have attempted to redress the

⁶⁶² James Iffland, ‘Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions,’ *College Literature* 19 .3 (1992), *Expanded Academic Index*, 19 June 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁶⁶³ John Beverley, Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 53, 16 & 89.

⁶⁶⁴ Audre Lorde, ‘Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,’ *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds., Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998) 631.

gender imbalance through creative expression. Thus, a study of working-class women's poetry not only provides an insight into the writers' culture, but the difficulties faced by the poets in getting their work published and taken seriously also reveal how class impacts on the opportunities for creating art. As Audre Lorde asserts: 'when we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art'.⁶⁶⁵ The feminist polemic that appears in the poetry of working-class women is one place to see feminism in action.

Working-class writing provides an insight into class oppression and is therefore an important aspect of working-class politics.⁶⁶⁶ The politics within a working-class text are 'encoded' within the descriptions of working-class life and the aesthetic of working-class writing itself becomes politically radical.⁶⁶⁷ Art and politics have a strong relationship according to feminist scholar Rita Felski, because politics includes 'questions of identity and personal life, so literature becomes relevant in new and often unexpected ways',⁶⁶⁸ feminists such as literary theorists Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, also acknowledge that all readings and interpretations of texts are political⁶⁶⁹ thus literature can become a tool of political resistance for working-class women. But choosing poetry as a medium for working-class expression can potentially lead to some constraints; namely in the cultural capital needed to enter the literary 'mainstream' and the resistances to working-class poetry in general displayed by the literary gatekeepers discussed in chapter two. The small number of Australian working-class women publishing poetry compared to their male counterparts suggests that there are gender barriers involved too.

In Australia the majority of working-class poetry that is printed in journals and individual collections is written by men. One could posit various reasons for such an imbalance – women are generally less likely to have time to write about their experiences, as they not only have to work, but are usually the primary carers of children and responsible for the running of households.⁶⁷⁰ These tasks leaves little time for pursuing a writing career, as any time available after completing all daily chores and

⁶⁶⁵ Lorde 632.

⁶⁶⁶ Worpole 23.

⁶⁶⁷ Syson, *Australian Working Class* 26.

⁶⁶⁸ Rita Felski, *Literature after Feminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 163.

⁶⁶⁹ Catherine Belsey, Jane Moore, eds., *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 1.

⁶⁷⁰ Lorraine Biddlecombe, et al. *Learning the Hard Way: Women's Oppression in Men's Education* (London: Macmillan Education 1989) 68.

finishing paid work is more likely to be spent engaged in some form of entertainment and escape. Working-class people of both genders may lack cultural capital, but Robbins believes that for working-class women the opportunities for ‘investment in some kind of educational system, the personal investment of time’ are less than for working-class men.⁶⁷¹ It is also possible that women may have less confidence than their male counterparts in submitting their poetry for publication, and may feel intimidated by the prospect of standing in front of an audience to read poems, which is an important method of gaining recognition and subsequently increased chances of publication. As Tillie Olsen claims: ‘how much it takes to become a writer...how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one’s right to say it...difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman’.⁶⁷²

Despite the numbers of female poets and female writing students, poetry remains male-dominated and the majority of poetry editors are men. Literary critic Jenny Digby argues that the poetic canon as a whole is male dominated, with poetry by men valued and canonized above women’s poetry ‘the construction of poetic tradition, its formal standards and aesthetic criteria was originated and defined by and for men’.⁶⁷³ How then do working-class women challenge the double oppression of gender and class? Literary theorist Jane Greer believes that working-class women writers learn how to, ‘reconstitute and reclaim’ the, ‘repressive language of their workplace masters’.⁶⁷⁴ This can subvert the rules of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ poetry and challenge the cultural hegemony.⁶⁷⁵ Such challenges have led to a set of commonalities in working-class women’s writing which Zandy describes as possessing four main characteristics. First it is ‘multi-vocal’ and is shaped by specific conditions of working-class life; second, the writing must be viewed in context of its creation, such as the environment in which the writing was produced. Third, the writing is ‘intertextual’ in that it is often sparked by a specific event that has an impact on working-class lives and last, it has a sense of ‘relationality’ or collectivity.⁶⁷⁶ Merylyn Cherry suggests that these commonalities reveal ‘an aesthetic

⁶⁷¹ Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 34.

⁶⁷² Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (NY: Delacorte Press, 1978) 27.

⁶⁷³ Jenny Digby, ed., *A Woman’s Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets* (St. Lucia: UQP, 1996) xiii.

⁶⁷⁴ Jane Greer, ‘Writing With and Against the Master’s Language: Lessons in Critical Literacy from Working-Class Women,’ *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 26. 1-2 (1998): 216.

⁶⁷⁵ Brenda Walker, ‘Introduction,’ *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women’s Poetry and Politics*, eds., David Brooks and Brenda Walker (St Lucia: University Of Queensland Press, 1989) 1.

⁶⁷⁶ Zandy, *The Complexities* 6.

ideology' and emerge due to the writers' urges to 'portray common experiences, the sense of community and environment, of life and death within families and the struggle against poverty'.⁶⁷⁷ The poetry of Cathy Young and M.M.L. Bliss demonstrates these commonalities at work.

Cathy Young and M.M.L. Bliss

The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings by Cathy Young and *Ravo* by MML Bliss are quite divergent in style, but each collection portrays the lives of working-class women and offers examples of how feminism operates in the everyday. In both, the poetry explores the effects of oppression on working-class women and reveals the ways in which women respond to their oppression. Young's poems are autobiographical in nature and follow the narrator through a series of occupations and personal situation, and Bliss' work is based on her experiences living on a housing commission estate. Through personal narrative and intimate depictions of working-class life their poetry offers a discourse on class and offers an alternative aesthetic to that found in non-working-class feminist poetry.

Cathy Young gives voice to women who work in low-paid and menial jobs; she dedicates her book to 'the hidden, faceless women who have done the thankless work we, as a society, are dependant on, yet who very rarely receive recognition for the hours they have put in, out of need and because of their gender'.⁶⁷⁸ She shows the impact of class on women and examines themes such as work, unemployment, poverty, migration, single parent-hood and love and challenges the view that working-class women's experiences are not 'fitting subjects' for literature.⁶⁷⁹ A working-class feminist sensibility pervades her work as she focuses on female workers, thus contesting traditional male-centered examinations of class. Young developed an interest in poetry from a young age when given a book of poems as a child, and was immediately drawn to a poem in the collection that described the experience of Christmas for an impoverished child, as she could relate to the story in the poem.⁶⁸⁰ Throughout her youth, Young wrote poems in response to emotional events until taking up writing as an adult seriously in the 1990s, when she realized that the various low-paid jobs she had

⁶⁷⁷ Cherry 96.

⁶⁷⁸ Cathy Young, *The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings* (Tasmania: Cornford Press, 2004) N.pag.

⁶⁷⁹ Zandy, *Calling Home* 1.

⁶⁸⁰ Cathy Young, Interview with Sarah Attfield, September 2006, unpublished.

worked in provided her with a wealth of stories.⁶⁸¹ Although Young does not refer to being influenced by particular poets, her work follows on the tradition of Mary Gilmore and Dorothy Hewett by giving working-class women a voice, but differs from this tradition as she is writing as a working-class person. In contemporary times Young's poetry could be compared with American working-class women writers who explore similar themes; Nellie Wong's poetic narratives of life in the workplace, Karen Brodie's recounts of repetitive work as a typesetter, Susan Eisenberg's poems written from the perspective of a female electrician and Jan Beatty's portrayals of waitresses reveal the impact of class and the ways in which gender and class intersect.

Young's work is temporally diverse and moves through different eras, from the 1950s and 1960s into the present day, tracking some of the changes in attitudes that have occurred while also highlighting how working-class women's lives have remained essentially the same despite the successes of the feminist movement; women may have moved out from the home and into the workforce, but for many working-class women this shift has led to further oppression and exploitation. There is a political backdrop to her poems as the policies of each era impact on the lives of the characters within the collection in relation to migration, sexual discrimination, equal pay, reproductive freedom, institutionalized care, welfare and unemployment. Although these issues affect both men and women, it is arguably the women whose lives are most dramatically shaped by such policies. And the classed nature of all these conditions is apparent throughout the book.

According to reviewer Noela McNamara, Young's work captures the 'delusion, isolation and oppressive conditions' faced by working-class women, with an emphasis on the 'human spirit to endure'.⁶⁸² This said, she is not a mere observer, and Liz Winfield (former poetry editor of *Famous Reporter*) suggests that she has not seen 'anyone successfully write poems like these unless they've been there: but these poems extend the experience to anyone willing to read them.'⁶⁸³ Winfield's response reflects the attitudes of those engaged in working class studies – that knowledge of working-class life comes from 'experience and story, history and memory and from the urgency of witnessing'.⁶⁸⁴ Politics are embedded in the aesthetic – this is not an overt polemic, but Young's intention to create 'poetic social commentary' and witness the truth for

⁶⁸¹ Young, Interview.

⁶⁸² Noela McNamara, 'Let's Talk About Life,' *LiNQ* 31.2 October (2004): 102.

⁶⁸³ Liz Winfield, 'Winners, Losers and Others,' *Famous Reporter* 29 (2004): 77.

⁶⁸⁴ Zandy, *Calling Home* 8.

working-class people is seeded through her poems.⁶⁸⁵ An interesting political element to Young's poetry is its refusal to include a change of class identity as a prescription for a 'better' life. The poems include hope for an enhanced economic future, but do not suggest that the people portrayed want to become middle class to improve their lives. This is an important characteristic of working-class writing, and offers a radical position on the concept of class mobility. It is often assumed that working-class people are willing to abandon their cultural identity in pursuit of social mobility, but it is generally the case that regardless of improved economic situations and the ability to acquire material goods, most working-class people prefer to maintain their identity with little desire to become middle class.⁶⁸⁶ Writers such as Young demonstrate this by holding onto a working-class identity and therefore refuting the idea that becoming a writer means an individual can no longer consider themselves working class.

Young's poems may be based on her personal experience, but despite the specifics of her particular situations the poems present commonalities with working-class women's experience in general and operate on a micro level as 'a social exposé of class'. Philip Harvey states that the poems rely on 'a minimum of literary arrows for their effects' and that the lack of 'pathos' creates a 'heightened credibility', although he does also criticize Young's pared-back style as leading to 'sociology rather than epiphany' and occasionally 'no more than job description'⁶⁸⁷ which suggests that a certain amount of 'literary arrows' are required by critics to accept such poems as legitimate literature. Young begins her collection with a 'calling poem' 'Come Down the Line with Me',⁶⁸⁸ its title operating ironically as the poem sets the scene for the kind of jobs she will describe, the poetics mimicking the monotony and repetition of many work environments:

we supply overall hairnet
rubber boots plastic gloves
must be worn when working
change rooms are on the left
after tearoom before time-clock
clock on when you start
and off at meal break
on when you come back
and when your shift's over

⁶⁸⁵ Young, Interview.

⁶⁸⁶ Mahony, Zmroczek 4.

⁶⁸⁷ Philip Harvey, 'Close to the Bone,' *Australian Book Review* 262 June/July (2004):52-53.

⁶⁸⁸ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 1.

get your supervisor to sign if you forget
we only pay for hours worked
pay day is Wednesday
we keep two days in hand
so you won't be paid this week
you can start straight away on packing
oh yes there's a fifteen minute tea break
please use the toilet in your own time

The robotic tone suggests the role of the workers as machines rather than people, which is reminiscent of Chaplin's *Modern Times*, or the workers in Lang's *Metropolis*. The poem's timing and line structure emulates the relentless nature of such work. The poem's narrator does not allow the worker to ask anything about the job. She is expected to comply with instructions unquestioningly – silent and accepting of her role. It is significant that the worker remains voiceless as it sets up Young's role as speaking for the marginalised, a role she takes on in the subsequent poems. There are many issues at play in this poem, the regimented culture of the factory floor, the restrictions placed on the basic bodily functions of eating and going to the toilet, the practice of keeping wages in hand which could leave the worker without money for several days despite the hours she has worked – all of which have been part of industrial culture and spurred many women to industrial action throughout Australia's industrial history. The conditions described in the poem above are reminiscent of those protested about by women workers during a strike at the Melbourne Kortex textile factory in 1981; the striking women successfully fought for the right to longer breaks and the dignity of being able to choose when to go to the toilet.⁶⁸⁹ There is no hint in this poem of industrial action though; the apparent acceptance of the conditions by the voiceless worker is indicative of the compromises made by working-class women on a daily basis as they accept low-paid, low-status jobs – providing a contrary experience to those of middle-class feminists who have been able to celebrate their achievements within the professional workplace.

In 'Starting From Scratch',⁶⁹⁰ Young goes on to further set the scene, describing the experiences of female migrants arriving from Britain in the 1960s, and the hardships they endured in an environment which did not live up to the promise of a new comfortable life and greater opportunities. Although Young mentions non-Anglo migrants in other poems, here she focuses on her own experiences as a British migrant:

⁶⁸⁹ Sandra Bloodworth, 'Sweatshop Rebels: The 1981 Kortex Strike,' Bloodworth, O'Lincoln 124.

⁶⁹⁰ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 9.

After the boat trip
there was the hostel
half a Nissen hut
squeaky beds a few chairs some cupboards
a table with fan for the 100 degrees plus heat
communal laundry and eating area
average stay 6 weeks to 6 months
depending when the father breadwinner
got his 20 pound a week job
and put down the deposit
on the nice new house
with no floor coverings
in the new outer suburbs
with the big back yard for the kids
part of the 80 thousand target a year Australia wide...

it was all so new
prices to learn
houses to furnish
friends to be found
networks to be formed
gardens to be planted
kids to be fed
clothes to be sewn
babies to be born
constant demand to be met from scratch
lucky for hire purchase
in temperatures they hadn't dreamed of
in the promised land of suburbia
some went broke others broke down
many gave up and went back home
the bulk plugged on
committed
that 20 pounds a week
floating a lot of hopes

This poem highlights the isolation felt by women who found themselves living in a new suburb, '17 miles from the GPO' with few local amenities; it was very different from the close-knit working-class communities they had left behind. While the 'fathers went to work in the family car', the women were left to care for the children and create a sense of home in this alien environment. The women described in this poem had to forge new connections and friendships within these sprawling neighbourhoods – to foster a feeling of community to compensate for the family support they had left back in England. Here, the gendered and classed nature of migration is apparent as Young

describes the specifics for life as a migrant woman. This poem reveals how the Australian government's migration targets – figures to be submitted in reports and policy making – actually affected individuals. There had been a specific plan to increase labour and therefore boost the economy of areas such as Adelaide, 'get those British girls/ breeding/ it was all in the 1961 Adelaide Plan'⁶⁹¹ and migrants were encouraged to start new lives in Australia despite the fact that the infrastructure required to support them were not always in place. In her descriptions of British migrant experience Young is tapping into stories that have not been considered to be an important part of migration narratives, mainly because British migrants (especially those who arrived in Australia as part of the Assisted Passage scheme – so-called 'ten pound Poms') have been viewed as distinct from their non-Anglo counterparts due to the similarity between British and Australian culture. However, historians such as Hammerton and Coleborne have uncovered the personal stories of many British migrants and have discovered that the majority experienced culture shock and 'were assaulted by the landscape, climate and distance' as well as the necessity to survive severe hardship.⁶⁹² The political implications of this poem are therefore not difficult to unpick as Young offers a criticism of the schemes that encouraged families to migrate to Australia despite the lack of facilities and employment opportunities in the areas they settled. The poem also refers to those who were not able to cope with life in Australia and who were ruined financially, or suffered mental stress, or returned to the UK thus challenging the positive picture of migration that was used to illustrate the success of such schemes.

Home is a recurring theme in working-class women's writing covering not just the physical house but also 'shared relationships, languages and identities.'⁶⁹³ Treatment of the domestic has been a feature of feminist literature as writers have considered the oppressive nature of the patriarchal family. Ferrier suggests that first and second wave feminists such as Leontine Cooper and Betty Friedan viewed the home as representing the site of women's oppression, and they campaigned for women to be freed from the constraints of the domestic sphere.⁶⁹⁴ Motherhood and the family were seen as stifling creative and intellectual expression; writing or academic pursuits were

⁶⁹¹ Young 9.

⁶⁹² Catherine Coleborne, Anthony James Hammerton, 'Ten Pound Poms Revisited: Battlers' Tales and British Migration to Australia 1947-1971,' *JAS Australia's Public Intellectual Forum* 66 (2001): 87-89.

⁶⁹³ Zandy, *Liberating Memory* 3.

⁶⁹⁴ Carole Ferrier, 'So, What is to Be Done About the Family?' *Australian Humanities Review* 39-40, September (2006), *La Trobe University*, 20 June 2007, <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-September-2006/ferrier.html>>.

considered to be in opposition with domestic duties.⁶⁹⁵ First wave feminist writers such as Barbara Baynton and Christina Stead highlighted the struggle of women to assert themselves within the patriarchal family structure, but the feminist politics that were apparent in their work came from a white, middle-class perspective. Second wave feminist writers such as poet Gwen Harwood also critiqued the role of motherhood and housewifery, notably in her poem ‘In the Park’, which describes a suburban housewife’s disappointment and frustration with her situation, as she sits in clothes that are ‘out of date’ with children that not only ‘whine and bicker, tug her skirt’ but are more sinisterly described as having ‘eaten’ her ‘alive’.⁶⁹⁶ But what of the experience of working-class women? Have working-class women been as keen as feminists to escape the confines of the home? Some second wave feminists realized that the experience of family life was not necessarily the same for all women. African-American feminists pointed to the importance of the family to minority communities as a potential site for resistance and solidarity and Ferrier argues that racist policies threatened the survival of Aboriginal families in Australia.⁶⁹⁷ So how have such gendered roles been critiqued by working-class women? In ‘Girly jobs/Parental discipline’,⁶⁹⁸ Young shows how working-class girls were socialized into their roles during the 1960s. Discontent and frustration is also evident here, not at the family structure per se, but rather at the restrictive role forced onto the young woman, especially the expectation that she should serve her father:

starting early
 helping mum
 peeling potatoes/setting tables/doing dishes
 simple things
 made sure
 dad’s happy
 long day at work
 meal fit for our king
 no arguments
 offer first
 can I help beats the rule
 seen not heard
 look happy
 scowls bring pain
 and no sixpence at the end of the week
 getting older
 mind the littlies
 mum needs rest...

⁶⁹⁵ Julie Kelso, ‘Representing Mothers,’ *Hecate* 32.2 (2006): 5.

⁶⁹⁶ Gwen Harwood, ‘In the Park,’ *Selected Poems* (NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1990) 27.

⁶⁹⁷ Ferrier, *So What*.

⁶⁹⁸ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 14.

getting too big
tell her about
putting her name down
Woolies/Coles/deli work
after school/ weekends/ holidays
earn her own pocket money
buy her own clothes
she can still
help around the house
before she does her homework
good training
look happy

A series of orders punctuate this poem, and the short lines evoke the lack of redress afforded to the girl; she is supposed to be uncomplaining and accepting of her situation and any rebellion is dealt with harshly, a process to set her up for the role of an oppressed and exploited woman later in life. The father is the head of the household even though it is the mother who is holding the family together. He is treated like the 'king' and must be kept happy by the daughter to reduce the chance of physical punishment. In the working-class household, everyone is expected to pitch in, and as soon as the girl is old enough, she will take a job to alleviate some of the financial burden. This will not lead to her independence and the prioritizing of housework and paid work over homework suggests that this girl is unlikely to be encouraged to further her education. She is expected to be grateful for what she has, and not to cause trouble by demanding an education – impractical in a struggling family that needs the financial contribution of its adult children. It is likely that this poem is relating Young's personal experience as a young woman, but the poem (like many in the collection) is criticizing the general sexist attitudes faced by many girls and women within their working-class communities. Young is highlighting oppression both at a fundamental and intimate level which is informed by the feminist critique of the family. In this case the experiences of being a working-class girl are not completely at odds with those of middle-class girls of the same era as both were faced with the expectation of fulfilling domestic roles. However, Young's poem shows how the ideological oppression of the patriarchal family structure was matched by the economic oppression of the working-class home that further denied freedom to young women as they were needed to contribute financially to the family.

In working poems such as ‘So what was it like (in the home)?’⁶⁹⁹ Young draws on her time in a Catholic girls’ home, where the residents were expected to work in the institution’s commercial laundry:

It was the raw heat of ironing room presses
not giving the cool of summer morning
a chance to breathe as you walked through
passing left stoked up to boiling-industrial
washing machines right drying room cabinets...

sheets tablecloths pillowcases towels
face flannels tea towels bedspreads napkins
surgical linen altar cloths to be
fed folded and passed through
the pacing room hatch for sorting...

It was the drab depressing scene
of ill-dressed girls in donated clothes
8 o’clock breakfast fed after 7.30 Catholic girl washed
a soapy flannel on faces armpits privates
behind dressing gowns the bowl room squat
the smell of immature hygiene – period blood and
sweat mixed with cheap talcum powder –
rushing carting lifting distributing
regular workplace hours adhered to
no wages paid no-one there by choice...

the noise of the packing room gates unpadlocked for the laundry vans
and the thought of feet running the driveway
crunch-crunch-crunch-crunch...

This was a hard life, and there was little opportunity for the girls to enjoy their youth. Young does not explain why girls were in the home but, according to a 2004 Senate Inquiry into the abuse of children in institutionalized care, there were various reasons why young people may be have taken into care during the 1960s such as the child’s ‘uncontrollable’ behaviour, perceived risk of ‘moral danger’ or for being convicted of a juvenile offence,⁷⁰⁰ and Anne Summers suggests that up until the 1970s it was common practice to send young unmarried pregnant women to ‘homes’.⁷⁰¹ The politics around the institutionalization of teenage girls is implicated in this poem, as the girls are clearly

⁶⁹⁹ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 24.

⁷⁰⁰ ‘Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-Home Care as Children.’ *Commonwealth of Australia*, 2004, <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/inst_care/>.

⁷⁰¹ Anne Summers, *The End of Equality: Work, Babies and Women’s Choices in Twenty First Century Australia* (Sydney: Random House, 2003) 34.

prisoners and forced to labour in the laundry. Young vividly captures a depressing scene of unpleasant conditions and monotonous, heavy work, with the cramped, suffocating atmosphere representing the lack of outlet for the girls' youthful energies, locked as they are into a regimented routine with little prospect for teenage experiences. All that is left is the dream of one day escaping. The conditions of their daily lives are also cramped and restrictive and Young's descriptions of morning ablutions suggest the constrained repression of the girls. The religious repression is implied in the repetition of 'Catholic girl'; feminist theologians have critiqued the patriarchal nature of institutions such as the Catholic Church,⁷⁰² and the poem also operates as a critique of the Church's treatment of young women. Gender-specific religious oppression is not only experienced by working-class women, but the politics behind this poem call for a recognition of how such an religiously repressive and institutionalised beginning will set the girls up for a life of menial work, as they are socialized into accepting their suppressed position. The dream of escape provides the only hope as the narrator imagines running away with the sensual 'crunch' of gravel under her feet.

From the experiences of a young girl living in a Catholic girl's home, the poems move into adult life and deal with paid work, survival, relationships and family. The title poem of the book, 'The Yugoslav Women and Their Pickled Herrings',⁷⁰³ takes the reader inside a factory with a narrator who is new at her job and feeling lonely and depressed until she is able to make contact with some of the migrant women who seem to understand her misery and reach out to her in friendship:

So cold and long
 this walk
 wet too at 6.30 in the morning with
 tram fares to payday already spent like wishes
 I see some of the Yugoslav women from work I don't really know
 bundles of quilted parkas on the other side of the road and
 slow down to let them get ahead...

I'm the new girl at the end of the line been there a week & a half
 no-one's complained about my work I keep up
 putting the pairs of rubber gloves in plastic bags...

rapport takes a while in factories with so many
 coming and going leaving two days in hand to the better job...

⁷⁰² Elaine Howard Ecklund, 'Catholic Women Negotiate Feminism: A Research Note,' *Sociology of Religion* 64.4 (2003), *Expanded Academic Index*, 20 June 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁷⁰³ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 32.

started to feel sorry for myself...

working up to quite a state
just noticing the eyes of the women I'd followed to work
looking at me their mouths talking about me...

Catti Catti they called quick feeees
feeees what's feeees? I'm thinking
and the older woman biggest smile I'd ever seen in my life pulled
out from that waving shopping bag
a large jar of pickled herrings (rollmops)
we make you feeees Catti...

This poem exposes the struggle of surviving on low wages and the alienation that can exist in a factory environment, as each individual is isolated from their colleagues as they endeavour to 'keep up' with the work. The low status of factory work is also evident here as the narrator speaks of workers hoping to find a 'better job'. The major theme here though is of working class camaraderie and the way that cultural differences can be overcome in an environment of shared struggle. At the beginning of the poem the narrator is outside the group of migrant women, but is eventually drawn in when it becomes clear that they understand her loneliness. They offer her the pickled herrings they make themselves, which is a touching way of inviting her into their world. By sharing an aspect of their culture, they open up the potential for cross-cultural dialogue, demonstrating a female sense of community, companionship and reassurance. The descriptions in the poem provide a hint that the narrator had been observing her colleagues, and she is able to pick out small details of the Yugoslav women's possessions and clothing: 'shopping bags that wave their hidden contents/ of purses knitting cross-over cotton pinafores fresh socks family/ photos orange cordial and lunch'. Within this description there is a suggestion that the narrator had been yearning for contact. Young is demonstrating here that women are often able to find commonalities regardless of cultural differences – the shared experiences of the work and being separated from family create a sense of understanding that leads to potential friendships and support. There is ultimately a feminist statement here; regarding the ability of women to work together with a common goal in mind – not to advance feminist theory or to lobby governments for change, but to survive and find some humanity amid an oppressive workplace. Historical facts such as the reportage of the Kotex strike mentioned earlier support the events played out in this poem as that

particular event demonstrated how migrant and locally born women have supported each other during times of struggle. The poem illustrates this cooperation and shared understanding. Young also addresses the reader directly: 'you know the theme/ bullshit job rotten pay no friends fuck the walk home' which demands the reader's presence. This approach reveals an intention for the poems to be read by other working-class women who would have a genuine understanding of the events portrayed, and a challenge to others to comprehend such a life. Bringing the working-class reader into the poem is an empowering device as it challenges the discourse of working class people as unlikely to be reading poetry. The intimacy created by addressing the reader sets Young's poem apart from treatments of factory life by non-working-class writers such as Jennifer Maiden, a socially conscious poet whose short poem 'The Factory'⁷⁰⁴ focuses on the materials used on the production line:

Metal from metal, metal shapes metal
metal eats metal, metal wastes metal
Is rebuked by metal, designed by metal
Metal rules metal. Metal pays me.
One thousand three times a day I kick
Metal and metal issues forth the same

They say repetition enforces Truth
and ritual is Divine, and here am I
Queen of the chrome bucket
That brims with silver-blue thunder
Clinking as metal finds metal.

The narrator of the poem philosophizes on the nature of the work, and considers how the work can be applied to abstract concepts. This poem focuses on industrial materials and includes abstract concepts such as 'truth', and does not possess the intimacy of the Young poem. The worker as 'Queen of the chrome bucket' is almost unidentifiable from the metal, which does suggest the alienation of such work, but the emotional resonance created by the inclusion of specific everyday details in the Young poem is arguably missing in Maiden's.

Paid work outside the home is only one aspect of life for working-class women. Pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood in a working-class context are explored in

⁷⁰⁴ Jennifer Maiden, 'The Factory,' *Poetry Australia* 32 February (1970): 38.

‘Occupation Mother’,⁷⁰⁵ which describes the experiences of a young woman who does not realize she is expecting a child until she is almost eight months pregnant, and the difficulties she faces in trying to juggle her low-paid job with the arrival of a newborn baby and the challenges of surviving on a low income with a gambling partner who is unwilling to find work:

Blew then all out at work
when I rolled back smocked and thronged
fat gut swelling maternity bras bursting
“not so thin and clever now” said the evil knitter
but I had more to think about than her smart mouth
the boyfriend didn’t believe in work
the boss wanted my holiday pay and leave loading back
(Buckley’s
bastards).

Dickens’ women had nothing on me
4 weeks pay before this foetus arrived
(I hadn’t had time enough to bond to call it a baby)
no clothes and nappies bed and bedding for the little bugger...

This exposé of the effects of poverty on the experience of childbirth and motherhood brings to light an important feminist issue of women’s reproductive health and freedom.⁷⁰⁶ Feminists have pointed out that women do not always enjoy fundamental reproductive rights in terms of access to contraception, abortion, fertility treatments and adequate care during pregnancy and childbirth.⁷⁰⁷ The denial of these basic rights is more prevalent among those from low socio-economic status, both in the developed and developing world.⁷⁰⁸ Poverty has an impact on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth in this poem in several ways, first through an attack on the narrator’s right to keep her baby, and secondly through the added hardship of caring for an infant without adequate resources:

and the hospital called in a social worker
when I booked in “sign here give the baby up you’re not married”
she said
was I being punished for being slim? (Confusion reigns can’t win
a trick

⁷⁰⁵ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 48.

⁷⁰⁶ Julia Stein, ‘Industrial Music: Contemporary American Working-Class Poetry and Modernism,’ *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 23 Spring (1995): 237.

⁷⁰⁷ Gill Greer, ‘Defending and Debating Sexual and Reproductive Rights,’ *The Lancet* 368.954 Nov (2006), *Expanded Academic Index*, 20 June 2006, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁷⁰⁸ Dorothy Shaw, ‘Sexual and Reproductive Health: Rights and Responsibilities,’ *The Lancet* 368. 955 (2006): 1943.

monsters)...

The woman challenges authority and fights for her rights, demonstrating that working-class women are not passive victims, but are able to agitate for change:

I called up the union problem 1 solved
6 weeks unpaid leave and I'd pay back pro rata the loading when
I returned
problem 2 the boyfriend's sister and mother bought the layette
paid
for the wedding
problem 3 the social worker couldn't get me
problem 4 the new husband went on the dole...

The hopeful element injected by the narrator's pro-active behaviour evaporates dramatically though as Young presents details of the undignified labour the narrator endures due to her poverty:

Down the back lane we shuffled
the day the baby was born
a bath towel folded between my legs
pinned to my maternity shift
to catch the waters pains 10 minutes apart...

the towel was full and sagged to my knees
and feet brown mud sloping
I slid the length of the tram on my thongs
he was worried and feeling guilty
the trots hadn't paid the night before
(hence the tram ride)
and I was scared out of my mind
angry and ashamed at this child's journey to be born
didn't care about anything any more
couldn't get worse, could it?...

The images of the soaking towel and the woman slipping on her own waters is far from the romantic descriptions of childbirth that often appear in poems. Childbirth is often awarded a mythical, spiritual status within poetry and rarely engages with the pain, indignity and messy aspects. Karin Voth Harman, in a study of women's birth poetry, argues that feminist writers have been reluctant to represent the physicality of childbirth and have tended to use metaphors in describing their pregnant and birthing bodies. Voth Harman also suggests that birth poetry written since second wave feminism has tended

toward conservative representations of motherhood as the ultimate goal for women.⁷⁰⁹ Young's poem appears to be providing the physicality noted as missing from middle-class feminist birth poetry, and provides a picture that is far removed from the romantic ideal of motherhood espoused by conservative pro-family campaigners. Once again Young employs the dialogic and demands the reader's presence through a direct question: 'couldn't get worse, could it?' which sets up the events to come in the next stanzas as things do get worse for the narrator:

my one bar radiator
flat up on the second floor with neighbours
who complained about the crying baby setting off
the new husband who set off all the fire extinguishers
so we had to move which was all right really
because I couldn't hang out the washing any more
someone had smeared human shit over it
the same day I'd carried my dolled up baby
down two flights of stairs in his umbrella pusher
only to tip him into the Swan Street traffic
crossing the road because I'd forgotten the seat belt...

The woman returns to work and her life is a constant struggle against poverty, squalid living conditions, workplace injury and general desperation:

the roof leaked onto contact covered floor boards
and the lounge room floor would come to life
cockroaches thousands of them when the lights
were off I'd hear them scurrying like the scratching
of a hundred thousand overgrown toenails sleep with
the light on and both eyes open guarding that baby.
Then ...I developed RIS from the keyboards at work
my hands like crab claws locked in mid-air ...

At the end of the poem the woman wonders: 'just who was writing my script? it was beyond me' as if she is living the hand dealt to her, with little chance of changing her difficult circumstances. This fatalistic approach (also observed in the poetry of Searles and Johnson) is understood by psychologist Barbara Jensen as such; 'working-class people just live and accept what life brings their way. Sometimes this is the powerlessness of resignation, but at other times it is a grateful acceptance of the work

⁷⁰⁹ Karin Voth Harman, 'Delivering the Mothers: Three Anthologies of Birth Poetry,' *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth Century Women Poets*, ed., Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 178-180.

and that we can't control it all.'⁷¹⁰ In this poem the narrator does not display 'grateful acceptance' and the negativity of the final lines does not provide a happy ending – only the relentlessness of a situation over which she appears to have little control. The many issues evident in this poem are embedded in the narrative, and the events in the poem serve as a powerful account of the devastating impact of class on women. Feminists have fought hard for the right for women to work outside the home, but for many working-class women the luxury of being able to stay at home and take care of their young children is an impossible dream.

There are many poets who write about failed relationships and the pain of separation, but such poems are usually focused on the internalizing of the emotions that heartache creates. In Young's poetry the effects of relationship breakdowns are coupled with poverty which provides a different perspective to the usual breakdown angst, as the lens of personal relationship experience focuses on the wider social problems faced by working class people. 'I'm Talking About Love Here',⁷¹¹ is a poem that deals with the cynicism the narrator has developed towards romantic love, as her experiences have not only led her to emotional pain, but also to the added hardships of extreme poverty. In this poem, the narrator is watching a young couple whom she identifies as impoverished, and reflects on how she has suffered despite experiencing the initial joys of being in love:

and the two young people
and a blue heeler
on the footy oval
next to our Housing Trust "estate"
on a day
when the sun comes out in winter
but not enough
to warm
the inside of his druggy shirt
or her acrylic jumper
the day before dole day...

see her clap and smile at him
then reward each other with a hug and kiss...

and I'm back
in a boarding house
\$8.00 a week
phone-book for toilet paper

⁷¹⁰ Jensen 211.

⁷¹¹ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 70.

12 rooms of male derelicts...

and a boy-man
who taught me that body heat was the best heat...

and the babies that came too soon
and the long walks from home to outpatients to home
and the constant winter cold and continual arguments about (lack
of) money
that separated this little family
and I felt like screaming: You're too poor to be in love.

It is the poignancy of love in the first half that supports the poem. The lack of money does not seem to be spoiling the young couple's enjoyment of each other, but the narrator's description of her own unhappy experience points to the way in which poverty and struggle can poison relationships. The narrator has survived hunger, inadequate shelter and medical problems and as a result she can see with hindsight how love can wear thin when other basic necessities are missing. There is anger in this poem at the injustice and the absence of fairness for those trying to deal with homelessness and poverty and still maintain relationships. The narrator wants to scream at the couple, but her anger is not directed at them but at the inequities that keep them in their class position. Does a poem such as this one suggest that there is no place for love in a working-class setting? Is it possible that the effects of class are so far reaching that there is no possibility of personal happiness? Young provides a balance in the collection by including poems such as 'Yes You Said',⁷¹² which does focus on the pleasures of a satisfying personal relationship:

It was a night of
no kids let's get drunk
listen to our own music
fall in love again
we play...

raid the fridge
and the cupboards
plan next shopping expedition
to Foodland...

better make this the last
we've run out
from a head that's dissolved

⁷¹² Young, *Yugoslav Women* 85.

into the pillow comes
when do you love me the most
before during or after
Yes you said

This poem shows that despite the hardships faced, working-class people can find contentment in love. Having said this, poems such as ‘Yes You Said’, also show that although love is examined in working-class poetry, it is considered within its classed context. In this case the evening of companionship and sex is interrupted by a lack of food and the need to budget for a shopping trip to the low-price supermarket. But the relentlessness of the grim aesthetic evident in the work of Searles is softened by Young as she allows moments of happiness. I would suggest that for working-class women in particular, the promise of hope is a survival skill, and operates as an incentive to keep going, despite difficult circumstances. Young combines this hope with a strong polemic in ‘When Jenny George spoke’,⁷¹³ which describes the inspiration experienced by the narrator on hearing a speech by the former leader of the Australian Council for Trade Unions:

I heard the stories and tunes
dreams and wishes of workers
tumbling from the guts of her voice
calling me to dance.

I waved my washerwoman
factory shop-girl picker sorter
packer cleaner arms high...

my voice humming along to her chorus
me and millions of other working women
worth our salt.

Here Young reinforces her commitment to her working-class identity and her belief in the importance of collective action, thus providing a mini-manifesto of her political position. The narrator feels connected with her fellow workers and her isolation melts away. An element of solidarity is crucial to the working class whether it is manifested through union membership or links with community, as it is this solidarity that provides the numbers to win victories within the workplace, and the people to provide support during hard times. Young states in this poem that she, and the millions of working-class women like her are ‘worth our salt’ tapping into the notion of ‘salt of

⁷¹³ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 82.

the earth' sometimes used to describe 'ordinary' people. The women attending the rally in the poem are like the narrator – despite the physical ramifications of their labouring lives, 'my often bent/ squeezed squatted toting body' – they are able to stand 'straight and proud/ as the strongest of trees' when gathered together, illustrating the potential power of the collective and the pride often evident in working-class people. Young is not just providing the reader with descriptions of working-class life, she is opening a door into this world and challenging the non-working-class reader to enter and leave their privilege behind. For the working-class reader she is showing that their lives have value and are important, and contain the richness of experience that is necessary for poetry. Ultimately, Young tells it like it is; uncompromising, unromantic working-class life.⁷¹⁴

see this middle finger mate?
(as in baneful as in boss bloke and babbling politician)
its bite's fucking a hundred times
worse than anything you'll ever imagine
you see I'm a working class woman
a big part of this world
don't give me trouble.

The poems are direct, economical in description and 'meant to be read aloud to real people, not just poets'.⁷¹⁵ The poems in this collection feel like stories told by a friend who wishes to describe her life and that of the people she has known. Young describes herself as a 'grassroots' feminist, highlighting class-based 'exploitation and oppression'⁷¹⁶ through her poetry and the focus of the poems are the working-class women to whom she provides a powerful and eloquent voice.

M.M.L. Bliss

In *Ravo*,⁷¹⁷ the title poem of M.M.L. Bliss' collection, one of the characters challenges the reader:

welcome to a place that's out of your
comfort zone,
for us, it's THE zone

⁷¹⁴ Young, *Yugoslav Women* 43.

⁷¹⁵ Winfield 77.

⁷¹⁶ Young, Interview.

⁷¹⁷ M.M.L Bliss, *Ravo* (Tasmania: Cornford Press, 2004) 6.

Bliss' poetry has the ability to remove readers from their comfort zones and she gives agency to some of the most marginalised members of the working-class community. *Ravo* is set within the housing commission estate of Ravenswood,⁷¹⁸ on the north-eastern outskirts of Launceston, Tasmania (known by the locals as Ravo). Like Young's, the poems in this collection are confronting and unsentimental. On reading this collection, Liz Winfield described experiencing 'an ache like I'd been hit in the stomach for a few days; the truth can hurt.'⁷¹⁹ The collection is significant not just because it represents a marginalised community but because Bliss allows many of the characters to tell their stories in their own voices. Many of the poems are written from the first person perspective of the residents, and Bliss demonstrates an understanding and empathy with the characters that suggests a deep connection with her subjects. Her feminist polemic is evident in the space she gives to a variety of women, presenting the particular difficulties they face amid housing estate life. Bliss draws attention to the devastating impacts of poverty and lack of education on young women, while demonstrating the resilience of the older female residents.

Focusing on similar themes to Searles, Bliss' poems are highly political in that they highlight the many social problems that occur on housing commission estates. While Bliss manages to humanise the people of Ravenswood, she is not afraid to describe the destructive elements of disadvantage, and the book includes drug addicts, thieves, violent men and women, and alcoholics. Always present is a sense of dark humour and irony that Syson suggests is a feature of working-class poetics.⁷²⁰ Many of the poems are written in working-class dialect which arguably assists in forming the 'cultural identity' of the characters. As discussed in chapter one, working-class speech is a significant aspect of the working-class poetic. The use of dialect can work in different ways depending on the position for the reader. For the middle-class reader, the departure from Standard English may seem shocking, and might in some cases lead to what Wesling refers to as 'bafflement' as the reader may not be privy to the particular slang and turn of phrase used. On the other hand, the working-class reader may find the dialect as a way into the poetry, as validating the non-standard forms of speech and

⁷¹⁸ According to the Ravenswood 'Walk Tall' association, the area suffers from high unemployment, poverty, 'low self-perception' and is isolated from the city due to a lack of public transport. <<http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/house-publichousingestate>>.

⁷¹⁹ Winfield 76.

⁷²⁰ Syson, Working Class Literature 28.

providing authenticity and recognition. The use of dialect in *Ravo* is a powerful method of challenging the normative standards of poetic language, and allows the reader greater understanding of the characters by creating an experience where the reader can ‘inhabit the other’s speech’.⁷²¹ But is Bliss patronising her characters by using working-class dialect, as Murray would have us believe? I would argue that she is empowering the working-class reader who is seldom able to see their own (usually de-valued) speech patterns positioned as ‘literature’. The use of dialect is one of the ways in which Bliss engages her working-class reader and challenges the ‘standard’ reader.

M.M.L. Bliss was formerly known as Jenny Boulton, and under her previous name she published several collections of poems, many of which dealt with the lives of working-class women. Boulton had a life-long interest in poetry and wrote and published poems while still at school.⁷²² Her first collection which was published in 1980 was well received and she was well-known on the performance poetry circuit. Boulton was interested in reaching a diverse audience through her poetry, and advocated poetry that was relevant and meaningful for contemporary audiences.⁷²³ In 1999, Boulton changed her name to M.M.L. Bliss and began to write under that name. She died in 2005, the same year that *Ravo* was published. During her career, only one interview was published (as Boulton) and therefore there is little published material to draw from in determining her influences. A reference to C.J. Dennis on Boulton’s *Auslit* biographical page hints at an influence for her passion for the vernacular. In the published interview she stated that an early influence was W.B. Yeats, although she mistakenly referred to his poem ‘Easter 1916’ as ‘Easter 1919’ and claimed that she could not remember much of the poem. She also referred to the Beat poets as appealing to her as a teenager, but did not list any further influences.⁷²⁴ It is difficult to see the influence of either Yeats or the Beats in Bliss’ work, although it is possible that her interest in performance style may offer a link to the Beat movement. Her poetry does not appear to contain the mystical elements common to the Beat poets, and her emphasis on the experiences of women operate in contrast to the male-dominated world of the Beats, although it may be possible to witness some of the ‘terrible beauty’ described by Yeats in ‘Easter 1916’ – but not in a mythical, hero figure context. The terrible beauty of Bliss’ work exists in the art she

⁷²¹ Donald Wesling, ‘Mikhail Bakhtin and the Social Poetics of Dialect,’ *Papers on Language and Literature* 29.3 (1993), *Expanded Academic Index*, 15 March 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁷²² Jenny Boulton, quoted in Myron Lysenko, ‘Out of the Blue: An Interview with Jenny Boulton,’ *Going Down Swinging* 9 (1989): 53.

⁷²³ Boulton 55.

⁷²⁴ Boulton 53.

creates from the hard and often desperate lives of her working-class and underclass characters.

Bliss begins *Ravo* with an explanation poem that positions the writer in the neighbourhood and explains to the reader that these poems are a result of direct experience of living in the area.⁷²⁵ She creates a setting scene, and also acknowledges the people she has written about:

the characters are fictional, if you recognise yourself
in, on, or between the lines, think of yourself
as an archetype. that doesn't make you less
of an individual...

This poem provides the context for the rest of the collection as the reader discovers that Bliss was not only an observer but a participant in Ravo life. Although the reader learns that Bliss lived in the area for only a year, it is also apparent that she experienced poverty during her time there and was already familiar with hardship: 'poverty's an old friend.'⁷²⁶ Bliss announces her intention to describe the reality of people's situations: 'i see what i see, & in ravo/ i wrote about it' which also implies that her poems were written as the events unfolded, possibly accounting for their immediacy and lack of detached judgement. The collection is centred on the estate, and all action and events occur within this area. Bliss's book is different to Young's as the setting is confined to one area and the time frame remains in the present, but she manages to display changing attitudes of the working class through the voices of disparate characters who represent the younger and senior generations. Whereas Young's poetry tends to focus on work, Bliss' characters are more inclined to be unemployed or too young, too old to work. There are similarities here with the dysfunction evident in Searles' work, but Bliss also presents moments of love and companionship in a similar vein to Young. The beginning stanza of the title poem, 'Ravo'⁷²⁷ offers a touching scene observed of two elderly people as they celebrate a birthday and a lasting relationship:

couple. park bench. early morning. they sit, shoulders
touching, familiar as shared pegs on washing-line underwear...

& they smile the secret smiles that lovers share, knowing.
so what is the world doesn't end outside the breeze-blocks

⁷²⁵ Bliss, *Ravo* 1.

⁷²⁶ Bliss, *Ravo* 2.

⁷²⁷ Bliss, *Ravo* 6.

it's her eightieth birthday, a youngster, he is eighty eight...

her fingers dip into marmalade
honey toast on his lips happy birthday, love...

The poem continues with a detailed description of the flats the writer lives in and some of the other people who also reside there, such as a young girl who dreams of getting away from her abusive father and a group of single mothers on pension day. The poet combines short, ungrammatical sentences and lists of single words with longer more lyrical lines to create a jerky rhythm that emulates the unpredictability of life in such an environment. The poems jump from description to first person dialogue, so the reader has a sense of observing with the writer but also dipping directly into the world of the people as they offer their opinions using their own speech and slang. This device involves the reader in the character's lives and prevents the detachment of description alone:

she's fifteen left school a couple of years back
after she'd had the tats together forever & i wanna
be your bitch...

the growds are getting' to me, man
she whispers. the old girl found me pills & dope & me dad
belted me. look! displays the bruises, sunset on her back...

Unlike the women in Cathy Young's poems, who seem to maintain a sense of self-respect despite the hardships they endure, Bliss shows women who can also be coarse and aggressive:

it must be payday the single mums cruise up dolled out
in their best clothes all branded & hair tortured into frizz
feathers ratstails & sundry *hello!* styles. they meet & greet
each other, voices rough as snail bellies. hey bitch fat C U
next Tuesday pull your skirt down...

shaddup shania!...

want a smack? i'll give ya one...

stop hittin' each other i'll break ya bloody necks.
a new generation sits four to a seat mum's a teenager
three kids three dads nineteen today...

The dialect here is realist rather than patronising and this stanza of the poem raises the issue of teenage motherhood. The aggressive behaviour of the young mothers towards

their children seems to confirm the kinds of conservative studies that suggest working-class mothers lack parenting skills and, although Bliss records the mothers' speech here, the reader's vantage point allows them to observe the scene from a detached position. Bliss therefore sets the characters up for judgement, contrasting with the previous intimacy awarded to the concerns of the teenage girl in the earlier stanza. Why Bliss does this is not clear, except possibly to provide a backdrop to the later poem written from the perspective of one of the single mothers – 'Serenity'.⁷²⁸ Issues around teenage pregnancy are well documented in sociology and health publications. The data on teenage pregnancy reveals that the majority of pregnant teenagers come from low socio-economic backgrounds and are more likely than their higher socio-economic background counterparts to become single mothers. Teenagers from low socio-economic backgrounds are also less likely to terminate their pregnancies which accounts for the high rate of motherhood for these young women. Single parent status for disadvantaged teenagers leads to welfare dependency and poverty. The cycle of poverty is perpetuated as daughters of single teenage mothers are more likely to experience unplanned pregnancy at a young age than those who have grown up in a non-teenage mother family.⁷²⁹ These sobering statistics are brought into focus and given life through the portrayal of real people in Bliss' poetry.

In 'Serenity', Bliss provides a first person monologue that follows the narrator's immediate reactions to her situation which reveals the financial and emotional difficulties of coping alone with small children on welfare payments. There is humour here too, with the behaviour of the children contrasting with the calmness of their names (Serenity and Peace). The mother is exhausted and she sees her four year old daughter as being deliberately uncooperative and antagonistic. The daughter almost appears to be the enemy and the mother's frustration is heightened by her daughter's independent spirit:

serenity's videoclip dancing
raps fat mum crybaby fat mum crybaby. enough. that's enough...

domestic asio, hitler youth...serenity's full of demons
demanding release. my head aches, when did this slavery begin.
want to walk away & leave her.
four years old & she knows how to gloat...

⁷²⁸ Bliss, *Ravo* 96.

⁷²⁹ Annabelle Chan, et al., 'Teenage Pregnancy: Trends, Characteristics and Outcomes in South Australia and Australia,' *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 26.2 (2002): 127 & 130.

This is a woman who must cope alone; missing here are the family members or neighbours who would have been the backbone of support in a more traditional working-class community. This poem reveals the frustration and desperation that can be a feature of single-parenting, and by allowing the reader to see through the eyes of the mother, Bliss is ultimately challenging those who judge and label single mothers as irresponsible as well as aligning herself with feminist critiques of motherhood.

Bliss engages with a range of characters and situations, but seems to place particular emphasis on the young people of Ravenswood; the teenage girls who fall pregnant, or take up theft and prostitution to pay for drug addiction and those who are victims of sexual abuse and rape. In ‘Chenille’s Story’,⁷³⁰ Bliss presents a harrowing story of teenage prostitution and the rape and murder of one girl related by her friend in a terrifyingly matter-of-fact tone:

at the 24 hour delicatessen we sit round & wait
for the call. it’s rare night none of us go out,
& don’t the marks love their piece of teenage tail
like we love the money & the drugs, hour by hour
the way we make it. had this regular who fell for me
wanted to take me away from all this to suck his
shrivelled little secret on demand...

It is a depressing world for the observer as it is hard to imagine how these girls might extricate themselves from such life threatening situations. The girls in these poems are members of the underclass, lacking adequate education, financial resources, and the comfort of family and community support. The narrator seems to accept this life and there is a sense that she enjoys the danger she has created for herself. She does not seem to value anything above the need to satisfy her drug habit and seems oblivious to the immediate threat of her environment. Even when Chenille is abducted, raped and killed, the narrator appears to be unaffected and her tone is callous, even though she had a narrow escape after being rejected as an ‘ugly fatbitch’ by the group of men who forced Chenille into their car:

in a few days they find her raped gangbanged & gagged
in tailrace park. stabbed full of wounds, the woman cop “lucky
for you.” “yeh,” tell her straight. “if that’s what happens
when you’re good-looking, I’d rather be a dog.”
wore my new black jeans to the funeral
went home with chenille’s brother. he said she was too

⁷³⁰ Bliss, *Ravo* 33.

beautiful for her own good...

This poem is shocking in its straight-forwardness; there is no melodrama, no sympathy or outrage displayed. The blasé attitude of the narrator towards her friend's death may also be a result of the environment in which she has been raised. The sense of resignation and combination of selfishness with lack of self-respect is not uncommon for young people who feel they have been rejected by society and who are unable to picture themselves living a more hopeful, valued life. Bliss ends the poem with the girl allowing a young man to follow her home, even though she acknowledges that he might be implicated in Chenille's murder. Placing herself in potential danger is possibly the final act of self-destruction for this young woman. There is a hint here of the ending to the film *The Boys*, where three brothers see a young woman alone and decide to 'get her'. In Bliss's poem the girl herself is implicated in her potential brutal fate. This is the grim aesthetic at play once again – the lack of hope, desperate situations, despondency and disconnectedness of the girl make for extremely disquieting reading.

Further female teenage aggression, drug culture, underage drinking, promiscuity, bullying and violence are explored in 'Slut Scrap':⁷³¹

yorktown square with a few other kids
so stoned on skunk, couple of boys with cider...

that chick rabbacka
who used to be a friend comes over with these heavy
chicks from mayfield & we don't know them
rabbacka calls me slut ravo slut & we start to move...

we scream and try to run. they push me down, start to kick
we yell help help. somebody calls the cops & that tall one grabs
tammika & won't let her arm go, slaps her face & screams
right into her & she bites her nose...

Although images of aggressive youths are common in the media's creation of moral panics to exaggerate incidences of anti-social behaviour without the need to analyse the causes of such behaviour, this kind of violence between girls is not something that is usually made the subject of poetry. Away from the sensationalised media accounts of youths 'rioting', the reality of working-class kids' lives does often include aggression, whether as a result of bullying at school, confrontations with rival gangs or violence

⁷³¹ Bliss, *Ravo* 36.

within the home; but it is unusual to come across poetry that attempts to portray such occurrences with such an objective honesty. This is what Bliss ultimately strives to achieve – a dispassionate account of life on the Ravenswood estate, challenging the view that all housing commission residents are criminal, ignorant and anti-social while revealing the reality of social problems that do concentrate in such areas. There are hints in this particular poem as to the reasons for the girls' behaviours. Both of the main characters, Rabbacka and Aleesha have alcoholic mothers which suggests that they have not had positive role models. Aleesha describes her mother as: 'bit of a goer my mum, cops come over regular/ when she's had a few & turns the volume up', and Rabbacka's mother is: '...pissed as...& full of valium/...the old bag takes us home in a taxi, she pays, that's/ tomorrow's drinking money she hisses at me'. In the final stanza of this poem Rabbacka seems to be losing her mind at the prospect of attending court and being convicted of assault and she appears to be contemplating suicide with an overdose of drugs she has been hiding:

things go red in front
of my eyes & my head feels like there's a tidal wave
cresting in it & scream scream, & can't stop. don't know
where it's coming from...

& in my room check my stash, all those
pills the hagmother never missed, white lines & rocks. highway
to hell & this disposable fit's my ferrari...

The reader does not find out if the girl takes her own life, but there is little hope in the final lines; the devastating impact of drug addiction and dysfunctional family life is given full force. Interestingly, the portrayal of the negative effects of drugs and alcohol on working class people is a dominant theme in working-class poetry. These kinds of poems can be compared with middle class treatments of substance use and abuse. The Beat poets, cited by Bliss as an influence, tended to glorify the mind-altering effects of drugs as beneficial and even necessary elements in the creative process. Even the Romantic poets such as Coleridge lauded the benefits of drugs as muse invoking. Twentieth century poets such as John Berryman extolled the virtues of drink,⁷³² but the contemporary poets discussed in this thesis seem unanimous in their recounts of the destructive effects of drugs and alcohol. Does this point to a conservative attitude

⁷³² Roth n.pag.

among the writers? I would suggest that this conservatism is the result of experiencing the direct results of addiction.

Despite the bleak picture, Bliss does provide a balance by including young people who are able to find fulfilment in their lives, and parents and family members who do their best to provide a secure beginning regardless of their hardships as evident in 'Ravo Pride':⁷³³

“me ‘n’ your mum are into higher education.”
it’ll be me next year, my marks were in the top five per cent
they’ll admit me to the bar in a few years
that doesn’t mean i’ll study hospitality & be a drink-slinger
information copyright, that’ll be my thing
make a lot of money
buy my own place in ravo...

This poem also examines class mobility. It may seem naïve of the narrator here to think that he will still want to live in Ravo once he is a well-paid solicitor, but this wish to remain within a working-class community is well-documented by working-class academics, who describe the psychological pain that can occur as a result of class mobility – the boy here is stating his loyalties to his working-class family. This poem also includes a section spoken from the perspective of school students who display pride in their neighbourhood, despite being told they are ‘marginalised’ by a visitor to their school:

a motivator came to school & asked us
to put our hands up if we lived in whatever suburb
when he called out ravo
we all stood on our desks & whooped
“yay ravo. ray-vo ray-vo” stomping out feet & that
those others got no pride...

he tells us we’re marginalised
live like we’re backs against the wall
peer group pressure and feral
we stood up, as one like a wave
about to break over him
& left the room...

The students’ refusal to accept their position as marginalised and their act of rebellion by leaving the classroom ‘as one’ is in the tradition of socialist poetry that emphasises working-class pride and collective acts of resistance. The insistence by the residents that

⁷³³ Bliss, *Ravo* 18.

Ravo is a decent place to live contradicts the negative image of housing estates populated by degenerates, and reveals a political message of working-class resistance in the face of authority. Despite the social problems revealed throughout the collection, Bliss also ensures that the strong working-class women of Ravo are represented. These are the women who frequent the social clubs, help their elderly neighbours and take pride in their homes and gardens:

we like it here, the garden looks like
a tidy towns winner again this year
the wild kids move on, grow up, grow old
it's what you make it...

Women keep families together and try to boost the spirits of unhappy members:

my sister's latest boyfriend drops her like a china vase
for some slut with a 38C bra size. & she's shattered
she stomps & screams & rakes her fingers
through her hair & fetches all her stuff to do her nails.
mum offers to make a nice cuppa tea.
she looks at her, rolls her eyes right back in her head
"make it coffee."...

back home, gran stops in on her way home from Lonnie
she's carrying bags in both hands, she says her head's
aching fit to blind her, her back's that bad from the weight
of the bags & her feet are sore as a baboon's bum & heavy
as suet dumplings in an irish stew. mum puts the kettle on
& grans' face lights up like a sunbeam caught on a mirror
"just what the doctor ordered ducks." they sit at the kitchen table
while gran shows off her bargains. "nothing
like a nice cuppa tea."
& mum's happy as...

In this poem, 'A Nice Cuppa Tea'⁷³⁴ the cup of tea becomes a symbol of comfort and encouragement through the gentle suggestion that everything will be better eventually. It is a necessary aspect of survival, when there is little practical help that can be offered. The language of this poem emulates the kinds of similes used in working-class speech; the unsubtle and sometimes clichéd expressions that may be viewed as hackneyed and unsophisticated by the bourgeois reader. Working-class sisterhood is also on display here within the domestic sphere. In poems such as this which demonstrate resilience

⁷³⁴ Bliss, *Ravo* 79.

and cooperation, Bliss is showing how feminism can work in a working-class setting, away from political rhetoric and based within the everyday.

Bliss is giving the invisible a voice, and according to Winfield, ‘the book has the power to change the way people think’.⁷³⁵ The politics are mainly seeded into the descriptions of events and characters, but in ‘Stark Ravo’,⁷³⁶ Bliss includes an overtly political section:

we are the troubled & heavy laden
the aged and infirm, we have been traumatised
made redundant, have chronic disabilities,
we have been divorced by our husbands
& our wives & by society.
disadvantaged, we become gamblers
with nothing to lose...

this is the land of the unseen
where shut-in is the only way to live
where the only thing that runs out is money
we are not statistics, we are here among you
we are real people, condemned by ignorance
the scum of the earth, risen like cream on milk.
on tv, “a little girl waits...”
so do we.

Bliss lists some of the problems that the marginalised people of Ravo face, pointing at the way society has chosen to ignore their situation and declaring that these are real people who deserve to be treated with respect. It is an impassioned and angry demand for acceptance and understanding. Bliss’ poetry gives the people of Ravo, and those who live in similar circumstances around Australia, the visibility and voice they deserve and have been lacking. The unique style of her poetry does justice to the interesting and rich lives of working-class people. Working-class lives stripped bare and shown on the page helps to move people out of their comfort zones and challenges the opinion that Australia does not possess a class system. Poetry such as Bliss’ and Young’s demonstrates the ways in which working-class women poets express their feminism and politics and demands ‘visibility, respect and interactive discourse’ to complement that which exists for dominant forms of literature.⁷³⁷

⁷³⁵ Winfield 76.

⁷³⁶ Bliss, *Ravo* 123.

⁷³⁷ Christopher, Whitson 80.

Chapter Seven

Indigeneity, Identity and Class in Aboriginal Poetry

Is it problematic to include poetry by Aboriginal writers under the umbrella of working-class poetry? By claiming Aboriginal poetry as working class am I likely to displace it from its cultural roots? As a white writer I speak from within the dominant discourse of whiteness, and am implicated in the continued oppression of Aboriginal people in Australia. The Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that whiteness in Australia is culturally based in that it controls institutions and defines the 'mainstream'.⁷³⁸ If this is the case then it follows that whiteness shapes the production and reception of literature. It is therefore important to acknowledge the specific injustices suffered by Aboriginal people in Australia since white invasion, and because of this I have chosen to write about Aboriginal poetry separately in an attempt to frame the poetry within its Indigenous cultural context. However, there are many parallels between contemporary Aboriginal life and the wider working-class experience and much Aboriginal poetry shares commonalities with non-Aboriginal working-class poetry – namely through choice of colloquial language and common themes such as exploitation of labour, poverty and struggle. Whether an Aboriginal text can be described as working class depends on its criticism of capitalism, Syson claims. I would suggest that much Aboriginal poetry reveals the 'structurally generated oppression' that Syson speaks of and subsequently challenges the narrow view of working-class culture as only white.⁷³⁹

Westergaard has argued that class and race are intertwined and examinations of class suggest racial inequality operates through class – that it is the class system that exaggerates and exacerbates racial discrimination. Such divisions between black and white people are expressed in class terms as class provides, 'a structure through which

⁷³⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Witnessing Whiteness in the Wake of Wik,' *Social Alternatives* 17.2 (1998) 11.

⁷³⁹ Ian Syson, 'The Problem was Finding the Time: Working Class Women's Writing in Australasia,' *Hecate* 19. 2 (1993), *Expanded Academic Index*, 22 March 1999, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

the distinct inequalities of ethnicity are articulated'.⁷⁴⁰ These racial divisions can also be seen as operating in the interests of the ruling class, as divisions between racial groups prevent people from organising collective action.⁷⁴¹ hooks notes that this kind of divide and conquer is prevalent in the current trend which focuses on sexism and racism rather than class, but she asserts, racism cannot be separated from class.⁷⁴²

The specificities of Australian Aboriginal experience include genocide, suppression of culture and spirituality, forced removal of children and dispossession from land⁷⁴³ which, according to Hodge and Mishra has left many Aboriginal people living as, 'fringe dwellers in their own land'.⁷⁴⁴ But despite the particular history of oppression suffered by Aboriginal people, the class system as well as that of racism also has an impact on Aboriginal life. Mudrooroo suggests that Aboriginal people are in fact a 'lumpen proletariat' due to the effects of 'invasion, occupation and dispossession',⁷⁴⁵ and Greig observes that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the working class and underclass, existing as 'the most disadvantaged people in Australia'.⁷⁴⁶ Class and capitalism were imported from Britain and imposed on Aboriginal people from the beginning of invasions of the 1770s,⁷⁴⁷ leading Aboriginal people to being 'drafted into the working class' and into a role as 'exploited labour'.⁷⁴⁸ But this forced inclusion into the working class did not necessarily bring with it a place among a workers' collective⁷⁴⁹ as during colonial times as well as subsequent industrialisation, non-Aboriginal workers viewed the lower wages paid to Aboriginal workers as a threat to their livelihoods.⁷⁵⁰ According to Armstrong, current statistics show that this positioning on the lower rungs of society has continued to hold Aboriginal people as they are over-represented among the unemployed, low-waged, incarcerated and addicted.⁷⁵¹ They suffer from comparatively poor health, lack access to education and

⁷⁴⁰ Westergaard 145.

⁷⁴¹ Mick Armstrong, 'Aborigines: Problems of Race and Class,' Kuhn 143.

⁷⁴² hooks, *Where We Stand* 5-7.

⁷⁴³ There are, of course, non-Aboriginal people in Australia who have experienced similar atrocities and have arrived in Australia as refugees, such as those from Rwanda, Kurdistan and so on.

⁷⁴⁴ Hodge, Mishra 92.

⁷⁴⁵ Mudrooroo Narogin, *Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (Victoria: Hyland House, 1997) 3.

⁷⁴⁶ Greig, Lewins, White 129

⁷⁴⁷ Buckley, Wheelwright 18.

⁷⁴⁸ Armstrong 145.

⁷⁴⁹ Bryan D Palmer, 'Canada and Australia: The Paradoxes of Class Formation,' *Labour/Le Travail* 38 Fall (1996): 16.

⁷⁵⁰ Katherine Ellinghaus, 'Margins of Acceptability: Class, Education and Interracial Marriage in Australia and North America,' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 23.3 (2002): 64.

⁷⁵¹ Armstrong 146.

decent housing compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts and find themselves socially excluded – whites tend to think of Aborigines in terms of stereotypes, as dysfunctional, alcoholic or criminal, lacking any social standing.⁷⁵² The ‘processes of dispossession and colonisation’⁷⁵³ have led to fights for land rights, but the daily struggles of Aboriginal people for jobs, decent housing, and education are also shared with members of the wider working class.⁷⁵⁴

How then, does poetry reveal such inequalities and injustice? Aboriginal literature, much of it based on oral traditions and pictorial representations through art, helps to ‘make sense’ of this history of cultural displacement, and allows Aboriginal people to become ‘discursive agents’ of their experience.⁷⁵⁵ Maggie Nolan claims that contemporary Aboriginal writing such as that by Lisa Bellear and Lionel Fogarty can be a ‘tool of recognition, acknowledgment and transformation, producing new kinds of knowledge’,⁷⁵⁶ thus suggesting that such work can operate as a powerful tool for understanding contemporary Aboriginal life. Adam Shoemaker suggests that some Aboriginal writers consider their creativity to have a useful social function for Aboriginal communities in terms of ‘reinforcing identity’, ‘attacking government policies’ and ‘criticising social ills’,⁷⁵⁷ an aim which is reminiscent of the literature of oppressed people around the world.⁷⁵⁸ Aboriginal writing challenges the colonial documentation of Aboriginal people⁷⁵⁹ and focuses on Aboriginal life from the inside. But Aboriginal writing does not necessarily operate as post-colonial literature as Aboriginal writers and scholars dispute the status of Australia as post-colonial due to the continuing oppression faced by Aboriginal people, as Lisa Bellear asserts in her poem ‘The Great Australian’:⁷⁶⁰

Hope they get what’s coming to them
But, you know what, mate

⁷⁵² Mackay, *The Mackay Report* 38.

⁷⁵³ Larissa Behrendt, *Achieving Social Justice: Indigenous Rights and Australia’s Future* (NSW: Federation Press, 2003) 8.

⁷⁵⁴ Armstrong 146.

⁷⁵⁵ Hodge, Mishra 74.

⁷⁵⁶ Maggie Nolan, “It’s All Migloo Crap to Me”: Identity Politics in Contemporary Indigenous Writing in Queensland,’ *Queensland Review* 12.1 (2005): 37.

⁷⁵⁷ Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page* (St Lucia: UQP, 1989) 180.

⁷⁵⁸ Kevin Gilbert, ed., *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (Victoria: Penguin, 1988) xvii.

⁷⁵⁹ Michele Grossman, ‘When they write what we read: Unsettling Indigenous Australian life-writing,’ *Australian Humanities Review* 39-40 September (2006), *La Trobe University*, 20 June 2007, <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-September-2006/grossman.html>>.

⁷⁶⁰ Lisa Bellear, ‘The Great Australian,’ *Dreaming in Urban Areas* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1996) 34.

It's not bloody likely when we don't have the power
Yeah, it's not bloody likely when we don't have the power

Anne Brewster believes that rhetorical questions within poems such as Belleair's provide the opportunity for dialogue, and demand that the white reader consider 'their whiteness and ...the process of racialising the other'⁷⁶¹:

Through such writing, Aboriginal writers are able to represent their communities and convey important messages both to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers, creating literature with a social function— never far removed from the lived experiences of the people being represented. Shoemaker states though, that some Aboriginal poets 'eschew any political involvement'⁷⁶² (although he does not provide examples of such poets). But critics such as Mudrooroo suggest that the very act of writing is political for an Aboriginal person and that even if Aboriginal literature is not invested with political intentions, it is a 'cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood'.⁷⁶³

Stephen Muecke argues however, that there are traps to avoid when thinking of Aboriginal writing as representative of whole communities, as there is no single Aboriginal community and such assumptions about homogeneous culture can lead to constraining generalisations.⁷⁶⁴ It is a colonial construct which has grouped Australia's numerous Aboriginal communities, cultures and languages into one. Publishers tend to turn to such generalisations to decide what kind of writing is 'authentically' Aboriginal, demonstrating a narrow view of Aboriginal writing.⁷⁶⁵ Certain 'expectations and demands' are made of Aboriginal writers,⁷⁶⁶ and they may have to contend with white editors who attempt to control the writing.⁷⁶⁷ This idea of colonial constraint is also argued by Sonja Kurtzer who criticises non-Aboriginal readers for insisting on a single version of Aboriginality that is non-threatening and who reject more radical,

⁷⁶¹ Anne Brewster, 'Fractured Conversations: Indigenous Literature and White Readers: A Reading of the Poetry of Lisa Belleair,' *Altitude* 5 (2005), *API*, 30 June 2007, <<http://www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/altitude21c/fly?page=Issue5&n=5>>.

⁷⁶² Shoemaker 179.

⁷⁶³ Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Vic: Hyland House, 1990) 1.

⁷⁶⁴ Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Perth: API Network, 2005) 105.

⁷⁶⁵ Joan Newman, 'Commitment and Constraint: Contemporary Koori Writing,' *From a Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement*, eds., Wenche Ommundsen, H. Rowley (Victoria: Deakin Uni Press, 1996) 87.

⁷⁶⁶ Ommundsen, Rowley xi.

⁷⁶⁷ Jennifer Jones, 'Oodgeroo and her Editor: The Production of Stradbroke Dreamtime,' *JAS* 76 January (2003): 47.

confronting voices.⁷⁶⁸ Despite the manipulations and demands of white publishers and editors, the underlying messages of Aboriginal texts remain intact, and Moreton-Robinson argues that white editors cannot remove or obscure the ‘knowledge and experience’ of being Aboriginal that is present in the writing.⁷⁶⁹ Since the 1980s there has been a growing interest in Aboriginal writing, and there are now presses such as Magabala Books and IAD Press and literary prizes such as the David Unaipon Award specialising in Aboriginal works. Aboriginal writers have been generally well-received and some Aboriginal texts (such as Sally Morgan’s *My Place*) have been included on school study lists. For Kurtzer and a number of other Aboriginal critics the types of texts chosen as acceptable to the literary mainstream are those that do not question the hierarchy of whiteness, but instead demonstrate that, despite past injustices, it is possible to write without bitterness towards white oppressors.⁷⁷⁰ I would suggest that despite the contentious area of defining Aboriginality and authenticity, poetry has been a successful medium of ‘resistance literature’⁷⁷¹ for Aboriginal writers; and (possibly due to the less commercially driven nature of poetry publication), there have been far more confronting representations of Aboriginal life within contemporary poetry than in fiction or even autobiography written by Aboriginal Australians.

According to Aboriginal author Anita Heiss, poetry is currently the favoured literary medium for Aboriginal writers. Heiss believes that this is due to the potential poetry has for relaying a political message and because many Aboriginal writers who have struggled with literacy find poetry less confronting than other forms of literature.⁷⁷² Newman argues that poetry was the first print medium used by Aboriginal authors and she explains that this is because of the oral qualities of some poetic forms such as the ballad, which could easily be shared and reproduced within communities.⁷⁷³ There are certainly a number of contemporary Aboriginal poets currently publishing their work, and many more who have not yet sought or gained publication. The range of

⁷⁶⁸ Sonja Kurtzer, ‘*Wandering Girl: Who Defines “Authenticity” in Aboriginal Literature?*’ Grossman 183.

⁷⁶⁹ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (S Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000) 2.

⁷⁷⁰ Kurtzer 183.

⁷⁷¹ Grossman 2.

⁷⁷² Anita Heiss, ‘Black Poetics: The Relationship Between Aboriginal Poetry and the Aboriginal Political Voice,’ *Meanjin* 65 .1 (2006): 180. Illiteracy among Indigenous schoolchildren has been well documented and the awareness of the high levels of illiteracy among Indigenous people has led to various government strategies to improve literacy such as *The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000-2004*. Commonwealth Government, 2000, *Department of Education, Science and Training*, 1 July 2007. <<http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/schools/publications/2000/CNS.pdf>>.

⁷⁷³ Newman 86.

published Aboriginal poetry is diverse – there are poems about the land, spirituality, and tradition (Lorraine Mafi-Williams, Eva Johnson) while others focus on political themes such as land rights (Kevin Gilbert), reconciliation (Jack Davis) and deaths in custody (Robert Walker). Some examine the everyday (Alf Taylor, Charmaine Papertalk-Green). The work takes a variety of styles from the lyrical or philosophical (Mudrooroo) to narrative (Graeme Dixon), monologue (Anita Heiss) and language-driven (Sam Wagan Watson). Aboriginal poetry often maintains a sense of spare lyricism which allows the message of the poem to be clearly understood. Colloquial speech and dialect are employed, and these reflect the oral traditions of Aboriginal culture. These oral patterns recur in aspects of ‘folk tradition’ which Mudrooroo believes inflect both Aboriginal and working-class poetry.⁷⁷⁴ Kevin Gilbert noted this and maintains that there is a specific Aboriginal poetics that contains ‘cyclical incantation, the emotional mnemonics’ which tends to be removed from ‘aesthetics, pleasure and the pastoral view’.⁷⁷⁵

Reading presents its own set of concerns about aesthetics and attempting to critique Aboriginal poetry from a mainstream position is inadequate, according to Mudrooroo. Aboriginal poetry is generally written with specific intentions and the message contained in the poetry is extremely important and may even outweigh aesthetic concerns. Mudrooroo suggests that such work is ‘poetemic’ – the polemical aspect of the poetry seemingly the most important factor.⁷⁷⁶ John Muk Muk Burke also believes that the strength in Aboriginal poetry comes from ‘whatever degree of unforced conviction went into the writing’ which means that even poetry that is ‘uneven’ aesthetically can be powerful.⁷⁷⁷ However, if the message and aesthetic style are complementary will the poem be successful in relaying its message to a reader who approaches the work from an aesthetic perspective? Dennis McDermott claims that poetry that is ‘in your face’ without a particular attention to aesthetics and the ‘mystery’ inherent in poetry ultimately loses impact and the message will not be noticed.⁷⁷⁸ Instead of thinking of Aboriginal poetry as political writing, it may be more useful then to understand the writer as a witness. This position allows for subjectivity and truth to

⁷⁷⁴ Narogin, *Indigenous Literature* 170.

⁷⁷⁵ Gilbert xvii.

⁷⁷⁶ Narogin, *Indigenous Literature* 72.

⁷⁷⁷ John Muk Muk Burke, ‘Abo-Proof Fence: Can Poetry and Prose Ground a “Virtual” Australian Apartheid?’ *Ngara: Living in this Place Now*, ed., Martin Langford (Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 2004) 129.

⁷⁷⁸ Dennis McDermott, ‘In Your Face Out Your Ear,’ *Blue Dog Australian Poetry* 2.3 (2003): 70.

be represented. McDermott believes that such witnessing opens up the possibilities for the pain experienced by Aboriginal people to be moved into the public sphere where it may be known by non-Aboriginal readers.⁷⁷⁹

I would suggest though that a reader/critic needs to approach the work with an alternative aesthetic at play, and their 'rules' of judgement as applied to other works will not necessarily apply. The idea of art for art's sake is rejected by most Aboriginal writers⁷⁸⁰ and Gilbert asserts that in order to fully understand Aboriginal poetry, it is necessary to become familiar with a poet's background and the cultural context in which the poetry was created.⁷⁸¹ Gilbert rejects the post-structuralist approach that does not allow for an examination of the author in favour of a structuralist one that takes into account not only the author's background but also the structures of class and race that contextualise the writing. This knowledge will assist the reader or critic to understand the vein of anger that runs through much Aboriginal poetry. Confronting this anger forces the non-Aboriginal reader to place themselves in the position of the Aboriginal poet or narrator, and opens up a space to explore why such anger creates unease in the non-Aboriginal reader.⁷⁸² Anger, as hooks has acknowledged, can be a dominant emotion in those dealing with 'white supremacist aggression' but rather than being a pathological condition, this anger is an 'appropriate response to injustice'.⁷⁸³ A close reading of the writer, as it were, has also been advocated by literary theorist Anne Brewster who suggests that Aboriginal writing can not be removed from the 'social and material conditions of the utterance' as to do so leads to a de-politicisation which is tantamount to a form of re-colonising.⁷⁸⁴

'White critics have been extremely harsh on Indigenous poets', Mudrooroo believes. Indigenous poets often end up as 'fringe dwellers unable to enter the elitist fairyland of bourgeois poetry' – poetry that is 'committed' and concerned with the delivery of important messages which render aesthetics 'subordinate' has led to its dismissal as, outside the realms of 'real' poetry.⁷⁸⁵ This attitude is exemplified in the treatment of Oodgeroo's poetry. Oodgeroo is now considered one of the most important

⁷⁷⁹ McDermott 68.

⁷⁸⁰ Shoemaker 180.

⁷⁸¹ Gilbert xix.

⁷⁸² Simon Whitear, 'Feeding off the Anger: A Response to Aboriginal Poetry,' *Meridian* 15.1 May (1996): 68.

⁷⁸³ bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995)26.

⁷⁸⁴ Anne Brewster, 'An Uneasy Time: Aboriginal Women's Autobiography in the Arena of Post-Colonial Studies,' *SPAN* 36 (1993), *Murdoch University*, 10 May 2007, <<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/36/Brewster.html>>.

⁷⁸⁵ Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe* 44 & 34.

pioneering Aboriginal writers, but her poetry was not initially received well, and was criticised for lacking the metaphor, simile and adequate imagery needed for ‘good’ poetry. Shoemaker quotes one reviewer as dismissing her work due to the ‘incessant thud of a single message’ that had ‘nothing to do with poetry’.⁷⁸⁶ In a similar way to Oodgeroo, many Aboriginal poets have found their work to be marginalised. Ignored, they have had to fight to gain recognition for their poetry. Kevin Gilbert believes that narrowly-focused critics prefer to witness the ‘exotic’ in Aboriginal writing and therefore are not prepared to engage with poetry that deals with ‘truthful subjective material’ in a ‘raw’ and ‘rugged’ manner.⁷⁸⁷ This is indicative of the way in which Australia presents itself to the world, with Aboriginal motifs used to market Australia as an attractive tourist destination, while the majority of people refuse to acknowledge the brutal way in which Aborigines have been treated since European invasion and the harsh reality of life for most contemporary Aborigines.

Adam Shoemaker argues that the work of Indigenous writers is dismissed as protest literature, a form that is unpopular with the Australian literary establishment.⁷⁸⁸ Gilbert also suggests that Aboriginal poems focus on ‘life, of reality...concerned with life and loving and dignity and justice, birth, regeneration and children and the land and they are saying how, where and why, *why* has it gone so wrong?’⁷⁸⁹ Readers are constantly challenged to understand life from an Aboriginal perspective and to accept the possibility of their complicity in the continued marginalisation of Aboriginal people; Gilbert maintains Aboriginal poets are not prepared to gloss over the harsh facts of reality or produce a sanitised version for the comfort of non-Aboriginal readers, and they confront readers with an alternative to the myths of settlement and occupation that are generally accepted: ‘black poets...know that the russet stain that Dorothea Mackellar spoke of is actually the stain of blood, our blood...’⁷⁹⁰ Thus, the confrontational style and the explorations of the effects of colonialism that constitutes much Aboriginal writing is ‘sharply contested’⁷⁹¹ by those whose interests may be threatened by an acknowledgement of Australia’s violent past.

The reception and marginalisation of Aboriginal literature can be paralleled with that of other Indigenous cultures, such as Native American. Writers and scholars of

⁷⁸⁶ Shoemaker 182.

⁷⁸⁷ Gilbert xv.

⁷⁸⁸ Shoemaker 189.

⁷⁸⁹ Gilbert xxiv.

⁷⁹⁰ Gilbert xxiv.

⁷⁹¹ Muk Muk Burke 125.

Native American literature have also fought for a place within literary and academic discourse, and Deborah Miranda connects this exclusion to a ‘larger cultural amnesia’ surrounding the truth behind America’s foundational myth.⁷⁹² In the same way as Australian Aboriginal literature, Native American writing also speaks of the daily oppressive conditions faced by Native Americans as well as issues of dispossession and relationship with the land.⁷⁹³ The anger described earlier is also evident in Native American literature, although critics such as Jeffrey Berglund have argued that describing writers as angry implies irrationality or lack of control. Berglund asserts that the writing should be described as political, not angry.⁷⁹⁴

Just how then, does the Aboriginal experience of the wider working class manifest in poetry? The answer to that, I would suggest, rests in an examination of some of the themes found in Aboriginal poetry. These themes demonstrate how the poetry both creates a sense of the specific for Aboriginal people and reveals commonalities with the wider community of the working class. The backgrounds of the poets and the social, political and cultural context of the poems also serve as an important tool in reading and deconstructing Aboriginal poetry. A dialectical approach considers the way society shapes literature but also looks at the way the literature plays a part in shaping society,⁷⁹⁵ pointing to the role Aboriginal poetry has not only in Aboriginal communities but also in changing the attitudes of non-Aboriginal readers. And it should be noted here that the majority of readers of Aboriginal poetry are non-Aboriginal people – due to the low literacy levels of Aboriginal people highlighted earlier.

A study of Indigenous poetry reveals themes of work, alcohol abuse, prison, welfare dependency, family and domestic violence. Work features as a predominant theme in Aboriginal poetry⁷⁹⁶ because labour exploitation has been a feature of Aboriginal life since colonial times and continues to feed racial discrimination. Representations of slave labour occur throughout the canon including the poems of Kerry Reed-Gilbert and Lisa Belleair. These poets not only acknowledge the historical context of Aboriginal labour exploitation, but also argue that many Aboriginal people

⁷⁹² Deborah A Miranda, ‘What’s Wrong with a Little Fantasy? Storytelling from the (still) Ivory Tower,’ *The American Indian Quarterly* 27.1-2 (2003): 335.

⁷⁹³ Dale E Seeds, ‘The Future of Native American Literature: A Conversation with John E Smeker,’ *MELUS* 27.3 (2003), *Expanded Academic Index*, 15 June 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁷⁹⁴ Jeffrey Berglund, ‘Facing the Fire: American Indian Literature and Pedagogy of Anger,’ *The American Indian Quarterly* 27. 1-2 (2003): 80.

⁷⁹⁵ Haslett 36.

⁷⁹⁶ Nolan 43.

continue to work for low wages. In ‘Let’s Get Physical’⁷⁹⁷ Kerry Reed-Gilbert for example, demonstrates anger at the white man’s exploitation of Aboriginal labour, and points to some of the wider issues of oppression within a capitalist, class-bound system as a white man hoards the profits from an Aboriginal man’s labour. Reed-Gilbert is the daughter of Kevin Gilbert and, like her father, has been involved in Aboriginal activism. She considers the message within her work to be the most important factor, and aims to draw attention to the effects of colonisation of Aboriginal people.⁷⁹⁸ ‘Let’s Get Physical’ also highlights the need to survive and provide for family that drives the Aboriginal man into hard manual work:

Let’s get physical
The white man cried as he watched them
Pick his cotton, make his money
To put in his bank.

The repetition mimics the act of picking cotton and the song-like quality is reminiscent of traditional Aboriginal oral forms:

Let’s get physical
The white man cried, he’ll never know
The Koori pride that makes that man
Bend between his rows.

Let’s get physical
The man cried, five in the morning
They lined up side-by-side row-by-row
Let’s get physical
The boss man cried as he started them off
On their walk for miles
In between rows they did walk
Backs bent, too tired to talk.

The description of the man’s labour also evokes African slave labour in the United States, and there are parallels with the poems of African-American Langston Hughes, most notably a poem about African cotton pickers: ‘Negroes/ Driven to the field/ Plowing, planting, hoeing,/ to make the cotton yield’.⁷⁹⁹ The rural ideal is shattered in Reed-Gilbert’s poem as there is nothing romantic about the man’s labour and the poem also challenges the often stereotypical image of Aboriginal connection to the land.

⁷⁹⁷ Kerry Reed-Gilbert, ‘Let’s Get Physical,’ *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers*, ed., Josie Douglas (NT: Jukurrpa Books, 2001) 61.

⁷⁹⁸ Kerry Reed-Gilbert <<http://www.kuracca.com/writing.htm>>.

⁷⁹⁹ Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 75.

There is no Dreamtime invoked in this poem, and it reveals how Aboriginal people who have been dispossessed of their land can find themselves alienated from that land through hard, menial labour:

Koori pride is what it is
That makes that Black man
Bend his back, to pick his cotton
To pay his rent, to feed his kids.

The worker is humanised by the poet though – he is in possession of a pride that the white boss does not recognise. The connection with the African-American experience is once again evident as the pride articulated by the narrator is comparable to that of African slaves who used songs and poems to express their resilience and solidarity.⁸⁰⁰ This triumph over adversity is an important feature of Aboriginal poetry and provides a link with the non-Aboriginal working-class experience that is poeticized in Geoff Goodfellow's writing. Surviving on low wages may well be an experience that shapes the lives of many working-class people, but the difference here is the racial dimension – Reed Gilbert's anger is an uncompromising critique of white exploitation.

Alcoholism affects many Aboriginal communities and is linked to the history of dispossession of land, removal of children and destruction of culture.⁸⁰¹ Such crimes have led to despondency and alienation in some communities from which alcohol provides an escape. This in turn leads to social problems such as violence, criminal behaviour, family breakdown and homelessness.⁸⁰² Although alcoholism is a disease that affects many people, the misuse of alcohol among Indigenous peoples around the world has been described as inflicting a 'special harm' due to a historical controlling relationship between Aboriginal people and those who have supplied alcohol. In colonial times Aboriginal people were sometimes offered alcohol in exchange for work and alcohol became an effective method of control as addicted Aboriginal people became dependant on it.⁸⁰³

Alcohol addiction is a theme that appears in some of the most confronting Aboriginal poetry. By choosing to write about alcoholism within Aboriginal communities, poets are allowing the alcoholic and those affected by alcoholism to speak, and are able to reveal reasons why the disease is so prevalent in some Aboriginal

⁸⁰⁰ Lauter 66.

⁸⁰¹ Leon Sheleff, 'Drowning One's Sorrow: The Legal Implications of Alcoholism among Indigenous People,' *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 5 .15 Feb-March (2002): 12.

⁸⁰² Gregory Phillips, 'A Search for Indigenous Healing,' *Drugs in Society* September (200): 14.

⁸⁰³ Sheleff 12.

communities.⁸⁰⁴ The poet Alf Taylor, grew up on a mission after being removed from his family and was employed for a number of years as a rural labourer – such details are important in locating the social context in which his poetry has been created. ‘In Stockmen’⁸⁰⁵ for example, Taylor writes about an Aboriginal man’s dream of being a stockman with the autonomy to work at his own pace and the chance to enjoy the camaraderie of his fellow herders:

I would love
To have been
A stockman
Riding the range
So bold
Sittin’ around
A campfire
Sharin’ a couple
Of yarns...

This poem presents an ironic picture of the stereotypical figure of bush life and of the Aboriginal stockman, assimilated into non-Aboriginal culture and seemingly equal to his stockmen mates. In reality, the life of an Aboriginal stockman would have been much harsher and characterised by long, difficult journeys across the bush and it is unlikely that the Aboriginal stockmen would have been awarded the same privileges as their white counterparts. There are numerous accounts of Aboriginal people working without being paid, or being paid less than white stockmen. The narrator, unable to experience life in the outback, sits instead in the park drinking cheap alcohol with other dispossessed men. He has become the herded, suggesting that he and his friends are treated like animals by the police:

But
As you know
I sit
In the park
With a flagon
Waitin’ for
The police
To
Round us up
And herd

⁸⁰⁴ Pauline McMillan, ‘Kevin Gilbert and Living Black,’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 45 June (1995): 12.

⁸⁰⁵ Alf Taylor, ‘Stockmen,’ *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*, eds., Anne Brewster et al. (WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000) 321.

Us in

The dark humour provided in the contrast of the contented stockmen with the men drinking wine in the park ultimately suggests that the man is fully aware of his marginalised position as he attempts to hold on to some semblance of dignity through self-deprecation. Humour can be a tool of resistance and Aboriginal writers often use humour in an ironic way to highlight oppression. This poem allows the reader to know that the men drinking in the park are individuals with hopes and ambitions despite their addiction. Again the characters have been humanised – no longer the anonymous subject of a white gaze which uses their presence to justify a negative stereotype. This theme of alcohol and identity is also carried through the work of Lionel Fogarty who has explored how alcohol had an impact on the lives of those living on his mission. Alcohol directly affected his family and his brother died in police custody after being chased from a park where he had been drinking.⁸⁰⁶ This first hand experience is apparent in his work and his poems deal with the many ‘crimes committed against the Indigenous people of Australia’.⁸⁰⁷ In ‘At Home: To Musgrave Park People’⁸⁰⁸ he reveals how alcoholism can be a consequence of dispossession from land. The park referred to in the poem is the same park from which Fogarty’s brother was chased. Such narratives are extremely important to Fogarty and he states that he learnt the craft of poetry from listening to the stories of people from his community and from the ‘down and outs’ in locations such as Musgrave Park:⁸⁰⁹

Bludging no-hoper
This dopey blackfella
Who? you saying, uncle, boong.
Yeah! What a shame.
Poor boozed up old lad.

At Musgrave we is frightened
when you talk land rights, black power
cause we is live experiences.
Look boy, me braver than youse.
Remember when dumbfounded you were.
All youse don't sit parked,

⁸⁰⁶ Philip Mead, ‘Lionel Fogarty in Conversation with Philip Mead,’ *Republica* 3 (1995), *Auslit*, 18 May 2007, <<http://www.auslit.com/a/fogarty/foga-iv.html>>.

⁸⁰⁷ Narogin, *Indigenous Literature* 80.

⁸⁰⁸ Lionel Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems: Munaldjali, Mutuerjaraera* (Victoria: Hyland House, 1995) 113.

⁸⁰⁹ Mead.

don't drink flagon red on lips to tip
never flagon to flake out at Musgrave Park...

The economy of language employed by Alf Taylor forms an interesting contrast with Fogarty's work. Fogarty creates confronting poems in a form of Creole which draws on English and Aboriginal languages. According to Mudrooroo, Fogarty takes the language of the white oppressors and uses it against them, speaking a powerful message of injustice and determination to survive. He combines aspects of traditional oral Aboriginal culture with 'standard' forms of poetry to produce a unique and extremely powerful approach which develops his aim to 'put Aboriginal designs of art inside the lettering to bring a broader understanding to the meanings of the text'.⁸¹⁰ Fogarty is consciously manipulating the English language in order to represent Indigenous culture and in doing so is able to make the language 'his own'.⁸¹¹ Whilst Fogarty doesn't reject the oppressor's forms entirely, he manipulates them to promote his own polemics, thus turning forms previously used against his people into tools of liberation. Mudrooroo describes Fogarty as a 'poet guerrilla using the language of the invader in an effort to smash open its shell and spill it open for poetic expression'.⁸¹² Fogarty often uses the grammatical structure of Murri language within his poems which 'indigenises and subverts the English language' and leaves the non-Aboriginal reader confused, operating as a form of 'colonisation in reverse' as it is the non-Aboriginal reader who must find ways to understand the language and cultural references that they are not familiar with.⁸¹³ His writing is therefore immersed in Aboriginal references which demand an alternative reading to that usually applied to non-Aboriginal poetry – the reader must learn to 'feel' the poems, rather than try to make literal meaning.⁸¹⁴ Although the language used by Fogarty is not immediately accessible in the same way as that of many other Aboriginal poets, the themes he writes about and the politics woven through his work provide a point of comparison with non-Aboriginal working-class poetry. There are similarities between his work and that of π.o. who also uses a hybrid version of English, based on the speech of working-class Greek Australians and other Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds.

⁸¹⁰ Fogarty ix.

⁸¹¹ Narogin, *Indigenous Literature* 80

⁸¹² Narogin Mudrooroo, 'Guerrilla Poetry: Lionel Fogarty's Response to Language Genocide,' Fogarty xii

⁸¹³ Sabina Paula Hopper, 'Reading Lionel Fogarty: An Attempt to Feel into Texts Speaking of Decolonisation,' *Southerly* 62.2 (2002):61.

⁸¹⁴ Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe* 36.

‘At Home: To Musgrave Park People’, like Taylor’s ‘Stockmen’, focuses on the human story behind a group of people drinking in a park, marginalized from the wider society and suffering from daily injustice and indignity at the hands of authorities; surrounded by the problems created by their dispossession, but maintaining a tentative sense of community. The people in the poem are also aware that they are not benefiting directly from any political advances in Black rights, that they are living proof of how society abandons those it cannot deal neatly with. Fogarty opens his poem with a list of common derogatory descriptions used against him; fully aware of the way he and his friends are perceived by those who see them drinking in the park. Fogarty appears to be addressing both whites and Aboriginal people who distance themselves from the men in the park. Through the use of Creole, the reader is given a chance to experience this world closely while also being required to put aside preconceived notions of ‘standard’ English as the accepted rules of grammar are thrown aside to create an alternative version.⁸¹⁵ Fogarty allows the characters to speak for themselves, without compromising or attempting to force the poems into acceptable forms for non-Aboriginal readers. As Fogarty states: ‘I like to hit psychological minds and cross boundaries. It doesn’t matter if it is incorrect grammar or their style of writing, because the white man will always criticise written pieces of paper’.⁸¹⁶ The poems are presented on their own terms, offering an insight into lives lived daily on the edge, with no reassuring references to accommodate the white reader. The white reader must overcome literary preconceptions to accept the literature of Fogarty on its own terms.⁸¹⁷ Fogarty’s argues that ‘the only way I can write political things is through poetry’; and it is clear that he uses poetry for a specific purpose – to show how his people are treated by white society.

The effects of alcohol on Aboriginal communities are also tackled in Graeme Dixon's ‘Friday Night in Hell’⁸¹⁸ which explores the violent outcome of an alcohol-fuelled Friday night. This poem illustrates a fight between some young Aboriginal drinkers. The police who come to arrest those involved are brutal and the scene descends into bloody chaos. The poem maintains the action by employing short lines and a flowing rhyming scheme. The language is direct and uncompromising:

⁸¹⁵ Narogin, *Guerrilla Poetry* xi

⁸¹⁶ Fogarty x.

⁸¹⁷ Newman 88.

⁸¹⁸ Graeme Dixon, ‘Friday Night in Hell’ Douglas 12.

Obese barman bellows
'Time for last drinks!'
Young, angry blackfellows
Kick up a stink
A pool stick is broken
As sparked temper flares
Shirts sweat soaked
Piercing blood-shot stares...

The police are indiscriminate in whom they arrest and treat all the patrons with same level of violence regardless of whether they were involved in the original fight:

Into meat vans
Toss the walking and lame
Arrest all you can
They all look the fucking same

If they resist
Bash 'em to the ground
Skull baton-kissed
Sickening cracking sound

This violent relationship between young Aboriginal men and the police is well documented in social policy and through statistics showing the young Aborigines who have died in police custody, either as the result of injuries sustained during arrest or by taking their own lives when confronted with the prospect of being incarcerated. In this overtly political poem – in which the police are portrayed as thugs, the palpable anger is drawn from the poet's personal experiences of arrest and alcohol addiction. Dixon was raised in orphanages and spent most of his youth in correctional facilities addicted to alcohol and other drugs. He educated himself while in prison, and began writing and publishing poetry in his thirties.⁸¹⁹ His story is not uncommon for many male Aboriginal poets (such as Kevin Gilbert, Ken Canning and Robert Walker) who also experienced institutional life, gaol and addiction. These experiences provide a context for and shape their poetry, arguably providing the detail and authenticity that the poems exude. Although the reasons for alcoholism as represented in the poems discussed above may be specific to the Aboriginal experience, themes of drunkenness and associated violence are explored by non-Aboriginal poets such as Goodfellow which again provides a link between the content of Aboriginal poetry and that of non-

⁸¹⁹ Jack Davis, 'Forward,' Graeme Dixon, *Holocaust Island* (St Lucia: UQP, 1990) x-xi.

Aboriginal working-class poetry. As discussed in chapter five, alcohol is generally treated negatively by working-class writers, and this tendency to focus on the destructive elements is also evident in Aboriginal poetry.

If alcoholism and drug addiction lead to crime, then it follows that the high levels of alcoholism and addiction in Aboriginal communities would lead to contact with the law. In general, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from low socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely than their more affluent counterparts to end up convicted of a crime and sent to prison. Recent demographic data shows that the majority of offenders have been educated up to year 10 or less, and almost 50% were receiving government benefits prior to conviction,⁸²⁰ revealing the links between social class and crime. Aboriginal people are over-represented in correctional institutions (in 2004 the Aboriginal imprisonment rate was fourteen times higher than the non-Aboriginal rate⁸²¹) and in numbers of people who die or are injured while in custody.⁸²²

There have been several anthologies of prison poetry that have included the experiences of non-Aboriginal poets such as Allan Eric Martin, Eric MacKenzie and Max Williams.⁸²³ How then have Aboriginal writers dealt with the physical and psychological effects of incarceration? Robert Walker's poems offer an insight into prison life, and illustrate the confrontational relationship between many Aboriginal men and the police (or other figures of white authority). Tragic outcomes of this relationship are common in Aboriginal communities as families deal with deaths in custody. Walker spent most of his youth in prison, after having left school at fourteen,⁸²⁴ and the experiences of prison described in his poetry could arguably apply to many young working-class men. In 'Solitary Confinement'⁸²⁵ Walker attempts to bring this world into sharp focus:

Have you ever been ordered to strip
Before half a dozen barking eyes,
Forcing you against a wall —

⁸²⁰ *Crime and Justice Statistics* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007), *Australian Institute of Criminology*, 10 May 2007, < www.aic.gov.au/publications/facts/2005/06_corrections.html#prisons>.

⁸²¹ *Australian Crime Facts and Figures: Corrections* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2006), *Australian Institute of Criminology*, 10 May 2007, < www.aic.gov.au/publications/facts/2005/06_corrections.html#prisons>.

⁸²² Pat O'Shane, 'Back to the Future: Aboriginal Imprisonment Rates and Other Experiences,' *Flinders Journal of Law Reform* 3.2 (1999): 127.

⁸²³ For example, Rodney Hall, ed., *Poems From Prison* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1973).

⁸²⁴ *Auslit*, 10 May 2007. <<http://www.austlit.edu.au>>.

⁸²⁵ Robert Walker, 'Solitary Confinement,' *Up Not Down Mate! Thoughts from a Prison Cell* (SA: Justice Freedom and Hope Workshop, 1987) 12.

Ordering you to part your legs and bend over?

Have you ever had a door slammed
Locking you out of the world,
Propelling you into timeless space —
To the emptiness of silence?

Have you ever heard screams in the middle of the night,
Or the sobbings of a stir-crazy prisoner,
Echo over and over again in the darkness —
Threatening to draw you into its madness?...

The images of the prison cell and the indignities suffered by the inmate are difficult to imagine. It is a graphic account and the use of the second person and the direct questions challenge the reader to understand. Humiliation, physical deprivation and the spectre of mental breakdown are evident, yet despite the descriptions of such conditions, the narrator invites the reader to count their blessings if they have not shared his experience:

If you've never experienced even one of these
Then bow your head and thank God.
For it's a strange thing indeed —
This rehabilitation system!

It is possible that the poem is operating as a warning for young Aboriginal readers about the consequences of imprisonment. Studies have shown that incarceration can lead to a myriad of health and social problems such as loss of housing, damage to mental health, increases in substance abuse, reduction of employment potential; social exclusion and exposure to diseases such as Hepatitis C.⁸²⁶ Walker may be hoping that his readers will not follow his path as he is fully aware of the potential human costs of prison. For many Aboriginal men, going to prison is not just a case of serving time for a crime committed but is a matter of life and death, and this poem is all the more poignant for the fact that the poet died after being beaten while in prison custody.

What, then, of other social problems linked with Aboriginal communities? How do poets challenge the stereotype while exposing the truth? The issue of welfare dependency is often focused on by the media and government officials. Welfare dependency is seen as a 'psychological and moral' condition which leads to the notion

⁸²⁶ Anthea S Krieg, 'Aboriginal Incarceration: Health and Social Impacts,' *Medical Journal of Australia* 184.10 May (2006), *APAIS*, 17 May 2007, < <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/search;res=APAFT>>.

of welfare dependency as a ‘highly stigmatised personality disorder’⁸²⁷ rather than a situation based on necessity. Welfare recipients are pathologised and negative stereotypes of the lazy, apathetic ‘dole bludger’ or irresponsible single mother abound in media representation. More recently, Aboriginal welfare recipients in some remote communities have been labelled as neglectful parents and more extremely as child molesters, and commentators have lobbied for governments to punish this perceived lack of parenting skills through the removal of welfare payments. hooks provides a explanation for such pathologising of minorities in her examination of class and race, suggesting that labelling people as ‘morally bankrupt’ due to their race can help alleviate while guilt over poverty and deprivation.⁸²⁸ Aboriginal writers can offer an alternative representation while still acknowledging the problems that exist within their communities. Graeme Dixon shows how some Aboriginal people survive not only the poverty but indignity of welfare dependency in ‘Pension Day’.⁸²⁹

Postie has been
cheques have been changed
Food and drink
have all been arranged
Dad cracks a bottle
passes it around
Says let’s have a charge
then piss off to town...

Town she jumps
on pension day nights
Girls looking for boys
boys looking for fights
Tomorrow they’ll be hungover
some sore — most quiet
But who gives a shit
coz tonight Noongahs RIOT!

The poem points to many problems within the community such as gambling, binge drinking, violence but there are hints here of the traditional celebration or Corroboree and an underlying sense of community as the people decide to make the most of their welfare payments. Welfare dependency and the practice of spending most of the cheque in one night is not restricted to Aboriginal people and has been seen in the wider

⁸²⁷ Andy Blunden, ‘Welfare Dependency: The Need for a Historical Critique,’ *Arena Magazine* 72 Aug-Sept (2004): 31.

⁸²⁸ hooks, *Where We Stand* 68.

⁸²⁹ Dixon 38.

working class. This apparently hedonistic attitude towards welfare payments is seen among those whose payments do not allow for any luxuries, therefore there is the temptation to spend money on luxuries when a lump sum arrives – deferring the budgeting or worrying about how to survive the remainder of the month or fortnight. The link between the Aboriginal and wider working-class experience is again clear and non-Aboriginal poets have also attempted to relate the experience of waiting for a welfare cheque. Coral Hull's poem 'In Blankets in Newtown' offers a non-Aboriginal take on this practice, as the narrator describes waiting for an unemployment cheque and then spending nearly all of the cheque on the first day on luxury food items for herself, partner and dogs. The seeming indulgence of such an act can arguably only be understood by someone who has experienced such poverty and can understand how easy it is to become caught in the cycle of welfare dependency.

The first poems in this chapter have focused on men, and although faced with many of the same cultural experiences as the men, Aboriginal women's lives can be quite different, and their poetry tends to focus more on family and survival. Such tales are an important part of Aboriginal feminist discourse, and reassert the important role of women and the family in Aboriginal culture.⁸³⁰ This feminism is centred in the domestic – a domain that has been challenged by white feminists interested in the rights of women to participate in society outside of the home. Brewster asserts though that rather than operating as a 'locus of oppression' the family plays a role in 'resisting white culture' as the act of keeping a family together challenges the discourse of forced separation.⁸³¹ Motherhood might be viewed as a form of imprisonment for white middle class feminists, but this position does not take into account how the idea of motherhood changes when the forced removal of children and subsequent destruction of the family is included.⁸³² But white feminists have not always included their Aboriginal sisters and have been guilty of maintaining their positions of white privilege even when fighting for women's rights. Moreton-Robinson criticises the 'unequal' place that Aboriginal women occupy within feminist discourse and calls on white feminists to acknowledge their dominant position.⁸³³ Writing about hardship and survival can be an important method of bringing a sense of identity and determination to Aboriginal women's lives.

⁸³⁰ Catherine M Demosthenous, et al., 'Stories from the Aboriginal Women of the Yarning Circle: When Cultures Collide,' *Hecate* 31.2 (2005): 36.

⁸³¹ Brewster para 24.

⁸³² Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Tiddas Talkin' up to the White Woman: When Huggins et al Took On Bell,' Grossman 40.

⁸³³ Moreton-Robinson, 'Tiddas Talkin' 77.

Since the late 1980s there have been a number of autobiographies written and published by Aboriginal women, and these stories have been important tools in ‘reversing white cultural amnesia’⁸³⁴ by revealing how racist government policies such as forced removal of children have affected Aboriginal families. The life writings of Aboriginal women challenge the white ethnographies that have reduced Aboriginal women to ‘objects’ without agency, by including their ‘subjectivities and experiences of colonial processes’ in their writing.⁸³⁵ I would suggest that this challenge is not limited to life writing as poetry also allows Aboriginal women to relate their experiences, possibly without the high levels of white editorial interference that some writers (such as Ruby Langford Ginibi) experienced during the more involved process of producing a novel-length autobiography. Moreton-Robinson explains that life writing, and I would add poetry, leads to ‘self-presentation’ where women can be the ‘subject of their own gaze rather than the object of white anthropological scrutiny’.⁸³⁶ As Leigh Dale states, poetry can be useful in ‘encouraging and manifesting their commitment to establishing their own personal, political and cultural identity...These women write from the perspective of those who have probably been treated worse than any other identifiable sector of the Australian population.’⁸³⁷ hooks believes that black women do not necessarily see themselves as victims though, and points to the ways in which black women have ‘gained strength by sharing knowledge and resources’.⁸³⁸ This view can be translated to the Aboriginal experience as the women draw strength through solidarity.

Bobbi Sykes illustrates some of the specific injustices suffered by black women⁸³⁹ in her poetry and paints a vivid picture of desperation and lack, matched with a determination and will to survive and a tenacious clutch onto hope. Her poetry speaks of ‘passionate commitment to the cause of social justice...It is poetry of courage, inspiration and conviction’,⁸⁴⁰ and explores ‘human nature at its best and at its worst.’⁸⁴¹ Sykes is a well known activist and writer and has campaigned for many

⁸³⁴ Brewster para 5.

⁸³⁵ Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 1.

⁸³⁶ Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 3.

⁸³⁷ Leigh Dale, ‘Lights and Shadows: Poetry by Aboriginal Women,’ Brooks, Walker 73.

⁸³⁸ hooks, *Killing Rage* 51.

⁸³⁹ It should be noted that Sykes has had her Aboriginal identity questioned and claims have been made that she is of Anglo and African American background. However, she has been a passionate advocate for Aboriginal rights and strongly identifies as an Aboriginal woman. Anita Heiss suggests that the work of writers such as Sykes should not necessarily be discounted due to questions over identity as they are still making an important contribution to the study of Aboriginal literature. Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu – Yala To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003) 5.

⁸⁴⁰ Jena Woodhouse, ‘A Passionate Commitment,’ *Imago* 1. 1 (1989): 48.

⁸⁴¹ Mary-Ann Bin-Sallik, ‘Review,’ *Ulitarra* 10 (1996): 104.

Aboriginal causes and she writes with an insider's view of racism and discrimination. The women in her poems do not give up easily, despite having the odds stacked against them, and the images she creates are powerful tools in understanding life from the perspective of a black working-class woman. In 'Black Woman',⁸⁴² Sykes points to the irony of Aboriginal women being feted in the name of equality or reconciliation to present their views at official forums or encouraged to join political parties while their immediate circumstances and hardships are ignored and no solutions are offered to alleviate the problems of lack of food and basic essentials, absent partners and sick children:

Black Woman

your near meat-less stew
boils over in the kitchen
you stand at the front door
your baby in your arms
next youngest twisting at your skirts
you listen to the man
from the Australian Party
asking you to become a candidate
in the forthcoming election
– in your hand today's mail
advising you of scholarship benefits
and black medical services
your mind wanders to johnny
lying in the back room
wheezing his tiny life away
and to the two you lost before
the advent of black services...

The political message and sense of injustice is not didactic in its delivery. The language is colloquial and the poem demonstrates Sykes' ability to create a sense of 'accessibility' and 'immediacy'⁸⁴³ with powerful and uncompromising images. Despite the fact that the woman has suffered the loss of children, there is no sentimentalising. The reader is given the chance to step inside the woman's life and try to understand that there is no time for melodrama when the daily needs of a struggling family must be met – the 'practical, political and personal effects of being "other"' that Moreton-Robinson observes in Aboriginal women's life writing⁸⁴⁴ are evident here. Although the narrator is detached from the woman in the poem due to the use of 'you', the empathy of the poet

⁸⁴² Bobbi Sykes, *Love Poems and other Revolutionary Actions* (NSW: The Saturday Centre, 1979) 52.

⁸⁴³ Jena Woodhouse, 'Living Close to the Bone,' *Hecate* 14.2 (1988): 86.

⁸⁴⁴ Moreton-Robinson, 'Talkin' Up 3.

is evident, and the poet appears to understand the circumstances and situation of the woman. The images in this poem are strong, as the woman is:

asked to speak to groups
in your st vincent de paul dress

The hypocrisy of society is evident as the narrator points out the condescending and hollow sentiment behind, ‘demonstrations of the day’ and ‘new l –liberal views / mouthing anti-racist slogans’ but offering no practical assistance. The woman becomes a puppet for those wishing to do good, but she admonishes herself for feelings of bitterness or ingratitude toward her ‘improved’ condition, and the poem ends with a sense of the inadequacy of belated political action that does little to alleviate the ongoing and ingrained injustices meted out to black women.

Sykes had some difficulty in gaining recognition and acceptance for her poetry and her first collection, *Love Poems and Other Revolutionary Actions* was, according to Mudrooroo, ‘dismissed as not being “real poetry”’,⁸⁴⁵ and this has been a common reaction to much Aboriginal poetry. Sykes herself claims that the initial responses to her published work were ‘destructive’,⁸⁴⁶ but this did not deter her in her determination to have her voice heard. It is apparent that Sykes intends to highlight the experiences of Aboriginal women for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers and will not be dissuaded by criticism or influenced by the ‘predatory interest of “concerned whites”’,⁸⁴⁷ who may wish to appropriate her experiences and interpret her work from a non-Aboriginal perspective.

Dysfunctionality within some Aboriginal families can manifest in domestic violence. Although the ‘universal risk’ theory assumes that all women are at risk of domestic violence, studies show that there are strong links between class status and domestic violence, with women from low socio-economic backgrounds at a greater risk of being victims of such violence.⁸⁴⁸ Aboriginal women in turn, suffer from high rates of domestic violence and Aboriginal feminists such as Sonia Smallacombe are not only troubled by this situation but are also concerned that Aboriginal women are often

⁸⁴⁵ Sykes n.pag.

⁸⁴⁶ Sykes 1.

⁸⁴⁷ Dale 80.

⁸⁴⁸ Susan Evans, ‘Beyond Gender: Class Poverty and Domestic Violence,’ *Australian Social Work* 58.1 Mar (2005): 39.

excluded from discussions on the issue in public forums.⁸⁴⁹ In 'Domestic Violence'⁸⁵⁰ Charmaine Papertalk-Green highlights the particular difficulties faced by a woman in an abusive relationship who does not have the financial means to escape, or the possibility of supporting herself due to a lack of education:

They all say it with ease
'Leave the bastard.'
But what about the kids?
Where will they live?
How will they be fed?

Sometimes it's easier to stay
take the punches, hits, verbal abuse
Doesn't seem to hurt after a while
The kids have a bed
They all have a feed
There is no shame.
Escaping thoughts sometimes enter.
Flee. Run where?
No education. No money. No hope.
The next day always seems better
Thinking the hits will stop today.
Most times they never do.

Yeah. They all say it with ease
Leave the bastard.
Yet a lot of women
Are just not that strong.

The woman prioritises her children over her own safety. The narrator is justifying her reasons for staying with her violent partner, even though she is aware that the abuse will continue. She is not ashamed of her position as her children are cared for, and to leave the partner would mean living on the streets. The poem challenges the idea that it would be easier to leave the man – well-intentioned outsiders advise the woman to escape, but they are seemingly unaware of the complexity of her situation. The narrator claims that she is not strong enough to end her predicament, despite enduring the abuse. It's a desperate situation and the frankness of the narrator's monologue creates a sense of her hopelessness. Poems such as Papertalk-Green's are important in giving victims a voice and ultimately challenge the marginalization of Aboriginal women's stories. The

⁸⁴⁹ Sonia Smallacombe, 'Speaking Positions on Indigenous Violence,' *Hecate* 30.1 (2004): 52.

⁸⁵⁰ Charmaine Papertalk-Green, 'Domestic Violence,' Brewster, *Those that Remain* 153.

experiences within the poems highlight the continuing injustices faced by Aboriginal women due to racism and gender oppression. There are clear parallels between such poetry and that of non-Aboriginal working-class women poets such as Cathy Young and M.M.L. Bliss, and commonalities such as the effects of poverty, struggle for survival, social problems and humour amid adversity are apparent. Non-Aboriginal working-class women have also found themselves excluded from feminist discourse but, like their Aboriginal sisters, have found their own methods of resisting both patriarchy and class through the maintenance of family and community. Although the links between Aboriginal poetry as represented by the examples discussed above and the poetry of non-Aboriginal working-class women are arguably clear, it is important to acknowledge that despite their disadvantaged class position, white working-class women maintain an advantage over Aboriginal women due to the privilege of their race.⁸⁵¹

Although there are cultural reasons that make the experiences of Aboriginal people unique, it is possible to suggest that single mothers, welfare dependants, and the chronically unemployed both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, would be able to understand and empathise with each other's experiences. There are commonalities and differences in day to day experience, but all share the disadvantage of being on the lowest rungs of an inequitable society, with the class system shaping their daily lives and opportunities. Aboriginal poetry is rich and diverse, and poetry that deals with the themes discussed above is only one aspect of the full range of Aboriginal voices. The examples offered here, however, illustrate the similarities with working-class poetry in general and demonstrate that, depending on how individual poets wish to be identified, Aboriginal experience should be included as a vital component of the proposed working-class poetry genre.

⁸⁵¹ Moreton-Robinson, *Tiddas Talkin'*77.

Chapter Eight

Different Directions: Working-Class Expression through Music

Bourdieu asserts that, ‘nothing more clearly affirms one’s class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music’⁸⁵² suggesting that the type of music listened to reflects class position. With Bourdieu’s statement in mind, is it possible to consider how class background may not just shape the music listened to, but the music that is created? Further to this, will the lyrical content of songs written by working-class people reflect working class experience? Musicologist Andy Bennett, concurs that popular music ‘functions at a collective level...linked with political issues and social change’⁸⁵³ which hints at the role popular music may play in working-class life. These issues emerge in the kind of music that has been associated with working-class people such as Oz rock, rap, folk and country music. But does this mean that there is a distinct genre of working-class music? I would suggest that, despite the range of different styles used, there is a body of music that seeks to represent working-class life, and it is this music that could arguably be defined as working class. It is rooted in popular music and contains depictions of everyday working-class life in the lyrics. Theorists such as John Shepherd have identified a genre of working-class music and have attempted to describe the main elements; there is an emphasis on the ‘personal and immediate rather than global and abstract’ and they believe that such music is not concerned with the ‘isolated individualism of “middle class” intellection’ but refers to a sense of ‘individuality in community’⁸⁵⁴ which is akin to the characteristics of working-class poetry that have been outlined in previous chapters. Popular music is more likely to appeal to working-class youth than other forms of music because this is the kind of music to which working-class people are generally exposed and have access. Working-class children are less likely than their middle-class counterparts to grow up listening to classical

⁸⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, Quoted in Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2001) 4.

⁸⁵³ Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001) 1.

⁸⁵⁴ John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 136.

music and often have limited opportunities to learn classical instruments.⁸⁵⁵ In contrast, picking up a guitar, or learning to play the drums is a more viable alternative as these instruments can be self-taught.

Robin Balliger observes that popular music can operate as ‘a vehicle through which the oppressed recognise each other and become more aware of their subordination’.⁸⁵⁶ This statement points to the potential for popular music to be used as a political tool as artists urge audiences to be aware of their class status and to challenge the dominant hegemony. Folklorist Warren Fahey claims that political songs have been an historical site for working-class expression, operating as one of the ‘few ways the working class could record their point of view’.⁸⁵⁷ Recognition of others in similar situations through the shared activity of concert going could also pave the way for collective action whether through political means or through daily resistance to the status quo. However, despite the potential political message of popular music, it has been argued that such messages will only be listened to if the music is entertaining and presents ‘a new and irresistible mode of kicking butt’.⁸⁵⁸ This suggests that lyrics can not be separated from the music, as to do so would potentially turn audiences away. Music journalist John Leland cautions the reader to consider ‘the old question of how rock or rap lyrics, removed from the roar and theatre of the music, fare as poetry. On the cold black and white of the page, do they still sing?’⁸⁵⁹ And musician Stephen Cummings states that ‘rock lyrics rarely qualify as poetic on the printed page. The power of rock music lies in the unrefined energy of the music and performance, not its libretto’.⁸⁶⁰ I would argue though, that it is possible to isolate the lyrics to determine their working-class content, but would agree that the message will most likely not be delivered if the music is not appealing. With this in mind is it at all useful to position song lyrics as poetry? I would suggest that regarding lyrics as poetry allows the critic to focus on the content which in turn provides further insight into working-class expression. In this chapter I will be considering how song lyrics parallel working-class

⁸⁵⁵ Lucy Green, ‘Ideology,’ *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, eds., Bruce Horner, Thomas Swiss (Malden: Blackwell, 1999) 14.

⁸⁵⁶ Robin Balliger, ‘Politics,’ Horner, Swiss 61.

⁸⁵⁷ Warren Fahey, *Ratbags and Rabblers: A Century of Political Protest Song and Satire* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2000) xv.

⁸⁵⁸ Susan McClary, Robert Walser, ‘Start Making Sense: Musicology Wrestles with Rock,’ *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds., Simon Firth, Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990) 288.

⁸⁵⁹ John Leland, ‘It’s Only Rhyming Quatrains, But I Like It,’ *New York Times Magazine* July 8 (2001): 36.

⁸⁶⁰ Stephen Cummings, ‘It’s only Rock ‘n’ Roll and They Like it,’ *The Age Saturday Extra* 23 July (2001): 8.

poetry and will argue that popular music provides another important site for working-class expression.

Song Lyrics

Can song lyrics be considered poetry? The suggestion that song lyrics *can* be read as poetry comes with a series of assumptions about how poetry itself is defined in the Western world and how lyrics might fit into this definition. If song lyrics are compared to the current canon of poetry, there are similarities and differences, and there have been suggestions that lyrics can be legitimately considered as poetry for a variety of reasons. There are many definitions of poetry and not all poems possess every characteristic, but there are some generally agreed upon common elements. Poems are compositions in verse used to evoke emotions, experiences or ideas and utilise literary devices such as meter, rhyme, metaphor, and are generally created with an economy of language rather than using standard prose narrative. If this definition of poetry is correct then it can be safely suggested that many examples of song lyrics are poems, as they contain meter, rhyme and condensed narratives. There is a strong connection between song and more traditional forms of poetry and, in many traditional cultures, poetry is by definition a medium that is still sung, but this element of poetry has been lost in the evolution of the western poetic cannon. Mark Jeffreys argues that poems in ancient cultures were originally always set to music, but a split occurred in the West in the seventeenth century and the poem became distanced from its musical origins, although poems are still plundered to create music lyrics.⁸⁶¹ If it is true that poetry through the ages was traditionally sung to an audience, the lyrics of popular music can then arguably operate in much the same way as the ancient forms, as McGregor states: ‘most poetry, in most cultures, has been sung....the pop song has restored it to its rightful format.’⁸⁶² The lyrics of popular music can enter the consciousness in a similar way to poetry, and have replaced poetry as a method of organising ‘the truths that rattle around in our skulls’.⁸⁶³

⁸⁶¹ Mark Jeffreys, ‘Songs and Inscriptions: Brevity and the Idea of Lyric,’ *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 36.2 (1994): 125.

⁸⁶² Craig McGregor, *Sound Tracks for the Eighties: Pop Culture, Australian Politics, Suburbia, Art and Other Essays* (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983) 21.

⁸⁶³ Leland 36.

The use of ‘meter and verse’ in song lyrics may be seen as originating from poetry,⁸⁶⁴ as can rhyme, repetition, and the poetic tropes of metaphor, simile and images, and poet Denise Dumars suggests that many songs are reminiscent of narrative poetry.⁸⁶⁵ According to Dettmar and Richey, the connection between rock songs and poetry is clear as ‘rock songs...are at their best as dense and densely allusive as imagist poetry’ and there are many examples of poetic and literary references in rock music such as Kate Bush’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ and David Bowie’s ‘1984’.⁸⁶⁶ However, these statements point to a particular kind of poetry being valued by the author and do not allow for more direct, less ephemeral forms. Musicologist Roy Shuker picks up on this point when he states that only certain rock songwriters have been lauded as poets, generally those whose lyrics are ‘akin to romantic poetry with lots of covert and obscure allusions.’⁸⁶⁷

Popular music lyrics are used by schools to serve as examples of poetry in an attempt to capture the interest of students who may be resistant to the idea of poetry in its more traditional forms. This can be seen when browsing through school curriculum information and education journals. As part of the NSW year 7-10 English syllabus students can be asked to research the lyrics of pop and rock songs and to discuss their content. Two artists for recommended study are Bob Dylan and the Beatles.⁸⁶⁸ There are critics of this approach though, who claim that to bring certain lyrics into a formal education arena can strip them of their cultural significance, especially in regard to rap lyrics which by their definition operate as resistant to mainstream culture and institutions.⁸⁶⁹ The rebellious attitude of rock music is arguably ‘diametrically opposed to the very idea of studying’ and could even be ‘a threat to its vitality’.⁸⁷⁰ Others have stated that claiming song lyrics as poetry may be positioning them as ‘high art’, which contradicts their popular origins.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁴ Antoine Hennion, ‘The Production of Success: An Antimusicology of the Pop Song (1983),’ Frith, Goodwin 188.

⁸⁶⁵ Denise Dumars, ‘Poet to Poet: Narrative Poetry,’ *The Writer* 106.3 (1993): 23.

⁸⁶⁶ Kevin Dettmar, William Richey, eds., *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999) 3.

⁸⁶⁷ Shuker 147.

⁸⁶⁸ See <<http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au>> and ‘Tips for Incorporating Rap Rhymes into English Instruction,’ *Curriculum Review* 42.7 (2003): 10.

⁸⁶⁹ Tony Mitchell, ‘Another Root: Australian Hip Hop as a “Glocal” Subculture,’ *UTS Review* 5.1 May (1999): 137.

⁸⁷⁰ Bruce Horner, ‘Discourse,’ Horner, Swiss 31.

⁸⁷¹ McGregor, *Sound Tracks* 16.

But certain scholars of popular music such as Robert Walser, claim that there are enough differences to set lyrics and poetry apart as distinct forms. As mentioned previously, some lyrics do not work as successfully in a published form as they require the music to provide their real power and impact.⁸⁷² According to Shepherd, the musical elements can influence the ‘semantic content or meaning of the lyrics’⁸⁷³ and lyrics can be misheard or misinterpreted. Many songs have lyrics that are nonsensical or unintelligible and therefore the actual words used are not particularly significant⁸⁷⁴ – the words simply fit the rhythm of the tune as Leland suggests ‘in the quiet of print, rock lyrics are often less than meets the ear. Rock has always found meaning in nonsense’.⁸⁷⁵ But arguments that suggest that song lyrics are not a particularly significant element of music do not take into account the impact that lyrics can have on listeners. Lyrics can have different meanings depending on where and how they are heard and it is important to consider the context in which lyrics are encountered. A seemingly innocuous song can have political connotations depending on the context. In a place where pop music may be banned, listening to innocent or naïve songs could be considered a subversive act. According to Balliger, lyrics have the power to challenge and operate as ‘poetics of resistance’ regardless of whether they are explicitly political and can therefore be important tools in the struggle against oppression; song lyrics are ultimately a ‘medium of communication’ and have been vital in cultures without written texts or where access to texts has been suppressed.⁸⁷⁶

The importance of lyrics is demonstrated by the existence of influential groups who take popular music lyrics seriously and who have campaigned to remove what they consider to be offensive or potentially harmful material from music lyrics. The Parents’ Music Resource Centre founded in the 1980s and based in the United States, lobbies music companies and governments to regulate the content of song lyrics and to remove explicit references to sex and violence.⁸⁷⁷ Although the PMRC have not been successful in having lyrics censored, they have been instrumental in persuading music companies to attach ‘parental advisory’ labels on music CDs. Groups like the PMRC are convinced that lyrics can have a detrimental effect on young people and incite them to behave in

⁸⁷² Robert Walser, ‘Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy,’ *Pop Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed., Simon Frith (London: Routledge, 2004) 385.

⁸⁷³ John Shepherd, ‘Text,’ Horner, Swiss 173.

⁸⁷⁴ John Connell, Chris Gibson, *Soundtracks: Popular Music Identity and Place* (NY: Routledge, 2003) 71.

⁸⁷⁵ Leland 38.

⁸⁷⁶ Balliger 14.

⁸⁷⁷ Shuker 224.

unsavoury or anti-social ways. Some artists have been accused by the PMRC of including back masking on their songs, which they believe allows Satanist messages to be relayed when the music is played backwards and there have been a few well-publicised cases of legal action taken out against songwriters whose lyrics have been blamed for causing teenagers to commit suicide such as the famous 1990 case brought against heavy metal band Judas Priest.⁸⁷⁸ Song lyrics have also been included in anthologies of literature which is further evidence that lyrics are being accepted as poetry, and two recent anthologies of American working-class literature include slave songs, worker songs and the songs of contemporary artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie and Janis Joplin.⁸⁷⁹

Oz Rock

There is a history of working-class songs within contemporary Australian popular music, most obviously within the phenomenon of ‘Oz rock’ that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and which was characterised by a male, white, working-class voice that sang in suburban pubs about working-class life – the factory, the grind, the escape – and included bands such as Cold Chisel, The Radiators, AC/DC, Rose Tattoo, The Angels, The Goanna Band and Moving Pictures, many of whom remain iconic to a generation of working-class Australians. Oz rock gave young working-class men the chance to hear their frustrations and experiences expressed, and acknowledged the injustice and oppression present within Australian society, using a voice that was resistant and rebellious⁸⁸⁰ – playing a similar role to punk music in the UK, in that it spoke to youth about oppression and exploitation.⁸⁸¹ Although punk rock did emerge in Australia, it was mainly performed by middle-class artists who were interested in the independent and avant garde nature of the music.⁸⁸² Jimmy Barnes however, articulated a working-class position in ‘World’s on Fire’:⁸⁸³

⁸⁷⁸ Timothy E Moore, ‘Scientific Consensus and Expert Testimony: Lessons From the Judas Priest Trial,’ *Skeptical Inquirer* 20.6 Nov-Dec (1996)32, *Expanded Academic Index*. 26 March 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁸⁷⁹ The anthologies are, Ann Fitzgerald, Paul Lauter, eds., *Literature, Class and Culture: An Anthology* (New York: Longman, 2001) and Nicholas Coles, Janet Zandy, eds., *American Working Class Literature: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸⁸⁰ Graeme Turner, ‘Australian Popular Music and its Contexts,’ *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular Music and Australian Culture from the 1960s to the 1990s*, ed., Philip Hayward (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992) 21.

⁸⁸¹ Vikki Riley, ‘Death Rockers of the World Unite,’ Hayward 115.

⁸⁸² Connell, Gibson 78.

⁸⁸³ Jimmy Barnes, et al., ‘World’s on Fire,’ *Bodyswerve* (Mushroom, 1984).

Doctors and lawyers
And rich man's sons
Think that they must be
The chosen ones
They use you
Abuse you and rob you blind
They sit counting your money
While they fuck
With your mind
Nobody listens and nobody cares

This song and others in a similar vein share some of the characteristics of working-class poetry, most notably the 'us and them' content, angry tone and the simplicity and directness of the language. Many of the Oz rock songs are a celebration of masculine working-class culture and feature sex, cars and alcohol. The songs did not call for collective action or a workers' revolution, but described ways to 'stick it up the boss'. Turner suggests that by refusing to challenge the status quo, such songs were supporting the inequalities of society,⁸⁸⁴ bringing to mind Adorno's argument that pop music distracts people from the exploitation sustained by capitalism,⁸⁸⁵ however, it is difficult to imagine Jimmy Barnes or *AC/DC* as agents for the dominant hegemony especially when considering how they reached their audiences – belting out raw rock music in working-class suburban pubs. It may be true that working-class people tend to focus on enjoyment outside of work hours, but the pleasure seeking mentality can also be seen as a form of resistance as the 'pleasure of marginalised people' often challenges the dominant hegemony.⁸⁸⁶ Audience participation in the Oz rock phenomenon should not be dismissed as audiences in general are not necessarily passive. According to Negus, 'pop music has been central to audiences and listeners' lives and often has had direct impacts on the surrounding culture'.⁸⁸⁷ It is likely that the predominantly male audience would have related to tales of heading to the coast with a surfboard on the roof racks and the promise of summer and escape in songs like 'Summer Holiday'.⁸⁸⁸

I'm heading down the highway
got my surfboard on my back
lying on the beach I've got my suntan

⁸⁸⁴ Turner, *Australian Popular Music* 23 & 21.

⁸⁸⁵ Theodor W Adorno, 'On Popular Music,' (1941) Frith, Goodwin 310.

⁸⁸⁶ Balliger 21.

⁸⁸⁷ Keith Negus, 'Pop Music between Celebration and Despair,' *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction*, eds., John Downing, et al. (CA: Sage, 1995) 387.

⁸⁸⁸ Brian Nichols, 'Summer Holiday,' *Feel the Heat* (WEA, 1980).

at night I'm getting dressed and I'm heading for the local
pub and then
and then get layed.

Songs such as this express the hedonistic attitude displayed by young working-class men whose priorities seem to be surfing, getting drunk and picking up girls. The lyrics of the songs articulate these attitudes in a direct and colloquial manner – there is no mistaking the storyline of the songs, nothing euphemistic or symbolic. This is characteristic of much working-class poetry which rejects euphemism for an emphasis on realism.

Barnes is arguably the epitome of the working-class rocker and he tapped into the Australian masculine blue collar world with songs such as *Working-Class Man*,⁸⁸⁹ which became an anthem:

Working hard to make a living
Bringing shelter from the rain
A father's son
Left to carry on
Blue denim in the veins
Oh he's a working-class man

'Working-Class Man' tells the familiar story of a man enduring the grind of hard work in order to support his family, and living day to day and enjoying his limited and valuable leisure time. In Barnes' song the working-class man is a quiet struggler, despite his criticism of the American government for causing him to be sent to Vietnam he is not challenging the oppressive society but is trying to survive and make the most of his position. This song has remained in the popular consciousness and enjoyed a revival in 2004 due to the television talent contest *Australian Idol*, which generated a cover version of the song by contestant Shannon Noll. Noll's video clip for the song presented a traditional version of working-class Australia, the young Anglo man in singlet and work boots, but within a rural setting (Noll is from a small country town and his rural background was emphasised throughout the contest). This is significant as it points to the way in which working-class culture maintains a hold on the popular imagination of Australia. It is interesting to note that the popular press does not seem to have a problem with reporting on working-class people, and the many articles and

⁸⁸⁹Jimmy Barnes, 'Working Class Man,' *For the Working Class Man* (Mushroom Records, 1985).

interviews with Shannon Noll often acknowledged his working-class background. His ability to represent working-class people became part of his marketable appeal.

There are obvious links between the themes of Oz rock songs and those found in the working-class poetry examined in this thesis. As well as the songs of escape and pleasure-seeking there are also songs about work as exemplified by The Goanna Band in 'Factory Man':⁸⁹⁰

Don't wanna be a factory man
Don't wanna be a part of someone's plan
Spending yr life just chained to the machine
Well that's someone else's dream
Day after endless day
You labour yr life away
All the more you give it seems
The more they take away

The song's narrator is defiant and challenging the life he is expected to lead and refuses to be the uncomplaining worker exploited by the system. Again, the language and message is direct, with the use of the pronoun 'you' drawing in the listener and suggesting a common understanding of this predicament. Alienation within the workplace and feelings of powerlessness are articulated in a similar way in the poetry of Goodfellow, Young and other working-class poets. It is likely that many working-class listeners in similar situations would be able to relate to the character in the song.

The culture of Oz rock was undoubtedly exclusionary, as women were rarely represented within this domain except in songs relating to sexual conquest. The omission of strong female characters in Oz rock songs reflects the world of rock music in general and there have been suggestions that male rock demonstrates male insecurity and subsequent need for supremacy through the domination and exclusion of women.⁸⁹¹ Although female rock musicians did not achieve the same fame or success as bands such as Cold Chisel, there was a vibrant alternative female-led music scene within Australian cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The pub music scene provided venues for female bands at The Women's Warehouse and Frenches in Sydney.⁸⁹² Bands such as Stray Dags sang about their experiences as working-class lesbians, and many other all-girl bands attracted large followings and crowds at their live shows. Unfortunately, very few of these bands remained together and only the Stray Dags

⁸⁹⁰ Shane Howard, 'Factory Man,' *Spirit of Place* (Uluru Music, 1982).

⁸⁹¹ Shepherd 145.

⁸⁹² Lindy Morrison, *Australian Women in Rock and Pop Music* (Melbourne: AusMusic, 1999) 25.

recorded their songs although there is little record of their achievements except through anecdotal evidence. One successful female counterpoint to the male working-class bands of the time though was Christine Amphlett and her band The Divinyls. Amphlett sang about love and sex from the perspective of a strong, sexually confident woman, but also sang about female characters she encountered while growing up in working-class Geelong, Victoria. 'Elsie'⁸⁹³ tells the story of a woman with little formal education and limited choices:

She never had an education
She uses her life as her vocation...
She just sleeps all day
In her squalid little slum
And takes little white pills
To make her body feel numb
And it's dark and dirty
And there's nothing left to eat
And in her heart there's a feeling of defeat.

This is not a self-conscious celebration of working-class life, but it provides some representation of the desperate circumstances of women struggling at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The language is stark and the images unpleasant – there is little hope here and Amphlett paints a depressing picture of a woman who has given up on the idea of improving her life. This song is a contrast to the mainstream female image of the idealised woman with access to happiness and comfort through romantic love. Amphlett's women are either victims of the system, like Elsie, or are aggressive sexual beings living life on their own terms. Although women's bands and female musicians were active in the alternative and independent music scenes in the late 1980s there have been very few bands with assertive female musicians such as Amphlett and female band members tend to present a non-threatening image.⁸⁹⁴ The riot grrl movement of the 1990s⁸⁹⁵ was influenced by aggressive singers such as Courtney Love, but in general these groups have not been commercially successful and the mainstream industry favours female artists with marketable sex appeal. In more recent times there has been an increase in female singer/songwriter acts such as Missy Higgins and Sarah Blasko who present a relatively soft, although independent image. These artists are writing

⁸⁹³ Christine Amphlett, 'Elsie,' *Desperate* (Chrysalis Records, 1983).

⁸⁹⁴ Holly Kruse, 'Gender,' Horner, Swiss 91.

⁸⁹⁵ Morrison 46.

songs about relationships from a female perspective but their performance styles are not particularly challenging.

Although the Oz rock phenomenon was predominately Anglo-Celtic in nature, there were several Aboriginal rock bands during the eighties such as the Sunrize Band, No Fixed Address, and Coloured Stone. Reggae was popular with Aboriginal bands of the times as it was seen as music of black resistance and bands used the reggae style to sing of 'cultural survival, resistance to colonisation, cultural loss and Indigenous rights'.⁸⁹⁶ Tony Mitchell suggests that all Aboriginal music is political as Aboriginal people continuously struggle to have their voices heard.⁸⁹⁷ Most of these bands performed to predominantly Aboriginal audiences within Aboriginal communities, but there was some wider exposure and their music also reached non-Aboriginal audiences with No Fixed Address appearing on the chart show *Countdown* in 1982 to perform their song 'We Have Survived', and arguably setting the way for the future success of bands such as Yothu Yindi.⁸⁹⁸ In a similar way to the Oz rockers, many of the Aboriginal rock musicians have continued to make music and perform, and Coloured Stone has played at some major Australian music festivals such as *WOMAD* and *Livid*. Aboriginal musicians have also often been active in areas outside of music such as fighting for Aboriginal rights in political contexts or working with Aboriginal people at a community level.⁸⁹⁹

It is probably safe to suggest that songs such as 'Working-Class Man' and 'Struggle Town' by the Choirboys offered some working-class youth a chance to see their lives represented, and arguably these lyrics can also be described as working-class poetry. Aspects of working-class poetry, such as the explicit working-class content, the simplicity of the lyrics and narrative that many possess, and the focus on actual experience rather than abstract or esoteric themes, feature in the Wedding Parties Anything song 'Do Not Go Gently',⁹⁰⁰ the lyrics of which were laid out on their album cover with particular attention to line breaks and indentations which visually creates the

⁸⁹⁶ Peter Dunbar-Hall, Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004) 47.

⁸⁹⁷ Tony Mitchell, *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania* (New York: Leister UP, 1996) 177.

⁸⁹⁸ Clinton Walker, *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (NSW: Pluto Press, 2000) 235. The Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music in Adelaide is one body that has fostered Aboriginal musical talent by supporting bands such as No Fixed Address and US Mob in the 1980s.

⁸⁹⁹ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 91.

⁹⁰⁰ Michael James Thomas, 'Do Not Go Gently,' *Difficult Loves* (Warner Music 1992).

impression of a poem, and this particular song could arguably be just as at home within an anthology of poetry as in album liner notes:

To the bars he goes, in his half grown beard
And his workman's clothes
Until closing time, he can sit and think of the things
That he did in his prime
When his hair was longer
And his ideals were stronger
Before he let things pass
When he thought he was the voice of the working class
He really thought he was the voice of the working class.

Despite the popularity of bands of the Oz rock era, there appears to be little equivalent among current rock bands, and the self-consciously class-based commentary of the Oz rock songs seems to have disappeared within the present music scene. Political rock songs do exist and offer critiques of society and politics such as those of Aboriginal band Nokturnl who write politically charged lyrics critiquing non-Aboriginal society in an attempt to educate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences about the injustices inherent in society.⁹⁰¹ But the language of class or mention of working-class culture is no longer explicit in contemporary rock music.

Rap Music

The reputation of rap as music of the streets and ghetto makes it an obvious place to look for lyrics dealing with class-based issues such as poverty, disadvantage, and working-class/ underclass culture in general. These themes are certainly evident in much of American rap and many of the Black pioneers of the rap scene such as Public Enemy wrote overtly political lyrics, calling on their listeners to 'fight the power'⁹⁰² while others offered an expose of social problems within their deprived neighbourhoods.⁹⁰³ From its early underground origins, rap has become a global and commercially successful phenomenon, mainly due to the popularity of 'gangsta rap' which often includes violent lyrics and projects an image of the Black artist as a pimp, with ostentatious trappings of wealth and a misogynist attitude to women. Many of the

⁹⁰¹ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 179.

⁹⁰² Carlton Ridenhour, et al., 'Fight the Power,' *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam/Columbia Records, 1990).

⁹⁰³ Jennifer C Lena, 'Social Context and the Musical Content of Rap Music 1979-1995,' *Social Forces* 85.1 (2006): 486, *Expanded Academic Index*, 24 March 2007, < <http://find.galegroup.com>>.

socially conscious rap artists (such as Jurassic Five) have distanced themselves from this particular representation and critics have suggested that the gangster figure perpetuates stereotypical images of Black men, detracts from the real struggles of African Americans and is ultimately divisive.⁹⁰⁴ An alternative position suggests however that these images are intended to be read ironically as the majority of African Americans do not enjoy the wealth displayed in rap music videos.⁹⁰⁵ There is a suggestion that the notion of a Black man empowered by wealth is extremely discomfoting to white audiences. Not all rap artists are African American and within the United States there are Hispanic, Asian and also 'white trash' rappers such as Eminem who rap about life from the perspective of the white underclass.

Rap therefore has some excellent credentials as working-class poetry due to the content of the subject matter and the class background of the majority of rap artists. The audience for rap also points to its class origins as it is especially popular among disadvantaged, working-class youth who turn to rap for a sense of community and to see themselves represented and their lives therefore validated.⁹⁰⁶ It has been suggested that the UK rap scene is providing the commentary on class that once existed in British pop music, with artists such as Mike Skinner of The Streets and Dizzee Rascal providing an expose of class through lyrics that focus on everyday working-class life.⁹⁰⁷

Regardless of the content of lyrics, can rap be described as poetry? There is evidence that the lyrics of rap songs are being heralded in some literary quarters as poetry, with some established poetic figures in the US acknowledging rappers as fellow poets, and some rappers revealing their literary influences. According to music writer Dara Cook, rap artists can be seen as leading a significant new poetic movement as rap is fundamentally synonymous with poetry 'rap's economy, adherence to metaphor, simile, imagery and ability to express the pain and triumph of a people with infectious cadence and an obsession with rhythm renders it poetry par excellence'.⁹⁰⁸ The skilful

⁹⁰⁴ Raphael C Heaggans, 'When the oppressed becomes the oppressor: Willie Lynch and the politics of race and racism in hip-hop music,' *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 50 Fall(2003): 77. *Expanded Academic Index*. 24 March 2007. <http://find.galegroup.com>

⁹⁰⁵ Mickey Hess, 'Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop's Persona Artist' *Popular Music and Society* 28.3 July (2005)305, *Expanded Academic Index*, 24 March 2007, <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁹⁰⁶ Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy and Lived Practice* (NY: P.Lang, 2001) 2.

⁹⁰⁷ Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, 'The Other Side of the Tracks,' *Financial Times Weekend Magazine*, February 19 (2005): 34.

⁹⁰⁸ Dara Cook, 'The Aesthetics of Rap,' *Black Issues Book Review* 2.2 (2000), *Academic Search Elite*, 1 March 2005, <<http://web.ebscohost.com>> .

manipulation of language in rap, the use of striking images and the adherence to metre assists in the identification of rap lyrics as poems and according to music critic Christopher Farley, rap is ‘the music of necessity, of finding poetry in the colloquial, beauty in anger and lyricism even in violence’ which suggests its poetic relationship.⁹⁰⁹ Rappers often play with language, creating their own words and working with puns and double meanings. The most accomplished rappers demonstrate flair for language, wit and a mastery of the vernacular – skills gained on the streets as part of the banter enjoyed by many working-class people. Rappers from non-English speaking backgrounds add their own versions of English and incorporate words from other languages to create a rich hybrid language.

American linguist H. Samy Alim makes an argument for the inclusion of rap as poetry in his book *Roc the Mic Right*. He states that scholars have begun to examine the ‘artistic complexity’ of rap lyrics, but that it is still marginalised and misunderstood and under examined. He describes rap lyrics as ‘power poetry’ and ‘hi-tech combat literature’, and points to its origins in black oral tradition and the accomplishment of rappers in ‘verbal gymnastics’ and ‘acrobatic rhyme’. Alim lists a variety of poetic devices used by rappers such as alliteration, assonance, wordplay, metaphor and personal narratives. He gives particular attention to the complex rhyming schemes of rap, and describes the use of multi-rhyming through polysyllabic rhymes, compound internal rhymes; mosaic rhymes which rhyme different grammatical categories, chain rhymes, bridge rhymes which connect unrhymable words as well as parallelism. According to Alim it is the combination of alliteration, assonance and rhymes which create euphony for the listener. Although Alim is arguing for rap’s status as poetry he also points to the elements that differentiate it from conventional published poetry, namely its rhythmical connection with the listener.⁹¹⁰

Cultural theorist Tricia Rose states the poetic qualities of rap originate from ‘black poetic traditions and the oral forms that underwrite them’⁹¹¹ which suggests the kinds of poetry that have emerged and developed from traditional communities. The original underground element of rap is drawn upon by music journalist Rob Kenner in

⁹⁰⁹ Christopher John Farley, ‘Hip Hop Nation,’ *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, ed., David Brackett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 426.

⁹¹⁰ H.Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 126- 127, 140, 144, 146-151.

⁹¹¹ Tricia Rose, ‘Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music,’ *Sounding Off! Music as Subversion/ Resistance/ Revolution*, eds., Ron Sakolsky, Fred Wei-han Ho (NY: Autonomedia, 1995) 88.

his description of rap as ‘samizdat poetry’⁹¹² suggesting that rap follows a literary tradition of spreading a message out of view from the mainstream (although this might not apply to the more commercialised versions of rap). The resistance evident in rap has been described as racially specific, and music writer Ewan Allinson believes that white listeners are unable to understand the experiences of Black rappers first hand, and tend to maintain a distance from the realities portrayed in rap lyrics. The lyrics of rap are therefore intended to be understood by Black listeners only, which has the effect of ‘disquieting the colonising thoughts of the white listener.’ The popularity of rap among white youth is explained by Allinson as due to the desire to mimic the ‘coolness of ghetto composure, the hipness of an oppositional underclass’ without getting too close to the realities of ghetto life.⁹¹³ This may be true of the American experience, but Australian rap tends to be more multi-racial and has more scope to be understood and appreciated by a more diverse audience base.

There is a cross-over element of rap and poetry within poetry slamming, which generally consists of spoken word artists performing short, sharp and often rhyming poems which are sometimes read over a piece of music. Poetry slams attract rappers and spoken word performers as well as more conventional poets and sometimes manifest as a contest between performers who must improvise a poem on a chosen theme. This is akin to the ‘battles’ fought by MCs at hip hop venues and there is a clear connection between the two forms, although poetry slams do still tend to occur in more traditional poetry settings such as writers’ festivals and writers’ centres. There are a number of spoken word performers engaged in slams, and in 2005 a Sydney show, *Slamming* featured six young poets performing in a similar format to the successful American *Def Poetry Jam* show which was created by Russell Simmons of hip hop record label *Def Jam* and includes rappers and poets on stage. The *Def Poetry Jam* has been credited in America with bringing poetry back to young people and making it ‘cool’.⁹¹⁴ The 2005 Sydney Writers’ Festival included a hip hop event in the program, with a performance by rapper Trey as part of collaborative group of artists from western Sydney. Cook also

⁹¹² Rob Kenner, ‘Word’s Worth (Poetry and Poetics of Hip Hop Music),’ *Poetry* 187.3 December (2005): 222.

⁹¹³ Ewan Allinson, ‘It’s a Black Thing: Hearing How Whites Can’t,’ *Cultural Studies* 8.3 (1994): 438, 442, 449.

⁹¹⁴ Caroline Baum, ‘Rap Poets’ Society,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* January 3 (2004), *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, 27 April 2005, <<http://www.smh.com.au>>.

points to the increasing popularity of incorporating rap styles into poetry which suggests that rap is gaining credence within the literary mainstream.⁹¹⁵

Despite the claim that rap lyrics are poems, not all rap artists would describe themselves as poets. Rappers do not seem to be asked about their poetic leanings in interviews, but will occasionally make reference to the poetry of their lyrics and the headline of popular press articles on rappers often refer to them as poets in some manner. Sydney rapper Trey is presented in an article as a poet and lyricist speaking out to the disadvantaged youth of Sydney's western suburbs.⁹¹⁶ Suffa MC from The Hilltop Hoods states that he has not really thought of himself as a poet, but he does make references to poetry in his lyrics and suggests that rappers like himself often see poetry as an elite form that has become disconnected from its oral traditions 'my rhyme is like poetry only less pretentious.'⁹¹⁷ Brisbane group, Modern Day Poets seem to be stating their position as poets quite clearly through their name, and their first single 'These Kids'⁹¹⁸ is a highly political song condemning society's failure to understand and assist troubled youth:

it's kinda funny how tha crime rate is so high
in suburbs where family ties are low, n suicides an the rise
so we as a nation just class em as a waste of space
these kids trapped in a struggle
don't know where they're heading
a whole lotta trouble is all they're getting.

As in many other parts of the world there is a vibrant rap music scene in Australia, with artists making some ground in bringing their music to a wide audience appealing to those outside of the close-knit hip hop culture. There is a commonly held notion that Australian rap music is predominately produced by young people from working-class, multicultural, economically deprived areas such as the western suburbs of Sydney, and there are many artists who have originated from such neighbourhoods.⁹¹⁹ In his writing on Australian hip hop, Tony Mitchell points to artists such as Def Wish Cast and Sound Unlimited who are considered pioneers of the rap music scene in Australia and who come from the western suburbs 'an area traditionally

⁹¹⁵ Cook n.pag.

⁹¹⁶ Andrew Drever, 'Trey Bien,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 27 (2003), *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, 23 February 2005, <<http://smh.com.au>>.

⁹¹⁷ Suffa MC, personal communication, March 2005.

⁹¹⁸ Joel Turner, Tim Turner, 'These Kids,' *Joel Turner and the Modern Day Poets* (Marjac Productions, 2004).

⁹¹⁹ George Stavrias, 'Droppin Conscious Beats and Flows: Aboriginal Hip Hop and Youth Identity,' *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2005):46.

regarded as working class, underprivileged and crime ridden, with a large proportion of immigrant inhabitants and deprived of many of the social and cultural amenities enjoyed by the inner and northern suburbs of the city.’⁹²⁰ There are rap outfits from many parts of Australia, and all the major cities are represented from Canberra (Koolism) to Darwin (Culture Connect) and Mitchell described Australian rap as a localised phenomenon⁹²¹ with the majority of acts focusing on the specifics of Australian culture and rapping with Australian accents. In her comparative study of Australian rap music and other music genres, linguist Renae O’Hanlon determined that Australian rappers use broad Australian accents to a greater degree than other popular music genres and employ non-standard English and slang in order to display their authenticity and ‘Australianess’.⁹²² Mitchell also points to this emphasis on the Australian vernacular and believes the technique provides a ‘vitaly important medium of renewed expression for colloquial and workin-class forms of Australian vernacular English.’⁹²³ Mitchell also suggests that there are several different types of Australian rap music such as ‘ocker’ rap (Hilltop Hoods, Art of War) which celebrates working-class culture and includes references to sport, drinking and barbeques; ‘falafel’ rap (The Herd, Combat Wombat) which is more politically engaged and displays anti-government and/or left wing political leanings, and ‘wog’ rap (Koolism, TZU) which incorporates the experiences of non-Anglo Australians and reflects Australia’s multi-cultural communities.⁹²⁴ There is also a sense of larrikinism among Australian rappers who do not display the aggressive ‘cop killer’ stances of many American gangster rappers. Australian rap is often humorous and offers a satirical take on Australian culture with reference to the attempts of young people to evade authority and have a good time without resorting to violence.

According to an article in *The Age*, rap music is filling the gap created by the meaningless lyrics of the majority of pop and rock songs, by offering lyrics that have a ‘social conscience’ and deal with ‘real issues affecting young people’.⁹²⁵ Many of these issues relate to the lives of ethnic youth and their lyrics relate to the racism and experiences of living on the fringes of the mainstream culture. Mitchell states that the

⁹²⁰ Mitchell, *Popular Music* 193.

⁹²¹ Mitchell, *Popular Music* 127.

⁹²² Renae O’Hanlon, ‘Australian Hip Hop: A Sociolinguistic Investigation,’ *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 26.2 (2006): 204.

⁹²³ Tony Mitchell, ‘The Reography of Reason: Australian Hip Hop as Experimental History and Pedagogy,’ *Altitude* 8 (2007), *Curtin University of Technology*, 16 July 2007, <<http://www.api-network.com/altitude>>.

⁹²⁴ Mitchell, *The Reography* n.pag.

⁹²⁵ Patrick Donovan, ‘The New Beat on the Block,’ *The Age* September 9 (2004): 4.

music of rap artists provides ‘effective means of vernacular expression of self-identification for many young people of Indigenous, Pacific Islander and non-English speaking backgrounds’.⁹²⁶ Rap music is particularly popular among Indigenous youth who have embraced the storytelling elements of the genre to relate their experiences in a racist society and the particular disadvantages and oppressions they face. The ‘performative and autobiographical’ nature of rap described by Stavrias helps Indigenous emcees to relate their experiences and to educate their audience.⁹²⁷ And Mitchell also speaks of the empowering quality of rap as it provides a ‘vehicle for self-expression, self awareness and historical knowledge’ and its pedagogical role as artists consciously use the medium to express their ‘personal, social and cultural oral histories and philosophies.’⁹²⁸

The interest in rap music among Indigenous youth may also be due to what Dunbar-Hall and Gibson describe as an ‘increasing affinity’ between Aboriginal people and African-Americans from the 1990s, which has led to interest in various aspects of African-American culture, with rap music (and R & B) currently serving as the idealised example of African-American music. The similarities and experiences of disadvantage and racism faced by African-American and Aboriginal youth have created a mutual respect and interest and some high-profile African-American rap artists have visited Aboriginal communities and commented on some of the issues important to Aboriginal people such as reconciliation.⁹²⁹ There are a number of Indigenous rap acts including Wire MC, Stray Dogs, Propaganda Klann, Indigenous Intrudaz, Local Knowledge and MC Murriss who perform both at Indigenous festivals and hip hop events and receive airplay on the national youth radio station Triple J. Many of these artists rap about Indigenous issues, and they are conscious of how their music can influence other young Aboriginal people. Koori rapper Little G offers an Aboriginal perspective on Australia Day celebrations in ‘Invasion Day’:

What’s Invasion Day?
My people suffer to this day, but we still stand strong and survive today
Fuck Australia Day, my people suffer to this day
but we still stand strong: it’s survival day

⁹²⁶ Tony Mitchell, ‘Australian Hip Hop,’ *Youth Studies Australia* 22.2 (2003): 42.

⁹²⁷ Stavrias 51.

⁹²⁸ Mitchell, *The Reography* n.pag.

⁹²⁹ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 121.

Little G states that ‘rapping to me is poetry in motion with a bit of attitude to it’⁹³⁰ and it is important to her that the songs she produces deal with the important issues faced by Aboriginal communities and young people from non-Anglo backgrounds.⁹³¹ In a radio interview, Brisbane group MC Murriz describe how they started writing raps to encourage other local Aboriginal teenagers to keep away from drugs, stay out of trouble and to be proud of their Aboriginal culture:⁹³²

I tell ya keep ya head up, believe in yourself you ain’t no failure
And realise that if you’re gonna commit crimes there’s a price to
pay
Jail’s a place where you lose more than a day
So change the world through your actions in a positive way⁹³³

There have been various hip hop workshop programs in Indigenous communities which have assisted in providing young Aboriginal people with the skills to express themselves in rap lyrics. These programs such as those organised by Morganics and Triple J in 2002 have led to the exposure and subsequent success of rap groups from disadvantaged Aboriginal communities. One such group is the Wilcannia Mob, who are a group of young Aboriginal rappers who rap about life in outback Wilcannia and whose single ‘Down River’ became extremely popular after extensive airplay on the national broadcaster Triple J in 2002.⁹³⁴ MC Wire has been quoted as describing rap as ‘the new corroboree’ as it includes the elements of dance and music found in traditional Aboriginal corroborees, and he also suggests that for urban Aboriginal men such as himself, rap can assist in providing links to traditional culture.⁹³⁵ And Local Knowledge demonstrate how Aboriginal artists have localised rap in their song ‘Blackfellas’, which starts with a hip hop ‘shout out’ to the different Aboriginal groups in Australia, ‘To all the Murris, Kooris, Gorris, Nyoogar, Nungar, Bama, Wangal...’.⁹³⁶

Australian rap is often political and, as Kurt Iveson asserts, rap is a radical musical form with the ability to challenge ‘dominant visions of our national identity’ and offer ‘an alternative agenda’. The lyrics can relate strong social or political

⁹³⁰ Quoted in Michael Winkler, ‘Not Short on Words,’ *The Age* March 2 (2004), *The Age Online*, 27 April 2005, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/>>.

⁹³¹ Stavrias 48.

⁹³² Deadly Sounds Show Archive, *Vibe Australia*, 10 June 2007, <<http://www.deadlysounds.vibe.com.au/dsounds/archive/read.asp?id=658>>.

⁹³³ MC Murriz quoted in Patrick Donovan, ‘The New Beat on the Block,’ *The Age* September 9 (2004), *The Age Online*, 27 April 2005, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/09/08/1094530687035.html>>.

⁹³⁴ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 130.

⁹³⁵ MC Wire quoted in Tony Mitchell, ‘The New Corroboree,’ *Meanjin* 65.1 (2006): 28.

⁹³⁶ Local Knowledge. ‘Blackfellas,’ *Blackfellas* (Propaganda Recording Company, 2005).

messages in a direct and concise manner, assisted by the musical elements of the songs which are important for attracting and keeping listeners' interest.⁹³⁷ The Hilltop Hoods rap about political issues in 'Walk On',⁹³⁸ which deals with the Howard government's treatment of asylum seekers, the exploitation of the environment, war and Australia's military involvement in Iraq and they call for change, for people to make a difference:

Wanna swallow people's pain and spit it from the hilltop
Wanna affect change in the subjects that we talk on
Connect strangers, work together and walk on.

There are other groups who maintain a sense of politics within their work such as The Herd who rapped about the attitude of the Howard government and the Australian public towards asylum seekers in their 2003 single '77% Tampa Tantrum', and have revealed a blatant anti-government stance in other songs such as 'Burn Down the Parliament'. It is the content of their lyrics that attracts many fans as well as the catchy hooks of their songs. Their music has been described as 'protest music' and they have likened themselves to 'storytellers', something that they consider to be intrinsically Australian in nature.⁹³⁹

In a similar way to in working-class poetry, there is an emphasis in rap lyrics on realism⁹⁴⁰ – to write about life as experienced by the rappers and the members of their community. This sense of community is extremely important as rappers often consider themselves as members of a hip hop family, and the particular neighbourhoods and locations that they come from feature heavily in their lyrics.⁹⁴¹ In 'The Hard Road', the Hilltop Hoods describe their teenage years, and dropping out of school, getting into trouble with the police and working in low-paid jobs:

They'd have me in the back of a paddy, down to lock up,
Smack me, pat me down for a baggy, mums would rock up,
And bail me out, a failure out once again,
Next weekend, bail me out, drunk again,

⁹³⁷ Kurt Iveson, 'Partying, Politics and Getting Paid: Hip Hop and National Identity in Australia,' *Overland* 147 (1997): 40.

⁹³⁸ M Lambert, D. Smith, 'Walk On,' *The Calling* (Obese Records, 2005).

⁹³⁹ Liz (no surname given), 'An Interview with The Herd,' *Oz Music Project Magazine*, Oz Music Project, 15 February (2005) <<http://www.ozmusicproject.net/magazine/interview>>.

⁹⁴⁰ Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin Upper* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003) 195.

⁹⁴¹ Mitchell, Another Root 127. Many rap songs contain a list of 'shouts' to various crews and neighbourhoods.

And I never will forgive myself,
For putting you through all that hell,
I went from high school dropout to factory labourer,
Slave to the clock until four, went from sleeping on the floor,
To being out on tour, now no stopping me...

In this song, it is rap that ultimately 'saves' the writer as he discovers his talent for hip hop. It is an example of how the chance for creative expression can be empowering for disadvantaged youth. The culture of hip hop provides a potential sense of community for young, marginalised working-class people as they are able to witness aspects of hip hop culture within their environment such as graffing (graffiti art) and the 'phat' beats of rap music spilling from the corners of neighbourhoods.⁹⁴² MC Trey affirms the link between class and rap 'whether you are in Sydney or in New York they are talking about people who are struggling, whether it be through poverty or whatever and it's not necessarily a race thing anymore, it's more the different class sectors and stuff'.⁹⁴³ But hip hop critic Miguel D'Souza suggests that rap music is in danger of being appropriated by non-working class musicians: 'it has moved to being a culture adopted by hip university students, those with a background in the performance arts, the academy and most of all, the inner city. It isn't hip hop anymore.'⁹⁴⁴ Some groups have reacted to the dubious authenticity of certain rappers and staked a claim for rap as the music of working-class suburbs rather than the middle-class inner-city. In 'Illusionary Lines',⁹⁴⁵ The Hilltop Hoods criticise those who are interested only in rap as it becomes fashionable:

Cos hip hop ain't faking for ends
Hip hop ain't fading with trends
it ain't rich kids playing with pens,
it ain't the clothes on your back, or the label on them,
it's where you're at, so I say it again

It should be noted that, despite the ability of rap to give expression to those who are often pushed to the margins of society, like Oz rock, hip hop culture is generally a masculine domain and female voices are not heard as often as those of their male

⁹⁴² Iverson 41.

⁹⁴³ MC Trey quoted in Fiona Clarke, 'It's a Rap,' *ABC Lateline*, March 18, 1999, *ABC Online*, 27 April 2005, <<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/S20303.htm>>.

⁹⁴⁴ Miguel D'Souza, 'Hip Hop & Sydney's Western Suburbs - A Brief Pot-Stirrer,' Presented as part of the *Urban Expressions Hip Hop Festival*, Sydney, 1988, <<http://www.cia.com.au/peril/youth/miguelurb.pdf>>.

⁹⁴⁵ D Smith, *Illusionary Lines*, (Obese Records, 2003).

counterparts.⁹⁴⁶ As Ian Maxwell states, this is a community ‘for the *boyz*, a masculinized, even phallogocentric world in which young men performed...hung out, strutted... where young men talked about *their* Community, Culture, Nation.’⁹⁴⁷ Although women have been important contributors to the rap music scene, the ‘masculinist discursive strand’⁹⁴⁸ in rap music and hip hop culture has often relegated women to the margins and despite a small number of high profile female rappers, women are mainly visible (especially in gansta rap) as sexualised objects within video clips.⁹⁴⁹ The domination of the rap music scene by male artists is matched by the male domination of the rock and pop music scenes in general, and this points to issues of gender and class and the lack of opportunities for young women to express themselves and participate in the creation of subcultures.⁹⁵⁰ There are exceptions to the male rap artist model though, and in Australia several female rappers, such as Trey, Layla, A-love, Macromantics and Little G are making their mark on the scene. It is also worth noting that the hip hop show on the Triple J network is presented by a female ‘MC’, Maya Jupiter and there is a record label, Mother Tongues devoted exclusively to female rap artists. Female emcees also organise and run hip hop workshops for young women⁹⁵¹ and there have been female rap music events such as Ladies First, a night of female hip hop performed in Sydney in 2003. An independent documentary on female Australian hip hop has also been produced entitled *All the Ladies*, directed by Colleen Hughson and Mary Quinscara in 2003 and screened at various film festivals around the country. However, the majority of rap acts with hit singles and radio airplay are still male.

The absence of women on the hip hop scene is partially explained by the male-dominated nature of the music industry as mentioned earlier, but is also possibly due to the music preferences of young women. Women have been seen as possessing a much more frivolous attitude to popular music, choosing to listen to songs that do not

⁹⁴⁶ Mitchell, *Australian Hip Hop* 41.

⁹⁴⁷ Ian Maxwell, ‘True to the Music: Authenticity, Articulation and Authorship in Sydney Hip Hop Culture,’ *Social Semiotics* 4. 1-2 (1994): 33.

⁹⁴⁸ Layli Phillips, Kerrick Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Stephens, ‘Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976-2004,’ *Journal of African American History* 90.3 (2005): 254.

⁹⁴⁹ Jason D Hangen, ‘“Unladylike Divas”: Language, Gender and Female Gangsta Rappers,’ *Popular Music and Society* 26.4 (2003): 429.

⁹⁵⁰ Maxwell 33.

⁹⁵¹ Donovan n.pag.

challenge them politically and more likely to become caught up in pop idol worship.⁹⁵² For many young working-class women the pop ballads, especially those sung by females may represent a 'lifeline' that offers an escape and retreat from an increasingly violent and unstable society; according to Balliger: 'women can relate to female vocalists as...trusted voices for counsel...the bedroom becomes a temporary refuge against a large social assault'.⁹⁵³ While young men listen to angry music which calls for the destruction of the status quo, young girls immerse themselves in the fantasy world of soothing pop songs. According to British feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, young working-class women are not provided the same opportunities to create and participate in subcultures, and are more likely to conform to traditional oppressive gender roles and seek escape through 'expression in the ideology of romantic love' such as pop songs.⁹⁵⁴ The gender imbalance in rap aside, it seems that rap music is providing a site for young people to speak of their class experience, and an opportunity for young working-class people to create a sense of community and be empowered through creativity. The content of much rap music lyrics is firmly rooted in working-class experience, and the potential literary qualities of the lyrics make rap an interesting and important poetic alternative to more traditional forms of published poetry.

Folk Music

Folk music has traditionally explored working-class life through songs written from a personal perspective. And Connell and Gibson describe folk music as emerging from a 'rural, working-class, community tradition' which was originally written and performed for such an audience.⁹⁵⁵ These forms were popular in the Western world for centuries, and survived into the modern era in the form of working-class ballads in the nineteenth century. The mainstream popularity of such ballads has diminished since the nineteenth century, possibly due in part to the decline of 'labour movement institutions and the working-class public sphere that supported bush ballads,'⁹⁵⁶ but interest in the form has endured and there are a number of Australian writers, performers, fans, websites and

⁹⁵² Jay Press, Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock and Roll* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995) 5.

⁹⁵³ Balliger 67.

⁹⁵⁴ Angela McRobbie, 'Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique (1980),' Frith, Goodwin, 75.

⁹⁵⁵ Connell, Gibson 29.

⁹⁵⁶ Iverson 39.

organisations that exist to promote ballads. Music historians Judith Brett and Graeme Smith point to the importance of folk music:

The folk movement's cultural theory has been widely criticised as ahistorical, utopian and romantic by scholars of popular culture. But for the folk movement the “folk community” and the “folk process” are not just a theory about creativity in a bygone age or simpler societies. Rather they are ideals through which the movement understands its own cultural activity as it attempts to reproduce socially situated creativity.’⁹⁵⁷

Brett and Smith suggest that there are two styles of folk music, one based on traditional music played and enjoyed within specific communities such as the ‘Hillbilly’ music of the Appalachian Mountain region of south eastern America. Such traditional music is still popular within its region and there are various organisations that exist to promote the teaching and performance of ‘face-to-face’ music which is played by amateur (although accomplished) musicians and is part of local and family life. The other style is ‘public folk music’ which was part of the 1960s youth movements and initially centered in urban coffee houses and folk clubs before gravitating from coffee lounges to folk festivals in the 1970s.⁹⁵⁸

Australian folk as a genre arguably has its origins in a 1950s nationalist movement which was looking for music to reflect national identity and the ideals of egalitarianism and collectivism.⁹⁵⁹ Within the radical Peace Movement was an idealistic view of the working class, and left-wing political groups embraced folk music and attempted to cultivate the genre as a musical backdrop for their political causes. Many folk singers of the Peace Movement were middle-class dropouts who rebelled against their middle-class roots and attempted to show an affinity with working-class people such as Australian folk singers Judy Small and Jeannie Lewis who wrote songs with political themes in the 1960s and 1970s, and performed to educated audiences in city coffee lounges.⁹⁶⁰ In the 1980s folk festivals were professionalised and became large events – some of which, such as the Woodford Festival in Queensland, continue to attract crowds in the tens of thousands.

⁹⁵⁷ Judith Brett, Graeme Smith, ‘Nation, Authenticity, Social Difference in Australian Popular Music: Folk, Country, Multicultural,’ *JAS Australian Public Intellectual Forum* n58 (1998): 4.

⁹⁵⁸ Brett, Smith 4 & 5.

⁹⁵⁹ Brett, Smith 4.

⁹⁶⁰ Morrison 12 & 13.

According to Brett and Smith, folk music has an ideology at its centre rather than a particular musical style, and this ideology is based on the folk community, traditional music and the perpetuation of an oral culture. Despite having its roots in the exclusionary tradition of early Australian nationalism, folk artists do attempt to challenge this tradition by participating in a ‘kind of cultural recovery and contribution history.’ Amateurism is encouraged and folk prides itself with its sense of inclusion which has been described in a similar way to the inclusivist policies of various social movements.⁹⁶¹ The gender imbalance of rock and rap is less evident in folk, but the claims to inclusivity should be tempered with the fact that the majority of Australian folk singer/songwriters appear to be Anglo-Celtic, despite the interest of folk musicians in ‘world music’ and ethnic instruments.

A brief examination of folk music websites reveals hundreds of folk musicians currently performing in Australia, and there seems to be an emphasis on experimenting with ‘world’ music rather than singing about social issues closer to home. There are a few performers who sing traditional Australian ballads, and some who write about blue collar or rural workers, such as ‘Midland Railway Workshops’ by Bernard Carney:⁹⁶²

For over ninety years these sheds
Have raised the workers’ hopes
And for thousands of apprentice lads
It’s where they learned the ropes
And through the generations
The skills were handed down
At the Midland Railway Workshops
At the east end of town

This song has a poetic quality in its rhythm and can be read as a ballad without requiring the music. It’s unlikely that the musical element of this song is essential for providing impact as it is the narrative of the song that is more important. This particular song can be read as an example of working-class poetry due to the content and the working-class vernacular used to tell the story. Another contemporary songwriter who engages with the experiences of ‘ordinary’ people is Paul Kelly who although not necessarily from a working-class background, shows empathy for working-class life. Kelly’s musical style varies from pop to rock, blues and even country but many of his songs are folk. Kelly sings about poverty, work, unemployment, domestic violence,

⁹⁶¹ Brett, Smith 5 -7.

⁹⁶² Bernard Carney, ‘Midland Railway Workshops,’ *Go West* (BJCD04, 2004).

prison, alcohol, rural working-class culture and has even been described as a modern version of the lyrical bard.⁹⁶³ In 'Tighten Up',⁹⁶⁴ Kelly describes the type of family dysfunction that is the result of poverty:

Mama don't like your holey shoes
Scrapping in the back yard – 4 be 2
Daddy's smokin' motor didn't make it up the hill
Mama can't pay, she got one day
She got no money for the telephone bill
Tighten up, tighten up
Everything falls apart.

The images of working-class life are clear and authentically portrayed. The song works as a poem without the music as the lyric evokes the desperate situation and the emotional qualities of the poem are provided in a characteristically poetic economical use of words. Kelly has published collections of his song lyrics and it is probably reasonably safe to suggest that he considers his lyrics to be poems. Kelly has been compared with the British songwriter Billy Bragg who has made a career from singing about working-class experience and is active in working-class politics. Kelly may not have the working-class credentials of Billy Bragg, but he does treat working-class culture sympathetically. He has also worked with Aboriginal musicians such as Archie Roach and Yothu Yindi and appears to understand the experiences of the marginalized.

Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter are Aboriginal musicians who sing within the folk genre and relate stories of their experiences as stolen children. There is a cross-over within Aboriginal music between folk and country music and artists like Roach and Hunter may also be considered as country musicians but the strong sense of injustice in their songs arguably places them within the folk ideology. Roach's song 'Took the Children Away'⁹⁶⁵ paints a powerful picture of his experiences as a stolen child and the consequences of being raised in an institution:

Took the children away
The children away
Snatched from their mother's breast
Said it was for the best
Took them away.

⁹⁶³ Robert Adamson, 'Forward,' Paul Kelly, *Lyrics* (NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1993) iii.

⁹⁶⁴ Paul Kelly, 'Tighten Up,' *Paul Kelly and the Coloured Girls* (Mushroom Records, 1987).

⁹⁶⁵ Archie Roach, 'Took the Children Away,' *Charcoal Lane* (Festival Mushroom Records, 1990).

These are highly emotive images and Roach channels anger and sadness into the song to illustrate the terrible significance of such policies. This song has simple, direct language and the repetition emphasizes the continuing pain caused by removing the children. The songs of Roach use personal experience to highlight injustice in a manner that is both accessible and easily understood in much the same way as the work of Aboriginal poets. In 'Down City Streets'⁹⁶⁶ Roach's partner Ruby Hunter writes about Roach's experiences. This song works very well as a poem on the page and is included in a collection of Roach's lyrics and poems *You Have the Power*.⁹⁶⁷ The song captures the life of a homeless alcoholic:

Down city streets I roam
I had no bed, I had no home
Crawled out of bushes early morn
Used newspapers to keep me warm
Then I'd have to score a drink
Start me up, help me to think
Down city streets I would roam
Used my fingers as a comb.

It is a depressing but accurate image, made more poignant by the attempts of the narrator to take care of his appearance despite his desperate situation. The song does offer a sense of hope as the listener discovers that this man found a better life and now has a partner and family. His previous life has not been forgotten though, and he now is saddened by the continuing sight of homeless youth and understands their plight and marginalization from society: 'I look around and understand/ How street kids feel when they're put down'. Kev Carmody is another Aboriginal folk musician who has also worked with Paul Kelly. Carmody's songs focus on life for Aboriginal people and others who are disadvantaged, and serve as a critique of inequality. He writes songs about workers, addicts, rural youth, the unemployed as well as more overtly political material covering land rights and Aboriginal activism. In 'Living South of the Freeway'⁹⁶⁸ he outlines life for some of the young residents of working-class Logan in Queensland:

⁹⁶⁶ Ruby Hunter, 'Down City Streets,' Roach, *Charcoal Lane*.

⁹⁶⁷ Archie Roach, *You Have the Power* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994).

⁹⁶⁸ Kevin Carmody, 'Living South of the Freeway,' *Bloodlines* (1993).

Logan city ain't it pretty?
Logan city what a pity
That we're livin' south of the freeway

Rich up north....poor down south
Rich live up there in their expensive house
Livin' south of the freeway

Rip off a car....save you a walk
Can't afford to buy, like the rich up north
You counted out down here before you've fought
Hey!!!

Sux-gas, flash, backflash, bash, crash, smash
Trash!

Just enough money, to go get pissed
Thieve off the rich here, just to exist

Got no phone, got no home
Rack my clothes from the Hyperdome

Cloned, postponed, disowned, methodoned, stoned
Logan city....loaded with stops
Down on the southside, we cop the lot

Divisions between rich and poor, the despondency of youth and the consequences of that despondency are all at play here. There are parallels with the poetry of Searles and Bliss in this song, as Carmody offers a depressing view of life for young people in this area. There is no direct reference to the youth in the song as specifically Aboriginal which points to the cross-over of experience for disadvantaged people from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds. Folk music continues to be socially conscious music and the songs of artists such as Carmody demonstrate how folk music represents the lives of working-class people.

Worker and Union Songs

In her song 'No Thanks, No Recognition', ⁹⁶⁹ Rita Menendez speaks on behalf of female workers:

Which chord will tell the truth,
Of thousands of silenced women
Whose prayers became this song?

⁹⁶⁹ Rita Menendez, (1985) 'No Thanks, No Recognition,' *Strike a Light: Contemporary Songs of Australian Working Life*, ed., Gillian Harrison (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1988) 43

Whose prayer became this song

Although traditional forms of working-class musical expression may be in decline, there are still songs about working life being written and distributed through labour and workers' organisations. Musicologist Thérèse Radic states that the Australian labour movement has a tradition of musical expression with bands and songs a feature of union protests and meetings. These forms survive and workers continue to write songs about their experiences and unions continue to run competitions for workers' songs. Radic suggests that workers' songs have enjoyed a revival since the 1950s through the efforts of migrant workers who brought their own musical traditional to add richness to the genre.⁹⁷⁰ There is a website (<http://www.unionsong.com/muse/unionsong/>) devoted to workers' songs which includes historical examples and contemporary songs such as those written during the 1998 Maritime Union of Australia industrial action. Unions are still involved in promoting workers' songs through competitions: the Labour Council of New South Wales ran a May Day song writing contest in 2002, and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union has asked members to vote for their favourite union songs to be included in a 'top ten' list. Workers' songs deal with a variety of issues and themes such as the effects of hard physical work, difficult work conditions, surviving on low wages, comradeship, belonging to the union, family, and so on.⁹⁷¹ There are songs about industrial blue collar workers, rural workers, migrant workers and songs that reflect the changing nature of the working class:

As a worker in the workshop
As a slave on the assembly line.
Two jobs to make one living.
No magic way to find the time
For the work that waits at home,
For the rest I never get.⁹⁷²

This song portrays the life of a female assembly worker who works long hours to support her family, and who is faced with domestic labour once home – family life and personal health are compromised as the worker spends the majority of her time in the factory. This is a scenario often explored by working-class poets, and there are obvious links between union songs and the genre of working-class poetry. Songs such as this

⁹⁷⁰ Thérèse Radic, 'Introduction,' Harrison 8-9.

⁹⁷¹ Thérèse Radic, *Songs of Australian Working Life* (Vic: Greenhouse Publications, 1989) xi.

⁹⁷² Menendez 43.

one share many characteristics with working-class poetry although the songs are generally more explicitly political, referring to specific events such as strikes or industry closures. In 'Steel City Blues' S. Edmonds sings about life for a steelworker and the threat of redundancy that looms over many workers' heads:

A steel and iron giant
Casts a shadow on the town.
When the giant catches cold
It drags the people down....

A downturn in production
7,000 lose their jobs.
There's nothing else to turn to
Unemployment's what you cop.⁹⁷³

The songs offer a direct expression of working-class experience that provides the kinds of representation that is absent in much of popular music. But despite this potential for representation, worker songs generally do not cross over into the mainstream and enter the public sphere in the same way as popular music. It is unlikely that young working-class people regularly listen to worker or union songs, as these songs are rarely distributed outside of their union or workplace setting and are probably written by workers with some interest and knowledge of the history and traditions of such songs.

Country Music

Australia has a large country music scene, and country music is a popular musical genre in rural and outback areas for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. There are several organisations that support and promote country artists and many country music festivals occur around the nation with the annual Tamworth Country Music festival the largest and most prestigious. The awarding of major country music prizes usually attracts mainstream media attention and some artists such as Kasey Chambers and Keith Urban are well-known by the general public outside of the country music circuit.⁹⁷⁴

⁹⁷³ S. Edmonds, (1985) 'Steel City Blues,' Harrison 10.

⁹⁷⁴ It has been suggested that Kasey Chambers has been instrumental in forging a path for country music artists into the mainstream music charts, most noticeably with the success of her 2001 hit single, 'Not Pretty Enough', Carriage, Leigh & P. Hayward. 'Heartlands: Kasey Chambers, Australian Country Music and Americana,' *Outback and Urban: Australian Country Music*, ed. Philip Hayward (Gympie: Australian Institute of Country Music, 2003) 113.

As acknowledged by Connell and Gibson, country music has a tradition of telling the stories of ‘ordinary folk’, especially those who have struggled and survived hardships and evokes images of the working class and engages with issues such as ‘blue collar work and class divisions’⁹⁷⁵, although Brett and Smith claim that country artists in general prefer to use terms such as ‘everyday people’ rather than refer directly to class divisions. In general, country artists prefer to highlight social difference through the ‘strong narrative tradition’ of the music in order to ‘explore social difference through the concrete depiction of individual dramas rather than in terms of the celebration or critique of abstract social categories such as class, gender and race.’⁹⁷⁶

Brett and Smith explain that the country music style was adopted by Australians at the beginning of the twentieth century and established as a musical genre in the 1930s⁹⁷⁷ as a way of expressing a sense of space and exploring the love and hate relationship non-Aboriginal people had with the land. It was built around stories of the rural Australia that was becoming the epitome of Australian identity.⁹⁷⁸ Key elements of the style included ‘narrative lyrics, rural and working class imagery and references, distinctive tense vocal style, yodelling and instrumentation from stringed instruments’.⁹⁷⁹ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson connect the evolution of Australian country music to the ‘working-class “cowboy” music from America’⁹⁸⁰ and colonial bush ballads. And Brett and Smith suggest that Australian country musicians acknowledge that their style descends from vernacular poetry and song of the nineteenth century. Country music artists often regard themselves as the ‘authentic representation of Australian experience and national identity’.⁹⁸¹ Fans of country music expect their favourite artists to maintain this authenticity and to be accessible and sincere. There is a sense that the artists and fans ‘believe that there is a real, authentic product that is truly country music’ and any attempts to create something insincere would be dismissed as just not country.⁹⁸² Brett and Smith argue that it is this quest for authenticity that keeps country from being as commercially successful as other forms of popular music, alongside the perception that people have of country as being an unsophisticated

⁹⁷⁵ Connell, Gibson 80.

⁹⁷⁶ Brett, Smith 12 & 15.

⁹⁷⁷ Brett, Smith 12.

⁹⁷⁸ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 96.

⁹⁷⁹ Brett, Smith 12.

⁹⁸⁰ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 96.

⁹⁸¹ Brett, Smith 12 & 11.

⁹⁸² James E Akenson, ‘Afterword: Australia, the United States and Authenticity,’ Hayward 189.

‘backward’ form of music.⁹⁸³ Despite this insistence that country music is ‘authentic’, Hayward asserts that country music is inextricably linked to the music industry and the importance of the commercial viability of artists.⁹⁸⁴

Storytelling is an important aspect of country music, and many artists attempt to relate tales of the places and people they encounter along their travels. They build a picture of the ‘everyday’⁹⁸⁵ in an unromantic and arguably authentic manner reminiscent of working-class poetry, and artists such as Colin Buchanan make notes while on the road and turn these sketches into songs as can be seen in ‘The Local District Show’⁹⁸⁶ which illustrates a country fair:

Once a year from all around
They all converge on the showground
Some just look
Some compete
For some it’s just a chance to meet
The kids’ll walk you off your feet
But everyone’ll go
To the local district show

In Greg Champion’s ‘Waukaringa’⁹⁸⁷ rural labourers are given a voice:

it's been a hard hot summer boys
it was tough and it was tiring
there were times when it was too hot to go on
but we stuck it out, and now the job is done
well we make a likely lot
there's the rouser and the ringer
and Ugly Mick's the gun, or so he says
but bulldust is the thing that Mick does best

well the work's all finished here
and we must not linger too long
there's jobs at Waukaringa, so they tell
and the chance that I might meet a local girl.

These are working-class characters – people that rural working-class audiences can relate to. Champion’s song works as a contemporary bush ballad and the cross-over element of country music and bush balladry is clear. As well as the more everyday

⁹⁸³ Brett, Smith 13.

⁹⁸⁴ Hayward viii.

⁹⁸⁵ Mark Evans, ‘Bringing Country to the City: The Mission of Colin Buchanan,’ Hayward 104.

⁹⁸⁶ Colin Buchanan, ‘The Local District Show,’ *Hard Times* (Wanaaring Road Music, 1992).

⁹⁸⁷ Greg Champion, ‘Waukaringa,’ *North and South* (ABC Music, 2004).

aspects of rural life, many country music artists relate stories of historical and mythical figures from the bush and some songs display nostalgia for the golden years of pastoral Australia. As Dunbar-Hall and Gibson suggest in their study of Aboriginal music ‘when bush ballads become country music, the result was an Australian idiom that “rode on the sheep’s back” and posited the bush as the wellspring of all that was “authentically” Australian’.⁹⁸⁸ But there are also songs that deal with the reality of drought⁹⁸⁹ although such tales of hardship are often tempered with a sense of overcoming adversity that epitomises the stereotypical farmer figure.

Robin Ryan suggests that country music is popular among Aboriginal musicians and listeners due to the traditional link that country music has with the land, and the emphasis on the story-telling nature of the songs, and country music provides a medium for exploring Aboriginal life and responding to the effects of white settlement on Aboriginal land.⁹⁹⁰ According to music writer Clinton Walker, Aboriginal country music set the precedent for all other forms of modern Aboriginal cultural and artistic expression such as poetry and other literatures. Walker claims that the success of Aboriginal country music is based on the story-telling elements that appeal to both black and white listeners due to their universal themes and the sense of loss that is characteristic of country music is highly appropriate for the kinds of heartbreaking stories that many Aboriginal people have to tell. Aboriginal country music has become a successful ‘cultural clash’ melding traditional oral, story-telling and musical forms with modern Aboriginal culture and from a practical perspective, country music is a relatively easy music to learn to play and can be played on a guitar which is inexpensive and highly portable.⁹⁹¹ However, it has been noted that the country music infrastructure in Australia is still based within the colonial notions of the bush and nation, and does little to acknowledge Indigenous culture and the connections between a rural national identity and the forced displacement of Aboriginal people from the colonised land. This is highlighted by the scheduling of the Tamworth Country Music Festival over the Australia Day holiday, which does not consider the implications of this celebration for Aboriginal people many of whom view Australia Day as a reminder of the devastating effects of European invasion.

⁹⁸⁸ Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 96.

⁹⁸⁹ Evans 108.

⁹⁹⁰ Robin Ryan, ‘Gumleaves or Paper Roses? Indigenous and Introduced Traits in the Koori/Goori Country Music Music Tradition,’ Hayward 55 & 57.

⁹⁹¹ Walker 13-15.

Although non-Aboriginal country music is often influenced by an Anglo-Celtic, masculine, mythical colonial bush ideal, it has been suggested that Aboriginal listeners may find alternate meanings and relevance within these songs especially in terms of their references to ‘country’ which refers to ancestral land in Aboriginal culture. The reinterpretation of lyrics to create local meaning is also apparent in the popularity of American country prison songs among Aboriginal audiences which is most likely due to the high percentage of Aboriginal inmates in prison populations and the devastating effects that Aboriginal deaths in custody have on communities. Such songs are relevant to Aboriginal listeners and have been performed and recorded by Aboriginal artists, some of whom, such as Vic Simms, have experienced prison life first hand.⁹⁹² Country music has often explored themes of jail and imprisonment and it is clear that prison life is a recurring theme in Aboriginal writing.⁹⁹³ There is often explicit political content in Aboriginal country music and songs such as Bob Randall’s ‘My Brown Skin Baby’⁹⁹⁴ tells the story of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families:

My brown skin baby they take him away.
To a children’s home a baby came
With new clothes on and a new name.
Day and night he would always say
Mummy, Mummy, why they take me away?

As a contrast to the traditional country music style is country rock, which offers a harder, less sentimental version of country themes and which became popular in the 1980s. This type of country has been described as ‘outlaw country’ and its songs explore contemporary themes such as drug and alcohol addiction, urban as well as rural lives, thus opening up a wider audience base and attracting younger listeners.⁹⁹⁵ Some country rock bands such as the Warumpi Band (an Aboriginal band) from the 1980s were able to break into the Sydney inner city ‘indy rock’ scene with their fusion of country and rock sounds and politically charged lyrics. The Warumpi Band was therefore able to provide predominately non-Aboriginal audiences with an insight into the kinds of issues that affected young Aboriginal people. Like folk, country music has its exclusions though, and despite the number of Aboriginal and female country music artists there are few artists who come from ethnic minority backgrounds. According to

⁹⁹² Dunbar-Hall, Gibson 109-110.

⁹⁹³ Walker 120.

⁹⁹⁴ Bob Randall, ‘My Brown Skin Baby They Take Him Away,’ *Nobody’s People: Stolen Generation* (Kimberly Stolen Generation, 2004).

⁹⁹⁵ Phillip McIntyre, ‘Never Mind the Bullocks, It’s the Tex Pistols: Country Punk, the Tamworth Festival and the Australian Music Scene in the 1980s/1990s,’ Hayward 146.

Aline Scott-Maxwell, this Anglo-Celtic dominance of country music does not take into account the many ethnic migrants who have worked on the land since post-war migration began. There are, however, non-Anglo-Celtic country music artists such as Italian-born Peter Ciani who sing about migrant experience both in an urban and rural setting.⁹⁹⁶

If working-class poetry is characterised by its working-class content and use of a direct, working-class vernacular, then the lyrics of many songs can be considered to be examples of poetry. Due to the popularity of rock, pop and rap music there is scope for extensive representation of working-class experience to reach a wide general audience; however, it seems that artists who are interested in exploring working-class life explicitly within their lyrics are in the minority.

Despite the worthy examples that do exist and which have been presented in this chapter, the absence of working-class content in popular music (with the notable exception of rap) reflects the general absence of working-class representation in cultural production. Although Australia maintains a sense of the outback working-class ideal in the images it presents and maintains a celebration of working-class culture in the cult of sport, contemporary working-class life is rarely portrayed accurately or authentically, and the songs, films, books and other forms of cultural production or artistic endeavours that do deal with working-class life remain outside of the mainstream and less likely to be distributed back into working-class communities.

Questions therefore arise about the ways in which working-class life and experiences are expressed by working-class people, and it may be necessary to consider other forms of expression to understand how working-class creative energies are channelled. From an examination of various forms of cultural expression and artistic activity it seems that working-class people are not well represented within the Australian art mainstream, and that works of theatre, visual art, film, television and literature tend to exclude working-class experience. When working-class characters do appear they are often represented as stereotypes, such as the good-hearted simpletons of *The Castle*, or ignorant social climbers such as Kim in *Kath and Kim*. Authentic and sympathetic representations of working-class Australians do exist in films such as *Mullet* and more recently *West*, but these films tend to remain separate from the mainstream due to their independent production and limited release.

⁹⁹⁶ Aline Scott-Maxwell, 'This Beautiful Country: Country in Peter Ciani's Music,' Hayward 171 & 181.

There seems to be more scope for working-class representation within popular music and this may be because the production of popular music is not dependant on the kinds of cultural capital that inform other artistic endeavours. It can probably be assumed that the majority of filmmakers, playwrights, visual artists and novelists are in possession of formal educational qualifications and training relevant to their fields and it is therefore much more difficult for people who have not gained such qualifications to participate in these forms of cultural production. Working-class people in general are not as well educated as their middle-class peers and are less likely to have access to the cultural and material capital required to produce art. Attitudes also form a barrier for working-class people who may feel that a particular art form is not intended for their consumption and therefore do not become involved in artistic activity.

These barriers are less likely to exist in relation to popular music which is often defined as operating as an opposite to 'serious' or 'high' art such as classical music. Most working-class youth can find expression in the popular music they listen to or create. Sometimes these forms of expression allow the performer to critique their class position in a powerful and direct manner. Young working-class people may be engaged in graffiti art, the writing of rap rhymes or may be channelling their artistic tendencies into other cultural pursuits such as sport, dance (cheerleading) and fashion. My interest here is how working-class people are represented (if at all) in cultural production. The representation of minority or identity groups has merited wide discussion but not that of the working class, especially not within an Australian context. There is therefore wide potential for these areas of study and hopefully Australian working-class cultural production and the ways in which working-class people are presented will attract more attention from scholars in the future.

Conclusion

Marx claimed that the proletariat had ‘nothing to lose but their chains’.⁹⁹⁷ In making this statement he was most likely envisioning acts of revolution, but I would suggest that it is also possible to apply his words to contemporary working-class people in relation to their potential for empowerment through creative expression; as Goodfellow calls ‘let the carpet layer have a poem, let the painter have a poem’. The conclusions drawn in this thesis therefore suggest that there is potential for the carpet layer and painter to have their poems – for their lives to be represented in poetry and for the work that includes their experiences to be acknowledged and accepted as a significant genre within Australian literature.

This thesis began with a series of questions relating to the Australian class system and to the existence of the working class. The outline of class structure I provided in chapter one showed how class creates inequality and impacts on the lives of people on a daily basis allowing me to argue against the death of class thesis and providing a current definition of working class. Through the presentation of evidence that validates the continued existence of the working class, I have been able to challenge the false rhetoric of Australian egalitarianism.

As I stated in chapter two, there is a strong link between literature and class which manifests in the opportunities for working-class people to produce and publish their work. Despite the perception of working-class poetry as inferior and non-literary, I also have demonstrated that contemporary Australian working-class poetry does have literary qualities; the poetry is well crafted and rich in language and description, arguing that the difference between this poetry and that of non-working class poetry is that the language employed is of the working class, and the images and descriptions are intended to be understood primarily by working-class readers and therefore the poems remain lucid and accessible to a readership which may not be in possession of cultural or literary capital. I have also shown that although the language may be direct, the

⁹⁹⁷ Marx, *Manifesto*.

poems are not simplistic in their structure or content, and many of the poems studied contain complex examinations of human emotion and reveal what Cobb and Sennett refer to as the hidden injuries of class.⁹⁹⁸ Hidden maybe from middle or upper-class people perhaps, but painfully clear to working-class people. As has been observed by scholars such as Zandy and Christopher, and discussed in this study, the poems possess shared characteristics and it is the presence of these common themes and working-class language, and the intentions of the authors to speak directly too of these qualities, that has led me to propose that working-class poetry constitutes its own genre.

The attitudes and opinions of editors and poets highlighted in chapter three track the obstacles faced by working-class poets wishing to gain publication and recognition within the literary mainstream. But I have also asserted that resistance to the idea of working-class poetry from academics and literary figures has been on going and futile. This resistance has been shown to influence the reception (or lack thereof) of working-class poetry in the wider literary and academic world but not in the pubs and other venues where working-class poetry is warmly received.

The commonalities I have suggested may not have led to a formulaic approach by writers though – working-class poetry remains, after all, as diverse as the experiences of its authors – so examples presented in this thesis set out to show that the genre of working-class poetry contains a diverse body of work. Geoff Goodfellow's exploited workers, Martin Johnson's woodcutters, the grotesque characters of Mick Searles, the resilient women in Cathy Young's collection, the dysfunctional youth of M.M.L Bliss' *Ravo*, as well as the meat workers, factory workers, single mothers, shift workers, prostitutes, the unemployed, shop assistants, call centre employees and labourers who feature in other working-class poems – I have shown that these varied voices deserve to be heard and studied and that working-class experiences can be projected into the public consciousness through a wider range of avenues than those currently available to writers and scholars such as myself.

And the poems I have introduced represent a small sample of the dozens of contemporary working-class poems that have been published by writers not included in this thesis such as John West, Allen Martin, Kerry Scuffins, Dennis McDermott, Justine Williams, Jack Davis and many others. My thesis also does not include the hundreds of poems written by working-class people on a daily basis and never published. In the process of choosing the works on which to focus, I have asked myself whether there is a

⁹⁹⁸ Cobb, Sennett 118.

contradiction in claiming that working-class poetry is marginalised while acknowledging the numerous examples of working-class poems published. Apart from the occasional success in gaining publication for an individual poem in an established journal, the majority of published working-class poems have appeared on the fringes; in lesser-known journals and magazines, in self-published collections and non-mainstream anthologies with the exception of Young and Bliss' publication through the Cornford Press (which is still a small, independent publisher). And as I have argued, the marginalisation of working-class poetry is perpetuated by the gatekeepers mentioned throughout this thesis, who refuse to consider the potential contained within working-class poetry.

The approach I have taken aligns me with the discipline of working-class studies and as stated in the introduction, one of the central tenets of the Working-Class Studies Association is to ensure that working-class people are the focus of working-class studies and that research and other activities lead to actual improvements in the lives of working-class people. One of the intentions of this thesis has been to show how poetry has a role to play in working-class life. Poetry at its best has the ability to reflect and question life, and offers a way to understand those who are marginalised. Poetry can highlight the inequalities and oppression experienced by working-class people and can empower those who have had little opportunity to have their stories told. Poetry workshops for the disadvantaged can be especially useful in channelling negative experiences and even aggression into poetry, for example, Geoff Goodfellow has had a great deal of success in harnessing the creative talents of disadvantaged young people in the workshops he has led in juvenile detention centres.

Poetry can be a celebration of identity and culture and can bring together members of a community through shared experiences. It can provide a window into those experiences for those on the outside. Poetry can also provide enjoyment and has value as a leisure pursuit with potential for entertainment through performances and shared reading. And as discussed in chapter three, working-class people do read for pleasure. But this activity will be harder to achieve if working-class poetry is not published or distributed into working class communities. As a working-class academic I have a responsibility to bring working-class poetry into focus and to establish a place for the genre within the literary mainstream as well as facilitate ways to take poetry to working-class people. I hope that my work will lead to the inclusion of working-class poetry on literary festival programs, in poetry magazines and anthologies. Increased

acceptance of working-class poetry would create opportunities for the work to be reviewed and featured within literary journals. I have shown that for this change to occur a different approach to working-class poetry is required, one which recognises the social function of poetry and considers the work in the context of its classed production and acknowledges the background and intentions of the author.

Through my analysis of working-class popular music I have also demonstrated that song lyrics offer an alternative to published poetry and provide a medium for young working-class people to express themselves creatively. The lyrics of rap music in particular offer a rich vein of working-class expression that warrants a more detailed examination that was beyond the scope of this thesis. And a study such as this inevitably contains omissions; there are other forms of working-class expression that I did not have space to examine, such as working-class fiction, theatre, autobiography, film, television and visual art. The representations of working-class people in Australian culture are rarely examined by scholars and there is little attention paid to artists who portray working-class people in their work. The study of representations is important as it reveals the stereotyping and pathologising of working-class people, and challenges such portrayals through the examination of more authentic and empathetic, and ultimately empowering representations. By rejecting works such as *The Castle* and *Kath and Kim*, and replacing them with alternatives such as *West* or the writing of Neil Boyack there is potential for a more truthful depiction of working-class life.

I only briefly considered the intersection of race and class in my discussion of Aboriginal poetry, and there were many questions left unanswered. Why do Anglo-Celtic voices dominate published working-class poetry in Australia? Where can one find the experiences of non-English speaking background working-class poets who write in languages other than English? It is possible that journals such as *Otherland*, which publishes Chinese-Australian poetry, may be providing sites for alternative voices? These questions certainly merit further investigation.

I did not examine the poetry of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender (GLBT) working-class poets either. This is mainly because during my research I have not encountered Australian working-class poems that overtly include queer experience. It is therefore appropriate to consider whether the homophobia often attributed to working-class communities suppresses the potential for GLBT working-class literary expression. In the US there are recent studies which explore the literature of gay working-class men, such as *Everything I Have Is Blue: Short Fiction by Working-Class Men About More-or-*

Less Gay Life (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2005) edited by Wendell Ricketts, but as far as I am aware there are no equivalent Australian studies.

There has not been the space to conduct a comparative study of Australian and US or UK working-class poetry. This would be an interesting and useful study to explore the similarities and differences between the poetry of different nations. Although the experiences of working-class people tend to be universally understood, there are subtle differences in language, tone and general approach which could be compared. The differences in the reception and distribution of working-class poetry would be valuable to research in order to look for ways to improve upon the systems of dissemination within Australia.

In the US and UK since the mid-1990s there has been a renewed interest in the study of working-class literature and a growing awareness of working-class poetry as a genre in its own right, with increased acceptance of working-class poetry within the literary mainstream. The literature referred to in this thesis has shown that working-class academics have been promoting the field of working-class studies. Their studies of working-class culture are putting class back onto the agenda within the disciplines of literary criticism, cultural studies, social inquiry and creative writing. These issues of class are being considered alongside other forms of identity. The approach taken by working-class scholars, and in this thesis, requires a certain level of advocacy in order to push for the recognition of working-class literature. This approach is similar to the study of other previously undervalued bodies of work such as women's, migrant and Aboriginal literature. As has been observed in this thesis, discussions of class in relation to cultural production have the potential to highlight the inequalities within society and to get people interested in working-class life and the ways in which the everyday experiences of working-class people can be improved. The purpose of this study has been to show that working-class people are capable of creating literature, and that this literature has a social function. I have argued that art and social function are coterminous and the poetry presented here has served as proof of the relationship. The resistance to poetry that falls outside the bourgeois model of 'quality' from established poets, critics, editors and publishers has been revealed, and I have sought to demonstrate that contrary to the opinions of Australia's literary gatekeepers, working-class poetry warrants a place in the Australian literary mainstream. Hopefully the work I have started here will be followed by further scholarly activity into Australian working-class cultural expression.

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