

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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Signature removed prior to publication.

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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Sections of this thesis have been published/ presented in slightly different versions as the following articles and conference papers:

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

‘Not Enough Class? Working-Class Poetry in Australia’ *Blue Dog: Australian Poetry* 2.3 (2003): 60-64

‘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

‘Is there a Place for Working-Class Poetry Within the Australian Canon?’ *New Reckonings: Australian Literature Past, Present and Future*, University of Sydney, February 2007

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

‘Working-Class Studies’ *Culture Fix: Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference*, University of Technology, Sydney, November 2005

‘The Representation of Working-Class People in Contemporary Australian Poetry’ *New Working Class Studies: Past, Present and Future, Seventh Biennial Conference of the Centre for Working Class Studies*, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio, USA, May 2005

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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.