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Blue Collar, Red Dress
A novel and critical commentary

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Blue Collar, Red Dress. Critical Commentary

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Introduction

In the critical commentary component of my thesis I explore representations of class, and, more particularly, representations of working-class women in Australian literature. My novel, *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, which accompanies this commentary, is an attempt at a literary representation of Anglo¹ working-class women's lives, thus adding to a small but significant body of writing which has broadened, and made more representative, an Australian literary tradition.

Zelda D'Aprano points to both self and distanced representations in accounting for the paucity of women's lives within a canon of Australian working-class literature.

Working-class women very rarely write books because of our inability to write at the level required by male established literary standards. Nor are many books written about the lives of working-class women because our lives are considered to be too humdrum. (D'Aprano: 1977: x)

This comment highlights two essential components in my study of representations of working-class women in Australian literature:

- Working-class women seldom represent themselves due to a class-based unfamiliarity or lack of access to the literary language of representation.
- Australian working-class literature relies heavily on heroic archetypes as modes of representation.

Being literate, that is having the capacity to read and write, is a world away

¹ For the purposes of this thesis I am using the term Anglo to include both Anglo-saxon and Anglo-celtic background.

from creating literature, or that which is interpreted as writing of a literary nature. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the term literary, amongst other things, as “polite learning” and “uncolloquial”, meanings which at the outset would exclude many working-class ways of knowing and expressing, in a written form, this knowledge.

Strength, physical labour, toughness, masculinity. These are some of the icons and archetypes which have defined the working class in Australian popular culture and literature.

Working hard to make a living, seeking shelter from the rain,
A father's son left to carry on, blue denim in his veins.
He's a working-class man. (Barnes: 1985. recording.)

Australian working-class men are visible through their labour, usually of a physical nature. In any analysis of working-class literature it must be remembered that the “working” in working class contains a wealth of signifiers and historical interpretation which can serve to exclude many women. Whilst work certainly involves a process of self-definition, it is not the only process. Women's work, especially in the domestic sphere, is ignored in economic terms and treated as an adjunct to the “real” work, that of paid labour. That which we could loosely define as a canon of working-class literature, including literature from the Realist Writers' movement (Syson : 1993) is a small but significant part of Australian literature and provides an historical and social record of *some* working-class lives. I say some because when we turn our attention to working-class women's lives the gap widens considerably. My research suggests that due to a lack of working-class women writers with the lived experience to draw upon, the majority of Australian literature representing women's lives has taken on a particular middle-class focus, which alienates many students and readers and does not include *their*

experience of being Australian within an Australian literary tradition.

Syson says that working-class literature is “a name we can give to a literary/social/critical practice that is informed by a consciousness of the social and historical importance of class antagonisms.” (Syson : 1993 : 87.) To translate or interpret class antagonisms from a domestic sphere is an awesome task for any writer. A sense of injustice is clearly visible if we locate literary texts within an industrial setting where we have bosses and workers, power politics and industrial disputes to emphasise class divisions. In Australia, the 1930s depression and post World War II are additional settings in which class consciousness is highlighted due to endemic levels of dispossession and clear delineations between those who have money and those who do not. However, outside such discourses the nuances of dispossession are more subtle, fragmented and less visible. Industrial conflict unites groups of individuals who have common goals. Class consciousness is formed by the realisation that collective action is required to achieve these common goals. Working-class literature in Australia, including women’s working-class literature, has generally stayed within the boundaries of industrial conflict, the 1930s depression, and post-war settings, in order to represent class consciousness and attempt to bring it within a mainstream literary perspective. One result of such restricted settings, however, is to suggest that class consciousness and indeed working-class consciousness, is the exception or an oddity pertaining to particular sites of reference. The fact that a body of literature is categorised as working-class marginalises it in a similar way to Aboriginal and migrant literature; it becomes “the other” in any analysis of Australian literary traditions. Aboriginal and migrant literature is often working-class literature also, but by classifying it as Aboriginal or migrant we can point to sources of dispossession other than class and therefore imply that the way in which Australian society is ordered is not a major feature of cultural difference and

dispossession.

Carolyn Steedman, a British author, in *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, places the working-class biographies of her life and her mother's within a political context in order that their stories become part of the landscape of history itself rather than marginalised or the exception. Steedman sees that children learn about social class through trying to place themselves within a landscape in which they are living, as well as a fantasy world with which they are less familiar (e.g. fairy tales). They know they want to escape but they are not sure what from or why.

But as forms of analysis and writing, people's history and working-class autobiography are relatively innocent of psychological theory, and there has been little space within them to discuss the development of class consciousness (as opposed to its expression), nor for understanding it as a learned position, learned in childhood, and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives. (Steedman : 1986: 13.)

Steedman stresses the importance of women's aspirations, often deemed trivial, in their wish to escape the unfairness of their lot. The symbols of dress, food and material possessions, however small, are real and indicate a realistic understanding of dispossession. Because they are in the realms of the domestic, and hidden from historical accounts, they are often ignored but they represent aspirations through a different medium than the overtly political. They are often the only means women have of expressing the political.

Is it this notion of domestic as trivia which prevents Australian women writers from using working-class lives in domestic realms as a means of representation? Have they been taken in by the egalitarian myth? Or, as D'Aprano suggests, are there indeed few women writing who have these lived experiences of dispossession to draw upon?

Women writers published up to the late 1960s, such as Dorothy Hewett, Betty Collins and Kylie Tennant all placed their working-class depictions within industrial and depression settings. Ruth Park and Dymphna Cusak set their best known works in post-war city life where chronic housing shortages and rationing made levels of dispossession highly visible. Each of these writers wrote from direct experience, living or working, by choice or chance in these settings. Although some did not have working-class family backgrounds, they did their research thoroughly and thereby created authentic representations. Such times and settings do, of course, bring issues of social structuring naturally to the fore but I would argue that class in any location or setting is crucial to modes of literary representation.

From the 1970s onwards there are very few representations of working-class Anglo women in Australian literature, including that written by women. Does this matter? Is class an issue? Have demographics changed so much that there is no longer such a thing as working class? Is Australian literature representative and inclusive, or does it lock certain people out?

In part one of this paper I explore the proposition that class is still one of the dominant forces operating in Australian society. In part two I attempt to locate the class positions of those doing the representing, and in part three I look at how women have portrayed class, using examples from the 1940s to the 1960s, and from the 1970s to the 1990s. In part four I locate my novel in the sphere of adding to working-class representations of Anglo women, and in my conclusion I present an overview of my findings and learnings as relating to both my critical commentary and novel.

Part 1: Class in Australia

Class has always been a difficult concept. At its most simple it is a shorthand way of talking about observable social difference; at its most complex it underpins a whole theory of society in which economic conflict is the key to unravelling not only social structure but politics and history as well. But even the most simple is not really all that simple. (Brett : 1997: 15.)

Indeed class is a difficult, multi-faceted and complex issue. Australia, like any other industrialised capitalist society, has a social order determined by levels of possession and power within society. These levels of power, which create 'observable social difference', possession and dispossession, are based primarily in socioeconomic factors and monitored regularly by census figures and surveys of wealth by magazines such as *The Business Review Weekly* and *The Bulletin*. As McGregor states, "There is more income inequality in Australia than in any other developed nation." (McGregor : 1997: 268). In July 1996, *The Australian* newspaper devoted a whole issue of its weekend magazine to the question "So who is working class these days?" While this feature highlighted significant historical, industrial and social changes which have tended to blur some old class boundaries for individuals and society, divisions in society were readily recognisable. Millionaire Tony Richter, who started out life in a working-class family, was asked if his ascension would be harder today. "I think that the transition through class is probably no easier than it was before and there are barriers. There is no question there are barriers. The development of my own provenance and credibility was bizarre. It required grim determination." (Neill: 1996. P.20.) Class-based divisions, trajectories and identifications are still visible and therefore relevant to any analysis of Australian society and representations of Australian society through the medium of literature.

There is solid, quantifiable data relating to social class which can tell us much about its impact on the creation of the individual. Traditionally, class stratification is measured by a set of variables including wealth, occupation, education and family membership. Of all the variables the two which cannot be chosen or changed are family membership and schooling² .

In addition to economic status, family membership brings with it a set of values and belief systems which constitute a view of the world and one's place within it. Martin suggests that, as well as economic advantage for the child from a middle-class family, there is also "a less tangible social and psychological advantage in achieving a high status occupation." (Martin : 1981: 149.) This sense of future and characteristic view of the world does much to determine behaviour as well as aspirations and goals in life. It is interesting to compare the influence of family on two writers, Barry Dickins who came from a working-class background:

I pine for unreasonableness because my Australian childhood worked on highly polished hinges of shame, guilt and eternal sorriness. (Dickins : 1991: 165.)

and Joanna Murray-Smith, who came from a middle, if not upper-class, background:

My parents, in their political beliefs, implied that I had an effect on the world I lived in, and that with that power came obligation. (Murray-Smith : 1997 : B3.)

It is therefore easy to see that our notions of power and powerlessness, and an understanding of dispossession (or Steadman's 'difficult and lonely lives') begin in our earliest sphere of knowing, that of the family.

² The element of choice in schooling, despite more contemporary demographic access, is dependent upon the income level of the parents.

In addition to the inheritance of aspirations and life expectations, we can also inherit social stigma, particularly if our family home is a Housing Commission flat:

Objective difference in the way Housing Commission tenants are treated are part of the general stigma attached to being a Housing Commission tenant...that tenancy as such is held in low esteem; [that Housing Commission tenancy marks a person as being of low income. (AGPS : 1975 : 49.)

A major theme of my novel, *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, is the effect and legacy of growing up in Housing Commission step-up flats in the 60s and 70s. It is a lived experience, translated into fiction, which I believe needs to be represented in Australian literature. As Baker states, “Well over 70% of Australians live in houses that they own or are buying...This is a much higher proportion of home ownership than just about anywhere else in the world.” (Baker : 1993 :14.) Given the importance, for Australians, of owning their own homes it is hardly surprising that Housing Commission dwellers are highly visible, and easily stigmatised, even though a minority group. Jan Pearce, in an article recalling life in highrise Housing Commission flats, describes “the mixture of shame and triumph on my face” as she reveals to a writing group that she had lived in a highrise flat and knew its smells intimately. As she also said, “What middle-class Melbourne person would have even entered the highrise, much less lived there?” (Pearce : 1995: 5.) There is indeed an enduring sense of shame in having lived in an environment so totally alien to middle-class Australia.

As surely as family membership is the greatest determinant in finding one’s ‘place’ in society, and often prevents movement from that place, education is crucial in reinforcing class boundaries. Given that schooling covers, for each individual, the most formative years of existence, its importance cannot be

underestimated. As Martin points out, “Our education system is indeed probably the strongest single force promoting the rigidity of the class structure, for, like family membership but unlike occupation or manner of living, an individual’s educational background is fixed and irrevocable.” (Martin : 1981:147.)

In promulgating the dominant values of society, schools often categorise and isolate students albeit unwittingly. Edgar argues that students are processed according to social status, “so that some are ‘locked in’, while others are ‘locked out’.” (Edgar : 1981: 226.) My novel, *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, gives a clear picture of how female working-class students in the 1960s were channelled into Commercial and Domestic streams of study, rather than Professional, according to family and school expectations. This was partly gender-based but equally class-based. Despite talk of access and equity, and a range of new policies and programs to that effect, little has changed in education over the last three decades. Class background is still a more important fact than gender (Kuhn and O’Lincoln : 1996.) with students from upper-class areas gaining far higher exit grades than students from working-class areas (McGregor : 1997.)

Each school has its own unique culture, each could be placed along a continuum of social class (according to location and reputation) with the most expensive non-government schools at the top of the social ladder. There is an overt and covert curriculum operating in all schools which serves to reinforce the ‘place’ which has been learnt through family membership with its forms of knowing. As Jones points out “Mass education, including the mass media as well as the schools, serve to inculcate allegiance to the authority of existing elites and a degree of resignation to or acceptance of existing inequalities...” (Jones : 1981 : 44.) Some very good examples of the complexities of this

hidden curriculum are given by Patricia Berwick-Emms in *Absent and Not Excused*, where she analyses the interpretations of teachers in regard to parent excuses for student absence by students from high and low socioeconomic areas. One disparity she noted was,

The first is a child who is pushed into so many extra-curricular activities that a day off has become necessary. School, that should be providing sufficient extension, has become too much. This is acceptable in the eyes of the teacher. The second child is also having a day off because of tiredness. She has had little sleep due to an unscheduled family event where emotion had to be running very high. But, it is not an acceptable reason for a day off. (Berwick-Emms: 1987: 2.)

In summary, she noted of high socioeconomic parents that, “their excuses are accepted unquestioningly because they are presented in acceptable ways.” (Berwick-Emms : 1987 : 2.) For ‘acceptable ways’ read access to the power of language. The school reinforces notions of individual worth as distinct from any social order, or as Jones argues, “it teaches its own individualistic logic: this explains learning, ‘failure’ and ‘success’ as the results of individual ability and motivation.” (Jones : 1987 : 5.) As Edgar points out, “No matter how ‘progressive’ the school or its curriculum, you won’t get progress or give the disadvantaged any sense of power unless they learn the language of the power game itself.” (Edgar : 1981: 226.) Recent research suggests that children from low socioeconomic groups may not be accessing basic literacy skills, due to a continuing emphasis on the individual:

The question must move from asking what is wrong with the individual child, to asking what is wrong with a curriculum that produces such uneven results, in identifiable social demographic patterns, from early periods of life. (Age : 1998: 2.)

Literature, especially that from one’s own country, is a crucial component in

learning about the power of language. If you do not find yourself represented, or your ways of knowing, represented in that literature, accessing the power of language as a social force is made so much more difficult.

It is like being lost, without realizing one is lost, and therefore not asking for directions. For me, this is such a class thing. (Clancy: 1997: 46.)

Schooling, rather than being a means of broadening perspectives for students, tends to act as a means of reinforcement of one's perceived place within the social sphere. It acts to compound the sense of worth, advantage or disadvantage, perceived within the family setting. Martin points to the tangible but less measurable effects of this for students attending non-government schools, "that is, the task of preparing the child to take his place among the higher-status members of society by teaching him their customs, imbuing him with their values, and providing him with friends and contacts within this section of society." (Martin : 1981 : 147.) New research on retention rates for boys, by the Australian Council for Educational Research showed that, "the rate of completion for boys from unskilled family backgrounds dropped by 18 percent this decade, compared with 2 per cent for boys from professional backgrounds." (Luff : 1997 : 12.) Unless we believe that working-class people are born with a lower intellect, this is further proof that social class significantly affects aspirations, opportunities and, ultimately, outcomes.

An emphasis on individual ability is not, however, confined to education, but is a crucial feature of the egalitarian myth which lies like an imaginative veil over Australia, serving to obscure or confuse social difference. The egalitarian myth basically says that because of an overriding or 'national' commitment to fairness and equity, anybody can make it, it is up to the individual. Although this is a notion completely at odds with the class-structured nature of our society, it is acceptable because of its ideological nature. We want to believe

that all people are equal. Indeed the egalitarian myth makes not only the working class disappear but also the ruling class:

The ruling class disappears behind a veil of ideas that seem to come from the society as a whole, and seem to represent a consensus of opinion. Acquisitiveness and competitiveness are said to be natural, and it becomes difficult for the common people even to formulate the nature of their discontent, or to arrive at terms in which to criticise their world. (Connell & Irving: 1976: 83.)

Connell later summarises the role of the mass media in relation to maintaining a conservative, hegemonic society:

It is an outcome of the normal, regular processes by which commercial mass communications work in a capitalist system, producing and reproducing an ideological interpretation of the world. (Connell: 1977: 195.)

The mass media plays a crucial role in upholding the egalitarian myth and yet simultaneously creating its own divisions by modes of representation (the aforementioned article on retention rates in the *Herald Sun* was given the headline “Dropouts get it from home”) and an interpretation of what is important and newsworthy. These interpretations have not changed in twenty years, as the following extracts indicate:

As an example from the field of mass communication, compare the bouquets passed out by the (privately owned) newspapers when a company makes a record profit with the screams when a union wins a record wage claim. (Connell and Irving: 1976: 84.)

It has been conservatively estimated that medical fraud constitutes about 7% of total Health expenditure (\$500 million lost in 1992)...Whereas the Federal government spent around \$28 billion on social security payments in 1991-92, less than half of one percent, or less than \$130 million was defined on new

overpayments, and the majority of those were the result of administrative error or genuine mistake rather than fraud. *Yet it is the frauding of the social security system, rather than medical fraud, which garners the most vigorous state reaction and public media condemnation.* (Emphasis added.) (Kuhn and O'Lincoln: 1996: 136/137.)

The modern media also creates its own distinctions within social classes through perpetuating the notion of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (yet again an emphasis on the individual). Hence support for the latest government scheme of hiring private investigators, and public phone ins, to detect dole cheats, yet again concentrating on individuals, rather than the social structures which have created a dearth of unskilled employment opportunities. The new 'underclass' of chronically unemployed is ripe for stigmatisation. As McCalman indicates we have not moved since the nineteenth century in terms of class stigma and "such notions remain embedded in our social consciousness." (McCalman: 1984: 295.) This stigma, and its affect on identity is seldom represented in Australian literature.

That is what lies at the heart of working-class shame, a deeply felt sense of working-class inferiority which comes from seeing ourselves through middle-class eyes. (Reay: 1997: 22.)

In contrast to class stratification, or the way in which we are ordered according to our origins, socioeconomic status can change as our economic and occupational situation changes. These changes indicate social mobility. However, social mobility does not necessarily mean changing social classes. For example, an educated working-class woman could have a high socioeconomic status and yet not consider herself middle class. Class is not simply wealth, poverty or occupational status, but a view of life comprised of inherited values, attitudes and belief structures, often difficult to articulate, particularly if you cannot access the language of representation. As Skeggs

puts it, “You know that your forms of capital are lacking and have no value (although you probably don’t articulate it that way - you just feel permanently awkward.)” (Skeggs: 1997: 131.) It is these values and belief systems, creating a sense of ‘otherness’ which do not change rapidly or easily.

Social mobility works in strange ways for the individual moving by choice or chance from a predetermined position in society. The two most common methods of upward social mobility are via marriage or further education, but the transition can be a complex one involving a questioning of values and belief systems which have formed an identity, sense of self and way of knowing. Landis argues that difficulty in forming satisfactory relationships is one important result of moving upwards in social strata where “one becomes alone, and a marginal man (*sic*) between two worlds and a member of neither.” (Landis: 1974: 121.) Or as Walsh puts it succinctly “Looking back now, the ‘problem’ - that is, *the creative problem* - remains: you ‘get out’ of one class (sort of and without trying), but you don’t want to get into another.” (Walsh: 1997: 164.)

The journey across and between social classes is an ambivalent and ambiguous one, physically, intellectually and emotionally. Patterns of behaviour, appearance, language and beliefs are constantly challenged often causing embarrassment and discomfort. There are a series of assumptions by outsiders who may see only the current socioeconomic status of the individual and imply values according to this status, which can result in confusion, conflict and loss of identity.

The possibility of a complex social trajectory for people who remain working-class is often denied. (Reay: 1997: 19.)

The premise of my novel *Blue Collar, Red Dress* revolves around the

alienation experienced by two women who move across social classes, one via education and the other through occupation. The pivotal point of the novel is the impact of this shift on the notion of identity and loss of identity. This journey across social classes must be a relatively common phenomenon given the number of mature age students entering universities and the emphasis on education as a life long learning experience, and yet it is a social trajectory I have found is seldom represented in the literature of Australia.

By far the safest, easiest and most comfortable method of living is to remain within the social class to which one is born, which is of course a bonus for any capitalist society which seeks to retain the status quo. As McGregor says, "For most people, class is what keeps you in your place." (McGregor: 1997: 19.)

With the perpetuation of an egalitarian myth immensely important shifts for people are not acknowledged in any formal sense. This can add to the confusion for the individual undertaking such a journey. As with migration, when you cross social classes you take some things with you, others you leave behind. It can be a process of entering a different world.

Letch found swapping a working-class environment for an inherently middle-class one was "very intimidating and alienating. It was also quite shocking to realise there is a whole society out there that my society never really comes into contact with." (Neill: 1996: 29.)

It is these shifting realities and their profound impact on the individual which my novel *Blue Collar, Red Dress* seeks to address.

Australia is a country which, despite its egalitarian mythology, is comprised of distinct social classes even though the boundaries may become blurred in an era of rapid technological and social change. Suburbs can still be denoted as

working class, middle class and upper class, even though some may meld over time. Statistics relating to income level and unemployment show quite clear demarcations in Australia, in both metropolitan suburbs and country areas. Social class is a powerful way in which Australian life is ordered, lived and imagined.

...all recent sociological surveys demonstrate that at least a hefty four-fifths of the population will freely acknowledge the existence of social classes in Australia, even to total strangers undertaking doorstep polls. (Hiller: 1981: 258.)

Merely relying on socioeconomic status, however, can and does confuse class identification and true social mobility usually occurs very slowly and over several generations. There is a large working class, of which women comprise a significant number.

Given that the popular media has had a large role in upholding traditional values and shaping the Australian identity, what has been and is the role of Australian literature, another form of media, in this regard? Is there such a thing as working-class literature in Australia and are working-class women represented in this literature, by whom are they represented and what are the implications of this for an Australian literary tradition?

Part 2: Locating the origins of representation.

In researching issues of class in Australian women's literature and particularly representations of working-class women, I have been faced with the complexities of the writers' own position in relation to class. It is a far easier task in looking at writers from the 1930s to 1960s era than it is for those from the 1970s onward. There is substantial biographical detail available on such

writers as Kylie Tennant, Dorothy Hewett, Ruth Park, Betty Collins and Oriel Gray due to more extensive interpretations of their texts and four of the five have published autobiographies. When I came to look at the origins of writers from the 70s onward, such as Margaret Barbelet, Helen Garner, Dorothy Johnston and Clare Mendes, however, I became acutely aware of the limitations of information provided in such sources as Debra Adelaide's *Australian Women Writers: A Bibliographic Guide* and *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. The only writer from the 70s onward whose father's occupation is listed is Amanda Lohrey, "her father, grandfather and great uncle were waterside workers with strong union loyalties." (Wilde, Hooton & Andrews: 1985: 475.) Presumably this is because Lohrey's *The Morality of Gentlemen* is set in the world of union affairs. The details of writers such as Garner and Johnston being graduates of Melbourne University and working for a time as teachers insinuates middle-class backgrounds. However, an entry relating to myself would read in similar fashion as I graduated from Monash University and worked as a teacher. What it would not tell you (unless I specifically requested it be told) is that I worked as an office worker and waitress for 10 years whilst completing my Year 12, prior to attending University. It would not tell you that my father was a truck driver and linesman and that I grew up in Housing Commission flats. In the final analysis the only writer of the latter era of my investigations who depicted dispossession, in any detail, outside the realms of the 30s Depression or industry, was Mendes. I had no alternative but to contact Clare Mendes by telephone when I realised the only biographical details available were through the fly leaves of her novels and these told me only that she was a Melbourne University graduate who worked for a time as a copywriter in advertising. In a telephone conversation on 10 March, 1998, Mendes was open about the fact that she did not come from a working-class background, her mother being a teacher and her father a public servant. She explained that the idea for *Drift*

Street came about through her belief that Australian society is not egalitarian, and that “some people haven’t had the same chances and are never going to.” Mendes said she was annoyed at the attitude of friends toward these people and she “wanted to give them a bit of a break.” Mendes also said that she believes “we should be observing society.” *Drift Street* is a work of fiction, as is my *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, but it is obvious from her comments that she is attempting a representation of society through this work of fiction, and that this representation includes working-class women.

There is an argument that working-class writing does not in fact have to be written by people from a working-class background:

...it would seem not only problematic but also overly concessional and apologetic to exclude Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin Up* and Mena Calthorpe’s *The Dyehouse* from ‘working class writing’ on the grounds that their authors were not from the working class. (Syson: 1993: 98.)

Whilst the issue of authenticity is an extremely complex one, put at its most basic level the logical conclusion of this argument would be that a novel about migration or Aboriginal life does not have to be written by someone from a migrant or Aboriginal background. Would we then classify Dymphna Cusak’s *Black Lightning* as an Aboriginal novel? I think not. The recent controversy surrounding Demidenko/Darville’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* has brought these issues of personal biography, authenticity and literary representation to the fore of public debate. Post the 1996 Miles Franklin Award it was discovered that Demidenko was far removed from the Ukrainian working-class background she had depicted.

...(that) a young woman of English descent whose life experience had been confined to a comfortable middle-class suburb of Brisbane would have been seen as the appropriate person to interpret experiences as profound and

traumatic as those that occurred in Ukraine during the 1930s and 40s? Of course not. (Jost: 1996: 160/1)

This interpreting of experience lies at the heart of literary representations. Can you interpret what you have not experienced? You can research the issues and actually place yourself for a time within the environment you are depicting but the element of choice is crucial to the representation. It is not possible to fully understand the dynamics and subtleties of dispossession unless you have been formed by the exigencies of the reality. These questions of representation and authenticity have, of course, been the key subject of much literary debate, and while they embrace complex notions of subjectivity, and authorial licence, the arguments about the necessity of experience in order to make literary interpretations and authentic representations are compelling. (Reimer: 1996; Jost, Totaro & Tyshing: 1996).

In the case of Darville, judgements and the full weight of moral outrage were able to be clearly directed against the author because she used a false name, deceiving the literary world into believing she was a culturally specific writer. Culturally diverse writers are a small but growing literary force who accurately represent migration experiences and the notion of shifting identities. Authenticity in relation to class background is harder to pinpoint. As Darville showed us you cannot change your ethnic background by changing your name, but, as Lowenstein shows, you can reposition yourself in relation to class.

I decide no-one's going to call me middle class any more. I belong to the working class, I'm a working-class writer. (Lowenstein: 1997: 29.)

Whilst I appreciate Lowenstein's many years of work with the union movement and extensive research leading up to the excellent *Weevils in the*

Flour, there is an inheritance in relation to class consciousness, a sense of unfairness that I don't think Lowenstein can access. But whether she needs to "feel it in her gut" in order to represent it is another argument entirely. Despite the complexities of positioning and interpretation, and indeed the subtleties of class positioning, the dearth of Anglo working-class women, who were born that way, themselves contributing to Australian literature (apart from a limited number of autobiographical works) is worth exploring to build up a picture of an Australian literary tradition and its role in accurately representing Australians.

...in the final analysis a novel is not a documentary but, like any other work of art, a lens through which we see life from its author's point of view. (McLaren: 1967: 235.)

If then, working-class people, and particularly women, are largely represented in a particular way, or are under-represented, is this lens portraying a distorted picture of Australian life? As Mark Davis says of the Melbourne Writers' Festival, "minor tokenisms aside, it's barely representative." (Davis: 1997: 6.) It is interesting to note that Davis's explanation for this resounds with echoes of the egalitarian myth yet again influencing representations.

Everything trails along in the wake of the middlebrow. And the middlebrow can be so damn normative. Politics takes a back seat. And it seems, as if to avoid the usual kinds of ghettos to do with class, race and gender, the programming committee has avoided hard topics altogether. (Davis: 1997: 6.)

This positioning of literature within the middle ground also raises questions about the relationship between the dominant culture, marketing forces and literary publication. What is not produced, does not reach publication or is altered prior to publication?

Criena Rohan began writing *The Delinquents* when she was eighteen but could not find an Australian publisher because, she said, the book was not about Australian heroes. (Smith: 1994: 6.)

Add to this Kylie Tennant's earliest writings:

...she assumed the strength and maturity of Australian literature and insisted on presenting her 'facts' no matter how unpleasant. In doing so she made a contribution to the maturity and autonomy of the literature of her native land. But she had to look to England to find a publisher for her work. (Spender: 1988: 152.)

In his introduction to the revised (and revisited) edition of *The Copper Crucible*, Syson describes some of the severe editing by the publisher of the earlier edition:

For example, he felt that some of the sections dealing with problems of housekeeping in a town without reliable water and electricity supplies were not important enough to be worthy of attention. (Syson: 1996: xiv.)

Here are clear indications that representations of working-class people are more acceptable as recognisable archetypes, sentimentalised portraits or located within an industrial, rather than domestic sphere. To what extent our literary tradition can be representative, is therefore thrown into question. As Syson also points out, traditional literary study "is not interested in the study of texts written by working-class women..." (Syson: 1993: 89.) It would seem, from the above examples, that literary representations of working-class culture seldom emerge unless they are heroic archetypes (and therefore traditionally male), if they have the allure of the exotic by depicting abnormally difficult times or situations, or if they have shock value and therefore represent "the other" as in grunge literature. It is easy to see a link with the maintenance of the egalitarian ethos, whereby the lives of working-

class people, and women in particular, become invisible because class itself is invisible except for heroes and aberrant or deviant behaviour. If class is constantly denied in cultural terms it is no surprise that writers and the literary establishment fail to see the significance of its representational effects.

I do not believe, however, that Australia has a monopoly on limiting modes of representation. As Podhoretz, an American, points out, "There is something in us, it would seem, which resists the idea of class. Even our novelists, working in a game for which class has traditionally been a supreme reality, are largely indifferent to it - which is to say, blind to its importance as a factor in the life of the individual." (Podhoretz: 1974: 134.)

There is an audience for depictions of working-class lives and people can readily point to a need for broader representations when given the opportunity. As Steavenson said of *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby, a north London school teacher, "People who did not watch football...loved the book because it celebrated the ordinary." (Steavenson: 1997: 73.) The ordinary, however, or D'Aprano's "humdrum", needs to vibrate with a resonance, bringing lived experiences into the world of literature by recognition.

There's a special kind of pleasure in finding a place that you know
like your own memories caught in intimate detail in a work of art.
Your once-banal knowledge becomes a kind of wisdom; mere
places become legends. (Carter: 1990: 6.)

In Australia, as Donaldson points out, "However it is measured, women make up the majority of the working class. They are under-represented in the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the 'new middle class' (managers, officials, supervisors) and over-represented among wage-workers and those dependent on the social wage and on the wages of others." (Donaldson: 1991:

31.) Thus working-class women in Australia are most ideally placed to represent in a fictional context the shaping of a working-class identity through their lived experience of the journey.

One of the results of oppression is a thorough knowledge of the ways of the oppressor... Hence, it is precisely those most affected who are best placed to offer insights into the mechanisms of social control that dominate any particular society." (Hawthorne: 1990: 115.)

Issues of social control are largely missing from Anglo women's writing since the 1970s. Whilst this period also marked the 'coming of age' of women of migrant background, it would seem more than coincidental that women's liberation reached Australia around the late 60s to early 70s, bringing with it a new focus on women's ways of knowing, but a lot of women have since questioned whether it was in fact women's ways of knowing or middle-class women's ways. Indeed Germaine Greer stated in 1987, "We were just rich kids playing and were never really going to change anything and not for women either." (Wallace: 1997: 13.). Whether Greer's interpretation of the women's movement is accurate is open to interpretation. Zelda D'Aprano's autobiography (D'Aprano: 1995) would certainly suggest that working-class women were also involved. Whatever the overriding make up of the movement it marked a new era of "the personal is political" and thereby shaped new representations of women by women, with gender issues largely replacing class issues in representational terms.

...our focus on women's oppression pushed class oppression aside. Even concerns around sexuality, 'race', ethnicity and disability often left our class differences unacknowledged. (Reinfelder: 1997: 102.)

In order to achieve any meaningful change for women it was necessary to focus on women's needs and women's invisibility in a political context.

However, the debates were intrinsically about power and in terms of power women have never been equal, economically or morally. As Anne Summers detailed in *Damned Whores and God's Police*, there are two images of women which persist over time, one as sexual objects and the other as moral guardians. Because of this persisting double standard, representations of women in any class category are much more complex than those of men. Working-class women are not only less equal than middle-class women, they are also less equal than working-class men.

In the last two decades there has been an additional emphasis on identity politics and economic rationalisation, all of which tend to focus on the individual rather than wider social issues.

The working classes are no longer entitled to a sense of unfairness because everything from their financial situation and the state of their health to their children's schooling has been repackaged under late capitalism as the responsibility of the individual alone. (Reay: 1997: 23.)

A good example of this shift to identity politics in literary terms is the work of Amanda Lohrey. In 1984 Lohrey's *The Morality of Gentlemen* was published. It is very much a political narrative describing discord within the unionised labour movement resulting in the break away Democratic Labor Party. In this novel, the relationships of the central characters are incidental to the larger political picture. The novel has a lot to say about politics and a working-class society. Unfortunately, however, it is a very male world we explore and we only catch minute glimpses of working-class women's lives. Lohrey has travelled a long way to the publication of *Camille's Bread* in 1995. The focus of the latter is on personal relationships in a middle-class setting. Indeed as Salzman puts it "the political world is now subsumed into the personal and domestic." (Salzman: 1995: 42.), but it is certainly not a working-class

domestic world. However, I think Salzman misreads the book (perhaps from a middle-class perspective) when he says “Stephen meets head on the violence inside him which, the novel suggests, is inherent at some level in fatherhood.” (Salzman: 1995: 43.) He uses an extract from the novel, to support this interpretation, which includes the following images: “littered with cindered chops”; “working by day as the lackey of some rich man”; “and every night, like his father that impulse to just up-end the table and throttle someone.” These images speak loudly of a working-class domestic life left behind, a life where injustice and unfairness had no outlet except for an enormous, overpowering anger which usually erupted in socially unacceptable ways. Lohrey, for me, has moved with the times in broadening her landscape, but has done it subtly so as to cater for differing interpretations across a range of class-based experience. Lohrey has retained her lived knowledge of working-class life and skilfully woven it into a novel which appeals to a middle-class audience. Lohrey herself sums it up beautifully in an interview with Helen Elliott, where she says with tongue in cheek, “You could say it’s me and my Shirley MacLaine reincarnation, but in fact it’s very serious.” (Elliott: 1996:13.) Lohrey is very much aware that her work will largely be read and interpreted through middle-class eyes.

Given that the make up of Australian society is a constantly changing scenario in terms of how we see ourselves and how we are shown in an international context, how does Australian literature represent changes in society and how have Australian women writers contributed to this? We have seen two distinct groups speak out over recent years - migrant women writers and Aboriginal women writers, both groups which could also be largely considered working-class writers. Migrant writers such as Rosa Cappiello in *Oh Lucky Country* and Aboriginal writers such as Sally Morgan in *My Place* have opened up new perspectives on the impact of social forces, conflicting values and oppression

in the shaping of identity in Australian people of migrant and Aboriginal background. There are indeed many similarities in the alienation experienced by migrant and Anglo working-class women. Hall, for example, points to the effects of displacement on identity, that:

Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. And since he/she is positioned in relation to cultured narratives which have been profoundly expropriated the colonised subject is always 'somewhere else': doubly marginalised, displaced always other than where he or she is, or is able to speak from. (Hall: 1987: 44.)

This displacement occurs in shifting countries, cultures and classes. Our Australian literary tradition is enriched and given credence by the incorporation of migrant and Aboriginal literature. It could be seen, however, that the focus on these so called 'marginal' groups could be yet another way of dividing and ultimately denying a working class.

... the politics of special categories of oppression obscures a recognition of class differentiation within some of those categories - especially women and migrants - and so obscures an understanding of capitalism as resting on class exploitation. (Curthoys: 1989: 221.)

The question, which still needs to be asked, is where are the Australian working-class women of Anglo background in Australian literature? Who is representing them and how are they represented?

Part 3: Women and Working-Class Fiction

In my research to date I have found few female Anglo-background writers of fiction who have had the formative experience of a working-class background. For example, in looking at the novels of Kylie Tennant I discovered that

although several have a working-class setting, such as *The Battlers*, *Foveaux*, *Tell Morning This*, Tennant actually researched the issues and characters by placing herself deliberately within that environment for a period of time, rather than being a product of that environment.

Before writing *Foveaux* she lived for a year in the Sydney slums of Surry Hills and Redfern, sleeping in rooms lined with newspaper and infested with bugs, beat upon by misery, filth squalor and ignorance; before writing *The Battlers* she travelled for months with the nomad unemployed, enduring all the hardships of the track... (Dick: 1966: 12.)

Tennant herself came from a middle-class background, indeed her autobiography, *The Missing Heir*, strongly links her to England and inherited wealth as part of her own self image. Her novels are certainly accurate depictions as far as her thorough research can allow, but her involvement is a voluntary one which she is able to enter and leave at will. Her novels are also often set within either the context of the depression or of rural life, as are many other Australian novels of that vintage.

Similarly, Dorothy Hewett, in her novel *Bobbin Up*, creates a realistic portrayal of factory life through her own experience of working in that environment and living that lifestyle. However, it was a deliberate choice on her part to do so, in fact she chose to work in a factory in order to be a part of the industrial proletariat to tie in with her political convictions as a member of the Communist Party of Australia. Hewett had come directly from a middle-class family in Western Australia, and thus had far more choices available to her than that of working in a factory in the inner suburbs of Sydney. Thus in the same way as Tennant she was certainly a part of the working-class life she wrote about, but it had not formed or shaped her own identity or self image.

Ruth Park would appear to have the closest connection to those she represents in *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man's Orange*, with their graphic depictions of inner-city life in post war Sydney. Park wrote from what she knew, both she and partner, D'arcy Niland, living meagrely on their writing incomes in that era and location. Additionally Park's autobiography, *A Fence Around the Cuckoo*, is a lively narrative of a working-class childhood in New Zealand, where she had first hand knowledge of different ways of knowing. In narrating her first experience of a woman of an upper-class background, she tells us: "Poor Madame, how little we understood her, and how little she understood anyone. We lived on different levels of reality." (Park: 1992: 163.) Park creates extremely authentic representations of working-class women where the domestic is never trivial but graphically delineates dispossession and celebrates ordinary lives. Her female characters are far stronger than those of her men, they are the ones who ensure a family's survival, they are the realists who are ultimately responsible for the next generation. As a reflection of Australian society at the time and Park's own experience, the working-class setting in both novels is very closely confined to Surry Hills. It is a snapshot of a community in a specific era but its representations of working-class women have resounded for decades, finding their way on to film and thus becoming even more accessible to those they represent.

In much the same way as Tennant lived her research, Betty Collins creates in *The Copper Crucible*, a distinct working-class town, Mt. Irene, from a year lived in Mt. Isa and from recorded stories of the huge industrial struggles of the mine workers. Like Hewett and Oriel Gray, Collins was also for some years an active member of the Communist Party of Australia. Syson points to the place of *The Copper Crucible* in Australian literature in it being "the most positive representation of working class struggle." (Syson: 1993: 66.) Fortunately the re-published version of 1996 brings back much of the

women's role in the town and the way their class consciousness is formed through the domestic as well as industrial imperatives. As with Tennant, the sense of community and shared humour feature strongly in the novel, aspects lacking in later depictions of working-class women. It is largely set in the industrial sphere and as a working-class novel it holds an important place in Australian literature and history, having been written from the perspective of those whose lives are directly affected by clear demarcations between owners and workers. There is little other Australian literature which gives us such a story from within.

The novels of Tennant, Hewett, Park and Collins were written and published in the period from the 1930s to the late 1960s, an era in which there was a depression, a world war and union strength - an era which could be said to have forced forward issues of class. In comparison the period from the 1970s to the present day has been characterised by falling union membership, the rising tide of economic rationalism, more diverse migration patterns and the introduction of new technologies, making many unskilled jobs redundant. Whilst there are huge differences between the eras, there are also some similarities (e.g. high levels of unemployment) and some constants (e.g. wide disparities in wealth). In order to establish whether any significant changes in representation have taken place and whether Australian literature remains representative of all social classes, and their ways of knowing, it is worth taking a look at a range of women's novels from the 1970s to the 1990s to see if class issues are there and what shape they take.

Margaret Barbalet's character, Jessie, in *Blood in the Rain*, published in 1986, moves through a variety of social class settings and finds inner peace when she is returned to a working-class lifestyle at the end of the novel. However, the various social settings are not used as any basis for conflict, inner or outer,

and Jessie, unlike the characters of Park and Tennant, never reflects upon the journey she has undertaken or her place within the society of the time. It is as if a difficult life has not affected the character, she is affected only by her relationships with her lover and brother. The end of the novel is the most powerful with its working-class inner city lifestyle. Interestingly, the ending of the novel is set within the 1930s Depression. Here we gain a perspective of the community Jessie is placed within, its shared difficulties, hopes and concerns. It is as if that setting finally allowed the author to interpret and represent class issues and the nuances of dispossession from a female perspective. It could be, however, that the novel only introduces issues of class at the end due to the setting which forces it upon a novel that is concerned with the personal rather than the political.

In 1997 Dorothy Johnston chooses to set *One for the Master* in factory life in the 1960s. As Martin notes of the novel, “The English industrial novels of the 1840s and 50s are invoked by the nature of the work in the novel and by explicit parallels.” (Martin: 1997: 8.) Yet again it would seem that representations of working-class people are only acceptable in industrial, post-war and depression settings. It could be argued that such settings provide an identifiable icon of dispossession and therefore work in allegorical ways which are timeless. My contention however, is that by adhering to these metaphorical allusions to class we are denying that class is any longer an issue. I have shown previously that class is still an issue, people and particularly women, still lead lonely and difficult lives. Do modern writers no longer do the research in the way Hewett and Tennant did or is it that modern writers, unlike Collins and Park, have difficulty depicting working-class lives in contemporary settings because this is too removed from their own experience?

Helen Garner, one of our better known contemporary women writers, since

her first novel, *Monkey Grip*, depicted 70s Melbourne, appears to have an ambivalent attitude to the role of class within her writing.

In a piece from *True Stories* about siblings, Garner quotes a conversation with one of her sisters. Her sister is recalling how, when they were growing up, she wanted to be like the 'Geelong Grammar posh people' she knew. In another essay on school dances, Garner mentions the Western District boarders at the Anglican girls' school she attended in Geelong. I take up the question of class differences but Garner doesn't seem much interested in pursuing it. While she believes that intellectual concepts and systems are essential and useful, she says she's 'not very good at ideas'. With a small, ironic smile she adds, "I mean, I have them. Occasionally. But I don't seem to be able to think that way." (Capp: 1996: 1.)

To see class as an "intellectual concept" is indeed telling. One wonders if she would see feminism as an intellectual concept. In her novel, *The Children's Bach*, Garner creates a range of characters who by their very individualistic and idiosyncratic natures, are classless creatures and there is little sense that they live by any values; traditional, adopted or otherwise. Their actions and utterances are propelled by a desire to be noticed or admired, rather than arising from conventions of behaviour and language. The characters are vivid and memorable but they are all isolated from one another in their attitudes and behaviours, which do not change throughout the novel. Many of the characters live a hand-to-mouth existence but without any family or work histories they become eccentric rather than representative of a way of life.

Doris Brett, on page one of her novel *Looking for Unicorns*, introduces us to the ruling class world of her main character, Stephanie Alwyn and the pervasive landscape of the novel,

Mother would love me in this outfit, I thought, as I checked myself out in the mirror. She would also love what I was doing - postgraduate work in

psychology, would you believe. (Brett: 1992: 1.)

It is a world full of doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists in St. Helens private hospital, interspersed with dinners at expensive restaurants, breakfast at the Hilton and an overseas trip. The novel is a fascinating look at a very upper-class world. However, the scope of the novel, in terms of character development and social representations is confined by the very narrowness of its world, for example, Meredith, the flat mate who is an obsessive cleaner. In the final exposition on Meredith, Brett has her tell us, “I *like* being neat and tidy. I *like* being clean. (Brett: 1992: 169.) And that is all we learn about a character who is obviously an outsider in this ruling class world. It is interesting that Brett uses obsessive cleanliness for a character trait but does not, or perhaps can not, make the link with class-based values. D’Aprano could, in fact, be summing up Brett’s characters, Stephanie and Meredith, when she says, “for while the rich cling to their money, the poor cling to their cleanliness, their last vestige of dignity.” (D’Aprano: 1977: 14.) If Brett’s purpose was to accurately depict a small section of Australian society, that of the ruling class, then she has probably achieved that purpose. However, for this very reason, I could not agree with Leon Trainor that, “Most women will find something to identify with here.” (Trainor: 1993: 7.)

Brett does give us tantalising glimpses of how representative of Australian society the book could be, “Most of them were in rather fearful plights, being depressed, destitute and having Joan for a therapist. Many came from the grey boxes of Housing Commission flats near the hospital. They were deserted wives or unmarried mothers, fragmented by a life of poverty, brutalisation and children whom they experienced as mother-eating piranhas.” (Brett: 1992 : 11.) Unfortunately we never see or hear from anyone within this group. It is a throwaway reference to which the reader is never returned, or a set up

which is never paid off, and ultimately Australian literature is the poorer for the lack of a social framework which is inclusive rather than exclusive.

Similarly in *Truce* Joanna Murray-Smith gives us the rites of passage story of Georgia Manifold searching for her true identity in a privileged world, where as Donisthorpe says, "The father, whose death draws the family together, is a romantic figure, voraciously reading in his study full of books, antiques and freshly cut flowers..." (Donisthorpe: 1994: 13.) It is in fact a romantic novel in the true sense of the word, full of beautiful, evocative imagery, landscapes of sea and suburbs. The narrative is a stream-of-consciousness, monologue style which is in danger of becoming tiring until she introduces the new lover, Gabriel. Gabriel comes from a different social sphere to Georgia. He is one of the "bad boys" who "live on the fringes of Beau-Mer in the subdivided estates that have smaller houses with speckled orange glass beside the front door and no pergolas or pools or cleaning ladies." (Murray-Smith: 1994: 67.) However, we are never really taken into this different world, merely told that his mother watches "Wheel of Fortune" whilst ironing. Georgia supposedly earns an income from writing poetry, but Gabriel is never shown as having any form of employment.

Georgia's parents are portrayed as Communist Party members who "no longer have the fire in their hearts." For a young woman who claims to have inherited their capacity to agitate and demonstrate she has a strange attitude to people from other levels in society. "I envy the dumps for their dull camaraderie and their certainty, for we all believe these girls are certain failures, their futures promontories of mediocrity..." (Murray-Smith: 1994: 45.)

These novels by Garner, Brett and Murray-Smith, published in the 80s and 90s

are but three examples of the way in which the focus of much Australian literature has shifted from communities and societal issues, as per Tennant, Collins and Hewett, to the individual and personal relationships. The mobile phone and the self-help book are other identifiable icons of the way in which life has focused on identity politics. Life imitating art, or art imitating life?

These novels, by Anglo women, concentrate on a central female character and in terms of perceived audience, would appear to be aimed at a women. However, in terms of identification and contemporary representations of Australian women they both lack the breadth and resonance which create accessibility and representations which are accurate and meaningful. It could be argued, of course, that these novels have a place in Australian literature, a specific place which would offset and counterbalance those novels which depict working-class women. If one could find a contemporary *Poor Man's Orange* or *The Copper Crucible* then this would indeed be the case, but without such novels we can receive an erroneous impression of modern Australian society and the way in which it is ordered, lived and imagined.

There is a "blokey" Anglo-saxon working-class culture depicted in some Australian novels, for example, Tim Winton's novels, particularly *Cloudstreet* (1991) but it is usually from a masculine viewpoint. Winton combines both the ordinary and the mystic in *The Riders* (1995). It is interesting that Winton has such an enormous appeal across gender lines. Winton's *Cloudstreet* has some similarities to Ruth Park's *Poor Man's Orange* (1949) in that the sense of community, ordinary aspirations and personal tragedies provide accessible sites of reference for many Australians. Barry Dickins, another well known contemporary, is perhaps best known for his irreverence and mocking of authority, rare components in current Australian literature. In his autobiography, *I Love to Live: The Fabulous Life of Barry Dickins*, (Dickins :

1991.) he gives us glimpses of the working-class values and attitudes which shaped his self image and identity. However, his is a very male world and the narrative skips, weaves and dances, with the family and the narrator the only constants. The characters tend to bounce around and off Dickins rather than challenge or shape his identity. It is a graphic and humorous account of specific periods in his life rather than an exploration or journey of the growth of an individual.

Two novels by Australian women published in the 1990s provide some interesting insights into representations of class issues in the 90s: *Drift Street* by Clare Mendes (1995) and *The Animal Shop* by Oriel Gray (1990). Both these novels could be construed as working-class writing in that they both have as their subject the poorest and least powerful members of society.

Drift Street is a graphic account of a dispossessed and dysfunctional family, written through the eyes of each of the five family members. The strength of the novel lies in its depiction of complete dispossession, a snapshot of Australian life seldom seen in modern Australian literature, and therefore a welcome and timely contribution. However, the closed nature of the landscape of the novel prevents any background of social stratification which leads to this dispossession. We seldom see the family interacting with any other family, friends or fellow humans. Danny, the one character in the novel who represents hope for the future, has to be moved to a middle-class setting in order to survive and flourish.

Mendes's Washbourne family is a disenfranchised and powerless unit caught in isolation from the rest of society. It is this isolation from relations, friends and fellow humans in similar conditions which makes her characters extremely marginal and unrepresentative of the working class. It could be argued that it

is necessary to isolate such characters in order to show that dispossession leads to alienation from mainstream society, but an equally important implication of this isolation is that the Washbournes are the exception rather than one of a whole strata of dispossessed families and individuals. Their isolation also may carry the suggestion that perhaps they create their own circumstances rather than being a product of a strongly stratified society. In this way the Washbournes become yet another representation of the “undeserving poor”. In fact the similarities between the character’s lifestyles and those recently highlighted through the media in a current murder investigation in regional Victoria are startling. When we view, through literature, working-class or under-class society from the outside, rather than the inside, there is a very real danger of media based stereotypes being reinforced.

The novel is at its best in the very brief periods when outside characters are introduced, e.g. the welfare worker, the schoolteacher, Trevor’s mate Damon, Sky’s school friend. These are the moments when the Washbournes are thrown into sharp relief as powerless people because of the way society is structured. We can feel their discomfort, their inadequacy and embarrassment and their knowledge that they are set apart. Regrettably these incidents are all too brief, so that what we are left with is a family which mainly creates its own environment, outside of society, and could therefore easily be classified as immoral, stupid and flawed by their own creation. Indeed, this sense of self-destruction is emphasised many times in the novel.

So, is *Drift Street* representational in terms of social class? Does it add to our appreciation of the many layers in Australian society. As to the first I would say it creates no sense of a stratified society, which is the reality, no sense of the complexities which create and maintain dispossession. As to the second, the novel does, however, break new ground in its subject matter and there is a

strong sense of a lived reality for the Washbourne family through the strength and vividness of the narrative. The novel, to use the language of film, is an ensemble piece where the drama is created through a series of events rather than a strong psychological and emotional journey for any one character. It adds a new dimension of extreme dispossession, but a dimension which would benefit from incorporation with a sense of social order and disorder. This lack of society placing and controlling individual aspirations leads to a loss of connectedness for the reader and I agree with Bernard Cohen that:

... while the book points to the cultural and socioeconomic traps of the underclass, it seems to me that it's a book about those people over there, the Others, who only need to be shown middle-class values to start on the road away from Drift Street toward enlightenment. (Cohen: 1995: 46.)

By middle-class values we can take it to mean respect for law and order, being polite, and perhaps delayed gratification, rather than taking what you can get at the time, because you can envisage no brighter future. Indeed the aspirations of the characters in *Drift Street* are so bleak, the cycle of poverty so entrenched that the traditional working-class value of thumbing your nose at authority, usually in a humorous way, is entirely lacking. *Drift Street* is so much "the other" that it is exotic and therefore acceptable in that the sources of dispossession relate to the individuals rather than social positioning. I have no doubt, given my telephone conversation with the author, that her motives were sound. Mendes wanted to show that there are some people who have never been, and will never be, equal. However, without access to the ways of knowing, the inner life, of a people dispossessed by society's mores, there is a danger of representations imitating media stereotypes.

In the first nine pages of *Drift Street* we are introduced to heavy drinking, sadism, racism, pill popping, general laziness and squalor. In a similar vein

Oriel Gray in *The Animal Shop* has told us thirteen times in the first twenty pages that the setting is West Heidelberg, a Housing Commission area created using the Olympic Village constructed for the 1956 Olympics. I wonder whether this emphasis was deliberate because Gray knew she was writing for a middle-class audience. Where Gray differs markedly from Mendes however is in style and breadth. Whereas Mendes's style is apocalyptic and "in your face", Gray coats her narrative with a veneer of sentimentality. All of her characters are good at heart, caring individuals, the only exception being Eddie, but we are told (very early in the novel) of the corruption of his personality through his experiences in Vietnam. Whilst it is refreshing to find a novel set in a Housing Commission area, by making the characters so "nice" there is a sense of distance between the writer's voice and the place being depicted. Stephens sees Gray as more than distanced from her working-class characters,

More distressingly the author is condescending towards her working-class heroes. For example, they nearly all wear clothes which are ill-fitting, too tight or gaudy, whereas the dress of the middle-class characters is not described or is of the tasteful tweed suit variety. (Stephens: 1990: 10.)

The Animal Shop is, however, successful in depicting zones of comfort and discomfort, for its characters as they interact with others from different social backgrounds. The character Louise defines herself by her middle-class background and struggles for acceptance in the almost exclusive working-class culture of West Heidelberg. One would be tempted to ask why Louise doesn't go back where she came from but Gray succeeds in keeping her there via the clamp of a valued friendship with Pat and Louise's own search for identity after her collapsed marriage. I found it interesting that Stephens criticises Gray for her depiction of zones of discomfort, "A single-mother living in a Housing Commission flat is overcome with forelock-tugging

confusion when a retired schoolteacher visits her.” (Stephens: 1990: 10.) As with Salzman’s commentary on *Camille’s Bread*, Stephens fails to recognise the reality of a sense of shame which comes from class-based stigma, and ultimately interprets the text from a middle-class perspective.

Whilst Mendes isolates the Washbourne family from society, Gray creates a range of characters other than the Housing Commission dwellers. Some of these characters, however, seem to have been created for particular purposes somewhat extraneous to the landscape of the novel. For example Dorothy Halstrom’s comment on unmarried mother of three and currently pregnant Marilyn,

“I know their pensions are disgustingly inadequate,” she said, “but they do make such poor use of them. With the same amount of money they spend on hamburgers and dried up chickens they could buy fresh ingredients and make cheaper, more nutritious meals. (Gray: 1990: 9-10.)

One could be excused for supposing that Gray uses such characters to impart clear, middle-class moral messages for the reader. It is interesting to note the emphasis on religion (via the local priest) and charity (via the Blue Cross Opportunity Shop) in the novel. These motifs in relation to the dispossessed have strong historical links to the notion of moral guidance. However, *The Animal Shop* is a novel full of authentic working-class characters, which carries on a tradition established prior to the 1960s. Carter captures these echoes of former literature and the novel’s representations, when he says, “Reading *The Animal Shop* brought to mind Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin Up* or Kylie Tennant’s fiction, even Barry Dickins...” (Carter: 1990: 6.) This is hardly surprising given that Gray is of Hewett’s vintage and was also a member of the Communist Party of Australia in the 1930s and 40s, as depicted in her autobiography, *Exit Left: Memoirs of a Scarlet Woman*. (Gray: 1985.)

Coming from a politically active family (Adelaide: 1988: 76) and as an ex member of the CPA Gray's knowledge of class consciousness informs her narrative in many useful ways. She also lives in the suburb in which her novel is set, although not within the Housing Commission estate.

Clare Mendes's second novel, *A Race Across Burning Soil* (1997) shows a less exotic and therefore less "other" approach to representing working-class lives. Mendes again writes through the eyes of her characters, but this novel is not an ensemble piece, it is character driven. Mendes takes her characters, Patrick and Sheila, through immense social and psychological journeys and they become far more representative of their social origins through their interactions across a broader social scale. Although the novel would have benefited from a more severe editing - at times it rambles along with a lot of unnecessary detail and repetition - it marks the development of Mendes as a writer who can understand the fierce ambition to obliterate a difficult life, and the fact that journeys across social classes are full of embarrassment, misunderstanding and emotional turmoil. Sheila tries for an extended time, to live in a world far removed from her class origins, but it disintegrates around her. The resolution of the novel is dependent upon both characters finding their zones of comfort and these relate very much to their original working-class values (e.g. saying what you mean, rather than what you think people want to hear; valuing the friendship of the person rather than what they can do for you) as well as their love for one another. Bennett fails to recognise important working-class values in Mendes's novel.

Patrick's maudlin sensibility is an annoyance here: spaniel-like, he hangs around, dribbling and wagging his tail, proving himself loyal again and again. (Bennett: 1997: 8.)

Loyalty is, in fact, a crucial feature of class consciousness. It takes Sheila a

long time to realise the value of Patrick's loyalty and friendship, as opposed to the material possessions, status and networking she has been relentlessly pursuing in her search for self.

In researching issues of class, and working-class issues in particular, in Australian literature written by women from the 1970s to the 1990s I have found few examples of writing which acknowledges that class is an issue, that people's lives are lived differently depending on their position in society. This is hardly surprising given that class as a concept has been unfashionable for some time (and indeed denied by the egalitarian myth) and that few working-class women become published authors. I have shown that class is a crucial feature of Australian society, despite some blurring of old traditional boundaries. Australian literature should offer representations of our lives and help us interpret its meaning. Women writers such as Ruth Park and Kylie Tennant are still popular because, as yet, there has been little published to build upon the representations of working-class women they portrayed so well. Migrant and Aboriginal women writers have provided significant working-class representations in contemporary novels but whilst they continue to be categorised and marginalised as migrant and Aboriginal writers it will always be easy to dismiss them from a canon of working-class literature and to point to their representations coming from a base other than that of social order. It is a "chicken and egg" argument of which comes first, the alienation which is culturally defined or the alienation which is defined by stratification?

Part 4: Blue Collar, Red Dress - Adding to working-class representations.

In writing *Blue Collar, Red Dress* I have attempted to build on to a small tradition of Anglo working-class literature, starting from the works of Hewett,

Park, Collins and Tennant, and latterly the novels of Mendes and Gray. It is purely Anglo because that was the context through which my own ways of knowing took shape, form and meaning. I had two major goals in writing my novel. Firstly, I wished to capture what it means to be brought up not only working class but also in Housing Commission flats. As children, my sister and I had our own social system worked out; there were those who lived in real houses, those who lived in Housing Commission houses and those who lived in Housing Commission flats. We knew our place very well and our greatest dread for adult life was to end up alone, pregnant and living in Housing Commission flats. This was the very worst lived reality we could imagine. I doubt that anyone middle class would ever entertain such notions. Not only does social class determine goals and aspirations, it also helps determine fears.

The second goal was to take my audience through the journey across socioeconomic zones and have them experience the contradictions of wanting to leave one class but not entirely enter another. This aspect of life I have found to be missing from Anglo Australian literature by, for and about women. This was by far the most difficult aspect of the novel, translating not only a sense of dispossession but also the aspects of working-class life we do not want to lose. I realised that we don't have to acknowledge that class boundaries exist until we attempt to cross them. This, and the notion that it is dangerous to try and completely eradicate your past (as per Mendes's second novel), became the premise for my novel. During my research it became increasingly obvious that this social trajectory has many similarities to that of migration. As Elizabeth Jolley said, "The impact of the new country does not obliterate the previous one but sharpens memory, thought and feeling by providing a contrasting theme or setting." (Jolley: 1989: 531.) The impact of migration and stories of expatriate Australians feature heavily in an Australian literary tradition and yet forays into new social spheres are seldom visible. As

with migration when you shift classes, “you don’t become a different person, you just communicate differently.” (Richards: 1987: 490.)

I encountered many difficulties in adequately depicting an enduring sense of stigma, shame and displacement whilst simultaneously celebrating working-class values and ways of knowing from a woman’s perspective. How to create recognition for working-class women without alienating middle-class publishers? Many of the difficulties lay in showing zones of comfort and discomfort for the two central characters, Linda and Heidi, as they travel physically and psychologically through hitherto unknown social mores. I found this was only possible through the device of a strong friendship, based on shared background, which enabled my characters to express what would otherwise stay totally hidden in a society which promotes hegemony and is based on a myth of egalitarianism.

The political in my novel is very much in the realms of the domestic, but the sense of dispossession is clearly visible in their homes, families, education and early employment prospects. Work is an important component of their lives but it is not what ultimately defines them. Linda and Heidi’s experiences of working in the biscuit factory in their school holidays confirm for them what they do not want to do. Their first post-school jobs in offices are stepping stones to a different future, away from the dreaded flats. Heidi’s turbulent career and Linda’s further education take them slowly away from their background but not from who they know themselves to be.

Humour is a crucial component of my novel, in showing both the absurdities of social conventions and the battle to maintain dignity through irreverent humour. Interestingly, I found few examples of irreverent humour, or to put it in the working-class vernacular, “taking the piss”, in Australian women’s

writing. It is there in some Australian men's writing, e.g. Winton and Dickins. Perhaps there is a double standard operating along parallel lines to the sexual double standard, i.e. nice women do not use such language. I would hope that the dialogue between Linda and Heidi, particularly in their last years at school, is recognised by adolescent working-class women as their language.

I wrote the novel in the first person present in order to give an immediacy to the lives represented and a sense of growth. However, the limitations of this style of narrative soon became evident in fully developing the character of Heidi, who is not the narrator. I therefore introduced interspersed passages in the third person past tense which allow the reader to more fully understand Heidi's inner life. These also provided a vehicle for more poetic writing than is possible when the majority of the narrative is dialogue. Working-class people do not generally wax lyrical in normal, everyday speech.

In creating and portraying difficult lives it was necessary to juxtapose a variety of other lives, to create a broader society for my characters to weave their way through, some with better lives and some with worse. In doing this I was striving for a relativity I found lacking in *Drift Street* where the Washbourne family operates in isolation, *The Copper Crucible* where the mine isolates the society, and *The Animal Shop* where the restricted community setting confines the characters and their growth.

Conclusion

In researching issues of class I have found that Anglo working-class men have limited, but significant access to language, cultural and literary icons which help shape their existence and identity. They may be stereotyped but they are represented. Anglo working-class women since the 1970s are largely invisible

in a literary and cultural context.

Within the canon of Anglo Australian literature it would seem that there is a tradition that issues of class arise in industrial, post-war and depression settings but apart from these settings they do not “get a guernsey”. Even when it is women who are doing the writing, Anglo working-class women remain largely unrepresented, misrepresented or misinterpreted. I have shown this through reference to a variety of novels in two eras of Australian women's' literature, that of the 1940s to 1960s, and that from the 1970s to 1990s.

I have shown that women, such as Hewett, Tennant and Collins, writing up to the 1960s did use issues of class in their narratives but their settings were industry and the depression of the 1930s. In covering three decades which included a world war and a world wide recession, these novels reflected the times, issues and preoccupations of that time. However, I also discovered that none of these women had been shaped by the realities of the situations they were depicting. They did their research and often lived the life they created stories about, but they were not from working-class backgrounds themselves and so had not been shaped by the lived reality. However, despite this there was a small body of literature which was recognisably working class. Today we would be hard put to define a similar body of Australian literature. It is encouraging, however, to see writers such as Mendes incorporating class issues and writers such as Lohrey weaving class-based icons into a contemporary narrative.

Much of my research has centred on class in Australia in order to establish an accurate picture of the current status quo, as opposed to media interpretations. I have shown that class is an issue, statistically and anecdotally, because it shapes the range of possibilities available, and different lives are lived,

depending on your place within a social order, and these differences continue to be compounded by family and schooling. My hypothesis, that Australian literature is unrepresentative of these differences, is then proven by evidence of what is being represented and who is doing the representing. From the 40s to 60s the impact of class featured in Australian literature, albeit in restricted settings. However, from the 1970s onward issues of class, particularly for women became obscured by emerging identity politics including gender and ethnicity. Class has always been an integral part of gender and ethnicity but it became subsumed and lost in these new fields of representation. With few exceptions, women writers were classified, and perhaps marginalised, by identification as feminist, migrant or Aboriginal writers, but not as working-class writers. Whether writers classified themselves in relation to gender and ethnicity or whether it was the publishers, promoters, and the literary establishment, the end point is that class relations are obscured and ultimately nullified. The complexities and subtleties of social class make it difficult to classify, to pin down. It is no longer socially acceptable to take away a person's ethnic origins, especially in an avowedly multicultural society, but you can deny them a working-class identity through reference to current economic status or occupation. Indeed, the egalitarian myth seeks to deny its existence for everyone.

I have been made to realise that, for a lot of people, class is an uncomfortable notion. Class has become a dated concept in literary terms and, except for deviant or bizarre behaviour, is obscured in media interpretations of the way society works. In a sense it is acceptable that migration initially may lead to dispossession as it can be a short-term thing. However, to acknowledge that there are Anglo background (and therefore no disadvantages in relation to skin colour or access to language) people who remain on the lowest rungs of society's social ladder after several generations is to accept that there are

disadvantages for many within the current status quo. This is indeed matter for serious thought and drastic change along the lines of social justice and wealth redistribution. The Whitlam Government's short-lived era is proof that Australia is not comfortable with any rapid change. I have been writing about something nobody wants to know about, let alone acknowledge. Maybe there are some lives we don't want represented from the inside because the sense of responsibility for upholding a social order which disenfranchises many would be too uncomfortable a notion for the reader. However, my belief that there are things to celebrate about working-class lives is just as important as disempowerment. I believe we are losing something by promoting egalitarianism in much the same way we would have lost had we not moved from policies of assimilation to multiculturalism. With assimilation you merge into the whole, become the same, with multiculturalism you celebrate the differences and diversity which create a more complex yet more rich society. If our literature does not represent the many layers in society we may be seen as egalitarian but also stale and boring.

As well as erudition, literature has the purpose of creating meaning and giving recognition by representation. Literature should add to our interpretation of a variety of lives, our understanding of the multiple ways of knowing. Literature should also question our understandings and reveal realities different to, and far more complex than, representations through the media and popular culture. Australian literature has gained in richness and diversity through the incorporation of Aboriginal, migrant and feminist ways of knowing. It would be strengthened even further by representations of working-class lives which are acknowledged and celebrated in terms of class differences. Class difference need not always be seen as a negative thing, especially when class-based icons are an integral part of community and a sense of belonging.

I have shown, by reference to Lohrey's *Camille's Bread* and *The Animal Shop* that even when class-based icons are represented however, some reviewers may fail to recognise them. I would suggest it is unfamiliarity which precludes recognition, an unfamiliarity because such icons are so seldom represented. Thus, in the same way that the media promotes social hegemony, so too does Australian literature, through lack of reference to social difference.

In focusing on two novels, by women, published in the 1990s, Mendes's *Drift Street* and Gray's *The Animal Shop* I have attempted to show that representations of dispossession are rare and some may still lack resonance due to the distance between the writer and the lived reality. Not only do they lack resonance for a woman from a working-class background but they send moral messages which relate directly back to egalitarian myths. Powerlessness continues to be seen as a result of a lack of individual effort or lack of moral guidance rather than as an aspect of the way in which society is ordered, lived and imagined.

The lack of a social trajectory for characters in both novels, and any other novels for that matter, is possibly the most important feature in skewing representation of working-class lives. The difficulties of crossing social boundaries are well documented in research and sociological studies but that is largely where they stay. They stay in places which are largely inaccessible to working-class people. The only literary exception I could find, in relation to this particular point, was Mendes's *A Race Across Burning Soil* and perhaps Lohrey's *Camille's Bread*. In writing *Blue Collar, Red Dress* I have attempted to take these lived journeys and their complexities and weave them into a narrative which will be recognised as authentic by those who are being represented.

In writing this critical commentary I have come to realise that I have been working against an inherent contradiction relating to class, gender and language. As a working-class woman I mistrust reliance on the 'work' aspect of working-class in order to represent working-class lives. They are far more complex than this. As a product of a working-class background I have an ingrained preference for language which is direct and accessible. So in a way I have been translating as I go, attempting to distil complexities of academic discourse to their essence, so that I could own this knowledge before using it to place my critical commentary within a context of what has gone before. In analysing reviews of the novels I became even more conscious that the same language can be interpreted in vastly different ways, depending on the class background of the reader. I wanted this commentary, in its role of accompanying the novel, *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, to carry its arguments, fulfill its aims, without me moving away completely from the language of my class and its ways of knowing.

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