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Writing working class ghosts

Abstract
On 15 October 1970, in one of the worst industrial accidents in Victoria's history, a span of the West Gate Bridge collapsed during construction. Thirty-five workers were killed. Very little has been written about the West Gate Bridge collapse, the men who died, the men who survived or the families that were left behind. The Bridge has become a road, too often clogged with traffic, a nuisance, an annoyance. It's a tragic history, one that the city seems to have forgotten, but more than forty years later, it haunts my imagination and demands to be written.
This is a self-reflexive article that explores the process of writing the West Gate Bridge collapse into a work of fiction. It focuses on the challenges of capturing the voices of the working class who are often marginalised and occasionally mythologised (as working class heroes) but rarely the central focus of literature, and the ethical risks associated with aestheticizing a traumatic historical event. Like Gerry Turcotte, I believe that engaging with our ghosts is the 'only remedy for the distressing legacies' (Turcotte 2007: 115) of our history, and argue here that fiction has a role in giving the ghosts of our past a voice in the present.
Keywords: working class writing, working class fiction, West Gate Bridge

> Humans, in the end are ghosts. We haunt each other. We circulate in complex ways the products
> of past hurts and stolen moments; of profound love and impassioned connections;
> accidental and meticulously planned. Exorcism is not an option.
> It would spell the end. (Turcotte 2007: 112)

Setting the scene

On 15 October 1970, in one of the worst industrial accidents in Victoria's history, a span of the West Gate Bridge collapsed during construction. 2000 tonnes of steel fell 45 metres. There were more than 60 men on the site that day. There were men on the span itself, men inside the hollow of the span and in the construction huts below. 35 men were killed.

Survivors recall the sound of the bridge groaning, 'an eerie pinging noise', the bolts turning blue and rivets popping like bullets from a machine gun (Hitchings 1979; Cunningham 2012).

If you are a Melburnian and old enough to have been around in the 1970s, you will probably remember the collapse of the West Gate. You will probably remember where you were when you heard the news. Across the city there were reports from people who witnessed the Bridge collapse – the span was there one minute and gone the next.

Sophie Cunningham in her book *Melbourne* quotes a ten-year old boy who was on a school excursion and took the photo that ended up on the cover of the Sun:

> I took one picture of the bridge and then we heard an explosion... So I put my camera up again and took another. At first I thought they were blowing something up. Then we realised the bridge was falling. I didn't see any men, but some of the other boys and girls said men were jumping and falling from it. When the bridge hit, it caught fire. (Cunningham 2012: 232)

I was at school when the bridge collapsed and have vague memories – the sounds of ambulance and police sirens, of helicopters overhead, clouds of smoke and dust; the shake in the principal's voice as she announced that there'd been an accident; as she requested that any girl with family members working on the West Gate report to the office.

I arrived home to find my neighbourhood on the street. Anxious groups of men and women gathered in front of the milk bar, on verandas and in driveways. Shaking heads, tears and anger. Almost everyone I knew, knew someone whose father or grandfather, brother or husband worked or had worked on the bridge and everyone in my neighbourhood understood the dangers and hazards of this kind of work. Everyone's father and many of our mothers were factory workers, or labourers on a building site, on the railways or the wharfs, where accidents happened often. Workers died at work; men and women were injured at work. My father had almost broken his back in one accident; he'd lost half a finger, lucky not to have lost his whole arm, in another.

For the next week we sat in front of the television and read the newspapers, holding our collective breaths as we waited to hear who had died and who had survived. Some men's bodies were never fully recovered.

Nine months later the Royal Commission report was published (Report of the Royal Commission 1971). While the Commission found that the company Freeman, Fox and Partners was to blame – lack of communication and poor decision making – all the other parties, including the unions and the men were criticised in the report. The most quoted lines of the report say much about the circumstances leading up to the collapse: 'Error begat error ... and the events which led to the disaster moved with the inevitability of a Greek Tragedy' (Report of the Royal Commission, 1970-71VPRS 2591/P0, unit 14).

Over the last five years, I have been working on a novel that focuses in part on the collapse of the West Gate Bridge. This article is a reflection and interrogation of some of the motivations and inspirations as well as the questions that have arisen and are arising as part of the process of writing.

The Bridge (working title – previously titled *The Fallen*) has two protagonists Antonello, a 22-year-old rigger who has been working on the West Gate Bridge for almost two years when the Bridge collapses. Antonello survives, but two of his closest friends die. The first half of the novel traces Antonello's story up until a few days after the collapse. The second protagonist is Jo, a young working class woman born in the 1990s. The second half of the novel begins with an accident that connects Jo and Antonello. For the purposes of this

article, I am not going to discuss Jo or her story. While there are some overlaps in relation to the issues and questions that have arisen for me in writing Jo's character, there are also major differences, partly because of gender, but also because of the way our understanding and experience of class identity has changed in the intervening years.

The aim of this article is to focus on the issues and experience of writing about a tragic event and about the working class men at its centre.

Hauntings

The West Gate Bridge is within walking distance from where I live and on summer evenings my husband and I sometimes stroll along the Stony Creek Walkway that extends across the breakwater to the Yarra; we watch the container ships make their way out of the bay and the birds playing in the wetlands. It is a sad place; no matter what mood I am in, when I go there, I leave feeling solemn and mournful.

I'm not a great believer in ghosts. Dead is dead. But there is something *haunting* about the West Gate Bridge. In her book *Traumascapes*, Maria Tumarkin writes: 'Traumascapes are a distinctive category of places transformed physically and psychically by suffering...' (Tumarkin 2005: 13). They are 'traumascapes', she argues, because they are more than just the 'physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time' (12). Some nights I can't make it all the way to the end of the Stony Creek Walkway before I am compelled to turn back. Some days, I drive kilometres out of the way to avoid driving over the bridge, to avoid the moment I reach the top and remember the men who died building it. I think about the hundreds of people who, over the last 40 years, have committed suicide by leaping off the West Gate Bridge into the Yarra River; among them a close friend of mine. These are 'hauntingly possessive ghosts' (LaCapra 2001: xi). Their voices rising from the river to reach me. The West Gate Bridge is a 'traumascape'. It is haunted:

> Full of visual and sensory triggers, capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions, traumascapes catalyse and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events...the past, whether buried or laid bare for all to see, continues to inhabit and refashion the present. (Tumarkin 2005: 12)

The psychoanalyst, Stephen Frosh, who argues ghosts are real, also focuses on the way these ghosts inhabit the present. For him they are 'manifestations of actually existing present tense losses... They happen because there are people who are made ghostly by the silencing of their voices' (Frosh 2013: 4). This is an argument that is also made by some postcolonial literary theorists, including Gerry Turcotte who has written about Australian and Canadian postcolonial gothic literature and the ghosts of those that have been rendered invisible, beginning with the declaration by the invaders of '*terra nullius*' and continuing for over two hundred years (Turcotte 2007).

While there is a large memorial to the men who lost their lives when the West Gate Bridge collapsed, it is not seen from the Bridge, and their stories and experiences are largely silent and invisible in the larger narrative of the city.

For over 20 years, I resisted the impulse to write about the West Gate Bridge collapse, but it proved to be an impulse impossible to dismiss. For me, it is a kind of *haunting*:

> To be haunted is more than to be affected by what others tell us directly or do to us openly; it is to be influenced by a kind of inner voice that will not stop speaking and cannot be excised, that keeps cropping up to trouble us and stop us going peaceably on our way. It is to harbour a *presence* that we are aware of sometimes overwhelmed by, that embodies elements of past experience and future anxiety and hope, that that *will not let us be.* (Frosh 2013: 2-3)

For Frosh, 'psychoanalysis and haunting go together' because 'psychoanalysis intentionally stirs up demons' (3). The same might be said of fiction writing, at least for this writer, haunted by those 'things that are left *over* from past happenings or left out of conscious recognition' (3). Among the many arguments I had with my mother over the years, there was the one about not stirring up the past. 'Stop writing,' she demanded after having a cousin read her a memoir piece I had published in *The Age*, 'Why can't you just remember the good things?' My mother was a storyteller too, but in her stories she remade people to into better versions of themselves, she was sentimental and nostalgic. The 'bad' things, the stories she wanted to forget, *haunted* her at night, they turned into nightmares, but she refused to tell them.

The past needs stirring up. Facing our ghosts and learning to live with them in the present may be 'the only remedy for the distressing legacies of the all-too-recent past – especially since to paraphrase Faulkner, the past isn't dead...it isn't even past' (quoted in Turcotte 2007: 115). The past is in our present and as Derrida argued in his conceptualisation of the spectre (another form of the ghost), the past is also in the future (Derrida 2012). By giving these ghosts a voice, by telling the stories that have been silenced, it may be possible for us to shift from 'fear to accountability' (Turcotte 2007: 111).

It is in this context that I welcome these ghosts and their haunting, and the possibility that through the writing of this novel, I might give voice to some of the working class ghosts of the West Gate Bridge, who as living beings had very little power, whose stories have been silenced for too long. This is 'unfinished business' as the character, Rosa Diamond declares in *The Satanic Verses*: 'I know what a ghost is... And I know what it isn't too, she nodded further, it isn't a scarification or a flapping sheet, so pooh and pish to all that bunkum, What's a ghost? Unfinished business, is what' (Rushdie 2011: 129).

A working class hero is something to be

Recently I attended a 60th birthday party. The house was full of old lefties, retired politicians, union organisers, public servants, teachers and academics. It was a few weeks after the AFL grand final and somehow I found myself in the middle of a football conversation.

My friend said, 'Nat Fyfe is this season's hero.' [1]
'I don't get footballers as heroes,' I said.
'He played the whole prelim final with a broken leg,' she said.
'That sounds like stupidity to me,' I said. 'It's not heroic.'
There was the usual laughter that my digs at football generate among my friends. But I continued.
'Our idea of what a hero is pisses me off,' I said. 'People who work in factories, on building sites, in dirty and dangerous jobs so they can feed their families are heroes. And they get paid peanuts, while those boys running around after a ball get millions.'

My friend's partner, a recently retired CFMEU Industrial Officer, said, 'I worked in factories for 30 years, now that was stupidity.'

That some people can speak, while others are silenced, that some stories are told and celebrated, while other stories are censored and suppressed, has always been the driving force for my writing and thinking. The question of how to write the stories of the working class men and women in my family, in my neighbourhood is something I have grappled with most of my writing life. Or even longer, since I first read William Dick's novel, *A Bunch of Ratbags* (1965), the story of a working class boy growing up in Footscray in the 50s and 60s. Reading it as an eleven-year-old, I discovered that not all fiction had to be set in the English countryside; it could be set among the factories and oil refineries of my neighbourhood.

In the 1970s and early 80s, Working Class Hero was one of my favourite John Lennon songs: The song is John Lennon's 'post-Beatles polemic against authoritarianism of every kind,' writes Sean Burns, an American writer and cultural historian:

> written at [a] time, really not that long ago, when a generation of young people shared Lennon's conviction – a time when the social idea of "the worker", which is to say the coal miner, the builder, the mechanic, the longshoreman, conjured up pride, skill, accomplishment, even heroism. (Burns 2011: xv)

A working class hero is something to be – I played this song often when I was an undergraduate at Melbourne University, where the working class were fairly thin on the ground. And the lyrics rang true for me, but in ways I was struggling to understand as a young working class woman longing for an education, a woman with aspirations beyond my class. At the time, I subscribed to Lennon's view (in the song) that workers, my parents among them, were being 'doped with religion and sex and TV' and would remain poor and exploited. However, like the young people Burns was writing about, I was also proud of my working class background. I believed it had shaped me politically and morally. In some places (especially literature tutorials) I felt inadequate next to my middle class peers whose knowledge of the arts and literature I didn't think I could ever catch up with. (I don't think I'd heard the term 'cultural capital' then but whatever I might have called it – I knew they had bucket loads more than I did.) However, it is also true that often their middle class attitudes and what I saw as their lack of understanding of what the world was 'really' like for most people annoyed me. I had little tolerance for it.

The problem of definitions

To define working class, especially in the 1970s when the West Gate Bridge was being built, I use Paul Lauter's definition:

> "working-class people" [are] those who sell their labor for wages: who create in that labor and have taken from them "surplus value" to use Marx's phrase; who have relatively little control over the nature or products of their work; and who are not "professionals" or "managers". I refer to people who, to improve their lot, must either move in solidarity with their class or leave it. (Lauter 2014: 63)

While this definition may be out-dated in the new globalised world where many Australian products are manufactured overseas, and increasing numbers

of young people are going to university, qualifying as 'professionals' only to end up in casual jobs with little power or voice, it does describe the working class men and women I grew up with. My only qualification would be to point to the issue of diversity – in terms of gender and ethnicity – because often when we discuss the working class in Australia, the focus is on white men from British backgrounds. This is not the case, and certainly wasn't the case in 1950s, 60s and 70s' Melbourne where migrants, men and women, mostly European, made up a substantial proportion of factory workers, workers on building and construction sites, on the railways and the wharfs.

On the question of what is working class writing Paul Lauter asks: 'To begin with, what do we mean by "working class literature"? Literature *about* working class people, literature *by* them or literature *addressed* to them?' (Lauter 2014: 63). These three categories are often cited when there is talk of defining working class writing. To be working class literature, academic Ian Syson would argue, it needs to be informed 'by a consciousness of the social and historical importance of class antagonisms' (Syson 1993: 87) and the way these play out in industrial settings.

As a fiction writer, do I need to be concerned with these questions of definition? When I talk about the novel I am working on and about writing about the West Gate Bridge collapse, I am often asked: where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? What did your father do? What union did he belong to? Recently when I presented a version of this article as a paper, at my University, I was asked: how can you write this story without interviewing the men? It's not your story, it's theirs. While I have working class credentials – my father was a fitter and turner, a staunch unionist, and I went to a local school in Footscray – the questions are unsettling. Questions of authenticity and appropriation are often asked of writers, especially those writing about groups that are considered marginalised. Eva Sallis, an Australian fiction writer who has often written fiction peopled with characters from backgrounds different to her own writes;

> Seeking authenticity and authority for imaginative work is destructive and leads to writers lying about their names and antecedents and generates an even more authenticity-conscious readership. Taken to its conclusion this trend is the death of fiction. (Sallis 1999)

I understand Sallis' concerns, and I too think that writers should be free to imagine themselves into the lives of other people and into other worlds and that no writer should be obligated to keep to their own territory, to their own culture, that part of the pleasure and power of writing is to imagine the other. On the other hand, we are all historical and cultural subjects and writing is 'not neutral' (Macherey 1978: 41). Australian contemporary fiction – with a few notable exceptions – tends to focus on the lives of the middle class and 'the working-class has all but vanished from Australian fiction' (Maguire 2009). Therefore as a writer, writing a working class story, I do have a responsibility to ensure I don't perpetuate stereotypes and myths but challenge them. I do feel politically accountable in ways that I would not if I was writing about white middle class men:

> ...political accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narratives. They activate the process of bringing into discursive representation that which by definition escapes self-

> representation and can only be disclosed by the active intervention of others. (Braidotti 2002: 12)

Mine is an active and deliberate intervention, fuelled by a desire to 'give them back speech in a way that allows the ghosts to be present in the work' (Bolt 2015). I choose fiction because I don't think it is possible – in any genre, including history – to 'reconstruct events, as remembered by witnesses' (K Clark quoted in Bolt 2015). Instead as Bolt argues (referencing both the artist Arthur Russell and the novelist Katherine Atkinson), 'The responsibility of the artist is to ... create something "intensely present" which will allow (new) worlds to germinate.' What does Bolt mean by 'intensely present'?: 'An image that is alive, an intensive presence that insinuates itself into our world so that we live it.' Bolt is talking about visual art, about images, but this is my aim in the novel too, to bring the story to life, to create something 'unimaginable yet precisely "true-to-life" in an act that allows the ghosts to speak and, in doing so, does justice to the histories to which the work is indebted' (Bolt 2015).

Questions of authenticity are also problematic because they are homogenising. The implication is that there is an authentic 'working class man/woman' who has the authority to speak. I am not one of the survivors. I am not one of the working class men who worked on the West Gate. But I am also not a complete 'outsider', my roots are working class. This is my 'location', it gives me a particular perspective with its advantages and its challenges. To make my way into the writing I ask myself: How can I do justice to the lives of working class men and women? And to their stories? Susan Holmes in her Masters Thesis: *Blue Collar, Red Dress*,an exploration working class women's writing argues that 'literary representations of working-class culture seldom emerge unless they are heroic archetypes (and therefore traditionally male)…' (Holmes 1998: 21). How do I write the novel so as to challenge the heroic archetypes – the myths of the working class hero? How do I write to open up discussions about the way that the working class have been used and continue to be used as a cheap and dispensable workforce without presenting them as victims with no power to act?

The bridge builders were ordinary men, not heroes. They didn't go to work on 15 October 1970 to give their lives – for the bridge. It was a job and those responsible – the companies, the managers, the engineers – were negligent and did not make safety a priority (Report of the Royal Commission 1971). But the men were not passive victims, the men took action on a regular basis; they were willing to fight for better conditions and there were many industrial disputes during the construction of the Bridge. The story of the collapse is not just the men's story, it is also the story of the local community, of the unions, of the families – the women and the children. How can I capture these various and often conflicting narratives? The complexities of class. My aim is to present the 'past not as a distant object, but as a fluid process made by people conceptually proximate to ourselves' (Dalley in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 47) and yet not us.

Writing the Bridge: stories and myths

As *The Bridge* is a novel indebted to an actual event, I do feel a responsibility to do the research, to understand or at least try to understand what happened. This is especially the case because many of those affected are still alive. The research for writing about Antonello has included reading through volumes of the Royal Commission report, reading newspaper reports of the collapse and of the commission hearings, articles, stories online on *The West Gate Memorial*

site set up by survivors [2] and the only book on the collapse, *West Gate*, written by the journalist Bill Hitchings, a nonfiction work that traces the collapse of the Bridge and the hearings and tries to come to terms with the causes of the collapse – technical and human [3].

I have talked (informally) to people about rigging and the Bridge, but I chose not to talk directly to survivors. This was not an easy decision and at times I wavered and reconsidered. I made this decision in part because having conducted interviews for a number of other research projects, I know how important it is to represent people's telling of their stories as authentically as possible. But I am not a historian and this was not a history project, I was not aiming to 'reconstruct events' as they happened or were remembered by the survivors. I wanted to include the stories of those ghosts haunting my imagination and not just the stories of the living, and to re-imagine them all, in a way that might make them 'intensely present' to the reader.

The Bridge is in part a historical novel, though more than two thirds is set in the present. It has much in common with those novels that Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon 1988) and Peter Pierce calls 'neo-historical' (Pierce 1992): to question the historical knowledge, to play with notions of truth and lies in the historical records, and to raise questions about the actual 'knowability' of the past – both in relation to what is remembered by the individual and what is documented. My novel does not use the self-reflexive devices common to the postmodern texts Hutcheon focuses on – there is no narrator stepping out of the novel to address the reader but I am aiming to create a text where many voices and many stories intertwine so that no one 'truth' can be distinguished. Fiction is my political tool (Gandolfo 2006), and with it my aim is to challenge or at least call into question the official records and dominant narratives.

During my research, I came across two particular 'narratives' related to the Bridge collapse that I found troubling. One was the focus on the men's love of the Bridge, and the implication that this love may have blinded them to the problems and the other, almost its opposite, the implication that there were an unjustified number of strikes during the construction of the Bridge. When I uncovered these narratives in the reports and other documents, I can hear the ghosts, ensnared in other people's versions of their lived experience, they haunt me.

Challenging the official narratives 1: Love

The men's love for the Bridge; their pride in being 'bridge builders'; the sense of betrayal they felt when the span collapsed and the fact that many of them felt compelled to return to finish the Bridge is documented in official documents, in newspaper articles and in interviews with the survivors and the families of the men who died. That love haunts me when I stroll along the Stony Creek Walkway; when I drive over the West Gate. It is a potent emotional theme, especially for a fiction writer. But it is also a troubling one.

Mavis Harburn, whose husband was killed, said: 'He loved that damned bridge' (Hitchings 1979: 3). Bill Hitchings talks about two other victims, Jack Grist and Fred Upsdell, 'the way they went on about "their bridge" to their wives and friends you'd swear they were the only two building it' (3).

Hitchings again: 'But soon after the last block was put in place a buckle appeared in plates near the centre line. It was a buckle… It could be fixed … in fact, in their bid to hide the problem, it was said later that someone threw a

sack over the buckle when it was learned the Authority's general manager … was due to visit' (Hitchings 43).

There are many varieties of love and the word love has many meanings. It is entangled in various discourses from the romantic to the theological and even though we usually associate love with our feelings towards other people – we do use the word 'love' in our everyday language to articulate our strong feelings towards material culture including objects (Dant 1999).

The men's love of the Bridge was in my view, twofold: it was associated with the pride they took in their work and with the symbolic nature of the West Gate Bridge in the imagination of the city.

Richard Sennett argues in his book *The Craftsman* that the 'impulse to do a job well' is a basic human impulse (Sennett 2008: 9). Most of the men working on the Bridge were skilled labourers – carpenters, riggers, boilermakers and ironworkers – they developed their skills over time and took pride in their work.

However, the men who worked on the West Gate were not the only ones who were proud of it, there were many others, including Premier Bolte, the engineers and the companies especially the Australian company John Hollands, and Melburnians who crowded the viewing stands on most evenings and weekends to watch the bridge being built, who also had an attachment to the Bridge. The government had run a campaign to ensure support for their substantial investment in the West Gate: to convince people it was the right decision to build a bridge that would bring a city together. It had come to symbolise Melbourne's progress (Hitchings 1979).

In the novel, my aim has been to both capture the men's love and pride for the Bridge, to have it be 'intensely present' for the reader but also to trouble it. The main protagonist, Antonello is certainly 'in love' with the Bridge and the idea of the Bridge, of bridging a river as wide as the Yarra. Early in the novel – Antonello and his wife Paolina talk about his love of the West Gate:

> "Yes," he admitted, "I do love the Bridge. You know it's going to be the biggest…"
> "Yes, yes," she interrupted, "I know…" She stretched her arms wide and grinned, and Antonello, captivated, watched as the dimples transformed her face, "…the longest, most amazing bridge, higher, taller, more spectacular ... you're lucky I am not one of those jealous Sicilian women."
> It was a favourite joke. When they first met, he had explained that some of the city planners favoured an underground tunnel, but in the end the bridge proposal won.
> "Why?" Paolina asked.
> "Premier Bolte saw it as a chance to build a bridge that would be bigger and better than the Sydney Harbour Bridge."
> Antonello understood there were more solid, rational reasons for choosing to build a bridge and not a tunnel, but he doubted any were more enticing to Bolte.
> Paolina shrugged, "Millions of extra dollars to get one up on Sydney."
> (Gandolfo 2016: 3)

My intention here and throughout the novel, is to highlight the political and social discourses about the Bridge and about class, alongside the individual and complex relationship the men had with the Bridge. The way, for example, that

being a migrant – many of the men working on the bridge were migrants – impacted on Antonello's attachment:

> "...Before this, I worked on building sites, and you know we were proud of what we built, but this is different, it's so big and so ambitious, two and a half kilometres long, and eight lanes. And it's like some amazing feat you know, like super human, we're making a roadway over a river, there is something magical about it, like the story of Jesus walking on water ... but we're making it and we're ordinary blokes, and lots of us are migrants and we are making something for this whole city. It makes me feel like I belong here, like I am contributing something and then when it's finished, I will be part of the city..." (Gandolfo 2016: 64)

There is no evidence that the men's love for the Bridge was blind. There were, for example, many disputes during the construction of the Bridge and most of these were related to the health and safety of workers:

> Pat recalls the early years on the project as a period when the modern concept of occupational health and safety management was unknown. Many of the hazards and risks that are now universally recognised were not understood, or were simply ignored.... But there were things the workers knew were not right. For example, they were concerned about the health effects of the special paints laced with lead and chromium that were used to protect the steel from corrosion. And there was a litany of injuries and dangerous occurrences that seemed to happen on an all-too-frequent basis. Getting their concerns taken seriously and dealt with promptly was a continual struggle.
>
> "At that time, safety issues were safety disputes," Pat recalled. "There was no site safety committee and the company had no formal process for dealing with the workers' health and safety concerns. So the unions had no alternative but to take industrial action over particular issues until management took notice of them." (WorkSafe Victoria's Construction Safety Circulation Service 2003)

Challenging the official narratives 2: The strikes

Taking collective action is one of the few things that workers can do to fight for their rights and conditions. Like my father, Antonello's father was a unionist and he gave his son a speech not unlike the one my father gave me when I started my first job:

> "You never step onto a work site without union membership," Franco told Antonello. "Otherwise, the bosses will screw you. When everyone stands together that's when workers can have some power." (Gandolfo 2016: 38)

There were many disputes on the West Gate Bridge during its construction – over many different issues. When the commission released its report, it attributed some blame to the men and the unions for what it referred to as 'unjustfied' union stoppages. It accused the unions of 'malingering, bickering,

unnecessary absenteeism and other actions and accused them of industrial sabotage' (Hitchings 92):

> For their behavior on the contract, which inevitably led to the quite unnecessary weakness of the span at the relevant time, the unions and the men must bear their share of responsibility for the tragedy. (quoted in Hitchings 92)

Trying to map all the disputes and to assess this claim by the Commission, disputed by the unions, is difficult. What is clear is that the overseas companies did not understand the Australian unions and while demarcation issues seemed trivial to some, for the unions and the workers it was about protecting their jobs – as well as about issues of safety and making sure appropriately skilled people did the work. It is also the case that the unions were not represented at the Hearings after the first formal sitting. This was a decision made by Trades Hall – according to Hitchings because of the high cost of legal representation – but the result was that the union's perspective was often missing, and there was no opportunity to defend or justify the actions taken (Hitchings).

A few months before the collapse of the West Gate Bridge, another box girder bridge collapsed. The bridge in Milford Haven, Wales was also designed by Freeman Fox. The men asked questions, demanded answers, and were reassured by management that things were fine (WorkSafe Victoria's Construction Safety Circulation Service 2003). Why did they believe them? Because they wanted to believe their bridge was fine? Because they didn't want to go on strike again?

If the men had taken action after the Milford Haven collapse, if they had not believed the assurances given by the engineer from Freeman Fox (WorkSafe), and refused to return to work on the West Gate, no doubt this would have been categorised as another 'unjustified' strike.

Recently I gave some sections of The Bridge to a man who worked on the West Gate after the collapse. He said to me, 'You know it wasn't all horrible. We also had a good time working on the Bridge.' This is an important point. While as a political fiction writer, I want to write about the ways that working class men and women are often exploited and victimised, I do not want to take away from their humanity:

> When Antonello first started on the bridge, his cousins, his soccer mates, even some of his *Australiani* neighbours who hated the dagos who'd taken over their street, patted him on the back when they saw him, *hey hear you're working on the West Gate Bridge*. But with the increasing problems, the bridge became the butt of silly jokes round barbecues, at the bar in pubs across both sides of the river. *That bridge ain't ever going to be finished*. (Gandolfo 2016: 38)

Conclusion

In 2000, in 'Of a class' published in *Overland* (Gandolfo 2000), I wrote about growing up working class in the western suburbs of Melbourne in the 1950s and 60s and the way the area was changing. I wrote about what class meant to me, the nature of identity and the importance and influence of place. In a review of that issue of *Overland*,the reviewer, Terry Lane mentioned:

> …an article by Enza Gandolfo, who asks "What does it mean to be working class?" and then proceeds to answer the question in an essay paid for by grants from the Australia Council and a Varuna Writers Fellowship. Being working class boils down to being a child of migrants and having a chip on your shoulder.
>
> In fact the essence of being working class, if *Overland* 159 is anything to go by, is being perpetually angry, and getting it off your chest with big words. (Lane 2000)

Lane's review reminded me then, as it does now, that when writers write about injustice from a personal perspective, we are often attacked, especially by those who are in positions of privilege. This happens when women write about sexism and when black people write about race – *we should get over it, move on, we are always complaining, we have a chip on our shoulders* – it is not unique to the working class.

Some scholars and writers argue the novel as a form belongs to the middle classes: stories about middle class people, written for middle class readers (Shivani 2011; Williamson 2011)? When James Kelman's working class 1994 novel, *how late it was, how late*, was shortlisted for the Booker, one of the judges, critic Simon Jenkins, wrote in *The Times* that 'he despaired over the Booker judgment, raging at the "literary barrenness" of the novel and the act of "literary vandalism" involved in handing the award to Kelman' (Kirk 2007: 106). Kelman argued in several interviews that the issue was 'cultural imperialism through language':

> 'To me, those words are just another way of inferiorizing the language by indicating that there's a standard,' he said. 'The dictionary would use the term "debased". But it's the language! The living language, and it comes out of many different sources, including Scotland before the English arrived.' (Kelman quoted in Lyall 1994)

My novel is not written in the vernacular but it is a novel about the working class and aims to capture the voices of the working class men and women of my childhood, as well as some of the aspects of their lives including a 'consciousness of the social and historical importance of class antagonisms' (Syson 1993: 87).

As a novelist, both the political and the aesthetic are crucial to me. By telling the stories of these working class men and women my intention is to generate interest in the history of the West Gate Bridge, in the history of the working class and the unions, highlight the significance and implications of the collapse, and raise question about what class means in contemporary Australia. The aim is to create a work that will sit next to the historical documents and challenge the narratives they tell, give the ghosts a voice. As Nick Couldry argues in his book *Why voice matters: culture and politics after Neoliberalism:*

> Voice as a process ... is an irreducible part of what it means to be human; effective voice (the effective opportunity to have one's voice heard and taken into account) is a human good. "Voice" might therefore appear unquestionable as a value. But across various domains – economic, political, cultural – we are governed in ways that deny the value of voice and insist instead on the primacy of the market functioning. (Couldry 2010: vi)

No doubt the West Gate Bridge and its ghosts will continue to haunt me even after this novel is finished, I am not after exorcism. The story of the West Gate

Bridge disaster is part of the city I inhabit, part of its history and its present. Fiction has the potential to create a space in which new understandings are possible and new interactions might be envisaged.

Notes

[1] He is an Australian Rules footballer and he won the Brownlow Medal in 2015. return to text

[2] The West Gate Bridge Memorial http://www.westgatebridge.org/ (accessed 10 June 2016). return to text

[3] Fiction writers and poets have largely steered away from writing about the West Gate Bridge and its collapse. There are a couple of short stories, a couple of songs and poems, and a play by Vicki Reynolds. return to text

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