

UWL REPOSITORY
repository.uwl.ac.uk

The construction of (white) working-class identity in narrative literary texts and its contribution to socio-cultural and politico-financial inequality

Crewe, Jonathon ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4108-1551> (2021) The construction of (white) working-class identity in narrative literary texts and its contribution to socio-cultural and politico-financial inequality. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25 (3). pp. 237-251. ISSN 1479-7585

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1942943>

This is the Accepted Version of the final output.

UWL repository link: <https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/8162/>

Alternative formats: If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact: open.research@uwl.ac.uk

Copyright:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy: If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us at open.research@uwl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The construction of (white) working-class identity in narrative literary texts and its contribution to socio-cultural and politico-financial inequality

Jonathon Crewe

Department of Film, Media and Design, University of West London, London, UK

London School of Film, Media and Design, University of West London, St Mary's Rd,
London, W5 5RF

Work: 0800 036 8888 (ext. 2571)

Jonathon.Crewe@uwl.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4108-1551>

Jonathon Crewe is a writer and director for Film, Theatre and Radio. He founded the Human Factory filmmaking collective in 2004 where he wrote and directed a number of award-nominated and internationally exhibited short films. His debut feature film is currently in post-production, due for exhibition in Autumn 2020. His debut feature screenplay was shortlisted for a David Lean Award and he continues to work as a freelance screenwriter.

He has written and directed for radio, with three plays being produced and broadcast at Resonance FM. In 2016 he had his London theatre debut, writing and directing for the Brockley Jack Theatre. His award-nominated follow up was staged at the Bread and Roses Theatre in November 2019.

He completed his PhD Creative Writing at Surrey University where he investigated representations of the white working class in mainstream media, politics and contemporary literature. At Surrey he lectured in Screenwriting, Filmmaking and Creative Writing before moving to become a Lecturer in Film Production at the University of West London, where he lectures in Screenwriting, Fiction Production, Directing and Writing for Performance.

The construction of (white) working-class identity in narrative literary texts and its contribution to socio-cultural and politico-financial inequality

Using Fredric Jameson's theory of the ideologeme to trace representations of working- and white working-class characters through a selection of contemporary literary texts, this article shows how the construction of (white) working-class identity in literature has been influenced by, and fed back into, mainstream representations of the (white) working class in politics and media, thus contributing to cycles of socio-cultural, financial and political exclusion.

This article continues by arguing that there is a lack of rounded and developed white working-class characters in British fiction, specifically in London and the South-East, and that contemporary authors continue to rely on typified representations rather than interrogate them, therefore remaining complicit in feedback loops that work to marginalise the (white) working class.

To conclude, an argument is put forward in support of opening up space in the public arena for both imagined and real individual voices from marginalised groups to be heard, providing more direct access to channels of representation and an interrogation of the blame narratives that are used to maintain these groups' socio-economic and political exclusion.

Word Count: 7119

Keywords: working-class; white; literature; ideologeme; identity; socio-cultural

No potential conflict of interest reported.

This article argues that literature has been, and often still is, complicit in the marginalisation of the (white) working class through typified portrayals of (white) working-class characters and lifestyles, thus feeding cycles of negative representation and socio-cultural, financial and political exclusion. Tracing examples of typified depictions of working-class characters from writers such as Martin Amis, this article will then look at a selection of contemporary novels and demonstrate how the same tropes of working-class socio-cultural identity, and more specifically white working-class identity, are used in the construction of (white) working-class characters. This article continues by arguing that there is a lack of rounded and developed white working-class characters in British fiction, especially in London and the South-East, and that some contemporary authors continue to rely on typified representations rather than interrogate them, therefore remaining complicit in feedback loops that work to marginalise the (white) working class. To conclude, an argument is put forward in support of opening up space in the public arena for both imagined and real individual voices from marginalised groups to be heard, providing more direct access to channels of representation and an interrogation of the blame narratives that are used to maintain these groups' socio-economic exclusion.

It could be argued, given the relatively small proportion of products and consumers that literature contributes to the narrative-based industries, that literature's power to construct socio-cultural identities and to maintain financial and political hierarchies, is limited. However, literature's status as a classed cultural product allows it to disseminate and recirculate ideological representational structures to the elite, those with access to leading public bodies and institutions, thereby influencing mainstream media and political representations of excluded groups, and potentially government

policy (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Crewe, 2017). Thus, literature contributes disproportionately, in relation to its market share in narrative-based industries, to feedback loops of representation. By exposing these connections, this article aims to highlight, and put forward for scrutiny, the 'middle-class method of repressing reality...of leaving out, of strategic omissions, lapses, a kind of careful preliminary preparation of the raw material such that certain questions will never arise in the first place' (Jameson, 1988, pp118-119). In literature's case, how the construction of character within a novel can feed back into class identity politics, socio-cultural status, and financial and political hierarchies. As Adams and Raisborough put it in their study of representations of the 'chav' figure in mainstream media, how typified portrayals of white working-class characters are used to hold 'them in place (physical, imagined, and symbolic) and at a safe distance, whilst simultaneously establishing the morality and social standing of the valorized in group' (2011, p91). The stereotyped image of the white working-class subject as an object of ridicule and contempt works to support middle-class identities, setting distinct boundaries between respectable middle- and upper-class whites and the white poor (Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008; Webster, 2008). In an era where racist and sexist language have become taboo within public discourse, classist language has flourished (Webster, 2008). The 'chav' figure has emerged as one such designation that attempts to capture the essences of white working-class degeneracy, used to both entertain and reinforce middle-class identities through ironic and comic depictions (Tyler, 2008).

Fredric Jameson claims that central to this paradigm is the elite's, conscious and unconscious, fear of losing their socio-cultural status and the economic and political privileges associated with it. This anxiety of decline manifests itself in depictions of working-class lifestyles and the misery that accompanies them (Webster, 2008;

Jameson, 2013). These portrayals of working-class characters and environments are more specifically reflections of a continuing identity crisis in the author's own class. By adhering to mainstream media and political representations of the white working class as being violent, racist and culturally inferior, middle- and upper-class writers assume the opposite position of their own class existence, as nonviolent, anti-racist and culturally superior (Tew, 2007). In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson posits what could either be seen as the root cause or logical conclusion of this phenomenon: whoever is different constitutes a threat and is therefore evil, yet 'the essential point to be made is not so much that [they are] feared because [they are] evil; rather [they are] evil *because* [they are] Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar' (Jameson, 2010, p101, original italics). By highlighting the underlying motivations for an author's narrative choices when representing other, oppositional groups, Jameson suggests that any given literary text cannot be viewed as independent and autonomous in itself, but rather as being 'rewritten' as part of a set of traditional interpretative functions during the process of its reading (Jameson, 2010). As suggested above, literature is primarily a cultural output of the middle- and upper- class educated elite and is predominantly consumed by those who share the same socio-cultural identity. Therefore, as it is mostly the same group that writes and rewrites through interpretation, literature predominantly becomes a process of reasserting the primacy of one hegemonic class. As Jameson puts it, 'the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right' (Jameson, 2010, p64). In this way, literature can be seen as complicit in upholding hierarchical socio-cultural structures that maintain financial and political privilege, justified by the apparent degeneracy of the working class who cannot be trusted with power due to their socio-cultural and intellectual inadequacies.

A further reason for literature's disproportionate influence on the way in which the elite make assumptions and judgments about working-class lifestyles is the concept of literary realism, which claims that representation is achievable through mimesis. This assertion works to construct the sense of a shared system of belief or common-sense (Jameson, 1988), which includes the premise that it is morally justified to exclude the white working class from positions in leading public bodies and institutions because of their immoral and culturally deficient lifestyle choices. However, as Jameson argues, realism is nothing more than a set of traditional and pervasive codes that work to mask the underlying hegemonic class structures that permeate literature (Wood, 2009). A writer claims, consciously or unconsciously, to have access to the thoughts of the character, the 'truth' of their essence. When this character is a member of a marginalised 'other' group, such as the white working class, the claims of realism as representative feeds into the writing and rewriting through interpretation process, whereby the middle- and upper- class producers and consumers of literature, consciously or unconsciously, reaffirm their shared sense of belief in their own lifestyle choices as being normal and desirable by projecting the opposite and inferior cultural behaviour patterns onto the character in question. In this way, literature works to create and maintain what Gayatri Spivak (and Morris, 2010) calls the subaltern; those subordinate groups that are excluded from access to representation in areas of public discourse, including literature, which limits their ability to express themselves in the public arena (Bentley, 2008).

The contemporary white working-class cultural identity is constructed in mainstream media and politics through the same set of signifiers, which Webster claims are often associated with specific locations such as inner-city urban areas and estates (2008). These signifiers tend to show the *chav* figure as irrational, aggressive, lazy and

immoral, partaking in excessive consumption of alcohol, drugs and unhealthy food, all contributing to the general depiction of a flawed consumer unable or unwilling to make the 'correct' lifestyle and cultural choices (Haywood and Yar, 2006; Adams and Raisborough, 2011). Media depictions of working-class estates tend towards 'a general demonisation of estate inhabitants and the culture of social decay' (Hewitt, 2005, p53). Predominantly white inner-city estates are often shown as segregated zones of urban decay inhabited by a criminal white underclass, who freely choose to live there and, therefore, are the drivers of self-segregation (Webster, 2008). Spatial marginalisation of the white working class is a way in which political and media elites are able to reaffirm the different levels of acceptable whiteness, clearly marking the whiteness of the low-income estates as undesirable and their own as desirable. McKendrick *et al*'s study of media representation of poverty concluded that reports about the poor were, on the whole, negative, where 'notions of individual responsibility and connections between poverty and anti-social behaviour are never far from the centre of debate' (2008, p41). Even more telling is the way in which the mainstream media report poverty:

Although one-half of reports mentioning poverty in the UK are accompanied by an image (51 per cent), in three-quarters of these reports the image that accompanies the report is not an image of poverty (74 per cent). It is more likely that it will be a headshot of an authoritative expert voice such as a politician or a journalist. Images of poverty are evident in only 13 per cent of poverty reports in the UK (McKendrick *et al*, 2008, p21).

Low-income groups are not representing themselves. Their image is being created and disseminated, in the vast majority of cases, by media and political elites, and, as demonstrated by the McKendrick study, this image is overwhelmingly negative.

Realist literature works in a similar way, reproducing these signifiers to suggest ‘true’ working-class voices, in order to construct blame narratives that posit marginalised groups, such as the white working class, as the cause of their socio-economic and political exclusion. One possible way to trace examples of this process in British fiction is to identify recurring ideologemes, what Fredric Jameson describes as ‘the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes’ (Jameson, 2010, p61). Ideologemes work as both a conceptual construction and as a narrative sign, a duality that incorporates concepts such as beliefs and opinions as well as minimal units of socially symbolic narrative acts (Jameson, 2010). As such, they can be seen as the inherited units of representation upon which the process of writing and rewriting through interpretation bases its narrative construction. As Jameson puts it, ‘by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of...the ideology of form, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted...by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production’ (Jameson, 2010, p61). By identifying recurring ideologemes, the marginalisation of the lower classes in literature through conscious or unconscious typifications of character, lifestyle and environment can be traced. This article continues by selecting some key examples of recurring ideologemes of lower-class representation, beginning with Martin Amis and moving on to more contemporary writers.

The sense of contemporary crisis, a cultural decline into degradation and banality assumed by many twentieth century writers, is suffused with blame narratives that posit the lower classes and their flawed patterns of mass consumption as cause and effect of this phenomenon, whilst, through the ideological act of narrative production, holding their own classed existence up as the potential solution (Tew, 2007; Jameson, 2010). Whereas the Victorian ruling classes accused the working class of being barriers to modernisation, towards the end of the twentieth century these blame narratives shifted to the white working class as drivers of cultural decline (Crewe, 2017). This is articulated in a “‘chain of signifiers”’: familial disorder and dysfunction, dangerous masculinities,...antisocial behaviour, moral decay and quick to resort to criminality’ as well as ‘backwardness, degeneracy, over-fecundity, fecklessness’ (Webster, 2008, p307; p302). One key example of this trend would be the white working-class character, Keith Talent, from Martin Amis’s *London Fields*, who embodies all the signifiers mentioned above. This is how Nick Bentley describes Keith Talent in his book *Contemporary British Fiction*: ‘Keith is of limited intelligence and his cultural pursuits revolve around darts, football, pornography and TV. He is a violent petty criminal who preys on the weak and the vulnerable, mainly because he ‘failed’ to be ruthless enough to get into serious violent crime. He is a racist and abuses women’ (Bentley, 2008, p38). Taking examples from *London Fields* it is possible to trace recurring ideologemes through Amis’s working-class characterisation (All excerpts taken from Amis, 1989):

We parked under the shadow of the craning block — which sparked and flickered like ten thousand TV sets stacked up into the night. Keith hurried. He summoned the elevator but to his silent agony the elevator was dead or elsewhere. We climbed the

eleven floors, passing a litter of sick junkies sprawled out on the stairs in grumbling sleep (p102).

The dilapidated environment in the first extract is interwoven with Keith's character and appearance, highlighted again in the extract immediately below.

Then [Nicola] swivelled and inspected him, from arid crown to Cuban heels, as he cast his scavenging blue eyes around the room: Keith, stripped of all charisma from pub and street. It wasn't the posture, the scrawniness of the shanks and backside, the unpleasant body scent (he smelled as if he had just eaten a mustard-coated camel), the drunken scoop of his gaze - unappealing though these features certainly were. Just that Nicola saw at once with a shock (I knew it all along, she said to herself) that the capacity for love was extinct in him. It was never there (p72).

It's also worth noting here that both the descriptions above are from the perspective of middle-class characters, Samson Young and Nicola Six, an awareness shared by the upper-class Guy Flinch, but never with the white working-class Keith. Keith is never privy to self-awareness in the way the other middle- and upper-class characters are.

I wish to Christ I could do Keith's voice. The t's are viciously stressed. A brief guttural pop, like the first nanosecond of a cough or a hawk, accompanies the hard k. When he says

chaotic, and he says it frequently, it sounds like a death rattle.
'Month' comes out as mumf. He sometimes says, 'Im feory . . .'
when he speaks theoretically. 'There' sounds like dare or lair.
You could often run away with the impression that Keith Talent
is eighteen months old (p26).

Keith is ridiculed for his diction and inability to speak 'properly'. Amis expands this mockery of 'improper' speech by ridiculing Keith's lack of education, demonstrated in the extract below where Keith's inability to spell or construct 'correct' sentences is ridiculed, by both Amis and the educated middle-class character of Samson.

The Keith Talent Story [was where] Keith logged his intimate thoughts, most (but not all) of them darts-related. For example:

You cuold have a house so big you could have sevrall dart board

areas in it, not just won. With a little light on top.

Or:

Got to practice the finishing, got to. Go round the baord religiously. You can have all the power in the world but its no good if you can not finish.

Or:

~~Tedn Tendnen~~ Keep drifting to the left on the third dart, all them fuckign treble fives (p177).

Amis never interrogates the reasons why Keith is like he is or ever suggests that he could, or should, be given the opportunity, through education or any other means, to raise himself out of his socio-cultural status.

His lunch consisted of Chicken Pilaff and four Bramley Apple Pies. His tabloid consisted of kiss and tell, and then more kiss and tell, and then more kiss and more tell (p104).

As demonstrated in the extract above, Amis shows Keith to be irresponsible in his consumption patterns, expanding poor food choices into the world of mindless mass media consumption. The blame for this contemporary crisis of banality rests solely on Keith the consumer. Amis never once analyses the role of the producer in the consumption/production cycle of mass media, which is in the majority control of the elite, not in the hands of low-income groups.

The peculiar difficulty with girls experienced by...Keith was [he] raped them. Or [he] used to. The main reason [he] didn't do it any longer was that rape, in judicial terms (and in Keith's words), was no fucking joke: you just couldn't ever come out a winner, not with this DNA nonsense. The great days were gone...Of course, Keith's rapes were to be viewed quite distinctly from those numerous occasions when, in his youth, he had been obliged to slap into line various cockteasers and icebergs (and lesbians and godbotherers). Rape was different.

Rape was much more like all the other occasions...when he had candidly used main force to achieve intercourse (p168).

Finally, we have the construction of Keith as dangerously, and uncontrollably, sexually promiscuous, as opposed to Nicola's empowering, and controlled, sexuality. Whereas Keith's libido is interwoven with violence and aggression, Nicola's is interconnected with liberation, empowerment and pleasure. The implication being that Nicola understands and uses sex, where Keith blindly consumes it. Keith's sexual immorality is clearly highlighted by his propensity to rape women, shown in the extract above. Amis takes this to its furthest extreme in depicting Keith's sexual exploitation of an underage girl, demonstrated in the extract below.

And Debbie? Little Debbie? Well, Debbie was special. Dark, rounded, pouting, everything circular, ovoid, Debbie was 'special'. Debbie was special because Keith had been sleeping with her since she was twelve years old (p51).

The charges of 'typification' and stereotyping levelled at Amis are usually countered with the claim that he is using irony to expose and question such stereotypes across society as a whole. One such argument is put forward by Nick Bentley: 'All of Keith's negative attributes can be identified in society (and more significantly within what is constructed as working-class culture by certain sections of the middle classes), however, Amis is...alerting the reader to the implications of uncritically accepting these stereotypes' (2008, p39). However, if we take Jameson's argument from *The Political Unconscious*, then the reading of Amis's work must go further than Bentley's use of

irony as a defence. Instead the analysis must consider the ideologemes that are embedded into his novels and how they function in the process of writing and rewriting through interpretation, how *London Fields* as narrative production is a socially symbolic act (Jameson, 2010). As mentioned above, Keith is never self-aware, never conscious of his failings or the low socio-cultural status he embodies, which is in direct contrast to the three other major characters, Samson, Nicola and Guy. Each is well educated and drawn from the middle and upper classes. They have their own failings and they each attempt to manipulate the other characters for their own ends, yet they are all given a level of self-awareness and perception that Amis denies the only major working-class character. Nicola, Samson and Guy are all conscious of their socio-cultural status and thus distinctly aware that Keith's is lower. Underpinning all this is Amis's suggestion that only those with education and self-awareness have the ability for self-expression, a vital component, implied by Amis, for being able to truly experience life. Amis uses working-class cultural choices to reinforce his, and his implied reader's, own socio-cultural hegemony, attributing judgements and value to working-class cultural and consumer choices to stigmatise them 'as immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable' (Skeggs, 2005, p977). Insinuated by Amis is the idea that those without adequate education, most often found in the poorest groups in society, cannot understand or appreciate life. He stops just short of the logical next step; that these people do not deserve life.

Underlying Amis is the suggestion that the lower classes are unaware of their degradation, of their vulgar behaviours and lifestyles, but more importantly is that they have no desire to live any differently. They are the self-perpetuating cause of their socio-cultural status and economic and political exclusion. Amis, consciously or

unconsciously, constructs the middle and upper classes as the only classes that can recognise, understand and interpret the contemporary crisis of society. In effect, the class of the writer and implicitly the assumed class of the reader. As Tew succinctly puts it:

Authors may explore a sense of localised community in an increasingly disjointed world, but mostly through a middle-class prism...Nevertheless, rather than being subsumed by the crisis of an increasingly complex culture, the characters and narrators in a range of contemporary writers...very specifically interrogate the crises of identity of their own class, its enculturation and the species of peculiarity liminal urban ontological existence that they at least imagine that they particularly have to endure (Tew, 2007, p89).

The typified construction of working-class characters described above are clearly present in the ideologemes identified in Amis¹. The cause of which could be seen as derived ‘from a psycho-emotional imperative to fix other bodies into social and moral hierarchies’ (Adams and Raisborough, 2011, p91).

It could be argued that novelists originating from the middle class, such as Martin Amis, are, to some extent, far more likely to embed stereotypical working-class behaviours into their characters due to their backgrounds and are therefore less valid in terms of tracing how far typified working-class ideologemes permeate literary fiction.

¹ See Hewitt, 2005; Skeggs, 2005; Hayward and Yar, 2006; Tyler, 2008; Webster, 2008; Sveinsson, 2009; Adams and Raisborough, 2011; Rogaly, 2011; Crewe, 2017

However, it's possible to find traces even in novels written by authors from working-class backgrounds. A case in point is the novelist Tim Lott, the son of a West London greengrocer, whose 1999 novel *White City Blue* was a critical and commercial success, winning the Whitbread Award for Best First Novel. The book tells the story of Francis Blue who, similar to Lott, is a white working-class man who grew up in inner West London. The protagonist, the son of a coal man, has managed to gain a university degree and is a successful and affluent estate agent. His three friends, whose relationships with Francis are the focus of the novel, are all from the white working class; Nodge - a taxi driver, Tony - a hairdresser, and Colin - a low-level I.T. worker. It might be expected that a writer from a white working-class background, who grew up in inner London and has recently been openly critical of the restrictions white working-class writers and stories face from the publishing industry (Lott, 2015), would be conscious to avoid clichéd or stereotypical representations of working-class communities and individuals. Yet, the ideologemes identified in this article can be found embedded in *White City Blue*. One such example from the book comes when Francis describes the White City Estate where Colin lives:

the smell of chips and junk-fed babies, small cascades of ripped and discarded lottery tickets, rattling beer cans sucked dry by collapsing scumbags (Lott, 2000, p89).

Similar to the descriptions of working-class districts seen above (and below), the estate reflects the culturally inferior lifestyles of the residents. Lott constructs them as disgusting with the use of the derogatory term 'scumbag', poor consumers with the reference to chips, alcohol and 'junk', petty gamblers and bad parents. His prose,

similar to Amis, caricaturises the estate residents, going beyond pure visual description and thus invoking vivid judgemental assumptions through embedded 'known', rather than 'seen', tropes. Lott continues the theme with Francis worrying that the children on the estate are going to attack him, damage his BMW or steal his computer, adding criminality to the list of identifiers of estate inhabitants. He describes his potential assailant as a 'white Reeboked, stone-washed, malnourished welfare burden' (Lott, 2000, p89). In this description Lott adds the signifiers of dress and appearance to the list of deficiencies that are ascribed to the poor. Their choice of attire becomes signifiers of inferiority, immorality and separation from the mainstream, clothing and consumption patterns becoming ways in which individuals are recognised by those of other groups and, as a result, become determinants of exclusion or inclusion, acceptance or contempt (Haywood and Yar, 2006). Finally, by calling the estate residents 'welfare burden', he includes feckless, lazy and unemployed to characteristics that complete the novel's representation of working-class estate residents. Lott's usage of these ideologemes re-affirms that cultural assimilation, the acceptance of middle- and upper-class lifestyles as 'normal' and 'desirable', is the only way to improve oneself and escape, what is defined by the ideologemes as, an inferior class. Francis's financial success and assumption of middle-class consumer habits and behaviours is constructed in the novel as positive and desirable. The residents of the estate, the class Francis has left behind, are constructed as negative, deviant and inferior. Thus, re-enforcing the socio-cultural, and as a result the politico-economic, hierarchy.

Turning to post-millennial fiction, particularly work set in urban environments, on the surface there seems to be a shift away from novels that deal with class identity. Instead, the politics of race, gender and sexual identity have become more prominent subjects

(Bentley, 2007; Jameson, 2012; Lott, 2015). When class is addressed it appears to be conflated with that of ethnicity, where working class is often seen to mean *white* working class (Lott, 2015; see Crewe, 2017). The urban, inner-city, estate-dwelling, white working-class subject has become, at least in part, racially constructed (Byrne, 2006). The key point being that the whiteness in question is connected only to socially excluded, poor and deprived whites, whereas the white middle and upper classes maintain an invisible or implicit whiteness (Webster, 2008; Rogaly, 2011; Crewe, 2017). As such, the ideologemes of lower-class representation traced through the examples above have also been conflated with that of ethnicity. White working-class characters are still created in terms of their geographic connection to spatialised poverty, most often inner-city estates, where their inferior and immoral lifestyles are interwoven with urban decay, and are constructed as the self-generated and perpetuated cause and effect of their socio-economic exclusion (Webster, 2008). Yet, now the white working class are also portrayed as the main proponents of racism (Webster, 2008; Lott, 2015). Sveinsson, writing in the Runnymede Trust's report *Who Cares About the White Working Class?*, suggests that, 'feigning white working class disadvantage as an ethnic disadvantage rather than as class disadvantage is exactly what rhetorically places this group in direct competition with minority ethnic groups.' (2009, p.6). Shifting focus away from class and onto race detracts attention from the common problems that poor white communities share with other disadvantaged minority ethnic and immigrant groups, that of increasing separation from middle and upper classes, who as a result avoid moving down the social hierarchy (Gavron, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2013; see Crewe, 2017).

To see this process in action, below is a selection of key examples from contemporary writers that include either the ideologemes discussed above or the

conflation of these with the added ideologeme of the inherently racist, lower-class, urban white.

The housing estates looked like makeshift prison camps; dogs ran around; rubbish blew about; there was graffiti... The shops sold only inadequate and badly made clothes. Everything looked cheap and shabby (From *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi, 2009, pp223-224).

...the estate unfolds before her like a dark shadow, a vast landscape of council flats, barking dogs and worn-out grass. Filth is strewn everywhere, and a group of kids are playing what seems to be an organised game of football using a tin can instead of a ball. She walks past Bojangles, which she can see is a former Catholic church that has now become the estate disco, and then she passes the cracked and peeling outdoor swimming pool, which looks as though it has never seen water. Pretoria Drive leads to Pretoria Mansions, and she climbs the stinking urine-stained circular staircase to the third floor (From *A Distant Shore*, Phillips, 2004, pp264-265).

In these first two extracts we can identify the same ideologemes that work to interweave spatialised poverty with the lower classes. They are dirty, uncared for by the residents, who, as a signifier of out-of-control bodies, even use the buildings as toilets. The motif of the feral dog highlights a lack of order or control. The closed church a signifier of an

irreligious, and potentially immoral, local population. Poor consumption patterns are emphasised in the description of the unsuitable local shops, and more acutely in the implication of wasted money on alcohol and gambling, whilst poor diet choices are conflated with inadequate parenting skills. Each extract carries the signifiers of working-class patterns of behaviour and lifestyles and exhibit, embedded within them, the ideologemes identified in the previous section. In each of the novels the extracts are taken from, the writer has omitted any interrogation of the housing and environmental conditions of lower-income groups. There is no discussion on how or why the inhabitants live there, what economic or political factors could have contributed to the assumed urban decay, or even if these estates are representative of all inner-city estates. As such, each extract carries the assumption that they are providing an accurate and normative representation of lower-income districts and their inhabitants. This supports the underlying assumption of a natural socio-cultural hierarchy and the implicit justification of economic and political exclusion. It is worth noting, though, that Phillips does work consciously to interrogate and juxtapose representational codes. For example, in the extract above, the reference to the South African executive capital, Pretoria, most likely works to question the historical legacy of racial segregation in the United Kingdom. However, Phillips's portrayal of the sink estate per se is not challenged and as a result there is a lack of interrogation into his representations of poverty. In fact, neither Kureishi nor Phillips suggest that a lack of investment by local (and national) government could have contributed to the condition of the area, and thereby fail to recognise that the low-standards of living in low-income districts are not the sole choice or responsibility of their residents.

In the extracts below, the typified portrayals of the working class are conflated with that of ethnicity in the construction of white working-class characters. The first

extract is taken from Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). The book tells the story of a Bangladeshi woman's life in London after coming to England to live with her husband. This extract is taken from the protagonist, Nazneem's, early experiences of living on an east London council estate:

The tattoo lady had no curtains at all. Morning and afternoon she sat with her big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair, tipping forward to drop ash in a bowl, tipping back to slug from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window...She scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks. She yawned and lit a cigarette. At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink...The [designs] were ugly and made the tattoo lady more ugly than necessary, but the tattoo lady clearly did not care. Every time Nazneem saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment (From *Brick Lane*, Ali, 2007, p17-18).

Ali's tattoo lady embodies the signifiers of lower-class lifestyles; poor consumption habits, excessive alcohol and nicotine abuse, overweight, badly dressed, ugly, lazy, and indifferent to it all. What sets this passage apart from the earlier extracts is the very visible contrast between the tattoo lady and the protagonist, Nazneem; the attractive, curious, appearance-conscious, Bangladeshi immigrant, whose own henna tattoos are portrayed as an enhancement of her beauty. Implicit in this juxtaposition is the encoding of ethnicity onto white working-class patterns of behaviour and lifestyles. Although, it is worth noting that Ali develops the symbolic relationship between

Nazneem and the tattoo lady as the novel progresses. When Nazneem discovers that the tattoo lady was found sitting in her own faeces and taken to an institute, she questions why nobody saw or helped her. The tattoo lady becomes representative, in the 'passive' sense, of the white working-class subject, equally invisible and silenced as Nazneem herself. As such, Ali provides a critique on a society where poverty is hidden and ignored by those in power, regardless of ethnicity.

The first scene with the tattoo lady also foregrounds the conflict between the Bangladeshi community's 'Bengal Tigers' and the 'active' white working-class 'Lion Hearts' that appears later in the book. The latter are set up as demanding their right to use the community centre for pornography, drinking and gambling, whereas the former are purely in opposition to this, making more reasonable demands; *no* pornography, *no* drinking and *no* gambling. The white working-class community is represented through the ideologemes identified above, yet this time constructed as being in opposition to minority ethnic and immigrant groups, implicitly embedding racism in their cultural identity. As such, Ali replicates what Gavron identifies, in *Who Cares About the White Working Class?*, as a consistent focus in the media on the struggle for scarce resources that pits white working-class communities against other ethnic and immigrant groups (2009). Thus, potentially feeding into what Wendy Bottero calls a '*cultural* reading of inequality, focusing on the distinctive cultural values of disadvantaged groups, rather than looking at the bigger picture of how systematic inequality generates disadvantage' (2009, p.7, original italics).

This conflation of working-class identities with white working-class racism can be seen in many other examples taken from contemporary British fiction. The first of these returns to *A Distant Shore*:

Feroza was aware that her husband could no longer stomach the disrespectful confusion of running a restaurant. The sight of fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath, and bellowing for mini-cabs and food that they were too drunk to see had already arrived on the table in front of them, was causing Mahmood to turn prematurely grey (From *A Distant Shore*, Phillips, 2004, p202).

In the extract above, racism is interwoven with poor consumption habits and excessive alcohol consumption, combined with violence and aggression. The extracts below further cement the inclusion of racism into the ideologemes that construct white working-class characters and culture:

The area in which Jamila lived was closer to London than our suburbs, and far poorer. It was full of neo-fascist groups. Thugs who had their own pubs and clubs and shops. On Saturdays they'd be out in the High Street selling their newspapers and pamphlets. They also operated outside the schools and colleges and football grounds, like Milwall and Crystal Palace. At night they roamed the streets, beating Asians and shoving shit and burning rags through their letter-boxes. Frequently the mean, white, hating faces had public meetings and the Union Jacks

were paraded through the streets...The lives of Anwar and Jeeta and Jamila were pervaded by fear of violence...Jeeta kept buckets of water around her bed in case the shop was fire-bombed in the night. Many of Jamila's attitudes were inspired by the possibility that a white group might kill one of us one day (From *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi, 2009, p56).

The extract above combines the ideologeme of intertwining low-income locations with their inhabitants' cultural inferiority, violence and immorality, with the notion of the intrinsic and organised racism of the white working class. Kureishi constructs violent racism as a symptom of cultural inferiority and conflates it with both poverty and white ethnicity. It is worth noting, however, that at the same time, Kureishi uses irony to expose middle-class desire for authenticity in the *other*. One example can be seen in the Scottish working-class character, Heater, who is constantly asked to repeat stories about working-class violence even though he himself would prefer to discuss literature or philosophy. However, Kureishi still associates violent racism with the white working-class community, locating it in areas of poverty, yet never questions the underlying reasons for this aggression, or if it is truly representative of *all* white working-class people.

The construction of the white working-class identity as a set of signifiers can be seen in this extract from Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*:

Up ahead I see a group of four boys walking towards me. For a moment I consider turning about-face, but I do not wish to turn my back on them for I know they do not desire to use me well.

It is better that I can see them. After all, I recognise them. They are strangely almost hairless, with egg-shaped heads and blue tattoos on their bare arms. They all wear polished boots, which suggests a uniform of some kind, but the rest of their clothes are ill-matched (Solomon/Gabriel describing his murderers in *A Distant Shore*, Phillips, 2004, p282).

In the above example, the signifiers of the white working-class subject are explicitly conflated with intrinsic violent racism, culminating in the racially motivated murder of Gabriel/Solomon, a refugee from Africa. Not only does Gabriel/Solomon 'recognise them', Phillips expects the assumed reader to do as well.

The mainstream media and political representations of the white working class as being violent, culturally inferior and the drivers of racism in England can be found throughout contemporary literature, confirming the argument that literature, to an extent, tends to be complicit in the feedback loops of representation that work to exclude the white working class. This essay, however, is not claiming that all contemporary authors use simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of (white) working-class characters. In fact, there are a number of writers who purposely challenge media and political constructions of the working-class, most notably James Kelman from Scotland, Kit de Waal from Birmingham, Beryl Bainbridge from Liverpool, Pat Barker from Yorkshire, to name a few. What is noticeable though, according to Tim Lott in an article for the *Guardian* newspaper, is that it appears 'as if the working class south of Manchester does not exist in literary terms, despite London and the south-east containing some of the worst areas of deprivation in Europe' (Lott, 2015). Given that

London is home to the United Kingdom's largest (white) working-class population, there does appear to be a lack of novelists from, or writing about, this group. One such writer, however, is Zadie Smith, a contemporary of Monica Ali, whose debut novel *White Teeth* provides a complex and nuanced approach to depicting the lives of working-class, multicultural and multi-ethnic Londoners. Her 'characters' lives reflect aspects of a difficult evolution of British culture and identity. Her vision is neither utopian or essentialist' (Tew, 2010, p68). As with *Brick Lane*, Smith investigates the intersection between class and ethnicity. However, unlike Ali's use of white working-class characters, Smith allows her central character from that group, Archie Jones, to be fully developed and rounded. He is both incredibly mundane, but at the same time, 'there is much positivity in [his] vague idealism, and it stands...in opposition to the middle-class values of intervening in and shaping culture' (Tew, 2010, p67). Archie is white and working class, yet Smith provides him a nuanced approach to race, where his wife and best friend are both from minority ethnic backgrounds. In *White Teeth*, Smith recognises that it is traditionally white working-class communities that have absorbed a far higher proportion of immigrants than the communities of their white middle- and upper-class counterparts, who tend to be grouped together in 'essentially white settlements' (Butler and Robson, 2003, p2). As such, her working-class characters are constantly *experiencing* life in multi-cultural communities, rather than *theorising* it from outside. This is highlighted most starkly in Smith's ironic take on middle-class values and the liberal left, as epitomised by the Chalfen family (Tew 2010). Underneath this comedic portrayal, Smith inserts a serious criticism of middle-class assumptions about working-class prejudice. In her juxtaposition of Archie *et al* and the Chalfens, in particular Joyce and her 'thinly-veiled racism' and interest in the 'possibilities of a hybridised nation on an intellectual level' whilst treating Irie and Millat with a 'deep

seated liberal intellectual racism' (Moss, 2003, p15), Smith foreshadows Sara Ahmed's assertion that 'the discourse of tolerance involves a presumption that racism is caused by ignorance, and that anti-racism will come about through more knowledge, [and that we] must contest the classism of the assumption that racism is caused by ignorance – which allows racism to be seen as what the working classes (or other less literate others) do' (Ahmed, 2004, p14). As such, Smith stands in contrast to the contemporary authors analysed above. Yet, at least in London and the South East, her depictions of the white working class remain the exception rather than the norm.

Most notable about many writers of the contemporary period is that, although they are consciously interrogating racialised constructions of minority ethnic and immigrant characters and lifestyles, their, conscious or unconscious, embedding and conflation of racist and working-class ideologemes actually work to racialise the white working class. As such, contemporary writers risk feeding back into the white middle- and upper-class hegemonic structures that keep narrative literature intrinsically linked to the socio-cultural construction of classed identities. The ideologemes that permeate contemporary literature work to construct the white working class as violent, culturally inferior and the main drivers of racism, are the same ideologemes that work to reaffirm the writer's and assumed reader's² class as 'other' to the white working class, nonviolent, culturally superior and anti-racist.

² Literary fiction's traditional status as a medium of the elite has permeated through to contemporary society where the assumed readership of the publishing houses is that of middle- and upper-class groups who will recognise and relate to the representational codes embedded in the texts. This may change with the advent of the internet and opportunities for

In conclusion, there is a need for more contemporary literary novels to work with and against prevailing typifications of white working-class characters and lifestyles in order to interrogate the writing and rewriting through interpretation process as a socially symbolic act, confronting the prevailing assumptions of the dominant politico-cultural class about the lives of the white working class. Thus, exposing the literary ideologemes that feedback into mainstream media and political representation of the white working class, and at the same time opening a space in the public arena for that excluded group to speak. Similar to Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*, where the novel works to ‘provide a textual space in which the subaltern can speak,...an alternative form and medium through which that voice might be heard. [Where the writer] can produce a representative voice by adopting the marginalised position of the subaltern’ (Bentley, 2008, p85). Essentially, this article calls for narrative fiction that mimics the intentions of *Brick Lane*, but from the perspective of the white working-class subject and community. Ultimately with the aim of opening up the space left by this gap in contemporary British fiction by exposing the hidden potential of the white working-class voice, which is as nuanced and complex as any other, and cannot and should not be reduced to a derogative stereotype.

Bibliography

ADAMS, M. and RAISBOROUGH, J., 2011. The self-control ethos and the ‘chav’: Unpacking cultural representations of the white working class. *Culture & Psychology*, 17(1), pp. 81-97.

AHMED, S., 2004. Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism. *Borderlands ejournal*, 3(2), pp. 1-16.

self-publishing, but at the time of writing, the major publishing houses are still in the majority control of independently educated, white middle- and upper-class elites.

- ALI, M., 2007. *Brick Lane*. London: Black Swan.
- AMIS, M., 1989. *London Fields*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- BENTLEY, N., 2008. *Contemporary British fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- BOTTERO, W., 2009. Class in the 21st Century. In: SVEINSSON, K.P., ed. 2009. *Who cares about the white working class?* London: Runnymede Trust.
- BUTLER, T. and ROBSON, G., 2003. *London calling: the middle classes and the remaking of Inner London*. Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Berg.
- BYRNE, B., 2006. *White lives: the interplay of 'race', class, and gender in everyday life*. London; New York: Routledge.
- CREWE, J. 2017. 'Another London: A novel and critical commentary investigating representations of the white working class in media, politics and literature in an age of multiculturalism', PhD diss., The University of Surrey. Available at <http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/id/eprint/813208>
- GAVRON, K., 2009. Foreword. In: SVEINSSON, K.P., ed. 2009. *Who cares about the white working class?* London: Runnymede Trust.
- HAYWARD, K. and YAR, M., 2006. The 'chav' phenomenon: Consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2(1), pp. 9-28.
- HEWITT, R., 2005. *White backlash and the politics of multiculturalism*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- JAMESON, F., 1988. *The ideologies of theory. Essays 1971-1986* 2 2. London: Routledge.
- JAMESON, F., 2010. *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act*. London: Routledge.
- JAMESON, F., 2012. Antinomies of the realism-modernism debate. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73(3), pp. 475-485.
- JAMESON, F., 2013. *The antinomies of realism*. London: Verso.
- KUREISHI, H., 2009. *The Buddha of suburbia*. London: Faber.
- LEVINE-RASKY, C., 2013. *Whiteness Fractured*. Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- LOTT, T., 2000. *White City Blue*. London: Penguin.

- LOTT, T., 2015. The loneliness of the working-class writer. *The Guardian* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/07/loneliness-working-class-writer-english-novelists> [Accessed on: 17th August 2015].
- MCKENDRICK, J.H., SINCLAIR, S., IRWIN, A., O'DONNELL, H., SCOTT, G. and DOBBIE, L., 2008. *The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK*. UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- MOSS, L., 2003. 'The politics of everyday hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*', *Wasafiri*, 18:39, 11-17
- PHILLIPS, C., 2004. *A Distant Shore*. London: Vintage.
- ROGALY, B., 2011. '*Indigenous*' transnationalism: life geographies of the 'white working-class'. [Working Paper edition] UK: Institute for the Study of European Transitions.
- SKEGGS, B., 2005. The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation. *Sociology*, 39(5), pp. 965-982.
- SMITH, Z., 2000. *White Teeth*. London: Penguin.
- SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CHILD POVERTY COMMISSION, 2014. *Elitist Britain?* UK: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.
- SPIVAK, G.C. and MORRIS, R.C., 2010. *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- SVEINSSON, K.P., ed. 2009. *Who cares about the white working class?* London: Runnymede Trust.
- TEW, P., 2007. *The contemporary British novel*. London; New York: Continuum.
- TEW, P., 2010. *Zadie Smith*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- TYLER, K., 2008. Majority Cultures and the Everyday Politics of Ethnic Difference. In: PETERSSON, B. and TYLER, K., eds. 2008. *Majority cultures and the everyday practices of ethnic difference: whose house is this?* Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- WEBSTER, C., 2008. Marginalized white ethnicity, race and crime. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12(3), pp. 293-312.
- WOOD, J., 2009. *How fiction works*. London: Vintage books.