what happens next, but also, with a critic's puzzlement, in an effort to 'place' the genre. The book is described as a 'memoir'; a positively Chaucerian moral-tale-with-social-commentary results. The delicious sketches are fuller of implications than they seem and repay return visits, but the central character is never quite in full view. He remains observer and not observed. Eagleton is rightly confident that his readers will be so enchanted by his stories that they will not gaze too hard at the Anglo-Saxon attitudes being struck by the narrator himself.

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BOTH WARNING AND MEMORIAL: A MAJOR BOOK ON WORKING-CLASS LIFE

The likes of us: a biography of the white working class. Michael Collins, 2004. London: Granta Books; ISBN 1862076006, 240 pp., £12, paper.

Michael Collins was born in Walworth, southeast London, in 1961, and has written 'the inside story of a tribe on a particular reservation and during a particular period, as told by an erstwhile native son' (with special thanks to his dad in the Acknowledgements). His age, class and gender are significant ingredients and vantage points within this biography: 'A native attempt to take an audit of the area and its inhabitants, including my family, from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to cast an eye over those aforementioned missionaries who attempted to bring about change' (p. 11). Collins' tripartite structure further evokes a sense of ethnographic quest. 'An Excavation', 'An Evocation' and 'An Expedition' draw you in through history and auto/biography, as he identifies southeast London as 'an educational desert' of 'destitute and depraved children' (p. 30) with 68% below the poverty line in the 1890s (p. 44); 'a culture created in isolation, distinct from the official culture of the country' (p. 54).

Stigma, social and economic disadvantage, marginality, disruption, endurance mark this story; as well as 'lives of love and perseverance' (cited p. 80), lived in conditions of gruelling poverty, indefensible overcrowding and inhumane working conditions (p. 101). It was in the 1930s that Collins's grandmother, 'an efficient working-class housewife' (p. 118), whose story threads through the book from beginning to end, reached her lowest point since losing her first child, a two-year old son: 'Even though she and Bill were in work, their incomes could barely help them sustain a decent standard of living. The bills piled up, and she seriously considered suicide' (p. 119). The familiar features of white

working-class lives in the early nineteenth century and into the 1930s are given an extra edge by the way that Collins ties his own family history to class history throughout his narrative.

Object of scrutiny, subject to change

The slum journalism of the 1880s and the slum fiction movement a decade later would take the circumstances and materials of working-class lives as their impetus, just as social and religious missionaries and 'radicals' saw them as material for conversion: as ever, the object of inquiry, disparagement, policy and intervention.

Unlike the languages of recent immigrants, 'the local dialect, native to the working-class Londoner' (p. 85) was not a heritage to be respected in school. The Conference on the Teaching of English in London Elementary Schools, 1909, reported: 'The cockney mode of speech . . . is unworthy of being the speech of any person in the capital city of the empire' (cited p. 85). Would my father (two at the time and growing up in the East End of London) have been aware of this stigma later in life, I wondered? Or did his socialist politics protect him?

After all, in the 1930s, 'within the upper classes there emerged a generation that positively embraced the idea of the proletariat' (p. 113), if not their actual bodies. And while, according to upper- and middle-class observers (pp. 115, 123, 126), neither the politics of fascism (upper-class offspring) or socialism (upper and middle class) attracted 'the working man', those in the working class were deemed to have revolutionary potential by those who documented, theorized and sought to direct their lives. Collins counters with an insider's view (p. 11):

> This class more than any other is inextricably linked with the concept of home, a street, a neighbourhood, a community. Yet historically, the landscape of the urban working class has been subject to more change than elsewhere because of redevelopment, the arrival of migrants en masse, and incessant attempts to accommodate its dense population.

Mass culture, consumer goods, no books

After the long build-up of the opening section, 'Excavation', it is clear that Collins's book is more than the audit he announces in his Preface. He tracks his 'tribe' from their 'reservation' to 'the satellite suburbs of south-east London' (p. 10); then, in the 1980s, the mass exodus spilling further afield into Kent (p. 207).

Despite more affordable consumer goods towards the end of the 1930s (p. 128), and the beginnings of 'mass culture' and consumerism in the 1950s (p. 137), Collins notes that 'the working class . . . did not become

middle class and continued to have little contact with those from other classes' (p. 151). Even the younger generation of Southwark 'held fast to many of those "older" values, living by habit, aphorism and ritual, adhering to an oral tradition' (p. 152). Collins's childhood spanned the 1960s and 1970s, and he notes: 'like most of the neighbours, we lived in a home where no one bothered with books' (p. 170). There are many such jolts to the system throughout the book. I found myself regularly checking: what was I doing at the time, what were my circumstances? And thinking how lucky I was to grow up with books, education and politics; and without the shadow of poverty.

Cinema (from 1917, the year of Chaplin's *Easy Street*, through the boom cinema years of the 1920s and 1930s), radio (from 1922) and then TV would make greater inroads into working-class culture and habits than reading books. These could be accommodated as family and community activities, as opposed to the solitary and individual nature of reading, which signals the beginnings of 'separation' and difference within the white working-class family.

Suzanne Moore's mum used to say when her working-class daughter showed signs of growing up 'shiny': 'Suzanne's reading. She's a bit depressed' (Burchill, 1998: 62). And reading may be a greater risk to working-class *masculinity*, being both associated with middle-class lifestyles and identified as *effete*. The class and gender connotations and the social and political significance of reading (and therefore not reading) cannot be overstated, as Julie Burchill notes in her own autobiography of a white working-class childhood:

> It looks like the most passive activity known to man; people who give 'reading' as their hobby qualify themselves as automatic wallflowers. Yet reading has rocked more worlds, turned more heads, changed more lives than sex, drugs and Nintendo put together. . . . If you don't read books, you really have been fucked over in a major way. . . . To read, voluntarily, is the first step to asserting the fact that *you know there is somewhere else.*
>
> (Burchill, 1998: 46)

But for those white working-class boys who had not already adopted reading as a significant and pleasurable activity, reading has perhaps been somewhat bypassed in this function by the visual media: by film, TV and advertising, which now promote 'see and buy/be'. From the outset, thanks to hire purchase and rentals, the majority of TV sets were in the homes of low-income families. And 'seventy percent of those with TV licences had not been educated beyond the age of fifteen' (p. 171). This is how 'information from the global village flooded into family homes' (ibid.).

Working-class writer Richard Hoggart would mourn what he saw as the corruption of [white] working-class culture and values by the mass media.

The fact that white working-class boys in numbers still refuse to read suggests that social isolation, cultural insularity and territoriality remain persistent features of traditional working-class masculinity, which men in general accept and/or identify with (see Walsh, 2005). Writing nearly fifty years after Hoggart, Collins shows the situation to be more serious, more damaging, more complex than Hoggart foresaw in his own ground-breaking book, *The Uses of Literacy*: unforeseen and different.

Englishness: citizens, natives, immigrants

After 1960s classlessness and 1970s multiculturalism (p. 221), 'race was embraced and class relegated to the back burner' (p. 222), and after the economic, demographic and political changes of the 1980s, it became evident that: 'Many of the urban white working class saw themselves more as part of an ethnic group united by colour and culture [pub, street market, street, football], than as a class united by their work' (pp. 188–89). The social and political consequences of this were unforeseen by politicians and commentators, who do not see the white working-class 'diaspora' (p. 80) as an uprooting: a consequential loss, not just of community and place (a geography), but of the roots of white working-class identity and its attachments (auto/biographical meaning). Reading Collins, it feels like a *wound*, ignored at our peril. And that 'our' is all-inclusive.

Significantly, the book's Preface, 'Everybody's Obituary', takes as its point of departure the murder of young, black Stephen Lawrence, in southeast London: 'what became apparent in the aftermath of the inquiry was that reports on racism had segued into a demonization of the white working class' (p. 8). This *injury* is the trigger for Collins to put the record straight, and signals his deep purpose. His account is both raw and astute: simultaneously an accumulation of compelling detail and a kind of mourning; moving to explicit indictment, particularly in the hard-hitting final section, 'An Expedition', in which he is scathing about the role of the media and other cultural movers in the misidentification, marginalization and demonization of an indigenous population: these *native sons, his tribe, his community*. He cites the fear and failure of white middle-class professionals to challenge the demonization of white working-class people in the midst of multiculturalism. And now, the undeniable unlovability of the ranting white working-class racist is allowed to drown out the fact that (p. 223):

> Modern-day white working class had a more varied, more honest, more intimate experience, having known non-whites as lovers, muggers, husbands, killers, wives, victims, neighbours, rapists, friends, foes, attackers, carers. For decades, the urban white working class had largely

been educated in multiracial schools, worked in multiracial environments, and lived in multiracial neighbourhoods.

White working-class people have proved their 'tolerance' and adaptability on the ground, despite initial fears. By contrast, Collins 'names and shames' (a roll-call of 'left' establishment artists, critics, commentators), and asks: 'What could be a pain-free Englishness that wouldn't upset the sensibilities of any of the nation's citizens in these post-imperial, multicultural, EU days' (p. 229). 'Us English' have been airbrushed out by 'multicultural rebranding' (p. 263). For the natives themselves, the greatest threat to white working-class culture was not mass media or American-style consumerism, but 'the arrival, en masse, of black immigrants' (p. 189).

The spotlight fell on the issue of Englishness, which the white working class were said to be as attached to as the aristocracy. This has been my experience of the tribe, who see patriotism, even nationalism, as an extension of their attachment to a street, a neighbourhood (pp. 228–29).

Collins's biography culminates in a social and political time bomb, which renders his book as itself incendiary.

Loss, exile, opportunity

Collins wants commentators and readers to look deeper: at the foundation of white working-class views that express a sense of having been ousted, becoming foreigners at home, of being second class. And he reiterates 'the insularity and attachment to place that defines the white working class, and *which is born of a lack of opportunity*' (p. 237, emphasis added). In the final pages, there is poignancy, as he and several former neighbours look back and recall: 'That ubiquitous eye of the neighbours that helped cocoon us as kids, translated into nosiness and interference when we were adolescents, and how it seemed to be checking for a code to which we were expected to conform, and which appeared to threaten any ambitions beyond the familiar and the well-trodden, when we were heading for adulthood' (p. 254). Born in 1959, two years before Collins, Burchill has also testified to this 'trap', and the particular form it would take for a white working-class girl in Bristol in the 1970s: 'death by matrimony' (Burchill, 1998: 19).

The issues of class and literacy, of class and language, of reading as access to and engagement with mainstream culture, remain contentious, not just because so many working-class children (and boys in particular) still fail to achieve sociolinguistic confidence in a 'native' language which still counts as an 'other' language, another culture. Oral tradition is *internal* to the tribe; it does not serve communication with Others, rather it serves to define 'outsiders'. In these circumstances, cultural participation

as opposed to consumerism, and social/political dialogue as opposed to insularity, are problematic, even objectionable. 'I don't do dialogue with the middle class', one Mersey activist retorted to me online, after, on stumbling into what felt like a boys' playground of fighting and conflict between various 'left' activists, I suggested dialogue and alliance (as opposed to macho linguistic and communication styles) as vital ways forward! There's a fixity about this stance, which is both futile and scary.

Money can be acquired without the loss of class identity and allegiance: without class guilt. However, reading and education are cognitive, cultural processes with significant and complex consequences, not just for employment. For example, for white working-class people there are risks of both public exposure/failure to achieve, and (worse?) 'class betrayal' (see Walsh, 2005).

Take-up of higher education (particularly by working-class boys, black or white) is still low, and the white working class has split into those who have entered the middle class via education, and those who have become (labelled) lower middle class via money (p. 208). Collins points out that moving nearer the rural areas into better housing and cleaner air, has not endeared the latter to the middle and upper classes, including their erstwhile 'promoters' on the left (pp. 208–10).

Belonging

Unlike Hoggart before him, Collins identifies whiteness as crucial to his narrative about working-class identity and culture, but like Hoggart, his working-class is a default *masculinity*, which he fails to make explicit or reflexively interrogate. This has the effect of subsuming white working-class women within the men's lives, as happens, and fails to highlight gender as a significant social and psychic difference within white working-class narratives. While Hoggart and Collins are preoccupied with oral tradition, loss and social justice, the auto/biographical testimony of women from white working-class backgrounds demonstrates different motivational drives: 'my mother's longing shaped my own childhood', writes Carolyn Steedman (1986: 6). Shame, 'shameless defiance' (Steedman, 1986: 2), desire and exile (see Steedman, 1986; Burchill, 1998; Walsh, 2005) feature prominently, and as *gendered* phenomena, understood as specific to life as a working-class *woman*.

> But I knew that my life couldn't go on as it was. For a long time now … I had felt as though I was in exile. … . Yet how could I be – there I was, living in the house I had lived in all my life? I was in exile, obviously, from the life not yet known; the life which was meant for me.
>
> (Burchill, 1998: 89)

There's an unsentimental and focused fierceness that informs many white working-class women's *leaving* of territory which not only never felt like theirs, but which is identified as a danger zone to them *as women*. 'I knew as surely as I knew my own name that if I stayed I would get fucked, pregnant, married. And after that I wouldn't get anything but old' (ibid.: 45).

A woman does not mourn such a necessary departure (see Walsh, 2005). I draw this contrast because it is the rising crisis in white working-class masculinities which haunts Collins's narrative (not least because it is not made explicit). Throughout the period covered by Collins's biography, society had avoided the entwined issues of class and gender, and the relationship between masculinities; the situation is now daunting, even life-threatening on the street. I was reminded of an incident on an underground station platform one evening in Liverpool recently.

I had politely asked a passing young man to remind his friend, who had gone ahead of him, that this was a non-smoking area. He turned on me: 'Where do *you* come from? You're not *local*, are you?' (I've lived here probably twice the length of his life.) When I asked why he was so obsessed with where someone comes from, he replied aggressively: 'We're *tribal*, this is *our* territory, we're like *dogs*. You don't belong here.' Identifying me as 'not belonging', trespassing on his territory, was clearly about class, gender and neighbourhood. Our common whiteness was an irrelevance.

This book is both warning and memorial. It has the potential to alter our understanding of what has happened and why, and help us move away from the impulse to criminalize rather than understand: to acknowledge a part in this process of social breakdown. Collins gives us 'a story worth telling' (p. vii) in the form of a biography which requires more than reading. For readers need to position themselves auto/biographically, to identify their position and responsibility within this unfinished story. Where does it leave us? We've had 'neglect and punish': what are we going to put in its place? Are we up to it? Can we be bothered? How much time do we have?

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