

Bobbin Up as a Social Reproduction Novel

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Dorothy Hewett's dedication to *Bobbin Up* (1959) connects her novel to a journey of political-emotional education, its writing linked to the process by which she learned 'to love and understand the tenderness, courage, and struggle of the Sydney workers' (np). These terms of emotion (love) and politics (struggle), held in connection by Hewett, have, in her work's critical reception, too often been treated separately, as a set of two choices for affiliation and focus that critics and readers need to make: love or understanding, tenderness or courage, the private realm or the public sphere? Materialist and feminist debate around Hewett's achievement has generally been polarised, contesting the text's terms as either a 'women's' or a 'strike' novel. Recent activist scholarship in social reproduction theory offers an opportunity to revisit these debates about Hewett's novel and demonstrate the way that the details of domestic life and industrial labour are threaded together both in *Bobbin Up* and in Hewett's vision of political commitment more broadly.

In what follows I set out an argument for reading *Bobbin Up* as a social reproduction text. To this end I argue that *Bobbin Up* is at its most materialist and committed in its socialism when it is most thoroughly concerned with documenting the domestic, the intimate and the extra-market social relations that structure family life and reproduction. I suggest that the novel's attention to the details of domestic structures and relations is part and parcel of its fidelity to a realist vocation of representing in narrative the complex totality of capitalist social relations in motion. *Bobbin Up* remains a strike and industrial novel according to this reading, but an industrial novel of a special, and especially illuminating, kind.

I also argue that this novel, by now an historical object, brings something useful to contemporary theoretical debates over socialist strategy. Hewett's text anticipates, in fictional form, current theorising over the role of social reproduction in wider capitalist social relations. Further, in its generation of readerly *experiences* of these relations, it produces political insights. Hewett's insights about social reproduction were stranded, for a generation, between the historical impasses of her own time and her later personal disavowals of her Communist productions. Our current moment, then, offers a chance to read *Bobbin Up* anew, with an eye to both what social reproduction theory might bring to the novel, and to what the novel may in turn teach social reproduction theory.

This is an opportune moment for such an encounter. The dozen years since the beginnings of the Global Financial Crisis have spurred a renaissance in Marxist scholarship and, in more uneven form, political organisation and renewal. Theorists of capitalism's formation, dynamics, instabilities, and possible ends, from David Harvey to Thomas Piketty, find themselves in the bestseller lists, an unusual enough situation, and radical publishing houses such as Verso report buoyant sales of dissenting scholarship and criticism. None of this has yet found full expression in the Australian social formation, to be sure, marked as it is by the strange pairing, in both parties at federal level, of sclerotic, unmoving and exhausted party forms paired with turbulent, eccentric and oftentimes cruel advances from leader to leader. Old certainties are upended, and the impossible—from the Trump presidency to a popular and youthful *marxisant* publishing program flourishing in the United States—now appears as fact.

All this suggests a good time to revisit old texts in search of new insights; what may once have seemed dated could now, in our moment of crisis, generate alienation effects and insights unavailable during the years of our Culture Wars.

One striking feature of both the effects of the Global Financial Crisis and the interests of its theorists has been the return of what Nancy Fraser calls the ‘crisis of care,’ those ways in which capitalism’s ‘freeriding on the lifeworld’ (101) has generated problems for the system’s own operations. Austerity policies have cut welfare, childcare provisions, and public health programs across the advanced capitalist world, but any savings to the state and to capital won by this retrenchment has been repaid in problems caused by falling birth rates, declining life expectancy (in the United States at least, which has tended to be the context of Fraser’s analysis), and scandals, from burning public housing to rotting hospitals. All of this exposes the difficulties facing workers seeking to reproduce their own capacity to labour. Fraser describes the situation as follows:

[E]very form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies. This social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism lies at the root of the so-called crisis of care. (100)

This capacious account of crisis which refuses to treat ‘the economy’ as reified and separate from the patterns of life and its renewal ‘enables us,’ as Cinzia Arruzza argues, ‘to understand the current crisis not simply in economic terms, but rather as a general crisis of the reproduction of capitalist society considered in all of its dimensions’ (11).

‘Social reproduction theory’ refers to a cluster of work in the Marxist tradition paying renewed attention to the connections between waged labour and unwaged social reproduction. It is ‘a *methodology* to explore labour and labour power under capitalism’ (Bhattacharya Introduction, 4), that aims to theorise ‘the *relationship* between market and extramarket relations rather than simply gesturing towards their distinction’ (14). Rejecting what Lise Vogel calls ‘additive solutions to the problems of theorizing gender, class and race’ (xi), social reproduction theory instead seeks to generate rich, complexly totalising accounts of the *coproduction* of categories of oppression and systems of exploitation, using an expansive conception of labour—in forms both waged and unwaged—to understand together the crisis of care (the crisis of human reproduction) and the crisis of capital accumulation (the crisis of the economy). ‘The fundamental insight’ of social reproduction theory, as Tithi Bhattacharya puts it, ‘is, simply put, that human labour is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole’ (Introduction 2). This insight, and what it tells us about ‘the “unique” commodity labour power,’ ‘*singular* in the sense that it is not produced capitalistically’ (3), has strategic implications for how we understand, and might organise around, class categories.

Social reproduction theory is not a literary theory, and its most creative theorists have not, to date, applied its insights to literary texts or, for that matter, sought to draw on the insights of literary production in their own theorising. Yet, in its concerns and methods—an ambition towards totalising comprehension; an interest in the politics of human experience; a commitment to understanding life relationally and as embodied and lived in history in order to foreground ‘experiential *and* human agency’ (Ferguson, ‘Canadian’ 50)—social reproduction theory shows productive affinities with materialist literary theory and practice

and particularly with the work of Raymond Williams. Drawing on Williams's example, this essay sketches out some of the mutually beneficial possibilities that come from deploying social reproduction theory as a *literary* theory.¹ Reading *Bobbin Up* as a social reproduction text illuminates its generative insights around housing, home, care and its crises—insights neglected in earlier Marxist accounts of the novel. *Bobbin Up* therefore offers an example of the way literary texts can, through their technological capacity as generators of narrative energy, elaborate and expand upon the theoretical insights of social reproduction theory.

This reading of Hewett's novel as a social reproduction text allows me to negotiate the ongoing, and gendered, division in critical approaches to Hewett noted by Nicole Moore ('Asking for More'). Hewett's complicated denials of Marxism, Communism and, indeed, at times, *Bobbin Up* itself can be countered by readings that decouple her texts from authorial intention. However at the same time there are reasons for feminist critics to be troubled by a too-hasty undermining of a woman writer's only recently restored authority. The split between Marxist and feminist accounts of *Bobbin Up* is almost always also a split between the publications of male and female critics.² Social reproduction theory, with its concern to theorise how 'the capitalist economy relies on . . . activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free' (Fraser 101), opens up the possibility of integrating, if not reconciling, these critical approaches. *Bobbin Up* is at its most interestingly Marxist, I argue here, when it is furthest from the factory, the traditional locus of materialist critical attention, and when its imaginative energies are engaged in questions of birth and labour, living, and finding emotional sustenance.³ What Fiona Morrison calls Hewett's mid-to late-career 'gendered valorization of emotion, intuition and affect' ('Leaving the Party' 38) is anticipated by many of the concerns of *Bobbin Up*, which in turn anticipates the restored attention to the generative role of these emotions in Marxist theory today. *Bobbin Up*'s desire to 'love and understand the tenderness, courage and struggle of the Sydney workers' (np) marks it as a social reproduction text narrating the 'crisis of care' created by the everyday workings of capitalist social relations.⁴

Social Reproduction Theory Reads *Bobbin Up*

Labour *power* is, for Marxism, the commodity a worker sells to her employer. A surplus is generated from the worker's labour and from this the employer makes a profit. However, if labour power circulates like other commodities, unlike other commodities (like for example a coffee mug or a convention centre), it is not itself produced in market relations. Marx acknowledges this crucial point in *Capital* but passes over it, where social reproduction theory would like him to linger:

The owner of labour-power is mortal. If then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous transformation of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself 'in the way that every living individual perpetuates himself, by procreation.' The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power. Hence the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour power must include the means necessary for the worker's replacements, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its presence on the market. (275)

Marx refers to the worker as a ‘peculiar commodity owner’ because the production of that commodity is *extra-market*. The commodity these ‘peculiar commodity-owners’ possess is their own mental and physical capacity, in bodies reproduced in social relations—care, nurture, labour itself—outside of, although connected to, market relations. As Susan Ferguson and David McNally point out,

if we follow Marx too quickly here, we run the risk of failing to ask an equally powerful—and, for present purposes, more crucial—question: how is that special commodity itself produced and reproduced? . . . what are the *conditions of possibility* of this ‘special commodity,’ labour-power, the very pivot of the capitalist economy? What is the nature of the social processes through which labour-power is itself produced? (xxiv)

For social reproduction theory the family, and women’s work in the home, is not a *separate sphere* from capitalist production, as the patriarchy and socialist-feminist theorists of the 1970s argued. Rather, it is an integral part of capitalist *reproduction*. As Ferguson and McNally elaborate, ‘the socio-material roots of women’s oppression under capitalism have to do instead with the structural relationship of the household to the reproduction of capital: capital and the state need to be able to regulate their biological capacity to produce the next generation of labourers so that labour-power is available for exploitation’ (xxv). Avoiding the pitfalls of both biological reductionism and free-floating ideological critique, social reproduction theory seeks a dialectically totalising approach. Drawing out the contradiction of the non-market relations which undergird market relations, nurture, care, nourishment, social reproduction theory demonstrates that

it is not biology *per se* that dictates women’s oppression; but, rather, capital’s dependence upon biological processes specific to women—pregnancy, childbirth, lactation—to secure the reproduction of the working class. It is this that induces capital and its state to control and regulate female reproduction and which impels them to reinforce a male-dominant gender-order. (xxix)

Social reproduction theory pays particular attention, therefore, to what Bhattacharya calls ‘myriad capillaries of social relations extending between workplace, home, schools, hospitals’ (‘How Not to Skip Class’ 74) and seeks to develop a more rigorous and capacious conception of class and class agency. ‘The working class, for the revolutionary Marxist,’ Bhattacharya continues, ‘must be perceived as everyone in the producing class who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society—irrespective of whether that labour has been paid for by capital or remained unpaid’ (89).

Hewett’s youthful journalistic work anticipates the approach of social reproduction theory. For example, in a 1948 ‘Not Just for Women’ column in the Communist Party’s *Workers’ Star* she described the fight for equal pay as ‘not only an urgent fight for the women workers themselves’ but as ‘part of the struggle of all workers, *the working class housewife included*’ (*Prose* 146, my emphasis). She would also champion ‘a kind of dialectical intuitive leap beyond political analysis and emotional understanding into a new synthesis’ (150) in the final years of her Party membership. She was, with other Communists, active in equal pay campaigning throughout the 1950s and wrote columns under the heading ‘Not Only For Women’ for the Party’s newspapers. More importantly, for my purposes here, a social reproduction theory lens allows us to read *Bobbin Up* as a text which thinks about class *in formation*, and about the ‘production and reproduction of labour-power [as] a process

undertaken in socially located people' to quote Susan Ferguson and David McNally. This way of reading 'brings agency and, ultimately, history, back into politics' just as, ultimately, it 'also brings bodies back into the equation' to quote Ferguson and McNally again (xxxviii).

This approach avoids the weaknesses of a structuralist Marxist and feminist approach that, as Himani Bannerji has observed, 'disattends Marx's analysis of capital as a social relation rather than a "thing"' (76). As we will see, in *Bobbin Up* the working-class home and the body of the labourer and the woman's body in labour are just as significant for a Marxist reading as the mill and the women in paid work. The novel begins, after all, not with an image of the factory or a narrative of wage labour, but with a woman pregnant and in movement, Shirl 'nineteen years old, four months gone and just starting to show, bumping through Newtown on the back of a second-hand Norton' (1). The image recurs, and Shirl's presence ('[f]our months gone and just starting to show . . . roar[ing] up King Street on the back of a second-hand Norton' 96) acts as a reminder for the reader of the simultaneous events represented in different chapters. The first and second chapters in *Bobbin Up* open with images of pregnancy, Beth's 'sway' and her 'unconsciously folding her arms across her belly' (11) introduce her to the reader, just as the novel's second-to-last sentence reminds us of 'the pregnant Beth' (204). The narrative discourse is studded with concrete details of the labour of reproduction and love, from 'a French letter' (73) to the 'varicose veins right up to [her] crack' (73) Jessie has had to live with since her 'last two' (72). Whole chapters are devoted to pregnancies, wanted and unwanted (Connie's unwanted and socially disastrous pregnancy in Chapter Thirteen, for instance; Peg's unplanned and ambivalently wanted one in Chapter Nine). There are, also, narratorial asides acting as reminders of what happens when the process of reproduction transgresses state regulation:

On the opposite side of the river Saint Magdalene smiled in the garden of the Home for Fallen Girls, otherwise known as the Tempe Laundry, raising her white plaster arms in enthusiastic benediction. The fallen girls lay quietly, their little red hands, chapped with washing soda, folded gently above the sheets, their institutional nighties buttoned tightly up to their necks, dreaming of sweethearts and marriage and a fat baby nuzzling for love at their narrow little breasts. (83)

There is more here than the insertion of women's *content* into social-realist *form*, as Susan Lever suggests when she describes *Bobbin Up* as 'a woman's attempt to write within the Marxist frame of socialist realism' (147). Rather, a political aesthetic of visceral, physical, intensely realised details of labouring bodies and agential characters narrating the Australian working class allow the labour of social reproduction to be visible as part of this class narrative. Varicose veins, sore feet and a weary back are signs of a specifically women's work (pregnancy), to be sure. They are also, however, signs of time at the spinning mill and of a fuller working-class process of production and reproduction. When Nicole Moore writes of Hewett's 'passionately articulated imaginary' as 'rooted and lodged in the local details of quotidian living, distinctively inhabited community, and inherited memory' ('Placing' 36) she also sketches *Bobbin Up*'s political aesthetics. 'You,' Hewett's narrator tells us, 'could never be lonely in Waterloo, always conscious of the myriad lives woven and interwoven with your own, breathing, battling, loving, fighting, suffering in the stifling summer heat' (67). The intertwined pregnancy sub-plots connect *Bobbin Up*'s factory material to its domestic narratives as examples of capitalism 'free-riding on the life-world': the mill-owner needs new generations of labour to work the mill, whether through immigration (the novel's 'New Australians' 203) or by human reproduction and yet, if a woman is found to be pregnant, she

will lose her job. Each scene of sexuality or childcare Hewett writes is thus, indirectly, also legible as an industrial-political episode.

Pregnancy also stalks the ‘official’ politics of the novel, the strike sub-plot Hewett’s first Communist readers approved of but found underdeveloped. It therefore acts as a kind of social reproduction shadow or reminder of the ‘myriad lives woven and interwoven’ in the inseparable play of production and reproduction, embodied by particular workers living particular lives in history.⁵ Tommy’s decision to join the Communist Party—prompted, the narrator tells us, by Sputnik’s success, and by his realisation that ‘all men only existed in relationship to other men’ (101)—comes just after he has learned that his wife Peg is pregnant. In this his sense of own sexuality and sexual body is linked to his political commitments (‘They can’t keep a good militant down’ 100) and his sense of politics connected to his sexuality: ‘ROMANCE, ROMANCE, ROMANCE’ (101). The Communist Party branch meeting of Chapter Eleven takes place in Nell’s kitchen, and Hewett intersperses political discussion with social reproduction details (‘when the comrades came in twos and threes out of the summer dusk, she was just finishing *The Magic Pudding*’ 122) and domestic interruptions.

In the narrative discourse, too, these connections are knitted together through a loosely bound symbolism. Rita, ‘a Waterloo dressmaker’ has been Communist Party ‘branch secretary for years, running the branch in the same careless, slipshod, generous way she ran her own life’ (125). Her ‘shabby little lounge room in a smog-blackened semi near Botany Bay was perpetually snowed under in an exotic litter of patterns and pieces, and half-cut dresses’ (125) with which she gives some ‘glamour’ (125) to ‘all the factory girls and the Waterloo housewives’ (125). Later, as Nell is winning Shirl to the sit-down strike in the mill at the novel’s conclusion, she notices ‘the skirt of the blue silk dress, hanging like a little ghost of love behind the door’ (202). Shirl is, on one reading, sacrificing personal love for collective struggle; she was due to be married and the ‘blue dress and freedom’ (202) stand for personal fulfillment against class action. But social reproduction theory allows another reading to come into view: the dress and the ‘ghost of love’ are *both* desire and sacrifice. They are both political organisation and planning by women in struggle—Communist and factory—and the details of everyday social reproduction. Rita’s work ‘bringing a fugitive beauty into the lives of the toiling women of Waterloo’ (125) is introduced at the same time as her Communist activism, just as the sit-down strike narrative links ‘the rooftops and factory chimneys’ (203) with a ‘blue dress’ and ‘freedom’ (202) and ‘the pregnant Beth’ (204). Hewett’s associative poetic devices here offer, in narrative form, a social reproduction Communist method of imagining and organising work and resistance.

Further, her imagination and insight is not limited to resistance. If Hewett had a tendency later in her career to feel ‘something close to revulsion’ (‘Afterthoughts’ vii) at what she took to be *Bobbin Up*’s dishonest confirmation of Communist Party dogmas and ‘wish-fulfilment’ (*Wild Card* 246), a social reproduction reading allows us to see the ways in which the text draws attention to the complicating shifts in Australian social life, shifts that challenged Party positions. As Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman point out in their study of nineteenth-century American household labour: ‘although highly uneven, bifurcated between waged and unwaged work, divided by gender, and oftentimes invisible, the patchy terrain of social reproduction was not only a site of struggle but a potential site of class formation’ (47). They argue that social reproduction is ‘not simply a terrain of struggle; it rapidly emerged as a site of class recomposition’ (52). Housing is a constant interest across the chapters of *Bobbin Up* and, if the narrator’s direct interventions draw attention to connections with class struggles

from the 1930s, the narrative itself comes alive when noticing how ‘the rooftops had come out in a rash of television aerials’ (112). *Bobbin Up* does not simply reinforce an unchanging Communist message across generations but, rather, returns repeatedly to social reproduction as an historical process, a process involving class composition, recomposition and transformation. Chapters often end at night, with the city visible to narratorial view. For example:

Over the crooked roofs of Woollahra the moon sailed, poking her face in at the window in Moller Street where Beth lay, smiling gently in Len’s arms, where the tiny bat fluttered and crept from the jacaranda tree onto the landing . . . on over the sleeping city to crease the folds of Shirl’s wedding dress with moonlight, to weep with Dawnie over her stray cat in Byrnes Lane. (60)

These lyrical moments are undercut, however, by the fact that in adjacent parts of the city, some workers had ‘changed from rent payers to home owners in a generation’ (104). Rosebery’s ‘inhabitants had emancipated themselves by hard work, or luck or other means, out of the sub-standard, yardless semis, exchanged for that cheery, extroverted pavement society, a brick wall, a lemon and a peach with fruit fly in the back yard’ (104) while others stared over and across ‘the crooked slate and corrugated iron roofs of Waterloo and Redfern’ to ‘the Housing Commission flats’ that ‘stood like a dream of luxury amidst green lawns’ (64). *Bobbin Up* crackles with social reproduction energy, just as ‘Surry Hills was restless with life and the living’ (159), and this an unruly energy not able to be contained by Communist Party orthodoxy. Consumer culture and the stirrings of what will be the Long Boom have their attractions, and the text is drawn to new commodities and social reproduction technologies. Advertising jingles and pop songs interrupt and cross-cut the narrative discourse. Al ‘murmured and swayed and crooned to the hermaphrodite tenor voice on the air’ (51) as she prepared dinner, while radio hits score the text as a refrain (see, for example: 75, 102, 95, 96, 98, 106).⁶ Pepsi, or its advertising, is a promise of sexuality, a woman’s ‘demure eyes and enticing buttocks’ just ‘like the girls in the Pepsi ads’ (34), while ‘a bottle of Pepsi Cola’ (85) is all the payment Patty will get for singing at the Rumpus Room. Sputnik, a familiar motif in leftist criticism, is jostled by a host of others: Pepsi, pop songs, pregnancy. At times, the language of advertising bursts through the narrative itself.⁷ Chapter Three, for example, begins as familiar heterodiagetic narrative focalised through Beth, who ‘stood, gazing perversely and longingly at an impossibly high-bosomed, flat-stomached model in a skin-tight sheath’ (23) before moving into an uneasily identified blur of free indirect discourse followed up by a different narrative voice altogether:

No deposit . . . easy terms . . . everything for baby! High chairs, commodes, playpens, baths, bassinets, bootees, bonnets, bunny rugs . . . everything for baby. But baby is kicking in his mother’s womb . . . he’s finished with confined spaces.

No deposit . . . easy terms . . . I’ve got a kewpie doll with long nylon legs to call me own, who never gets pregnant, but stands under a pool of gold at a street light in the Cross and whistles up the cruising taxis. (23–24)

From material anxiety to advertising plentitude, from fantasies of the post-war nuclear family to the intrusion of sex work and advertisers’ perverse and impossible iterations of the feminine mystique: *Bobbin Up* tracks a class in recomposition.⁸

***Bobbin Up* Reads Social Reproduction Theory**

If a social reproduction lens makes visible the political-aesthetic work going on in *Bobbin Up*'s interconnected narratives of industrial production, women 'blurred and distorted through a fine, damp mist of steam,' sweating 'between bobbin box and rover, like nightmare figures in the grip of some awful compulsion' (86), and domestic reproduction, what might *Bobbin Up* give in return to social reproduction theory? What does literature offer social criticism?

Social reproductionists hope to offer, in Susan Ferguson's words, 'an alternative to the traditional approach to social theory' in which 'concepts like economy, class, gender and race are treated as just that—concepts, emptied of social content and historical specificities. One of the central upshots of this recognition is the attempt to retheorise class as a lived experience, beginning with the acknowledgement that class never exists outside the other fundamental relations of lived reality' ('Building' 7–8). By approaching 'its analytic categories—labour, the economy, households and so on—as *processes* rather than things,' social reproduction theory 'opens up,' Susan Ferguson and David McNally contend, 'the possibility of a more genuinely *historical*-materialist reading of the social relations of power' (xxxvii). This is the vocation of fiction too, and *Bobbin Up* uses the possibilities of fiction to draw into Marxist discourse the language of lived reality. It is not just that the narrator shares her characters' experiences and outlooks, taking an obvious delight in the 'dazzling girls in skin-tight bathing suits, clinging to the arms of brawny, godlike, brief-trunked young men' (35). The promise of life, sexuality and freedom, expressed here in images of the sea, of Bondi as 'a great, dark, silken, heaving surf in the heart of Sydney' (35) is drawn, by association, to the limiting force of wage labour, 'the noise of the mill' roaring 'out of the summer like waves beating and thudding against the mind' (85). Fiction can reproduce the associative leaps of social processes with a dexterity the register of social theory struggles to capture, and its techniques of verbal patterning allow it to register the historical specificity of life's repetitions:

Generations merged into each other and time lost its meaning. The struggle to live out your days blurred your dreams. Powerless, you watched them sliding away like the sunlight on the roofs of the trains, never to come back again, lost forever . . . lost . . . lost . . . only to be born again in the hearts of the little girls leaning over the railway fence chucking orange peel onto the rails. (88)

'When we restore a sense of the social totality to class,' Tithi Bhattacharya claims, 'we immediately begin to reframe the arena for class struggle' (90). I have, in this essay, attempted a homologous operation in literary criticism. The more obvious aspects of the text's politics—and literary limitations—are still there, from the occasionally hectoring narrative voice ('it was the Party that had taught her all this' 132) to the heavy Stalinist labour expected of the Sputnik motif, and I do not wish to read them away. What I suggest here, instead, is that a social reproduction lens can generate new insights from *Bobbin Up*, or find insights that were there all along and waiting for the right political alignment. It may also bring the text's fully *literary* achievements into view.

Ralph de Boissiere, reviewing *Bobbin Up* in *Overland*, set out what became the standard socialist appreciation and critique:

The first three-quarters of the book are given up to descriptions of the individual lives of the characters. I got the feeling they had come too much out of the one mould. Dorothy Hewett worked with these people. She came to love them. She

surrounds them with mother love and is more occupied fighting for them than they are for themselves. She would have been more persuasive if she had flung them out of her nest and let them fly. The conflicts in them do not develop because the main contradiction—that between the girls and the millowners—is not allowed to develop. We are given a lot of minor conflicts that belong to the past rather than the present. They are necessary as a preparation for what is to come, they build the characters up to a point where they are ripe for action. But this action, in this case the strike, does not develop, and she deprives the characters of their essential revelation. (36)⁹

De Boissiere's gendered terms of condescension in fact echo Hewett's own commitment to 'love' as a form of political understanding and commitment: 'I've loved them all, the tumult of their voices, / Seamen, and steelmen, wharfie, weaver, poet' ('My Party is the Party of Aragon,' *Poems* 14). But what if this political evaluation is connected to an aesthetic mis-evaluation? De Boissiere, and socialist critics after him, insist, following socialist realist orthodoxy, that the novel needs to have a 'main contradiction,' an 'essential revelation' with the sit-in strike. *Bobbin Up* may have been presented and received as an exercise in socialist realism, but its imaginative innovations critique and upend the genre's expectations at the very moment they fulfill them. Must novels move towards climax and resolution? Must readers distinguish between minor and major conflicts? A social reproduction poetics, focused on the everyday processes of class composition and the 'myriad capillaries of social relations extending between workplace, home, schools, hospitals' might, instead, draw on the techniques of repetition, indirection, return, and rewriting. *Finishing* without concluding, in a strike that has just begun and the trajectory of which is unreadable from the narrative discourse, presents a more tough-minded and militant challenge to the reader's strategic imagination than any substitution of narrative closure for political resolution: 'It's likely to be a long wait' (204). *Bobbin Up*'s episodic, loosely organised arrangement of 'the individual lives of the characters' refuses the kind of novel-logic and political-order de Boissiere relies on as uncomplicated political-aesthetic virtues precisely because its social-reproduction insights question and complicate that logic and order.¹⁰ If *Bobbin Up* circles its topics, repeats its materials, and returns to blocked and unresolved contradictions and conflicts, it offers, in the process, a narrative style better attuned to the live experiences of social reproduction struggles.¹¹ This does not discredit industrial fiction or the ambitions of the strike novel, certainly, but it does warn critics against any too-hasty association of narrative conclusion and political resolution.

Hewett described *Bobbin Up*, in conversation with Nicole Moore, as 'really a series of short stories, strung together by the image of the spinning mill'; a year later she repeated the claim but with 'the central symbol' being 'the city itself' ('Afterthoughts' vii). Her novel might be aligned to a canon of social reproduction texts, then, received as novels but composed and conceived of as short stories, from Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) to Agnes Owens's *Gentlemen of the West* (1984), innovative in their awkward, difficult-to-assimilate refusal of the linear logic of the novel form.

This awkwardness—the over-protective 'mother love' de Boissiere wanted cast away—suggests, finally, a social reproduction poetics of narrative contest, as *Bobbin Up*'s narrative positions can be read as radically unstable, open to competing positions, views, and voices. A heterodiegetic omniscient narrator oversees most of the narration, their observations reproducing the Communist Party's views of the time. Occasionally, however, they are supplanted by a narrator inside the storyworld, unnamed but involved absolutely with the

lives of their characters, the struggles of this Sydney. This voice and its insights have much to offer the new and ongoing work in social reproduction theory:

We've washed the worst of the grime off our feet and our faces, we've combed our hair and put our lipstick on, changed out of greasy overalls, and now we're women again, with kids to collect, husbands to feed, boy friends to cuddle . . . Out at last and the day is only a memory of sweat and fluff and grease and grinding noise, to be added to all the other days, weeks, months, and years. (11–12)

NOTES

¹ See Bhattacharya, 'How Not to Skip Class' (88) for her use of Williams. It was Fiona Morrison's suggestive reading of Williams and Hewett alongside each other as examples of 'the strain of organicist romanticism that co-existed with a sustained and committed Marxism' (8) that first set me thinking in the terms this essay sets out. Although they are not cited directly in what follows, this essay is indebted intellectually to the work of Ankica Čakardic, Susan Ferguson ('Intersectionality') and David Camfield. I am grateful to Holly Lewis, Paul Salzman, Sarah Ross, and JASAL's two anonymous readers for their criticisms and advice around earlier rehearsals of this argument. None are responsible for the political analysis advanced here.

² For all their local differences, Ian Syson, Nathan Hollier and Stephen Knight can be read as examples of the 'materialist' line, Nicole Moore, Susan Lever and Fiona Morrison as key feminist critics.

³ I do not contest, then, Ian Syson's arguments for the early Hewett's Marxist writing against the later Hewett's public disavowals, although I find his language of 'belief' unhelpful. This essay, rather, develops the insights of his and Nathan Hollier's works in a different, although still materialist, direction.

⁴ My interests in this essay are not biographical, although I have taken inspiration from the work of Jane Jarvis-Read and Susan Sheridan. No essay on Hewett's art and care now can fail to acknowledge also the domestic 'crisis of care' documented by Kate and Rozanna Lilley.

⁵ David McNally, unwittingly but illuminatingly, echoes Hewett's cadences in his contribution to social reproduction theory when he writes of race, gender and class that 'these relations do not need to be brought into intersection because each is already inside the other, co-constituting one another to their very core. Rather than standing at intersections, we stand in the river of life, where multiple creeks and streams have converged into a complex, pulsating stream' (107).

⁶ This can be read as, in part, auto-critique of Hewett's earliest anti-cultural Communist journalism, and as part of her re-introduction of pleasure and the body into Communist discourse. Hewett had written in support of campaigns to ban horror films in *The Workers' Star*, commenting that 'a big campaign to ban these trashy overseas comics must go hand in hand with action on rotten films' (4). The contrast between leftist Sinatra and commercial Crosby and Elvis Presley in *Bobbin Up* continues this philistine Communist orthodoxy (86–87), but the text's energies are elsewhere.

⁷ Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel have explored some of the ways these consumer details facilitated readings unassimilable to Stalinist orthodoxy in the novel's German Democratic Republic reception, with popular commodity culture signifying something quite different to East German readers than it may have for Hewett's official Communist critics.

⁸ For this reason I find John McLaren's comment that the Australasian Book Society's 'publications reflect a generation of readers and writers retreating into a past that lent itself to easy ideological explanation' (38) misplaced when applied to Hewett.

⁹ Stephen Knight's description of 'the argumentative heart' of *Bobbin Up* as 'the women's strike' (70) repeats, thirty-five years on, the essential political assumptions of de Boissiere's initial review.

¹⁰ Consider here also Hewett's creative repetition across her career of important moments and stories, from *Bobbin Up* to 'The Alice Poems' to *Wild Card*. Material is revisited and reworked across her writing rather than, as a 'socialist realist' poetics would have it, resolved in closure.

¹¹ I am indebted here to the work of Susan Winnett and Valerie Rohy.

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