

## Chapter Three

# Blood and Loyalty

### The Patriarchal Family



I am pregnant with certain deaths  
of women who choked before they  
could speak their names  
could know their names  
before they had names to know.

*They Inhabit Me*  
by Marge Piercy  
from *My Mother's Body*, 1985

*I dreamt that a skin of the finest quality porcelain coated my body flesh. Then, completely without warning, in an unpredicted moment, a sudden freezing engulfed me. The skin cracked, leaving the myriad tracings of shock imprinted over my entire body. All external features disappeared. My hair and my eyelashes, the down on my cheeks, were burnt off in a moment, gone, as went every other visible manifestation of life, living, inside and outside. What remained looked to be a completely vitrified body. Naked. It was a brittle remnant, a featureless shell. Nothing more. It was only a dream.*

*I am so distant from my family as I go deeper into this writing, we are living far away from each other and phones are ultimately inadequate. I ask myself again, why am I doing this work? Why move away from my kids and do this research? I feel so dis-connected.*

*I write over and over that I wasn't looking for secrets in the Lifestory Workshops. But I have never had to look for secrets. Secrets are regularly handed to me without my asking. I am often told stories by friends and other women who invariably say, 'I never talk about this, I don't want anyone to know'.*

*Why not?*

*I am implicated in the secret keeping.*

*Complicit?*

*(I don't want to be complicit)*

*I know too many secrets.*

*I've held the hands of women who were raped by their brothers, carried his child or were too young to conceive were only babies themselves, really. I know women whose husbands have beaten them, whose uncles have stalked them, at home, a Mother who raised her daughter's baby pretending it was hers. A husband who threw his wife's study notes in the street, he cut up her assignments with the scissors he used to threaten her, and one who burnt everything that mattered, it all, everything in their home. I know women who've been dragged by the hair by the arm by the heart by too much love and too little. Boyfriends who said they didn't sleep around but gave their girlfriends crabs not roses, and herpes, but it could have been AIDS, and dumped them because she was a slut too demanding too emotional too much of a whinger. Nieces who died from heroin from prostitution from sexual abuse from shame from fear, who were kissed and fondled and touched as children with hate disguising as love, but it's lust. I've held the hands of women while they've cried, run from life, threatened to die, gone into a*

*trance that couldn't be broken, trauma that broke them while their hearts have been breaking, remembering they didn't know how to protect them selves, say no tell someone who cared, but could anyone hear would anyone care? I've raised women from the floor who cowered in corners, held a girl who cried in the dark but no one knows why my Mother screamed in the dark I don't know why. I've screamed in the dark I rage in the daylight will tell every chance that I get why women are silent, why they silently cry, why secrets aren't healthy. I know why they're silent, they're ones who survive.*

*I know a woman whose brother sodomised her three sons, they weren't even five, she screamed loud and she screamed long and they sent him to gaol. Her family won't talk to her now. I held the hand of a woman whose son killed him self, with a gun, he was twenty-one, then his brother was bashed, murdered on his way home. She cried silently. She was numb. Schizophrenia they told her husband, in time, then gave her some pills. She tried to talk tried to cry tried to remember how, to forget, they gave her more pills. She left him, her husband, and then for a while, all she did was cry. So he took the children, the three younger ones, and gave them his care. They don't see her now. She's a brittle remnant, a featureless shell. She tells me, its hell.*

*I have held the hands of a woman whose cousin shot her in the chest, forty years later the memory is the least of her pain. Her body aches, and some days she is trapped by fear, but the pain is silenced, though it remains a scar, 'keep it all in the family, so we know who we are'.*

*I have heard so many secrets,  
And now, they inhabit me.*

Apparently, some women who joined the Lifestory Workshops came thinking that *their* family was unusual and other families were 'normal'. They were surprised to discover that there were similarities in the family stories told in the group. Common themes were revealed when the women began talking about their individual lives. Claire could hardly believe the extra-ordinary stories finding resonance in the group. They were similar and familiar. This realisation began to undo the idea that the average functional family exists.

welcome Maryanne:

*Everyone has a little story,  
Don't they?*

Claire:

*Oh well,*

*Actually,*

*Apparently,*

***Yes.***

Some of the ‘little’ stories told in the Lifestory Workshops were about teenage pregnancies, adoption, alcoholism, polygamy, suicide and attempted suicide. Silence around these stories points to shame about family experiences that transgress respectable norms and a desire to present a respectable image. Absence, formed around silence, created a semblance of the protected environment that is thought beneficial to childhood stability. Transgressive experiences were smoothed over but this created confusion for children when secrets about their own lives were masked by the image of the functional family that Kaye referred to as the Brady Bunch. Hiding family secrets is not unusual and Annette Kuhn draws the conclusion that:

A family without secrets is rare indeed. People who live in families make every effort to keep certain things concealed from the rest of the world, and at times from each other as well. Things will be lied about, or simply never mentioned. Sometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved. From the voluntary amnesias of repression to the willful forgetting of matters it might be less than convenient to recall, secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory. (Kuhn 2002:2)

If secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory as Kuhn suggests, social and family narratives police those borderlands to build an image of family respectability. Women in the Lifestory Workshops indicated that as children they experienced the borderlands of memory as a confusion they did not have words to speak.

This chapter focuses on discourses and discursive practices that are bequests of the family and package ‘family’ in constancy with patriarchal ideology at the same time as the social and structural base is elided. My discussion revolves around the fantasy of the family looking at underbelly, or abjected stories and the nuanced meanings encountered in learning gender and class in families.

Workshop discussions demonstrated the symbolic importance of family based on biological relationships, women's responsibility for care work and the moral education of children. However the stories and conversations in the Workshops also point to ambiguity, ambivalence and conflicting meanings in relation to responsibility for children, the importance of biological relationships, conflict between the performance of respectability and 'the real' self, the disciplinary effect of shame, and the interconnectedness of these issues.

Family<sup>13</sup> is a core social institution that is often thought of as natural rather than being socially determined (Gatens & Mackinnon 1998:3). Moira Gatens and Alison Mackinnon (1998:2) state that, 'the family is the single most important institution which constructs and shapes the behavior of both sexes'. They approach the family as a social rather than private institution that is central to understanding social interaction in all contexts (1998:4). Family is a concept whose meaning is negotiated through the lived experience of discourses and practices in the way of Bourdieu's notion of habitus<sup>14</sup> 'as a set of embodied durable dispositions that tends to reproduce the society that produced it' (Bourdieu 1990 quoted in Cresswell 2002:380). Family, like other systems of discourses founded in ideology including class and race, becomes taken-for-granted intersubjectively. So although concepts such as family, mother, woman, and class cannot be conclusively fixed, individuals make their own attempts to stabilise meanings in order to make sense of their experiences or, as Kuhn puts it, to imagine them into being (Kuhn 2002:1). Drawing on Bourdieu's work, Tim Cresswell (2002:380) writes that, 'Power, ... is reproduced through practices of people who act in accordance with internalised (embodied) schemes of perception'. Dominant cultural values are sustained in the blurring of family experiences to mimic the taken-for-granted ideal. Even though there is no fixed or unitary configuration of family the concept is central to the transmission of cultural meaning. Susan Hawthorne (2002:10) explains that 'the culture is passed on through meaningful objects or ideas. And it is this sense of meaning, in the deepest form, which is critical to the sustainability of culture'. In this way ideology of the family is an interpretive framework for cultural meanings and the maintenance of socio/cultural stability.

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<sup>13</sup>In using *family, the family, families*, I am less interested in a specific definition than taken-for-granted meanings that the concept elicits. Family is generally understood in a taken-for-granted way, and yet any definition of family is contestable given the diversity of household groupings, extended and ethnic family configurations possible. My use of the term family is not fixed on a particular form but on the discursive meanings the concept elicits. My interest is with the effects that the term speaks into being in individual usage. By leaving this explanation out of the body of the text I want to leave the ambiguity in the text, and the unasked question 'what kind of family?' Unsettling the concept is important because assumed meanings are multiple and even contradictory.

<sup>14</sup>'For Bourdieu [...] habitus is an active, generative set of unformulated dispositions, not a store of passive knowledge. [...] As the internalized set of tacit rules governing strategies and practices in the field, the habitus of a field is destined to remain unarticulated' (Moi 1999:271).

This work is achieved by a range of traditions that bequeath cultural meaning through dominant discourses and impact on identity and desire.

### **Finding the real family**

In each series of the Lifestory Workshops there was one woman who disclosed that she had been adopted at birth. For these women finding their biological family (who they often referred to as their real family), was one aspect of finding themselves. Melissa said she found herself at forty years of age and Maryanne was finding herself at fifty.

The relaxed atmosphere and developing trust between the participants fostered the sharing of personal stories such as those about adoption. Multiple and conflicting storylines, interrupted by laughter and chatter, were even folded seamlessly into casual conversations such as the one to follow during a coffee break. The following conversation that I refer to as *Coffee Tea or Biscuits*, is primarily between Maryanne and Claire, with interjections from other women. It reveals ambivalent feelings about mothers' responsibility for conception and for the maintenance of families. Threaded into the conversation is a theme that was a persistent storyline throughout the two series of Workshops that women's desire for a loving family life is at odds with women's individual desires for fulfilment in other ways.

Maryanne began this conversation by musing over the special connection involved in genetic relationships and biological families. She and Claire kept their own lines of thought flowing in the conversation and often the two were superimposed on each other, as happens with informal talk. Moving spoken conversation to type written words is a significant gesture of re-inscription of genre (Game & Metcalfe 1996:120). Non verbal elements of the conversation are unrepresented on the page as the words become fixed. Gesture, eye contact and body language are lost in that movement (Game & Metcalfe 1996:120). As we sat around the laminex table for coffee, Maryanne and Claire were engaged in an animated conversation that had the attention of everyone present.

Morgan:

*Coffee, tea or biscuits?*

(They talk adoption at tea)

Maryanne:

*You see,  
It's quite incredible  
the genetic base of your life.*

(chatter and noise)

*I had ...  
I met them,  
I met my siblings,  
but they were all different  
from me.  
she adopted two out,  
before she had me.*

Claire:

*actually adopted, your siblings?*

Maryanne:

*I had two that were older than me.*

Claire:

*That were adopted out?  
You've contacted your family of birth?*

Maryanne:

*mmm  
Twelve months later Community services contacted **me**.  
They'd found another two siblings,  
we had different fathers  
but with the same mother.  
Well,  
I was astounded,  
I said it's not true!*

*I'm sorry,  
That's what the computer says.*

Claire: *Is she a bit reluctant to tell her story?*

Maryanne:

*She knew I was coming to talk,  
you know,  
it took her two months to tell my natural brothers and sisters  
the ones with her,  
so imagine what she's going to have to go through about this other two.  
You know she's too old,  
she's too vulnerable.*

Shame and secrecy around adoption are accepted here as an effect of illegitimate birth. Claire and Maryanne take for granted that speaking about her illegitimate births is a significant threshold for Maryanne's biological mother. The collusion of other adults in keeping secrets was more harshly judged in Workshop discussions than the silence of the biological mother, although knowing someone else's secrets is seen to bear its own dilemmas.

Claire: (interjecting)

*Like my husband's mother!  
she had an affair,  
the result of that was a pregnancy.*

Maryanne: (continuing)

*There's that story too,  
but there's another,  
my father,  
my adoptive father,  
he couldn't have children so they adopted me.  
The following year my mother was pregnant.  
It wasn't his  
but they just pretended.  
he was an alcoholic and then he died.  
But my sisters don't know  
I had to keep that a secret,  
because...  
that's the problem about keeping a secret,  
it wasn't my choice to know,*



*but they might want to know about their father,  
they have a right to know.  
Their genetic father.*

Claire:

*They've done genetic studies in England and,  
one in five children aren't genetically related to the father.*

(laughter, chatter, noise)

Discussions such as this one often focus on mothers' responsibility for conception and care of children.

Maryanne:

*the stories you're given!  
I like to know the truth,  
But my mother,  
she lived this lie,  
she lived it so long,  
she believes it now,*

Claire:

*oh yeah oh yeah  
you can't break down that powerful barrier,*

Maryanne:

*It's up there for a reason.  
Shame.  
You totally avoid,  
but I have needed to come to terms with my life.  
And, **I have.***

Maryanne and Claire are reiterating Annette Kuhn's (2002:2) point previously discussed, that family secrets can be so well protected that they become an absence in memory, tucked out of conscious awareness and forgotten as a shame response. Maryanne thinks that her adoptive

mother was brave to raise the children she conceived in an extramarital affair and Maryanne explained that she coped by presenting a moral, Christian image to the public that protected her *real* self from shame.

Maryanne:

*in fact it was the mother,  
the one who stuffed up by having these kids  
in a way she didn't  
but she did  
you know,  
she was a much more real and caring mother  
than the good Christian she was trying to project into the community.  
Very strict idea of herself.  
but she was really much more interesting.  
it was very brave of her to bring up those children  
and keep them in the family.*

Claire:

*When **my** cousin came along  
mum said,  
Kaylie's adopted and I want you to know  
right from the beginning  
because if you find out later  
it's too much of a shock.  
It's better to know straight away.  
so much shame  
tied up  
with adoption.*

Claire makes the point that it is preferable for adoption to be disclosed early so that the child's life is not shrouded in secrecy. In their discussion of disclosure, Margaret Marshall and Audrey McDonald (2001:125) quote a conclusion reached by David Howe who conducted extensive interviews with parents who had adopted children. Howe said that, 'the parents' level of confidence affected how relaxed they felt discussing adoption with their children. The more at ease with the notion of adoption were the parents, the more matter-of-fact about their

adoption were the children' (Howe 1996 quoted in Marshall & McDonald 2001:125). The adopting parents' motives in choosing to adopt are another layer of moral and interpersonal issues that can contribute to the fabrication of either a murky or transparent background to the child's own experience.

Maryanne:

*And even if you're married at seventeen,  
If you're pregnant,  
so much shame.  
people  
just cross the street  
when I went by,  
you were just hidden away,  
pushed away.  
Shame.  
You're just innocent  
too young  
not knowing the facts of life  
finding out the hard way.*

Maryanne's words here do not adequately convey the emotion she experienced when people crossed the street to avoid her after her early marriage on account of her pregnancy. A woman's body is a powerful and ambiguous signifier. The body of a young pregnant woman can be a source of shame and embarrassment, or equally a sign of joy and achievement depending on the context of moral and social discourses.

The blame heaped on women as responsibility for conception deflects attention away from paternal responsibility and the problematic association between in/fertility and self worth that is tied up in traditional versions of masculinity and femininity demonstrated in Maryanne's story (above). Maryanne suggested that her adoptive father would have been embarrassed and ashamed if the knowledge of his infertility or his wife's infidelity became public. Shame necessitated that Maryanne's mother remain silent about these issues, and her father's authority framed the mother's life and her relationship with her children.

Maryanne:

*I know the type of person my mother is  
and it was the shame factor,  
my father saying...  
(this is the shame factor here)  
you're going to pretend these are my children  
you're not gonna do **that**,  
and you **will** do this.  
I remember (when he was in hospital)  
catching the two of them,  
I must have been,  
four,  
catching those two  
in **that** situation.*

*I know why she did it.  
I know all that,  
I understand that,  
but dad would have told her what to do then!*

Maryanne's mother had few options at the time, a story that is echoed by Claire.

Claire:

*My mother-in-law's a wonderful old person,  
I think she just couldn't terminate,  
it was a very loveless marriage,  
she was lively and vivacious and friendly and fun loving  
he was kind of cautious,  
she didn't want to marry him  
she nearly walked away.  
Her sisters talked her into it.  
He was a good man!  
Her mother's father had been a bastard to her mother  
so there would have been pressure from the mother too,  
a good safe man*

*and she gave in.*

*Caved in.*

Both Maryanne and Claire acknowledge the limited options available to women of their mothers' generations when the best chance of success was thought to be marriage and the shelter of a good man. Maryanne and Claire make the distinction between blame as a consequence of the moral codes at the time, and responsibility as a consequence of being a mother. This distinction polarises social expectations and a perception of biological expectations in this situation.

Maryanne:

*No blame,*

*But,*

*why do I have to be told,*

*that's what I can't imagine,*

*she's had these affairs and stayed with her husband*

*why'd she tell me?*

Maryanne perceived that keeping other people's secrets is an uncomfortable responsibility and a weight she unwillingly carries. She considers that other people's secrets aren't hers to tell, and the protagonist has the authority to disclose, or not. However, Maryanne does not want to be complicit in the kind of secrecy that she found painful and confusing in her own life, though she demonstrates loyalty to her mother.

Claire:

*A friend's father had a family with two kids in New Zealand and*

*he had this whole other family in Perth,*

*As well!*

Maryanne:

*Just consider the distance*

(laughter)

Claire:

*there were two business offices  
and,  
there were two wives.*

(laughter, chatter, silence)

Claire:

*No one knew.  
Until he died.*

Women in this group thought this was an unbelievable story however, polygamy was also an aspect of Lena's family stories. Lena, who was in the second series of Workshops, discovered after her father's death that he had several wives.

### **Family myths**

Stories that were previously absences in family narratives are sometimes incorporated into family histories if they are revealed, often as a family myth, romantic or villainous storyline. There is a touch of romantic nostalgia when Claire talks about her mother-in-law's life. These storylines gain emotional distance over time, allowing dissociation and disidentification from the shaming experience, even finding a degree of tolerance for the family character who is 'other' to the respectable family. These characters and secrets are also more easily assimilated through brief contextualising explanations, such as Maryanne gave above, *You're just innocent, too young, not knowing the facts of life, finding out the hard way*, or Claire's explanation, *she was lively and vivacious and friendly and fun loving, he was kind of cautious*. These explanations put the woman at the centre of her story from where her experience becomes comprehensible in her own terms. Secrets that are kept a tightly closed package of uncertainty and intrigue intended to camouflage moral transgressions interpret the experience from an external and objective authority position.

### **Confusion**

Bea and Kaye explained in Chapter Two how they were confused and angry about the uncertainty they experienced as children. Like other women in the Workshops their confusion was only resolved when they found out the previously secreted story that contextualised and made sense of their feelings of confusion. Several of the participants spoke about confusion

they experienced that was related to a vague uncertainty about biological relationships. Carolyn Steedman writes about her own uncertainty as a child, and her feeling that people knew something about her that she didn't know (1986:40). Speaking about the secrecy surrounding her illegitimate birth Steedman (1986:41) writes that, 'It wasn't the legal impropriety that I knew about, the illegitimacy, rather I felt the wider disjuncture of our existence, its lack of authorisation'. Authorisation is an aspect of systemic power manifested often in subtle but pervasive ways camouflaged by social norms (Hawthorne 2002:80-81). In *feeling different* from their families, Bea and Melissa (to come) were dissociated from legitimate authority because how they were different was not part of their conscious knowledge. Secrets can be mythical, shameful or even romantic, yet they exist because of actual situations and particular moral codes. Steedman (1986:40) gives credence to confusion around secrets, and challenges any romantic attachment to uncertainty when she asks, 'What kind of secret was the illegitimacy? It was a real secret, that is the product of an agreed silence on the part of two people about a real event'.

Bea explained that she found out a family secret by accident. She told us that when she was a child, she 'just knew' she didn't fit with her family. She talked about confusion that she couldn't express, when she didn't understand the 'weird stuff' that adults did, that they expected her to behave in a certain way when, even as a child, she was aware that they were motivated differently. Later she realised that her parents weren't necessarily aware of the contradictions and confusion they created in the keeping of secrets. Bea explained that she thought people get conditioned into keeping secrets as a way of coping with problems and that way of dealing with certain problems is taken-for-granted as the appropriate action. But as Bea shows, her childhood was impacted by the secrecy because she lacked trust and certainty. Bea's experience resonates with Roxanne Rimstead's (1997:253) claim that the taken-for-granted has repercussions for the self by conferring discursive power 'capable of flattening the psychosocial space that houses our sense of identity'. Taken-for-granted knowledge in the form of dominant discourses, and in Bea's family the idea that secrecy protects the child, spawns suites of deception and absences in family narratives.

Bea:

*You're in deep trouble,  
there's no one to trust,  
And there's no one to tell anything to,  
You just eek out a life as best you can,*

*Amongst all of this  
And make sure you don't get squashed flat in the meantime.  
I think people must get conditioned into that, you know?  
I found out just by accident  
that my stepfather wasn't my biological father.  
I was about twelve when I got this information.  
I had to go seeking it from family members  
to find out if I was on the right track, or not,  
eventually I got it out of my mum,  
  
'well, yes darling, you are quite right,  
that man is not your father.'*

*Right,  
ok,  
just been living with him for twelve years,  
and I knew it!  
I knew it!*

welcome Martina:

*what did you know?*

Bea:

*well I just felt it.  
I just knew that I didn't fit with that family, and umm,  
although I have two brothers and a sister,  
we have the same mother  
and, they all share the same father,  
who is the stepfather that I always just knew instinctively,  
didn't have anything to do with me.  
and, um,  
I think it was my very first lesson in Chemistry,  
or something,  
when you find out that,  
you know,*



*that two blue eyed parents can't have green eyed children.*  
*And then there's me,*  
*with these great, green eyes and everyone else has blue eyes.*  
*Oh yeah!*  
*Ok,*  
*I see.*

Bea's childhood awareness of her difference, however vague, was like Melissa's, based on questions arising from appearances and hushed conversations. In explaining the awareness of their difference the women found it difficult to pinpoint the source of this knowing, except in the piecing together of inconclusive fragments of information they hoarded throughout childhood. Bea thought that her parents '*had the fear that there were certain things that kids weren't privy to*' and so they withheld information from her. What was this fear? Perhaps it was a fear of shame and not performing respectably or a fear of failure to provide a protected childhood. At times the uncertainty in her life created a perilous environment for Bea growing up. She explained she hadn't known where to put herself, and she didn't trust the adults. She was aware of the necessity of keeping out of their way.

Bea:

*It explains my grandmother's very odd behaviour as well,*  
*(she was my stepfather's mother)*  
*and,*  
*she was lovely.*  
*but how she treated me was,*  
*it was .....*  
*she would just sing me these really weird songs about orphans and things,*

(laughter)

*I'd just be thinking 'jeez my grandmother's a lovely singer'*  
*'but jeez, she sings some sad songs'*  
*and years later I added it all up, and I thought,*  
*that woman, she loved me so dearly,*  
*and,*  
*she felt so sorry for me.*

Was Bea's grandmother offering her alternative storylines to prepare her for the secret her parents maintained, to disrupt the taken-for-granted family narrative? Perhaps this was how her grandmother dealt with the responsibility of knowing the secret kept from Bea. By introducing these ideas in songs she presented Bea with knowledge of other kinds of family experiences, although they were sad songs and apparently didn't frame difference positively. Songs have traditionally been a way of passing information through generations.

### **The fabric– the background**

Subterfuge is apparently a common background to childhood. The women whose adoption was hidden from them in childhood both embarked on a rebellious drive for independence from the adoptive parents, and a lifetime search for answers when they were told they had been adopted at birth. 'Adoption has a cascade of consequences for all the individuals involved, some of which are positive, others not' (Marshall & McDonald 2001:223). Likewise, secrets and hidden family stories have a cascade of consequences and produce discomfort that is long lasting and difficult to understand until the secret is revealed, because, as Steedman explains:

In childhood, only the surroundings show, and nothing is explained. Children do not possess a social analysis of what is happening to them, or around them, so the landscape and the pictures it presents have to remain a background, taking on meaning later, from different circumstances. (Steedman 1986:28)

Lena explained that her childhood uncertainty manifested as anxiety that she understood much later on as related to her father's deception because he had 'all these wives no one knew about.'

### **Dissociation — disconnection**

Childhood impressions become a background that embodies memory with its traces. Though we move beyond childhood understanding of life experiences, embodied memories can be a pathway from where we can reflect on earlier experiences if they are not locked out of self-reflexive reach. Amal Treacher (2000:133-4) speaks of different ways of viewing childhood, as a separate realm of subjective experience, the raw material of later life, or an incremental capacity of individuals to reflect on their experiences through memory as their cognitive abilities develop. The memory of childhood involves all three of these.

In talking about their lives, some of the women often referred to their childhood selves as ‘you’ maintaining the separation between the selves they are now and the child they were. This is evident in Workshop discussions (and also in my own stories), when the conversation or stories draws on adult reflection to explain the childhood experience. Bea does this when she talks about the confusion she felt as a child and how she handled it at the time. While collective biography fosters the process of re/memory, Davies et al. (2002) explain that, ‘memory is not able to produce experiences identical with the original events since they must be filtered through the present context and historical moment.’ Childhood is a separate realm of experience that can be continually reworked, depending on perceptions brought into play by early experience and language available (Steedman 1986:128). Absences and silent stories compound if dominant discourses suppress embodied and intuitive knowing to a repressed background. Perhaps the instinct that Bea refers to below is an indication of the self trying to make sense of experiences that are locked out of conscious memory.

Morgan:

*Secrets get built on when you don't know that there's a secret there.*

Kaye:

*even when you don't know, but something in you just knows that it's not right.*

Bea:

*and I don't really enjoy that,  
you know?  
I think that as I'm older now,  
I still get caught up in that stuff,  
when I instinctively know something,  
but I can't back it up with physical proof.  
That just drives me absolutely mad.*

The frustration Bea describes would provide a useful starting point for collective biography work.

Melissa also spoke about ‘feeling’ something was amiss in her family when she was a child. Her younger sister looked like her parents and Melissa was quite different in appearance. She'd noticed odd comments adults made about family resemblances that she didn't understand until much later. All her life she was fussed about and over protected, unlike her sister who was treated more casually. Melissa said that she knew she was different somehow,

and that she didn't belong. There were many incidents in her life that confused her. For a long while her parents avoided any questions she asked but finally when she was about eleven her mother sat down with her and told her 'a beautiful fairy tale' about their adoption of her.

*welcome* **Melissa**

*It was [a story] about a baby girl who smiled up at her parents,  
that's when they knew I was going to be theirs.  
I was special.  
What a story to tell!*

And Melissa couldn't wait to tell her fairytale! She told children living nearby who she played with occasionally. They were intrigued by the tale and went home to check with their parents what 'adoption' meant. Their own parents told them a different story to Melissa's fairy tale.

Melissa:

*then came the teasing and the taunting,  
'your real mother didn't want you,  
your mother didn't love you,  
and she gave you away.'  
My fairytale was shattered.  
I was heartbroken,  
was this really true?  
this was not the way I was told.  
So this began my road of many years of total despair,  
until it ended  
just before my fortieth birthday.*

The neighbourhood parents explained adoption as the lack of a mother's love. Disdain for birth mothers who give up their babies is still prevalent even today, according to Drucilla Cornell (1998:96).

Melissa's story<sup>15</sup> (to come) reveals the appeal of blood ties and their association with the notion of the ideal family and belonging. Melissa describes herself as though the events of her

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<sup>15</sup> The following are brief excerpts from stories Melissa wrote and gave me.

life are actually her. She embodies negative discourses around her adoption and expresses them as attributions of self rather than as emotions, experiences or effects. In telling her story, Melissa shows the conflicts and complexity she lived in cross-cutting storylines. Melissa's story reveals an acute awareness of the contradictions she negotiated when she was a teenager, wanting independence, desiring connection, and feeling betrayed by her adoptive parents after they knowingly destroyed her original birth certificate to prevent her from discovering her birth mother's name.

In her early teens Melissa constructed a defiant story about her self. It was a romantic tale she fabricated with her first boyfriend from fragments of information she knew about herself and patched onto a love song playing on the radio at the time. This was part of her separation from her adoptive parents and the creation of a context to explain her life independent of them.

The following extract is taken from a story Melissa wrote during the first weeks of the Workshops. It tells about her teenage years after her adoptive parents refused to give her any information about her birth.

Melissa:

*I became a rebel with a cause, the object being to cause pain and misery to my parents. They said they had no answers, they wouldn't help me to find my real mother.*

*When I got pregnant at sixteen we decided we wanted to have the baby. But my parents had other ideas. They wanted me to have an abortion, the good Catholics that they were. I said no. Then they suggested adoption. That just made me more determined, after all how could I let someone go through what I was. I realised that part of the reason I wanted this baby was because I wanted someone that looked like me, someone that was of my blood. Someone that was my own.*

*We got married in the Registry Office, and he spent the rest of the day drinking with his mates. He was always in trouble. Cars were as much a passion as being out drinking, and he spent quite a bit of time in court.*

*This time he was in deep trouble. He was driving on a disqualified licence, he was drunk, caused an accident and left the scene. Things weren't looking good this time. His solicitor told him, he'd done it this time, he'd go to jail. He swore he would never go.*

*That night he went into the bedroom and came out with a rifle and one bullet. Later at the hospital I remember saying that I didn't want him to die, but my mind kept screaming, please die, I can't take this anymore. At 3.30 am the hospital rang to say he was gone, he was only eighteen. In three years I had learnt all about domestic violence and adultery, and now at eighteen not only was I a widow but a single mother as well.*

Melissa used stories to disrupt the normalcy that covered aspects of her life in secrecy. The secrecy around the circumstances of their birth did not protect either Melissa or Maryanne from confusion, nor were there alternative storylines available that might have framed their experiences in positive terms. Instead they lived their childhoods in the borderlands of respectability.

### **The borderlands of respectability**

Julie's experience (to follow) is another story about teenage pregnancy and Julie giving up her daughter, Anna, for adoption in the 1970s. Julie was literally sent away and hidden out of the sight of respectable society when Anna was conceived outside of marriage. Women couldn't really escape the negative labelling associated with unplanned pregnancy and they were often condemned on moral grounds (Marshall & McDonald 2001:81). Young, pregnant and unmarried, Maryanne, Melissa and Julie, were subject to punitive discourses that are the underside of stereotypical ideals of moral and sexual behaviour that construct a knowing of self that inscribes guilt, shame and other negative emotions, often blocking alternative ways of experiencing events. I am including Julie's story although she wasn't a participant in the Workshops, because it goes hand in glove with stories told in the Lifestory Workshops by the women who also know about the losses incurred when respectability is transgressed.

Julie's pregnant body is not perceived as belonging to her, as though she relinquished any right to her own body and the child that was growing within her because she had behaved irresponsibly. Within her family's moral code Julie's pregnancy identified her as being incapable of making the *right* decisions and so decisions were made for her. Her pregnancy exposed her personal being and her sexual self became public. Parental authority outstripped Julie's rights and denied her womanhood, deeming her childlike. Julie held Anna only briefly before she was adopted.

*welcome Julie:*

Julie never did tell her story. Anna's father told me about Julie twenty-eight years after her death by suicide, thirty years after Anna's birth. The following words express his perception of Julie's pain.

*It wasn't in loverhood, or motherhood, or daughterhood, that words had meaning for Julie. It wasn't to be found overseas, far from family and old friends. Meaning was finally, for her, to be found nowhere. Maybe it is somewhere in between the scattered words she left behind and those never heard, that could have been spoken if there was a receptive and knowing ear nearby. No ear nearby. Only death, which, like the sea, speaks loudly and silently.*

The fathers of adopted children are often referred to as shadowy figures according to Marshall and McDonald (2001:78) and certainly this young father had no place in the decision regarding Anna's adoption, but Julie is the shadowy memory. In her absence, Julie's story might have remained respectably silent but hearing about her experiences has drawn me into a labyrinth of imagined effects and questions.

*Julie, you named your daughter Anna, as parents give their baby a name that either delights, or has some other significance. And then, with only as much choice as you thought you had in 1971, you gave Anna up to other parents, married parents, wise and older parents, the respectable kind. They named her Carolyn. Anna was lost to you and your sweetheart. Now you are lost to Carolyn. Did you die from grief or shame, from pain or love, from the im/possibility that it is to be a mother, when a woman is still a child? Julie, why did you die?*

For Julie and her boyfriend, the repercussions of sexual experimentation and the conception of a child outside of marriage transgressed family and community values. There was a collision of narratives, the entrenched discourses of morality and the newly emerging sexually liberated social movement, that demonstrates what Sara Mills refers to as crisis points in the discourses of 'conflicting communities of practice' (2003:96). The social moment understood as sexual liberation conflicted with traditional morals and social values inculcated in early life but as Lois McNay (2000:42) explains, entrenched values are resilient even through changing times.

Maryanne, Julie and Melissa were mothers by the time they were seventeen. Each of their stories reveals an unpreparedness for their blossoming sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s. I have wept with empathy listening to the experiences and pain these stories tell in the collision of moral codes that repress sexuality, with changing popular culture.



## **Shame**

Silence and absence do not prevent shame, guilt, distress or fear. Maryanne was matter of fact when she referred to 'the shame factor' in the conversation, *Coffee, Tea or Biscuits*, where the man of the family was the final arbiter of stories made public. The shame factor was the reason why her adoptive mother didn't talk about her affair with another man and how she came to be pregnant after adopting Maryanne. The shame factor involves recognising how others will judge your mistakes and deciding on the appropriate action.

Michael Lewis (1992:33), examining theories of shame and self conscious emotions, concluded that it is 'the focus of the self on the self's failure, and an evaluation of that failure, that leads to shame'. The self-reflexive focus, self scrutiny, attributes shame according to Lewis, and is an effect of the socialisation of children in their first three years accomplished within the family:

The goals and rules that govern our lives are learned from those around us, and our evaluation of success or failure also involves learning. Our parents teach us how to set standards and how to evaluate performance. Parents also play a teaching role that is more indirect but just as important. Parents who practice love withdrawal or express contempt or disgust affect their children's sense of pride and shame. The available data indicates that girls and women are more likely than boys and men to make global self attributions '- "I am bad"' not '"My performance is bad"' - when they fail. Thus, girls and women may experience more shame than boys and men. (Lewis 1992:10)

Shame or guilt are experienced as the consequences of the self's failure in regard to a standard, goal or rule (Lewis 1992:9). Since shame involves self-assessment of failure, avoiding shaming situations is an act of self-discipline associated with becoming a social being through awareness of social rules and standards, and 'being good'. Concealment as a shame response was common in regard to illegitimacy, abortion and adoption until recently in Australia (Dalziell 1999:67). Rosamund Dalziell (1999:63) writes that respectability is a refuge from shame, except when the shame results from illegitimacy. According to Dalziell, it was evident in the biographies she studied that shame has the function of developing a sense of the other in the shaping of self:

As part of the shaping of the self, an internalised shaming 'other' begins to form within the family of origin, in relationship with other family members. Although the experience of shame is painful, a sense of shame may well be a useful guide to the restraint required for peaceful coexistence with others. (Dalziell 1999:64)

Self scrutiny and the ability to identify shameful behaviour has a social function, as Dalziell (1999:64) points out, but the disciplinary underbelly is a shadow of the socialisation of children in families when it necessitates secrets, when it makes a life unlivable or builds fear and confusion.

### **The benevolent girl**

*When I was a girl, I knew it was unlucky if your parents didn't want you and you were bad if you got yourself into any trouble. I knew that girls stayed with their parents until marriage and the worst thing you could do was to get pregnant without being married. Mum would say that if a girl got herself into trouble, well you were just throwing your life away. They'd send you to a home for unmarried mothers and you'd have to scrub out the toilets and wash the dirty nappies of other girls' babies while they were waiting to be adopted out, while you waited for yours to be born.*

*Sometimes my mum would yell and scream at my older sister, that they'd send her away to reform school. That's what'd happen if you back answered, if you didn't behave. So you just did. You just learnt to be good, you shut up and you did what they said, and you never asked questions.*

*When I was fifteen, my girlfriend and I started taking children from an orphanage on outings, just for the day. My girlfriend's mother had grown up in an orphanage but it wasn't until she was a teenager that she discovered she wasn't an orphan, and her dreams of the perfect mother who had died a heroic death were shattered. She must have organised our outings because I don't remember the nuns asking us any questions, they just let us take the kids.*

*We took out two little girls at first and we looked after one each. My little girl was Elaine, and she was six. I've still got a photo taken of us together in a booth at the station, two young faces beaming at the camera. Another time we took boys who were brothers. We were shocked to hear that none of these children were orphans. They all wanted to come and live with us, they wanted us to cuddle them and hold their hands all day. We were just fifteen.*

*The Children's Home had a hostel for unmarried mothers attached to it and we caught glimpses of girls our age with big bellies, waddling around in shapeless smocks when we went to collect the children. The nuns showed us the babies' room with rows and rows of bassinets and babies who cried for hours in between feeds. We saw the dining room for the toddlers*

*with low tables and chairs set with plastic bowls and spoons. The walls were bare and the rooms were cold and completely unadorned. We wanted to help, but we always had to take the children back at the end of the day.*

*Then when I was twenty-one and married for two years, I got a job in a children's home. The job description said training to be a housemother/youth worker. It was like school day and night but with its locked gate and no privacy inside, the slick new building felt like a prison. I only stayed a week, grateful that I could choose to not go back and wracked with guilt because I couldn't change the children's lives, I couldn't take them home.*

Girls like me learned benevolence for less fortunate others from our earliest years. At school we heard about charities that looked after unfortunate children and mum always put her spare change (if she had any) in the Barnado's envelope when it was sent home from school once a year. It was part of my moral and social education to be grateful that I wasn't one of the unfortunate ones. Growing up I had learned about shame as a consequence to be avoided at any cost and I learned I was different from unfortunate others whose experiences were 'not me'. This othering is a narrative maneuver that operated as a disciplinary strategy of respectability.

Beverly Skeggs (1997b:4) explains that recognitions do 'not occur without value judgements and the women [who participated in the study] are constantly aware of the judgements of real and imaginary others. Recognition of how one is positioned is central to the processes of subjective construction'. Steedman (1986:122) also makes this point when she writes that, 'Psychic structures are shaped by these huge historical labels: *charity, philanthropy, state intervention*'. Learning benevolence positions girls with respectable middle-class values and fosters distance from the not respectable, less fortunate others because caring is a way that working-class women gain legitimacy and recognition as respectable, responsible and mature (Skeggs 1997b:56). Benevolence is therefore powerfully situated to foster self-scrutiny according to middle class values of respectability. In what seems to me a convolution of meaning, benevolence fosters both care and disconnection from others through objectification, drawing on women's assumed biological predilection for selflessness and nurture.

### **Precarious childhood**

My childhood was underwritten by a threat of abandonment, of being 'put in a home'. It surprised me recently to read Dorothy Allison (1994) and Laurel Richardson (1997:230) both

talking about being threatened with this punishment. Richardson discusses her father's threat to put her in a juvenile detention centre on one occasion in *Fields of Play* saying that she withdrew from him afterwards, and reacted by wanting independence (1997:230). While Richardson was in her mid-teens when the incident occurred, in my home a similar threat was frequently directed at my older sister. The fear of being sent away generally underpinned my childhood and underwrote my desire to be a good, respectable girl.

What I didn't know as a child was that kids in homes were rarely orphans *or* particularly naughty. State authority routinely stepped in to provide appropriate protection, discipline and residential care if families were deemed to have failed in their duty of care and protection of children. This was also often the fate of children when a parent was left with sole responsibility for children they were not able to look after while they went to work. In 1979, there were four hundred and ninety one identified institutional homes in Australia (Hanson 1979). They were both state owned homes and homes controlled by welfare organisations. The majority of the homes dealt 'with dependent children – who were admitted because of neglect, family problems, desertion' (Hanson 1979:6). The institutional care of children at risk of neglect, often on account of a perceived lack or absence of mother care for whatever reason, was legally sanctioned and accepted in Australia until the 1980s. It was part of our moral and social conscience to intervene in the lives of less fortunate others.

### **The motherland**

Shaming and benevolence are in a symbiotic relationship with 'other'. In that symbiosis conflicting and ambiguous storylines are spawned as a result of tensions between private experience and public authority. The tension is silenced as both Peter Pierce (1999) in *The Country of Lost Children*, and Rosamund Dalziell (1999) in *Shameful Autobiographies* reveal in their discussions of an underlying shame in the Australian psyche related to the care of children. Solidity and strength of character are aspects of the storyline of respectable Australian identity relying on metaphoric association with home and family, yet Australian history attests to a vulnerability perpetrated on children.

While blood relationships are widely considered important, legislation regarding the well-being of children, illegitimacy, inheritance and also adoption, has seen significant changes of heart in Australian history (Marshall & McDonald 2001:9). The changeable mood regarding blood relationships is evident in public opinion in support or opposition to State practices. In the 1920s, opposition to the legalisation of adoption focused on the need to preserve

bloodlines but this later shifted to a concern for the quality of care of children above blood ties (Marshall & McDonald 2001:9). With that shift adoption came a popular option for infertile parents.

The removal of children from their biological families has been an accepted practice throughout most of Australia's history and justified by public discourses about benevolence. The deception and moral persecution involved in this widespread practice is experienced by many people now as a deep national shame, in the theft of Aboriginal children, the deceit involved in child migration from Britain, the moral denigration often at the heart of adoption, and the institutionalisation of children at risk of neglect, many who suffered abuse at the hands of institutional carers.

In raising these issues my aim is to make it clear that 'the family' is subject to other institutions in the service of the social system and even global imperatives, often with devastating impact on children and parents. Intervention into family life is justified by whatever is currently the accepted discourse or trend relating to the protection of children. Yet, the symbolic and ideological functions that link the family with national and global issues are elided, and the responsibility for children's well being shifted onto the private sphere of the family with emphasis on love and emotional ties that are the responsibility of mothers.

*Home* shapes the ideological landscape that shelters family values and institutes the protected space of childhood in response to systemic needs of the broader culture. The blurring of the interconnectedness of family, home, nation exploits the taken-for-granted associations, especially the emotional bindings between family and home. According to Sean Scalmer (1999:9), home is a cross-class image and in this sense it is a unifying concept.

### **My home — my self**

The space of the home and all its details is largely considered the private sphere and associated with the maternal. Home is a feminised notion that is often used metaphorically to express the desire for a particular kind of identity that enables us to make sense of our lives (Alsop, Fitzsimmons, Lennon, & Minsky 2002:208). bell hooks (1990:49) for example, writes about homeplace 'that space where we return for renewal and self recovery, where we heal our wounds and become whole'. Certainly, in the Workshop discussions some of the participants wanted to find a self, or to name self as part of a narrative of home and belonging

that Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon explain is a way to make sense of life experiences (2002:208).

Metaphors of Australia as home and the Australian population as family have been used to promote desired immigration, where home involves 'perceived core values' that encompass benevolence and tolerance (Burke 2002:1). Linking family, affection, home and the feminine with nationalism draws significantly on the desire for belonging and self understanding. The underlying myth of Australian identity and Australian femininity as morally good, caring, and selfless hides shame inherent in Australian history where, according to Pierce, 'the innocent young are in most jeopardy' (1999:xi). It reinforces heteroreality and the heterosexual couple as the respectable and appropriate social unit to shelter children.

### **For love or money**

*When I was a little girl dad used to tell me that I was priceless. I remember turning over my thoughts trying to comprehend these confusing words, it was as if they were a puzzle. I just couldn't fathom the meaning. I must have asked my mother to explain because I recall my attempts to imagine all of the money in the world piled high in one place. Priceless, she told me, was more than that. There was no amount of money anyone could pay that would buy me, she said. There was no diamond more precious, I was irreplaceable, priceless, she said.*

The story of the priceless child reminds me now of the beautiful fairy tale Melissa was told by her adoptive mother and Bea's grandmother, who loved her so dearly she sang songs about orphans. These are all storylines spawned by a romantic notion of childhood as an idyllic background to later life.

Grown up, I realise to the contrary that women and children are a commodity regularly traded (Jeffreys 1997; Johnson 2003), and that lives are often expendable. Priceless was an attempt by my father to quantify his love but there was something else at play that made it confusing for me. In retrospect he was also expressing a frustration, or disappointment, he had with the girls in our family. Perhaps it was his disappointment or a sense of failure that he hadn't fathered the much wanted son but there was something about his girls that confounded him. He'd shake his head when he didn't understand me, and say 'you're priceless', as though I was a mystery to him. He was clearly the authority figure in our family and certainly a mystery to me. Though I didn't see it often, I thought of him like a volcano that might erupt

and mum was the fuse that either lit or extinguished the eruption. Mum mediated all things between dad and me.

The idea that love transcends fiscal affiliation is a pervasive marker of our cultural perspective on family. Catherine Belsey (1994:72) writes that 'love is a value that remains beyond the market'. Indeed, to equate love and children's worth in dollar terms is certainly not the respectable thing to do in our culture. Yet, though children and family are ostensibly incommensurable with money, economic considerations are increasingly of prime importance in decisions regarding children and arrangements for their care. Not only in decisions as to whether or not to have children or the timing of pregnancy, but also when parents longing for a child have been willing to pay for babies from overseas or embark on expensive IVF with its low rate of success, where success is a healthy, live baby (Klein 1989:282-3).

The complications surrounding love and money become clearer in women's negotiations between unpaid and paid work. Alison Mackinnon (1997:234) observes that when income, and benefits like superannuation must be given up or childcare paid for, 'the priceless child can indeed have a price tag attached and it is a very high one'. Women's responsibility for care institutes their economic disadvantage and dependence.

### **Woman the caretaker**

In 1995 Rosemary Pringle (Caine & Pringle 1995:208) wrote hopefully that, 'Women's greater legal, sexual and financial autonomy makes the 'patriarchal nuclear family an anachronism'. However to the contrary, the patriarchal nuclear family form is alive and flourishing in 2005 and women's responsibility for domestic work is global, as Suzanne Franzway explains:

[a] survey of the substantial qualitative and quantitative research on men, women and housework finds that there are barely any differences between the industrialised countries. Class, race, or any other factors (such as employment, cross-cultural differences or household income) make no significant difference. What is remarkable is the lack of significant variation. The main influence on the amount of men's domestic work is 'the presence or the absence of a wife. (Franzway 2001:115)

Although there is a variation in what is taken-for-granted as being men's work and women's work cross-culturally, there is a constant hierarchical opposition of masculine and feminine that underpins the sexual division of domestic labour globally (Gatens & Mackinnon 1998:13).

Although households are more flexibly arranged and women have increasing opportunities for paid work they continue to experience periods of dependence on account of their primary responsibility for family care (Segal 2000:207). In the Workshops, for instance, Melissa phoned me midway through the first series to say she couldn't come any more because she was starting some voluntary work that might develop into a paid position. Like other women who have been primary caregivers for most of their adult lives, Melissa had very little paid work experience. Now, striving for financial independence, Melissa wanted to update her skills and gain experience in the paid workforce. Melissa told me that having recently separated from her partner she is now a single mother and 'the price of freedom is poverty'.

At the centre of family is reliance on the couple to manage the intersection of private and public life in the form of unpaid and paid responsibilities. Cixous (1996:67) says woman's domestic function is necessary to the social system but it leaves woman in the shadow man throws, 'Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning'. The couple is the site where change is necessary for transformation if relationship with other is to be any way than oppositional (Cixous 1976 cited in Burke 1995:165). Certainly it was a challenge for Lifestory Workshop participants to situate themselves with authority and tell their stories from their own embodied subject positions and for Melissa and Maryanne, who were both recently separated from male partners, their quests for self were inflected by the desire for independence.

Maria Mies (1998:70) goes as far as to say that family is a social construction of patriarchy based on the sexual division of labour that has civilised women to internalise their own oppression. As an historical artefact 'The institutional and ideological props necessary for the maintenance of this self repression were provided by the church, the state, and through the family' (Mies 1998:71). Mies goes on to explain that for women, love is 'the necessary ideological mystification of their own self-repression' (1998:71). For this reason Diana Gittin's concerns about inequity and the perceived naturalness of the family ring as true today as when she wrote in 1993 that:

The locus for unequal relations between men and women and adults and children is perceived as lying in 'the family'. As such, the family has become a vital and central symbol to notions of authority, inequality and deference. The symbolic importance of the family cannot be underestimated, for it goes beyond political allegiances of left or right and has arguably come to be seen as the most important institution of modern industrial society. The problem, however, is that it is seen as an institution grounded in reality rather than as a symbol-system or ideology. (Gittins 1993:59)



Pringle's later comments are also pertinent 'We have to understand the ways in which family, state and professions have moved beyond patriarchy while remaining patriarchal' (1995:211). Rosemary Hennessy (2000:83) reiterates that it is necessary to understand how institutions such as the family remain patriarchal in a socioeconomic climate that increasingly divests individual experiences from a relationship with underpinning structures like capital and class, focusing instead on equal opportunity.

### **Concluding thoughts on the family**

It is in families that individuals generally first learn about themselves. In spite of multifarious family forms in Australia in recent years, the concept of *family* remains a significant framework that provides narratives and storylines through which an understanding of identity and self is formulated. The first frame is usually gender followed by a personal name in addition to a family name. In combination these powerfully establish a foundational identity that locates the child as an historical, gendered person within metanarratives that are patriarchal, generally heterosexual, and valorise biological connections.

Family is, however, fraught with complexity as an interpretive framework because the concept rarely matches individual experiences and links between the private sphere and broader social trends are often unclear.

Intersecting discourses, structures and emotions shape individual desires but the family's hold on be/longing is legitimated by dominant discourses, or metanarratives of the social system that imbibe family with symbolic and ideological importance. Family and belonging link social and personal needs through ideology, but this link is powerfully couched in personal and emotional terms. Moira Gatens and Alison Mackinnon (1998:14) challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about family decisively when they say that 'the institution of the family and the gender norms that govern it *have* become synonymous with cultural meanings and practices'.

The family exists at an intersection of feeling and instrumentality, or is feeling an essential aspect of the instrumentality of the family? The combination of enduring patriarchal ideology around the notion of family, the fuzzy meanings that result from emotional entanglement, the recognition of diverse experiences and the perception that *things have changed*, see family as a site of conflicting and ambiguous desires according to Aslop et al. (2002:90-91). It is important to differentiate the family as a site of entanglement and contestable meanings from

the idealised nostalgic romance, however intersections or crossovers between material considerations and emotions are difficult to disentangle because inherent contradictions and paradoxes do indeed produce mixed and conflicting feelings.

Family is a closed circuit that fuses together systems of power, material conditions and bodily experiences (Adair 2001:452). Familial ideologies pass on cultural authority, or the lack of, in the transmission of dominant discourses, traditional sex roles, naming practices, moral codes and symbolism attached to objects such as toys including dolls, and jewellery. Symbols of relationship, belonging, selflessness, and dependence are bequests of the family that fabricate a resilient gendered and classed background to women's life experiences that creates an impasse women face to their becoming woman-defined Selves. Metaphoric associations of family and home powerfully infuse women's psychic interior life with moral discourses that are disciplinary. The perception that family and home are expressions of an inherently natural social organisation creates an emotive storyline that ties women's self worth to the needs of others, emotionally overloading women with responsibility to uphold and maintain cultural mores. Carolyn Steedman's poignant point demonstrates the dire consequences for women:

it is women who socialise little girls into acceptance of a restricted future, women who used to bind the feet, women who hold down the daughter for cliterodectomy, and who, in more familiar and genteel ways, fit their daughters for self-abasement. (Steedman 1986:87)

Women's apparent complicity is a vexing issue framed this way when it is clear that respectable womanhood is training in the subversion of woman identified Self. as Irigaray (1992:18) also points out when she describes woman as a receptacle made and re/produced to receive and to nourish the other, or to re/produce and nourish discourses that subvert the feminine (Whitford 1991:118-132). The closed circuit of the family is socially constructed, a self-perpetuating man/ifestation of dominant discourses.

#### **May 2004**

*Family is a concept rife with contradictions; between the symbolism and lived realities, between the way women's role remains pivotal in families, taken-for-granted and yet obscured and undervalued. Though the concept 'family' stretches trying to accommodate diversity, the core ideal preserves the myth of the functional nuclear and patriarchal family, held together with blood and loyalty in a wash of national identity. The family remains a powerful myth disconnected from women's lived reality and eliding the profound relationship*

*with the needs of the capitalist economic system that organises identities and desire (Hennessy 2000:183). And women still silently cry.*

*When my mother was the age I am now, she was very depressed but I don't know what she thought or felt. She used to say she had worked her fingers to the bone. I don't know how she would have described her depression. It was never spoken about. I never heard her cry. My only recollections of the manifestation of her unhappiness were her nightmares and addictive behaviors. Mum managed the dis/ease in her life with cigarettes, alcohol, Vincent's headache powders and valium – a potent mix she took every single day. A number of times she was threatened with hospitalisation and shock therapy. I wonder was she struggling as I have, to swallow the whole of the womanliness, 'the motherliness' inscribed for her (Pollack Petchesky 1998:262). I used to worry that she or I would be taken away and put in a home, but I never knew if it was because I was bad or because she was sick. My fear has often been that I am like her. How does she inhabit me?*



Ariadne

*Is she Ariadne,  
helpmate of the hero?  
She who holds the thread,  
waiting as though she would not,  
could not  
be,  
without him.*

*She stays,  
always waiting.  
The hero takes the lead,  
sutures her identity to his,  
and cleaves to the thread she  
holds,  
for him.*

*It's a compelling myth.  
His success the same thing as her abandonment.  
She is betrayed,  
dissociated,  
disconnected,  
unfree in the waiting.*

## Chapter Four

# Flesh and Desire

### Embodying Discourses that Class/ify



I am wolf. I call across the miles  
my messages of yearning and hunger,  
and the snow speaks to me constantly  
of food and want and friend and foe.  
The iron air is heavy with ice

tweaking my nose and the sound  
of the wind is sharp and whetted.  
Commenting, chatting, calling,  
we run through the net of scents  
querying, Are you my daughter?

*They Inhabit Me*  
by Marge Piercy  
from *My Mother's Body*, 1985

Giving birth remains undeniably women's work, and as Adrienne Rich (1985:11) says, 'the one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body'.

*I don't remember my mother very well. I don't remember her telling me that she loved me. Ever. I have searched through mementos, photographs and letters for traces that would give me a sense of the woman she was, because I realise I barely knew her. She was just mum. She existed as background in my life. This isn't surprising, it's a sentiment often expressed as Adrienne Rich does when she writes that 'The child does not discern the social system or the institution of motherhood, only a harsh voice, a dull pair of eyes, a mother who does not hold her, does not tell her how wonderful she is' (1985:245). But in spite of my lack of memories of affection from my mother, I am her daughter.*

*Mum was a dressmaker. When I was a child she was known throughout the district for her ability to cut patterns from her own sketches and she could get a dress out of the barest scrap of material. She'd copy clothes she saw in the shops, or in the magazines women brought to show her. Bridal wear was her specialty. She would draw the patterns freehand on the big double sheets of the Saturday Herald, using the woman's exact measurements. When it came to stitching she didn't use French seams, instead she'd save time by ironing the seams open to smooth out the rough edges and assure a professional appearance on the outside. When her own daughters walked down the aisle our bridal gowns were the essence of good taste, and mum was justifiably proud.*

*Mum's good taste was an outward display of respectability. Her performance of respectability was a thin veneer she'd put on, with her own copycat clothes, her makeup and the correctness of her speech in public. As she hurried out the front door she always said, 'Is my face on straight?' In later life, the slippage between the respectable image and another side she tamed with pills and alcohol became a rougher seam.*

Respectability is a classed discourse that shapes women's subjectivity. It is a difficult concept to contain because respectability is an intertwining of moral and social expectations that are a function of class and gender. Respectability involves a tangle of discourses that intersect with class. The decline in class analysis in recent years does not demonstrate the decline of class and class effects. Beverly Skeggs is one of many theorists who have written about, 'the retreat from class analysis'. According to Skeggs, this retreat has made class invisible in a way that

assures the identity of the middle class. Skeggs (1997b:7) goes on to explain that class informs subjectivity even when ‘we do not feel impeded by it or choose not to recognise it, or to avoid it through disidentification and dissimulations’. Skeggs (1997b:7) argues that the relative invisibility of class in social analysis suggests that class differences in power are ‘now institutionalised, legitimated and well established’.

The gendered economy that depends on the unpaid work of women in the care of others has profound effects on the production of women’s identity and desire, in the family and in other institutions including, schools, churches, the law and cultural practices in general (Hennessy 2000:183). Hennessy is adamant that class knowledge is formed through complex mediations and knowledges that seem to have little to do with class but nevertheless represent the interests of the ruling bloc (2000:177). For that reason she believes it is necessary to:

develop ways of understanding how affect accompanies and is organised through its interface with social relationships through the ruling bloc narratives and the counter narratives to them that people live by. (Hennessy 2000:214)

The work of women such as Susan Kreiger (1996), Valerie Walkerdine (1997), and Annette Kuhn (2002) explores the interface between social relationships and the dominant paradigms of class and gender, including relationships with mothers in the formative years of childhood. Carolyn Steedman (1986) is another who explores her childhood experiences and her mother’s life as a source of learning marked by class.

The task of this chapter is to look at discourses that re/produce and consolidate class differences as individual women negotiate and embody them. I am especially interested in discursive practices that silently influence women’s lives and inform classed and gendered identity, especially for women who learn to perform womanhood respectably. Women like me, whose lives have been neither desperately bad, nor interestingly triumphant, but whose experiences can perhaps provide evidence of the impact of class and gender on women’s subjectivity in trying to *get it right*. The middle class has been the standard against which notions of respectability have been set, indeed, Skeggs (1997b:2) writes that ‘respectability was a central mechanism through which the concept class emerged’. Respectability was important because the working classes were considered to be dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect (Skeggs 1997b:1). Getting respectability right involves desires that are no arbitrary choice of individual free will. Knowing what is ‘right’ is a consequence of ‘Desires [...] constituted through the narratives

and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are “interpellated” into the social world’ (Davies 2000a:37). Knowledge of class difference is embodied in response to lived situations and, as Simon Charlesworth explains in *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience*, embodied knowledge of class impacts on ways of being in the world:

everyday human existence involves an understanding of what it is to be that is manifest in everyday practices concerning others and objects. This understanding of being is not exhaustively contained in the mental states of individuals. Rather, it involves a whole background structure of intelligibility that orients our concerned involvement, our circumspective coping with the world. What is of deepest importance in identity and being is thus manifest in our comportment, our bodily sense of our ‘place’ in the world emanating from the world contained in the place in which we live. (Charlesworth 2000:66)

This chapter will look at women’s ways of being in the world through negotiations with respectability. My interest in discourses and discursive practices is not intended to question or deny the structural bases of class differentiation and the family’s central role in meeting the social need for unpaid domestic care. To the contrary, my work is premised on the embeddedness of individual negotiations within social organisation that tailors consciousness, consumption and identity in ways that are inextricably linked with class, and re/produced discursively. Rather than slotting people into class categories, my approach is via the negotiations women make in response to discourses that are classed and gendered and against which women are positioned.

I take my own childhood experiences as a central thread because my realisation in recent years that I have a well developed working class consciousness surprised me and was significant to my interest in this research. My respectable working class background provided embodied knowledge long before I was aware of its influence, because I clearly did *know my place* and how to be a *good girl*.

*When I was a child mum’s Singer sewing machine was a permanent feature of the big back room that was both kitchen and laundry at our house in Bankstown, out in Sydney’s west. You always had to walk around the machine because it was near the doorway so that the cord could reach the power point in the next room where it was coupled with the ironing board ever ready for use. The kitchen was generally a storage area, though that’s too neat and tidy an explanation for the excess that found its way into any space available. Piles of washing, stacks of newspapers and the empties were left in the kitchen for the want of somewhere else*



*to put them. The house only just accommodated all of us and the work that kept the family going. We three sisters shared one room, dad's tools and equipment were in the Workshop off our bedroom, mum's sewing and the more usual family needs found places wherever they could. Every space, behind or under, was a convenient place to store things. Against the wall behind the sewing machine in the kitchen mum's big wooden 'glory box' stored fabric remnants. Of a night we girls would sit on the padded felt lid of the glory box and dangle our legs off the floor, talking to mum while we waited for her to cook tea.*

*Mum taught me the art of crafting a respectable image, how to speak the right way, how to look and sit like a lady, and in that learning were lessons about class and knowing my place. These were lessons that my body took into its composure without resistance at first, because above all, a child wants to be good enough, and loved.*

My recently realised class-consciousness has given me a different vantage from which to reflect on my childhood. I want to unpick influences that extended beyond our private family life but contributed to my embodied sense of self. In her discussion of Steedman's work, Roxanne Rimstead (1997:262) raises Steedman's suggestion that 'we look at the development of class consciousness as a process that may occur [...] in private rather than through organised public struggle and may also involve the formation of a class-marked unconscious that would be discernible by looking at loss and desire in terms of social exclusion'. The exclusion Rimstead (1997:250) is referring to is the result of practices such as blaming, disbelieving and stereotyping that exclude women, or result in self-blame, shame, passivity or powerlessness. These exclusions shape experiences in ways quite differently from the myth of working class struggle as a noble quest for social improvement. The struggle to survive or manage in the context of a life where opportunities are constrained by disadvantage that is material, and embodied by individuals, even as a class-marked unconscious, is quite a different approach.

Our family was an ordinary family. Typical of the mid twentieth century, dad was the family breadwinner, mum the family caretaker. Mum supplemented dad's wage with work she took in at home and she was the frontline in bringing up their three girls. My parents' financial situation had always been precarious but their problems were entrenched when my father was involved in an accident that kept him off work for two years when I was a preschool child. Struggle was implicit in our lives, but never spoken of – it was important to keep up appearances. My class-marked unconscious was quietly formed in the private places of my

childhood, in the home where I lived, the school I attended, and the familiar environment of our working class suburb.

*There was nothing romantic about my childhood though there was a tantalising tale about dad's patrilineal history in an exotic and distant French past. There were no special attributes that marked us different, just an ordinariness that was coloured by a hint of the larrikin in dad. We've mythologised dad's larrikin streak in the years since his death, remembering fondly his sheepish grin, his charming good looks and personality above his less endearing habits. It was just a hint of the larrikin really, not enough to be in serious trouble over, just enough to cause us girls embarrassment in our self-conscious teens. Until recently any memories I had of my mother were much more critical. We girls were quick to blame her for any problems because we thought she had let herself go.*

*We knew no working class solidarity, no sense of community. There was no deep sense of empathy with our neighbours, only a patronising dis/interest in the remote 'poor' who I knew lived on charity, and accepting charity was a source of shame. Distance was the key to the tolerance I learnt as a child. We were just an ordinary family living an ordinary life, Aussie battlers. Mum and dad just kept on going when their luck ran out while they waited for their ship to come in.*

The ordinariness of life contains clues to discursive practices that shape the everyday and taken-for-granted. Steedman (1986:123) explains that what is brought forward for interpretation in childhood stories is structured by its own figurative devices arranged according to the earliest perceptions of the real world that give us our metaphors and the social reality and meanings metaphor conjoins. The clichés in the story above were the kind of explanations I often heard when I was a child and they were a means to understand experiences. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989 cited in Skeggs 1997b:11) note that clichés have the useful purpose of reminding us who we are because they teach us our place. Common clichés represented the way I learnt to understand my life through a certain superstitious inevitability occasionally interrupted depending on *the luck of the draw* that tended to cancel self-determination.

Telling my childhood stories without *polish* (as mum would say) brings me vulnerably closer to the fragility of respectability in my childhood. Mum's acknowledgment of the importance of polish, involves the understanding that respectability is window dressing – the presentation

of an image. I agree with Dorothy Allison (1994:24) that it is tempting to ‘play off the stereotypes and misconceptions of mainstream culture, rather than describe a difficult and sometimes painful reality’. I mentally position my own life relative to Allison’s, mine wasn’t as bad, not as poor, not physically violent. Nevertheless, like Allison, I grew up in an environment that ‘held the dogged conviction that the admirable and wise thing to do was keep a sense of humour, never whine or cower, and trust that luck might someday turn as good as it had been bad – and with just as much reason’ (1994:25). We always relied on luck, and like Allison, at the base of that reliance was the notion that ‘serious belief in anything – any political ideology, any religious system or any theory of life’s meaning and purpose - was seen as unrealistic’ (Allison 1994:25).

*In my family even good luck could be bad luck, like the time dad won a television not long after they had bought our first one. The telegram said ‘phone re Art Union win’ so of course mum thought dad had won a new house on the Gold Coast and we spent a disappointed evening wondering what to do with two TVs. After the prize TV arrived it took pride of place in our lounge room for several months, still in its solid wooden packing before they decided what to do with it.*

*Mum longed for a better life. She was envious of acquaintances who lived in the classy area around Sylvania just across Tom Ugly’s Bridge in the south. Dad had joined the Bowling Club at Sylvania as a foundation member in the 60s when Sylvania was still a remnant of rural Sydney, beautifully natural with tall gum trees and roads meandering the riverfront. Mum’s grandparents had an orchard there once, and her cousin, who was a fisherman, still had a house down by the river where we sometimes went to get fish. Mum could fillet and bone a fish as good as any fishmonger, she’d been doing it all her life. Mum and dad were going to move to the other side of the bridge too some day, so dad joined the Club with mum’s cousin and then the Sunday drives were across the suburbs to the bowling club. That’s how we got to know people moving into the luxurious ambience of the new Sylvania Waters Canal re/development, people with money.*

*Mum’s longings for a better life found a goal in Sylvania, for a fancy new home and friends with connections. Sometimes the new friends would bring chips and drinks out to the car to amuse me while I waited in the car park. Mum always bragged that I was the brains of the family so her friends talked to me about what I wanted to do when I grew up and they planted the dream of a university education in my imagination beside mum’s longings. In spite of the*

*cigarette smoke and smell of beer on their breath in the confined space of the car, I was mostly grateful for the attention of these men who came to keep me company while mum and dad had their last drink.*

An incoherent conflict became well established in my teens between a desire for the career and travel that tertiary education might bring, and in contrast the desire for respectable womanhood I had been prepared for from birth. This was crosscut by the uncertain fortunes of luck conflicting with a vague desire for independence and escape from the family home.

*A university education was only ever a daydream, but I loved school from the very first day at Bankstown Central Infants' School. Bankstown kids had a name for trouble by the time I started at four and a half. My older sisters were part of the bodgies and the widgies generation, but they were respectable girls. Sometime mid-1950s Bankstown High was burnt down or fell down, anyway it was closed down, so my sisters had to travel two stations in opposite directions to the nearest girls' high schools. My oldest sister went further west to Birrong and my other sister went two stops towards the city, to Wiley Park. When it came my turn to go to High School I went to Wiley Park too, even though the new Bankstown Girls' High School was open, because mum wanted the best for me.*

One of my special joys at school was singing songs of celebration and the ritual reading of Australian poetry. Dorothea Mackellar's *My Country*, and Henry Kendall's *Bellbirds* filled my heart with gratitude and national pride for the lucky country, and nostalgia for the Australian flag was etched right beside my love of the bush. My childhood pride sits uneasily now with a deep sense of betrayal since learning about atrocities like the murder of Aboriginal Australians and removal of children from their families. Jennifer Rutherford's (2000:15) book, *The Gauche Intruder*, has helped me to contextualise my memories of the national pride of my school days in what she calls 'the white Australian fantasy [of the nation] as the site of a privileged and realised good'. Rutherford suggests that learning respectability involves learning national pride as Beverly Skeggs (1997b:2-3) also comments in regard to her study conducted in England. However, Rutherford (2000:18) argues that there is an 'ethical paradox' at the heart of Australian fantasies of the good nation that reveals an aggressive desire to occlude past traumas and preserve the fantasy of goodness. This is consistent with the quest for respectability too and family silences. Rutherford (2000:18) even poses the question 'whether an individual's attempts to sustain the fantasy of a happy childhood mirrored the way a nation returns to romanticised versions of its own past – in order to sustain

intact a fantasy that can occlude the real trauma of the past'. The fantasy of the good nation is a myth of respectability that silences other experiences eliding underlying structures. These dominant discourses unify experiences and are a benchmark from which lived experiences usually depart.

Struggle marks working class lives, and yet 'there has been little interest in how actual people live the condition, the exploitation, the poverty, the oppression' because concerned interest in the working class has mainly focused on how people might change and become something better (Walkerdine 1997:32-3). Social strategies for change often involve broad generalised sweeps that cannot accommodate the consciousness of people who form the flesh and sinews between extremes of poverty and privilege. The life I had been prepared for was firmly established in my psyche – university and a career were too foreign. Even though I did not understand my life through discourses of poverty and oppression that Walkerdine speaks about in her English experience, I did know my place was *down* the social ladder. I knew that we weren't *the poor*, they lived even further away in Sydney's outer west, neither were we *the well to do* who spoke with a plum in their mouth. Knowing my place meant accepting that my possibilities were restricted.

Mum knew how to participate in the discursive practices that give meaning to categories and classify people in the way that Bronwyn Davies (2000a:44) explains is an aspect of taking up a subject position and learning to position ourselves in terms of those categories. Mum had a clear perception of *the social ladder*, and she taught me by example in everyday conversations how to interpret and interact with it, increasingly through consumer culture and image that could be bought.

*Bankstown Square Shopping Centre was built right across the road from our house in the early 60s. It became the focus of my teenage years and it was the scene of many personally memorable and formative events. It became the suburban pulse of my youth. The new shopping centre was built over several large blocks of my childhood and was opened when I was thirteen. It exposed our house to the world when a new road and T-intersection were built right out front, and created traffic day and night.*

*Bankstown Square was built on the heels of Roselands, which was one of the first in the trend to mega shopping complexes in our part of Sydney. In contrast to Bankstown Square, Roselands was a wonderland of extravagance that entered my imagination in the realm of*

*fantasy. I had never seen such opulence before. The Raindrop Fountain right next to the escalators was a source of pure delight to me. Droplets of water slid down invisible threads of nylon wire, each drop meticulously paced in relation to the next. Not a drop out of place, ever.*

*Bankstown Square was definitely different from Roselands. Not as posh and showy, but we expected that because Bankstown wasn't as good as Beverly Hills. We knew that. Bankstown Square was still fancy but in a more practical way with less glitz. Even so, the Square's World Fare Restaurant sold hot chips in cardboard cups rather than wrapped in newspaper like the ones we bought down the street before the Square. Even at fourteen the relevance of World Fare was totally lost on me, I wouldn't eat Chinese food or Mexican and I don't remember what else they sold except chips and iced chocolate.*

The women in the Lifestory Workshops who grew up in Australia also spoke about their lack of awareness of other cultures and cultural practices in their everyday childhood experiences. None of us had ever met any Indigenous Australians when we were children. Margot was *almost* an exception because she had seen Aboriginal people living at La Perouse, but none of us could remember mixing with children from other cultures in our primary school years, although most of us knew shopkeepers who were European immigrants. The culture around me growing up was very much white Australian. However, the personal mobility that came with my teenage years, coinciding with the opening of the new shopping centre, introduced me to a world of consumer opulence and a vague awareness of cultural difference right on my doorstep.

*The year I went to high school mum got a job in a frock salon several suburbs to the south-east in Hurstville. That meant I could hang around the shopping centre of an afternoon as long as I wanted and my friends and I soon became the original 'mall hangers'. We spent most of our after school hours and Saturday mornings in the World Fare Restaurant stretching a single carton of chips out as far as we could, then we'd head for the bus stop outside the Square. These were the best places to keep an eye out for boys and watch to see what the cheap girls were up to. They were the ones who reefed up their tunics with their belts after school. Maybe even spot the latest one who was in trouble. You wouldn't say pregnant, that was rude. Mum always said 'expecting' and my sisters who were much older than me said 'preggers'.*

*You had to look like you were actually doing something while you were hanging around, but we were good at faking it. My first boyfriend and I met at the bus stop. He wasn't catching a bus either, so he walked me home. Later we spent hours freezing cold and canoodling awkwardly on the cement stairs of the multi storey car park when it was deserted in that era prior to seven day trading. In 1967 there was nowhere else to go. The football, maybe the pictures, or tenpin bowling, but you needed money, and then you couldn't pash. Nice girls wouldn't do it in public and anyway I had to be home by five and the Square was close to home. Bobby bought me a teardrop necklace with a cultured pearl from Prouds that Christmas. It was so embarrassing, and I broke up with him soon after, but I've still got the pearl.*

The pearl necklace was a signal. It was embarrassing because it brought my innocent relationship with this young boy to the visibility of my family and now they'd know we'd been kissing. Anything that drew attention to me as an individual was potentially either embarrassing or a source of ridicule, and I didn't want them to think I was cheap. The idea that girls were cheap if they displayed too much interest in boys, gave in to boys, or revealed too much body, was important knowledge. Cheap was a telling statement of girls' availability to boys, if you were too loud, wore too much makeup, or clothes that were too skimpy. Now, in tension with self-worth, cheap harkens to the trade of women between men, back then sexual awareness was nothing more than intriguing gossip and innuendo based on prohibitions and repressions. Appearances were what mattered.

Knowledge that the body signifies certain attributes, and positions the individual with particularity, was an important influence in ways of being. Indeed, Skeggs (1997b:83) writes that the attempt to keep up appearances, in behaviour and outward presentation of self, creates the body as 'the most ubiquitous signifier of class'. The cut of the hair, the carriage of the limbs, the tilt of the head, and the pitch of the voice are *ways of being* that are the embodied dividends of privilege or disadvantage. The body is the material expression of one's place in the social spectrum. Yet, the body is a unreliable signifier since it is the site of conflicting and multiple inscriptions, of class, gender, ability, race, age and so on. Though respectability is a discourse shaped by class it incorporates gender expectations including sexuality.

Respectability was linked with family secrets in Week Five of the first series when many stories had been told and it was clear women knew the social rules about respectability. Lena actually used the word when she explained that family secrets are 'a lot to do with

respectability'. The women agreed that respectability is to do with moral issues but there was also an understanding that respectability involves keeping up appearances, and is materially expressed by the outward physical appearance of the body. Clothes are a way of positioning oneself to gain legitimacy, by showing that a woman knows what is appropriately respectable in matters of taste (Skeggs 1997b:87).

However, body appearance is not only performative but is also more directly indicative of structural inequities and poverty as Vivyan Adair (2001) succinctly illustrates in *Branded with Infamy*. Adair (2001:452) highlights the inadequacies of theories of class production that neglect to analyse the nexus of the textual and corporeal, and the reproduction of social and bodily markers of poverty and class. Adair (2001:455) observes that images of poor women tell us more about the culture that spawned them than the women themselves. Rose's story (following) about her recent trip to the dentist is indicative of markers of class that are visibly inscribed on the body. She expressed her frustration, but also her awareness that physical appearance remains a pervasive marker of class with actual repercussions. Rose was financially dependent on social security and unable to afford expensive dental treatment. In one of the Workshop sessions she told the group about the problems she encountered when her front tooth was broken.

Rose:

*John Howard's government has kicked the guts out of the dental health service.  
That's the way to get people back to work, Johnny,  
keep the unemployed sick or unsightly.  
Blow hell being fiery,  
if I had my druthers the hell I'd send Mr. Howard to  
would be a demon dentist's chair!*

Bea and Kaye agreed an experience of the government's free dental service was suitable retribution for Prime Minister Howard's policies relating to welfare recipients. The women anticipated inadequacy and a lower standard of treatment from social welfare.

Dental appearance remains a significant marker of class as an economic category because dental treatment is only minimally subsidised by the national health scheme leaving poor and working classed people with limited access. The presentation of self required for success in the waged labour market requires capital investments, not only in clothing but as Rose



demonstrates, in presentation of body/self. Rose's experience is a collective story that demonstrates the relationship between a private/personal issue that is political, and a factor of class difference (Salazar 1991:96). In this instance the mark of class is evident in physical bodily appearance that is not performative.

Class is both performed and inscribed from a structural base. Referring to the *embodiment* of class, or knowing the self through the flesh, may initially appear incongruous to the notion of class and gender as performative. However, as Bettie argues, classed behaviour does constitute a performance because:

there is no interior difference (innate and inferior 'intelligence' or 'taste', eg.) that is being expressed; rather, institutionalised class inequality creates class subjects who *perform*, or display, differences in cultural capital. (Bettie 2000:11)

While Bettie explains that class is performative, it is the embodiment of class-consciousness that produces the performance of class, reflecting lived experiences that inform an individual sense of self. Class is embodied through the internalisation of social hierarchies and the embodiment of the requisite knowledges about class position, producing performances of class related practices like respectability. It is as if the requisite knowledge viscerally shapes the knowing of self.

As the participants often revealed in their conversations, Rose demonstrated her understanding of requisite knowledge about respectability when she responded to the need for a crown on her front tooth with wit, and a playful satisfaction that she could subvert society's norms (institutionalised respectability) in her own individual way by suggesting her tooth be left as a stump. Rose took control of the political effects by responding atypically and she avoided being shamed by dominant proscriptions.

Rose:

*The first thing discussed was my ability to pay,  
then assuming I was in some lucrative line of business,  
not a dismal sideline like mine,  
the comment was  
'Oh that would be so bad for personal presentation.'  
Well not actually,  
I'm a fortune teller.*

The women in the Workshop responded to this with gales of laughter. Rose's delight in subverting expectations shows her awareness of social positioning and demonstrates her ability to resist negative discourses. Like Rose, financial security was of concern to several of the participants and the opportunity to re-interpret disadvantage was an indication of their desires to resist oppressive situations and stereotypes. This is not to say that the women did not want equitable opportunities or that they did not take pride in their appearances. Indeed they did. While they displayed considered approaches to social justice and were aware of barriers they also resisted judgment of their situations. The women were often delighted by each other's responses when awareness of disadvantage was demonstrated and a duped or victim position resisted as Rose's was. The women's refusals of powerlessness are indicative of a refusal to be seen as powerless or to be positioned without power (Skeggs 1997b:11). Skeggs explains that this local level is the site where de-legitimacy is resisted (1997b:11). Rose resisted de-legitimacy in making a life in a niche of her own where she was not constrained by respectable middle-class expectations, and she made use of mythic and stereotypical associations with fortune tellers for her own benefit to resist middle-class notions of respectability.

Resistance involves understanding requisite knowledge and a display of agency as a function of desire, as Rose's story illustrates. Davies (2000a: 37-8) says that understanding desire allows us to accept multiplicity and even contradictions in the storylines we use to know ourselves, and in deconstructing these we can be less constrained by the feminine. Subversion of respectable appearances resists the popular myths that represent poor and working class people as taken up with the struggle to be like the middle class.

Adair (2001:468) suggests that although poverty inscribes bodies with physical marks, sharing experiences fosters awareness that emboldens women to resistance. Awareness fosters critical interrogation of the systems and discourses that inscribe classed and gendered consciousness and those systems and discourses are 'rendered fragile, unstable, and ultimately malleable' (Adair 2001:468). Rose certainly demonstrates the potential to unsettle constraining systems and practices.

The potential in sharing experiences and critical self-reflection was apparent in many ways during the Lifestory Workshops. In the second Workshop series, Maryanne was speaking in a conversation with Claire (to follow), about the changes that were happening in her life at that particular time because she was in the process of separating from her husband of many years.

Her children were grown up and were now living with their own families. She explained that it was a different experience for her now coping with the breakdown of her marriage and being able to express her grief, compared to struggling to manage throughout her marriage and when she was a child.

In effect Maryanne was explaining how she had learnt to filter her own needs through the expectations and needs of others, firstly her parents', then her husband's and her children's needs. She had learnt to *fend* for herself when she was a child, that meant looking after herself and not giving in to personal desires and emotions. Maryanne was exploring the notion of love understood as the care of others. Her story shows that the need to be strong as a matter of survival overcame her own needs in a way that she feels denied aspects of her femininity, and was at odds with how she understood femininity as dependence. The following conversation also reveals that the femininity Maryanne learnt as a child involved the denial of her own needs and emotions. Maryanne expressed her frustration with the unfamiliarity of speaking about her own feelings. The conversation between Maryanne and Claire draws attention to the ambiguity associated with strength and stoicism as a gender/ed binary. It is an ambiguity at the base of the confusion and fears women expressed about getting femininity right and performing respectability. The confusion exists between the stoicism required of women who, in the repression of their own needs, don't have the opportunity to explore their own strengths.

Maryanne:

*I have grown up this person who has to fend for myself,  
always,  
Fend for my children, and just cope.  
Just cope.  
you don't fall down,  
you don't cry,  
and all of a sudden, I've decided that I want to do things for myself,  
I want to find me, and,  
what I am discovering is this person inside who really needs to be loved,  
and cared for,  
and treated delicately.  
And all of a sudden I started to see,  
because I was ...  
and now,*

*I have surrounded myself with all these delicate, lovely, little things  
in my space,  
and that's part of my picture.*

(silence)

*Don't feel sad for me.*

Claire:

*I can relate to that,  
um, the needing to be strong,  
and then you allow yourself to fall down,  
and ...  
it's a very special thing.  
It certainly means finding out about yourself,  
I mean to be a woman,  
you know,  
some of the aspects of ourselves,  
and often these stronger things come out.*

Maryanne:

*I feel as though I should be allowed to fall down,  
and cry,  
especially if I'm a girl,  
but I haven't been allowed to do that,  
all the time.*

(silence)

Over the course of the Workshops, Maryanne often spoke about the isolation in her childhood and of her unsatisfactory relationship with her mother. She thought this meant she had grown up tough and capable of getting by. *Falling down* was a luxury that she hadn't been allowed before now when she was becoming more autonomous and unstitching her own life from her husband. Maryanne explains her responses to recent changes in her life as an exploration of her femininity and a different kind of strength, or autonomy, or freedom, that she is discovering. She believed that a new strength was developing out of her recent experiences and was overriding the need to be tough as a matter of survival. Claire's comments support this idea as well, that the strength that grows in response to direct experience is somehow

more authentically a woman's own strength and is more resilient. Strength is not related to being a victim of circumstance but to the woman's own agency. The women's lack of experience of their own capabilities unmediated by relationships with men resonates with Janice Raymond's (2001:59) ideas that women are dissociated from a woman-defined sense of Self. When women derive meaning and reality from husbands, fathers, and other men, Raymond (2001:153) argues they assume 'a worldlessness almost by default, that it is, by virtue of the passive and derivative position into which they have been forced throughout history and in almost every culture'. Worldlessness is an effect of heteroreality that denies women access to their woman-defined strength.

Class issues share with gender their embeddedness in heteroreality that spawns dependence and respectability. Sexuality was not discussed in the Workshops but conversations and stories told indicated a dependence that is consistent with the heteroreality of the social world and its impact in shaping desires. The regulation of sexuality is less obvious as an external phenomenon than are class, gender and race according to Beverly Skeggs, nevertheless the regulation of sexuality involves a sexual classification positioned against, or a negotiation of embodied self, constructed by respectability (Skeggs 1997b:130). The women in Skegg's study were found to be positioned by heterosexuality even though they avoided a sexed identity due to a desire for respectability, which precludes an interest in the sexual (1997b:135-6). While this positioning is institutionally based, economic security and cultural benefit are supported by ideologies that normalise heterosexuality via romantic storylines (Skeggs 1997b:127). Heterosexuality is a condition of respectability that is consolidated in caring, motherhood, and family (Skeggs 1997b:123). Heteroreality has effects apart from sexual identity in its organisation of social life around assumed heterosexual norms, and as Susan Kreiger explains:

Heterosexuality has profound effects. It is more than an observation about who mates with whom. It is a theory about incompleteness and completion, about the desirability of women valuing men over women, and about the need for maintaining distinctions between the genders. I think it is a bad theory, but I am not immune to it, to the gender idealisations that come with it, and to the way it shapes the imagination. (Krieger 1996:28)

### **Immunity to the social system**

Women's selflessness is one of the gender idealisations expected in heteroreality. Krieger (1996:33) writes in *The Family Silver*, that it is work for women to perform gender appropriately and that work requires the silencing of pain often associated with the

subordination of aspects of women's subjectivity, and I remember that my mum never spoke about her own unhappiness. Turning away from, and silencing your own desires to perform appropriate femininity or respectable womanhood is to be dependent on others for your sense of self. Krieger says this is the women's work necessary to maintain heterosexual gender relations:

Our social system depends on a female underclass, and any attempts to disavow the importance of gender conveniently hide this dependence. The work women do is often invisible and takes many forms. One of these is that of maintaining the female gender role despite inner conflicts. (Krieger 1996:33)

### **October 2003**

*I learned about pain from my mother. It's not that she hurt me or intended to, but what I experienced of her was her deep dissatisfaction with her lot, her unhappiness. She expected me to be strong too, she wouldn't take any crying. She used to say that she worked her fingers to the bone and in more desperate times she'd talk about putting her head in the oven – it was gas. Mostly she made jokes and didn't talk about her feelings, and in that hiding she passed on to me that women must keep secrets and hide their emotions. I never understood mum's depression. She never talked about it and probably I never asked her.*

*Mum and dad always worked hard to make ends meet. They both took in extra jobs at home and on weekdays they'd be gone to work before I left for school. My sisters too. First they went to their clerical jobs in the city, then off with their husbands to smarter addresses. Mum said we had to get jobs in the city because she didn't want us mixing with boys from Bankstown and getting stuck there for the rest of our lives like she was.*

*It was always intended to be a temporary arrangement for mum and dad when they moved in with mum's old Uncle Julius in Bankstown. Mum was already at home with two young girls so she could look after Julius, and the rent they saved would go towards their own place. But time passed and troubles landed on them and they stayed long after cranky, old Unc had gone. So they bought the house for a good price from the family. Mum hated the place, and it showed in the dust on the furniture and the mould on the bathroom walls as much as it did in her longing for a blonde brick house with picture windows, on the other side of town.*

Mum's stoicism belied her disappointment with life and she taught me not to complain. Susan Krieger (1996:106) explains that pain 'gets passed down especially to girls, who learn to be

women in important inner ways from their mothers and from other women. It gets passed on among women each time we teach, and help, one another to bear our respective pains’.

### **November 2003**

*I learnt about love from my relationships with men who told me they loved me, that they would protect me and would be my other half, if only I ...*

*Recently I went out with a man. We were dancing partners, and we had great fun driving away to dances in neighbouring towns. There was ease between us, friendship, and no problems. For a while it worked well, until he wanted more of me, and assumed that he knew me and had rights over me. Then he took to sulking and talking even less, and in the end he wouldn't dance with me. And now it's over, but sometimes I miss the support of his big strong arms in the dance. And I am reminded of my friend, Louise.*

### *welcome* **Louise**

*Louise and I have known each other for twenty-two years, since our children were babies. 'We've been through it all' we would say to each other on occasion. Births and deaths, divorce and losses, we had been through it all. This day was not so different from other times, our talk was mostly about our families. Louise was congratulating me, and wishing me well with my move to Armidale. She asked a string of questions that had in the previous few weeks become predictable; how do you feel about leaving Cody, will you be able to live on the scholarship, what job will you get when you finish. That kind of thing, questions about kids and money and work. The same questions that had always been at the centre of our friendship.*

*Louise was excited for me. She spoke with a tinge of longing that was familiar to us both, and about the need to make changes herself now her kids were grown up. She and Laurie were making compromises, she told me, trying to meet each other's dreams, his for a motorbike, hers to get out of this town that had consumed their life together. They had to go away weekends or someone would phone with a broken water heater or blown fuse, and you couldn't let people down in a small town. Better to just be away, then Louise wouldn't have to explain that Laurie didn't want to work that weekend, that he needed a day off now and then.*

*In the end they took out a loan and bought a motorbike and now they spent weekends exploring the countryside chasing Laurie's hobby. With her man warm between her legs and her arms firmly wrapped around him Louise enjoyed the scenery until they arrived in new*

*places. Eventually Louise would wander away to nearby craft shops or her knitting in a quiet place. It was a break, for both of them, a weekend escape.*

*It was years since I had the buffer and complicated security of a husband's bulk. My options for paid work had come down to the Chinese Restaurant four nights a week, or cleaning. Cleaning was the choice most of my friends made, and private houses were better than motel rooms. Motels wanted you there early and they worked you hard. Houses were cash in hand, and the hours suited. You could get your own work done first thing, then go out to clean mid morning and be home in time for the kids. Louise made quite a tidy sum cleaning. But cleaning wasn't really a choice for me. Years of savage back pain and an operation made it clear that heavy work wasn't an option. There was a bit of relief work in the antique shop, but mostly I'd studied. At least I was taking some steps towards future paid work and financial independence, while the kids were young and when I needed to be home outside school hours.*

*Louise understood. She supported my decision to keep on going, 'follow your dreams,' she would tell me. But sitting in the sunshine that morning, both of us thinking about everything we'd been through together and looking to the future, we were also saying goodbye to our shared times. Then, she made a sudden unexpected leap between practicalities and emotives. 'I just think about what I've got in my life and try not to think about what I haven't had,' she said. 'Someone else would grab him, if I don't hang on to him. Some days I just have to stay at home and wait for the depression to pass, it does eventually, I pull myself out of it, go out in the garden, cook, just get on with it. I couldn't be on my own. I haven't got your strength, I couldn't do what you do, I couldn't manage without him.'*

Louise's family life is respectably heterosexual and my status as single presumes an independence positioned against that and at odds with the heterosexual, nuclear family. Louise understands *strength* as a personal attribute of identity. She does not recognise the suppression of her inner conflicts as stoic and that we are both involved in the work of gender and class performances. The political dimensions of a coupled relationship are made invisible and silenced by associated gender work. Louise's stoicism is her own experiential response to appropriate gender and class performances of respectability. Heteroreality produces inner conflicts for us both, in our ways of being women, mothers, and making ends meet.



### **Escape into respectability**

Mum's hopes were framed by heteroreality and a view of girls' success tied up with her female body, as an ornament, a possession or utility as mother and housekeeper. She understood her daughters' means of escape from Bankstown into respectability as achievable through marriage to boys who would take us to live somewhere else and provide for us financially. Mum saw her only escape to respectability in selling the house and moving. Property wasn't worth much in Bankstown and our place had long gone to the dogs so mum's hopes of moving were shattered until the redevelopment of our street for a Shopping Centre was first proposed.

*It was a windfall for homeowners when the developers came with huge wads of money to purchase property on the site where the Square was built. Even the worst decaying houses brought good money but we lived on the wrong side of the road, facing the development. A few owners held out for more money. Some were old fogies with neat and tidy homes and clipped lawns, bordered by flowering beds who'd been here most of their lives. They didn't want to leave. My mother watched jealously as the houses across the street were bought up and vacated for the Square. Then the yards grew out of control waiting for the bulldozers. Ours had long been out of control. All we could do was watch, increasingly trapped by the resentment mum felt from the first day they moved in with old Unc years before.*

*After the Square was finished, my parents waited for the developers to come back for more land to build high-density housing. They waited ten years. Mum had watched as the stalwarts across the road who hung out for a better price were surrounded by the devastation of the building site. Their blocks became isolated outposts of suburban respectability, the grim consequence of wanting too much. Mum knew it. The greedy ones were finally persuaded to sell when six foot wire fences were constructed on their boundaries and they found themselves living in a building site. By then they had to take whatever the developers would give them.*

*This was a dilemma for mum who was determined to sell out at the first opportunity. But, they needed a good price. The house was falling down around them in synergy with the backyard turning into a suburban black spot. They had to be careful about negotiations or the developers would take their plans up or down the street. Twenty years later I thought mum and dad must have done it well, because some of those old houses were still there the last time I detoured off the main road and went shopping in Bankstown.*

*When they sold up, most people just packed their furniture and left Rickard Road. It wasn't so simple for mum and dad. Dad had worked in the backyard on weekends panel beating for extra money for years. It looked like a wrecker's yard with car bodies in various stages of dismantle littering the quarter acre. Some nights prowlers would sneak around the wrecks searching for parts and give us girls a scare when we were on our way up the back to the dunny. On more than one occasion the bushes outside our bedroom window rustled during the night with the movement of a looter come peeping tom. The police made remarks about the state of the yard but put the intruders down to three young girls in the house.*

*The wrecks were my playground as a young child. I used them as cubby houses, and Volkswagens made a reasonable slippery dip. 'Watch out for funnel web spiders' mum would yell from the back door. But when it came to moving, the bombs were a liability and dad had to clear the yard before the developers would pay up. And, it was a big backyard. Probably that was the reason it was the developers' first choice, but grass had grown up through the wrecks and who knows what else underneath. For mum and dad, moving meant disentangling themselves from the years of hard work and neglect.*

*Dad was used to getting rid of junk the good old-fashioned way. He'd pile up old tyres and other rubbish every Cracker Night and we would have the best bonfire in the district. Sometimes neighbours would get a bit unnerved and call the fire brigade or the police who got to know what to expect. Eventually an officer would come before Commonwealth Day with ordinances and official papers and dad had to stop setting tyres alight with petrol. Now he had to pull out the overgrowth and arrange for tow trucks to take the wrecks away. All of them.*

*When they finally moved house to a new estate in Condell Park just a few kilometers away, dad set fire to the grass in the new backyard because he reckoned it was too long to mow. The neighbours were worried and then the fence burnt down. The police, the council and the fire brigade said it wasn't on, so in retirement dad had to settle for brewing his own beer in the garage under the new house, and mum opened the curtains on the picture windows with pride. Mum and dad's lives changed when they moved, but their familiar ways of being in the world and interacting with it were more resilient than a new image of respectability could budge.*

Simon Charlesworth (2000) explains that sense of self is informed by the dispositions the body has learnt in response to the many interpretive frameworks experienced. In *A*

*Phenomenology of Working Class Experience* (2000), he draws attention to the intersection of place, experience, and psyche in the shaping of self-knowing, and in *knowing your place*. Charlesworth (2000:278) does not focus specifically on gender but his discussion about the influence of the material effects of social position to ways of being in the world also applies to gender.

My mum certainly did not cope well emotionally with the circumstances of her life, her place in the world and, she certainly did work hard. Her ambitions for her daughters are indicative of her own struggles with gender and class structures and her interpretation of middle class standards and success. She wanted her daughters' lives to be better than hers.

### **Mothers' responsibility**

Childhood has often been used to measure respectability, especially of working class women, and to legitimate state intervention in their lives. Women's acceptance of intervention has often been on the basis of mothers' perceived responsibility for providing a protected space that is childhood. Women have acquiesced to intervention due their need or their child's welfare, either a desire for respectability or for the physical and emotional good of their child (Swain & Howe 1995:140).

Valerie Walkerdine (1997:187-8) explains the very notion of childhood as a construction in relation to middle class values, 'the idea of a childhood separate from adulthood, a protected space, has always been an idea that has come from the bourgeoisie'. Respectability is concerned with the protection of children from moral danger and also involves, as Walkerdine (1997:188) writes, the prevention of rebellion through the learning of requisite knowledges. Mothers are generally responsible for the necessary teaching and Skeggs goes as far as to say that mothers are considered invisible pedagogues of children and responsible for the national anxiety to curb unruly behaviour in early social policies (1997b:43).

Respectability can thus play out as a violent sanction that disciplines women and girls, even very young girls barely older than babies, for failures of mothering, in the failure to receive adequate mothering in the event of the mother's death, her need to go out to work, or the inability to cope with demands of motherhood. I have cried my way through the biographies of some Australian women who didn't, or couldn't get it right. These biographies are about women whose childhoods were what I always feared, they were girls who did not get appropriate femininity right, because as children, they didn't learn how to perform

respectability. Their stories reflect the profound powerlessness of little girls and the problematic intersection of class and gender.

Vicki Griffin (1990) tells of her childhood rebellion against authority in *Like Mother, Like Daughter: The story of Australia's youngest grandmother*. Vicki was labelled uncontrollable at twelve years of age, and she was institutionalised in remand centres and the Parramatta Girls' Home. This experience was later repeated by her daughter, Charmaine. Vicki attributes responsibility for their experiences as a failure to be appropriately disciplined in childhood, a failure to receive appropriate care, and a failure of their childhoods. Vicki also feels let down by social services for their lack of intervention when she writes, 'First the mother and then the daughter slipped through the bureaucratic gaps into the abyss of street life' (Griffin 1990:4). Vicki is hopeful that Charmaine's daughter Christie Lee, will have a better life than she and Charmaine, since they now have greater awareness of how to mother and to discipline; 'Both Vicki and Charmaine yearned for an ordinary family life, but neither had ever experienced it for long enough to know the pattern' (Griffin 1990:5). In this poignant story Vicki reads their lives as a failure of care and lack of education. Broader social implications are not considered, nor the impact of the influences of gender and class. Vicki does not politicise her experience and generally internalises responsibility and blame. Her story bears the marks of an internalised powerlessness and deference to external authority that is fuelled by an internal censor.

Peter Pierce (1999) calls Australia 'the country of lost children', but for the many children institutionalised throughout Australian history, it is also the country of lost childhoods. The stories about 'homes kids' (Shayler 1999), who were put in Children's Homes after the death of their mothers when they were infants, have a painful and poignant relationship with respectability. Such are the stories of the Lavarni sisters retold in *A Place Like Home* (Todd 1987) and Kate Shayler, in *The Long Way Home* (Shayler 1999). For these girls, their mothers' deaths resulted in the failure to achieve a protected childhood that resulted in their institutionalisation. When four-year-old Kate was put in a children's home after her mother's death she cried so desperately that she was locked in a small room. Shayler writes that 'the child who came out of that room was not me. Not the whole and perfect child. the child who came out was broken, frightened, secretive. ... Getting lost took moments. Finding the child I was took many years' (Shayler 1999:7). Some of the participants in the Workshops told similar stories about failures of respectability.

## **Concluding remarks**

Knowledge of class/ed position embodied in childhood is a very durable way of interacting with the world throughout life and a resilient framework that informs the performance of self. Bettie (2000:11) takes up Bourdieu's claim that while social, linguistic and cultural competencies can be acquired, the natural familiarity achieved from actually growing up in a particular class cannot be achieved later. This resonates with the experiences of academic women from working class backgrounds who say they fear inadvertently revealing their classed backgrounds. Beverly Skeggs (1997b), Valerie Walkerdine (1997), and Carolyn Steedman (1986), for example, have written eloquently and poignantly about the lives of working class women, and their own working class childhoods. These women achieved middle class respectability through their access to educational opportunities and academic careers. Nevertheless, folded into their personal stories is a fear of being found out as working class, or exposed as a fraud. It is a persuasive and persistent voice that reiterates the fear of not having the right sort of cultural capital in spite of education or achievement (Skeggs 1997a:133). Dorothy Allison (1994:31) explains her related fear as 'a class constructed distrust of change, a secret fear that someday I would be found out for who I really was, found out and thrown out'. This fear echoes Kristeva's notion of the abject and the impossibility of excluding psychically and socially threatening aspects of self. Proper subjectivity, according to Kristeva, requires silencing improper aspects of subjectivity, but these are always present at the borders of the self:

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva analyses the ways in which 'proper' subjectivity and sociality require the expulsion of the improper, the unclean and the disorderly...[Kristeva asserts] that what is excluded can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the borders of our existence, threatening the apparently settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution. It is impossible to exclude these psychically and socially threatening elements with any finality. The subject's recognition of this impossibility provokes the sensation Kristeva describes as abjection. (Grosz 1989:71-2)

Jane Ussher (1996) recognises this dilemma between the abject and proper and she observes that it leads to the splitting of subjectivity with upward class mobility. In a review of five books written by academic women from working class backgrounds, Ussher points out common themes; feelings of not belonging, separation from roots, shame about family and family environment, anxiety about exposure, the debt to society for the opportunity for education, and the complexity of gender and class at an individual level (Ussher 1996:468). Class mobility for these women is fraught with mixed emotions and a dissociation from their childhoods and working class origins that underpins their successes with a commonly

expressed, ‘demon fear that we will be dragged back to our roots’ (Ussher 1996:470). Indeed, Ussher (1996:468) describes academia as ‘the privileged place furthest from home’. These issues are reiterated by Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek (1997) in *Class Matters: Working-Class Women’s Perspectives on Social Class*. These academic women’s accounts of social mobility also reveal ambivalences inherent in the respectable negotiation of class and gender that threaten to split subjectivity. This perceived threat explains the need to silence aspects of self and experience that transgress the respectable, and sheds light on my own fears and the concerns of Beverly Skeggs and Valerie Walkerdine and others about *getting it right* or found out as working class (Skeggs 1997a:109). Working class/ed/ness is embodied and cannot be left behind but hovers uncertainly as an abject, destabilising influence because class is a phenomenon of the flesh that shapes desire as Charlesworth writes:

The important point is that class is a phenomenon of the flesh, of coming to inhabit the world in a certain way through powerfully internalizing senses based in an objective hierarchy of relations within which individual sensibilities take shape. It concerns processes of desire and aversion, through which individuals come to be located within certain fields. (Charlesworth 2000:65)

Embodying the social manifestations of classed hierarchies is achieved through resilient and self-perpetuating discursive practices that are inextricably linked with gender expectations reflected in Rosemary Hennessy’s (2000:87) concern that neoliberalism has ‘repressed consciousness of the integral role of political economy in setting the terms for cultural struggles’ and erased the role of exploitation in capitalism. These issues are related to dependence on women’s emotional and unpaid work in the care of others, issues that are often obscured by the language of choice and desire. Even as *class* disappears from social commentary, in discourses that unify social differences at the same time as underlying gender expectations are elided, its resilience remains significant to women’s everyday experiences and ways of being.

*I thought my mother was in the background of my life, but she was the fabric of my childhood where attributes of class, gender and multiple other aspects of subjectivity shaped my self-knowing consistent with the social world in which we were both embedded.*





Mum.  
Valerie Florence Nora Mackintosh



In 1938 when Women's Weekly celebrated  
150th Anniversary of Australia  
you were 21.