

Working-class Youth Subcultures: Resistance and Exploitation in Criena Rohan's *The Delinquents* and Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling*

IAN HERBERTSON
University of Southern Queensland

Of the small group of Australian novels written from beneath the shiny surface of late '50s and early '60s youth styles—reports from underground, stamped with 'insider' authority—none observed the intellectual uncertainties of this new order more acutely than Criena Rohan's *The Delinquents* (1962) and Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965). Both novels hinged on an intriguing paradox: on the one hand they eagerly accepted that youth subcultures were the source of new identities, less welded to traditional class alignments; but they also contained some dark interpretations of the relationship between youth and the culture industries which provided the raw material for subcultural styles. Their radical depiction of youth's energy and popular culture's allure was undercut by doubts that youth could creatively use mass popular culture to resist or undermine the power of the dominant capitalist order that produced it.

These novels were not just ambivalent about the advent of the teenager, simply repeating the pattern of post-war books on youth that expressed uncertainties regarding cultural change and adolescence. Rather, they embodied the widening and opening of debates in Australian on mass and popular culture. This openness derived from the period's 'cultural loop', where changes in media and technology ensured that commentary by those 'living the changes' had an immediate feed-back into discussions of change itself. And a significant, yet overlooked, aspect of this fluid discursive climate was that it generated so many of the theoretical benchmarks about the workings of popular culture which later became scripture. Australian cultural commentary—and fiction—of the late '50s and early '60s frequently articulated concepts which were academic commonplaces by the mid '80s: resistance, rewriting and appropriation were there in embryo. At the same time, concerns that mass culture was inherently manipulative were taken seriously enough to generate new approaches to that old complaint as well.

The Delinquents and *Wild Cat Falling* represent precisely this ability to hold conflicted theoretical concepts in a single textual field. They embody ambivalence towards notions of domination, manipulation, pleasure, resistance and empowerment that subsequent fiction and subcultural theory flattened by increasingly overstating the potential for personal liberation through the consumption of popular culture. Strikingly, they celebrate mass culture's liberating possibilities, portraying Australian youths 'making over' the products of Americanised culture industries to forge local identities, but also exhibit narrative cracks from which older concerns about manipulation leak out.

Frederic Jameson has observed that from the late '50s and early '60s, technological advance produced a new media-oriented culture: an historical and cultural break, he argues in *Late Marxism*, that demanded a theory of contemporary mass culture anchored in 'populism' (141). As a consequence of mass cultural production's apparent success, this populist thinking expresses 'increasing impatience with theories of manipulation, in which a passive public submits to forms of commodification and commercially produced culture whose self-

identification it endorses and interiorises as “distraction” or “entertainment” (141). A utopian impulse displaces concerns about exploitation or manipulation, Jameson wrote: an impulse detectable in New Left theories of the type associated with Herbert Marcuse in the ‘60s, postulating that commodification and the consuming desires awakened by late capitalism would eventually, and paradoxically, generate resistance to capitalism. The impulse was also evident in postmodernism’s later suggestions that the elimination of borders between high and low culture, made possible by new media technologies, ushered in an age of universal depoliticisation (142). Jameson contends that at the end of the twentieth century, utopian theories of mass culture were so ‘complete and virtually hegemonic’ that a corrective theory of manipulation was needed: one accounting for the real transformations wrought by post-war capital (143).

Surprisingly, in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s —the moment Jameson nominates as the ‘break’—emergent populist utopian impulses still ran beside the sort of critical corrective that Jameson sees as gradually extinguished in the decades after. This duality not only informed the writing of a few academic cultural analysts in Australia, such as Craig McGregor and Max Harris, but it also marked fictions about working-class youth subcultures. In *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling* there is certainly euphoria for new popular cultural forms and their functions as rallying points for an overdue youth rebellion. But this euphoria is undercut by residual doubts that the liberating possibilities promised by youth culture might be an illusion: merely another disguise for the operations of monopoly capitalism. Under the late twentieth-century theoretical hegemony Jameson describes, it was difficult to question the orthodoxy that culture industries were essentially harmless. In the ‘50s and ‘60s novels like Rohan’s *The Delinquents* and Mudrooroo’s *Wild Cat Falling* could still explore both sides of the youth and culture debate.

At the time, though, the notoriety attracted by flamboyant subcultures and styles at least made it seem like there *was* a self-sufficient international youth movement. In Australia, this found literary expression in fictions about working-class youth which echoed closely a notion that sections of the media found increasingly attractive: subculture ‘cut you free from other allegiances’. It was also testimony to the power and international reach of American cultural influences that when this literary theme was taken up in Australia, it was parcelled with the idea that imported American music and its associated styles were such key ingredients of youth identity, that absorbing them amounted to a legitimate alternative education.

In his afterword to a revised edition of Ciena Rohan’s *The Delinquents*, Barret Reid observed that the background of imported American music, rock ‘n’ roll, was a crucial part of its portrayal of youthful rebellion. And while Australia’s bodgies and widgies did not replicate exactly subcultural types such as London Teddy Boys, their function in *The Delinquents* was to reproduce locally what media coverage overseas had promoted: the vision of youth culture as a phenomenon separate from other worlds. The central characters in Rohan’s novel experience family life as stultifying, and traditional paths to adulthood as thoroughly odious. In Australia, as in other western countries, the excitement surrounding post-war popular culture—particularly those American forms pushing the idea of teen rebellion—was instrumental in exposing youth to the idea that adult institutions (marriage, work, politics) were a set of apparatuses dominating youth on the grounds of an adult jealousy: the fact that youth was young.

The Delinquents follows teenage lovers Lola Lovett and Brownie Hansen, as they elope from rural Bundaberg in the late ‘50s. This primal rebellion against adult control sets the tone for a

story woven around Lola's rough handling by a succession of authority figures, all intent on thwarting her independence. Separated from Brownie and surviving a back-yard abortion obtained at her mother's insistence, Lola migrates to live among the runaways, drunks, working poor and prostitutes in the low-rent inner suburbs of Sydney and Brisbane. A series of often brutal encounters with welfare services ensues, before the reunited teens set up house with a like-minded bodgie couple.

Lola and Brownie do not 'belong with the mugs'. They are disinclined to suppress youthful energy and sexuality, and the notion of 'fitting in' with the staid institutions maintained by adults is anathema:

Do the social workers and clergymen, well meaning though they be, really think youth clubs, organized sport, fretwork classes are of any use? Come now! Lola had no faith in the Boy Scouts, the young Liberal Movement, choir practice, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, cold showers ... or these healthy outside interests they're always talking about. (18)

Her mother imagines Lola transcending her modest background; having a career and marrying perhaps a 'lawyer, a bank manager—a man who wore a public school tie' (19); but Lola despises these social fantasies and aspirations. Mother talks of the day she will be a nurse, private secretary or doctor's receptionist: Lola dreams she will be a dancer or travel in a carnival (19). These dreams are unrealised, but Lola is drawn to a subculture of an equally spectacular type, where the dancing is uninhibited. Detained for twelve months in the Jacaranda Flats Girls' Corrective School for vagrancy, Lola longs for the freedom that rock music represents—a self-possession defying the controlling social workers:

The vocational guidance officer had asked her would she like to take up dressmaking, or a commercial course, or nursing or hair dressing or weaving. Lola had said she wanted to learn the guitar and the vocational guidance officer had given her a long spiel about how she should try to break away from the rock and roll crowd, and Lola had not listened. (84)

When Brownie and Lola are reunited in Brisbane's West End, they establish ties with bodgie fellow-travellers Lyle and Mavis: ties bound round a common 'outsider' image. That image is built on adopted American music and fashion styles: the immediate and universal interface for teen outsiders, irrespective of whether they are bodgies in sub-tropical Brisbane, or Teddy Boy slum-dwellers in London.

Press reports at the time showed that urban, working-class Australian youngsters adopted American styles with the same gusto as their British contemporaries; and there was keen Australian interest in British developments among commentators whose cultural 'domino theory' made them anxious that Australian youth believed that style and attitude *really did* separate, or alienate, them from mainstream adult society. In 1957, two anonymous articles by a British correspondent for Brisbane's *Courier Mail*, titled 'The Troubled World of Youth', drew on the moral panic surrounding rock music and Teddy Boys in Britain to warn of the outcomes if the same subcultural identification became widespread in Australia. It was a 'black picture' in which decent young people might be driven from their native land by a sense of despair—but 'The Troubled World of Youth' also reminded Brisbanites that there was a solidly respectable 'youth' whom the headlines forgot:

They are pale, these young [Teddy Boy] East End Londoners, from lack of sunshine, lack of fresh air [...]. This is a black picture. But, of course, only a section of London's youth are Teddy Boys. In this huge city you probably would find as many young people who love Beethoven as love Rock 'n' Roll. Many of these serious minded young people, coming to London from provincial homes, live in tiny, rented rooms, cooking meals over gas rings, perched near their beds, pushing pennies and shilling pieces into meters to get a little heating for hot water. They work hard, study hard, and save hard, except for tickets, maybe two or three nights weekly, to West End plays, ballets and musical recitals. It is these gentle, friendly young Londoners who seem to worry most about their nation's future, who ponder the rights and wrongs of migrating to new, energetic lands. A young man who wanted to marry and then take his bride to Australia, told me: 'It sounds unpatriotic, but this country is finished. We reached our natural limits many years ago. From now on we go down hill.' (2)

The Delinquents' bodgie couple, Lyle and Mavis, are British migrants, but motivated by a different temper and aspiration from those of the young man in 'Troubled World of Youth'. Mavis migrates to escape a neglectful widowed mother and a guaranteed future as a factory hand. Lyle's move is an escape from his family's semi-poverty in Newcastle (115-116). Lyle and Mavis know that Britain is not going 'down hill' because of cultural or moral decay: economic hardship and the blockage of youth's desires and opportunities is the cause. In Australia, however, the couple finds familiar forces at work.

Australia's 'dislike of migrants'—their labelling as outsiders—encourages Lyle and Mavis to intensify defiantly their 'deviance' and inhabit an exaggerated territory of marginalization (116). They experience the same stultifying conformity in Australia as in Britain—an anti-youth society; and they react by adopting the dress codes and mannerisms of Australia's most notorious young outsiders of the '50s and early '60s, the bodgies and widgies. *The Delinquents* describes Lyle's response to public disgust: 'no stimulation except the stimulation of disapproval—the locals looking with intolerant amusement at his pegged trousers and duck-tail haircut. Well, at least that was something. He went out and bought a black shirt and a motor bike' (117). However, camaraderie among *The Delinquents'* outcasts often means little more than sharing a night-spot and music. The coffee at Dan's was terrible, but they 'liked the colour scheme of blue and yellow, the juke box jumping out of its rhythmic de-celebration', the 'company of their own kind' (152). The 'American strains of *Rock Around the Clock*, *St. Louis Blues*, *My Baby Rocks Me with a Steady Roll*, *My Boy Flat Top* etc.' provide the constant soundtrack (117-118).

In every respect, this is a milieu depicted in the only other Australian novel in the period comparable for the quality of its 'insider' depictions of youth sub-cultural life, Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling*. And Mudrooroo's book also extols a 'utopian sub-cultural discourse', working against the codes of dominant society from the margins, symbolised by American musical and cultural forms (Bentley 78). Strikingly, too, *Wild Cat Falling* recalls Richard Hoggart's observations about the impacts of Americanisation on British working-class culture in the famous 'Juke-Box Boys' section in *Uses of Literacy*, but from the other side:

I look through the window of the lighted milk-bar and the familiar surroundings glow a 'Welcome Home' to me. This joint is the meeting place of the bodgie-widgie mob. Here they all are—the anti-socials, the misfits, the delinks, in a common defiance of the squares. The juke-box, a mass of metal, lights and glass,

commands the room, squat god worshipped and fed by footloose youth to fill their empty world with the drug-delusion of romance. It flashes me a sarcastic grin and blares a Rock 'n' Roll hullo. I'm back and the gang crowds round—the boys in peacock-gaudy long coats and narrow pants, the girls casual in dowdy-dark jeans and sloppy sweaters. (55)

For Hoggart the popularity of the milk bar was depressing evidence of working-class youngsters succumbing to the 'spritual dry-rot' of mass-trends. Enamoured with glossy new forms of entertainment, they were losing the sense of class continuity and responsibility that youth clubs and sporting clubs had once fostered (249). On the one hand, *Wild Cat's* frequent references to crime and prison seem to confirm the suspicions of those like Hoggart about modern youth's irresponsibility and disengagement from parent communities. Yet a strong, but less explicitly expressed, force bringing *Wild Cat's* bodgies together, underneath the surface thrill of illegal activities and embrace of spectacular fashion styles, was precisely their backgrounds in working-class families with low incomes and few opportunities.

Descriptive similarities between *Wild Cat Falling* and *The Delinquents* are unsurprising. As Mary Durack revealed in a foreword to *Wild Cat Falling*, Mudrooroo met Criena Rohan after moving to Melbourne from Perth at the start of the '60s, and regarded her as a mentor (xxiv). Furthermore, in an interview with Uli Beier (under his birth name of Colin Johnson), Mudrooroo confirmed that the beatniks he mixed with in Melbourne included Criena Rohan's father Leo Cash (70). Mudrooroo's account of Australian youth subculture, with its sometimes journalistic style and characterisations drawn from life, had the 'authenticity' and intimacy with young 'outsiders' that Rohan likewise achieved by digging into her own experience. And that experience was drenched with imported style: as Mudrooroo wrote to Mary Durack around 1960, 'unfortunately ... I feel very detached from what they call "The Australian Way of Life". Australianisms seem false and meaningless to me—"fair dinkum" they do, but I "dig" the beatnik jargon. It comes naturally' (xxii).

Through a series of flashbacks, *Wild Cat Falling* charts the alienation of its unnamed central character, beginning with his earliest encounters with the juvenile justice system as a youngster in a fringe Aboriginal community, through jail and his involvement with a bodgie group. It is a tale of multiple marginalisations: as an Aboriginal youth, a youthful offender, and a bodgie youth. *Wild Cat Falling's* critical heritage is complicated by troubling questions: whether it is the first Australian Aboriginal novel, if Mudrooroo's claim to Aboriginality is legitimate. Recently, Maureen Clarke's 'Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor or Rebel with a Cause?' (2004) revisited these debates, usefully suggesting that it might be more productive to concentrate on the writing itself—on the fact that Mudrooroo told a 'great yarn' about rebellious youth, which along the way also made a significant contribution to Australian literature, and to the development of a genre of Aboriginal writing (109). Furthermore, and notwithstanding *Wild Cat Falling's* unmistakable message about Aboriginal injustice, Greg Hughes correctly asserts the novel's debt to existentialist influences—Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, Beats like Jack Kerouac—rather than to an 'Aboriginal' aesthetic (119). And as Stephen Muecke points out, snapshots of the subcultures of the late '50s and early '60s, the language and style of the milk-bar bodgie, distinguishes *Wild Cat Falling* from any Australian novel except Rohan's *Delinquents* (xi).

A letter from Mudrooroo at the time he was writing his first novel revealed how much the existential weariness of the central character in *Wild Cat Falling* was an explicit reflection of the author's own feelings of alienation:

Can't stand the middle class, the workers, or the Beatniks any more. Went to a working-class party and drank and nothing else. Was flung out of a lower middle-class party for sneering. Went to a Beatnik party and drank a bit and talked, which was somewhat better [...]. I have now taken up learning the guitar, the first really new interest I have had in ages. (Durack, 'Foreword' xxiv)

This letter seems to enact the abandonment of class as a meaningful experiential category. Yet if older conceptions of class seemed *passé* to Mudrooroo and Rohan, there was an abiding contradiction in *Wild Cat Falling* and *The Delinquents* alike: while their heroes claimed youth subculture made them an 'anti-class', their working-class origins were continually stressed.

While the complications cannot be ignored in *Wild Cat Falling*, 'working-class' is an apt descriptor for the central character's community: the locals are mostly seasonal workers who 'picked apples, dug spuds and odd-jobbed at harvest and shearing time', his mother's lover is a white wood-cutter earning just a 'decent enough crust' to supplement his mother's deserted wife's pension (9-10). And the prison experiences of *Wild Cat's* delinquent youth show rigidities of social class enforced behind bars: 'screws the contemptible masters, tough cons the bosses next in line, stool pigeons the outcasts. The rest a formless mass, neither big nor small, only there' (5).

In *The Delinquents*, Brownie Hansen's estranged father is a railway fletcher, while his mother's latest lover is a pest exterminator (7-11). Lola Lovell's cash-strapped mother works as drink-waitress in a South Brisbane hotel to pay for her daughter's abortion (44). Brownie had become a merchant seaman, an option still not uncommon in the '50s for working-class lads with otherwise limited prospects, while Lola occasionally works as a shop assistant. Lyle and Mavis, Brownie and Lola's bodgie friends, are from similar working-class backgrounds in Britain—Mavis's mother a factory hand, Lyle forced to work when he reached school-leaving age (115). Irrespective of any intended irony, only someone like Mavis, with a background among the working poor, could be so oddly over-enthusiastic about Lyle's 'fabulous new job in the Cold Storage' (133).

In other words, the characters in *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling* remain socialised as working-class in a structured class society—though actual descriptions of work are scant. It is as if subcultural youth really lives through the spectacles of the popular—music, movies, fashion; and as if the spectacular forms of pop culture can be quarantined from 'culture' as 'a whole', and economic 'way of life'. This highlights an important question in both novels: to what extent did the main characters, and their new patterns of consumption and adopted style, represent resistance and a challenge to the dominant structures of class and capital? On one level, *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling* do presume that if youth listens to rock music or jazz, 'dressed snappily and stayed cool', it need not obey the traditional dictations of working-class identity.

The problem with this presumption, as Alan Sinfield argues, is that subculture represents a response to class—not an alternative to it (170). Sinfield reasons that the resistances associated with youth subcultures should be reconceptualised as 'ways of coping'—ways of retaining 'a degree of collective identity and individual self-esteem' in response to the frustration felt by people at the wrong end of prevailing relations of production. From this perspective, subcultural resistances seem not only less coherent but also illusory (153). Sinfield issues a timely reminder, too, that production has always been one of the keys to

understanding popular culture; and in this regard *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling* exhibit narrative cracks through which the spectres of production and the culture industries emerge.

The cultural commodities and styles adopted by youth in *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling*, formative of subcultural identities, are all commercially sourced and promoted –as products are in the capitalist mode of production. As youth subcultures developed in the '50s and early '60s, commercial and media involvement in them became more integral and blatant in western countries (Sinfield 177). Consequently, and with some subtlety, *The Delinquents* and *Wild Cat Falling* recognised the dilemma that youth subcultures were an aspect of the way consumption *and* production were structurally interrelated and organised. These novels were not simple-minded fantasies of resistance and utopianism. At one level they could celebrate youth's adoption of imported culture as a means of expression which overrode old class considerations. But they also sounded a dissonant chord about the persistence of power and control: ironically as the latest defences of mass popular culture in countries like Britain were being replicated in Australia by the late '50s.

Such defences provided early glimpses of a view which would also become common in Australian cultural studies later: that American influences could be 'made over', appropriated and 'Australianised' in a creative and even resistant way. In 1960, Max Harris's article about youth and pop culture, 'Cat's Own World', rolled out the arguments. Harris opined that Dr Leonie Kramer's criticism of one of Australia's first popular music television shows, 'Six O'Clock Rock', was typical in its 'tight-lipped and implacable hostility' of the period's unsympathetic insight into teenage mores (10). The influence of rock'n'roll was not to be feared, wrote Harris, if its intrinsic potential for transmutation was recognised. The bastard origins of rock and skiffle in American country music and blues meant they were cultural forms which lent themselves to local adaptation; as an example, Harris lauded the skiffle influence in his namesake Rolf's send-up of "'Bulletin" bush-whackery' in "Tie Me Kangaroo Down" (11).

Craig McGregor suggested the same in the '60s: 'since the history of Australian culture is the history of a series of derivations; what is more important is what use has been made of the borrowings'. McGregor knew that most pop music, in particular, was imported from America or Britain, and that Australians were largely consumers of that form rather than creators (*Profile of Australia* 146). Yet he remained certain that resistance to American dominance in commercial, mass-produced, popular culture was expressed through adaptation, modification 'amusement': 'beneath the slick, American-style surface of cigarette ads, breakfast cereals, quiz shows, Westerns, trade-ins, and car 'barganzas' a rich and sardonic popular consciousness still operates' (*Profile of Australia* 148). Forty years later, McGregor still maintained that although American cultural forms were so truly *international* they could be readily and creatively localised: the issue was really that of 'make-over' rather than 'take-over' ('Growing up Uncool' 95).

In effect, Australian critics like Harris and McGregor had prefigured in the late '50s and early '60s much of subsequent cultural studies theories of the popular, resistance and liberation. But McGregor's *Profile of Australia* had also touched on the other side of this idealism, inadvertently tapping a weakness in the 'resistance through style' argument. The book identified a range of products—cigarettes, breakfast cereals, quiz shows, Westerns, cars—unwittingly suggesting that Americanisation might well mean Australia's inculcation into a particular economic system and its modes of consumption: a process enacted by industries

which commodified ‘culture’ as a major currency. Even the period’s enthusiasts of ‘revolt through style’, such as McGregor, could not completely evade the possibility that irrespective of localisation, Americanisation was centrally tied to a process in which ‘culture’ was increasingly redefined and implicated in the targeted production and distribution of a range of consumer items, and he had named them. This ‘sideways’ critique also haunted fictions depicting working-class youth’s interactions with mass culture in liberationist terms.

In Rohan’s *Delinquents*, for example, the positive portrayal of youth’s ‘revolt into style’ is precisely disrupted by the issue of consumption. Teenage runaway Lola is detained by welfare services and placed in the care of its most notorious disciplinarian, Aunt Westbury. Westbury measures the progress and success of her youthful charges by their middle-class aspirations and hunger for the latest household consumer goods: frumpy Isobel is paraded as one of Westbury’s triumphs because ‘now she has her own home and everything a woman could desire, electric stove and wall to wall carpets, and her husband has his own carrying business’ (90). For young would-be widgie Lola, Aunt Westbury’s carping about Isobel’s materialism provokes a naïve mass society critique—a sarcastic commentary on life dominated by dreams of consumption:

We can’t all go on the streets as you so quaintly put it, and you’ve got your nice kitchen to make up for it. You know the nice kitchen with the rubber-backed lino and the electric stove with the thermostat and the mixmaster, the thousand-unit fridge, which makes such beaut ice-cream, the Hoover and the washing-machine and the built-in laminex-covered wireless so that you can listen to your serials in the morning and everything. (97-98)

Lola, Brownie, Lyle and Mavis’ rented weather-board digs in Queensland are far from the gadget-rich Australian suburban dream home: where bodgies and widgies live, intermittent water supplies and lack of sewerage are the norm (133). But the bodgies and widgies *are* consumers: their meagre disposable incomes buy the emblems of style. The record player and music collection that blasts the neighbourhood are obtained on hire purchase—like a suburbanite’s mixmaster (114); Lyle’s motor-bike is an impulse buy, inspired by the image of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. And when the couples step out to Dan’s, a notorious bodgie hangout raided regularly by the police, they crave Coca-Cola, burgers and American music on the juke-box. On a night out, ‘the look’ must be just right: Lola and Mavis in gala attire, ‘scene stealers in any bodgie’s book’ with ‘spreading skirts and high-heeled scuffs [...] tight velvet slacks with pegged cuffs’ (152-153). Next morning, however, Lyle returns to the ‘square’ world and job in the cold storage depot; Brownie goes to work as deckhand on a Brisbane River barge. If the novel privileges glittering descriptions of subcultural leisure over detailed accounts of work, it does not erase the issue of work altogether. Indeed, *The Delinquents* reluctantly acknowledges the connectedness of leisure and work: ultimately, the accoutrements of subcultural styles are consumer commodities paid for by working-class labour. For all their outrageous self-display, *The Delinquents*’ main characters are not so far from their staid working-class peers: they are workers and consumers. This is a significant fracture in Rohan’s narrative of teen rebellion; a crack in the myth of youth’s capacity to oppose a dominant socio-economic order.

Wild Cat Falling was caustic on this point. Writing the book, Mudrooroo was immersed in the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre, Camus, Beckett and the American Beats: a passion reflected in the novel’s narrative flavour, unmotivated characters and specific incidents (Beier 71). Marking time as he waits to meet a bohemian university crew, the protagonist randomly

opens *Waiting for Godot* in the university bookshop—finding that it instantly speaks to his own life; in a key episode at the end of *Wild Cat*, clearly indebted to Camus' *The Outsider*, he shoots a policeman. Above all, however, existentialism affords Mudrooroo a position to comment on the structure of the social world that produces callous indifference (Muecke x).

In *Wild Cat Falling*, the central character's first impression of the middle-class university crowd is that it is vastly different from his working-class bodgie milieu: jazz, classical music, men with beards, dark-rimmed spectacles and corduroys, girls with casual slacks and jumpers (69). They endlessly talk about life rather than living it, and *Wild Cat's* bodgie protagonist scorns their cerebral vacuity. He plays the trickster, parodying and punctuating their aesthetic pretension. Looking at a painting on a coffee shop wall, he knows how to sucker their attention—'This art jargon is a pushover':

I hadn't registered it before, except to note it was called for some reason 'Man in Revolt of Exile'. I can't see any man, only a revolting mess of hectic semi-circles and triangles, but I have been listening enough now to get a line on this art jazz.

'It seems to hit something in me', I say. 'There's a certain mood of —well, melancholy, going off into utter, black despair.'

They all stop talking and give me the floor. (76)

This excursion into middle-class bohemia yields a crucial insight. As *Wild Cat's* hero stares at the hard-edged stories of working-class youth, crime and police harassment in the sauced-stained pages of the newspaper, the distinctive styles of subcultures dissolve: the vacuousness of the university trendies is no more an alternative to real oppression than the emptiness of bodgie anomie: 'I wonder whether I still consider myself a member of this bodgie mob any more. They are a pack of morons. Clueless, mindless idiots'. He finds the phoniness of the milk-bar boddies increasingly intolerable, concluding finally that they are cultural dopes: 'make-believe-they-are-alive kids moving like zombies to the juke-box will' (97). 'Style' is a con; a fraud perpetrated on working-class youth by the delusional hope of a revolution that can be traced to America and Hollywood—to movies projecting 'the glorious fakery of blown-up life from the United States of Utopia' (80).

According to Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, a legacy of the existentialism filtered through American Beat generation writing was nihilistic rejection of all social connections: 'the Beat Man cannot take because he has nothing to give'. Feldman and Gartenberg saw this Beat posture replayed in British writing about working-class experiences in the late '50s: in the work of authors grouped (if wrongly) under the 'Angry Young Man' rubric—dispossessed, disconnected figures who forged 'their identities in the smithy of the here and now' (9). The same ethos appears in *Wild Cat Falling*: its sense of rejection seems total; it equally debunks the self-importance of subcultures and the mediocrity of mainstream society. But Feldman and Gartenberg also argued that the Beats were beguiled by essentially bourgeois fantasies of a subcultural carnival which was nihilistic and apolitical; whereas the distinctly *working-class* alienation of British (and, arguably, Australian) writers meant that they were highly political (9-10). Thus, writers like Mudrooroo had a greater capacity for social critique: they could shine a cold light on Beat-like celebrations of subculture's carnival, questioning whether the adoption of spectacular styles was in any way resistant. In *Wild Cat Falling*, Mudrooroo fashioned an 'unstable and ambivalent reading of youth' from international influences; contradictory trends that undercut pictures of the American-inspired carnival of youth with darker observations on the commodification of 'youth' and its reliance on the economic frameworks of consumerism (Bentley 76).

What if the universal function—and intention—of culture industries was *precisely* to segregate political from popular cultural life; infantilising and politically paralysing youth in the present, ensuring that a future generation of working-class activists did not ‘grow up’? The young Australian bodgies in *The Delinquents* embody the problem: in the final analysis, the milk-bar lifestyle is no solution to life at the low end of the economic scale. The bodgies are oddly disconnected: from meaningful work or any political activity that might improve their lot. They exist in a narcissistic cycle, labouring to fund their directionless leisure, spending everything they earn on the commodities that define their style. Mudrooroo’s *Wild Cat* is more explicit, implying that the ‘zombie-like’ indifference of late-’50s Australian subcultural youth might be deliberately, commercially induced: concealing the reality that established structures of social power are unchanged. Many of the period’s novels about disaffected youth clung to connectedness, the shifting ground of hope that somewhere, sometime, somehow, youth would be grounded in a meaningful collective effort directed to transformative social action. But this sense of rapprochement and motivated intellectual self-fashioning was unthinkable in Mudrooroo’s *Wild Cat Falling* and Rohan’s *Delinquents*. In these Australian texts about youth anomie, Mudrooroo and Rohan depicted juvenile ‘cool’ in much more extreme, existential terms: their youthful outsiders were superficially connected by style, but essentially alone and struggling against a mainstream world that declared total war on them.

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