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# *The Robust Imagination*

Writing is one of the ways I participate
in the struggle...in the transformation...
Writing is one of the ways I do my work in the world.
- *Toni Cade Bambara*

I want to choose words that even you
Would have to be changed by.
- *Adrienne Rich,* Implosions

In 2005, at a *Writers in Focus* session held at the State Library in Melbourne, Eva Sallis complained that a number of reviewers of her latest novel, *The Marsh Birds*, confused her political activism with her fiction writing. The two are very separate, she insisted. This comment from Dr Sallis, whose novel I found to be both political and literary, was surprising and yet not surprising.

My own writing is always, at some level, politically motivated as is the work of the writers I admire - writers like Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few. I believe in the power of writing - the political and cultural power of the text. Yet when I first noticed my paper for the 2005 AAWP conference (an earlier version of this one) was listed in a session under the title: 'Writer/author as political activist', I felt uncomfortable and apprehensive.

Why was I discomforted by the notion of author/writer as political activist? Predominantly because, like Sallis, I know that historically Australian fiction labelled 'political' has been considered less literary, and as a result, has been devalued. While many of us would agree that all writing is political, it is the writing that is critical of the dominant culture and ideology that is usually tagged as 'political'. 'Novelists who become activists are seen as defective artists', Sallis was quoted as saying in an earlier interview (Murdoch 2003: 3).

This devaluing of 'political fiction' is, at least in part, due to myths about creativity that are entrenched within the discipline of creative writing itself. These myths posit creativity as irrational, spontaneous, and spiritual so that even when faced with evidence to the contrary we continue to advance the view that the imagination will be blocked, and that the writing will be negatively affected, by too much politics and/or theory. This view holds the imagination as 'fragile' and the intellect ('too much thinking') as the enemy out to kill it.

Recently, I undertook an initial survey of writing programs in Australian universities and TAFE colleges by reading online course descriptions. With only a few exceptions, these creative writing courses appear to concentrate on craft and technique as if they can be separated from politics. They reflect a 'theory of reading/writing that regards the text's meaning to be not so much "produced" by cultural and historical factors as by the imagination of the author...' (Zavarzadeh & Morton 1994: 85).

In this paper, I will explore some of the ways I have brought political awareness into my own writing and how strategies can be incorporated into the creative writing classroom. I begin here by reclaiming the notion of author/writer as political activist, acknowledging that all creative work is a form of cultural production and social construction, and challenging the binary view that separates imagination and intellect, and in doing so work towards a shift from the fragile to the robust imagination.

This shift is important to me as a feminist committed to being 'politically accountable', as an academic working to further the development of creative writing as a discipline in universities and, especially, as a writer writing to challenge our perceptions and create deeper understandings of ourselves and each other.

I have developed the ideas in this paper from interrogating and theorising my own distinctive and individual writing practice - what I call 'fictionmaking'. For the purpose of this paper, I have divided my process into three categories: intention, vigilance and laughter. These are three aspects of my fictionmaking that continually merge and interconnect.

## Intention

For me, writing has always been a tool for generating change in the world. It has always been a way of bringing the voice of the other into being: 'Writing as an act of hope' and as a way of 'illuminat[ing] the dark corners', to use Isabelle Allende's words (Allende 1989: 48-9). This is my reason for writing. It is my prevailing intention.

Barthes' announcement of the death of the author (Barthes 1988) - his argument that the text's meaning lies with the reader and that the author's intention is not a necessary or even desirable avenue for interpreting the text - is not one I want to take up here. However, I do want to say that while I agree that the reader constructs the meaning of the text in the reading, I also believe 'every story is loaded' (Kearney 2002: 156). As my purpose here is to illuminate and theorise the writing process, an understanding of the writer's intention is crucial. And by *intention*, I mean: Why I write. I take this statement from Joan Didion's essay 'Why I write' (1980) because of her emphasis on the 'I', and on the writer's intention to invade the reader's world, and to make an impact on it:

> In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with … but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space. (Didion 1980: 17-18)

Regarding my *intention* - here is a specific example. In 1999, after reading and being moved by Susan Johnson's *A Better Woman* (Johnson 1999), a memoir of her experience of childbirth and motherhood - a poetic and brave book - I went to a talk Johnson gave in a local bookshop. The audience, all female, listened to her read, asked her questions, and then we shared our appreciation of her willingness to tell her story, one of the hidden, never-told stories of motherhood, in which, we said, women could find themselves.

In the midst of this discussion, a number of women vented their anger against a reviewer who had called *A Better Woman* 'self indulgent'. 'She would not understand, she's childless,' one of the women called out. Oblivious, or indifferent, to the fact that childless women may be sitting among them, many of the women joined in a tirade not only against the reviewer but also against all those 'selfish and bitter childless women' who 'can never understand what it's like to be a mother' (I quote voices in the gathering).

Silenced by the antagonism around me, I did not declare myself. I longed to stand up and speak in defence of childless women but it seemed impossible to argue with the key premise that a woman without a child could never understand what it was like to be a mother. I found this division between them as women with children and myself as a woman without children disturbing, especially, as it seemed to be laced with such hostility.

In the months after Susan Johnson's talk, I contemplated the possible responses I might make to the antagonism those women voiced towards the childless; in the end I decided to write. In the same way that Susan Johnson allowed me to connect with her experience of mothering when she wrote *A Better Woman*, I hoped that through my writing I would allow others to connect with the experience of childlessness.

This was my intention: to write a novel that would increase the reader's sensitivity to a particular character; to write a novel that would not only have the reader empathise with the particular woman, but also come to appreciate what the Australian feminist theorist, Rosi Braidotti, calls the 'positivity of difference', and by doing so recognise the limitations of her (the reader's) own position (Braidotti 2002: 177).

This was my beginning point: a desire to write and give voice to a childless woman, and by doing so, make her visible. This intention raised two key questions: *How do I write the childless woman so that she is not read as she has always been read - as 'barren', 'incomplete' and 'tragic'? How do I represent the childless woman in all her varieties?*

The first question focused my attention on language and the way it reinforces the cultural assumption that all women are, or at least should be, mothers; the way it equates womanhood with motherhood. I was reminded of Toni Morrison's discussion of language: 'I am a black writer,' she wrote, 'struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive "othering" of people...' (Morrison 1992: xii-xv).

Though my writing about childlessness is very different to Morrison's writing about racism, her work reminded me of the importance of uncovering the 'hidden signs' and the hegemonic cultural assumptions inherent in the language. The terms used to name the woman without

children - childless, nonmother, infertile and barren - all articulate lack; they describe what is missing and 'emphasize absence' (Morell 1994: 21). I spent days when I first began this project looking for a positive adjective to replace 'childless', for a word that did not begin and end with lack. The writing of the novel, *Swimming* (unpublished) was an attempt to 'struggle with and through language' and narrative to challenge the 'dismissive "othering"' of childless women.

The first question also focussed my thinking on voice and tone, on character and structure and highlighted the political nature of all the technical and craft aspects of writing.

The second question, the question of representation, opened a poststructuralist can-of-worms: *There is of course no childless woman. There are many women without children, many versions of childlessness.*

Was I thinking too much? Was this a case of what the writer Rod Jones refers to as 'too close an association with theory'? An association that, he warns, is likely to result in 'drying the writer up'? (Jones 1989: 11). Jones' choice of words brings to mind the pejoratives often used to describe the childless woman -barren, infertile, *dry*. Jones' argument is that theory will render the creative writer *unproductive*. It is an argument I find problematic because of its implication that there is only one way to be a 'real' creative writer; problematic in a similar way as the assumption that all women are or should be mothers.

Nevertheless, it was theory in the end that provided a way to think through these issues; a way to free up the writing. Specifically, it was Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses*, and her notion of 'alternative figurations' (Braidotti 2002) that gave me a new way of seeing my protagonist, Kate, and the novel I was writing. I borrowed Braidotti's concept of 'alternative figurations' as a starting point, or more precisely a sparking point, to further explore questions of representation. Her 'figurations' that 'attempt to draw a cartography of the power-relations that define…respective positions...' provided me with a way 'to identify possible sites and strategies for resistance' (Braidotti 2002: 13). By writing Kate as an alternative figuration of the childless woman I was able to illuminate the 'limitations of our locations, truths and discourses' and thereby challenge the discourses of the general (Braidotti 2002: 13).

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari argue that art, like science and philosophy, is one of the ways we think through the issues, questions and concerns that confront us as individuals and as communities. Art is thought through 'sensations' but it is nevertheless 'thinking' just as philosophy (thought through concepts) and science (thought through functions) are thinking, and 'no one of these thoughts is better than another or more fully completely…"thought"' (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 198). I wrote the novel Swimming (unpublished) to think through what it means to be a woman who has never had children.

Why do you write? I ask my students. Why are you writing this? What questions, issues are you thinking through? What is your intention? I ask them to contemplate, to question, to think about the words and the narratives they send out into the world.

Of course intention is not the whole story; we discover things as we write, both in the process of writing and in the process of reading what we have written, and sometimes not until another reader points them out. There are

aspects of our work, which can be traced to their genesis, followed to their source like one might follow a river back to the mountains, but always there are the untraceable underground streams. So why ask students about intention?

My literary studies students understand the notion of themselves as positioned readers who construct their own meaning from the text. I ask my writing students these questions hoping it will lead them to understand that as writers they too are positioned. The 'politics of location' insists on '"political accountability" (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational collective activity of undoing power differentials… (Braidotti 2002: 12). The 'politics of location' exposes our perspectives as limited and positional, and posits experience and all representation, whether stereotypical or not, as socially constructed.

**Vigilance**

This understanding of ourselves as positioned arises when we start to think more deeply about our intention as writers. It demands a self-reflective and critical approach to our writing. I call this self-reflectiveness: Vigilance (after Rich 1995). Watchfulness. Alertness. A state of being awake to both our conditioning and our position. Being aware all the time of who we are, where we are standing, and the way that how we write or speak that may exclude others but not letting the problems associated with that stop us from speaking, writing and acting.

I am not suggesting here that all writing, all creative work, is or should be rational and conscious. Rather, as the novelist Rose Tremain puts forward, I suggest that we accept that 'the imagination conjures gifts; what the ungrateful, unsentimental part of the mind has to do is unwrap them, find fault with them, see them for what they are and then alter them' (Tremain 1993: 5-6).

Vigilance is the act of interrogating our influences: to what are we blind? What are the hidden signs in the language that dismiss and exclude some people? What are the hidden rules and notions that restrict us from seeing in other ways? From writing in other ways?

Paul Dawson argues in 'Towards a New Poetic in Creative Writing Pedagogy' (Dawson 2003) that all those creative writing givens, like 'show don't tell', taught in our writing classes as if they are just matters of craft, are in fact political. They are based on our notions of 'good literature'. *Show don't tell*. I have heard myself say it many times to my students without thinking about its implications.

Vigilance is the way to be alert in the process of our own writing and teaching. 'This kind of worklife means vigilance,' Adrienne Rich argues,

> for the old definition[s]…still lurk in me and I feel the pull of false choices wrenching me sometimes this way, sometimes that. But if we hope to mend the fragmentation of poetry from life, and for the sake of poetry itself, it's not enough to lie awake...listening only to the sound of our own heartbeat in the dark. (Rich 1995: 53)

When I began working on my novel, the protagonist, Kate, was teaching English to migrant women in a factory. In the class was Mai. Mai is a strong character from this early writing. She was always Vietnamese.

From the very beginning I knew that she would fall in love with Kate's husband, Tom, or at least take the opportunity of him loving her to have her own family. But all the time I worried about her being Vietnamese, of my making the *other* woman, the mistress, Asian, the *other* of the *other*.

Kate lives in a suburb with a strong Vietnamese community…why wouldn't Tom fall in love with a Vietnamese woman…why not? Aboriginal writer Marcia Langton writes: '[The] easiest and most "natural" form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible' (Langton 1993: 24). If I turn Mai into Anglo-Australian Ann or Susan that would be safer, but another form of, exclusion.

Mai should not be seen or created to be representative of all Vietnamese women or all women who have affairs with married men. However, the particular woman I write does raise questions about the nature of all women's lives, and stereotypical or two-dimensional representation are not only bad fiction but perpetuate the very patriarchal notions that it is my intention to work against.

How do we ensure our own fiction is not racist? My students and I pose this question. We read novels and theory, I suggest that to counter racism in fiction we need to ensure the character is not other to the reader. However, in early versions of my own novel Mai is mute, silent; she is the other.

I go back to rewrite Mai. I want the reader to understand that Kate is ascribing otherness to Mai, and that from Mai's perspective Kate is other. This is my intention: to expose the constructed nature of otherness.

We need to be vigilant if we are to see the pitfalls, in language and in structure, often subtle, that perpetuate the stereotypes. But intention and vigilance make writing sound rational, conscious, heavy and very serious and we all know that in the process of writing some aspects are spontaneous, irrational and joyous.

Adrienne Rich again:

> If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. (Rich 2001: 21)

**Laughter**

The third notion is laughter. This laughter is transgressive. It is the laughter sometimes called play that often acts as a metaphor for the 'poetic imagination', for creativity. Laughter opens up numerous possibilities.

I learned to laugh from my mother. During the hundreds, maybe thousands, of times I saw my mother and my aunt together, they were never lost for words, and always their conversations overflowed with laughter. Theirs was a loud deep laughter that bound them together. They laughed their way through the worst as well as the best of times. They told each other stories, and laughed as they waited for the nurses to collect my

aunt for surgery to remove her left breast. They laughed and cried at the airport as they farewelled another sister they knew they would never see again. My cousin and I often laughed with them at jokes we did not understand, infected by their joy, by their resistance. Their laughter *was* resistance; it gave them a way to live that was more than just survival. Laughter was for my mother and aunt, Italian migrant women who were in many ways dominated by the men in their lives, a special joyful space, a space I long to create with my writing. Irigaray says, 'begin by laughing' (Irigaray 1977:163). Irigaray's laughter, like my mother's laughter, is contagious.

Paul Kearney argues in *The Wake of the Imagination*:

> The imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play. Indeed one might even say that it needs to play because it is ethical - to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, in ways which animate and enlarge our response to the other rather than cloistering us off in a dour moralism of resentment and recrimination... The Other which laughter brings into play...is a catalyst for poetical imagining. (Kearney 1988: 366-9)

Laughter, or play, is an important part of all creative work. It involves the freedom to write freely, and with joy. Crucially, room must be found for laughter/play in university writing courses. This is a project as crucial as (and perhaps even more difficult than) to find time to discuss theory and politics.

In my writing, I aim to challenge what I know, twisting it round, turning it on its side and inside out to see what new figurations I can create, and how that might transform my thinking and my world. This is a fictionmaking that is both a form of production, shaped by culture, history and the economic and political environments it is part of, and a creative practice which aims to reveal, interrogate and contest the taken-for-granted assumptions of that same culture, history and economic and political environment.

This writing is the work of the writer/author as political activist. This is political writing. It is the work of both the intellect and the imagination. A robust imagination.

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