

University of Canberra

*Jen Webb**Individual Enunciations and Social Frames*

The Writing 2000 conference held at Griffith on the Gold Coast provided a marvellous opportunity for teachers of creative writing to listen to each others' views on our practice, to hang out together over coffee and lunch breaks, and to participate as members of a discipline committed to that most anomalous task - the teaching of a creative practice. A question that emerged over and over in conversations during these breaks was: *What do writing students need?* This, inevitably, is one of our ongoing concerns as teachers of creative writers, as designers of creative writing programs, as managers of creativity, and as creative writers ourselves, in our other identities. My response to this question - a response predicated on my other-other identity as a cultural theorist - is that one of the skills writing students need is in understanding the politics of identity and representation; and that the active incorporation of cultural studies methodologies within the creative writing program is a good starting point for its provision.

It may seem rather facile to offer this up, given that in many writing programs some cultural studies subjects or approaches are already being offered, and given the fact that our interest and attention are diffused over so many equally pressing perspectives: creativity, or productivity, or practicality, or technicality, or digitality...all approaches that deal in a direct and functional manner with ways of managing and manipulating our medium - words. But while these are, certainly, important aspects of a creative writing program, and useful tools for emerging creative writers, a focus on either the mechanics or the aesthetics of writing in the absence of a contextualised framework risks overlooking the equally vital attention that could be paid to the social conditions in which creative works are made. The logic for paying this sort of attention to extra-aesthetic, extra-technique studies lies in the fact that writing as a practice and a product is framed within institutional and discursive boundaries, and is shot through with a very messy combination of (if you'll forgive the alliteration) politics, positions, performative possibilities, and often contradictory priorities. And, perhaps most centrally, understanding the frameworks is vital because writing exists as a field of belief. It is in stories and other creative products that the social world is made manifest, and it is in such spaces that practitioners and audiences can explore who and what 'we' are, and values and meanings can take on forms.

This is not to discount or discard the more conventional ways of teaching creative writing, but to suggest the value of weaving cultural studies into the existing programs. And it can be justified institutionally, on the grounds that it broadens students' skill bases. This is useful, since the broad context in which we're working is a trifle gloomy. Our students - as they keep reminding me - are living in a constrained employment market, and some at least are likely to be wondering (or explaining to their parents) why they should be studying any creative field, given its notoriously low incomes and uncertain job prospects, instead of preparing for a career in, say, law or information technology. If we are to convince them (or their parents) of the viability of the degree programs, and of the profession as a whole, we need to be able to provide them with ways of understanding what it is to 'be' creative, and with the artisanal skills that will allow them to make their creative works effectively. We need to train them in the awareness of the legal, ethical and institutional responsibilities that will equip them to operate as professionals in a complex and plural field like writing. We need to teach them how to handle the craft side of writing, to find their own 'voice', and to develop a commitment to their own aesthetics. And as far as I can tell, we are doing all these things pretty effectively. Creative writing students seem able to find work, to get published, to demonstrate their literacies in the publishing sector, and to understand issues like regulation, censorship, production costs, taxation status, grant opportunities, how to find markets, how to write publication proposals, how to market their published work - all those aspects which are unproblematically committed to administrative rationality, and yet provide them with what they need to negotiate the field more effectively and to widen their vocational prospects. But along with these artisanal and professional skills, they also, I'd argue, need to become fluent in techniques for understanding the processes of enunciation, and in ways of analysing and negotiating the field: developing the ability to observe and think through what's happening in the wider context, developing a certain sensitivity to the politics of representation, understanding how values come to be inscribed in texts, and learning how to deal with the space between ethics and art.

The reason I point to cultural studies as a useful methodology and pedagogy for engaging with these questions is that it offers a wonderful range of techniques. Cultural studies can, of course, be seen as a piratical discipline that swoops through the academy, robbing literature, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology and even physics of their gems, and rearranging them somewhat arbitrarily in its own crown. And certainly, careful training in cultural studies

does provide the basic literacies to make use of concepts and some of the methodologies from a number of related disciplines. But it can equally be defined as that discipline which has a concern, as Stuart Hall phrases it, with the 'politics of theory. Not theory as the will to truth, but theory as a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges'. (Hall 1992: 286) Such knowledges are worth learning and holding, because they are not concerned with the abstract or deracinated world of 'pure' knowledge (the 'will to truth'), but of life as it is practised in all its messy everyday ways, and as it is rooted in specific contexts - the sorts of 'life', in fact, that often emerge reframed as fictional narratives in our own and our students' work. These knowledges provide ways of thinking clearly and reflexively about the material that often becomes the content of fiction. But more than that, such knowledges allow us to make sense of those *localised contestations* that Hall describes. And these are also critical knowledges, because it is on the outcomes of these contests that 'truth' is (for the moment) determined, and that 'truth' is also contested and re-determined. The outcomes of these contestations establish what 'counts' as Writing, what belongs under the rubric of Ozlit, what should be included as part of the national cultural capital and - very important for our students and ourselves - what is deserving of public attention and support. In short, these contests are the sites in which what is (for the moment) considered worthy of inclusion in the *entre-nous* is evaluated.

The association I am making here between creative production and 'truth' is not new. It has an ethical face, of course, and always has had: the Stoics in ancient Greece considered that aesthetics was an ethics; and in a much more recent text Joan Didion asserts that 'Writers are always selling somebody out'. (Didion c.1968) Given this context, and the always-present possibility that we are in fact 'selling others out', it is important that writers understand the politics of representation, and know how to navigate the space between creative autonomy and ethical representation. And more than that; in as much as creative production can craft up images of the world that come to stand in for 'the truth', we need to acknowledge that we are participating in truth-making. Unless we understand and can participate in these local contexts, local conjunctures, and localised contests, our ability to navigate the field effectively and position ourselves and our work within the *entre-nous* is vitiated.

These sorts of issues suggest to me that there are two main areas, or streams, outside of the more conventional aesthetic/mechanical training, which we can offer our students, each of which is conveniently mobilised from within a cultural studies framework. The first deals with ways of analysing and understanding the writing 'field' and its politics - what sort of positions are available within the field? who are the gatekeepers, and how did they come to occupy this position? what do audiences want? what are the dominant narratives (or discourses), and how does my work relate to them? The second 'stream' is less practically oriented, but equally important in that it provides the means to analyse and negotiate our position within the field, because it deals with the politics of meaning - with what are we creating when we write our vision of the world. Both of these streams can be identified in Tom O'Regan's statement, published some years ago now, that 'Conferring and creating meaning...is necessarily caught between individual enunciation and its social frame', (O'Regan 1994: 337) and I would like to take up this point - the point of reflection on individual (speaking) identity and its social contexts. This, of course, demands a certain amount of unpacking since, in an environment that is marked by the attenuation of identities, the multiplicity of writing styles and publishing modes, and the tension between the material and the virtual, both 'individual enunciations' and 'social frames' are becoming increasingly slippery entities.

In order to render this manageable, I'd like to start with the argument that what we are doing as writers is, in O'Regan's words, *conferring and creating meaning*. There's a certain isomorphism in this 'conferring' and 'creating' given that, as humans, we occupy a symbolic, discursive universe, and so conferring doesn't precede creating: they happen pretty much simultaneously. If I can slip into a very rough-cut linguistics, meaning doesn't precede its articulation, but is produced in that articulation and its enunciation. Hence it is the articulation of a statement that brings it, and its referent, into being (or at least, into a condition of accessibility). What we are doing as writers is fabricating the discursive world, creating meaning, and conferring meaning, because in what we choose to represent, and in the way we choose to represent it, we make visible some ways of seeing, ways of understanding, and ways of being in the world.

This act, at once creative and political, isn't as autonomous as was implied in the old Romantic dream of the charismatic artist. As the second part of O'Regan's statement goes, we are not free meaning-makers, but are *necessarily caught between individual enunciation and its social frame*. In other words, we are neither truly alienated nor truly autonomous. Instead, we are produced by the social and discursive frameworks in which we are ourselves inscribed, and we are constrained by its truths, values and knowledges in what we can say, and how we can say it. This is a point at which the technologies and methodologies of cultural studies can be put to work, because it offers ways of thinking through both the necessarily political act of creative writing, and the frameworks that delimit our creative possibilities, and the terms of identity available to us as Australian, 21st century, creative practitioners.

Which brings me to the final point - the question of values inscribed in texts, and the social and professional repercussions associated with value. The one 'moment' in Australian literature that is doubtless tattooed on our memories is what is often referred to as 'the Demidenko affair'. This otherwise perfectly valid approach of writing a story about the nature of evil as focalised through the eyes of the baddies would have been just another Vogel award if the book hadn't subsequently won the Miles Franklin award, with the result that the spotlight turned away from the content of the book to its context. As is now part of Australian history, Helen Demidenko turned out to be not the child of Ukrainian peasants but a mainstream Anglo-Australian, and this changed the story - changed the reading of

her novel and understandings of its value, and most particularly problematised the right of the author/narrator to make statements about the Holocaust. A central argument was that she had no right to write this book, or to write it this way, because she had no personal contact with the Ukraine, with Jews in the Ukraine, with the whole history; and that her grasp and perspective were, therefore, necessarily flawed.

The argument that we can only write about ourselves or characters very like ourselves is not one I want to take up here or, indeed, anywhere. I am rehearsing these well-known points only to make another point: that if we are to avoid the 'Demidenko fallacy' - the idea that as writers we have the right to say anything about anyone in any idiom, with or without knowledge - then we need to understand very clearly the politics of enunciation, and the politics of the social frames within which such enunciations are made. If, for instance, I choose to write a story about Indigenous Australia, particularly a story focalised through an Indigenous Australian, then I need to be aware that despite the fact that meaning is created in its articulation, it is also created within 'contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges'. Parts of these knowledges will always be unavailable to me, writing as I do from my background as South African; and even should I through luck and good management come to be identified in some way with Indigenous Australia, my own social identity will always mediate the readings of my work. In other words, even with the best will in the world, these knowledges will come to me already laden with values and with history, as am I; and by diving into this world I will necessarily shine a spotlight on my own contradictory interpellation as a subject and a writer.

What is necessary in all this delicate and convoluted politics is to find ways of thinking through the stories we want to tell, and the perspectives from which we want to tell them; to understand the connections between language and community; and to judge the relative values and risks in understanding, as Clifford Geertz puts it, 'how it is we understand understandings not our own'. (Geertz 1983: 5) The politics of practice are multi-layered, but my recitation of these already-known issues is predicated on Foucault's point that what lies behind the effort involved in crafting one's life and one's work is the relation between freedom and power. Writing students are potential truth-sayers and myth-makers, and can only benefit by learning how to navigate the space between freedom and power, the spaces within which they will be working. I'm certainly not arguing that they need to be theorists as well as creative writers, but if they understand how meanings are made; if they can identify the field and their place in it (or the place they want to be); and if they understand how to develop the voice they want, and communicate the worldview which conveys their ethics and values, they'll be in a better position to become strong and significant writers.

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Notes and Debate

Paul Dawson *Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy* Vol 7 No 1 April 2003

Marcelle Freiman Letter Vol 7 No 2 October 2003

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TEXT

Vol 4 No 2 October 2000

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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