

# Performing Australian Ethnicity: 'Helen Demidenko'

Gunew, Sneja "Performing Australian Ethnicity: 'Helen Demidenko'", in Ommundsen, Wenche and Rowley, Hazel (eds) From a Distance: Australian Writers and Cultural Displacement, Geelong, Deakin University Press, 1996.

## Performing Australian Ethnicity: 'Helen Demidenko'

by Sneja Gunew

'A lot of Ukrainian families don't want to own up to their pasts.' (Demidenko)

'Gender here, exists only in representation - or performance. This is the scandal of transvestism - that transvestism tells the truth about gender.' (Garber)

'... what is "performed" works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable.' (Butler)

The positioning of minority cultures is symptomatic of the paradox at the heart of national cultures. Do they 'belong' in terms of assimilation and appropriation or do they constitute the exclusionary framework of 'foreign bodies' which both encloses and defines a national culture? In the settler colony of Australia, the issue of minority literatures, including the emergent writings of the Indigenous peoples, continues to be a thorn in the flesh of those who maintain the institution of Australian literature. After all, this cultural formation was really only consolidated in the 1970s by those left-wing intellectuals who managed to place class and, to some degree, gender at the centre of these definitions. Thus Australian literature emerges in the latter part of the century as respectably replete with working-class and women writers. There was, however, little acknowledgment of the impact of post Second World War immigration which

redefined, in retrospect also, the 'always-already' multicultural character of Australia. It has been difficult to gain any serious recognition for writers from those sixty or more groups who wrote both in English and other languages but whose writings were, until recently, neither, systematically nor comprehensively, collected or studied as a significant part of the Australian literary heritage (Gunew 1994). The difficulties have continued to perplex critics in the field who have had to deal not so much with any version of 'backlash' as with an entrenched refusal to take minority cultures seriously. Indeed, the small gains that have been made within, for example, the ambiguous orbit of 'multiculturalism' in both its state and 'community' manifestations, have provoked consistent 'backlash' reactions to attempts to introduce concepts of cultural and racialised difference, or efforts to illustrate the hybridised nature of all cultural productions. A recent major literary controversy in Australia highlights some of the complexities involved in these debates.

In September 1995, Meanjin, one of the oldest cultural journals in Australia, published a short story called "Pieces of the Puzzle" by Helen Demidenko (1995). Ostensibly there was nothing remarkable here, merely that in this journal too 'ethnic minority authors' were finally appearing as a matter of course. Since significant immigration from areas other than Britain and Ireland largely dates from the post-Second World War period onwards, such manifestations are not as pervasive as they are in Canada or in the US. (Gunew 1993). For those of us alert to such symptoms here might be another tiny register that things were changing in the institutional networks which comprise any national literary formation.

As part of setting the context for the story, the first-person narrator states the following:

It is 1988 and my boyfriend is Croatian. ... I grow up Ukrainian-Australian. No-one has ever heard of my country, much less the enforced famine that killed seven million of its citizens. I do not write this at school. I carry it around in my head. This history is my cultural baggage. (433)

Later in the story an archetypal Australian barbecue is the setting for an encounter between the narrator's uncle, Pavel Hryniuk, and an Australian neighbour, Keith McGuire:

'I am vairy bat person. Waffan-SS.'

'Look mate, I don't give a shit what uniform you wore, as long as it wasn't bloody Japanese!' (434)

The story culminates in a fight between Pavel's son Vik and a school fellow, Solomon Blatsky:

People take sides. The halfdozen skips in the crowd look bewildered. Miryana stands behind Solomon. So do the rest of the Serbs. Vik looks wounded. Miryana was his girl until five minutes ago... One of the skip girls yells and pleads. Her face is dusty and tears have left glistening snail trails on her cheeks. 'This is Australia, for fuck's sake. Stop it! Please stop!' (436)

A footnote explains that 'skip' means the child of two Australian parents. The reader notes that the story divides its characters between 'Australians' who are 'skips' and other children who are identified as Ukrainian, Croatian, Jewish, although since they are growing up in Australia one could be forgiven for imagining that they too are Australian. While the story appears to suggest, through Keith's comment, that intolerance and racism are as rife amongst the 'skips' as the newcomers, the final section and the comment by the 'skip girl' seems to indicate otherwise, that these immigrant children are perpetuating hatreds which have no place in the new country.

In the same issue of *Meanjin*, and preceding this story, an essay by Morag Fraser (1995) titled "The Begetting of Violence" describes the various types of international violence around events such as the O. J. Simpson trial and

suggests that Australians have "a compensating advantage" in that they "start off without a reflex recourse to vendetta" (419). Fraser suggests that violence, according to US analysts, results from a mixture of the environmental and the biochemical (420). Such triggers, she maintains, have been inadequately acknowledged and debated in the Australian public domain; hence the lack of understanding which greeted the publication of Helen Demidenko's novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994). After a summary of the controversy she suggests that "as it stands the voices from **outside the Ukrainian circle** are unconvincing. Demidenko herself admits to a failure there, a flatness, a retreat into stereotype. But it is not Jews alone who are schematized. So are Demidenko's Germans..." (425, my emphasis). Fraser ends her essay with the statement that "The novel will prompt necessary questions about the cultural pathologies that spawn violence." (429) At the back of this issue of *Meanjin* in the 'Notes on Contributors' there is a hasty and inexpertly interpolated note on Helen Demidenko stating that: "About the time *Meanjin* went to press, she changed her name back to Helen Darville." (583) Clearly there are mysteries here which require further investigation and Morag Fraser's suggestion that this novel gives an insight into 'cultural pathologies' relevant to Australia acquires, perhaps, a different meaning to the one suggested before the author 'Helen Demidenko' was found to be not quite the authentic 'ethnic spokesperson' she appeared to be.

## ***Authenticity and Minorities***

The question of authenticity continues to haunt the reception of minority writings. In the struggle for minority rights and the battles over who controls representation there are those who take the position that only members of such minority groups have the authority, or at least moral right, to represent themselves. But who, institutionally speaking, decides the group membership and who interprets and legislates whether this authenticity has been achieved? Moreover, in a poststructuralist context of decentred subjectivity, some might argue that

no-one can fully represent anything. These days such questions are signaled by terms such as identity politics (where representation often means not so much 'depiction' as 'delegation' or 'speaking for') and in literary discussions with the 'appropriation of voice' issue aired in Canada a few years ago.

To summarise the controversy in question here: the first novel of what appeared to be the work of a young Australian-Ukrainian author, Helen Demidenko, won a major literary prize reserved for first novels - the Vogel award (1993). Her novel purported to be triggered by the war crimes trials that had surfaced in Australia as they had in other parts of the world. The novel's narrator, somewhat akin to the narrator in the short story described above, is a young Australian-Ukrainian woman, Fiona Kovalenko, whose uncle (and possibly father) are threatened with being tried for war crimes. She discovers some old photos implicating her uncle and father in the Holocaust. This in turn leads her to try and understand how people she had long loved and respected could have committed these deeds in the past. It leads her back to the 'evidence' in the pre-war Stalinist Soviet era where the Ukrainian famine is depicted in all its horrors. The implication throughout is that the 'Bolsheviks' who carried out these atrocities in the Ukraine at a local level were also 'Jews'. The terms 'Jews and Bolsheviks' are consistently twinned throughout the book. In other words the suggestion is that the hatred fueled by the Stalinist measures, allegedly perpetrated by Jews, were the grounds for Ukrainian involvement in the Holocaust, seen here as a kind of reprisal. The implication is that these 'explained' the enthusiastic participation of figures such as 'Ivan the Terrible' at Treblinka.

Reception of the book was relatively muted until the author received the country's biggest literary prize, the Miles Franklin award, given for outstanding novels describing Australian life. Meanwhile Demidenko had been gilding the 'ethnic' lily, appearing in 'ethnic' costume, signing her book with Ukrainian inscriptions and even performing Ukrainian songs and dances (Roberts and Makler 1995). When she

received the Miles Franklin the book came under more intensive scrutiny.

The first controversy generated around this text was that it was inherently anti-Semitic (Legge 1995; *Australian Book Review* #173). Readers appeared divided between saying that presenting or describing characters who were motivated by anti-Semitism was the same as condoning it and those who argued that this was an honest attempt by another generation to understand from within the twisted logic which led up to these horrors. This was Morag Fraser's line. Thus readers were split between calling this a very brave book which tackled difficult issues which needed to be aired in Australian debates and those who condemned it as perpetuating scurrilous myths. On the latter side historian Robert Manne (1995) wrote a long account in the national press detailing the various historical errors in the novel. He pointed out that Jews had been purged from the ranks once Stalin came to power; that the idea that Bolshevik and Jew were linked was in fact the cornerstone of Nazi propaganda and that anti-Semitism in the Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe did after all pre-date the era of the Second World War and so couldn't simply be 'explained' by the immediate pre-war events. These critiques were echoed by others (Christoff 1995; Henderson 1995; 1995a; Indyk 1995). Much of the argument rested on whether this text purported to be fact (or history) or whether it could claim the license of fiction.

Helen Demidenko meanwhile defended herself by saying that the book was based on the oral evidence of her own family and indeed that members of her family had been killed by 'Jewish Bolsheviks', "...most of my father's family, including my grandfather, were killed by Jewish Communist Party officials in Vynntsia" (1995a). Thus she herself, at this stage, reached for a legitimization based on the 'facts' of history, albeit a history fashioned from the vagaries of personal memory.

The arguments to illustrate the novel's inherent anti-Semitism may be summarised in the following ways:

There does seem to be little distance between the implied author (who focalises much of the historical 'evidence') and the contemporary narrator 'Fiona'. Nor is there much guidance as to any moral condemnation this contemporary narrator might offer. Robert Manne (1995), for example, called it "the coldest book I have ever read" and was echoed by many others. In an early defense of the technique Demidenko argued that she deliberately attempted to be 'amoral' and not to provide a 'neat moral' (1995a). She also stated, in that same piece, that she regretted the two-dimensional characters she created but offers this in connection with the German characters and not the Jewish ones and certainly not the Ukrainian ones. Reading through the text one notes that the term 'Jews and Communists' is a refrain constantly used in conjunction and that the link is never problematised (Demidenko 1994: 9, 11, 15, 16, 28, 29, 32, 43, 45, 46, 65, 90, 96, 108, 117).

If one were to argue that the book recirculates myths and a version of history which has a certain purchase in a range of ethnic groups in Australia, then this is, alas, quite probably true. However one would have to add the important rider that this anti-Semitic set of myths is retold across the spectrum of Australian ethnic groups and that it includes Anglo-Celtic Australians who have a share in this exchange and indeed have their own idiosyncratic contributions to make concerning anti-Semitic propaganda.

As part of this debate, there were comments somewhat more direct than Morag Fraser's implication concerning 'cultural pathologies'. In other words, it elicited familiar murmurs amongst the ethnic majority groups that this book simply confirmed their fears concerning the pathologies residing in ethnic minorities, which were always threatening to break out into the larger body politic. Indeed the Miles Franklin judges' report stated that, "Helen Demidenko's first novel displays a powerful literary imagination coupled to a strong sense of history, and brings to light a **hitherto unspeakable aspect of Australian migrant experience.**" (*Australian Book Review* #173:19 my emphasis). It became increasingly clear that

what was in the book was already less important than its reception and the ways in which this reception catalogued a number of the problems bedeviling the reading of minority literatures.

The controversy took a new twist when it was suddenly revealed that 'Helen Demidenko' was really Helen Darville, the daughter of two British immigrants who had no Ukrainian connections whatsoever (Roberts and Makler 1995). How did this affect the evaluation of the book? If it was solely regarded as fiction (as placed in binary opposition to the notional 'facts' of history) then it was, if anything, an even more significant imaginative creation than had hitherto been thought. If it was considered to be 'faction' (part fiction, part fact) then its legitimacy (the 'real' story of a "hitherto unspeakable aspect of Australian history") took a nose-dive. One press commentator, Luke Slattery (1995) stated accurately enough that, "The Demidenko affair tells us rather a lot about ourselves" and then elaborated that "we have been desperate for the authentic authorial voice of contemporary multiculturalism." David Marr (1995), one of 'Demidenko's' supporters in the controversy over the novel's anti-Semitism wrote somewhat nostalgically in the face of the revelations, trying to recapture his earlier response, that "I am moved by the **simplicity** of the figures on this Ukrainian landscape" (my emphasis). Helen Darville now maintained that she had encountered Ukrainian witnesses in her past and that their accounts had haunted her and that this had fueled her treatment of events (Darville 1995). As tireless investigative reporters from her home town of Brisbane, sifted the evidence, it was revealed that the author had a long history of 'passing' as an 'ethnic', although her specific allegiances had been all over the map, so to speak, ranging from Czechoslovakian to Hungarian etc. (Bentley 1995; Dibben 1995). In the wake of the intense media coverage in Australia, the news was rather gleefully picked up by the international press. She was also accused, at various stages, of plagiarism, but acquitted, although some of the cited evidence, including passages from Toni Morrison's work, would perhaps lead one to less charitable conclusions than those arrived at by

the publisher's lawyers (Peel 1995). Increasingly, both author and book were perceived as a hoax and were discredited accordingly. Along the way various earlier supporters of the book within the literary establishment also had their reputations tarnished (Henderson 1995b). Others no doubt sighed with relief that they had not become involved. When the grounds of literary evaluations are examined by the predominantly anti-intellectual public eye they are often perceived as absurd or at least as not having quite the absolute authority we might imagine. Certainly, the judges of the Miles Franklin award and those who had awarded her the prestigious Australian Literature Society gold medal were heavily criticized (Indyk 1995a; Daniel 1995; Wark 1995). In relation to this last award, a familiar refrain appeared in the judges' report: "A text that positions itself within the wider questions posed by multiculturalism, it resists monolithic assumptions about culture and identity - assumptions that produced the horrors it so chillingly describes." (De Groen et al. 1995) Those who had previously argued that this was an anti-Semitic text would no doubt maintain that the text reinforced rather than resisted "monolithic assumptions about culture and identity."

No doubt there will be further developments to this story but already a number of aspects make it very interesting to those of us laboring in the field of ethnic minority literary criticism. In brief I will argue that minority writers, as such, are invariably confined to the issue of their 'identity' even in a poststructuralist world of decentred subjectivity. They function as what Gayatri Spivak (1988) has termed the 'native informant', with an unproblematically coherent subjectivity projected upon them. They are constructed as 'insider' sources for 'information-retrieval' rather than being deemed capable of postmodernist writing. In short, their ability to produce 'textuality' is ignored. As well they are legitimated in large part by their 'eye-witness' accounts of certain minority histories which also confine them to realist genres and, as I've argued in the past, they are read more for sociological evidence than for literary merit

(Gunew 1994). This is not to devalue the important testimonies (based on oral material) which have been recorded by minority writers but simply to suggest that this should not be the only vehicle open to them. However, what the Demidenko/Darville case seems to illustrate is that we are concerned here with authenticity in terms of the performance of 'ethnicity'.

## **Performing 'Ethnicity'**

What models of performance in recent theoretical debates are available to us for understanding this bizarre episode in Australian literary history? As the opening epigraph to the essay suggests Marjorie Garber sees cross-dressing and 'passing' as contributing to the deconstruction of gender through its excesses or over determinations. If one looks at her analysis of David Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* and the notorious case on which it is based there are some interesting parallels with the Demidenko performance. In the playwright's own words, the play is based on the following incident: "A friend asked, had I heard about the French diplomat who'd fallen in love with a Chinese actress, who had subsequently turned out to be not only a spy, but a man?" (Hwang 1988). Demidenko/Darville too could be described as a spy who 'cross-dresses' to infiltrate 'ethnic' circles and to bring back dispatches to the Anglo-Celtic majority who are not, of course, labeled as ethnic. We note, for example, the comments by Slattery and Marr above. But there is also something more profound about this performance than merely putting on a costume in the superficial sense. Helen Darville, as has been pointed out, had a history of 'ethnic' cross-dressing and as Garber speculates, in many of the studies of transvestism no-one really looked closely at the figure of the transvestite in terms of "the fact of transvestism as both a personal and a political, as well as an aesthetic and theoretical, mode of self-construction" (236). But what was the nature of the 'personal and political' investment here? Clues are found in the latter part of Garber's chapter. For example there is a moment in *M. Butterfly* when Song Liling (the transvestite) states that "only a man knows how a woman

should act" (241). It is interesting to substitute 'ethnic' here, meaning that only those who are the 'non-ethnic' audience for the spectacle of ethnicity know how an 'ethnic' should act in order to produce that spectacle, that theatrical display, 'authentically'. This runs together with the motif, suggested in the play, that Song Liling also performs the role of the perfect or idealised 'Oriental woman' and that Gallimard is ignorant, for example, of the genre in which he first encounters Song Liling, namely the Peking Opera. This profound ignorance of a particular cultural tradition provides the necessary conditions for the existence of the idealization of the conflated Oriental women. In like fashion one might suggest that lack of knowledge of any of the details of ethnic differences (languages, history etc.) provides the very conditions for the acceptable construction of ethnicity in the framework of official or state multiculturalism as a system of surveillance and control in the Foucauldian sense. Garber also quotes Hwang in an interview as stating that: "A real woman can only be herself, but a man, because he is presenting an idealization, can aspire to the idea of the perfect women." (246) Precisely, and so it is with ethnicity and its idealizations. Thus we could of course substitute ethnicity for Garber's opening quotation so that it reads: "Ethnicity here, exists only in representation - or performance. This is the scandal of transvestism - that transvestism tells the truth about ethnicity." Helen Darville merely wished to perform the idealised 'ethnic'.

### ***The Demidenko Show***

Let us look at the material evidence. The cover of Darville/Demidenko's book presents a hint of Cyrillic script in the font but is general enough to incorporate as well the whiff of German gothic script. The muted background of a wheat field connotes both history (the sepia tone) and signals that wheat links the histories of Australia and the Ukraine through postwar immigration. The iconic author-goddess (pale-skinned with long white-blonde hair) appears in numerous newspaper photos in 'ethnic' dress (not just any Ukrainian blouse but one from Kiev) and performs Ukrainian dances as well as sending

cards and inscribing books in Ukrainian. Inside the book as part of the prefatory pages there is a Ukrainian glossary, as there is for the story quoted earlier. This is indeed a text with subtitles.

The whole show could have been scripted by the wicked humor of the Australian-Polish performance artist Ania Walwicz. Helen Demidenko gave the Australian public everything it wanted, including the parade of pathologies - anti-Semitism and those festering wounds (old rivalries) that all right-thinking Australians know lie behind the costumes and the cooking which continue to be the acceptable face of multiculturalism.

The props by now are well-established for the ventriloquising of 'ethnicity'. What counts as 'ethnic': the foreign name; the 'un-Australian' history; the first person narrator delivering an

authentic story, the alleged eye-witness accounts underpinning the foreign. The history is suitably simplified into binary oppositions in which the characters remain two-dimensional because this is, of course, not where the complexities of 'real life' are played out. The sense of a wider community is also absent because this would complicate the essential(ist) frame of reference. By now these spectacles have been rehearsed so many times that many of those designated 'ethnics' in the prevailing paradigm have internalised them. After all this is the only space available to them in the staging of Australian culture. It may be a small space and the genre is embarrassingly outmoded, but one takes what one can get. The Australian-Ukrainian community were also, it seems, unwittingly complicit players in the debacle.

### ***Ventriloquisms***

One way of situating these debates is as an 'appropriation of voice' issue. This was a major point of contention in Canada a few years ago and dealt in the main with debates over what was seen as the appropriation of Native Canadian voices by non-Native writers such as W. P. Kinsella and Anne Cameron who wrote

texts purporting to incorporate these viewpoints or set amongst these communities. In other words even relatively benign representations of minority groups contribute to stereotyping. Calling it ventriloquism accentuates the power relations involved and certainly raises questions about whose voices we are hearing and who the 'we' are. And here's the nub for the Australian debates. Whose voice did Australian readers, 'inside' and 'outside' ethnicity, believe they were hearing? Who, for that matter, is the implied reader inside the text? The narrator is a first-person one and traditionally there is not much of a gap between such a narrator and an implied reader. As 'Demidenko' stated in an early interview, "A lot of Ukrainian families don't want to own up to their pasts" (Demidenko 1994a), and the moral dimension she ventriloquises was of course taken up by the Miles Franklin judges in their comments that she bravely represented the "unspeakable aspect of Australian migrant experience".

If anything, the controversy has reiterated the fact that ethnic minority writings are read in a two-dimensional way in Australia for their authentic, and preferably 'simple', representation of the migrant experience (Marr 1995). In other words, those folk who came to Australia carry with them a certain foreign and exotic history which Australian readers can plug into as a cheap cultural tourism event. If a name signals a non-'skip' background (to borrow from the idiomatic speech reported in 'Demidenko's' story), it is read for its authentic insights about being a migrant - nothing else. In other words this reading position is a way of reducing and trivializing a creative text into a piece of sociological data. Less benignly, there is the sense that ethnic minority writers are read to reconfirm views on inherited and imported pathologies, thus ensuring that the nation remains morally 'clean', or, in Fraser's terms, continues not to be animated by a "reflex recourse to vendettas." Consequently there is the anxiety and the confidence that the 'ethnic ghettos' both harbor but also serve to contain social pathologies.

What was also interesting about the reception of

Demidenko/Darville is that spokespeople from the so-called 'ethnic' groups also felt that although this seemed to be a fictional text it should none the less get its history right, particularly in the first stage of the affair (*Australian Book Review* #173). Here too there was a perception that the writer's function was a representative one and therefore the minority view had to be 'correctly' represented. This kind of censorship (anxiety around representation of the minority) has bedeviled a number of writers who have seen their own communities (often self-appointed) turn against them.

## **Performative 'Ethnicity'**

It is instructive to turn to another theorist, Judith Butler, and her distinction between performance and the performative. Butler (1993) defines the performative in the following way:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech... statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power... performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. (225)

In this case it is not a subject who acts (or 'represents' herself in the traditional humanist sense) but the discursive and reiterated performance which conveys power to a subject: "I can only say 'I' to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech... recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject." (225-6). Butler also distinguishes sharply between performance (more in Garber's sense) and performativity:

...performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer... what is "performed" works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. (234)

The 'Helen Demidenko Show' illustrates that ethnicity, conceived as minority or apprentice national subject-in-process, is always a performance and, significantly, that this performance is framed by a decades-long (in Australia, longer elsewhere) reception of such 'multicultural' texts and subjectivities. This gave 'Demidenko' the authority of not just a credible performance but of performativity.

Reinforcing her point concerning the link between the performative and speech acts which reinscribe 'the law', Judith Butler refers in her study to the famous cartoon of a nurse holding up a baby to its proud parents with the comment, "It's a lesbian!" (232). The 'joke' incorporates a number of elements: that this could be the first question asked about a child; that the information given in this case, concerning sexual preferences, is assigned the same importance as the sex of the child; that one can 'tell' merely by looking that a child contains the seeds of one sexual preference rather than another; that the doxa which blames mothers for the 'pathology' of lesbianism is suspended; and, perhaps most importantly, that the public expression or endorsement by someone invested with this authority decrees a certain kind of identity. The performative is confirmed in its authority by the iterability of the performance. "It's a boy/girl" confirms the law; "it's a lesbian/gay" may well disrupt the law, but can only do so as performance, as a joke. One cannot merely don the accoutrements of ethnicity, though this too has its place in these debates, but must, more pervasively, act out doxa, received wisdom as articulated in discourse and rendered prescriptive there. Althusser's notion of interpellation in which a subject (effect) is hailed into being by certain discourses or institutions is analogous here, and Butler draws upon this earlier work. Thus 'speaking as' can only be heard as 'authentic' in certain circumstances. In Australia, what is recognised as 'authentic' has in a sense been reduced to an 'identikit' of markers that we have been taught to recognise as 'ethnicity'.

The obligatory performances, in the more usual sense, which attend the promotion of a book

carry a further charge of the performative. The author is paraded as part of the context of the text (Oakley 1995). "It's an ethnic!" is elaborated as a mirror-doubling of author and text. Adherents of New Criticism in the debate tried to maintain that it was only the text they were dealing with, not the biographical context of the author nor the historical context of World War II or of contemporary Australia. At the same time, the judges who had awarded the novel the Miles Franklin award had justified their decision in part with the words that it represented a 'first-hand' account of immigrant history. So among other things, Helen Demidenko/Darville proved herself to be an extremely adroit reader of the general literary public's consumer habits. She gave them what they wanted and there is no doubt that in terms of market forces her book is a runaway bestseller, something harder to achieve in Australia, with its far more limited publishing industry, than elsewhere.

### **Backlash Scenarios**

But what are the further implications? For minority writers, including Indigenous writers, it has eroded even further any chance to be published and to be published in their variety in the immediate future. Any hint of 'ethnicity' will now be drowned in the raucous laughter which has already long attended attempts to legitimate other than the familiar British and Irish-derived versions of Australian writing. In Australian vernacular 'doing a demidenko' has already entered the vocabulary. This could be viewed as one of the charming habits of Australian humor (that nothing is taken too seriously), but it also has its disadvantages when one is arguing for cultural complexities. The Australian cultural critic Mackenzie Wark (1995), noted for his abrasive lambasting of traditional cultural pundits and genres, argued that one of the lessons learned from the affair was that the traditional literary establishment should be overhauled. I agree with him but suspect that he and I would replace it with quite different personnel. Amongst the more bizarre responses, for example, was the suggestion that the blame could be laid at the doors of English



departments for their irresponsible teaching of postmodernist ideas (Daniel 1995).

This backlash is likely to affect the structures which govern the public support for the arts in Australia. The much-vaunted principle of arm's length peer review hides very specific political agendas. Over the last decade funding bodies have attempted (albeit in very minor ways) to acknowledge the increasing diversity of Australian culture and such attempts have been met with overwhelming criticism from the established arts community (Gunew and Rizvi 1995). Attempts to redress the balance (e.g. at one stage 7% of Australia Council funding was tagged to go to 'multicultural arts' very broadly defined) have been countered by stories concerning pernicious social engineering and arguments that claiming a minority 'ethnicity' will get you prizes or that funding bodies will give you preferential treatment (Legge 1995a). Such views are a familiar part of a rhetorical reversal pattern that characterises the recent Political Correctness (PC) debates in which the mainstream cries victim and argues that those really discriminated against are white heterosexual males (Weir and Richer 1995). What might be a response to all this by those trying to argue a case for taking minority writing seriously and being alert to the importance of 'representation' both as depiction and delegation?

One solution is not to suppress these 'ethnic' histories or to ghettoise them as the foreign or the parasitic but to encourage more informed discussion, to proliferate the information concerning a wider European history as well as a current understanding of, for example, Asian contexts and histories. One of the outcomes of the Demidenko affair appears to be that the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organizations and the Council of Australian Jewry are planning a public forum which will give the wider community an opportunity to be informed about events hitherto considered 'un-Australian' (Editorial 1995).

This brings up the question of representation as delegation. While no writer either wishes to be

or can be described as being contained by a community, there is a sense that one might learn from the example of Aboriginal kinship networks. Here the community, partly based on a shared linguistic or more general cultural history, carries information about its members and what they are creatively generating. If funding bodies are seriously trying to encourage a wider range of artistic activities then it makes sense to include representatives from those diverse groups. From media reports one gathers that such potential conduits of 'ethnic' information did not participate in the judging panels. The judges assumed, in the usual way, that they were knowledgeable enough to evaluate the 'migrant experience' and of course in the vulgar sense that I've presented above, they were. The implications are also reinforced in relation to incorporating minority writings within the teaching of Australian literature so that they are read as complex texts and not exclusively as authentic histories of personal identity or of pathologised group identity, much less as surrogate cultural tours of exotic and foreign places outside the borders of the nation.

To return then to the Butler epigraph at the beginning of this essay, Helen Darville/Demidenko might be perceived as akin to Butler's heterosexual melancholic, grieving for the loss of, or foreclosure on, the homosexual. Within questions of ethnicity, the unperformable or opaque which 'Helen Demidenko' performs in Butler's sense of the performative could be construed as the dominant group's own disavowal, precisely, of ethnicity, for ethnicity, as we know, is not usually ascribed to those who come to Australia from either Britain or Ireland.

## Notes

My thanks to the following for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper: Richard Cavell, Margery Fee, Anna Gibbs, Efi Hatzimanolis, Susan Magarey, Fazal Rizvi, Leslie Roman, Susan Sheridan, Anna Yeatman and to Marian Boreland and Hazel Rowley for keeping me up to date with the media material.

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