What's Policy Got To Do With It? Cultural Policy And Forms Of Writing

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What connections are there between forms of writing and the policy domain? What does policy have to do with literature, and also with other forms of cultural composition? Two broad areas of response are possible. The first considers the kinds of funding of literature, classifications of film, and so on, which are guided by government or other organisational policies. These comprise what can be called external relations between policy and literature. When external relations are all that literature and policy are considered to have in common, it is because policy and literature are being seen as radically different creatures – that is, the one bureaucratically administrative and the other humanistically expressive – which meet unequally as the administrative (hopefully) enables and (inevitably) limits the expressive.

The second area of response comes from a different conception of the characteristics of policy and literature in which, as neighbours in the same street, rather than different orders of being, the relations they have are internal. This is the starting point for our argument that policy has a lot to do with literature and culture.

Conceptions of 'policy'

Neighbours in the same street? Certainly this is contrary to the impression given by a number of representative contributions to the often acrimonious debate waged over nearly a decade between two camps: those identifying with cultural criticism or critique (with its stewardship of literature and a broader aesthetic domain of potential liberation) and those articulating a new set of interests in cultural policy studies. As Tom O'Regan put it, for players on the pro-policy side 'there is something wrong at the heart of the whole cultural studies enterprise' (O'Regan 194). For Terry Threadgold, on the cultural studies side, the problem is with 'the suggestion [made by the pro-policy camp] that the moral enunciative position is an outmoded inheritance of English as a discipline and can ... be simply dispensed with' (Threadgold 173).

While O'Regan, Threadgold, Toby Miller and others have energetically charted what are alleged to be the cultural policy camp's mistaken caricatures of cultural critique – namely, that critique has had no means of engaging meaningfully with

policy and the socially formative aspect of culture – these writers have not been slow to draw their own caricatures of cultural policy studies. Thus O'Regan, playing the magisterial reconciler, 'helps' us to see that cultural policy studies understands policy as 'particular intellectual programs for machining the social [and as] *the structural engine room which powers everything else*' (emphasis added 199). This mistaken attribution of a conception of policy as a new, unified point of determination, inevitably 'machining' the social and populations, in one unresisting direction is compounded in O'Regan's distinction of *his* 'rhetorical' understanding of policy from the 'Bennett-Hunter position [which] foregrounds the propositional contents of policy as so many "rationalities"' (200), rationalities of governance which, in O'Regan's reading, are central to their functionalist view of policy.

If O'Regan calculates that such distinctions will help overcome an unnecessary 'divide' between the policy and critique positions, then he mistakes the extent to which his account perpetuates the divisions, in ever more refined formulations. It is not that there is anything wrong with O'Regan's rhetorical understanding of the policy process; quite the contrary. But its focus on the 'persuasive aspects of the policy process' (200) is certainly nothing to be distinguished from a sense of policies as governmental rationalities: it is rather *entailed* in the contingency and uncertainty that infuses – despite all persuasive appearances to the contrary! – the dispersed and diverse programs for shaping the 'mental and behavioural attributes of populations' (Mercer 72). We agree with O'Regan about needing to shift the binarism that has developed between 'policy' and 'critique,' but that won't be served by maintaining the fiction that cultural policy studies is guided by instrumental or functionalist views of policy, or of 'government.'

Instead, the cultural policy studies we had a role in establishing, and see continuing to develop, understands policies as the governing and jostling frameworks of assumptions and techniques which are historically and institutionally organised and which are what actors master, develop, alter and use to work up diverse domains of reality such that they are amenable to intervention and transformation. This is a picture of policies as the work of varied and non-unified actors and their acquired capacities; of the shaping up of objectives as internal to policies, rather than instrumentally imposed from outside by 'the State'; of an array of institutional and organisational policies; of unpredicted as well as calculated outcomes. All of these things are what O'Regan misses in his caricature of the (spuriously conflated) 'Bennett-Hunter' position as determinist; a position made to stand for the role of policy in the government of populations.

Our point is that it is quite consistent to be concerned with the role of policies in the governance of populations – a 'governing' which is a chancy and contingent business, shot through with the multiple and contesting objectives and rationalities of a diversity of institutions and actors – *and* to be concerned with the rhetorical aspect of policies. For us it is one and the same thing. It is through the persuasion of the various constituencies of particular policies to the specific objectives internal to the policies – the shaping of the dispositions and of the rationalities of populations – that policies help constitute social relations and realities.

And this is where 'policy' and 'literature' are neighbours in the same street. Both engage, in the different domains of the administrative and the fictional, in a rhetorical appeal to particular readers, seeking to persuade them, through different rhetorical techniques, of the explicit or implicit propositions they set out; seeking to move their audiences to particular forms of action, compliance, or simply imagining of the world. While the 'imagining' might most obviously seem to be the outcome of a literary persuasion, the overlap is caught by one policy-maker's recent reflection that '[t]he era's over, only in the sense the real policy – the sense of imagination it all had – is gone' (Keating in Robinson 25). We turn now to one of those appeals to action, compliance and imagining.

Cultural Policy: *Creative Nation*

In the midst of wedge politics, we want to consider a cultural policy statement of not quite four years ago, *Creative Nation,* which spoke a different politics of inclusion (See Pearson). *Creative Nation* spoke, amongst other things, of how 'the meeting of imported and home-grown cultures has massively enriched us' and of 'the culture and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians ... as having become an essential element of *Australian*identity, a vital expression of who we *all* are.' The policy document said these things in stipulating the significance of culture: 'it is the name we go by, the house in which we live' (5).

This was a policy statement that was also noteworthy because of its ambit. It represented the first attempt at a *national* and *comprehensive*cultural policy in Australia. Through its explicit engagement with new communications technologies it was involved in enabling new kinds of cultural futures: it insistently pulled together the arts (literature, the performing arts, painting, sculpture and film) – traditionally dealt with through policies of subvention or input mechanisms – with the communications industries (television, radio, multimedia), traditionally dealt with through policies regulating distribution or output.

Comprehensive and coordinating, *Creative Nation* attracted considerable negative press, amongst which were notable criticisms from those concerned with a Government interfering with what allegedly should be an autonomous sphere of creativity, and those concerned with the artefacts of new communications technologies such as CD-ROMs squeezing out funding for and cultural emphasis on literature and other arts.

Another point worthy of remark is the way *Creative Nation* with its ambitious, comprehensive character could be described as governmental in objective. 'The ultimate aim of this cultural policy is to enrich the people of Australia' (5). As the reference to the productively ambiguous 'enrichment' of the population registers, the ends of the policy are both the prosperity and the happiness of the Australian people. In another paragraph, the cultural policy is presented as also 'essential to the *health* of society.' And again, 'the ultimate aim of this cultural policy is to increase the comfort and enjoyment of Australian life. It is to heighten our experi-

ence and add to our security and well-being' (7). *Creative Nation* explicitly states that it is a *social policy* as well as a *cultural policy* and an *economic policy*.

This was, arguably, good news for those interested in culture in Australia in that it represented a high-level recognition of its centrality to national life. However, the associated aspect of this – and going to the core of its governmental, constitutive character – was that what was involved was not simply overdue recognition of a self-evident truth but a concerted shaping and remaking of culture *as* centre-stage. Hence the refashioning of the Australia Council, making it an agency responsible for various activities envisaged as necessary for overall cultural development; not just funding of individual writers and groups of artists, but audience formation, and the *distribution* of cultural products, and international cultural marketing. The Australia Council was charged with facilitating *formative* cultural activity, or to put it another way, to help connect up tutelary apparatuses, or what the document calls the 'parallel education system ... libraries, museums, historical societies, open learning and continuing education agencies, film and television and the like' (14).

It was this aspect of the governmental aims of *Creative Nation* that earned its reception as 'peculiar social engineering' (Monks 16). This indicative response to *Creative Nation* stages again the established view that policy and the planning it entails is necessarily social control; that policy and the public, accountable mechanisms it presumes – if not always lives up to – can properly have only an external, arms-length relation to the creative activity of writing.

Departing from this view, we wish to consider briefly the significance of the rhetorical propositions *Creative Nation* put, with a lot of fanfare, in the public domains of news, current affairs, arts and cultural commentary (Greenfield and Williams). While we acknowledge that a policy statement and its media coverage is not the same thing as a policy program and its implementation, (See Craik 203 and Armstrong) neither should it be dismissed as 'mere rhetoric,' an epiphenomenal flourish. The point can be made by tracing the fate of *Creative Nation* and associated Labor cultural policy initiatives under the Howard Coalition Government, because, as Terry Flew has noted, while many of the institutional arrangements and policy actions have been maintained under the Coalition policy programs, what has occurred is 'a substantial shift [in discursive terms], with the Coalition being strongly opposed to the notion of cultural policy being used as an instrument for the shaping of national identity' (Flew, 'Cultural Regulation' 75). Gone is the yoking of government facilitated cultural activity to 'enlarging and enhancing our national life' (Keating 6).

In his later consideration of the 1997 Goldsworthy Report into information policy commissioned by the Coalition, Flew focuses on the consequence of this shift in the rhetoric within which information policy objectives have been formulated and pursued. The Report marks 'an approach to Australian information policy which is ultimately incoherent, and a policy dead-end' (Flew, 'The Goldsworthy Report' 19), because it decides on a narrow technology-driven focus: 'Its supply-side economic nationalism is unpersuasive to globally oriented industry interests and to neo-liberal policy communities and advocates.' And he continues,

> It is also unlikely to attract broad community support ... because, among other reasons, it is not clear what a program of tax incentives and subsidies to multinational ICT investors would actually offer to improve the health, welfare and happiness of the community. (19)

In other words, the likely success of implementing policy programs deriving from the Goldsworthy Report can be, in part, linked directly to its rhetoric, and its abandonment of the rhetoric of *Creative Nation* and of the adjacent 1995 Broadband Services Expert Group Report, with their emphases on broader economic, social and cultural issues. Here is an understanding of rhetoric and the persuasion of audiences as integral to the substance of policy, just as much as it is to the composition of literature.

Intersections

Creative Nation's socially inclusive rhetoric – its concern with the health, welfare and happiness of a community conceived as multicultural and diverse – mattered. It also mattered when it was deployed in the literary field by, amongst others, Nicholas Jose in *The Custodians* and Stephen Muecke in *No Road*. These two books can, arguably, be located within the same cultural ecology as *Creative Nation*, though differently located, and resisting certain of the entrepreneurial features of this ecology. This was a cultural ecology most easily referenced by Keating/Watson notions of a 'postmodern republic' (James); a diffused or decentred but determined nationalist position mounted on conditions of exportability and tolerance of external influences and pressures.

We could note that these sorts of intersections between literary and policy domains aren't new. As Gough Whitlam's Introduction and Frank Hardy's Epilogue to the reissue of Hardy's 1968 book *The Unlucky Australians* registers, the diverse range of writings for various newspapers and other places – from which Hardy compiled the documentary-autobiographical book – made a major contribution to the 1967 Referendum on Aborigines as part of the Australian population. (See also Horne). Similarly, Hardy's *The Obsession of Oscar Oswald* and the pseudonymous Oscar's *Warrant of Distress* relayed knowledges about the Australian finance sector, and in particular consumer credit and defaults on payment, to other and wider audiences than those for the formal policy deliberations on these issues of the 1981 Campbell Inquiry and the February 1984 Martin Committee of Review. *The Obsession of Oscar Oswald* and *Warrant of Distress*, and allusions to these texts, played a prominent part in the 1980s inner-city Melbourne campaign around the problems arising from consumer indebtedness and the harassment of debtors, a campaign contributing to a specific socio-legal outcome in new consumer laws and the setting up of State Credit Tribunals (Williams 654–86).

Our interest in all of these literary texts, within and through their aesthetic pleasures and engagements, is how they play a part in social organisation. They do this

by relaying particular knowledges and propositions circulating in non-literary domains and providing them with a wider audience. In doing so, these forms of writing provide the materials with which particular populations acquire or consolidate the rationalities, or discursive means, that individuals use to formulate their opinions and their interests and to guide their conduct. This is a post-representational view of the relations between literature and social realities (Hunter). Accordingly, our description and analysis of *The Custodians* and *No Road* find their significance in the connections between these books and forms of 'writing' in other media domains, trace some of these, and catalogue the kind of propositions or materials to which they give a currency adjoining policy, parliamentary, and journalistic fields.

The Custodians and No Road

In *The Custodians*, Jose uses a disparate array of characters who travel from Adelaide to other parts of the country and beyond, but with a particular narrative inscription in the Willandra Lakes region and an Aboriginal burial ground there. The story of relations developed, complexified and remade between the characters is – in the novel's conclusion – an inversion of a Forsteresque sadness about the impossibility of connection. Not only do the characters connect in personal relationship – indigenous with non-indigenous, Catholic humanist with Protestant administrator, stolen generation with lost family – but by the end of the novel the trope of speeding car travel across inhospitable and barren terrain has been replaced by connection with the land and with its history:

> ... seeing the place truly at last. The past in the present, dark behind the light, and the prospect of a further light beyond that darkness. Himself. This continent. (474)

It is a connection that extends the nation beyond itself, or rather proposes a porous and hybrid nation that echoes the idea of a postmodern nation-state:

> How else could he explain his feeling that this country, separate from time immemorial, unique in all its forms, was connected in barely known ways with other continents and other worlds, as if here history was joined in one creation with all that lay beyond? (480)

In Muecke's *No Road* (1997), there is a similar preoccupation with the form that movement across the land can take, and with the depredations wrought on both apprehensions of history and on land tenure in Australia. Here the travel is less linear, as Muecke pursues the ethical stance of ficto-critical non-touristic accounts. New ways of connecting with the land – a light touch – mean a break with identitarian obsessions:

> 'What would it be like if I wasn't here?' the post-tourist might ask ...
> Instead of imagining myself 'at one' with a place, a plodding spirituality,
> might I not just imagine that I'm already gone – that much *will* be cer-
> tain – and in this lightness lift ever so slightly off the ground so that
> objects are only faintly touched, real seeing is in the glimpse, sounds
> reduce to a whisper ... (135)

This more gnomic form of connection is necessarily about new ways of making community in Australia:

> Opposite to the will to self-protection, xenophobia disguised as ethics of
> the self, is the will to *community formation* characterised by a way of talk-
> ing ... Something new begins when Australians, strangers, begin to ac-
> cept their implication in a network of indigenous rights and obligations,
> an implication that any fair person can accept. Such connections are a
> new way of *reasoning*. The one who *connects* in this way commits himself
> to a community, commits himself to both the indigenous and the broader
> community. (184–5)

In arguing for such community formation, *No Road* is somewhat like a 1990s version of Hardy's non-touristic work *The Unlucky Australians*.

A number of common topics are treated in *The Custodians* and *No Road*: history/the past; policy/politics/the governmental; travel/traversal/boundaries/roads; custodianship and land. It is in both their working within and explicit addressing of these topics that the books contribute to the socially inclusive cultural ecology discussed above. Where these topics throw up such issues as land rights or geno-cide, it's important to note that neither book licences itself to speak for or on behalf of indigenous people, mindful, it seems, that no non-indigenous person can take that role unless specifically delegated. Rather a range of differently indigenous and non-indigenous characters and voices in the books speak *with* each other.

History/the Past

In Australia over at least the past four years there has been a major debate over what counts as Australian history; what's to be emphasised, what's to be valued, what's to be marginalised or excluded (See McQueen). In their different ways these two books, particularly Jose's, challenge the reactionary emphasis of this debate, a debate orchestrated at the highest government levels, and propositions from which have massively informed policy positions on such social groups as Aborigines, women, migrants, and working people in general. An indicative quotation from Jose, reminiscent of Benjamin's angel of history, insists on the role of the past in people's making of their futures:

'No going back,' Alex declared, 'but we take it with us. The pressure of what we leave behind is always against us. That's what the past is. It's the resistance. The friction. It's what is always pushing us backwards.' (133–4)

Policy/Politics/the Governmental

Both *The Custodians* and *No Road* propose the intertwined themes of policy, politics and the governmental as something for readers to be interested in. They invite readers to see them as bound up in people's everyday lives rather than as external, remote, non-human, and despicable. *The Custodians* does this through its repeated yoking of narrative cause and effect to specific policies (eg, of dispossession and of genocide, 183, 188) and through its exploration of the nature of politics and of administration through the characters of Alex, the Federal bureaucrat and Cleve, the Aboriginal welfare worker. *No Road* accomplishes this too through its occasional but crucial arguments about the significance of Mabo (eg, 226–9) and through its musings on the status of politics.

Travel and Custodianship and the Land

Embedded in the debate over what counts as Australian history is the local geo-politics of different ways of seeing the land called Australia. Muecke gives an example from his Aboriginal friend Paddy Roe to indicate different groups' competing orientations in space or time.

These books effectively question prevailing notions of land tenure and traversal which have as virtually their only goal exploitation for corporate profit; as their only rationale a capitalist aesthetics of extraction and contemplation. The earlier quotation from *No Road* about a 'light touch' on the land registers one of the preoccupations of that book, and the argument Muecke makes about the need for and redemptive character of changing white relations to the land is gently explicit: 'To leave the bitumen, to leave the roads and finally to get lost and maybe to find a way again' (133).

Similarly, in *The Custodians,* negotiation over land is central to the narrative causality that separates, but finally and more decisively, connects characters. A specific site recurs, an area from 'the Murray to the Darling' (270) which is layered over with different associations, significance and claims. To the Aborigines it is Lake Moorna, an indigenous burial ground. To Elspeth and her pastoralist parents it is Whitepeeper, a vast and now struggling station and 'inalienable Masterman land' (271). To curious travellers, and in the exoticism of the tourist signage, it is the 'Walls of China,' a unique geological formation which helps summon up, as the narrative concludes' a visiting Chinese delegation calculating future emigration policy. In *The Custodians* the need for and redemptive nature of changing white relations to the land is pressed home:

It was farewell to her [Elspeth's] old life and old arrangements in which she was a representative of her family, her class, a line of ancestors who were greedy, oppressive ghosts. She was the one who had toppled their world. Not for the sake of destruction, but to conserve even more important things. (482–3)

Relays

In tracing the circulation of the arguments already mentioned and of some more specific but related arguments there remains space for noting only some of the relays between *The Custodians* and other forms of writing.

1. Jose's 'Author's Note' specifies *The Custodians'* imaginative relaying of the disturbing and ghastly knowledges in the *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Regional Report of Inquiry in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania* (1991) and the *Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Malcolm Charles Smith* (1991), and the documentary *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?* (1992). These find their wrenching rhetorical force for readers in the characterisation of Danny and in his tragic end.

2. The history of Danny and his brother Cleve presents the novel's readership with the same 'well-intentioned' government policy of stealing children and its outcomes as *Bringing them back home* (AGPS), and which circulates too, now, in *the stolen children* edited by Carmel Bird. Jose cites *The Lost Children* (1989), edited by Coral Edwards and Peter Read.

3. The arguments about the foundations of white settlement that Jose presents are the same which confronted television viewers of the documentary series *Frontier* (ABC 1997), and in more melodramatic and entertaining ways viewers of the 1998 mini-series *Kings in Grass Castles*.

4. *The Custodians'* gravitational centre – the South Australia–New South Wales–Victoria border country and Lake Moorna – stages again a story audiences may have heard on news radio, watched on current affairs television, or read in the papers. This is the story of Lake Victoria, a burial site newly available through drainage (See McKenzie). Thus does social realist writing gain its plausibility in the repetitions and restagings of available stories.

5. The restitution enabled by the slowly acquired understanding and subsequent conduct of the *The Custodians'* grazier character Elspeth, in ceding rights at Whitepeeper to the Aboriginal custodians of Lake Moorna, echoes the encouraging story of Camilla Cowley ('A Pastoralist speaks out'), the white pastoralist whose disposition to the Wik legislation was decisively altered in negotiating with the

Gungarri people and meeting, in particular, Ethel Munn and her husband Gordon, such that her co-appearance with Gladys Tybingoompa at the presentation of the Australians for Native Title petition (12 October 1997), has become one of a number of media stories of 'reconciliation.'

As fiction, *The Custodians* does not footnote its relays. On the other hand, *No Road's* relays are conspicuously signalled: the words of Abdelkarim from Morocco, of Paddy Roe from Broome, of 'T' from Perth and then Newtown, of Roland Barthes from Paris and Algiers, of Trinh T Minh Ha, and Derrida, and Marcia Langton, and Deborah Bird Rose, Meaghan Morris, and Katherine Susannah Prichard, and so on. *No Road* is a new presentation of knowledges available to a particular kind of readership in the library of theory and scholarship.

Conclusion

The point? A small one, but important if we are to make a clear-eyed assessment of the significance and role of literature. This novel and this ficto-criticism find their role within the circulation of argument, speaking to those who will hear their particular rhetorical address, and entertain their propositions. These books are two elements in a literary apparatus which does not picture Australia in the 1990s but deploys rationalities in the attempted (and disparately goal-driven) governance of populations, the quiet transforming of social life through appeal to audiences who, in their pleasurable solitary reading, may learn and acquire ways of assessing situations beyond their aesthetic pursuits: in this, these books share something with the formal policy documents we are more accustomed to hearing about in this role of social persuader of conduct. And our argument has been that *The Custodians*, *No Road,* and *Creative Nation* also share a particular kind of contribution to our resources for citizenship in this country.

The last word should go to Jose, whose own conclusion offers a way past Xavier Herbert's lament – for each and all of us – 'poor fellow my country':

> All he [Cleve] could do now was remember and work so that the denial of an ordinary human life to Danny was not inflicted on any more of their people. He needed time to feel the weight of the great act of restitution that must be made, its justice and rightness and irreversibility. What further gains would be achieved were up to the likes of him. (486)

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