A Scholarly Affair

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Writing that matters: Positioning cultural studies and criticality in the 'audit age'

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Abstract: Research in the humanities has variously received criticism for its obtuse and inaccessible language (Reizs 2010), benign claims for action (Lather 2007) and authorial positionality (Jameson 1990, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Perhaps worst amongst these criticisms is that scholarly, academic work is irrelevant to the world outside of academe. With recent conceptual developments in the way that research, particularly naturalistic, humanist, qualitative research is undertaken and generated (Denzin and Lincoln), cultural studies is (and has been) positioned to lay bare the operations by which humanities research is both made and consumed. In this paper, an approach to cultural studies research that attempts to re-engage the 'ordinary' (that original site of investigation for cultural studies scholars) for the 'ordinary' by making a case for critical, de-centred accounts of the everyday will be presented. Such an approach seeks to remove the institutionalised nature of knowledge construction through the deployment of a 'critical aesthetic' mobilised by the 'citizen-as-critic'. In citing examples from the author's own fieldwork and significant contributions from the recent literature, a renewed view of how cultural studies research might be considered, undertaken and mobilised beyond the academy will be provided. This paper will also make a claim for how emancipatory imperatives, so often promised in humanist academic writing, must be realised in those communities and settings from which research is generated and moves on to suggest, within a discussion of a critical aesthetic, the operations of a research 'mentality' that goes both beyond and between institutionalised research agendas.

What follows is a cautionary tale. Contained here is a statement—a call to action of sorts—for academics and those engaged in the writing of scholarly works that report on our world. This is a paper that, whilst perhaps short on analytic depth, hopes to provoke the re-appraisal of what it is we do as academics, and how it is our work comes to mean in an increasingly bureaucratised and corporatised university sector.

I want to begin by relaying an anecdote of a life-altering experience. Early one morning as I walked from my motel to a University I was working at whilst on a visiting scholar appointment late in 2009, I cast my gaze toward the glass front of an empty store and the vandalised pronouncements it contained. For that moment, I was stopped dead in my tracks. My career flashed before my eyes. Here I was, a previously brash young academic, now with ego dashed and shattered broken on the ground before me. A statement so simple, yet powerful, that it made those thousands of words of scholarly output I worked so hard to produce look meaningless (Figure 1).

What prompted this realisation was a simple piece of vandalism (Figure 2), albeit an entirely intentioned and cleverly contemplated *détournement*, situated above one of those ubiquitous no-smoking signs so often seen at the entrance of buildings. Here the simple word 'bullshit', cleverly situated, spoke to a larger audience than any article I could produce and provided a glimpse of an underlying social critique and suggestion for living pasted by an unknown and

unnamed activist. I was horrified. Those precious A* ranked journal articles[1] I worked so hard to produce counted for little in front of this swear-word genius.
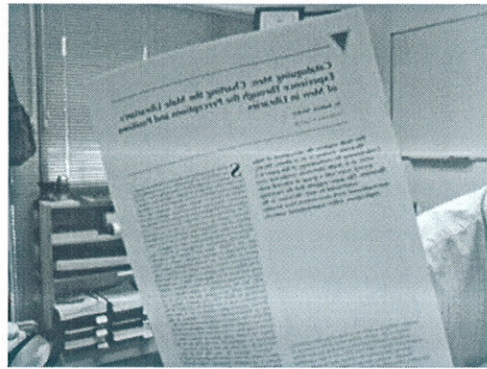

Figure 1: One work of social commentary. Photo: Andrew Hickey.

Figure 2: Another, arguably more influential, work of social commentary.
Photo: Andrew Hickey.

It was from this point on (but now that I think about it, I see roots for these concerns operating in my scholarship from sometime earlier) that I realised that I couldn't simply exist as an academic, content to produce a couple of articles a year—articles that may well maintain my career, but do little else. The role of the academic should be too important for just this. Like so many others who enter the humanities, what I wanted to achieve as an academic and what I wanted to do as a cultural studies scholar was have some positive effect on the world; to alter things for the better through critique and exposure of social practices that aren't right (as academics, we have an obligation to the world). It occurred to me that writing my articles and labouring away on erudite works that largely weren't going to be read, at least by those people for whom I hoped this work would matter, was a largely pointless endeavour, but one actively encouraged by the Universities in which we mostly do our work, and the policies and practices that arbitrate how it is we do it. Beyond meeting performance review processes and research output targets, what does our work do? Who would read my work, and more importantly as Patti Lather cogently notes 'who is going to get emancipated here'? (2007: 50)

I wish to present what I think is a fairly straightforward proposition in this paper. That is, that the conceptualisation of the results and outcomes of academic work require reconfiguration in the minds of scholars and must look beyond existing points of academic success as markers of

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[1] As per the ranking system currently applied in Australian Universities following the Federal Government's '*Excellence in Research Australia*' initiative.

'good academic work'. I argue that it should not be the case that a journal publication (or for that matter, any publication) be seen as the result of social research, nor that it be considered anywhere near enough. Something more engaging and directed to the communities with whom we do our work must also be ensured.

Noises from the academy

I'm not alone, of course, in drawing a critique of the role of academic work. Beyond those well worn, populist criticisms of the 'ivory tower' exclusionism and the inaccessibility academic pursuits (particularly in the humanities) are often lumped with, two recent items from the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, stand as examples:

- Leeds University, as reported by Newman (2010), has recently implored of its staff to write more 'humanly', with less technical jargon and a focus on humour and wit. The point here is to connect with a reading public who, it is claimed, are unable to comprehend current academic writing.

- Similarly, Reisz (2010) reports concerns regarding the delusional self-importance of much academic writing and the rhetorical hurdles that are put in the way of otherwise straightforward ideas.

These concerns are picked up also in Rowe and Brass' (2008) survey of the 'uses of academic knowledge'. As they note:

> There is a pattern of criticism in the media and public sphere of universities for being 'out of touch', disconnected from the real world, outside the ivory tower, complacently and indulgently oblivious to 'ordinary people's' needs and priorities. (677)

Again, these views are far from alone. 'Academic bashing' is a largely popular pastime for the media and some quarters of the community—particularly in some of the more anti-intellectual aspects of Australian society (eg, the conservatively laden sections of talk-back radio and print media for instance). Even amongst ourselves, we argue as to the accessibility and arcane nature of our work. In the well-publicised debate between (then) Monash University's Peter Gronn and Peter McLaren, following Gronn's review of McLaren's seminal work *Schooling as Ritual Performance*, McLaren responded to Gronn's claims for undue complexity and 'pretentious apocalyptic socio-babble' (1988: 313) by making the point that perhaps complex ideas and new terrains of knowledge require complex language. His defence is an appealing one for academics partial to the turn of a phrase—that indeed we should sometimes expect language to be difficult and that perhaps some intellectual labour is required on behalf of the reader in comprehending these works (as a Literature and History graduate, I wholeheartedly support this view and wish that some of my students would just knuckle down and read with intent like in the good old days when I was a student!).

What all of this points to is the existence, in the public imagination at the very least, of two forms of writing. On the one side is that accused of being highly technical, jargonistic, academic and purportedly 'useless' to anyone but an academic, and on the other, a softer, simpler community oriented language of the 'everyday'. This is a compelling situation— particularly in terms of a public disconnected with the work of academics; a public that also happens to be suspicious of the importance and relevance of some of the work they do (again, especially in the humanities). The problem here is one of how we as academics get the

message across and the manner by which we approach and connect with those communities we do our work on behalf of.

Realisations of a scholar

So what must we do as academics? I want to introduce and build upon what I think is a seminal idea developed in part by, as it turns out, a colleague of mine from the University of Southern Queensland. In explaining the practices and behaviours 'resistant' classroom teachers within the institutionalised world of schooling, Danaher, Coombs, Simpson, Harreveld and Danaher (2002) coined the term 'double-agent' to explain the way that these teachers performed their work across two realms of practice—that of the formalised bureaucracy and that of the real work of teaching at the coal face. Often times these two realms did not align and resulted in resistant activity by teachers who had identified alternative goals for their students as compared to those mandated by 'the system'.

I want to apply a variation of this idea to the work of academics and pose some thoughts on how this might be done. But first of all, it is necessary to understand the realities within which we work. We do need to take account of the structural conditions that most academics in the humanities in Australia have come to expect as being normal—that is, such wonders as tight budgetary constraints, increased workloads, administrative reporting, benchmarking and quality assurance accounting. Unfortunately, it seems that these things and more structural shifts in the way academics work (mandated by innovations such as *Excellence in Research Australia* ranking process and the unyielding corporatisation of the University sector[2]) will remain for some time. Whilst it is of course vital that we actively critique these changes to our work and question the underlying motives they carry—neo-liberalising motives that result in increased reporting and surveillance of academics through accounting 'busy work' and the homogenisation of locations in which to publish—we must also be pragmatic, on a day-to-day basis, and find ways to work within the system as it affects us in doing the sort of work we want to do. Here, a 'double agency' that allows us to quite simply maintain employment but also do the work we need to do (that is, socially just and meaningful work centred in those communities with whom we work) is the goal. We should seek to provide ourselves with space to critique and respond to the transformation of the University at the same time we retain as sacred an autonomy to work with community.

The role of cultural studies

The dynamics of the 'scholarly affair' in the context of this new audit culture in Australian Universities (and those in most parts of Western world) have changed. What once used to be a profession of considerable autonomy and public respect has been scrutinised[3] to the point that the life of an academic is now as much about record keeping and justifying 'outputs' as it is about producing scholarly works. Our teaching, research and engagement with communities are carefully accounted for via institutional and national regulatory agencies, with this new climate theorised by scholars including Strathern (2000) and Shore (2008). As Shore notes:

The economic imperatives of neoliberalism combined with the technologies of New Public Management have wrought profound changes in the organization of the workplace in many contemporary capitalist societies. Calculative practices including `performance indicators' and `benchmarking' are increasingly being used to measure and reform public sector organizations

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[2] Such as that noted recently by University of Queensland Vice-Chancellor Paul Greenfield, in Trenwith (2010). Further concerns are raised by Shor in his seminal article, '*Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance*' (2008).
[3] With this scrutiny motivated by mistrust in what it is academics are seen to be doing.

and improve the productivity and conduct of individuals across a range of professions. These processes have resulted in the development of an increasingly pervasive `audit culture', one that derives its legitimacy from its claims to enhance transparency and accountability. (2008:278)

It is no different for the University, argues Shore. Similarly, eminent sociologist and cultural critic Raewyn Connell notes of the current climate and *Excellence in Research Australia* initiative specifically:

> It's a technique intended to help ration the inadequate resources for research available in Australia, but on the evidence so far, the cure is far worse than the disease. (2010:20).

This is the terrain upon which we work. As publicly visible 'cultural workers' who draw on public funds and are rarely seen to be able to commercialise our work (perhaps unlike our fellow travelers from faculties of engineering or business), we find ourselves open to public critique voiced from a perspective of neo-liberal accountability; 'how are you contributing, and why should you continue to be funded' goes the mantra[4]. It is within this context that we must reconcile our purposes as academics interested in making the world a more inclusive and egalitatrian place. To seek that space we require, we must look at what is available to us and work to protect and maximise those opportunities to keep doing the sort of work that matters.

The great advantage and privilege of Cultural Studies is in what it allows us to explore. Williams (1989) and Hogart (1957, 2003) both noted that we should focus our attention on the everyday by tapping into those life patterns and operations of culture that shape what it is people do. This is the first key point to take on board in light of those criticisms of academic work I identified above: cultural studies allows inquiry into everyday culture and provides direct access to people and the things they do. This is important, because if there is an indeed a gulf between what it is we as academics do and what it is 'the public'[5] know, it is upon this terrain that we might reinvigorate the role that academic work plays in public life.

Secondly, it is from this engagement with the everyday and the fluency cultural studies practitioners must have with culture and its people that mediations between the academy and community might occur. We stand on the cusp of these two worlds—between the institution that employs us and those communities with whom we undertake research and engage in teaching—and are positioned beautifully to function as interlocutors for each. This is the point from which we must conduct our work as 'double agents'. We must articulate with both and be fluent for each in having our work mean something.

What I am arguing for is the breaking of the format for conducting academic work that spins around in its own world of self-reporting and self-affirmation. We must move outside of these formulated formats of producing academic work (such as the journal article) that sees the 'reportable output' as the end in itself. If we are serious about fulfilling the responsibility of the positions we hold as academics, and about doing something positive with those people we spend time developing our ideas (that is, our research participants and the communities in which we work) we must assume the role of double-agent and proceed to co-exist between the

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[4] A 'contribution', of course, being measured via largely economic determinants.

[5] I want to stress that homogenising terms such as 'the public' are largely aberrations. In no way do I want to suggest that some self-aware collective known as 'the public' exists, except in terms of how this might be conceptualised and framed by institutions such as the media. What I do want to suggest here is that academics and academic work has been cast in certain ways, and it is in terms of that work we do with those communities we are connected with that these impressions might change.

positions of academic privilege we hold and that of the cultural interlocutor who hopes for positive intervention in those sites we research.

There is value in maintaining and growing an academic position—I do not wish to suggest otherwise. But I argue that the sorts of moves we see being thrust upon academia, moves that are arguably predicated on rationalist approaches to make economically 'viable' the work we do, must be clearly recognized and seen for what they are. For instance, I become somewhat depressed when I hear new academics talking about the number of 'A' rank articles they have published or the amount of funding they have received (or are aspiring to) as if this is the end in itself. The risk is that the purpose of social research—that of contributing to the betterment of the communities with whom we work as social researchers—loses its intent. We must be more than criteria checkers and points gatherers, and to do this we must conceptualise our work primarily according to how it will benefit community; and only worry about completing 'reports' after this is achieved. It is possible to do meaningful work and meet the requirements of those reporting structures we work against. It is the priority that is given to each that matters.

Where to from here?

Where does this leave us? I argue that the work we undertake as Cultural Studies scholars must recall those original intentions our founding theorists established; such things as criticality, concerns for social justice and concerns for local practices. With the ethics that these intentions suggest, we must work to not only expose those situations and practices that marginalise, but also work to do what Paulo Freire (1972) refers to as conscientisation; to provoke in those people we encounter a criticality for reading the world. This might be as much focused on our colleagues and management structures as it is with those members of community we encounter. This is how we must approach the world—as active agents and public intellectuals (in the tradition of Edward Said and Henry Giroux for example) seeking to disrupt marginalising practices and set 'right' what is currently not so. It isn't enough to simply report; we must seek to make things better.

The point of this is to more genuinely aspire to make the sort of world we would like to see; to not rest comfortably once the publication has been accepted, but to actively work at making the world a more participatory and inclusive place by provoking a 'critical aesthetic' in those people we encounter when undertaking our work. In short, the products of our academic labours must carry an ethical purpose and seek to do some good beyond just maintaining our employment. What is the point of this work otherwise

On this point, I say this: make sure your academic labours mean something. They must go beyond simply furnishing a career and must prompt some move towards positive social change. To do this, seek inspiration in those original ethical concerns from cultural studies' seminal works and founding theorists and work between those two zones that cultural studies is well positioned to articulate—the institution of the academy and community. How this is done might take all manner of forms, but the measure of good academic work must be in the effect it yields in communities; not in reporting. If reports and tallies of journal articles take precedence, the purpose of our work is lost. Work that seeks to open dialogues, engage opinion and generate democratic participation in the world is the goal.