

Multiple Ethnicity Disorders: Demidenko and the cult of ethnicity

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by Efi Hatzimanolis

A couple of years ago, before Demidenko, in a paper entitled 'Ethnic Double Agents', I analysed the manner in which some second generation immigrant women's writing in Australia produces an ironic consent to speak as such by incorporating prevalent ethnic stereotypes. Briefly put, I examined the texts in terms of their ironically excessive gratitude and their consent to identify with the assimilationist narratives which repress immigrant experiences and history in terms of the migrant success story. I suggested that the 'migrant success story' was in the process of being replaced by the 'second generation immigrant *success* story', through an ironically agonistic narrative about emulation and self-improvement, in which 'success' is superseded by representations of excess. These representations include metaphors of (first generation) immigrants' bodies ('the parents') as abject, ethnic remains which irrepressibly return to contaminate the relationship between host and guest. Similarly, this paper will return to the question of the repression of ethnic bodies in its focus on the work of irony (and the repression of irony) in dominant readings of ethnicity.

In my earlier essay, I argued that

in speaking as ethnic, the texts intervened in the relations of reciprocity characteristic of institutional desires for the authentic ethnic voice in which the minority ethnic woman is positioned to recount a tale of victimage, and then to be grateful for the opportunity to speak for herself. In other words, the demand that she speak for herself is all too often little more than the insidious repositioning of

minority women through a politics of inclusivity, to speak as themselves, that is, to conform to and satisfy paternalistic institutional desires for an authentic other (Hatzimanolis 1995: 43).

The slippage between speaking for yourself and speaking as yourself is a fraught one for many ethnic writers. However, it has also been a highly productive point of departure for a number of immigrant women writers, one of the most notable being Ania Walwicz, whose ironic play with ethnic stereotypes functions in part as a sophisticated critique of the sort of inclusivity which official multicultural rhetoric generally signifies. In Australia, official multicultural rhetoric about cultural diversity and pluralism has overwhelmingly displaced questions of access, focusing narrowly instead on tokenistic ethnic success stories. And this brings me to Demidenko/Darville and the manner in which she represents many of the tensions and anxieties around questions of ethnicity, the visibility of ethnic bodies and the marginalization of ethnic writing. Above all, and most disturbingly for me, Demidenko/Darville, at the time of winning the Miles Franklin Award had become the vision splendid of official multiculturalism. It was her visibility as ethnic, established in particular through the fetishization of certain ostensibly ethnic signifiers such as the embroidered peasant blouse described as the Ukrainian national costume, that highlighted for me the manner in which journalistic and literary discourses (amongst others) persist in viewing ethnicity in terms of stereotypes, and then in a type of self-fulfilling and self-regarding prophetic mode reward themselves in (mis)recognising their idea of ethnicity. In this sense, the numerous and prestigious awards which Demidenko collected for her novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* function in self-congratulatory and self-confirming ways for Australian literary communities.

In her performance as Demidenko, Darville, without any hint of the sort of irony I described above, plugged into some of the crudest and most prevalent stereotypes of ethnicity and ethnic writing. She thus fulfilled many of those institutional desires expressed through demands for tropes of authenticity and otherness. Demidenko embodied the tropes not only through the pretty peasant blouses, but also through her characterisations of her Ukrainian father as a vodka drinking illiterate peasant and Valiant driver (Heywood 1995: 40; Pottinger 1995: 38). I might add that the Valiant (complete with fluffy dice) is a 'classic' stereotype straight out of 'Kingswood country'. It is a significant stereotype here because it is usually reserved for Southern Europeans; not that Darville erred in using it. If anything, her use reveals the extent to which the category 'ethnic' refers to a lumpen group in which ethnics are interchangeable; and this perception seems to be borne out by Darville's other reported ethnic incarnations, namely Czech and French.

However, unlike most second generation immigrant writers who use these signifiers of ethnicity, Demidenko did not recognise the bitter ironies at the heart of institutional (mis)recognitions of ethnicity, ironies which bespeak the exclusion of ethnic writers from definitions of the literary and categories of authorship, because their work is deemed to be too ethnic, and because questions of ethnic subjectivity are deemed to be irrelevant to categories of literary excellence.

In theorising the relations between ethnicity and performance, Sneja Gunew argues that Demidenko "gave the Australian public everything it wanted" (1996: 58) in terms of its recognition of ethnicity, and she also argues astutely that 'Demidenko' highlights the disavowal of ethnicity by the dominant group of *its own ethnicity* (1996: 61). Gunew's argument is confirmed by the literary judges' refusals to change their evaluation of Demidenko's novel, and more importantly, by their refusals to make explicit the criteria informing their judgements. And this is also confirmed, aptly enough, in

structural terms by the fact that few if any ethnic writers or literary critics are members of judging panels for the major literary awards, or were interviewed about the effects of the Demidenko affair on perceptions of ethnic writing. For many critics of multicultural policies Demidenko confirmed what they 'always suspected', that is the supposed ascendancy of ethnic writers. However for ethnic critics she revealed glaringly (but unintentionally) the protocols by means of which ethnic writers are prevented from authorising questions of ethnicity within literary formations. Indeed, the feeling amongst many ethnic writers and critics in the wake of Demidenko is that ethnic writers may be subjected to the sort of scrutiny that demands proof of their identity merely in order to reconfirm ethnic stereotypes, thus policing literary boundaries rather than examining the politics of exclusion. However, the irony for many lies in the fact that this already happens and that is why Demidenko/Darville was so successful.

I am focusing on the production and reception of ideas about Demidenko and to a much lesser extent her novel, not only because, for all sorts of reasons, a text's meanings are intimately bound up with the text's promotion and reception. This focus is also important because the question of ethnicity - in the form of ethnic writers, ethnic critics, ethnic bodies and voices - was at worst erased and at best rendered unrecognisable in the mainstream debates about the issues arising from Darville's duplicity. Apart from the ongoing debates about the novel's racism, much of the initial outrage was about her duplicity in authenticating her story. This was followed by outrage about her alleged plagiarism. Rarely was there outrage about the more politically disturbing questions about the ethics of her speaking for and as an ethnic. I am arguing here that in a very real sense, the mainstream literary and journalistic communities were not duped, precisely because in Demidenko they realised their self-confirming ethnic writer, their other.

In an article on literary hoaxes written after

Demidenko was exposed as Darville, Michael Heywood described the successful hoax as satisfying “wishful thoughts”. However, it is unclear who he thinks is being satisfied, (and I do not mean to refer here simply to an abstract audience, Darville or both) or even what those “wishful thoughts” might be. I think these are crucially important ambiguities because they point to the mutual confirmations between Demidenko and the literary establishment in producing and repressing ethnic bodies and voices, simultaneously. Although Heywood's article begins promisingly in acknowledging a level of mutual reciprocity at work in the occasions and conditions which make possible the successful hoax, for example, he writes that Demidenko “stroked an audience into giving little gasps of assent and recognition”, he does not extend the argument to discuss critically how this particular literary hoax was complicated by national desires for ethnics as ‘others’ onto whom ‘we’ may project fantasies of difference and interchangeability in a move that disavows structural inequalities (Heywood 1995: 40). Significantly, this displacement of national desires centrally involves the disavowal of questions of ethnicity and also exemplifies the continuing repression of ethnicity as a literary discourse in Australia. Indeed, the “wishful thoughts” may be the unspoken desire for its continued repression as a condition for reproducing and validating ethnic stereotypes as fetishized fantasies of difference and interchangeability. It is in this sense that Demidenko represents the tacit pacts in the continuation of a non-threatening, tokenistic politics of inclusion.

The fetishization and commodification of difference she embodies stage the desire for ethnicity, and they also suggest (in a paradoxical move) that duplicity is a feature of ethnicity, so much so that once Demidenko's real identity was revealed, ‘doing a Demidenko’, not ‘doing a Darville’, became a common phrase. Despite Darville's duplicity, however, ideas like truth and authenticity which were highlighted in praising the book while she was the ethnic writer, became even more valued after she was exposed as Darville. (I discuss this further

below.) Demidenko's argument that the story was told to her, that she was recounting others' experiences, fulfils the criteria of authenticity demanded of immigrant writing, according to Gunew (1996). The Hand That Signed the Paper was lauded and awarded for its historical veracity, and Jill Kitson, one of the Miles Franklin Award judges is quoted on the back cover of the second edition describing it as “a searingly truthful account of terrible wartime deeds that is also an imaginative work of extraordinary redemptive power.” A critic of the book's racism, however, wrote: “Is it truthful, and who is redeemed?” (Christoff 1995: 45). Indeed, the debate about its historical veracity was linked to a debate about its anti-semitic representations. However, the common opposition ‘literary merit versus politics and history’ was played out in the mainstream media in a manner which implicitly confirmed Demidenko's ethnicity, by drawing on stereotypes of the racist and disruptive ethnic. Paradoxically, it also continued to repress questions of ethnicity because the Demidenko performance, or so it appeared, had attested to the irrelevance of questions of access and equality. After all, had not Darville proved that not only could ethnics win major literary awards, but also that they did so because they were ethnic. This infuriatingly spurious logic was echoed by a number of commentators and letter writers, too numerous to mention here. Suffice to say that none of these writers were ethnic, and all of them opposed, one way or another, what they read to be ‘politically correct’ judgements about the book's racism. Moreover, within a fortnight of the revelations The Sydney Morning Herald published an article called ‘Chic to be ethnic’ (1995: 11). The tacit agreement, the mutual and unspoken terms of reciprocity between journalistic and literary formations, that Demidenko embody the authentic ethnic writer, the writer who records true historical events, and who complies with every other stereotype in the book, so to speak, now switched focus to the more recent and much more insidious stereotype of ethnicity as a privileged subject position. According to the latter, ethnics now have access to everything, but most gallingly and most pleasingly of all, it

seems they have what the dominant culture lacks, that is, access to 'ethnicity'. This rhetorical move between pleasure and displeasure does not recognize difference so much as commodify it in order that 'we' may still speak for everyone, especially since 'we' are not ethnic.

Another fortnight later The Australian ran an article about the latest short list for the Vogel award (Demidenko had won the previous Vogel award) ambiguously entitled, 'nothing Ukrainian, please' (1995: 6). The article included a photograph of two little children, a white boy, snowy haired like Demidenko, seated in an oversized leather desk chair typing and peering at the computer screen which we cannot see but which also fascinates a little dark girl (in keeping with the spirit of Demidenko she may be interchangeably Aboriginal or southern European) standing patiently and directly behind him. Presumably, the children represent some sort of literary future of Australia, heterosexually and racially harmonious, with the little white haired boy in control of the writing technologies. Given the recent controversy over Demidenko's ethnicity, in my reading of the photograph the image of the little dark haired girl signifies the tokenistic exploitation of Indigenous and ethnic groups as alibis against possible charges of structural inequality in the arts. In addition, this pre-emptive move together with the positioning of the white male as dominant implicitly validates the many paranoid criticisms of multiculturalism as fostering the ascendancy of ethnics, and silencing Anglo-Australians through political correctness. Such bourgeois notions of ethnicity as desirable and chic, together with common myths about migrant groups prospering on the margins, continues the repression of questions of ethnic bodies and voices and further contributes to the validation of Darville's performance as ethnic.

Finally, Darville's most telling performance as Demidenko, in terms of my argument about the repression of ethnic bodies and voices, was revealed in a talk she gave at the Sydney Festival prior to being awarded the Miles Franklin

Award and the ALS Gold Medal, and after winning the Vogel. She wrote: "So I learned to take pride in my bedraggled pack of scrappy people (her ethnic family) and to reclaim my Effie accent." (Demidenko, 1995: 160) In her characterisation of herself as a born-again ethnic whose self-hatred is redeemed through Australian literary awards, the Australian literary community got the ethnic they deserved. Demidenko is incognizant of the ironies at the heart of ethnic women's 'gratitude' in their engagements with exclusionary arts formations. Indeed, Mary Coustas' 'Effie' and Darville's 'Demidenko' are not the same practice. Claiming ethnicity is not the same thing as being ethnicised. While the 'second generation immigrants' who employ irony in reproducing ethnic stereotypes do so as a critique of institutional demands for them to speak as what Gayatri Spivak has named incisively as the self-confirming other, Demidenko merely (mis)recognised the demands as 'ethnic identity in search of redemption'.

Reading, Reading, Reading

In presenting the above paper at the National Library of Australia at a seminar entitled Women Writing: Views and Prospects 1975-1995, I remarked somewhat facetiously that I had not read The Hand That Signed the Paper, or at least, I had only read half of it. For one member of the audience this was enough to disqualify me from discussing it as racist. For me, however, focusing on the book's content alone is a disingenuous exercise since it occludes the complicitous relationship between literary and journalistic discourses in the promotion of what is deemed to be Australian 'literature' along indisputedly racialized and ethnicised lines, which are disavowed and institutionalized in the cultural formations of canonicity and disciplinarity. More disturbingly, I myself may be recuperated here as an ethnic success story in order to (in)validate Demidenko's desire to emulate an 'ethnic writer'. As I am cognizant of precisely those literary institutional desires for self-approbation I mentioned above (for whom the category 'ethnicity' functions as a trap to be bypassed on the path of 'excellence'), I was

cautious about validating the text in terms of a discussion about whether its content was racist because this would have bypassed that other question concerning racism, that is, the question of 'who is speaking for for whom' in Demidenko's performance. In hindsight, my decision to mention that I had not read the book was fortuitous for it revealed a great many anxieties about pressing ethical and critical questions concerning ethnicity, questions which would rather be dismissed by mainstream literary types, preferably at the same time that their anti-racist credentials are being displayed prominently. And this is in fact the main rhetorical feature of such liberal racism as it currently operates, that is, cry racist and disavow ethnicity, simultaneously. Don Anderson's recent argument exemplifies a similar disavowal of questions of ethnicity when he opines that

Having read the novel I am of the opinion that Helen Demidenko did herself a disservice by adopting her 'Ukrainian' persona. Her first novel can stand on its own imaginative legs. Indeed its achievement is all the more considerable if claims of 'faction' or non-fiction are ignored (Anderson 1996: 13).

The implied conflation of faction and non-fiction with ethnic identity is significant because it suggests the common definitions and literary disparagements of ethnic writing as factual rather than imaginative or textual. The novel's literary value increases accordingly once the writer's 'non-ethnicity' is revealed. Such staggering avoidance of questions about who speaks for whom is compounded by the term 'imaginative' which here signals both the interchangeability of ethnic bodies and voices and the disavowal of ethnicity in writing. In other words, Darville's book succeeds where Demidenko fails, or more correctly, gets caught out. 'Imaginative' is not only the trope for the sanctioned, unethical appropriations of others' bodies and voices, it is also unnamed and aestheticised Anglo privilege. Anderson writes

I became convinced, finally and reluctantly, that not to read 'Demidenko's' novel was an act of intellectual and, more importantly, moral cowardice,

was to be complicit in the sin which Auden isolated in 1939: 'Intellectual disgrace/Stares from every human face,/And the seas of pity lie/Locked and frozen in each eye' (1996: 13).

Avoiding complicity has never been so easy. The manifest irony here is that in having read the book, Anderson's bourgeois notion of reading as a morally elevating cultural practice becomes a major condition for the racist disavowal of ethical questions of ethnicity in speaking for and as others. And that condition is best described as the redemptive reading practice which maintains a nostalgia for innocence for the privileged.

Questions of reading The Hand That Signed the Paper also arose during the televised version of the 1996 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, itself appropriately enough a site of the politics of identity, bodies and representation. Anchoring the parade, at least in the televised version, were the twelve Helens. David Marr's pleasurable anticipation of the twelve Helens' appearance was somewhat wryly intoned when he said "regrettably", they had not read the book.

The demands, however wry, that this book must be read for one to be qualified in speaking about it shift the focus of the debates away from the question of ethnicity, a question whose repression the drag performance highlights mockingly. Conversely, and ironically, too, similar qualms about Demidenko's speaking for others were dismissed. In my reading, Marr's 'regret' concerned the return of ethnic bodies in the form of 'Demidenko'; instead of a disembodied issue (and book) sanitized of the conjoined issues of identity and representation, the Helens' appearance(s) signified the latter's return, this time embodied many times over. However 'unread', the Helens staged the return of the culturally repressed through their proliferation of Demidenkos. (As Freud notes in 'The Uncanny', the return of the repressed is signified through doubling (Strachey 1955).) Another useful rereading of Marr's 'regret' is that in not reading the book the twelve Helens were in fact performing a *misreading* of the

book. That is, they did not validate the book as cultural or moral artefact; following my reading of Anderson's approach to questions of reading this would probably define them as (crypto) fascists. For me, however, the Helens' (mis)reading was a highly literate and sophisticated reading of the repressions at work in the cultural politics of identity, especially in terms of the questions who speaks for whom, and also 'who listens?' In addition, the bracketed UK in the sign 'Miss (UK)raine' which the Helens carried made clear that there was a politics of identity and repression at stake not only in reading the book, but also in the prevailing reading practices employed in (mis)recognising 'Demidenko' in the first place.

As significantly, some of the Helens kept their thick dark moustaches, manifestly maintaining their masculine appearance in donning the feminine long white wigs and pretty blouses. It is obvious they are neither women nor beautiful. Their very unglamorous and amateurish looking drag performance was funny not only because of its 'unsophisticated', clownish and somewhat 'blokish', slapstick humour which punctured the perceived vanities of Demidenko, including the literary star system. It was also funny because the explicitly metonymic way they performed 'Demidenko' through the long white wigs, blouses and improvised folk dancing did not attempt to emulate Demidenko, in the way that Demidenko emulated 'ethnicity'. They did not double her so much as redouble her, thus displacing her claims to an 'original' ethnic identity. Through their proliferation of Demidenkos (twelve not including the 'original') not only did they ironise her emulation of ethnicity, they also ironised her lack of irony. Indeed, as I argued above, the few times Demidenko used 'irony' she offensively appropriated ironic stereotypes from second generation immigrants, such as Mary Coustas' work, and drained its humour of certain crucial ambivalences in the second generation's representations of family and migrant success stories. Demidenko's inability to ironise her desires was inversely represented by the twelve Helens as an excessive lack precisely through their performance of proliferation. In this sense,

they defined her in terms of an inordinate desirousness, which they mockingly fetishized in offering plenty of poor copies.

I have argued elsewhere that irony is most often used by second and first generation immigrants in ways in which it is not simply a substitute for authenticity. Rather, the ironic consent to speak as ethnic is represented frequently as an exchange of abjections between host and (immigrant) guest. Such irony, in other words, functions to scrutinise questions of identity relationally. In these terms, ethnicity is not a discrete category of identity that may be replaced by irony; rather, notions of an ethnic identity may already be multiple, or at least susceptible to doubling in an ironic manner through the doubleness or in-betweenness experienced and described as such by first and second generation immigrants. I am not describing Darville's use of stereotypes. Rather, speaking as an ethnic shifts and multiplies the sites of ethnic identity, making it a recursive, and as such, for many ethnic writers, an ironic deconstructive project that undermines attempts to locate authenticity authoritatively, especially where the latter is composed of essentialising discourses about origins in defining identities. It is in this sense that Demidenko's lack of irony bespeaks her 'inauthenticity'. Where Demidenko secures ethnic identity to an ordinary discourse, the twelve Helens proliferate it, and also dismember it in a manner which focuses on the excessively generic nature of her ethnic body: peasant blouses, folk dancing, long hair. The dismembering is significant for the ways it draws attention to the metonymic nature of stereotypes, and for the ways the twelve Helens come closer to approximating the sort of ethnic sense of irony 'Demidenko' thought she had mastered in her comments on "reclaim(ing her) Effie accent". I am reminded, for example, of a similar tactic used by Mary Coustas in promoting the show *Wogs Out of Work* through an Effie look-alike competition in Wollongong several years ago. The competition was incredibly successful in spawning Effie doubles, and I believe the winner was an Anglo-Australian girl.

The Helens debunk the manner in which Demidenko 'herself' is identified through a conglomeration of parts. In this they also exemplify what Eco has called "instinctive semioticians" in his work on readings of cult films together with notions of the cult textual object as an 'unhinged' collection of stereotypes and intertextual references (Eco 1986: 197-211). All together, each Helen represents the idea of a simultaneously grouped and fragmented identity capable of spawning more Demidenkos, precisely because her attributes to begin with are drawn from a cultural repository of ethnic stereotypes. In this way, Demidenko is defined as an excessively generic body, and that is why the very *number of* Demidenkos is so crucial in producing implicitly a critique of the ways questions of bodies are repressed in issues of representation. By exceeding any singular reproduction of Demidenko or look-alike competition, both of which invite a close scrutiny of the copy through comparisons to an original, the Helens produced a reading that staged the return of the ethnic body and disconnected it from the redemptive rectitude and repressions in dominant (disembodied) reading practices.

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Efi Hatzimanolis has published widely on multiculturalism, critical theory and cultural differences in writing, and lectures at the University of Wollongong.

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