

# The New ‘Coterie’: Writing, Community and Collective

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## I. INTRODUCTION: *GANGAJANG*, ‘*SOUNDS OF THEN*’

In *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* (1997) Mark Davis outlined the increasing nepotism of the Australian literary establishment along generational lines. Post-*Gangland*, the term ‘coterie’ has retained an association with elitism and become a bit of a dirty word, even as the literary becomes more and more of a niche market. Yet, literary coteries have been with us prior to the British early-modern era and through to (and beyond) Anglo-American modernism and I’m interested in how coterie practice continues to play out locally in some less elite contexts. If, as Curtis Perry argues in the context of Renaissance court culture, ‘the notion of coterie production offers a useful way to think about the kinds of networks that provided the social occasions for a great deal of literary production’ (108), might productive parallels be drawn with contemporary literary production in the era of social networking? In what ways does ‘insider trading’ continue to play a vital part in communities of writing and reading, considering the blurring boundaries between writing, reading, publishing, networking and socialising?

Pierre Bourdieu’s mapping of the field of cultural production in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* provides a useful schema in which to read localised struggles over literary ‘capital’, which as David Hesmondhalgh argues ‘often take the form of a battle between established producers, institutions and styles, and heretical newcomers’ (216). *Gangland*’s front-line argument—the need for a changing of the guard from baby-boomers to younger generations in national cultural institutions—has now, however, been playing out for over a decade. It is also clear that if a baton is to be passed—or is being passed—many of these institutions and practices no longer carry the same enduring cachet or power (something Davis goes on to argue in 2007 in ‘The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing’). Rather than assessing the decline or breakdown of national literary cultures (Davis 2007) or revisiting Bourdieu’s assumptions around high culture’s enduring prestige, this essay will follow on from both Bourdieu and Davis to explore the potential that this displacement in the literary field has opened up. With the advent of new forums for reading, writing and publishing—including, but not limited to, on-line environments—new kinds of ‘non-elite’ coterie practices and networks are forming.

In Bourdieu’s schema, my focus is on non-mainstream, relatively non-elite cultural producers (primarily driven by cultural, rather than commercial, imperatives) who are already working in a sub-field of restricted production (which Bourdieu refers to as ‘production for producers’) and who, as Hesmondhalgh argues, ‘are left pretty much to talk to each other’ (214). This particular configuration of community ‘discussion’, far from remaining inconsequential or off the radar, seems instead to have an inherent overlap with contemporary social media networks. Indeed, the literary field is not a two-

dimensional or closed field, but rather a multi-dimensional field (or network) influenced by, and connected to, other economies and technologies. While there may still be an undeniably hierarchical axis to the field, in a networked context other pathways are possible, as smaller non-mainstream literary communities are extended via on-line and other networks in ways not previously available to coterie cultures of the past (or at least not as readily).

In the more immediate wake of *Gangland*, the first National Young Writers Festival was held in Newcastle in 1998, which attracted strong press coverage and publicity, leading to 'a flood of support for the following year's festival' (This is Not Art (TINA)). By the turn of the century (i.e. 2000!) new youth initiatives became more prevalent. Such programs have had a significant impact over the past decade and the category of 'emerging writer' is now familiar grant-speak. There is also, undeniably, a kind of superficial blandness to this moniker (which may have come about partly in reaction to the *Gangland* accusation, as cultural institutions scrambled to become more generationally inclusive). While there are now many earmarked avenues for young and emerging writers, such as the practice of including a smattering of new writers alongside more established writers in anthologies, competitions such as the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelist or The Vogel, these examples primarily aim to 'break' new authors into the established literary market and are working off a more homogeneous and culturally valorised idea of publishing culture. If we consider that mainstream literary publishing isn't necessarily the shore upon which all these emerging writers will eventually *emerge*—or more likely beach—such initiatives may perpetuate unrealistic and unnecessarily narrow expectations.

In 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing' Davis argues that post-*Gangland* many writers have moved on from waiting to take over the reins of institutionalised power to seeking alternative forums:

The increasing difficulty of getting published has fostered an underground push for change and a search for new paradigms, reflected in the rise of alternative literary festivals, a live reading circuit, and self-publishing through make-your-own imprints. ... Such developments point to how literary culture might become a do-it-yourself culture that will operate, for the time being, at least partly outside mainstream publishing culture, having cleared for itself a space for experimentation. (130)

While any 'pure' distinction between these do-it-yourself (DIY) practices and the institutional isn't possible (which also renders a term like 'underground' problematic), there is now a burgeoning emerging literary community in Australia which occupies—at least in some sense—a space of becoming or in Bourdieu's term 'the space of possibles' (206). Ample evidence of this community can be found in the programs of festivals such as the National Young Writers' Festival and the Emerging Writers' Festival (held in Melbourne and established in 2004), which include traditional literary genres as well as zines, blogs, graphic novels, comics and poetry slams. These festivals attract a markedly different demographic to the middle-class, middle-age stalwarts of mainstream writers'

festivals in the late 1990s (Davis, *Gangland* 113-117) and have now, arguably, established their own generational coterie. The rise in popularity of writers' festivals over the last decade (both mainstream and non-mainstream) is indicative of the way in which authorship has increasingly become a social practice. Further, at emerging writers' festivals the audience is made up largely of other writers or practitioners, which could perhaps be considered as representative of a generational shift where individuals become cultural 'makers', at least at the DIY level. Indeed, conventional literary authorship is not necessarily a pre-requisite to being considered a writer, or to participating in many emerging literary communities. While the definition of 'emerging' writer varies (perhaps the only time it is really policed is in terms of eligibility for grant funding programs, depending on how many publications a writer has had) it has become a shorthand term for an otherwise amorphous community made up of many smaller scenes.

For some writers being 'emerging' is still seen, no doubt, as the initial stage on a spectrum towards becoming established, though many so-called 'emerging writers' have now been emerging for many years. While conceived initially as a remedy for an ossified literary culture, these categories are perhaps instilling yet another form of arrested adolescence (ironically reminiscent of Davis' gripes in *Gangland*). As Aden Rolfe, in his essay 'Navigating the Emergentsia or Why haven't I made it yet?' asks: 'is the supposedly linear continuum from emerging to established still relevant?' (159). While Rolfe debunks the category of the emerging writer as, in part, a necessary bureaucratic evil, he also argues that:

By broadening our artistic workload and skill-set, by taking advantage of and creating opportunities for ourselves and our peers rather than looking forever upward along the food chain, we have become a more complicated beast than can be contained within the existing model. (161)

I'd also argue that this search for new literary paradigms by emerging writers speaks as much to an on-going desire for affective communities of practice, to feeling connected, to having inside contacts and overlaps, as it does to any sense of opposition or exclusion from the mainstream literary system. Literary nepotism and cliquishness won't be banished with the baby-boomers or any other generation, and taste cultures continue to prevail at all levels of the literary spectrum. As Rolfe writes, many emerging writers are quite happy within their community: 'This is where they find their appreciative peers and a supportive audience, where the people that inspire them are, and where the projects they want to be involved in are happening' (160). This is still a networked model, however, enmeshed somewhat in the literary system, while also extending beyond it and transforming it. Even the annual Emerging Writers' Festival is not an autonomous event, but 'mixes emerging literary professionals with more established writers to forge a better understanding between the past and future of Australian writing' (EWF).

## II. COTERIE

While my use of the term 'coterie' in relation to contemporary cultures of reading, writing and publishing has an admittedly anachronistic air, it may also hold a certain

'retro' appeal, given that the small publishing company *Sleepers* (whose focus is on new writers) runs a series of 'salons', and that zines are often traded at 'fairs' and other events (including The Emerging Writers' Festival's 'Page Parlour', The National Young Writers' Festival's 'Staple Manor', TINA's annual 'zine fair' and Sticky Institute's 'Festival of the Photocopier'). At such gatherings zines are sold or traded largely by initiates who share an interest in DIY culture and aesthetics. The Oxford English Dictionary 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1989) defines coterie as 'a circle of persons associated together and distinguished from "outsiders"' and while 'community' is an alternative term, and one that I may use interchangeably, 'coterie' has a particular resonance with literary cultures and subcultures.

The need for a revised understanding of coterie practice supports my argument that merely opening up the mainstream literary field—as if it could be rendered more democratic—runs counter to the historical nature of cultural production as outlined by Bourdieu in his work on the literary fields of the nineteenth century and of the 1970s (which showed how coteries are intrinsically linked to the generation of literary value over time). If, from the 1980s on, this debate has been somewhat displaced by the overriding influence of commercial cultural production and mass consumer capitalism (which has seen the demise of the 'cultural capital' of the literary, whether elite or non-elite), returning to considerations of small-scale literary production may be particularly pertinent in this context. Ultimately, I concede, the term 'coterie' is possibly too historically resonant of a genteel Europeanness to translate in the Australian vernacular, yet I'm interested in considering how configurations of coterie practice may, in fact, be somewhat disabling to endless national turf wars, by moving beyond oppositional power struggles, generational or otherwise.

Rather than jostling for predominance or supremacy, a more provincialised and provisional idea of the literary is taking shape. There's no doubt that there's been a form of 'market-correction' in the literary field more broadly—as literature becomes a 'minor' discourse in the Deleuzian sense (not necessarily such a bad thing)—and, in theory, much of this small-scale, socially-networked rhetoric might now apply across the literary spectrum. The literary may wax and wane in terms of cultural ascendancy, but the field is perpetuated, nonetheless, by relationships between all its constituents (and will continue to be as long as they still share something in common, beyond their divisions). Indeed, this goes some way to explaining the intractability of the literary field in the face of many predictions of its demise and why it is still possible to speak of contemporary literature, despite the gap between enduring notions of literary prestige and the reality of its contemporary incarnation as just another genre in mainstream publishing.

For Bourdieu, even small-scale avant-gardes who claim to shun the mainstream market can eventually accumulate high levels of symbolic, if not economic, capital. The literary field is also a predominantly recuperative system, as yesterday's avant-gardes become consecrated. A contemporary example would be the 'McSweenification' of boutique literary publishing (perhaps the ultimate Generation X success story), echoed on a local level by the aspirations of a publishing company like Melbourne's *Sleepers* (*McSweeney's* has come to represent the ideal of highly designed and diversified literary

product for the 'hipster' market). Even alternative writing and publishing cultures that position themselves as somewhat extra-literary, such as zine culture, can become 'mainstreamed', as Anna Leventhal writes:

It seems unlikely that creators of early zines, the disenchanting punks, freaks and outspoken critics of the 1980s, could have imagined that their cheap and dirty style, born largely out of frustration with mainstream taste-culture, would one day be the hallmark of 'DIY Chic'—viewed not as a condemnation of consumerism but as an easily co-opted and reproduced aesthetic. (1)

More locally, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) now holds an annual zine fair as part of the Sydney Writers' Festival, with tables for the 2010 fair selling out in a record 1.5 hours.

Mark Davis argues that literary culture, more broadly, has always, to an extent, been a coterie culture, in that it has always relied on some form of patronage despite the increasingly market-driven rhetoric of contemporary publishing ('Decline' 130). Further, Jen Webb suggests that:

The charismatic, romantic (and Romantic) notion of the artist as independent, solitary and disinterested cannot of course be sustained. First, as a result of economic structures in the late twentieth century, artists in western countries have been brought back to something like the position they had before the Renaissance, again being dependent on patronage (in the form of arts grants and public funding), which means they are also coming under a sort of hidden censorship—those who do not please the state are less likely to be funded. (167)

What interests me in particular about coterie, beyond Bourdieu's critique of the literary as primarily a product of bourgeois taste culture, and Davis's post-Marxist critiques of coterie as a primarily elite (or, as in Webb's argument, state-sanctioned) model, is the way that it revisits post-romantic definitions of authorship. Perhaps the isolated individual author is the real anachronism here, despite its perpetuation as the dominant literary model. If Wordsworth considered the 'Poet' to be 'a man ... endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind' (79), then we must almost be at the point where this author-type is, in a Being-John-Malkovich kind of way, culturally overabundant.

True to form, emerging writers seem to keep on 'emerging', begging the question: out of what? (Perhaps some kind of primordial alphabet soup!) The uniqueness of the post-romantic literary author (let alone the 'isolation', given contemporary media networks) is perhaps being broken down most effectively by the expanding size of the author-class, and this is especially evident over the last decade. It is often said that we are in a situation where there are now too many writers and not enough readers, as if market forces are

simply to blame for the schism (a moral panic that has been in play since at least the eighteenth century when 'Samuel Johnson worried that the sheer proliferation of printed matter would make readers rush into print, becoming writers themselves' (Littau 4)). The fact that the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century is a reminder to also take the long view with new technologies (ergo, it's the early days of digital media).

Undeniably, some form of literary authorship still holds 'symbolic' capital in the early twenty-first century, even for writers who may never be directly supported by the mainstream publishing industry or who continue to subsist as 'bottom-feeders'. By revisiting ideas of coterie in our contemporary context I hope that this may shift some of the focus away from the prominence of traditional authorship (and the concomitant publishing crisis for many aspiring authors) and onto formations of literary community or peer-to-peer networks of writers and readers (where individuals may, of course, be both). It's here that there has been a productive reprise of the 'literary circles' of yore, whether in analogue DIY zine cultures, emerging writers' festivals, small press or online publishing environments. This area of small-scale production has been actively producing a reconfigured sense of literary community, which, while it can still be read in terms of position-taking in the overall literary field (Bourdieu) or in terms of a rhetoric of generationalism (Davis), is producing new literary cultures that also differ from those which preceded them (especially given the impact that new technologies are having more broadly on writing and reading as 'social' and 'collaborative' practices).

### III. COTERIE-NOUVEAU

My definition of new literary coterie may be another way of speaking about 'nodes' or interested clusters within a network, which allow for the retention of subjective aesthetic and socio-cultural preferences. In the era of social networking this involves immediate circles of writer-friends as well as more extended networks built around socio-cultural sensibility and connectivity. The literary field, by definition, may never be 'democratic', but in opening up to a networked model, hierarchical stratification is only one potential axis, with other multi-dimensional connections, and collective forces, becoming just as important.

Zine culture is an example of an extra-literary community in which models of authorship are reconfigured into a more participatory network, arguably indicative of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature' where 'everything takes on a collective value' (17). While certain zine writers may become known within the community as prolific or popular authors, most 'zinesters' are 'insider traders', and participate as both zine makers and readers/collectors. A zine fair is very different to the conventional writer's festival 'star' model (where there is a clearer demarcation between authors and their readers, who are seen as a captive market by publishers). There is a particular social intimacy to zine culture, where you engage directly when you buy or swap zines, and where the author's email or postal address is usually on the back of a zine (inviting readers to correspond with them directly, rather than through a publisher or agent). Anna Poletti's *Intimate Ephemera: Reading Young Lives in Australian Zine Culture* defines zines as 'handmade texts circulat(ing) in an economy of gifting and exchange' (back cover) and situates zine

culture as an inter-subjective literary community. With small photocopied print runs, mail-lists and zine fairs, there could be some parallels with the idea of a non-elite coterie culture. In her M.A. thesis 'Becoming Zine: The Place of Zines in Australia's Cultural Life', Kirsty Leishman argues in a chapter titled "'After Gang Warfare": Zines and Public Life' that zine subculture, in the Australian context, is an area of practice that has been supported by youth arts initiatives on its own terms (i.e. outside of the established publishing industry which Davis was agitating against in *Gangland*).

Zine culture is both small and local, yet also extends into a transnational community (lately with an online presence) and is linked to many late twentieth century-early twenty-first century social movements and aesthetics. Anna Leventhal reads zines as 'non-canonical' writing which 'does not contribute to a sense of national identity, or even a sense of personal identity with reference to the nation, but rather uses the language of the majority to articulate a politics of displacement, smallness and minority' (2). Zine culture is also an example of the paradoxical way that smaller coterie cultures can now become networked (by-passing limiting national hierarchies of reputation and reach): size is relative in a networked context. As I've previously stated, this doesn't mean that the zine community, or any other, can ultimately sustain 'pure' or naïve notions of creative freedom and innovation, given that the zine subculture has followed a similar trajectory to other independent media in terms of growth and institutionalization, nor is this community without its own internal logic and strictures. In 2007, for example, the small press Local Consumption Publications published zinester Vanessa Berry's *Strawberry Hills Forever*, an anthology of autobiographical stories predominantly from her personal zines (which she has been producing for over a decade). Poletti reads Berry's foray into small press literary publishing and the associated trappings of authorship (book launches, Radio National interviews, writers' festival appearances and the like) as a transgression of an unwritten code of practice (288-293), despite the fact that Berry's book was published by a non-commercial press and her book launches were more likely to involve homemade cupcakes. Conflict around authorship and centuries old tensions between the professional and the amateur continue, as modes of authorship remain somewhat specific to modes of production and their respective orthodoxies. Yet this is also being transformed by the emergence of hybrid 'pro-am' alternatives in independent cultural production and the increasing diversification of contemporary authorship for emerging writers, who as Rolfe argues often 'don't want to be pigeonholed in a single stream' (160).

If zine culture exists somewhat on the margins of literary practice, emerging writers in more traditional genres and forms are also forming coterie networks. Many emerging poets, some who are yet to publish a first collection, participate in a dynamic on-line community of publishing and commentary. The blogrolls of these poets are too long to list, and such networked communities, by definition, become open fields, resisting fixed representation or overviews. Perhaps poetry as a form suits on-line publishing (given its relative brevity) and poets are able to publish poems on their blogs and in e-zines such as *Cordite*, which has been published on-line since 2000. Despite flourishing social networking, however, on-line poetry publishing—along with other traditional literary genres—still hasn't translated into a strong DIY bookselling culture.

If the 1970s avant-garde small press literary print culture is well documented in Australian literature, contemporary small press publishing is in a transition state and is yet to fully exploit new publishing technologies. As Emmy Hennings writes in her article 'Shares and Share Alike', the web 2.0 environment has the potential to have a similar impact on the emerging writers' community to that which occurred in independent music, with the rise of unsigned bands using social networking sites and MP3s. On the non-zine side of the equation, the reason a strong DIY publishing culture has not yet occurred (at least when it comes to the book), even in the emerging writers' community, is perhaps due, conversely, to enduring investments in the status of professional authorship, despite new publishing technologies becoming available that allow authors to bypass traditional models. Print on Demand (POD) publishing, for example, allows one-off printing to be economically viable for individuals and small publishers. This small-scale economy has not previously been possible in publishing and it could lead to a surprise renaissance of print book culture (let alone in terms of what it could do for access to previously out-of-print-books and back-catalogues). This is also a model that could be embedded into existing networks (allowing individual writers to sell their books from their blogs or to facilitate small print-run publishing by small and independent presses, such as members of the local SPUNC network—a network of small Australian publishers who might benefit from selling POD titles, rather than struggling to ape conventional models). The sample bag at this year's Emerging Writers' Festival contained at least two brochures for POD publishers, trying to add literary or boutique authors to their client lists. The oft-anticipated alternative is, of course, for e-books and e-readers to usurp print culture and for this to be a primarily electronic, rather than hybrid, revolution. Either way, beyond the broader promise of egalitarian openness in new DIY publishing technologies (such as the US-based POD publisher Lulu, which allows anyone to publish a book and sell it online), a smaller coterie concept may yet drive new publishing and distribution models for local communities of writers and readers (especially in terms of readership). As I've argued, it's not the 'common' reader that these literary authors are likely to attract (despite the fact that the internet offers potentially limitless distribution), but a 'coterie' one.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: READING REVISITED

As I am predominantly focused here on literary communities that are not solely market-driven, I want to conclude by returning to some of the underlying theoretical shifts that might drive (or impede) change, rather than focusing on the various merits of different technologies and formats (DIY, POD, e-books etc). As Clive Thompson argues in a recent *Wired* article: 'We need to stop thinking about the future of publishing and think instead about the future of reading. Every other form of media that's gone digital has been transformed by its audience'. The impetus for the idea of linking POD or e-publishing and coterie practice has come not from the desire to better service new authors, or as a salve to the constrictions of the mainstream literary publishing industry, but to allow interested communities of writers and readers more immediate avenues to *read* each other's work (even if the potential readership is small). From my experience of the emerging writers' community, the models that work most successfully in terms of

readership are probably the zine community and on-line poetry publishing (both of which work off relatively minute economies and are perhaps closest to 'coterie' practice). When Aden Rolfe writes that the most interesting thing he's read all year 'is a 30,000 word zine that deconstructs the author's love of cycling while he stays up late watching The Tour de France' (160)—a reference to Ianto Ware's *21 Nights in July: The Physics and Metaphysics of Cycling*—it's clear that the way emerging writers are accessing and reading some contemporary texts is through new forms of literary, and extra-literary, community networks.

The fact that the power-base of the old cultural brigade is shifting and the publishing ecosystem for contemporary writers and readers is becoming more diversified should not be limited by eschatological discourse (the *endist* and *endless* rhetoric of decline). There are growing communities/coteries of writers and readers rather than a monolithic national literature with its hierarchy of authors and critics (and ostensible apartheid of said authors and critics, when, in fact, as Davis noted in *Gangland*, the critics and writers always had a cosy camaraderie). Even before I started thinking through ideas for online models for readers to access affordable DIY books by authors who may never get a major publisher, I was interested in ways that emerging literary communities have developed models that more closely resemble coteries and other more intimate methods of manuscript circulation (beyond the endgame of publishers as gate-keepers). What this does to the status of authorship and modes of readership, and how it affects ideas of national literatures, markets and the canon, is something that remains to be seen as we continue to shift towards an increasingly networked literary field.

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