

What's in a Name?

Helen Garner and the Power of the Author in the Public Domain

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The name 'Helen Garner' is a powerful one in Australian public discourse. Garner is a canonical Australian writer who is also seen as a 'public intellectual' (Dessaix 1). Her 'name and its meanings,' as Kerry Goldsworthy has put it, 'have become part of the Australian public culture' (Goldsworthy 26). Garner's status has been particularly evident since the public debate sparked by the 1995 publication of her first book-length work of non-fiction. *The First Stone* has made this popular writer realize that 'Helen Garner is not just me any longer: there's no longer a simple link between the words "Helen Garner" and this person that I feel myself to be. Those two words come trailing clouds of meaning from which I can't detach myself – clouds of *projections*' (Garner qtd in Mercer 23; Garner, 'Art of Dumb Question' 11). This paper returns to *The First Stone*, not to re-engage with the discussions concerning sexual harassment and the nature of contemporary feminism which it provoked, but to examine the way in which Garner's name has functioned in the debate and what this can tell us about some of the functions of authorship in the public sphere.

Delys Bird has pointed out that much of the discussion about *The First Stone* revolved around Garner's name. 'Garner is well known to Australian readers for her fiction and journalism,' she argues. 'She is a name – and her insistent personalisation of the story she set out to tell was elaborated through that name just as the book was marketed on that name' (Bird 48). What is the name of Helen Garner, how does it function, what are the different types of authority and power invested in its celebrity? And how have these strategic positions influenced her representation in *The First Stone* debate? I want to concentrate here on a small but symptomatic aspect of the struggle for authority that inflected the public debate: the uses of Garner's 1972 sacking by the Victorian Education Department.

In *The First Stone*, Garner uses her prior career as a schoolteacher to represent herself as a veteran of the feminist movement. She writes that

in 1972 I had been sacked from my teaching job for having discussed sexual matters with my young students at Fitzroy High School. I tried to work out whether my initial rush of sympathy for Colin Shepherd had been merely an upsurge of the rage I'd had to swallow at the time, when I'd been sent sprawling and had had to pick myself up and find another way of making a living. (*The First Stone* 40)

The sacking had become a *cause célèbre* in early 1973 when the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association (VSTA) called a one day stop-work meeting in which 2000 teachers participated, and threatened a week-long strike which, despite their failure to have Garner reinstated, did not take place (McBurney 2–3). The Education Department's attention had been drawn to the class by the publication, in November 1972, of an anonymous article in the Melbourne counter-cultural newspaper, *The Digger*, entitled, 'Why Does the Women Have All the Pain, Miss?'. The story describes an impromptu sex education class in which the schoolteacher answers sexual questions at the students' behest, and encourages them to use common four-letter words throughout the discussion because 'these are the best words, the right words to use when you are talking about sex' (3). The story's authorship was traced to Garner and she was dismissed immediately. The writer reprints the essay that caused the sacking in her most recent collection of non-fiction, *True Stories*. She places a great deal of importance on the dismissal, claiming, in the opening essay of the collection, that 'getting the sack was the best thing that could have happened to me. It forced me to start writing for a living' (*True Stories* 2).

The claim that it was the sacking which led to her career in writing is interesting in terms of the questions about the reputations of the author raised above. Garner was clearly writing for *The Digger* before the sacking, since it was her writing which led to her demise as a schoolteacher, yet she seems not to acknowledge these writings as part of her literary career. At the same time, she accords them a pivotal role. This brings to mind David Carter's assertion that in any act of writing by an author, the 'writer's own prior texts and careers will be part of what is at stake, part of the structuring context ... and any new act of writing which is granted status within the career will work to re-order, to re-write, this prior history' (Carter xii). The author's prior career, and the texts that relate to it, which have previously been disregarded as 'occur[ring] before and outside the project of [her] writing career' are now able, through their validation by republication, to perform a strategic function in the representation of Garner's authorial self (Carter 1). They are used to invest her name with a certain type of authority. Garner's past activism authenticates the claims she makes in *The First Stone* to be a veteran of the feminist struggle.

The sacking is crucial to the public persona Garner seeks to project in the present because the evidence it provides of her past political service authorises her right to speak on feminist issues. Throughout *The First Stone*, and in her subsequent interjections in the debate, Garner displays a dissatisfaction with academic feminism. She perceives it to be separated from the 'real' world. Cloistered within university campuses, feminists who understand the alleged sexual encounter at the heart of the Ormond affair in solely institutional terms, she believes, actually diminish women's personal power. This understanding is entirely at odds with the front line of feminism in the 1970s which worked to 'free' women sexually and politically (*The First Stone* 113). Where contemporary feminists run to institutions such as the law to protect them from 'real life', Garner suggests that her generation acted in the world to achieve their political goals. In doing so they suffered for the cause.

Garner was punished by a conservative, sexually repressive establishment for attempting to liberate her students by educating them about sexuality. According to Garner, contemporary feminists refuse to acknowledge the validity of these struggles. They '[don't] give a shit' about what the writer, tongue in cheek, refers to as her generation's 'magnificent heroism' (*The First Stone* 106). The re-invocation of the sacking in both *The First Stone* and *True Stories* represents an attempt by the author to gain respect for the political action of women's liberationists and to authoritatively stake her claim to the title of feminist. Her suffering in the 1970s invests her story, with its recourse to experience over professional knowledges, with an authenticity which the more academic forms of authority struggle to dislodge.

The author's claim to authenticity, of course, has not gone uncontested by those whose legitimacy it works to undermine. A recent collection of essays entitled *Bodyjamming*, edited by Jenna Mead, one of Garner's most prominent opponents in *The First Stone* debate, directly contests Garner's account of sexual harassment and feminism. In her essay in the collection, 'Remembering Fitzroy High', Rosi Braidotti implicitly recognizes that Garner's claim to authority in the present rests upon her infamy of the 1970s. In an attempt to undermine that authority, Braidotti responds to Garner's re-invocation of the sacking by interrogating the case from an alternative perspective. As the Professor of Women's Studies at Utrecht University, Braidotti is a professional feminist philosopher. Her authority to write in a book about 'sexual harassment, feminism and public life' derives from her credentials as an academic. She occupies the very institutional position which Garner attempts to undermine through her representation of the sacking.

Braidotti provides quite a different narrative of the events of 1972 to Garner's. Where Garner plays down the fact that the furore over her sacking was about more than the politics of her individual case, Braidotti makes much of this fact. The knowledge that Garner's case was important at the time because it raised a number of issues including the treatment of temporary teachers, curriculum innovation, and sex education in the classroom informs Braidotti's interrogation of the event (Hannan 13–14). Where Garner has recently suggested that the authorities became aware of the case by tracing the *Digger* article back to her, Braidotti implies that news of the sex class was passed through school-yard gossip (Braidotti 139). She also gives voice to a criticism made by a spokesperson for the migrant community at the time, that Garner 'impudently used the names' of her migrant students 'in an article that she preferred to keep anonymous' (Randazzo qtd in 'Minister' 3; Braidotti 140). Moreover, she suggests that her 'offensive' portrayal of 'her migrant students as not being leading lights intellectually, as speaking bad English and having brutally ill-educated parents' is evidence of Garner's 'ethnocentrism' (Braidotti 135). Braidotti also disputes the author's claim that despite the establishment's disapproval, popular support for her actions was considerable. 'Contrary to her protestations,' she writes, 'Garner had no support in the school whatsoever' (Braidotti 130).

According to Braidotti, Garner was completely out of touch with the 'political priorities and the human situation of the school' (Braidotti 130). While Garner

preached sexual liberation, the main political goal of the migrant community of Fitzroy High was to improve the public image of the school which was suffering due to its poor HSC results and the negative connotations attached to migrant, working-class culture. Braidotti describes 'a contest for media attention over Fitzroy High between, on the one hand, the militants for a 'positive' image of the school ... [and] ... those who were quite happy to confirm Fitzroy High's disastrous image in a context where 'times were a-changing and standards were negotiable anyway' (Braidotti 130). 'Garner belonged to the latter,' she writes, and by taking her case to the VSTA, she 'managed, with the fortuitous assistance of historical circumstances, to turn her hasty dismissal from Fitzroy High into a general civil rights case that mobilised the progressive militant teachers throughout the state' (Braidotti 130, 132). This meant that public discourse was dominated to the extent that '[n]o other discourse was taken into account, let alone circulated' (Braidotti 131). In Braidotti's estimation, Garner's attempt to 'free' her migrant students sexually actually 'betrayed and dispossessed' them of their 'political standpoint' (Braidotti 129).

The interesting thing about Braidotti's argument is that not only does it recognize the importance of the sacking for Garner's authority, it replicates it. For while Braidotti's identity is that of a professional academic, she writes from the personal perspective of the dispossessed migrant student. Her interpretation of the case is clearly informed by her feminist and post-structuralist knowledges, but it is the fact that she was a student at Fitzroy High in 1972 which authorises her criticism of Garner. This is evidenced by the rhetorical mode which she adopts – that of gossip.

In an attempt to undermine 'the cultural power that [Garner] is perceived to wield', Braidotti's essay reverts to gossip mode, what Goldsworthy describes as 'a last resort of the powerless' (Goldsworthy 4, 3). Most of her 'personal' recollections of Garner derive from the stories she was told by her brother, who apparently gleaned his knowledge second hand. On the strength of these tales, Braidotti describes the teacher as a 'very Anglo' 'leftie' who may or may not have been 'gay' or 'bisexual' (Braidotti 14–25). Her assertions are regularly prefixed with phrases such as 'I have always believed', and 'In my view' (Braidotti 129). She also foregrounds her own highly emotive response to the dismissal, declaring that Garner's theft of the political limelight 'actually hurt' (Braidotti 129). Garner is portrayed as a selfish individual who mobilized the hegemonic dominance over the left which those of her political persuasion exercised in order to turn 'the situation to her best advantage, using the publicity to pursue her own agenda' (Braidotti 129). In using her 'personal' experience to attack the authority invested in Garner's name, Braidotti plays on two types of authority: academic and personal. By privileging her personal over her institutional authority, however, the professional academic opens her own work up to attack.

The critical response to Braidotti's essay *has* been predominantly negative, and has tended to rest on her personal challenge to Garner's authority. McKenzie Wark observes that the essay 'descends from a critique of Garner to an unseemly resentment of her celebrity' (Wark 40). Robert Manne declares her essay to be 'genuinely cruel' and aimed at 'destroy[ing] Garner's reputation' (Manne 19). Jean

Curthoys has recently suggested that some of the contributors to *Bodyjamming* 'engage in a manner of criticism usually thought to be antithetical to inquiry and decency – criticism unrestrained by the requirements of argument or evidence or by prohibitions against the purely *ad hominem*' (Curthoys 9). Margaret Henderson, in a generally positive review of *Bodyjamming*, queries the effectiveness of Braidotti's essay. She describes 'Remembering Fitzroy High' as 'vitriolic and often unfair to Garner', and wonders whether her 'personalised savaging of Garner's past role as radical school teacher is constructive criticism' (Henderson 325). She goes on to suggest that the essay 'does no justice to Braidotti's internationally-respected reputation as a feminist philosopher' (Henderson 325). Clearly the discursive mode employed by Garner and adopted by Braidotti is not available in any straightforward way to professional academics.

Is this because the types of authority wielded by authors and academics are substantially different? Is it that academic claims to the right to speak derive from their professional knowledges, while the authority of literary names rests on their reputation? Are writers somehow able to capture the 'spirit of the age' through what Garner calls their 'fiercely over-developed observing eye', or their unity with 'the force that creates' (*True Stories* 141, 140)?

In the case of Garner, it *seems* that the author is able to identify with her publics at a more personal level. By drawing a distinction between her 'self' and particular institutions, Garner creates the illusion that she is somehow de-institutionalized. She can therefore *appear* to interact with her readers in a relatively unmediated way, where academics who speak from within the institutions cannot. Hence, Garner is able to influence public opinion without relying on professional knowledges. Robert Dessaix has recently suggested that Garner's

ideas on social issues in Australian society, particularly those affecting women's lives ... have been informed, complex and widely listened to. ... [I]n book after book she articulates widely held but unformulated ideas on matters of public concern (such as gender politics and sexual harassment), freeing up the public discussion of these ideas and points of view. (Dessaix 164)

Despite this, she displays an 'unwillingness to be cast in the role of ... public intellectual', and is 'oddly hesitant about the realm of the intellect' (Dessaix 164). The writer consistently shuts herself off from academia by foregrounding her 'fear of professors and people with Ph.Ds, a leftover from my own undistinguished and almost totally silent university career, thirty years ago' (*The First Stone* 145). She tacitly agrees with Dessaix that she has developed her creativity 'as a defence against' academic intellectualism (Dessaix 166). This rejection of the intellect allows Garner to respond in a more personal way to public events. Fiona Capp writes that '[a] hallmark of Garner's writing and public demeanor has been her openness and candidness' (Capp 2). She consistently 'develop[s] her case through personal anecdotes ... and then generalise[s] out from them, rather than arguing

in a classically systematic way with reference to the historical and social forces at work' (Capp 2). While Garner's technique has never been universally accepted and praised, it is this style of writing which has seen her become one of Australia's most popular and respected authors.

Garner's interrogation of a sexual harassment case at Melbourne University became the sensation that it did because, as a big-name writer, her personal responses to public events are accorded a special significance in the public domain. Her introspective thoughts articulate what might be called a public interiority: they express 'our public ethics and our private values' (Mead 17). The writer's querying of professional modes of authority resonates with the socio-political milieu of late twentieth century Australia, which is characterized, in part, by a rejection of professionalism on the part of 'mainstream Australia'. This is evidenced every day in the opinion pieces and talk-show commentaries of media spokespeople such as Luke Slattery, P. P. McGuinness and John Laws, who, purporting to represent the opinions of the 'general public' consistently question the validity of academics and other professionals. The fact that *The First Stone* was taken up and used as ammunition in the anti-academic and anti-feminist diatribes of many such commentators would seem to indicate Garner's acceptance by 'the mainstream'. The power of the divide between the 'general public' and academia, particularly in the case of *The First Stone*, is pointed out by Rosemary Sorenson when she asserts that:

When they [academic feminists and the literary establishment] turn their backs on someone with the reputation and power of Helen Garner, not to mention the ability, they have made a tactical error. They may find that Garner, outside, is in fact much more important and influential than they are, cloistered inside. They are talking to themselves while she is talking to the rest of us. (Sorenson 9A)

Is the power of the author such that intellectuals can never hope to contest it evenly in the public domain? Is Jenna Mead correct when she declares that 'I will never be as powerful or as popular as Helen Garner. I am neither a famous novelist nor any kind of cultural icon' (Mead 17)? Bronwen Levy has pointed out that 'the literary events of 1995 have shown ... that books, whether 'fact', 'fiction', or somewhere in between, do matter in the scale of things; that a work of fiction can contribute to, or even change, how we understand, or thought we understood the world' (Levy 115). *The First Stone* was heavily influenced by the power of Garner's name, and that name helped to place sexual harassment and contemporary feminism on the public agenda. In many senses it was Garner's celebrity status that provided academics with a point of entry to the public domain. Rather than lamenting their position as being always marginal and secondary to authors, academics should make the most of opportunities such as this to make their voices heard in an environment which is becoming increasingly hostile to professional spokespeople. I would like to second Levy's suggestion that academics should 'aim to ... maintain the energy, if not the rage, of the literary debate th[is] [book] ha[s]

engendered but to make sure, as a priority, that progressive ideas are central to it and help define it' (Levy 116). We will do this not by personally attacking Helen Garner but by intellectually engaging with the issues that she raises in a tone which is accessible to the publics they seek to influence. This will not be a simple task, given the uneasy acceptance of academic forms of expertise in the public sphere, but it is up to us to determine a means of achieving it.

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