

PANEL: FICTOCRITICISM

FICTOCRITICISM: PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

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In this brief discussion I do not want to define or theorise fictocriticism at any length but rather to talk anecdotally about (my own) fictocritical pedagogy and about what scope this genre offers me in my own writing. I want to preface the first part of this paper with some brief autobiographical comments in order to describe how fictocriticism evolved as a teaching tool for me.

I teach in an interdisciplinary School where students major and minor in their choice of two streams from among seven. Interdisciplinarity is further inscribed within the degree structure in the foundational first-year course and in cross-over units at second- and third-year level. The structure of the Honours year further reflects this interdisciplinarity in its offering of both core theory units and those that are disciplinarily specific.

The nature, degree and range of the School's interdisciplinarity is constantly being (re)negotiated, as is the formation of perceived hierarchies among the streams. Among the various pedagogies and epistemologies of the streams there are inevitably incommensurable differences which produce a degree of uncertainty and anxiety for the staff in negotiating disciplinary trajectories and in incorporating interdisciplinary pedagogies into specific units and streams. In resisting the impulse to hierarchise it is necessary to allow differences to co-exist and to refuse the will to colonise. It is necessary to affirm a certain looseness and flexibility in the School's program and to defend this against the boredom and repetition of foreseeable discourse, for there is indeed pressure from many sides to reinscribe disciplinarity. We experience this in the form of various institutional demands for bureaucratic accountability and administrative streamlining which are imposed from the federal level downwards. This impinges not only on our teaching but on our research. For example, the DEET Finance and Research Publication Annual Data Collection, the research quantum guidelines on which Curtin University bases its own Research Performance Index, endorses the more conventional forms of scholarship and knowledge production while deprivileging other genres of writing such as fiction.

The flexible and shifting terrain of the interdisciplinary School, while giving rise to an environment which can at times challenge the comfort zone of staff, ironically creates the very conditions in which students are enabled to exercise a high degree of creativity, initiative and self-motivated learning. Many students, in my experience, especially at third-year and Honours

levels, exhibit a desire to enter into dialogue with received knowledges and to challenge the notion of genre. For example, my students often express frustration with the discursive limits of the essay which has long enjoyed the status of the prime genre of written assessment in literary and cultural studies courses. They find the conventions of the so-called impersonal, disinterested voice of academic scholarship and the narrative closure of the essay limiting. They often question the hierarchisation and compartmentalisation of genres in the academy which generally disallow forms of written assessment other than the essay such as the importation of discursive strategies of fiction or poetry (or other genres) into the essay.

It is this type of hybridisation which appeals to them for it enables them to bring together the different knowledges they acquire in the university (rather than maintaining a kind of schizophrenic suspension between subjects or courses), to relativise them and to insert their own speaking position within the array of authoritative discourses that theory, for example, hegemonises. Some of my female students, in particular, experience the discursive orthodoxies of the academy as coercive and as prohibitive of all but a narrow range of speaking positions.

Fictocriticism is one practice which enables the interrogation and the shifting of the boundaries of the essay (or any other genre). In defamiliarising genre, fictocriticism interrogates the way in which academic knowledges are constructed. It can be seen as a 'space-clearing' strategy which enables the dialogisation, the hybridisation and the relativisation of knowledges. It foregrounds and problematises in very productive ways the conventions—especially those relating to closure—of the genres it invokes. Accordingly, it requires a different reading convention, one which accommodates open-endedness, multivocality, and non-linear narrative. I rather prefer the original seventeenth-century definition of the essay as 'an irregular undigested piece' to the contemporary incarnation of the genre as 'a finished treatise' (these definitions are from the *Storfer Oxford Dictionary*).

Fictocriticism, as an alternative model of knowledge production which foregrounds issues of relativity, hybridisation, contradiction and uncertainty by defamiliarising the conventions of genre, enacts the *process* of thought, of learning, of writing and reading, and the 'digestion' (or non-digestion) of knowledge. The open endedness and sometimes collage-like strategies of fictocriticism allow for the incorporation of troubling discursive problematics of language that conventional narratives of academic knowledge often elide, such as its non-referentiality, contradiction, exclusion, difference, doubt, inconclusiveness and ambivalence. In short, fictocriticism can expose the underbelly of intellectual endeavour, namely the inadequacy of language as a site of knowledge; Spivak invokes this crisis eloquently: 'what is known is always in excess of knowledge. Knowledge is never adequate to its subject' (254).

Perhaps I am straying here into the area of my own fictocritical writing practice which focuses on issues of knowledge, writing, storytelling and the body, and which does investigate crises of knowing; I invoke Gramsci's aphorism, 'pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will' (and in my fictocriticism I substitute, in effect, the 'body' for the 'will'), to counter what can amount to a certain bleakness in this project. In setting up this panel session on fictocriticism, Amanda Nettelbeck very generously gave us the licence to approach this topic from any angle we chose, and I request your indulgence to include here some of my own work and to talk about what the genre of fictocriticism offers me as a writer and an academic. Here are three short passages, 'love/story', 'frontier' and 'cross-hatched':

love/story

days and nights the heartbeat of waiting. the sky framed like a moment. the moment the space between us. the trajectories of eyes of words of hands this space sculptured by gesture by language all that i wanted to tell you i have told you you have taken it in your hands and turned it over turned it into a new story turning me over i was slowly astonished by the revelation this familiarity a story whose grammar unwinds itself the body unwinding before your eyes making a language a story of a woman in veils coming over the sand a genie who in a moment will appear and disappear leading you further into the story your eyes bring me here where i will wait the night sky is

framed by a thin moon and a cliff edge of cloud one more night i will wait within this crystal ball the past suspended in a dream a thick silence where symbols are dense with import, time condensed; this space of the wise woman the sage the magician the witch the reader the hermit who is always alone with the knowledge of solitude of waiting of watching the events about to unfold the story in the wings

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frontier

words etched into the cliff face of the page, chiselled like the gods, the kings of Petra, of Abu Simbil, staring you in the eye, and staring into the distance, the past from which you have emerged, stunned and forgetful, these words, black, unfathomable, silent, unyielding, these words, the ordinations that channelled your eyes and your steps in the ways of the world, these words and the chasms between them, the silence nudging at every pause, sounds like glass, sounds like sinews of an instrument stretching and sliding, sounds like peanuts dropped and rolling, everywhere the vibrations and the arc inscribed on silence, sculptor of language, the unspeakable, corralled within cities, the masterful stroke and eloquence of law, we tread these streets dazzled by power, breathless and breathing in that space where we read your lips, your line, majestic, dumb, these little strokes that nod like a mad bear, like a judge's hammer; stakes driven into virgin land, the frontier staked out each new day like the ocean remaking the shore, the body wet, wavering, stamped and recomposed, like silence it falls between language, after language it recovers its footing, slides, terminator, into its diet of steel, I learn the law you teach me: the new land is the old land printed upon, territory claimed and mapped, discovered, leaking the unspeakable stories of arrival, of the past stripped like skin; deaf, miming the passage across the desert, the galaxies, the table we sit at, hands folded, we speak, read, this knowledge is unexpected yet awaited; expected yet surprising, moments like bubbles release us to air, breathing in the pauses we speak

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cross-hatched

I breathe in a thousand moments linked in a pause a place between words where I let my heart tick like a heavy foot, thoughts the clear blood that moves me on, a clear pool like money, something I dropped and watched disappear, loss that could not be fathomed, my hand on my chest, cross-hatched, the warp and the weft, knife slicing down the length, split between us, I see red, swords drawn, mellee; a flag furled or unfurled, waiting, words inconsequential, shining and ricocheted, this commerce as deadly as any plot moving inexorably towards the discovery, the body still fresh from life, the murder weapon spirited away, the small blank space a word leaves, the trace of a smile, lines of flight, lines of knowing, cross-hatched, drawing me into this space, staked, inscribed and dissolved, stealing away like a glance, a heartbeat, a breath, a shovel striking the ground, a gash, hieroglyph, gesture, waiving the penalty for casting aside silence, giving just this much, a language written on the skin, pulse, absence, the impossibility of knowledge; the clear blood moves me on

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These fragments I organise into sequences and sometimes interleave with extracts from theorists, although the fragments themselves are self-reflexive and informed by the rhetoric and issues of poststructuralist theory and are thus hybrid texts which draw on a number of different discourses and registers. As I mentioned above, most of the fictocriticism I have been writing in past years explores the construction of knowledge in the practices of enunciation, that is, of

reading, writing, speaking and making stories, and how these practices in turn relate to the body. Many of these fragments are urban parables about knowledge production within the academy. I'm interested in knowledge as a process of fascination and narrative as a process of seduction. These fragments explore the restlessness of these processes, the impulses of shedding and renewal. I'm fascinated by the epistemic violence of the will to know, to name and to possess, particularly in the fields of colonisation and gender and also the contestatory and agonistic nature of knowledge production and the solitariness and loneliness of this process, similar to that of the novelist, as remarked upon by Walter Benjamin in 'The Storyteller'.

I'm interested in reading, writing and speaking as somatic practices implicated in other bodily functions such as breathing and listening and in how language and syntax embody rhythm. I'm especially interested in memory as one of the body's practices of knowledge. The relationship of the body to language and to memory is complex. Memory is a source of resistance for minority constituencies and, as the site of memory, the body is a vehicle of resistance. As such it often contests history (if one adopts, in this context, Halbwachs' somewhat contentious claim in *The Collective Memory* that history begins where memory stops and Peter Burke's more commonly agreed-upon adage that 'history is written by the victors'). Orality would appear to have a role in reliving memory and in the recovery of invisible and occluded histories, given that these have not been transformed into writing; as Paul Carter suggests, history excludes what is not written down (326). I'm interested in these exclusions and absences, in silence, the unspeakable and the unsayable, those stories that are elided by official and formal histories and knowledges. Stuart Hall suggests that identity is formed at the point where 'the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history' (44); it is this juncture that I excavate in my fictocriticism.

This genre creates for me, as it has done for my students, a space in which to bring together various discourses and registers which we are often required to compartmentalise and separate from each other in forums of academic discourse. In my own writing I translate poststructuralist rhetoric and issues into the arena of a radical subjectivity, where the subject is both the subject and the object of the investigation, which takes the form of a personal treatise or manifesto. The juxtapositioning of fragments, 'voices' or quotations in collage-like arrangements in various art forms has often been remarked upon as a feature of postmodernity and I'm sure that hybrid genres such as fictocriticism will continue to appeal to intellectuals both inside and outside the university.

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Note

- 1 The latter two of these pieces will appear in *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*, eds. Amanda Nettelbeck and Heather Kerr (forthcoming). I have published other ficto-criticism in *Hope and Fear: An Anthology of South Australian Women's Writing, 1894-1994*, eds. Anne Chittleborough, Annie Greet and Susan Hosking (Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, Flinders University, 1994).