

What Can Fictocriticism Do?

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Circular Quay, Sydney, October 2010.

[1] Along the Quay a man dances with a mannequin Velcroed to his feet and crotch, her hand fixed on his arse. They do the rumba, the tango, an ironic doll-like smile stretched upon his lips. They move across the semi-circle created by the spectators who have gathered to laugh and wonder at this scene. The crowd throws loose change into a hat put there for the purpose. The performance reaches its climax; the mannequin almost life-like, almost erotic. The audience cheer, laugh, point, exclaim, clap. It is over, she collapses lifeless. She tears at the Velcro that binds her feet and hands as he glides around the now moving crowd, the hat of loose change outstretched in his hand beckons for generosity. The semi-circle collapses, can no longer hold, and is now filled with the innumerable wanderings of lovers, tourists and spectators who promenade along the Quay. The space is theirs again and they make it their own.

[2] A woman sees me wondering in this space, she catches my eye, "I hate to see what he gets up to at home!" I smile or cringe, I do not know which. I walk on, my pencil and notebook in hand, and wonder why we need to articulate our common world ordinariness against the strangeness of others.

[3] Ferries rust stained, painted cream and green, motor into the Quay. Their deep diesel engines spinning in reverse, water broiling in mighty cellular thrusts at the stern. Men throw and tie ropes on bollards; passengers alight and disappear into the city that towers beyond. The ferries want to nudge each other like horses do in a stable, but they are held tight against car tires affixed to the Quay, they squeak and squeal in calm protest.

[4] A classical guitarist in battered black coat-tails and top hat plays Gypsy, Russian and Baltic tunes on his worn-out guitar. A hole, gnawed in the guitar-wood by the ardour of fingernails, imperceptibly gains with tempo and rhythm.

[5] People stare at me writing. I am a strange presence, still and observant in this free flowing space. Mums and dads walk by pushing toddlers. I look, missing my kids back in Geraldton, Western Australia, feeling a little unanchored in this place. A mother, a young thirty-something smiles at her daughter as some observation is murmured on the little one's lips. The mother smiles in honest fostering of her daughter's intelligence and being-towards-the world, but she also smiles for herself,

for her own acceptance and love of the mundane extraordinariness of parenting, for those uncanny and strange articulations that form in the minds of pre-schoolers. Concepts get mixed up, or appear as they truly are, infinite and momentary in their assemblage. Love, compassion, the tender human experience, is all mixed up, strolls by, and is an event itself.

[7] I move down the way. An old bush balladeer, Graham, plays a beaten up old guitar. He sings equally battered old-timey Australiana. The coarse flattened vowels are tinged with Irish sing-song rises and granite-y outcrops. We travel along with Graham in a kind of fundamental dryness, all flourish and tone momentary and illusionary. The soundscape more dry creek bed and piercing cicada than weeping willows and bluesy flowing rivers. His voice is hard and tight, yet beauty was harboured in all that epic flatness. A young guy is setting up next to Graham, Ray Ban "Wayfarer" sunglasses thrust forward on the bridge of his nose, shirt languidly tucked into tight black jeans. The old fella's set is almost over and as he rambles through his last tune he-gets-a-talkin' about the young fella.

[8] "This is Alex," says Graham, "he's gunna be singin' for you now. He's the voice of new music and he can play. I'll be on my way then, and be seeing you soon."

[9] Alex, before beginning, talks up the old fella and tells us all to buy his CD. Alex can sing, has a lovely timbre and command to his voice, it floats and drifts above the strolling crowd. People stop and pause, his rhythm and phraseology coming to earth around the bystanders. Where does this human voice come from? How does it touch us and move us in our daily lives? I suppose in all reality it is all around us in flattened vowels, little murmurings, guttural gestures and yelps, bubbling rhythms, sing-song rises. As if reading my thoughts in writing, a group of women dressed in fluoro fairy gear maraud through the promenade. They flit and flutter and bubble in bright giggles. A woman comes up to me and commands me to practice her bridal waltz. I am confused, I'm all mixed up by this odd coupling, but she has infectious energy and is persistent in its distribution, I cannot refuse. We walk, bridal waltz style, arm in arm down the promenade. Her friends take photos and hoot. People stop and watch at this strange performance. The fluoro bride to be and me "high-five" and I walk away with the notebook in the crook of my arm. I find another place to sit and write, a bit further down the way.

[10] An Aboriginal man in garish '70s boy-leg bathing trunks, white fishmonger gumboots and a blue Lycra surfer's rash vest stops his bike and rests his balls, longingly, on the cold metal cross-piece of the bike's frame. He watches for awhile and then is off, his arse tight against Lycra techno-colour, his white gumboots gently thumping his brown hairless calves with the rise and fall of the pedal stroke. A gay Aboriginal fishmonger riding a bike in a surfer's rash-vest, well hell, why not? It's as real and full

of human intent and desire as anything else I've seen promenading today.

[11] As I sit there, writing, a woman all heaving breasts, bangles and smoker's cough takes a seat nearby.

"Do you mind if I smoke," she asks.

"Sure, you reckon I can have one?"

She dove into her cavernous bag, a billum from Papua New Guinea I noted, and pulled out a pack of Peter Stuyvesant's.

"Ah," I said, "Your International Passport to Smoking Pleasure," as I remembered the packet inscription from years ago.

She chuckled, her laugh turning lung-ward, thick like molten tar. She looked down at my boots.

"Have you been in the desert?" She said it as a joke.

As a matter of fact, the red dust caught in the stitching of my Rossi Mulga boots was only a few days old. I talked about how I was in the Pilbara, Western Australia, two days before, working on a public art project in Karratha as an anthropologist.

[12] "Anthropology! I studied that at Sydney Uni in the 1960s but I dropped out. You know I never could understand all that kinship stuff. See I'm a single child, all that mother's father's sister's cousin's stuff, I just couldn't stay with it; it's all they seemed to talk about. I couldn't make any sense out of the whole thing. So I failed anthropology, or dropped out, or something happened."

[13] "What are you doing in Sydney?" she asked.

I told her that I was in Sydney for a conference on fictocriticism at The University of New South Wales called "What Can Fictocriticism Do?"

"What's that?"

"Well, it's like a new writing style in the social sciences, a new way of engaging in the real world reality of things. Like any good writing it has critical depth, insight, it observes life but does it through a story. You know, it uses things like character, setting, events in order to tell a story, but also has a kind of sub-plot to it as well; a sub-plot of social observation or critique. It is a method of writing where you become an actor in a social space rather than a removed observer. It's not about maintaining critical distance, but being an active participant with forces, objects, other actors. Like being part of something, rather than standing apart from what's going on."

[14] "This is so weird," she said, "I've just started an Australian Literature course at ACU (Australian Catholic University), it's called the Clementine Course for Homeless and Disadvantaged People, see

I'm homeless, I move around, shelter to shelter. But it's a great course. See I started at uni a long time ago, but never finished, you know like I told you, anthropology and that kinship stuff, oh things get in the way, it gets hard; life is hard. I started doing a course in community welfare but I got kidney disease because I took lithium for twenty years, see I'm bi-polar, so what am I going to do? I'm fifty-four. But I can't keep it up. This course is amazing, we are doing a play with the Bell Shakespeare Company, Louis Nowra's play *Golden Years*, do you know it, it's about these savages in Tasmania. These two men find them, some kind of lost white tribe, stuck in the 19th century, speaking this odd language. The men try and bring them into civilisation—Hobart—I'm one of the tribe, Betsheb, the world breaks into war, it's set in the 1940s and 1950s, I outlive everyone! I'm the lead role, I get locked in an insane asylum! Can you believe it! I didn't know how to act, because I talk so fast. This is the best year of my life, hell I've been chain smoking, it's not good for you. But how are you going to quit after so long?"

[15] Just then a gust of wind blew across the promenade, hats went flying, Alex's open guitar case tipped, scattering money across the pavement. He quit singing and collected up the gold and silver coins. Jane's cigarette blew out of her hand, she went into a frenzy trying to find it in her PNG string bag.

[16] "Oh no, did you see my cigarette, it blew out of my hand and into my string bag, shit I hope it doesn't burn, where is it? Did you see it?"

She was swimming headlong in her bag, looking for the lit cigarette.

"I keep packing and unpacking my bag, I'm so nervous, this man is after me. Oh shit I hope it doesn't burn all my stuff, all these papers I got, I got so many papers, Centrelink, oh shit here it is, still alright!"

[17] She erupts, molten bubbling in her lungs; her laugh, half-mad, intensifies. I wonder now if she is weeping. It seems everything could collapse, her exterior "face" melting into delight, pain, suffering. Nothing left but the stammering "speechlessness of sobs" as Alphonso Lingis says, or the abandoned shrieks of laughter (113). The tremor subsides, is grounded in speech.

[18] "I love this billum, some PNG friends gave it to me, they were from some village in the Sepik, they gave it to me, they called me sister. They made this statue at UTS (University of Technology, Sydney), radical students brought them out, they made this fertility sculpture, on the spot, out of sandstone, two figures you know, you should've seen the genitals! But all the middle-class students didn't like it, they took it down, put it around the back somewhere, they found it offensive. They bought all these

torches and radios for the village, but they didn't have any batteries!"

[19] She laughs again. I've never heard such a laugh, on the edge as it is of utter weeping; it threatens to dissolve her whole being.

[20] "They gave me a dog tooth necklace, but an Aboriginal woman took it off me with a hammer to the head." She laughs again. Is this weeping I wonder? It cannot be anything else.

[21] "This man, I got to get away from the man. I can't stop smoking. Look at that pigeon, sunbaking in the tanbark while we are rabbiting-on, isn't it great. I better go, keep on it. Nice to meet you. Isn't it funny meeting you here: that was real dust on your boots! I wish I had a camera. I would take a photo of your boots and put it on a blog. Nice jacket too. Where did you get that? Oops off I go again, do I talk fast? The director of the play tells me I talk too fast, it all just comes out."

[22] She was off. I was left sitting there on the Quay with my writing, this little story. A collection of actors and participants, observations and conversations, I tried to ground them in writing, somehow make it work like that, keep on it like that. I looked down at my boots and the red dust that fringed the stitching. My notebook too had smudges of red dust. Corners of pages were dyed red by the dust. I had worked it in inadvertently through the sweat and pressure of my hands as I wrote or as I flicked back and forwards across the recorded thoughts and experiences contained within. I came to rest at the last entry before I came to Sydney. I read what I wrote.

Karratha, W.A.

[23] The taxi driver was racist, small minded, pissed-off.

"Aborigines," he said with a dismissive and aggressive tilt to his head. "Art," he said it with similar dismay.

I could tell this conversation was going to be difficult.

"I used to live in Bunbury (south of Perth), it's always been a bit weird. I went to the Bunbury art awards a few years ago, there was a painting, nothing but orange, called *Outback*. I might put a canvas, all black and call it night sky."

"I mean fuck me, what's the world coming to. So you fly around the country talking to artists?"

I explained that I am an anthropologist and have mainly worked in Wiluna. But that I was working with the Roebourne art group as they developed concepts for public art sculptures. He interrupts.

"What's that you dig up bones and shit?"

“Nah,” I reply, “that’s an archaeologist, I work with live people.”

“What’s anthropology?” He asks.

“It’s the study of human cultures. Like, now, I’ve been working with these artists as they develop concepts for some public art sculptures in Bayton-West, you know that knew subdivision in Karratha...” He cut me off.

“I lived in Broome, couldn’t go back there. They certainly have a very different concept of life. I’ve been here for a year, can’t fuckin’ stand the place. So these artists what kind of work did you say.”

“Um, well, the works, they’re big, like kids could climb on them, or hide in them, or you could rest in their shade, you know public sculptures. The sculptures are based largely in pattern, texture, organic forms, made out of concrete and steel, you know. They are based on things important to Indigenous culture: like cycles, the ecology of life, the connection between the eternal and present and the travels of the ancestral beings, you know ‘the dreamtime’, but the Yindjibarndi don’t call it the dreamtime, they say ‘when the world was soft’. I like that. The sculptures will be part of the environment, they’ll change in the light, and expand in the heat. You know they’ll audibly creak in the cool, they’ll cast shadows and create hollows and play-spaces. They can be climbed on and touched, they’ll radiate warmth at night. They are sculptures that are alive with the life within and around them.”

“Fuck me, they’ll be quite something then.”

[24] Luckily we had arrived at the airport. I opened the door and was blasted by the dry Pilbara heat, that awesome sun beat down clarifying all things to their essence. It was a relief after the stuffed atmosphere of the taxi. I had the beginnings of a headache. I felt frustrated, somehow exposed now to the latent violence of this place, I could feel the tension in my neck. The whole way to the airport we had been battered with an endless procession of mining trucks and 4WDs. The intensity of industrial activity was mind blowing: mine sites, trucks, gas plants, water pipes, men in high-viz work clothes, populated the landscape in frenetic clusters, everything literally glowed. Things were moving: people, raw materials, energy in all directions at once. It was like watching people prepare for disaster, some awesome deadline was nigh, it was reckless, somehow abandoned to a new kind of reality. A post-apocalyptic civilization was taking shape, or had already happened.

[25] I walked into the airport, checked in, got a coffee. The machine was broken, so there was free instant coffee in polystyrene cups. I shovel in two teaspoons. It is acrid, bitter, but somehow compliments my mood. It heightens it in fact. I can smell the fumes from the cup dissolving in my coffee, stinging my nostrils. I overhear a conversation behind the airport’s kiosk. The staff are discussing how to tell a cheese sausage from a normal sausage. Three of them peer into the Bain Marie like seekers on a great quest, their hair glowing in haloes from the golden light. They gently

prod the oily and glossy sausages. See how this one has little hairs on it, that is the normal one. The cheese one has, see, he prods and turns the sausage, it is more red, and has these little things on the end, see like a pig tail. Oh said the other two in unison. They continue to peer and prod and be a little uncertain. I grabbed my things, leaving their contemplative stares at the eternal present and headed for the transit lounge.

[26] I walked through the security check. I had with me my black plastic dust-proof Pelican case. I just knew the explosives guy was going to pull me up and want to run some residue tests on that briefcase. It's one of those standard issue briefcases for terrorists, bomb makers and strangely enough anthropologists working in the field. The security guy was Indian-Australian, he checked my briefcase and we talked about the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. I liked the inversion: the white middle class anthropologist in the field as it were being pulled up by the Australian-Indian customs official because of his suspicious briefcase.

[27] I found a seat in the transit lounge and suffered through the bitching of junior mining executives as they pissed and moaned about the shitty rules that govern their requital and reimbursement of travel expenses. As they vented their angst against HR I was beginning to wonder what was real and important, none of this seemed to make any sense to me. The world up here constantly peppered with fuck and cunt, was obscene and barbaric, a kind of apocalyptic display of base industrialisation and masculine bravado, but also strangely distracted, like people weren't quite here, there life was elsewhere. But more so than that everyone seemed vaguely pissed-off, that somehow they were missing out on some cut, that some other cunt was making more money than them, that somehow they were losing out to women, HR managers, Abos, or the Chinese. We were called on to the plane and I walked onto the tarmac. The tarmac was shining in the heat, sweet and acrid vapours stung my nostrils. I trudged up the aluminium steps to the plane with the other passengers. I paused on the top landing and touched the pop-riveted outer sheet of the plane's exterior. I marvelled at the thin skin that was soon to carry us safely as we hurtled through the air. Such a thin line between life and death, soaring and terror, the straight line and the flat spin, being here and not here. I was with these thoughts, both marvellous and terrifying as I found my seat and fastened my belt. Like many others who aren't quite sure about air travel I confronted my own mortality and suddenly with tremendous longing missed my kids and wife back home.

[28] The engines started up. I was sitting in good view of the turbine. It spun with furious intensity, its high-pitched vigour pulsing in surges of power and high pitched whining. We taxi, the wings almost flap as we roll over imperfections on the tarmac. We pick up speed and noise and fear, the wings

evidently flexing and trembling. The turbines sing with awesome power. We displace air, the plane thumps as it leaves the ground and surges into the air. I try to write as pure brute force pushes me against the seat. I cannot write in the midst of such tremendous momentum and metaphysical violence. So I sit back as my ears push and pop against the pressure. I turn my neck against the thrust and look out the window as we fly over luminescent salt pans, fluoro-green tailings dams, radiant flotation ponds, and the epically devastated country of mine-sites. If there can be beauty in destruction this was pay dirt. The suburbs of Karratha, neatly laid in a grid begin to fade, with our increasing height, into the sensual folds of the Pilbara landscape.

[29] Forces begin to equalize, my neck no longer strains, my eyes relax on the landscape. The country down there is big and beautiful and takes your breath away. Red and brown hills capped with rocky tops roll beneath as rocky gullies filled with white gums and Spinifex break out in intense jumbled streaks. That country down there, so hard and unrelenting, but also I know, soft, beautiful, present. Even in the airplane hundreds of meters above, I feel some of its presence. The trace of dust in my nostrils, the astonishing vault of archaic stars, the warmth of that red rock as it radiates warmth and bodily presence. Some of that intensity is with me, it lingers in the cabin, settles on my mind. We climb higher and they begin to serve tea and coffee, our flight path flattens out, the transition from hard earth to weightless air almost forgotten. Wisps of clouds hover and drift and float by. More clouds form as we climb. I see dark patches on the earth. I immediately think they are hills, but they are in fact the shadows of clouds. I watch these shadows drift so beautifully over the landscape, effortlessly gliding over hills, across plains, hovering over salt-lakes. All this writing is beginning to make me sick, I can feel the tension in the back of my neck increasing, I give up and wonder what to do.

[30] I looked up and my eyes wandered along the promenade, momentarily followed others. People promenaded, ferries motored into port, the city of Sydney as always buoyant and radiant in the sun. I sat with my notebook and wondered into space. I thought of that conference, "What Can Fictocriticism Do?" Well, I wondered, *what does it do?* I looked all around me, and my eyes came to rest on what was before me, the Quay, the travellers, the innumerable wanderings of lovers and tourists, my little battered notebook smudged with dust. What does it do, this fictocriticism? Like so many fictions and criticisms we tell ourselves, I wrote in my little book, it elucidates a claim to the real and to truth. We like to share this, I continued, with our community in order to make it reality. Something like a momentary assemblage beckoning for generosity full of molten bubbling laughter and coarse flattened vowels that is perhaps also weeping.

Works Cited

Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print.