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### *Theorising the madwoman: fictocritical incursions - a performance*

#### *Abstract*

*'Theorising the madwoman: fictocritical incursions - a performance' is an intervention into the politics of naming and writing about women's madness in literature. Using fictocritical tactics, this article stages a dialogue between the madwoman and the critic to make visible 'the fiction of the disembodied scholar' deployed in textual criticism. Sometimes speaking as the madwoman, sometimes as the feminist critic, I aim to destabilise the voice of the objective scholar, while continuing to lay some claim to it. Polyvocal in arrangement, discordant and offbeat in its strategies, and fictocritical in its tactics and stylistics, this article is an incursion into, rather than an interpretation of, women's madness. Using a hybrid of fictional strategies, feminist scholarship, and personal experience, I allow the madwoman to interrupt, challenge and resist the interpretive project, by careening into it. Provisional, disorderly and subversive, fictocriticism offers a way of thinking through, rather than thinking about women's madness. It seems particularly suited to an investigation of the madwoman in literature, as it dramatises the very disorder and instability the madwoman is said to embody.*

*Keywords: women's madness; feminist literary criticism; fictocriticism*

Eccentrics require new kinds of biographies, but they may be so 'dishevelled - in such dishabile (sic) from their long obscurity and fantastic behaviour' that they will be illegible. Illness requires a new kind of language - but it may be incomprehensible. (Lee 1997: 194)

This epigraph, taken from Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf (1997), derives from Woolf's essay 'The Eccentrics' (published 1919), and records Woolf's own concerns with how madness might be written about, and what stylistic and imaginative strategies might be used to depict madness. Hermione Lee shows that Woolf's naming of eccentricity here was a strategy to re-think madness, which, in the language of the day, referred to 'idiots', 'imbeciles', 'lunatics' and the 'mentally defective', with little distinction between intellectual disability and mental illness (Lee 1997: 188-195). Woolf's horror at seeing a group of asylum inmates on an outing is later fictionalised in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), where Septimus Smith, who has his own interest in critiquing the diagnosis and treatment for 'shell-shock', refers to the inmates as 'a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud)' (cited Lee 1997: 188).

In re-positioning madness as eccentricity, Woolf distances herself from the cruel labels used to make meaning about madness, and reclaims her own mental illness as the more neutral 'eccentricity'. Woolf's call for 'new biographies', 'dishevelled and in *déshabille*' as they may be, precedes the French feminist theory and poststructuralist theory that gave rise to the split in feminist debate around the politics of women's madness: its status as liberatory and redemptive on one side of the split, and a regressive retreat into unintelligibility on the other. Women's madness may have been read as a symbol of feminist protest against confining regimes of gender and culture, but the (in)validity of this very positioning within feminist interpretation points to larger anxieties framing literary feminisms.

These debates inform the work I am undertaking in a 'conventional' PhD about representations of women's madness in four novels by Australian women writers: Christina Stead's *The Man*

*Who Loved Children* (1941), Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story* (1985) and its companion narrative *Dark Places* (1996), and Elizabeth Jolley's *Palomino* (1984). The novels are linked by several themes: daughters growing up in the confines of dysfunctional patriarchal families, incest, and madness. The questions of who is labelled mad and why are central to my concerns. Incarceration, whether in asylums or within confining psychotic family models, and how to escape it, offers productive ways of engaging with questions of gender relations, patriarchal culture, and power. Women's madness may be an old topic for feminist literary criticism, but the theme of women's madness recurs in contemporary literature, too. For example, Gail Jones' *Sorry* (2007) features a depressive mother and a traumatised daughter, while Hazel Smith's poetic multimedia work, *the writer, the performer, the computer program, the madwoman* (2004a) charts the tensions of the writer/performer, 'dramatised as a power struggle between the writer and other forces, a balancing act between madness and sanity, and an exercise in sexual politics' (2004b). Smith makes the point that the madwoman is sometimes read as nearly male, at other times as nearly female (2004a), demonstrating the sexual politics at work. Madness may have become marginal in feminist literary criticism, but it has not gone away in the works of women writers - or should that be writers who are women? - informed by the politics of gender and madness. However, I have grappled with a set of questions about theorising the madwoman: who am I to speak about 'madness'? What does it mean to speak about it? Is there a disinterested critical standpoint, or is this just a posture of objectivity? What is my speaking position? And how should I speak?

This article therefore takes Woolf's re-conceptualising of madness as a point of departure in devising strategies to theorise the madwoman, and charts the critical debates in feminist literary criticism with the aim to make a fictocritical incursion into these debates. Using fictocritical tactics, I stage a dialogue between the madwoman and the feminist literary critic. I take up a range of positions, sometimes speaking as the madwoman, sometimes as the feminist critic, to perform the split in feminist theory and destabilise the voice of the objective scholar, while continuing to lay some claim to it. Polyvocal in arrangement, discordant and offbeat in strategies, and fictocritical in its tactics and stylistics, I make an incursion into, rather than an interpretation of, women's 'madness'. Neither life writing nor analysis, this paper fuses fictional strategies, personal experience and feminist scholarship. The madwoman appears as a character who interrupts, challenges and resists the interpretive project, careening into the scholarly text with the intent to disrupt it. Fictocritical writing operates as 'a kind of hysterical writing - a writing not moving simply from position to position, but between positions as well; a writing refusing and incapable of "an ordered account"' (Susan Stewart, cited Gibbs 1997). Any resulting incoherence is entirely deliberate and strategic, as it is designed to replicate the instability the madwoman embodies.

### **Approaching the madwoman in literature: feminist debates**

Most writing about women's madness uses conventional literary interpretive approaches, so that 'the' madwoman and 'her' discourse act as a series of figures, tropes, texts and subtexts to be analysed and interpreted by the feminist literary critic. This reproduces the figures of the analyst and analysand of the psychoanalytic relationship. As Hermione Lee points out, 'do we need - or do we have the right - to put Virginia Woolf on the couch and make more sense of her than she can make of herself?' (Lee 1997: 198). As interrogators of literature, we enact power relationships: the feminist critic acts as the arbiter of knowledge about the literary madwoman, decoding her 'madness', explicating it, deconstructing it, and linking it to the over-arching sociocultural framework in which women's madness has been produced and reproduced. This may take the form of an investigation of the heroine's psychic topography, or a textual analysis of the patriarchal machinery that engendered it, or a discourse analysis, among a range of useful critical approaches. Within these critical and discursive frameworks, madness has become the site and terrain of women's inequality and gendered oppression (Gilbert & Gubar 2000 [1979]; Kate Millett 1972; Elaine Showalter 1985, 1998; Toril Moi 1985). Such approaches have raised important questions about the institutionalisation of gendered inequality, as well as interrogating the violence and inadequacy of psychiatric discourse and psychiatric institutions to understand feminine experience, whether disordered or not.

But equally, the interpretive enterprise is not a neutral one, for the scholar locates the work in the field, determines its literary merit or otherwise, and is elevated to the position of 'expert', so that the scholarly voice can drown out the writer's. As Anna Walwicz asks: 'Does one plan one's position, the writerly position? Is it "Look at me Ma - I'm going to be a marginal writer!"?' (1998: 273). Walwicz argues that what 'needs to be rewritten is the institutionalised study of literature and its arrogant stance' which positions the writer as someone to be 'placed, named,

labelled, positioned, [who] does not define herself. She becomes subservient to the gaze of another. The author is colonized' (1998: 273-74). The dangers are that when the writing becomes the object of study, to be theorised, understood, accepted or rejected by the 'expert knower' in the form of the literary critic on its literary merit, the writing no longer speaks, but is spoken for, as the 'expert' text of the critic subsumes the writer's. Or as Hazel Smith puts it: 'I am a writer, I am a performer, I am a computer program, I am a madwoman. Texts come back to me, texts I have not spoken. Do you think you know me? I keep reaching for my voice, but it has been plucked and purged' (2004a). Such positions need to be considered by literary feminists so that we do not produce knowledge about women's writing at the price of colonising the woman writer.

The madwoman occupies opposing locations on either side of the split in feminist theory, and I cite some examples here to demonstrate this. For Mary Jacobus, women's madness is a 'transgression of literary boundaries - moments when structures are shaken, when language refuses to lie down meekly, or the marginal is brought into sudden focus, or intelligibility itself refused', to reveal 'not only the conditions of possibility within which women's writing exists, but what it would be like to revolutionise them' (Jacobus 1989: 56). Critics such as Gilbert and Gubar (2000) celebrate this as the symbol of the defiant and furious feminine that will not be contained under patriarchal control, visible in the disruptions and ruptures in women's writing. Madness, within this framework, is imagined as revolution. Transgressive, disorderly, and redemptive, it represents the 'innate, disruptive, revolutionary force of the female' in a process by which 'the madwoman, articulating "otherness", becomes the subject' (Baym 1992: 202-203). For the feminist interpretive community, if ever such a cohesive and unified community existed, the madwoman had been elevated to a status in which she became 'the representative of femininity' (Martha Noel Evans, cited Showalter 1998: 56; emphasis added). The politics of naming this femininity as disordered seemed to have escaped some feminist theorists, in their rush to celebrate the madwoman as 'symbolic of women's silencing in the institutions of language, culture and psychoanalysis' (Showalter 1998: 56).

However, Nina Baym in 'The madwoman and her languages: why I don't do feminist literary theory' (1992), takes issue with feminist critical approaches that celebrate madness and excess as emblematic of feminist protest. Baym concedes that madness is stylistically visible in *écriture féminine*, writing that is 'open, non-linear, exploded, fragmented, polysemic', but this fragmented writing is also 'congruent with the idea of the hopelessly irrational disorganised "weaker sex" desired by the masculine Other' (1992: 204). Such strategies come close to re-inscribing madness as the province of women because of 'a recurring identification of the female in *écriture féminine* with madness, anti-reason, darkness, mystery' (Stanton, cited Baym 1992: 203). Shoshana Felman has likewise argued that madness is 'quite the opposite of rebellion. Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation' (Felman 1975: 2). Marta Caminero-Santangelo, in her book *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998), also rejects the madwoman as a symbol of resistance to patriarchal power, arguing that the postmodern subject and the mad should be distinguished, despite the seeming parallels between multiple personalities and multiple identities. She concludes that madness is a form of total silencing and an untenable position for feminist action, as it symbolises only the disintegration of the speaking subject: 'madness is not simply personally disabling, it is absolutely antithetical, at a fundamental level, to feminism' (1998: 179). The madwoman was in a bind: possibilities for madness to be written about using experimental tactics resulted in charges of 'unintelligibility' (Vickery & Henderson 2009: 4). The problem of women's madness enacted a bipolar split in feminist discourse.

It is important to note that the transformative potential of women's madness as a strategy of feminist protest has been discounted at a historical moment when literary feminisms 'are facing a period of crisis' (Vickery & Henderson 2009: 1). Indeed, these very debates about the intelligibility of women's madness may have contributed to the sense of crisis in literary feminisms, where 'the initial thrill and excitement experienced by scholars and writers has been replaced by a different range of affect: melancholy, ennui, boredom, grieving, frustration, and sometimes shame, a shift paralleled in feminism more generally' (Vickery & Henderson 2009: 1). The notion that we have entered a post-feminist world, a world shaped and informed by feminisms to the extent that perhaps feminisms are no longer necessary, certainly precipitates a sense of crisis, situated around whether a post-feminist world means 'moving beyond gender' (Vickery & Henderson 2009: 12). But, as Rachel Blau du Plessis contends in 'Gender Buttons' (2009: 25), it is a 'post-patriarchal' rather than a post-feminist culture that feminists aim to achieve, and countering gender injustice is central to this project. Vickery and Henderson note that recent efforts to consolidate literary feminism and authorise 'a canon of feminist criticism seem to arise from a sense of its instability' (2009: 2). They cite the editors' motivation in

compiling *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Plain & Sellers 2007) to counter a dangerous 'amnesia' and the 'increasing spectrality' of the feminist project that threatens to dilute the power and gains of feminist literary criticism as a body of theory constituting a political intervention into literary studies (2009: 2). The fictocritical incursions into women's madness that I stage here respond also to these concerns, which echo the very terms that describe women's madness.

### **Fictocriticism: strategies and tactics**

Fictocriticism offers an opportunity to engage with the bipolarity enacted by the split among feminists about women's madness in literature. Feminist literary criticism can represent another prisonhouse of language, in which the madwoman is enclosed anew in the attic of feminist interpretation. Rather than take up a position on one side or the other of this interpretive split, fictocritical approaches to women's madness allow the feminist critic to engage with both sides of the debate: not to say anything new, precisely, but to find a new way of speaking about the madwoman, from a new location. Fictocriticism not only situates itself as a practice emanating from 'the space between' the borders demarcating fiction from criticism, but also stages the very tensions that this location produces. Fictocriticism engages with the bipolarity enacted by this split in feminist literary theory by performing it.

As a mode of critical interrogation, fictocriticism is indebted to the work of French and experimental feminists such as Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig and Kristeva, whose works intervene into the masculinist structures of the academy and its disciplines (Gibbs 1997). Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva are arguably among the earliest fictocritical practitioners, interrupting the scholarly interpretative canon of psychoanalysis to write the bodies of women into that discourse and to interrogate the patriarchal assumptions that underpin this canon. Fictocriticism also emerges at a particular historical juncture: postmodernity. With roots in *écriture féminine*, broadly understood as a means of 'writing the body', fictocritical writing shares feminist concerns about the social positioning of women. In this, it mirrors the broadly feminist project to write back to, and against, the constraints of established literary forms and critical approaches. Literary feminists are located within contemporary literary schools of thought as much as we aim to critique and challenge them. Feminism haunts literary criticism, aiming to carve a discursive space within the body of work that constitutes literary analysis.

Fictocriticism is a branch of that engagement, one that Alison Bartlett suggests 'could be the future of feminism' (2006: 68). Although Bartlett writes this in 2006, it is clear that fictocriticism has been part of the currency of feminist scholarship in Australia since 1998, when *The Space Between: Women Writing Fictocriticism* (Kerr & Nettelbeck 1998) was published. Bartlett published *Jamming the Machinery: Contemporary Australian Women's Writing* in the same year, a text that interrogates Australian women writers' approaches to writing and their responses to French feminist theories of *écriture féminine*. Bartlett's reading of contemporary Australian women's writing mixes chapters of conventional literary criticism with pieces of more experimental writing, including a play, a fictocritical piece, and a speech. Bartlett describes her strategy:

Rather than assume a single, linear, consistent and authoritative voice as an author, I want my narrative to resound with the many women's voices on which I have drawn to produce this text. I want it to reflect the 'different economy' of *écriture féminine*. (1998: 3)

This different economy, outlined in Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, positions *écriture féminine* as subversive, undermining and disrupting expectations of the conventional literary text (Irigaray, cited Bartlett 1998: 3). Bartlett argues that *écriture féminine* 'is a style of writing marked primarily by its disruption to conventional reading, writing and representational practices as produced through, and supported by patriarchal values', which offers women writers ways 'of jamming the theoretical machinery itself' (Bartlett 1998: 1). Bartlett follows Irigaray's argument in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that 'woman' is what 'resists adequate definition' because cultural constructions of women are saturated in patriarchal ideologies that are insidious and invisible (Irigaray 1997: 251). Bartlett contends that women writers who adopt the techniques of *écriture féminine* actively and consciously disrupt patriarchal codes in the production of writing as 'counter-strategy', while 'inventing new ways for women to speak and write about themselves as women, rather than through the narrative machinery of patriarchy' (Bartlett 1998: 1-2). Bartlett's play uses fictocritical devices so that the seven authors as well as the theorists 'inhabit' the same 'space', allowing Bartlett not only to highlight common themes in their approaches to writing and theory, but also to make visible the constructedness and 'staging' of discourse. The seven

women authors therefore function as characters, and rather than being relegated to the status of objects of research, they take up positions as subjects. *Jamming the Machinery* is a sustained fictocritical performance, in the tradition of the French feminists themselves.

Anna Gibbs, in her article, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences' (2005), argues that fictocritical work reverses academic approaches that either reduce the voice of the 'other' to one needing 'critical interpretations and translations', or appropriate it. Fictocriticism seeks 'to allow the voice of the other to interrogate the voice of theory ... to reveal its particularity and partiality' (Gibbs 2005). It is therefore a *political* intervention in that it challenges the authority of academic discursive modes. In 'Bodies of Words: Feminism and Fictocriticism: Explication and Demonstration' (1997), Gibbs suggests fictocriticism is primarily a strategy that 'blends essay and fiction, shifts suddenly between fiction and poetry, makes use of indeterminate forms like the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés - all manner of literary detritus'. Fictocriticism is deconstructive, multivocal, 'necessarily performative' and 'entirely tactical' (Gibbs 2005). For Gibbs (2005), it is a 'haunted writing', its numerous voices working in unison or in counterpoint, sometimes 'in deliberate discord' to challenge the supposedly neutral, objective, academic standpoint of disciplinary practitioners. Neither fiction nor criticism in the conventional sense, it speaks from the interstices, 'the space between' those distinct genres. In her introduction to *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*, Amanda Nettelbeck writes that fictocriticism is 'hybridized writing' that appears 'at the intersection of literature and postmodernism', but forms a new type of text (Nettelbeck 1998: 3). It:

moves 'between the poles of fiction ('invention'/'speculation') and criticism ('deduction'/'explication'), of subjectivity ('interiority') and objectivity ('exteriority'). It is writing that brings the 'creative' and 'critical' together - not simply in the sense of placing them side by side, but in the sense of mutating both, of bringing a spotlight to bear upon the known forms in order to make them 'say' something else. (Nettelbeck 1998: 3-4)

She goes on to say that fictocriticism is less a 'discrete literary genre' than it is a practice, a 'strategy for writing' (1998: 4). Such a strategy, of course, replicates some of the qualities that women's madness can be said to articulate in literary texts, shaking the conventional literary and interpretive structures to bring the marginal into sudden focus, as well as engaging in the open, fragmented and non-linear discourse that marks the terrain of *écriture féminine*. But these tactics act as a form of staging, to mark the particular constructedness of the interpretive standpoint. A fictocritical incursion into women's madness enables speaking *as* the madwoman, rather than simply *as* the critic. It seems particularly suited to an investigation of the madwoman in literature because, in mirroring hysteria, it dramatises the very disorder and instability that the madwoman is said to embody. It might even act as a new form of biography, the one that Woolf postulated might be dishevelled and in *déshabille*, because there is in this way of speaking about madness a certain disrobing.

### **The Intelligible Madwoman Speaks:**

When first I invited the madwoman to my rooms she said:

'I'm abnormal, angry, acting out a devalued female role, barmy as a bandicoot, batty, bonkers, berserk, beside myself, barking (arf-arf), cooked, cracked, crackers, certifiable, *cuckoo, cuckoo!*

**BUT ALSO**

damaged, deranged, defective, dingbats, dis-eased, difficult, discursively constructed, excessive, and emotionally extreme.

she's a fruitbat,

funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha, a fucked unit, a fuck-up, fucked,

gone troppo,

hyper, hysterical, histrionic, historically constituted,

insane, irrational, inherently weak, AND in-valid

kangaroo loose in the top paddock, that's me!

loony tunes, loopy, (here we go, loo-by loo)

manic, moony, morally weak, MENTAL!

I'm numb, nuts, not all there, not playing with a full deck, need my head read.

I'm off-beam, off-tap, off with the pixies,

off my face, tits, head, tile, trolley and scone, off my rocker, off the air, off the wall,

out of my mind, out of my tree, over the edge,

a total psycho,  
queer, round the bend, round the twist, running amok, revolutionary,

screwed up, got a screw loose, a stubby short of a sixpack, stark raving mad, a  
schizo... and subversive, too

unhinged, unbalanced, unruly, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, unsound, unwilling to  
take up my adult female role,  
as well as

violent, wild, wrong in the head, *womba* [1]...In short, mad as a cut snake.'

To name herself such seemed excessive, perhaps histrionic?

'Histrionic personality disorder is bogus. Are you aware that the only diagnostic  
criterion you have to meet is being a woman? Men with the same symptoms don't get  
named histrionic' (Denise Russell 1995: 41).

Borderline?

'That's not a diagnosis. It's an insult. And which classification do you use to arrive at  
that particular label? I don't seem to have the required number of piercings for that to  
hold up.[2] Dr Ali's 'correlation' of piercings and borderline personality disorder is  
scientifically valid, is it? Yeah, right!'[3]

### The disembodied scholar

Fictocriticism deliberately blurs the distinctions between fiction and theory to make visible the constructedness of the narrative 'I' of theory. In fictocriticism, consciousness is not severed from the body, dislocated and disembodied. Theory is not an exteriority uninformed by bodily affects, impulses and drives. Thought does not become exterior simply by being emptied out onto a blank page, assembled into words and sentences and paragraphs and forms. These are merely organising structures, narrative devices, and rhetorical ploys. The voice of theory is a fictional device like any other. The 'I' that it constructs is the 'fiction of the disembodied scholar' (Waldby, cited Bartlett 2006: 60), a textual construct that only appears 'neutral' and 'objective'. Much like feminist literary criticism, the fictocritical voice is concerned with subjectivity at least as much as it is concerned with ontology and epistemology. It is concerned with bodies themselves as they produce and reproduce knowledge, and with the politics of writing. However, both its form and its discursive tactics pose a range of problems for the feminist scholar. It requires border crossing, rather than occupying a position on one side of the fiction/theory divide. This is of course not the accepted or conventional standpoint from which theory deconstructs the literary text. A fictocritical approach runs certain risks because it collapses the posture of critical distance required of the interpretive performance.

Gibbs (2005) suggests using fictocritical strategies is an 'act of defiance, an attempt to exorcise the paralysing interdictions of disciplinary academic authority'. The fictocritical project is subversive, resisting the 'policing' of the disciplines and the 'peremptory dictation of the institutional superego' (2005). The language she uses here is explicitly critical of academic regimes of power and authority and their required allegiance to disciplinary forms and conventions. Fictocriticism bends the rules, even while it remains aware of them: it is transgressive, performative, resistant and experimental, critical of the body of theory at the same time as it works to insert itself into the field as an intellectual and political practice. It is a form of thinking *through*, rather than thinking *about*. It enables speaking *as* the madwoman, rather than simply *as* the critic. It seems particularly suited to an investigation of the madwoman in literature because it dramatises the very disorder and instability that the madwoman is said to embody. It might even act as a new form of biography, the one that Woolf postulated might be dishevelled and in *déshabille*, because there is in this way of speaking about madness a certain disrobing.

### Un/intelligible discourse

A formal diagnosis would take months. The madness particular to the madwoman would have to be established according to formal diagnostic criteria that circulated within

medical, psychiatric, feminist and cultural studies disciplines. To limit an analysis to only one of these disciplinary practices would be to ignore the meanings that attach to, and the politics behind, these forms of labelling. Naming this figure as ‘mad’ would have to be supported through an analytical frame that considered the socio-cultural mechanisms and discursive frameworks invested and implicated in this positioning. Scarcely had I formulated these thoughts than she spoke again, enunciating clearly: ‘Related Keywords: the Psyche; Illogicality; Stupidity; Foolishness’. I could hear the semiotic emphasis, the Capitalisation of Important Words:

‘Such labels are to be understood in opposition to terms such as all there, clear-headed, composed, coherent, cogent, legitimate, lucid, logical, present, normal, ordered, rational, reasonable, responsible, sane, sober, valid, well-balanced. In one’s right mind. *Stands to reason*. Doesn’t mention phal-logo-centric anywhere.’

Having staked out the field, and marshalled the terms, she sat back with her arms crossed.

‘You realise that if I meet the standards for mentally healthy behaviour for a woman (passivity, dependence), I’ll fail for a mentally healthy adult independent of sex? And if I make a good job of being a woman and following my role, I can be diagnosed histrionic or hysterical? (Russell 1995: 32-37). Did I mention illogical before?’

I could only interpret this as a challenge to me as analyst, expert and critic. Her appearance, symptoms, somatic experiences, and lived experience might be decoded through a critical lens and standpoint. Translating her discourse, decoding the symptoms written on her body, re-presenting them back to her in ways that she could view objectively, making her disorder intelligible to her and others, that was the analytic task. That it was reductive did not occur to me until much later. The critical posture I had adopted unravelled. For the madwoman *was* me.

### The critic as ‘knower’

The ‘mad’ can only appear once the discursive field creates the space for them as objects to be dissected, scrutinised, labelled, classified, medicalised, detained, coerced and controlled, subjected to regimens of therapy that may be brutal, primitive and damaging. Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (2001: xii) argues that the discourse of modern psychiatry is a ‘monologue of reason about madness’ rather than a common language spoken by doctor and patient. Psychiatry is a ‘broken dialogue’ that requires the silencing of the patient so that the discourse of the mad can be translated and decoded by the psychiatrist as intermediary. Within that dialogue, the physician’s role is to impose order, constraint and conformity. Knowledge about madness comes at the price of the patient’s silencing, while the doctor is elevated to position of expert.

#### I(nte)rruptions

‘What name do you go by?’ she interrupted.

‘Anna; I’m Anna.’

‘Anna Livia Plurabelle? Anna-lyst: Anna-leptic, Anna-esthetic, Anna-gram, Anna-rchist, Anna-paest, Anna-thema.’

(Ana: anecdotes or literary gossip about a person (plural); a collection of a person’s memorable sayings (singular).

Analect: collection of short literary extracts.)

‘You can call me Polly,’ she said.

‘Polyvocal? Polyphonic? Polysemous?’ I countered.

‘Polyhistor. Polemic.’ She laughed. ‘But you said, before, that you were me. That I was you. How can you occupy two distinct and separate locations at the same time?’

‘Polly/anna’.

### The *mestiza* consciousness

Gloria Anzaldúa has argued that to occupy two distinct locations is to receive multiple and opposing messages, often from incompatible frameworks, which constitute ‘a struggle of

borders, an inner war' (Anzaldúa 1997: 234). This 'clash of voices' results in 'mental and emotional states of perplexity', and gives rise to a 'dual or multiple personality' (1997: 233-34). Rather than take up a position on one shore, the *mestiza* communicates a 'conscious rupture' with 'oppressive traditions', becomes 'willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar' (1997: 238). This defamiliarisation is rather like what occurs in mental illness. In Anzaldúa's work, this *mestiza* consciousness works to break down racialised thinking that has oppressed indigenous Mexican people. In my teaching in Indigenous Studies, border crossing is a legitimate, and daily, tactic. But it poses certain dangers in my research into women's madness. For me, taking up a *mestiza* position requires locating myself as one of the one in five people who experience mental illness, as someone who has been 'mad'. Several years ago, as a single mother supporting a young child, I began working in a children's contact service for children of separated parents, and it was my job to ensure the children were brought to their non-residential parent in adherence with Family Court orders. Many of the male clients had protracted histories of domestic violence and violence against women, and I was attacked by a very angry male parent, whose (because his?) child had not yet arrived for handover. I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and co-morbid depression following this violent assault in the workplace. While I recovered from the physical injuries, it took several years to recover from the trauma, and I was never to return to that workplace. I choose to make this visible, despite the dangers that Hazel Smith points out: 'A madwoman isn't someone anyone wants to know. No one knows what a madwoman wants or will do next. But the sane need the mad to measure themselves up against. The sane need the mad to feel there is a route for escape' (2004a). Am I sane? I have been mad. I am therefore not a disinterested scholar who seeks only to know *about* madness as represented in literature. I know madness ontologically, from a subjective, rather than objective, standpoint. The critical posture unravels.

### Subversions

Anna: 'I think you should keep quiet about your psychiatric history. It's not very objective, is it?'

Polly: 'But the disinterested scholar is only an invention.'

Anna: 'A convention'.

Polly: 'A cliché.'

Anna: 'You can't *say* that.'

Polly: 'Then let someone else say it for you. That's the convention.'

### Contexts and conventions

Gibbs' critique of narrative and theoretical writing in her - what are we to call it? - an essay? a story? - 'Bodies of Words: Fictocriticism and feminism: Explication and Demonstration' (1997) is that both are 'haunted' forms: 'It's only words, I say. It's all secondhand, borrowed, stolen. That's the real story'. Gibbs stages this critique by moving between story and explication, so that one voice comments on the other: 'fictocriticism was never a genre that was One. And still isn't. Not so much a genre as an accident, even a hit and run - or perhaps precisely a hit and run guerrilla action, tactical rather than strategic' (Gibbs 1997). These critiques do not simply interrupt the stories she tells in this essay, but *are* the story:

Writing is done with the knock at the door, the gun at her head, the knife at her throat, as if the threat of the cut opens the wound through which the rivers of clichés can run. This is what writing is: the strict discipline of the flood of clichés. Their assembling and marshalling. She licks them into shape. Their strategic deployment. She flirts and finesses. Their feverish disposition. They are highly excitable. They rise one after another in her throat... The everyday means eating it up, forcing it down, swallowing words, a lump in her throat and a stone in her stomach. Writing is regurgitation, throwing up ... (Gibbs 1997)

The shifting point of view in this passage between words as objects and the writer as 'she' dramatises the split between inside and outside as the 'writer' shapes the 'text'. This is writing that is embodied, that has sensory and bodily affects and drives. But writing, whether theoretical or fictional, is derivative, as the words are herded into recognisable forms, recycled and regurgitated. Resisting this process means to make the clichés of theory, both as form and practice, visible:

Hey you, yes you, I'm talking to you

She was onto a good thing and she was going to stick to it. She was a wild one, a couple of kangaroos out of control in the top paddock, a screw loose - they'd have to round up the posse to hose her down. They all knew there was no smoke without fire and she had been fanning the flames, cooking up trouble, keeping things on the boil. (Gibbs 1997)

Gibbs concludes with passages composed entirely of clichés, so that her critique is embodied in the form as well as in the words themselves. The use of anecdote, story, or memoir collapses critical distance between text and theory, so that 'theory can be read as fiction, as fully textual' (Gibbs 2005). Its tenor is playful and experimental, and Gibbs argues it allows us 'to find a place in the world, or in words, rather than being simply subjected to it, or them. Or in this case, to theory' (2005). It is through this very playfulness that fictocriticism resists mimesis and approaches what Derrida calls '*différance*', subverting the critical forms that are the apparatus of literary criticism. It is a mode of subversion approximating the call by French feminists for a transgressive writing, a writing that does not erase the body, but writes the body into theory. It is not simply *écriture féminine*, a sexed specificity, but a form of writing that allows consciousness and affective knowledges located in the body to be heard.

'Polly. Are you awake?'  
 'Yes. What do you want?'  
 'Do you think I'm mad?'  
 'Brave, maybe.'  
 'By which you mean foolhardy?'  
 'No, just ... *naughty*. Not mad.'

Experimental writer Anna Walwicz has been located as a 'marginal' writer, precisely because of her formal experimental tactics. In 'Look at me Ma - I'm going to be a marginal writer!', Walwicz situates fictocriticism as the *enfant terrible* of the academy. She argues that the fictocritical writer's refusal to reproduce the clichés of theoretical form by writing 'against order, the father, the language of the father', constitutes 'a rebellion against power, ... an act of reversal' in which the 'master of words does become the minor, the naughty, such a naughty child' (1998: 277). Her tactic in this essay is to 'open up the polyvocal elements' by refusing to locate herself or her body of work in a singular narrative voice:

I have failed to place myself anywhere. But you said that you are avant-garde, before! I have named myself Polly. I am very fancy. Is one allowed to be contrary? I am never serious. I am ironic. How do I conclude now? [gap] How do I end? A text becomes finite, conclusive, limited, strained here, uneasy, shush ... I don't want to play the game. I don't want to play the game anymore [in a child voice, with a French accent]. I don't want to play the game any more [adult voice]. But you must, you must play the game, say the Professor Elephant and Professor Zurbrugg. (1998: 276-77)

This naming of herself as Polly and the juxtaposition of serious and ironic voices undermines the 'straight' academic text that is expected of literary criticism. Here, the fictocritical figures as the naughty child who will not play by the rules of the game, who will not arrive at an orderly, logical conclusion.

'Anna, listen. I just read this essay by Roland Barthes: "every writer's motto reads: mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am" (Barthes 1975: 6). You're not mad. You're just neurotic.'

'I am *not*. I have the psych. reports to prove it.'

## Notes

1. This term is from an Aboriginal language and was given to me by Associate Professor Tracey Bunda, Yunggoorendi First Nation Centre for Higher Education Research, Flinders University. It refers specifically to the madness of white people. Terms for mental illness relating to Aboriginal people are more respectful. return to text

2. Denise Russell (1995: 42) cites the 'extremely odd' report by Dr Alan Ali in 1990 in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, in which he argues that there is 'a strong correlation between having [borderline personality] disorder and having multiple ear piercings per earlobe'. return to text

3. In using terms such as 'bipolar', 'histrionic' and 'borderline', I do not seek to diagnose, but rather to make visible the gendered assumptions that underpin these diagnoses in psychiatric discourse. return to text

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