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Essaying the Self: ethnicity, identity and the fictocritical essay

I grew up in Newcastle, in a street with a pipe works down the end. My mother was a Polish refugee, my father was a teacher, but not a regular 'Yes, Sir. No, Sir' sort of teacher. He had done his Leaving at night school while working as a carpenter during the day. So, in my house, instead of the lyricism of Shakespeare and the irony of Jane Austen, we were immersed in tradesmen's English and, on my mother's side, the dialects of New Australia. That's why it is strange to remember that my life was also shaped by Bacon, Stephenson and Orwell. My father drew me an escape route from our house of calamities, and found a way to love me through his night school texts, nineteenth and twentieth-century essays, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. From an early age, I really couldn't see the difference between a good argument and a good story.

Still, ours was a world where books were closed away, protected from grubby hands and poor living conditions. I was left with a hunger which could not be sated by the cultural artefacts that fell into my hands as a child. Children learn by osmosis: they learn speaking and walking and singing in the same way that they learn to eat. There are social and cultural hungers, so to speak, and children move to fill them. They do not go out and buy a map of culture with the intention of visiting their world: they are explorers, essaying the territory of self and world. Children do not understand when these hungers push them beyond their parents and cause them to question who or what they are. The quest beyond the parent is a part of identity construction. Like the cyclic drawings of autistic children, we explore ourselves with maps that are 'superimposed in such a way that each map finds itself modified in the following map, rather than finding its origins in the preceding one: from one map to the next, it is not a matter of searching for an origin, but of evaluating *displacements*' (Deleuze 1997: 63).

Movement through a geographical and conceptual space is essential for arriving at who we are. We are not butterflies undergoing metamorphoses; rather, identity 'follows world-historical trajectories' (Deleuze 1997: 62), movements through space and time where '[the] imaginary and the real must be, rather, like two juxtaposable or superimposable parts of a single trajectory, two faces that ceaselessly interchange with one another, a mobile mirror' (Deleuze 1997: 63).

I must have been about eight when Dad took up pointing me down a path which followed his own footsteps. Early one evening, to the music of cicadas and clanging keys and nails screeching out of timbers, Dad wrenched the tops off two wooden storage boxes with the claw of his hammer. His hands - always big, always rough - brushed away the dust of my early childhood and pulled out a book on the classification of invertebrates, a sample of the hidden mysteries of his life before I existed. He had no idea of what I was interested

in, what I was hungering for; he just hoped I was like him. He then took out a book on advanced calculus. As I held it in my arms, it overflowed me with its weight and size and strangeness. The pages were stuck along the edges; opened, they smelt of the press. Like most of Dad's books, there were thin leafs of tracing paper with beautiful cursive script across them, sacred notes in pen and ink alongside tiny numbers and curved lines. Dad left his books in my hands without any explanation of how to use them. The words inside were ciphers: the lines and graphs resonated like incantations. They were Pythagorean incense and I was intoxicated by the smell.

Meanwhile, Dad's head was down in the storage box. His hands brushed away remnants of cockroaches; a devouring of some books had begun already. Dad swore. As if something entered into his heart and was tearing its walls, his face started to go an odd shade of blue. The covers of the essays and *Lord of the Flies* were pot-holed with cockroach bites.

'I studied these for my Leaving,' he said with the sound of goodbye in his voice. These were maps to a place away from long grass, broken floorboards and rooms spilling over with screaming kids. Dad handed them to me, tickets to another country he always wanted to revisit.

The gift of books became a gift of voices. The voices are family; are meaning; are the sounds of literature and music beating pulses across the inner ear. Too often these voices are chords of memory, each string resonating with its own note as it plays its part in the composition of self. Yet, I am cautious about discussing concepts like competing voices, even though it is something we all experience. Nobody is completely consistent; we are all contradictory in ourselves. We are our own orchestrations of self-dialogue, of doubt and assurance. As these disparate voices call out their fragmentary meanings, they require of us the work of composition.

When I come to myself, to my work with family stories, I sift through these voices. These fragments and unknowings, the elements of both memory and history, can only be understood through the sounds which call me into being: my father digging through boxes of decaying books; my mother pounding life into rising pizza dough. I was four or five when I learnt the term 'black sheep of the family'. I was about ten when I realised I was the 'black sheep' of mine, not because of anything I did wrong, but because of the maps I used and the songs I sang. I'd left home long before I packed my bags. I could see the tremor I left in my mother's eye as she built her life with fridges of bulk groceries, mixing bowls of biscuit batter. She wasn't worried that I could follow a different drum; she appeared more terrified that I might compose the tune myself.

It was the drive towards understanding that anchored me in essays. Essays, as opposed to fiction, articulate relationships of ideas. They rely on metaphor and metonym, implication and allusion, less readily than does fiction. Fiction appeals to a sensibility educated in the discourse of plot and character; more, however ready that reader's sensibility is to be shocked by or sensitised to the new, it has developed from a shared body of cultural knowledge. By contrast, the discursiveness of the essay allows a reader to be located outside the cultural context of the argument, to inspect propositions with which they have no culturally trained sympathy. Essays are good for creating maps for thought and behaviour, as they often explain both language and culture. Ironically, they seem to present the same kind of security that Roman roads brought to Europe: early on, essays provided me with thick, straight lines which seemed easy to follow. To this end, Orwell (1970) not only taught me about language and politics, and thus the vital importance of English; he also enlightened me

that the main road of Hamilton in Newcastle, N.S.W., was not the only place in the world where ethnic marginalisation created little countries inside bigger ones. During of my childhood, the separation between the Anglo-Celtic Australian community and the agglomeration of 'New Australian' communities was such that I could go for days in the holidays without seeing an Anglo-Australian face other than my Dad's. In his essay 'Marrakech', Orwell (1964: 129) took me through the Jewish quarter of Marrakech, where, just like the Italians, Greeks and Slavs of Hamilton, 'the Jews live in self-contained communities [and] follow the same trades as the Arabs, except for agriculture. Fruit-sellers, ... butchers, leatherworkers, tailors ..., whichever way you look you see nothing but Jews'.

Just as a map may become an artefact of beauty in and of itself, the aesthetic value of essays would become a vital aspect of this art form. The breath of the author across the page is a throwing open of windows. Stevenson's (1963: 243) proposal in 'An Apology for Idlers' that 'idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity' was as important as Hazlitt's (1963b: 171) faith in 'On Going a Journey' that 'we go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others'. Essays like these taught me that I could discover myself within the form. Words were more than tools used for recollection or argument; they were constructive. I began to structure myself through essays: if I wanted to know what I really thought about something, I would map myself out in this art. Beyond argument, essay writing becomes self making.

Because of the close relationship between identity formation and the process of constructing a familiar essay (Hazlitt 1963a: 163), the fictocritical essay became significant in exploring the biographical material surrounding my ethnic heritage. Rosalia Baena writes that life writing possesses 'value as a complex dynamic of cultural production, where aesthetic concerns and the choice and manipulation of form serve as signifying aspects to experiences and subjectivities' (Baena 2007: vii). In fictocriticism, the beauty of life writing blends with the cultural discourses surrounding the subject *I*. There is freedom for me to move, to breathe and reflect upon the layers of my self mapping. I can explore the positioning of my thoughts within the context of the trajectories which have formed them, 'not in order to assign an origin to them but to make their *displacement* something visible' (Deleuze 1997: 66). This is important in negotiating 'transculturality' (Baena 2007: vii) beyond points of biography and experiences of marginalisation. The reduction of identity to an issue of personal struggle is too crude a model of the non-Anglo-Celtic Australian experience: rather it is necessary to explore the spaces and illuminate the margins which have been formative for many Australians. Sneja Gunew (1994: 27) wrote that 'being marginalised cannot be reduced simply to a struggle between oppressor and oppressed in which the latter remains utterly passive. In their spatially conceived representation of exclusionary gestures, margins have always been ambiguous signs which have served to frame the centre'.

In this way, fictocritical writing allows a familiar voice to emerge for life writers. It allows us to negotiate marginality without tidying up the edges. As Brewster (1996: 30) explains, 'fictocritical writing does not deliver us from anxiety over the production of meaning ... explorative methodologies such as fictocriticism avoid the trajectories of received knowledges. The effect can be unsettling and disturbing'. So it ought to be when the writing enters worlds of marginality. The experience should be full of dead ends and wonderings about how things work. It should foreground bewilderment at creolized and mixed languages which left me like other children perplexed by what was actually

going on at the dining-room table. There is a wonder in 'transculturality', and uneasiness about it.

For me, life writing has been fraught with uneasiness. Most of the family stories I work with exist as fragments, bits of memories which are as roach-holed and worm-ridden as the books my father gave me as a child. Family secrets darken knowledge. The re-conceptualisation of identity that comes with discovering oneself a survivor of the Nazi sub-Slavic solution creates a present which at times appears to be a starting from nowhere. There is no continuity of narrative or character, unless the lack of consistent recount can be seen as having a discontinuous consistency of its own. We are fractured biographies, half-truths and recreations. Inside memoir, all I can ever be is a map made by a child with autism, all 'wandering lines, loops, corrections, and turnings back' (Deleuze 1997: 61). It was only through the writing of essays that I could find a way to renegotiate these meanderings, to resketch myself in something other than the crayon of the dislocated and displaced.

Fictocritical essays enable me to confront present circumstances with a freedom in which the critical questions I ask about self, ethnicity and family can be related to each other. They empower my investigation of the boundaries of what I actually do know and how I interpret that knowledge. In writing essays about relationships with my mother, my grandmother, my father and my fiancée, I can extend my mapping of self into the dark spaces of no-man's land, the unexplored. These stories often require me to draw together the facts of our heritage in a way that sheds light on present dysfunction. For instance, I can take my mother's birth in Holthausen Camp in Waltrop, Germany, and through the lens of Nazi-sanctioned child abuse and genocide explore the migrant experiences of assimilation and current familial difficulties. Essays enable me to overlay literary criticism and psychology, identity theory and philosophy in an attempt to understand what might be hidden within the decaying spaces of amnesia, justification and evasion. Years of listening, living and knowing come together in the brief space of the essay.

Forming a fictocritical essay is not a deliberate process of planning, organisation and argument. Rather, this form of essay writing is akin to opening up a space in which one's full knowledge has freedom to play and explore. In the first instance, it is like impromptu performance: like singing scat over jazz or taking up the position of a bard inside a Celtic circle. I poise my hands over the word-processor and allow the voice of the essay to create the music for me. There is an intention or image or reflection which acts as a motif for the piece, much as novels or short stories are seeded in some strong, emotional knowledge. There may be the flick of colour, an infant memory of bright red geraniums on a blue verandah. When I come to the essay I do not know what this image means or will come to mean, but in the writing I get to discover the neurological maps I have created attaching this childhood recollection to the present situation or enquiry. It is a meditation in which images and feelings overlay one another, making a poetry of argument, and it is in this poetry that I discover what drives me creatively and intellectually.

I have been a hyphenated Polish-Australian all my life, and I still don't have any answers. Sometimes I belong, and sometimes I don't. I am constantly amazed by the walls that I bump into: life can be 'like birds that strike their beaks against the window. It is not a question of interpreting them. It is a question instead of identifying their trajectory to see if they can serve as indicators of new universes of reference' (Felix Guattari cited Deleuze 1997: 63-64). In the reality of everyday life, those borne upon the waves of migration after World War II often find themselves isolated even from their

own families. We flow like water and our maps are meanderings. For me, the hyphenated nature of my heritage makes the darklands of my map the darker.

Deleuze (1997: 67) writes that 'every work is made up of a plurality of trajectories that coexist and are readable only on a map, and that change direction depending on the trajectories that are retained. These internalised trajectories are inseparable from becomings'. Whether these trajectories are the result of real journeys or imagined ones does not matter in the construction of self. The existential self retains its sense of reality despite knowing the constructedness of the reality. I must accept that absence and speculation will forever haunt my work. There is a sense in which I must recognise that I am a book with pages torn out, a map worn threadbare by poor storage and neglect. My best attempt at reconstructing these spaces involves both intuition and reason, both mythology and history. Inside the space of the fictocritical essay, there is room to navigate uncharted regions and to explore the boundaries of self.

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