The University of Western Sydney

Anna Gibbs

Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences

I want to begin by suggesting that fictocriticism is a 'haunted writing' (note 1): traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord. The problem of haunted writing comes to the fore in academic discourse when disciplinary authority and discursive protocol function as the voice of the dead stalking the present so as to paralyse it with terror, or else as a kind of watchful superego as resistant to modification as if it were a text inscribed in stone. In an act of defiance, an attempt to exorcise the paralysing interdictions of disciplinary academic authority, feminist writers in particular have sought other relationships to such forms of authority than those of simple submission and unthinking repetition.

This, then, is the necessity of haunted writing: to move from citation, the kind of repetition you have when reference is deference to disciplinary authority, to recitation - the performance of repetition, a repetition of repetition in order not to reproduce identity, but to try instead to engender new differences. Not so much for the sake of sexed specificity, as we did in the eighties, but heuristically, to see what happens. Especially, as I will show later, when differences take the guise of similarity.

Fictocriticism resists the peremptory dictation of the institutional superego or the policing of the academic discipline in order to listen more attentively to the range of tones and styles (from tirade to intimidation, from severity to seduction), to the precise and specific modes of the maintenance of authority that was not, after all, monolithic. It was not by chance that feminist writers of the seventies and eighties (Cixous, Irigaray, Marini , Wittig and the numerous Canadian experimental writers, both francophone and anglophone, inspired by them) were so prolific in devising new fictocritical forms (note 2). For the heterogeneity of fictocritical forms bears witness to the existence of fictocriticism as a necessarily performative mode, an always singular and entirely tactical response to a particular set of problems - a very precise and local intervention, in other words. The fictocritical act is, strictly speaking, inimitable (note 3). For this reason fictocriticism is also a writing which must furnish its own code either as model or anti-model (note 4) as it undertakes its own critique, provides its own process of self-reflection, and works at the same time to make an active intervention into a field of argument.

Fictocriticism is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched. It is writing as research, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain

process in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow *after the event*, a simple 'outcome' of a research which always takes place elsewhere, in the archive, in the field or the focus group, on the web.

It is perhaps not by chance that some of the most interesting fictocritical writing in Australia takes up and comments on the discourse of anthropology, ethnography, psychoanalysis and autobiography or memoir, all of which require a kind of research and reflection intimately involved with the voices of others (note 5). These kinds of writing all represent - in different ways - what Michel de Certeau has termed 'heterology', and which he defines as a science of the different which attempts to 'write the voice' (note 6). While heterologies often involve attempts to neutralise or to appropriate the voice of the other which they also tend to render as naïve, requiring critical interpretation and translations (note 7), what characterises fictocritical work in this domain is its reversal of this process, its attempt to allow the voice of the other to interrogate the voice of theory in such a way as to reveal its particularity and its partiality (note 8). This also necessitates engaging with affect, both the writer's own and that of others, and the concomitant opening up of rhetorical modes (the lyrical, the elegiac, the rhapsodic, the humorous, the parodic, the satirical and so on) which enable the staging of passionate engagements and which emphasise the pragmatics as much as the semiotics of texts and writing.

Fictocriticism is free to make use of narrative modes and of the rhetorical strategies available to them, including anecdote and (or *as*) allegory which stage the singular encounter between the writer's emergent, embodied subjectivity and what is written about. This is a way of writing suited to speculative thinking and to modes or research in which the researcher is implicated in what is investigated. Of course, as Morris points out, the anecdote is a rhetorical form which must be used strategically. That's to say, it's value is not simply as personal testimony, guarantee of truth, sign of authenticity or even simply of subjectivity, but rather it must have 'narrative point' in a given context (note 9). It aims not simply to make a point, but have a point - which is to bring about a certain change in a certain set of narrative relations. For, as Wlad Godzich has put it:

> That human beings are the subjects of stories means then that the communicative act in which a story is told is constitutive of its participants, that it is an experience in itself, and not merely a way of talking about experience, though it is that as well (note 10).

Fictocriticism, then, focuses as much on the saying as the said, on how things are said and what kind of difference that in turn makes to 'things'.

Fictocriticism's self-conscious mixing of registers and (already mixed) genres matches (or mimics) both a multidisciplinary approach - which may encounter areas of incommensurability in the overlaps between disciplines - and the 'methodological impurity' of cultural studies (note 11). It is a risky approach which must be offset by a commitment to attention, openness and reflexivity about questions of the politics of *poiesis* on the part of the writer. But in risk lies excitement, and to demonstrate the thrill of excitement in one's approach to a project is perhaps the best guarantee of arousing it in one's readership. And, if this kind of writing at times seems to skate on thin ice, there are at least some helpful bodies of work which may assist in better negotiating tricky terrains. Not only are there now numerous fictocritical acts - feminist or otherwise - themselves, but

there are, as I hope I have indicated here, the often overlooked but theoretically indispensable tools provided by narrative theorists such as Felman, Chambers, and Godzich - too often ignored in favour of simple citation of (as opposed to actual use of), for example, Deleuze (note 12).

Of course, like all genres, as Derrida has made unforgettably clear (note 13), the novel and the essay were ever hybrids (think, just for example, of the historical novel, or the novel of ideas) (note 14) and a process of self-reflection or a kind of critical commentary on itself is built into the novel as Bakhtin long ago observed, pointing out its propensity not only to represent, but 'itself [to serve] as the object of representation' (note 15). In other words, the novel is precisely a dialogical rather than a univocal form, and it foregrounds itself as such. Fictocriticism capitalises on the inherent tendencies of the novel to multivocity, tendencies which Bakhtin termed 'dialogism', and which he saw at work in discourse more broadly:

> ...the struggle is not between one person [or one author] and another but rather between ways of speaking and writing... such struggle is already under way within the language of a single person. In this case, to interrupt it is simply to provoke tendencies at work in that first language. In this sense, the practice of interruption seeks not to impose a language of its own but to enter critically into existing linguistic configurations, and to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified. (note 16)

In fact, one technique germane to various forms of fictocritical practice might be characterised as 'interrruption'. And in this it can be seen that fictocritical modes borrow from certain Situationist practices, among them, of course *derive* (or digression, or, more literally, wandering) and *detournemement* (the turning around or undoing of something by turning it on itself, as BUGGERUP and others do with billboard advertisements), and also from the more broadly modernist strategies, especially collage, montage and the cut up (note 17). Perhaps the best known example of interruption as a fictocritical method is the work of Luce Irigaray (note 18) as she rereads the work of Freud and of various philosophers in order to undo it from the inside, interrupting it not only with comments and asides, but above all with questions, which come to form the basis of an interrogative mode of writing which aims to open up spaces of debate rather than to close them down with assertions. But in this work, Irigaray makes a specific intervention into a particular philosophical context, one in which the psychoanalytic and philosophical habits of generalising about humankind on the basis of the masculine is challenged. Reading psychoanalysis and philosophy as standing in isomorphic relation to a masculine libidinal economy - a relation which is not simply a matter of the content of the discourse, but also of the very procedures of writing that characterised these domains - she attempts with her questions to undo the constative voice of what she sees as masculine discourse, making apparent the discontinuities, ruptures, gaps and silences that lie hidden in the smooth features of argument so as to open a possible space for another speaking. Here a fragmentary form emerges, one in which the parts do not add up to a whole, where totality as well as closure is resisted (note 19). Irigaray has also termed her procedure a 'miming' of the texts she undoes, a technique she both takes from and turns against Derrida, who in turn stole it from Benjamin, and to which I will later return.

Much feminist fictocriticism (even contemporary) can be read as an attempt to surprise the paternalistic voices of theory in action, to unveil

them and reveal them for the partial rather than the universal view they in fact represent. As Roland Barthes put it with characteristic succinctness:

> The father…is the Speaker: he who sustains discourse(s) outside of praxis, severed from all production; the Father is the man of statements. Hence, nothing is more transgressive than to surprise the Father in the speech-act; this is to surprise him in intoxication, in gratification, in erection: an intolerable (perhaps sacred, in the sense Bataille gave this word) spectacle… (note 20)

Concomitant with this attempt to unmask the universal was an attempt to speak and write otherwise, as when Marguerite Duras proposed reversing

everything. Mak[ing] women the point of departure in judging, mak[ing] darkness the point of departure in what man call light, mak[ing] obscurity the point of departure in what man call clarity…(note 21)

In this she was speaking tactically, heuristically, in a spirit of experiment: if one did this, what would happen? Elsewhere in the same interview she recommends that men in particular must 'give up their theoretical rattles' and listen to silence to see what might emerge from it. And she enjoins us all to pay attention to the body: 'Men have been completely dethroned', she says (and here the utopian aspect of her thought becomes clear), we 'must move on to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, in the body' (note 22). We might read this as a call to see what happens when epistemology takes the female rather than the male body as its starting point (as others have wondered, say, what would happen if we took smell rather than vision as a starting point for epistemological imaginings). And this would indeed have been the preferred reading of the eighties, in the light especially of Irigaray's work on sexed specificity and Cixous' on *ecriture feminine*.

But today - without forgetting either the reality of sexual difference or the complexities of gender as it fails to map neatly onto it (as in transsexualism, the tomboy experience, the girlie gay boy or any other number of lived experiences to which one could point) - we might instead read Duras as speaking advisedly of 'the [sic] organism'. To take her this way would be to open up another way of thinking through the possibilities of fictocriticism, if not one which is exactly new. But I will break off here and return to this point by way of a brief but necessary detour through the ruins of a certain discourse, one which holds to the possibility of making an absolute distinction between discourse and metadiscourse.

It is the collapse of this distinction, arguably, that inaugurates postmodernism, for it is this collapse that generates both the famous 'crisis of authority' of postmodern times, and the now notorious 'linguistic turn' of the Humanities.

In the domain of philosophy this meant the textualisation of philosophical writing, and the realisation that it has no privileged claim to the truth, but, like the literary from which it had traditionally sought to distance itself, philosophy was a tropological discourse. That's to say that it was reliant on metaphor, and that metaphors have philosophical consequences, as the work of Michelle LeDoeuff so beautifully demonstrates (note 23). In literary studies, the collapse of the discourse/metadiscourse distinction meant the collapse of 'critical distance' (or, as Barbara Johnson has it, 'critical difference'). This distance was that between the literary text as an

object of study, and those discourses in which the study was carried out, whether commentary, interpretation, or theory. Perhaps most pernicious, the rhetorical strategies and techniques of fiction were found to be at work in avowedly objective assessments of literary value.

Roland Barthes was especially alive to the ways in which the replacement of an emphasis on truth with an examination of the truth - effects of theoretical writing makes it possible to rethink what we can do with disciplinary discourses - like that of linguistics. He speaks imaginatively, for example, of constructing a 'pseudo-' or 'metaphorical' linguistics in which 'the concepts come to constitute allegories, a second language, whose abstraction is diverted to fictive ends' (note 24). In this way the truth-value of linguistics would be relativised, and its use-value emphasised - even as new uses were discovered for it. In such ways theory can be read as fiction, as fully textual, and it can be played with, play being, of course, a serious business. At once a fuzzy and a precise activity, play is inherently experimental. 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, for there are times when toys may also be tools, as Marguerite Duras implied (note 25), and Lacan also implicitly discovered when he used the device of playing on (and with) the signifier (puns and multiple *entendres*) to decipher the destination his own words devised for him as he allowed himself to be productively derailed by language. Out of accidents - in the Humanities as well as in the Sciences - come new discoveries.

To write in this way is to uncover the multifarious ways in which language - and especially discourse - becomes 'second nature'. And to struggle against it, in keeping with the project of denaturalisation that has characterised the Humanities since the seventies, and which, in many quarters, still does. But there is, now, another project afoot, one which - perhaps - answers Duras' call for attention to the organism.

Since the republication of selected writings of Silvan Tomkins by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank in *Shame and its Sisters* in 1995, theory in the Humanities has begun to rethink its relation to the Sciences - a project announced, and in large measure enabled, by the introduction to this volume (note 26). The aspect of this project which especially interests me here is that which might intricate the body, evolution, affect and imitation in a new relation to writing (note 27). To unfold a little of what this might mean for the theory and practice of fictocriticism, let me begin by reference to the work of San Francisco sound artist, Paul de Marinis.

In his work *Music As A Second Language* (note 28), De Marinis is interested in what both precedes and enables grammatical sense: in the pieces on this disc, everyday technical discourses (like those of foreign language-learning, or hypnotism) are explored for the way in which they are sustained by another language subtending explicit meaning. This 'second language' by which we are spoken (in much the same way as Lacan maintains we are spoken by language *tout court*), is music - or, more accurately, speech melodies 'more ancient than language'. Referring to the theory that, phylogenetically speaking, we may have learned to sing before we learned to speak, by imitating birds, De Marinis writes of:

> [b]rain's secret convulsions making muscles articulate,
> shaking the world with a song now lost to us except
> perhaps in laughter, giving birth to a duality of sound and
> meaning… (note 29)

He is speaking here of the basis of articulation in the body, the way bodies and affects are coded within the melodies of speech so that 'as our leaders talk [we hear] not the words but the music, we sing ourselves into a sleep of understanding.' And more,

> The whistles of birds in our nose, the creaking door which closes a phrase, the measured pause which precedes a two beat putdown - all these underlie the choice and order of our words. These are the ghosts in grammar's basement. (note 30)

I think most writers - even of academic work - have experienced a dawning awareness in the act of writing that our word choices and our grammatical structures are dictating themselves to us via dimly-remembered melodies which we feel in some - perhaps not precisely locatable - region of our bodies as we write. It is in this sense that thought takes place without language, and the inchoate, subtle activity of the body as we sit more or less still to work actually both drives and sustains our thinking and our writing. We are aware sometimes, that we are writing to a rhythm which will generate particular lexical selections, as rhyme also does for rap poets, which perhaps gives the clearest example of the kind of phenomenon I'm discussing. In still other forms of writing it may be tone that takes the lead. What I'm suggesting, then, is that writing may be driven as much by the body as by thought: it partakes not simply of ideas, but of sensory and affective knowledges which are not secondary to thought (its window-dressing), but which are active in deciding not only the forms ideas will take, but also in discovering or inventing ideas themselves (note 31).

One way we make use of these extended cognitive capacities is by mimicry. This is a phenomenon we often associate with the animal world as presented to us on wildlife documentaries where mimicry mostly features as a defence manoeuvre aimed at avoiding being eaten by predators. But mimicry is something human beings do especially well, and you only have to watch a baby imitating you when you put out your tongue to it to see this in action. Mimicry is a major mode of learning for babies, and in fact it continues to be in adults. Essentially one learns to write by imitating other writers, consciously or not, as many works in the *bildungsroman* (note 32) genre testify. This is not simply plagiarism (but the copying involved in plagiarism, at least before electronic chunking became possible, may actually enable a student to learn something about style); but a borrowing, a 'trying on' of a particular way of writing that facilitates the acquisition of certain technical skills.

At the limit, mimicry also represents the collapse of critical distance that gives rise to fictocriticism. Roger Caillois, whose beautiful essay on mimicry, as Elizabeth Grosz observes, implicitly critiques the functionalist Darwin view of the relationship between mimicry and evolution, producing mimicry instead as something excessive which, like the disorder of legendary psychasthenia, dissociates consciousness from the body so that the subject merges with its surroundings (note 33). Mimicry for Caillois is a disturbance in spatial organization - that is to say, in the relationship of organism to environment - which ultimately points to the fragility of this very distinction. And this, I would argue, stands as an accurate analogy for what may happen in writing when something simply 'derivative' is produced. Equally often, though, the very success of mimicry lies in its failure, for out of failure comes unanticipated innovation, at least in the philosophical tradition in which copying is seen

to generate productive difference from, rather than mere degradation of, the putative original.

Walter Benjamin understood this very well (note 34), and in Laleen Jayamanne's recent book on cinema she experiments with a way of writing about film and the experience of watching it derived from Benjamin and Adorno. She attempts a kind of writing about film which mimes the original 'in a new modality', so that the 'double that emerges is not a copy or an imitation of the object, but a mimetic double of it'. This implies that an excess or difference is produced which contributes something new to the work discussed. In Adorno's words, what the writer produces is 'an exact fantasy'. As Jayamanne comments:

> The idea of exactitude acts as a rein on the fanciful and capricious correspondences one may be prone to make, while the mimetic impulse that enables one to perceive correspondences is what individuates criticism. (note 35)

What seems to be required from the writer in such an enterprise is alert attention to the object and to the affects and sensations it produces in her, sharp observation, detailed and accurate description, and a capacity for acts of imagination - all predicated on a wide-ranging knowledge of the various disciplinary, generic or discursive territories inhabited by the object, without it ever completely belonging to any of them.

Jayamanne does not mention the feminist uptakes of Benjamin's work on mimesis by writers such as Irigaray, or indeed the situation of feminist uses in the broader field of poststructuralism, which they also transformed as their work was fed back into it - although perhaps this is not surprising as her work deals with the visual and her references are drawn almost exclusively from this field. However, although it has not been theorised as such and it is not often sustained as an approach, mimetic writing is a not infrequent feature of much writing about the creative arts across film, the visual arts, performance and fiction, in genres from journalism (at least in journals, such as *RealTime*, that facilitate a more adventurous approach to reviewing) to academic writing as reviewers and critics attempt to communicate something of the experience of their object, rather than simply talking about it as if they could make an objective assessment of it independently of their own affective experience of it.

In work of this kind, the difference which is being produced is not necessarily the difference of sexed specificity. But it is a form of difference in which sexual difference has a place. It is the difference of the similar. Finally, then, fictocriticism may make use of mimicry as strategic simulation and dissimulation, a performance of repetition in order, ultimately, to do something differently, to undo something, to make a difference.

Notes

1. A term originally taken from Avital Ronell's *Dictations: On haunted writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). While Ronell focuses on the indebted nature of haunted writing, however, I wish instead at this point to address questions of its multivocity. I have discussed fictocritical indebtedness in 'Writing and the Flesh of Others', *Australian Feminist Studies* 18, 42 (2003): 309-319. Return to article

2. One could cite Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott, Madeleine Gagnon, Daphne Marlatt, France Theoret, among many others. Return to article

3. I use the term 'act' advisedly. See Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with JL Austin or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans C. Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983). Return to article

4. For a discussion of the use of *mise-en-abyme*, or embedding, to inaugurate a code, see Lucien Dallenbach, *Le recit speculaire, essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977). Return to article

5. For example, Gail Jones, Robyn Ferrell, Elspeth Probyn, Jennifer Biddle, Katrina Schlunke and Stephen Muecke have all produced essays that could be read as fictocritical, and, in Muecke's case, his book, *No Road: bitumen all the way* is a highly developed elaboration of fictocritical strategies. Return to article

6. Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) Return to article

7. For an analysis of psychoanalytic case writing as heterology, see Anna Gibbs, 'Acts of Creation: the brainchildren of certain psychoanalytic fictions', in Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (eds), *Sexy Bodies: the strange carnalities of feminism* (London: Routledge, 1995). Return to article

8. Heather Kerr takes up what I think could be seen as closely related questions in 'Fictocritical Empathy and the Work of Mourning', *Cultural Studies Review* (vol 9, no 1, May 2003): 180-200. Here she discusses 'ethically self-conscious cross-cultural writing'. Return to article

9. On narrative point, see Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: narrative seduction and the power of fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Return to article

10. Wlad Godzich, 'Forward', in Chambers, *op cit*. Return to article

11. John Frow and Meaghan Morris, 'Introduction' to *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, John Frow and Meaghan Morris (eds) (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993). Return to article

12. Here I speak as a passionate reader of Deleuze, but one dismayed by his dismal impact especially on postgraduate work in Australia, as thought seems increasingly to be replaced by jargonistic replication. Return to article

13. 'The Law of Genre', in Derek Attridge (ed) *Acts of Literature* (London: Jacques Derrida Routledge, 1992), pp 221-252. Return to article

14. And, conversely, the novelistic techniques of story-telling have long inserted themselves into other genres: think of contemporary neurological writings by Oliver Sacks, Jonathon Cole and others, or of Freud's case histories, all of which tell stories, lending their work an undeniably novelistic appeal. Return to article

15. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p 7. Return to article

16. David Silverman and Brian Torode, *The Material World: some theories of language and its limits.* (London: RKP, 1980), p7. Return to article

17. Gregory Ulmer addresses the ways in which Derrida's writing practices depend on a supposedly superceded modernism in 'The Object of Post-Criticism', in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster (ed) (Port Townshend, WA: The Bay Press, 1983). Return to article

18. See e.g.: *Speculum of the other woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987); *This sex Which Is Not One* trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); or her later works with various male philosophers in relation to the elements of earth, air, water and fire. Return to article

19. The use of the fragment is common in fictocriticism, because it enables the creation of commentary from juxtaposition and facilitates the formation of relations between things that previously had none. It allows for gaps and discontinuities, and for the use of silence. One might think of it as a verbal form of montage. Return to article

20. Roland Barthes, 'To The Seminar', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp 332-342. Return to article

21. Marguerite Duras, 'From an interview', in *New French Feminisms* (eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron) (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp174-176. Return to article

22. Duras, *op cit.* Return to article

23. Michele LeDoeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: Continuum, 2003) Return to article

24. One can also do this with everyday language, of course, as I have tried to do with proverbs, maxims and clichés ('The Hard Word', in *Southerly* special issue 'Close Up' edited by Kate Lilley, 61, 2 (2001): 164-167. Return to article

25. *Cf.* her comments cited earlier. Return to article

26. I have expanded on this point in 'Disaffected', in *Continuum: a journal of media and cultural studies* 16, 3 (2003): 335-341. Return to article

27. And here I thank my friend, colleague and collaborator in the much larger project entailed by this, Maria Angel, whose ongoing openness to the new has been an inspiration. Return to article

28. Paul De Marinis, *Music As A Second Language,* Lovely Music Ltd, New York, 1991. Return to article

29. Paul De Marinis, *Music As A Second Language,* cover notes. Return to article

30. De Marinis, *op cit*. Return to article

31. As I think Silvan Tomkins' work makes clear, we too often think of intelligence as a hierarchical structure with 'thinking' as the 'highest' form: but thought is completely dependent affective and sensory forms of knowledge. On this point see my paper 'Disaffected', *op cit.* Return to article

32. Loosely translated: 'portrait of the artist as a young thing'. Return to article

33. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: toward a corporeal feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Grosz' work - in this text and elsewhere - has been the major starting point for writing aiming to rethink the importance of the biological sciences to feminism. Return to article

34. See, for example, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations: essays and reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed) (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp 217-252. Return to article

35. Laleen Jayamanne, *Towards the Cinema and it's Double* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Return to article

Anna Gibbs teaches Writing in the School of Communication, Design and Media at the University of Western Sydney. Her research interests include contemporary writing, writing and new media, fictocriticism, psychoanalytic theory and affect, emotion and the senses in the cultural field. She is currently working on a book on Mimesis, *and a collaborative project on* The Power of the Image.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@griffith.edu.au