

EXAMINING THE VALUE OF FICTOCRITICISM:

THE MEANDERING NARRATIVES OF A CREATIVE
WRITING PHD STUDENT

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the construction of a doctoral project relating to the ‘self’, with attempts made to contextualise the author’s work in the vein of autobiographical writing. The methodology of fictocriticism is implemented into the paper in an attempt to contribute to knowledge within the discipline, both via the inclusion of original creative writing pieces and a revisiting of the usefulness of fictocriticism as a creative writing strategy. A brief overview of fictocriticism is given also. This paper questions if fictocriticism can be innovated on, and contends there is a paradox between the theory surrounding fictocriticism suggesting how ‘freeform’ it is, and how non-freeform it still seems to be due to its lack of theoretical boundaries. The theme of *journeys* is used as a strategy to convey the methodology of fictocriticism overall, as an untapped way of writing both personally and theoretically, with a unified and engaging ‘double-voice’. Attempts at pushing the threshold and parameters, in differing experimental creative works, advocate for what fictocriticism could be, and if it can be reinvented or innovated on, into something more stable, yet still evolve into a mode of writing that is engaging, identifiable and prominent within the academy.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Pawel Cholewa completed his PhD in the Creative Arts and Writing at CQUniversity Australia in 2019. His first book *Fictocritical Innovations: A Millennial Perspective* was published in 2021. Since 2011 he has worked as an English Teacher, a university lecturer/tutor and freelance editor, intermittently producing music under the moniker *Outside The Academy*.

KEYWORDS

fictocriticism—creative writing—autobiography—genre—methodology—subjectivity

Fictocriticism is a hybrid-style of writing that is naturally theoretical, personal or personalised and professional, fictional and critical (Schlunke and Brewster 2005:393). For quite some time it has been considered a bit of a 'buzzword', on the fringe, 'meta' and postmodern in nature and form, format and execution or delivery. It has also been referred to as 'a refusal of any steady border between genres' (Trottier 2002:1), a mode (or collage) of thought 'gently flapping, between experience and interpretation' (Kerr and Nettelbeck 1998:109), 'a textual no-man's land' (Dawson 2002:139), 'a writing of compounds and mutations, a hybrid writing which is not just any one thing, but *not* any *one* thing' (White et al. 1990:10-11), an 'inchoate category' (Schlunke and Brewster 2005:393) that allows or permits one to really disperse oneself and the 'I' – a potentially liberating or hindering issue/concern with which I will be engaging in this essay. Hence, within the context of examining the value of fictocriticism as a creative writing PhD student, some research questions posed are: does fictocriticism work? And can it (still) be innovated on, or at least become more classifiable?

Though perhaps it is easier to merely think of fictocriticism as a way to process thought – 'a strategy for writing' (Kerr and Nettelbeck 1998:4). The majority of accounts of fictocriticism are somewhat equivocal. To my mind, they either overcomplicate the idea or the language used to describe the idea is too figurative or metaphorical. Hazel Smith's explanation in 'The Erotics of Gossip: Fictocriticism, Performativity, Technology' is well-balanced in this regard, and probably the best description I have found so far to explain the concept:

fictocriticism juxtaposes creative and academic writing environments, and breaks down their separation and autonomy. Fictocritics may, for example, insert, imply, or elucidate theoretical ideas within creative work without feeling the pressure to transform those ideas into entirely fictional or poetic texts. Such texts can take many different forms, but may often be experimental and discontinuous: for example, fictional or poetic sections are juxtaposed with theoretical interjections so that they reverberate with each other. Or, fictocritical critics may attempt to disrupt the formality of the academic essay with strategies such as crossing of genres, collage, non-linearity, wordplay, anecdote, or use of the first person (Smith 2009:1001-02).

It is clear that it is very difficult to dictate any kind of authority over a form of writing that is so inherently freeform. I have seen it referred to as a genre that is about 'personal journey and storytelling' (Hancox and Muller 2011:149) and that 'the form is part of the message' (Flavell 2004:186). To continue explaining it or locking it into any kind of parameters, I want to argue, goes against the grain and meaning of its intention as a literary form of writing or device – a tool for the (erratic) construction and personalised investigation of journal-like meaning.

Fictocriticism is for me a rule-breaker, so it is understandable that its impact in the academy has been fleeting and sporadic – ‘fictocriticism has come and gone...It came and went’ as my academic supervisor remarked in 2017. Still, perhaps it is now time for a change.

I once took a stance that almost any creative autobiographical or semi-autobiographical writer could write themselves into a fictional narrative. However, much of the autobiographical writing I encountered would attempt to demonstrate a duality and writerly polyvalency. My doctoral writing project planned to invest the writer’s ‘self’ in a series of creative works emotionally and psychologically, through a set of themes that encompassed and embraced scattered instances and experiences littered throughout the conscious (or subconscious) of a young man’s creative writing. The methodology of fictocriticism seemed ideally suited to the story-telling intentions of this erratic, impulsive, contradictory and juxtaposing way of writing about the ‘self’ in relation to one’s context (Gibbs 2005:309; Kerr 2013:94; Smith 2009:1001-02).

I began using the fictocritical mode and methodology one year into my PhD. It was at this point that a major and entirely unplanned writing schism became visible, between the abstract, hyperactive and autobiographical elements initially implemented into my writing and any semblance of it having a legitimate undercurrent of social commentary or academic critique. My more creative writing practice was fluid and impulsive and it might be argued that such ease might have been, in itself, a warning sign. The social commentary, or the way in which my writing/pieces were to be inflected academically/fictocritically, was planned to arrive much later, after the creative work was complete; the exegetical component of my project was originally hybridised with the creative artefact. These two elements were separated, and then relevant thematic research components were injected back into selected creative pieces in order to make them more fictocritical or ‘double-voiced’ (Kerr 2013:93). In hindsight, this was a complex task rendered more difficult by the demands of any lengthy exegetical structure and, in the final analysis, was not an efficient method of creative writing. An example/excerpt of this style of work is featured later in this paper.

In any case, fictocriticism is seen as a highly reflexive ‘embedding’ literary form, incorporating a framed-narrative method to story-crafting in which there is often a ‘story within a story’ (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 134), as can be seen in ‘The Use of Frame Story in Kashmira Sheth’s *Boys without Names*’ (Alobeytha, Ismail & Shapii 2016:105-11) and in ‘One and “I” in the Frame Narrative: Authorial Voice, Travelling Persona and Addressee in Pausanias’ *Periegesis*’* (Akujärvi 2012:327-58). These novels’ authors alert the reader to the fact that they are writing (or have written) a novel, a narrative of the sort that Roland Barthes might call ‘writerly’. The seminal example of such a work is Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*

(1760–7), in which the reader comes to understand that the story is about a writer, writing an autobiography in which the author experiences almost nothing new. Sterne uses reflexivity among other literary devices to illustrate the ‘disconnect’ between ‘real life’ and the life of the subject. There are a number of other notable reflexive narratives written in the same period, such as Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). It became fashionable in the mid-1700s to experiment and craft such narratives in different structures. Such texts can be considered the precursors to the more recognisable metacriticism seen two centuries later. It becomes clear early on in the reading of the texts mentioned in this paragraph that these authors are fully cognizant of their experimental approach, an attempt at shaping a chaotic reality into a reproducible narrative form. This is especially notable in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), American feminist author Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) which won the Booker Prize in 1981. These works could be considered quite vital in their inherently fictocritical nature and form. Of course, fictocriticism could/should be considered as existing on a spectrum, ranging from more creative fictocritical works to more theoretical, academic or discipline-specific fictocritical works. This could be one of its innovations: the *classification* of fictocriticism as constituted by a spectrum.

It was anticipated that the creative writing in my PhD might be considered similarly reflexive as I attempted to create an autobiographical record of lived experiences in a fictional, self-reflexive form. Other fictocritical texts that exist within this tone, style, structure (and spectrum) include Ania Walwicz’s ‘Look at Me, Ma—I’m Going to Be a Marginal Writer!’ (2013), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Tendencies* (1993), Anna Gibbs’ ‘The Gift’ (1998) and ‘Writing and the Flesh of Others’ in *Australian Feminist Studies* (2013).

However, what transpired in my creative writing was not quite the intended outcome, as mentioned earlier. My original project proposal deviated into fictocriticism from a basis in pure autobiographical works. The difficulty was in reconciling that deviation and retrieving the/a necessary double-voiced fictocritical form (Kerr 93).

An example of a successful and accessible fictocritical narrative is Hamish Morgan’s ‘What Can Fictocriticism Do?’:

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, 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. (2012:1-2)

Morgan's writing is successful in conveying all of the facets of fictocriticism he lists more broadly in this piece: 'character', 'setting', 'story', and 'social commentary' (2012:3), all of which come in the form of a story about interacting with Sydney-siders, and then later through a more specific anthropological (disciplinary) lens:

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 new subdivision in Karratha ... (Morgan 2012:6)

In contrast to Morgan, some of my experimental fictocritical pieces have character, setting, a story (though all generally based around dialogue within one primary scene), but, upon reflection, no real social commentary or research, unless, for instance, a biased, anecdotal autobiographical account of the drinking/pub scene in Rockhampton, Queensland, from the perspective of a 20-something year-old white Melburnian male counts as social commentary or research? Hence, in the process of my meandering journey/narratives it is/was clear that my writing was not yet fictocritical. This possibly resulted from a method still in development. The form does need to be able to ensnare some of the bias and anecdote mentioned, but it should also put pressure on itself to *be* scholarship too. So, perhaps I needed to frame this as a process of discovering an appropriate fictocritical method. A journey, for instance? That frame wasn't set yet.

Here is an extract from a piece of mine written in 2013 entitled 'At Some Point Reality Needs to Become a Part Of..' – an autobiographical account of the drinking/pub scene in Rockhampton from the perspective of a 20-something year-old white Melburnian male:

And in between these moments of intermittent comprehension and the incoherent babbling drool of language I sat there, eyes fixed, glued to the barstool, and listened. I listened and I sat there transfixed. I had no idea what especially I was trying to look and listen out for, but I felt that this was extremely important. This was communion, and a real genuine integration with a new place, with a real emergence existing in a chasm within myself ...

... I'm here, this is now, it's new, and yet it is part of something older, more mature, settled, stubborn and fixated than what I can really grasp or understand. It's subjective, but it has no context, so I have no ideas that I can really cement in anything. I'm simply meandering along in this new environment, drifting within a distilled dam until hopefully my foot can latch on to something, at which point I can start simulating and generating algae in a pool of water, a pond of my own.

This story, and others like it, although difficult to convey in a short extract, were found to work as pieces of autobiographical creative nonfiction with some examination and analysis of initial impressions of the drinking/pub scene in Rockhampton in 2013, but they were not yet fully-fledged fictocriticism. For fictocriticism demands a double-meaning in order to make the narrative 'work'. Fictocriticism requires a double-sidedness or 'double-voicing' (2013:93) as Heather Kerr suggests in her text 'Fictocriticism, the "Doubtful Category" and "The Space Between"' in which it does two things at once: observation but also critique.

Double-voicedness is a key feature within the context of fictocriticism – it is about subtext: the voice on top and the voice on the bottom, or the voices of the writer speaking side-by-side.

My piece 'The Mission Man' (extracts of which are featured below) does support some claim to being a fictocritical work, due to its double-voiced creative and analytical elements, which reverberate against/within the narrative relating to not being capable of living in the moment, or feeling like an erratic, restless entity (Kerr 2013:93).

The Mission Man (*excerpt*)

Though it can also be a speedy transition; a mission of sorts. For I am, can be and have been the mission man, where things irregularly flow from one to the next.

In fact, there is no flow, so much as there is an immediate changeover. As much as I love the 'in-between', I attempt to eliminate as much of the time between the 'in-between' as I can, in order to be moving on to the next thing.

...

Unable to grapple with the overly ambient or vague concepts in 'self help' books like Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, I – the mission man – liken or align myself moreso with the notion of Jack Kerouac's falling (failing, or flailing) star idea in *On the Road*: 'I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop' (1957:113).

Because as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman indicates, there is a ‘conflict between your experiencing self and your remembering self’ (McRaney 238): the experiencing or ‘current self is the one experiencing life in real time’ (McRaney 236); the remembering self, on the other hand, has to make ‘all the big decisions. It is happy when you sit back and reflect on your life up to this point and feel content’ (McRaney 237). There is a serious imbalance between these two different selves and the reality that is formed in one’s mind about one’s life as a consequence of this imbalance (McRaney 238). These two differing selves or perspectives have to be a well-balanced combination of one and the other. ‘You have to be happy in the flow of time while simultaneously creating memories you can look back on later’ (McRaney 2012:238-39).

...

Like an eccentric ass, I roam and stumble on in a daze, as the figurative apple (of life) swings on a string in front of me.

It is commonly agreed that the first Australian article to have the term ‘fictocriticism’ appear in it was Stephen Muecke and Noel King’s ‘On Ficto-Criticism’ in 1991 in the *Australian Book Review* (Hancox and Muller 2011:148, Brook 111). Muecke and King’s article appears to be the catalyst for the perceiving of Roland Barthes as the ‘godfather’ figure of fictocriticism. Barthes is fondly cited in Noel King’s ‘My Life without Steve: Postmodernism, Fictocriticism and the Paraliterary’ (1994:262), Kerr and Nettelbeck’s *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* (1998:4), and Monique Louise Trottier’s Masters thesis ‘If Truth be Told...’ (2002). Paul Dawson in ‘A Place For The Space Between: Fictocriticism And The University’ says fictocriticism is ‘a mode of critical writing which echoes the work of Barthes and Derrida’ (2002:141), Simon Robb in ‘Academic Divination is not a Mysticism: Fictocriticism, Pedagogy and Hypertext’ states ‘[central] to current theorising of the fictocritical is Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*’ (2013:98), King claims that Barthes, along with Derrida, ‘[blur] the distinction between literature and literary-critical commentary’ (270), which is the precise underlying mood of fictocriticism, and exactly what many of Barthes’ texts (*A Lover’s Discourse*, *Roland Barthes*, *Mythologies*) are.

Following in this vein, Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) was one of the most influential postmodern and metafictional works in the development of my creative work(s). Furthermore, the style of ‘automatic writing’ (Barthes 1977:144) that Barthes alludes to in ‘The Death of the Author’ led to the kind of writing experiment performed in my creative works (extracts of which I have included here). These works are more impulsively written, which reverberates with/against the Barthesian approach. So, again, does/can fictocriticism work? Can it be innovated

on? And is further experimentation in fictocriticism warranted? Is it possible to innovate upon the form successfully, or does it in fact simply fail, as Scott Brook suggests in ‘Does anybody know what happened to ‘fictocriticism’?: Toward a Fractal Genealogy of Australian fictocriticism’:

So, as a general reference to a much touted ‘hybridity’ in Australian contemporary writing, I want to suggest the term [fictocriticism] is potentially not only redundant, but that it also obscures the fact that genres are never as stable as they seem. One of the ironic effects of thinking about [fictocriticism] as a transgressive, hybrid form of writing might be to shore up the differences between its constitutive parts. Instead of thinking of genres as essentially different – that is, as different in *type* for being based on historically discrete discourses, and therefore capable of monstrous coupling in the ‘space between’ – perhaps we should think of genres as already monstrous (Brook 2002:113)

Monstrous or not, my early fictocritical writing attempts had minimal restraints or limitations put upon them. They were uninhibited. Thus, they also rejected many fictocritical ‘norms’, if there are such things. Ironically, such freedom can sometimes be paralysing to a PhD student – like venturing out into nebulous waters. Parameters, boundaries, and indeed, *innovations* can serve as catalysts for creativity after all.

The way in which my creative artefact was initiated, the plan behind it and the cautiously grasped model of fictocriticism that was initially held, turned out to be something less than fictocritical. In my work I hope to uncover (or discover) ways in which fictocriticism can be innovated on, if it can be innovated on at all, or if any attempts to innovate on it are as futile as any attempts to physically surmount something as elusive as an horizon.

When first embarking on my doctoral project the proposal of the creative writing project was called ‘Investigating the Polarised Characteristics of Autobiographical Creative Writing’. However, my proposal was not put into any kind of methodological or fictocritical practice or framework because, to begin with, the project had no real methodology aside from some vague allusions to creative non-fiction and autobiography. Fictocriticism was implemented into the creative artefact into the project’s inception later. Yet once the literature surrounding fictocriticism had been reviewed it was my belief that the mode of fictocriticism could still be innovated on. Yet there was a major paradox between the theory surrounding fictocriticism that suggested how ‘freeform’ it was, and how ironically non-freeform it becomes in practice due to its lack of theoretical boundaries and parameters. The theme/idea/concept of *journeys* for me is/was an appropriate way to use the methodology of fictocriticism overall as an unbridled, untamed, yet

still untapped way of writing both personally and theoretically, with a unified and engaging ‘double-voice’ (Kerr 2013:93). Hence, I would like to carefully find ways to push the threshold and parameters of what fictocriticism can be, if it can be reinvented and innovated on into something more (or less) concrete, and still become or evolve into a mode of writing that is engaging, identifiable and prominent within the academy.

This paper reflects on the difficult and meandering nature of exploring a large creative writing PhD project at the postgraduate level, via a fictocritical lens – a genre/form that requires some further attention, clarification and innovation. I attempted to consolidate some of these avenues for attention in 2021, in a book I was fortunate enough to publish called *Fictocritical Innovations: A Millennial Perspective*. In this book I attempt to provide a new understanding of fictocriticism as both an art form and as a vehicle for higher theory and criticism, exploring key question such as: can a writing method still be fictocritical if one does not intend it to be so? Can the hunt for form and knowledge be retrofitted to fit into the/a fictocritical form? What allows the author to think fictocritically? And to provide new and expanded reading tools that both explain the subjectivity and context of fictocritical writings, while simultaneously innovating on the form.

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