THE FALL: AN AFFECTIVE METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

While the impossibility of neutral observation has become a truism in ethnographic practice, ideals of ethnographic evidence frequently remain tied to a particular notion of 'being there' and bearing witness. This essay critically questions observation in ethnography, asking what happens when a researcher's ethnographic gaze fails due to overwhelming affective forces that collapse time and space. In doing so, it takes up Stephen Muecke's discussion of fictocriticism as an act of 'falling' into concepts and using percepts to climb back out. I ask what this iterative engagement with affective forces and critical theory means for focalising ethnographic accounts, and how one might come to position ethnographic practice and evidence as an ongoing process of thinking as affect and bodily disposition. I ground this discussion in an autoethnography of inter-personal and political affects in relation to narratives of belonging and nationalism in 'Outback' Australia.

KEYWORDS

ethnography, affect, focalisation, Australian studies, grief, failure

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The thesis examiner wants me to explain the gaps in my ethnography. "In the defense," She writes, "I'd like to explore questions of her autoethnographic practice and thinking as affect or bodily disposition." I had glossed over this in my methodology section, mentioning that my thinking about multiple contested belongings in Outback Australia had often resisted logical ordering, coming to me as affect, as poetics, as fleeting imagery, often long after the events. I had quoted Her, saying I'd wished I could have better captured "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies" (Stewart 2007, 1-2). I had tried to acknowledge the gap, saying that in piecing together the logical ethnographic argument of a Ph.D. thesis, 'something' (Berlant 2007a, 2007b) had exceeded the structure: 'something,' I suppose She would say, that "throws itself together" (Stewart 2007, 1) in "the slippage, or gap, between sign and referent, event and meaning" (Stewart 1996, 26).

What I had to explain, then, was the fall.

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In an early draft of my methodology chapter I tried to write about it, the fall into the field on my first day in Northwest Queensland. It begins with me standing in the corner of the cattle yards on a blistering day, awkward in my brand-new work shirt and boots. The crew at the cattle station—what Americans might call a 'ranch'—were nervous about my presence. I was entangled with this station in a way that opened up gaps and fissures in simple narratives of land and legacy, and they knew it. It was the land that, in an act of state-sanctioned theft of Indigenous country, my great-grandfather had taken up over a hundred years before. It was the station that he had passed down to his son, and his, such that the place and my maternal family's name had become synonymous. But in all that had come to pass over the years I had not been there before, nor had I spent much time with my family, or worked with cattle since I was in my teens. Then there was also the question of what the hell I was doing. I was there to do work, but not the usual work of the socio-spatial assemblages of the station. I was there as an ethnographer, whatever that meant. After some discussion, the station owners, my aunt and uncle David and Loretta, had decided that I would not partake in the 'yard work' of branding, dehorning, and vaccinating calves, but that I could observe the process from some distance. So, I stood by the timber railings, notebook in

hand. The part of me that wanted to belong in rural Australia felt rejected, useless, in a way. The part of me that wanted to belong in anthropology hoped I could work out what to take notes on. All the while I felt haunted by the sedimentation of spoken and unspoken narratives of that place, and my own relationship with the ghosts of the past.

The cattle yards were set up so that, through the opening and closing of various sliding gates, the Brahman calves would be ushered up a 'race' and into the 'crush', that is, a small crate that would restrict the calf's movements. Most 'crushes' are manual and involve encouraging the beast forward until a lever can be pulled, sliding bars on either side of its neck to trap it. This is the type of crush that I had grown up using on the small rural property my mother had owned, that I would see on other properties in Outback Queensland, and that, playing the role of participant-observer, I would come to use myself. But David preferred to use a modern electronic setup. He told me that he'd seen an advertisement for the electronic crush on TV, where three beautiful young women, each with blonde hair, tagged and dehorned a calf at incredible speed. He'd reckoned that it looked like a pretty good investment.

The crew assembled in their places. There was my aunt and uncle; Bett, my older cousin who lived and worked on the family property; Emily, a young woman employed for the season while she decided whether or not to go back to medical school; and Martin, a teenager chasing big dreams of being a 'ringer'.[1] I watched the first gangly brahman calf with too-big ears step forward into the crate. Bett pressed a button and with an electronic whir, the sides of the crush closed in on the calf, then rotated to pick the calf up and tip it onto its right side. It bellowed, tongue lolling from the side of its mouth, hooves paddling the air. The workers sprung into action. Emily administered a vaccine into the calf's rectum. Loretta noted its details down for DNA testing. Martin chose a plastic ear tag and yelled the number out to David, who picked up the associated numbered irons from the furnace and held the hot brand to the calf's flank, burning the numbers into the flesh. At the same time, Beth pierced the tag into the calf's ear. She picked up the 'dehorners'—large pincers used to cut the nascent horn from the calf's head. As the dehorners clenched shut the calf bellowed. Blood spurted out in a high fountain from the incision and onto Bette's shirt. In a moment, David had pressed the button again and the calf was tipped back to vertical, placed on its hooves. The gates opened. With a shake of the head, the calf trotted back to the herd, trailing blood behind it. "Just like a little kid scraping its knee," David said to me, grinning.

The morning continued like that. If I focused amid the flurry of motion, electronic whirring, opening and shutting of gates, squirting, bellowing, yelling of numbers, and snipping, I could hear the sizzle of hair and skin, smell the acrid burning flesh, the heady scent of blood and horn.

Mostly I was struck by the matter-of-factness of it all. It was a violence that was completely ordinary, wholly to be expected, something I'd seen in other yards long before in my childhood. By the time they were done, the ground beneath my boot soles was sticky with blood, the scent metallic in the mid-morning heat, and I was vaguely surprised to find myself bored.

After the branding and dehorning, I joined Beth, Loretta, and Emily to 'mother up' the newly branded calves. Beth and Loretta rode on horseback amongst the herd of heifers while Emily and I worked on foot in the next yard. We'd shoo a calf through the gate and call out its new brand number, then Beth and Loretta would observe which cow the calf went to and write down the corresponding cow's number. By doing this, they were able to keep a record of which numbered calf belonged to which numbered cow. I tried to do my job of ushering the calves through the gate but I kept getting in the way. Eventually, I was asked to stand aside, once again relegated to the fence-line to observe.

There a peculiar panic seized my body. It started as a tingling in my limbs, then grew to a heaviness in my chest. In the dust of the cattle yard, so similar to the dusty cattle yards at the property on which I'd grown up, an old memory had emerged. It was the kind of visceral, elusive charge that could be nostalgia or trauma or just an ordinary moment dislodged from temporality that comes to take control of your body. My heart raced. My vision tunneled. I held the rail for support and breathed deeply. What happened next is a blur. Maybe it was the blood I'd just seen, the heat, the fatigue from the two long days' drive to get there, the confusion of not knowing what to do, a jolt of the past, a deep melancholia. Maybe it was something that wasn't mine but an inherited *something* that came from the stories of pain and heartache, drought and alcoholism, land and longing, tied to that place. Maybe it was a combination of it all. Whatever it was, at that moment the world began to slide away into absence.

The other women found me on the ground, passed out amid the dust.

They bundled me into the old Suzuki that had no doors and a cracked windscreen. As I came to, I protested that I was fine and that I should stay and keep taking notes. They ignored me. After that, I was not allowed to work in the yards at the station again.

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In a paper entitled 'The Fall: fictocritical writing' Stephen Muecke (2002) asks what it means to fall into a viscerally felt idea. Muecke draws upon the Deleuzian distinction between concepts and percepts. Concepts are what are used in and arise from criticism, circulating as a kind of currency. Percepts are the hard-hitting perceptions and affects that arise through art. They are singular and distinct. Muecke suggests that in fictocritical writing, a reader may be attracted by artistic percepts and then 'fall' into the concepts of criticism. This, he explains, is not a unidirectional process, because through acts of engaging with art, we can fall again and again. We fall for the art, but through the things we learn in criticism, we may climb back out, aware of the percept but willing to fall all over again.

I first read Muecke's paper on my way out to the field, sitting in a caravan[2] parked amid horse stables at my father's small property, awaiting ethics approval so I could begin interviews. It was probably the longest I had spent with my father in a decade, but I thought it would be a good opportunity to learn from him about my fieldsite in Outback Queensland where he had lived and worked when he was young, and where he had met my mother. Over 'smoko',[3] I would sit with him on the 'verandah'[4] overlooking his paddocks and ask him questions about 'Outback culture.' In response, he would shrug or mumble a few words, then go back to staring into the middle distance. Most afternoons I'd retreat to the caravan to read, telling myself theory would prepare me for what I was about to encounter. I remember breathing in the dusty air and scent of livestock as I highlighted passages from Muecke's paper. I liked how it was written. I liked the ideas. But in hindsight, I didn't really get it. I had to fall myself.

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It was July 2019 when I initially tried to write about my experience of falling in the field, two years after it had happened. I had reached something of a crisis point in my research, in that I no longer knew what I was writing about. I had gone out to the field to do something about stories and the existential role of these stories in people's lives. I'd pitched it to the university as a reimagining of the 'bush yarn', a sub-genre of Australian nationalistic folktales told in rural regions, with strong parallels with the American Wild West genre. I suggested that we

needed to critically re-evaluate the role these stories played in a time where the environments, identities, and projects that frequently formed a central part of these narratives were contested. But by 2019 I'd come to realize another reason for choosing to study Outback Queensland was more personal, and probably had to do with my own deep and ambivalent feelings about rural Australia. In going 'out West' to the Outback I hoped to grapple with an imagined origin place in the nationalistic grand narrative—a settler-colonial chronototope associated with the impossible 'out there' and 'back then' (See Rose 2004). But it was also something of an origin point of my own existence. I wanted to follow narrative traces that were also in my own flesh. That would probably explain why I spent most of the fieldwork crying rather than observing. Why else do fieldwork in a place where my great-grandfather had invaded Indigenous lands, the place in which my mother had grown up, and where my father had ventured as a young man to partake in the activities he'd heard about in legend? Why else do fieldwork amid the kind of rural life I thought that I had long ago rejected, a culture in which I never felt I belonged? Why else engage with scenarios that would re-enact the embodied movements of my exiled inner child, continuously evoking some of my most shameful and deeply buried memories? Why else keep returning, again and again, to the question of what it means to call stolen land home, and how to tell a story of such a place?

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Joan Didion (2006, 185) famously wrote that "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." People like to use this quote to speak about the power of narrative to make sense of the world. But they often forget that Didion was probably more interested in the failure of narrative: "We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience…Or at least we do for a while." We take percepts and string them into plots and structures, forming concepts that might lend some sense of order to a universe that constantly eludes explanation. But then we fall once again into the fragmentary moment.

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I was stuck (Cvetkovich, 17; 32). Unable to fall asleep, I lay awake turning over my conflicted emotions about how to represent the people and place I had encountered in my fieldwork. And so, years after my fieldwork, after months of spiraling around the same questions, I sat in my kitchen at 3 am to write what I thought might be an easy methodological anecdote about losing consciousness in fieldwork. I had hoped that in doing so I could open the door for a discussion of embodied observation, of how my own body and emotions interacted with the field, the bodies, and emotions of others, to produce an affect charged with tensions of memory and politics and identity. Riffing on Spinoza (1994, 155) I wanted to think through the fall in relation to questions of what a body can 'do'—or, 'in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 257). If my body failed and revealed my unbelonging in the scenario, the bodies of the workers demonstrated their sense of belonging in the work environment. The workers had moved together in productive unity, embodying a contemporary revisioning of the modernist grand narrative of 'The Outback Legend' (Ward 2003), where brawn, efficiency, and domination over animals unite with technical innovation. The body of the calf merged with both human and non-human movement in this moment, where the worker's care or violence against that body remains open for interpretation. Bodies, human and non-human, were in affective circulation with events, narratives, and ideologies.

I wanted to communicate that despite my attempts to introduce myself in the scene through a neutral ethnographic gaze, my body, and its affective connections betrayed me. It had collapsed into 'an infinite history of traces without an inventory' (Singh 2018, 18). There was a gap. I had tried to inhabit the role of the objective participant observer, but a confluence of some things—my queerness, my vegan-ness, my craziness, my left-wingness, the dust, the heat, the bellowing beasts, the memories—flooded my body. I fell. What had I let slip in that gap between sign and referent, event and meaning, where ethnographic observation failed and where, paradoxically, my presence as an observer was emphasized? What could be said of my own bodily traces in the dirt? I wanted to express that for all I had seen, or thought I had seen, for all I had been present for, *something* was absent in my writing. There were so many more moments my body had been flooded with intensities, queries, and paradoxical pulls, that I'd ended up covered in dust, unaware of what was going on.

I'd written up to the point where I'd lost consciousness when I got the phone call saying my father had died.

Figure 1. T*races: My father's hat and coat outside his home*, Central Queensland (2019)

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When I was an undergraduate student my lecturer in critical theory introduced Nietzsche's (See Nietzsche (1993 [1873]) concept of truth through the image of falling. Life, my critical theory teacher said, is mainly made up of metaphors and concepts, structures we use to make sense of things. But every now and again these concepts fail us. It is like when you go to take a step and realize the ground is not where you thought it would be. You feel an electric jolt through your body, a panic. Perhaps you try, unsuccessfully, to fight it. Perhaps you let go. Then there's the concept again, the ground beneath your feet. But, in between, you fall for an instant into something truer than truth.

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At the funeral, I placed my father's wide-brimmed 'cowboy' hat on his coffin with some eucalyptus leaves and hoped it wasn't too much of an Australian cliche. We played the theme song from *Lonesome Dove* because it was the only sad music anyone could really ever remember him listening to, and I tried not to think about the settler-colonial undertones of the film, of the notion of White pastoralists coming to 'tame the wilderness' in a frontier land, the way the story of the frontier reproduced in Westerns had been used in other settler-colonial contexts as far away as Australia to lend legitimacy to a narrative of settler belonging, and how both my father and I were a part of that narrative making.

After, at the pub, stories I had heard often about him took on new life, grew to mythic proportions, and circulated. Everyone wanted to talk about my father as the Outback legend. An anonymous person sent a floral arrangement of Australian natives that included a stock whip and branding iron. I was told of how my father was a 'true Aussie battler' who fought bushfires, forded flooded rivers, survived droughts, and broke in wild horses. I couldn't help but deconstruct the stories for their adherence to a settler-colonial narrative. I didn't point out that he never really saw himself that way, or that some of the stories were simply not true, or that his old *bushy*[5] *mates*[6] were finding sentimental comfort in the evocation of a nationalistic trope that was easier to grasp than the complexities of a real human being but was still just as full of paradox. Instead, I sat and drank with men in checked shirts and cowboy hats as they waxed nostalgic about the good old days of rodeos and horse breaking before their respective bustups. I imagined their bodies much younger, working amid the dust of a stockyard, and all the times they must have fallen in the dirt.

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Stories do, of course, do real work in the world. The anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013) argues that storytelling is a "purposeful action" where storytellers and listeners attempt to make sense of their individual, subjective, experiences in relation to the social, intersubjective, world. At the social level, sharing stories helps create a sense of solidarity within a group, thereby reaffirming a group's existence. At the individual level, one can use stories to recover a sense of agency and view oneself as an active subject in the face of events beyond one's control.

But sometimes, the power of stories rests in their ability to give images to a given moment. Joseph Russo (2022), writing of the particular kind of 'hard luck' stories men like my father's mates are prone to telling, suggests that stories are also what we turn to when we are 'stuck.' Rather than actively trying to reposition one's existential status or reclaim a sense of subjectivity, 'hard-luck stories trace the movement and resonance in the void left by life without a genre—the persisting of time and voice in the space of stuckness' (4). These are stories that point to the failure of those other stories we tell in order to live, repositioning the bodily traces of that failure into a series of sensations and images. Stuckness, writes Cvetkvovich (2012, 20) is an image that connotes the spatial, temporal, and bodily state of impasse.

If an impasse is a build-up of concepts that forces one to slow down or stop, maybe these moments of stuckness evoked by cowboys at a wake held in a pub in 'the Beef Capital of Australia' are where the cross-generational residue of nationalistic concepts and blood and booze and dirt has accumulated. I see this stickiness and then also the moment of coming unstuck as part of the interplay of concepts and percepts. Sometimes, we follow a percept, even a percept of 'stuckness', and all at once we fall into some new creative possibility. Then the stories start to build up all over again.

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Late that night after the last rounds we pried ourselves from the sticky floor of the pub. The men staggered out onto the sidewalk, walking shoulder to shoulder to keep each other from falling. I'd told my older cousin, the owner of a fuel trucking business with a brood of active kids and a drought-stricken farm somewhere else out west, that we would give him a lift back to his hotel. Exhausted, I sat in the

front passenger seat, fighting off nausea and dread, while the driver navigated the empty streets. Thinking of some sentimental memory of childhood, I turned to share it with my cousin. We had picked up the wrong guy.

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There is a period after sudden change where you try to make sense of things using a logical narrative structure. My father's partner spoke again and again of my father's fall. Him falling. Her trying to revive him. The long wait for the ambulance. The fact that none of it made sense. We had the story but no plot. A plot, Forster (1955, 86) writes, is different from a story in that in a plot 'the time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it.' We'd talk about these plotless events over smoko, and again as we drank beers in the evening.

Perhaps looking for answers, we sorted through the old metal toolbox where my father stored his 'important things.' We lay the faded photographs of favorite horses and long-ago lovers and letters from banks like pieces of evidence or tarot cards to be read for some clue of the past or future, and which ultimately we were unable to decipher. I packed up his saddlery shed. Someone wanted to buy the 'useful' things, so I sorted the broken eye-glasses, ketchup bottles filled with glue, stolen mugs, scraps of leather, hand-written notes, ideas no one had ever got around to patenting, and rodeo buckles from the tools that still worked. I wondered what such an archive that spilled over with seemingly incongruous materialities and incommensurate domains said about life. Or about the archive for that matter.

In between, echoing my time at the property on the way out to the field, I would sit in the caravan in the horse stables and try to read the books and papers that, under some fundamental misunderstanding that grief might lend itself to productivity, I had taken from my office the day after I learned of my father's death. I had chosen the books because in my crisis of how to represent the strange, arresting experiences that formed gaps in my fieldwork I had remembered Muecke's paper about concepts and percepts, and wondered if reading anthropologists who used poetry and non-representational writing to think through ethnographic moments might help me give form to affect and bodily disposition. How had others attempted cartography of the gap, the something, the slippage, that occurs in ethnography?

I kept returning to Michael Jackson's (2018) assertion that 'space and time are not essentially different realities, but different ways of apprehending basic human experiences of relative nearness and remoteness, presence and absence' (122). What, I wondered, of those moments of collapse, when the dust of the stables smelled just like the dust of my childhood, of the dusty days spent with my father as we sat on the veranda, of the dust of my fieldwork? What of these gaps in time and space do I feel as I fall through in those moments?

The other book I had brought with me, Ronato Rosaldo's (2014) *The Day of Shelly's Death*, is a collection of poetry recounting the death of Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, the author's wife after she fell from a cliff during fieldwork in the Philippines. The fall itself is a gap in the text, focalized not through the eyes of those who saw it but through a recounting of another fall in the same place (8). What does this gap in a book retelling the fall some thirty years after the fact say of space and time in mourning? Or thinking? Or affect and bodily disposition? 'The material of poetry is not so much the raw event as the traces it leaves,' Rosaldo (102) writes.

I read this late into the night and considered what it all meant for my own experiences of being absent in the field and my father's absence. What story do we turn to, do we construct and reconstruct, from the traces—the 'vestigia'—of an absent event where the traces are not signs or images per se, but irreducible affects? What is the space and time of one's own embodied archive?

At dawn, the horse in the stable beside me would start pawing at the metal gate. Bang. Bang. Bang. Echoing into the frigid winter night. From within the caravan, I inhaled the dust and listened time and time again to the falling of hooves, thinking of the imprint it would make (See Spinoza 1994, 131).

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In another West across the world, E Cram (2022, 6) evokes "the nonlinear traces" of settler colonialism's "enduring materiality and sedimentation" through the notion of "land lines." Land lines, as "the ecological, energetic, and affective inheritance" of frontier construction, can be found in archives, museums, and narratives—those things that are collected to turn the dead into nationalistic tropes, half-knowledges that fill the living with *wanting*. But the trace is also in the land itself, in the places of collective memory and familial mythology, where violence has been waged,

Figure 2. *Archives: My father's saddlery before I packed it up*, Central Queensland (2019)

lives lived, and the metaphorical body of the state and the real bodies of individuals intermingle in systems of governance. The book traces land lines through these sites of memory and their violent inheritances, demonstrating ways in which attention to one's own bodily affordances and traces can resist colonial tendencies.

The book begins with a conversation between the author's father and the author. "You know", the author's father says, "they say if you really love this place, you have to bury your nose down deep and smell the blood in the soil" (xi).

When reading this, I laughed: how does one end up with their nose buried in the soil? How does one get back up again?

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After that, you could say I fell apart a bit. I returned to the city, ended a long-term relationship, stopped sleeping, and took to lying on the lino floor of my unfurnished subleased room because it meant I could fall no further. I tried going back to the university, but could make no sense of my field notes or what I had already written. All I had to show for ten months of fieldwork were collections of fragmentary moments about fragmented identities in a place that existed more tangibly in myth than reality. My ethnographic gaze had failed me. Or I failed it.

'You're telling me you didn't do real fieldwork?' my supervisor said incredulously when I confessed my fear that I had failed completely at capturing the bush yarns and events I'd set out to record. I wanted to tell him about the gap, the slippage, the feelings that flooded me so entirely with *something* that I was unable to do anything but feel. I wanted to tell him that it was all embodied archives without indexes, that the questions I wanted to interrogate were between the sense of being overcome and the time when you find yourself lying in the dust. Instead, I said that I suppose I hadn't done real fieldwork and that I should probably drop out of the course.

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In her metaphorical memoir, *Lying*, Lauren Slater (2000) recounts her experiences with epilepsy, or mental illness, or Munchausen's Disease, or all of those things. It is a strange kind of memoir, one that actively resists truth, objectivity, and teleology in favor of feeling. The unreliable narrator, Lauren, speaks of sensory forces that turn to the ruptures of seizure, leaving gaps in time and space and rendering truth

uneasy. As part of learning to live with her illness, she must learn how to fall; learning to fall properly protects an epileptic from unnecessary injury. While reading this text, readers too must fall into a memoir we are explicitly told is filled with lies. Midway through the text, the narrator addresses a potential publisher through numbered points, one of which requests that the text be sold as 'a book that takes up residence in the murky gap between genres and, by its stubborn self-position there, forces us to consider important things' (270). The list concludes:

> 18. Look here.
> 19. This is where I am.
> (Slater 2000, 277)

As readers then, we are asked to search for the focalizing narrator in the space between the text, the fall from line to line, somewhere amid the self-conscious theorizing and array of narrative elements deployed to demonstrate that theorizing.

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I didn't drop out of the doctorate program in the end. Instead, a senior academic asked for me to come to her office. She had heard I was struggling after my father's death. I said I wasn't sure it was so much the death as the fact that I hadn't really observed what I should have in the field. Instead of taking neat notes I had been overcome. I had, I kept saying, too many gaps in my data. And too many feelings in my body.

'I see you are feeling emotional about your fieldwork', she said. 'So write about those feelings.'

She gave me permission to fall.

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Following the publication of Bronslaw 'Father of Ethnography' Malinowski's diaries in 1967, there was a crisis of representation in anthropology (See Geertz 1988; Marcus & Clifford 1986; Rosaldo 1989). The field Malinowski wrote of in his journals was different from that he wrote of in his ethnography. His ethnographic gaze seemed split. This, combined with the post-structural zeitgeist, meant that the myth of the neutral ethnographic observer, to the extent it was still believed in, fell from favor.

And yet, despite some thirty or so years of disciplinary soul searching since then, in anthropology there is still some clinging to the truth of witnessing, to the idea that ethnography is some kind of rational act of observation that emerges from the field. The classic tale of our discipline is one that follows the participant observer from the early foibles of fieldwork, the misunderstandings, and the mistakes, to where they come to understand social life, eventually departing the field to write up something that weaves ethnographic narrative with analysis. An ethnographic truth or anthropological evidence rests in having been there, and having seen a particular happening. Generally, we don't like to talk about the gaps in the ethnographic gaze and the unreliable focalization of the narrative. But there are inevitably moments when our concepts and pre-existing narratives fail us. If ideas are, as Spinoza would have it, formed through the body and the body is always being affected, ideas form reflexively and iteratively in relation to multiple affects (See Pethick 2015, 50). Later we retrospectively piece something together, thinking with affects and bodily dispositions that arise in relation to, but often temporally and spatially distanced from, the field. Through a creative curlicue of ethnographic writing, we focalize it all as if from the observer we should have been. To quote Lauren Slater, 'we create all sorts of lies, all sorts of stories and metaphors, to avoid the final truth, which is the fact of falling' (2000, 325).

The final act of falling is the affective something, the felt experience, the embodied act of being overcome, such that the gaze fails and all one knows is a sense of a moment being 'thrown together' through bodily affiliations with disparate times and places. Some ethnographers (Hickey-Moody 2019; Lau 2008; Varley 2008; see also Halberstam 2011; Law 2004; Singh 2017) have come to engage with this fact of falling—the times when our gaze fails, becomes obscured, turns myopic—as an essential part of the ethnographic process. They advocate for ethnography focalized in relation to falling and failure.

In another vein, Russo (2017, 6) emphasizes the affective transmission of ethnographic observation, 'the interplay of simultaneous affective states: those that are observed and those that influence the trajectory of observation' as part of a process of contending with the flow of incommensurable elements that emerge in the making and unmaking of worlds. Here, the affective incommensurability and 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005) of worlds are central to ethnographic thinking as a means of grappling with the meeting of disparate social elements, power structures, ideologies, and affects. Importantly, this way of thinking acknowledges that

'affective transmission' (Brennan 2004) does not end after we exit the field. Rather, ethnography is an ongoing process of examining the incommensurate moments, theories, and gaps in the attempt to create some kind of story about a time and a place. To this, I'd add that it is a process that is necessarily embodied, with the ethnographic urge to do such grappling with a bodily disposition towards the world.

Viewed in this way, we fall, again and again, for the affective intensity where past and present and truth and fiction collapse into an arresting moment that always, always, exceeds the event itself. Sometimes, using concepts we can make our way out, only to fall again.

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For the Ilgongot of the Phillipines, there is a particular 'overwhelming force' that arises in grief. Ilgongot men told Rosaldo (1989) that this force can be dissipated through the act of ambushing a victim, cutting off their head, and then discarding that head. Dismissing this account as too simplistic, Rosaldo tried out a number of anthropological theories to explain the practice. It took him 14 years and deep reflections on his own engagement with such an affective 'force' of grief to really understand what they meant. His thinking about this affective force which had no translation in English had to be affective and bodily. Ethnographic truth here resided not in unwavering observation and detailed description but an awareness of one's own subjectivity as being constantly repositioned in relation to the forces that surround the researcher both in and out of the field. It is a way of conceiving thought as something that is felt (Pethick 2015, 3). It is also this thinking that led him to return, time and time again, to rewrite Shelly's death through poetic form, as a fictocritical journey with concepts and percepts.

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In the period between submitting my thesis and the thesis defense, I performed in a butoh work about Deleuze and Guattari's theory of a Body Without Organs, choreographed by Saara Roppola. There is a point in the choreography where the dancers' bodies undergo metamorphosis. We had been desiring machines and catatonic patients. Soon we would birth the world. But to get there, we had to perform the axis point, the moment where everything changes and pasts and future choreographies are given new meaning. We stood on the balls of our feet with legs crossed, balancing precariously as our bodies constricted and reformed, our arms spasming, our heads yanking back. The music rose to a high crescendo.

Then, we fell.

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In the end my thesis became about the narratives people in Outback Queensland construct from the ruins and cruel optimisms (Berlant 2011) of modernist ideology to express or legitimate a sense of belonging in the shadow of unfulfilled settler colonial dreams. I contemplate the traces of inheritance through the bodily, spatial, and temporal acts of going 'out West.' The text keeps returning to the moments where the world of the now fades away and one finds oneself with their nose buried "down deep," where the scent of "blood in the soil" is unavoidable. There is an inescapability to this scent of blood in settler colonial Australia, perhaps because of the multiple impossibilities of ever returning home (Boym 2001; Massey 2005, 124). It speaks to stuckness, tracing not one narrative, but being overcome by incommensurate moments, by falling into the gaps in these narratives and the way we relate to a world that is constantly throwing itself together, and thus is not stable enough to ever truly grasp in a coherent narrative form. We plot and replot our lives as our reference points shift (Hastrup 2005; Vigh 2009). In doing so, we rarely keep both eyes on it in order to focalize our narratives from one perspective, but rather we draw from ruptured multiplicities to string together a series of gaps in such a way that we pay attention to the weave rather than the absence it delineates. I wrote in my methodology that perhaps a work of fictocriticism, a falling between the lines of the text, would have been more fitting as an ethnography, but it didn't fit the criteria for a thesis at my university. So, I was left to explain how I leaned into the ruptures in the stories we tell ourselves in order to live, following the traces rather than the events across time and space, sifting through mutable debris of material realities of life and death. What I needed to convey to the examiner was how I leaned in so far, I fell into the affective entanglements of an ordinary amid the decomposing identities of nationalistic myth in a time where grand narratives have failed and modernism's promises of belonging are scattered as rubble in the dust. Thinking as affect or bodily disposition, I needed to say, involves falling, using theory to climb back up, and falling all over again.

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Endnotes

1. 'Ringer' is an Australian English term for someone who is skilled at working with cattle and horses on stations (ranches), akin to a 'gaucho' or 'cowboy' in the Americas. While 'cowboy' may be used as a descriptive or term of endearment in Outback Australia in reference to the Hollywood Western, on stations it also refers to a role of someone undertaking menial work around the homestead.

2. 'Caravan' is an Australian English term for 'trailer.'

3. 'Smoko' is an Australian English term for a short break from work, traditionally to have a cigarette and tea.

4. 'Veranda' is an Australian English term for 'porch.'

5. 'Bushy' is an Australian English term referring to Australians from rural areas who embody a certain set of rural ideals. Such rural areas are commonly referred to as 'the bush.'

6. 'Mate' is an Australian English term referring to both friends and also a moralistic ideal of gendered behavior.

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