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# The problem of privacy

Maria Takolander, privacy  
by Maria Takolander,

We have a strange and contradictory fascination when it comes to other people's lives. We care too much—as in the case of celebrities, those holographs (projected by the machine of capitalism) which we obsessively flesh out so that they resemble human beings. Our imaginations are tirelessly attentive to them. Alternatively, we care too little—as in the case of asylum seekers, whose lives we don't want to imagine at all.

Since the so-called ethical turn in literary studies, the skill of imagining another, of invading another's privacy—which literature allegedly hones—has been regularly valorised by critics (Martha Nussbaum, for example). Such critics draw distinctions between the easy identifications invited by popular texts about 'others' and the challenges issued by more ethically minded texts. JM Coetzee's novels, for instance, contain characters that prove resistant to the reader's imaginative incursions (such as the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the tongueless Friday in *Foe*). And often the voyeuristic reader is represented diegetically by an observing and prying character or narrator. (There is the doctor in the *Life and Times of Michael K* or David Lurie in *Disgrace*.) In an essay soon to appear in *Telling Stories: Australian Literary Cultures, 1935-2012*, I discuss the ways in which Coetzee's 'Australian' novels invite engagement with these issues as they pertain to asylum seekers. What Coetzee's work acknowledges—and what well-meaning celebrations of empathic experience often neglect—is that the process of being imagined can be an intrusive and unsettling one. Coetzee also notably protects himself from the public eye and mind.



(<http://www.smh.com.au/ffximage/2007/03>

[/02/coetzee030307\\_070302034422070\\_wideweb\\_300x300.jpg](#)) I have been provoked in these reflections by a recent experience I had of being photographed. In a single week I found myself photographed by two different photographers. While this hardly makes me famous—particularly given that I solicited the services of one of the photographers—I was nevertheless given the 'celebrity treatment' of being imagined by outsiders. One photographer thought that it was her business to

portray me in a flattering way, which she imagined as generically feminine; the other photographer had more masculine ambitions involving the creation of a work of art. The first photographer confided in me her belief that a subject can never wear too much make up; the second told me that his fundamental interest was in the effects of light on facial ‘landscapes’. Neither photographer knew me or my work. Yet I found the experiences unnerving—and not just because they challenged my vanity. (Indeed, I considered myself fortunate given that the art photographer, who also took pictures of my husband, made him look like a grey-faced inmate released on parole due to a terminal case of emphysema.) I rejected further sessions with both photographers. I decided, as I often do, that I wanted to be left alone.

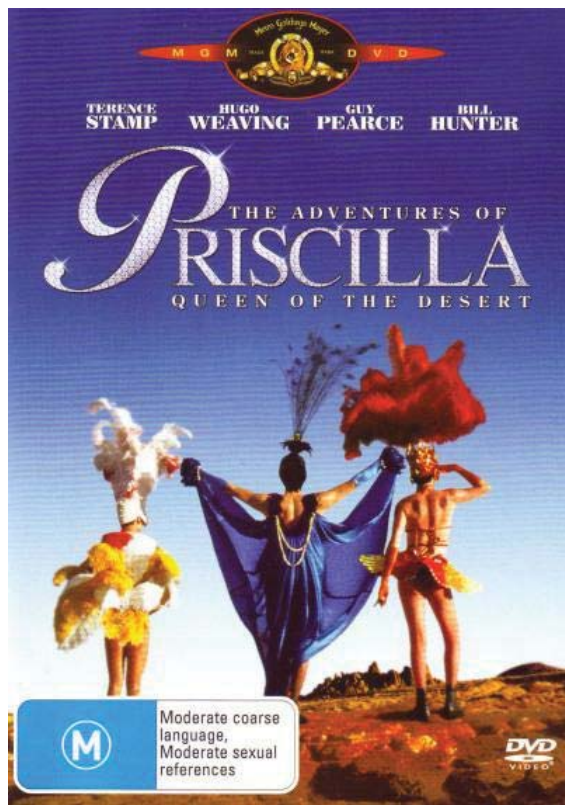
More disconcerting, undoubtedly, was the experience of having poems written ‘about’ or ‘for’ me by others. Lisa Gorton dedicated a typically brilliant poem to me—quite unexpectedly—and I felt shocked and exposed by it, even though she suggested to me that the subject matter was inconsequential. At least one early poem of my husband’s had a similar effect.

I could explain my love of privacy by calling on my Finnish heritage, which I like to do from time to time—with varying degrees of sincerity—as readers of my blog would by now recognise. Finns are a private people. When I visited Finland in my early twenties I went on a ride in an amusement park in Tampere with my sister. We were hanging upside down and happily screaming when we realised that everyone else on the ride was silent. Other characteristics suggestive of privacy were noted: men said very little; women’s sentences trailed out into whispers. Upon visiting someone’s home, there were prolonged silences during which we could appreciate the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the old-fashioned ticking of a clock. There were Finnish sayings celebrating silence as golden. Even when flaccidly drunk, Finns exposed very little—if we don’t include their body parts. One of my twenty-five cousins was so drunk one night that he was unable to recall the location of his new apartment. He lived there alone, confiding in us that his ex-girlfriend had demanded of him a choice: her or alcohol. That was about as confessional as it got—utterly inconsequential in comparison to the drunken Australian ‘gut-spills’ to which I was subjected at various pubs and parties while growing up around Melbourne. The difference between Finns and Australians might very well be encapsulated in the difference between Aki Kaurismäki’s *The Man Without a Past*, a film about a taciturn man with amnesia, and *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, a film glorying in the spectacle of self-exposure—although there is a similar penchant for self-caricature and the grotesque.

Of course, a major explanation for my discomfort in being photographed or written about involves power. While I feel uneasy about other people representing me, I feel empowered in representing myself—or in not representing myself—as I see fit. It’s why there is no contradiction in me writing a blog complaining about other people invading my privacy, or of people going on Facebook to criticise corporate or governmental surveillance. Celebrities often ask for the right to portray themselves, as do indigenous peoples.

However, I am acutely aware of my hypocrisy on another level. Even while I understand the ethical implications of representation and have experienced firsthand the discomfort of being represented by outsiders, I continue to depict others with impunity. My blog posts have invaded the privacy of my parents, my primary school principal, my husband, my unfortunate Finnish cousin, and even the two





personable photographers who performed a service for me. Then there are the people exposed, with merely a fig leaf to conceal their public identities, in my poetry and fiction. And let's not forget the violent incursions that I hope to make upon readers' 'souls', in line with Franz Kafka's sadistic conceptualisation of literature as an axe for the frozen sea within us. Much of the unsettling power of literature, as Kafka's and Coetzee's commanding work suggests, lies in holding up the broken pieces of a mirror and inviting readers to recognise themselves in that defamiliarised context. So what if the masochistic writer, exemplified by Kafka, had to look in the mirror first?

Either my writing is a testament to my hypocrisy or, more forgivingly, it constitutes evidence of the fact that we exist only inter-subjectively. Our lives are inevitably and profoundly imbricated with those of others. Others live inside us; we live inside others. Perhaps the worst of us are those who try to deny that—a denial that I witness daily upon reading the online newspapers and observing the comments of online readers in response to stories about

asylum seekers. These readers seem interested only in protecting their economic rights. I'm not sure, though, that this lets me entirely off the hook. Perhaps, like those who refuse to imagine the suffering of asylum seekers, I am simply intent on justifying my solipsistic and immoral way of life.

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