



**Reading the Country: 30 Years On**  
Philip Morrissey and Chris Healy (eds)

CSR Books

# Reading the Country: 30 Years On

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**Reading the Country:  
30 Years On**

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# Introduction

Philip Morrissey

In October 2014 a three-day festival was held at the University of Melbourne to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*. The Benterrak, Muecke and Roe text, published in 1984, remains a high point in Australian publishing and intellectual life: the festival aimed to revisit and recapture the intellectual radicalism and political energy of that time. For three days we established a Temporary Autonomous Zone, turning time into space—a space to think—replacing deceit, pomposity and policies with respect for traditional owners, elders and the learned, with intergenerational concern, autonomy, community and joy.

Festival participants came from diverse fields such as philosophy, anthropology, publishing, English, theatre and cultural studies, and included both established and emerging scholars. We offered hospitality to undergraduate students and members of the general community, whose participation was facilitated by not charging any conference fees. The event featured a range of forms—academic papers, discussion forums, film, performance, poetry, music—and actively encouraged the engagement of all participants, not just the formal presenters. Together we discussed the multi-faceted experimental aspects of *Reading the Country*, and reread it in light of changes in Australian society and universities, and contemporary developments in critical theory and reading methods.

Elements of play, music, theatre and food were self-consciously used to disrupt conventional conference procedures and create the spirit of the sensorium. This was both a reflection of the intellectual and aesthetic openness of the original project and an implicit critique of the careerism, lack

of imagination and petty competitiveness often associated with western academic conferences. We aimed to mobilise the energy of popular cultural forms for an intellectual and political project. Presenters came on stage to personally selected walk-in music, in the manner of contemporary prize fighters entering the ring; a DJ provided music for the duration of the event.

The Melbourne premiere of Stephen Muecke's performance piece, *Turning into Gardiya* (his dramatisation of his relationship with Paddy Roe), was delivered outside in the public space of the University South Lawn (a former site of radical student protest). In an unexpected piece of authoritarian corporate agit-prop, a suspicious security guard lurked on the edges of the performance, muttering into his two-way radio. In a further development of the rich University of Melbourne reading group culture, the festival featured a Philosophers' Maul, where philosophers tossed around ideas and ran with them. In the twenty-first century the rugby union maul is just as appropriate a trope for the robust pursuit of truth as the game of polo was for fifteenth-century Persian-language poets. In an acknowledgement of 1984 as a high moment of second-wave feminism in Australia, a panel set up a dialogue between different generations of feminists, who offered personal reminiscences and intellectual critiques of a political, activist culture across thirty years.

The festival project also featured the republication of the text of *Reading the Country*, which was unavailable in 2014. With the agreement of Fremantle Arts Centre Press and very limited resources, we were able to scan and re-edit a text (with black and white illustrations only) which was published by re.press and made available to delegates and students. Copies were provided to Krim Benterrak and Stephen Muecke, and through Stephen to the Goolarabaloo. Copies of this edition remain available as a study edition for University of Melbourne students of Australian Indigenous Studies.

While the festival focused on the cultural moment and continuing importance of *Reading the Country*, and paid full tribute to the late Paddy Roe and to Krim Benterrak, it was structured specifically as a celebration of Stephen Muecke's career, and his presence and active contribution were vital

to its intellectual and social success. Muecke's key role in the development of the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Aboriginal Studies and Ficto-criticism in Australia across the decades from the 1980s was identified, analysed and celebrated.

In respect to *Reading the Country*, one of Muecke's main achievements was to demonstrate definitively that Roe's concepts were not anthropological and time bound, but could be used in contexts remote from their origin; this insight is foundational to his version of Aboriginal Cultural Studies. *Reading the Country* was the first major intellectual statement of 'country', explicated by Roe and re-presented by multiple authors in different media. More unexpectedly, our festival also revealed the innovative power of the concept of 'reading' in *Reading the Country*, one of the first books to use 'reading' in its strong sense of learning. Reading is the word for what Roe taught Muecke, not just what he learned but the process of teaching. This idea is also applied in Benterrak's paintings and in the way Muecke used the resources of his academic training and his background in continental theory to understand and communicate something always existing but also fundamentally new. Muecke was also uncompromising in his insistence on the use of Kriol in *Reading the Country*, so that meaning is not translated or commodified, but available only through a full reading of the language itself.

The festival was conceptualised to look back to the formative moment of the 1960s as a useful device for understanding and critiquing where we are now. May 1968 symbolically opened up the political possibilities of a conjunction of theory and praxis in the study of the humanities, via their first encounters with continental philosophy and critical theory. By the early 1980s there was a strong sense of possibility for tertiary institutions in Australia and for the centrality of humanities within them; *Reading the Country* is an emblematic text for this period. Our festival and this publication situate *Reading the Country* in the 1960s (arguably its period of inception) and the 1980s (its moment of production) through a reevaluation of its influence and significance in the contemporary age of neoliberalism and corporatism.

This account of the generative and heterogeneous moment of the 30 Years On festival provides a context for reading

the essays collected in this volume. Here we have aimed to preserve the occasional spirit of the papers, their origin in a specific moment of collaboration and celebration, rather than to present a unified or comprehensive academic engagement with the Benterrak, Muecke and Roe text. What follows is a selection of the more formal presentations from the festival, organised to draw attention to some of its recurring themes and not attempting to do justice to all aspects of this groundbreaking text. Varieties of form, tone — and even quality — are entirely deliberate and, we believe, in the generous spirit of our originating text.

The first section, ‘Revisiting the Text and its Production’, places *Reading the Country* in the context of the historical and intellectual currents of its time of publication. Stephen Muecke revisits the intellectual radicalism of his text. Originally he and his coauthors had to introduce the concept of ‘country’ as disclosed in all its complexity by Paddy Roe; as a part of this Muecke himself had to engage in a critique of the core disciplines which formed the Western understanding of country (such as anthropology and history). Thirty years later, Muecke returns to the idea of ‘country’ and argues that rethinking country and acknowledging its multiplicity are central elements in providing for the coming generations — ‘the children's children’. John Frow, one of Australia's most influential humanities scholars, writes in response to Muecke's paper and with deep appreciation of the achievement that is *Reading the Country* and its continued power to engage and challenge.

Ray Coffey's tenure as publisher at Fremantle Arts Centre Press is in many ways representative of the robust intellectual climate of the time, where things could change, and ideas and intellectuals had a role in making this happen. Coffey writes of his experiences in encountering and brokering a text unlike any he had seen before. Writing from the perspective of postcolonial Australian nationalism and cultural politics, Mark Davis discusses *Reading the Country* in the context of the ongoing assertion of sovereignty by Aboriginal nations. The justice of this claim has become ever more pressing, thus affirming the prescience and significance of *Reading the Country*.

The second section, ‘*Reading the Country and Education*’, displays the infinite possibilities that an engagement with *Reading the Country* can offer to issues in contemporary education. In the first essay Meaghan Morris, a pioneering figure in Australian cultural studies and continental theory, offers a personal perspective on the intellectual ferment that coalesced in Paris in May 1968 and which had a formative effect on the generation of intellectuals who transformed the humanities in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. Philip Morrissey’s essay is an account of how *Reading the Country* and the Muecke/Roe relationship became the basis of a practical ethics underlining the development of the University of Melbourne’s first Australian Indigenous Studies major, some twenty-five years after the publication of *Reading the Country*.

In a witty deployment of the then-and-now trope, Katrina Schlunke contrasts her heedless undergraduate self in 1984 to the academic writing now with full understanding of the educational efficacy of *Reading the Country*, especially in a context where the subjectivity of academic researchers is interpellated through the demands of corporate jargon and metrics. Terrence Twomey writes frankly about the challenges of reconciling his passion for research and teaching with an educational environment marked by the exploitation of a casualised workforce and job insecurity. Philosopher A.J. Bartlett delineates the ethics of educational practice in the Classical Greek academy as the basis for a principled critique of the reductive commodification and sale of knowledge in the contemporary corporate University.

To end this section, Lauren Bliss extends the resonance of May 1968 with a whimsical Melbourne-based reflection on Chris Marker’s *A Grin without a Cat* (1977). This elegiac film-essay on the failure of leftist political movements provides us with an opportunity to revisit the political dimensions of *Reading the Country* and consider what forms of community are appropriate for a transformative politics today.

The third section, ‘*Reading the Country as a Model for Reading*’, presents a range of different reading practices which all owe something to the example of *Reading the Country*. Chris Healy notes the gentleness with which *Reading the Country* clears away the conceptual accretions of history and



anthropology and raises the possibilities for a rapprochement between the ethics of *Reading the Country* and the Australian passion for travelling and travelogues. Ken Gelder discusses the mutual openness with which Benterrak, Muecke and Roe engage with each other's culture, in contrast to contemporary attempts to rewrite alterity through, among other things, an archaic cultural insiderism.

Philosopher Jon Roffe draws our attention to a potential intellectual weakness in that exciting period of radical intellectualism in the 1980s — its reliance on the talismanic use of key (but often under-analysed and loosely applied) concepts from continental theorists (such as Deleuze). This reminds us of the continuing challenge that theory and practice provide to each other, and of Muecke's groundbreaking work in setting up that dialogue. Timothy Laurie and Peter Nyhuis Torres apply the method pioneered by Benterrak, Muecke and Roe in a theorisation of reading as a process and a means of disclosing truth. They identify Settler society's resistance to reading those aspects of contemporary Aboriginal society which are most confronting and yet most require reflection. Finally, theatre scholar Denise Varney proposes a parallel between *Reading the Country* and Jack Davis' *No Sugar* (1985): both texts disclosed previously unimagined possibilities within Aboriginal experience and revealed its translatability beyond its own sphere. She identifies this continuing legacy in some examples of contemporary theatre and dance.

The final section, 'Rewriting Country', offers some contemporary versions of country. First we return to Paddy Roe's idea of country in a different expressive form and model of collaboration with Nyikina Traditional Custodian Anne Poelina and filmmaker Magali McDuffie. Their paper describes the concepts informing the film *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree* about the Mardoowarra, Fitzroy River Country and its custodians; the film itself was shown at the festival. Kate Leah Rendell offers a personal exploration of the meaning of country in relation to the contemporary implications of her family's colonial heritage, juxtaposing Settler history and attachment to land with Aboriginal dispossession and sovereignty. Karen Hughes' essay takes us to Ngarrindjeri Country in South Australia in the 1950s, via the work of pioneering

Aboriginal woman photographer Charlotte Richards; the essay both discusses and reproduces some of Richards' photos of family life.

Stuart Cooke, Bonny Cassidy and Michael Farrell presented a lively poetry reading at the festival, and some of their poems are reproduced here, affirming *Reading the Country's* faith in language and the possibility of communication. We are also pleased to be able to print an extract from Cooke's edition and translation of *The Bulu Line*, a West Kimberley Song Cycle from George Dyungayan, a Nyikina lawman from the Roebuck Plains.

Writer and historian Tony Birch provides the Epilogue to this collection. In a brilliant narrative Birch reimagines the Aboriginal power embodied by Paddy Roe and related by him in some of his oral narratives, in a fraught contemporary setting.



# I: Revisiting the Text and its Production



# How Many Countries?

Stephen Muecke

It's really a great honour for us, the authors of *Reading the Country*, that our book is the pretext for this festival. And I think I can speak for the other two in saying that we applaud your aim to 'revisit and recapture the intellectual radicalism and political energy of that time'. We certainly need it, and I could go on to talk gloomily of the dark times we live in. But capturing such times is partly what I am getting at with my title, 'How Many Countries?' I will go on to talk about multiple ontologies and other arcane matters under that heading, but my first point is that reading the country, reading any part of the nation, including Roebuck Plains, for me means sooner or later confronting the effects of globalising corporate capital.

Things may have seemed a little more innocent in 1983, when we slaked our thirst with the beautiful cold water of the spring at Djarrmanggunan, Paddy Roe's birthplace. The water was rushing out of a pipe into an old bath serving as a cattle trough. Paddy stood up and said of the water, 'Aaa yeah, middle of the heat *more* cold.'<sup>1</sup> And today the spring has been trampled by cattle and no water is visible, only mud. It is not just cattle on Roebuck Plains destroying the *jila* (springs). The industrial regime is changing from pastoral to heavy industry. Exploratory fracking licences have been issued from near Broome right across to the Fitzroy river valley. Cultural and ecological issues are sidelined by what seems to be a massive neoliberal consensus (corporations plus the state plus most workers) about what is 'good' for the country.<sup>2</sup> 'Country', then, is a word whose meaning can oscillate wildly between small sites and the whole nation.<sup>3</sup> That's not a bad thing. Trick is to make that oscillation work for you, if you care for country, not just leave it in the hands of exploiters. I agree with myself then, my 1984 self, that it is important to keep even the smallest

sites visible. And that even the smallest sites contain masses of knowledge, and perhaps power, a power of resurgence, if we refuse to accept that it is only a matter of time before the march of capital stamps its heavy footprint over the whole country, over many countries; that what happened in the Pilbara must now happen in the Kimberley, in the kind of logic the Western Australian Government uses.

There is more than one logic, just as there is more than one country, and it is with this pluralism that we can contest the narrative that 'it is only a matter of time'.<sup>4</sup> So, I'm going to tell you why, if I had to do it again, I could not write *Reading the Country* the same way. In fact, I am doing it again, with a book that might end up being called *The Children's Country*, about country up the coast to the north of Broome. Now, *Reading the Country* was composed around a fairly simple idea. Roebuck Plains was the *one* country, the constant, the pivot around which all these possible interpretations revolved. There was one country and multiple representations of it. For a long time now I have abandoned this subject-object model on the grounds that the country, like the European concept of Nature, would be made singular and foundational, and that the readings would be *mere* representations of it, historically real, but somewhat arbitrary, provisional and relative. Now, in a new model which I have learnt from Bruno Latour, I want to abandon the singular ground and give full ontological weight to each 'reading' or rather build up descriptions of several different worlds constituted by all kinds of things and beings, not just by humans who have the virtuoso capacity to see and read differently.<sup>5</sup>

So when Woodside Petroleum looks at Walmadany (James Price Point), the site on the coast that they wanted to use to build a gas plant and port, their activities institutionalise the site into a quite different world from the one that Paddy Roe showed me around decades ago, and different again from the one where the activists situate their base camp for the anti-gas campaign. What elements constitute the Woodside version of Walmadany? The resource they are after, methane gas, is central. They see it as a part of nature, over there, unconnected with us humans, in fact we are alienated from it. (I should add that popular ecological discourses share this same European

view of Nature, which is why they too alienate humans from ‘wilderness’). Woodside’s modern institutions set up their outposts in this place such that certain practices can occur: an Economy, a way of doing Science and deploying technology, and a way of managing an organisation. A globalising western modernity extends its tentacles here as if it had no connection at all except to extract one part of its Nature, the gas, along the pipeline, which is now a metaphor as well as a technology, a metaphor for an institution that is built to get in and get out with nothing sticking to it. No need to *renaturalise*, as I like to say now.

Because if I no longer hold with *one nature*, and think there are *many* natures, one for each country, and that natures are entangled with cultures, then for me it follows that visitors have to renaturalise, to adapt after arrival. But you will protest: the laws of nature are universal, as shown by physics and chemistry.<sup>6</sup> They are in a way, as if they were designed to permit another law, a law that powerfully exploits and transforms matter as if it came for free, in a world without end. Try telling the residents of the city of Baotou in Inner Mongolia that the mining of rare earths there comes for free. When these peoples’ hair turns white and their teeth fall out, their bodies are making an argument that is specific to this particular natural-cultural arrangement. Universal laws of nature are not always relevant, they are specifically applicable.

Once you take the first step, establishing that nature has to be reinstated, rebooted, because the version of nature that European modernity brought with it has hit an ecological wall, then the other institutions have to be readjusted as well. Science, the Law, the Economy, Aesthetics, all have to be reinstated. They do not have to be completely replaced, because of course there are good things about them, and they have always, in any case, been subject to change. But with my new project, *The Children’s Country*, I want to specify the changes that might have to be made in the light of indigenous and ecological local matters of concern. What will the children of the future think if we fail to start instituting the necessary changes? It is a question of survival, of persistence rather than opposition and critique. It is about redirecting the flow. For this reason, I want the book to speak, like Latour in his



*Inquiry*, to each *mode of existence* (Science, the Law and so on) on its own terms, as they are practically *instituted*. The ethnography, the descriptive writing, will follow what it is that keeps the institutions alive as going concerns. These instituted modes are equally real as each other and are busily and simultaneously composing themselves, with and without our help. They are works in progress, and I hope to expose their more solid attributes as well as their sensitivities. Humans and things interact in the composition of these worlds, they *intra-act agentially*, as Karen Barad puts it, because this is a process in which human subjectivities are being invented and sustained.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in what we used to call the ‘objective world’, facts are brought into being and kept alive in their networks of relations. So-called Nature is no longer the privileged site of the real, nor is Society a place for humans alone.

### Surprising interruptions

If the real is neither settled in some domain, nor separated off, it might be characterised, strangely enough, by *surprise*, or *irruption*. A bit like a scientist discovering something in their lab, yelling out and high-fiving their colleagues. Or a poet defamiliarising the most mundane object: ‘So you think that because the rose/ is red that you shall have the mastery?’<sup>8</sup> The real is present, emergent and performative. My ethnography will reproduce moments of surprise, encountered during ‘field-work’ which is kind of everywhere. It won’t ‘capture’ those moments in a prose that *reports back* on them (across that interpretative divide) but *reproduces* the surprise with the necessary estrangement of its writing techniques.

I can illustrate this with a scene from Aaron Burton’s documentary *Sunset Ethnography* (2014). I want to add, to the element of surprise or irruption that we are looking for in the scene, a suggestion to look for institutions. If we reject ‘society’, ‘language’ and ‘nature’ as too transcendent, we can nonetheless fall back on institutions, a very practical thing to do. When Mick Taussig, Teresa Roe and I ‘act’ in this film, whose institutions are we acting as extensions of? Or rather, how is our acting passionately extending those institutions?

For years I was in the habit of meeting the patriarch of the Goolarabooloo community, Paddy Roe, under the old

tamarind tree where he had his meetings, and now, over a decade after he passed away, the tree is even more institutionalised. But I make a serious blunder as we are filming a documentary called *Sunset Ethnography*. Having decided that the tamarind tree might be a good spot to film a conversation, we install ourselves there as Aaron Burton is doing the filming.<sup>9</sup> Michael Taussig and I are staging a conversation about the theory that is supposed to relate to the workshop on 'experimental ethnography' that we were holding at the time with a few colleagues in Broome:

Michael Taussig: What about a different understanding of the representation of theory itself in its relationship to, aah, call it raw life? That seems to be very important to me, that the theory is not like a ... flag that's nailed to the experiences, but has a much more ... sinuous relationship, often barely visible?

Stephen Muecke: Yeah, well, it does, I think. Like, from Michel Foucault I gleaned the idea of the, of the *specific intellectual*. And I found I could immediately say, yeah, well, that's what my friend Paddy Roe is. He's not a *general* intellectual, he's one that works through, um, specific situations, and his technique is a storytelling technique. He persuaded people. He did his politics through seduction, and ah...<sup>10</sup>

Local whitefella: G'day. The woman that owns this block is just inquiring as to what you're doing here.

SM: Teresa?

LW: Yeah, Teresa.

SM: Yeah, she knows me well. Tell her it's Steve.

LW: Steve, Steve's here. Is that all I need to say?

SM: I think so.



1.1 Mick Taussig, 2013  
From *Sunset Ethnography* © Kurrajong Films, reproduced with permission



1.2 Teresa Roe with Stephen Muecke, 2013  
From *Sunset Ethnography* © Kurrajong Films, reproduced with permission

LW: Oh, she was a bit miffed. Somebody under the tree, she couldn't see who it was.

SM: Tell her I'm real sorry.

LW: I asked if they got permission, and she said, 'I don't know.'

SM: I didn't know I needed permission. I worked with old Lulu on this spot years ago, that's why I came back here.

LW: Yeah yeah, no, that's OK. No, nothing else needed?

SM: Tell her I'm sorry.

LW: Yeah yeah, that's all right [He walks off]... Steve.

MT: What about the place of, ah, pictures and images in the story, that would seem to me to be important in developing the experimental ethnography?

SM: Yeah, well all I can think about them is their role as mediators. Um, they're not illustrations, they open another window, another mediation, so it's not about... 'I am interpreting the world', but er...

[Teresa Roe walks up]

MT: Hi there, how are you?

SM: How are you?

TR: Heeeey! Good to see you. Good to see you, Steve. [we hug] Been a long time.

SM: Yeah. Only last year I was here. [I introduce] My friend Mick.

MT: How you doing?

SM: This is Aaron.

Aaron Burton: Nice to meet you. Hi.

SM: Well, we had some good news this week.<sup>11</sup>

So in order to be as practical as possible, as realistic as possible, I want to follow the networks of associations that keep institutions alive, especially as they encounter interruptions (like Taussig and I being interrupted in the smooth flow of our intellectual talk; or like when your ISP ‘goes down’ and you have to launch ‘Network Diagnostics’ software to find where in the chain of links the break is). With interruptions you find out once again how things work; the networks are made real again because we have to retrace the connections.

### Law and Dreaming

Now let’s take the institution of the (European) law in Australia, clearly a massive institution of statutes, courts and archives, closely networked with training institutions, legislative functions of government, enforcement functions of the police and so on. In its encounter with Aboriginal Australia we witness, historically and in the present, all sorts of ‘interruptions’ and failures. These are of interest to the ethnographer because they show the workings of this institution as it tries to repair the breakdowns. But why did they occur? Partly because there is another institution of the law, that Aboriginal people follow, called *bugarrigarra* around Broome. There are contradictions between White and Black laws, problems that are not solved by direct application of English Common Law. No, it has to be modified, things have to take time to go in a roundabout way; they zigzag, and after years of labour something called Native Title Law has been painstakingly produced in order to make compromises for an initial blunder of colonisation, the so-called *Terra Nullius* doctrine.

So if you are a White lawyer, you know how to inhabit ‘the world of the law’, with its networked institutions, actors and modes of existence. You may have no idea about what

goes on in the institutions of Indigenous law, like the *bugarrigarra*. And if you are an anthropologist you might mediate, and get caught in the fight, as described by Paul Burke. He begins his *Law's Anthropology: From Ethnography to Expert Testimony in Native Title*, with an image of physical damage sustained by anthropologists in such encounters:

The bodies of anthropologists, bruised from their encounter with native title, are to be found recuperating all around Australia. Some, still wounded from humiliating cross-examination, swear, yet again, never to be involved in another native title claim. While they lament their lack of influence, others warn of native title completely engulfing anthropology and ruining it (see, for example, Morris 2004). One Aboriginal leader has made the opposite claim—that anthropology has engulfed native title law—blaming anthropology for the High Court's poor legal conceptualisation of native title.<sup>12</sup>

What causes these bruises on the bodies of anthropologists? It is not so much the mismatch between two different legal institutions, I think, it is the mismatch among three things: what is a stake for the Indigenous people (what they want to protect and sustain); the *social-scientific* methods of the anthropologists (with their specific modes of verification and authorisation); and the admissibility of evidence according to legal procedures and rulings. Three different regimes of truth that can inhabit the same space only with difficulty, the usual difficulties that are negotiated in the ins and outs of discussion in hearings, briefings, affidavits and last-minute promptings in the corridor.

Now, the anthropologists wouldn't have so many bruises if they could just work on so-called traditional cultures in a traditional way. They wouldn't have to test their science in public or in a law court to see if it holds up in another institution. At this point I could do a description of what I think *bugarrigarra* law is all about: the travelling of the ancestor beings Malara and X (who can't be named), the ceremonial procedures for the initiation of boys, the texts of the sacred songs, the ceremonial artefacts, and so on. Such descriptions of Dreamings

often appear in anthropological texts on Australia, and they strike me as very partial translated summaries, struggling not to reproduce clichés. How can such law be given its full ontological weight? Perhaps it can't be in a text of a few pages, perhaps the text should somehow acknowledge the thousands of years it took for such a mode of existence to put on weight, for its existence to be really palpable? I don't think the ethnographer should give up in the face of this huge difficulty. On the contrary, one should try harder to write such a description, recognising the failures of past descriptions, looking to invent a new template that does it justice.<sup>13</sup> It means, obviously, guarding against the age-old slogan of the front line of modernisation: 'they believe, we know'. When whitefella law makes a blunder, like 'Aborigines have no sovereignty over land', or when Western Australia's premier Colin Barnett, makes a *political* blunder like saying the coastline at *walmadany* is 'unremarkable', or an anthropologist makes a *knowledge* blunder like assuming Aborigines don't understand biological conception (because 'they believe' in *rayi*, children's spirits), then these failures call for new templates to be made. These modernists *could* try to carry on regardless, as they have in many cases, by forcing people off their homelands, or sending Aborigines to sex education classes so they can understand reproduction the correct scientific way. We have an inkling what is lost each time these modernist universalist templates are imposed without modification; a *whole world* is threatened, a whole world, not an Indigenous version of the same world.

Now, in conclusion, about the law, I want to worry about how these two laws relate to each other. I might have seemed to be saying that they were locked in battle, or ontologically incompatible; if one is in place, the other can't be. But if we listen to my teacher, Paddy Roe, he doesn't seem to say anything like that. He is talking more like a sovereign leader making a highly diplomatic statement:

Law—  
That's *bugarrigarra*, law—

I think English say—  
'dreamtime'—

But we say *bugarrigarra* —  
law

He actually isn't opposing the two kinds of law. There is a different discursive logic here, the one that has been called 'same but different, really'. 'Bugarrigarra'  $\cong$  'law'  $\cong$  'dreamtime'. The effect of the way that Paddy puts it is not contrastive at all, it is *integrative* of the things that actually are *living* there in the country, one next to the other. His style introduces a *tonality*, a smooth texture, a flow that invites you into its movement. Living country, they call it, or living culture. Paddy Roe's finger inscribes *bugarrigarra* into the sand at *walmadany*, as he is saying 'this is *bugarrigarra*'. He used to do it over and over, whenever some whitefella developer came along wanting to 'modernise' his country. As he inscribes *bugarrigarra* into the country, it is like saying, with an indexical sign that is not a sign, 'it is going to be very hard for you blokes to move us off here'.

#### Reference and science

Scientific knowledge, in Latour's account, is elaborated with a mode of existence he calls reference.<sup>14</sup> It is what enables knowledge to be passed and maintained across great distances in time and space. It might be born in labs and accumulate in archives, but it needs the collaboration of colleagues, human and non-human actors, to sustain it. It, too, is tested against alterity. This would be experimental method. If the same results can be obtained with a repetition of the experiment *in a somewhat new context*, then the facts are sustained and can continue to exist.

Now, Aboriginal people in Broome don't do this sort of thing, surely not? Where are their labs and archives? Exactly: while everyone agrees that Aboriginal people have lots of knowledge, they are not quite sure where they are hiding it. It kind of pops up unexpectedly. Let us recall, before going on to a case study, that Latour's 'Anthropology of the Moderns'<sup>15</sup> has successfully 'provincialised' western modernism (as Chakrabarty led the way for history). The universalist pretensions of this modernity are now somewhat specified and moderated, and can only now enter into negotiations with all



kinds of others. The old colonial pedagogical attitude, based on universalist pretensions, was not conducive to negotiation.

So the case of Phillip Roe and the sea turtles is relevant here. Phillip Roe is a key figure in the campaign against mining interests taking over the country that his family has custodianship rights over. Now, at the time of the Woodside Petroleum push to build a gas plant at Walmadany a team of scientists was engaged by the state government to carry out an environmental survey. Hawksbill and Green sea turtles were two animal species on the list to be investigated. The nesting study commissioned for the Department of State Development found only one 'old' nest and three false crawls. An independent and peer-reviewed study into marine turtle nesting in the James Price Point area led by University of Melbourne marine biologist Malcolm Lindsay found 14 turtle nests and 38 false crawls over the 2011/2012 nesting season. This independent study was one of a few carried out by 'citizen scientists' on different species. They were able to point out flaws in the design of the government report, which, for instance 'surveyed only 12 % of the coastline most threatened by the precinct, overlooking the significant 6 km. strip of important nesting habitat'.<sup>16</sup>

The scientists doing the government report didn't seek or obtain the help of Phillip Roe who has hunted turtles and gathered turtle eggs in season all his life. His people have been doing this for innumerable generations. He pointed out to the citizen scientists that turtles around Walmadany often nested on the rocky foreshore. The government scientist hadn't bothered to look there because they 'didn't expect' or 'would be surprised' to find turtles nesting in a rocky place. Informants were also amazed at Philip's uncanny ability to point out nests when they couldn't see any traces of a nest in the sand, or, on one occasion, pointing into the ocean and saying the special word (*undud*) for mating turtles. It took my informant a few minutes to see what Philip was seeing.

Alterity introduces the unexpected, disrupting the repetition of the already known that I think characterises the spread of modernist universals. For the government scientists the science hadn't really extended beyond the lab back in the city and they were closed to the possibility of extending collegiality

to Phillip Roe. That the citizen scientists were prepared to do this meant that *their* lab included aspects of the West Kimberley. It *went further* in time and space, which is what a referential mode of existence is meant to do, as it discovers and then sustains its forms of truth so that they can be relied upon.<sup>17</sup> This is what I mean by the process of *renaturalisation*, and it is what any good scientist would do anyway, that is, not expect that a new context will allow the reproduction of results from elsewhere.

### Politics in circles

Surprise or discovery is not really what one expects from the mode of existence that is politics. Its truth conditions are not about extending knowledge in time and space, which is why we often accuse politicians of lying—they will renege on their pre-election promises. Politics is about extending representation, in both senses of the word; the politician *counts for* the people in the electorate, and hopes to speak to them and for them in a language in which they can recognise themselves. There would always be some difficulty for a white politician from a capital city far to the south to represent Aboriginal people who may even refuse to vote; but that is a rather general issue.

The more significant thing for my ethnography is the organisation of alliances that either builds up or diminishes the number of spheres of influence that are associated, broadly, with the two sides of the gas plant issue. And if I do not want to use ‘society’, I can replace it with ‘association’, which means not just associations of humans, but also things, concepts, feelings as these link up to create real worlds. ‘Society’ is what *still* has to be made, it is not the explanatory term one can easily fall back on.

The interiority of a sphere is constituted by the elements inside breathing the same atmosphere—you can tell that I’m using the language of Peter Sloterdijk here<sup>18</sup>—or having the same values, while being surrounded by a membrane that provides immunity. To this, I would add Latour’s idea of partnerships or allies in political causes, and different spheres might be drawn together in political association. Yet, these spheres are fragile, and tactics of imitation (Gabriel Tarde)

are political tactics that attempt to redraw the spatial map of associations of different spheres.<sup>19</sup> That the bubble of capitalist confidence is constantly under threat of bursting may not be such an arbitrary metaphor, and it certainly applies in the case of Woodside's tenuous relationship with its joint venture partners. Woodside's bubble finally burst in April 2013 when it announced that it would not continue with the 45 billion dollar gas plant. All along, it was the state government's financial and political support that was urging Woodside on. The head of government, Barnett, you might recall, was the one I said made a 'political blunder' in saying that the coastline at Walmadany was 'unremarkable'. Suddenly he wasn't talking the same language as the people he was supposed to represent. For them, the beautiful red cliffs *were* quite remarkable, which is where a political mode of existence can cross with an aesthetic one.

But just to conclude this section on politics; you will excuse me, I hope, for complicating the picture with the addition of Sloterdijk's spheres. But they are useful in that they reinforce Latour's rhetorical figure of the circle as that which characterises the political mode of existence. Politicians talk in circles. They can't be expected to adhere to the truth conditions of scientists whose knowledge is organised to persist over long distances and times. Political talk is true for short periods—as they say, 'a week is a long time in politics'. It sounds the right note, gathers further allies, and increases its sphere of influence. It will network with institutions and influential individuals to extend its circle, which of course was the case with Barnett's political work in the Kimberley, where the Aboriginal organisation the Kimberley Land Council was a key ally. In the end, Barnett's Woodside episode was a failure. In the state election of June 2013, a Green candidate collected 38 per cent of the votes in the town of Broome, going against the major parties' trends, and nearly getting elected.

### Aesthetics

Now, if Barnett blundered politically by saying that the coastline was 'unremarkable' implying 'empty' in that time-honoured settler style, suitable for 'development', then this is a point where the aesthetic crosses the political. The red

cliffs are identified with the places where people love to go fishing and swimming, which are significant sites for law and culture, which contribute to tourism — nothing much to do with capitalist efficiency, profitability and rationality (Latour). But feelings like ‘love of country’ cannot be ignored if my ethnography is to find out what the core values of the negotiating parties are. You know what the central values are when people will lay down their life for them. The late Joseph Roe said the last thing he would give up in any negotiation is the right to protect law and culture, *bugarrigarra*: he was like a *garbina*, shielding his country. While his major opponent, the politician Barnett, might say that the last thing he will give up is the right to exploit Nature, which probably comes down to Efficiency, Profitability and Objectivity, core values that never seem to migrate into Indigenous Australians’ spheres of influence without threatening their very existence as Indigenous people.

I want to give an example of how this love of country was mobilised as political activism in the campaign against the gas plant, and stay within Sloterdijk’s ‘sphereology’: spheres are interiorities that are defined by their passage to the outside through mechanisms of attraction, repulsion and flow. Sunday 13 May 2012 in Broome, Mothers’ Day<sup>20</sup>, provided an ‘atmosphere’ in which the anti-gas protesters tried the charm of love hearts, and so on, to lure the police into imitative association and hence into a mutual sphere of protection. The protesters, against all expectations that there would be sporadic violent protests, came up with an unexpected idea. They tried to create a common sphere with the police; they could not assume they were already securely in one (as co-citizens of the Nation, for instance). This was a kind of spell exercised in the context of (what Latour used to call ‘transference’, now Metamorphosis) remembered as the previous year’s ‘Black Tuesday’ when police got quite violent. The rhetoric of this ‘Platonic love story’ seemed to say: ‘We are all within the charmed circle of mother-love-fertility, within yet another sphere of celebration of the national day for mothers.’ All this is spatially organised and imitative rather than communicative — they would like the love to be contagious by association.

This unexpected manoeuvre by the activist campaigners worked. It came as a surprise as it produced a counter-real. Some of the police said they were touched and took flowers home to their mums, the broader community was ‘charmed’ and therefore seduced into sympathy for the campaign. It was coherent with their core beliefs (What do you love about Broome? *The beach, the fishing*, Where do you go fishing? *Up the coast...*). Affect and other aspects of an aesthetic mode of existence take on weight here and assert their singular effects. They are strong in themselves, they are not the effect of something else. I have made the point about Barnett’s mistake in trying to reduce this mode of existence. By saying ‘unremarkable’ he tried to deflate the aesthetic sphere, so that efficiency and profitability could take over. But by discounting the attachments of the Broome folk who ‘love the place’, he committed the basic political sin. He lost numbers. People moved and attached themselves to the ‘Save Broome’ campaign, which was contingently making itself attractive with the good timing of the Mother’s Day event.

And let’s not forget what is positively asserted by aestheticians for the Goolarabooloo and for the Broome people. The latter, and the tourists, even though they often make the mistake of equating ‘country’ with Nature, as in ‘landscape’, nevertheless inflate an aesthetic sphere with a million amateur and professional photographic clichés and postcards. That in itself is a long modernist European tradition. Let’s not be too cynical, the aesthetic does come into existence each time a photo is taken; a way of being in the world is created (‘instaured’) as into each photo flows a formal composition that ‘holds up’—as the photographer contemplates it on the screen and makes a decision to press the delete button or add it to the disparate archive that is helping keep an aesthetic associated with Broome alive.

An important aspect of Sloterdijk’s sphereology is that he asks us to ‘abandon the idea of space as an empty field’.<sup>21</sup> Like Latour, who wants to trace real chains of association and transformation, Sloterdijk does not invest the gap or the ‘in-between’ with utopian potential. Spheres, as I am trying to imagine them, must abut like living cells in a body. Applied to James Price Point, Walmadany, we can now see this as a space that is

*full* of Indigenous and activist/resistance tactics for togetherness; it is not an *empty* space for Woodside to occupy. Living in a sphere is a vital experience of being animated together; the same experience applies to media spaces like Facebook as used by the Save the Kimberley and other allied groups.

This spatial tightness, with spheres abutting each other and sometimes dissolving into each other when they find they are swimming in the same atmospheres, breathing the same oxygen, also means that discourses of emancipation don't work so well for the analysis and the writing we might perform. It will not be a question henceforth of cutting ties in order to liberate, but cutting ties in order to engineer further and more productive connections; changing the flow. This has consequences for the writing of ethnographies which work up close with their partners in a critical proximity (immersion) characteristic of forms of fictocriticism, like that of Kathleen Stewart.<sup>22</sup> Critical proximity means not withdrawing to a 'perspective' out in that empty space somewhere, that claims overview and impartial judgement. It means a contingent and negotiated 'earning the right to participation' in a particular sphere, as I have said elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

So, I'll be interested to hear what you think about my new version of *Reading the Country* as applied to an ethnography of the country north of Broome. As I said, I can no longer hold the 'country' as central and equivalent to Nature or the objective world. Nature has to be rebooted, reinstitutionalised through a process of renaturalisation. This recasting of Nature, so that it becomes closer to natural-cultural compositions, is closer to Indigenous networking, I think, where bilbies, turtles and whales are all part of 'society' and play their parts as enshrined in the Law.

So once Nature is rebooted, all the other modes of existence have to be adjusted too.<sup>24</sup> The scientist arriving to do an EPA realises that her European version of Nature — one size fits all — will not cut it. By paying 'due attention' (Whitehead) she will be surprised by the 'something more' that is offered by the processes of natures reproducing themselves. Methodologies might have to be adjusted too. Scientific reliability comes through spreadsheets and statistics, and that is essential. But to them she might have to add Indigenous

colleagues with their non-statistical ways of knowing. They also perform exactly what scientific modes of knowledge are supposed to do — make knowledge persist through the generations and across great distances. I want the sciences to be able to do what they do best, but in a new way adjusted to local conditions. For example, Steven Salisbury, the paleontologist of the dinosaur footprints, collaborates in a way that makes him an exemplary kind of scientist in the way I have been describing. He is prepared to say, working with Richard Hunter, that a dinosaur footprint *is* the emu *marala*, not ‘they believe’ it is *marala*, while ‘we know’ it is really a trace of a 130-million-year-old suaropod.<sup>25</sup>

And in a multirealist framework, each mode of existence has its own way of reproducing itself, with its own felicity conditions. They can be described in such a way that they don’t try to take over each others’ territory, either cross-culturally, or within a given ‘culture’. There are good reasons why English common law can’t take over the *bugarrigarra*, reduce it to some sub-clauses covering ‘customary law’. There are good reasons why, within what many whitefellas like to call their ‘modern society’, the Economy can’t take over the institutions of the Law, or Science swallow up the Aesthetic, or Politics trump Religion.

Where, you might ask, is the political edge in all this happy pluralism? As the planet faces up to what could be its greatest set of crises, radically new conditions will pertain. We can either ecologise and adjust, or continue to modernise as usual. Those who would do the latter know that the planet can’t sustain that strategy, yet they are prepared to go for the end-game. In the name of ‘what the market can stand’, they attack every progressive institution within sight. For me, the politics of caring for country, for countries, for the whole country, is one of caring for the institutions that sustain what we care most about: scientific discoveries, creating works of art, organising politically to increase numbers. I think it is a mistake to start from the position of ‘protecting Nature’ via country. Nature as the stable backdrop to human activity is an idea as dangerous to human existence, as the notion of the Economy as second nature is toxic. Nature is composing itself in conjunction with our institutions, through multiple mediations. The sea grass

of Roebuck Bay maintains its existence with the care of the working group from Environs Kimberley. This is a mediation the Goolarabooloo and the other Indigenous peoples of the country have always understood, life sustained by networks of multiple beings. Avoiding the reduction to Nature means also taking seriously and helping grow their precarious institutions, like Paddy Roe's tamarind tree in Broome, that have already provided answers to really important questions like, how do you look after country without money, without Native Title and without a Nature-Culture divide?

### Notes

- 1 Kim Bentrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, 3rd edn, Re.Press, Melbourne, 2014, p. 48.
- 2 David Trigger, 'Mining, Landscape and the Culture of Development Ideology in Australia', *Ecumene*, no. 4, 1997, pp. 161-80.
- 3 The term 'Country' has been increasingly used over the last few years for some Indigenous version of the home territory for which one is a TO (traditional owner), for instance 'buru' in the West Kimberley. It is especially evident in the phrase 'being on Country', which implies a reciprocal ethics of care.
- 4 Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 11, no.1, March 2005, pp. 183-96.
- 5 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013.
- 6 'The globalization of knowledge is clearly not a one-way process of intended transmission ... in modern science, knowledge becomes global both by processes of localization and delocalization. Knowledge is always bound to local conditions of its reproduction, and the problem of encounters between different knowledge systems embedded in different local conditions is a persistent feature of historical development.' Jürgen Renn and Malcolm D. Hyman, 'Chapter 24: Survey', in Jürgen Renn (ed.), *The Globalization of Modern Science*, Edition Open Access, Berlin, 2012, p. 563. <http://edition-open-access.de/studies/1/28/index.html>
- 7 Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, Spring 2003, pp. 801-31.
- 8 William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Book I, New York, New Directions Publishing, 1995, p. 29.
- 9 *Sunset Ethnography*, dir. Aaron Burton, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/113130961>
- 10 See 'Intellectuals, Power and Truth,' in Bentrak, Muecke and Roe, pp. 168-75.
- 11 *Sunset Ethnography*, 12'.48' to 18'.00'
- 12 Paul Burke, *Law's Anthropology: From Ethnography to Expert Testimony in Native title*, referring to Noel Pearson in the *Age*, 28 August 2002.
- 13 Latour AIME website: 'The first question is modernisationist; a front line of modernisation is set up which is going to limit, each time it is extended, the range of available types that could explain any situation. The second solution consists in doing the analysis of this modernisation effort by noting, on each possible occasion, the failures of the first solution.' <http://www.kachinas.be/seminaire-latour/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/How-To-AIME.pdf>
- 14 Latour, *Inquiry*, chapter 3.



- 15 Latour, *Inquiry*.
- 16 Environs Kimberley media release, 30 March 2011. <http://www.environskimberley.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/EKMR-3003121.pdf>
- 17 The Wilderness Society, Environs Kimberley and Conservation Council of WA, *James Price Point Science Assessment Report: Updated Supplementary submission on the WA government's Browse LNG Strategic Assessment for a proposed gas processing hub at James Price Point, Kimberley WA*, May 2012. <http://www.environskimberley.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/james-price-point-science-assessment-report.pdf>
- 18 Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2011.
- 19 Gabrielle Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation*, Félix Alcan, Editions Kimé, Paris, 1993 [1890].
- 20 Stephen Muecke, *The Mother's Day Protest and other Fictocritical Essays*, Rowman and Littlefield International, London 2016, chapter 2.
- 21 René ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 'Interfaces', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2002, pp. 139-51, p. 142.
- 22 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007.
- 23 Stephen Muecke and Max Pam, *Contingency in Madagascar*, Intellect Books, Bristol, 2012, p. 19.
- 24 Didier Debaise, Pablo Jensen, M. Pierre Montebello, Nicolas Prignot, Isabelle Stengers and Aline Wiame, 'Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop', trans. Stephen Muecke, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-74. <http://environmentalhumanities.dukejournals.org/content/6/1.toc>
- 25 University of Queensland Dinosaur Lab. <http://www.uq.edu.au/dinosaurs/index.html?page=157055>

# Re-reading *Reading the Country*

John Frow

*Reading the Country* is the singular great achievement of Australian cultural studies — indeed, I'd go so far as to say that there is no other book in the discipline, anywhere, that can match its methodological originality and its writerly (and painterly, and narrative) force. Stephen's retrospective 'How Many Countries?', published in this celebratory volume, is characteristically modest, and I want to reply to it by arguing that it is in fact far too modest about that earlier achievement.

The complaint Stephen makes against the book, from his present Latourian perspective, is that *Reading the Country* was written, or rather composed, on the basis of a subject-object model in which a singular 'country' was the object of a plurality of representations, readings that were constrained by the prior reality of the one country of Roebuck Plains. Were he and his co-authors to write such a book again, they would give 'full ontological weight' to each reading: they would count each reading as a world, a mode of existence in its own right.

Now, that supposition of the unity of country was already undercut in the introductory chapter on the book's methodological grounds. 'With three authors', the authors (speaking in the voice that we identify as Stephen's) write, 'one cannot imagine that the book is guided by any poetic unity or harmony. On the contrary, the poetry is of a different sort, one that responds to our times. It is a poetry of fragmentation, contradiction, unanswered questions, specificity, fluidity and change.'<sup>1</sup> The structure of the book thus 'seeks to maintain the separate identities of the three authors; their three strands are woven together in a loose kind of way but each remains forever partially ignorant of the purposes and effects of the other's work'.<sup>2</sup>

There is, to begin with, no singular country. Roebuck Plains and Paddy Roe's country might be, more or less, geographically coterminous but they are, for all intents and purposes, different places: one the object of surveyors' maps, of pastoral inscriptions, of extractive activity, and of a brief settler experience, the other the ancient repository of law and story; and Paddy's country is one of many such countries.

More importantly, however, the structure of the book itself undoes that model of a singular reality and its multiple representations. The four discrete modes in which it is cast — Paddy's storytelling, Stephen's analysis, Stephen's photographs, and Krim's paintings — are not refractions of an ordinary reality but are epistemologically so disparate that they constitute distinct realities, distinct 'countries'. This is not a collection of oral 'stories' accompanied by an 'analysis' and by pictorial and photographic 'illustrations'; it is nomadological writing that seeks to give the fullest possible autonomy (a mutual 'partial ignorance') to each of its component parts.

This formal structure was already strikingly in evidence in Paddy and Stephen's previous collaboration, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, the first book I know of that breaks with the tradition of translating Aboriginal stories into standard English and into the genre of 'myths and legends'.<sup>3</sup> *Gularabulu* sought to reproduce the sheer strangeness of Paddy's talk, its poetic and rhythmic qualities, and the rich variety of genres in which his stories take shape, and thereby to put it into a disputatious dialogue with a long tradition of ethnographic appropriation of Aboriginal narrative.

*Reading the Country* extends that dispute, but complicates it by the play it sets up between story, painting and analysis. Krim's paintings, for example, set an agenda, engaging in a dialogue with Fred Williams on the one hand and Aboriginal forms of 'aerial' visualisation and the drawings Paddy makes in the dirt with his digging stick on the other; and he and Stephen and Paddy talk; and Stephen philosophises, bringing Deleuze and Foucault and Derrida into close proximity with Butcher Joe's songs and Paddy's stories about his country, without ever making it the voice of authority. There is no singular reality here, and it's the book's formal structure that

performs that dispersion of the real. That's what was magic about the book in 1984, and what is still magic about it today.

### Notes

- 1 Krim Bentrerrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, 2nd revised edition, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1996 [1984]), p. 15.
- 2 Ibid., p. 19.
- 3 Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.

# A Ute, Not a Land Cruiser: Publishing *Reading the Country*

Ray Coffey

I begin with a qualification. Much of what follows is based on memory of over thirty years ago.

The beginning for Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) was in 1982 when Stephen sidled up to me at Adelaide Writers' Week and said, 'Pssst, do you want to see a manuscript?'. Anyone in publishing knows that this could now go anywhere or nowhere, or be about anything, perhaps even everything, or about nothing.

Stephen went on to explain that the text was a collection of stories by an Aboriginal man from the west Kimberley, presented as a form of direct transcription from the oral source.

This was of immediate interest. First, because the manuscript was not one of the usual approaches at that time: 'as told to' or rewritten to fit European forms. Approaches that so often flatten out, dumb down and misrepresent the original material. Growing up in Australia in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s most of us had been exposed to these tired and unimaginatively presented 'Aboriginal stories' or 'Aboriginal Myths' or 'Dreamtime stories'. The possibility that here was a MS which had reimagined the way such material could be approached and presented spoke directly to our own instincts and desires at the fledgling FACP.

FACP began in 1976 as a not-for-profit literary publishing house — initially focused on poetry and literary fiction. We were established with the purpose of not only editing and publishing but also of supporting and assisting the development of Western Australian writers and writing. This nurturing role, in which FACP has always been supported by a modest grant from the WA Department for the Arts, has proved a

cornerstone of its success and survival. When we started, an article appeared in the local press that included a comment by a critic suggesting that the venture was doomed because ‘they’ll soon run out of writers’.

In some ways, because we were young and very inexperienced as publishers, we just did not recognise the possibilities of failure that loomed about us. We were engaged by the exciting possibilities of our undertaking, not by the possible limitations. We just kept thinking, imagining and moving. Of course, they were perhaps kindlier, gentler times for such enterprises. (But that’s for another story.)

Although FACP began life as a literary publisher, we rapidly looked to expand into other areas of publication. The Press grew out of the Fremantle Arts Centre, an organisation established at the start of the 1970s to promote the visual arts and crafts in Western Australia through exhibition and education. Similarly, a publishing program was seen as the best way to promote, to the widest possible audience, writers and writing from Western Australia. Our association with the Arts Centre and the visual arts was initially expressed through the use of works of art on the covers of our books—and often inside them as well—but within a few years we also began publishing our first art monographs.

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The manuscript Stephen submitted also appealed to us as literary publishers. For us, the use of language and awareness of the possibilities of language, were of primary importance. So when we looked at the MS, which was to be published in 1983 as *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*,<sup>1</sup> we were struck by how the immediacy, liveliness and authenticity of the oral language was so successfully recreated on the page.

Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke’s *Gularabulu* texts were indeed a radical departure from how oral narratives had been previously presented. The on-page presentation—as a kind of cross between poetry and theatre—recreated, as near as we had come across, the dynamics of the spoken word, of the storytelling experience. Re-reading the book in preparing this talk, I am still excited by the immediacy of the voice, the sound

of the voice; I am often startled, in a way that poetry can startle, by an unexpected usage, a novel coinage, an original (for me) way of seeing. And I am again admiring of Muecke's lightness of touch and his editorial integrity.

The third reason we were interested in the possibilities of the *Gularabulu* manuscript was that the stories were from an Aboriginal person — they came from outside the mainstream, outside the grand narrative of Australian cultural and historical experience. They helped expand our understanding and knowledge of what it means to be in this country, of what it means to be human.

As has been widely noted, through the 1970s we saw an increasing interest in Australian stories and experience, initially through theatre, film, television and the visual arts. This interest arose and grew not only among writers, artists, filmmakers and intellectuals but also with Australian readers and audiences. At FACP I think we did see ourselves as part of a general political and cultural awakening in Australia; we felt we were grasping an opportunity to make up for the lost ground of the politically, socially and culturally conservative 1950s and 1960s. They were exciting times — a spirit of '68, if you will — with a lot to do and a will to do it.

By the late 1970s, with the approach of Western Australia's 1979 sesquicentennial, to be followed by Australia's bicentennial, at Fremantle we decided to develop a non-fiction list with a primary focus on stories by and about ordinary people and their experiences. Influenced by the Hackney Project in the then working-class borough of that name in northeast London, which sought to gather and publish the stories of the people and the workplaces of the local area, we successfully applied for a grant from a state government sesquicentennial fund to establish the Community Publishing Project. Through this project we actively sought manuscripts from non-writers, from ordinary working men and women, from people from the diverse range of ethnic backgrounds that make up our community. It is perhaps hard to imagine now when we are bombarded by a book or television program on seemingly every person and their dog and the dog's stylist, that until the 1980s biography and memoir was overwhelmingly the preserve of politicians, military men and the squattocracy.

The three or four years of the Community Publishing Project produced a dozen, or so, mostly small print-run, modest publications. Several were successful enough to go to a second and third printing and to sell reasonable numbers outside their immediate communities.

But the other success from the project was that it enabled FACP to put up its shingle in the wider, non-literary community as a publishing house that supported the development of writers with a story to tell, irrespective of background or experience. As a result, I believe, many people who may not have otherwise done so set out to write down their story, or a relative's story, or a local history, or they dusted off something put away in a bottom drawer that they never thought anyone would be interested in.

Over the years Fremantle has successfully published a great many of these kinds of stories, taking local people, local experiences, to the world. In particular, *A Fortunate Life* by A. B. Facey and Sally Morgan's *My Place*<sup>2</sup> have become two of the most successful books in Australian publishing history. Interestingly, Facey's manuscript evolved from a series of dusty notebooks in the back of a wardrobe until one of his daughters pulled them out when she learnt of our community publishing program. 'I was wondering if I could get a few copies printed up for the family', she said when she brought in a rough typescript she had made from the notebooks.

And later with *My Place*, Sally Morgan approached me with the idea for her book as a result of the success of *A Fortunate Life*. I guess *A Fortunate Life*, having been published to immediate national success in 1981, may have also been a factor that influenced Stephen to show us *Gularabulu*.

So this collection of Paddy Roe's stories also interested us for the unique way in which it expanded the repertoire of stories, indeed histories, told about Australia, and because it represented a voice not usually heard by most of us, and certainly not one usually found between the covers of a book. In its own modest way *Gularabulu* proved to be a publishing success, attracting very good reviews and going to a reprint—travelling from a small corner of north-west Western Australia into libraries, schools and homes throughout Australia and overseas. Not long after the book first appeared, the historian



and poet, Eric Rolls (author of *A Million Wild Acres*<sup>3</sup>), told me that he not only found it a beautiful book to read, but thought it among the most culturally important books to have been published in Australia.

Of course, the publication of *Gularabulu* was for us, and presumably for Paddy and Stephen, a seed for something altogether more ambitious and more radical.

The editing, production and publication of *Gularabulu* not only introduced me to Paddy and Stephen but also Krim Benterrack. Those familiar with the earlier book will know that the cover features a splendidly appropriate Benterrack painting of a spring in Paddy Roe's country.

I believe it was during work on *Gularabulu*, or perhaps just after publication, that Stephen and Krim began to talk with me about an idea for another, more ambitious book. Another book with Paddy Roe's country and his stories and knowledge at its centre, but which would include a range of other ideas, visions and knowledges in response to this place called Roebuck Plains. A book about the local, about the specifics of a place, but which would lead to questions about how we might make sense of all the places in which we live and pass through.

The idea of such a book appealed to us at Fremantle Press, not the least because it promised to explore and articulate a number of issues and ideas we were seeking to address and promote as a publisher. Language, story, the visual arts, cultural exploration and exchange, multidisciplinary approaches to knowledge and experience, new ways of seeing and expressing — these were all things we were drawn to.

So, too, 'place'. It is often suggested that it is geographic isolation — a remote corner of the globe, locked between desert and ocean — that seems to have given Western Australians a particular preoccupation with the idea of place. In the 1970s questions regarding a 'sense of place' received a particular intellectual focus, with seminars, papers and books engaging with the issue. (As most of you will be aware, I am sure, in recent years writer Kim Scott has written and spoken eloquently, from an Indigenous perspective, on this preoccupation as being an expression of European-Australian insecurity.)

Although, to various degrees, we at FACP had engaged with those exchanges on the meaning and value of place, our

primary focus was on how you might write and publish from and of the particular, from and of the local, yet do so in a way that had much wider meaning and relevance. Apart from an intellectual and emotional desire to do this, there was also an economic imperative that it inform our work. This concern about how the particular might move outwards informed our editing, design and production, marketing and promotion.

But a critical aspect of this is to be able to speak back to the local while engaging the wider community. Despite awareness, attention and effort, success in this is always variable. As I mentioned earlier, *Gularabulu* was successful critically and in finding a readership but, ironically, as you will all know, its readership was overwhelmingly non-Indigenous and primarily literary and academic. This remains an issue with which we all continue to grapple.

So *Reading the Country* began as a set of ideas and desires shared between Paddy, Stephen and Krim, as outlined in the opening texts of the published book, which were then shared with me as publisher and editor. From first discussions, within the limitations of a small publisher with no money and few resources, I believe that we were supportive of the book. Certainly we would have been very positive to the idea of a book built from a wide range of materials — Paddy’s stories and knowledge side by side with Krim’s paintings, Stephen’s essays, commentary and photographs, Butcher Joe Nangan’s songs, and interviews and other fragments and pieces from history and other disciplines — with the journey through the country of Roebuck Plains to unify it all.

The other attraction for me was that Stephen, Krim and Paddy embraced, indeed valued highly, input from a publisher’s editor in the process; from teasing out and developing ideas and possibilities, to building and shaping the final book. They understood that the ideal relationship between author and publisher is a collaborative partnership. Because of the richness of this particular collaborative experience, as well as the book’s content, *Reading the Country* has remained a highlight of my long editing and publishing career.<sup>4</sup>

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An idea of Stephen's struck me early in the editorial process and became a sort of guide. At the beginning of the book, he refers to I.A. Richard's notion that 'a book is a machine for thinking with'. Winding down the window and sticking out a sunburnt elbow, Stephen expands, 'it can pick you up in one thinking spot and take you to another one. It's like a ute.'

So, I saw that this book was to be a working vehicle, loaded with a lot of useful stuff, packed in a particular order at the outset, but which anyone can draw from however they wish, according to interest and need.

Certainly a loose structure was intended which could shape the general accumulation of knowledge, experience and ideas as a reader travels through, but we knew that there were many ways of travelling and of reading. So, while the journey of the book does broadly follow a series of journeys across the physical landscape, which we can plot on Krim's painting/map at the beginning of the book, it is also a journey into ideas and experience which, as we know, plot their own course. Thoughts can take you anywhere. A story or idea in an essay can lead to a song, which can jump you back to a map, or forward to a painting, then to another story.

Thinking about the book in this way from the outset enabled us to build into the text some guidance and signposts for readers as to how they might read the book, so they might locate themselves as they move through. This is about establishing and maintaining trust in the text. Michael Ondaatje in his novel *In the Skin of the Lion* writes:

The first sentence of every novel should be:  
 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here,  
 very faint, very human.' Meander if you want to get  
 to town.<sup>5</sup>

Helping to ensure that trust is established and maintained between text and reader could be a way of thinking about the role of an editor of any book.

So to editing. With *Reading the Country*, as with any book, my first and most basic role was to check the dotting of 'i's' and crossing of 't's, the technical stuff—spelling, punctuation, syntax, grammar. All the stuff that should never be noticed,

that should not distract the reader from the purpose of engaging with the content of a book.

(Sadly, despite best efforts errors can get through. For example, I noted when preparing this talk and reading the 1996 revised edition of the book that many internal page references are out by a page or two. It certainly tests the trust when as early as page 15, paragraph 1, we are directed to ‘see map page 59’ only to find the map on page 61. Clearly, this was an error that crept in when the pages were reformatted for the new edition and not picked up in proofreading. I apologise for this.)

The other essential role of an editor is to try to ensure consistency and clarity. That Nargananan is spelt that way throughout (although Krim’s map/painting proved to be a law unto itself), that something on page 100 does not disagree, or appear to disagree with something earlier, to identify and seek to resolve possible obscurities or lack of clarity, and so forth. An editor has to imagine the future readers and be a first reader on their behalf; an editor will therefore try to approach the text not only with their own knowledge, expertise and limitations, but with those of the imagined readers.

From memory, Stephen, who did the main author liaising with me, sent the various texts through to me for feedback in a number of batches. I think Stephen pretty much built his essays around Paddy’s stories and dialogues, so sometimes I’d get a story and associated essay together and other times a story would have a note indicating intended content of an essay to come.

Quite early, when talking about the possible essays Stephen was planning, I remember thinking of them and referring to them as meditations—discourses expressing considered thoughts on a subject—as, for me, this seemed to reflect a tone he was after. I know that maintaining this kind of tone informed my reading and editorial comments and suggestions back to Stephen on the various pieces.

There are only a few specifics that I recall from working on the essays. My recollection is that the introductory piece ‘Nomadic Writing’, or at least the first half of it arose, at least in part, from the early discussion and decision that the literal journey across the plains would provide the book with its loose

narrative trajectory. At some point I think I suggested that the actual process of creating the book—which was emerging in the stories, essays, and so on as they appeared—might be foregrounded more, beginning with a description of Paddy, Stephen and Krim gathering together in Broome in preparation for the journey ahead. A traveller's tale; a simple publisher's device to ease a reader into the journey, and then to link the various elements of the book.

It was Stephen, too, who took most of the photographs, or provided them from other sources. He was keen that by and large we should try to avoid captions. So, because most of the images directly illustrated Paddy's texts or Stephen's essays, I came up with the editorial/design solution to, as far as possible, treat them like paragraphs within the text. Thus, apart from placing them as exactly as possible before or after the passages they relate to, most have been blocked out to the text margins and trimmed down top or bottom to sit within the text just like another paragraph. Apart from negating the need for captions, placed in this way they, relatively unobtrusively, extend the texts and reading experience.

There was, I think, only one major editorial issue with the transcriptions of Paddy's words. Initially all these texts had been transcribed and presented in the same form, in the manner of the stories in *Gularabulu*. Lines were broken and turned to the next line at pauses, with the varying lengths of the pauses represented by dashes at the ends of lines. As with the earlier book, with the new stories this radically new form of presenting such material worked brilliantly. But half Paddy's texts in *Reading the Country* are not stories, but more of the nature of dialogues with Stephen, Krim and/or Butcher Joe, or monologues imparting information and knowledge as he travelled across the landscape. I didn't feel it worked as well to present these in the same form as the stories. For me, presenting them in the same way as the stories perhaps detracted from the integrity of the stories. So I suggested to Stephen we look at giving the non-story texts their own form. After pushing around a few ideas and tinkering with formats we came up with the variation now in the book. Looking at it now, I think it works pretty well, signalling to the reader a different form, context and tone. A different reading.

With Krim's paintings my 'editorial' work was minimal. Apart from ensuring we had all the correct technical stuff—title, date, medium—I remember suggesting a map/painting for the endpapers. But I think even this Krim may have thought of earlier. Krim left the cover to last and very late in the process, so we could provide him with final format and design specifications. The stunning piece he produced was all we could wish for. For a publisher the perfect cover, one that demanded to be looked at, picked up, paid for and given a good home. Sometimes a ute can look as spiffy as a inner city Land Cruiser, but still remain a solid, hard-working carry-all, not frightened to go off the bitumen.

Another critical editorial/publishing issue with the paintings was their placement. An important issue for publishers is the cost of colour printing and, to minimise costs, colour is often grouped together in as few sections of the book as possible. I was keen from the start to integrate the paintings throughout the book; treat them in the same way as the book's various other voices—speaking with, responding to, counterpointing or reinforcing each other. So a publishing decision was made early that for the integrity of the book we would wear the not inconsiderable extra cost, take the extra economic risk, and place the paintings throughout the book.

An aside. Interestingly, the reason we were able to take this economic risk is another thing for which we might thank A.B. Facey and *A Fortunate Life*. As I've said, that book was a great success. But one that almost killed us. Pre-publication sales were such that by the release date we had had to press the reprint button, and this run too had effectively sold on release, so a loan was required for another printing. And still it went on. The problem of success like this for a small organisation with no capital is that print bills were due at thirty days, but bookshops paid at sixty or ninety days. At the time we were working on *Reading the Country* Penguin Australia had offered to buy the rights to *A Fortunate Life*, but we said no, and instead offered to lease rights for an advance and a percentage of Penguin's sales. The counter offer was accepted. So financially, apart from anything else, this enabled us to present the *Reading the Country* paintings to best advantage.

To continue this aside for a moment, the great success of *A Fortunate Life* was such that Penguin were quickly back negotiating an extension of the lease. As part of that extension agreement, we negotiated a national distribution arrangement with Penguin for all our books—we became the first publisher outside their own stable to do so. Thus, *Reading the Country* was among the first of our books to benefit from this arrangement, increasing national distribution and sales considerably above what might have been expected for a ‘difficult’ book produced by what was, at the time, a tiny publishing house on the wrong side of the country.

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We are asked about the decision by Fremantle Press thirty years ago to publish a radical text like *Reading the Country*.

Essentially, a simple answer is that we did not think of the book in this way. Of course we knew that on a number of levels it was and would be seen to be radical. But for us, radical was not an issue—at least, not a negative or limiting one. At the time, in some respects setting up a small independent Australian publishing house was fairly radical, publishing contemporary Australian fiction and art was fairly radical. You did not have to go back far to when teaching Australian literature in our universities was radical (the early 1970s, perhaps?), or the idea of our own film industry, or when wearing jeans or women drinking in bars was radical. In the 1970s in some parts of Australia the idea of Aboriginal people living in towns rather than on reserves was still radical. So, as suggested earlier, the context is that we had been through a decade or so of some quite radical political, social and cultural shifts in Australia.

As also indicated earlier, Fremantle Arts Centre Press began as a publisher of contemporary Australian literary fiction and poetry and art monographs, and as we know, in Australia through the 1970s relatively radical explorations of these forms and a range of largely hitherto neglected issues and subjects began to be made by a number of our writers and artists. Developments we readily embraced at Fremantle. Indeed, ‘radical’, ‘difference’, ‘groundbreaking’ were all things we were naturally attracted towards.

This is not to diminish the importance and impact of *Reading the Country*, it's just to say that in the context in which we had grown, as individuals and as an organisation, radical was not a dirty word.

In 1980s Australia another way in which the book was considered radical, and perhaps controversial, was how Stephen's texts drew strongly upon what was seen then as radical cultural and literary theory. Indeed, in Australia it was quite widely dismissed either as a silly and incomprehensible French fad or vehemently attacked as a dangerous threat to life as we know it.

My memory is that the ideas of post-modernism, -structuralism and -colonialism and the work of the likes of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault really only staggered into Perth in the latter half of the 1970s, and by the early 1980s were upsetting the neighbour's dogs. I must confess, coming to this writing cold I did not always find the language particularly easy, but along with my editorial colleague at Fremantle Press I was readily sympathetic and attracted to many of the ideas, perspectives and tools for thinking that it provided.

So again, this theoretical aspect of *Reading the Country*, although perhaps considered radical in some quarters at the time, found an interested ear at FACP. What excited us most, I think, was Muecke's ability to take these ideas out of the abstract and onto the ground so we could see how they moved. And this *was* one of the radical aspects of *Reading the Country* in Australia in 1984: showing how Theory relates to what is in front of us; how it is a tool for thinking and talking in new and extremely valuable ways about Aboriginal culture and experience, about landscape, and about how we might make sense of our experiences of all the places in which we live.

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The legacy of *Reading the Country* for Fremantle Arts Centre Press has been significant. And, although hard to quantify, I think the book's appearance also played a role in a shift among some other Australian publishing houses, for a time at least, towards including more adventurous non-fiction titles on their lists.



At Fremantle, *Reading the Country* and *Gularabulu* were the beginning of what became a very active and successful program of publishing Aboriginal writers and writing on Indigenous issues and experience. A long list that includes fiction, poetry, memoir, art books, children's books, political, social and cultural analysis; that includes the international bestseller and award-winning *My Place* by Sally Morgan, Stephen Kinnane's multi-award-winning *Shadowlines*, the work of dual Miles Franklin award-winning novelist Kim Scott, and Anna Haebich's major, multi-award-winning history of the stolen generations, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*.<sup>6</sup>

I think that working on *Reading the Country* so early in our career as publishers strongly reinforced our views that publishing and editing is a collaborative partnership to the extent that it became a cornerstone of our practice as publishers. We also learnt much from Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's editor-author relationship. I think that the respect and sensitivity displayed in both *Reading the Country* and *Gularabulu* helped inform the way we approached our editorial relationships with the large list of work we developed with inexperienced writers and informants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

The experience of publishing *Reading the Country* also helped reinforce our view that a large part of our role as independent, not-for-profit publishers was to be prepared to take risks with writers and writing that others were unlikely to. We successfully managed this for many years by developing a more commercial, mainstream list to not only, and necessarily, financially sustain the organisation, but to help cross subsidise a program of more adventurous and risky titles.

For the thirty years I was at Fremantle Arts Centre Press, *Reading the Country* was always seen by us and represented to others as one of the cornerstones of our achievement and of who we were as publishers. This is not just because of the role we played in producing such a positive exemplar of how we might find practical ways to engage and exchange with Indigenous history, experience and knowledge. It is also because for us the book was a touchstone for the active role that publishers, along with other cultural institutions and the academies, should play in the general sharing of knowledges

and the discussion and exchange of political, social and cultural ideas in Australia.

### Notes

- 1 Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, ed. Stephen Muecke, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.
- 2 A.B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1981; Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1987.
- 3 Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres: 200 Years of Man and an Australian Forest*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1981.
- 4 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984.
- 5 Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of the Lion*, Picador, London, 1988, p. 146.
- 6 Stephen Kinnane, *Shadowlines*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2003; Kim Scott, *True Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1993; Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1999; Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2000.

# Unsettled Objects: Books, Cultural Politics, and the Case of *Reading the Country*

Mark Davis

*In the end, there is always this desire to create: to break through silence into form.*<sup>1</sup>

Early on in Krim Bentrerrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country*, Muecke, the book's narrator, makes an observation about the role of books. He asks, 'What are books for? The famous literary critic, I.A. Richards, had one way of putting it: "A book is a machine for thinking with".' Muecke continues:

A book is like an organic machine in a production line of other machines: conceived in a typewriter, gestated in a publishing house, born on a press, consumed in *the* press, read by people who have been through the schooling machine. It can pick you up in one thinking spot and take you to another one. It's like a ute.<sup>2</sup>

Muecke's observation is one of several about the function of books in a book that fixates on its own status as a cultural object. A few pages further on he quotes a speech he gave at Broome in the lead up to the creation of the then-proposed book:

All this to contribute to one small rectilinear object—a book. An object to be promoted, circulated, sold and read. A book is a little communicative item which is destined to be shunted around; bought, borrowed, stolen and ending

up in places the authors would never have imagined. It is only valuable as long as it is travelling or as long as eyes are travelling across its surfaces. It's like a nomad in the sense that it belongs to a certain territory, yet only lives if it is made to move and to be seen to be going somewhere — perhaps putting on a fine dust jacket to pick up a nice reader, for it is also an object of desire.

So my question here is what kind of book-object is this?

*Reading the Country* sits in a history of Australian non-fiction book publishing and, in particular, a history of books that seek social change. This got going in earnest in the late 1950s and early 1960s when local publishers, determined to do their bit to wrestle Australian public culture from the arms of the British, many of them working in British-owned firms, started to get serious about publishing local non-fiction on affairs of the day. Books such as Robin Boyd's *Australian Ugliness* (1960), the Peter Coleman edited collection *Australian Civilisation* (1962) and Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (1964) were the result, and foreshadowed a gathering 'new nationalism'.<sup>4</sup> Then came the radical critiques of the 1970s; books like Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* (1970), John Docker's *Australian Cultural Elites* (1974), Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975) and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda* (1976), among many others. *Reading the Country* is part of another formation again, written out of a 'poststructuralist ... movement'; Australian culture seen through the eyes of continental critical theory.<sup>5</sup>

*Reading the Country* was published at a moment, too, when independent presses were starting to make their presence felt in no uncertain terms. Independent publishing has always been a feature of the Australian publishing landscape. Rigby, Jacaranda and Sun Books are among the proud independent presses of the 1950s and 1960s. But there was something more reckless and experimental in the independent publishing of the 1970s. Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) was among many new presses founded to break moulds, such as the Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, Outback Press, Wilde and Woolley, and McPhee-Gribble. As FACP publisher Ray Coffey has said, one motivation for publishing was the

‘enormous number of current issues that are, so far, under-represented in publishing’.<sup>6</sup>

But *Reading the Country* belongs to another cultural conversation as well, and sits in another important tradition in Australian non-fiction publishing. It is one of around 769 non-fiction books published between 1960 and 2000 (inclusive) that had Aboriginal culture as their topic.<sup>7</sup> Before that, a handful of non-fiction books by and about Aborigines were published through the first half of the twentieth century, such as David Unaipon’s *Native Legends* (1929), A.P. Elkin’s *The Australian Aborigine: How to Understand Them* (1938), Clive Turnbull’s *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (1948), and Unaipon’s *My Life Story* (1954).<sup>8</sup>

It was only in the 1960s that rates of publication in the area began to rise to between 14 and 17 per year, increasing to a rate of around 30 to 35 titles per year by the end of the 1990s. The vast majority of these books were published by a handful of publishers: Angus and Robertson and Rigby in the 1960s, then university presses, small independents and Penguin Books in the 1970s and, in the 1980s, Allen and Unwin and the three major specialist Indigenous presses, Aboriginal Studies Press (founded in the 1980s as part of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, which had itself been a prolific publisher of titles through the 1960s and 1970s), IAD Press and Magabala books. FACP was a significant contributor to Indigenous non-fiction book publishing, with nineteen titles in the area. Even Penguin, the only large international trade publisher to show an interest in such books in those four decades, only published twenty-one. Allen and Unwin published fifty-nine, and the lion’s share was published by the three main specialist Indigenous publishers, which together published 211 titles, 160 of them by Aboriginal Studies Press and, before its inauguration, the AIAS.

This area of publishing, too, went through phases. Through the 1960s most of the books were *about* Aborigines. It was only in the late 1960s, at the time of the citizenship referendum and W.E.H. Stanner’s famous Boyer lectures that decried the silence about the presence of Indigenous people in Australian history, that Aboriginal voices began to appear

in the first person as agents of their own history. That, too, at first, was in the pages of a white-authored book—Frank Hardy’s *The Unlucky Australians* (1968). Kevin Gilbert’s *Living Black* (1977) was a landmark, and another book that came out of a conversation with its publisher, John Hooker at Penguin Books, who asked Gilbert to write a book about what being an Aboriginal in Australia is like.<sup>9</sup> Even AIAS didn’t publish its first Aboriginal-authored book, Jimmie Barker’s *Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker*, until 1977. By the time *Reading the Country* was published, another trend had begun. This was the idea of telling Australian history from the Indigenous side, epitomised by Henry Reynolds’ *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, which Reynolds had first published out of his department at James Cook University in 1981, before Penguin Books ultimately decided to publish an edition in 1982.<sup>10</sup>

*Reading the Country* doesn’t simply want to tell history from the other side. It wanted to unsettle everything about the epistemology in which it sat. As Muecke later explained:

A sea-change was happening in the humanities, I had intuitions born of my time in France in 1968; paradigms were groaning and shifting. The intellectual distance marked by the knowing subject and the object of knowledge was about to be broached from multiple directions: indigenous knowledges were starting to assume overt agency in the determinations of research agendas; the subjectivity or identity of the academic researcher was challenged and was leading to self-reflexivity, narrativisation and negotiation of one’s speaking position: real friendships were beginning to count more; urgent Aboriginal political agendas were installing themselves in the quid pro quo of fieldwork relations, so that the exchange of knowledge for chewing tobacco was exposed as laughably trivial.

Anthropologically inspired protectionist and preservationist strategies were now less relevant as key Aboriginal professionals and activists, like Gloria Brennan, were emerging and asserting self-determination.<sup>11</sup>

It's in this context that the book questions the western-centric politics of its production, including the use of the book form. With almost every turned page the book works to defamiliarise itself as a cultural artefact, and to foreground its textual politics with respect to the living culture it records:

The dreaming is not a set of beliefs which is being lost because it is no longer valid, it is rather a way of talking, of seeing, of knowing, and a set of practices, which is as obtuse, as mysterious and as beautiful as any poetry ... This book is a record of Paddy Roe's dreaming at its most important nexus: the country itself ... Krim and I are foreign to the Plains, Paddy is foreign to the book as a European artifact, Paddy and I are foreign to painting, Krim and Paddy are foreign to the sort of writing and philosophy I have adopted to construct a unity or general direction of the book.<sup>12</sup>

That 'Paddy is foreign to the book as a European artifact' is the very business that *Reading the Country* seeks to negotiate. As part of these negotiations the book form is unsettled, framed in terms of the politics of nomadology (an idea Muecke attributes to Deleuze and Guattari) that are famously at the book's heart: 'A book has to be a set of traces, words going somewhere. The nomadic reader will then come along afterwards and track things up, deciphering the traces.'<sup>13</sup>

If the aim here is to unsettle and make nomadic the normal conditions of narrative, then it makes sense that Muecke is also at pains to leave behind the persona of author: Nomadic writing writes itself; its authority comes from the territory covered, not the person temporarily in charge of the pen. It cannot be imperial (like General Theory) because it has to abandon the traces it leaves behind and anyone can follow them up. But what do they find in the end? The material object, a book which is the product of reading the tracks made across a piece of country. But also an intellectual space made through the essentially nomadic practice of moving from one set of ideas or images towards another set progressively picked up on the way. If this imaginary journey will move closer to Aboriginal understandings of a part of Australia it is not for

one person to say. The book can only be a white man's artifact in the end, but Paddy Roe's texts can be read independently (and must be read) as paradoxically included in the book, and thus incorporated in the broader culture, but extending before and beyond the covers (already crossing the country before the book was thought of), one word after the other like footsteps: lively spoken words.<sup>14</sup>

It's perhaps fitting that in the context of the physicality of *Reading the Country* its famous nomadology is itself fugitive. The book's subtitle, 'Introduction to Nomadology', appears on its half-title and title pages but not on its cover. A happenstance play of presence and absence, perhaps.

Just about every Australian non-fiction cultural politics book, from *The Australian Legend* on, seeks in some way to rewrite national identity.<sup>15</sup> Paddy Roe, whose book *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (1983), edited by Muecke and one of FACP's first non-fiction books about Aborigines, supplies the disruptive voice to unsettle received notions of Australian history and its present that are a target of *Reading the Country*.<sup>16</sup> In one important passage in *Reading the Country* Roe tells the story of how he avoided being stolen as a child:

when he see them —  
my mother said, 'Hello, this is a p'liceman coming back  
from La Grange' — they come back from La Grange, see —  
come back —

'Hello,' he said, after —  
my mother said, 'What I gonna do with this little boy?' —  
so my mother ooh he think about something he tell the old  
man, Get up get up get up,' he said —  
(Growl) 'What for,' he —  
'P'lice coming' —  
ah they took the canvas outa the old man (Laugh) an',  
'Come here boy,' he said —  
so he put me there, 'Lay down' —  
rolled me up —  
wind me up an' mother was sitting on me like a swag here's  
a p'liceman coming around the corner now —



‘Hello,’ he said —  
 ‘Good Morning’ —  
 an’ old fella sitting up just having a drink of tea too —  
 mm —  
 ‘Any piccaninnies?’ he asked, you know —  
 ‘Any piccaninnies?’ —  
 ‘No, we got no pic —  
 nothing’ —  
 ‘Where you going?’ —  
 ‘Oh, we goin’ walkabout, now, bush’ —  
 ‘Yeah, all right, goodbye,’ he say —  
 ‘We can see that, you no got nobody,’ but I was there  
 (Laugh)<sup>17</sup>

Roe’s mother is one of the few women mentioned in *Reading the Country*. Her conversation with Roe’s father about how to hide young Paddy, itself unsettling, is presented as part of the happenstance *bricolage* (a term Muecke uses throughout) of the book, and carries significant political weight as a retelling of one incident in protectionism from the ‘other side’. In another passage Roe tells the story of his wife’s first pregnancy:

So we just gettin’ ready to go you know oh we started off  
 ’bout —  
 from here to the building —  
 old woman, my old woman get sick —  
 ‘Oh,’ he tell me, ‘I get sick little bit’ —  
 (Soft) ‘Oh, what wrong?’ I say —  
 ‘I dunno,’ he say, ‘must be that honey, waladja’ —<sup>18</sup>

As Muecke has explained, this story is told in a ‘in a very specific cultural and political context’. It is a story about a ‘conception dreaming’, and ‘political because this dreaming will attempt to establish the daughter’s custodianship of that country in the context of actual Broome land-rights claims and counter-claims’.<sup>19</sup>

Paddy Roe talks of many other things of course. Not every Indigenous utterance has to be weighted with spiritual or political import, which is itself one of the ways Aboriginality is constructed. The everyday banalities of what Roe and his

friend Butcher Joe (Nangan), along with Mueke and Krim Benterrak do and say — opening gates, finding water, being silent, telling stories, walking, drinking tea — are some of the best parts of the book since they engage and frame experience on their own terms, and help this reader, at least, enter into imagining what the quotidian business of being Indigenous and in country is like. *Reading the Country* is in these ways part of an emerging conversation about being stolen and the loss of country, and about the everyday banalities of living self-aware, or not, as an Aboriginal, that is central to another important trend in Australian Indigenous non-fiction publishing. From the late 1970s on, life stories by relative unknowns, such as Jimmie Barker's *Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker: The Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900-1972* (1977), Ella Simon's *Through My Eyes* (1978), Elsie Labumore Roughsey's *Aboriginal Mother Tells of The Old and The New* (1984), Sally Morgan's controversial *My Place* (1987), Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987), and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love To Town* (1988), became an important part of the publishing landscape.<sup>20</sup> Tim Rowse cites *Don't Take Your Love to Town* as an important site of negotiation in the question of what constitutes Aboriginality, where the 'category "Aborigines"', Rowse argues, following Bain Attwood and others, is understood as 'an artifact of the colonial process'.<sup>21</sup>

But in the same cultural moment as these unsettling, self-reflexive conversations about the conditions of Australian Aboriginality were engaging readers, other conversations and other negotiations were taking place that sought to reinscribe older notions of Aboriginality and white settler patronage. *Reading the Country* was published in 1984, which is the year mining magnate Hugh Morgan made the speech that he later said 'really got things wheeling' in terms of coalescing opposition to Indigenous rights struggles.<sup>22</sup> The speech, which Andrew Markus has said 'in important respects prefigured some of the views later expounded by Tim Fischer, Pauline Hanson, and David Oldfield, amongst other politicians of the right',<sup>23</sup> proclaimed the view that Australia was a Christian society in which calls for Aboriginal land rights were not justified, and raised the proposition that to grant such rights would potentially be to also license 'infanticide, cannibalism, and ...

cruel initiation rites’, and that for a Christian Aborigine such a move would represent ‘a symbolic step back into the world of paganism, superstition, fear, and darkness’.<sup>24</sup> Another high-profile speech given that year, by historian Geoffrey Blainey (who had provided background research for Morgan’s speech), would become equally famous for its attacks on Asian immigration. Both speeches singled out a self-interested elite comprised of bureaucratic, media and academic types, as culprits for the problems that had arisen — the ‘Aboriginal Affairs Industry’ as Morgan called it — and contrasted their claims against a vision where the best way forward for Australia was, as Morgan put it, ‘to treat all Australians equally’.<sup>25</sup>

*Reading the Country* was, then, published at a hinge moment in recent Australian cultural politics. The oppositions drawn in these 1984 speeches between ‘equal rights’ and ‘special treatment’, mainstream and elite, reasoned centre and unreasoned other, would become definitive in battles over the Australian bicentennial celebrations, the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal deaths in custody, the Mabo and Wik native title judgments, and the Northern Territory Intervention. The related difference between self-responsible individuals and ‘rent seekers’ is pivotal, too, in economic debates about the role of government and that of markets. None of which is to suggest that such debates have been conclusive. The very definition of Australian postcolonialism, as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs have shown, is in the inconclusiveness of ongoing transactions between Indigenous and settler cultures.<sup>26</sup> This lack of a conclusion arises at least in part because of the ongoing resistance of Aborigines and their supporters to the opposing claims of settlers and settlement. That *Reading the Country* is something of an ageless book, that still looks and feels contemporary and relevant, from its text to Benterrak’s artwork, is perhaps because it positions itself at every level of the ongoing struggle to unsettle these conditions of settlement. Even if, as *Reading the Country* knows, every impulse towards unsettlement and nomadism, and towards un-bookishness, carries its own trace of, and is ultimately ensnared in, those cultures that it seeks to resist, of settlement, authority and books.

**Notes**

- 1 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, 2nd revised edition, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1996 [1984]), p. 15.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 4 James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2010.
- 5 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 255.
- 6 In Louise Poland, 'An Enduring Record: Aboriginal Publishing in Australia 1988-1998', *Australian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, Winter 2001, pp. 83-100, p. 97.
- 7 Mark Davis, 'The "Cultural Mission" in Indigenous Non-fiction book Publishing in Australia 1960-2000', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 2017, pp. 1-22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2017.1383295>.
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- 9 Geoffrey Dutton, *A Rare Bird: Penguin Books in Australia 1946-96*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 135-6.
- 10 Mark Davis, 'Making Aboriginal History: The Cultural Mission in Australian Book Publishing and the Publication of Henry Reynolds's *The Other Side of the Frontier*', in *Resourceful Reading: The New Empiricism, eResearch, and Australian Literary Culture*, ed. Katharine Bode and Robert Dixon, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2010, pp. 176-93.
- 11 Stephen Muecke, 'Visiting Aboriginal Australia', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, pp. 49-54, pp. 49-50.
- 12 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 19.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 15 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958.
- 16 Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, ed. Stephen Muecke, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.
- 17 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, pp. 48-9.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 19 Muecke, 'Visiting Aboriginal Australia', p. 51.
- 20 Jimmie Barker, *Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker: The Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900-1972*, AIAS, Canberra, 1977); Ella Simon, *Through My Eyes*, Rigby, 1978; Elsie Labumore Roughsey, *Aboriginal Mother Tells of The Old and The New*, McPhee-Gribble, Melbourne, 1984; Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1987; Glenyse Ward, *Wandering Girl*, Magabala, Broome, WA, 1987); Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988.
- 21 Tim Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 83-103.
- 22 In Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 60.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- 26 Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 22.

# Poems

## Stuart Cooke

Lurujarri  
*a poem by foot*  
from *Opera* (2016)

(*first*)

it begins as  
stumbling into that point of distant tinder

\*

distance slides into darkness

we drag our winters

over a thick  
scrub

of palpitating nerves

and moths

[star/light whispers calcite  
and silicate

evening's fat as ant]

[thunder along a cable's salt]

( it bulges into blister:  
the structure of sweat

someone's geology trapped in the gunk beneath a nail
--

(second)

then

a dim day

we walked so far we missed the **dance**

across the flood plains

the creation site / the broad banks

beside a river's hidden **crocodile**

rays squeezing out

like

**the neg**

ative

hairs from a pale leg

cirrus breath and murky country

and rhythm slippery

*as mud*

we kept following, the horde of us

the whole horde of us kept following

it was a dance [a fire (a **cave**) ]

by the time we arrived it was *the story of it*

we set up for rest

edges grumbling with storm

-----)

a swim's fresh glove }

an evening's wet rattle }

bugs whirling around in the beam }

from my head }

(third)

later on, well after lunch  
it's hard to sit down: floor's  
^^

a hardened reef spotted with succulents  
||  
in the east the soupy storm

storm barrels towards the sea, squashing me  
into the scrub, the storm's  
a grey-navy mind{mediating{infinite{

that group, I saw them between  
bleeding land  
blue brain  
between the bleeding land and the blue brain  
their spires heading north...

||  
leaving without me  
painting their lives into the shore:  
cusp of tyre... without mine...  
that moving  
fibre through  
dusk's crusted  
grime

and the coral flutes OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO  
|pushing songs from the reef—  
of day clearing and shining soprano  
////////////////////  
refrains of tinge

and green  
smear

I am the softest and the youngest time  
slowly melting older on a pock-marked clump  
O O O O O O

(fourth)

beach  
 of a hermit the  
 breast crab scuttle  
 the to steal  
 scaling their wood!

dig a pit / start a fire  
 smoke ourselves out to  
 the country went flat  
in ocean knifed horizon

by

*back south*

*dyubardyubbagun ignites the clouds* sprung crystalline

|  
\*the odd drop\*

(pressure's seething plume)

\*thock

\*that

\*thock

hermit crabs insist on the pit

tumble into it

U

the young

ones grab them up

{chuck them in a basket crackling

{and clinking with the rest: smash

/the shells, catch bream

octopus, dive/

with a knife/

stab a turtle

strip the curve from its back

and cook up good tucker, crisp

and smokey...~



READING THE COUNTRY: 30 YEARS ON

our sore toes hug powdery *pindan*  
our tail's a road furry with scrub and palm / swim and warm  
we chuckle your naked coals, snatch  
and scratching at cliff, skeleton, relic scatter or dune-ish  
*skeletal dunes scattered*  
angry cork spirits sleeping / we'll sleep here  
and call to noon  
and be gone by noon

*(fifth)*

this time  
arrived in a cesspit: low beneath dunes  
weeping smoke and stinking with still heat

sat and  
waiting a while: flies drop on my face  
like a rain of dried, crumbled shit  
stick it out  
sun stalked by cloud / catch the breeze  
up top

swim and breeze and sear  
foot cut on coral  
my blood's billowing like worn silk  
blood's like lace  
kisses fish crap, clam puss  
or a bottle contaminated by its own chemical

smoke's silent  
flies munch on my wound  
we walked to reach this, to move on  
from this / our vines embering  
and going dirt / jelly sweet  
human giving, patter and mauve  
red rock skewers fossil  
and ocean

(sixth)

/

listen

\

marks are ribs      [what hot solar]

\                                  /                                  \

phirl/phirl/phirl                                  teek

\                                  /

phooloo...                                  phooloo...

/                                  |

<zzill>

<zzill>                                  \

<zzill> O — phooloo: in the supple jack

/                                  /                                  |

here in mine

\                                  /                                  \

&... &...                                  <cuool>

/                                  /                                  \

prell/prell                                  <cuool>                                  irruption

/                                  \                                  /                                  \

cool as slate — thumping — scratchy wattle

/                                  \                                  /                                  \                                  /

                                sand                                  /                                  \                                  /

/                                  /                                  /                                  \                                  /

                                calls the rain                                  for clapping sticks—

/                                  |

we're scattered by accident

/                                  /                                  \                                  /                                  \

tent < > (sight) <cuool>

/                                  \                                  /                                  \

                                cushioning — hot totem

\                                  /                                  /                                  \

— tell me                                  granular — bloodwood hum

\                                  /

do you say

\                                  /                                  \

\*                                  cycle — rusted hub cap — prell/prell

\                                  /                                  \

composting tombs                                  spike & shade

|                                  /                                  \



(seventh)

frigates flocking to fresh bilara  
 |  
 rain clamped down to force our fester  
 |  
 stringent as fish gut  
 |  
 apathetic and muck  
 |  
 O — I want  
 |  
 frigates flocking to fresh bilara  
 |  
 O  
 |  
 I make bilara with my sweaty footprints  
 but knock a hole in me  
 and I become billabul  
 I rip gills from dead bodies  
 |  
 O  
 |  
 I want  
 |  
 |  
 |  
 |  
 movement  
 but all the roads speak RIVER  
 a spiky branch gouges out my scalp: *this*  
*country* is sick of me  
 |  
 O  
 |  
 carving more claps — and digging sticks  
 |  
 fire sticks  
 |  
 spears

I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I—I

cumulonimbus punch

the cliffs|

|shhh...

|shhhhh...

|hurl and sodden!

|shhhhhhh...

|hurl and

|soak and

|soak

and the dunes shift their bulk south

our images swim north

spurting and dugong against road

(*eighth*)

<u>feet on a clean floor too soon</u>	The rain's persistence	X
	drove us back	
	the line shredded by torrents	O
	barely tied to its last thought	
		O
	and now, fading country	
	and now, juicy fillets and capsules of linen	O
	can we sing back a coast that ends in the sign	O
	of the first and the always line	
	(	O
	of the wind's unrelenting hakea	
	of survival as an obdurate succulent	O
	: mine is a skin without flesh	O
	my footsteps grow anxious	
	I walk the globe without a sign of I	O

(*ninth*)

I washed the dirt from my chest

:

pindan rust in moon dish

(•)

they called I  
wandered to the sunset

O

-

-

-

-

the sun dragged the o  
cean down with it

I walked across cimmerician sea beds

[feet] stomach damp, soaring way

I walked an instant

X

\

O

but their stars pulled at me

their floating stars

L

E

D

or: some kind of coda  
we populated the country together  
we left together  
we together are a lantern huddled  
before the throat

|

we broke up a chunk of elegy  
and ate it in rolls and photographs

we are an eddy and we



(tenth)

I have the eyes and the nose of the houses  
cars drive over me / push me deeper into the earth

- a slip of bay slithers over the mangroves
- a sky riddled with roots and with hope
- a tracing of the many through the one

further on down to low tide's magnet  
those kite flooding after prey  
I stop and kneel and ask myself  
I cuddle up beside the chest of a boab

you hauled the evening up  
over your bodies like a blanket  
left strands of rope and empty tins on the shore  
your symbols scurried in their shells  
across my dream's cooling bank

what I can't see is what I must never see  
the rest is light searching for campgrounds

a sail on the trail's pink dust

) dancing

) dancing

the poems are waterholes or they are the thinnest creeks  
skin-thin, moist bead and nervous wire

and  
they are  
or

we gathered by the embers and waited  
for the stories  
for the history of O  
while it slumped and *spat* and cooked up the night

but you are coal and its capacity for ember  
you are you or O

the angle invented by a king brown  
lush and poison between granules

- I awoke inside the boab
- it was full of sea-weedy fumes
- we packed up and moved on without me

Extracts from *George Dyungayan's Bulu Line: A West Kimberley Song Cycle*, featuring George Dyungayan, Paddy Roe, Ray Keogh & Stuart Cooke

## Verse 11

*milydyidawurruy*

*dyalbirrimbirrai*

*ɲarany ɲarany yinydyarrgana*

milydyidawurruy

[*milydyidawurru*: 'rainstorm from the south']

dyalbirrimbirrai

['storm building up']

ɲarany ɲarany

[*ɲarany*: a waterhole in Garadyarri country,

northwest of La Grange]

yiny-dyarrga-na

['it stood over, it waited, it hung over']

Roe:           dyalbirrimbirrai   cloud all heap up  
                  ɲarany ɲarany yinydyarrgana   it's raining in  
                  Njarany

Keogh:        According to Roe, Verse 11 describes how it rained at Njarany, a waterhole near Dampier Downs Station. Dyungayan could tell it was raining, says Roe, because he could see the clouds building up to the south of the Roebuck Plains.

Roe:           rain from this way<sup>1</sup>  
                  milydyidawurru we call im rain  
                  anytime cloud come we call im milydyidawurru  
                  [*rhythmicises words*] milydyidawurruy

dyalbirrimbirrai  
ah he making up you know dyalbirrimbirri  
rain they bin see im from long way too

Keogh: Dyungayan stated that the verse refers only to the clouds, and not to any rainfall. However, on another occasion he seemed to contradict this interpretation.

Dyungayan: wila I look im all the rain<sup>2</sup>

Keogh: Verse 11 accompanies a dance, but neither Roe nor Dyungayan could remember the lirrga.

Cooke: it's a rainstorm from the south  
all that rain  
the storm's building up  
clouds heaping up  
hanging over Njarany  
raining in that country  
rainstorm in the south  
over the waterhole  
in Garadyarri country

all that rain  
storm growing  
standing over Njarany  
waiting there

in the south  
the storm's building  
the clouds are growing  
the storm's hanging  
over Njarany  
it's raining on the waterhole

in the south  
the storm's building up...

Verse 12

*bandirr yarrabanydyina*

*burarri yiṅanydyina*

*dyalal yindinayana*

bandirr           yarra-ba-ny-dyina  
[body designs] ['we see him']

burarr-i yi-ṅa-ny-dyina  
[dim]   ['he's there']

dyalal yin-di-na-yana  
[∅]   ['he did']

Roe:           bandirr yarrabanydyina   we seen bandirr  
          burarri   can't see proper   long way  
          dyalal yindinayana   he come out from dark

Keogh:       According to Roe, a group of rai were painted up with body designs in preparation for corroboree. They used the white ochre from Verse 3 (galydyi). In his dream, Dyungayan saw them emerge from the dark, but they didn't come close so he couldn't see them clearly.

          Verse 12 is the lirrga for Verse 13.

Roe:           that one   something bin come out bandirr  
          bandirr bilongu corroboree you know bandirr  
          dyalal yindina he come out   from dark   you know  
  other side  
          he come out in open  
          burarr yiṅanydyina means   oh  
          burarr   he stop long way   can't see im proper you  
  know burarr  
          he just come out and he can only just see im that  
  bandirr  
          rai bin come out dancing   in dream



Verse 13

*dadyiwurrurruy*

*dyunbarambara*

*ganal yimbanydyinayana*

dadyi-wurrurruy

[Ø] ['large group of people']

dyunbarambara

[*dyunbara*: dust cloud]

ganal yim-ba-ny-dyina-yana

[Ø] [*yimbanydyina*: 'he sees him']

Roe: ganal yimbanydyinayana he come to nothing<sup>3</sup>

Keogh & Roe: R - he come out now this fella

[rhythmicises words] dadyiwurrurruy

dyunbarambara

dyunbarambara means he bring dust you

know

with his foot

he come to nothing

but he bin dust coming out dyunbarambara

ganal yimbanydyina and he come to nothing

when he's high up wind blow im away you

know

you can't see any more dust

K - so what's that dadyiwurrurruy wurrurruy?

R - dadyiwurrurruy that's them people coming

out the<sup>4</sup>

for dance they're dancing dadyiwurrurruy

wurrurru yinjan like big mob coming

dadyi nothing to make that corroboree

Keogh: According to Roe, in this verse the rai from Verse 12 come out in full view and begin to

dance. As they stamp the ground, clouds of dust rise up from their feet. The wind blows the dust away, however, so it comes to nothing.

Butcher Joe & Dyungayan:

D - this one nurlu I bin get im long time ago  
when I was a young young fella  
B - that old man name Bulu  
that from Wanydyal  
an he sing for sing an dance  
that one now dadyiwurrurru  
he make dust  
one time we come from Beagle Bay run to  
thatplace there<sup>5</sup>  
somebody dancing there  
we look he dancing  
marlu ginya murda he gone<sup>6</sup>  
D - well that one now

Keogh:

According to Butcher Joe, however, it isn't the rai who appear, but Bulu *himself*: Bulu is dancing.

Butcher Joe links the verse to a historical event in which a group of people were travelling from Beagle Bay. They saw a lot of dust caused by somebody dancing. The dancer was Bulu, but when they looked closer he had gone.

Dyungayan confirmed Butcher Joe's explanation.







## II: *Reading the Country* and Education



# In Praise of Experimental Institutions: After May 1968

Meaghan Morris

*The intellectual is on the margins of the common body of knowledge. By knowing things which come from elsewhere (the 'frontiers' of science and technology, the strange, almost perverse discourses of the humanities, and other cultures) he or she makes raids on common myths at the same time as building up new ones which will come to count as common knowledge one day. It is Paddy Roe's confidence in the knowledge of his own culture which enables him to challenge in such a forceful way European notions of marriage and he saves one of his countrymen from seven years of suffering. This is perhaps the power of the intellectual; to intervene in a situation and tell a story which can change the conventions for understanding things.*

*Reading the Country*<sup>1</sup>

When I was stumped for a topic to bring to the *Reading the Country* festival, Philip Morrissey suggested something about the student-worker uprising of May 1968 in Paris and its implications for universities, along with the 'sense of possibility' around the Humanities in Australia in the early 1980s when *Reading the Country* was composed; then, something about the situation today in which people seek to recapture the political energies of that now rather distant past. This was a clear, reasonable brief for one of my age and experience and yet it sent me from stumped to stymied. While I have joyfully surfed waves created by May '68 for much of my intellectual life, I never felt that I *understood* those events that took place when I was in my last year of high school in the country town of East Maitland, New South Wales. I was once scolded by my friend

the radical Melbourne thinker Boris Frankel for ‘admitting’<sup>2</sup> that my family only read the *Maitland Mercury* and at the time I saw an article covering the Paris events only as a big garbage strike. But this is not a shameful confession: to know that it is possible to change common knowledge it matters to remember what the East Coast white working-class country was like in 1968. Life was not completely parochial; we backed the unions and we certainly knew about the war in Vietnam. Our families quarrelled over the war and I pasted atrocity photos cut from the *Mercury* on my school exercise books in protest. Later at university I would read about May ’68, mostly things written from France or Britain, but understanding seemed always out of reach—like the flouncy New Look dresses I adored on my older cousins, only to find mini-skirts on sale when I was old enough to dress up. 1969 was not a great time to be a young woman harangued (and worse) in an Australian university by New Left student leaders. Women’s Liberation erupted on campuses then for a reason.

So Philip’s brief was hard and how could I link this anyway to *Reading the Country*? I thought about how I first met Stephen Muecke and his friend Krim Benterrak in Paris around 1976, before *Reading the Country* and in the aftermath of May 1968. Stephen was an exotic person to me; he lived in Perth and in that time before affordable trans-continental plane trips I had never before met anyone who did. (I probably had no idea that people like Paddy Roe existed ‘over there’; Australia had no truly national media-sphere until satellite transmission began in 1985). Stephen was studying at the cutting edge and scientifically respectable University of Paris VII-Jussieu in the Latin Quarter. Julia Kristeva taught there though I don’t think that mattered to Stephen. I arrived to study eighteenth-century French women’s novels (a topic I chose as good for a scholarship out of Australia) at the cutting edge and romantically disreputable University of Paris VIII-Vincennes in the woods on the fringe of the city. Deleuze taught there and that ended up mattering to me. What didn’t matter much to foreign students then were the boundaries between institutions. Once enrolled in the Paris university system you could audit any classes you liked. So a bunch of us would go to different places to hear the weekly lectures by our

favourites (Foucault and Deleuze for me) and try out others now and then. We sat on the floor for Barthes' packed-out Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France. I went to hear Derrida once and he spoke like he wrote so I almost fell asleep. I saw Lacan once, too; he really did stay analytically silent for most of the hour and the bejewelled *bourgeoise* sitting next to me held opera glasses up to catch his every expression. Practising transference, I guess. Waiting for Irigaray and Kristeva to have a cat-fight one time at the Pompidou Centre, police funnelled the huge crowd towards closed glass doors with such force that they smashed and people up front were cut, blood everywhere. It was strange to go to London for language relief and see violence like that at rock concerts.

I know how this sounds. And yes it was exciting and it changed my life and we were lucky to drift in from Australia right there, just then. But those starry-eyed moments are not what formed something in me, a path or a 'mobile diagonal line'<sup>3</sup> that hooked me up with Stephen again in the radical BA Communication course at the New South Wales Institute of Technology (NSWIT) where I taught Semiotics and experimental cinema from 1978 to 1985, the year he came; and not what took me back a decade later to the 'University of Technology, Sydney' where we started a journal, *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, in part to help people cope with the newly emerging pressure to have publications refereed.<sup>4</sup> Our first issue in 1995 was on 'Intellectuals and Communities', with the Samoan poet Sia Figiel on the cover and essays by Rey Chow, Bruce Robbins, Philip Morrissey, Ghassan Hage and Ruth Barcan as well as Figiel's poetry inside. The next year we did an issue with Chris Healy asking 'Is an Experimental History Possible?', featuring Stephen on histories of Kimberley colonialism up front. Looking at these for the first time in years, I suddenly see how May 1968 and *Reading the Country* are indeed linked for me. That 'something' those Paris years formed was a need as well as a passion for inhabiting experimental institutions, for creating or visiting places of learning, teaching, talking, storytelling, thinking, writing and reading that materially bring changes into the world that were hitherto not meant to be.

So to come back to *Reading the Country* let me talk about Paris VIII-Vincennes and the idea of intellectual life that it fostered. Like most students I had a fuzzy impression of the past of the place where I studied but it was commonplace to believe that a new university had been created out in the Vincennes Woods in 1969 to get *gauchiste* (far left) staff and students as far away from cobble-stones as possible. A recent article by Paul Cohen celebrating the fortieth birthday of Paris-VIII explains that the story was more complicated.<sup>5</sup> Vincennes took shape as an experiment at the intersection of at least two government strategies for higher education reform. One was to modernise France's sclerotic university system in the hope of forestalling further revolts by expanding enrolments, reducing ministry oversight, opening up governance to faculty and student participation and fostering a spirit of interdisciplinarity. This strategy was about the future. The other was aftermath management: to separate across the system, not just at Vincennes, 'enemies whose post-1968 animosities threatened to bring universities to a halt'.<sup>6</sup> Thus Vincennes had a 'right-wing twin' across the city at the economics, business and political science programme of Paris 1X-Dauphine.

There are beautiful universities elsewhere whose physical design is said to have been shaped to make mass demonstrations and riots impossible: the University of California at Santa Cruz, for example, and the mountainous main campus of the National University of Singapore. Thrown up in great haste, the shabby prefab buildings of Vincennes were intended to create an egalitarian world of collective discussion and decision-making. There were no Sorbonne-style amphitheatres for god-professorial speech. Seminar rooms were a new thing in France, but to hear Deleuze you just had to arrive in time to pack in to the flat space of a sort of Nissan Hut where, with windows closed against the cold and the air clogged with cigarette smoke, people sometimes fainted from lack of oxygen. Appointed by a group led by the feminist Hélène Cixous, advised by Barthes, Lacan, Georges Canguilhem and Derrida, the entire faculty was left wing. Foucault created a Philosophy Department including Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière and Michel Serres, with Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard joining just after Foucault left

in 1970 for the Collège de France. Cohen has an anecdote that captures the difference in spirit between the great political experiment of Vincennes and the sad discipleship rivalries organised oedipally by these names in the Anglo-American academy now. Vincennes was introducing new areas of study to France: Cinema, Computer Science, a version of Linguistics that had room for sociolinguistics and generative grammar, Plastic Arts, women's and gender studies and Psychoanalysis. To make room for the latter, Foucault 'volunteered to sacrifice faculty positions in his own department to make the creation of a Lacanian-inflected centre possible'.<sup>7</sup>

Intellectual debates between these parties were certainly furious and the conflicts on campus between Communist (PCF), Trotskyist and Maoist factions were vicious, leading to the forces of the Left turning bitterly on each other in the isolation of Vincennes. By the time I went there six years after it opened the graffiti-smearred campus was a battered, ugly and often scary place. However, reading past polemics without their wider institutional context impoverishes our political legacy. The founders of Vincennes were united in what Raymond Williams called a 'project' of broad social transformation as distinct from battering down on 'defensible' disciplinary objects.<sup>8</sup> Two of the policies furthering that project had a more profound impact on me than even the cast of professors. One was an open admissions policy allowing people with work experience who had never finished high school to enrol in Vincennes' programs and participate on an equal footing with students fresh from school with their *baccalauréats*. The other was the principled refusal by members of the influential Philosophy Department to award discriminatory course credits. To pass their courses you just signed a piece of paper; passing his around, Deleuze would say that a human being cannot 'fail' philosophy. However when Lacan's Maoist daughter Judith Miller went public with this in an interview, further sharing her desire to destroy the university as a 'piece of capitalist society',<sup>9</sup> the Department lost accreditation and this affected the whole aura of Vincennes. Not least, it induced a demographic shift in a highly diverse student body with very large numbers of men, but few women, from francophone North and West Africa (that is, former French



colonies) and a mixture of men and women from other parts of the world with some white French women. The shift was that white French men, happy to hang out at star courses but unwilling to enrol in a vocationally worthless degree, became a minority in much of the everyday life of the campus.

This all came together in a sustained two-year culture shock for a white country girl whose experience of race, class and ethnicity was shaped in Tenterfield and Maitland by Australian colonial relations and postwar immigration policies. Some days I would dread the long trip out to Vincennes where a strategic insufficiency of buses to campus from the Metro led to punch-ups between queuing and non-queuing cultures (the former mostly Anglo, the latter including the French). At one time there was an outbreak of Eldridge Cleaver-style aggression toward white women as ‘property’ through whom the French colonial ex-master could be touched. In my experience this was a politics of humiliation rather than immediate violence, but it made a long day out there oppressive in a very intimate way. Yet you might share a seminar on, say, cross-cultural theories of gender with men from Algeria, Morocco, Mali and Senegal—some Muslim, others Catholic, some aristocrats funded from their homelands, others migrant workers come to Paris from poor rural backgrounds—and you had to stand up and make your case. You had to be willing to explain everything you said to anyone who asked anything at Vincennes and that ‘all in’ culture was magic. It taught me how to fight with good humour and to despise unctuous versions of self-hating political correctness. It taught me trust, and how to learn from strangers by creating something in common between us, even just a conversation, that had not been possible before. It taught me in the end how to teach and how to write so that a mixed bunch of people might want to understand me.

Storytelling as way of ‘changing the conventions for understanding things’, as *Reading the Country* put it, was vital to life at Vincennes, even if your powers of narration failed. An experience I shared once in a text with Stephen is worth repeating here.<sup>10</sup> I did a seminar run by Serge Moscovici, the ‘social ecologist’ who argued that all significant change is driven by minorities. Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and*

*Feminism* had just come out in French and since I was the only woman in the class and the only Anglophone who might explain why the British were only now discovering Freud, he asked me to give two sessions presenting her argument in my bad French to those for whom the book was too long to read. Speaking bad French was okay at Vincennes, but I stumbled early on when Boilême, an Algerian migrant worker, interrupted to ask, ‘Who’s Oedipus?’ I needed to step back from Mitchell’s text to tell the original story, creating common knowledge where there was none before, but for the life of me I could not remember it in enough detail to achieve the classical aura required. So after my mutterings about a swollen foot and the Sphinx and killing your father and marrying your mother and not sure how it ended, Boilême said in a puzzled way, ‘but that’s a stupid story!’ Inclined to think so too, I wanted to laugh but in Vincennes protocol I had to try to explain why many great Western minds had thought that it wasn’t a stupid story. I didn’t do a good job, haplessly exposing that it was conventional to pretend familiarity with classical matters that weren’t really common knowledge at all. Moscovici enjoyed this hugely and pushed us all into an intense discussion of appropriate ways of acknowledging the sexuality of your parents and what makes a story ‘good’. Our different ways of thinking about these things formed the knowledge we created in common that day.

I would experience the intellectual magic enabled by an open admissions policy again in my NSWIT years and to this day I believe that it is the best undergraduate experience that a university can provide. Institutions that undertake this are ‘experimental’ in a special way; they intervene transformatively in existing social relations as well as producing new curricula and this combination changes knowledges practices, ‘the conventions for understanding things’. Of course, there are many kinds of institutions (including right-wing experiments, like Paris IX-Dauphine or the powerful think tanks we know in Australia today) and they all have rules, like the tamarind tree in Stephen’s essay in this volume. Some institutions are esoteric, open only to initiates; some make their rules more public than others, and some have rules about not having rules. Whatever the case, reflecting on the affordances

of those rules and working with them to shape possibilities for shared experience is often what the process of initiating change is all about.

Going back with this in mind to the passages from *Reading the Country* that discuss Paddy Roe's practice as a 'specific' intellectual in Foucault's sense I am struck by two things. One is that the text does not situate the intellectual as 'outside' institutional space or on a 'society's' margins, both romantic versions of intellectual positioning that would be highly inappropriate for describing Paddy Roe's relationship to 'a particular Aboriginal institution: traditional culture of the Broome area'.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, the margin that the intellectual occupies in *Reading the Country* is defined in relation to the 'common body of knowledge' because he or she brings to that knowledge something 'from elsewhere'. This is a margin moving into that common body in order to change it, not one being expelled or excluded from it. (Serge Moscovici would have liked that.)

The second thing that strikes me is how the text ascribes Paddy Roe's capacity to act effectively from that margin to a storytelling power he draws not only from his confident knowledge of his own culture but also from his ethnographic willingness to 'read' another culture so as to tell some stories in a way that members of that culture can understand (and then bring the story of *that* telling back to country). In the book, Paddy Roe tells Stephen and Krim a story about explaining to white welfare officers why it was all right in 'black man's law' for a man to be travelling with his twelve year old 'promised girl'. Able to read the white law's conventions for understanding this situation, Paddy Roe is able to explain why their application has been mistaken. As a result, the man is released from a seven-year jail sentence and the girl is freed from a convent.<sup>12</sup> Glossing this story in relation to a preceding discussion by Paddy Roe of belief and the nature of law, Stephen writes:

From the discussion with Paddy Roe, and his story, it is easy to see how different cultures produce different sorts of truths which hold good only within their own systems. But Paddy Roe's approach is 'intellectual' in the sense that he

doesn't dismiss the white man's institutions out of hand; he reads them from a perspective which takes into account cultural similarity and difference. Christianity and bugar-rigarra thus have 'invisibility' in common.<sup>13</sup>

My story here has been about discovering a way to situate *Reading the Country* in relation to my own experience of the political energy that moved between institutional experiments created in the aftermath of May '68 in Paris and in Sydney. I must insist that I am not suggesting that this was Stephen's trajectory, either before or after collaborating on the book; whatever he might want to say himself about times in France, the Aboriginal institutions of the Broome area have clearly been generative for him. However, in turning to Philip Morrissey's question about the situation today it also seems important to say that my appreciation of the achievement of *Reading the Country* owes more now to the twenty-five years I have spent experimenting with intellectual and activist friends in Asia than to those originary moments that I was indeed fortunate to spend in Paris. In often ferociously hostile circumstances, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies network between Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea as well as Australia has been able to create out of nothing and sometimes successfully to defend from assault undergraduate courses and programs, postgraduate schools, numerous research centres, a biennial conference, a summer school, a teaching camp and a refereed journal.<sup>14</sup> These not only keep earlier political experiments alive (the Bandung Asian-African conference of 1955 is exemplary) but work collectively to create the new institutional energies needed for survival as intellectuals in the region are wedged between, on the one hand, the globalising policy-sharing that ever more tightly links different national education systems and, on the other hand, the diverse political pressures that everywhere attend the growing power exerted by the PRC.

In this situation we all have a lot to learn from the method of *Reading the Country* and the intellectual strategies of Paddy Roe as the book presents them. I don't yet feel enough at home back in Australia to make suggestions about what people here might do, but I can make two observations. First, the

art of reading institutions through cultural similarity and difference can be practised anywhere, and using one's wits and storytelling powers to make raids on common myths while taking advantage of institutional rules generally works better and more pleasurably to sustain energy than 'speaking bitterness' (as the Chinese say) alone. Second, I think it is vital now to look beyond the institutional Anglo-sphere for allies and for inspiration. If I have foregrounded here some aspects of my own ignorance in the past that seem a bit shocking now, it has been in part to come back around to saying that none can be sure of knowing what others or indeed ourselves in the future will feel that we should have known now. I am sure, however, that the PRC will play a pressing role in Australia's future one way or another, including in our universities, and that therefore the political energies unleashed by the remarkable Occupy Central movement triggered by high school student activism in Hong Kong in 2015 may well become as consequential for future experiments as May '68 has been for decades. But this is (of course) another story.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Krim Bentrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Revised edition (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996), pp. 195-6.
- 2 The scare quotes here are mine.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, pp. 293-8. The diagonal is a line that can carry us to a place we were not supposed to be.
- 4 Now published by UTS e-Press, this journal still exists as *Cultural Studies Review*: <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>.
- 5 Paul Cohen, 'Happy Birthday Vincennes! The University of Paris-8 Turns Forty', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 69, 2010, pp. 206-24. Further references in parentheses in the text. 'Vincennes' was relocated to Saint-Denis in 1980, but the old name still sticks.
- 6 Cohen, p. 209.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 8 Raymond Williams, 'The Future of Cultural Studies' in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, pp. 151-62.
- 9 Cohen, p. 211.
- 10 Meaghan Morris with Stephen Muecke, 'Relations of Theory: a Dialogue', in *Outside The Book: Contemporary Essays on Literary Periodicals*, ed. David Carter, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 1991, pp. 57-68.
- 11 Bentrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 195.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 193-5.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

- 14 See the personal stories of experimental institution-building collected in Meaghan Morris and Mette Hjort (eds), *Creativity and Academic Activism: Instituting Cultural Studies*, Hong Kong University Press and Duke University Press, Hong Kong and Durham, 2012.
- 15 I tell some of this story in 'Getting a Life: Expatriate Uses of New Media in Hong Kong', in Larissa Hjorth and Olivia Khoo (eds), *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015.

# The Muecke/Roe Relationship as a Model for Australian Indigenous Studies

Philip Morrissey

In *Reading the Country* Stephen Muecke describes Paddy Roe as an intellectual and relates a conversation in which Paddy, after questioning him, identifies *invisibility* as the common factor in Christian conceptions of Divinity and Bugarrigarra.<sup>1</sup> The enduring aspect of the Muecke-Roe relationship is its intellectuality. The relationship is intellectual - not simply reducible to the interpersonal, or a cross-cultural friendship between a Settler academic and an Aboriginal elder. And though in conversation with Stephen Muecke Paddy Roe articulates a specifically local and Aboriginal wisdom, it can be applied in surprising contexts. A consideration of the philosophical, ethical and pedagogical aspects of the teaching relationship between Muecke and Roe was of fundamental importance when envisaging the creation of an Australian Indigenous Studies undergraduate major and program as part of the University of Melbourne's New Generation Arts degree. Considerations of that relationship can lead to ever more complex understandings, though in the instance of this essay it was used to develop some simple ethical principles for a corporate work environment.

For Muecke, it involved the evolution of ways of listening and a growing sensitivity to the implicit and non-verbal forms of Roe's teaching as well as the development of a shared context for the verbal exchanges. This would seem conventional enough, but Muecke himself says in the postscript of *Reading the Country*: 'I have tried to delineate our differences rather than stress our common purpose, for there is no absolutely

common purpose, just as there is no common feature, like our humanity, which could adequately unite us for any common purpose.<sup>2</sup> The radicalism of this statement seems to challenge any possibility for learning. Friendships that bridge cultures, and the mutual recognition of similarity underlying outward difference, if not goals in themselves, are commonplace ways for Settlers to validate research relationships with Aboriginal people.

A further challenge is found in the situational nature of Paddy Roe's teaching. The manner in which he speaks to his interlocutor and directs conversation, the stories he chooses to tell and the varied way he responds to questions, is to an extent more illuminating than the obvious content. In contrast, Mowaljarlai and Neidjie, two other great Aboriginal teachers of the twentieth century, provided explicit concepts for teaching and use, in contexts removed from their immediate community. How can we learn from the Muecke-Roe relationship to the extent of turning it to the prosaic ends of developing a set of ethics for corporate governance?

Education theorist Mark Tappan's discussion of moral development in education, which uses the theoretical framework of Lev Vygotsky, provides some guidance. First Tappan quotes Michael Oakeshott: 'the conditions which compose a moral practice are not theorems or precepts about human conduct, nor do they constitute anything so specific as a "shared system of values"; they compose a *vernacular language* of colloquial intercourse.'<sup>3</sup> If we accept this 'colloquial intercourse' as applicable to the interaction of Muecke and Roe we are able to proceed to the next step of Tappan's argument when he suggests that higher mental (or moral) functioning is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse which function as 'psychological tools' that both facilitate and transform mental action. In other words, the creative richness of the manner in which Roe communicates and its perpetual qualitative dimension exercise a transformative effect for the listener, or anyone who reads the transcript of the conversation; it becomes internalised. Tappan writes that 'external speech between people becomes inner speech within people - that is, as overt, external moral dialogue becomes silent, inner moral dialogue'. This inner speech is transformed into moral understanding,



moral sensibility, and moral volition in contexts radically different from that in which they were received.<sup>4</sup> (Here I would emphasise that the term ‘moral’ is being used as a synonym for ‘ethical’.)

This inner speech enabled by *Reading the Country* with its multiple authors and voices becomes the foundation for the following ideas presented to Aboriginal teaching practitioners.

### **Indigenous ethics in a corporate university**

#### ***Value driven***

In *Reading the Country* there is a black and white photograph of Paddy Roe and underneath a sentence: ‘You are looking at Paddy Roe while he is glancing to his left. Will your gazes ever meet? If they do will you recognise each other? Will this recognition be based on sameness or difference?’<sup>5</sup> Novelist Teju Cole puts it this way: ‘Difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no.’<sup>6</sup>

A critical thing we, as Aboriginal people, face in the contemporary university is control over the institutional use of sameness and difference, that is the specificity of our Aboriginality balanced against our shared rights and responsibilities as workers and students. Though we are oppositional, and people who contest and contribute through debate and critique, we still need a vision of the future, and we certainly need a structural analysis of policy, a sense of future directions, of where things are going. How do we do things more effectively? How do we live out our varied human potentials? We spend our lives in corporations; how do we have a meaningful life within them? Here I’m going to talk about ethics and values, taking in the main as my inspiration the late Nyikina elder Paddy Roe as well as drawing on other aspects of the Aboriginal tradition.

One of the things that has always defined Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne is that it is a value-driven program. That may sound a little enigmatic but the concept has a history and you may be surprised to learn that I heard it used for the first time by John Avery, New South Wales Police Commissioner in the 1980s. When Avery was appointed Commissioner he instituted a number of reforms, including reconfiguring the NSW Police Force as

a value-driven police service.<sup>7</sup> For any organisation, having values inevitably means that it will experience moments of contradiction; for the police service, it meant in practice that some things that communities might desire, or the agendas of politicians, could be inimical to those values. An instance here might be an upper-middle-class suburb where the residents would prefer that the police move on people deemed by appearance, or race, to be undesirable. Similarly, politicians might find it in their political interests to have greater or lesser rates of arrest for certain crimes. By extension one can see that having values in the contemporary university inevitably means there will be moments of contradiction, resolved through conflict, compromise or negotiation. That in itself should be recognised as a valuable contribution to institutional health.

### *Things must go both ways*

So, a value-driven program. It was just a phrase for a number of years but has become important as we've had to respond to the rapidly changing organisational culture of the tertiary sector. The ethics modelled in Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*<sup>8</sup> and in *Reading the Country* have been foundational in forming our Australian Indigenous Studies program. In many ways *Reading the Country* provided the key to thinking about the *Gularabulu* narratives and for interacting with other Aboriginal narratives, whether personal or shared publicly, in the specific context of university administration.

I realised with Paddy Roe that a lot of what he stood for was an ethical philosophy encapsulated in the phrase: 'Things must go both ways.' Stephen Muecke relates his first meeting with Paddy Roe: 'It was our first meeting and I wanted him to work with me, a first year student recording oral narratives ... When I asked him to tell me a few stories he responded by saying, "Things must go both ways." When I ask what he meant he laughed and asked if I could start by loading the corrugated iron on the truck.'<sup>9</sup> This becomes the basis of a teaching and learning relationship. In comparison, Muecke noted in *Reading the Country* that (at the time of publication) the only reference to Paddy Roe found in the Australian Institute of

Aboriginal Studies' library was for *Gularabulu*, notwithstanding the fact that academics from various disciplines and public servants had collected and circulated his knowledge under their own names.

At its simplest, the concept is about equivalent exchange: our students are our clients and they pay money in exchange for teaching, that's a very basic relationship. In reality it is something much more organic where there's an interchange and development on both sides - for the teacher and the student. It's a dynamic relationship. It means openness to the possibility of a reinvention of the self, a rethinking of what we do. It's not against valid hierarchies. But it says those hierarchies should be organic, they shouldn't ossify and become points where the organisation works less effectively, where diversity is corralled, contained, fetishised.

In a reciprocal community everyone should serve and be served. What does that mean? In some cases it's straight-forward. For instance, in a work team that meets regularly, everyone takes a turn at making the coffee and tea, and cleaning up and washing cups, irrespective of seniority or gender politics. Reciprocity produces stability and a higher-order mode of communication. But 'things must go both ways' should also be dynamic. Like the yin/yang symbol, predicated on mutuality and in which each half contains the seeds of its opposite, we need the openness to a continual disclosure of new possibilities. In the following I'll discuss what I believe are some of the elements of the precept 'Things must go both ways' and their practical application.

As an example as to how this might work, consider that at the most junior level the employee is completely open to scrutiny from each level above. This scrutiny is strictly downwards - imperatives and demands on senior employees become increasingly opaque. An ethical working relationship might require that no one with management responsibility should have key performance indicators that are private. All university staff would know what their agendas are. Further, no one would receive performance bonuses for anything unless it was open to public scrutiny. Without this transparency such bonuses are the moral equivalent of secret commissions.

**Respect**

If reciprocity is based on exchange, respect is an enabling factor. It allows us to learn, to be open to learning what we don't know. To be disrespectful is to close ourselves down; you have to keep working it out in your own professional life. With our own practice we urge students to attend lectures out of respect for lecturers, particularly Aboriginal lecturers, and members of the community who come in and lecture. Early in 2013, Warwick Thornton spoke to some of our students about his understanding of respect in relation to some of his elders.<sup>10</sup> Respect in this context means that if you give something, demonstrate respect in a concrete way, they might give you something back in the form of knowledge - and experience and knowledge are what they are rich in. We accordingly need to foster meaningful respect, not just politeness. For universities, policies on Indigenous issues should start with an understanding of respect rather than performative gestures.

**Charity/sympathy**

*Gularabulu* contains the exquisite story 'Yaam'. Yaam is a man who has become deranged, it seems as a result of trauma. Having lost his people, he believes that a mob of wild cattle he travels with are his tribe. The story illustrates the understanding and equally importantly the sensitivity of Paddy and other Aboriginal stockmen when they encounter Yaam, and then years later, after Yaam had passed on, the respect with which they re-inter him when they find that his grave has been disturbed. The stockmen model a conception of the individual that is non-objectifying, transcending narrow economist conceptions of humanity.

If this is an example of sympathy, we find examples of charity in Paddy Roe's interactions, his accepting that people will make mistakes and when necessary correcting them gently. In one recorded instance he's sitting with a friend, Franz Hoogland, and in passing he's mentioned *liyan*, an intuitive faculty which is located in the solar plexus.<sup>11</sup> Intrigued and interested, Franz says to Paddy: 'How do I develop that *liyan*?' Paddy looks down, pauses, his face veiled by his hat, he coughs gently and then he says: 'That's the hard one, we got to teach 'im.' He doesn't say: 'You can't ask in that way, you're not in a

position to ask that. Because you've asked that question I can't teach you.' He defers the question and a direct answer until the moment it might be asked in the appropriate manner, in the right context, and properly answered. In some ways this is the highest level of communication and teaching.

### **Prudence**

One of Paddy Roe's most surprising teaching concepts is that of prudence. (It should be noted that prudence is the principal of the four cardinal virtues of classical philosophy and scholastic theology. The others being justice, fortitude, and temperance.) It is still one I'm trying to understand, but we are looking at each of the elements of the philosophy of Paddy Roe, as we understand them, and as they relate to workplace practice. To be prudent, I think, is to be aware of what's happening around you, sometimes avoiding conflict in order to conserve energy and maintain focus on the essential. Discussing the intuitive faculty *liyan* with Franz Hoogland, Paddy Roe gives an example of how walking through the bush it could manifest as an awareness that something was not right and a precautionary avoidance implemented: 'Might be someone waiting with spear, we better go this way.'

In 'Donkey Devil, Story II' Paddy takes his spear and tomahawk when asked to investigate an apparently demonic creature even though he appears sceptical when told the story of the encounter with a strange creature. Here there is an awareness of possibilities implicit in his investigation, innocuous as it seems. Implementing prudence in the corporate workplace we try to consider events, and the consequences of actions, from multiple perspectives and keep in mind that there are aspects of people or situations that exceed our observations or experience. A heavier burden, but one in which prudence is a protective discipline for Aboriginal people, is the intention not to be provoked, not to act instinctively in the face of culturally disrespectful acts encountered in the workplace. Without prudence one's whole project is jeopardised.

### **Protocols**

If we believe people have inherent value, how do we recognise this in corporations? Corporations can do this

as an abstraction. But we do need operative protocols and Aboriginal culture can provide models.

Now I want to extend this into the notion of what it might mean in terms of community. Whether we like it or not we live in communities. And for better or worse we are in the university community. I think for these purposes we should see community as not just a group of friends but rather a group of people who are brought together because they have some shared interest or purpose. With that comes the question, what can we learn from Aboriginal culture with respect to protocols? And once again I'd like these protocols to be seen as operative protocols. They provide guidance, allow us to behave in the most appropriate manner if we don't have necessary social knowledge or are limited by our own psychology or personality. They can open up possibilities for communication as well as acknowledge and protect sensitivities. Protocols can make interactions less awkward and violent. They can deal with issues that are going to affect everyone. What if a colleague dies suddenly? How is that recognised? How are the feelings of the colleagues who may have been close to the deceased respected? When is it appropriate for someone to move into their office? Sit at their desk? When should their photographs and personal information be removed from web pages? Who will ensure that this happens? A corporation usually doesn't have policies on any of this. It's left up to the judgement and initiative of individuals and of course this is where barbarisms can occur. It's really about manners, and if we're looking at Australian Indigenous studies one of the things that we should be trying to do is civilise the people we work with.

### ***Shame***

There are three ways this term was used in Aboriginal communities. First, someone might use it as a description of self-consciousness and social unease: 'I'm ashamed (or I'm "shame")'. When Aboriginal and white people lived in separated communities, social interactions with white people could produce this feeling of unease. People might also feel it if undue prominence was given to them at the expense of family or community. The other sense is when it's said directly to someone to 'growl' them, to express disapproval of their

behaviour, 'shame!'. Similarly, it might be used in conversation to pass judgement on someone's behaviour and to affirm accepted norms. The term 'shame job' might be used. (This judgement is often expressed in tones of mild amusement rather than censoriousness.) Both these usages proceed on the assumption that someone is being rebuked because they are a member of a community; or that a judgement is being expressed because it involves a community member and intact social relationships and responsibilities.

The gravest use of the concept of shame is shame at someone's shamelessness. In this instance, the person who uses it takes on the shame of the perpetrator. Mrs Ellen Draper, in writing down the story of the Myall Creek Massacre for publication, says that the story of the massacre had never been written down before by Aboriginal people because the shame of it prevented its re-telling outside the small Aboriginal circles in which it was traditionally told.<sup>12</sup> The Aboriginal people who are the custodians of the story feel shame but the shame is for the behaviour of the massacre perpetrators. In this case the shameful act has not estranged the perpetrator from the community but rather from humanity. It's a cautionary tale for the powerful, those who overturn accepted standards in pursuing their ends. This is shame as an absolute limit and this is the worst possible outcome for an organisation.

### *Community*

While the corporate governance works on a system of reward and punishment and the sometimes unhelpful individualisation of its workers, there may still be the possibility for individual units to do the opposite by practising communal responsibility. Where there is a failure or a fault the whole system should be analysed, and that will take into account attitudes modelled by senior staff, peer group cultures as well as individual responsibility. The parallel here is with the management technique of root cause analysis which is designed to find why a failure occurred as well as how it occurred.

An illustrative story I heard once involved a remote Aboriginal community where a non-Aboriginal visitor was found alone late at night with a young woman who was about to marry one of her own community. Nothing had happened

but an immediate court was convened at which all community members were present. After violent and frightening expressions of anger a surprising change occurred after some time, as individual community members rose and publicly held themselves to account for their role in creating the situation, in some cases accusing themselves along the lines of 'I'm her uncle and I should have taken better care of her'. This is a sophisticated method of identifying the complex causes of behaviour.

While we are talking about communities and community responsibility, one of the things that we do in ours is make it clear that we don't blame people for failing or having problems, but the one mistake we take seriously is hiding a problem and not seeking communal support or advice. We own the problem with the individual. Now that contradicts the system we've identified where people are individualised and given individual rewards and punishments, dispersed and set against each other. In that system there can be no communal responsibility.

**Justice**

Finally, an Aboriginal responsibility is the willingness to execute justice when necessary. Not everyone needs to execute this responsibility but it is a communal one. Now, I've talked of charity, sympathy in relation to people and the acceptance of mistakes. In almost all instances failures and shortcomings should remain private, but sometimes private justice can mean public injustice. In some instances justice and retribution is sought publicly, not in the crude sense of shaming someone but because to learn from it, and prevent its recurrence, the offender and the offence need to be brought into independent, objective frameworks of power.

The *Reading the Country* narrative 'We Better Go Back to Country' tells the story of when Paddy eloped with another man's wife and returns to Broome to make amends and re-establish his relationship with community and, more fundamentally, tradition and country.

I gotta go to Broome I gotta -  
 I gotta make all these people -  
 square' -  
 you know 'cos I -



pinched his woman from somebody -  
so I gotta make all this fellas I gotta make them clear -<sup>13</sup>

Back in Broome he presents himself with a spear to the wronged man who takes his revenge but afterward embraces Roe and affirms him and his new family.

no bad friend nothing -  
he just leave-im be -<sup>14</sup>

Here I have identified how *Reading the Country*, and its central relationship between Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, can help establish a Value Driven program, where Things Must Go Both Ways and the principles of Respect, Charity/Sympathy, Prudence, Protocols, Shame, Community and Justice can operate to mobilise Indigenous Ethics in a corporate university.

### Notes

- 1 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, pp. 169-70, 173.
- 2 Ibid, p. 230.
- 3 Mark B. Tappan, 'Moral Education in the Zone of Proximal Development' *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1998, p. 147 (italics in original).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 16.
- 6 Teju Cole, *Open City*, Faber, London, 2012, pp. 104-5.
- 7 The change of name from Force to Service is noteworthy. It has since been renamed the NSW Police Force. See John Avery, *Police, Force or Service?*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1981.
- 8 Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, ed. Stephen Muecke, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.
- 9 Stephen Muecke, 'Towards the Centre', *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, p. 66.
- 10 Australian Indigenous film director, screenwriter and cinematographer, director of *Samson and Delilah*, 2009.
- 11 Richard Meech and Michael Grant, dirs, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, A Biniman Productions Ltd, Adrian Malone Productions Ltd, KCET, Los Angeles and BBC-TV in association with The Global Television Network, 1992.
- 12 Ellen Draper, 'Old Cobraboos', in *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writing*, ed. Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin and Adam Shoemaker, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane., 1990, pp. 90-103.
- 13 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 137.
- 14 Ibid., p. 139.

# Re-writing the University with 'Reading the Country'

Katrina Schlunke

I loved the aim of the festival that was *Reading the Country; Thirty Years On*. 'The festival aims to revisit and recapture the intellectual radicalism and political energy of that time', the invitation read. 'That time' was 1984, the year of the original publication of *Reading the Country*. The festival, not conference, asked we participants to 'consider the multi-faceted aspects of the text and re-read it in light of changes in Australian society and universities, and contemporary developments in critical theory and reading methods'. But 1984 does not stand out for me as a year of 'radicalism' or 'political energy'.

As a first-year student at Melbourne University in 1984 I found a university culture that had just turned from a popular concern with Pine Gap to a popular concern with chocolate and Christianity in the guise of the vote-grabbing Chocolate Appreciation Society and the highly active and influential Christians on Campus group. I was in a university college where it was assumed a country high school girl would be safe under the wing of its Presbyterian antecedents but where my O'Week was spent drinking heavily, really very heavily, and calling out to each other college in turn: 'Trinity takes it up the arse', 'Queens fuck goats' and 'All Catholics are cunts'. This final one was a particular problem to me given that I had a) never used the term 'cunt' before; b) I knew a chunk of my family had been Catholic until the romantic tragedy of my grandparents marrying across the Anglican-Catholic divide threw future generations into Presbyterianism and, more generally, Catholicism was related in my mind to culture and civility via the piano teaching nuns of my town; and c) I had just returned from a year of exchange in Mexico where

everyone I loved was Catholic and where I myself had seamlessly taken to crossing myself upon all sorts of occasions. Apart from these outward efforts at abuse, we college 'freshers' also participated in a variety of collective humiliations in the name of exorcising pre-existing ties between those students who had all come from similar private schools and replacing it with new ones based on collegial fraternity that would include folk like myself who had come from somewhere else entirely. In its pared down tribal primitivism these rituals were radical but not exactly politically energised as imagined by the *Reading the Country, 30 Years On* festival organisers.

But the 1984 campus/college environment also boasted reading groups, junior common room debates about issues of the day and collective subscriptions to a wide variety of newspapers and literary reviews. And the university, even amid the turn to God and chocolate, still had the Student Union-supported clubs and societies that included Judy's Punch, the feminist collective, and an active political life that included going onto the streets and into the offices of the university hierarchy. It was only a few years later that we would be organising the first demonstration against the introduction of fees—in 1986 I think—where we occupied the Stock Exchange in what now seems a very prescient understanding of what was happening to us.

What I remember as an oasis of that time was the Koori Centre run by Lisa Bellear. Or maybe someone else was running it but Lisa was definitely the force and that was where the arts, politics and fun, joy actually, really came together in a way that you could feel if not quite articulate at the time. And if there is some inchoate model of an ideal space from the mid 1980s that would be it for me. So this jumble of joy and political losses amid an assumption about what would last within a university culture is my lightly strung temporal bridge from my 1984 to *Reading the Country*. Before the festival I had never linked *Reading the Country* to the time it was written. *Reading the Country* is associated in my mind with the excitement of cultural studies and the real pleasures of learning to read again at the University of Western Sydney after I left Melbourne Uni. So I thought I would write a reflective piece on why for all sorts of reasons associated with curriculum and culture I could

not 'read' *Reading the Country* in my very first encounter with it. But doing that felt a little like squandering the legacy of the book and its accumulated and accumulating force.

So this is instead some writing about not *reading* the book *Reading the Country*, but rather treating it like a 'working vehicle', as a ute that might take you round corners so you have to hang on for dear life or as a really good ride that you can enjoy like a happy kelpie with your tongue hanging out in the wind, trusting the book and the words and ideas within it will get you somewhere. Somewhere unexpected.

For me at the moment, universities are small places. They have shrunk even as they build more and more buildings and make campuses further and further from this country. They are not the rich places supported by knowledge and elders and community like the Fitzroy River community that Anne Poelina and others are growing because they know a visit there might grow all of us up.<sup>1</sup> They are, as Philip Morrissey suggests, places that need the restorative practices represented by Paddy Roe, of 'respect, sympathy and modesty'.<sup>2</sup> But how could I bring these two worlds of thinking together? These two worlds that don't meet? My method is to begin with some little fragments of these Lilliputian worlds, an email and a piece of policy, but use the tactics bequeathed to us in words and method by Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke to rethink them. So I am not 'reading' *Reading the Country*, I am more bluntly using it. At least some of the time, in some of the places we call universities, research and teaching are still the heart of what we do even if doing that might now be called 'core business', so it is through those headings that I begin to re-read.

### Re-reading research and teaching

#### *Research*

This is what research looked like in *Reading the Country*. This is the sound of Stephen listening, conducting research, on pages 35 to 46:

Mm,  
No?  
Oh right  
Yeah.

What's this one?

Yeah

Yeah

Is that cattle truck there?

Got big foot that one

Oh yeah brahman

Right

You used to make things with that, clay?

You used to make em?

Oh right

Yeah

This is the sound of research, communicated via a general email to staff in a faculty of an Australian university:

As a starting point for working out the future of the Strengths, Centres, Programs and Networks I would now like your suggestions in two categories:

1. Areas where we could make a defensible claim, right now, that 'In the area of XXXX, the best research in the country is being conducted at (name of university)'. Can you also please send me the names of the key (name of university) researchers working in this area.
2. Areas that are emerging and where you think that, in three years' time, we could make a defensible claim that 'In the area of XXXX, the best research in the country is being conducted at (name of university)'. Can you also please send the names of the key (name of university) researchers in this area, and your suggestions about what we would need to do in the next three years in order to make us the best in Australia?<sup>3</sup>

### *Teaching*

Paddy Roe on teaching:

That's why we can't teach young people this time  
we put lotta things away from these fellas because  
today too much drink in the road  
no good for young people they can't use-im right way<sup>4</sup>

and later...

If we only just  
teach  
just tell-im stories  
stories  
you know just tell-im stories  
just tell-im stories  
if we tell-im stories but they won't work for-im

and later...

They like to see it they like to see it move,  
but er sometime they tell us  
'Why don't you people make it move?' you know so we can see  
'Yes, but er our old people didn't teach us how to move  
these things so we can't move-em (Laugh) we can only tell  
you story (Laugh)

And this is the description of teaching to be that was circulated at an Australian university in 2014. It was concerned with approaches to teaching and included the following:

It has been agreed that a university KPI be developed that measures the university's adoption of [name of program]. This will require:

- i. Agreement on the conditions under which a subject/course is certified as '[name of program] compliant' (see Appendix A for draft)
- ii. Establishment of a system of peer review of compliance

and under 'Supporting Students':

Students (will be) given a 'flipped task' to Google themselves before arrival, and in session discuss the pros and cons of their online identity.

Professional Identity Photo Booths (will) provide opportunities for students to be photographed in professional themed costumes as well as corporate attire for future use in (their) online profile development<sup>5</sup>

To gloss and simplify the differences we could say Stephen's style of research in the quoted instance was based upon listening and the university's is based upon competition, being the 'best of the best'. In terms of teaching, Paddy Roe suggests that the student must be ready, that not everyone or everything should be taught and that important stories, important knowledges should be kept from those who aren't ready for them. He also seems to be saying that what we teach is limited by what we were taught and that there is a connection between those ancestors who made the world, 'moved things' and the stories we tell now. In its current shape teaching in university bears no relationship to the Indigenous forces that made our world. The limits to knowing university knowledge are shaped by financial issues and as teachers where flexibility of delivery trumps content, we are often teaching what we have not been taught, including, I assume in the future, how to dress our students in 'corporate attire'.

But even this short comparison drains something away from what was happening when Stephen listened and Paddy Roe spoke. We've lost the country itself and we've lost the context and the power of the multiple politics happening in those moments they are together. So I am not suggesting we should simply make a model of research and teaching whereby we would list the characteristics of ideal research and learning situations that would include Listening, Student Readiness and Teachers teaching only what they have been taught or have the right to know (although that could be a step in a good direction). For if we shape one situation, even one as attuned to both the poetics and politics of its moment as *Reading the Country* is, into a model that can be applied anywhere, anytime and is enforced by an institution and measured, then the specificity of that practice is drained of its vitality, its infectiousness and its ineffability. That I think would be a critical abuse of *Reading the Country*. And using other people's work is something that needs to be done well, as in with respect,

because Paddy Roe is not here to be asked ‘Can I use your words over here?’ Stephen is here but it isn’t only Stephen’s words I want to use—it is both of them, together. And this brings us to a confrontation with the ethics of the recorded word, translated onto the page and circulated to decontextualised others. As Ross Gibson (and others) wrote a very long time ago but neatly emphasised via Ong in *South by South West*, the act of translating local knowledge to transportable readable documents was one of the conditions of possibility that allowed colonisation.<sup>6</sup> *Reading the Country* was created in a particular shape to precisely challenge that kind of colonial transformation of orally imparted knowledge. It’s very hard to turn Paddy Roe’s words into the language of military coordinates, of places, distances and boundaries. And I think (although I am not certain) that writing up Paddy Roe’s words in their heard rhythm so we take in his laughter and the gaps between words that emerge out of Stephen’s style of listening and then using all of that affecting exchange to reconfigure ordinary university talk would help me. It would help me grow the ‘small’ university. It might also make a little path between the colonising university (colonised and colonising by capital and ‘management’ of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges) and what Paddy Roe and Stephen say and do. The first path is poetry of a sort, a simple verbal experiment:

### ***The Professional Identity Booth***

Professional Identity Photo Booths  
 (will) provide  
 opportunities for students to be photographed  
 in professional themed costumes as well as corporate attire  
 for future use in (their) online profile development  
 Mm,  
 No?  
 Oh right  
 Yeah.  
 What’s this one?  
 Yeah  
 Yeah  
 Right



Can you also please  
send the names  
of the key (name of university) researchers in this area  
and your suggestions about  
what we would need to do  
in the next three years  
in order to make us the best in Australia?

Mm,

No?

Oh right

Yeah.

What's this one?

Yeah

Yeah

Right

As Paddy Roe says:

our old people didn't teach us how to move these things  
so we can't move-em (Laugh) we can only tell you story  
(Laugh)

### **Only stories**

That extracted phrase of Paddy Roe's keeps me thinking: 'our old people didn't teach us how to move these things so we can't move-em (Laugh) we can only tell you story (Laugh)'.

Moving his words through the claims that the university will help students by assisting them in the performance of 'professionalism' without reflecting on the formation of those trappings of corporate life and efforts to pick out only the 'best' of researchers without considering their context sets up a resonance with how we, me, all of us who have moved through the university system were taught to 'move' things. If I have understood the context correctly Paddy Roe is talking about the literal making of the land, the creative power of those early ancestors and how that power was not passed on but the stories were. But those stories still carry some current that will change things in unexpected ways. In the putting on of professional costumes and picking and personalising 'the best' researchers there is no preceding act of vast creation. These 'stories' of the university are denuded of any complex time and work like bullets, only one trajectory imagined: forward,

into and onto bodies. So asking over and over again, ‘what are these stories’ lets us potentially see that they don’t necessarily belong to the acts of teaching and research. The stories of being the best, of dressing up as professionals, do not come from a complex time of creation. They are concrete actions denying the moving creativity of research and teaching. Paddy Roe’s technique of discernment could be best summed up as: What’s this one? So if we can see with Paddy Roe’s help that these stories don’t last, don’t belong, what stories do? Here is another story.

### Following and reproducing out west

Here’s a story about driving in a car. It’s a Lexus actually. I think of it as Pru’s car because she loves driving. She will drive places when everyone else in the city has given up and decided they can only get there by bus or walking.<sup>7</sup> It has seat warmers. But today Stephen is driving, is driving me in fact. And we are not, as the Lexus might suggest, anywhere near Broome or up north although we are headed west. We are going out to meet up with, talk with, the Western Sydney University FictoLab at Parramatta. They are, we are, *contertulios*.<sup>8</sup> That is, we are participants in a *tertulia* inspired event. What is a *tertulia*? Wikipedia will tell you it is:

rather similar to a salon, but a typical *tertulia* in recent centuries has been a regularly scheduled event in a public place such as a bar, although some *tertulias* are held in more private spaces, such as someone’s living room. Participants, known as *contertulios*, may share their recent creations such as poetry, short stories, other writings, and even artwork or songs.<sup>9</sup>

The UWS postgraduates have created a different form whereby they invite different fictocritical guests to join them after their fictocritical workshops to have a chat and a tea and/or drink. Today it will be a drink as we are meeting at a pub, the Albion. Stephen is worried. His son Joe and partner Nana are having a baby and Nana (the mother to be) has gone into hospital with complications in Denmark where they live. Everyone is waiting for news. It will be Stephen’s first grandchild.

We move with the flow of traffic and so start out fastish and then slow to the stopping start pattern of the choked up M4 motorway. Although we were invited to the University of Western Sydney only a few weeks ago, it has now become the Western Sydney University, reborn via a multimillion-dollar design team to become a little bit different, a little bit the same as before. I like it. As an alumnus I like that we might now reply to the query, 'So where did you go to uni?' with 'Western Sydney'. In that ordinary, mild way, we ex-students will lay claim to a whole history of class, development, neglect, politics, innovation, a history of suburban sprawl and the pulse of an Australia figured upon diversity, that is *western* Sydney.

We are already on this country of 'Western Sydney' but neither in it or of it. We are driving through the suburbs although we wouldn't really know. We are driving along motorways or highways and only occasionally see homes where people live or open land that might suggest where people once lived. Stephen writes about two ways of producing culture in *Reading the Country*: 'Either one can "reproduce" or one can "follow". The theoretical space which takes as its conditions of operation the constants of gravity and metrics reproduces the same objects continually, mechanically, professionally.'<sup>10</sup> Stephen is using a bit from Deleuze and Guattari that juxtaposes the mechanicalness of reproduction against the positive suggestion of what might arise from stepping off the bank and jumping into the flow that following suggests. Following, means we don't keep reproducing the same object.

In our car we are surely following. Following the other cars, following the strictly controlled major motorway when we are on that. And in doing so we are reproducing ourselves each kilometre passed, as the same cultural object: commuter, user of cars, human wiping our tyres over earth or animal, anything that we are not protected from or in control of. In this way our 'following' is not what Deleuze and Guattari meant; in sticking to the path made by others in watching the houses flow by we are not really 'following' at all merely reproducing one kilometre after another of what is already there.

But in another sense we *are* following. We don't know what this fictocritical group might have done today; in saying yes to this invitation we are also throwing ourselves into a flow

that will take us somewhere we have never been physically or intellectually. An open invitation is a current to be swept into, to join with. In *Reading the Country* Stephen quickly leaps from Deleuze and Guattari to examples from Indigenous life and Paddy Roe including examples of what it means to track. Through 'tracking up' the tracker comes to know place and person. To walk exactly in their footsteps means that there is an imitation — not a reproduction — of the whole movement of their bodies.

In following the connective maps of the UWS mob who are becoming the Western Sydney mob I am not so precise. But I do want to imitate their model. By putting my body in the spaces and traces left by theirs I too could create an eddy and flow for others to follow. But here we have to think about time and context and the knowledge that what they are doing is connected to something that others have done, other academics, other thinkers and other writers who in their teaching and in their research created connections, pointed out flows that others could follow. In universities it was and sometimes still is, called a 'research culture', but it can also be a salon, a reading group, a writing group or a drink with curious folk. In a very different way to what is at stake for Paddy Roe in the appropriate people knowing how to know his land, these currents created by these small groups that we jump into are also vulnerable places. Vulnerable to being mined out via the requirement to reproduce accounts of why we met, whether or not we had spent money and what we might produce as 'outcomes' in the future. To limit the demand of that audit fracking the most energetic of these gatherings are simply para-institutional now. Alongside the university but not of it. Using the university to initiate a dialogue but letting whoever will step into the following of where this idea or that group might go. These gatherings are more open to diverse communities and less likely to be as they once would have been, an assumed part of a university department culture. Like some highly affective and infectious being these little groups come and go, grow and die and are reborn, somewhere else, sometimes looking very different.

I like the idea of affective imitation Stephen evokes through his description of one of us putting our feet exactly in the

imprint of another. Yes, it is an imitation of the stance of the body of that individual as we model the pad of our foot to exactly that angle and yes it is a learning to walk like another with others. But it also means one singular path is made over land. One path unable to be shared by too many others. One person has earned the right to make that path in that way and to initiate an imitative following. This idea of strengthening the particularity, the unpredictable currents and eddies of one body when applied to a 'body' of ideas interests me. In following the Western Sydney Ficto Mob out here, out to the Albion in Parramatta, I am accentuating the effects of their intellectual marks while adding my own that may eventually be felt by another. These are the lines of fight for the kind of thinking that travels with the past and future and discerns in the present what belongs to the generative possibilities of this moment.

We arrive at our destination. We know we are there before we are actually there because the chosen voice of Google Maps tells us so. Stephen checks his phone and discovers that in that forty-five-minute, all-road-bitumen and car-all-the-way space speckled with conversation and revelation, gossip and silence he has become a grandfather. There is delight. All the way over there to all the way here has come status-changing news. Is the birth of a baby reproduction, or following? Perhaps a little of both.

We go into the Albion. The Albion is kind of famous and has a past. In 2013 shots were fired into the car park and the hotel itself in the early morning when the pub was still populated by drinkers. As the policeman said at the time: 'By the Grace of God no-one was injured.' This evocation of divine forces seemed apt given the description that the pub was a 'known hangout of the Hell's Angels outlaw motorcycle gang'. The incident was to be investigated with the help of Operation Apollo targeting 'gun and organized crime'.<sup>11</sup> In another incident in 2012, police had been pushed, punched and spat upon in an incident also involving the Hell's Angels.<sup>12</sup> This pub has been in place since 1860 and accounts of bad behaviour at the Albion go way back. In 1928, for example, a constable told two men who were drunk and wanted to fight each other to 'go home'. They don't and get arrested and there is a court case where one of the men denied he ever wanted to fight in an exchange that was reported verbatim:

'Fight's the thing I never look for.'  
'You're one of the Rydalmere Burkes aren't you?'  
'I am.'  
'And you don't know how to fight?'  
'No.'

But the court ruled: 'The constable was perfectly right in trying to send these men home and in issuing a summons when they persisted in their riotous conduct.'<sup>13</sup> Where do academics fit with outlaws and angels? A bit of both? In meeting at the Albion are we following older histories of trouble and troublemaking?

The Albion opens wide, inviting us into its beer garden and social spaces marked by cosy corners, veranda style pavilions and long tables reserved for trivia. And it follows a temporal logic geared towards early morning, opening until 4:00 am. Maybe this is why Operation Apollo had some success here. Apollo who moved the sun across the sky. The old god of the late night opener? This is a good place to think with. It has curved seating around tables and it spreads out for serious drinkers and then curls in for those of us wanting group conversation. We follow the prompts. We toast Stephen becoming Lulu, although not exactly Lulu. Paddy Roe's Lulu is, as I understand it, a precise connection, naming lawful relations. Our toast is an affectionate muddle of wonder, sentiment, hazy memories of Grannies and Grandpas and thoughts about how to name aging. The toast is an enactment between the Albion and us and an idea of what we might be and what Stephen may become. Re-reading is now also re-enacting 'family'. We use sensations and material resources from multiple times to trouble an assumption of what a university now is and who we are as higher education affiliated folk met and made by the Albion. And Paddy Roe.

In our particular expression of what we wished to do, in the enactment of something both traditional and new, we have territorialised the Albion, the spaces between here and the city, those between western Sydney and eastern Sydney and between loosely formulated disciplines. In our expression of being there we were not defensive but talkative. We were neither the best of the best nor easily recognised in our de rigueur professional costumes. In the right light we might have

been mistaken for a trivia team or an after work party, which I think would have suited us fine. We were connected to rather than distinct from our place, using the old pub, each other, the tradition of meeting and talking, to ‘follow the flux of matter that keeps one alive’.<sup>14</sup> To have been given some clues on how to find that conditional and contingent liveliness in the university, in this time, across space, right now and right then is a legacy of *Reading the Country*. Or maybe more than a legacy—it’s a kind of law about how to survive. Listen. Repeat stories. Follow the flux of matter.

### Notes

- 1 Anne Poelina, presentation to the Re-reading the Country Festival, December 2016.
- 2 Philip Morrissey, presentation to the Re-reading the Country Festival, December 2016.
- 3 Although this was a specific email at a specific institution it is typical rather than particular. It is perhaps cruder than some institutional approaches but possibly smoother than others. It is the underlying order of competition and marking shared by both universities and corporations that I am drawing attention to here.
- 4 Krim Bentrerrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 88.
- 5 Again, although is a very specific example from a specific institution it is its typicality rather than specificity I am highlighting here. Its language of ‘flipped learning’ and unquestioning ‘professionalism’ is a very usual focus in many institutions.
- 6 Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, p. 4.
- 7 I refer here to Dr Prudence Black, author of *The Flight Attendant’s Shoe* (New South, Sydney, 2011), also Stephen Muecke’s partner and co-owner of the Lexus.
- 8 With many thanks to Hermann Ruiz for organising this event and our fellow thinkers and readers, including Alex Coleman, Jasbeer Mamalipurath, Tsvetelina Hristova and Christiane Küling.
- 9 ‘Tertulia’, *Wikipedia*, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertulia>>.
- 10 Bentrerrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 248.
- 11 Di Bartok, ‘Shots Fired into Albion Hotel’, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 February 2013 pp. 1-3, <<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/parramatta/shots-fired-into-the-albion-hotel-at-245am-believed-to-be-gang-related/news-story/63f23b4141f113df34905ff9ebf34960>>.
- 12 ‘Four Bikies Charged over Parramatta Brawl and Shooting’, *The Sun, Parramatta and Holroyd*, 17 July 2012, <http://www.parramattasun.com.au/story/249313/four-bikies-charged-over-parramatta-brawl-and-shooting>
- 13 *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, Thursday 7 February 1928, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article104717065>.
- 14 Bentrerrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 246.

# A Casual Reading of the Corporate University

Terrence Twomey

Thirty years ago, *Reading the Country* demonstrated how connections to place could be articulated and interpreted differently.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it gave a voice to perspectives that were largely silent in mainstream academic discussions. This essay provides a personal account of the corporate university as a place of employment for casual academics, who have become the silent and invisible majority within academic institutions. We have become a second-tier class of academics whose place within universities is increasingly precarious, ambivalent and ambiguous.

Since *Reading the Country* was published in 1984, universities worldwide have adopted a corporate model based on neoliberal principles. A consequence of this is the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce. In the last twenty years the number of casual or sessional academics in the Australian higher education sector has risen dramatically, with 50 to 80 per cent of the teaching load now being carried by casual employees.<sup>2</sup> Sessional tutors are hired semester to semester on short-term contracts that are flexible in terms of duties and duration. As such, we 'are the ultimate form of contingent labour'.<sup>3</sup> The problems associated with this practice have been qualitatively and quantitatively documented.<sup>4</sup> In support of this research my chapter offers a personal perspective on some of the particular difficulties we experience as casual employees in a corporate place.

Lack of job security is a reality that all casual academics must deal with. As each semester comes to an end the nervous wait begins. Despite having worked as a casual in higher education for over ten years there is never a guarantee that I



will be offered a contract for the upcoming semester. For many casuals, teaching at university is their primary, or only, source of income. This makes sessional employment particularly precarious and stressful for many academics who rely on this income. Unfortunately, the best way to ensure getting work each semester is to be complicit. Over the years I have learned that it is best not to speak out or complain about the difficulties casual staff encounter. Do not, for example, complain about the lack of appropriate space, absence of benefits afforded full time staff or having to answer hundreds of emails without remuneration, because this increases the chances your future applications will be overlooked. It also helps if you can appease the friendly benefactors that coordinate subjects and allocate work. This usually involves going above and beyond what is expected; for example, helping develop the curriculum or coordinate the tutorial program gratis will improve your chances of getting future work.

Compounding this problem are the facts that casualisation is increasing and being a casual employee makes seeking fulltime employment more difficult. Tenured and full-time employees who retire are not always replaced, which introduces more casuals into the teaching pool. More casuals and fewer permanent positions on offer mean the market for jobs in academia is highly competitive. In my experience, the main criterion being considered in job applications is the number of publications you have. You may have ten years teaching experience, but if you don't have ten peer-reviewed publications your application is not likely to make it past first base. The problem with this is that it is very difficult to produce quality research or theoretical works while working as a casual academic. During the semester, teaching and administrative duties inhibit us from doing any serious writing or research. Between semesters casuals lack the resources, funding and time that tenured staff have to produce academic research papers. In my case, despite potentially fruitful research projects that I could pursue, the motivation to write papers has waned after many years in the system without any apparent prospects for fulltime employment.

Many of my postgraduate colleagues face a related problem when trying to finish their masters or doctoral theses.

The catch-22 here is that you cannot finish a thesis effectively while tutoring, but many postgraduates cannot afford to give up the income tutoring provides. While universities do have processes in place to avoid this situation, many postgrads delay finishing their thesis so they can maintain their income. Fortunately postgraduates have access to resources and support that can help minimise these conflicting interests. However, we itinerant workers who have completed post-graduate study don't have the same access to resources, such as the space, technologies and support services available to current students.

The flexibility and economic incentives of a predominantly casual teaching workforce are beneficial to corporate universities in several ways because they don't have to provide sessional employees with the entitlements afforded tenured and part-time staff. For example, sessional employees receive no leave loading, no penalty rates, no sick pay, no maternity or paternity leave, and they are on a reduced superannuation rate. Also, unfair dismissal laws and protections do not apply, as all sessional staff are effectively dismissed each semester. These conditions may be acceptable for employees who are only dependent on casual teaching for a short term. However, many academics like myself have been employed in a casual capacity at the same institution for more than five years. Withholding these benefits and protections from people who are effectively long-term employees is perhaps the greatest injustice sessional staff must contend with.

Casual academics also rely heavily on contacts with subject coordinators to ensure ongoing work. If the coordinator changes, casuals may lose work, as subject coordinators tend to stick to their preferred cohort of sessional tutors. There is no executive monitoring of the hiring process, as this responsibility lies with department heads and managers who tend to trust the judgment of subject coordinators. In some cases, casual academics are hired as subject coordinators, so we often rely on sessional academics themselves to administer sessional contracts. As Ryan et al. have pointed out, 'we have a professional, sophisticated knowledge based industry that is export-intensive, yet it relies on employment practices for casual academics that would be unacceptable in most other

sectors of the economy, including the fast food industry',<sup>5</sup> In many respects this issue is the elephant in the room. This obvious and unacceptable situation is simply never discussed or acknowledged by the institutions that are reaping great rewards by exploiting workers in this manner.

There is an implicit expectation that casual tutors conduct unpaid duties that are directly related to their role. Departmental administrators and subject coordinators would deny this most strenuously. However, the manner in which contracts are established and implemented does not cover everything a tutor must do to teach effectively. Preparation time, reading materials, administrative obligations and attending lectures are all duties that often extend beyond what is written up in short-term contracts. In my own experience, responding to emails is a duty that we are not adequately paid for. Over the last ten years more and more time has been dedicated to answering work-related emails, a process we might call 'email creep'. In the past, if students wished to contact their tutor this had to be done during the tutorial or during the tutor's consultation hour. Today students email their tutors at any time on any day. Tutors are paid for one hour per week to be available for consultations, but this is not sufficient to cover the time spent responding to and sending emails. The ten or eleven hours per semester that tutors are paid to be available for student consultations are always used up, in particular when students need to discuss assessment and plan essays. I always spend more time in student consultations than we get paid for. The alternative would be to stop seeing students once the payment threshold has been reached, which of course would be unfair and unacceptable from a teaching perspective. The point here is that all the pay allotted for consultation is used up in consultations. However, tutors also have to answer hundreds of work-related emails during the semester. While exact figures on this are not available, it is not unreasonable to think that tutors would spend five to ten hours each semester responding to emails from students and colleagues; in my experience this is a conservative estimate.

On reading these reflections it would seem reasonable to ask, why do it? Why do unpaid work? Why work as a sessional teacher at all? As mentioned above, people do unpaid work

and accept poor conditions because there is no other option. If you want to obtain work in the upcoming round of offers it is important that you do not complain about these conditions. However, this is not the main reason most tutors go the extra yard for students and subject coordinators. Tutors in general have a real concern for and dedication to high standards of teaching and to their students. We try to maintain a degree of professionalism and quality teaching despite the deteriorating conditions that make this more difficult each year, as class numbers increase and resources and remuneration decrease. With non-academic administrators making the decisions about how academic services will be delivered, it is unlikely that the situation for casual teachers or students in tertiary education will improve anytime in the immediate future.

Currently the situation is such that casual academics can do little to improve their lot. The tenured and full time staff that sessional staff rely on for work have little authority to advocate for them. Unfortunately, the jobs of subject coordinators are also precarious in the corporate university. Full time staff members are under pressure not to exceed departmental budgets, so paying tutors properly is not something they can push for. They have no authority over decisions like numbers of students in tutorials, how budgets are allocated, or what work tutors should be paid for.

While it does what it can, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is very limited in its capacity to improve the situation for sessional staff. For example, although the union has helped negotiate the establishment in some universities of positions that would offer casuals more job security, such as Teaching Specialist (Periodic), there is no obligation from the various schools and departments within universities to offer anyone these positions. In most respects, these are nominal not real positions. The union also relies on the solidarity of casual staff to take action against the unfair work conditions they face, but this is not a realistic option because casual academics are a disparate group. Some casuals are postgrads who probably don't see themselves as tutoring for more than a year or two, so they are not motivated to seek any long-term gains for sessional staff. Others may be financially secure retired former staff members who have no strong motivation

to improve the conditions of all casuals. There are also 'long-term' postgraduates who are unable to complete their masters or doctorate degrees as they must take on as much sessional teaching as they can. This group is very dependent on the work and has no desire to lose opportunities through industrial action. Some may be 'outsiders' from different institutions, with no intention to rock the boat in a new work environment. Then there are 'long-term' sessional staff like me, who are keen for change to happen but don't want to make waves and so try to avoid strong action that may exclude them from future opportunities. For action to be effective all casual staff need to be unified, and this is not likely to happen. To make matters even more difficult the corporate university is very much a segmented workplace in which it has become virtually impossible for the different parts to work effectively together. We are all constrained in our capacity to take action and to teach effectively in the corporate environment.

It is very disconcerting to be a casual academic. We have highly specialised skills, yet work under conditions that would be unacceptable in any other industry. Despite this, I enjoy being a tutor. Teaching the brightest young students from around the world and helping them develop is very rewarding. I have also made some great friendships with tenured staff who support me and other tutors in my situation. I could of course just give up on academia and do something else, but I have worked towards an academic career for over ten years now and don't want to let go of that aspiration. The message I get from the corporate university is: 'if you want to be an academic, these are the conditions you must accept, and if you don't like it you can go off and do something else'. The problem with this, though, is that if others and I do give up our academic aspirations and get off the merry-go-round of sessional employment, then there simply won't be enough quality tutors to meet the demand each semester. Unfortunately, in the long run this system can only result in poorer teaching standards for the students and damaged reputations for academic institutions. There will be no winners, other than the executive staff who have implemented this system and whose only concern seems to be profits and inflating their own salaries. The corporate university is a curious place in that

it has come to value competitive marketplace strategies and incentives over their core business of providing high quality teaching services.

### Notes

- 1 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984.
- 2 Suzanne Ryan, John Burgess, Julia Connell and Egbert Groen, 'Casual Academic Staff in an Australian University: Marginalised and Excluded', *Tertiary Education and Management*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2013, pp. 161-75.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 4 Tony Brown, James Goodman and Keiko Yasukawa, 'Academic Casualization in Australia: Class Divisions in the University', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2010, pp. 169-82; Megan Kimber and Lisa C. Ehrich, 'Are Australia's Universities in Deficit? A Tale of Generic Managers, Audit Culture and Casualization', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2015, pp. 83-97; Christopher J. Klopper and Bianca M. Power, 'The Casual Approach to Teacher Education: What Effect does Casulisation have for Australian University Teaching?', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2014, pp. 101-14; Ryan, et al.
- 5 Ryan, et al., p. 172.

# On Education Unbound from its Knowledge

A.J. Bartlett

*...no-one ever made me say St Petersburg*

Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup>

*...white people go to school where they teach you how to be thick*

The Clash<sup>2</sup>

*I have always had 'school sickness'. I cannot cross the threshold of a teaching institution without physical symptoms ... of discomfort and anxiety. And yet it's true, I have never left school in general. I must suffer also from 'school sickness'.*

Jacques Derrida<sup>3</sup>

## Preface

For the conference to mark the thirtieth anniversary of *Reading the Country*, I was asked to speak on the question of education. My argument, following the work of Alain Badiou, is that the only form of real change is the production of some new truth in and for a given world. Such work is that of a subject, and the construction of a subject is the force of any education. Truths are antagonistic to and subtractive of knowledge; subjects are not reducible to individuals; and education is thus irreducible to known knowledge, opinion and the entire logic of interest. There is not and never has been any truth in the state other than as immanent exception to it. Education aims at what is universal, at what is for all. 'What is for all' presumes that a regime predicated on the flux of exploitation, competition and interest must truly change. If education is not about truth, it is about nothing

but repetition — change (or ‘modernisation’), such that there is no change at all. Repetition is movement’s image. This version of real change, naturally antagonistic to the state, is also antagonistic to what is often supposed to be in opposition to it: in this case what Stephen Muecke presents in his work as the theory of nomadology.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is possible to say that this theory of *nomadology*, despite its intent but intrinsic to its composition, and in concert with various modes of critique, has effected in the contemporary neoliberal state the means of its discourse; that, partially via the school and the academy as means of transmission, and via the cultural formations informed by these and without forgetting the knowledge effects of the predations of capital as lived experience, it has been inculcated as such. The basis of this conflation, I suggest, is a shared predicate in the disavowal of truths and subjects, or equality and the means of organisation it entails. For Muecke’s Deleuze-inflected propositions, *no such subjects exist*; for the state, no such subjects must come to exist. When I speak of nomadology here, however, I speak only of the theory; I have nothing to say about Muecke’s specific application or realisation of it. What I aim at, polemically, beyond the state of the educational situation, is education as real change, absolutely without inscription in the state, and as such universal: education for all such that it is ‘what a people are capable of’ and not ‘what can be done to a people’; an immanent universality, invariant. In the way of the construction of such a thought it is perhaps truly ‘nomadic’, precisely insofar as no *a priori* conceit as to knowing the limits of knowledge, the horizons of being or of subjective capacity directs the traverse, which is to say, the orientation of all to what is *real* for it.

### Constructing corruption anew

Plato’s contention in the *Laws* continues to resonate: ‘if at any time education becomes corrupt, but can be put right again, this is a lifelong task which everyone should undertake to the limit of his strength’.<sup>5</sup> For Plato, sophistry named this corruption, consisting in the nexus of exchange between knowledge and money, the form of the state and the youth. What the sophists taught, for money — very good money in some cases — was the knowledge of the state: better and worse, success



and failure, technique. Sophistry sells whatever works to this end, without discrimination as to its good—selling whatever sells—teaching the youth that the interests of the state are in its interest. Knowledge and the state are synonymous, implicative. Socrates names the procedure for not knowing this knowledge.

Today, more completely than at any other time, education is reduced to being the training ground for good state subjects: as so many policy and curriculum documents, no less than course descriptions, excitedly attest. The rhetoric of employability, job readiness, adaptation, flexibility, resilience and so on—all of which see the subject in no other terms than that of ‘human resources’—that great concept of Stalin no less—permeates and determines the educational discourse of the so-called West and those determined to follow its ‘lead’. The educational systems of the latter—ex-Soviet as much as postcolonial—have been humanitarily-intervened-on in the name of the good of education. Such a good requires, the World Bank tells us:

flexible and nimble institutions and policy frameworks that can adapt to rapid change, and a creative and entrepreneurial private sector that can exploit new opportunities that emerge from that rapid change. Thus creating a society of skilled, flexible and creative people, with opportunities for quality education and life-long learning available to all, and a flexible and appropriate mix of public and private funding.<sup>6</sup>

This is the good(s) the Western nomad trades on in its interest, repeated in policy documents and faculties of education everywhere without remorse. As Marx noted: ‘Whenever it comes across evil it attributes it to its own absence, for, if it is the only good, then it alone can create the good.’<sup>7</sup>

The nineteenth-century dreams of figures like J.K. Shuttleworth—tasked with getting state education off the ground in the United Kingdom—for an education that ‘promot[es] the diffusion of that knowledge among the working classes which tends beyond anything else to promote the security of property, an appreciation of free trade and the

maintenance of public order’ are in our age decidedly real.<sup>8</sup> In his excellent but subtle book, *Rethinking the School*, Ian Hunter celebrates Shuttleworth as bringing to his task ‘a non-ideological pragmatism’.<sup>9</sup>

Shuttleworth’s work as chief pedagogue and saviour of the poor had already caught Marx’s attention. Among the pointed critiques, and with a sharper eye for irony than Hunter perhaps, he situated the type: the pedagogue takes his place among, and in the service of, the various social reformers — ‘economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the conditions of the working class, organisers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, hole and corner reformers of every imaginable kind’.<sup>10</sup> Each, by these very ‘socialist’ means (we’d say democratic today), seeks only to secure and conserve the continuation of the rule of capital.

Today, UNESCO documents re-present this same non-ideological, mobile pragmatism in assigning the moniker Low Development Capacity to countries long ravaged by colonialism and capitalism concurrently. UNESCO obscures this history in its telling, lest it subtract, ironically, from the historical narrative of incapacity. This assignation means in effect that these countries qualify for (are now ‘ripe for’) educational intervention: the model education being that which makes their country capitalism-ready, in the same way students today as a priority are to be rendered job-ready.

A single example of a global complicity:

We have devised the UNESCO Capacity Development for Education for All program (CapEFA) for this purpose, pooling funding from different donors to help countries improve the effectiveness of their educational systems. One example of the implementation of this scheme was Côte d’Ivoire, where the challenges included insufficient links between the labor market and the training availability, outdated curricula, and lack of quality data.<sup>11</sup>

The problem today is *not* that neoliberalism is trying to take over education, as so many critical pedagogues, uptight *arche-liberals* and nineteenth-century-Cardinal-Newman-*imitating*

gentlefolk idealists think: the problem today is that *education is neoliberal*. Neoliberalism is the contemporary form of the state. It is the knowledge of capital. It provides the norm by which reality is constructed, exactly what the cronies of the Mount Pelerin Society set out for it to be some seventy years ago and which they have achieved: ‘a thoroughgoing re-education effort for *all parties* to alter the tenor and meaning of political life: nothing more, nothing less’. Shuttleworth’s dream of free trade for all in public schools is now the every-day knowledge of the school. As Naomi Klein among others points out, Chile après coup is the contemporary model for living this old dream.<sup>12</sup>

The globalised pedagogy of Mount Pelerin squares with the key idea that animates Emile Durkheim’s brilliant study of the history of the school in France: ‘that the forms and methods of didactic organization depend on the way in which, in a determined age, the general organization of knowledge is conceived, and above all on how the opening of knowledge towards thought itself is seen ...’<sup>13</sup>

Hence in neoliberalism, neoliberalist pedagogies are embraced and deliriously reconciled as the ‘knowledge economy’: not simply knowledge for sale or reduced like all else to the commodity form, but knowledge as economy — economy, the law of the state qua household as all knowing and thus itself unknowable, which, as Agamben shows us, means we are under the administration of angels.<sup>14</sup> What the ‘better angels of our nature’ occlude, which is their one and only true job, is the opening to thought of this unknowable guarded by some God or other. In the case I am tracking here, as Plato demanded as the work of us all, what the current Angels of our flexible and flux-able nature occlude is the thought of education itself.

This observation of Durkheim also necessarily includes the contemporary critiques of *this* form of ‘state education’ including those mentioned — critical pedagogues, liberals and gentlefolk idealists — but not only them; and thus a further problem remains over for thinking education against the all-change market sophistry of today. I can only indicate the problem here: the great bulk of this critique, emerging out of the 1970s and 1980s — critiques of curriculum, institutional arrangements, the epistemological, psychological and political

context and so on and lately, among the deluded enthusiasts of the techno-giscenti, who provide the edifying site of accusations as to the almost terroristic lack of educational innovation or ‘disruption’—shares with the ‘knowledge economy’ an epistemological predicate: ostensibly that the subjective capacity to know is bound at the limit by some conception of the unknowable or inaccessible or ineffable or unsayable or indeterminate.

### **Metaphysics, nomads, a queer sort of education**

Ostensibly, this lately Kantian-inspired-critique-become-commonplace is a theology. In ancient times to traverse the unsayable was an impiety that was punishable by death. Socrates went down for just this; treating with the irrationality of diagonals and the capacity of slaves for truth (and mentioning where the money came from), and yet it seems to be the ‘unsayable’ seems to be the one stake our contemporary critics of all varieties, all anti-Platonists, won’t wager!

Death as implacable horizon or the hermeneutic imperative of finitude—or in other terms, ‘giving in’ to our animal being or even the pieties of ‘critique’—remains the horizon of so much contemporary discourse, saturating not so much thought itself (which always reserves the right to the infinite), but the representation of it in a form of knowledge which, despite or because of its finitist protestations concerning limits (the ineffable, unsayable, veiled, neumenon), is guilty of the highest conceit: of knowing, thereby, what can and cannot be known as knowledge. It’s a totalising regime masquerading as the height of liberalist freedom—whose metaphysical name is potential. Of course liberalism has always been a masquerade, as Dominico Losurdo sets out for us in a most telling way. Its classical feature is to tell itself what it is not. Positive Psychology performs the same fiction anew, in university departments the world over.

Today the ‘market’, already a metaphor, a mark of the displacement of the real, is for us that master signifier which knows precisely what we do not and cannot know—this being the didactic of Mt Pelerin—and thus being good Kantian subjects, what *must* not be known. Hence as the totalising condition of all known knowledge the market cannot be

thought; it marks the space of the ineffable limit for creatures like us and, just like the mind of God, we must only know it as our ‘manifest destiny’ and not presume to think it. Which is to say, to think what is true of it—exploitation, division in two examples—which is also to say, to think what-it-is-not *for all*. That way lay the camps, so goes the current pedagogicisation.

In the theoretical perspective Stephen Muecke deploys in *Reading the Country*, ostensibly and critically to think that which has not been thought before and, as such, that which might educate us anew, and deployed moreover to provide him a discourse in which to transmit this ‘new’ thought drawn from a specific encounter, he seems unfortunately to affirm this finitist predicate as constructive of this nomadology: a ‘theory that recognises its limits, knowing that its object, always smarter than any subject, remains partially impenetrable’.<sup>15</sup> (One may wonder what work ‘partially’ is meant to do here.)

He relies, as do Deleuze and Guattari, on this Kantian dogmatic to moreover claim that any notion of ‘common purpose’ is untenable—being *false* at the limit. Ineffable difference, which means in these terms the *constancy* of deterritorialisation has the day. Difference manifest is difference found. In other words, the empiricism available in Deleuze and Guattari is found on the ground in *Reading the Country*. Nomadology and what we might call the neoliberal sublime coincide at this juncture (this is not a new observation, but circulated already in the early 1970’s when ‘nomadology’ took flight ‘horizontally’ as it were), of *knowing* what must not be known, of, ultimately, and in tune with the times or at least the theoretical times of western theory, committing a *destitution* of the subject. Thus they coincide not just in their horizontal conception of space but also in their metaphysics of the subject.

This destitution is not ‘de-individualisation’ or even the individualisation of communities of difference but de-subjectivisation: the impossibility of some collective, participative formation predicated on an indifference to differences, on some idea irreducible to any specified or determined body and to any determinative and classificatory schema of language. In short, the destitution of a subject predicated on what we are capable of here and now beyond such a reduction to the finitist

categories of ‘bodies and languages’, identities and differences. This subject has been shamed into impossibility by charges of immodesty and impiety: impiety before the market, immodesty before our *a priori* determined limits, which, when we add the vitalist-empiricism, converts this knowledge into what is effectively a bio-logic of subjective incapacity. Thought, the very kernel of the subject, the wager that is its sole predicate is annulled in the knowledge that goes before it of this ‘partial impenetrability’, this living impossibility.

Purposefully vague but ideologically crucial conceptions of change, innovation or disruption predicated in an affective other-worldly vitality provide the very conditions of the constancy of this nomadic regime of knowledge: constant movement or innovation, and so, paradoxically, an anti-statist ‘disruptive’ conceit is its loudest most interminable refrain, its contemporary pedagogical force. The unsayable, ineffable etc., what remains over as a thoroughly un-actualised infinite potential, stands guarantee for the in-terminable multiplicity of appearances or knowledges, movements and ‘disruptions’, which the repetition of deterritorialisation requires. Another way to put this is as the ‘free market in ideas’, where everyone can choose their own ‘truth’ qua identity given precisely that nothing is truly true — nothing ‘solid’. This is the triumph of the simulacra, wherein the economy of immutable difference is life itself — the beings of (non)being. And you cannot opt out.

To distinguish nomadology from capital — both of which ‘commercialise this void’ (of non-being) as the impossibility to truly *decide* — what we need to ask is what holds out against this, what point of indifference, what point of a new orientation? What in the education situation refuses the demand to not demand the impossible as real? Without holding to something un-deterritorialisable, nomadology can only be conceived as a clearing for what already exists and not an inventing of what *can* be: ‘if the people do not have their *own* politics [education], they will enact the politics [education] of *their* enemies: political history abhors a void’.<sup>16</sup> The great sophist of the ineffable multiple, Protagoras, already described this ineffable condition of human-being: ‘It is impossible to judge what is not, or to judge anything other than what one is experiencing, and what one is immediately

experiencing is always true.’ But the catch is that this unactualised multiplicity whose being is movement — manifest as *individual* experience — is the logic of the state itself.

This nomadism as prescribed here is too much and not enough. It is movement sanctioned by the constancy of what is impossible for us, what is impossible to know. What is off limits is that this very bond between the logic of indetermination and the multiplicities of desire be itself cut and thus what is impossible in the moving image of knowledge that organises us pedagogically — we are all *educated* after all — is the truly new: not some *laissez-faire* fantasy, which is to return to the market-divine but the truly new as that-which-is *for all*. A subject is what holds to *this* — that truths are what a collective is capable of — which is (not) impossible. In other words, the state is incapable of truth, but this does not mean, as has long been assumed, that truths are thereby fictions of the state.

An education predicated on a limit or a horizon of the knowable — ‘the pedagogy of the world as it is’<sup>17</sup> — is, as Plato says, a queer sort of education: one that reduces to a mere utility function and, having a use, can be bought and sold depending on the difference currently demanded by the market. Education is currency. It presumes also, ‘conceitedly’ to use Plato’s term of art, that there exists a knowledge, contradictory (as noted, the knowledge of the limit), off limits to thought and so (and clearly problematically for the concept) off limits to education. It knows that to un-know the state is impossible, as *there is* no such knowledge and it is this *unknowability* or this subjective incapacity that is taught. Today education, given over to the nomadic predations of state logic — there is nowhere it cannot go — is the taught knowledge of the lack of education. This is not a paradox but the logic of the systemic necessity to *not* hold fast. ‘The solemn and sanctimonious declaration that we can have no knowledge of this or that always foreshadows some obscure devotion to the Master of the unknowable, the God of the religions or his placeholders.’<sup>18</sup> We might call it the hidden curriculum.

To reiterate: this ‘disastrous theme of our “finitude”’,<sup>19</sup> which licenses deterritorialisation as state form is the default knowledge of established states. It was already that of the great Protagoras, had a Kantian re-emergence — the thing

in itself as critique of classical metaphysics — and received a Heideggerian impetus — the destitution of the subject as adjunct to this limit. We could even put it in Wittgensteinian terms: the limit of my knowledge is the limit of my world. Thus language, knowledge, existence, life and being, bound ineffably, constitute a reflexive a-subjective pedagogical matrix through the Kantianism of critique, the Heideggerian reflex, the ‘linguistic turn’, much of post-structuralism, deconstruction, so called post-modernism and as bio-nomadology, wedded as it is to the eternal flux over the production of the true. The internal oppositions we might productively find in this matrix, and indeed the critical force available there, turn nevertheless on a commitment to a singularly and fatally shared predicate.

Much of this, leaking into and then out of the humanities, finds itself re-presented (and it is this act of re-presentation that is critical) in policy and curriculum documents, in the faculties of education ‘educating the educators’, attesting less to an appropriation than to this shared constructivist predicate which its own critique has never broken down. It comes down to a single presumption: ‘that which is not susceptible to being classified within a knowledge *is not*’. As Durkheim points out, with specific reference to education, to what is true for it, ‘the recurrent and never fully solvable tension between thinking and knowledge is the rule rather than the exception’.<sup>20</sup> In other words the thinking of education needs again to be unbound from its knowledge.

#### **Invariance: singular universal**

To institute a break, let me quote Alain Badiou, from the early 1970s:

Hand over education to those who got tired of antagonism, to all those who, after joining their fate to that of the workers, have since then come back to their prescribed place as intellectuals, and you will make the wish of state functionaries come true by keeping thought for the next two decades within the narrow confines of the usual course of affairs. It will be everyone for him or herself ... This is the surest road towards the worst.<sup>21</sup>



Let us take four episodes in this history of an antagonism, each of which decidedly sets out to avoid the worst: Plato, Saint Paul, Marx and Lacan. The polemical claim is that these four demonstrate the *impossibility* of education as a state form and it is this impossibility which is the basis of education being 'for all'. In other words and contra the nomadological predicate, universality has no relation to the state: the axiomatic for this, shared uniquely by each of my four examples, and in my terms, is that 'anyone has the capacity to not be known by the state'. Such an education manifests its subject; which is to say, and again contra nomadology, the state and the subject are irreducible.

The project of which these episodes are the integral part effectively re-analyses education with regard to its four component parts: *epistemological, pastoral, political, psychological*. The antagonism animated by this, if I may, re-reading of supposedly familiar country, situates, relative to Plato, Saint Paul, Marx and Lacan respectively, the *truth* of knowledge against the linguistic constructivism of state *sophistry*, a praxis of love or faring-well against the criterion and classification by law, 'the real movement which abolishes the present state of things' against the *global and nomadic predations* of bourgeois competition, and the desire of the *subject* against normalising discourses of 'change': '*adaptability*' '*flexibility*' and '*personality*'.

In these four figures we see an education actively *taking place*. We see what it looks like in terms of invention, procedure and transmission: in terms of the break each affirms with established knowledge, the procedures they enact on the basis of this non-knowledge, the thought of this non-knowledge they establish and hold despite the vitality and utility of established knowledge and the new forms or genres of transmission they effect. All are or present as exiled and in some ways 'nomadic' figures relative to the state, but they are also figures of subjective re-composition, which is to say their traverse is also an orientation.

What is true for all is the discipline of the movement: what is nothing is what becomes everything, that is to say that the determined indeterminate is merely the *what is nothing* for the entirety of that situation. Across this divergence of instances

or examples and in their discrete practice a formal invariance inheres and is demonstrable: this invariance provides us with the means to create its concept. We need to find in state-capitalist education (or the contemporary double-bind as set out above) that which it cannot assimilate to itself as the totality of knowledge: that which is invariant despite it. The argument is that this has been done before, or rather that this invariant exists and can be thought.

**To resume again**

*The lover thinks more often of reaching his mistress than the husband of guarding his wife; the prisoner thinks more often of escaping than the jailer of shutting his door; and so, whatever the obstacles may be, the lover and the prisoner ought to succeed.*

Stendhal<sup>22</sup>

It is ridiculous to give summary to polemic but let me just note again what it forces into the scene of education. In the first place, that education is the site of a fundamental antagonism: this is because it can never rest assured as the knowledge of the state. It asks necessarily of this state of knowledge, this moveable feast of the knowledge economy, which supposes itself to be the limit of all. When the knowledge of the state is the state of knowledge education nowhere exists. Education always exceeds its limit and so begins again as an exception to it. This is the promise of education for all. And it is this immanent force that the knowledge of the state operates on in its interests. It idealises the promise and instrumentalises the procedure betraying, in a Lacanian sense, what is invariant to it. But this invariance insists and shows itself as unbound from the state and its limits, its metaphysics, its bio-logic. To insist on this invariance, which insists as what is not the knowledge of the state, and thus as what is truly education, is the force of the subject. The subject of education is the capacity to take, to produce, to invent a non-state form. The exceptional force of education is invariably to not know the state. This educated subject is the end of the subjective incapacity that the state cannot not teach: the teaching that the interests of the state are the interests of all and that there are no others

is the intrinsic corruption of the state. The subject of education is necessarily the destruction of this subjective incapacity, the affirmative corruption of this corruption. Hence it is found nowhere in the state but is not impossible.

Education truly can only be the constructive destruction of this incapacity—which can only be un-educative given it stakes all its worth in a limit which is unthinkable for it. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is possible to see that in *Reading the Country*, in the construction of itself as an exceptional work, just such a subject insists and this despite the insistence of its own metaphysics that no such subject is possible. Indeed, the individuals that make up this subject are precisely de-individuated in the invention of this work as truly new, truly exceptional and *for all*. Something within the situation of the state that the state as such renders impossible, for it is made manifest as truly of that situation, this ‘country’. The subject names this procedure of its invention, the construction of its form, which is at the same time the means of its transmission. The subject of education insists in its exception to the limit and as this ongoing procedure of which *Reading the Country* can be seen to be one more element. What is decisive is that we refuse to not read it there.

### Notes

- 1 Alain Badiou, ‘Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of the Truth of the State’, trans. B.P. Fulks, *Lacanain Ink*, vol. 22, 2003, pp. 58-89.
- 2 The Clash, ‘White Riot’, *The Clash*, CBS, 1977.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, ‘A Madness Must Watch Over Thinking’, *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. E. Weber, trans. P. Kamuf, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p. 343.
- 4 Kim Bentrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, re.press, Melbourne, 2014, p. 23 passim.
- 5 Plato, *Laws*, trans. T.J. Saunders, in *Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, Hackett, Indianapolis, 644a-b, 1997.
- 6 ‘Building Knowledge Economies: Opportunities and Challenges for EU Accession Countries. Final Report of the Knowledge Economy Forum “Using Knowledge for Development in EU Accession Countries”, World Bank in cooperation with the European Commission the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank Paris, 19-22 February 2002’, May 2002, [www.worldbank.org/eca/knowledgeeconomy](http://www.worldbank.org/eca/knowledgeeconomy).
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- 8 Harold Silver, *Education and the English Radicals 1780-1850*, Routledge & K. Paul, London, 1975, pp. 96-7.
- 9 Ian Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994.
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- 13 Emile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, trans. P. Collins, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.
- 14 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011.
- 15 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 254.
- 16 Alain Badiou, 'The Fascism of the Potato', trans. B. Bosteels, in *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 193.
- 17 Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, tran. B Bosteels, London, Verso, 2009. P. 302.
- 18 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. A. Toscano, London, Continuum, 2009, p. 535.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Durkheim.
- 21 Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, p. 181.
- 22 Stendahl, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, trans. J. Sturrock, Penguin, London, 2007.

# A Letter from Copernicus the Cat to Chris Marker

Lauren Bliss

## Part 1: On seeing the future lost

Chris Marker (29 July 1921 - 29 July 2012) figures his identity like his filmmaking, under the sign of erasure. As a young man, he changed his name from Christian Hippolyte François Georges Bouche-Villeneuve to Chris Marker (apparently because Chris Marker fitted on his passport);<sup>1</sup> less than twelve photographs of him exist, he has only ever given a small number of interviews,<sup>2</sup> and when asked for a photograph he generally responded with a picture of a cat. His films, made from 1952 until his death in 2012, attend to the paradox of the *lost memory*. These losses are figured in the form of the future that could have been, as a vanishing nostalgia or a nostalgia for the future which did not come.

*La Jetee* (1962) is the premiere example of Marker's artistic rendering of this paradox, insofar as it is a film set in the post-apocalyptic future about a man tortured by a group of scientists, who experiment on him to see if time travel is possible in order to try and rescue the present. The scientists send him into the past, where he sees a man being shot on the jetty at Orly airport, a vision that later turns out to be the impossible memory of the man's own death—one that occurred at the hands of the scientists to prevent their prisoner from exposing the secret of time travel. Although Marker is often linked, in his artistic rendering of time, war and social alienation, to the other left bank filmmakers of Paris such as Alain Resnais (*Night and Fog*, 1955; *Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959; *Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961) and Agnes Varda (*Cleo from 5 to 7*, 1961), it is well known that he belongs to the wider

cinephilic tradition that sought to film the revolution, or revolutionise society through film, which is perhaps the same thing. As the uprisings and social revolutions of the late 1960s took place, filmmakers all over the world created a swathe of films under the influence of semiotic film theory. Itself influenced by Freud and Marx, semiotic film theory is guided by the idea that film has direct, if unconscious, impact on the psyche and imagination. Marker, with a host of other filmmakers including Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin of the Dziga Vertov Group, Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen and Masao Adachi, inherited the Soviet tradition of *dialectical montage* and sought to cinematise revolution, to wake up the eye and mind to capitalist and global oppression through the filmic medium.

*A Grin Without a Cat*—made in 1977—is in fact a eulogy to the failure of the 1968 uprisings of Paris, and for the increasing understanding that cinema would never achieve this dream of revolution.<sup>3</sup> What takes the placecard of this invisibility, this nostalgia for that which never came, is the image of the cat. The cat is at once Marker's own personal signature and an odd figure of political defiance. For cats, as the film tells us through the words of Louis Althusser, are never on the side of power. *A Grin Without a Cat* of course takes its name from the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, whose grin remains after his body disappears. This disappearing body is figured through Marker's complex and carefully composed montage as it juxtaposes shots of the powerful to the powerless, including images of the May '68 riots in Paris, with the uprisings in Latin America, the Prague Spring and resistance to Vietnam War. These are placed in a visual collage, or constellation, that moves from images of the powerful—the soldiers, and the government forces, discussing techniques of torture—to students and workers engaged in mass protest and voicing their demands. This dialectical montage invokes Marker's indebtedness to the Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov insofar as it aims to create new meaning by colliding independent shots together. However, *A Grin Without a Cat* moves away from the idealism, and thus the manipulative streak, that marks Soviet filmmaking practice. This film is not trying to raise consciousness or open our eyes to exploitation

as such, but is a film that figures a concrete vision of the world. Rather than operating as a call-to-arms, as a propagandist piece or as a fetishised view of unity or utopia, Marker attends to what we could call the incompleteness of what was lost or what never occurred. *A Grin Without a Cat* does not pose a solution to a problem, nor—more polemically—does it even suggest there is a problem that requires a solution. *A Grin Without a Cat* is not a simple reflection of the history of the 1968 movement, but tries to film that history *as it is* and in that process it is a film that tries to recognise its own incompleteness in itself.

This visual paradox is an extension of *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema. Described in the words of one of its founding theorists, sociologist Edgar Morin, the aesthetic practice of this movement is to pose reality as though it can be seen, then to pose that reality as a question. Marker uses the idea of the grin without a cat to figure this paradox, and the montage becomes like the haunting gaze of the cat as an imagistic address to the spectator. In Marker, the cat is a living shadow, the cat who stares back without positive or negative judgment but in whose eyes we see a kind of truth of the world.

**Part II: I'm writing you this letter from a distant land**

I discussed these ideas with my 7-year-old cat, Copernicus. We both agree with Marker that cats have total knowledge and access to the truth itself, and Copernicus has responded with a letter to Marker.

Dear Chris Marker,

*A Grin Without a Cat* seeks an invisible cat, but in that seeking it is overwrought with a wistful longing for cats to appear from behind the smile.

You say that cats are not on the side of power, but I say that precisely because we renounce and reject everything we are absolutely on the side of power. On behalf of all cats, I reject your film.

Your film is not a grin without a cat, but wants to be a cat without a grin. It is obscured by the noise of the 1960s, and

a sentimental, overwrought vision of its own importance. The deceptions have been taken too seriously, as if the fact that the film knows the problems of its present have been lost to the future is enough to confer to yourself, and to your viewers, the destination in sight. Recall Alice asking the Cheshire cat what direction she should take in order to reach her imagined destination:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“— so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Chris Marker: your films operate as though the idea that you have not seen what you want to see can be seen through the filmic lens, and as though the eyes of your audience, your intended viewers for this imagined vision, cannot see and have never seen what has always been directly in front of them. For that reason, *A Grin Without a Cat* is an exploitation of their imagination and their visual sense.

Yours,  
Copernicus



**Notes**

- 1 Peter Aspden, 'Chris Marker: Phantom of Cinema', *Financial Times*, 28 March 2014.
- 2 For a full list of interviews see <http://chrismarker.org/chris-marker/>.
- 3 See, for example, Laura Mulvey, 'Looking at the Past Through the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s', *Signs*, vol. 30, no. 1, Autumn 2004, 1284-92.

# Poems

## Bonny Cassidy

The day after reading that book  
Already full on  
his reasonable magic

the day passes out  
in grains of distress.

I don't know the words for this one

but hear his  
sprout above the gale, huh—  
living their life midair

into squinting faces  
over, speak.

**Destiny**

The duck is sceptical

*agape*

it faces the deep

passing time.

The duck sighing

shuffles

its beak

writes the word

*blame.*

**Inland**

I lay my thought  
over the bough

mouthless  
clear as confidence

its spiral  
tipped and  
drawn.

I will imagine you in foreign streets;  
not at the feet of history  
but in the alley where it limps.  
Sometimes you  
come back in drips  
from your shoulders, other eyes.

Last light mine  
I stand up in the field

incommensurable

a doric winter  
straight  
my fluted brain.



### III: *Reading the Country* as a Model for Reading



# *Reading the Country After Travelling Television*

Chris Healy

This is, inevitably, happily and idiosyncratically, a personal response to an invitation to reflect upon *Reading the Country* thirty years down the track. Inevitably, because although my initial engagement with *Reading the Country* was scholarly, for me, it was then and is now, biographically important. It's a book I feel lucky to have engaged with when I did, in the 1980s, when it was one encounter among many with a diverse array of scholarly works, along with contemporaneous film and television, music, art, politics and theory, which re-ordered my relation to Australia. These reflections are also happily personal because my reading the book was followed not only by the joys of working, talking and walking with Stephen Muecke but also with me following in Stephen's footsteps and meeting and walking with the Goolarabooloo people of Broome, including Paddy Roe. But here, these personal aspects of reflecting on *Reading the Country* can remain in the back seat on this trip despite my idiosyncratic focus here on mapping some specific associations between Stephen's 30-year-old book and my current research on television.

That work is concerned with a genre of television I call 'travelling television', programming that has been a regular and popular presence on broadcast television in Australia since 1956. Travelling television is often series-based and consists of journeys to and through remote or distinctive places. The journey might be in search of fauna or history, characters or family, spectacle or wonder, or merely motivated by a desire to explore or discover. It is a genre of television that includes famous examples like *Ask the Leyland Brothers* (1976-1979, 1983-1984) and less well-known series such



as *Absalom's Outback* (1981) and Deborah Mailman and Catherine Freeman's *Going Bush* (2006). Travelling television began in Australia with Charles Chauvel and Elsa Chauvel's 1956 BBC production *Walkabout*, a 13-part series in which the Chauvels journey by car, horse and train from their home in Sydney to Victoria and South Australia and on through Central Australia.<sup>1</sup> *Walkabout* picks up and elaborates a range of cultural conventions from the rich variety of travel writing that was so important in bringing Australia into imaginative existence. It also introduces a number of formal conventions that characterise the genre, such as the use of charismatic presenters who guide, direct, orient and instruct the viewers by speaking both as authoritative narrators and directly to the viewer in more intimate ways as we follow in their footsteps.

Many of the contrasts between travelling television and *Reading the Country* are obvious. Published by a small, marginal and distinctively committed press (as Ray Coffey makes so clear in this volume), the book was a unique experiment in writing, painting and rendering speech about country. The generosity of spirit in and collaborative nature of *Reading the Country*, its adventurousness with form and its commitment to a deferred authority of storytelling, all this and more contributed to it being a remarkable intellectual contribution that has echoed, warped, repeated, faded and then returned again down the years in a series of effects and after effects. Travelling television, by contrast is, by and large, the product of conventional practices of television-making and Australian broadcast television. It's largely television telling predictable stories and aiming for ratings-based popularity; it's tightly stitched to tourist consumption, celebrates the fetishism of vehicles and other commodities. So, it's important to state from the outset that I am not proposing any symmetry, correspondence or analogy between *Reading the Country* and travelling television. However, as narratives, they do share a connection with what Michael Taussig has called 'the origin of storytelling ... in the encounter between the traveller and those who stay at home'. Here I want to argue that, as storytelling, *Reading the Country* and aspects of travelling share some concerns; with journeys, with clearing away habits of thought, with how things move, with the circulation of ideas and with

modes of being-in-place. I want to suggest that in both we can find resources for the future in the present.

### Preparing the vehicle

We have attempted to convey in pictures and words our feelings for this country ... as civilisation spreads and destroys more wilderness areas every year ... As you read our books and watch our films you will share with us some of the real Australia that will soon be only a memory.<sup>2</sup>

Any significant journey and perhaps any travel at all is preceded by a travelling imaginary and, in many cases, proceeds from some version of that imaginary. A journey might be raised purely in the imagination but it might also be dreamed-up with the aid of a guidebook's itinerary or a postcard; it might be inspired by a traveller's tale, a map or even a television program. The imaginary of remote Australia produced in travelling television draws on images and stories already firmly in place: of white men exploring and colonising; of ardour for the bush, the hardships of occupying country and the opportunities promised by development; of the romance of the primitive, and the wonder of landscape and fauna. There is also, as in the quote above from the Leyland brothers, sometimes a melancholy fantasy of imminent disappearance in the imaginary of travelling television which is part of the work of preparing the vehicle and the mind to cope with the vicissitudes of the journey ahead. It's as if the act of planning to travel in Australia is shadowed by a fear of failure. There's a foreboding that the productive forces of modernity which enable such travel will also have clear-felled the forests, mined the desert and despoiled the reefs; that towns will have been abandoned, that bush characters and the Aboriginal people they depended on will have vanished; that the imagined journey is actually one that could only have been made in the past, that 'the real Australia will only be a memory'.

*Ask the Leyland Brothers* was a very popular program that ran for many years during the 1970s and 1980s. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the hosts, Mike and Mal Leyland, look a little like precursors to the slick

specialists and gurus identified by Tania Lewis as the key characters in contemporary reality and lifestyle TV.<sup>3</sup> But the Leylands were deploying a very different kind of expertise, a much more ordinary and gentle version of leading by example. And this is built into the structure of their programs, in that Mike and Mal's travelling is directed, in part, by the questions that viewers sent them by mail. An online search of 'Broken Hill Caravan Park review' today yields more than 200,000 results but when a viewer wrote and asked the Leylands about caravanning in Broken Hill, the brothers and their families travelled there to show us what it was like. In this and other episodes they conducted a dialogue with fellow citizens/consumers/travellers that was instructional because it invited emulation. The viewer sees ordinary family travel, and knows they can reproduce just that. In this way, the Leylands' knowledge was presented as model, practice and lesson.

*Ask the Leyland Brothers* voiceover commentaries and pieces to camera were methodical and patient in their explanations, and delivered with a matter-of-fact affect. They never assumed prior knowledge of the topic at hand, be it the 'dreamtime stories' of Uluru, the lifecycle of the platypus, the industrial techniques involved in the production of Akubra hats or what it would be like to live the life of a drover. Again and again their 'answers' to viewers' questions feel like Mike and Mal — child-migrants from the United Kingdom who grew up in Newcastle, New South Wales — are keen not only to instruct but to learn and then share that knowledge, to quietly explain to the audience how they might produce their own ordinary expertise in the country they inhabit.

If *Ask the Leyland Brothers* and other examples of travelling television are one of the means by which people get out of cities, into the country and to places like Broome, then motor vehicles are central actors in their stories. In early film, like *The Back of Beyond* (1954) and newsreel coverage of the Redex Motor Car Trials of the early 1950s, the vehicles themselves were, in Georgina Clarsen's account, heroic 'steel capsules, technological prostheses for attacking expanses of territory'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the vehicles initially used by the Leylands are very modest modes of transport. They travel by tinny down the Darling River, and on the road they load up a VW Kombi van. Once

they get sponsorship, the series joins a long line of television programs that promote the use of four-wheel drive vehicles that, decades later, are the Toorak tractors roughing it at suburban shopping strips and on display outside private schools of metropolitan capital cities, and which are still valourised in hyper-masculine advertising as cars that can conquer ‘the toughest country’. There is an extreme version of this way of producing relationships between cars and place in Paddy Roe’s country in a video posted by ‘Top Gear Driver Training’ in February 2016. The vehicle in the clip is a kind of mini-monster truck equipped with huge tyres and massive suspension to enable it to drive at high speed along sand tracks. The occupants, in all likelihood wearing helmets, would experience the place they’re travelling through as a blur in their peripheral vision, as they’d be focused solely on keeping the vehicle from crashing. The track they’re driving on is a little north of where Krim, Stephen and Paddy travelled but it was Paddy’s great grandson, Daniel, who posted the video on Facebook. He wrote of the clip: ‘Here’s one for the Yawuru Rangers to follow up, these mob exploiting a section of land my family been trying to close off to the public for years. Maybe able to prosecute them for driving through an aboriginal heritage area.’

Perhaps as a reaction against these vehicular traditions, there’s barely a mention of cars in *Reading the Country* and they’re featured in only two photographs; the first of a wrecked K5 International that Paddy stripped and left on his windmill run and another of a stationwagon that’s become home for a goat. As we know from other television programs such as *Bush Mechanics*, there’s a rich tradition of Indigenous creativity centred on vehicles but in *Reading the Country* the focus is less on the vehicle as object and more on what they can do to get things moving. Our access to Paddy Roe’s knowledge comes, in part, from Stephen being not only a scribe but also a ‘driver’ of a vehicle — the use of which enables not tourism or even travel but one way of beginning to produce the assemblages that come to be described as ‘knowledge about country’. The book is replete with a gentle and unassuming clearing away of anthropological and historical conceptual inheritances (Stephen refers to an argument he has with Krim about abandoning ‘intellectual baggage’) and it certainly deploys

many theoretical resources. In terms of travel, there's not a lot of 'before' in *Reading the Country*; no training for the rigours of the journey, no anticipation of what's to come, no discussion of how to keep the bulldust out of the luggage, no thought about how many spare tyres to load or how many jerry cans to carry additional fuel, and no melancholic anticipation of failure or the absence of attachment which accompanies that fear. In this sense *Reading the Country* is less about travel and much more about being in space; it's more cinematic, beginning *in media res*, or maybe in the middle of the second reel. But this too is in the spirit of the nomadology that Muecke invokes: 'While ... nomadology might talk about things people do in their travels, it can also be about abstract journeys taking place while one is sitting down.'<sup>5</sup> And what's disclosed of their journeying actually occurs when the men sit down, here and then there to listen and talk. And this talking becomes, again and again, Paddy Roe 'telling stories in joyous affirmation of his peoples' will to survive'.<sup>6</sup>

**'We must make things move': screen and maps**

*Mad Max* (1979)

*Tracks* (1980)

*Place without a Postcard* (1981)

*Reading the Country* (1984)

*Born Sandy Devotional* (1986)

*Crocodile Dundee* (1986)

*My Place* (1987)

*Songlines* (1987)

*At the Henry Parkes Motel* (1988)

*Bush Tucker Man* (1988)

*Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988)

Mike and Mal Leyland made film for a relatively new medium and they understood deeply two foundational aspects of television: that it is democratic and that, in market societies, television is a site where experience is commodified and integrated into other aspects of everyday life. Paradoxically, travel television was often organised precisely around an escape from the world in which one might watch television,

into (another) world that one might have watched on television. The travelling of travelling television is not the travelling of 'discoverers' or of the first colonisers but the much more ordinary travelling which is undertaken as a way of occupying country, of settling, of belonging, of feeling part of place on television. In the second half of the twentieth century, travel television was central to the production of an image-saturated popular pedagogy that connected television viewers to national and local places and offered one of the key ways in which settler colonialism was both perpetuated and forgotten. It was organised around both participatory and mimetic travel and much of it aimed to inspire and train people to undertake their own journeys, producing new kinds of relations between routes, screens, car ownership, indigeneity, maps, petrol stations, tourism, self-formation and national identification. Early in *Reading the Country*, Stephen writes:

Paddy Roe and his people have their intellectual baggage too, their culture and their philosophies. Significantly, these are located *in* the country, the stories and songs are strung out across the Plains and are brought out as one moves along the tracks. Paddy Roe has an expression for the production of this culture: 'We must make these things *move*.'<sup>7</sup>

At the tail end of the wet season, Stephen is concerned with getting started on the book, writing: 'How could I make this thing *move*.' In 1984, Land Rights legislation in Australia was not yet a decade old, while Mabo and the Native Title Act were nearly a decade in the future. In this sense things were both on the move in the shifting recognition of Indigenous rights to land and, as Paddy Roe insisted, in need of being moved. The list of texts above, (mostly) from the 1980s, share a concern with various kinds of movement in film television, popular music and various forms of writing at a time the transformation of the Australian economy under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments (1983-1996) was building speed. As Krim, Paddy and Stephen head from Broome to the Roebuck Plains Station and further east from the Old Sheep Camp towards Nyikina country, they need to 'unlock' the barriers to their travelling,

farm gates festooned with signs reading: ‘Trespassers Prosecuted. No Entry.’ Keys to the gates can be obtained by Paddy diplomatically approaching owners or managers. But, says Muecke, the real key to the country is Paddy Roe’s astounding range of knowledge across so many domains and the long silences ‘which speak of the lack of common ground between Aboriginal discourses and White discourses’.<sup>8</sup>

There’s a shift in the concerns of travelling television that comes from a more explicit engagement with Indigenous knowledge in *Bush Tucker Man* and with the arrival of Indigenous television presenters such as Hetti Perkins in *Art and Soul*. In fact, the origin of *Bush Tucker Man* is very precisely in a gap, the lack of common ground identified by Stephen. Les Hiddins talked about the idea for *Bush Tucker Man* originating as he was flying over country in Northern Australia as an Australian Army officer and wondering:

Crikey, how would we get on if we had to ditch here? How would we survive” And I found that we really had nothing on a sheet of paper about survival in the Australian continent. So, I thought, why not get out there and start tabulating this information.<sup>9</sup>

In his work with the Australian Defence Force, Hiddins went on to create ordinance survey maps for soldiers training in northern Australia that, on the reverse, feature descriptions of edible plants and animals. Most of this information comes from traditional owners and it’s this knowledge, much of it shared cooperatively and treated with respect, that forms the backbone of *Bush Tucker Man*. And there’s a different kind of movement again in a very beautiful scene in *Art and Soul* when Hetti Perkins, the series presenter/host, travels to New York with Doreen Reid Nakamarra. It’s a brief montage that cuts from Nakamarra working and talking with Perkins at Papunya Tula in Alice Springs, to iconic shots of the New York skyline and the Statue of Liberty from the Staten Island Ferry, and shots of the group of Aboriginal women walking hand in hand through Washington Square. Perkins, Nakamarra and others had travelled to New York as part of the Papunya Tula Artists’ team to present the exhibition ‘Nganana tjungurringanyi

tjukurrpa nintintjakitja'. As Perkins says; 'sharing our dreaming at 80 Washington Square East Galleries, New York, at the end of the Icons of desert exhibition tour, shortly before [Nakamarra] passed away in 2009'.<sup>10</sup> So, even in a genre as conventional as travelling television, things move, and perhaps new possibilities are opened up.

## Place

Once I travelled the country to the North of Broome with Paddy Roe recording sites and stories on what became the Lurrijarri trail, which you have also written about. I had an idea then for a work called 'The Children's Country' which was supposed to follow through Paddy Roe's heritage of this trail and its sites via his daughter Teresa. The original story about this is in *Reading the Country* and is called 'We better go back to country'. So, I worked with Paddy and his family, but extended the scope by interviewing Broome primary school kids about their impressions of these sites where they often go for weekend fishing trips: Barred Creek, Minariny, etc. But that work was never completed.<sup>11</sup>

In the first few pages of *Reading the Country*, in the section of the book titled 'Reading this Book', Stephen writes that place is 'central to the theory and method of the book'.<sup>12</sup> He goes on to provide three reasons for this centrality: place introduces specificity and difference; place displaces dominant meanings and reified categories; and place foregrounds and can (re-)sensitise us to our modes of apprehending our environments. The most obvious way travelling television works with a related notion of place comes in how the genre connects being-at-home in travelling with the being-at-home of a television spectator.

Take, for example, one of the only two clips from *Walkabout* available online.<sup>13</sup> The scene opens with a smiling and relaxed Harry Closter, the unit's cameraman, sitting in the back of the parked Land Rover passing Elsa a pumpkin and some tinned food. The fixed camera pans to follow Elsa carrying the makings of a meal to her food preparation area in the kitchen set up under the shade of a tarpaulin while in the



middle distance we see Charles crouched by the fast-flowing Katherine River filling a billy and then walking toward the camera as he brings the water into the kitchen. It's a beautiful and economical shot that produces a strong sense of immediate and easy domesticity.<sup>14</sup> The dialogue over this and the following shot is characteristic of the kind of first-person, location-based narration Elsa uses so often in *Walkabout*:

'These are really blue heaven days as we camp on the river below the little township called Katherine.

The lonely men who first came into this country called their homesteads and little townships after far-away wives or sweethearts, like Alice Springs, Charlotte Waters and Katherine.

Well, here's Katherine.'<sup>15</sup>

The effect of the images and this little narrative works very specifically to produce a sense in which both the expedition and the viewers of *Walkabout* are visitors to Katherine; both are on the edge of the town, passing through this place rather than being of it. The contrast with *Reading the Country* could not be stronger. Rather than writing, painting or talking as tourists on expedition, the creators of the book seem to be constantly asking about their relation to place, what they bring to it, what is already there and what they might give to it and take from it in their temporary occupation.

There might have been something of this dynamic at work in the travelling of the first person I met who'd been to Broome. Lester Allan was a slaughterman at the Angliss Meatworks in Melbourne in the 1930s, working on the mutton chain. A long-time (un-paid) union official and a member of the Communist Party of Australia, he later worked as a meat inspector. When I interviewed him in 1984, he said that he frowned on the killing of animals and described himself as a 'conservationist, recycler and scrounger'. After he retired, Allen and his wife would load up the caravan every Autumn and, before the weather turned cold, begin a drive to Broome and beyond, not returning until Spring. Lester said they both loved the bush life. The travelling

of this working-class couple was a product of the kind of demotic possibilities celebrated by much travelling television. As well as seeking the sun like the grey nomads of the twenty-first century, the Allens were curious about what lay beyond years of factory work and a home a stones-throw from an oil refinery at Altona. Lester might not have met Paddy Roe, and I doubt that he read *Reading the Country*, but he seems connected in some way to the vitality of Paddy Roe's people, to the establishment of the Lurujarri Trail, the victory over Woodside Petroleum and the WA State Government, and the survival of Goolarabooloo. Somewhere between the fantasy of 'a wide open road' celebrated by travelling television and *Reading the Country*, there might be spaces made to ask the question 'What kinds of cultural conditions and resources need to be invented to make the country viable for people to have place to live?' In this sense, *Reading the Country* still seems like both an urgent project with lessons for this time and one whose time is yet to come.

### Notes

- 1 See Stuart Cunningham, 'Charles Chauvel: The Last Decade', Continuum, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987.
- 2 Mike and Mal Leyland, *Discovering Australia*, Golden Press, Sydney, 1976, p. 7.
- 3 Tania Lewis, *Smart Living: Lifestyle Media and Popular Expertise*, Peter Lang, New York, 2007.
- 4 Georgine Clarsen, 'Automobiles and Australian Modernism: The Redex Around-Australia trials of the 1950s', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2010, p. 361.
- 5 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 15.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 8 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 67.
- 9 'Les Hiddins: Bush Tucker Man', Talking Heads, ABC TV, 2007.
- 10 Hetti Perkins and Warwick Thornton, *Episode 1, Art + Soul* (DVD), Hibiscus Films, Sydney, 2011.
- 11 Chris Healy, 'Travelling Theory: An Interview with Stephen Muecke', *Meanjin*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1999, pp. 174-91.
- 12 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 13.
- 13 'Australian Screen', <https://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/australian-walkabout/>.
- 14 It's interesting that after this shot we cut briefly to another set-up of Elsa working in the same kitchen that's been arranged differently so that she's lit by artificial light and the river features more prominently in the background. This was presumably shot as an alternative to the longer shot described above but it doesn't produce the immediate sense of shared domestic intimacy.
- 15 <https://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/australian-walkabout/clip2/>.

# Thirty Years On: *Reading the Country* and Indigenous Homeliness

Ken Gelder

The 2014 reprinting by re.press of Stephen Muecke, Krim Bentrak and Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (first published 1984) is a useful reminder, thirty years on, of just how contemporary this remarkable book still is.<sup>1</sup> Although it isn't 'anthropological' (and speaks in fact about the 'death of anthropology', a discipline from which it distances itself), *Reading the Country* nevertheless embarks on a journey with which anthropologists would be only too familiar: with Muecke getting into the car, driving out to a remote community in north-west Western Australia to encounter a Moroccan artist, Krim Bentrak, and a senior Aboriginal man, Paddy Roe, and talking and listening, transcribing, and then reflecting on what has been transcribed. The book is also an expression of male companionship—if we think of the meaning of 'companion', *with bread*—where three men (and, sometimes, others) come to know each other by sitting down together, and making spaces for each other, although in very different ways, with very different outcomes: stories and narratives, paintings, and various intellectual meditations on all this that drew extensively and specifically on Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term *nomadology*.

The emphasis in *Reading the Country* is on movement, tracking and travel; those moments of companionship therefore seem provisional, as if no one stays in the same place for very long. This is consistent with nomadology, which doesn't seem to encourage a reading that might by contrast place an

emphasis on home, or homeliness. The only ‘homestead’ in *Reading the Country* belongs to the Roebuck Plains sheep station: while nomadology is tied to indigeneity, homesteads are understood as the outcome of colonialism and settlement. (I shall return to the word *homestead* later on.) On the other hand, in a narrative about making rain on the station, Paddy Roe remarks at one point, after some hard work: ‘We go back home — / go back for dinner’:<sup>2</sup> a familiar homely image. Indigenous land ownership is cast in this way too, as it must be in modern Australia. Muecke talks occasionally about Paddy Roe’s ‘home country with which he has the closest links’.<sup>3</sup> Roe is a welcoming host in this book, while Muecke and Benterrak are visitors or guests: ‘Krim and I’, Muecke writes, ‘set up camp at Coconut Wells, on Paddy’s block of land. Not only do Paddy Roe and Butcher Joe (Nangan) live here, but also various members of Paddy’s family at different times.’<sup>4</sup> In this account, Roe’s home — and home country — is both colonised and hospitable.

Homeliness might seem like the opposite of nomadology. But here is another homely moment, this time in an article Muecke published much later on, called ‘Visiting Aboriginal Australia’.<sup>5</sup> Here, he thinks back to his first job in Perth in 1974 — ten years before *Reading the Country* was published — and recalls some bad but no doubt well-meaning advice from a senior anthropologist there: “‘Don’t have anything to do with Aboriginal women”, this man says, “or Aboriginal politics.”” Muecke writes: ‘I was embarrassed [by this advice], for only the other night I had been in Gloria’s bath. When I moved into the Everett St flats, my hot water was out of action, so Gloria, immediate neighbour across the hall [an Indigenous woman], had invited me to use her tub.’<sup>6</sup> Later, she offers Muecke a martini. This is another welcoming encounter (‘visiting Aboriginal Australia’) that might seem to be outside and even in contradistinction to the frame of *Reading the Country*: metropolitan, not remote; neighbourly, rather than to do with companionship; the host here is a woman, not a man; and the image is indeed homely, rather than nomadic.

I want to use this chapter to think about homeliness a little more, in the distant aftermath of an important book that had read Indigenous relations to country primarily through the

concept of nomadology. Incidentally, the word *Indigenous* itself comes to Australia after the first publication of *Reading the Country*—Muecke himself never uses it—and of course it works to adjust the politics, and the cultural politics, of the word *Aboriginal*. It is therefore possible to say that *Reading the Country* is literally a way of registering the process of ‘becoming Indigenous’, which, as James Clifford has noted, involves a combination of relations to country that are both ‘displaced’ and ‘sustained’, combining the experience of dispossession and re-attachment. For Clifford, the combination of processes of movement, dislocation and homeliness also means that becoming Indigenous and being diasporic are therefore similar: as he puts it: ‘In everyday practices of mobility and dwelling the line separating the diasporic from the Indigenous thickens: a complex borderland opens up.’<sup>7</sup>

It does generally seem as if *Reading the Country*—because of Muecke’s many contributions to it—is dominated by a Deleuzian use of nomadology; but it isn’t, not completely. A whole number of citations flow through the book, making it a sort of tool kit that readers—students, especially—will no doubt continue to enjoy: there’s Deleuze and Guattari, but also Foucault, Baudrillard, Barthes and many others, even Dick Hebdige who, by the early 1980s, was an important figure for cultural studies. Muecke’s project in *Reading the Country* was indeed a bit like Hebdige’s on British punk, bringing a wide range of continental theory to bear on a social group in the hope of illuminating what they do, culturally speaking. (Muecke’s work is more successful here, refusing to give up in the way Hebdige finally did; and of course, his project is ethnographic, while Hebdige’s was certainly not.) Muecke drew on Hebdige for ‘bricolage’, channelling anthropology through cultural studies as he cast Aboriginal families in northwest Western Australia as do-it-yourself ‘*bricoleurs*’.<sup>8</sup> The citation in fact takes us to Dick Hebdige on London’s mod subculture: ‘the mods’, Hebdige writes, ‘could be said to be functioning as bricoleurs’. The application of this citation to Aboriginal people in remote communities literally associates the process of ‘becoming Indigenous’ with becoming *mod*—or more broadly, becoming modern. It is also one of those many moments in *Reading the Country* where an actual social practice is tied to a

critical method, a way of reading or encountering texts (which is how nomadology itself is understood):

for both Aboriginal and ‘general’ readers, there is a pleasure in the text of *bricolage*, a pleasure in seeing the edifice of language tremble a little as it becomes a kind of poetry. Bricolage is flexible, economical and unstable. It does not seek continuity or harmony in a world of discontinuity and inequality. It is functional rather than idealistic; it uses the wrong object for a useful purpose, but can change according to necessity. It suffers no illusions. It allows a goat to make her home in an abandoned car.<sup>9</sup>

This interesting passage ends, perhaps unexpectedly, with another homely image: the car that no longer goes anywhere, a domesticated animal (gendered female), and the idea of dwelling and of home-making—which speaks to what some commentators these days have been calling ‘portable domesticity’, a practice that brings dislocation, mobility and home-making into proximity with each other.<sup>10</sup>

Nomadology was always a bit impatient with homeliness, with the practice of stopping in one place. ‘History is always written from the sedentary point of view’, Deleuze and Guattari observed. ‘What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history.’<sup>11</sup> But the nomadological emphasis on movement and travel always ran the risk either of romanticisation or appropriation, as many commentators have since observed.<sup>12</sup> In the mid 1990s, Rosi Braidotti had tied nomadology or nomadism to a kind of cosmopolitan, multi-lingual, romantically conceived feminism: ‘As an intellectual style’, she wrote in 1994, ‘nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries his/her essential belongings with him/her wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere.’<sup>13</sup> This is another expression of portable domesticity, reminding us of just how entwined nomadology and homeliness can be. James Clifford had written about ‘dwelling *and* travelling; travelling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling’ in his earlier book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*; he goes on to ask, ‘What are the

political stakes in claiming (or sometimes being relegated to) a “home”?’<sup>14</sup>

Since nomadology, cultural criticism over the last twenty-five years or so has returned again and again to the question of home and homeliness. Think of the geographer Doreen Massey, for example, and her interest in ‘place’ as a ‘point of intersection’, a ‘meeting place’ (a place of companionship) which looks both inward and outward: ‘which is extroverted’ and ‘includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world’.<sup>15</sup> This is place becoming modern, defined as much by those who don’t live there (visitors, tourists, anthropologists, and so on) as those who do. The question is, as David Morley puts it, why in the midst of all this ‘particular people stay at home’ and ‘how, in a world of flux, forms of collective dwelling are sustained and reinvented’.<sup>16</sup>

Becoming Indigenous is also a matter of becoming modern: where the experiences of dislocation and dispossession underwrite, and shape, expressions of attachment to land. This binary has of course been remarkably influential in Australia, structuring the ways in which Indigenous Australians and their various claims on the nation—to land, to children, and so on—are recognised and understood. In anthropology, this can mean that Indigeneity is sometimes negatively conceived as a condition that can never be complete-in-itself, although I would add that it is hardly alone in this. This is what Elizabeth Povinelli suggests, for example, in her book *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002):

At the most simple level, no indigenous subject can inhabit the temporal or spatial location to which indigenous identity refers—the geographical and social space and time of authentic Ab-originality ... Producing a present-tense indigenosity in which some failure is not a qualifying condition is discursively and materially impossible.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the idea of Indigeneity-in-(its)-place is not allowed; it is literally not quite at home in these remarks. One can see why Muecke in *Reading the Country* was ambivalent about anthropology. But it is also possible to see how the discursive shift

from *Aboriginal* to *Indigenous* in the discipline of anthropology carries with it precisely this kind of structural adjustment, where ‘becoming Indigenous’ and ‘becoming modern’ inhabit the same space even as, together, they make the question of the inhabitation of *place*—we might say, of dwelling, or home, or even of settlement—one that is always in process and never fully realisable.

Muecke’s work in *Reading the Country* knows very well that the anthropological binary of the settled (or sedentary) and the nomadic is a bit of a mixed blessing. As one of those people who all-too-casually tends to collapse nomadology into nomadism, I’m always inclined to think here of Henry Mayhew’s famous (or notorious) introduction to *London Labour and the London Poor* from the early 1860s, which saw nomadic ‘tribes’ flowing through the centre of a sedentary metropolis: itinerant, tied to territory but not property, ephemeral not permanent, and so on. The question of place or of settlement (who can claim it, who can’t) becomes both contingent and essential here, just as it is when we think about Indigeneity in Australia in the aftermath of *Reading the Country*. In her earlier book, *Labor’s Lot: The Power, History and Culture of Aboriginal Action* (1994), Elizabeth Povinelli had looked at the predicament of Indigenous women in several remote communities across the Northern Territory. A ‘woman’s voice is generally marginalised’ by anthropologists, she notes:

but women map out connections to land, they govern in various ways, and so on. The emphasis in [Povinelli’s] book is on dwelling or residency, on belonging to land as a matter of position and degree: Aboriginal women who had come to the Docker River settlement, for example, ask not who belongs there ‘*instead* of someone else ... [but] who belonged there more than someone else?’<sup>18</sup>

‘Whose Settlement—whose “country”’, Povinelli asks, ‘is Docker River?’<sup>19</sup> and in relation to what conceptual and legal frameworks? What I want to pause over here is precisely the use of that word *settlement* in the context of thinking about Indigenous relations to place. Usually, we use *settlement*



in relation to settlers, to non-Indigenous colonials and postcolonials; and our postcolonial response to this is to talk at the same time about *un*-settlement, about the capacity for settlement (under postcolonial conditions) to be something that can never fully be *settled*. Jane M. Jacobs and I wrote about this predicament at length in *Uncanny Australia* back in 1998, but the issue still seems to be trending even in these post-postcolonial times, and we can still see variations on it today.<sup>20</sup> A good example is John Frow's recent essay in the *Cultural Studies Review*, titled 'Settlement', no less, which turns back to the Tonnesian notion of *gemeinschaft* (community) and to Georg Simmel's iconic figure of the stranger as a visitor from outside who — once he arrives — does not leave.<sup>21</sup> Frow looks at Tommy McRae's remarkable 1890s drawing of the escaped convict William Buckley's colonial encounter — and colonial exchange — with local Aboriginal people, and he sees it in terms of the way McRae presents Buckley as a settler who is nevertheless also a stranger: something more than a visitor, someone who seems, as Andrew Sayers puts it, almost to have 'bridged the (seemingly unbridgeable) gap between Aboriginal and settler society'.<sup>22</sup> That is, Buckley is someone who — through his encounter with Aboriginal people — has 'left the world of white settlers' to become, literally, *unsettled* (a word that Frow repeats a number of times). Frow's view of the Aboriginal world Buckley enters is equivocal, however, because it is itself 'becoming modern' through the colonial encounter. That world, he writes, is 'not unproblematically a community' — although he adds that it is at the same time 'clearly, still, a community', as if that moment *before* 'becoming modern' cannot be let go of or forgotten: it is a place, but an extroverted place.<sup>23</sup> McRae's drawing of Buckley with a group of Aboriginal people therefore gives us what Frow calls an image of 'settlement with the stranger', and it looks as if he means *Aboriginal settlement* here: where McRae's drawing appears to convey an Aboriginal world in which whites are accepted, as Frow puts it, 'almost as equals'.<sup>24</sup>

This is, of course, a benign view of colonial exchange and the colonial encounter, built around what is often now called in cultural studies and elsewhere 'convergence': where you look at otherwise *divergent* social groups to analyse those

points or moments where they actually meet or come together: their points of intersection. It is an approach that has played itself out in various ways both before and after *Reading the Country*. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis's book, *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, opens by quoting Muecke on the 1977 film *Backroads* and its 'moments of exchange': where 'characters gain and lose identities, transferring and transforming cultural understandings'.<sup>25</sup> Then they look at the films *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker*, pursuing the figure of the stranger in the latter film through the relationship between what it calls the Tracker and the Follower:

The Follower becomes a stranger in The Tracker's eyes ... [Their] friendship ... is premised on a recognition of difference but one that allows for an ethics of hospitality. The Tracker is now recognised as the one who is "at home", welcoming The Follower to another's country where they are both strangers, or guests.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, Indigeneity is understood through the figure of the stranger even when it is *at home* (a phrase that now finds itself in inverted commas: as if it, too, can never be at home with itself). It is a relational or relative condition, in other words, playing out precisely this entangled predicament of dislocation and homeliness. This is something that anthropology — in spite of everything — has understood very well. The Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is one among many others who has recently thought about the question of 'convergence', in an article titled 'The Relative Native': wondering in particular about whether anthropological knowledge applies concepts that are 'extrinsic to their object' (for example, applying Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadology or Hebdige's concept of bricolage to Aboriginal people in remote north-west Western Australia), or whether 'the procedures involved in anthropological investigation are of the same *conceptual order* as the procedures being investigated': that is, where what is 'extrinsic' somehow does indeed manage to converge with (rather than just, say, visit and leave) the object of study.<sup>27</sup>

I have been raising all these issues and processes—‘becoming Indigenous’ and ‘becoming modern’, convergence and the colonial or postcolonial encounter, the question of settlement and Indigeneity, the question of the home and Indigenous domesticity and so on—not least because I had been interested in a criticism made in 2012 of something Jane M. Jacobs and I wrote some years ago in our book *Uncanny Australia*—and for better or worse, I want to outline that criticism here. Alison Ravenscroft’s book *The Postcolonial Eye* is in most respects the complete opposite of *Reading the Country*. Whereas Muecke, Benterrak and Roe invest in notions of companionship and hospitality and open up Aboriginal storytelling for discussion and circulation—making Aboriginal knowledges of land and place available to non-Aboriginal readers—Ravenscroft’s book wants to set limits to all this: there are things non-Indigenous readers of Indigenous narratives, she insists, are not supposed to know, or cannot know. She wants to assert ‘the idea of radical differences between white and Indigenous cultural forms’: she is against ‘convergence’ because she wants to preserve Indigenous alterity (which means that her ‘native’ is not ‘the relative native’).<sup>28</sup>

So her book is a sort of gatekeeping exercise, where (by, for example, stressing her intimacy with Indigenous writing rather than her companionship with Aboriginal people) she is somehow able to know what it is that non-Indigenous people cannot know. Her readings are therefore introverted, not extroverted—if I can draw again on Doreen Massey’s description here. In a chapter about *Uncanny Australia*, Ravenscroft goes on to claim that Jacobs and I had inadvertently compromised the alterity of what she calls ‘the Aboriginal subject’; and to make her argument, she looks at a story we read and commented on in our book, told by Percy Mumbulla and transcribed by Roland Robinson way back in 1958, called ‘The Bunyip’. This story involves a marauding bunyip figure, which (as we say in our reading) turns up unannounced at Percy Mumbulla’s parents’ ‘homestead’ and has what we call an unhomely effect. In Simmel’s terms, the bunyip is a stranger. Percy’s mother and father are, as we note, unsettled by the bunyip’s visit but they also negotiate with this figure (in

‘the language’) and are able to remain in their place (‘at home’). For Ravenscroft, however, we:

install an Aboriginal family at home, in place. This is not any old place, though; for Gelder and Jacobs this is the place of the white man. Gelder and Jacobs call the family’s home a homestead, an extraordinary misnomer, for whoever heard of an Aboriginal family with a homestead?<sup>29</sup>

Ravenscroft then suggests that we compromise the alterity of this Indigenous family to such an extent that we represent them as if they are nothing less than (non-Indigenous) ‘settlers’: dwelling ‘in the homestead’, as she puts it, ‘rather than [for example] on an “Aboriginal settlement”’.<sup>30</sup>

I was interested here in the way that for Ravenscroft Indigenous people can inhabit an ‘Aboriginal settlement’ without being homely or ‘at home’ or (we might even say) ‘in the home’ — putting aside the banal fact that, in the story we are talking about, Percy Mumbulla’s mum and dad are standing *outside* the home when the bunyip visits. Returning to the binary of the sedentary and the nomadic that is so important to nomadology and *Reading the Country*, we might then say that Ravenscroft wants Aboriginal people to be ‘in place’, even *settled*, but not ‘at home’ — a condition she ascribes only to *settlers*. The word *homestead* does, of course, have settler connotations, used in *Reading the Country* only to identify the sheep station on Roebuck Plains. But is this the only connotation it can have? Percy Mumbulla and his parents lived at Wallaga Lake Aboriginal settlement on the south coast of New South Wales. In May 1950, state government records tell us, ‘work commenced on the construction [of] 15 houses for Aboriginal People, a store, recreation hall, school and roads’.<sup>31</sup> Mark McKenna notes that Aboriginal people at Wallaga Lake ‘had ... campaigned for better housing in the 1950s’, writing petitions and so on; these campaigns were relatively successful.<sup>32</sup> We know very well that Aboriginal housing and state intervention have always been intimately entwined, where the boundaries between homeliness and the state (private lives and the public management of those lives) are routinely transgressed. This is another instance of the extroversion of place: someone, rather

like the bunyip in Mumbulla's story, is always turning up and making demands, insisting on a response, asking for hospitality, and not always going away. This is what Peter Read says in the introduction to a collection of essays titled *Settlement: A History of Australian Indigenous Housing* (2000):

A cottage inhabited by an Aboriginal family<sup>33</sup> was less a shelter than an instrument of management, education and control. It is not until, broadly, the entry of the Commonwealth government after the 1967 referendum that Aboriginal housing assumes its more recognisable form of providing shelter, a hearth, a refuge of affection and an armour of security. Many of the subsequent battles were fought over who, in the end, was to control accommodation and shelter.<sup>34</sup>

Helen Ross takes the title of her earlier book, *Just for Living* (1987), from a different perspective on Aboriginal housing, writing: 'While it is useful to know how [Aboriginal] people use, that is, live in, their houses, it is equally important to step back from the housing-centric view of affairs and consider how, even whether, housing plays a role in people's daily and whole lives'.<sup>35</sup> 'For some Aboriginal people', she goes on, 'moving into a house and creating a sense of home there is a major aspiration. For others, the house is more incidental to their lives'.<sup>36</sup>

I certainly do not want to invest in a sense of Indigenous homeliness as some sort of utterly assimilated condition, of the kind that leads Ravenscroft to imply that we talked about this Aboriginal mother and father in the late 1950s as if they were 'settlers': as if (forgetting the entanglement of becoming Indigenous and becoming modern) they were somehow not Indigenous at all. On the other hand, I do want to suggest that in the aftermath of *Reading the Country*—both despite and because of this book's emphasis on nomadology—it has been increasingly possible to conceptualise what might very well have once seemed like nomadology's opposite: that is, Indigenous homeliness and being-at-home. We can remember the colonial racism that thought, as Joseph Banks once did, that Aboriginal people didn't have a sense of land ownership not least because they didn't seem capable of building houses.

Their shelters, Banks observed, were ‘framed with less art or less industry than any habitations of human beings that probably the world can shew’.<sup>37</sup> Following on from a long and violent history of Indigenous dispossession after colonisation, we can also remember the more recent histories of Aboriginal evictions from homes: for example, the 1997 Homeswest eviction of an Aboriginal family in Perth to which Quentin Beresford, among others, has drawn attention.<sup>38</sup> We could also think about what is now called ‘out of home care’ for Indigenous children in state institutions, and what it means *not* to have a sense of being-in-the-home when Indigenous children are institutionalised by the state. And I also think we should not forget the question of nomadology when we think about Indigeneity ‘at home’. In her essay ‘Deleuze and Guattari at Muriel’s Wedding’, Meaghan Morris has reminded us of how these apparently opposite things are in fact folded together: where she reads the chapter *before* the one on nomadology in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, to think precisely about *homeliness*. As she puts it, ‘homeliness follows the drawing of a circle round an “uncertain and fragile centre” ... home is in the middle of things ... neither origin nor destination, home is produced in an effort to organise a “limited space” that is never sealed in, and so it is *not an enclosure but a way of going outside*’.<sup>39</sup> If we think along these lines in particular, then perhaps we can read that image of the bunyip roaring at Percy Mumbulla’s mum and dad as they stand outside their home — or ‘homestead’ — in a way that complicates, rather than flattens, these connections between settlement and unsettlement. And if we think like this, it may help us to consider more adequately — and less dismissively — what it might mean to ‘become Indigenous’ in the kind of ‘limited space’ that could be understood as a home.

### Notes

- 1 *Reading the Country* was reprinted by re.press at the end of 2014, exactly thirty years after the date of its original publication. Stephen Muecke, Krim Benterak and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle; Stephen Muecke, Krim Benterak and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, re.press, Melbourne 2014. In references to this work, page numbers refer to the Fremantle Arts Centre Press edition.

- 2 Muecke, Benterrak and Roe, p. 85.
- 3 Ibid., p. 23.
- 4 Ibid., p. 26).
- 5 Stephen Muecke, 'Visiting Aboriginal Australia', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, pp. 49-54.
- 6 Ibid., p. 49.
- 7 James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013, p. 70.
- 8 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London and New York, Methuen, 1979, p.104.
- 9 Muecke, Benterrak and Roe, pp. 171-2.
- 10 See, for example, Janet C. Myers, *Antipodal England: Emigration and Portable Domesticity in the Victorian Imagination*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 2009.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, London and New York, Continuum, 2004 p. 25.
- 12 See, for example, John K. Noyes, Ronald Bogue and others in a special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, devoted to a discussion of the uses, and usefulness, of nomadology and nomadism.
- 13 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994. p. 16.
- 14 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 36.
- 15 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 155.
- 16 David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 12.
- 17 Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2002, p. 49.
- 18 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Labor's Lot: The Power, History and Culture of Aboriginal Action*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 43.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998.
- 21 John Frow, 'Settlement', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, March 2012. <<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrf/article/view/1611>>
- 22 Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 75.
- 23 Frow, p. 16.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Cited in Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 166.
- 26 Ibid., p. 16.
- 27 Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, 'The Relative Native', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2013, pp. 473-502, p. 477.
- 28 Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, UK, 2012, p. 2.
- 29 Ibid., p. 84.
- 30 Ibid., p. 85.
- 31 'Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Station', NSW Government State Records. <<http://search.records.nsw.gov.au/agencies/4143;jsessionid=220878F8EFEDDA3BA296864F73B80AFE>>
- 32 Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfella's Point: An Australian History of Place*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002, p. 172.

- 33 An observation that might very well prompt Ravenscroft to ask, ‘whoever heard of an Aboriginal family with a cottage?’
- 34 Peter Read, *Settlement: A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2000, p. 1.
- 35 Helen Ross, *Just for Living: Aboriginal Perceptions of Housing in Northwest Australia*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1987, p. 3.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 37 Cited in Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin, ‘Beyond Savagery: The Limits of Australian “Aboriginalism”’, *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, September 2008, p. 148. <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/article/view/2077>
- 38 See also Joan Martin, ‘The Homeswest Incident’, in Joan Martin and Bruce Shaw, *Joan Martin (Yarrna): A Widi Woman*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2011, pp. 145-8.
- 39 Meaghan Morris, ‘Crazy Talk is not Enough: Deleuze and Guattari at Muriel’s Wedding’ in her *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2006, p. 190.



# Nomadology, the Nomad, the Concept

Jon Roffe

There is, in my view, a list of five or six very unfortunate things written or spoken by Gilles Deleuze. Here is one of the most egregious:

Yes, that's what a theory is, exactly like a tool box ...  
A theory has to be used, it has to work. And not just for itself. If there is no one to use it, starting with the theorist himself who, as soon as he uses it ceases to be a theorist, then a theory is worthless, or its time has not yet arrived. You don't go back to a theory, you make new ones, you have others to make. It is strange that Proust, who passes for a pure intellectual, should articulate it so clearly: use my book, he says, like a pair of glasses to view the outside, and if it isn't to your liking, find another pair, or invent your own, and your device will necessarily be a device you can fight with.<sup>1</sup>

This seemingly innocuous, somewhat interesting, passage — from a discussion with Foucault called 'Intellectuals and Power' — has given rise to, or at least underpinned, some of the most depressing, underwhelming and pointless works of 'critical theory' produced in the last thirty years. It has been taken as a licence to engage in a kind of free-form conceptual snatch and grab, where one's favourite object of contemplation can be given rigour through the magical words 'Using the concept of the nomad in Deleuze, I will argue that ...'

More specifically, the problem is that — in the lion's share of cases — the concept is conceived as the manifestation of a particular talismanic power rather than the bearer of specific

intellectual content and theoretical construction. Indeed, for all the talk of challenging the hegemonic status quo, what is kept intact is precisely the *form* of hierarchical authority. This is all made so much worse by the fact that the *content*, the concept itself, tends towards the absolutely arbitrary. Emboldened by this tool-box talk, we use the concepts however we like, ignoring what they were in the first place. In fact, this whole tragicomedy is a game of proper names: the proper names of our (mostly French) masters, the proper names of concepts, and our proper names. The apparent free-form activity of the radical intellectual is nothing other than the marriage of an extreme subservience to institutionalised authority and an extreme self-indulgence close to malignant narcissism. For, at the very least, if we take concepts to be tools without understanding what they are in their singularity, they become, one and all, *clubs*.

The worst examples of this kind of situation are found in the ‘uses’ to which the proper names Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and the names of their concepts—for example, the rhizome, or the nomad—are put. While thinkers smoke the rhizome pipe and rhapsodise about imagined nomadic lines of flight, the university grows more rigid, harder, colder; if possible, even crueller.

I could go on. Now, imagine my surprise when I first read *Reading the Country*, which makes heavy use of French theory, and whose single most prominent concept is that of the nomad and its cognates. For in fact what we find here is the toolbox approach *succeeding*. I don’t want to give the impression that I think *Reading the Country* is the perfect ‘application’ of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept. I do have reservations on a number of points, to say nothing of the fact that the very notion of ‘application’ is part of the problem that Muecke’s approach entirely avoids. However, what we do find here, I think, is a genuine example of what Deleuze and Guattari think theory—really, thinking as such—can and should be like. And it does so with one of the most interesting, complicated, maligned and misused of the many concepts found in the infamous *A Thousand Plateaus*: nomadology.

It does this in three important ways. First of all, the political system of proper names is not given any more

significance than it deserves, which is none. If Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are used, and this is the second point, they are not treated as essential framework into which the particular case of the country and the situation of Australia is slotted. The concepts—entirely in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's own edicts on this situation—are deployed as equal parts of the work (along with paintings, photographs, discussions, and so on), one case of the material composition of the work, rather than as master tropes. Finally, *Reading the Country* succeeds in showing how the concept gains its critical force by simply treating it as what it is: a concept. Here concept is opposed to something like precept or maxim, something I'll come back to at the end of this piece.

In this pause in the flow of invective, I would like to quite briefly reflect on the account of nomadology that is presented in *Reading the Country* (particularly in the final chapter), in light of its success at the level of its deployment.

### The nomad in Deleuze

The social category of the nomad and the nomadic, and its concomitant conception of thought that they call nomadology, is a particular focus of two late chapters in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, the opposition there between nomadic and sedentary is already at issue in Deleuze's earlier work *Difference and Repetition*. He introduces it as one half of a pair of concepts, *nomos* and *logos*, which he contends are concepts pertaining to 'hierarchy and distribution', which is to say, hierarchy and ordering.<sup>2</sup>

The word *nomos* itself, normally translated as 'law', has its roots in the more ancient root *nem*, which describes the pasturing of animals—hence the word *nemo*: 'To take to pasture.'<sup>3</sup> Instead of the land being parcelled up in advance, the sheep were free to wander, giving rise to the organisation of space as a secondary effect rather than presupposing it, as in the modern cattle industries. This is already illuminating, but let me briefly add to it by noting two interrelated characteristics belonging to *logos* and *nomos* respectively.

The first point is specifically organisational. The form of distribution that is governed by *logos* is one that assumes a fixed order of reality to which things can conform or diverge

from. The problem of good organisation — of a life, a city, a community, and so on — is thus one of imposing a rule in a transcendent fashion, without attention to the specificities of what will be brought under the rule. There is a converse form of distribution or organisation proper to *nomos*.

It is not the case, contrary to Badiou's infamous and pseudonymous critique, that the nomadic designates a lack of organisation.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze is very clear on this point: 'The question has always been *organizational*.'<sup>5</sup> In turn, nomadic organisation is not anarchic, but rather eschews the transcendence of a structure or a rule in favour of the dynamic practice of organising.

Let me note in passing the great irony of the common use of the concept of the nomad in the humanities: to the degree that it is deployed as a locus of intellectual authority, transcendent in relation to the material it is 'applied' to, this common use is essentially aligned with *logos* rather than *nomos*. This is ironic, but not in a funny way.

The second point concerns spatiality. Deleuze will align the distribution of *logos* with what he calls 'sedentary space'.<sup>6</sup> Sedentary space is that which is broken up in accordance with the *logos* and its modes of distribution. This is the space of a city map, of an office, but also the stratification of organisational roles, rules governing correct or appropriate discourse and the uses of bodies, and so on. In contrast, *nomadic* space is smooth — which is to say it has no *a priori* structure before it is occupied. 'Here,' Deleuze writes, 'there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute *themselves* in an open space.'<sup>7</sup>

When we turn to *A Thousand Plateaus*, we see the analysis extended more explicitly in the direction of a social analysis. There, they argue that the nomadic is a form of social organisation, one that has no place for fixed social structure. In fact, the point is a stronger one: nomadic societies are actively hostile to the kind of structure deployed by the state. The category of the war machine, which is central to their analysis, expresses in the first instance this hostility, the war machine being nothing but the corrosive capacity of nomadic societies to undo fixed social formations, the state formation in particular. This generalised hostility is true not just in terms

of things like lines of filiation and descent, but is also registered, Deleuze and Guattari argue in divergent conceptions and deployments of science, thinking, weaponry, writing and warfare. Together these features fall under the title of ‘nomadology’, and we find an excellent gloss of this long discussion in ‘Strategic Nomadology: An Introduction’, the penultimate section of *Reading the Country*.

As in *Difference and Repetition*, though, the analysis has a distinctive, even primary, spatial register. In a certain sense, nomadic societies can be characterised as at once evading the state striation of space and constructing a smooth space. This is why Deleuze and Guattari will say: ‘Nomadism is precisely this combination of war-machine and smooth space.’<sup>8</sup> The hostility towards state organisation has as its obverse the practical constitution of a smooth space, in which movement is not to and from fixed places, but instead a generalised condition, a state against the State.

Before continuing, it is important to note that all of these oppositions (smooth/striated, nomadic/sedentary, *nomos*/*logos*) are distinctions in principle. This is to say that in fact we never find a social organisation that is strictly nomadic, just as even the most rigid state organisation nonetheless gives rise to its own ambulatory, peripatetic elements, and its own smooth spaces. There is no place, therefore, to speak of a pure exteriority. As Muecke argues in the excellent ‘Bricolage’ chapter, any assertion that *de facto* absolute oppositions hold is, in reality, a fantasy: ‘Discarding Western clothing does not reduce one to a state of nature.’<sup>9</sup>

### Nomadology in *Reading the Country*

All this brings us to *Reading the Country* proper. I have talked about *how* the concept of the nomad is used, but now a few words about *what* it is used to do. There are quite a lot of things to be said here, but I’ll restrict myself to two.

1. The first important move that Muecke makes (I have hinted at this already) is to realise that *nomad* and *nomadology* designate concepts to be treated on their own terms, rather than descriptive categories to be judged in terms of their adequation to reality. In the words of Ron Bogue: ‘Deleuze and Guattari’s object is not to systematise received anthropological

taxonomies; rather, it is to articulate two tendencies—the nomadic and the sedentary—that have each a certain inner coherence and that manifest themselves in various mixed forms.<sup>10</sup> Muecke was perhaps the first to recognise this, and to anticipate already both the entire debate that would take place about the ‘accuracy’ of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis and its resolution at the level of the concept.

Ultimately, concepts are, for Deleuze and Guattari, to be *used*. It is hard to disagree, therefore, with Muecke’s assessment: “‘nomadology’ is ... an exotic import, from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. How did they see this “empty spindle” being used? No doubt they would welcome its aberrant usage in the Kimberleys.’<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, though, I think we must disagree with another of *Reading the Country*’s assertions, the claim that the book ‘has appropriated nomadology as a metaphor’.<sup>12</sup> The metaphor, as both a rhetorical figure and a mechanism in the circulation of sense, presupposes the state organisation of language, with its hold on the category of the literal, and its regulation of value. Concepts, on the other hand, and with Deleuze and Guattari, are never metaphors, since they function directly at the same level as everything else.

2. I said earlier that there cannot be, in Deleuze and Guattari’s view, a nomadic society in fact and as such, since all such social groups include in them other divergent tendencies too. Paddy Roe recognises this in his discussion of the term ‘nomad’, and it is marked at a number of other points in *Reading the Country*, for example:

while the marauding armies of nomads like Genghis Khan have disappeared, and the conditions for their existence no longer pertain, nomadism as a set of practices still survives in all sorts of ways. Traditional ways of living have a habit of not dying off completely, even when modern society seems to have quite decisively closed the book on the past. They persist as ideas or as practices and even now the ‘progress’ we have made can be measured afresh in their light.<sup>13</sup>

Muecke here marks the fact that this co-implication of nomad and state goes both ways, for processual elements

of nomadism continue to exist in the Australian capitalist state, alongside the other vectors of organisation the terms 'state' and 'capitalism' imply. What is decisive, therefore, is not exactly the postulation of a nomadic social formation, even in principle, but the location of a series of processes and practices that cut against state organisation and give rise to a smooth space: this is precisely what we can understand by the phrase 'Strategic Nomadology'. Muecke presents on this front the excellent example of the *lobby*:

Nomadism has always infiltrated even the heart of government. There is, for instance, the swarming and ambiguous group of the *lobby*—sometimes comprised of members holding state positions, sometimes not, trading in favours and secrets, always mobilised towards specific tasks. The two groups, government and lobby, are dependent on each other for their mutual functioning, yet they are animated by different sorts of *esprit de corps*, they have many characteristics which are opposite. The lobby has 'secret' workings, while government presents public positions.<sup>14</sup>

### The concept as nomad

I would like to conclude by returning to my own proper territory, philosophy. A realisation has slowly dawned on me this week as I reread *Reading the Country*—and, of course, there is no such thing as reading the country, all reading being a rereading, every discovery a rediscovery, every reading always already writing. The realisation is this: that the concept is also a nomad. This is true even though its particular form of state formation and its smooth space are noetic, noological, belonging to thought rather than to the country. The smooth space of thought spreads out now as an heterogenous patchwork of topoi, places, rather than an interior closed volume proper to an individual, not 'in the head'.

The use of a concept can be measured then by the two criterion that belong to the nomadic: its capacity to break with the state of its situation, in the most general sense; and its capacity to engender a smooth space in thought.

What is the state with which *Reading the Country* broke and continues to break? Certainly, the sociopolitical representation of Australia. But also and still a certain academic approach, one that neatly separates out life and reflection, practice and journal articles, since what it makes clear is that to speak, to write and to think happen among and at the same level as reality as such. This in turn is the smooth space that *Reading the Country* constructs.

**'No, I've never talked about the nomad'**

Since I've done nothing much here other than briefly dwell on this surprising conceptual success in *Reading the Country*, and its proximity to Deleuze and Guattari, I might finish by invoking one more thing that elicited not only a shock of recognition but also a loud guffaw. The book includes, of course, a chapter devoted to a kind of retrospective interview, where Muecke and Paddy Roe discuss the term 'nomad' itself, one that Paddy Roe tells us he hasn't heard before.

It reminded me of a line in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, which is devoted in part, as I'm sure you know, to the concept of schizophrenia. In an interview after the book's published, they say that their favourite sentence is this: 'Someone asked us if we had ever seen a schizophrenic — no, no, we have never seen one.'<sup>15</sup> In books, as in social life and every other ensemble of creative practices,<sup>16</sup> including philosophy, 'One does not represent, one engenders and traverses'.<sup>17</sup> I imagined how good it would be to be able to say — no, I have never talked *about* the nomad — certainly never used in philosophical works — while nonetheless being engaged in that lyrical, principled passage of a thinking that never ceases.

**Notes**

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina, semiotext(e), New York, 2004, p. 208.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 36.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 557, n. 51.
- 4 Georges Peyrol [Alain Badiou], 'Le Flux et le parti: dans les marges de L'Anti-Oedipe', *Cahiers Yenan*, no. 4, 1977, pp. 24-31.



- 5 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Athlone Press, London, 1987, p. 145.
- 6 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 36.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 33.
- 9 Krim Benterak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 171.
- 10 Ronald Bogue, 'Apology for Nomadology', *interventions*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, p. 172.
- 11 Benterak, Muecke and Roe, p. 241.
- 12 Ibid., p. 253.
- 13 Ibid., p. 243.
- 14 Ibid., p. 245.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983, p. 380.
- 16 Here I'm paraphrasing *Reading the Country*:  
 How does one find out about nomadism, or understand nomadology?  
 Firstly, there are texts, written or unwritten, from other cultures which pre-date the philosophical texts of Western capitalism. In this sense the ways in which many Australian Aboriginal people speak are free of the categories which articulate Western philosophies. Secondly, there are ways of living which are organised around movement, change and local politics. Then there is the imagination of the writer whose art eschews authority. All of these contribute to the study of nomadism.  
 Benterak, Muecke and Roe, p. 241.
- 17 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 364.

# Spatial Reading, Territorial Signs, and the Clamour of Occupation

Timothy Laurie and Peter Nyhuis Torres

## Introduction

This chapter examines the notion of reading in relation to space and place, and develops an ethics of reading from engagement with Krim Bentrarak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*.<sup>1</sup> In the context of settler colonial Australia, ongoing practices of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the 'logics of white possession' shape the ways that everyday social practices become readable in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories and communities.<sup>2</sup> Settler colonial society teaches non-Indigenous Australians to treat Australian spaces as incapable of sustaining Indigenous bodies and meanings. Among these spaces, public beaches and memorial statues have become particularly charged sites of investment for non-Indigenous communities,<sup>3</sup> but our focus in the latter part of this chapter will be the 'booing' of Australian Rules Football player Adam Goodes, an Andjambathanha and Narungga man, on the racialised space of the football field.

We begin this investigation through an encounter with *Reading the Country*. If we had spotted its spine in a library, we would have guessed that *Reading the Country* offered some comments on the poetics of pastoral landscapes. But then the subtitle, *Introduction to Nomadology*, contained a strong whiff of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Maybe this was a primer on *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)

or a survey of its acolytes. So, which was it: pastorals or philosophy?

Krim, Stephen and Paddy didn't do either of these things—or at least, not quite. They went for a walk. Krim, Stephen and Paddy walk across the Roebuck Plains, lands of the Yawuru people, located near Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Going for a walk is a wonderful way to think about reading: one can pause, meander, backtrack or walk in circles. These walkerly authors proliferate textual forms—essays, songs, photographs, paintings, conversations and a chaos of typesetting styles. The words of Indigenous custodians of country, geologists and anthropologists sit across the page from paintings, photographs and drawings. These are not seats of judgement and these words do not quarrel. Country is powerful enough to draw so many other actors into relation, and to make each readable to the other. The first definition of reading in *Reading the Country* is given as follows:

Reading is not a perfectly natural activity which once mastered becomes automatic. A friend, Ian Hunter, once said that reading was somewhere between *breathing* and *judging*. *Breathing* is an automatic and natural activity most of the time, and *judging*, as in courts or beauty contests, is a highly social activity; it is so charged with social or cultural meaning that there is nothing natural about it. In spite of the years of training taken to achieve fluency in the skill of reading, it is largely taken for granted as an activity which enables one to see the meanings behind words straightaway.<sup>4</sup>

The above quotation belongs to a friend. In the very moment when reading is being defined, and where we would expect the source to be something read, *Reading the Country* offers us something heard. To repeat the operation, Peter Nyhuis Torres once mentioned Ian Hunter's definition of reading to a friend, Justin Clemens, who remarked that breath and judgement could be taken as classical symbols of life and death, respectively. One can give 'the breath of life' or hand down 'the word of judgement', and readings can vacillate

between the two. Reading is intimately bound up with the social and genealogical aspects of cultural inheritance: what sort of reading work is required to keep ancestors in living memory? Or to borrow a phrase used by Muecke, itself borrowed from David Mowaljarlai, how can everything *be kept alive in its place*?<sup>5</sup>

### Critical reading and spatial reading

When making or arranging socially recognised signs, individuals do not control the scope of social meanings that their signs may subsequently produce. Indeed, even those with a professional relationship to sign-making—such as authors or directors—may find their own connections to signs churned by collective processes of re-interpretation. For this reason, many literary critics have learned to become sceptical about reverential attachments toward authors. One dominant expression of this scepticism is known as critique. The Critic identifies a gap between what a text says it is doing and what it is actually doing, such that ‘what a text means lies in what it does not say, which can then be used to rewrite the text in terms of a master code’.<sup>6</sup> Deep social conflicts give rise to signs as surface effects that deceive and obfuscate, like coils of smoke billowing from a fire. Authorial names are surface effects of this sort. *Don’t be fooled by signs*, says the Critic, *the smoke gets in your eyes*.

The public performance of the academic *habitus* in the humanities and social sciences. Affective registers such as joy and relief are often considered less rewarding than indictment and indignation. Unfortunately, like the Hollywood *film noir*, the pursuit of villainous texts often focuses attention on the skills of the detective, rather than on the wellbeing of those most affected by the crime. But there is a further irony here. Rita Felski notes that the contemporary dissatisfaction with the moral piety of the Critic can lead to its own cycles of shaming, such that criticism itself becomes a new object of suspicion. This feels like a suitable *noir* double-cross: it is always possible to show that even the most pious and vigilant Critics may be obfuscating, whether consciously or unconsciously, hidden motives linked to their social and institutional situation. How do we avoid ‘falling back into the

register of explanation-as-accusation, where accounting for the social causes of something serves as a means of downgrading it'?' One exit from this cycle is offered by Paul Ricoeur:

By reading we can prolong and reinforce the suspense that affects the text's reference to a surrounding world and to the audience of speaking subjects: that is the explanatory attitude. But we can also lift the suspense and fulfil the text in present speech. It is this second attitude that is the real aim of reading ... If reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things. To read is, on any hypothesis, to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text.<sup>8</sup>

For Ricoeur, readings follow from the affordances of the text, rather than any 'abstract physical property' of texts. An affordance is an arrangement or assembly of capabilities that allows readers to think and do things. Simone Weil expresses this attitude in the following way:

For the sailor, the experienced captain, whose ship has in a sense become like an extension of his [*sic*] body, the ship is a tool for reading the storm, and he reads it quite differently than the passenger. Where the passenger reads chaos, unlimited danger, fear, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, the means of escape from the storm, a duty to act courageously and honourably.<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur and Weil point toward a generative aspect of reading as the excitation, rather than the extraction, of textual meanings. For Ricoeur, this excitation has an inward aspect: in reading others' texts, we activate our own situations and intentions, in keeping with religious practices of hermeneutical reading. Weil is more closely aligned with cultural studies accounts of readers as doers and makers, wanderers and adventurers. The calling card of cultural studies' early interventions into literary criticism was the valuation of ordinary, everyday and habitual reading practices. Readers of romantic fiction, viewers of television soap operas and shoppers in malls became playful participants in the semiotic games of

authors, directors and architects.<sup>10</sup> This broad shift toward reading as an activity has turned on the meanings attached to the notion of *reception*.

Reception has been a key term for many of those unsatisfied with either reverential or critical approaches to reading texts. But what is a reception? Consider three shared features of two buildings that have receptions: hospitals and hotels. First, the reception is unlike the rest of the building. The reception to a hospital should not display donated organs, and the reception to a hotel should never have a bed. There are meanings specific to transitional thresholds, places of welcome, and the interfaces between insides and outsides (Gerard Genette calls these the ‘paratexts’).<sup>11</sup> Second, the reception is received as it receives us. We must work out which questions to ask and which may be asked of us. Third and most importantly, receptions distribute itineraries, shaping what the building becomes for the person moving through it. Every hotel is many hotels and every hospital is many hospitals. The ideas we form of these spaces involve mixtures of remembering and forgetting, anticipation and disappointment. Like a pedestrian navigating the corridors of an unknown building, readings produce a new map of existing terrain.

The study of reception can restore a sense of reading as a creative and embodied activity. This corporeality is easily lost in the Saussurean tradition of semiology, but can be readily identified both in historical accounts of reading practices, and in contemporary approaches to pedagogy within particular Indigenous Australian communities. Alberto Manguel’s *The History of Reading* imagines ancient Assyrian libraries as a cacophony of very public readings, where the ability to read without making a sound or moving one’s lips was seen as deeply peculiar. Unspaced and unpunctuated manuscripts were read aloud in groups and marks on the page were intended to represent speech sounds like notes on sheet music.<sup>12</sup> Texts were one half of a conversation separated in time and space, and the written letters functioned as prompts for an actor, enabling readers to perform aloud the part of the absent author.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the construction of social worlds around reading that acknowledge the space of reception can be important for developing alternative pedagogies around

reading practices. In a research project around educators in Yolŋu communities of Arnhem Land (located in the north-eastern corner of the Northern Territory), Melodie Bat and Sue Shore describe the significant gap between pedagogical norms promoted by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, and what Bat and Shore call the ‘grey literatures’ (papers, speeches, resentations, reports) that circulate among teachers in remote Aboriginal communities.<sup>14</sup> These literatures include an array of practical pedagogies developed to mediate between *balanda* (European) knowledges and literacies, a compulsory part of primary and secondary curricula, and Yolŋu knowledges and literacies, which ground learning practices in the inherited and living expertise of Aboriginal communities. Bat and Shore draw attention to ‘two-way’ or ‘both-ways’ learning as a means for students to position themselves *vis a vis* contrasting models of education, and cite a spatial figure used by Yolŋu people, that of the Ganma: ‘the lagoon where the salt water and the fresh water intermingle’.<sup>15</sup> Spatial thinking replaces oppositions with immersions. The body knows that fresh water and salt water can mix, and a simple test is to swim in the Ganma. This reorientation toward the materiality of knowledge as divided *without hierarchy* can perform important work in teaching spaces:

Water is often taken to represent knowledge in Yolŋu Philosophy. What we see happening in the school is a process of knowledge production where we have two different cultures, Balanda and Yolŋu, working together. Both cultures need to be presented in a way where each one is preserved and respected.<sup>16</sup>

The work of reading, either alone or with others, involves imagining the space one moves through when opening the text ‘out onto other things’, as Ricoeur earlier suggested. Spatial imaginaries offer resources *walking around* the metaphysical logics of identity and opposition. Seemingly incompatible categories — hot and cold, modernity and tradition, death and life — can be rearticulated as aboves and belows, heres and theres, nows and laters. Space always happens in the in-between. Travellers know that even the horizon, which

appears to bind space in every direction, is just another space in-between other horizons.

In *Reading the Country*, Paddy Roe reads the country by moving through it—his reception is immediately an itinerary. Roe points out the spot where the *yungurugu* was driven out by a *maban*,<sup>17</sup> or where a woman turned into a hill and the men who tried to touch her turned into the brolgas now pecking at the ground.<sup>18</sup> Roebuck Plains works as a kind of memory palace, with intellectual treasures stored away in its folds.<sup>19</sup> Land remembers its histories and provides an organic architecture for thinking through past events. Pursuing a similar trajectory, educator Coral Oomera Edwards enjoys children to develop friendly relations with the places they inhabit, to address a favoured campsite on approach ('Hello, only us mob coming up, OK if we camp here again?') or introduce themselves to their new classroom at the start of the school year ('Hello, my name is Timmy, is it OK if I spend a year with you here?').<sup>20</sup> Children treat country as a dear relative, paying visits, making sure it's healthy and trying to work out what it's been up to lately. Edwards proposes simple rituals for the children: 'to perform a little ceremony, to change each time they enter a place, to modify their behaviour at the threshold'.<sup>21</sup> If stories are remembered through the places they inhabit, custodianship of a text hangs crucially on custodianship of country, and a narrative which unfolds across many places—such as one about travelling mythological beings—require telling by many speakers.<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with the lively orientation of *Reading the Country*, we have written about empowering and creative emplacements of reading. But there can also be a violence to place-making, and to the imposition of territorial signs upon places with pre-existing meanings. 'For the nomad,' write the authors of *Reading the Country*, 'Australia is still not divided into eight "states" or territories, it is crisscrossed with tracks. The smooth space of these invisible and secret tracks has been violently assaulted by the public chequerboard grid of the states.'<sup>23</sup> Colonists in Australia have not simply claimed pre-existing territorial formations for their own; they have also attempted to destroy nomadic modes of organisation and mobility, and to re-territorialise space in ways that



accommodate distinctly European practices of state-based governance.<sup>24</sup> In the European construction of ‘Melbourne’, for example, the ‘street grid was a disciplining spatial formation vital to the colonizing process’.<sup>25</sup>

The racialised management and appropriation of spaces continues to profoundly shape Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal capacities for movement through country. For example, in the wake of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act in 2007 (also known as the Northern Territory Intervention), the Australian government’s legalised co-option of Aboriginal lands for mining interests pushed dispossessed Aboriginal people into townships and rural centres such as Darwin and Alice Springs. Displaced people faced a choice: either become permanently mobile to slip past the nets of vagrancy laws or navigate highly discriminatory housing markets.<sup>26</sup> Aboriginal presence on ancestral land was disparaged as an unnecessary ‘lifestyle choice’ in 2015 by then Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott,<sup>27</sup> and in Western Australia, several sacred sites (including the Burrup Peninsula and Murujuga on the Dampier Archipelago) have been deregistered from official heritage status because they are not visited more than once a year, or so the state government claims.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous communities in Western Australia also continue to face housing policies and policing practices that enforce a White Australian understanding of the absolute differences between ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘non-Aboriginal’ space, and between ‘traditional’ itinerant peoples and ‘modern’ settler communities.<sup>29</sup> The quotidian exercise of spatial violence to police Indigenous bodies provides the backdrop for more spectacular acts of settler violence, such as the destruction of the Oombulgurri Community in the eastern Kimberley.<sup>30</sup> In the final section of this chapter, we want to examine the ways that one highly visible space in Australia has come to be read as a ‘non-Indigenous’ space, and how this reading produces Indigenous bodies as out-of-place. This space is the football field.

### **The clamour of occupation**

*Reading the Country* does not offer a critical theory of racial politics, but it does tell us a great deal about practices of place-making and the circumstances through which ‘race’ acquires

social and geographical meanings. The distinction between nomadic organisation and colonial organisation, for example, allows a distinction between the participatory, inclusive and spiritual connections to country often formed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the possessive, exclusive and accumulative modes of land ownership associated with British colonisation. In contrast to the metropolitan 'distribution of things in parallel lines', the 'nomad does not try to appropriate the territory, there is no sense of enclosing it and measuring it as did the early surveyors'.<sup>31</sup> However, *Reading the Country* avoids characterising nomadism in terms of cultural holism, for this would still presume that 'whole races or communities can be designated or defined as being of a certain sort'.<sup>32</sup> Nomadism might better be understood as a 'counter-strategy' that can be linked to 'any struggle for survival'.<sup>33</sup> Here, Benterrak, Muecke and Roe introduce a further twist: there is a nomadism peculiar to the state. For example, the political *lobby* trades in 'favours and secrets, always mobilised towards specific tasks', and rather than establishing a clear hierarchy through territorial markings, the lobby 'works with a secret solidarity, a fraternity in which each person is on the same level, and which can go underground at any time'.<sup>34</sup> Racialisation in Australia may take place within the territorial frames of the colonial state, but its itineraries of communication may more closely resemble the 'horizontal' and 'dispersed' movements of the lobby.<sup>35</sup> The ostracisation of Australian Football League (AFL) player Adam Goodes provides an example of a nomadic practice that sustains, but does not coincide neatly with, the racial organisation of the settler colonial state.

AFL shares its history between Gaelic football and an Australian Indigenous game *Marngrook* belonging to the Gunditjmarra people from Western Victoria, and it currently has significant involvement from Indigenous players around Australia.<sup>36</sup> Adam Goodes is an Andjmathanha and Narungga man who belongs to a family marked by the history of Australia's Stolen Generations and has been a player for the Sydney Swans since 1999.<sup>37</sup> He has also been awarded the Brownlow Medal (for fairest and best player) twice, and was the 2014 Australian of the Year. In a 2013 match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), a 13-year old Collingwood

supporter called Goodes an ‘ape’ from the sidelines, and Goodes requested she be removed from the stadium. After this, a bristle of backlash followed. Merely days later, prominent Australian media personality and president of the Collingwood football team, Eddie McGuire, suggested on radio that Goodes might be useful in promotions for a King Kong production. Behind the apologies and press conferences that followed came a creeping noise of discontent fuelled by tabloid pieces about political correctness run amok. Then came the boo.

In May 2015, after kicking a goal to cap off a devastating win against Melbourne-based team Carlton at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG), Goodes performed a war dance. He moved in a syncopated stride toward the field barrier and completed the gesture by emulating the throwing of a boomerang. The move was developed for an underage Indigenous AFL squad the Flying Boomerangs, and intended to signal the notions of ‘strong’, ‘fast’ and ‘hunting’.<sup>38</sup> Indigenous bodies are rarely seen in absolute control of a public space on Australian television, and some Australian viewers read Goodes’s athletic body as expressing confidence, drama and humour. Among those Carlton fans initially caught on camera, some were laughing—and many continued jeering. One energetic participant leant against the barricades to extend a stream of abuse at Goodes. Goodes was quickly scolded by Eddie McGuire for ‘running straight towards a group of fans in an aggressive manner’ and for not giving fans ample ‘warning’.<sup>39</sup> (We should note in passing that it is not uncommon for those who make territorial claims to exaggerate their own vulnerability, in order to represent ‘difference’ as a sign of aggression from without.)<sup>40</sup> In the following games the abuse acquired a more global dimension. Each time Goodes touched the ball the ‘ooo’ would surge. The boo transcended player rivalries, team rivalries, metropolitan rivalries. Despite strong defence of Goodes from senior AFL spokespeople, the boo continued. In an interview, Goodes asked, ‘If we’re telling our people out there that you can’t represent your culture or represent where you come from, in around specifically acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, what are we saying?’<sup>41</sup> Goodes took leave in August 2015, and when he returned, the boo rebooted. ‘To Adam’s ears,’ wrote Wiradjuri journalist

Stan Grant, ‘the ears of so many Indigenous people, these boos are a howl of humiliation. A howl that echoes across two centuries of invasion, dispossession and suffering.’<sup>42</sup>

The boo was a clamour of occupation that posited Aboriginality as the problem and its disappearance as the solution. This was not without precedent. In the 1990s, Indigenous footballers Nicky Winmar and Michael Long both experienced racial abuse from other players and fans, leading eventually to an anti-racism clause built into the AFL Vilification and Discrimination Policy. Such clauses are ill equipped to tackle the white noise of the anonymous boo. Reflecting on the earlier Winmar and Long incidents, David McNeill notes ‘Aboriginal footballers who have the courage to speak out against racism on the football field ... are somehow guilty of a kind of ingratitude’.<sup>43</sup> Rather than confirming the myth of meritocracy by embodying the ‘role model’ who has overcome prejudice and obstacles to success, Goodes directly invoked his Andyamathanha and Narungga identities and made visible the political contest over space and sovereignty in Australia. One person Tweeted: ‘My dislike of #AdamGoodes has nothing to do with his race, it has to do with his attitude and his sense of entitlement.’<sup>44</sup> Goodes could no longer be read, by non-Indigenous audiences, as a mere asset to a domain safely possessed by white Australia. Goodes’ boomerang throw invited a re-reading of the football field as an Indigenous space—or, perhaps more precisely, as a space, which Indigenous communities may inhabit as sovereign agents not beholden to approval from non-Indigenous Australians.

We seem to have detoured from the consideration of specific places invited by *Reading the Country*. Discussion of Goodes’ symbolic significance elides the differences between football stadiums and audiences—the Melbourne Cricket Ground, the Brisbane Cricket Ground (also known as the Gabba), Perth Stadium, and so on. Sporting grounds are not neutral spaces in Australia; in many cases, they have been built in spaces previously used for gatherings by Indigenous communities.<sup>45</sup> But *Reading the Country* also points toward the logic of space introduced by the state. The ‘public chequerboard grid of the states’ fabricates an isomorphism between places. To read the booing crowd is to leap across synchronic spaces flung across

the continent. The boo is relayed from city to city as boopers in Melbourne become boopers in Perth become boopers in Brisbane. The culmination of such relays is what Ghassan Hage calls the fantasy of a national space.<sup>46</sup> Nationalists come to experience discrete practices as metonymic for national belonging or national governance, and the persons who move into these national spaces are treated as objects to be governed by a national will.<sup>47</sup> In this context, consider this description of crowds given in *Reading the Country* and drawn from Elias Canetti:

[The crowd] had a power beyond that of its individual members and a logic of movement (sticking together and ‘swarming’) which *can get things done* in ways which overthrow ‘proper channels’ and ‘standard procedures.’ The collective will of a crowd demonstrates its symbolic right to occupy a space in which to live...<sup>48</sup>

The booing of Adam Goodes expressed a violence of settler colonial occupancy oriented toward a national scene. By walling the football stadium with noise, boopers told the successful Indigenous man ‘to stay in his place’.<sup>49</sup>

The crowd appears to be opposed to the lobby group. The crowd gathers in public, and works through disorderly movements of mimicry, affinity, and fleeting sentiment. By contrast, the lobby produces serial effects in private spaces through favours, debts, and alliances. But these two movements can coincide. When *Reading the Country* identifies a nomadism in the state, it points toward a mixture of two distinct orders of power: a state that seeks to measure, distribute and govern, and an unwieldy formation of interest groups that churn through the state with anti-state tactics. By invoking the lobby group as a nomadism within the state, *Reading the Country* points toward a mode of disorderly violence that nevertheless contributes toward, and aligns itself with, the orderly violence of the state itself. The serial techniques of the lobby group, its tactical gossip and its hidden fraternities, can produce thresholds of action without claiming a leader or purpose. Boopers would regularly claim an individual dislike for Goodes, but never claim belonging to a political project. The booing of Adam Goodes was a systemic practice of serialised violence that

operated through the disavowal of its serial character. Power can work by multiplying the spaces available for not-knowing and extending one's alliances to other not-knowers. The booing of Adam Goodes involved a lobby of not-knowers to complete the nationalist project of keeping Indigenous bodies 'in their place'. In relation to Goodes's dance, Eddie McGuire stated that '[we've] never seen that [celebration] before and I don't think we ever want to see it again to be perfectly honest, *regardless of what it is.*'<sup>50</sup> How often will the same speaker who desires not to know later cry that 'we did not know'?<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

What use is the concept of reading? How do we decide which things are readable and which are not? We have drawn on *Reading the Country* as an invitation toward reading as a spatial practice. Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe enjoin us to trace the movement of signs as lively expressions of place-based histories. We have suggested some of the intellectual and political potential of Indigenous Australian concepts of country in treating space as kin, friend, interlocutor and historical archive. At the same time, the cultural politics of place involves a struggle over the signs of political identity and intentionality. 'I'm not reading you', says the boomer in the football stadium, 'so don't read me.' Scholars are well-equipped to read the ideologies of power, but we are often less prepared for cacophony, confusion and noise.<sup>52</sup> By 'introducing' nomadology as a complex interplay between nomadic space and the space of the state, *Reading the Country* points toward the combination of powers that produce the clamour of occupation. Noise is simply one way to silence the voices and bodies that call into question that occupation.

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# Reading Transhistorical Performances: *No Sugar* (1984), *Holy Day* (2001) and *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu [Wrong Skin]* (2010)

Denise Varney

Over thirty years ago, I saw a performance of the Australian Indigenous-authored play *No Sugar* (1986) in the cold bluestone-walled basement of Fitzroy Town Hall in inner-city Melbourne. The play was written by poet, playwright and political activist Jack Davis (1917–2000) and first performed at the Festival of Perth in February 1985. The play and its early performances share a timeframe with the publication of *Reading the Country*, although that is not to say they were connected. The play is set in the past, in 1929, and across spaces that Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as striated rather than nomadic. The action marks out lines that join a police station, a mission, government offices, clearings and a railway line. These are lines on country marked out and governed by the colonial apparatus. Yet *No Sugar* and *Reading the Country* can be said to share a history and a moment of intellectual and creative breakthrough which saw Indigenous perspectives and knowledge disrupt the surface of postcolonial Australia. Representing different time and space, but united on the margins of culture, both offer decentred ways of seeing and thinking. The representation of the Moore River Native Settlement in the southwest was far away from the openness of the Roebuck Plains in the northwest, captured in *Reading the Country*, but they both paved the way for radical changes

such as the Mabo Decision and the continuing renewal and circulation of Indigenous knowledge.

In this article, I re-consider Jack Davis's groundbreaking intervention in the 1980s into the cultural dominance of the European perspective and the associated nexus between settler or European drama and realism in the field of Australian theatre and performance. I then discuss the millennial drama, *Holy Day* (2001) by Andrew Bovell, which appeared in the midst of the Reconciliation movement and Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to acknowledge the dispossession and suffering of Aboriginal peoples as a consequence of British colonisation. I then trace Jack Davis's influence through to *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu (Wrong Skin)*, a performance devised and performed in 2010 by Yolngu youth from Elcho Island in the Northern Territory.

### **No Sugar (1986)**

Journalist Frank Devine noted in a tribute in *The Australian* shortly after Davis's death at the age of 83 that *No Sugar* was 'one of the plays on which the curtain never falls in the theatre of memory'.<sup>1</sup> My experience of seeing the performance at the Fitzroy Town Hall was unforgettable and to this day I can place myself in my seat and replay fragments of the performance. This was due to the play's visceral recreation of the brutality of the Moore River Mission in Western Australia but also the palpable spatial experience for performer and spectator of being enclosed in the Fitzroy Town Hall basement. It was an embodied, affective feeling of imprisonment and violence. The sound of heavy police boots on the wooden floor, and the threat of the whip produced automatic flinching and a sense of alert wariness for what was to come.

The Moore River Mission was run by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, the hated A.O. Neville, initiator of the child removals that continued until the 1970s as reported in *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997).<sup>2</sup> The actor playing Neville wore his double-breasted suit as a robe of power and ensured he stood over rather than beside or among people. The play is structured in three acts with several scenic changes

across different locations marked out and illuminated in the cavernous town hall basement. There was a large Indigenous and non-Indigenous cast with Davis unflinchingly using racist names such as Topsy and Black Tracker and with dialogue in local languages. The narrative follows an extended family, the Mundays and the Millimurras, as they eke out a refugee life on the Government Well Aboriginal Reserve in Northam. The families are dependent on government rations and must adopt the deferential demeanour of the receiver in relation to the all-powerful giver. Along with the references to loss of land, working without wages and massacres is the reassertion of knowledge to do with culture, land and totems. There are recognised Song Men, Dance Men and Dreamtime stories. In one sequence in Act 2, the men paint up for a corroboree and a fire is built. Jimmy Munday sings his grandfather's song in language that is translated as a song that sings for 'the *karra*, you know, crabs, to come up the river and for the fish to jump up high so he can catch them in the fish traps'.<sup>3</sup> This is followed by a dance sequence:

[JIMMY, JOE and SAM laugh. SAM jumps to his feet with the clapsticks.]

SAM: This one *yahllarah!* Everybody! *Yahllarah!*

[He starts a rhythm on the clapsticks. BLUEY plays didgeridoo. JIMMY and then JOE, join him dancing.]

Come on! Come on!

[He picks up inji sticks. The Nyoongahs, SAM, JIMMY and JOE, dance with them. BILLY joins in. They dance with increasing speed and energy, stamping their feet, whirling in front of the fire, their bodies appearing and disappearing as the paint catches the firelight. The dance becomes faster and more frantic until finally SAM lets out a yell and they collapse, dropping back to their positions around the fire. JIMMY coughs and pants painfully.]<sup>4</sup>

The dance interlude not only interrupts the realist dramatic action but injects a different energy and bodily way of being into the performance that contrasts with the imposed demeanour of the colonial subject.

Theatre scholar Marc Maufort writes that in the 1980s Jack Davis established ‘the formal and thematic standards of the fledgling genre of Aboriginal drama’, which notably questioned the foundations of European rationalism with the forging of ‘a syncretic style fusing Western realism and Aboriginal myth’.<sup>5</sup> Christopher Balme reads this syncretic style, also referred to as hybridity, as integral to Indigenous drama.<sup>6</sup> In acknowledging Davis’s contribution to Indigenous theatre and drama, director Wesley Enoch writes that his work ‘inspired and trained us and showed us the potential of theatre to cross our traditional storytelling with our contemporary lives’.<sup>7</sup> This syncretic style arrives at stunning new forms of Indigenous musical theatre in *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* [*Wrong Skin*]. But before moving onto that performance, I want to compare these performances with a non-Indigenous authored play that sits historically midway between the two at the turn of the millennium.

### ***Holy Day* (2001)**

In the early 2000s, John Howard’s Liberal-National Coalition government refused to apologise for the suffering of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children, who were forcibly separated from family and country. In the face of an unrelenting prime minister, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation organised the Corroboree 2000 Bridge Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge to raise public awareness of the cultural politics of colonisation. In the theatre, dramatists and theatre makers such as Wesley Enoch, Jane Harrison, Scott Rankin and Dallas Winmar honoured the Davis legacy by interrogating the representation of settler violence and the suffering of Aboriginal peoples. Andrew Bovell’s *Holy Day* (2001), a play about colonial violence, grew out of this period but adds a non-Indigenous voice to the growing body of dramatic literature re-examining Australian history. Bovell’s play is a historical drama set in the nineteenth century focusing on European settlement and the Frontier Wars. It was first

performed at The Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre in 2001 in a production directed by Rosalba Clemente and with Rachael Maza and Melodie Reynolds as the two Aboriginal women, Linda and Obedience.

*Holy Day* presents European settlement as a lawless place ‘six days ride to the nearest law’.<sup>8</sup> As with many non-Indigenous authored and directed colonial themed plays, it begins with early nineteenth-century settlers experiencing hardship and alienation in the colony. The play’s perspective is white but it increasingly highlights the perpetration of a reign of terror in which settlers massacre an Indigenous community and brutalise the young. The staging of abject horror and cruelty produces a shock aesthetic that seeks to distance the play from the secrecy surrounding official versions of colonisation.

In the opening scene, Elizabeth Wilkes, a Christian missionary’s widow, stands on stage with the sound of thunder rumbling in the distance expressing a sense of abandonment in a place far away from God, England and the rhythms of Christian Holy Days. Her words are cryptic but inscribed with enough Christian fundamentalism to present a picture of righteous fanaticism: ‘Do my justice, Lord, and fight my fight against a faithless people’; she goes on to imagine the day when: ‘I will go to the altar of God. Then I shall eat of His body and drink of His blood, the blood of my gladness and joy ...’.<sup>9</sup> The incantation is followed by a gunshot and more thunder. It later unfolds that she has burnt down her husband’s church and, as she anticipated, he has shot himself in despair. She then makes the claim that her child has been taken. The gothic constellation of thunder, gunshots, the burning church and the lost child takes the play into realm of the white colonial imaginary. As this schema dictates, the nearest Indigenous woman, Linda, will be assumed to have taken the child. But Bovell unsettles the white myth by continually refocusing suspicion back onto the white woman. There is more to the story of the missing child. Nora, the only other white woman in the area, and the owner of the Traveller’s Rest, a shack for grog and sex, offers two explanations: that a postpartum mother full of melancholia might leave her child out in the scrub ‘for the dingoes to steal away’;<sup>10</sup> or, intuiting that her husband, the pastor, has had a furtive sexual liaison

with the woman Linda, she is mad enough to kill the child and burn the church in revenge. The settlers, however, have their excuse to commit massacre. Aimed at the settler community of 2001 in the Howard era, the play paints colonial society as a lurid spectacle of violence beyond the boundaries of law, morality and humanity. Whether *Holy Day* produces a spectacle of violence that confronts but does not advance a case for reparative justice is the key critical dilemma of the play.

The white frontier is represented as the antithesis of the heroic founding of a nation. Fearful settlers maintain their precarious holdings; women are driven to kill their young. Beyond is the nebulous region referred to by settlers as the 'bush' where a deterritorialised Indigenous community has regrouped to witness the laughable if not tragic attempts to build fences and introduce sheep.<sup>11</sup> The presence of the Indigenous gaze from the bush invites contemplation of a series of inversions that upset the conventional hierarchy of settler and native. Settlers feel the presence of 'moving shadows',<sup>12</sup> while for the Indigenous community 'white men on horses' are the harbingers of violent death.<sup>13</sup> The Indigenous gaze challenges the settler view that the frontier is far away from judgement and retribution, and that there will be no memory of the events that take place.

If Elizabeth represents the classical Medea, the stranger driven to kill her child to avenge an unfaithful husband, the final scene takes the audience into Shakespearean tragedy. Obedience, the slave-named stolen Indigenous girl adopted by the Irish woman, is raped by a violent ex-convict, Nathaniel Goundry, who cuts out her tongue. As with Lavinia in the tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, the violence occurs off stage. The final image is of Obedience facing the audience with '*her mouth bleeding, her stare vacant*'.<sup>14</sup>

As a counterpoint to the bleeding Indigenous girl, the performance complicates its expression of colonial morality with further instance of settler violence towards its own young. Goundry, the violent ex-convict, has abducted and enslaved a blond-haired, 16-year-old boy, Edward Cornelius, whose tongue he has mutilated. The boy's experience thus parallels that of Obedience, whom he befriends and loves. Towards the end of the drama, station owner Thomas Wakefield advises

a traveller to avert his gaze from visions that will haunt his waking mind. Non-Indigenous audiences of *Holy Day* are called on to hold their gaze and critically respond to history that can ‘bleed’ through modern drama and leave its stain on the present.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, *Holy Day*, like many non-Indigenous authored plays about the past, represents that which Scott Rankin, creative director of Big hART, recently described as ‘a double wounding’.<sup>16</sup> This occurs when a white-made theatre piece represents the tragedy of European invasion and settlement and in doing so asks Indigenous performers to replay the role of victim, of the marginal character or the wounded object of the stage action. It also risks reducing suffering to voyeuristic spectacle. The play and its performance work on an aesthetics of brutality, directed at shocking a non-Indigenous audience, including politicians and policy makers, and disrupting the history of white settlement. The problem is that performers Rachael Maza and Melodie Reynolds remain fixed in time as vehicles for the education of the other rather than as agents of their own artistic expression. The performance stages the unresolved, and largely irreconcilable representation of colonisation through the European dramatic form.

### *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu [Wrong Skin] (2010)*

*Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu [Wrong Skin]* represents what Rankin refers to as ‘indigenous cultural strength’ and how ‘remarkable men and women [are] saving languages and cultures’.<sup>17</sup> The use of song and dance in recent Indigenous theatre marks a turning away from European models of dramatic realism and a preference for combining local cultures with popular media forms sourced from around the world to create joyous assertions of cultural survival. Following the critical acclaim of the stage and screen versions of Jimmy Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae*, engagement beyond the borders of European Australian culture can be seen in two recent Indigenous works. Tony Briggs’s *The Sapphires*, which tells the story of an Indigenous ‘Motown’ singing group that entertains the troops in Vietnam in the late 1960s, was originally staged at the 2010 Adelaide Festival, and then adapted for film in 2012. *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu [Wrong Skin]* is a multi-modal theatrical performance written



and directed by British-born Nigel Jamieson in association with movement director Gavin Robins, Elcho Island community and cultural liaison director, Joshua Bond, and film and video designer, Scott Anderson.<sup>18</sup> Made on the island in a collaboration between Nigel Jamieson and members of the Yolngu community, *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* [*Wrong Skin*] celebrates, but also historicises, the lived present of young islander men and women.

Central to the performance are the Chooky Dancers, a group of young Yolngu men from Elcho Island who in 2007 posted a parody of the ‘*Zorba the Greek*’ dance on YouTube, attracting a global audience of over 1.5 million viewers. Unlike a dance ceremony performed at large gatherings, where it is connected to song cycles that include Dreamtime stories, ‘*Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style*’ is more in the tradition of community entertainment. It is a lively, parodic synthesis of popular Greek and traditional Aboriginal dance combined with contemporary African-American hip-hop influences. The dance was originally performed by Anthony Quinn and Alan Bates in the film *Zorba the Greek* (1964). In the live performance and on YouTube, the Chooky Zorba is performed by nine young male dancers, who form a square grid formation rather than the arms-around-shoulder hold of the original. Their bodies are painted and they wear colourful loin cloths. Their feet are bare. The dancers move forwards and sideways to the music using arms and legs alternately, giving increasing emphasis to the steps as the music picks up pace. The dance displays a complex choreography involving synchronised movement, half turns, slides and athletic flexibility. There is much humour in the timing, in the ways the dancers extend or hold a formation and then break free from it. Where the Mexican-American Quinn and English Bates project iconic Greekness in the use of shoulder-to-shoulder movement, raised arms and finger clicking, the Chooky Dancers stomp and turn in a fusion of Indigenous dance and hip-hop, and remain straight-faced throughout.

The dance breaks up the performed monoculturalism of the original while blending and splicing in diverse movements without losing the Zorba rhythm. The dancers can be said to find new links in the form of fluent articulations between

Indigenous and European movement repertoires while emphasising the parodic element of the performance and their own virtuosity, discipline and inventiveness. As I have written in an earlier piece on this dance, it is a compelling example of ‘Indigeneity ... resignif[ing] European culture, asserting the performative power of the new version and celebrating the pleasure and freedom of the fluidity of movement, music, creativity and virtuosity.’<sup>19</sup> Looking at the performance on YouTube again, now with over two million hits, its power over time, space and the medium of dance expands rather than diminishes with repetition. We see how bodies draw and dissolve lines and circles on the ground in embodied gestures of connection to country.

Thirty years on from Jack Davis’s *No Sugar*, *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* features the talented, young and fit Chooky Dancers, whose theatre has moved to main city stages away from the basement of the Fitzroy Town Hall. The flow of digital cinematic and video imagery into the space of local culture and performance suggests the formation of youthful ‘Yolngu’ culture. Where Homi Bhaba suggests that colonised subjects use mimicry to unsettle the artistic domination of the Western canon, the Chooky dancers’s expanded field is a parody of both global popular culture and European fine arts. Here the frame of reference extends beyond the colonial footprint to identify with global popular cultures as a release from the narrative frameworks and characters of spoken European drama. Of significance, therefore, is that the dance performances involve not only the integration of modern digital technology into performance, but also the reaffirmation of local myth and tradition. The ‘ambivalence of mimicry’, Bhaba’s term for the desire for and threat of incorporation into the dominant colonial paradigm, is less palpable in the face of multiple lines of influence converging and transforming on the bodies of the dancers.<sup>20</sup>

Among the many adaptations that make up *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* is the romance narrative from *Romeo and Juliet* as experienced through the movie version of the musical *West Side Story*, featuring a stunning reworking of Anita’s song ‘I Want to Live in America’. Lead Chooky dancer, Lionel Dhulmanawuy, and actor, Rarriwuy Hick, play the

lovers. Their elopement in Arnhem Land transposes Venetian and Puerto Rican families and gangs into an allegory of the spiritual, moral and abstract power of kinship law. Here a lesson on kinship and modern global culture are continuous rather than opposed in a way that rejects the linearity of conventional history and its categorisation of time.

For all its playful adaptation and parody, *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* performs important community work that simultaneously engages with young performers and dramatises themes of kinship within the wider project of land rights and self-determination. The emphasis on kinship in *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* and other recent works of Indigenous drama such as Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *Seven Stages of Grieving*, first performed in 1995, and Dallas Winmar's *Yibiyung* from 2008 can be understood as timely response to the politics of land rights as well as the pressures of modernity as much as if not more than attachments to tradition.

### Conclusion

To conclude, I turn to the different kinds of audience responses the performances might create. Andrew Bovell's characterisation of the violent and abusive ex-convict, Nathaniel Goundry, and his brutalised wounded teenage victims fills out the details of what we have come to identify as Australia's secret history, demonstrating the particularity of the violence of colonisation as it affected individuals and families. Goundry stands for the European consumed by power and desire committing acts of cruelty; he is a depised product of modern Australian drama. He takes the audience, and the performers, into the zone of horror in a work that puts pressure on John Howard and others who resile from the recognition of the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples. *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* affirms Indigenous cultural strength while recognising the pressures of modernity on communities in the wider Northern Territory context. The performance 'argues' that young Yolngu men operate within a complex network of new modernities that impact on identity formation and cultural capital but they survive through being grounded in intergenerational relationships and connection

to country. Having acquired expanded identities as dancers, minor global celebrities, and embodiments of the capitalised signifier ‘Chooky Dancers’, the performance celebrates the links between an island culture and mainland Australia; remote Indigenous community and global culture; and pre-settler, customary, pre-modern Australia and new forms of theatre. Jack Davis’s play, first staged over thirty years ago, initiated formal innovations that continue to produce radical new extensions of the repertoire of Australian theatre and performance.

### Notes

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- 2 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Canberra, April 1997, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-preliminary#down>
- 3 Jack Davis, *No Sugar*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1988, p. 65-66.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 5 Marc Maufort, ‘Unsettling Narratives: Subversive Mimicry in Australian Aboriginal Solo Performance Pieces’, *Antipodes*, vol. 14, no. 2, December 2000, pp. 105-110, p. 105.
- 6 Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999, p. 13.
- 7 Wesley Enoch, ‘Davis’s Legacy Lives On’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March 2000, p. 14.
- 8 Andrew Bovell, *Holy Day*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 25.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 66; italics denote the stage direction.
- 15 Elin Diamond, ‘Modem Drama/Modernity’s Drama’, *Modern Drama*, ed. Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins and W.B. Worthen, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, pp. 3-15, p. 11.
- 16 Andrew Stephens, ‘Melbourne Festival 2014: Indigenous Community uses Theatre to Heal Old Wounds’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 2015.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Denise Varney, ‘New and Liquid Modernities in the Regions of Australia: Reading Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu Wrong Skin’, *Australasian Drama Studies*, vol. 58, 2011, pp. 212-27.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- 20 Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 129.

# Poems

## Michael Farrell

### C.O.U.N.T.R.Y

You feel this way, kind of free when you lie down

---

I've seen it, the cocking head, the dipping branch, but now  
I'm thinking of something else. The long drawn  
Out day. The novelty of peaches in  
A new form. Savour the bird's body language, you may need  
It to recognise yourself later. Like water, your head empties  
slowly  
Of melody (though not music) and you find yourself alone - but  
In a kind of love. The cow stretches her neck as  
If to scratch it on the rough air

---

You become milder, watching her, finally letting the march  
fly bite  
& then crushing it with a hand. 'What did I cook?

---

Chops a la Brisbane.' I heard, but looked at you like  
You're a jackass. To run as if your brain's an egg  
In the heat. The grass deep and delicately iced with petals

---

The woman identified the noodles. She was  
A grandmother now, cooking them for her plastic surgeon  
grandson. The  
True way to do it, she said, was

Under the blue light of the sky till  
You could see the moon  
In them. But her grandson would never be home  
In the daytime so she compromised. The bookshop next door  
caught  
Fire and the poets ran for their lives. They won't rebuild  
In a hurry she thought. Unlikely. Her grandson put  
On his red shirt that made him look like  
A detail from Caravaggio or  
A hundred kangaroo paws. The law differs. You see the plane  
Appear to pause. You bring it across the sky with  
Your mind. Two planes on the ground like insects without  
appetites

-----  
Behind the border, the look of things meant judgment was  
unstable  
-----

You could only report, and remember that  
Others were doing the same  
On the land that took horse's bones bigger than anything  
It remembered for thousands of years. A jay is tougher than  
A magpie. A magpie does the rounds  
Of the bus stops where the crows don't go. They sound  
Sweeter but are equally daggy in their daily activities with only  
A beak and no bag to put  
Over their wing. The leaves crackle like Christmas beetles  
& someone runs past in a cloak. Your body changes as  
Your mouth forms new words. You use a milk carton to  
Explain about the university you went to. Your great love was  
A Perth smoothie who rode a dugite. In their eyes  
A wall of surf. It made you social, like conceptual  
Art  
-----

There were so many waves. Our eyes are gloppy archives  
& seeing a man on a train blow gently on an  
Ant's just dust on the table. Come to me like  
A cat. Clay dries. Wood blackens. Hens dart in for company

Some Problems with the Page as Terra Nullius

That boat - from England - has sailed

---

You have a body, a cut  
Whole body. Your hand was once a wheatstalk, caterpillar  
dropping

---

The blue Word, the blue Explorer

---

(The grey banner, the grey ruler)

---

*Like poppies from a train window*

---

You were the first person in  
Your family to take a train; Australian fauna in  
Bavaria or the Forum would not  
Have fazed you. Now every page has the  
Finish of a Big Mac. According  
To Zizek. Only the view is yours, the reflected lazy  
Dust

---

Indigenous loggers write songs of the  
Pine trees' upright years. They were more like green beauty  
Queens

---

They would dance on the  
Needles and shells (of the shotguns). Only the joggers would  
See them. Some problems with  
The idea of nations. Two memories of pages, both in  
Colour: both practical, torn. Both  
Memories of more than one place; in the back  
Bedroom, in the hut, on the

Hip, on the safety clip. Why is there  
Nothing instead of something asked the  
Teachers of the statesmen? What is the point of military  
Tradition?

---

A line: a black line

---

Your company is no drawing

---

From above the trees are dots

---

Smaller dots become bigger dots

---

I want to reach the  
Readers of the nineteenth century; I want to reach the  
Readers of the eighteenth century. The  
First Australian poem was a collaborative prose poem of  
colons

Posing as a letter. Harpur off  
His hinges was better than a swinging door. I hope  
Your chooks turn into wrecking  
Balls and knock your arenas over. Undergraduates of  
Melbourne

These are your models. There never  
Was a space program stuck down your face. Lights  
Wipe out stars; suicides show a  
Lot of faith in the ground and sky. You were  
Born with bacteria in your gut

---

This is not, in itself, genius

---

Spilling coffee on a library  
Book is not a breakthrough, arguably. Some brought bricks from



Spain and Holland; and the paintings  
Came from Greece. They were rough and knew the  
Cycle of the pastoral. The two  
Shapes (of the square and circle) come together in  
The Western Desert. To start to  
Write poetry, first find a door

### What The Land

It's the usual rhetorical question. Don't begin to  
Understand yet, the poem hasn't quite begun. Quiet. The  
Only sound that of words on paper. Still: the  
Only movement that of the past, history if  
You will. The reading contract (not the writing contract)  
Is that you understand that you will feel  
Or think something. What the land forms in you  
In your mind. This relates to the history  
Of reading poetry, and to that of writing it

---

Money is part of it, take  
A step further, killing is part of  
It

---

We know that

---

It could probably be seen from the moon if  
Anyone was there (up, down, across), watching. The moon's  
A whole other concept  
Of land, related to space programs and other exercises  
In propaganda, imagination and syntax. We are  
In view of it as the sun and stars

---

Everything seen is implicated. Everything heard and said.  
Are  
You an unbeliever? Or are you the one who  
Understands, without reading, my love? Ok, that's ok  
You will never know I asked. The fragmentation  
Is complete. So  
Is the building. Now the poem can begin  
Oh. I am tingling. The wind is  
In the ruins. But the sound is not  
A message. There is residue  
In my teeth, teeth that

Ache for the ground, that  
Are part ground. Try to hear what is not  
An effect. What makes sense? Not writing. But  
It's the only challenge I want, not when  
Or whether people began to see a God, when  
That changed, how. If you carry a blue  
& white flag that says  
Your name's James Joyce, it makes sense

---

You come to the city because  
You want to show it to your dog

---

You can't stay in a hotel so  
You sleep nearby. The social seems  
Only to be between you. No local sees you

---

There is nothing 'going on'. If we step  
Outside we feel the mood, while others try to  
Escape the mood. A café is not a verb

---

There are realities. There are things we stopped believing  
In when we were seven that haunt  
Us forty years later if we make  
It like guardian angels

---

Adopted northern structures. The spines of the  
Oak trees reach though power lines. The power lines  
Run through the trees. Gold pours into the houses  
& other places mining for human feeling, boring holes  
In the world. Magazines flap against newspapers. Everything  
I thought all day was untrue. Time  
Especially. Alarms push themselves out into the air

---

A poem can't begin with so much action

# IV: Rewriting Country



# Nyikina Collaborative Filmmaking in the Kimberley: ‘Learning to Listen with Your Eyes, and See with Your Ears’<sup>1</sup>

Magali McDuffie and Anne  
Poelina

Long before it has even been thought about consciously, a film idea starts deep within country—*Booroo*,<sup>2</sup> with Nyikina custodians, and *liyan*. *Liyan* is a Nyikina word, which can be translated as ‘feeling, emotion, spirit’.<sup>3</sup> Some also refer to it as ‘intuition’. *Liyan* is the ‘life force of place’, it enables people to ‘feel’ their environment.<sup>4</sup> Physical boundaries of country are not to be found on maps, but within oneself, as Paddy Roe explained to Frans Hoogland in 1992:

*Frans*: This whole country is mapped out. Now each area is like a human being, got feeling, got the liyan, that’s the liyan of the place. The liyan is like the life force, it’s like your spirit, like your essence. Now the only way to make contact to those locations, to those sites, is through our liyan.

*To Paddy*: How do I make that liyan work for me?

*Paddy* (laughs): I know. Because that’s the hard one. That’s the hard one. My people straight away when we go from camp, we start from the camp. We think about there— which way we got to go? All right, we go this way. When we get half way, something make me feel liyan wrong

too. We better go this way. Might be somebody over there waiting with spear or something.

*Frans*: so when you go country you feel?

*Paddy*: We feel it

*Frans*: and how can we learn that one?

*Paddy*: We got to teach you. We feel him. (...)

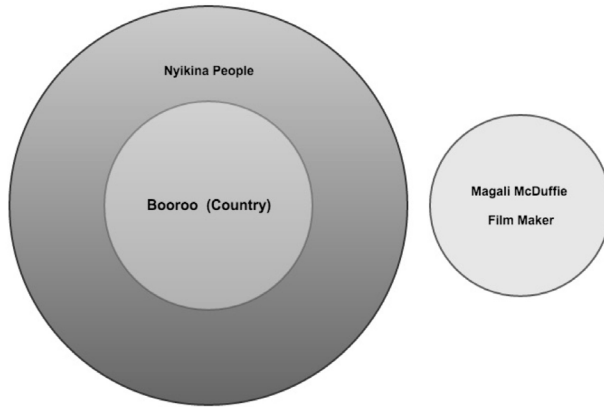
*Frans*: for the traditional people, that *liyan*, maybe same place as our intuition comes from, that never gets pushed away, that's the first and last voice.<sup>5</sup>

One gets a 'feeling' for country, one knows if a boundary is being trespassed. This feeling comes with recognising the relationship is mutually rewarding: we learn as human beings how to read the country, but we also acknowledge the country is reading us.<sup>6</sup> Film is a contemporaneous way to tell stories and build memories and strengthen relationships of and on country, a creative way to bring the audience into country and show the positive and negative issues which impact on our *liyan* and wellbeing.

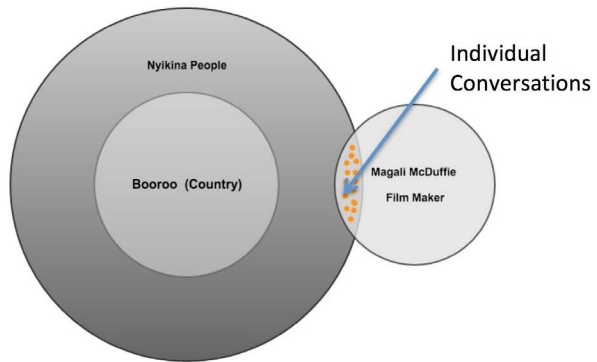
A film concept is both proactive and reactive. At the start, there is a will to create, to educate, to pass on stories to young generations, to mediate the impacts of colonisation, and to share culture, anchored in a belief that country must be protected, important stories retold, ceremonies performed.

The film concept is also born out of an external threat (intensive development, mining) to the country (*Mardoowarra, Fitzroy River Country*<sup>7</sup>) and therefore to people's *liyan*. It often occurs within a conflict paradigm (hurried processes, lack of consultation, community divisions), in which traditional custodians are protectors, not protesters.<sup>8</sup>

Throw in a French-Australian filmmaker interested in the camera as an emancipatory tool for the storytelling of others, a catalyst, an 'accelerator', a witness and an instrument for change.<sup>9</sup> Not to tell her story, but theirs—she does not know what the story is to start with, but simply wants to connect,



19.1 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 1<sup>10</sup>



19.2 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 2<sup>11</sup>



like many others have done in the past and many will do in the future. In order to understand the story, she will have to listen deeply, to ‘listen with her eyes and see with her ears’.<sup>12</sup>

This is the start of a conversation — one among many to come. A dialogic approach centred on country around its people’s feelings and intents. A listening approach based on open-ended interactions, a process in which the filmmaker becomes strongly influenced by the participants’ perception of reality.<sup>13</sup>

What takes place then is a transcendence of the status of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups, of perceived difference, to ultimately reveal a convergence of goals: that in spite of our cultural differences, we have a common vision for humanity; that we can focus on our commonalities rather than differences, on our shared, greater humanness and cultural and social endeavours, rather than on the economic rationale our governments would have us believe is the basis of our wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>

After these multiple conversations on country, much feedback, much consultation, we have our first cut, our first film. The year is 2007, the film is called *The Nyikina Cultural Centre*, which aims at explaining to potential funding bodies and other supporting organisations why it is important for Nyikina people to build a Nyikina Cultural Centre in Derby.<sup>15</sup>

The filmmaker knew nothing of the Nyikina context then, and did not fully understand the stories she recorded, although she knew they were significant — and she knows very little now. But this first film started the dialogue. She went back for more conversations — back to square one.

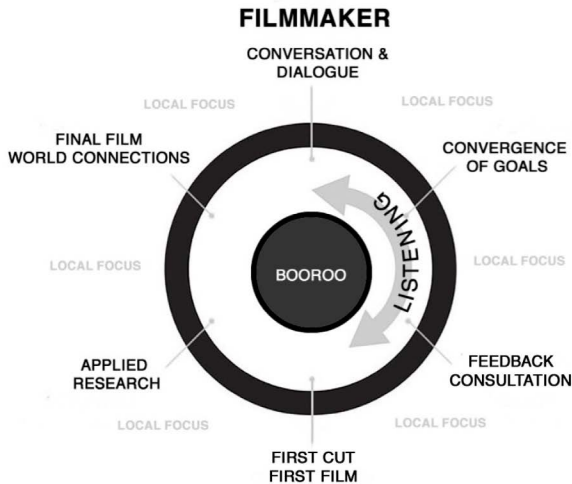
Conversations on country, transcendence, feedback, convergence of goals ... More films emerge, following an iterative process in which excerpts of our first films, first conversations, are selected as the basis for new ones, in a continuous re-actualisation, and a visual representation of an on-going dialogue — a talking circle. Interviews are revisited years later, understood better and reused in new contexts for new purposes.

Film starts to reveal itself as a technology not used in the sense of modern technology, for an all-encompassing ‘outcome’, ‘enframing’ for a purpose of using and producing, as just another resource, but rather as ‘poiesis’, crafted and

recrafted, time after time, for a slow ‘revealing’ of truth—going back to technology in its original state.<sup>16</sup>

Another ingredient comes in at this stage: research. The filmmaker has become a PhD researcher. The year is 2010. Hours spent in libraries’ entrails, digging in boxes, spooling through newsreels, archives, leafing through old court documents, anthropological reports, glued to computer screens. Her focus naturally directed towards unearthing information potentially useful for the communities and people she works with, and their families: people’s stories, anthropological texts, archival photographs, visual footage ... Anything of potential interest goes back to country to start the conversation again, triggering more stories, more telling, more knowledge ... and more listening.<sup>18</sup>

It has taken her seven long years, and more than twenty films, to understand the whole story of the creation of the *Mardoowarra*, Fitzroy River, and the essence of the *Warloongarri* Ceremony,<sup>19</sup> the ceremony for the river. It was only then that she was able to edit the different tellings of this story together, as one continuous talking circle, at the beginning of *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree*.<sup>20</sup>



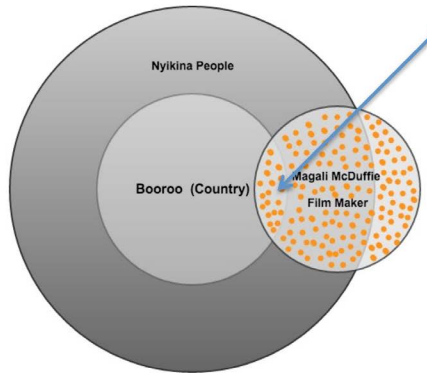
19.3 The filmmaking process<sup>17</sup>

This filmic dialogue becomes an interesting multilayered process in which people speak—reaffirming their Nyikina identity, knowledge of country, empowering themselves and others, telling stories to their families, future generations, interested strangers and, ultimately, the world.<sup>21</sup> The dialogue is individual, interpersonal, intergenerational, multifocal—and like *Bookarrakarra* (Nyikina Beginning of Time, not to be confused with *Dreamtime*<sup>22</sup>), unites past, present and future in one fleeting moment in time—the film itself.

It is a timeless dialogue that goes backward and forward in time—featuring statements from past Elders in dialogic history, for the purposes of dialogic futures not yet materialised but certainly envisaged—dreaming your reality forward, creating your path.<sup>23</sup>

Through this process, a counter discourse is created, through film, which challenges the dominant discourses of history, historiography, anthropology, development, governance and more.<sup>24</sup> The films themselves are cultural actions, answering back to the dominant culture—thus completing the act of listening, and speaking back.<sup>25</sup>

For the filmmaker, in all this, the dialogue is also internal—reflecting on her role. She is not as invisible as she thought. In fact, she has a fundamental role in the shaping of the overall story, made up of individual stories and lived experiences, whether she likes it or not. This is the turning point—being asked to be in the film, to ‘speak’ in the film, of the role of film and the filmmaker. At the same time, being on country for so long, every year for seven consecutive years, she has come closer to *booroo* and *liyan*. The conversations with Nyikina people on Nyikina country have brought her closer to the essence of what being Nyikina means. She is aware she is only scratching the surface—but in the process of ‘becoming’, or ‘inter-textuality’, she has learned, not only to listen, but also to ‘start seeing’.<sup>26</sup> This is the space where *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree* is born. The space where she edits the river, unconsciously, into the film so much that it becomes its main character, its storyline, its underlying structure, without her even being aware of it, until Jeannie Warbie’s comment after seeing the completed film for the first time: “*proper water this one. Proper water.*”<sup>27</sup> Country knows you, country teaches you—country reads you.<sup>28</sup>

The *Three Sisters*' Dialogic Space19.4 Chronology of a dialogue — stage 3<sup>29</sup>

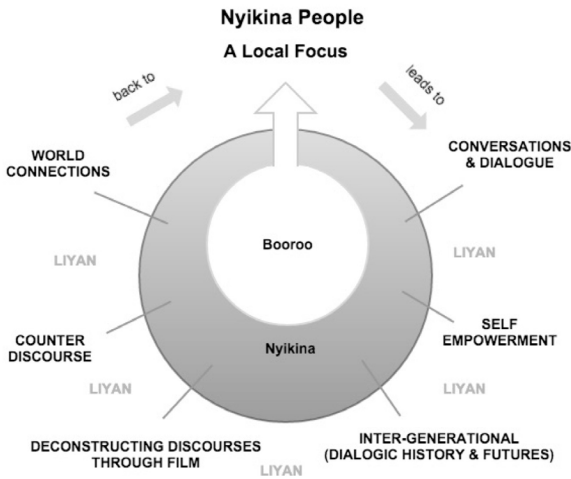
But what of the films' purpose? To talk back, to tell story, is to create connections, to foster the coming together of diverse people<sup>30</sup>—to tell the story of a songline that has gone from a local to an international context, such as the *Mardoowarra* Songline:

So the final message that I would like to leave the world is a Songline that has been sung for many many generations, from the beginning of time, from Bookarrakarra, and Jabo Darby used to say: come in, Jabirr-Jabirr, come in, Nyul-Nyul, come in, all the different people, come in Mangala people, come to the river, let it feed you, let it soothe your spirit, and then go back to where you came from, and tell your people out there, how important the river is ... And in more recent times, before Jabo passed away, he was singing a song, come in Japanese people, come in Chinaman people, come in English people, come in French people, come to the river of life, the Mardoowarra, come and show the world that this is important for all of us, for our humanity. So the song cycle now is to go forward ... So all you people out there, come and hear the call from Jabo,

come to the Kimberley, come and support us, because we are standing up for humanity.<sup>31</sup>

Our films are shown at conferences and festivals nationally and internationally, triggering more dialogue, creating many connections in France, the filmmaker’s country of origin, and other places, in a rhizomatic effect described by Deleuze and Guattari (1972–1980).<sup>32</sup> The film becomes a performance in itself,<sup>33</sup> brought from the inside to the outside, *Jimbinkaboo*, and shared with the universe, with no financial, academic or professional expectations—just a gentle nudge for people to listen.

Those who are interested, wherever they are from, are invited to country to come and ‘learn to see, and think’ for themselves, and they do. This immersion into *Booroo*, and *Bookarrakarra*, the circular storytelling, connects the past, present and future into this moment now, the moment in which we must all act ethically and responsibly. It also connects humans and non-humans, in *sympoesis*, transcending spatial and temporal boundaries<sup>34</sup>—the river itself can talk for



19.5 The Nyikina film process

its rights now, as the *Mardoowarra* did for its case presented at the Tribunal on the Rights of Nature.<sup>35</sup>

Leaving behind the Anthropocene, new and ever-evolving multi-species alliances<sup>36</sup> forge a cycle which begins and ends in *Booroo*... With other connectors, other actors, all simultaneously connecting to each other, and to their respective worlds, and back to their own world again, in constant flux, ensuring the story keeps being told — ensuring the story never ends.

## Notes

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# Re-reading the Country: A Settler Genealogy of Place

Kate Leah Rendell

'Oh' —  
'Hello'  
'Hello,' we say —  
'Where you come from?'

Paddy Roe<sup>1</sup>

*'Isn't it a very basic and important thing to know, from  
someone's tracks, where they have come from and which way  
they are going?'*

Stephen Muecke<sup>2</sup>

Last year my father and I made a trip north to the farmlands adjacent to the Murray River in north-central Victoria. Travelling through the communities of Barmah, Picola and Nathalia, we mapped our family's tracks of 'settlement' and 'selection'. It was simultaneously a journey of return and first encounters — an attempt to retrace our genealogy of place and, for me at least, to interrogate the implications of our history.<sup>3</sup> The desire to undertake this tracking had emerged from the intersections of recent work: a project on the Settler author Randolph Stow, particularly my thinking around his exile to England as a response to his 'unbelonging' in Australia; discussions within the Australian Indigenous Studies program at the University of Melbourne; a foray into Tony Birch's seminar *Genealogy of Place*; and of course the work of Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke and Krim Benterrak in their seminal book *Reading the Country*. Across these various threads a key question kept emerging — what of Settler connection to country? What of my connection? Central to this was Paddy Roe's



evocation: ‘You people try and dig little bit more deeply—you bin digging only white soil—try and find the black soil inside.’<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I take Roe’s appeal not as an invitation to simply borrow from Aboriginal readings of country, but rather for Settler Australians to dig more deeply and interrogate more fully our own narratives of place *in relation to* Aboriginal sovereignty. I suggest that if we are to take heed of the generosity of Roe’s philosophy, Settler Australians need to question our comfortable narratives of *arrival, settlement* and *homemaking*, which continue to evade the historical and contemporary colonising project. It is an interrogation that presents opportunities for new readings of country, grounded in an awareness of Settler presence as inherently possessive.<sup>5</sup> Or, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes: ‘what requires further theorizing is how the white and non-white postcolonial subject is positioned in relation to the original owners not through migrancy but possession’.<sup>6</sup> In my own case this requires an unravelling of familiar/familial narratives of ‘settlement’ that have circulated my whole life implicitly connecting me to a place that I have never actually lived in and marking me with an agricultural/rural identity that I have never actually inhabited. It is an interrogation that starts at ‘home’.

I embark on this journey with my father, Rob. Not only is he strongly connected to the rural tracks I seek to follow, he is also an enthusiastic and knowledgeable companion, keen to share this story with me. A fourth-generation Anglo-Celtic Australian, my father grew up on a mixed sunflower/sheep/wheat irrigation farm in the Murray-Goulburn region and honed this experience into a long and successful career in agricultural consulting. Somewhat of an expert on irrigation, salinity and agriculture, Rob jumped at the opportunity to show me around the farmlands of our family—to offer his reading of country informed by a career mapping, testing and surveying the land.

Following the tracks of my paternal line we drive first to ‘Longfield Farm’, a parcel of land at the edge of the Barmah Forest on the Victorian side of the Murray River, between Picola, Yielima and Yalca South on Yorta Yorta country. Longfield is the original Rendell ‘selection’, ‘taken up’ in 1876. Although not the farm my father and grandfather grew up on,

Longfield is still farmed by a Rendell and continues to mark and name our history of place.

We are greeted at Longfield by a distant third cousin of mine, who is most obliging of our request to see the farm, if not a little reticent (no doubt wondering what exactly it was this young woman from the city wanted to know). We are shown the original paddocks, the old dairy, remnants of the first buildings, and the rusty gate declaring this property to be ‘Longfield Farm’. While walking across one of the paddocks, the Rendell farmer reflects on his desire to see the land as it had been: ‘wouldn’t you love to see it before it was cleared’. We had just been talking of the effort required to clear the land ‘all by hand’, and I got the sense that his comment did not express a desire to bear witness to Yorta Yorta land management practices, or register the full extent of dispossession enacted in the clearing—but rather expressed a yearning to relive the struggle, to revisit the hard work of his forebears. There was pride and wonder in his tone. Yet I could not help but look over at the protected forest of Barmah and think of what was felled, of the canoe trees, hunting grounds and gathering places that once proliferated on this property, the other narratives worthy of pride and wonder in this land.

This was the first journey I had ever made to the original Rendell farm. Despite it playing a significant part in my genealogy of place, I had never considered its story relevant to my contemporary urban identity and certainly hadn’t sought out the history of its ‘selection’. This kind of genealogical ahistoricism is a powerful phenomenon within Settler Australia, especially for young third, fourth and fifth generation white Settlers. It’s an ahistoricism that became particularly evident to me within Indigenous Studies tutorials at the University of Melbourne, where in the interests of working towards safe and open discussion I would ask students to introduce themselves with reference to their identity and positionality. White Settler Australians struggle with this request to position ourselves—‘I am Australian’, we say, or ‘I suppose I am Anglo-Saxon’—with little reference to specific heritage or place. What became clear is that very few white Settlers could answer the genealogical questioning that our nation-state demands with any identification of Aboriginality. We could not map the

familial lines. We are not asked to. In fact, in the interests of the national Australian narrative we are required not to know, or to know only certain versions. This is not a passive unknowing, but a complacency made possible by the imperatives of colonialism, ‘terra nullius’ and the forging of new ‘Australian’ identities. Re-reading country as Settler therefore means being prepared to inhabit the colonial implications of your presence and the histories your lineage carries. It includes a responsibility to track these histories and unravel the mythologies that surround them.

For me, it is about coming to terms with Settler genealogies of place as an enactment of dispossession. In my case this genealogy is particularly agrarian: white settlement established through farming. It is a remarkably uniform heritage: all sixteen of my great-great-grandparents arrived from England, Scotland and Ireland around the 1850s and all eight families ‘took up’, ‘acquired’ or ‘selected’ properties across Victoria during the land grab made possible by the Land Act of 1869.<sup>7</sup> This was the Act that parcelled out the last remaining tracts of uncleared land across Victoria. Divided into 320 acre ‘allotments’, as Paul Carter writes, ‘selections were offered indiscriminately to individual owners — with the result that, instead of creating a network of public and private spaces, the Land Act simply encouraged a proliferation of clearings’.<sup>8</sup> With the Act requiring that all ‘selections’ be fenced and cleared within two years of possession, ‘selectors’ set to work razing the land with little regard for Aboriginal occupation. At £1 an acre, these allotments presented to my ancestors, many of whom had been poor tenant farmers in England, a golden ticket to property ownership. In particular, for Andom Rendell, a convict transported for arson and the first Rendell in Australia, the Land Act presented an unimaginable opportunity for reinvention.<sup>9</sup> For Aboriginal people across Victoria, however, the Land Act and subsequent ‘selections’ represented a method of terrible and irrevocable dispossession, as people were forced off the last remaining pockets of uncleared country into missions and reserves.

To uncover our own role in this history of ‘selection’ and dispossession, my father and I trace our familial lines. We draw directly onto a map of Victoria; encircling properties

in Yorta Yorta, DjaDjaWurrung and Taungerang country, we track my ancestors' possession of land in Yielima, Waايا, Carisbrook and Gerang Gerung. My father seems genuinely to enjoy this tracing, mapping the generations of farming that have shaped him. It is the similarity, the consistency, of the farming story—the agrarian lineage—that animates him. It is the very same aspect of the story that unsettles me.

It is not an easy thing to interrogate our family's history in this way. Katrina Schlunke suggests that 'these intimate histories somehow take you aside, very personally, into your family, your place' and asks: 'Is there something vaguely sinister about it?'<sup>10</sup> Walking the paddocks of Longfield certainly did feel somewhat sinister—even conspiratorial. As did asking questions of my family, querying their knowledge of Aboriginal sovereignty and their sense of complicity in Yorta Yorta dispossession. When I think of those in my extended family who have not read or heard me speak of this project, it still does.

Tracking our genealogy of place in relation to Aboriginal sovereignty and dispossession is an interrogation of history and identity that has implications for both my father and me, but more explicitly for him. My questions are a direct challenge to his proud farming background. Reflecting an identity woven into place and drawn from a real affinity to the land, Rob writes in an email:

Despite a totally different concept [to Aboriginal people] I certainly had an affinity with the country, the moon at nights while walking around the paddocks irrigating—some of the trees particularly the yellow box, the sheoaks and the Murray pine ... I think the summer nights were the best ... the experience of seasons and the dust and the wet and the spring is something that I don't get the same now.

Yet, he stalls when I suggest that his own affinity to the land is completely reliant on the erasure of Aboriginal presence, history and sovereignty. I have put him on the spot. Who am I to criticise? As Muecke writes, 'we are all spinners of texts'<sup>11</sup>—and as my father would say, I too am in this 'up to my neck'. Nevertheless, my father considers my questions, grapples with the implications.

In one email, sent after reading an early draft of this chapter, my father concedes that Aboriginal sovereignty was never at the forefront of his ancestors' minds: 'I suppose to be honest it was also about control and production ... the 50,000 years of the Indigenous was a foreign concept'. In the same email he writes: 'Couldn't sleep for thinking of the story ... asking the question why does the settler story totally exclude the Indigenous history.' I want to explain to him that our micro-history does not exist in isolation, that our narrative relates to the wider colonial project. I want to say that this love of the land is precisely why it's so difficult for many Settler Australians to acknowledge Aboriginal dispossession. And I do. But it seems such a personal attack. As North American scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Wang write, 'directly and indirectly benefitting from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples is a difficult reality for settlers to accept'.<sup>12</sup>

So we start at Longfield Farm—because this farm, as the first Rendell property, represents the strongest symbol in our familial lines of possession. We seek out the narratives of this place and look for the gaps, the silences and the erasures. I am lucky that my father joins me.

### Yeilima: 'Longfield Farm'

The histories of Longfield we uncover project a sanitised, even flippant narrative of 'settlement'. In almost all cases the historical depictions downplay the nuances and complexities of 'settlement' (including the role of women, class hierarchies between convicts and 'free settlers', religious divisions—in our family's case between the Protestants and Methodists), but most perversely they reveal a complete disregard for Aboriginal sovereignty. In the auspiciously titled *Pioneers of Nathalia & District, pre 1900: A History of Fifty-Seven Families, who Resided in the Nathalia Area before 1900*, written by the 'Genealogical Society of Nathalia' in 1985 and a permanent fixture of my family's bookshelf, the Rendell 'selection' of Longfield is inscribed in the most banal terms: 'when Yeilima was thrown open for selection ... Walter selected 320 acres, being allot.54 for himself and allot.53 for his father Andom also being 320 acres'.<sup>13</sup>

By all accounts Andom and Walter's 'selection' of Longfield was a successful one. Profiled in the local newspaper, the

*Nathalia Herald*, in 1887, 'the property of Mr. Andom Rendell' is described as award-winning: 'Mr Rendell's farm took the second prize in the farming competition ... It is not often that a farm so far out is so far advanced.'<sup>14</sup> Written eleven years after the original 'selection', the profile piece focuses on the 'well-ordered' state of the farm and the strong work ethic of the Rendell farmers:

The place gives one the impression of well-ordered plenty and content; the plenty was not conducive to sloth, as the tidiness of the place showed; nor the content to idleness, for the hum of the winnower and the thresher was heard on the land as we arrived.<sup>15</sup>

Poetic references to toil, cultivation and productivity abound in the description. It is a depiction of farming that reinforces the Lockean principle of labour as value, so central to the western-imperial concept of property ownership and the colonising project in Australia. In many ways I had anticipated this expression of production, yet I had also assumed this representation would rely on the total silencing of Yorta Yorta history. It was surprising therefore to read references to Aboriginal presence in the profile of Longfield Farm in 1887:

Half a mile across the road Mr Rendell has another property boarding the inundation of the Murray. On this which is ringbarked, but not yet cleared, some dairy cattle are kept. Kangaroos are not rare, and the trees bear many traces of the black fellows, where they have notched the trunk to climb the trees, and here and there openings have been cut in the trunks.<sup>16</sup>

I text my father to ask what tools exactly Andom and Walter would have used to clear the new paddocks, now part of an expanding Rendell property domain — how was it done? The text comes back abrupt and matter of fact: 'Axe to ringbark the tree to kill them — then cross cut saw with two people to drop the tree — then burn the stumps and wood.' It seemed so final; so violent. I think of the trees slowly dying then so wastefully burnt on site. I think of 'the many traces of the blackfellows' that were felled in the process.

In tracing the history of ‘Longfield Farm’, my research reveals that the farm is within the country of the Bangerang clan of the Yorta Yorta people. When I mention this to my father, he responds that he knew of Bangerang—in fact his high-school magazine was called that. There is a cruel irony in the recognition. I think of Bruce Pascoe’s reference to the Settlers compulsion to name properties in Aboriginal language:

To remember the original name even while trying to forget how the property came under white ownership. As if usurpation is not complete unless you steal the name as well. It’s eerie to have the name but none of the people.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Bangerang people were not completely absent at the time of the first Rendell possession (or indeed when my father was at high school), though the early waves of colonisation had severely diminished their population. As Yorta Yorta Elder Wayne Atkinson records, precolonisation figures suggest a population of 2500 to 3000 Yorta Yorta people, yet this population:

was reduced by 85% in the first generation of white contact and it did not stop there. The Victorian Aborigines Protection Board estimated that in the Victorian section of the [Yorta Yorta Native Title] claim area (1863) there were only 365 Yorta Yorta survivors.<sup>18</sup>

In 1876, around the time of Rendell possession of Longfield, Atkinson writes that surviving Yorta Yorta people were mostly living in camps on the fringes of pastoral stations, supporting themselves by hunting and fishing.<sup>19</sup> Self-subsistence was supplemented by a necessary contact with the local stations and reserves:

Ration depots were located on pastoral stations ... Some land was also reserved for Yorta Yorta use at Whgunya (near Corowa) ... From 1861-91, these became important bases for the Yorta Yorta to seek aid and to maintain connections with country.<sup>20</sup>

One such reserve was ‘Maloga Mission’, established as a school and mission station near Echuca in 1874 by Daniel Matthews. Research into this mission conducted by the Federal Court during the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim suggests that residence at Maloga in the early years:

tended to be intermittent. Most of those at Maloga were from Moira, and moved between the mission, a camp at Moira Station and camps around the Moira Lakes and Barmah Forest.<sup>21</sup>

The Federal Court research further revealed, however, that numbers at the mission ‘increased steadily during 1877’ and peaked ‘in 1886’.<sup>22</sup> Reading such findings I am struck by the very direct correlation between the population increase at Maloga Mission in 1877 and the establishment of ‘Longfield Farm’ in 1876. Such effects seem so obvious now, given the widespread dispossession enacted by the Land Act ‘selections’ — but Maloga Mission and the stories of Yorta Yorta people being forced off their land into residence there are completely absent from my family’s founding narratives. Similarly, the salient correlation between the Victorian Aborigines Protection Act of 1869 (which gave the government unprecedented discretionary power to relocate Aboriginal people and remove children) and the Land Act of 1869 — two parliamentary acts which directly facilitated my family’s possession of Yorta Yorta land — are palpable omissions from our stories of successful ‘settlement’.

#### **Picola: memorialising settlement**

Seeking out the wider historical narratives publicly available to visitors on our journey through the Goulburn-Murray region, my father and I make a stop at the ‘Historical Walk’ in Picola. Picola is not the closest town to ‘Longfield Farm’, but it is nearby, and I had read that the town had recently commissioned a historical park. I was interested in the ‘history’ that Picola chose to tell. A one-street country town, total population 300, Picola consists of the park, the pub (which also operates as post office, milk bar and VLine ticket office) and the public hall. The park is simple: a small block of freshly



mown grass, a rose garden, a barbeque hut and the public toilets. Along either side of the central walkway to the toilets is the recently installed signed walk: 'A Salute to Our Pioneers'.

Walking around the park, following the loop of signs, I can't help but wonder who actually stops here: who is the audience? No other cars pass while we are there, though the VLine bus does make its obligatory stop despite there being no passengers. Given you have to walk past the signs to reach the toilets, there is a chance a few passers-by might stop off, yet I am more inclined to suggest the park was established to reaffirm the local 'selector' community, rather than as a tourist attraction. It provides a visual guarantee that, despite the town's diminishing population, Picola's 'pioneering' history is not forgotten. Either way, for tourist or local, the historicising function of the walk is explicit in its aim to proclaim and 'salute' the 'improvements' brought by 'settlement'. As the final sign on the walk depicts it:

Reports of excellent pastures brought squatters from other areas to claim choice land ... By mid-1840s the first large runs such as Upper Moira, Lower Moira, and Yielima were established with stock grazing in the forest. The squatters' occupation was legalised in 1847.

In Victoria, public opposition to the squatter's occupation over Crown Lands led to legislation, culminating in the 1869 Lands Act, which broke up the large pastoral runs. In the early 1870s selectors began moving to this area to take up land ... and make improvements such as fencing, clearing and cultivation.<sup>23</sup>

According to a report in the *Riverine Herald*, this walk was completed in late 2014 and its construction was initiated and designed by the 'Picola and District Improvement Group'. The group's president, Jeanette Holland, claimed the walk was created in the interest of posterity: 'we didn't want the town's history to be lost'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the history the Picola and District Improvement Group choose to remember is a sanitised and selective narrative of 'our pioneers'. Visitors are not told that the 'choice land' was already

occupied or that the establishment of this town dispossessed the Bangerang clan of the Yorta Yorta. We are told nothing about the mass displacement brought about by ‘settlement’ and ‘selection’. Nor are we told of the irrevocable environmental violence that ‘improvements such as fencing, clearing and cultivation’ enacted on Yorta Yorta lands and waterways. Instead, historical narratives such as the Picola Historical Walk perpetuate the ongoing fallacy of Settler innocence; so, as Tony Birch writes, ‘the pioneer success story that underpins the construction of the nation-state is able to present itself as the innocent agent of a struggle over adversity’.<sup>25</sup> As Tuck and Yang reveal, such claims are the prerogative of the colonial project: ‘for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there’.<sup>26</sup> The signed walk of Picola does offer this acknowledgement: ‘We respect the Aboriginal people who roamed on this land prior to settlement.’ It is a strange offering that both recognises and disavows Aboriginal presence — with ‘roaming’ Aboriginal people represented as the disappeared while the contemporary and ongoing sovereignty of Yorta Yorta people is denied.

Yet there was a moment of slippage in the sanitised mythology of ‘settlement’ as presented by the historical walk. Standing in the Picola heritage park I could not help but notice the large Aboriginal flag flying high within the property on the opposite side of the street. The disjunct between the Aboriginal flag, a contemporary symbol of survival and sovereignty, and the past tense used by the historical society in reference to the Aboriginal peoples ‘who roamed on this land prior to settlement’ is telling. I did not meet the owner of the flag or the car adorned with Aboriginal stickers in the carport (I would have liked to have known what they thought of the historical walk) — yet the symbolic resonance of the red, black and yellow was felt, sending a current of Aboriginal resistance through the ‘salute’ to ‘our pioneers’ of Picola.

On the final leg of our journey my father and I make a stop at the Nathalia Cemetery to visit the graves of Androm and Walter, as well as other family members buried there. It is here on Walter’s grave in the Rendell family plot that we find a plaque that reads:

The descendants of Walter Rendell and Margaret Flett  
commemorate the settling of this land

5th June 1876

Lot 54

'LONGFIELD'

5th June 2000

My immediate family had not been present at this 'commemoration', in that auspicious millennial year. My father could not remember why. Yet he did not seem adverse to the sentiment of the event. In fact, he seemed disappointed we had not made it. Standing in the cemetery we discussed how the feat of our ancestors is one worthy of commemorating, that it is their journey across the seas, their toil on the land that we continue to benefit from. Yet I asked, and to continue to ask, what does it mean if this is the only version of the story we tell ourselves? Our story 'of settling this land' is a familiar and comfortable narrative in our family; it does not challenge our Settler 'innocence' nor does it speak to the profound dispossession we enact throughout our genealogy of place. If we seek to reread the country in relation to Aboriginal sovereignty and Settler possession, our story is far more complex.

In contrast to our story of 'settling this land', *Ina Yillian* is the Yorta Yorta creation story of Dungala [the Murray River] which tells of Biامي the Creator Spirit, Gane the rainbow serpent and the old woman Gumuk Winga and her weary journey to find yams with her digging stick. It is a story in which Gane the rainbow serpent, following Gamuk Winga through country, creates deep tracks as his body moves across the land pushing the earth into hills and valleys, culminating in the creation of the river by the Creator Spirit:

Then Biامي called out in a loud voice and thunder cracked as lightning flashed across the sky and rain fell ... Then the rain stopped and the mist cleared and the river Dungala was formed. This is the name used by the Yorta Yorta people. Others would know it as the Murray River.<sup>27</sup>

Published in the powerful collection *Nyernila—Listen Continuously: Aboriginal Creation Stories of Victoria*, this story

is inscribed in Yorta Yorta language (spoken by Yorta Yorta clans including the Kaitheban, Wollithiga, Moira, Ulupna, Bangerang, Kwat Kwat, Yalaba Yalaba and Ngurai-illiam-wurrung) and is translated into English by Djetcha Zeta Thompson. This story of Dungala, revealing the tracks of Gane engraved from time immemorial, expresses a sovereignty far stronger and infinitely deeper than the fresh tracks of my own family's 'settlement' and possession. Both tracks are there in the land—but Settler Australians must be more open and less defensive in order to read those deeper tracks, to 'try and find the black soil inside'.<sup>28</sup>

My father's own reading of country has altered in the process of this project: in a recent chapter he authored for the collection *Decision-Making in Water Resources Policy, Planning and Management—The Australian Experience* he writes: 'the history of agriculture and irrigation in northern Victoria is a story of farmers overcoming hardship and seizing opportunities. However, this was only possible at the expense of the indigenous Aboriginal inhabitants.'<sup>29</sup> He acknowledges that his version tells the 'post "selector" evolution of irrigation, because in reality, the Aboriginal peoples have been denied their rightful part.'<sup>30</sup> It is an unusual deviation, a side step from the statistics and 'objectivity' demanded in his line of work. He goes on to write:

this denial has continued even in the recent Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Aust Govt 2012), where although there have been many cultural surveys, consideration of the environment and agriculture is still primarily 'white fella' business. I hope we may combine the two stories one day, but at the moment the history is primarily about white people after the selectors.<sup>31</sup>

I am moved by the inclusion of these acknowledgements and I am glad that he's come with me on this journey. Rereading the country *in relation to* Aboriginal sovereignty and Settler possession is a project that my family are only just beginning; yet there is transformative potential in such rereadings, as my 95-year-old grandfather's response to this essay suggests:

Kate, it is a very challenging article. Perhaps for the first time in my life I have been challenged as never before. I certainly was never made aware that we were living at the expense of a people who had lived where we were now living. And, without even a whisper that we were (there's a word I want to use — usurper and I don't even know to spell it.) I was blissfully unaware and this is a wake up call.

John Rendell

### Notes

- 1 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 129.
- 2 *Ibid.* p. 210.
- 3 Throughout this essay I use the term Settler. In most cases I deploy this term in the broadest sense to refer to all non-Indigenous Australians living in Australia — as a differentiated identity from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Settler in this instance includes all non-Indigenous people as implicated as beneficiaries of colonialism. However, Settler is also used refer to my specific heritage as the descendent of selectors — which is marked different from the experiences of recently arrived or non-white Settlers whose relation to settler colonialism is distinct. Where possible I have used Settler as the general term and white Settler/ selectors as specific to my personal identity.
- 4 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 194.
- 5 This is by no means a new proposition, there is much recent work that similarly calls for an acknowledgement of Settler identity as possessive and our presence as one of occupier, for example: Aileen Moreton-Robinson *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2015; Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins*, Re.press, Melbourne, 2014; Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Settler-Colonial Landscapes and Narratives of Possession', *Arena Journal*, vol. 37 no. 38, 2012, pp. 176-98.
- 6 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonising Society', in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller, Berg, Oxford, 2003, p. 36.
- 7 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration in Landscape and History*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 9 The convict status of Andom Rendell was concealed in our family for many generations — with my grandfather only finding out quite recently that Andom was transported for arson. It seems Andom's reinvention as a free selector presented a more favourable version of family history — such omission is a telling example of the silences and gaps in family histories.
- 10 Katrina Schlunke, *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2005, p. 44.

- 11 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 118.
- 12 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, p. 9.
- 13 Genealogical Society of Victoria, *Pioneers of Nathalia & District, pre 1900: A History of Fifty-Seven Families, who Resided in the Nathalia Area before 1900*, Nathalia Genealogical Group Inc., Nathalia, Vic., 1985, p. 62.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 "'Longfield" in the Parish of Yeilima, the Property of Mr. Andom Rendell', *Nathalia Herald*, 10 February 1887.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Bruce Pascoe, *Convincing Ground*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007, p. 73.
- 18 Wayne Atkinson. 'Yorta Yorta Survival' in 'Not One Iota: The Yorta Yorta Struggle for Land Justice', PhD Thesis, LaTrobe University, 2000, p. 3. <<https://waynera.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/yortasurvival.pdf>>
- 19 Ibid. p. 8.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Federal Court of Australia, Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria & Ors, FCA 1606, 18 December 1998.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Picola 'Heritage Walk'.
- 24 'Signs of Improvement at Picola', *Riverine Herald*, 13 December 2014.
- 25 Tony Birch, "'Death is Forgotten in Victory": Colonial Landscapes and Narratives of Emptiness', in *Object Lessons: Archaeology and Heritage in Australia*, ed. Jane Lydon and Tracy Ireland, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005, p. 187.
- 26 Tuck and Yang, p. 6.
- 27 'Ina Yillian', *Nyernila Listen Continuously*, Arts Victoria, Melbourne, 2014, p. 53.
- 28 Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 194.
- 29 Rob Rendell, 'Agriculture in Northern Victoria (Australia) over the Past 20-30 Years — Factors Influencing Decision-making by Individual Farmers', *Decision-Making in Water Resources Policy, Planning and Management — The Australian Experience*, ed. Barry Hart and Jane Doolan, Elsevier: Academic Press, London, 2017, p. 62.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.

# Reading Resistant Landscapes in Ngarrindjeri Country: The Photographic Legacy of Aunty Charlotte Richards<sup>1</sup>

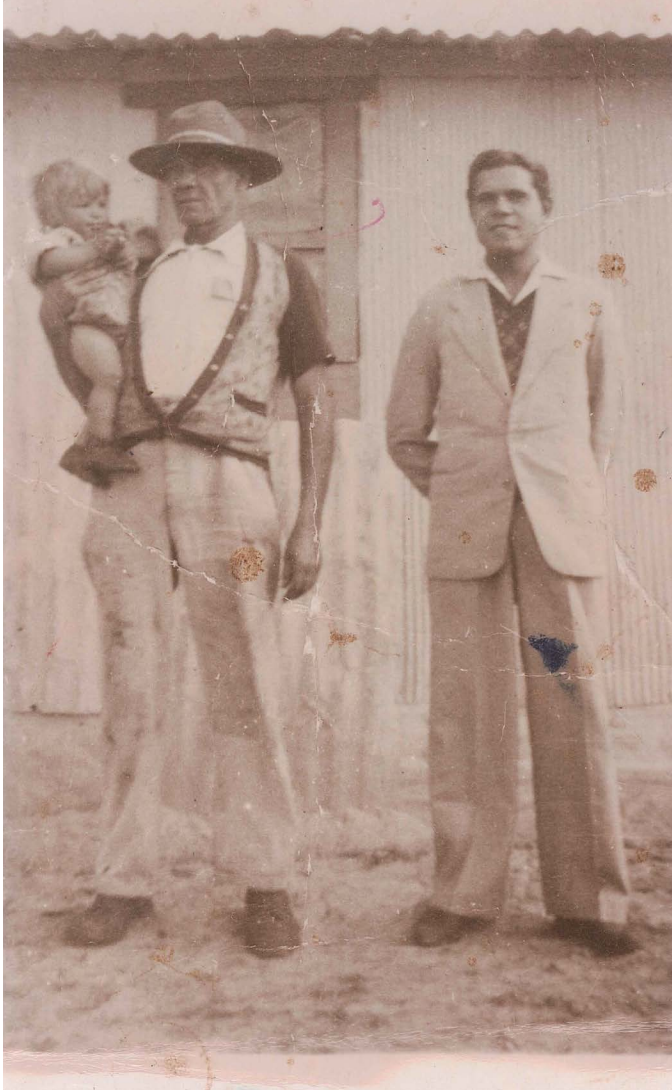
Karen Hughes

At Camp Coorong, just outside the South Australian lakeside town Meningie, the esteemed Ngarrindjeri Elder, weaver and cultural educator Aunty Ellen Trevorror has been up early helping several young grandchildren head off to school.<sup>2</sup> A winter mist has floated in from the Coorong waters. Aunty Ellen brings in a stack of loose pictures and photo albums she has selected from a collection passionately assembled over many decades.

She takes out a photo showing her husband, the feted Ngarrindjeri leader Uncle Tom Trevorror, as a chubby, well-nurtured baby, cradled in the arms of his father, Joe Trevorror, at the former One Mile Fringe Camp, near Meningie.<sup>3</sup> Next to them is Tom's brother Choom (Joe Trevorror Jnr), who in his younger days helped transport the mail across the rugged remote Oodnadatta-Birdsville track. Behind them stands a hand-built home, cobbled together from repurposed metal and wood (Figure 21.1).

The image, taken in 1954 by Aunty Charlotte Richards, vividly evokes the camaraderie, survivance and proud independence of Ngarrindjeri family life in the Meningie-Coorong fringe camps in the mid twentieth century.

Charlotte Richards is a talented, pioneering Australian Aboriginal woman photographer, notably one of the earliest *documented* Aboriginal women photographers.<sup>4</sup> Her rare, distinctive images offer an intimate inventory of the resilience of family life in fringe camp communities, on the edges of



21.1 Joseph Trevorrow holding his son Tom Trevorrow with Joe Trevorrow Jnr, 1954  
Photographer: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection



white settlement, from the 1940s to the 1980s. As history, they advance understanding of social realities of Aboriginal lives outside the regulated spaces of government reserves, rigorously challenging established notions of the ‘Australian family’ in opposition to dominant popular representations of the white nuclear family (shaped by the ‘white Australian policy’) and the three-bedroom home as the desired basis of mid-century Australian society.<sup>5</sup>

Very little is known of Aboriginal photographers from this period, and the history of the fringe camps has often been overlooked and misunderstood: cast in a negative light set in opposition to ideas of ‘tradition’ on the one hand, and to assimilation on the other.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is a rich, vital history of cultural and physical survival, negotiation with the colonial powers and of collective and personal entrepreneurship and distinct vibrant intellectual traditions.

Charlotte Richards was of Ngarrindjeri and Barngarla ancestry. She grew up in camps along the South Australian



21.2 Irene and Charlotte Richards, 1940s  
From the Charlotte Richards collection, courtesy Walter Richards, Jeffrey Hunter and families

Riverland and Coorong, and lived for a considerable time at the Meningie One Mile Camp, 'doing a little bit of schooling in Meningie'.<sup>7</sup> Born about 1930, she was the daughter of a skillful Ngarrindjeri *putari*, midwife, Ruby Koolmatrie, and a Barngarla traditional doctor, 'Nulla' (Walter) Richards, 'a tribal man' from the west coast of South Australia; her childhood was mobile, connected to seasonal work, kin, Country and learning.<sup>8</sup> She grew up surrounded by elders born in the colonial era, with deep knowledge from pre-contact times. From an early age Charlotte Richards had a passion for photography and was rarely without her box-brownie camera.

When she died in the late 1980s, she left four known albums of photographs that her descendants repatriated back to families two decades ago. It is part of our ongoing project to trace and document the collection, estimated to comprise around four hundred rare photos, now housed among a wide range of families living in different parts of Australia.<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal people became increasingly excluded from the Australian nation-state during the interwar years, under contradictory policies of segregation and assimilation.<sup>10</sup> As conditions on government reserves declined, living with extended kin on fringe camps became a way of maintaining continual, if changing, connections to Country, keeping languages viable, obtaining regular agricultural work, and overall living independent lives.<sup>11</sup> Fringe camps were a vital part of a wider struggle for sovereignty, land and citizenship that intensified in the politically volatile period leading up to the 1967 Federal Referendum.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal people could remain, to varying degrees, beneath the institutional radar. Ngarrindjeri name these 'survival times'.<sup>13</sup> Located at prescribed distances from white towns, camps often bore the name One Mile, Two Mile, Three Mile and so on. Importantly, too, fringe camps were significant sites of oppositional knowledge that nurtured future generations of cultural educators and community leaders.

Yet within the context of broader Australian history fringe camps signify a history of human rights violations, social exclusion, inadequate housing and deplorable health and life expectancy outcomes. Fringe camp families were, the late Uncle Tom Trevor explains:

living on the land at a time when you weren't allowed to live in the town, because only white people were allowed to live in Meningie, blackfellas weren't allowed to. Yet we had to be close enough to town for kids to go to school, otherwise Welfare would have stepped in. A lot of Ngarrindjeri people didn't want to live on the Mission, at Raukkan, yet couldn't live traditional along the Coorong because the land had been taken away, so they had to live, we could say a "semi-traditional lifestyle", in bush camps—the old bag huts, tin huts, tents. Always where there was fresh water and plenty of bush tucker, kangaroo and emu as well as rabbits and fish, birdlife and eggs, mallee-fowl, so we lived off the land. That carried on [into the 1970s], before we were allowed to live in the towns with the other people.<sup>14</sup>

While Indigenous people remained a popular and scientific subject of photography, as Jane Lydon has compellingly explored, they increasingly obtained the means to use the medium for their own purposes from the early twentieth century, when developing technology made private cameras widely available.<sup>15</sup> The advent of the box-brownie camera democratised photography for many, but for Ngarrindjeri with large families the cost of developing photos on a regular basis was prohibitive.

Charlotte Richards was, however, uniquely able to pursue a photographic practice because she didn't have children of her own to support (although she regularly fostered friends' children during tough times) and was exceptionally skilled in living off the land; hunting, fishing, trapping rabbits. Moreover, she never lived in a house, always in a tent and, at the end of her life, a caravan. Surplus income from sewing wheat-bags and picking beans and fruit, sustained her photographic practice. She spent her lifetime documenting other people's families so that they would be remembered through her photos, which she generously shared, during a time when the Aboriginal family was being torn apart by the state under aggressive policies of child removal, later known as the Stolen Generations. 'Can I get a photo of your kids?' she would always ask as she circuted the breadth and depth of Ngarrindjeri country, visiting her network of family and

friends with her camera.<sup>16</sup> Her deep and intimate knowledge of Country and traditional survival skills underpinned her mobility and independence, and ultimately her photography.

### Earliest photographs

The earliest photos we know of from Charlotte Richards date from the 1940s: four decades before ‘a self-consciously Indigenous photography movement began to emerge.’<sup>17</sup> Here (Figure 21.3) we can see her experimenting with the prevailing aesthetic tradition of the studio portrait, a medium long popular with Aboriginal people.<sup>18</sup> The thick scrub of the One Mile Meningie Camp, substitutes for a faux landscape backdrop, in front of which her subjects (her aunt Isabelle Koolmatrice, her sister Irene Richards and her grandmother’s brother Joe Walker Jnr) pose in a performative tableau. Dressed with flair, the subjects wear the coloniser’s clothes inventively, without need for the constraint of shoes on the soft Coorong sand. In the foreground is a pet magpie, Auntie Charlotte’s *ngatji* or totem, a hallmark of many of her early photos.<sup>19</sup> She was legendary for travelling with her pet magpies, which she taught to talk by splitting the tip of their tongue, with her cats and dogs in trail. To the right is a government tent, supplied sparingly by the Aboriginal Board of Protection, housing for many in the camps. Chairs are tin drums and, importantly, there is reading material, a newspaper or magazine. Sometimes such items were salvaged from the nearby town dump. In the background, Aboriginal viewers also point to the presence of ancestral spirit-figures. Charlotte Richards has altered or reconfigured dominant imagery to achieve a more accurate representation of Aboriginal identity.

Paired with this, a more relaxed, playful portrait, likely taken moments later, shows others at the camp, her parents Ruby and Nulla (Walter) Richards, with Joe Walker Jnr in his dapper striped blazer, with a remembered Aboriginal visitor from Victoria dressed in a dark formal suit and hat (Figure 21.4). We see, too, ‘the formation of an Aboriginal photographic practice ‘that centres upon ‘co-authorship between image maker and subject’.<sup>20</sup> The photographs evoke the powerful images of dispossessed rural workers, taken also in the 1940s, as part of the US Farm Security Administration



21.3 Rear: Isabel Koolmatric (Auntie Belle) and Irene Richards; seated: Joe Walker Jnr (Uncle Poonthie), taken at the Meningie One Mile Fringe Camp, late 1940s  
Photographer: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection

project, by photographers such as Dorothea Lange (most famous for her enduring image, *The Migrant Mother*).<sup>21</sup>

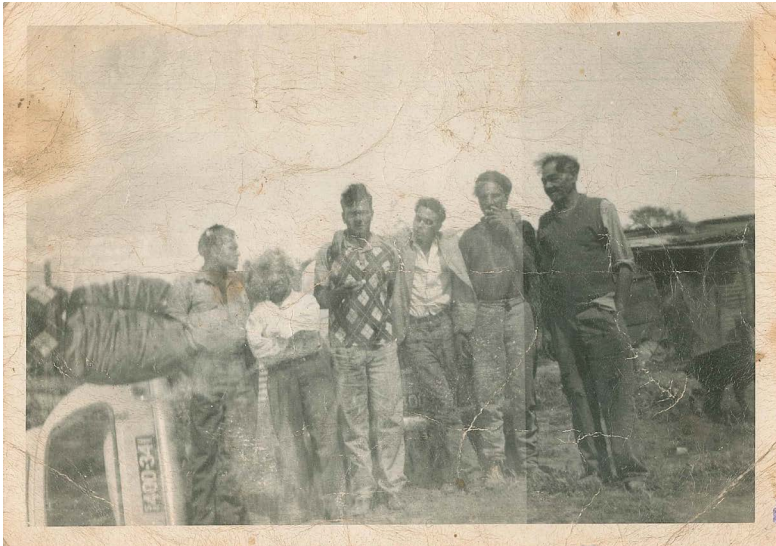
Another photo, from about 1950, features a convivial group of men at the Meningie One Mile Camp, including Tom Trevorrow's father and two of his brothers (Figure 21.5): 'Yeah, but a funny old camera: got to turn the motor car upside down, or sideways, see?' Tom remembers. 'The motor car's supposed to be *that* way ... with the boot open.' The double-exposure, produced by the malfunction of the camera's wind-on feature, has produced a magical 'signature' to this image.



21.4 Walter (Nulla) and Ruby Richards, Joe Walker jnr (Uncle Poonthie) talking to an Aboriginal man from Victoria, late 1940s  
Courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevor collection

Former fringe camp residents vividly remember Charlotte Richards. ‘Aunty Charlotte was the one with the camera, always clicking, taking photos of kids and adults,’ Aunty Alice Abdullah, daughter of Joe Trevorrow and Annie Mason, recalled. ‘She was highly spirited and full of life, like one of the film stars. She’d wear high-heeled shoes, stockings and red lipstick when she came to the One Mile. She was very beautiful with dark skin and a bushy head of hair; I used to think she looked like one of those kewpie dolls. When I saw her old box, I thought, “How can you make a photo out of that?”’

By any standards, and certainly for her era (much of her youth was lived before the 1967 Referendum), Charlotte Richards emerges as a talented and independent woman, who lived life on her own terms. With her sister Irene, she toured the country and western shows, singing and playing the button accordion. Her camps would ‘always be lit up with a lovely fire and they’d be sitting around yarnin’ and doing a



21.5 Group of Ngarrindjeri men, including Joseph Trevorrow, far right and Robert Day, second from left with double exposed car at the Meningie One Mile Camp, 1950s  
Photographer: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection

bit of cooking on the coals. She'd have her little old wind-up gramophone playing country and western music', Rita Lindsay remembered:

She loved the camp life, fishing and rabbiting. But she kept great security over her photographs, they were under guard. She stored them in big albums inside an old brown suitcase, which must have been waterproof. She wouldn't let anyone mess around with her special stuff, she was very particular. It would all be packed neatly in her car ... she always knew even when one photograph was missing.

Love of clothes and attention to fashion and its changing styles were an additional dimension of her aesthetic expression. In her relationships she crossed racialised sexual boundaries. Her partners were usually non-Indigenous men, but rather than assimilating into their lives and community, she drew them into the life of the camp. Such independence can be viewed as an extension of traditional Ngarrindjeri womanhood, embodied in the role of the *putari* (female doctor).<sup>22</sup>



21.6 Car belonging to Charlotte Richards, in which she travelled with her partner and animals in trail, and in which her photographs were meticulously stored  
Courtesy Rita Lindsay Snr collection



### Ngarrindjeri women

The warmth and subtlety with which Aunty Charlotte captured the world immediately around her, is particularly evident, too, in her portrayals of women, clearly showing her ability to encapsulate the inner life and uniqueness of her subject. They reveal her contemporaries as vigorously independent young women ready to take on the world in defiance of the docile gender roles of women in mid-century Australian society more broadly, and the race-based injustices that lay before them.

Charlotte's cousin Joyce Kerswell, pictured 'driving her old buck board' on the way to the fairground (Figure 21.7), dressed in an outsized man's cap, appears the epitome of the young, modern, mobile and independent woman.

'That's when she had a snake show,' Tom Trevorrow said of this photo:

and all her snakes are in that old buck board — tigers and brown snakes. That's how she started off, there were a lot of sideshows going on all around, boxing troops and all that back then. Then she left to have her own sideshow company, with the big blow-up castles and the fairy floss and the dodgem cars and all of that.<sup>23</sup>

Aunty Joyce Kerswell was an avid collector of photos and it is thanks to her diligent efforts that we have so many of Richard's photos today.

Like other Ngarrindjeri from the fringe camps, Joyce Kerswell was highly mobile and entrepreneurial, venturing into her own fairground business, starting with a collection of tamed (yet highly venomous) local snakes. Another Ngarrindjeri woman from the camps, Annie Mason, sometimes accompanied her, performing a fire-walking act.

This incandescent portrait of Aunty Thora Lampard, one of Charlotte's closest friends, probably from about 1950, shows the sensitive connectivity between photographer and subject (Figure 21.8). Her hair is elegantly coiffed in the latest style, her beauty radiates from the frame. The Castrol oil-drum on which she sits is the only hint of material privation. The photos are an equal collaboration between subject and photographer.



21.7 Joyce Kerswell, early 1950s  
Photograph by Charlotte Richards. Courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection

### **Bearing witness**

When she was around the age of thirty, not long after the photo of Thora Lampard was taken, a series of events triggered a turning point in Charlotte Richard's photography. As the camps became increasingly targeted for forcible child removal by the government, she turned her attention to photographing children in the context of their families, as a form of actively bearing witness.<sup>24</sup>

In 1956, Thora Lampard's one year old son, Bruce Trevorrow, was illegally and wrongfully removed by the Protection Board for Aborigines while he was recovering from gastroenteritis in hospital. Without Thora's knowledge or consent he was fostered into a white family while the state explicitly led her to believe he was still in hospital.<sup>25</sup> Not long after, Charlotte's young sister Irene Hunter died under tragic circumstances, having contracted pneumonia in a leaky tent beside the River Murray while pregnant with her fifth child. Charlotte's aging parents cared for Irene's children at the Meningie Seven Mile Camp, until one eerily sunny day the government lured the children away with the false promise of



21.8 Thora Lampard, taken at Victor Harbour in the 1950s  
Photograph: Charlotte Richards, courtesy Ellen and Tom Trevorrow collection

a visit to the circus. The children never returned; separated and fostered into different white families unbeknown to one another. Charlotte's mother's health broke and soon after she died. Charlotte was propelled ever more strongly to document *her* version of the 'Australian' family and in doing so she created a record that would later provide vital information for families piecing together shattered lives. As Jane Lydon has said, 'This points also toward a way of seeing photos that encompasses the healing power of images of kin and culture, as they are enfolded into living families and worlds.'<sup>26</sup> In this light Charlotte Richard's photos become much more than family histories; they are explicitly political, born of cultural genocide. It is fitting that Irene's children later became the executors of her work.

#### **Photos from the edge: photojournalism and the social realist turn**

Many of Charlotte Richard's later works, produced from the 1970s on, are more confronting; they exhibit an at times unflinching gaze and distinct social realist turn capturing definitive 'metonymic' moments that convey a larger story. Here, in her vision, her skilled capacity to seize and frame the definitive moment, and her knowledge of the power of angle and frame, Richards was influenced by the visuality of social realism evident in 1950s and 1960s cinema and the photojournalism tradition of Magnum photographers such as Eve Arnold and Henri Cartier Bresson, whose work circulated in *Life* magazine and in Australia was refracted in the more populist *Post* and *Pix* magazines, that Charlotte and other Ngarrindjeri women avidly read.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, magazine photographs, often those of Hollywood celebrities, papered the walls of the fringe camp homes. While Charlotte Richard's photos may lack the technical proficiency that comes from large budgets and high-end equipment, and her potential career was thwarted by the prevalence of the racialised thinking that dominated her time, they surmount this through their transmission of a lucid, unmitigated intimacy of a world of which she was inextricably part. The photographer, not the camera, is the instrument (to borrow Eve Arnold's dictum).<sup>29</sup>

These are photographs from the edge, taken by an Aboriginal woman from the fringe camps, chronicling an

important yet marginalised history at a time of intense raced-based social exclusion: as recent analysis has suggested, photography stands ‘at the crossroads of history and memory’, providing an essential resource for ‘critical black memory’.<sup>30</sup> The photographs were taken against the odds, and that they exist today is also against the odds. Their provenance in Ngarrindjeri peoples’ private collections, preserved in time-worn suitcases and biscuit tins under beds and in closets, as people moved between fringe camps, communities that were once Aboriginal reserves and private housing is evidence of the high value placed on them.

### Conclusions

Charlotte Richard’s photos depict the fringe camps in ways seldom seen outside the Indigenous community. They reveal Indigenous experience—‘including change, strength, dignity and worth’ within an Indigenous intellectual tradition, asserting a subtly nuanced, multi-faceted standpoint.<sup>31</sup> The humour and warm social relations embodied here are missing from most official visual documentations of Ngarrindjeri. Her easy, relaxed portraits, full of exuberance and vitality, offer us a unique and treasured glimpse into a world in which Ngarrindjeri led productive and resilient lives, resourcefully evaded institutionalisation and cared for one another during a challenging period of intensive state intervention. They celebrate both everyday pleasures and a spirit of survival against the pressures of assimilation. In a sense, Aunty Charlotte’s photos anticipate the later work of noted Ngarrindjeri visual artist Ian Abdullah, who similarly camped along the River Murray and painted intimate scenes of lived histories outside the mainstream.<sup>32</sup> She used the camera as an instrument to record family life for Aboriginal families themselves and it would seem with a keen eye to the future.

I would like to end with this photograph of an Australian family taken, it would appear, near the beginning of the 1980s (Figure 21.9). Here we see Charlotte Richards playing the piano accordion, an instrument previously played by her mother Ruby Richards, and more recently by her sister Irene Hunter’s daughter, the acclaimed Australian singer Ruby Hunter. Behind her is a Hills Hoist clothesline, a symbol that



21.9 Aunty Charlotte Richards and Uncle Jim Davis with extended family members; photographer and location unknown  
From the Charlotte Richards collection, courtesy Walter Richards, Jeffrey Hunter and families

has become iconic of Australian mid-century suburbia. With her is her partner from about the 1970s onwards, Jim Davis (1919-1998) and their hybrid blended family. We see an indigenised contemporary world, and, by extension, a re-imagined Australia with a cosmological order that could have been, if colonial relations had been different.

### Notes

- 1 I thank Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, Uncle Tom Trevorrow, Uncle Walter Richards, Aunty Roslyn Richards, Uncle Jeffrey Hunter, Aunty Rita Lindsay and Aunty Alice Abdulla for sharing their collections and knowledge and for their commitment to this ongoing project.
- 2 Bindi MacGill, Julie Mathews, Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, Aunty Alice Abdulla and Deb Rankine, 'Ecology, Ontology, and Pedagogy at Camp Coorong', *M/C Journal*,

- vol. 15, no. 3, June 2012. Accessed 17 July 2015, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/499>.
- 3 See Karen Hughes, 'Challenging the Moral Issues of his Time: Proud Ngarrindjeri Man of the Coorong, Thomas Edwin Trevorrow (1954-2013)', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 37, 2013, [http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Aboriginal+History+-+Volume+thirty+seven%2C+2013/10891/obituary.xhtml#toc\\_marker-10](http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Aboriginal+History+-+Volume+thirty+seven%2C+2013/10891/obituary.xhtml#toc_marker-10)
  - 4 In 2015, the remarkable Mavis Walley Collection [BA2666], State Library of Western Australia has also come to public attention. Walley's work documents Aboriginal families living in the Western Australian wheatbelt over a similar period.
  - 5 The 'white Australian policy' was instituted through *The Immigration Restriction Act*, 1901. See, for example, Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800-2000*, Fremantle Press, Western Australia, 2000; Karen Hughes, 'Mobilising across colour lines: Intimate encounters between Aboriginal women and African American and other allied servicemen on the World War Two home front', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 41, 2017, pp. 43-71. Karen Hughes, 'Federation's Children: Entangled Lives', *Women's History Review* (forthcoming 2018).
  - 6 For an analysis of this in relation to Ebenezer mission, see Jane Lydon, *Fantastic Dreaming: The Archeology of an Aboriginal Mission*, AltaMira Press, Maryland, 2009, pp. 175-6.
  - 7 Personal communication, Aunty Rita Lindsay, 2013.
  - 8 As her birth appears not to have been registered, we have only an approximation of her date of birth given by family members; this ranges from 1926 to 1936; Personal communication, Aunty Yvonne Koolmatrice, July 2014.
  - 9 The project I refer to here continues a research and curatorial collaboration with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow to document photographs held in Ngarrindjeri private collections in historical and cultural context, placing a particular emphasis on photographs of the fringe camps.
  - 10 Henry Reynolds, *Nowhere People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2005.
  - 11 As in Canada, in Australia Aboriginal people were subject to large-scale assimilation attempts.
  - 12 Fringe camps were spaces of activism and resistance as well as spaces that celebrated culture. When the Tent Embassy was established in Canberra in 1967 it bore some of the features of the fringe camps. Following the referendum, they drew a younger generation of leaders into activism. See Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007.
  - 13 Karen Hughes and Ellen Trevorrow, "'It's that reflection": Ngarrindjeri Photography as Recuperative Practice', in *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies*, ed. Jane Lydon, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2014, pp. 175-204.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, pp.190-1
  - 15 Lydon, 'Introduction', in *Calling the Shots*, p 5.
  - 16 Personal communication, Uncle Walter Richards, nephew of Charlotte Richards, September 2012.
  - 17 Lydon, 'Introduction', pp. 5-7.
  - 18 Michael Aird, *Portraits of Our Elders*, Keeaira Press, South Brisbane, 1993; Michael Aird, 'Aboriginal People and Four early Brisbane Photographers', in Lydon (ed.), *Calling the Shots*, pp. 133-56.
  - 19 *Ngatji* translates directly as 'close relation'.
  - 20 Keith Munro, cited in Lydon (ed.), *Calling the Shots*, p. 7.
  - 21 Stuart Cohen (ed.), *The Likes of Us: Photography and the Farm Security Administration*, D.R. Godine, Jaffrey, New Hampshire, 2007.

- 22 See more generally, Diane Bell (ed), *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Miminar Yunnun: Listen to Ngarrindjeri Women Speaking*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, 2008; Diane Bell, *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A World that Was, Is and Will Be*, Spinifex, Melbourne, 2014, second edn; Karen Hughes, 'Resilience, Agency and Resistance in the Storytelling Practice of Aunty Hilda Wilson (1911-2007), Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Elder', *Media-Culture Journal*, October 2013; Karen Hughes, 'From Adelaide to Arnhem Land: 'Irruptions of Dreaming' across Contemporary Australia', in *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, ed. Ann McGrath and Mary Anne Jebb, Aboriginal History Monograph Series, ANU Press, Canberra, 2015. <http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Long+History,+Deep+Time/11741/cho5.xhtml>;
- Karen Hughes, 'I'd Grown up as a Child amongst Natives: Ruth Heathcock', in Catherine Kevin and Zora Simic (eds), *Connections Made and Broken: Intimacy and Estrangement in Women's History, Special Issue of Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge*, no. 28, 2013. <http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-28/karen-hughes>
- 23 Hughes and Trevorrow, p. 199.
- 24 Tom Trevorrow, Christine Finnimore, Steven Hemming, George Trevorrow, Ellen Trevorrow, Matthew Rigney, Veronica Brodie, *They Took Our Land and Then They Took Our Children*, Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association, 2006; Hughes and Trevorrow, pp. 175-04; Thalia Anthony, 'Shaky Victory for the Stolen Generations', *The Drum*, 10 November 2010, accessed 18 August 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/40912.html>; Haebich.
- 25 This later became a landmark legal case in Australia and to date Bruce Trevorrow is the only victim of Aboriginal child removal policies to receive compensation from the state for wrongful removal.
- 26 Lydon, 'Introduction', p. 11; see also Gaynor Macdonald, 'Photos in Wiradjuri Biscuit Tins: Negotiating Relatedness and Validating Colonial Histories', *Oceania*, vol. 73 no. 4, 2003, pp. 225-42. Heather Goodall, 'Karoo: Mates: Communities Reclaim Their Images', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2006, pp. 48-66. Karen Hughes and Cholena Smith, 'Unfiltering the Settler-Colonial Archive: Indigenous community-based photographers in Australia and the US', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (in press, 2018/1 edition).
- 27 Karen Hughes and Ellen Trevorrow, 'The Nation is Coming Alive': Law, sovereignty, and belonging in Ngarrindjeri photography of the mid-20th century, *History of Photography*, (forthcoming 2018)
- 28 Personal communication, Muriel Van Der Byl, July 2014.
- 29 Brigitte Lardinois (ed.), *Eve Arnold's People*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2009, p. 14.
- 30 Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 2009, p. 119, cited in Lydon, 'Introduction', p. 12.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 See Ian Abdulla, *River, Land and Memory: The Work of Ian Abdulla* exhibition catalogue, curated by Christine Nichols, Flinders University Art Museum, Bedford Park, SA, 2002.





# V Epilogue



# Colours

## Tony Birch

Before I was sent to the local school for education, my Pop was my only teacher. He would take me out to the paddock behind the government house we were given on the Reserve and stop and tell me to look up at the night sky while he took a pouch of tobacco from his pocket. Pop wouldn't speak another word until he'd finished his cigarette, a habit he enjoyed years after the advertisements on the TV started warning us that people who smoked would lose their legs, eyes and tongue and die a painful death.

When smoking time was over Pop would point a pair of nicotine-stained fingers at the stars and tell me that the day would come when they would be there to help me. He'd then wave a hand in the air, smile at me and raise his eyebrows like we were sharing a secret. But the secret was his alone, seeing as I didn't have a clue what Pop was talking about. Even though alcohol was banned on the Reserve, Pop drank a lot of grog back then; *too bloody much*, my mum used to say. *Cooked himself*.

*This fella*, he told me one time, raising a bottle of wine in the air, *I love him, but he don't love me*. Mum was working on the chicken line and Pop was supposed to keep an eye on me. He didn't mind that I took off on my own for the day. Down to the supermarket mostly, where I'd lift ice cream and biscuits. He'd sometimes forget to feed me. And he hardly ate at all himself. The grog was his only tucker. He also loved a fight back then, against anyone who might be up for it. He'd tell all-comers to *fuck off* and up with the fists he'd go. He'd fought in the boxing tents when he was young. Pretty good too, they reckon. But once he hit the drink hard, he was ruined. He'd mouth off in a pub or in the street, get into a blue and end up belted round the street like an old dog. The coppers went after

him plenty of times, locked him up and give him a smack as well. He was always telling me, *ya see the Gunji coming, run like hell*. And I would. Anytime they drove down our street, coming to the house for him, I'd run to the dry riverbed and hide until they left, sometimes with Pop in the back of the van, kicking at the doors, letting them know where they could go. He'd come home the next day with blood under his nose, maybe a cut on the head, and tell me that the *fucken Gunji done this*. Maybe they did, I reckon. But then Pop could easily get into a fight on the way home. Like they say, my Pop could *find himself a fight in an empty house*.

The Welfare were gonna put a stop to me seeing him and then my mum, she died. She had a bad heart from the day she was born and was always catching her breath between smoking plenty of cigarettes, just like her father did. She was walking down the road after work from the chicken factory with one of her sisters, my auntie Beryl. Mum said to her, out of nowhere, *we had good times when we were kids, didn't we Bee?* She fell down in front of auntie and was dead. At the funeral Pop kneeled on the ground and grabbed two fists of dirt and shoveled them into his mouth, almost choking himself. Some thought he was crazy and tried to stop him, until his older brother, Ronnie, stepped up, put his hands in the air and said *let him be with himself*. And they did.

Pop lay down and cried into the earth. He told the ground he was ashamed of all the drinking he'd done and he was to blame for his youngest daughter dropping dead in the street. Ronnie kneeled down next to Pop and told him he wasn't to blame at all. The drinking was his own doing, for sure, but not Mum's bad heart. The doctor at the co-op had said her heart had been *broken in childhood* and no matter what anyone had done she'd have died anyway, sooner before later. Didn't matter to Pop. He took his daughter's death as an *omen*—that's what he called it. He gave up the grog from the day of her funeral.

He got himself into a different sort of trouble from that day on. He marched around town and told everyone, blackfellas and whitefellas both, that the grog was an evil, and they had to stop drinking if they were to become *decent*. Some of them drinkers, old mates of Pop, they got sick of his preaching,

threw empty beer cans at him and told him to *fuck off home* as soon as they saw him walking along the footpath toward them. A couple of famous drinkers, *Salt and Pepper*, who sat out front of the post office on the bottle most days, threw a half bottle of wine at him one time. The altercation did nothing to stop Pop spreading the word every chance he got.

He became spiritual too. Most thought it was the craziness from the drinking he'd done and the knocks on the head he'd taken. They paid no more attention to the religion talk than they did his sermons about alcohol. He'd been on the church mission as a kid, and out with the old fellas in the bush before and after the mission days. His spiritual talk was a jumble of blackfella and the Bible. He didn't make sense to most people, me included. But he could tell a good story in there with the religion and I liked to hear that from him. Once he'd quit the drink I loved him even more and looked forward to sitting with him after school. He'd make us a cup of tea and watch the tele until my auntie Beryl came and collected me once she'd finished work at the factory.

We kept our love for each other going like that until he had a stroke. It stopped him from moving on one side of his body. He couldn't walk proper and he found it hard getting his words out. Auntie Beryl tried looking after him, but couldn't keep up with the cooking and feeding and washing him as well as going to work. So they put him in a Home with the other old people, out beside the irrigation road that runs out of town. Blackfellas, yellowfellas and whitefellas, men and women. I'd never seen a mixed mob like. And they got on together like family, singing songs and playing cards, and the old boys telling dirty jokes. I'd walk the mile to the Home after school and sit with Pop for a time, then walk the mile and a bit more to Auntie Beryl's for my tea.

Pop liked to take me by the hand, using the other hand to prop himself up with his walking stick, and lead me out to the garden. He'd talk slow and jumble some of his words, but I could make out that he said *It's a good night*, he'd say, pointing his stick into the sky and talking about *constellations*. I'd listen carefully. He told me that blackfellas all over the country had their own names for the stars and their own stories. One night he whispered a *special story* to me, slow and sweet. I can't tell it

to you here because it's his story. Doesn't matter who you are, blackfella or whitefella, Elder or kid. Only Pop can tell it.

He finished the story and put his open hand on my chest. Pop told me I had a strong heart and I was to remember the story he'd told, and that it would be important to me to remember the shape of the *constellation*, which star went where in the dance of the story. *Right there's your map*, he said, *there in the sky*. I ran all the way home that night, the stars above looking out for me, following me down the road, through the bush track I took for a short cut home, all the way to auntie Beryl's front door. I hopped into bed that night and looked out of the window and up at the sky. The stars were there, watching me, the story whispering its way into my ear.

The next weekend I was sitting with Pop in the dayroom and told him I was certain the stars were keeping an eye out for me just like he'd said they would. He smiled wider than he had back when he was enjoying a big day on the grog. We worked together that day, making the Aboriginal flag—black, yellow, red—from coloured paper. Others in the room were making their own flags. Families all together. When we'd finished the carpet was covered with scraps of coloured paper. I collected them, with the idea of taking them home to make a picture. Pop closed his eyes a couple of times while we were sitting. He'd worn himself out and wanted to go to bed. I helped him climb into his cot, tucked him in, said goodnight and kissed him on the cheek like I always did when it was time to leave.

Afterwards I skipped down the middle of the road, feeling happy with myself and looking up at the stars. I was close to my auntie's place when I seen the Gunjis speed by me in a highway car, kicking up dust, two coppers in the front seat and one in the back. I heard the car brake, looked around and saw the police car doing a U-turn. I started to run, like Pop had taught me, about to head into the bush and lose them. But I was too slow. The car pulled into the side of the road and blocked my path. The driver got out and slammed the door. It was Camel. An ugly old copper everyone hated. He'd been kicking blackfellas around for longer than anyone knew. *What shit are you running from?* he asked, hitching his pants up. I kept my eyes off him, looking down at the dirt until he poked

me in the chest, real hard, and barked in my ear that I was a *half-caste cunt*. The other copper from the front seat, he got out of the car too. A big fella I hadn't seen around the town. He was drunk.

*You been drinking?* Camel said to me. I shook my head. *Liar*, he said. *You all drink, your mob. Can't stay off if, don't matter what age you are.* He turned to the young copper. *You know their fucken women breastfeed them grog.* He grabbed me by the throat with a claw, pressed hard and shook me. *I reckon we need to take him in*, the young copper said. *He needs a lesson.* Camel stopped shaking me, smiled and patted me on the cheek. *Yeah, why not?* He put his arm over my shoulder. *Back to the lock-up for some fun.* They threw me in the back of the car with the third copper. He was sleeping against the back of the seat with his mouth open and a bottle of grog in his hand. He come to and looked across the seat at me like I was a mystery.

Camel looked in the rear mirror and called out to the copper, *this is our little mate. Give the boy a drink, Murph, and warm him up.* Once the copper worked out what Camel was on about he grabbed me by the jaw with one hand and tried pouring the grog down my throat with the other. It went into my mouth and I tried spitting out so it wouldn't choke me. Most of the grog went over my front, the rest in the copper's face. He got angry and punched me in the mouth. I could taste blood, mixed with the grog. I started to cry and Camel called him off and they let me be until we were back at the lock-up. They walked me through the office, one copper under each arm, Camel out front like he was leading a lynching. Another copper, a lady sitting behind a desk, saw the blood on my face and the grog stains on my T-shirt. She stood up and was about to say something when Camel gave her a *shut it* look. She turned away and sat down. Camel grabbed hold of the bunch of keys swinging from his belt and opened a cell door. One fella was in there, one of Pop's old drinking mates, Corky, laying on the cement floor in his vomit. *No good*, Camel said to the young copper trailing him. He opened another door. The cell was empty cell. He threw me inside. *Tidy yourself up*, Camel yelled. *We're coming back for a play.*

The cell had no windows, a rubber mattress on the floor, and a toilet in the corner. I walked over to take a piss but the



toilet was blocked. I read the messages scribbled on the walls, some written in shit, about who'd been in the cell before me and which copper was a *NO GOOD DOG*. I could hear the old fella moaning in the next cell and starting thinking that when they come back to my cell the coppers would be out to beat me. Or kill me. I remembered then that Pop had once said to me that there would be no place worse to die than in a police cell. *If that happened, he'd said, everything, my body, my heart, would be taken.*

Pop came to me then, inside me, and again put his hand over my heart. He whispered in my ear that he had one more story to tell me. And he did, reminding me that I had the many pieces of coloured paper with me. The black, yellow and red. I took them out of my pocket, one at a time, and chewed on each piece for a bit, rolled them into small balls and stuck the coloured dots on the wall in a proper order. My map of the sky. It wasn't long before I'd made my own constellation, with Pop's help. Chewing on more scraps of paper, soon enough I'd created a night sky full of stars, each one with its own story. Camel came walking along the hallway, marching toward the cell, his keys ringing like a broken school bell. I could hear the young copper behind him, screaming something I couldn't understand. I pressed my body to the wall, where *my* stars were dancing with each other, where *my* story was waiting for me. The coppers, when they opened the cell door and looked inside I was gone. They turned the mattress over. The young copper was silly enough to put his head in the toilet bowl searching for me. Camel stood in the middle of the cell, scratched his head and said *fuck me, he's vanished.*

## Contributors

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**Michael Farrell** grew up in Bombala, NSW, and is now living in Fitzroy, Melbourne. His poetry books include *open sesame* (2012), *Cocky's Joy* (2015) and *I Love Poetry* (2017). He has also published *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796-1945* (2015), and edits a magazine, *Flash Cove*.

**John Frow** is Professor of English at the University of Sydney and the author of many articles and books, including most recently *Character and Person* (2014). *On Interpretive Conflict* is due to be published in 2018.

**Ken Gelder** is Professor of English at the University of Melbourne. His books include *Reading the Vampire* (1994), *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (with Jane M. Jacobs, 1998), *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004) and *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (2007). His most recent book is *Colonial Australian Fiction: Character Types, Social Formations and the Colonial Economy* (2017), co-authored with Rachael Weaver. He is currently writing a book with Rachael Weaver on the colonial kangaroo hunt.

**Chris Healy** teaches cultural studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications include *Forgetting Aborigines* (2008) and *Assembling Culture* (co-edited with Tony Bennett, 2011).

**Karen Hughes** is Senior Lecturer in Indigenous Studies at Swinburne University. She publishes widely on Indigenous and cross-cultural histories in Australia and North America. With Ngarrindjeri Elder, Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, she is helping to develop a wide range database of Ngarrindjeri history, heritage and culture that foregrounds Ngarrindjeri visual histories and the works of twentieth century Ngarrindjeri photographers. She is Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery Project 'Children Born of War: Australia and the War in the Pacific 1941-1945' with Victoria Grieves and Catriona Elder.

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**Meaghan Morris** is Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney, and former Chair Professor of Cultural Studies in Lingnan University, Hong Kong (2000-2012). Chair of the international Association for Cultural Studies (2004-08) and then Chair of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society (2012-15), she is a Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities and the Australian Academy of

the Humanities. Her books include *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (1988), *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (1998), *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture* (2006), and *Creativity and Academic Activism: Instituting Cultural Studies*, co-edited with Mette Hjort (2012).

**Philip Morrissey** retired in 2017 after ten years as the Head of Australian Indigenous Studies in the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne. He is currently the keeper and curator of the Lionel Fogarty archive. His most recent publication, co-edited with Tyne Daile Sumner, is *Lionel Fogarty: Selected Poems 1980-2017* (2017).

**Stephen Muecke** is Jury Chair of English Language and Literature in the School of Humanities at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Recent publications are *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays* (2016), a special edition of *New Literary History* ("Recomposing the Humanities — with Bruno Latour") (2016), and a new edition of Paddy Roe's *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (2016).

**Peter Nyhuis Torres** is a PhD candidate in Linguistics at the University of Melbourne, researching Indigenous languages of southeast Arnhem Land. He was secretary of the 'Reading the Country: Thirty Years On' festival.

**Anne Poelina** is Managing Director of Madjulla Incorporated, a board member of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), Adjunct Research Fellow with Charles Darwin University, Northern Institute and Adjunct Senior Research Fellow with Notre Dame University Broome. She is a Nyikina Warrwa Traditional Custodian from the Mardoowarra, Lower Fitzroy River, and deputy chair and director of the Walalakoo Prescribed Body Corporate responsible for the integrated management of 27,000 square kilometres of Nyikina and Mangala Native Title lands and waters. Dr Poelina champions the need to include traditional ecological knowledge and the rights of nature to the solutions for planetary health and wellbeing. [www.majala.com.au](http://www.majala.com.au)

**Kate Leah Rendell** is a writer and researcher currently living and working in Garrmalang - Darwin on Larrakia Country, Northern Territory. Recently graduated from a Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne, her research focuses on representations and interrogations of Settler colonialism at the intersections of literature, history and cultural studies.

**Jon Roffe** is Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of New South Wales. The co-editor of a number of books on twentieth-century French philosophy, Jon is the author of *Badiou's Deleuze* (2012), *Abstract Market Theory* (2015), *Gilles Deleuze's Empiricism and Subjectivity* (2016), the forthcoming two-volume Works of

Gilles Deleuze (2018), and the co-author of *Lacan Deleuze Badiou* (2014). His next book *Seduce or Die* (2018) is a collection of aphorisms.

**Katrina Schlunke** is Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Tasmania and an Affiliated Researcher with the University of Sydney. Her recent publications are concerned with sustainable queerness, haunted homes and 'natural' catastrophe. She is a co-editor of *Cultural Studies Review* and a member of the 'Extinction Afterlives' research project at the University of Tasmania.

**Terrence Twomey** is a paleoanthropologist and casual tutor at the University of Melbourne. His research investigates the impact of controlled fire use on early human societies and cognition. He also conducts research into neoliberal influences on higher education, and has a keen interest in the ecological history of humans and the history of western medicine.

**Denise Varney** is Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her areas of research are Australian theatrical modernism, and feminist theatre and performance. Her latest books are *Performance Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times* (2017), co-edited with Elin Diamond and Candice Amich, and *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene* with Lara Stevens and Peta Tait (2018). She is currently working on the plays of Australian novelist and Nobel Laureate Patrick White.

Steeped in story-telling and endlessly curious, *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology* (1984) was the product of Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke and Krim Benterrak, experimenting with what it might be like to think together about country. In the process a senior traditional owner, a cultural theorist and a painter produced a text unlike any other. *Reading the Country: 30 Years On* is a celebration of one of the great twentieth-century books of intercultural dialogue. Recalling a spirit of intellectual risk and respect, in this collection, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, poets, writers and publishers both acknowledge the past and look, with hope, to future transformations of culture and country.

‘This collection will find an audience amongst the generation who encountered and loved *Reading the Country* when it first turned up, and amongst those who will find it now to look and sound completely contemporary; a book from *right now*’.

Ross Gibson, Centenary Professor in Creative & Cultural Research,  
University of Canberra

‘What a great idea to have a publication devoted to this path-breaking work thirty years after its publication. The original book is full of surprises. It really seems like a journey into the unknown with its serendipitous confluence of painting and French theory with the travels across the Roebuck Plains guided by an indigenous elder. Nothing like it has happened before or since, in Australia or elsewhere.’

Michael Taussig, Class of 1933 Professor of Anthropology,  
Columbia University.

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