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REVIEW ESSAY

Locating Whiteness in the Academic Production of "Indigenous Philosophy" in and of Time and Place

Stephen Muecke (2004) *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy.* Sydney: UNSW Press.
Deborah Bird Rose (2004) *Reports From a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation.* Sydney: UNSW Press.

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[Social] subjects—including intellectuals ... are not those best placed to grasp that which defines the limits of their thought of the social world, that is, the illusion of the absence of limits [and] are perhaps never less likely to transcend 'the limits of their minds' than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits.

—Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 484)

1. This review will critically evaluate two recent texts by white academics working across disciplines of cultural studies, history and anthropology and published by UNSW Press, which share a focus on the relationship between Aboriginality, Philosophy, Place and Time in Australia. I write from the position of a queer white academic committed to engaging politically and intellectually with the challenge of Indigenous sovereignties in this place while also aware that my position as a middle class white woman and intellectual imposes limits on what it is possible for me to know about Indigenous epistemologies (see Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In the course of this review I will demonstrate how anthropology's tendency to fix its objects of study within a circumscribed space of 'difference' limits the capacity of texts produced within this discipline to account for racialized struggles over sovereignty. While these struggles are equally embedded in the ethnographic context and the nation's constitution and political institutions, we will see that Muecke and Bird Rose confront problems in analysing the relationship between the intimate space of the 'field', in which one's research subjects quickly become one's 'friends' and/or 'classificatory kin'—on one hand—and the public space of the nation within which statements about Aboriginality by white academics circulate and are vested with an authority that escapes individual intentions and control—on the other.

2. *Ancient and Modern* has an unconventional format of presentation, being divided into four main sections, with eight sub-sections in each varying in length anywhere from 1 to 11 pages. Muecke's writing style recalled to me ethnographic accounts of the trickster in Indigenous American cosmology (see Radin 1972). A liminal component of the social fabric who is variously visible, invisible, outrageously transgressive and profoundly wise, the trickster is at once every-person and no-person, a creator-being and destructive force, vested with great powers and childishly irresponsible all at once. While this authorial persona makes for an often engaging, if disjointed, reading, it also makes it extremely challenging to take the reader for an easy walk through this text. I found that it was often only in the *spaces* between sub-sections that I was able to draw some conclusions about what Muecke's understanding of philosophy might mean for political struggles on the ground of Indigenous sovereignties.

3. I noted five definitions of philosophy in the book but there are certainly more: at some points both Indigenous philosophy and the European philosophy Muecke provisionally positions as its Other, seem to resist all definition while at other points philosophy is apparently made to encompass everything. Insofar as this works to breaks down existing Eurocentric understandings of Aboriginality and philosophy, it is a productive move, an attempt to suspend the reader's existing knowledge of 'how the world works' (3) while refusing to 'establish models or methodologies for an indigenous philosophy...' (11). However, the author also seems determined to attach the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Philosophy' to very particular subjects, situations, texts and moments. Indigenous philosophy is initially defined in extremely general terms as '...a way of life' and an 'architecture of thought' (3 and 11). Later it is variously defined as the thought produced by a 'contingent situation' (156) and a 'helpmeet' (167—168); as embedded in the erotically charged writings of a white anthropologist or the descriptions of an excited Indigenous 'informant' (176) and as 'a thing of today' (176).

4. The book is extensively end-noted (there are 347 notes) but its field of reference is quite narrow, making the bibliography less 'select' than a 'selective' list of authors within a field that spans contemporary 'Aboriginalism' and its critique. The text's central argument, taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe* (2000) is that it is time the modernity of non-European cultures and subjects was acknowledged and Europe's claim to be the site of modernity was unsettled once and for all. Gilles Delueze's redeployment of vitalist philosophy (1991) and Michael Taussig's account of mimesis and state fetishism (1993) provide other recurring theoretical strands.

5. Out of about 86 references, only about 14 are apparently by Indigenous authors. Due to this limited scope of Indigenous academic references, Indigenous philosophy is often presented either through the lens of Muecke's previous work on the thought of Paddy Roe in *Reading the Country* (1984) and other publications or through the texts of white European and Australian anthropologists and philosophers. In this context, the arguments he refuses to engage (in particular critical theories of whiteness) and the Indigenous academics he ignores (like sociologist and critical whiteness theorist, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and legal theorist, Irene Watson, both of whom have made significant contributions to our understanding of Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophies and sovereignties) are as formative as the arguments and academics with which he engages most deeply. His focus on an older (and in some instances illiterate) generation of male

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Indigenous philosophers sits uneasily with his claim that Indigenous philosophy is a 'thing of today' and made me wonder why Muecke doesn't engage more with a generation of university educated Indigenous academics who are working within and upon every discipline in the humanities and social sciences. The problem with this limited range of Indigenous academic reference is that it tends to obscure the senses in which Indigenous Australia was and is a multi-national society within which total consensus over philosophy or other matters is rarely achieved and should hardly be expected.

6. *Ancient and Modern* begins by addressing the sterile debates of the 'history wars' over the past decade and advocating a 'return to place'. He explains his own refusal to 'be a historian' with reference to the argument of religious scholar, Tony Swain (1993), who researches Indigenous 'cargo cults', that '... through the relationships with strange visitors, Aboriginal peoples have adapted their way of being to accommodate different versions of strangeness and that these changes, by and large, have involved the incorporation of cumulative time' (15). Muecke builds on Swain's argument to claim:

> From the beginning, history has been wielded against Aboriginal peoples as something they, along with other non-Western peoples lacked. And much more recently too as something they, along with their sympathetic historians failed to get right... There was no traditional indigenous history in the sense of a set of texts setting out a linear chronology of events. But as we have seen there certainly was, and is, a radically different sense of time in its graphical and ceremonial forms, which are ways of connecting past events to ones taking place in the here and now... So Aboriginal peoples and the colonisers had radically different philosophical orientations. Let us hazard that, while Aboriginal people were anchored by place, the Europeans were busy marking time (24). If I were to risk a generalisation I would say that Aboriginal philosophy is all about keeping things alive in their place (27).

While this rationalisation of the author's refusal to enter the terrain of history wars is quite neat, it fails to address the sense in which white academic discourse has precisely been about keeping Aboriginal people and philosophy respectively *in their places* against Indigenous sovereignty claims which call for non-Indigenous Australians to *give ground.* Rather than acknowledging a plurality of possible relationships with place *and* time, Muecke seems here to reinforce the very distinction between time and place which was and is an indispensable condition for the establishment and maintenance both of a national history and a racialised regime of property ownership.

7. My unease with Muecke's emphasis on 'place' rather than 'history' as the ground of reconciliation increased with the following claim:

> [O]ne thing is certain, there is a division in indigenous communities between those who think that reform and the progressive acquisition of land is an effective enough decolonising strategy, and those who think that 'sovereignty' should be challenged with the notion of an unfinished war or a 'total' political challenge to the State by an indigenous Government (46).'

It is not just the scare-quotes around sovereignty—as though the very concept was provisional rather than the institutionalised root of Indigenous *dis-placement* past and present—that is problematic here. It is Muecke's assertive claim that there is a fundamental 'division in Indigenous communities'—on one hand—and his failure to address the similarly and necessarily ambivalent position of *non-Indigenous Australians* in relation to the question of sovereignty—on the other. Like other commentators on recent debates between Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle, Muecke fails to address the fact that Windschuttle prefaced his declaration of history wars in an article titled 'The Break-Up of Australia' published in *Quadrant* (September 2000: 8-16). This article was explicitly designed to resolve the unsettled status of Aboriginal rights in political and legal institutions through a sustained attack on the very concept of Indigenous sovereignty. When Muecke passes so lightly over the issue of sovereignty, as the central stake in the history wars, on the basis that Indigenous people are divided between 'reformists' and 'radicals', he paradoxically fails to register the very reason 'place' has become such a central issue in cultural and political negotiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

8. The further I plunged into the book, the more I became aware of the author's professional and personal attachment to the role of textualizing Indigenous Australia for the benefit of largely non-Indigenous readerships. This seemed positively perverse in relation to the inventor, author and preacher, David Unaipon, whose collected works *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* Muecke co-edited with Adam Shoemaker (2000). Rather than an intellectual whose thought might be productively engaged with, Muecke's Unaipon appears as a spectacular object or image. In accounting for Unaipon's performative intervention into historical pageantry as part of a Ngarrindgerri tour of Tasmania in 1910, he writes '... The demand for performance is something that dogs every indigenous person in such situations, making everyday life hard to find in public ... Some of us are a continuation, down through history of these "inquisitive white attendants' pondering how to write this event up in a way that does justice to ... what exactly?' (35) Muecke answers this question by suggesting that what is required to do justice to the 'truth' of this event is a 'magical writing' capable of bringing its subject to life in which the non-Indigenous author is conscious of the text as his or her own performative invention (35).

9. His broader argument, that we should see Unaipon as an exemplary instance of Indigenous philosophy as 'cultivation', is well made but the absence of discussion of Unaipon's writings as a key part of this cultivation is curious. I wondered whether the 'difference' Muecke wishes to make of Indigenous philosophy is irretrievably complicated by engagement with *texts* written by some of the Indigenous people that he presents as its exemplars? To the extent that this is the case, Muecke's broader argument about the modernity of Indigenous philosophy seems to be seriously undermined.

10. The subsection concludes with a discussion of Unaipon's capture as a head on the nation's currency:

> ... with the $50 note indigenous sovereignty is given some kind of cultural or political autonomy ... It is the task of cultural workers, I think, to fill out the meanings of such symbols. Where the official symbols tend to the deadly earnest and ponderous, somehow the filling out might be able to aspire to the light and satirical, the human, in other words, making David Unaipon count for more than just a token position on the 50, making his image count in other ways that resonate through society (39).

In this account, Indigenous sovereignty is *given*—albeit ponderously and earnestly—by the nation and 'cultural workers' are left with the task of filling out the *human* dimension of Unaipon, a task that Muecke has earlier performed for us. I want to note though that, however earnestly and ponderously, the Reserve Bank has included a reproduction of Unaipon's own words on the $50: "As a full-blooded member of my race I think I may claim to be the first—but I hope not the last—to produce an enduring record of our customs, beliefs and imaginings." This left me with the question: what 'human' component is present in the speculations made by Muecke about Unaipon's life that is absent from the

"enduring record" left by the man?

11. Following a description of the funeral of his long-term friend and teacher, Paddy Roe, Muecke finds new significance in his own paternity, and ends 'Devastation', the final subsection in TIME, with the following sentence: 'And yet, for those of us who have wondered sometimes as we do, grumpily, why we waste our time having children, he has provided an answer: "They have to look after the country, I s'pose"'(55). I was unconvinced by this implicit comparison between the Indigenous responsibility to reproduce as a means of cultural and political survival and the author's own investments in reproduction as a 'grumpy' white middle-class beneficiary of Indigenous dispossession. In particular I wondered why there wasn't acknowledgement in this context of the *incommensurability* between white and black paternities, illustrated by the tragedy of the stolen generations of Indigenous children as well as the current pathologization of Indigenous parenting within political and media discourses.

12. Having concluded the previous section positioning himself as a 'friend' following in the steps of David Unaipon, Muecke commences COUNTRY, with an account of a queer white woman anthropologist's description of sexual approaches that Aboriginal women made to her in the field (61-2). As with the implicit comparison he draws between his paternity and Paddy Roe's, Marie Reay's account is equated with Muecke's own experiences. He then recalls the two prohibitions with which he was sent into the field by his department's senior professor as a young anthropologist at University of Western Australia: "Don't have anything to do with Aboriginal women ... or Aboriginal politics" (62). He continues to explain the approaches Aboriginal women in Perth made to him in the 1970s in terms of '... the [philosophical] concept of connectedness or relatedness, which can be contrasted all too easily with the concept of individualism associated with the rise of modern Western philosophies ... Getting married in this case, is not just pairing off, it is, in a way, sharing each other' (63). I found this discussion of intersections between sexuality, politics, anthropology and philosophy unsatisfying. Apart from complicating the simple parallels he draws between straight and queer white subjectivities in the field, I wanted Muecke to pursue the corollary of his rejection of these advances; to explore his own role in reproducing the Indigenous as the "site of the nation's founding repression" (62). Two questions in particular arise: why does he seem to assume the Aboriginal women who sexually approached him wanted to marry him? And; why did he not question or disobey the advice of his professor?

13. COUNTRY develops into a discussion of landscape in Australian painting and cinema using Foucault's concept of the 'heterotopia', which disrupts Cartesian space and thought. (71-80). Phillip Noyce's acclaimed 1977 feature film *Backroads* starring Tent Embassy activist, Gary Foley, is explored and there is a discussion of an extract of the script of a scene shot in a car travelling between two different plot locations containing the improvised contributions made by Foley and fellow actor, Bill Hunter. For me the demonstration of how this scene works as a heterotopia through the interaction of direction, Aboriginal country and Western soundtrack, improvised dialogue and cinematography is a high point of the book *:* 'So we have seen a film, vehicled by movement, thus folded into the space of landscape, on the wings of a song, as new aspects of landscape continually emerge' (93). What the discussion of the film fails to do, however, in emphasising Noyce's self-effacing method of direction, is to adequately account for the director's agency in circumscribing Foley's agency as an activist and an actor. And I think this is linked to Muecke's inability or unwillingness to register the mutually constitutive relationship between whiteness and racism in Australia. To the extent that he wants to use the film to critique the self-righteousness of much anti-racist critique, he is unable to discuss aspects of this text that are *simultaneously* over-determined by whiteness *and* disruptive of conventional anti-racist critiques.

14. In section three, titled TECHNOLOGY, ethnographic and literary descriptions of sexualised Indigenous power are used in the opening subsection titled 'He thinks, he desires'. After making brief reference to Marcia Langton's description of Australian ethnography as "arguably the most important literature in our history" (1999), Muecke describes an account by the 'perfectly bilingual' TGH Strehlow of an Arrente creation myth and men's initiation ceremony as a literary "gem" (1947) that seems to 'empathise with an Indigenous philosophy (98). Building on this metaphor of mineral resources, the author goes on to discuss *Yarralie,* a 1962 novel by Donald Stuart about how a "growing girl" in North West Australia, the daughter of a white father and Garadjeri mother who are both prospectors, is helped by a line of black ants to find gold. Having equated the literary imagination of ethnography with Indigenous philosophy and, in turn with, Stuart's novel's description of the 'golden shine, which unites body and place (as of course Aboriginal philosophy does)' (100), Muecke concludes the subsection:

> So from those early days when whites and blacks, separately or together, made their lives nomadic in search of sudden wealth or, more likely, bare subsistence on the prospecting trails, we can shoot forwards (sideways, perhaps; the fossickers are still there) to the situation where the big businesses of extraction of mineral wealth still depend on indigenous cooperation (101).

As with a previous claim that '... there is a realisation among scientists that, in matters of Land, Aboriginal people are leading the way. The European institutions are starting to learn how to follow' (60), Muecke's picture of mining companies dependent on Indigenous cooperation glosses the crucial issue of consent. I would argue that this optimism is unwarranted on both counts: 1) *notwithstanding* their scientific appreciation and appropriation of Indigenous knowledges across disciplines of sociology, anthropology, biology, medicine and archaeology European institutions have rarely, if ever, followed the leadership of Indigenous Australians; and 2) for the majority of Indigenous people unable to benefit from Land Rights or Native Title law, *withholding cooperation* with big business where mineral extraction is not in their interests may be the only form of power available.

15. In the next subsection on Noel Pearson's elaboration and promotion of an 'Indigenous capitalism' combining a focus on Aboriginal 'responsibilities' with Aboriginal 'rights', Muecke directly addresses some of the issues raised by his "struggle with the topic of Aboriginal philosophy." He describes his response to the 'tentative' assent given by Indigenous historian and leader Jackie Huggins to his proposal to publish the outcome of this struggle in a book:

> I eventually came to see that it would be too hard for a white boy to do anything really strong; I could only approach the topic with a kind of humility because while there is something "out there" that is the accumulated wisdom of countless generations of Aboriginal peoples' living in their places: a mere book can scarcely contribute much to that. In any case, Jackie had a strong position on knowledge relations (105).

He follows this with a quote in which Huggins refuses to accept any non-Indigenous definitions of Aboriginality (1993) and with some further reflections on the difference between 'the fixity of knowledge recorded in texts' and the 'dynamic and continuous flux of

process'. This makes me think that Muecke may have missed Huggins' point: it is not the textualization of Aboriginal knowledge (for Aboriginal people like Huggins are also textualizers of their knowledge) that is the problem so much as the tendency of white authors to speak *in the place of Indigenous people*.

16. Having made this declaration of humility as a 'white boy', Muecke's discussion returns to the white ethnographic record, tracing themes of masculinity, sexuality, sacrifice and law in the texts of Strehlow, WEH Stanner and Michael Taussig. At this late stage, we also discover that the book is part of a broader struggle with Stanner over the respective definitions of Aboriginal 'religion' and 'philosophy' and that it is Muecke's aim to extend the scope of 'philosophy' to encompass the 'magico-religious forces observable in the rituals, and the cultural poesis, of non-state societies' (118). Yet this reader found it difficult to find a trace of humility in the claims of Stanner (1965), Taussig (1996), Jose Gil (1998) or Muecke made on behalf of the values and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples nor is there any attempt (at least in the passages cited) to explore their own investments, as researchers and privileged citizens of States founded on Indigenous dispossession, in what Taussig describes as '... the Law of the Father and, lest we forget, ... the spectre of death, human death in that soul-stirring insufficiency of Being'(108). Muecke concludes the discussion by remarking on the unfinished business of commemorating Aboriginal warriors and taking comfort from the 'resurgence of the power of Aboriginal rituals and of Aboriginality in rituals' as an indication that 'minor philosophies not only survive, but they are also the seeds of future thought' (118-119). I found this conflation between the 'power of Aboriginal rituals' and 'Aboriginality in rituals' misleading to the extent that the latter rituals being referred to are those of the white nation state. For, if we accept that 'Aboriginal power haunts Australian politics like a spectre', might the white nation not use 'Aboriginality in [its] rituals' *against* the 'power of Aboriginal rituals' in a malevolent form of mimesis?

17. In articulating an account of State power as simultaneously universalising (the Law of the Father) and racializing (Indigenous male initiation ceremonies are cited as the exemplary and ideal form of this Law) Muecke relies heavily on Taussig's account of state fetishism as ambivalently heterocentric and homoerotic. However the homoerotic aspects touched on by the latter remain unexplored by the former. Instead, Muecke's own fetishism (the object of Brook Andrew's queer critique in *Sexy and Dangerous* reproduced on the book's cover) not only appears to be 'deadly earnest and ponderous'; it also produces dubious parallels between 'rivers of blood' in Aboriginal creation stories and initiation ceremonies as recounted by white anthropologists—on one hand—and the sacred sacrifice at the heart of Anzac mythology and ritual—on the other. As though the violent and generative qualities attributed to the phallus provided a universal ground of commensurability between white and Indigenous existence in this place.

18. Having established foundations of power and knowledge in the universal law of gender difference, subjectivity and knowledge, it is a small step for Muecke to claim for the project of 'deconstruction' 'Boxer' a Kalkatungu man whose life and philosophy have been represented by Mary Durack (1935) (on whose east Kimberly station he grew up and worked), Tony Swain (1993) and Tim Rowse (1987). Boxer's appropriation of Christian texts and ritual becomes a means by which Muecke illustrates Jacques Derrida's theory of the generative and morally ambivalent power of politics and language within which all subjects are constrained:

> ... if we agree that there is no Aboriginal politics that is not complicit with the colonial violence that created the need for them in the first place, then there will be no pure Aboriginal position outside to provide a critique of what is going on inside Aboriginal politics. Those doing the politics are working within and continually on the symbolic violence of colonial history, in which that history can never be a purely whitefella imposition nor a purely blackfella revolution from the other side (123).

The problem with this formulation of parallels between deconstruction and Aboriginal politics is that it seems to assume a) that a 'pure Aboriginal position' is being asserted by critics 'of what is going on in Aboriginal politics' in the first instance and b) that the absence of such a 'pure Aboriginal' position licences or even necessitates critiques of Aboriginal politics. Both assumptions fail to register that critiques of Aboriginal critiques as "nativist" authored by white Australians are themselves complicit with 'the colonial violence that created the need for them in the first place' (123).

19. The question posed by Boxer for Muecke and articulated by Boxer's contemporary, Old Bulla, is:

> "Who's the powerful? Who's the strongest? The white man or the blackfella, see out of those two?" Now, having posed those questions, I am not going to be in a position to answer them here, and it is not my place to do so. I have simply woken up a sleepy word "order", which was happy to go along with the assumption that the whitefella world was taking over on this frontier ... (123).

So, having simply 'woken up' the political language of the Frontier, Muecke's work is done? I don't think so. Surely the corollary of Old Bulla's challenge is that Muecke (as with Swain and Rowse) should be recognised as a white man with continuing investments in securing dominance over Indigenous people and philosophies? Muecke continues to wonder: 'Whose magic is the more powerful? I can only keep asking that question, but I am an outsider critic ...' (124). Here he follows Rowse in distinguishing himself from the Duracks, whose everyday life was entwined with that of their Aboriginal workers.

20. But how is it that Swain, Rowse and Muecke can appear to be disinvested observers (or 'outside critics') of the struggle between racialised powers identified by Old Bulla? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in Muecke's earlier use of the term 'white boy' to describe his relationship to the project at hand. 'White boy' appears to function in *Ancient and Modern* as a metonym for innocence, enabling a disingenuous gesturing towards Aboriginal men's law as the source of "real" power in this place. As though there are no white professors putting the words and lives of Aboriginal men to their own political and professional uses; instead there are 'white boys' awed by the mystery and power of Aboriginal stories and male initiation ceremonies. Only in a hallucinatory 'white boy' universe could Mary Durack's account of Nubbadah, an Aboriginal housekeeper bringing a cup of tea to wake up the white members of the homestead, seriously raise the question: 'Who is running this show?' (125)

21. Parallels between Boxer's innovative re-working of Christian and Aboriginal rituals and beliefs and the Duracks' published drawings and writings which stake a claim to their knowledge about Aboriginal people are then drawn, with both presented as responses to the 'stimulation' of Frontier life. Modernity itself is equated with the stimulus presented to specific groups by new technologies and cultural contacts:

> Let us say that, when these forces of modernisation and colonisation arrived on the Australian frontier, there was a range of indigenous responses: compliance and collaboration, resistance and inventive adaptation, all of which I am prepared to call parts of a modern way of being because first,

they differentiate power and second, develop new forms of language and culture that involve lots of translation work (138).

I was unconvinced by Muecke's attempt to reconcile this assertion in which colonialization, modernisation, inventive adaptation and the differentiation of power are all inextricably connected, with Chakrabarty's critique of the pre-modern/modern binary in *Provincialising Europe.* Muecke's account not only rationalises colonisation under the rubric of modernity (it ushers in invention and new forms of culture) but evades the important epistemological question of what existed in this place prior to the invasion? Surely if we are to take the proposition of Indigenous modernity seriously, we need to at least consider that it pre-dated the 'forces of colonisation' that took root after 1788. Otherwise how can we ultimately avoid positing a 'pure primitive'? (138)

22. To acknowledge that all cultures, 'including the ones that see themselves as the most advanced will display moments of primitivity' (138) does not get the author out of this problem. Rather it further reinforces the very idea that some cultures (and peoples) are more primitive than others. This sits in apparent contradiction to the final suggestion in this subsection that 'the modern and the primitive coexist in multiple forms, [allowing us to abandon] the historicist argument that the former is the process of the elimination of traces of the latter' and install 'the idea of everpresent antiquities and primitivities in modernity' (139). But there is no way to escape the 'relativist comparison' of historicism as long as we differentiate between cultures, as Muecke does above, on the basis of their *respective proportions* of qualities deemed 'primitive' and 'modern'. This contradiction is reproduced when he concludes TECHNOLOGY by claiming 'the emphasis on modernities means treating everyone right now *as if* they live in the same time and place—coexisting contemporaries—rather than as vestiges of the past or future hopefuls' (151). Once we allow for the possibility of an entirely modern *and* pre-colonial Indigenous world we can replace 'as if' with 'because' in this sentence and consider that sovereignty itself, far from being an introduced product of the forces of colonialism and modernisation, has always resided with the many Indigenous nations that co-exist here.

23. The final section PHILOSOPHY opens with a consideration of the productive contingency of the philosophical project in Australia, as an 'Other-ed' site in relation to Europe. Muecke optimistically identifies several tendencies in the Australian situation towards 1) decolonising, 2) recognising the alterity of Aboriginal thought and 3) decentralising or 'provincialising' Europe. He sees Australian philosophers like Paul Patton engaging Indigenous philosophy from a Deleuzian perspective but, in focussing on its semantic contents, failing to engage with the power of country and bodies expressed in the anthropology literature. So Muecke returns to the words of David Mowaljarlai (Mowaljarai 1993), whose image *Body of Australia,* prefaces this last section:

> His picture is that of a body of connected parts, just as parts of the body relate to kinship categories, just as the body is inscribed with signs (paints, cicatrices) of belonging, being married or being from a certain part of the country. The picture does not signify generally, rather, it mobilises the energy of the body. As he says in his own vitalistic philosophy, "Everything standing up alive"' (172).

The image very effectively encapsulates Muecke's final critique of the idealism of European philosophy: 'Let me suggest that long-sightedness is a European form of philosophical myopia and that other versions of philosophy, Indigenous perhaps, have a more in-lived and intimate association with societies of people and the way they talk about themselves.' (174). Citing Mowaljarlai's collaboration with anthropologists between 1938 and 1993, he points out that this philosophy does not preclude Indigenous people from engaging with contemporary global politics or and disseminating their ideas through books (174-5).

24. Important as this point is, it nevertheless reinforces a concept of Indigenous philosophy as fundamentally *self-referential* even when it is oriented towards non-Indigenous readers. What is not theorised in *Ancient and Modern* and is rarely considered within Aboriginalist and anti-Aboriginalist scholarship by white authors (including myself) is that Indigenous philosophers might possess sophisticated knowledge of white people and our philosophies. These philosophies might appear diverse to us but viewed from another perspective share concepts and values which obviously and consistently support white hegemony. As Moreton-Robinson points out in relation to academic discourse on Aboriginality, 'Whiteness establishes the limits of what can be known about the other through itself, disappearing beyond or behind the limits of this knowledge it creates in the other's name' (2004: 75). This raises the possibility that the very search for 'Indigenous philosophy' might be a means through which colonising whiteness attempts to contain a threatening multiplicity of Indigenous sovereignties and epistemologies.

25. The final paragraphs of the book recount a dream which Muecke had concerning a ceremonial presentation by two female Aboriginal students in his class on Aboriginal philosophy:

> The coda to this dream, still in the dream, is my remembering an email I had received from one of these students, Jackie was her name, before the class, asking if she could use an unusual form of presentation. I had not answered it because, I guess, it was one of those emails that presents a difficulty and so one puts it aside to think about it, and then it slips one's mind.

This is a courageous way to end the book, implicitly acknowledging that the intersection between Aboriginal women and sovereignty presents a difficulty for his account of Aboriginal philosophy. This is reflected in the roles in which Indigenous women and men are respectively cast throughout *Ancient and Modern* —women are often positioned as educators, students, translators or seductresses while men are mostly celebrated as philosophers, inventors or magicians. That Muecke is at least capable of dreaming of a contemporary Indigenous subject of philosophy who is also a woman called Jackie (perhaps triggered subconsciously by the challenge to his project posed by Jackie Huggins) is, I hope, a positive sign of things to come from this influential Australian intellectual.

26. Prior to discussing Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for decolonisation* I should first highlight the significant extent of mutual referencing and promotion between this book and Muecke's. But in spite of their shared fields of reference and focus on questions of Aboriginality, philosophy, place and time, these books are quite different beasts. I think this reflects quite different understandings of the value of self-reflexivity on the part of each author. While self-reflexivity for Muecke often consists of playing a language game that seems designed to evade authorial responsibility for his bold claims on behalf of Indigenous philosophy, for the most part Bird-Rose explicitly positions her self within the text and examines its ramifications for the knowledge produced. Having said this, however, towards the end of the book this self-reflexivity suddenly disappears with disturbing consequences for the broader arguments the book seeks to make.

27. Much of the book is based on conversations with Aboriginal people from the Yarralin, Lingara and Pigeon Hole communities of the Northern Territory since her arrival to Australia almost twenty five years ago from the US. In contrast to Muecke, where the subject of the "we" he refers to seems to be deliberately slippery, Bird Rose begins by explaining:

I use the pronoun "we" to refer primarily to the conquerors and their descendants in settler societies. I also use the terms 'Whitefellas', 'White people' and 'Kartiya' (in its various spellings this is the North Australian Kriol term for non-Aboriginal people. Many of my teachers used the word 'Blackfella' to refer to themselves. Except in quotations, where a number of vernacular terms are used, I have opted to use the terms 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous'. In addition, I have slipped into the use of first names with some of my closest friends and teachers. I could press myself to be more formal, but my greater hope is that readers may also find ways to feel close to people who they may only ever meet on the written page (2).

28. The introduction 'Into the Wild' advocates the urgent necessity of decolonisation in a global context of ecological and other forms of terror and suggests the need for a new understanding of the concept of 'wilderness' and of the people and cultures respectively designated as 'wild' and 'civilized' (3-7). Rather than being a harbinger of civilisation, it is possible to view Captain Cook as the vehicle of a 'wild' destruction that has been 'catastrophic' for Aboriginal country and people. This turns the Enlightenment ideal of progress on its head and introduces a new conception of time. In contrast to Muecke's opposition of 'place' to 'time' she argues that:

[T]ime is neither homogenous nor linear (in any social sense). Alternatives to the wild can be found in the past and in the present. The alternatives are not sorted out into an "us" (wild) and "them" (non-violent). Rather, alternatives arise unexpectedly in relationships among peoples and between people and place.

29. She then proceeds to identify the four themes of the book: 'resilience'—or the will of all living things to flourish (7); 'doubled violence' which 'not only kills part of a living system but actually disables or kills the capacity of a living system to repair itself'; 'counter-modernity' which is not destructively opposed to modernity but in a productive and responsive relationship with it; and 'ethics' as defined by Emmanuel Levinas as a refusal to justify the 'neighbor's pain' and a first philosophy preceding ontology (1988).

30. The book is divided into sections and subsections like *Ancient and Modern* but there are fewer subsections and these four themes hold the argument together more carefully. The first subsection of HERE AND NOW, titled 'Recuperation' addresses the ethics of commemoration and history in terms of Levinas' distinction between destructive 'guilt' and productive 'responsibility' in relation to past events. Identifying 'disjunction' and 'irreversible sequence' as constitutive of modernist philosophies, Bird Rose argues that what is required for an ethical relationship to time is the rejection of 'a paradigm of future social perfection or some form of redemption, and revaluing the present as the real site of action in the world.' (19) Citing Chakrabarty's argument about the 'knotted' character of tradition and modernity at any given moment in time, she argues against persisting with a 'warlike theory of "self" that perpetuates colonial projects in the name of transcending the past to inhabit a "comfortable" national present and future, which the current Prime Minister defends so aggressively (23). Part of taking ethical responsibility involves the project of recuperation, requiring us to listen to the witnessing of colonialism's victims and to commemorate *their* dead with our own.

31. 'Wounded Space' explores the legacy of genocide and ecocide in Australia and the concepts of 'Down/Up' and East/West entailed in the cultural geography that made these violences possible. In the description of Australia by ex-PM Paul Keating as "the arse-end" of the world, Bird Rose sees a uniquely Australian debunking and destabilisation of 'all totalising narratives concerning White Australian identity'. And the 'great Australian mantra "she'll be right" (46) makes her worry about the danger of historical amnesia as well as giving her hope about the positive potential for the passionate critique of European concepts articulated by eco-philosophers like Val Plumwood (1993, 2002) and Freya Matthews (1991, 2002). She then contrasts the wounded space of white Australia to '..."the long transitive moment" that is the present and in which ancestral, recent past, now and the future towards which people are responsible co-exist in practical ethics of everyday life' (56).

32. The white Australian settler sense of time is presented as the product of a Christian concept of 'Year Zero', a palindrome in which all time is regarded as moving towards the birth of Christ and then, after his death, towards the second coming and the salvation of all of humanity (56-7):

... palindromic narrative thus articulates the view that a plan of history exists, that history moves from an early (proto- or pre-) configuration through disjunction/transfiguration to the realised or fulfilled configuration ... Year Zero is in practice a declaration of war...The violence by which those on the pre-zero side of the frontier are forced to give way to those arriving from the post-zero side is asserted to exist within a moment that is about to be overcome. The metaphor of right and left hands is useful for describing life during this explosive moment. The right hand of conquest can be conceptualised as beneficent in its claims: productivity, growth, and civilisation are announced as beneficial actions in places where they purportedly had not existed before. The left hand, by contrast, has the task of erasing specific life. Indigenous peoples, their cultures, their practices of time, their sources of power, and their systems of ecological knowledge and responsibility will all be wiped out and most of the erasure will be literal, not metaphorical. This creates the *tabula rasa* upon which the right hand will inscribe its civilisation. (60-2)

I found this evocative account of the *sense of time* by which white Australia is afflicted and which it has been determined to inflict upon Indigenous Australians more productive than the time/place opposition that Muecke reproduces. To illustrate her argument, Bird Rose cites the changes experienced in the single life of Jimmy Manngayarri, one of her 'teachers' who had seen relatives from the generation above him shot to death and otherwise brutalised by station managers, been involved in the Wave Hill Strike action and lived to see the passage of land rights legislation in which context he was able to give evidence as a law man. Lest this life be made to stand metonymically for the 'progress' of national reconciliation, however, Bird Rose reminds us of the incommensurable and conflictual character of times and subjectivities in Australia: 'The point I want to draw out is the connection between Indigenous people's remembrance, the strong determination on the part of some White people to reject that remembrance and the ongoing structure of violence' (71).

33. Bird Rose shifts focus in the following section 'Cattle Kings and Sacred Cows' to examine the complicated set of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in frontier 'cattle culture'. This culture, she argues:

can be seen to shelter and support a transitive moment, but [it] also shelters and supports those who resist being superseded [...] [Cattle events] ... are meticulously organised and rule-governed, and are supported by a large set of industries; at the same time, they perform unpredictability and

subversion, and assert the value of cattle culture as an end in itself (88).

So they resist analysis:

> ... that lines up a set of hierarchical dualisms [such as] culture: nature; human: animal; mind: matter; man: woman; civilisation: savagery [...] (89) In rodeo and other events, matter and mind, like nature and culture, are extravagantly entangled...Perhaps the battle today is not for control of civilisation but for defence against it. In that mode, it may not matter whether horse or man wins, or whether the man is settler or Indigenous; what matters is that they perform together their intersubjective, countermodern, embodied and dangerous collaboration. As we hold our breath and clench our hands we can find ourselves increasingly excited at the thought that maybe, perhaps, civilisation will not win, ever (94).

34. It is with this hetero-erotic sense of excitement at the rodeo that the reader moves into part two BATTLEFIELDS. 'Gender of the Gun' examines '... the links settlers were making between Nature, natives and gender in two moments in the frontier: at the point of conquest, and in the stretched period of settlement' (99). After reviewing early Frontier records by white men (Kimber 1990 and Stokes 1846), later novels by white women (Hill 1955) and more recent research on White male-Black female relationships by white academic, Ann McGrath (1987), Bird Rose opens her discussion of the relationship between masculinity, guns and whiteness on the frontier with this clarification: 'if coercive relations were possible, and if Aboriginal people had no legitimate defence against such relations, then the fact that some relations were not coerced cannot serve to deny the power supporting the whole set of interactions and obligations' (107). She explains:

> In a competitive field, differential access to firearms (and the right to use them relatively freely) skews relationships of power in particularly loaded ways. I would suggest in this context the cock is a displaced gun. It may not be that a man totes his pistols as a symbolic penis, as popular psychology indicates, but rather that a man totes his penis as a symbolic gun. The common practice of White men's sexual use and abuse of Aboriginal women ... and the removal of children ensured that sexual activity promoted the disappearance of Aborigines (110-11).

35. Subsection Six, 'The Fellowship of Mates' extends this discussion from the cattle industry, past and present, to examine gendered race relations in a cultural tourism context. It examines the way 'Max's Tour' operating out of Timber Creek (Northern Territory) brings visitors 'into the circle' of patriarchal white mateship through showmanship and humour as well as by instituting rituals, such as requiring every tourist to play the didgeridoo. The author explains that this ritual is introduced with a series of stories told in a pseudo-anthropological mode by Max which establish him as:

> ... the possessor of those boundary-threatening and boundary-sustaining qualities of Aboriginal knowledge and white male superiority ... I felt that I was being drawn into complicity with a set of values which I oppose. Further, I think that every person who put their mouth to the didgeridoo became an accomplice to a particular set of relations between Black and White (125).

She explains how Max uses sexist humour to ensure that white women are only conditionally included in the circle of mateship established by the cultural tour. The threat posed by imagined and actual relationships between White and Black women is implicit, she argues, in the very force with which Max controls the terms of white women's inclusion to establish, 'Conquest as an accomplished fact, Aboriginal conferral of legitimacy, the linear relationship of succession from Black to White, White supremacy and racial contempt, sexual violence, and maleness as the primary condition for genuine belonging to society and to the land' (130). In formulating this argument about the threat posed to patriarchal whiteness by relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, I was disappointed that Bird Rose didn't engage with Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (2000) which explains why Indigenous and white women rarely form effective feminist alliances from which to challenge patriarchal white sovereignty. In particular, Moreton-Robinson's account of the "Bell-Huggins debate" over rape in Indigenous communities highlights the ways that our investments in the subject position "middle-class white woman" stand as a barrier to co-operation between Indigenous and white women.

36. The next chapter examines the ambivalent relationship to Christianity of Daly River Aboriginal people who were missionised by the Jesuits and later abandoned by them after the farming practices they established proved unsustainable. In contrast to the Jesuits' fierce opposition to Indigenous religion, components of Christianity were incorporated into 'contact cults' through which people attempted to reconcile aspects of Gospel teaching with the dispossessing practices of missionaries and their own ethical values of reciprocity. A new religious practice was developed called 'Big Sunday' which White administrators unsuccessfully opposed on the basis that it incorporated 'ritual sex' (145-6). While Bird Rose sees in Big Sunday and subsequent Indigenous transformations of Christianity '... an imagination sharpened and expanded by the experience of the most barbarous of frontiers [offering] evidence of a continuing spiritual presence and an Indigenous promise of life', the following subsection examines the views of some Indigenous people, including one of her 'teachers', Hobbles Danaiyarri, who opposed Christianity and was 'driven to swings of despair and fury at the prospect that his people had survived Captain Cook only to fall prey to Jesus' (149). She then compares the respective orientations towards time of the missionaries and the Yarralin, providing a vivid contrast with Walter Benjamin's famous figure of the Angel of History watching catastrophes pile up while being propelled backwards into the future and with which *Reports from a Wild Country* was introduced:

> [For Yarralin, Our] descendants are the "behind mob" relative to us. We precede them, they follow along behind. And the whole of ordinary life can be understood as collectively as a "behind mob"—we all follow along behind the Dreamings. This is a temporal orientation that is based on sequence. First the earth, then the Dreamings, then the ancestors; we follow along behind them, and our descendents follow along behind us. The orientation, then, is the reverse of European co-ordinates. Westerners face the future, the past is behind; the image is of generations of people marching into the future. Aboriginal people face the source; the image is of generations of people returning into the Dreaming (152).

37. Demonstrating that aggressively teleological thought is not confined to the domain of missionary work, Bird Rose completes this section with a quote from the secular Australian historian, Manning Clark's *History of Australia,* (1973) equating his condemnation of 'Old World errors' with the missionaries' view of Aboriginal pre-history. Christianity's emphasis on 'other-worldly' places is then linked to 'the practice of colonisation that is destroying so much of people's living world [...] this teaching can be seen to reflect an emerging ecological fact—this earth is becoming just rubbish... Hobbles and others resisted [this] very idea that this world no longer matters (156).

38. Bird Rose then raises what I think is one of the most important questions in the book and one which is addressed very evasively by Muecke: where does the anthropologist stand in relation to conflicts both within the community of her research subjects and in relation to conflicts between that community and the broader colonising society within

which it is encased? She describes a decision about whether to attend church in the community in which she was doing fieldwork and which at least one of her Aboriginal friends and 'teachers' attended:

> Yes, a good anthropologist would have gone, but what would a good student of Hobbles have done? ... In doing anthropology my research took me into relationships bound by ethics ... I had been claimed, and I was now bound by an awareness of fidelity ... I was no longer free to do just anything that took my interest, even when it involved something as intriguing as drinking blood and taking fits ... I could not face his children and grandchildren knowing that I had engaged in actions that could be construed as support for the very people against whom he had put his life on the line by testing God (157-8).

Like refusing to put her lips on the didgeridoo, Bird Rose's decision not to attend the Church or to support the establishment of a museum or individually marked graves in Yarralin are stances taken in support of a specific political orientation towards the institutions and symbols of Christian time which she simultaneously embodies as a white anthropologist.

39. This refusal is important, I think, for unsettling a model of anthropological fieldwork as disinvested and politically neutral 'research'. In this context, not to engage with 'Aboriginal politics', as Muecke's senior academic advisor dictated, is not only to place oneself apart from the community within which one has been adopted but to fail to recognise Aboriginal politics itself as evidence of Indigenous sovereignty. That is: the differentiation of power which Muecke (incorrectly in my view) saw as a sign of modernity is the pre-condition for the political as such. The irony is that 'divisions within the Aboriginal community' are consistently used as a rationale on the part of the white nation state for refusing political negotiation with Indigenous Australians through a treaty or other constitutional tool. Catch 22. If you can't all agree, you are not 'ready' for sovereignty; if you *do* all agree, you haven't developed the culture of democratic dissent required for self-government.

40. Following David Burrumarra, who Bird Rose describes as 'one of the great sages of Arnhem Land', *Reports from a Wild Country* continues with reflections towards a counter-modern 'journey' of reconciliation within which human and ecological rights are inextricably entwined. The relationships between two aspects of Aboriginal philosophy elaborated by Mary Graham are then explored: "The Land is the Law. You are not alone in the world" (186). This leads to two unsettling questions for Bird Rose: 'What would it mean to think of ourselves as one species within western knowledge systems to become more than an observer in an observed world?' (187) As a way of approaching these questions she uses the work of ecologist, Freya Mathews, on "nativism" and she contrasts the ethical project of environmental "rehabilitation" to the modernist value of "wilderness conservation" (190-2).

41. It is from this point onward that the book's argument seems unable to contain the sudden shift of focus from the context of the author's fieldwork in remote communities in the Northern Territory to her work with Indigenous activists and non-Indigenous environmentalists in the 'settled South' of coastal New South Wales. Whereas Hobbles—as teacher and philosopher—provided Bird-Rose with the substantial framework through which to critique white colonial concepts such as wilderness and year zero, white eco-philosophers and proponents of reconciliation provide the framework for the book's final chapters. As a consequence, the specifically political challenges that confront the anthropologist at the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations recounted in the context of her remote Australian experience seem to drop completely from view.

42. A successful protest against logging on Gulaga Mountain by Yuin women in New South Wales supported by relatives and white people from the area is used to exemplify a decolonising journey of reconciliation. This is followed by reflections on interviews (conducted with Peter Read) with one of the supporters of this struggle, Mal Dibden, an old white farmer working to rehabilitate his property after years of destructive clearing and motivated partly by respect for the original Aboriginal owners. In considering the relationship between the country and its Indigenous and non-Indigenous owners, Bird Rose imagines a reconfiguration of the concept of 'nature' from 'history, conquest, and damage' to 'resilience, reconciliation and love. This appears to challenge her preconceptions about patriarchal white subjectivity: '... I thought at first that Mal was inscribing himself into the mountain, and only belatedly did I come to understand how deeply the mountain was inscribing itself into Mal' (212).

43. This final discussion of nature, love and reconciliation is a disappointing conclusion to a book that is often very thought provoking. Considering the ethics of resource-sharing that are so central to the argument elsewhere, I expected much more attention would be brought to bear on the sovereignty issues raised by Mal's privileged position as a land-owner in the area. But, in spite of questions of ownership that are explicitly raised in the interview transcripts (208-09) Bird Rose seems to re-present these through a frame of the 'White Man's burden: 'So his life problems circle round to economics, and the terrible pressure to be commercially viable' (208). There is no discussion of Mal's economic position relative to the Indigenous owners or the possibilities of an ecological and cultural sustainability founded on co-ownership.

44. It is as though Bird Rose is finally incapable of pursuing the political implications of her earlier arguments from a context in which she is a white stranger 'learning' from her 'teachers in a remote Aboriginal community through into the context of the densely settled Eastern seaboard where she is perhaps more obviously complicit with colonial heritages and processes. Unfortunately this creates an implicit opposition between Mal, as the environmentally sensitive farmer and 'good white man' and Max, as the exploitative tourist operator and bad white man, defusing the political challenge that the book had previously addressed to all white Australians irrespective of the distracting and unproductive issue of moral character. There seems, in this picture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people sharing country and living together under a rubric of reconciliation, a desire to provide the book with a "happy ending."

45. A consequence of this is that the absence of happy endings for many Indigenous peoples in the "settled south" is obscured. For example, the Yorta Yorta pursued their native title claims all the way to the High Court only to be told that the evidence of a white land-owner, Aboriginal protector and amateur anthropologist proved their connections to ancestral country had been "washed away by the tide of history". The work of Koori historian, Tony Birch, on the Victorian government's refusal to recognise Indigenous place-names on signage within the "Grampians" national park (1996) similarly highlights ongoing struggles of Indigenous Australians and their supporters in the face of what Moreton-Robinson describes as a "possessive investment in patriarchal white sovereignty".

46. In conclusion, both *Ancient and Modern* and *Reports from a Wild Country* successfully draw readers' attention to the very real difficulties of de-colonising our thought as white academics. While they definitely offer some interesting ideas and case-studies for consideration, it is arguably in their rehearsal of the epistemological problems inherent in analysing a regime of power of which we are also beneficiaries that much of the value of these books resides.

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