Reading Stephen Muecke's Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy

by Ken Gelder

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A response to this article has been received from Stephen Muecke.

It's over twenty years ago since Stephen Muecke published Galarabulu and then Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology, two very beautiful and complex books that built themselves around recorded stories told by a senior Aboriginal man from northern Western Australia, Paddy Roe. This is where Muecke installed his Deleuzean view of Aboriginal ways of being in the world: as nomads set against the State, and as storytellers who live out a 'rhizomatic' connection to country and community. His academic background is in French cultural and literary theory, but Deleuze has influenced him the most: rather than, say, Foucault, to mention the other continental theorist important to Australian cultural studies. The interest in Muecke's work has been disappointing over the years, mostly concerned with matters of editorial and ethnographic practice, usually looking critically—as Michelle Grossman has recently done, for example—at the way Muecke's commentaries in Galarabulu or Reading the Country work to 'filter' and 'conceal' Paddy Roe's stories, giving them something of a 'suffering' or 'subject' status in the text: as if the editor takes precedence over the storyteller. But Grossman's essay never bothers to offer an alternative editorial or ethnographic/fieldwork method; nor does it have anything to say about the role of Deleuze in all this, and indeed, it has little enough to say about Paddy Roe, too, whose stories it ignores altogether with just one brief exception.

It's worth noting that in Australian literary studies, non-Aboriginal readings of Aboriginal stories generally and unsurprisingly end up being about non-Aboriginality: a way of thinking about 'whiteness', except, rather than a chance to meditate on Aboriginality or on 'being Aboriginal'. These kinds of readings, in other words, are generally self-reflective. But in Stephen Muecke's latest book, Ancient and Modern, we get quite the opposite procedure: an ambitious non-Aboriginal or 'whitefella' attempt to describe 'being Aboriginal' and to account for what Muecke calls Aboriginal philosophy. Muecke remains Deleuzean in this latest work, even speaking about the latter's 'reterritorialisation' in Australia. Whereas Reading the Country had placed Paddy Roe's stories and Muecke's Deleuzean commentaries side by side, this new book is, I think, an attempt to become Deleuzean and Aboriginal simultaneously, to somehow tell these two realms together closer to the point of indistinguishability. Indeed, this is Muecke's primary method here: to entangle continental theory with Aboriginal practice. A chapter about another senior Aboriginal man is called 'Boxer, Deconstructionist', in which we are told that Boxer's stories have the power that is often attributed to European theories—Aboriginal people might very well be surprised to find themselves recast in this way, but Muecke is as enthralled by their stories as he is by the continental theory he brings to bear upon them. It can often seem as if by one he really means the other, and vice versa: this is the strategy he brings to the topic of 'being Aboriginal', and it is probably fair to say that sometimes it pays off and sometimes it doesn't.

Using Deleuze to read Aboriginal stories and philosophies may seem idiosyncratic, but in fact it works to situate Muecke's approach in a very specific Australian context. One of the keywords in Ancient and Modern is 'vitalism', taken from Deleuze but via Henri Bergson, who had influenced some earlier Australian literary and cultural critics, as well as several artists and poets—such as William Baylebridge, or Vincent Buckley whose early essay 'Utopianism and Vitalism in Australian Literature' was published in the conservative journal Quadrant in 1959. It is true to say that the champions of vitalism in Australian Literature have not on the whole been politically progressive. But Deleuze's 'vitalist philosopher' helps Muecke to emphasise his sense that Aboriginal people are defined through life-forces, movement, vigour, immediacy, connectedness, metabolism and 'becoming'. Aboriginal people are immersed in country: bodies and landscape, for Muecke, flow back and forth into one another. Such a view is not really very far away from some of the 'jindyworobak' poets from around the 1940s, for example, who were also absorbed by Aboriginal vitality. But to invoke it now is to take a certain risk, especially in terms of its earlier currency in Australia. For one thing, this view is purely cultural. Muecke emphasises what he calls an Aboriginal 'poetics', and poetry itself is important to him as a measure of authenticity when he analyses Aboriginal narratives and practices. A sequence in Philip Noyce's Australian film Backroads (1977) where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters argue about racism is given value precisely because it seems like 'a certain kind of poetry' (p.91). On the other hand, Muecke has very little direct interest in the political, progressive or otherwise: so (for example) he has nothing much to say about land claims and other contemporary expressions of Aboriginal political-philosophical will. He touches very briefly on some recent commentaries that argue for Aboriginal self-dependence and he speaks for a brief moment about 'Aboriginal capitalism'. But he mostly carves out a space for Aboriginal people that is free from these things, and which is almost entirely cultural—we might even say entirely literary—in its conception.

Drawing loosely on Dipesh Chakrabarty, Muecke suggests that Aboriginal people inhabit an 'alternative modernity' to non-Aboriginal Australians. This alternative modernity is linked to the 'ancient' which Muecke mobilises as a powerful force in Aboriginal philosophical expression and which underwrites his sense of Aboriginal vitalism. It is tied to ritual and magic, that is, it is cultural. Muecke quotes Josè Gil, whose work he has translated from the French, who writes that the earth is a 'magical territory perceived in the extension of the community body in relation to the ancestors' (cited p.117) – and this pretty much summarises Muecke's position on Aboriginal philosophy, even though the point is registered unevenly through this book. 'We have not left intuition and magic behind in our secular world' (p.161), he tells us, buying into the familiar thesis that the Enlightenment carries its shadows along with it. Many might agree with him here, but the point can also lead to a number of troubling mystifications. The modern West, for Muecke, values rationality and objectivity, while Aboriginal people 'are connected singularly to feeling, intuition' (p.170). This is a binary that indigenous people, as well as women, for example, have had to live with for some time. We could say that in spite of his commitment to deconstruction and continental theory, Muecke is therefore 'metaphysically' about Aboriginal philosophy. Non-Aboriginal modernity is routinely cast as superficial, ephemeral, atomizing; indigenous modernity, on the other hand, is grounded in the ancient and therefore has 'depth' and 'permanence', much like 'images from an epic poem' (p.12) and testifying to 'the deeper flow of fundamental narratives' (p.163). The perspective is surprisingly essentialist, for all its theoretical interest in flux and change and Deleuzean 'rhizomes' and 'becoming'.

I think that this essentialism arises in part from Muecke's tendency to slide from modernity to modernism in his book: returning over and over to modernism's high literary values in the midst of a world otherwise given over to information technologies, commodification and disposability. This is where he takes his valorisation of the poetic, for example, with its respect for tradition and ritual and its sense that modern, secular society is alienated from ancient, buried wisdoms. He admires the Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett, for example, because he 'remains within a modernist project' (p.150). Modernity, for Muecke, is defined in terms of consumerism and textual interpretation, producing 'modern affects' such as 'cynicism, irony and insincerity' (p.76). Aboriginal art and narratives are distinguished from all this—which means amongst other things that Muecke has no time for postmodern Aboriginal cultural production, like the work of Tracy Moffatt or Destiny Deacon which he never mentions. Can Aboriginal cultural producers be ironic? Not in Muecke's schema, it would seem. He prefers instead a model of mimesis that he takes from the anthropologist Michael Taussig, where what you see is exactly what you get. Just as Roland Barthes had once described poetry, so Aboriginal ritual and practice for Muecke is pure signification. There is no act of representation or mediation involved, just total immersion in the thing-in-itself. An Aboriginal painting, for example, embodies (rather than, say, symbolises) country and carries 'that country's vitality (power-to-grow) with it always' (p.21). This is in some respects a compelling view, but it runs the risk of mystification—and it relies utterly on a commitment to a sense of Aboriginal-immersion-in-country that remains untouched by colonialism (and, we might add, by modernity): as if dispossession (which we might think of here as producing disjuncture between signifier and signified) simply didn't happen. On the other hand, there may be nothing particularly Aboriginal about this at all. Another example of this kind of art for Muecke is the work of the non-Aboriginal Queensland painter, Bill Robinson. Robinson is a...
Muecke revisits his 2004 book Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy in order to refine some of his arguments about philosophical practice and the damaging periodization into Aboriginal 'alternative modernity'. He writes that Aboriginal philosophy is all about the 'surfacing of the primitive' in the midst of modern life (p.133). He notes how Aboriginal philosophy is characterized by its attention to Aboriginal women: only to ignore what they say, as he had with Jackie Huggins. He recalls how he got to the last couple of paragraphs of Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy (p.10). His commitment to cultural difference sits uneasily alongside these occasional yearnings for national unity—and he is not alone these days in wishing that all Australians could be equally 'indigenous': a yearning for what we might call non-hybridity, much like the valorizations these days of the Australian 'native-born' by writers like Peter Read or John Molony. We still don't have an effective and productive way of conceiving of Aboriginal hybridity or of understanding 'being Aboriginal' without attaching this to a Tonniesian sense of Gemeinschaft (community) which its connotations of anachronism, relic, and rurality; producing not so much an 'alternative modernity' as something other to modernity altogether. And 'banality' alone is not the answer.

Muecke's book seems only partially aware of its contradictions, it seems to me. It warns against the 'trap of romanticism' when examining Aboriginal culture, but its account of Aboriginal vitalism is itself a romantic one. It wants to speak up for flux and uncertainty and heterogeneity, yet it invests in the 'eternal', in continuity and essence, and in the truth of 'fundamental narratives'. It mocks those commentators who drop phrases from continental theory into their work, yet it routinely speaks of 'rhizomes', 'molar aggregates' and so on, dutifully following Deleuze. On the other hand, this is a book that has a lot to say and, bearing out its fondness for nomadic movement, it certainly gets around: from Sydney to Broome and back again. What remains unanswered, however, is the question of why—and through what protocols—a non-Aboriginal man takes upon himself to articulate Aboriginal philosophy in the first place. The issue is raised at one point, when Muecke quotes the senior Queensland Aboriginal woman, Jackie Huggins, who asks precisely why a whitefella should presume to account for Aboriginal world-views. But the query is left hanging as Muecke moves on to another topic: since this is not a self-reflective book, I recalled Huggins' complaint when I got to the last couple of paragraphs of Ancient and Modern, where Muecke curiously relates a dream he once had. As a teacher, he was surprised to see two young Aboriginal women performing an unusual ritual in his classroom. Later in his dream, he remembers one of the Aboriginal women ("Jackie was her name") sending him an email to ask if she could perform this ritual as part of her class presentation. He doesn't reply and then forgets about her email entirely: "...and then it slips one's mind" (p.178), he writes. This is, inexplicably and strangely, the last line of Muecke's book. Other readers will have their own views about this dream. I would simply note here that it is, perhaps significantly, one of only a few places in his study where he turns his attention to Aboriginal women: only to ignore what they say, as he had with Jackie Huggins. I would also want to say something about that email and the displacement of Aboriginal ritual—into a metropolitan university classroom, which seems to me like a good place to begin a book on Aboriginal modernity, rather than to end it.

Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy by Stephen Muecke was published by University of New South Wales Press in 2004.


**FOOTNOTES**


In the Australian Humanities Review, see also: Gelder, Ken, *Indigenous Issues*, Issue 36, July 2005

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