

Editorial

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Ideas of closeness and difference run through cultural studies, in ways marked by the philosophical and disciplinary trajectories that have shaped it.

One form of closeness happens when communities are studied from the inside. Richard Hoggart did this in *The Uses of Literacy*, as Ben Clarke points out in his review. His closeness to the warmth and tensions of the working-class world into which he was born gives the book its characteristic sense of unease and pride.

Proximity is a political force within cultural studies. It works by means of a commitment to sharing the world of those made distant, deploying methods such as ethnography, close textual readings, and careful questioning of the spatial politics of existence in order to render the distant immediate. Through such techniques and sensibilities the ordinariness of 'walking by', as Jan Idle shows so clearly in her essay, becomes a moment of knowing both the impossibility and the call of community. In 'going to work' we are pushed in and out of 'flexible' worlds that, as Jane Messer shows, are in many ways inflexible; in exploring the genealogy of creativity we find, with Camilla Nelson, that there is a reason why incommensurate

renderings of what the concept means can sit blithely side by side without anyone asking why. A similar kind of productive uneasiness, like Pratt's 'living on the edge of one's skin', can be seen in Alison Ravenscroft's delicate engagement with *Carpentaria*, Sally Macarthur's essay on 'Women and New Music', and Hamish Morgan's meditations on anthropology. Each makes a space within as much as a space between.

But perhaps it is time that is most often used to render distance irrevocable: the 'tides of history' that unnaturally seem only to sweep away, and not—as most tides do—to return. Distance is constantly mapped on to historical time in order to deny its existence in the present. And yet it is in the present that we know the past, in whose language the present waits for us. Lucy Tatman renders this waitfulness of time in a piece of writing that refigures what time could become. In a very different way, Ruth Balint waits with the still unknown corpse found in 1963 on an Adelaide beach, pondering what history can do with the unknown. Now is also the time to consider, as Deborah Bird Rose has argued, 'that an Earth-wise historiography has power to awaken us and change us, to call us into heteronomous proximity in modes that are relational, ethical, inclusive, open and responsive to the vulnerability of the living Earth'.¹ In just such a way does Thom van Dooren draw us close to the pain of extinction, just over there, in touch with all of 'us'.

And finally to the 'critical' of critical proximity. Jane Simon, in the elegant essay from which we have taken the title for this collection, seeks to 'write about images on their own terms'. She deploys a number of methods that 'will allow words to move closer to their objects'. Here the notion of critical proximity seems to echo other efforts to get us out of representation and into relations with the terms set by those who are other to us but not always human. In Simon's essay it is a textual responsibility to the visual; it might also be a promise to the material, to the natural, and to others.

Taken from physics, the notion of the 'critical' suggests a time when there is no longer a pre-existing boundary. Critical proximity is not just the application and creation of critique but the acknowledgement that a radically new arrangement of the ordering principles of distance and closeness has come to pass. Critical proximity is as much a description of our relations with the world as it is a cultural studies practice coming into being.

—NOTES

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, 'On History, Trees, and Ethical Proximity', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2008, p. 167.