

Placing the White Scholar in Indigenous Philosophy

Book Review

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Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy

Stephen Muecke

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The dead have been doing the rounds during recent weeks. Their inert blood has been pumped through the heart of the nation, a nation rebirthed annually live from the 'sacred grounds' of Gallipoli. This year a rare moment intervened into John Howard's bulldozer rhetoric from the story of an Adelaide VCE student, Donna Handke, from Mount Barker High School. Handke researched five dead Ngarrindjerri Anzacs who volunteered from the Point McLeay Aboriginal Mission—largely, it seems, to receive wages instead of rations. She followed up on the research of Ngarrindjerri historian Dr Doreen Kartinyeri, raised funds for a class trip to Belgium and located the grave of Private Rufus Rigney. She and her classmates spread sand on Rigney's grave from his country, Raukkan, and collected soil for his relatives, which they cleansed and cast into the waters of the Coorong.¹

Handke's story resonates with Stephen Muecke's book, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, in which he hopes to be a 'helpmeet' (167) to an indigenous philosophy. He writes, 'the affirmation of new forms of Australian cultural life would mean that the national dead will become increasingly the Aboriginal dead'. (65) Muecke is interested in the symbolic resurrection of the dead for the nation. But he is posing a challenge not just to the amnesia surrounding the devastation of Aboriginal populations: Muecke's book articulates the presence of the ancient to the modern. This guides *Ancient and Modern* from the historical shift of Henry Reynold's documentary record toward the epistemological 'renovation' implied by an indigenous philosophy. Among other things, an indigenous philosophy would reconsider time and space within a heuristic of place.

Immersed in place and body, Muecke's book is an unsettling and disorienting work, its argument deviating through the still-largely uncharted pedagogic mediums of footsteps, chance encounters, morning coffee, memories and dreams. In the same way that its cover knowingly comments on colonial appropriation and romanticism of the 'primitive', *Ancient and Modern* is the 'sexy and dangerous' assemblage of the idea of indigenous antiquity in Australian modernity, from the acknowledged standpoint of an 'outsider', a white scholar.

Being a white scholar myself, any questions hovering over this vantage are better posed by indigenous scholars. However, in his acknowledgements Muecke addresses the indigenous communities from whom he neither 'borrows' nor 'gives' the possibility of an indigenous philosophy. He does more than acknowledge indigenous scholars—Paddy Roe was his 'first mentor'. Through dialogue he wants to replace an ethnographic view of indigenous knowledges and practices with that of a cultural analyst or 'cultural worker'. Muecke writes:

Being a philosopher in an Aboriginal community, we find will be a quite different thing from being a social scientist there. The philosopher is not on the lookout for information to take home, he or she is alert for concepts which by their nature are generalisable. (68)

The Aboriginal community that Muecke seeks dialogue with is not to be found in his book 'there' in the ethnographer's outback camp. Half way through the book, Muecke recounts a discussion he had with Jackie Huggins at the Defence Force Academy in 1997 about whether he should continue with a book on Aboriginal philosophy. Huggins 'kind of, tentatively' said yes, but Muecke then quotes her position on knowledge relations not from this exchange, but from a 1983 piece in *Australian Historical Studies*. (104) Here Huggins categorically rejects the imposition of non-Aboriginal writers defining Aboriginality. Perhaps this important qualifying quote appears belatedly because by now it should be clear that Muecke is experimenting with ways to generalise, without defining, concepts that, if not inextricable from language, law and land, remain in Aboriginal custodianship. Nevertheless, Huggins's words cry out for a response, which Muecke

seems to evade while musing about the processes for the disclosure of Aboriginal knowledges, then turning to the compromised medium of the book, as a 'whitefella artifact'.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ He poses questions about teaching indigenous authors, advocates increasing indigenous literature, and over the page he adds, 'there is no indigenous content waiting to pour into any available form, such as the genres of English, which would remain untransformed by that process'.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ But the transformations are yet to manifest. Perhaps precisely because this is an innovative broaching of distinct and sometimes imbricated practices of knowing, Muecke is mindful of Huggins's words, but still unable to give a response.

Ancient and Modern draws on the notion of 'milieu', as medium and middle, to approach the in between of the artificially distinguished realms of the ancient and the modern. The undertaking of the book is to make something redemptive of the haunting of an indigenous ancient through 'a new Australian modernism [which] connects along multiple lines with indigenous antiquity'. (48) These are not lines of historical continuity, but more akin to the layering of social and ontological formations, from the tribal to the postmodern, that Paul James explores in his forthcoming *Global, Nationalism, Tribalism*.² This has the welcome political effect, particularly within a broader context of assimilation revivalism, of tripping the trajectory of racial destiny: 'To accept indigenous modernity is to refuse the idea of aspiration to that modernity some time in the future'.³

Ancient and Modern wants to confound the primitive as a counterpoint to modernity, by proposing an indigenous modernity, as 'a predisposition to (both) resistance and adaptation to the rapid changes introduced by invasion and colonisation'.⁴ Indigenous responses to colonisation—from 'compliance and collaboration, resistance and inventive adaptation'—differentiated power and developed 'new forms of language and culture that involve lots of translation work'.⁵ This rather agitates the conventional uses of modernity. Muecke writes, 'Maybe they were already modern in ways whitefellas don't have words for'.⁶ Perhaps if the unsettled and disoriented settler population had been a little more adaptable themselves their unwillingness to translate might not have meant our loss of sustainable land management knowledges. As Muecke points out, the challenge to western mapping and usage of space, wrought by a thinking specific to place, is bringing global indigenous and ecological movements into intersection.

In the absence of indigenous participants, however, I've known white environmentalists to risk a romanticism that Warwick Anderson traces back to the physical anthropologist Frederick Wood Jones (among others), and his interest in the Australian Aboriginal as a 'dark Caucasian'. This proved a distinct racial vocation and pathway, as an alternative to modern white degeneracy, and also exemplified 'an ethical relationship to place'. By the 1930s the Adelaide writers, the

Jindyworobaks, adopted this line of thinking and effectively licensed the primitive 'as a site for the expression, by some European Australians, of alternative modern possibilities'.⁷ All this might have had more credibility had it been linked to the understanding that connecting to indigenous ways of being and knowing can't take place in their absence.

In *Ancient and Modern* a more considered connection has the effect of 'moving knowledge around in different ways': generating, cycling, extending into space and being in and of place. 'Aboriginal philosophy is all about keeping things alive in their place'. (27) At times, connecting to stories in *Ancient and Modern* takes us on narrative rambles with undisclosed destinations; such as the story of another Ngarrindjerri, David Unaipon, whose head is on the fifty dollar note. This leads into having coffee with Clarrie Isaacs the morning *The West Australian* ran a humour story about his possible involvement in the decapitation of a Perth statue of the Aboriginal warrior, Yalngu, at the time his real head was being repatriated. (29–42) I was initially reluctant to set off without my accustomed scholar's orienteering kit, but unexpected things can happen once you stop keeping watch for the signposts of discipline.

Nevertheless at one point I seemed to miss a turn, possibly from not being a philosopher. I got lost in what seemed like a trail of undisciplined connections. Muecke analyses the participation of David Unaipon and a troupe of eleven other Ngarrindjerri men at the Hobart Carnival in 1910. He indicates the direction of his argument with a quote from Michael Taussig: 'In times past the shamans warded off danger by means of images imitating that danger'. (29) Mimesis is threaded through the account and then its transformative potential is extrapolated from the Unaipon instance and into the writing of performative history.

Muecke sees the Hobart carnival, an outdoors and popular pageant, as a 'perfect medium' for the twelve Ngarrindjerri to 'integrate' their 'own style' of public moral persuasion. (31) However, as well as having 'participated' in a march in which they appeared clad in furs—and were accordingly described by the *Mercury* as 'genuine aboriginal' ⁽³¹⁾—they also appeared indoors before white audiences as church preachers and choristers. (35) Unaipon was an impassioned and articulate advocate of Aboriginal rights. One of the Ngarrindjerri, possibly Unaipon, thrashes a white traveller at a game of draughts. Muecke notes that he 'beat the whitefella at his own game'. (34)

Muecke appreciates that Unaipon's mimeticism is how he was brought up, his performances were part of 'growing' a new culture for his people and he rightly comments, 'To the extent that it is intended to prove the point that Aboriginal people can do it too, his cultivation becomes a culture brought into battle against the primitivising and historicizing tendencies to keep the natives in their place'. (37) But then Muecke is inspired to allow mimeticism into his own writing to thwart the potential for 'inquisitive white attendants' and because our history needs to be

something beyond representation and should delve into the realm of magic, poetics and creating illusion. Muecke adopts mimicry as a technique in his historical performance of Unaipon's story. He argues that this adoption of mimicry from Unaipon's mimicry is about exploring the power of appearances as distinct from seeking the essence of Unaipon.

Although I've a way to go with it, mimesis strikes me as a delicate theoretical apparatus, particularly in connection to indigenous Australians, because white Australians, from Mrs Aeneas Gunn, to Daisy Bates, the Chauvels and Douglas Lockwood, have been very 'inquisitive attendants' to Aborigines' 'remarkable powers of divination and mimicry'.⁸ From the earliest settlers Aborigines were known for their uncanny and innate mimicry and, significantly, white Australians hoped it would facilitate their assimilation. Critical engagement with mimesis needs to take into consideration this context of white popular inquisitiveness about Aboriginal mimicry and its value in their minds for the aims of assimilation.

Muecke is interested in the ability of mimesis in performative history to bring 'the subject to life again', and of course in 'the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of'. (38) He advocates 'attention to performance, the mimetic power of history enacted and re-enacted. Far from being a primitivist appropriation of Aboriginality as some critics have suggested, it is designed to show the operation of "primitive" mimeticism in everybody's versions of modernity'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Without wanting to quibble about footnotes, an indication of who the critics are might have helped me regain my bearings, because within Unaipon's mimicry and then Muecke's adoption of mimicry into the writing of history, I still couldn't place this operation. Nevertheless, the collaborative research project informing this discussion is something to look forward to.

For all its twists and turns the book's whimsy and reverie is beautiful and sometimes funny. In a discussion of the representationalism of anthropologist WEH Stanner, Muecke writes: Stanner will later claim that one of the reasons there is no Aboriginal philosophy is that there is no tradition of intellectual detachment. True, there isn't an Aboriginal philosopher standing to one side observing this ceremony, stroking his beard and saying, 'Hmm, yes, definite sexual symbolism going on here.' That's the anthropologist's job. And we would have to reverse the gaze and ask Stanner just how intellectually detached he was about his *own* sacred rituals (seminars, advancements of science). Just how seriously was he taking himself.⁹

Muecke's coda is a perplexing dream whose meaning he leaves hanging. Two Aboriginal women students perform presentations. The first traces pathways with her bare feet through a classroom floor that has transformed into pebbles. Muecke wanted to photograph her work, but she smoothed them over. The second student carried in stones, in slabs and fragments, while repeating text in traditional language. In the dream Muecke remembers an email he'd received from one of the students asking to make her presentation in unusual form. He recalls that he'd put

the email aside because it presented a difficulty; he did not reply and finally it slipped his mind. (178) It seems such a strange account of the dream-workings of an author committed to dialogue but not replying, interested in indigenous knowledges and their disclosure but not understanding the language, watching the traces smoothed over. Along with Huggins, Gloria Brennan and the Mungamunga women, it is a rare acknowledgment of women being custodians of that knowledge, and yet it is elusive and transient; the pebbles and slabs are displaced.

No conclusion is drawn, which is telling of a book that generates a range of interpretive possibilities. It animates, perhaps, the slippage of mind required of white philosophers, of their own imaginings, in order to mindfully connect to the unusual forms of indigenous philosophy.

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¹ Transcript, *7.30 Report*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation,

<<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1353096.htm>>. Broadcast 25/4/05, accessed 27/4/05.

² Paul James, *Global, Nationalism, Tribalism: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community*, Sage, London, forthcoming, 2005.

³ James, p. 151.

⁴ James, p. 5.

⁵ James, p. 138.

⁶ James, p. 6.

⁷ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002, pp.199, 214.

⁸ AM Duncan-Kemp, *Where Strange Paths Go Down*, WR Smith and Paterson, Brisbane, second edition, 1964, p. 285.

⁹Muecke, p. 111. Stanner had his own thoughts on white visions of the Aboriginal primitive, as 'trifocal—romantic, realistic, sardonic'. He adds, 'as might perhaps have been expected, the collapsed romanticism turned into violence, the realism into indifference, and the sardonicism into contempt'. For Stanner this ensemble was part of the mood of a transplanted people. See WEH Stanner, 'A History of Indifference Thus Begins', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1977, p. 23.