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CULTURE REVIEW

Knowledge Valves. Or, keeping Cultural Studies going.

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One tends to ignore the periodicity of periodicals, that their composition depends on the building up of various intensities to the point of release that is their publication every three or six months. How can *rhythmanalysis* help us conceive of the persistence of a collective project, like running a journal? When it comes to each writer attending to their individual contribution, surely they are thinking that their content is what matters, not the form or the rhythm? As the deadline approaches, content may well be what they worry about, but are they not attuned from the start to the proposed theme (like 'Extinction,' *Cultural Studies Review* 25:1 (2019)), a theme that has energised them enough to accept the invitation to begin to research and write? 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is *rhythm*,'¹ writes Lefebvre, but hasn't place disappeared in the era of the on-line publication? Place has become referential rather than literally regional, territorial (or even national).

Writers, now, *refer* to places, evoke them and describe them, but there is little or no event-creating investment of words in places that matter, places that are crying out for our attention as we rebel against extinction. Mourning the fact that *Australia* has lost a major cultural studies journal, we remember that the evolution of cultural studies was always up and away, as if the global were more relevant. There was the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, founded in Perth in 1983. It became *Cultural Studies* in the United States, then went global. So we started another one, *The UTS Review* that became the *Cultural Studies Review*. We are all too familiar with the refrain that our situated knowledges were always seen to be (by some global eye in the sky) too parochial for relevance. If Australia is too parochial on that scale, what chance does Gippsland have? Or Goolarabooloo Country, where I write ethnography? Can't we get back to Earth and make cultural studies flourish once again down here?

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When Donna Haraway wrote about situated knowledges back in 1988, she stressed that the ‘partial perspective’ offered by a feminist vision could provide *greater* objectivity because it eschewed the transcendent masculinist vision of the ‘god eye’.ⁱⁱ I find her idea energising because it gives me a way to say that local descriptions (which is where any good analysis must start) can link up with each other in a local-to-local fashion, without being first shunted through the global/universal.

What Haraway’s seminal article did was open up some...let’s invent a concept: *knowledge valves*, those blockages that the Western modernist science or social science installs intentionally or not in its encounters with the local. Since the Enlightenment, European knowledges have been expanding towards greater and greater universality. That’s fine: if the ideas are good, they deserve to be spread around, but not so fine if this universalising mission is made possible through structural inequality. Because of knowledge valves, these so-called Western knowledge forms are able to persist, to feed more knowledge in, making sure in the process that the knowledge of the Other is translated, on the way out, into something relevant for the modern science in question, to the point where one wonders: was the whole idea to create good, useful knowledge, or was it to assist that universalising mission that started way back in Europe?

Examples of knowledge valves:

- 1) Call your Indigenous collaborator an ‘informant’, rather than an expert, colleague or named co-author.
- 2) Visualise everything through rectangles (viewfinders, picture windows, etc) to keep that renaissance perspectivism in place.
- 3) Translate reliability into numbers (statistics, dates, measurements).
- 4) Translate everything into the English language.

When you open up a valve, and let the flow go two ways, you begin to ask what the local system has going for it. That’s all I’m interested in analysing these days, what institutions *have going for them*, their attributes, their attachments, how they *belong* together in their disparate elements. You could call it *process ontology*: not what something *is*, but how come it *persists*? What elements does it have to acquire or shed to keep going, and what happens when it hits a roadblock and gets interrupted?

This is not an anti-science position, but a questioning of science’s ontological belongings, that is, the ways in which it makes itself relevant, which is always in relation to an Other. You might love modern science and you might be devoted to western philosophy, but you are thinking about new future conditions and how your disciplines might have to be rebooted to survive. What do you have to add to, or subtract from them, to help them survive under these new conditions? This process of adding or subtracting applies to any element of the laboratory: add funding, remove gender bias, try it on a different machine, reverse the procedure, consider epistemological structures ...this process might improve the science (or social science or cultural study), and it regularly does, but not because the science is universalised as it is purified, or vice-versa, purified as it is universalised, but because partial side-ways steps are normal, tentative footholds for the continued relevance of a project. Relevance is never maintained by falling back on the authority of the facts, as in ‘Nature has spoken’, nor on the disinterested authority of the objective scientist, whose task was nevertheless one of taking ‘situation-dependent’ knowledge out of a lab and into the world where it continues

its ‘adventure of relevance’¹ where relevance is one of making the knowledge matter, that is, making it into an *event* in Lefebvre’s sense.

My current project, is one where I am writing from a very situated position in the North-West corner of Australia where, paradoxically, a battle of ‘universal’ relevance between Indigenous traditional owners and the combined apparatus of the State and multinational capitalism is being played out.² Embedding this account at a frontier of the advance of extraction colonialism not only makes the issues starkly visible, but it is a common situation shared by many indigenous peoples around the world. Their local *situations* thus have the potential to universality, precisely because of the increasingly apparent failure of masculinist, globalising, transcendent forms of knowledge.

1 Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore. London and New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 15.

2 Donna Haraway ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’ *Feminist Studies* 1988, p. 583.

3 Martin Savransky, *The Adventure of Relevance: An Ethics of Social Inquiry*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

4 Stephen Muecke, ‘Indigenous-Green Knowledge Collaborations and the James Price Point Dispute,’ in Eve Vincent and Timothy Neale, eds. *Unstable Relations: Indigenous people and environmentalism in contemporary Australia*, UWA Publishing, 2016, pp. 252-272.