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Australian Indigenous Philosophy

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Abstract: In his article "Australian Indigenous Philosophy" Stephen Muecke discusses the fact that neither Australian philosophy nor Indigenous Australian philosophy exists as a field of study. Settler Australians have imported their philosophical traditions and have left it up to other disciplines to undertake the translation work of knowledge in the long-lived Indigenous traditions. Here, anthropology, history, and cultural studies have taken up the challenge. 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 "ancient" and "modern" cultures in colonial societies like Australia.

Stephen MUECKE

Australian Indigenous Philosophy

In the Australian "culture wars," sustained from time to time across the silent and bloodless columns of the so-called quality press, the increasingly strident Right regularly accuses the sad, now almost non-existent Left of supporting something called "cultural relativism." I have been wondering for a while what this might mean and to what it might be opposed. To cultural absolutism? Do we have a situation where multicultural lefties are prepared to say "one culture is as good as another," while their opponents sustain the vision splendid of one absolutely superior set of cultural norms? For eleven years (1996-2007) a conservative government in Australia failed to support Australian Indigenous people, in rhetoric or in practice. It was aided in this neglect by the neo-conservative "culture warriors" whose efforts were directed at discrediting those historians responsible for the development of the field of Aboriginal History, while also denying that there was any coherent or justifiable Indigenous resistance to invasion. This work has laid the foundations for questioning terms like "war," "genocide," or "invasion," and hence for the return of an authoritarian take-over of "the Aboriginal problem." This emerged in July 2007, an election year, with Prime Minister John Howard announcing that he was tackling the problem of the abuse of Aboriginal children by removing restrictions to government access to Aboriginal lands as he dramatically increased police and government control, while at the same time cutting funding. To some critics, this looked like facilitating access to mining interests as well, Howard always having big business' interests at heart. However, Noel Pearson, the most influential Indigenous person in Australia, supported the plan (<http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/yoursay/index.php/theaustralian/comments/politics_aside_an_end_to_the_tears_is_our_priority/>). Since then, a Labor government has been elected and one of its first acts was to apologise, very publicly in parliament, for past mistreatments of Indigenous peoples. Seen as a progressive gesture, this act will add to rather than resolve the ongoing debates in Indigenous affairs. It remains to be seen what further progress will be made.

In 2004 I published a book entitled *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, in which I tried to attribute a little more complexity, if not dignity, to Aboriginal knowledges. In taking this opportunity to think about it again, I realize that what I tried to do then was open the door to the possibility of an academic field of Indigenous philosophy, just as in the 1970s "Aboriginal history" had emerged. In Australia, the massive knowledge of Indigenous Australians consolidated and refined over 60,000 years has been happily filtered and translated in departments of anthropology, history, and English, but in philosophy, for the most part, continues to take little interest, although there is a short entry, "Australian Aboriginal Philosophy" by Max Charlesworth in *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand* (65). In departments of philosophy the tradition continues to be European and divided between "continental philosophy" and schools of logic. I do not claim any great capacity in philosophy, nor in Indigenous knowledge; just the rhetorical capacity to find and turn the handle of that metaphorical door. Maybe, I reasoned, someone would come later with greater capacity and walk through that door with something magnificent like a volume of "Pitjantjatjarra Philosophy." I was inspired by two other facts: a) African philosophy is a growth area in the U.S. and Africa and b) there is no Australian philosophy, Indigenous or otherwise. To those two facts my initial response was, why not here? But I could not be philosophically entirely ignorant, nor neutral. I found myself veering away from what I saw as the phenomenological orthodoxy; "being in the world," co-relating self and other. This is a typical critical move that Quentin Meillassoux has recently called "correlationism" (18-24). It holds that we cannot think of humans without a world, nor of world without humans, but only of a primal relation between the two; it is a fine Enlightenment (humanist) tradition of thought. My Indigenous teachers, on the other hand, allow for non-human modes as of existence and radical transformations from the human to the non-human, and vice-versa, in the many "myths" gathered under the heading of the Dreaming. And in a more Deleuzian fashion, I wanted to point more to the description of practices that make cultures grow or remain vital, as compositional assemblages of both humans and non-humans, where the relation of an emu to a star might be as important to the relation of a human being to a dingo. Of course I could not speak for or about any pan-Aboriginality. I wanted to think more about what might make the Australian difference, and that has to do with the Aboriginal legacy for Australians; because I think that legacy will define increas-

ingly our culture in the future. I coupled the philosophical argument with a culturalist one, one that redefined the relations between "whitefellas" and "blackfellas," in cultural terms, around what has become the pivotal term "modern." Blackfellas should not be seen, I argued, as representatives of an ancient heritage, either miraculously still intact after all these generations or museumified, while whitefellas remain in control of modernity. All forms of culture are made from ancient and modern bits, and their vitality consists in creative hybridizations. Michel Serres asks a simple question of an object, an automobile, that one is tempted to think of as quintessentially modern: "It is made up from an aggregation of disparate parts, from scientific solutions to technological items from different periods. Each part can be dated. One bit dates from the beginning of the [twentieth] century, another from ten years ago, and Carnot's cycle is nearly two hundred years old. Without even noting that the wheel is Neolithic" (72; my translation). So in the book I describe modern Aboriginal culture from the early twentieth century, as well as ancient, yet contemporary, European rituals in Australia.

Now to return to the philosophical. One of the reasons why the door to departments of philosophy has remained closed is that the dominant philosophical tradition is analytic. It sets up enigmas confident that sooner or later a proof or solution will be found, and that these proofs accumulate, rather like in mathematics. The fact that nearly all Aboriginal people do not play this game makes it difficult to include them in the philosophy club. It is much easier to treat their traditions as "cultural" and therefore subject to different kinds of analysis, social scientific or descriptive. In consequence, treating Aboriginal cultures as "a culture just like any other" (which often happens) is a dangerous leveller; it is a bad kind of relativism, because it ignores structure: the primacy of Aboriginal thought in the continent, the thirst for justice which articulates much contemporary Aboriginal thought vis-à-vis the institutions, and it ignores the quantifiable structural inequalities besetting the social field. I would therefore have liked to say, now that I have thought further, beyond the book, that there is something absolute and uncompromising about an "Aboriginal philosophy." The Dreaming is often spoken about in absolutist terms, and in the book I quote such statements from Aboriginal Australians without fully drawing out the implications for this absolutism (113-14, 170). No-one, least of all those whose existence is precarious, is happy to say, "my culture is a culture just like any other." They say "my life depends on it." But they also say it exists beyond my individual perception; it exists absolutely, it does not depend on this standard post-Kantian philosophical position of saying "the world exists (only) for me" or that it comes into being as my consciousness opens up to it. So, to elaborate, the Aboriginal philosophers I quote do not, unless forced to use the language, make Meillassoux's "correlationist" move, a legacy of phenomenology and structuralism, where the value of a term is always suspended in its relations with other terms. For our current philosophical architecture, it seems, we are deprived of direct access to the "real world" (you get laughed at and called a "naïve realist" if you assume access to the real world) so we have to keep talking about the ways in which humans "construct" the world. This correlationism is post-Kantian orthodoxy, and it holds that we can neither conceive of humans without an exterior world, nor of world without humans, but must base all philosophy in a correlation between the two. It is philosophically very interesting that Aboriginal discourses constantly reiterate a Dreaming as existing absolutely and beyond (before and after) human intervention. People are a key part of it, as custodians of ceremonies and texts, but it is not centered on them. Nor do they claim the power to change it, which is why they call white laws "weak", because they keep being changed! Moreover, by virtue of not depending on language, an Aboriginal philosophy is not beset by all those critical problems to do with representation that whitefella intellectuals worry about. As the Aboriginal intellectuals keep saying, the concepts are place-based and body-based, not word-based, and that a place is not simply an object, but it is shot through with life-giving relations (see Mowaljarlai and Malnic).

The U.S. has its pragmatism as something of a national philosophical style, but an Indigenous philosophy, or whatever type, is yet to emerge in Australia. My suspicion was that if it were to, then the power of Indigenous traditions to influence settler Australians cannot be ignored. But, since our intellectual traditions are mostly written, the power of the spoken word has been largely ignored by scholars. Nonetheless, a process of acculturation has been going on ever since colonization. The cultural influences have been going two ways, with Aboriginal people showing the settlers over the land, guiding them, offering them with pride what it had to offer, and finally trying to integrate them in Aboriginal social systems. On the other side, there were often successes in the teaching of whitefella farming methods, and so on. Was there appropriation? Of course, but I

also think that Aborigines have mechanisms for protecting core aspects of their cultures, like the processes for maintaining "secret and sacred" business. When you write philosophy in good faith, I think it is actually difficult to steal a concept, because you are constantly translating, from one semantic system to another, from one context to another. That said, it would be inappropriate for me, or any other whitefella, to set himself or herself up as an authority giving the meaning of things on behalf of Aborigines — for instance, with a complex concept like the Dreaming. In the book I quote the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's passage where he comes to an understanding of sacred sites:

> Scholars familiar with Aborigines have usually had one impressive experience in common: to be taken by Aboriginal friends to places in the wilds and there shown something — tree, rocky outcrop, cranny, pool — with formality, pride and love. Conversations follow rather like this: "There is my Dreaming [place]. My father showed me this place when I was a little boy. His father showed him." Perhaps a child stands near by, all eyes and ears. Here is a tradition being made continuous, as in the past, by overlapping life-spans. What had his father said? "He said: 'Your Dreaming is there; you want to look after this place; you don't want to let it go [forget, be careless about it]; it is from the first [totemical] man'." The historical link is thus made: from the now old to the still young; from the living to the anciently dead; from the very first true man to next true man; from the oldest time to the here and now. (Down with a crash come the needless postulates of racial and collective unconscious.) What did the father do there? "He used to come here every year with the old men, the wise men; they used to do something here [hit, rub, break off pieces, brush with green leaves, sing]; that way they made the [totem] come on, come back, jump up, spread out." How did that happen? What is it that is in the place? "We do not know. Something is there. Like my spirit [soul, shadow, invisible counterpart]; like my Dreaming [naming the totem entity]." Will he think more? What else did his father say? That there was something in the Dreaming-place? The dark eyes turn and look intent, puzzled, searching. 'My father did not say. He said this: "My boy, look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go [pass it by]; all Dreamings [totem entities] come from there; your spirit is there." Does the white man now understand? The blackfellow, earnest, friendly, makes a last effort. "Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what; something." There is a struggle to find words, and perhaps a lapse into English. "Like engine, like power, plenty of power, it does hard work; it pushes." (Stanner 165-66)

This passage is well written because he does not try to state categorically what these sites are. Rather, he tells a story about going to a place; it clearly shows him groping to understand what an Aboriginal man is telling him, and there is an Aboriginal child in the picture listening too, so it is all about that process of translation and passing on. A counter-example might be Marlo Morgan, whose work is theft and distortion because she creates fictional Aboriginal authorities and claims they gave her the knowledge. These days when highly knowledgeable Aboriginal people have published books, there is no excuse not to cite the references. Pretending you have found some prophet in the desert is a good literary device for making things up for a gullible readership.

My project runs in parallel to the long-standing whitefella yearning for connection with country, and this is linked to the reconciliation movement. Larissa Behrendt, in a discussion of *Ancient and Modern* at the 2005 Sydney Writers' Festival made a generous comment that seemed to be giving non-Indigenous people permission to connect with country and Aboriginal people. Again, the crucial thing — as in the Stanner example I just gave — is that she is there to be a "curator" of the generation of that feeling. It is a different matter for whitefellas to go off to the Blue Mountains to try to get a New Age Aboriginal Sublime thing going on their own. And she is not giving them permission to get connection with country via the culture of four-wheel-drive bush-bashing, just to be a bit crude about it. But everyday events are relevant, as can be illustrated by the following story which tries to perform the generation of knowledge: There is someone fishing off the rocks at a beautiful beach; someone else passes by going crabbing, and there is a moment of recognition which is neither suspicious, nor does it have any of that white-liberal reconciliation sentimentality. It might be something more like "kith and kin," as I say, knowledge in or through kinship, relationships which are known. For if this person is a stranger today, maybe next time you will better know him/her. You find my fishing scene too peaceful? OK then, the passing blackfella is feeling cross; this whitefella is fishing in the wrong spot! She might come up and say, "This is my grandmother's country, from this point right up to the creek over there. You can't fish here, you got to talk to me first … 'Bullshit,' says the whitefella, spitting on the rocks, 'It's a free country'." Free country. Well, well. There is a phrase that can be turned around and examined from all sides: legal, political, historical, ecological. And, if these two part on bad terms, with their afternoons spoilt, there will still be things to sort out later. The blackfella might have to prove continuous occupation of country in front of the law in order to get the rights to grandma's bit of beach (if she is lucky). What does the whitefella have to prove in order to keep fishing happily, without lurking

thoughts of dispossessing someone? Well, he might have to get a bit of philosophy and learn that there is no such thing as "free country," that the concept of freedom itself has a particular Western history unknown to Chinese or Aboriginal systems of thought, that is exploited to the limit by Western ideologues like former U.S. president George W. Bush and similar "neocons." Our two characters might have to be prepared to negotiate, even with absolutism in their positions. The last thing I will give up, says the one, is my "freedom" to fish here, while the other says that the last thing she will give up is her ancient heritage. But even with these kernels of absolutism in their positions, compromise can be reached, as we have seen in many settlements of this sort. The important thing, though, is the preparedness to negotiate, which depends on certain basic premises, the first being that your interlocutor is not, from the start, a "barbarian," "savage," or "redneck."

My argument, then, had to continue with its culturalist part, and that was to do with the way non-Aboriginal culture, in Australia, constructs and emphasizes time, thus using "modern" to exclude Aboriginal culture and people from contemporaneity. Following Bruno Latour, I endorsed an amodernity. The elements are there in the book to argue that the criteria for membership of the Modern Club are typically invented by those already in it: "Have you had an industrial revolution? A humanist enlightenment? Do you have superior weapons and technology?" The Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, South Asian, and South American worlds have all put in a claim for alternative modern status by broadening the rules or by setting up their own clubs. I think in Australia it is sufficient to say that anyone who can invent ways of adapting to rapidly changing circumstances is modern; modernity need not be a periodizing device, one that puts the "others" always in a position of catching up, as Dipesh Chakrabarty says. Instead, amodernity is Latour's way of saying let us not judge or compare modernities, let us try to think more symmetrically. Into this new atemporal "space" we can introduce the category of identity in the mode of Bhabha's "third space," which of course has resonances for identity, philosophy, and the analysis of culture.

I mentioned hybridity before, but I do not endorse hybrid identities as ontologies. Sure, Australians of all complexions agonize over their identities, but let us not leave the only avenue as one of being someone or something. The crucial and nonnegotiable identity emerges in action, or out of inventive resistance, or out of artful politics, it emerges only in movement. So I want to define identity as agentive: "you are what you do." For a philosophically-minded cultural studies, Bhabha suggests a "dialectics without transcendence" (25): you do not resolve the contradiction or opposition in order to posit a singular higher truth. Rather, you can continue the dialogue while on the look-out for contingent and multiple causes. So when we come to describe what is going on, which is what cultural researchers do, you might forestall a conclusion that might have said, "colonialism has destroyed this culture" because you have noticed that the culture rapidly changed and survived in a different form. I gave the example of "Boxer Deconstructionist," labelling provocatively a turn-of the century "magic" man (*maban*), Boxer was his whitefella name with a contemporary philosophical term. This extraordinary man, by inventing a new cult in Northern Australia at the turn of the century, made his culture travel through and around whitefella culture of that North-West frontier. He used techniques as well as ideas, which contest that dogmatic and fetishistic faith whitefellas have in their beloved technology. Now I think that if our European-derived conception of modernism is tarred with that brush, then it is a poorer form of modernism. It is the kind that had former Attorney General Phillip Ruddock condemning Aboriginal civilization to the stone age by saying, "We are dealing with people who were essentially hunter gatherer. They didn't have chariots. I don't think they invented the wheel" (Ruddock qtd. in "Pressure" <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s195809.htm>). There is something very funny about the way people can be quite solemn about their technology. The *Bush Mechanics* TV series is a perfect antidote to that and they remind us that the destiny of all technology is transformation, then obsolescence or destruction. Where is the real power, we can ask ourselves. Is it in the thing itself, or in the culture that invented it? Certainly the horse, the wheel and the gun were the necessary combination of things, along with humans, necessary to colonize not only Australia, but much of the world. Is that story really over already? Hybrid combinations of things are invented, and stories can work to change the compositions; it is in the compositions, not the entities, that the power lies.

Tony Swain attends to the fact of the persistence of Aboriginal power in the face of the opposing power of white technology and philosophy. He picks up on Robert Tonkinson's take on Central Desert peoples' take on aircraft as "modern" innovative objects: "Crayon drawings made by Abo-

rigines of *badundjari* [dream-spirits] sometimes resemble aircraft, and vehicles said to be used by *badundjari* to transport others are depicted as aeroplanes, complete with wings, tail, windows and headlights, but with sacred boards, not propellers or jets, supplying the power source" (Swain 238). And Swain concludes saying that "these spirit aircraft were propelled to their lands by icons manifesting the potentiality of place. Beyond dreams filled with invading places are visions of place-planes offering a ride home" (238). This innovation which articulates Aboriginal power with white objects of power, speed and travel, has a poetic resonance in the very shape of the propeller boards and the thrumming sound they make like the sacred objects called "bull-roarers." But we all know those guys must be quite wrong to think that is what gives these machines power, it is of course the engines, the petrol … unless we make one little shift, which is to put the object into a compositional relationship to the humans who made it, not fetishize its technology. The plane articulates with the bodies which use it, the seats and controls are made for bodies to occupy, it cannot function without them. The object has emerged out of human invention, out of bird-dreams, and how far is it from them in the ways we enjoy it? The power is ultimately relational, and understanding the plane from this perspective makes the Aboriginal version no longer primitive.

Technique is also embodied in rhetoric, and there is a lot of talk about Indigenous issues. Those who would "speak truth to power" effectively are no doubt elegant speakers, which is another way of saying that they have used rhetoric as well as objective truth. They have to tell stories and use poetic phrases. Edward Said used the phrase about speaking truth to power in relation to the Palestinian struggle, but he also said that he and his people had to keep telling their story over and over (36) and this applies to the Australian Aboriginal struggle as well. We are well aware of the "history wars" being a fight over the legitimacy and authority of words and stories, like whether to use "invasion" or "settling" and who gets construed as a "criminal." So I learnt from my Aboriginal friends over the years that there is much more than the accumulation of facts, I learnt about the performance of truth in storytelling. That is why I cannot debate the facts with historians who wield them like batons rather than telling you about the life history of the facts themselves, where they came from and how they got to be called as reliable witnesses in our debates. Now, the description of poetics and ritual marks off the analysis of culture as different in quality from the world treated as historical sedimentation, as the accumulation of objective facts. Gleaning facts and wielding them is a performance which most often denies its performativity. If we look at such performances — the historian in action — we begin to see something more multi-layered and cultural. If we describe the words, the feelings associated with them, the music and perfumes, the exhaustion and frustrations we are getting closer to describing the kind of life this cultural event is promoting. That is the kind of question I want to see answers to, and as it happens that is how I see Aboriginal philosophy, as "keeping things alive in their place". I have seen conservative historians behave as if they want to kill something. Some such fake historian might get a medal from former Prime Minister John Howard for saying to historian Henry Reynolds — I paraphrase — "You said there were twenty thousand Aboriginal people massacred, I can only find evidence for five thousand." And he — typically a he — might think that is a "killer" argument. I think you always have to ask that question about the kind of cultural life you wish to promote, as you are working or going about your everyday life. And of course an historian as much as anyone else can do wonderful things under that definition: a cultural politics that is rich and artful. There is no moral dimension here, for as soon as that moral position is occupied, the event starts to look once again like facts-as-weapons, and will likely end up an aesthetic failure.

Sometimes whitefellas do not understand Indigenous rhetoric. They accuse it of being contradictory, yet there are other philosophers who accept paradoxes and contradictions as part of the complexity of the problem they seek to describe. The more one seeks to iron out contradictions, the more one takes a smooth and serene critical distance. Then the world is viewed from a long way off as if one were judging from on high, and there is a problem with that. I have heard Aboriginal activists making land rights speeches and have found myself hearing the contradictions, like I give myself a tick for finding a formal weakness in the argument. But I know this is not the point, so when I think again, I realize that he/she is addressing a diverse audience. For political reasons, he/she has to include a bit for each constituency in that group. So, really, the contradictions are features of the geography, or the human contours of the land. It is a performance that is also an exercise in topographic translation, if you like. Later on, someone will translate it again for insertion in another culture, the system of Australian law, perhaps in order to make the land-rights bid.

Ken Gelder, in the *Australian Humanities Review*, queried my use of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, so I replied that well, if you impose him, or even "apply" him, you are being a bad Deleuzian (see Gelder; Muecke). The point of philosophy (I quote Deleuze on this in my book) is to be external to the current philosophical projects. The new philosophy will come from elsewhere, for there is no way Aboriginal ideas can be assimilated to some existing European system and still be Aboriginal ideas. As said, I am just trying to open the door so they can creep in and out. Elsewhere, Deleuze says: "Movement always happens behind the thinker's back, or in the moment when he blinks. Getting out is already achieved, or else it never will be" (Deleuze and Parnet 2). Maybe that is romantic from the point of view of the person who has to draft land rights laws where one has to be precise and unambiguous, but I am not doing that. I am "thinking" in public. When I think about "thinking" now, I have to ask what one is doing when one is supposedly thinking. Most often, one is writing, producing some kind of text according to generic conventions, and maybe modifying those conventions a bit. "Thinking" also means relating to others, negotiating with them. And it also often happens in front of a screen which is effectively externalizing one's intelligence, not only to interlocutors, but also to other intelligent machines and databases. Unlike the Romantics, I am convinced that there is no interiority or depth involved in creativity. It is all external and surface phenomena. So thinking is a multi-layered and diverse range of habits and actions which create and reinforce political alliances.

The process of writing *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* changed my thinking to the point where I thought some aspects of the liberal critical agenda will have to go. I can name them: the moral high ground; weak cultural relativism; utopian, redemptive, and apocalyptic storytelling; moral judgment. In their place, I suggest a renewed and radical empiricism (interrogating facts until they tell us their values); negotiation and collaboration; essaying and experimenting; and, finally, protecting our institutions, including the government, from post-modern politicians who have no regard for truth.

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