MOVING

an INTERVIEW with STEPHEN MUECKE

by CHRIS HEALY

HEALY: Reading the country, the book you coauthored in 1984 with Krim Benterrak and Paddy Roe, is dedicated ‘to the nomads of Broome, always there and always on the move’. What do you make of that dedication now?
MUECKE: When I worked in the Kimberley in the late seventies and through the eighties I was experiencing a frontier complex of cultures. Land rights were under negotiation. For nearly a hundred years whitefellas had been 'settling' and imposing pastoral and mining economies of exploitation; blackfellas were being displaced yet had obviously always belonged. Whitefellas and Asians were part of diasporic movements. People were moving around a lot, in modes quite unlike, say, suburban commuting.

The dedication used 'nomad' in an ironic sense—as an anthropological typology the notion was already discredited. So if people read me as really thinking there were nomads out there or as romanticising nomads, then I guess they hadn't finished reading the book. In later fragments I make it clear that the term—or concept—has no local currency; Paddy Roe had to have me explain it to him. And of course 'nomadology' I borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari. They use it as a philosophical 'concept' particularly in the chapter 'On nomadology: the war machine' in A thousand plateaux.

AROUND

Nomadology, as such, was not useful for the cultural experiences I was writing about if those were conceived as 'cultures in and around Broome' under the ethnographic gaze. But if my subject was cultural exchange and the (mis)matching of 'Western' and Aboriginal knowledges, and if my subject was also 'how to write a book about these things', then the concept came more into its own. I was also using it to poke fun at 'ologies', to point out some of the inadequacies of the social sciences. For instance: research as singular, uni-directional and
non-collaborative, the univocal text, the inflexibility of the structuralist theoretical model.

For me the nomadic had yet another use, and that was connected with grammatology. It was about writing, in general, as the deferral and deflection of desire, flickering perceptions of presence and absence. That is why the dedication is cast as a paradox.

Healy: In the interview towards the end of Reading the country you say: ‘For Paddy Roe one of my functions is that of the scribe, just as I was also his “driver”—a specific job up in Broome. He was in charge of the words, I operated the machinery (tape-recorder, car, typewriter) to move them around.’ Could you say something about how those relationships were important in making that book?

Muecke: Here I was groping towards a formulation—now well established, for instance in Howard Morphy’s Ancestral connection—of the different roles of different personnel in cultural production, something the primacy of origin in Western conceptions of authorship has tended to obscure. The person who ‘owns’ the stories can be different from the ‘manager’ of those stories—these roles distributed according to kin relations. In another context, a group of people may work on a painting but another may sell it, something that has confused the media stories about fraud in Aboriginal art. Ownership, originality, creativity and singularity are enshrined in copyright laws, but this is in constant tension with our desire to celebrate collectivity in the notion of the public domain. Aboriginal systems for the handling of art are somewhere between the two.

I was fascinated by the specificity and modesty in Aboriginal handling of knowledge. For instance, prying naive whitefellas are often palmed off with ‘Ask that oldfella’. They are sent on their way. But there is something more significant in this movement of deferral: custodianship, which I have often contrasted with authorship and its practices. We, as academic writers, footnote our authorities, with our-
selves at the top of the text. Custodians concatenate texts in time and space, 'on the same footing', they are passed on. One has to say 'ask that oldfella' because one has not yet been given the right to that knowledge—it will come later. And sometimes one can't finish a story because the next part is 'owned' by the next person down the line. These are protocols that are observed in Aboriginal systems, and I tried to incorporate them in *Reading the country*.

I think Aboriginal models concerning cultural production and ownership are 'good to think with'. We can think of the possibility of producing cultural things *in order to let them go* by way of exchange, inheritance, custodianship. This is not loss; it is cultural continuity achieved by inscribing knowledge in relationships. I was interested in defining my relationships with Paddy Roe as modest and everyday, like 'driver'. This, then, is 'moving around', a kind of textual mobility that I tended to literalise. 'Scribe-ing' is another relationship and a deflection of authorship, something of a medieval conceit. A conceit because the work of writing down spoken words is obviously a creative translation, and especially a shifting of context and audience. But I complicated the picture by insisting that Paddy Roe was also a writer, that there is Aboriginal iconography which he made use of, that the spoken word is not primary in relation to the written word.

**Healy**: You have recently been accused by Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, in their *Uncanny Australia*, of being 'less comfortable with the work of younger Aboriginal people'. How would you respond to such claims?

**Muecke**: It seems Gelder and Jacobs did put me in the 'traditional' cultural camp, something I can't really understand since *Reading the country* had a long interview with Peter Yu of the Kimberley Land Council, a member of a 'younger generation', plus an essay on 'Culture and the Modern Text' that was about tourism, modernity and the everyday.
Gelder and Jacobs seem to be suggesting that because my work was 'out there' in the bush with someone like Paddy—who is actually, like all of us, both 'traditional' and 'modern'—that I am necessarily reproducing the 'salvage paradigm', that is, seeking to harvest and preserve the aura of the primitive. I am actually fascinated by primitivity and activities like 'stealing the aura', which go on all the time in and across cultures. Michael Taussig once said to me that primitivity is the raison d'être of anthropology. Without it anthropology would turn into a very bland sociology, I guess. But what I am thinking now is that there are primitivities in both the traditional and the modern, that the modern has not exorcised its sacred rituals. Nor can it 'construct primitivity' in Others. Calling people savages does not give them that power! Primitivities are like pockets of cultural unconscious; complex ritual intersections of forces and signs, not easily made explicit. As Austin Powers might say, the mojo is there, Fat Bastard can steal it, but no-one knows how it works. In *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man*, Michael Taussig is good on envy as 'implicit social knowledge', a ‘theory’ of the evil flowing from (perceived) inequality. Further, it is a 'presence immanent in the coloring of dialogue, setting its tones, feelings, and stock of imagery'. I would be wrong if I said my work did not gain authority from Paddy Roe's. If he gave me some of his aura, I also let him have some of mine, which was whitefella, university even, authority. It was a reciprocal thing.

**Healy:** Could you expand on the way in which you've linked movement and 'room to manoeuvre' in 'Visiting Aboriginal Australia', a recent article that spends some time revisiting *Reading the country*?

**Muecke:** 'Room for manoeuvre' is of course the title of Ross Chambers' book in which he discusses Paddy Roe's narrative and rhetorical strategies as a triangulation between narrator (Paddy), narratee (me) and reader. This triangulation opens up a space of desire. Readers 'witness' our relationship, and wonder whether they are situated more
with me or Paddy, but the more they identify with the narratee, the more they are subject to narrative seduction, as I was, and are then less 'disinterested' witnesses. This process of seduction implies political recruitment in oppositional narratives like Paddy Roe's.

In my recent article I extrapolated this idea to the notion of 'room for negotiation'. Someone had criticised me for letting 'theory' overwhelm the other material in the book, and I argued that Reading the country was not theoretical at all in a restrictive sense. A short quotation can illustrate this:

It is not a question of getting the theory right (millions of indigenous people are no doubt indifferent). It is a question of reserving a place at the negotiating table and then listening. Reading the country created such a place in the domain of Australian literature for Paddy Roe, and the book is an archive of his words, maps and images more than it is an application of any sort of theory.

Healy: What about your own travels and trajectories after Reading the country?

Muecke: After finishing Reading the country I came back from the US where I was on a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania and took up a job at the then New South Wales Institute of Technology, in 1985. As a junior researcher I found it hard to crack the US scene, and since I was reading a lot of Foucault at the time, and exiting the linguistic paradigm, I was really in the wrong place. There was no-one in the US in the mid-eighties who I found inspirational in the way that the French still were at that time. The first French theories I read were structuralist and formalist, and only later did I follow them into the 'post' domains. Meagah Morris and I discuss this period of 'import rhetoric'—the influence of the French on a generation of Australian intellectuals—in an interview I did with her in 1991.

Healy: Can you tell me about how you now view 'import rhetoric'?
MUECKE: It is amazing how complex the import/export scene now is in cultural studies, or fields associated with the New Humanities. With several international journals in the field, the circulation is not only from the UK and Europe towards the south—‘South of the West’ as Ross Gibson put it—but across the northern hemisphere, and from as well as to Asia. In this international scene, Australians, or others who have spent time here, are acknowledged now as major exporters of ideas that have their origin in creative sparks between British cultural studies and continental theory but were developed here. So while that seems to mitigate cultural cringe as we used to know it, I still note a time-lag between fashions, more technologically driven perhaps now, as they appear in northern climes before arriving here. It seems that if IT developments happen first in the States, then the associated hypertext and cyber-theory also seem to develop there first.

HEALY: What about the role of the US in these patterns?

MUECKE: The influences are happening across the humanities in general rather than just in relation to cultural studies as a field. What the North Americans called the ‘culture wars’ was not specifically directed at cultural studies, even the Sokal affair. Mark Davis, in Gangland, has recounted how some specific North American agendas, with think-tank origins, were imported into Australia as part of an anti-PC backlash. But we were never as PC or identity-driven as these criticisms wanted to make out.

I could try to list who I think are the most influential US-based thinkers for Australian cultural studies, but that would be pointless. There is a long tradition of popular cultural appreciation in the US, which enabled them to take up cultural studies in a big way. New ethnographers, like James Clifford, George Marcus and Taussig have been very influential, more on Australian cultural studies than on Australian anthropology; the screen studies tradition in cultural studies has of course very strong US influences.
Healy: Could you tell me why it's been important for you to translate the two French works for which you're responsible?

Muecke: Jacques Donzelot's piece in *The apprehension of time* was something that seemed interesting to publish in the context of the 1988 Bicentennial. Here, as in France under Mitterrand, there was a government desire to 'make history', to re-enact, perform, spectacularise and commodify elements of a national history in forms that were less solid and monumental than those of previous historical markers. Donzelot is interested in what has happened to politics as he traces the history of the decline of the discourses of progress and history. These, it seems, have given way to planning and 'mission statements' across a broad range of organisations. Politics has lost its singular focus on the particular enemy, on the threat to the nation and ideological battles carried out under the same sign of the national good.

He says all this points to a quite new relation societies have with time; I could oversimplify it as the 'management of change' versus the 'will to progress'. Donzelot is positive about the legacy of the Left giving us the possibility of wrenching abstract values away from inexorable History. Apparently it is the post-'68 philosophies that are specifying the concrete political ethics we are going to need.

Jose Gil is coming from a quite different direction. He is putting a Deleuzian spin on some classic anthropological studies, like Mauss on the gift, Turner on ritual, Lévi-Strauss, Clastres—he gives him a hard time!—and so on. He too is interested in power and change, and how states societies could have evolved out of traditional ones, the operations of power being so different between such societies. His analysis proceeds intriguingly through the body and its associated rituals, curing, both 'primitive' and psychoanalytic, and those rituals that install power, like the enthronement of kings. That's his *tour de force*, the ritual relation between the state and the body of the monarch. Taussig remarks on the back cover, something Gelder and
Jacobs would like, 'Gil makes you realise all over again why primitive society is here to stay.'

**Healy:** Paperbark: A collection of Black Australian writings is obviously a very different kind of book from Reading the country but there are some similarities—it's not single-authored but cooperatively produced by yourself, Jack Davis, Mudrooroo and Adam Shoemaker, and it's a specifically political intellectual venture.

**Muecke:** What I really liked about doing the book with Adam, Muddy and Jack was its collaborative nature. And for that I owe a lot to Adam Shoemaker for whom research in the humanities was always about getting out there and talking to people, getting a sense of their agendas. Because of him I found myself at the first major conference on Aboriginal literature at Murdoch University in 1983, where Adam and I were the only non-black delegates. The book grew out of that conference and the strong political statements being made, asserting, as we said in the introduction, that 'literature is one of the ways of getting political things done'.

One of the literary/political interventions of the book, which other people picked up on, was to make a 'grammatological' point that 'writing is definable as any sort of meaningful inscription'. In that way we sought to break down the Manichean distinctions between spoken and written, traditional and modern. So while 'Aboriginal literature' had always been around, we were also on the wave of its emergence as a publishing success and as a field of study. Sally Morgan's My place had come out in 1987, we had a piece by her, but we also went back to Aboriginal writing as early as 1841.

These days there is a much greater variety in Aboriginal literature than there was ten years ago. New Aboriginal writers continue to emerge as the established ones also continue to publish. The status of Aboriginal writing has been battered a bit by the identity scandals that have also affected the art world. But I wouldn't want to overem-
phasise the effect of a few conservative scandal mongers in the press. And I don’t know whether we have yet seen the worst of the effects of the government’s attacks on Aboriginal people and their institutions. Aboriginal intellectuals and critics are much more prolific than they used to be. The popular support for artists and writers, which on occasion gives Pat Dodson heart for the reconciliation movement, also means that the books are bought.

Healy: The subtitle of your 1992 book Textual spaces is Aborigi

nality and cultural studies. Can you say something about what that phrase was meant to imply and what you now think of the conjunction as an intellectual project?

Muecke: When I chose that subtitle I wanted to bring those two things together. Now they are together of course, in degree titles like ‘Indigenous Cultural Studies’ I wanted to bring them together because I thought that in Australia the very existence of ‘Aboriginality’ posed the greatest challenge to the national culture and how it was con

ceived; how history was being radically redrafted, how Aboriginal knowledges posed epistemological challenges. Having said that, the project of the book was not to talk about how Aboriginality had affect

ed Australian national culture, how the picture had changed. It was much more about ‘enunciative possibilities’—the kinds of things that get said, and why, in a more dialogistic situation.

These days I think that ‘Aboriginality’ is not so much an object of interrogation, a thing to be interpreted or even ‘constructed in discourse’ as I said then. I think that today Aboriginality as a concept crops up in all sorts of domains that don’t pay attention to the discursive, such as Aboriginal organisations of various sorts: the legal ones sort it out for the law, as do others in medical, spiritual etc. domains. Intellectuals tend to continue the interrogation of Aboriginality in fields like Indigenous Cultural Studies without singularising it and without making it part of a dualism: ‘Aboriginality and
Cultural Studies’. So I realise now I was dealing with Aboriginality with one kind of method: how it gets *talked about* in various fields.

**Healy**: In what ways does *Textual spaces* mark your own movement from linguistics to cultural studies?

**Muecke**: I think critical discourse analysis is a very useful thing and not only in terms of language. Linguistic and technical close reading are identical in style to the analysis of film texts as narrative structure and shot structure. In the eighties it was demonstrated that this formalism could do its work not only on literary texts but also on TV programs, shopping centres and, in my case, oral narratives. But the ‘expansion’ in the kind of objects that could be brought under the paradigm ran its course. The criticism emerged that close textual readers were unable to account for contextual stuff, or that they were ahistorical. So textualists went from finding ideology in a passive construction in a sentence to talk about the circulation and exchange of texts, the political economy of texts as it were, and then to much grander claims for the alignment of texts with the narratives of a national culture, national histories and philosophies.

**Healy**: And this is, in a sense, where you went with *No road (bitumen all the way)* in 1997. It’s a difficult book to encapsulate for someone who hasn’t read it. Could you have a go?

**Muecke**: If you think about the often used figure of aporia—from the Greek aporos, ‘without a path’—then this is the sense I wanted to conjure with the title. Thinking with aporia is a way of deliberating, of asking oneself what is the best or most appropriate way to approach something. As I wrote:

> getting to know may mean leaving home and getting lost for a while, to admit that there may not be a road going anywhere that we all agree on, but that somewhere along that road is a local guide who knows a story we may never have heard before, a story that leads to a place.
The book is also about anti-teleological or postmodern forms of thought, linked ideas and stories that are articulated by relationships of kinship or friendship more than by the usual institutional channels. It struck me that the difficult coexistence of different—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—knowledges poses such a challenge for understanding that writing has to cut across the usual boundaries and categories. I also wanted to write with a sense of fun in these times, desperate times, for academic workers, and tell a few jokes.

**Healy:** What's at stake in *No road'*s attempt to hold together ‘nomadic theory [and] revelling in the passion of the senses’?

**Muecke:** What is at stake is that serious people will say that both are bullshit, either for academic work or for doing justice to problems of cultural and economic disadvantage. I am prepared to let go of any investment in the nomadic as a general idea. One reason being that many people can't move who want to—fixed labour pools that global ‘nomadic’ capital can abandon if they get too demanding. There may also be strong reasons for being ‘in place’ to resist such globalising tendencies, and some postcolonial theory too glibly endorses the ‘in between’ and movement. But I am still interested in the nomadic as a metaphor for ‘deferred local authority’, the willingness to ‘pass on’ knowledge rather than accumulate it. ‘Passing on’ is education, and it happens in the most valuable ways in what we call the public domain rather than with commodified forms of knowledge.

Now, the senses are just a way of adding more strings to one’s writerly bow. At the end of each fragment of *No road* I hoped readers would have learnt something and felt something. Ideas and feelings are multiple articulations in that machine-like Deleuzian sense. Traditional literature does exactly the same thing, of course, in a more seamless fashion.

When it comes to vital and vitalising differences, I find that I personally see a lot of value in the interweaving of fiction and theory,
story and argument. While the lived world is endlessly productive of difference, the question is: what does one do with it? It is not a question of saying, yeah, great, look at all this difference. Some cultural critics sit on a high moral ground and see the difference and disproportionate suffering of the Others, and in displaying their exemplary perception of this suffering end up mobilising it as effective self-advancement. So that story is about immobility, holding the ground of power. My story is about getting about and talking to people—which is why, by the way, I encourage postcolonial versions of ‘fieldwork’. In ficto-critical writing the story side is the seductive part of the text, and the critical side shows how the story connects with other ‘real-world’ things.

Textual criticism is a different thing. Standing at a distance from literary texts, it can leapfrog them into prominence, condemn them, summarise them usefully, etc. The relation of text to commentary is complex, but that is not to say it cannot be fairly transparent and honest. At best it can enhance forms of life, ways of being, which texts can sketch out.

HEALY: The question of the utility of writing and/or cultural criticism seems to haunt No road only to appear very sporadically as an explicit question such as when you write:

I’m feeling like a lonesome theorist. Theorists here are going through a paranoid phase, besieged in the press by neo-conservatives attacking us as ‘French’ and politically correct (can you believe it?). I’m vulnerable, I’m thinking half the time that being a plumber would be a whole lot more useful than doing Aboriginal studies. I mean, you can imagine turning up in some community in the North-West to fix the plumbing. That the people would see the point in doing. But the other?—‘Hi, I’m a cultural critic, I’ve come to fix up your representations.’

MUECKE: I felt stung by the ‘theory wars’, you know, the David Williamson-style critiques of the academy. I gave in a little too much,
and bought into a little of my own populism. But at least it gave me a joke about a plumber and a cultural critic. One argument for the utility of cultural critique would be that it produces a rhetoric for discovering and enhancing cultural value. Cultural value mobilises forces and meanings, generating forms of power that can sometimes exceed the power of social utility and the profit motive. As it is, today Aboriginal communities and individuals contribute far more to the GDP than their share as 2 per cent of the population, and the spokespeople know how to deploy this sense of value, they always have. While the average Aboriginal income is low, the very idea of Aboriginal cultures pulls in thousands of tourists, and stars like Cathy Freeman earn for the nation much more than they will every see in their personal income. If in the past Aboriginal people had been wiped out or totally assimilated, on some rationalist ground like not having a ‘productive’ relationship to the land, then this value would no longer exist and Australia would be immeasurably poorer, ‘spiritually’, but also the tourist industry would not be able to benefit from that incalculable attraction Aboriginal cultures have for tourists.

**Healy:** You wrote in *No road* ‘If Australia is to be changed, for example, by becoming a republic, then the kinds of stories we tell about Australia will have to change. Stories, after all, are a mechanism for focusing our desires to belong in a community.’ Do you think the stories have changed as much as you might have hoped then?

**Muecke:** It’s true, *No road* was riding on the cultural renewal and historical revisionism of the Keating years. So while the national stories have changed somewhat, I think progressives have taken a beating and are resting and waiting for the dinosaurs to die off. I hope it takes less than a decade! It might turn out that the next radical stories might be written from within capitalist processes, rather than from a critical outside, showing people how money could be used more responsibly, for instance. My new project about the Indian Ocean,
for instance, is about commerce and cultural exchange.

**Healy:** Could you talk about that project and your current work in cultural studies?

**Muecke:** I am interested in a ‘transnational cultural studies’ at the moment, with a specific focus on the Indian Ocean as a region, as a metaphor for international cultural relations, and showing different responses to decolonisation. ‘Transnational cultural studies’ cannot easily be defined, since it is still being shaped. The idea of the transnational is one that doesn’t reject the national out of hand. Instead we are wondering about workable, sometimes national, relations in progressive fields of political and cultural endeavour. Sometimes these cultural relations are supported and enabled by state organisations, and international agencies, at other times they rely on NGOs. So for some forms of emerging nationhood, being ‘in place’ can be useful in contesting globalisation.

My colleague Devleena Ghosh and I attended a ‘decolonisation’ conference in Mauritius last year—they were celebrating thirty years of colonial independence and republicanism, but there were very interesting intellectual struggles still going on about who in the political community was to take credit for this liberation. It struck us that Australia, including the indigenous peoples, is still in the middle of a not-unrelated form of decolonisation as we debate ‘black armband’ v. ‘white blindfold’ histories. The littoral nations of the Indian Ocean thus have interesting contrasts when it comes to this process. By talking to each other we will short-circuit the imperial trade routes. And, historically, as in the pre-colonial early-modern period up until the sixteenth century, it was trade and commerce that established cultural and cross-community relations, especially, say, between Aden, the west coast of India and the east coast of Africa. And again now, after the colonial period that mobilised military force with trade, we may be looking once again at a trade-driven set of cultural exchanges.
on a more global and information-connected scale. A cognate example of transnational cultural studies is Paul Gilroy's book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. With its emphases on diaspora, slavery and cultural trade, it provides something we can compare our work to and jump off from.

**Healy**: Along with Meaghan Morris, you are one of the founding editors of the *UTS Review*, which is now into its fifth year. What are the successes and failures of the journal, and what might you hope the journal could do in the future?

**Muecke**: I think it is a critical success, and people actually read it. The production values could be better, but it is a locally produced journal at an accessible price, $15 for each double-size issue. We have created Asian links with the East Asia cultural studies consortium going strongly there, and Meaghan has taken a job in Hong Kong, which will strengthen those links even more. An issue next year will deal with Indian Ocean questions, on the ground that, as for East Asia, that region might like to see a local inflection of the ‘international language of theory’ that is transnational cultural studies. This is a way of analysing the specificity of local problems without having to shunt the discussion through the imperial centres and the older disciplines. I hope there is a friendliness, modesty and flexibility in the role an Australian journal can play in those sorts of endeavours. There is space in the journal for both the newer scholars and the more established ones, and in the reviews section, I'm sure writers appreciate seeing their books discussed constructively, and finding out about other books, especially from the regions around Australia, not easily distributed here.

**Healy**: As someone whose studies of culture have been located in and addressed to various versions of Australia, who has an ongoing interest in regional articulations through cultural studies and who
writes from and for the 'international language of theory', could you say something about the tensions and aspirations of these kinds of intellectual projects today?

**MUECKE:** Like everyone else I find myself going more international, though for years I was really only interested in publishing and talking about very local issues. I'm hoping that the international or transnational is something of a revival of left internationalism. As I said, I think there are interesting things to do in short-circuiting the old imperial centres of power. I might fantasise about networks of local 'trade' relations across international frontiers, where ideas are traded as well as goods. In this internationalism I take the lead from my old friend from WA, Helen Corbett, now general secretary of UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, www.unpo.org) in The Hague, but as a writer and critic, my skills do not lie with activism as such. Her mode of representing the unrepresented is directly political; mine is textual, it is a kind of considered development of literary and cultural forms.

I'm excited about the possibilities for such forms. Publishing in cultural studies will no doubt be revolutionised by the Net, but this is before book publishing has anywhere near finished with the possibilities of cross-over genres. Design is pretty staid, agents and publishers are out to make a buck, academics, especially junior ones, are rightly worried about the risks of sticking their necks out creatively. But no-one can talk about the ivory tower any more, as universities establish more collaborative relationships with other cultural institutions and industries—this is, of course, what gets funded now. Networking seems to be all the rage, locally and internationally. It may turn out that the government policies of starving universities and other public institutions to make them more collaborative will strengthen them in that very collaboration before the young talent is finally scared off. I hope so.
STEPHEN MUECKE: Selected Bibliography

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