

WORKING PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN STUDIES

WORKING PAPER NO: 64

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1991

*Private Knowledges and the Public Gaze: Aboriginal Writing
as Property in the Late Twentieth Century*



Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
University of London

Series Editor: Richard Nile
ISBN 1 85507 029 4

Australian Studies in London

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Abstract

This paper observes textual representations of Aboriginal culture by focusing on the 'ethnographic' work of Stephen Muecke, in particular his books with Paddy Roe, Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology (1984) (with Krim Benterrak) and Gularabulu (1983), also the 'para-ethnography' of Sally Morgan's My Place (1987). The paper argues that these texts are part of on-going but often submerged dispute between informants and transcribers; in the instance of Muecke, as the white ethnographer looking in from the outside, and for Sally Morgan, as part of her journey of 'self discovery' through an investigation of Aboriginality.

The paper offers an argument of the 'secret' or of the 'private' knowledges as a point of resistance in Aboriginal textuality and of modernity's preoccupation with 'revelation' and 'universality'. It analyses these in terms of a 'discourse of acquisition' whose origins can be traced back at least as far as the nineteenth century colonial anthropologists who believed that everything is available for investigation and classification.

This paper draws a connection between literary resistance and ongoing Aboriginal claims for an independent culture. Lyotard's notion of the differend is useful in this regard and as a way of theorising about what is not understood in disputes centring on the private or that which is deliberately withheld. As science and anthropology have disputed Aboriginal claims in matters of cultural authority/autonomy and in matters concerning 'relics' and 'skeletal' remains so literary analysts and critics have tended to negotiate literary categories which have come down on the side of 'acquisition'. Post-culturalism and post modernism are more subversive discourses in which these ideologies might themselves be interrogated.

Ruby Langford's Don't Take Your Love to Town (1988) and critical studies by Mudrooroo Narogin, in particular, Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature (1990) are points of resistance to cultures of acquisition and classification.

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At one point in his book *Reading the Country* (1984), Stephen Muecke presents an account of colonial interracial contact, when at the turn of the century, Mrs Ada Janet Peggs, a folklorist, came up to Roebuck Bay in north-western Western Australia. Mrs Peggs made it her business to collect various artefacts from the natives - boomerangs and woomeras and other carved materials engaging in a 'discourse of acquisition' predicated on the colonial, yet somewhat postmodern, assumption that everything was available to her. One Aboriginal woman refused to part with some hair she was spinning into a belt - instead, she gives Mrs Peggs her empty spindle. A western 'discourse of acquisition', where the native's property is always available, is at last confronted with an item which is inexplicably unavailable, an item that resists acquisition. Muecke - an anthropologist who, by talking to Aborigines, has made their intellectual property available in the public sphere - is led to identify with Mrs Peggs in an unusually bleak moment in his meditations: 'wherever we go to pick up the spindle', he says, 'it is empty'.¹

Such a 'discourse of acquisition' has in turn been effectively appropriated by Aboriginal communities in land rights claims and - when intellectual property is at stake - in copyright disputes. In certain limited spheres, certain properties are now being 'returned' to Aboriginal communities. These returns are effected mainly when the properties in question have little or no immediate commodity status, or when those items can be symbolically integrated into a rhetoric of decolonisation - paintings, for example, are never returned, but relics are. The return of relics to Aboriginal communities, however, may still be contested on certain grounds. To give a local example, recently the State Museum of Victoria returned some relics dug up at Kow Swamp some twenty years ago to the nearby Aboriginal community at Echuca. Archeologists involved in the diggings - John Mulvaney and Alan Thorpe from the Australian National University - reportedly protested the return as illegal, on the grounds that Kow Swamp is 'outside' the jurisdiction of the Echuca community (it is about forty kilometres from Echuca). They also questioned the authority of the government ministers who orchestrated the return - the museum is credited by them with a 'higher' authority, as the rightful owner of Aboriginal relics. Another intervention in this dispute came from Robyn Williams, a scientist and the chairman of the influential *Commission for the Future*. Williams had visited an exhibition of prehistorical remains at the New York Museum of Natural History, where he was dismayed to find that 'no crucially important remains had been sent from Australia because of politics'.² In his article, Williams seemed concerned that archeological science should be put 'at risk' because of local community 'law'. 'Aboriginal law', he maintained, 'must not stand in the way

1. Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984) p. 105

2. 'Belief, Scientific Rationality and the Bare Bones of History', *Sunday Herald*, September 23, 1990.

of knowledge: if the Ice Age bones of Kow swamp are not available to scientists then new techniques of examination cannot be applied to answer very significant questions. One such technique I learned about in Oxford last month: how to extract DNA from ancient material so that a genetic fingerprint of the owner could be made'.³ Williams ends his article by remarking, 'It would be tragic for that process of enlightenment to be stopped by what, after all, is a matter of blind conservatism'.⁴

It is, of course, commonplace these days to note just how 'that process of enlightenment' is underwritten by a 'discourse of acquisition'. Museums stand as an emblem here, acquiring relics and making them visible to the public in the name of enlightenment. In his essay 'On Collecting Art and Culture', the American poststructuralist ethnographer James Clifford has noted that the western practice of acquisition or 'collection' is crucial to western identity formation.⁵ Acquisition is always appropriation: the word *appropriation* comes from the Latin *proprius*, meaning 'property'. To collect exotic objects is to appropriate the property of others, to turn the property of others into the property of the self. As Clifford says in an accompanying essay which addresses an exhibition in New York of so-called 'primitive' art, 'The relations of power whereby one portion of humanity can select, value, and collect the pure products of others need to be criticised and transformed'.⁶ That property is displayed, exhibited, as if it has always been somehow freely available. The appropriation itself is hidden under what Tony Bennett has called the museum's 'exhibitionary complex', where the museum as an institution arises in connection with 19th century ideologies of imperialism, nationalism and progress, laying out the relics of the past to remind spectators that this is the past, and in the process offering 'the ultimate spectacle of an ordered totality'.⁷ For James Clifford, one way to disrupt this is to make the shift from 'ordered totality' to the 'radically heterogeneous'.⁸ The appropriations museums put into effect necessarily reify other cultures, embalming their remains as if those cultures are no longer with us - as if the museum's job is to 'preserve' what is left in all its authenticity. Clifford's response is attuned to postmodernity: rather than embalming the authentic past of another culture, museums, he suggests, should celebrate the 'inauthentic' present, underscoring contemporary hybridizations or 'mixtures' of styles which mark the predicament of cultures these days. But the appropriation still remains: Clifford's postculturalism only disperses or decontextualises that focussed sense of property which has

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 220.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

7. Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', *New Formations*, 4, Spring 1988, pp. 73-102.

8. Clifford, p. 213.

become so crucial to another culture's claims against us. Simon During has critiqued Clifford on these grounds, in particular through Clifford's ignoring of the political value of the 'sacred': 'A postcultural discourse,' During writes, '... may ... legitimate depoliticisation by denying the sacred'.⁹ It would, of course, be quite wrong somehow to lift the 'sacred' (sacred sites, sacred relics etc.) completely out of the context of postmodernity; nevertheless, one would want to distinguish between those who wish to 'preserve lost aura' and those who wish to bind 'the sacred to political resistance'.¹⁰ This is why the return of sacred property to Aboriginal communities is not only a symbolic gesture.

Because of 'politics' there is no hair on the spindle and no bones in the museum: there may be moments when appropriation is thoroughly resisted and the collector goes away with an awful sense that something is missing, that the collection is incomplete, that an 'ordered totality' simply cannot be achieved. This may be true, as well, for the collector of stories - and incidentally, the metaphor which describes the anthology as a textual museum, preserving the texts of a dying culture and generating its own 'exhibitionary complex', is a familiar one. To return to Stephen Muecke, the collection of stories told by Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu*, are presented in the first place as 'public': 'This is all public. You know [it] is for everybody', says Paddy Roe in the epigraph to Muecke's introduction, which is also reproduced on the back cover as if it is a point which must be made before reading actually begins.

Because Muecke is presenting Paddy Roe's 'Aboriginal English' as a 'bridging' language enabling communication between European and Aboriginal cultures, publicity (indeed, publicity) must be adhered to. For this kind of communication not to break down, neither the European collector nor the Aboriginal informant must be seen to be breaching copyright laws - as, say, the anthropologist Charles Mountford had in his dealings with the Pitjantjatjara people (who took Mountford and his publisher to court and successfully stopped him from making tribal 'secrets' publicly available). Muecke has it from Paddy Roe that his stories are somehow already public. In his introduction Muecke notes: 'Strict copyright sanctions exist for secret or sacred stories; the passing on of such narratives or songs must be announced publicly. These sanctions may be relaxed somewhat for "public" stories'.¹¹

A problem arises here in the polarising of stories which are secret and stories which are public. The passing on of secret stories - or of copyrighted or unauthorised information generally - may not be watertight. When European anthropologists are involved, Aborigines have to make

9. Simon During, 'What was the West?' *Meanjin*, 48, 4, Summer 1989, p.769; my italics.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 770.

11. Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983), p. viii.

decisions about what they say - they may withhold information, or they may choose to disclose it, depending on the circumstances. In an article titled 'The Status of Women's Cultural Knowledge', Luise Hercus remarks on the work done by the anthropologists Spencer and Gillen with Arabana men in 1901 and 1912: 'They concentrated on obtaining detailed anthropological and ritual information from the senior men. These enquiries were unprecedented in their scope and led to recriminations for many years to come...Some old men are said to have been "boned" by others for allegedly divulging matters that did not 'belong' to them'.¹² Hercus examines the gendered storing of knowledges: one of her male informants only passes information on to her because she is 'an old woman'.¹³

In this complicated nexus of secrecy and transference, the anthropologist always figures herself as the exception, somehow 'at home' with another culture - so that by the end of her article, Hercus collapses the differences between herself and her informants (they have their old age in common) in a humanist complaint against a 'younger generation' who are no longer listening anyway.¹⁴ Certainly, as George Marcus has noted, the anthropologist and the native are 'never completely strangers when they meet', since they share 'a mutual historical - implication';¹⁵ nevertheless, the interplay of (in Raymond Williams' terms) 'emergent' and 'residual' forces complicates this - 'mutual historical implication' to enable - if not unrecognisability - then at least misrecognition. One would want to underscore the instability of the anthropologist here, relishing the rapport he or she seems to have established with the host culture - and yet radically uncertain about the status of information he or she (over)hears and makes available beyond that host culture. Diane Bell, imagining a sisterhood with the Kaytej people that similarly enables her to feel 'at home' with them, confesses at least to this anxiety: 'I would always be in danger of unintentionally disclosing something'.¹⁶ Since disclosure may be enabled by both the anthropologist and the informant - neither of whom may necessarily be attuned to community feeling on the matter - one would want to look more carefully into claims by either party that information is somehow already 'public'.

A reading of Paddy Roe's 'public' stories may also find points at which this polarisation between public and secret stories breaks down. The first story in *Gularabulu*, 'Mirdinan', tells of a *maban* or magician Mirdinan himself - who kills his unfaithful wife and is then pursued by

12. Luise Hercus, 'The Status of Women's Cultural Knowledge', in Peggy Brock, ed., *Women Rites and Sites* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 110.

13. *Ibid*, p. 105.

14. *Ibid*, p. 118.

15. George Marcus, 'A Prolegomena to Contemporary Cosmopolitan Conversations on Conference Occasions Such as the Present One, Entitled Representations of Otherness: Cultural Hermeneutics, East and West', *CHAI*, 2, 1989, p. 32.

16. Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 33.

police. The first time he is caught and chained up - but when the police check on him, they find he has disappeared. Mirdinan is caught a second time and locked up in Fremantle jail, where he turns into a 'pussycat' and escapes. The third time he is caught and taken to the gallows to be hung - but when the rope is put around his neck, Mirdinan turns into an eaglehawk and flies away. Certainly this story - so far - has recognisable structural features, offering three narratives which celebrate in an accumulatory fashion a folk hero's methods of evading the police. But then Paddy Roe sings a song that Mirdinan had made up about his escape. Another Aborigine, Butcher Joe Nangan, joins him in the song - they sing it in their own language, Nyigina, rather than in the 'bridging' language of Aboriginal English. Stephen Muecke doesn't understand the song: communication breaks down at this point. Afterwards, Paddy Roe offers a translation, but at certain points he becomes evasive - in particular, when he is translating the line accrediting Mirdinan with magical powers:

mudjaraa mudjariii ngalea that's his -
ngalea means that's his -
he had power in his -
in him you know -
in his belly -
maban maban (Stephen: *Ngalea* belly) yeah -
(Sings) *mudjariii ngaleaaa* (Stephen: Why, why belly?)
yeah -¹⁷

Paddy Roe passes over Muecke's question (the only point in the narrative where Muecke asks for clarification), moving on to the next line in the song. This is an important evasion: Roe seems not to want to elaborate on the source of Mirdinan's power.

It is not difficult to see Roe's evasion of Muecke at this juncture as a manifestation of the narrative's own thematics, describing as it has Mirdinan's evasion of the police. I realise that I am getting close to Frederic Jameson's point that all Third World texts - or Fourth World, in this case - are 'national allegories', speaking always of their colonisation.¹⁸ But this thesis may have a certain resonance for those texts which arise out of - as in this instance - Aborigines speaking to European anthropologists: the story of Mirdinan is an 'allegory' for the cultural property of the storyteller. To imagine Paddy Roe to be speaking to an anthropologist, and nothing more - relaying stories to Stephen Muecke which have already been sanctioned as 'public' and which therefore seem to have been in some sense always already available - is to disempower him, to neutralise him in the coloniser/colonised nexus (in the way that those Aborigines who recount 'legends' have been neutralised). On the other hand, to imagine

17. Muecke and Roe, p. 14.

18. Frederic Jameson, 'World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism', in Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke, eds., *The Current in Criticism* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1987), pp. 139-158.

Paddy Roe to be speaking about anthropologists, and about the relations Aboriginal people might bear to anthropologists - through the very text of his story - is to place the informant, quite properly, back into the power relations of that coloniser/colonised nexus.

'Mirdinan' - the story - is about evasion, just as much as it is about informing: towards the end, the Aboriginal community informs on Mirdinan, getting him drunk and handing him over to the police who, this time, hang on to him. This particular 'discourse of acquisition' is, on the colonisers' behalf successful: Mirdinan is, finally, lost property (in fact, he is drowned). At the end, there is no return to be had; but in the midst of this story, there is at least one item of information which is not handed over - the 'explanation' for the source of Mirdinan's magical powers. It may be that the story of Mirdinan has been triggered off precisely to make this point: that there is always something, something to do with power, which is unavailable. The 'public' status of this story becomes a frame for this point: this is a story made available to the public to let them know that there are certain things, certain properties, which are unavailable.

The stories in *Gularabulu* are only annotated sparsely by Muecke. By contrast, Paddy Roe's stories in *Reading the Country* are accompanied by lengthy and theoretically motivated meditations, in particular on the subject of 'nomadology' which Muecke takes from the French theorists Deleuze and Guattari. The book - with paintings by the Moroccan artist Krim Benterrak - is subtitled 'Introduction to Nomadology' and is dedicated 'To the nomads of Broome, always there and always on the move' - meaning Paddy Roe and the Aboriginal people along the north-west coastal plains. Muecke's creative engagement with Roe's narratives generates what is still one of the most productively postmodern encounters between the anthropologist and the Aborigine - reviewed in *Art & Text* (19, October-December 1985), *Reading the Country* was seen as a 'joyful affirmation that keeps word, image and bodies on the move', a 'polymorphous' text which deconstructs the 'power-difference and knowledge-difference' that usually characterises relations between anthropologist and informant.¹⁹ Five years later, however, the Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo Narogin offers a very different review of *Reading the Country* in his book on Aboriginal literature, *Writing from the Fringe*:

Stephen Muecke barricade[s] the discourses of Paddy Roe between slabs of Standard English. Paddy Roe is reduced to language, or discourse as heard through the ears of a European. Kriol or Aboriginal English becomes an interesting artefact which may be measured and deciphered using the methods of European criticism. In *Reading the Country* this has been pushed to such an extreme that Paddy Roe's

19. George Alexander, 'Australia A Prophecy', *Art & Text*, 19 October -December 1985, pp. 34-38.

discourse becomes imprisoned between slabs of academic prose resembling nothing more than the walls of a prison.²⁰

What is 'polymorphous' and liberating to a white reviewer is reductive and imprisoning to an Aboriginal reader. This would seem to be a point at which Jean-Francois Lyotard's *differend* could be invoked - 'One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy'.²¹ Indeed, the *differend* - 'phrases in dispute' - may also come to characterise certain moments during Muecke's hermeneutical interactions with Paddy Roe, not least when Muecke introduces Roe to the word 'nomad'.

An interview at the end of *Reading the Country* draws this disputation out, with the interviewer wondering why the commentary only works one way - Paddy Roe never comments on Muecke's work - and countering the 'co-operative' nature of the enterprise with a reminder about 'foreignness':

But what about Paddy. Krim has said that he, and presumably you too, discussed the problem of 'foreignness' to each others [sic] purposes and effects with Paddy at some length. How did he respond? I'm afraid [says Muecke] I honestly can't remember that specific discussion.²²

Nevertheless, the text itself is haunted by this particular 'problem'. Muecke writes - at one point of the 'disappearance of anthropology', influenced by Foucault's account of the death of 'Man';²³ this section comes to suggest, however, that anthropology lives on, albeit in a dispersed or decentred fashion. Because of this residual effect - and Muecke's bleak identification with Mrs Peggs, noted earlier, is another example of this residue - one can see the truth of both the *Art & Text* reviewer's claims for *Reading the Country*'s 'polymorphous' status, and Narogin's claim that Muecke imprisons Paddy Roe's 'discourse'. *Reading the Country* falls under Clifford's classification, as a dialogic, postmodern ethnographic work, where the 'monological authority' of the ethnographer - like anthropology itself - is not eliminated, only displaced.²⁴

Reading the Country is haunted by anthropological practices that have not died; in turn, in his subsequent essays on Aboriginal writing, Muecke seems haunted by *Reading the Country*. These hauntings are always centred around a notion of what is available from Aborigines. For

20. Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990), p. 151.

21. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. xi.

22. Benterrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 126.

23. *Ibid*, pp. 183-188.

24. Clifford, pp. 43-44.

example, a passage from *Reading the Country*, in the context of making a point about the wish to make Aborigines inclusive in an ideology of Australian nationhood, reads as follows: 'Tell us what you are really like,' say the white institutions, 'Dance for us once more and sing your songs'.²⁵ Muecke returns to this passage in his essay, 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis', published four years later in *Southerly* - but this time it is in the context of making a point about Aborigines as exclusive, particularly through their strategies of non-disclosure: 'Tell us what you are like,' the white institutions seem to be saying, 'sing your songs once more and tell your stories.' But, Muecke adds in the face of this powerful demand, could it be the case that Aboriginal peoples have learnt to retain a judicious silence, only giving out a certain amount of carefully constructed discourse, making sure that we are aware that in their economy of discourses the first separation is between the 'public' and the 'secret' and that a great wealth of culture lies below the surface?²⁶

In passing, one would want to reformulate that closing archeological metaphor (another residual effect, perhaps?) - there is not so much a 'great wealth' of culture 'under the surface', as a set of localised structures invested with power which gain their importance at the local level precisely because they are not ours - not available to us to be exhibited, distributed and so on. But the point is, that as shift in Muecke's thinking has clearly taken place here, from the earlier subscription to 'communication' through 'public' narratives - that, through the 'bridging' language of Aboriginal English, one is able, with Paddy Roe, to 'read the country' - to the current interest in secrecy and non-disclosure. Another essay published in the bicentennial year, somewhat paradoxically titled 'Body, Inscription, Epistemology: Knowing Aboriginal Texts', draws out similar preoccupations, returning to the earlier work with Paddy Roe. This essay is driven by an anxiety about speaking positions, about a speaker's relations to the text. Indeed, as Muecke writes, his own speaking position was challenged at a conference on Black Literatures in Brisbane in June 1986: 'I was told that I was not the "author" of the texts I had produced, the implication being that I had appropriated someone else's right as author (Paddy Roe, or another Aboriginal scribe)'.²⁷ Muecke's Foucauldian influence enables him to critique the notion of the 'author'; nevertheless, the essay is still very much concerned with questions of ownership and property - speaking positions being determined by custodial rights. Muecke returns to his previous preoccupations with 'communication' - 'the production (and distribution) of texts'²⁸ - but as the essay unfolds, the

interest shifts once again to the topics of secrecy and 'strategic non-disclosure', that is, to texts which resist distribution.

Taken together, these two essays show Muecke in a process of excluding himself from the Aboriginal sphere. A more recent essay, titled 'No Road' - illustrative of Muecke's further shift from ethnography into 'tourist studies' - makes the point more clearly. This is another, haunted piece of writing, beginning by naming a dead friend - he has a fragment of a postcard from her; with the words, significant enough for ethnography, 'In time maybe they will understand'.²⁹ In an essay which is once again about understanding - our understanding of them - Muecke describes a literal return to the Aboriginal realm of *Reading the Country*, driving out to the Kimberleys - the eastern Kimberleys, this time. The cultural baggage he takes with him has now changed: once it was Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Roland Barthes, but now it is work in the field of cultural studies - equally self-consciously displayed - including a paper by Meaghan Morris.

The return to the Kimberleys is a 'mistake'. Muecke argues with his old friend Krim Benterrak, the painter in *Reading the Country*; rain comes down and washes him out; and he refuses to join some Aboriginal artists at a local party. The trip back to Sydney (with great relief) is made symbolic: 'On the way home', Muecke writes, 'I thought I glimpsed Meaghan Morris in the Henry Parkes Motel in Tenterfield'.³⁰ This is a strangely anxious reference to an essay by Morris, titled 'At Henry Parkes Motel', published in the journal *Cultural Studies*. The trip back is made Oedipal: Muecke leaves the Aboriginal sphere in despair to re-enter the sanctuary of cultural studies itself (the motel, with Morris standing inside, is a 'home away from home').

In the process, nomadology - the concept which had underpinned Muecke's representation of Paddy Roe in *Reading the Country* - is now co-opted for himself as a 'romance': the nomadism of the tourist, the nomadism of those in cultural studies who write in an 'undisciplined' way, and so on. Indeed, the same point is made by Meaghan Morris in a paper published alongside Muecke's, where she describes without irony those who work in the cultural studies field: 'leading a generally uprooted and institutionally "nomadic" existence (which inclines us to be attracted to theories of de-centred subjectivity)', enabling a particular kind of criticism to be generated from that 'nomadic "class" position'.³¹ To conceptualise Aboriginal people as 'nomadic' is to project the self onto the other and the other back onto the

25. Benterrak, *Muecke and Roe*, p. 126.

26. Stephen Muecke, 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis' *Southerly*, 48, 4 (December 1988), p. 411.

27. Stephen Muecke, 'Body, Inscription, Epistemology: Knowing Aboriginal Texts', in Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed., *Essays on Black Literatures: Connections* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), p. 50.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

29. Stephen Muecke, 'No Road', *Meanjin*, 49, 3, Spring, 1990, p. 403.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

31. Meaghan Morris, 'A Small Serve of Spaghetti', *Meanjin*, 49, 3, Spring 1990, p. 474.

self: at last they are becoming like us - or, at last we are becoming like them. Doubtless Muecke's shift from ethnography to 'tourist studies' is symptomatic of this projection: tourists, of course, are nomadic, their itinerary consisting of a mapped out series of homes away from home, always able to leave when they want to, moving on to view another sacred site.

Yet to recognise oneself as a tourist - a recognition of one's postcultural condition - is also to recognise that one is excluded from those sacred sites and, in particular, from the essentially premodern conception of the sacred itself. This is where Lyotard's concept of the *differend* is most obviously applicable: there would seem to be no clear intersection between a premodern binding of the sacred into localised 'strategies of non-disclosure' and a postcultural mode of being which is ultimately global in its orientations, driven not by nondisclosure but by availability and appropriation - where one resists modernity not through silence or secrecy, but by positive and productive interactions with it, which is how cultural studies is imagined by Morris, just as it is how the 'cultural futures' of Aboriginal peoples are imagined by anthropologists such as James Clifford.

The point remains, however, that - premodern as it may be - the sacred is always residual in the emergent world of postculturalism, functioning as a kind of disturbance: the postcultural critic (Stephen Muecke is an example) is always haunted by the sacred, returning to it time and time again only to find it somehow deferred - coming away, like Mrs Peggs, with just an empty spindle. In his essay 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis', Muecke spends some time discussing Sally Morgan's best-selling autobiography, *My Place* (1987). Certainly, *My Place* is all about disclosure, about making information (designated as the 'truth') accessible and available. The narrator, Sally Morgan, who collects that information, is not only intimate with her informants, she is related to them: no ethnologist could be more 'at home' with her subjects, and it is doubtless this collapsing of the difference between ethnographic discourse and the 'other' that has made *My Place* so popular.

It is not forcing the point to say that Sally Morgan functions precisely as an ethnographer, recording (as she does) the stories of Aborigines onto her cassette machine and then transcribing them onto the page - indeed, *My Place* has already been well characterised by Eric Michaels as 'para-ethnography', not ethnography in its academic sense but nevertheless 'very much in dialogue with the profession'.³² But not every native is willing to say to Sally, 'this is what happened'. In spite of this text's capacity for revelation, there are still certain points at which a 'strategic non-disclosure' is maintained: Morgan herself is at times left holding that

empty spindle. As Muecke points out, this happens especially when Sally talks to her grandmother, Nan. Many reviewers have noted in positive terms that *My Place* is structured rather like detective fiction, with Sally functioning like a detective and her relations functioning as informants. But to be positive about this is to empower the detective and disempower the informant. At one point in the book, Sally's mother calls Sally a 'bloody detective'. Knowing the history of Aboriginal people's relations with the police in Australia (and Paddy Roe's story 'Mirdinan' was all about this), it seems unlikely that this remark is meant as flattery. One should not forget that ethnography is by its very nature a means of policing - that is, classifying - its subject, who is informing in both senses of the word (and we might recall Robyn Williams' example of the triumph of scientific knowledge here, which by analysing Aboriginal relics is able to fingerprint the owner). Sally's grandmother is even more severe with her, calling Sally a 'spy' and insisting on her right to withhold information from her. So the problem with *My Place* is precisely that it can be read positively (it is good to see Aboriginal people speaking out), just as it can be read negatively (what kind of violations of privacy take place in order for this speaking out to occur?).

Muecke is equivocal about *My Place*, not least of all because of the structural connections it bears to his own project in *Reading the Country* (both texts are even illustrated by 'Aboriginalised' colour paintings). Recalling the reviewer of *Reading the Country* who had celebrated its 'polymorphous' character, Muecke similarly reads *My Place* as 'multivalent or polyphonic'³³ because it makes room for other voices - Sally's mother, her uncle and her grandmother. This 'polyphonic' structure is seen by Muecke as more authentic, moving 'away from standard autobiography towards Aboriginal textual convention'.³⁴ But this may betray a fondness for the postmodern rather than the Aboriginal; more importantly, it neutralises the power relations between Sally herself (as the 'ethnographer', the detective, the 'spy') and her informants. To read *My Place* negatively again, one might by contrast recall Mudrooroo Narogin's remarks about *Reading the Country* the other lives in *My Place* are 'imprisoned' between slabs of standard English, subordinate to the framing self of Sally Morgan. One might even add that - much more than Muecke's nomadology - Morgan supplies a totalising narrative, an 'ordered totality', grounded in a set of feelings designated as 'Aboriginal' which overrides the heterologies of the other lives recounted in *My Place*. But the general point here is that *My Place* and *Reading the Country* can both be seen as variants on the ethnographer/informant paradigm - so that Muecke's discussion of the 'strategies of non-disclosure' in *My Place* necessarily folds back onto his own practices. What I've also been suggesting is that one can generate two mutually exclusive readings of both texts - positive and

32. Eric Michaels, 'Para-Ethnography', *Art & Text*, 30, September-October 1988, p. 51. Michaels may have lifted the term from Clifford, p. 24.

33. 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis', p. 415.
34. *Ibid*, p. 415.

negative - depending on whether one foregrounds disclosure (the 'exhibitionary complex' or non-disclosure, the public or the secret, the available and the unavailable.

Whereas Sally Morgan traces her Aboriginality back into the past through her mother and grandmother - one might say, vertically - Ruby Langford's Aboriginal identity in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) is always mapped out horizontally, through the people who surround her at the present moment. This horizontal identification is networked in complicated ways that are difficult to read. It seems, for example, that characters - and this book has many characters - enter Langford's life in an arbitrary way: they come and go, she bumps into them at random later on, and so on. Reviewers have complained that they cannot keep track of the many characters who pass through Ruby's life: the text seems 'disorganised' and overburdened. One should be conscious, however, of local structures which - even under the terms of disclosure enabled by autobiography may not be available to us. In this regard, attention should be drawn to Marcia Langton's work which argues that swearing and fighting amongst Aboriginal people is by no means arbitrary and 'disorganised'; instead, it is mapped out according to 'ritualised codes', according to certain rules: 'The behaviour in question is not mass deviancy and anarchy', she observes, 'but appropriate rule-governed behaviour adapted from earlier indigenous patterns to enable meaningful existence in the new political, legal and social situations imposed by the dominant Anglo-Australian regime'.³⁵ To read Ruby Langford's book as 'anarchic' in the same way is to 'misperceive' the codes and rules which determine patterns of behaviour, relationships, and the practices of everyday life.

Ruby Langford's autobiography is certainly an account of an Aboriginal woman's 'adaption' to new, postcolonial, postcultural situations - she joins various organisations (the Aboriginal Foundation, the Aboriginal Progressive Association, and so on), attends various national and international conferences, gives interviews and becomes a public figure: her politics operate in the public sphere, working to bring Aboriginal people into this public sphere by rewriting colonialist histories. In this sense, she differs from Sally Morgan for whom identity is individual rather than organisational. But there are other differences. In the last chapter, titled 'She's Very Impressive, Mary', an alternative set of strategies are glimpsed, centred not on public organisations but on localised sites and mystificatory power structures which seem tangential or even irrelevant to the public sphere. Looking at random through the newspapers - but of course, one might wonder if this really is another 'random' event in the autobiography - Langford notices a headline which mentions 'sacred rocks'. She reads the extract underneath, which introduces her to the first of a number of 'cleverwomen', of Aboriginal women who are

35. Cited in Nancy M. Williams, 'Studies in Australian Aboriginal Law 1961-1986', in R.M. Berndt and R. Tonkinson, eds., *Social Anthropology and Australian Aboriginal Studies* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), p. 223.

connected to particular sites or properties and who possess magical powers which are used to protect those properties:

Millie Boyd, 86, has always lived at Mulli Mulli mission, near Woodenbong, just below the Queensland border. An elder of her Githebul tribe, she is known tribally as a 'cleverwoman'....She is the spiritual custodian of Nimbin Rock, an Aboriginal sacred site shrouded in mystery, superstition and death. Whites who have visited the site have experienced a series of accidents not dissimilar to events that befell Lord Carnarvon's team of archeologists who opened the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutenkharman in the 1920s....A classroom of schoolchildren who went on an excursion near the site all experienced the same dreams that evening....There have been other events which no conventional white logic can explain.³⁶

The orientalist reading of Aboriginal 'sacred sites' - that they have certain inexplicable effects, much like King Tutenkhamen's tomb did on the archeologists who opened it up in the 1920s - should not be dismissed, however, as merely orientalist. These 'King Tut' effects are politically crucial, marking out a division - a *differend*, again - between what Simon During has called the post-colonisers and the post-colonised, enabling the post-colonised to claim that point as theirs, in a triumphant 'return to difference'.³⁷ And it is this 'return to difference' that marks out the peculiar politics (in its proper sense, meaning 'specific to the user') of Ruby Langford in this final chapter - a politics located around a network, a horizontal network, of sacred sites, and channelled through a number of 'cleverwomen' who keep those sites intact (including the 'Mary' of the chapter title, 'She's Very Impressive, Mary'). Certainly the postcultural realm of hybridities and inauthenticities is disturbed by this peculiar set of strategies: in this sense, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is by no means a unified text. Certainly, too, the more colonialist assumption that everything is still available in the name of enlightenment and 'knowledge' is also disturbed: there are no bones from Australia in the New York Museum of Natural History precisely because this 'return to difference' has been so effective.

36. Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 259-60.

37. Simon During, 'Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today', *Textual Practice*, 1, 1 (Spring, 1987), p. 45.