

ANCIENT



MODERN

TIME, CULTURE AND  
INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHY

*Stephen Muecke*

UNSW  
PRESS

M  
MNL 1815  
- EEG -

*For my father*

UL:AN

Universitätsbibliothek  
Duisburg-Essen

A UNSW Press book

*Published by*

University of New South Wales Press Ltd  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney NSW 2052  
AUSTRALIA  
www.unswpress.com.au

© Stephen Muecke 2004  
First published 2004

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Muecke, Stephen, 1951- .  
Ancient & modern : time, culture and indigenous philosophy.  
Includes index.  
ISBN 0 86840 786 0.  
1. Indigenous peoples - Philosophy. I. Title.

149

*Cover design* Di Quick

*Text design* Dana Lundmark

*Cover image* *Sexy and Dangerous*, © Brook Andrew, 1996, Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004.

*Printer* Griffin Press

## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Section One TIME	1
1 'Once I knew how the world worked'	3
2 When, or where, did modern Australian culture begin?	5
3 Why I am not a historian	8
4 The return to place	13
5 History's poison blanket	23
6 Performing life	29
7 Morning coffee with Clarrie	41
8 Devastation	43
Section Two COUNTRY	57
1 How do you get to Alice Springs?	59
2 '... a burly Salt Water woman of about my own age'	61
3 Towards the Centre	67
4 'OK if we camp here again?'	69
5 Landscape and country	71
6 Back to Rottneest	80
7 A character called '62 Pontiac Parisienne'	82
8 A space for ethics	91
Section Three TECHNOLOGY	95
1 'He thinks, he desires'	97
2 Indigenous capitalism	102
3 Travelling the subterranean river of blood	106

4	Life, abundant life	109
5	Boxer deconstructionist	120
6	Indigenous modernities	132
7	The religion of technology	140
8	'I don't think they invented the wheel': New Right assimilationism	142
Section Four PHILOSOPHY		153
1	Philosophy of the Other continent	155
2	Philosophical magic	159
3	Nomads	162
4	Secret English	163
5	Language as singular or general	169
6	Feelings of power	170
7	The Other continent	172
8	Philosophy from afar	173
<i>Notes</i>		179
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>		191
<i>Index</i>		194

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay (in four sections and eight subsections) has the modest aim of opening a door onto the possibility of indigenous philosophy as an area of study and experiment. To do this it plays tricks with time, and juxtaposes anecdotes and concepts. This is no journey towards any indigenous philosophy that might be out there somewhere in the bush, as if your narrator were just another whitefella on the quest for something to be discovered. So, in order to avoid coming back with *that* same old story, this philosophy will have to start here, in the middle of things.

As for you indigenous communities whose struggles for justice I am at all times mindful of, I am neither borrowing from you nor trying to give you anything, except in dialogue when I quote the words of your scholars and offer my own. In the end it will be up to the readers to make their own assemblages, just as I have, for here there can be no final word. Paddy Roe was the first mentor for me, a great and wise teller of tales.

I have spoken to quite a few people along the way who have offered their help or encouragement: Jeremy Beckett, Andrew Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gillian Cowlshaw, John W Durack, Gary Foley, Stephen Gapps, Devleena Ghosh, Liz Jacka, Brian Massumi, Fiona Probyn, Debbie Bird Rose, Noel Sanders, Katrina Schlunke, Adam Shoemaker and Mick Taussig. I am especially indebted to Gillian Cowlshaw, Angelique Edmonds and my father Doug Muecke for their thoughtful reading of the manuscript.

Philip Morrissey generously offered to be my *kurdungurlu* and co-author at one stage, and Angelique Edmonds worked as a research assistant in the summer of 2002–03. To her feisty arguments

Some of the things we have to imagine are the deep narratives that engulf our cultural experience. Sometimes deep narratives are mistaken for the Unconscious, but the Unconscious is too much a creation of model-makers to be real. Deep narratives are not unconscious. Deep narratives are consciously present to us, but always in transformed ways. That is why it takes imagination to see them.<sup>14</sup>

Our renewed historical imagination can go wide as well as deep. I am thinking also of a collective and polyphonic history, as described by Jean Starobinski:

The possibility of a polyphony in which the virtually infinite interlacing of destinies, actions, thoughts and reminiscences would rest on a bass line that chimed the hours of the terrestrial day, and marked the position that used to be (and could still be) occupied there by ancient ritual.<sup>15</sup>

‘Deep narrative’ and ‘ancient ritual’. It seems to me our complex being-in-the-world is – if you will excuse such preposterous philosophising – composed (like music) of layerings of ancient forms and imaginative inventions. It oscillates between the ancient and the modern. And in a country such as Australia you have to ask: Whose ancient forms? Whose modern inventions? It is a challenge to express both at the same time. What goes into writing the narratives of culture and of history so that this writing might, in some mysterious way, take on proportions and swell in volume to express a poetic force? Simple truth is not enough to answer to power; something more like creative events are needed to answer back to the blunt force – the primitivism – of the singular fundamentalism that tends to assert that ‘we’ are ahead of the Others. These questions are about the resurgence of the ancient in our dreams, like images from an epic poem. If this poem still sings to us of our humanity and of our virtues, it is one that may retune our listening in such a way that a certain type of continuity may be recovered through the recognition that modern societies are always also quite ancient.

## 4

### THE RETURN TO PLACE

Time and space are axiomatic philosophical concepts, possibly in any philosophy. Different definitions, values and ideologies can be attached to them. But even to the extent that humans have made them into mathematically universal concepts, they are not habitable as such. We live in places and times (places more than times, as I contend) and certainly not spaces. Living in a space would literally be like living in a triangle or a cube. In recent years place has made a comeback in Western thought and Edward Casey’s work, *Getting Back Into Place*, presents a strong argument for this. Places are ontologically singular: the world is replete with places, from the strongly settled, such as cities, to the more ephemeral places that shimmer into being as they are created by a dividing line, a wall or a hollow in the ground where a kangaroo might have spent the night. Gaston Bachelard, in his classic phenomenological study, *The Poetics of Space*, almost universalises one kind of place, the house, as fundamental to the psyche, but it is a particular culture being elevated here, as there is no doubt about the love and personal history going into his descriptions of French village and city dwellings.<sup>16</sup>

A world without places is unthinkable. The horror of the void can be experienced personally – when one is lost – and what is threatened is a loss of identity and direction. Migrants and refugees experience the trauma of placelessness to different degrees, buoyed only by the hope of eventually being able to come and go as they please in their own place. At a more collective level we find all cultures emplaced according to their own patterns and, in Australia, the so-called nomadic culture of the Aboriginal tribes was not one the British colonisers knew how to recognise. The British invented the designation of *terra nullius*, empty land, ‘nowhere’, to justify their

occupation, effacing in the process the specific modes of emplacement of Aboriginal cultures, which is tantamount to effacing the people themselves: if they are nowhere, where are they dwelling?

European occupation proceeded with spatial technologies, metrical instruments of surveying and measuring. These could be considered a kind of ritual of occupation if one thought for a moment about sciences too being certain kinds of cultures; this is what whitefellas did to consecrate places as their own. Out of a scientific knowledge of space they thus created places. What they thought they were doing was letting science encounter nature without the mediation of any kind of culture (least of all indigenous ones). In this disembodied act a new modern life was conjured into being: 'Through the mediation of scientific objectivity, technical efficiency and economic profitability, anybody could join this fatherland without ancestors, this ethnic group without rituals, this country without borders; this country of reason ...'<sup>17</sup>

But let us retain the idea that ritual connects people to place and that this happens not only with traditional ceremonies, but also modern ones. Let us also retain the idea that, while the concepts of space and time are somewhat abstract and universal, places are specific and contiguous to their human inhabitants who make them meaningful through ritual. Pause for a moment on 'human'. The English were right, the Aborigines were not quite human. In the philosophical sense of being a people without an intellectual discourse of humanism that was used to putting Man at the centre of the world and above Nature. But if it is true that place has a renewed significance in Western thought, it may be because this complex body of thought, without borders, has finally become aware of the survival of so-called traditional societies and that it is these very societies that have insisted, in arguments to Western powers, that their sustainability depends on retaining their places. Suddenly, we find place elevated to more universal significance, especially in a powerful combination with global indigenous and ecological movements.

In indigenous Australian country, where such sustainability has existed for thousands of years, time has none of the urgency of the imperial power seeking to improve quickly its capacity to exploit nature. Could it have been that the displacement that characterised imperial expansion brought with it an intensification of the sense of linear time, as well as a codification, in the books of History, of what would eventually be called 'historical consciousness'?

Tony Swain, working in studies of religion and setting up an opposition between Western Time and Aboriginal Place, sees the origin of linear time as a fall from place. In support of this he offers a seminal historical example:

History, associated quintessentially with the Hebrews, was something which intervened when the Israelites had lost their place. The covenant, God's promise, was to reinstate place, but this was only feasible by the Godhead entering a world given over to time. From the moment God said to Abraham, 'Leave your country', instead of their place the Hebrews had history and a promise of a land ...<sup>18</sup>

The thesis of Swain's book is that, through the relationships with strange visitors, Aboriginal peoples have adapted their way of being to accommodate different versions of strangeness and that these changes, by and large, have involved the incorporation of cumulative time.

For instance, he argues that the treatment of the dead in places where place seems less influenced by imported versions of time, there are rituals that return the focus of death to place, where death would otherwise 'logically' mark the passage of time (as well as, like birth from a human mother, privileging corporeal individuality):

Desert traditions oppose 'lineage' by eradicating the social memory of the dead with extensive taboos against referring to their past existence. Generations are therefore not amassed and thus in turn cannot (no more than uncounted seasons or other natural rhythms) constitute the measured units of time. To the North, however, where memorials are made to celebrate the dead, we hear the whisper of time ...<sup>19</sup>

Here identity and being do not emphasise genealogy (identity stretching back through parents or grandparents), but tend more towards maintaining the relationship to the deceased through their country, connecting country in a web of relatedness overlapping with the structure of kinship:

The basic tenet ... as Nancy Munn has perceptively shown, is that something came out of, moved across, and went into the earth. Graphically, Desert societies render this by employing two basic iconic elements: the concentric circle representing sites and lines standing for tracks between sites. In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests upon the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode ...<sup>20</sup>

Aboriginal people in the desert, specifically the Warlpiri who Munn speaks of, believe human lives follow this path. Children are born from the ancestor's spirit emerging from the ground, relating a person with their place of birth (and incurring the responsibilities of care for that country) and that, upon their physical, corporeal death, their spirit returns to that place. This is why, upon death, the emphasis is shifted away from the body and towards place as the enduring location of their spirit. Their name is replaced by the term *kuman-jayi* as a speech restriction, enacted so as not to contain the deceased in their last physical location, but to allow an unhindered return journey of their spirit back to their place of origin from whence their spirit emerged. The safe return of their spirit is imperative to the wellbeing of the place so that it may continue as an enduring life source and again be the site from where life will continue to emerge.

Now, movement is more important to Aboriginal modes of being than territoriality, and lines (or pathways of movement) more than boundaries, as I have argued before on the basis of 'nomadic' rather than settled civic life.<sup>21</sup> But Swain gives further reasons. 'Why must place move? There seem to be two facets to the answer to this question. The first is intentionality. Place itself is stretched by conscious action.'<sup>22</sup> The Ancestor moves, for example, in order to transform into something else. Ancestor travels, either real or projected, link these places one to another, whereas human manifestations of spirit most often emerge from and return at the same place with various trips in the course of one's life. What maintains the relationships between places is the maintenance of kinship, the interconnected web of kin and country and the roles of custodianship (*kirda* [owner] and *kurdungurlu* [manager]).

The second reason why place must move is to relate sites ... the Ancestors do not move *from* one place *to* another but rather they link sites by common intentionality of place ... the Aranda person 'believes in the simultaneous presence of the Ancestor at each of the many scenes which once witnessed the fullness of his supernatural powers. [Strehlow]<sup>23</sup>

The Aranda (now spelled Arrernte) understanding of the simultaneous presence of an Ancestor in many places is indicative of the absence of cumulative time and an understanding that presence can be held in place, enduring. Since country endures, is always already there, place becomes the horizon of temporality against which human

finitude finds a rhythm. Country can hold several moments simultaneously, just as an Ancestor may be present at many places simultaneously. So indigenous Australian time, while not metrical, was periodised nonetheless and enacted in rituals that brought out Ancestral power in ever-tightening rhythms, from the slowest cycle of the ancient dreaming, to the cycle of generations, to the life of one custodian, to the seasonal ritual cycle to the song cycle itself and its repeated phrasings and stamping of feet into the earth. Deborah Bird Rose adds intensification and life to her perception of Yarralin time:

Time, rather than being rendered static or absent, becomes experientially and overwhelmingly focussed, present and shared. The person flips from being an actor in time to becoming a heartbeat of time, and the whole on-going systole and diastole of life/time pours into and through persons, places and other living things. Perhaps time itself is a sound, a wave, a call that is pulled into specific places ...<sup>24</sup>

Swain is tempted to call such rituals Abiding Events, in which 'there was no fashioning of time, linear or cyclical, but rather a sophisticated patterning of events in accordance with their rhythms'.<sup>25</sup>

Time is not opening out into an unknown future, but is intensifying onto the present moment down through concentric circles of forces and meanings. The song and dance happening now have their reference in the place, the dreaming, the kin group and so on. So, as with naturalist Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic', as explored by Deborah Bird Rose,<sup>26</sup> 'the humans who are of a land's stuff do not, and cannot, exclusively control that site. The immediate result is relationship',<sup>27</sup> relationships to things, animate and inanimate, in the kinship system. And the other result is that war in the form of territorial conquest is impossible in this logic for, as people embody country, it is impossible to appropriate another person's being. Being and belonging have not yet been prised loose from country in such a way that would both permit those sorts of appropriations of country (in representation, for example) *and* allow for survival of individuals' identity where homelands are lost: 'Structured locative interdependence means to consume other people/lands is to destroy the world-pattern upon which one depends.'<sup>28</sup>

What Swain then goes on to look at in following chapters is the effect of strangers upon an ontology of place in its individual, social and cosmological levels. It must be cautioned that 'cosmology' is a

non-Aboriginal term that encapsulates a European enlightenment thrust to systematically explain cultures as totalities from a reflective distance, positioning the speaker as outside of and thus able to see the (conceptual) whole. But cultures are not lived as totalities; they are better conceived of as partially acquired skills and attributes. The indigenous emphasis on participation and a world lived-in means an absence of the reflective distance that allows terms such as 'cosmos' and 'cosmology' to describe, in a singular term, the relatedness of all that is. The discussion of Aboriginal 'cosmos' is an imposition that continues with Swain: 'Cosmologically, the continuum starts to shift from the uncompromisingly locative Abiding place to the temporalised Utopian vision.'<sup>29</sup>

However, the forms that time starts to take through contact with various strangers such as Macassans, Torres Strait islanders, Timorese and, of course, Europeans, involves, as Swain sees it, a dangerous dislocation from place and reorientation of being in time. This is shown in the performance of various new ceremonial cults or even, simply, the invention of a single god, for instance *baiami*, around the most colonised parts of southeastern Australia:

For a people who had lost much of their lands and most of their kinfolk, the High God's elevation from the land was simultaneously a rise beyond localised affiliations and a politico-religious premise which theoretically could, and in other hands has, embraced or conquered worlds.<sup>30</sup>

*Baiami* was modern, not by virtue of when he appeared, but because we can see from the description that he is clearly a highly inventive syncretic figure; it is harder to tell that about earlier aspects of culture we have become used to calling traditional or classical. We learn from Swain's source that he 'dwells in heaven on a throne of transparent crystal surrounded by beautifully carved pillars from which emanate the colours of the rainbow'.

Swain's politico-religious figure, which conflates the Christian God and colonialist expansion, is uncompromising in this instance and could be tempered by descriptions of local and more benign and humanist Christian traditions associated with village life and pastoral care. Nevertheless, he helps develop a description of the power of a representation that is portable (therefore not a fixed representation at all in that sense) in a way also suggested by new historicist Stephen Greenblatt describing the bringing of crucifixion images to the New World.

Greenblatt captures the dreadful beauty of Christianity: 'a religious ideology centred on the endlessly proliferated representation of a tortured and murdered god of love.'<sup>31</sup> Columbus and company, bearing flags and crosses, were literally armed with these representations, along with an immense confidence in the centrality (yet speed of expansion) of their own culture. And let's not forget that one of the holiest mysteries of the Christian church of Rome, the Eucharist, is the symbolic cannibalism of this 'god of love'; it was this strange concept that was imposed by force on incredulous 'savages', their death often marking the end of one era and the beginning of another. As the Christians continue the ancient chant that He gave His life so that you may live, the life promised is, of course, eternal, individual, Father-oriented (Oedipal) and an *after* life, a paradise on which you would hesitate to put a down-payment with any real estate agent.

Millenarian cults were modern inventions in Aboriginal Australia in the late nineteenth century. They unravelled concentric circle time to give it an endpoint, which involved inventing new hybrid rituals. We find, according to Swain's sources, the emergence of cults that were frightening for their participants. For instance, the *Mulunga* seems to be based on the shooting of Aborigines; the dancers, who carry forked sticks like rifles, are 'destroyed' by the cult hero. The imperative to participate in this ceremony as it spreads around the countryside is compelling; it is announced that everyone who hasn't seen the ceremony (including all the whites) will die. Yet, as a ceremony not based at a specific site, its power to spread could have the effect of displacing more traditional ceremonies, which are essentially locative. Swain further speculates that the genesis of *Mulunga* lies in the 1884 massacre of the *Kalkatungu* at Battle Mountain. Here, supposedly, war took place in which hundreds of warriors died. As the survivors regrouped their strength, they invented a powerful modern response, the travelling cult. But is this confirmatory historical 'truth' really necessary? Does it provide comfort for whitefella ways of seeing the world by returning the phenomenon in question to the available documentary sources?

Another example, that of the cult called *Djulurru*, sees

ceremonies begin with the women distant from the main camp. The men huddle to consult a piece of paper, *mili* [mail], which when opened reveals a drawing of a dancer and the words

'8 o'clock'. The women receive a similar letter, and thus the Business starts with a White message form announcing an onset symbolically co-ordinated by clock time.<sup>32</sup>

As philosophical exemplars these Europeans of the frontier can present only the most rudimentary rituals and languages, a kind of 'white trash' (there was no Opera House in the Kimberley all those years ago, no education to speak of), but the Aboriginal cult seems to be able to produce a fascinating transformation of it:

*Djulurru* dresses in white in the style of a cowboy, complete with hat and pistols. He variously rides his white steed or his motorbike, and he consumes vast amounts of alcohol ... While his ceremonies are being performed, *Djulurru* travels in adjacent areas recruiting those who have avoided his conscripting tradition and playing havoc with European technology. On the one hand he is something of a saviour, for if an initiates car runs out of oil or petrol, the Father will come to their rescue. On the other hand ... a pearl shell ... could be used to cause cars to crash when drivers failed to offer the person who carried it a lift. The shell was kept in company with another said to depict serpents and aeroplane propellers.<sup>33</sup>

These cults will be important in the examination of Aboriginal philosophy because of the way in which certain practices or exercises are incorporated as ways of being Aboriginal in connection with European ways. These cults are not primitive representations of European ways, rather, they mobilise all the transformative force of the mimetic, as described by Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity*.<sup>34</sup> The event generates its own kind of ritualistic magic, where 'mimetic excess' mobilises 'human capacit[ies]', and where the participants are 'neither subject nor object of history but as both, at one and the same time'.

The *djulurru* 'participants' are just that: they are living and animating the experiences. But a phrase like 'onerous trials of deprivation' in the text below gives the ceremony a Christian asceticism:

neophytes are referred to as 'prisoners' and those thus captured are kept in a shelter referred to as the 'prison'. In the days before the singing and dancing begins, the inmates are put through a series of onerous trials of deprivation, including spending extensive periods lying immobile (hence 'Sleeping Business') under the watchful eye of the 'policemen'.<sup>35</sup>

The functionalist residue of this language ('referred to'; the scare quotes) makes the ritual sound as if it is not real, that it is a mere construction invented for some purpose other than its own, a purpose that 'we', with anthropological or historical knowledge, are moving towards, as if we were free of the obscured vision that primitives participating in ritual must have.

This participation is, however, the expression of the necessary process that all human beings are involved in as they are involved in the world, as neither subject nor object, but mutually implicated. Mary Graham, as we have seen, usefully strips the word 'culture' of metaphor and reminds us that it is all about growing things. We make things grow in the country so that we can live off them, and Aboriginal English vernacular also speaks of 'growing up' children, an active verb expressing the responsibility of educators. Children, plants, animals and things must all be made to 'grow up' in country.

Dreaming stories, ritual acts and experiences are the forms of expression of indigenous Australian philosophies. By 'expression' I do not mean the representation or construction of some pre-given content or essence, I mean the expressions are the dreaming. 'This is my country,' an artist will say with pride in front of her canvas, and there is a crucial sense in which she does not mean this is a representation of my country, she means that this very object – the painting – carries some of that country's vitality (power-to-grow) with it always.

Vitalism, in early biological thinking, was the idea that there was some indefinable essence in living things which made them grow, and it gave way eventually to a more mechanistic and scientific idea that an explanation of the operation of all the parts would explain the life of plants. Scientists are yet to succeed in the process of putting all those parts together to explain 'life'. In the meantime I borrow the idea of vitalism to stress the process of living as experiential and experimental. Vitalism is the surprise of the new concept that animates thought, just as the hunter is alert to, yet surprised by, the animal suddenly 'standing up' in the scrub. This then is a philosophy of process in attendance to a complex, networked world of living beings and inanimate things. It has no universal principles of judgement, nor any atomistic indivisible parts that everything can be analysed down into. It looks not to the transcendental heavens for the higher concept (for concepts, like things, are of this world) nor



to future or past ideals. Is it possible that a vitalistic philosophy (bringing together both scientific and humanistic thought) could both precede and supersede both objectivist science and the reaction to it that was literary romanticism?

The indigenous Australian creation stories – just like the ceremonial songs which are chanted as one travels the country, encountering sacred sites – keep a multiple sense of being in flux. People can be sure about their belonging in places; historical time becomes far less important. The power that created the world resides in these physical locations. When an Aboriginal man or woman travels to one of these sacred places they put their bodies in the locus of creation and of continuity, and thus the power that resides there not only recognises them but also inspires them to act.

## 5

### HISTORY'S POISON BLANKET

Australian history is a non-event, relatively speaking, Australian history, that is, conceived of as the spinning out of a narrative of settlement and progress beginning in 1788. A couple of hundred years out of how many millennia of human civilisation here?

Once that history is pushed back beyond and across the frontiers of the original and often lawless violence that founded the state, it crumbles and disintegrates; it cannot be the same kind of history. There is, for a start, a polyphony of untranslated languages and there are layerings of legends and myths. Some historians, most famously Henry Reynolds, are enlightened by a change of perception as they start to glimpse what an 'Aboriginal point of view' looking across those frontiers might have been like. As we have found time after time a change of perception can create a new paradigm in history writing (otherwise no labour history, no feminist history could have emerged). Others find new sources in the documentary evidence to complement this change of perception. Reactionary historians come along and try to debunk both the change of perception and the new evidence.<sup>36</sup> It all seems so ephemeral: all we are left with, really, are the bones in the dry rocky hills of the country. These are the signs of an ancient world, which we see from the shores of our modernity, whose 'sinister glamour' can rub off so easily as indigenous Australians reinvent themselves in all sorts of ways, some quite shocking, as Ross Gibson sees the Native Police:

On the frontier, the Native Police imbibed whatever they wanted: grog, black women, the astonishing extension of power poised to spring from a loaded gun, the ravenous brigandry of rogue male companionship. For a brief time they were supermen, distance-consuming, machine-strong with

personal armament, transcendent of the laws constraining most people (blacks and whites), and therefore they felt unrestrained, beyond good and evil. In short, they were singular modernists, with no allegiance to the past and no responsibility in the present.<sup>37</sup>

That such an image of Aborigines as 'singular modernists' could emerge after only three decades of the study of Aboriginal History shows the diversity and richness of the field today, but was it such a gift to Aboriginal peoples that initially their history was brought into being as a prehistory to European settlement? Or that, in the early 1980s, '20 000 years' became a mantra of truth? Nevertheless, Captain Cook histories of exploration and discovery have been displaced and, with that triumphalism deflated, history, anthropology and the law combined in a powerful way to create the conditions whereby the 1992 Mabo judgment could become a reality and *terra nullius* denied.<sup>38</sup>

From the beginning, history has been wielded against Aboriginal peoples as something they, along with other non-Western peoples, lacked. And much more recently too as something they and their sympathetic historians failed to get right.<sup>39</sup> The Hegelian assertion excluding non-Europeans from history needs to be qualified. There was no traditional indigenous history in the sense of a set of texts setting out a linear chronology of events. But as we have seen there certainly was, and is, a radically different sense of time in its graphic, oral and ceremonial forms, which are ways of connecting past events to ones taking place in the here and now. This historical attitude is not just produced as a set of texts, oral or written, it is produced, rather, more ritually or ceremonially.

So Aboriginal peoples and the colonisers had radically different philosophical orientations. Let us hazard that, while Aboriginal peoples were anchored by place, the Europeans were busy marking time. There were technological and philosophical aspects to the Europeans' activity. The technological includes the need for the invention of chronometers to make the fixing of longitude possible in navigation; it also includes timetabling of the working day, calendars and so on. The philosophical includes the positioning of imperial activity at the endpoint of a linear forward-thrusting history. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben would call these technological and philosophical positions an 'experience of time':

Every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration of this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also – and above all – to 'change time'.<sup>40</sup>

Revolution – genuine or not, good or bad – certainly has the effect of marking an event that periodises. Henceforth, things will not be the same as they were and, with typical idealism, the future will be brighter. But this 'revolutionary' effect is an unfortunate feature of modernity to the extent that any powerful figure can attempt to erase (or idealise) the past as they create their own arrival as a turning point. The modern future is one that is pure and full of light and its past, by contrast, is replete with superstition, outdatedness or error. The genocides and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century provided some motivation for this forgetful aspect of modern temporality. As it moved to the postwar disillusion in the narratives of progress and a mistrust of history itself, temporalities became juxtaposed in a debate that took us back to the turn of the eighteenth century and the crisis of human consciousness, which was the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns.<sup>41</sup>

The early 1980s in Australia saw such a revolutionary change in time. For some people this experience was ephemeral, for others it was deeply felt, but in any case the germ of a new Australian culture was born. It began in 1968 with the discovery of an ancient human cremation at Lake Mungo; by 1982, with the publication of *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Henry Reynolds had pioneered a new history. 'Twenty thousand years' became an activist slogan that had the effect of stretching national time back into the distant past, crossing an intellectual frontier (just as the real 'bush' one was disappearing), indigenising history and creating new beginnings for the national story. This process of changing Australia's time by awakening a past has not gone all the way to completion; further steps could be taken, steps that broaden and consolidate the process and, in some ways, make it less the business of historians and more the business of philosophers, for it is not just a question of extending a timeline or uncovering a new archive. This new time is tied in with questions of justice (sovereignty), meaning, ceremony and nationhood.

Chakrabarty speaks philosophically, yet as a historian, when he listens to complex voices in subaltern pasts, murmuring in the

background, as Marxist historians take a peasant revolt of the Santal people in nineteenth century Bengal to be an instance of a modern revolutionary consciousness at work. Flip to the archival documents and here are the peasants' words, clearly insisting that they were acting under the inspiration of their god Thakur. Their actions and their history have a supernatural dimension, which we moderns can nevertheless understand because 'we have a pre-theoretical, everyday understanding [of this dimension] because the supernatural, or the divine, as principles, have not disappeared from the life of the modern'.<sup>42</sup> In other words, as Bruno Latour says, 'we moderns' (who 'have never been modern') have a continuity with the premoderns; it is just that our historicism keeps us busy drawing and redrawing the boundaries between nature and culture. As Jane Bennett, drawing on Latour, says,

Modernity, an inconsistent and paradoxical combination of claims about nature and culture, passes itself off as the clean, enlightened alternative to a messy, primitivistic cosmology that confuses the natural with the cultural, mixes the animal with the human, mistakes the animate for the inanimate, and contaminates the moral with the prudential.<sup>43</sup>

Latour reminds us that modernity too is a kind of cosmology, as cited earlier in this book as the 'modernist settlement'. Latour and Bennett use the morphing of hybrid beings as evidence for the messy complexity of both the modern and ancient worlds. I prefer to stress the spatiotemporal complexity of processes, such as rituals that condense and intensify moments of (total) primitivity or disperse into that pluralisation that marks modern social inventions such as democracy.

Chakrabarty argues for the complexity of time to be written into historians' accounts and for the peculiar contemporaneity of Others to become part of understandings giving rise to 'forms of democracy that we cannot yet either completely understand or envisage'.<sup>44</sup> One kind of polity is not the destiny for all moderns; our times are complex because we find the slow cycles of sacred time juxtaposed with the rapidity of commodity time coexisting. Indian democracy is accented by such differing temporalities, which is understood in the lived experience of the people as well as by the cultural analyst. But white Australia still tends to hold indigenous time at arm's length as it imagines for itself a uniform and dominant modernity.

The production of cross-cultural historical knowledge is not just an epistemological problem concerning the foundations for knowledge (principles we can settle on in order to work from them), but it is also an evolving temporal one occurring in rituals such writing an historical essay. It is therefore crucial continually to contrast accounts of ways in which other peoples come to know things with ways in which Europeans' institutions organise knowledge rituals; this is one of the strategies of this book. For instance, about 50 years ago linguist TGH Strehlow reported an account of a promising pupil of Arrernte knowledge:

The old men took me apart from the other young men of my own age at an early date. They showed me many gurra ceremonies which they withheld from the other members of my bandicoot clan because they were still too young. I remember their teachings well. I often had my veins opened to supply blood for the ceremonies. I dutifully paid large meat-offerings for the instruction that I had received. Some of the ceremonies were too secret to be shown even to ordinary men of the bandicoot clan ... My elders kept repeating these ceremonies time and again in my presence: they were afraid that I might forget them.<sup>45</sup>

Now, while university students don't come to seminars with large meat-offerings or open their veins (rather, the state bleeds them with tuition fees), it is more significant that the exhortation here is to remember the sacred text exactly through mimeticism and the practice of constant and creative repetition. In university seminars students are urged to put the text in their own words, to contribute, eventually, to the endless proliferation of commentary, which is the European way of sacralising texts, to renovate the classic text by making it 'mean something' in the contemporary context, coordinating the responses of other commentators, finding a new relevance for a theory by attaching it to a new object, in other words: *displacement*. So what is interesting for me in both cases is not core knowledge as such, but ways of practising knowledge repetitively, keeping it alive. If I were to risk a generalisation I would say Aboriginal philosophy is all about keeping things alive in their place.

We could therefore ask a question of ways of knowing something like 'Australian history'. Which is more important: the existence of major historical texts on library shelves or the way in which they get

activated as social memory through rituals such as annual final year school examinations as rites of passage?<sup>46</sup> Or, indeed, does the Gallipoli episode get reinforced as an Australian foundation myth more through the annual ritual of the ANZAC Day dawn services and the march or through the books, films and school excursions?

## 6

### PERFORMING LIFE

Lloyd Robson's *History of Tasmania*, despite its two volumes, omits any reference to the Hobart Carnival of 1910.<sup>47</sup> It is, however, of significance in the research into the life and writings of David Unaipon, a South Australian I have been researching for a few years with my colleagues Adam Shoemaker and Harold Kropinyeri. There are two reasons for our interest. One is that Unaipon's visit to the Carnival is another brief and scantily documented episode in his peripatetic life. The other will cause us to reflect on processes of historical representation. It seems that Unaipon was not supposed to appear there as himself, so to speak. He, along with the 11 other Ngarindjerri, who travelled across Bass Strait in the late summer of 1910 on the S.S. *Manuka*, were invited to perform semi-theatrically in the carnival as representatives of their race and thus to be an indigenous presence in a state that had failed to have the foresight to retain a few representatives of its own 'full-blood' population for exhibition purposes.

Who was Unaipon? When he 'dressed up' for performance purposes, in a white surplice to preach or, for everyday purposes, in a three-piece suit, what did the Others think? How complex were his motives? Here is another possibility: 'In times past the shamans warded off danger by means of images imitating that danger,' says Michael Taussig.<sup>48</sup>

At a high point of the carnival, there was a historic pageant, documented on film<sup>49</sup> and which represented the history of Tasmania beginning with the seventeenth century exploration of Abel Tasman. Professional actors and many local amateurs dressed up to represent, first, the history of the Dutch at Batavia, including an elaborate display of Javanese ballet, then the various episodes of Tasmanian history, represented in discrete scenes, which included 'large models of the Dutch ships *Heemskerk* and *Zeehaen* pass[ing] along the stage by means of an