

Roundtable Discussion with Katrina Schlunke, Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke

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This is an edited version of a conversation that took place in Sydney in August 2014, between the editors of this volume and former and current editors of UTS Review and Cultural Studies Review.

Tim: Katrina, Chris and Stephen, I was hoping we could begin with you talking about how you each came to engage with questions of indigeneity in your work?

Stephen: I went to Western Australia for my first job in 1974. In Melbourne I'd scarcely met an Aboriginal person except for Bruce McGuinness at a Monash University party. He opened my eyes to a few things. In Perth I joined the University of Western Australia Anthropology Department and there were Aboriginal students there whom I met and befriended, a lot of that being through the Ronald and Catherine Berndt Department where there was a very heavy focus on Indigenous Australia. My boss—I was employed to teach linguistics—was working on Aboriginal English issues and that took me up the Kimberley to be research officer on a project about Aboriginal English and primary school teachings. Then I came back to do my doctoral work up there. So that's the short version.

Katrina: I grew up in a town where [the] Indigenous presence was recognised and the massacre—which I came to write

about in my PhD—was common local knowledge. Growing up in that part of New England there were, of course, various Indigenous friends at school. But then, when I went to Melbourne University, my first exposure to thinking about Indigenous issues came from Lisa Belleair and the Indigenous liaison room or office. You could go as an undergraduate to these Friday afternoon drinks or talks, and that was fantastic. It was really a bit more like a groovy group you wanted to have a lot to do with, and I went to theatre and got involved in little bits of artwork. That was my introduction to one Indigenous world. And then formally, in terms of education, it was Greg Denning's course on Alternative Ethnographies that first began to talk about how there was more than one story about a particular incident. But when I came to do my PhD, in a sense, I didn't start out looking at indigeneity. I started out looking at whiteness as it was produced in the face of Indigenous realities.

Chris: For me it begins as a secondary school student in the late 1970s. As an ambitious kid I entered a public speaking competition in Year 10 and ended up in the regional final making the case for land rights in Benalla! Later at Melbourne Uni that translated into a set of connections through my involvement with anti-nuclear activism and an introduction to Fitzroy Indigenous politics as a volunteer at the Aboriginal Legal Service (I was a law student for a few years). But an engagement with Indigenous politics was a very ordinary experience for someone in the Left in Melbourne in the late 1970s in secondary school and the 1980s in university. When I went to do an MA in the United Kingdom I was influenced by work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, like the *Empire Strikes Back*, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, *Race and Class* and the Black Audio Film Collective. That work made me think about indigeneity in Australia differently and was partly why I came back to Australia to do a PhD. But before I did that I worked at UTS putting together the syllabus for a new public history program with Ann Curthoys and Paula Hamilton. Ann was very insistent that there be a strong Indigenous presence in the course, and so I put together an advisory committee that put me in touch with people at

Tranby Community College [now Tranby Aboriginal College] and ultimately with the beginnings of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-op. So those connections with new energies in Indigenous cultural production supplemented my earlier experiences with political indigeneity, which together with the influence of critical thinking around 'race' in the UK is why I ended up seriously considering the role of indigeneity in relation to Australian historical consciousness in my PhD.

Crystal: As non-Indigenous academics engaging with Indigenous subject matter, do you feel that those projects come with a certain set of responsibilities?

Stephen: I've always been conscious of needing to have a narrative about how you have the right to participate. In the days of good old 'theory,' you might think your authority comes directly down the tube from Michel Foucault. You might be deluded into thinking that. But then in the engagement with the Indigenous projects then, yes, you do have to say how you got there, and got involved and what that means. Responsibility has to be earned rather than just carried and that then influences how you write about it, I think. In the process, authority gives way to a more participatory kind of writing.

Chris: That's at the heart of *Reading the Country*. I think the central question of the book is 'what is this responsibility?' and maybe how is one to act and/or not act with responsibility. In *Forgetting Aborigines* I wrote about a major 1961 anthropology conference. I'd always know that anthropology took upon itself a particular responsibility to speak on behalf of, and for, 'Aborigines' in the absence of public Indigenous voices in Australia, but in reading accounts of that conference it just was incredible to me how that it seemed perfectly reasonable for those anthropologists to be assuming that responsibility in 1961. It was incredible because, twenty years later, that was deeply impossible for me. Instead, I was a law student being ordered around by Indigenous lawyers and managers in a grotty terrace house in Fitzroy. What right did I have to speak about anything 'Indigenous' from that position? A completely different enculturation in relation to questions

of responsibility once there's a serious Indigenous presence at the table, and my own personal history is that Indigenous people have always been at the table as a vital creative and challenging presence; certainly not objects to speak about.

Katrina: There's something about refusing to be a particular sort of responsible person, too. When I was doing work around Bluff Rock, talking to people whose great grandparents had participated in that massacre, one of the people had an original diary that I was wanting to transcribe. The purposes for which I was going to use that diary were not what this older woman would have wanted. So, you're there with an ethics form asking them to sign off on you behaving responsibly, but what's at stake is to not actually reproduce forms of behavior that have always actually benefited non-Indigenous people in terms of seeing the same histories again, because no new information enters the story because the records themselves are kept, say, only for family histories. I'm always curious about that sense of responsibility which I see from so many different Indigenous people, this idea of being responsible for people who they've got a connection to. On the other hand, trying to practice that as a non-Indigenous person and say, 'Well, we're both non-Indigenous so can I try and discipline you?' Can we insist on some connection or, are we just disconnected nuclei that can't actually stop behavior that needs to be stopped? Who is going to shut Keith Windschuttle up? Shouldn't it be my responsibility?

Chris: Thinking about what Katrina is saying, that sense of responsibility that I came across biographically was, by the 1990s, very quickly organised into institutional protocols that I associate strongly with the moment of 'reconciliation'. Too often the value of working with Indigenous people in universities or collaborating with Indigenous scholars got displaced onto a white-centered projects, which is what some versions of reconciliation became for me anyway.

Eve: I'd be interested to know how ethics committees have affected your work, Stephen, now that the responsibilities you carry are codified in such processes?

Stephen: I come from a pre-ethical era [laughs]. In the pre-ethical era you just headed out there and did it, no checks. With the codification, it's just a pain in the neck to be doing all that paperwork that you're pretty sure nobody's actually reading.

Crystal: Does it affect your relationships in the field?

Stephen: I do have different practices now. Whenever I'm tape recording I ask, 'I'm recording you but I'm not going to make any of this public unless I check with you first. Is that all right?' And they say, 'Yes,' and that's part of the signature. But actually getting people to sign a bit of paper in Broome would be awkward. With my early work I put in place what I thought were ethical things to do, which ethics committees still don't have any guidelines on. For example, when should an Aboriginal person be co-author as opposed to—well, we've given up 'informant'—a participant? Bizarre.

Chris: Were you nevertheless given training in ethics?

Stephen: Yes, famously. Professor Berndt says to me, puffing on his pipe, 'When you're out in the field,' and this is just after he told me where to get the chewing tobacco to give to people, 'don't have anything to do with Aboriginal women, don't have anything to do with Aboriginal politics.' It's like, you know, Freud and Marx [laughs].

Eve: We're going to move on. What role do you think the journal has had in fostering the project of Indigenous cultural studies in Australia? Perhaps you could start by talking about how the journal came into being.

Stephen: *UTS Review* comes out of a conversation I had with Meaghan Morris when she was at UTS. The reason it got that name was because she had the bright idea that the name would oblige the university to give some funding. I think I was probably pushing Indigenous content, soliciting articles, keeping an eye out for stuff in that domain. The other thing that jumps out at me as being notable was the collaboration

with Dipesh Chakrabarty around subaltern, Indigenous and multicultural histories.

Eve: Can you tell us a bit about that event?

Stephen: It must have been a bit of a gold-star event. I think it was pretty much Heather Goodall and Dipesh and myself having a conversation, and then Dipesh had two seminars which then went across two issues of the journal. From Dipesh's point of view, he was curious to see how the subaltern historiographical project would become inflected if it were relativised, so to speak, with these other historiographical modes. Also, Andrew Jakubowicz's presence at UTS was significant in keeping the multicultural aspect quite visible. Who else was involved? Lots of people.

Chris: It's interesting that Eve was referring to 'Indigenous cultural studies'. That event wasn't organised around that category. It was organised around historiography and history. Katrina and I were recently talking about how very little of the material you have collected together was produced with an imaginary called 'Indigenous cultural studies' in mind. There were other kinds of projects, other kinds of imaginaries being put to work.

Stephen: I would have first used that phrase myself—Indigenous cultural studies—in *Textual Spaces* in 1992.

Katrina: The key *Cultural Studies Review* volume that I had anything to do with was the one edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, which came out of a concern about what cultural studies was doing around the space for pan-indigeneity and Indigenous perspectives globally. Cultural studies has different moments. I think there was a feeling amongst people in Critical Race Studies that cultural studies wasn't doing enough about addressing ideas of whiteness as, perhaps, a better frame to use than colonialism.

Eve: We want to ask you to talk about the kind of relationship between broader public conversations going on about

indigeneity, colonialism, and the past and then what happens within the discipline and the journal. How did they map onto each other?

Stephen: I remember Keith Windschuttle came to one of those seminars with Dipesh when he was about to publish *The Fabrication of Australian History*. He was checking us out to see what 'rubbish' was going on there. But then the journal didn't take on the Windschuttle conversation, as such, and my personal attitude was to ignore it, write to newspapers, stuff like that. Nonetheless, Australianness and nationhood was always strongly on the journal's agenda.

Katrina: I can't think of a particular moment where the journal particularly rushed to contribute. For me, I think the high and low moments really did go through those Critical Race and Whiteness conferences. They had such force in creating awareness of the full range of Indigenous intellectuals in Australia, realising that to bring them together you're going to have to always be transdisciplinary. You had so many Indigenous people who wanted to really, say, contribute to the health area and apply critical thinking. They wouldn't come to a cultural studies conference because, I think, it still had a kind of stigma of being too theoretical, maybe not real enough to make a difference in an Indigenous community.

Eve: There aren't just those negative moments. I'm thinking of certain kinds of high points of public feeling in Australia around the push for an apology, the Bridge Walk, et cetera.

Chris: My sense is that the temporality of those kinds of movements and the temporality of the journal are different. I think of the way in which, since the beginning of *Cultural Studies Review*, debates around indigeneity in Australia have been central to public culture. It's always there, from the Bicentennial through to *Bringing Them Home*, the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, *Mabo* and on and on. The emergence of these formal, national political moments gets fed back into the journal in different circuits. But, it is also

important to say, first, that the journal doesn't exist on its own. What *Meanjin* is doing in the 1980s feeds into *UTS Review*, because, I think, it didn't want to just mirror what Jenny Lee had done at *Meanjin*. Second, these preoccupations come back in a variety of idiosyncratic ways. Dipesh's contribution comes out of an odd configuration: Ranajit Guha was in Canberra, and Dipesh does his PhD there, and then gets a job in Melbourne, initially in Indian Studies and then he gets to know people in the English Department who are reading cultural studies. They're very fortuitous circulations. The result being that people are trying to think about 'provincializing Europe' in relation to Australia years before the book is published.

Tim: I wondering if you could speak about how *UTS Review* and *Cultural Studies Review* have been sites or refuges for work that would otherwise maybe not have a home?

Katrina: I think one of the obvious areas would be that we have a new writing section. And that was always based on the idea that people might want to—I think these are Stephen's words—get to a point where they wanted to rearrange their thinking about something that could only be expressed by writing it differently.

Chris: I think it's important to say that the journal was established with institutional politics in mind. It was established as a way of claiming, 'This kind of work is important and valuable work across the humanities and we want to authenticate it.' Stephen and Meaghan set up a very distinguished international board, they put in place highly professional refereeing and reviewing processes for work that often didn't have a home anywhere else. They were saying, 'We're going to do this in a way that's going to get recognised.' So, it's part of a much broader way in which cultural studies established itself as central to the humanities in Australia from the late 80s on.

Stephen: I remember getting very excited by thinking I had discovered Sia Figiel, a Samoan writer who then hadn't published a book but was about to. She had a voice that had a strong tonality of the Samoan oral tradition, a storytelling writerly

voice, and that would have been hard to place elsewhere, I think. Meaghan also had an eye on the Pacific with people like Teresia Teaiwa from Fiji, who was more of a fictocritical voice, a creative theoretical language that was kind of unique.

Katrina: I think the journal has always shared an antipathy to, in Meaghan's words, a global theory as the norm, where an essay only has value in terms of its contribution back to the institutionalised grand theory. Instead an essay about a small museum, for example, might speak back to some of those global theories using either localised or a global understanding of a very different order. I think that's always been a key part of *Cultural Studies Review*, allowing both an intensification of the specific combined with a different perspective on something usually called 'the global'.

Chris: It's interesting, if you go back and look at stuff that was being done in Australia before the journal, the focus is overwhelmingly on questions of representation and often on ideology as false consciousness. That's not the starting point for *UTS Review* and then *Cultural Studies Review*. In a sense, Stephen and Meaghan are radically uninterested in representation except in relation to the constitutive processes of languages, images and histories in place that produce the terrain of what that can and can't produce. It's not about saying, 'These images of blackfellas on television are racist', but more about describing the cultural dynamics that make those kinds of practices possible or objectionable. Maybe it's one way of getting at what today we would call questions of affect.

Stephen: I think it was only after talking with Katrina that I started using the term affect. [laughs]

Chris: But you see it earlier in your work, otherwise why have you got Krim [Benterrak] doing his wacky pictures in *Reading the Country*? They're not representational, they're not saying, 'We're making good representations of blackfellas.' That's about being in place. It's about bodily forms of articulation and experience.

Katrina: But then you might get to that place because you just want to have an experiment. You arrive at what is an affective interpretation but the origin may have been, ‘Let’s try this.’

Chris: That’s right. I think that comes out of the engagement that Stephen and Meaghan have with French theory in the 70s and 80s.

Crystal: We were interested in terms of the meeting of Indigenous studies and cultural studies, where do you think it sits at the present?

Katrina: I’ve got a clear picture of three events in the next six months. One is an issue of the journal that Chris and I are working on, which will say something towards the Intervention, mostly through accounts of Indigenous artists in Central Australia. And then I’m thinking of the festschrift of *Reading the Country* down in Melbourne, something that was key in, say, my intellectual life and now kind of...

Crystal: Come full circle.

Katrina: Yeah. And then I’m thinking about Fiona Nicoll and Fiona Foley’s ‘Courting Blakness’ event up at UQ [University of Queensland], which is bringing lots of affective, critical interventions into both whiteness and, literally, the institutionalisation of Indigenous presence in universities through art and papers based around a physical material space. I think of all of those three as indications of where cultural studies and Indigenous studies are crossing over. What I’m saying is that it is a very lively space, but I would feel unable to predict the kind of forms or shapes it might take.

Chris: I don’t think there is something that I could recognise or point to that is called Indigenous cultural studies. I think of it more as about—how is it that work in cultural studies in Australia does and doesn’t connect with questions of indigeneity and with the work of Indigenous scholars? There are some really interesting things happening in that space. Stephen was talking before about Jon Altman picking up on work that

cultural studies wasn't doing. In that policy space that Jon connects with and that, say, Marcia Langton's had a big role in, and that people who are really significantly influenced by cultural studies, like Emma Kowal and Tess Lea, are coming at from a different perspective — what's interesting about that is that they're people who are influenced by cultural studies but are deploying other kinds of expertise. I think that will continue to happen. I think that engagement with Indigenous cultural production is a continuing challenge, whether it's the artwork that Jennifer Biddle's writing about or the work that Therese Davis and I are doing with Romaine Moreton around Indigenous television and filmmaking and the whole mainstreaming of some kinds of Indigenous cultural production. You could say that work is about question of cultural production and cultural criticism and the relationship between the two and the institutions that rely on and reproduce indigeneity. I think it's also worth mentioning that there's a whole other set of questions in relation to Indigenous scholars who are working in areas or questions that might not seem to be specifically 'Indigenous'. For example, Dr Misty Jenkins, a Gunditjmara woman who works on T cells at the Peter McCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne. What might Indigenous cultural studies make of the new moment when Indigenous scholars who are doing things that have a different kind of relationship to indigeneity? AFL football has been in that world for 40 years, since Polly Farmer. He wasn't playing Indigenous football.

Stephen: No.

Katrina: Or was he?

Chris: And he was. I should say he's not only playing Indigenous football. I would hope *Cultural Studies Review* would be part of that.

Crystal: You're talking about the engagement with Indigenous studies or knowledges or cultural production and then you also talked about Indigenous scholars...

Chris: Yes, and that they're two different things. It's got a kind of personal aspect for me: my first involvement with Indigenous students at Melbourne was in tutoring someone in British History in first year. That was Tony Birch. He was writing stuff on the dockworkers' strikes of the 1890s. He wasn't producing Indigenous history, or was he, in writing about the dockworkers? Stephen would say he was both producing Indigenous history and doing something else, which was is right.

Crystal: So, 'Indigenous art' is art produced by an Indigenous person?

Chris: Or maybe not only or not always that. Tracey Moffatt was a very influential member of Boomalli in the late 1980s, but then a decade or more later and Tracey's in New York saying that she's got a very different relationship to the category, 'Indigenous artist'.

Katrina: Everyone here will have a different take on this, but I think non-Indigenous scholars could look more imaginatively across the range of scholarship being produced by Indigenous academics. I don't know whether we do as much now as we might once have because those fields are getting more specialised and what is cultural studies has been more clearly defined. There's a lot of great work coming from Indigenous scholars from the health area and the education area, but I don't see that coming back through cultural studies.

Chris: That really raises the question, what claims of expertise does cultural studies make in relation to indigeneity?

Crystal: Or are there any?

Chris: A much better way of putting the question.

Stephen: I'm not sure that cultural studies has the impetus it once had as an interdisciplinary field that both loosens things up and shook out their concepts and made them work quite hard. And then when you ask about its expertise, it's

not quite sure what that could be. I get that impression where Indigenous people's activities are probably increasingly professionalised. So you figure you can professionalise towards being an historian, I guess, more than you can towards being a cultural studies person.

Eve: There is a professionalisation of the cultural studies undergraduate degrees and masters by coursework, et cetera, but they lend to quite a different set of skills than everything we've been talking about?

Katrina: There's certainly that push at particular institutions: come do a cultural studies degree and we'll connect you up with particular professional creative industries or something like that.

Chris: In terms of cultural studies being something that both tightened up and shook up possibilities, I don't think it's doing that now. I don't think it can. It's clearly become something which is on the one hand institutionalised in a small number of places in a particular form and a whole lot of other places in a very fragmented range of ways. That's got an up side in that cultural studies can make compelling claims in relation to cultural research but a downside in that not all of those claims are incommensurate. The different iterations are actually not talking to each other. One of the things that happened when things were being shaken up was that people were interested in kinds of institutionalisation, but they were more contingent ones, not as grand as the visions now.

Crystal: Now everyone is a bit separate?

Chris: Yeah. Cultural studies in Australia has to be thought of in relation to the higher education system. Where it was coming out of in the 70s and the early 80s were not out Sydney University or Melbourne University. It was coming out of the institutions that would eventually get unified under Dawkins in 1988. There was real space there, real space for experimentation was really possible, whether it was in the Western Australian Institute of Technology, the NSW Institute

of Technology or other places. We're now in an education system where its unification, and standardisation produces fewer and fewer possibilities for experimentation and more and more demands to justify every aspect of your existence, professionally speaking. The modes are much more defensive, much more about securing and controlling territory, whereas cultural studies was much more about opening up new spaces.

Stephen: The expanding field versus the shrinking field.

Chris: We're in a field which is paradoxically shrinking even though it's much bigger. And maybe its imagination is shrinking.

Katrina: But on the other hand, we do have a presence in the ARC, we can train students in a particular way, and have a history similar to every other discipline in that way. John Frow used to famously say that cultural studies existed best when two disciplines crossed or met. I was a bit cross with him for saying that because I left Melbourne University to seek out cultural studies. It didn't have a presence in '88, '89, so I went to UWS, where yes it became 'disciplined' but was also seen so could be studied.

Eve: We opened our discussion asking about your personal journey. Could you each speak about your own projects now, in terms of this meeting of Indigenous studies and cultural studies?

Stephen: Well, cultural studies has really taught me a lot about how to describe things and I'm kind of just getting simpler and I just want to be able to describe things. I'm not particularly fussed whether it's called cultural studies anymore or not. Happy to call it ethnography. Ethnography is one of the methods of cultural studies, possibly the method of cultural studies that really worked for that discipline. My work in Broome, it's ethnographic work and has an ontologically pluralist aspect. It's about imagination. When you're looking at describing 'what I am seeing,' you want to see more than you did at first glance. What is that 'seeing more'? How do you write it? That's my current problem.

Chris: I'm doing two things that are connected to this discussion. I've got a project which is looking at imagining that, rather than Indigenous people being absent in the history of Australian film and television, as though they somehow become part of that history with *Jedda* or *Night Cries* or *Redfern Now*, that instead the whole history of Australian film and television could be written after indigeneity. In other words, Indigenous people were there from the beginning, literally, in the first movie footage being shot in the Torres Strait, meaning we can read back through the history of Australian film and television as if indigeneity is at its centre. The other area I've been trying to think through is around culture and sustainability. What would it mean to talk about cultural sustainability in this country? What are things that are actually happening that are bringing that into existence or making it impossible?

Katrina: I've got an unfinished Captain Cook project that's most of all been about searching for a way to write it. How to write each of the moments in which Cook is made to appear in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds of Australian settlement, or indeed made to disappear? That's been my problem. My other interest, back to dead white men, is the figure of Ludwig Leichhardt. He used two Indigenous guides in his first expedition and there's this very lovely feisty account of Charlie Fischer hitting Leichhardt, and his white party managing that in a particular way. I haven't read other accounts of that kind of interaction, so that's what I'm going through the State Library trying to find at the moment. I will always call what I do cultural studies because it kind of saved my intellectual life.