

# Introduction

## Philip Morrissey

In October 2014 a three-day festival was held at the University of Melbourne to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*. The Bentrak, Muecke and Roe text, published in 1984, remains a high point in Australian publishing and intellectual life: the festival aimed to revisit and recapture the intellectual radicalism and political energy of that time. For three days we established a Temporary Autonomous Zone, turning time into space—a space to think—replacing deceit, pomposity and policies with respect for traditional owners, elders and the learned, with intergenerational concern, autonomy, community and joy.

Festival participants came from diverse fields such as philosophy, anthropology, publishing, English, theatre and cultural studies, and included both established and emerging scholars. We offered hospitality to undergraduate students and members of the general community, whose participation was facilitated by not charging any conference fees. The event featured a range of forms—academic papers, discussion forums, film, performance, poetry, music—and actively encouraged the engagement of all participants, not just the formal presenters. Together we discussed the multi-faceted experimental aspects of *Reading the Country*, and reread it in light of changes in Australian society and universities, and contemporary developments in critical theory and reading methods.

Elements of play, music, theatre and food were self-consciously used to disrupt conventional conference procedures and create the spirit of the sensorium. This was both a reflection of the intellectual and aesthetic openness of the original project and an implicit critique of the careerism, lack

of imagination and petty competitiveness often associated with western academic conferences. We aimed to mobilise the energy of popular cultural forms for an intellectual and political project. Presenters came on stage to personally selected walking-in music, in the manner of contemporary prize fighters entering the ring; a DJ provided music for the duration of the event.

The Melbourne premiere of Stephen Muecke's performance piece, *Turning into Gardiya* (his dramatisation of his relationship with Paddy Roe), was delivered outside in the public space of the University South Lawn (a former site of radical student protest). In an unexpected piece of authoritarian corporate agit-prop, a suspicious security guard lurked on the edges of the performance, muttering into his two-way radio. In a further development of the rich University of Melbourne reading group culture, the festival featured a Philosophers' Maul, where philosophers tossed around ideas and ran with them. In the twenty-first century the rugby union maul is just as appropriate a trope for the robust pursuit of truth as the game of polo was for fifteenth-century Persian-language poets. In an acknowledgement of 1984 as a high moment of second-wave feminism in Australia, a panel set up a dialogue between different generations of feminists, who offered personal reminiscences and intellectual critiques of a political, activist culture across thirty years.

The festival project also featured the republication of the text of *Reading the Country*, which was unavailable in 2014. With the agreement of Fremantle Arts Centre Press and very limited resources, we were able to scan and re-edit a text (with black and white illustrations only) which was published by re.press and made available to delegates and students. Copies were provided to Krim Benterak and Stephen Muecke, and through Stephen to the Goolaraballoo. Copies of this edition remain available as a study edition for University of Melbourne students of Australian Indigenous Studies.

While the festival focused on the cultural moment and continuing importance of *Reading the Country*, and paid full tribute to the late Paddy Roe and to Krim Benterak, it was structured specifically as a celebration of Stephen Muecke's career, and his presence and active contribution were vital

to its intellectual and social success. Muecke's key role in the development of the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Aboriginal Studies and Ficto-criticism in Australia across the decades from the 1980s was identified, analysed and celebrated.

In respect to *Reading the Country*, one of Muecke's main achievements was to demonstrate definitively that Roe's concepts were not anthropological and time bound, but could be used in contexts remote from their origin; this insight is foundational to his version of Aboriginal Cultural Studies. *Reading the Country* was the first major intellectual statement of 'country', explicated by Roe and re-presented by multiple authors in different media. More unexpectedly, our festival also revealed the innovative power of the concept of 'reading' in *Reading the Country*, one of the first books to use 'reading' in its strong sense of learning. Reading is the word for what Roe taught Muecke, not just what he learned but the process of teaching. This idea is also applied in Benterrak's paintings and in the way Muecke used the resources of his academic training and his background in continental theory to understand and communicate something always existing but also fundamentally new. Muecke was also uncompromising in his insistence on the use of Kriol in *Reading the Country*, so that meaning is not translated or commodified, but available only through a full reading of the language itself.

The festival was conceptualised to look back to the formative moment of the 1960s as a useful device for understanding and critiquing where we are now. May 1968 symbolically opened up the political possibilities of a conjunction of theory and praxis in the study of the humanities, via their first encounters with continental philosophy and critical theory. By the early 1980s there was a strong sense of possibility for tertiary institutions in Australia and for the centrality of humanities within them; *Reading the Country* is an emblematic text for this period. Our festival and this publication situate *Reading the Country* in the 1960s (arguably its period of inception) and the 1980s (its moment of production) through a reevaluation of its influence and significance in the contemporary age of neoliberalism and corporatism.

This account of the generative and heterogeneous moment of the 30 Years On festival provides a context for reading

the essays collected in this volume. Here we have aimed to preserve the occasional spirit of the papers, their origin in a specific moment of collaboration and celebration, rather than to present a unified or comprehensive academic engagement with the Benterrak, Muecke and Roe text. What follows is a selection of the more formal presentations from the festival, organised to draw attention to some of its recurring themes and not attempting to do justice to all aspects of this groundbreaking text. Varieties of form, tone — and even quality — are entirely deliberate and, we believe, in the generous spirit of our originating text.

The first section, 'Revisiting the Text and its Production', places *Reading the Country* in the context of the historical and intellectual currents of its time of publication. Stephen Muecke revisits the intellectual radicalism of his text. Originally he and his coauthors had to introduce the concept of 'country' as disclosed in all its complexity by Paddy Roe; as a part of this Muecke himself had to engage in a critique of the core disciplines which formed the Western understanding of country (such as anthropology and history). Thirty years later, Muecke returns to the idea of 'country' and argues that rethinking country and acknowledging its multiplicity are central elements in providing for the coming generations — 'the children's children'. John Frow, one of Australia's most influential humanities scholars, writes in response to Muecke's paper and with deep appreciation of the achievement that is *Reading the Country* and its continued power to engage and challenge.

Ray Coffey's tenure as publisher at Fremantle Arts Centre Press is in many ways representative of the robust intellectual climate of the time, where things could change, and ideas and intellectuals had a role in making this happen. Coffey writes of his experiences in encountering and brokering a text unlike any he had seen before. Writing from the perspective of postcolonial Australian nationalism and cultural politics, Mark Davis discusses *Reading the Country* in the context of the ongoing assertion of sovereignty by Aboriginal nations. The justice of this claim has become ever more pressing, thus affirming the prescience and significance of *Reading the Country*.

The second section, 'Reading the Country and Education', displays the infinite possibilities that an engagement with *Reading the Country* can offer to issues in contemporary education. In the first essay Meaghan Morris, a pioneering figure in Australian cultural studies and continental theory, offers a personal perspective on the intellectual ferment that coalesced in Paris in May 1968 and which had a formative effect on the generation of intellectuals who transformed the humanities in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. Philip Morrissey's essay is an account of how *Reading the Country* and the Muecke/Roe relationship became the basis of a practical ethics underlining the development of the University of Melbourne's first Australian Indigenous Studies major, some twenty-five years after the publication of *Reading the Country*.

In a witty deployment of the then-and-now trope, Katrina Schlunke contrasts her heedless undergraduate self in 1984 to the academic writing now with full understanding of the educational efficacy of *Reading the Country*, especially in a context where the subjectivity of academic researchers is interpellated through the demands of corporate jargon and metrics. Terrence Twomey writes frankly about the challenges of reconciling his passion for research and teaching with an educational environment marked by the exploitation of a casualised workforce and job insecurity. Philosopher A.J. Bartlett delineates the ethics of educational practice in the Classical Greek academy as the basis for a principled critique of the reductive commodification and sale of knowledge in the contemporary corporate University.

To end this section, Lauren Bliss extends the resonance of May 1968 with a whimsical Melbourne-based reflection on Chris Marker's *A Grin without a Cat* (1977). This elegiac film-essay on the failure of leftist political movements provides us with an opportunity to revisit the political dimensions of *Reading the Country* and consider what forms of community are appropriate for a transformative politics today.

The third section, 'Reading the Country as a Model for Reading', presents a range of different reading practices which all owe something to the example of *Reading the Country*. Chris Healy notes the gentleness with which *Reading the Country* clears away the conceptual accretions of history and

anthropology and raises the possibilities for a rapprochement between the ethics of *Reading the Country* and the Australian passion for travelling and travelogues. Ken Gelder discusses the mutual openness with which Benterrak, Muecke and Roe engage with each other's culture, in contrast to contemporary attempts to rewrite alterity through, among other things, an archaic cultural insiderism.

Philosopher Jon Roffe draws our attention to a potential intellectual weakness in that exciting period of radical intellectualism in the 1980s — its reliance on the talismanic use of key (but often under-analysed and loosely applied) concepts from continental theorists (such as Deleuze). This reminds us of the continuing challenge that theory and practice provide to each other, and of Muecke's groundbreaking work in setting up that dialogue. Timothy Laurie and Peter Nyhuis Torres apply the method pioneered by Benterrak, Muecke and Roe in a theorisation of reading as a process and a means of disclosing truth. They identify Settler society's resistance to reading those aspects of contemporary Aboriginal society which are most confronting and yet most require reflection. Finally, theatre scholar Denise Varney proposes a parallel between *Reading the Country* and Jack Davis' *No Sugar* (1985): both texts disclosed previously unimagined possibilities within Aboriginal experience and revealed its translatability beyond its own sphere. She identifies this continuing legacy in some examples of contemporary theatre and dance.

The final section, 'Rewriting Country', offers some contemporary versions of country. First we return to Paddy Roe's idea of country in a different expressive form and model of collaboration with Nyikina Traditional Custodian Anne Poelina and filmmaker Magali McDuffie. Their paper describes the concepts informing the film *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree* about the Mardoowarra, Fitzroy River Country and its custodians; the film itself was shown at the festival. Kate Leah Rendell offers a personal exploration of the meaning of country in relation to the contemporary implications of her family's colonial heritage, juxtaposing Settler history and attachment to land with Aboriginal dispossession and sovereignty. Karen Hughes' essay takes us to Ngarrindjeri Country in South Australia in the 1950s, via the work of pioneering

Aboriginal woman photographer Charlotte Richards; the essay both discusses and reproduces some of Richards' photos of family life.

Stuart Cooke, Bonny Cassidy and Michael Farrell presented a lively poetry reading at the festival, and some of their poems are reproduced here, affirming *Reading the Country's* faith in language and the possibility of communication. We are also pleased to be able to print an extract from Cooke's edition and translation of *The Bulu Line*, a West Kimberley Song Cycle from George Dyungayan, a Nyikina lawman from the Roebuck Plains.

Writer and historian Tony Birch provides the Epilogue to this collection. In a brilliant narrative Birch reimagines the Aboriginal power embodied by Paddy Roe and related by him in some of his oral narratives, in a fraught contemporary setting.