

Re-reading *Reading the Country*

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Reading the Country is the singular great achievement of Australian cultural studies — indeed, I'd go so far as to say that there is no other book in the discipline, anywhere, that can match its methodological originality and its writerly (and painterly, and narrative) force. Stephen's retrospective 'How Many Countries?', published in this celebratory volume, is characteristically modest, and I want to reply to it by arguing that it is in fact far too modest about that earlier achievement.

The complaint Stephen makes against the book, from his present Latourian perspective, is that *Reading the Country* was written, or rather composed, on the basis of a subject-object model in which a singular 'country' was the object of a plurality of representations, readings that were constrained by the prior reality of the one country of Roebuck Plains. Were he and his co-authors to write such a book again, they would give 'full ontological weight' to each reading: they would count each reading as a world, a mode of existence in its own right.

Now, that supposition of the unity of country was already undercut in the introductory chapter on the book's methodological grounds. 'With three authors', the authors (speaking in the voice that we identify as Stephen's) write, 'one cannot imagine that the book is guided by any poetic unity or harmony. On the contrary, the poetry is of a different sort, one that responds to our times. It is a poetry of fragmentation, contradiction, unanswered questions, specificity, fluidity and change.'¹ The structure of the book thus 'seeks to maintain the separate identities of the three authors; their three strands are woven together in a loose kind of way but each remains forever partially ignorant of the purposes and effects of the other's work'.²

There is, to begin with, no singular country. Roebuck Plains and Paddy Roe's country might be, more or less, geographically coterminous but they are, for all intents and purposes, different places: one the object of surveyors' maps, of pastoral inscriptions, of extractive activity, and of a brief settler experience, the other the ancient repository of law and story; and Paddy's country is one of many such countries.

More importantly, however, the structure of the book itself undoes that model of a singular reality and its multiple representations. The four discrete modes in which it is cast — Paddy's storytelling, Stephen's analysis, Stephen's photographs, and Krim's paintings — are not refractions of an originary reality but are epistemologically so disparate that they constitute distinct realities, distinct 'countries'. This is not a collection of oral 'stories' accompanied by an 'analysis' and by pictorial and photographic 'illustrations'; it is nomadological writing that seeks to give the fullest possible autonomy (a mutual 'partial ignorance') to each of its component parts.

This formal structure was already strikingly in evidence in Paddy and Stephen's previous collaboration, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, the first book I know of that breaks with the tradition of translating Aboriginal stories into standard English and into the genre of 'myths and legends'.³ *Gularabulu* sought to reproduce the sheer strangeness of Paddy's talk, its poetic and rhythmic qualities, and the rich variety of genres in which his stories take shape, and thereby to put it into a disputatious dialogue with a long tradition of ethnographic appropriation of Aboriginal narrative.

Reading the Country extends that dispute, but complicates it by the play it sets up between story, painting and analysis. Krim's paintings, for example, set an agenda, engaging in a dialogue with Fred Williams on the one hand and Aboriginal forms of 'aerial' visualisation and the drawings Paddy makes in the dirt with his digging stick on the other; and he and Stephen and Paddy talk; and Stephen philosophises, bringing Deleuze and Foucault and Derrida into close proximity with Butcher Joe's songs and Paddy's stories about his country, without ever making it the voice of authority. There is no singular reality here, and it's the book's formal structure that

performs that dispersion of the real. That's what was magic about the book in 1984, and what is still magic about it today.

Notes

- 1 Krim Bentrerrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, 2nd revised edition, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1996 [1984]), p. 15.
- 2 Ibid., p. 19.
- 3 Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1983.