

The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays

By Stephen Muecke

Rowman and Littlefield, 176 pp, 2016

ISBN 9781783488162

Reviewed by Therese Davis

THE *MOTHER'S DAY PROTEST AND OTHER FICTOCRITICAL ESSAYS* BY STEPHEN Muecke is the latest contribution to Rowman and Littlefield's series Place, Memory and Affect. The aim of this series is 'to forge an agenda for new approaches to the edgy relations of people and place within the transnational global cultures of the twenty-first century and beyond'. This collection of Muecke's essays offers a unique geo-philosophical, non-humanist approach to these relations, firmly planted in discussion of a wild array of places, events and things. Their insights into issues of climate change, indigeneity, protest, colonial history, critique and more engage readers in new ways with debates in Indigenous Studies, Environmental Humanities, History and Philosophy.

The collection begins with an introduction titled 'What is fictocriticism?' In Muecke's inimitable style, however, he quickly defers this existential question by focussing instead on the question of what can fictocriticism *do* (xi). This allows him to discuss the scope of fictocriticism, which we learn is practised not only in literary studies, a site where it is often narrowly pigeonholed, but also across a broad range of disciplines, from archaeology to anthropology, history and science and technology studies. Muecke also suggests that the powers of fictocriticism can be seen in operation outside the academy in unexpected places such as the courtroom or the best-selling works of a theoretical physicist.

Performativity is closely related to what Muecke calls 'something of a principle of fictocriticism', that is a writer telling *how* she has come to know something rather than displaying what she has come to know. He aligns this critical approach with traditions of thinking that refuse mastery (Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes). And building on anthropologist Michael Taussig's notion of the mastery of non-mastery (xiv), he explains how this tricky work of non-mastery involves techniques such as finding the right tone, 'a critical proximity, as opposed to critical distance' (xiv); becoming entangled with the material

properties of what is being analysed; becoming attuned to 'a poetry of fragmentation, contradiction, unanswered questions, specificity, fluidity and change' (xiv); and being open to the powers of joking and laughter as way of circumventing or dismantling problematic thinking. This list of minor becomings is not, however, exhaustive. Nor is it prescriptive. For the point the introduction makes is that thinking about what fictocriticism can do rather than what it is endlessly defers the latter question thus keeping fictocriticism vital and deeply political: 'What it is, exactly, remains to be seen' (xvii).

A clue to what, exactly, Muecke's fictocriticism can do lies in the book's dedication to Bruno Latour. Many of the essays perform a direct encounter with Latour's writings while Latour's influential criticism of critique is found more indirectly across the collection in Muecke's highly localised practice of 'criticism without judgement' (47). In Part II, 'After Critique', an essay titled 'Motorcycles, Snails, Latour: Criticism Without Judgement' provides a key image for understanding Muecke's critical approach. Here we find the figure of Muecke as cultural analyst drawing together two great threads of thought about human and non-human relations. In one hand he holds a vitalist thread that he finds in contemporary philosophical thought from Bergson to the post-Deleuzians and speculative realism. In his other hand is the thread of Indigenous Australian thought, which is 'also vitalist' and, further, in his words:

... taught me all about 'keeping things alive in their place', to create a slogan. I want to see what these two threads can do for a writing practice and even a literary theory that are localised, rather than universal in aspiration. They constitute events performed in particular places (49).

Acknowledging the influence of 'Aboriginal elders in Australia about cultural maintenance; authors like Paddy Roe, David Mowaljarlai and David Unaipon', Muecke describes their approach as 'an a-modern vision', attuned to:

... cultural forms that have local coordinates, one might see them with tendrils embedded ecologically, like roots from a seed. Does a seed have imperial ambitions, like the modernist commodity? Certainly, and weeds will take over the garden on their own unique ways of moving through their world. But they are limited by their resources, including the humans who chose what kind of culture they want to nurture (49).

Joining this thread then with speculative realism, Muecke adds that the speculative part of his experiment in experimentation means 'asking about the reality of the relations between things, relations that are not dominated by the

human experience of those things ... without anthropocentrism, without scientific reductionism, even without language' (49-50). This is 'a hard task', as he admits, but one he performs brilliantly in the different kinds of experimentation that comprise the collection.

In Part III, he extends his approach of 'keeping things alive in their place' to the field of experimental history in essays that take readers to the northern suburb of Pymble in Sydney, the Captain Cook motel in Cairns and lastly on a journey from the past between the colonial trade settlement of Calcutta on the banks of the Hooghly river of West Bengal to Sydney Cove, which was then a makeshift trade centre. In these places, he performs a range of critical strategies he describes as 'minor becomings' such as 'treating the oral as prior; deflating the life of [Captain] Cook of official history by testing his existence in popular culture; and using a story diplomatically to bring out an intercontinental link between India and Australia' (103).

The book's final part is titled 'Ecologies of Place' and sees Muecke perform experiments in ethnography that articulate the strangeness of the spaces that emerge in the postcolonial dynamic of Europe and its others as they come up against economic rationalism and the ecological limits of the planet. The four essays bring readers into contact with objects and hyperobjects, from coal and ivory to a "tropical island" pleasure dome in the frozen fields of the Brandenburg plains in central Germany' and strange weather events. 'Picture that Cyclone' invites readers to consider climate in terms of Tim Morton's concept of hyperobject through a recounting of an Indigenous account of an event commonly known as cyclone Tracy. The essay questions whether a cyclone can be seen as a purely scientific issue in the face of the increased incidence of cyclones with global warming. It suggests that not only humans are playing a part in climate change. As hyperobject, climate has massive 'endogenous powers' and, moreover, these powers are disturbing the language of human mastery of Nature in profound ways. Cyclonic disturbances are leaving us so-called moderns grasping for ontologies and aesthetic modes that can recognise the aliveness of the earth and its atmosphere, such as the notion of 'living country' found in Indigenous Australian thinking.

'Picture that Cyclone's' survival lessons are a book end to the collection's starting place, Part I 'Indigenous Australia', or, more specifically, the Great Western Desert of Australia's outback, where Muecke went in 1974, becoming entangled in what is now a long-standing relationship with the late Paddy Roe, a mentor and co-author, Roe's kin group the Goolarabooloo and their traditional lands. One of Muecke's most important interventions has been to contest the notion of Indigenous Australia as other to the modern world. Rather throughout his writings, and again in this collection of essays, he shows how Indigenous

Australia is deeply entangled in modernity and a site from which we can learn much about modernity and its alternatives. This lesson culminates in the book's title essay, 'The Mother's Day Protest', which takes the form of fragments that reflect on his most recent work with the Goolarabooloo. It asks what happens when a neo-liberal, globalised economic plan of action to extract masses of gas from the land comes up against the traditional Indigenous owners of the land's concept of human beings who 'act to energise the *life* of the country, which is destined to grow, generation after generation' (14). In a word: rage, as captured in the photograph of Teresa Roe, Paddy Roe's daughter, yelling at a convoy of trucks from the south that they should turn back and leave her country alone. As Muecke explains: 'for [Roe], survival, life itself, is the issue' (14). But this is not a story about modernisers versus traditionalists, as politics of mining in Australia is often figured in media reports. The essay uncovers uses of charm by both sides, disrupting the modernist script that tells us all that 'mumbo jumbo' about magic charms is behind us while revealing a complicated history of Indigenous participation in modernity. The Mother's Day march and the larger anti-Woodside gas plant protest has, for now, protected the networks that sustain life in this part of the world. Muecke's critical insights into this event present an important alternative lesson on economies of extraction and value:

When you know you are earthbound, connected to your territory like the Goolarabooloo never tire of asserting, then you know that the universal modernist script is unsustainable and must be cleverly interrupted, so that finally they will understand that value must be put back into country as well as taken from it.

THERESE DAVIS is an Associate Professor in Screen Studies in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University. She is the author of *The Face on the Screen: Death Recognition and Spectatorship* (Intellect, 2004) and co-author with Felicity Collins of *Australian Cinema After Mabo* (CUP, 2004). She has published widely on Australian cinema and Indigenous Australian filmmaking.