

## Ethnography—Who needs it?

### Review article

*Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and Other Aboriginal Song Poems.* Edited by Martin Duwell and R.M.W. Dixon. University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1994. Pp. xx + 169. \$14.95

*Bad Aboriginal Art : Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons.* By Eric Michaels. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994. Pp. 204. \$29.95.

I take my title to this article, which is a reconsideration of issues of interpretation theory in the form of a book review, from one of Eric Michaels' better-known titles. Speaking as someone professionally educated in literary theory and not anthropology, it nonetheless seems to me that the kind of radical shift signalled in Michaels' ideological stance announces the termination of ethnographic projects or at least their transformation into something so different as perhaps to require a new name. This is not such a large claim, given the death-notices which have been regularly issued over the past twenty five years in connection with history, teleology, authorship, origins and so on. At any rate I am encouraged to comment on developments in a discipline of which I have only amateur knowledge because of obvious parallels with my own discipline or more precisely because contemporary theory cuts across the disciplines, effacing or partly effacing old boundaries while delineating new ones, such that many of us, in supposedly diverse areas, currently find ourselves dealing with very similar questions.

What takes me to *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek* is an interest in both theory and Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture first. *Little Eva* is the second volume in the UQP series inaugurated by *The Honey-ant Men's Love Song and Other Aboriginal Song Poems*, edited by Martin Duwell and Bob Dixon. It is as powerful, diverse and beautiful a collection as the first. Most of the owners/performers of the songs are different, as are most of the recorders/translators: John Bradley, Luise Hercus, Ian Keen and the late Ray Keogh. The one Aboriginal name in the collection which will be familiar to the general reading public is that of Paddy Roe; others, including Jack Baju, Mick McLean, Peter Mondjingu and Runggurr deserve to be equally well known. Like its predecessor, this book has useful and readable introductions to the people and the material; followed by the Aboriginal-language text plus all-too-brief commentary (generally by Aborigines) plus translation. It's a compact item to be carried in your coat pocket and read in snatches when you feel like it.

Again, as with the first volume, there are four sections, this time one featuring songs from the Gulf country near Borroloola and one songs from the Kimberley, as well as two adding to the original material from the Simpson Desert and from Arnhem Land.

The Yanyuwa songs from the Gulf have something of the same liveliness, variety and immediate appeal as the Dyirbal ones which introduced the first volume. They range from cycles (eg. dealing with the 1942 crash of the American bomber *Little Eva*) to a host of occasional pieces. These last are really marvellous. They record or reenact everything from a woolly blanket catching fire overnight; to 'Saltwater Katy' standing in the fancy outfit given her by Europeans; to a pilot deftly manoeuvring a lugger onto a jetty; to harpoon ropes tangling; terns screeching when their eggs are stolen; pigeons calling 'from island to island'; a grader levelling a road; women mooching over sexy guys. Then there's the girl—no apologies to Freud—admiring her boyfriend's new long harpoon 'for the clear deep sea' or the fellow scratching a louse—shades of John Donne's 'The Flea'—whose lovebite signifies the hungry affection of his absent girlfriend. Or somebody whose pants keep slipping down because he's so skinny. Or, again and again, sensitively poetic references to animals, effects of weather, the sea—in a manner which might remind some readers of the sparseness of *haiku*.

Similar local effects obtain in the cycles (a white cameraman flat on his arse; inland Aborigines in a funk over crossing saltwater crocodile waters), but there the impact is more sustained. The 'Little Eva' sequence, composed by Frank Karrijiji, tells the story (assuming its mode to be merely documentary, which it probably isn't) of the air disaster, visualizing the bomber buffeted and brought down by winds, local people searching for the wreckage, wondering how pilots can bear to be all the way up there, noting that biplanes have armpits (why didn't anybody think of that before?), exchanging signals with searching planes and so on. Even if 'propeller' manages consistently to be misspelt, it's all immediately lively and—for non-Yanyuwa—a fascinating glimpse of wartime events through particular cultural eyes.

The *nurlu* songs from the Kimberley may remind people who saw the recent and quite startling Rover Thomas exhibition at the Australian National Gallery of the artist's *krill krill* ceremony. I don't know if this is or is not a legitimate comparison; at any rate we have in each case a song given to the singer by spirits (for example, of dead relatives), whose enactment involves the reliving of a spirit-journey. Thomas' classificatory mother told of her journey east from Derby (where she died) to the vicinity of Turkey Creek (where she was involved in the car accident which led to her death), then north to Kununurra, from which she witnessed the destruction of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy—the same creature so overwhelmingly depicted as a monstrous, charcoal bulge in Thomas' great 1991 canvas. In this case there were two spirit guides, each for a given phase of the journey. For this particular Italo-Australian the Dantean parallels are vivid: the traveller, successive guides (c/f. Virgil, Beatrice), the vast overview of topographies and of historical events—Tracy, observed from the grandstand of the Kimberley. I don't dare even to begin speculation on the significance of Thomas' juxtaposition of the mother's death and Tracy. It may well be deeply unflattering to Darwin *balandas*. At any rate the *nurlu* of the Duwell/Dixon anthology seem to tackle comparable subject matter. Spirits appear, dancing, then dive under the ground to reappear on the other side; or they soar and veer like birds; or they dig open your sister's grave, at which point she and other ghosts fly out; or they race, like athletes, towards paperbark country. Or there are comets and sickness-bearing clouds to be deflected from the community. All this usually in association with specific localities or underpinned by spirit-travels from landmark to landmark.

On a previous occasion I made some comment on the songs from south-central Australia presented by Luise Hercus in the original volume. The new ones included in this volume are remarkably good, just as striking as their predecessors. Again they range from what must be secular, 'rubbish' songs to material in an older mode: sections of a larger story dealing with Kinpili and his big penile club (something for the Lévi-Strauss databank, since everything here appears in twos: two trees, two men, two ants); and Fire History verses, narrating or acting out and recreating the transformation of Sandhill Lizard to Knob-Tailed Gecko. This last has intriguing Christian echoes of burial and resurrection, though in reverse order. The more occasional songs, if they are 'rubbish,' are very high-quality rubbish indeed. They include brilliant sketches—James Joyce would have said 'epiphanies'—capturing the soul of an event, such as the arrival of the first car in the district, the first sight of a train, the first encounter with a rabbit ('frightened of a rabbit!')—or a lullaby (grim, like most tales for children), or a spell against meat-ants.

If these, and the songs in preceding sections, are consistently tough and beautiful, Ian Keen's Yolngu selection is really ravishing, like all Arnhem Land material of this sort, from the Berndt translations onwards. One of the songs printed isn't the one mentioned in the introduction, but the reader can't complain, since it's excellent anyway. Five Yirritja and two Dhuwa pieces, the first lot funerary, the second apparently suitable for various occasions and embodying Djanggawul mythology, all focus on birds: Sulphur-Crested and Red-Tailed Black cockatoos, Red-Winged Parrot, Crested Pigeon, emu, bustard. Keen's translation seems to aim most specifically at poetic pyrotechnics, and it comes off, conveying both lyrical immediacy and a sense of *illud tempus* eternity. Clearly the birds illustrate and generate parallel human activities, group-, place- and season-specific, relating to obsequies or other rites. But even without any knowledge of or capacity to guess at this level of significance, anyone can be enthralled by the natural description, particularly those all-important small touches: cockatoo crests ruffled by the breeze, 'tongue-chasing' parrot talk, long-leg emu running, halting and looking round as emus do.

To turn to matters of theory. The main difficulty—and attractive challenge—of a collection like *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek* is the mass of queries it generates and the hermeneutic implications of these. Attention here necessarily focusses as much on the explanatory notes provided as on the translated texts themselves. Indeed in this context it is probably fair to say that the distinction between 'primary' text—the song—and 'secondary' explanation tends to collapse during the reading process. At any rate I want to know why the Little Eva verses concentrate on the search and not on the discovery, making no mention of the one survivor and his ordeal—surely the dramatic climax for any European narrative of the event. Is it because other verses, not printed here, exist or have existed? Or because the Yanyuwa experienced the event in their own narratological way? Or had a particular reason for highlighting some events and not others? Am I to read significance in the fact that the narrative—or rather the ceremony of which the song is a part—hinges not on the Crusoe topos of the survivor but on the topos employed by Joyce in *Ulysses*, that of encounter, contact, exchange—in this case between Aboriginal searchers on the ground and white searchers in the air? Turning to other songs: what am I to read into that snapshot of Saltwater Katy? Admiration? Moral disapproval? Katy acted as interpreter for white skippers who repaid her with dresses. But is there a suggestion of something shameful, prompting complex feelings, perhaps negative ones?

These are simple examples. More involved ones could be elicited from the (to a far-removed, uninitiated reader) radical ambiguities in the text, or, using Iser's terminology, the 'gaps' in the text, characteristic of the *nurlu* songs or the *Two Trees* sequence, all crammed with suggestiveness, but suggestive, in any given instance, of *what* in particular? I would prefer not to be accused of Faustian hubris, even if I am guilty of it, but it does seem to me that *Little Eva* would prompt as many if not more questions in other readers' minds, and as keen a desire to *know*—at least some of the answers.

All the queries I have raised boil down to issues of contextualization. Or of authorial intention which is itself one way of viewing the context in which something is done, said, sung or written. What might be the singer's attitude towards Saltwater Katy? Or the ceremonial whole of which a particular Yolngu song is a part? Of course the terminology, and the ideology, of parts and wholes, with its attendant problematic (the hermeneutic circle) can be traced back at least as far as the modern inventor of interpretation theory, Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher, with authority from Augustine who in book XII of the *Confessions* had insisted that to know the meaning of Genesis one had to know what its author Moses had intended, formulated the hermeneutic project, one that could only be approximately realized, as : understanding the text as well as or better than its author.<sup>1</sup> If in its early nineteenth-century form this formulation at least gives the impression that what is Other (the past, for example), may be recuperated with some objectivity, more recent hermeneutics such as Gadamer's has problematized the epistemic relationship. Still, interpretation remains feasible, at least something of the truth of what is Other (and therefore requires interpretation) may be known. While this truth is mediated by the situation of the interpreter, Effective-History (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) ensures that the interpreter asks meaningful questions and so receives valid answers. I suppose the explanatory notes accompanying the *Little Eva* texts take the premises of classical hermeneutics for granted, since they function to aid understanding (*Verstehen*) through contextualization : 'this is something of what x might have meant in the context in which s/he sang the song.' Contextualizing hermeneutics is necessarily anti-formalist (it is philosophically opposed to, for example, structuralist principles), and *Little Eva's* notes provide a fine example of this. 'The Ant-Monster' song on pp. 104–5 calls up the Dreaming event in which the ancestral meat-ant annihilated the goannas. At the same time the explanatory note points out that, according to reverse-magic logic, the verses are sung to remove *ants*, *not* goannas. Here, contextualization flatly contradicts textualization and points up the limits of any purely formal methodology.

Traditionally, hermeneutics worked to establish itself as a theorized alternative to positivist empirics. More recently it has had to position itself in relation to the radical philosophical scepticism of the post-structuralists. Radical scepticism rejects the contextualizing model, since it judges totalization, the notion of the 'whole,' to be inadmissible. Accordingly it insists on the heterogeneity of data, such that any ensemble, on scrutiny, immediately dissolves into further ensembles—strictly speaking, to the point of infinity. There are no texts, only intertexts, no 'things,' only differentials. To 'textualize,' ie. to fix the heracleitian flux, something one has to do if one is to think or

<sup>1</sup> *Hermeneutics the Handwritten Manuscripts*, H. Kimmmerle ed., Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986, p. 112.

talk about it, indicates a political move. 'Understanding' is never a neutral business. The dissolution of the 'whole' naturally implicates the idea of the 'part,' since after all 'parts' simply function as lesser totalizations. In Derrida's ontology they exist precariously as supplements, that philosophically problematical vitamin shot which adds without adding, since it adds to a deficiency. But it is all too easy to overestimate the difference between this conceptual strategy and the hermeneutic paradigm, even in its early nineteenth-century form. Schleiermacher was perfectly aware of the provisionality of interpretation, even in his more euphoric pronouncements. Who isn't? He saw the deconstructive dynamics of the hermeneutic circle, the mutual propping up of part/whole binaries. Understanding, after all, always presupposes that one has *already* understood. Still, epistemological euphoria sought to define the role of interpretation as one of regaining an original contextual meaning—something of this being preserved in E.D. Hirsch's argument in *Validity in Interpretation*. But, in general, twentieth-century hermeneutics has tended substantially to modify the Schleiermacher model, either by subjecting it to critique, as in Gadamer's work, or by reinventing itself as Reception Theory and so focussing on the response rather than production end of textualization, ie. stressing the productive process of interpretation itself. My own feeling is that Schleiermacher anticipated this with his insistence on hermeneutics as an 'art.' But this is not the assessment of, for example, Gadamer, whose model of interpretation incorporates reader-response, though not in such a way as to 'subjectivize' the operation after, say, the manner of Derrida.

It is not difficult to apply all of the above polemics to the situation of the ethnographer, who necessarily operates not merely as passive, as it were transparent, recorder of data but as interpreter. Transposing somewhat from my discipline, I assume that, somewhere along the line of the 'as-empirical-as-possible' process of data-gathering, the traditional ethnographer (and I include practitioners of structuralism in this) asked of the text in question, whether this text happened to be a story or a song or a kinship system : what does it mean? Or at any rate : how am I to understand it? It is probably not too unfair to say that this went hand in hand with more or less total scepticism of the truth of the text in its own terms. The 'real' truth of the text had to be, say, sociological or psychological or something of the sort. At the same time the European passion for anthropology since the days of the *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* implied a contradiction, a sub-text which inscribed that obscure nostalgia, the Rousseauist dream in which lost Europe finds itself once more, returns to its own source even as it enters the Heart of Darkness, the cultural Other. At the level of politics this contradiction takes the form of simultaneously undermining and seeking to protect the ethnographic object.

In contrast to all this, an ethnography informed by contemporary theory might well begin with the death-of-meaning premise, or perhaps with a less philosophically radical version of it, say the assumption that anthropology has little or no access to the empirical truth of the phenomenon, whether it be Saltwater Katy or Yolngu spirituality. Once meaning is bracketed in this way, the ethnographer is encouraged to ask : *whose* meaning and for what purpose? You no longer ask 'what is an Australian identity?' but, as Richard White did, 'who invented Australian identity and why?' I take it that at this point the ethnographer, instead of dismissing the truth of the textual Other, takes it seriously, not by actually *believing* it, but as a *political* act, an intervention. You relativize your own conceptual framework to the extent of allowing another framework to exist for

someone else. While you can't accept the truth of this other framework, you respect its integrity for essentially political reasons. Concomitantly you place that once disguised, displaced Rousseauist dream at centre stage. Instead of observing Otherness you shift the spotlight on yourself as object of anthropology, either by locating anthropology in Brooklyn instead of or as well as the Amazon, or by checking out the politics of ethnography itself.

I am not so sure that the new strategies are so very different from the old ones; one might unkindly suggest that they represent de-essentialized versions of these. After all, that wretched ethnographer is still too superior actually to accept Otherness in its *own* conceptual terms. Instead of interpreting along positivist lines s/he now interprets in terms of political strategies. And by acknowledging the originally-disguised reflexivity of the project, what is s/he doing other than practising overtly rather than covertly that original European self-centredness which characterised the supposed study of Otherness?

All of these issues are raised in the reading of Eric Michaels' *Bad Aboriginal Art : Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*. The book, which makes stimulating reading for anyone interested either in Aboriginal matters or in contemporary theory, media and cultural studies, consists of ten (previously published but uncollected) essays. These deal with the—as Michaels nicely has it—Aboriginal invention of electronic mass communication, questions of ethnographic practice and ethics, Aboriginal acrylic art and, at every point, the current state of anthropology. All this drawing on Michaels' work at Yuendumu between 1982 and 1986 and elsewhere in Australia up to his AIDS-related death in 1988. *Bad Aboriginal Art* (mischievously ironic, like other Michaels titles, and guaranteed to catch attention) is edited, minimally it appears, by Paul Foss, who is never actually named as editor. There are four introductions, all of which are excellent, only one of which is called an introduction. While Michael Leigh and Paul Foss speak of Michaels as a friend, introducing his work in more personal terms, Marcia Langton puts it all in the perspective of Aboriginal media and media politics—and Dick Hebdige explains where, conceptually, Michaels is coming from. Langton's piece gives much information; Hebdige's serves the purpose of mediating between the local and the overseas reader. Though I have a deal of enthusiasm for the contents of this book, I nonetheless felt that Hebdige's comments—knowledgeable, sympathetically partisan, articulate, as you'd expect—are, in the end, a little too partisan. Clearly Michaels, when he did not arouse opposition, aroused immense affection and admiration. His essays are remarkably lively, witty, bitingly intelligent. But I am inclined to resist that—as always, overstated—melioristic faith in generational superiority, the sense, both in Hebdige's comments and Michaels' essays, that we are somehow, at last, conceptually 'on the right track.' I've never met an academic on the right track, myself included. And what of the Walpiri view of the subject? The other temptation worth resisting in the reading of this book is the one which might prompt one to canonize Michaels because he has died—and of AIDS (one thinks of the haloed ikon in the recent *Art in the Age of AIDS* exhibition). Not that the commentators succumb to this exactly: it's just that the option looms on the textual horizon.

Michaels' 'Aboriginal Content: Who's Got It? Who Needs It?' takes up the major threads of the theoretical polemic alluded to above. It does so in a refreshing and disarming, indeed compelling way. Rather than engaging in the potentially essentialist

complexities of 'what constitutes Aboriginal content on TV?' ie. 'what is "Aboriginal"?' Michaels sidesteps and counters with 'who *decides* on definitions of this sort?' It's a question of power : *who's got it*. Once we abandon the hunt for that elusive *meaning* of Aboriginality we are freed to analyse constructs of Aboriginality. The conclusion is that the 'professional' Aborigine, the one required by bureaucracy and mass media, is not only phony but destructive (*who needs it?* ). But destructive of what? Here Michaels is hard put not to reintroduce his own brand of essentialism, the 'real' Aborigine obscured by the political construct. His Aboriginal identity is local, not pan-Aboriginal, in line with post-1968 ideologies of regionalism and pluralpolitics. I expect that Michaels is right in stressing that Aboriginal identities *were* bound to locality and therefore heterogeneous. I'm not so sure he can maintain this is still so or will continue to be so. Certainly Aboriginal people themselves argue the point. Eleanor Bourke accepts the idea of 'Aboriginality' preceding contact with Europeans; Kevin Gilbert fought for pan-Aboriginality, an identity postdating contact; Gordon Briscoe thinks there never was and never will be any common identity.

At any rate Michaels puts the case attractively as a defence of local (eg. Yuendumu) TV, the liveliest, most community-oriented, most empowering. In so doing he raises the spectre of anthropological protectionism, since he aims to preserve the Walpiri from bureaucracies and business and—worse—from themselves. After all (and at points like this the author is amusingly honest) the Walpiri embarrassingly prefer Bruce Lee to their own product. They would just *love* to make Kung Fu movies rather than local documentaries. Very much to his credit Michaels understands that any ideology, any methodology, generates its peculiar contradictions. In the end, he admits, the temptation to interpret Jupurrurla's TV as Brechtian represents the ethnographer's own 'quirky aesthetics' (p. 38). We are a long way from reader construction of the text here, much closer to an old-fashioned, unavoidable hermeneutic respect for the original. I must say, though, that I thought the Appendix to the article deconstructs the rest in a less than attractive way. Michaels hears that some Aborigines *don't* approve of his comments. His response, alas, is to lecture them in no uncertain manner, claiming all those liberal bourgeois rights to free speech and his own opinions he gladly trashes elsewhere.

The same problem crops up in 'Para-Ethnography,' a highly-critical review of Chatwin's *The Songlines* and Morgan's *My Place*. What is there to say on the subject of Chatwin's book except that it deserves all of Michaels' criticism and more? We are here in the true, original home of nauseous ethnographic mystique. As regards Sally Morgan, my reaction is much more ambivalent. Michaels attacks Morgan, not to mince words, as *racist*—because he thinks (and it is consistent with his anti-essentialist nominalism) that the construct 'Aboriginality' is racist. I find this doctrinaire and beside the point. Morgan's sin is that, instead of *inventing* her identity, she *discovers* it: always was, always will be—Aboriginal. Michaels', for once *tired*, suggestion is, amazingly, that *My Place* should have de-privileged the Aboriginal by putting it on a par with Morgan's non-Aboriginal ancestry. This so patently misses the point that it seems scarcely necessary to say so. It doesn't mean that there may not be a touch of sentimental smugness in Morgan's all-too-pat position. But there are insights which validate themselves : you just can't argue with them, except at the risk of appearing obtuse. Perhaps Morgan will find the need to problematize 'her place' at some stage. Even so, you can't problematize every

act of understanding; to do so would be to negate understanding itself, to remain precisely obtuse. Moreover the attack on Aboriginality as a racist construct has its own tendentiousness. Ultimately it allies itself with the dismissal of nationalism characteristic of contemporary theory, particularly that emanating from France. Of course anyone can point to the Nazi experiment or to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. But nationalism has its uses in a world of dominant multinational corporations. Aboriginal people may judge that it will serve them well, even at the cost of subverting local identities. Certainly it served the Algerians against the French and the Vietnamese against the French and the Americans. Perhaps that is why contemporary French intellectuals have little time for nationalism: in its Third World form it has tended to bite the revolutionary hand that fed it—given that modern nationalism may be said to date back to 1789. So it's a noble sentiment when you have it, less noble when others use it against you. White Americans and Australians subdued indigenous peoples in the cause of nation-building. What is the morality of white academics lecturing these same peoples on the (potential? actual?) racism of *their* growing national consciousness?

The best side of Michaels' politicization of hermeneutics, the shift from 'what does it mean?' to a Beckettian 'who is asking this question and why?' is probably evident in those witty, incisive and enthusiastic accounts of Walpiri video and TV. Michaels draws up preliminary guidelines for ethnographic collaboration, the *sine qua non* ethics of photography in remote communities ('A Primer of Restrictions on Picture-Taking in Traditional Areas of Aboriginal Australia'), as well as giving an account of what *actually* happens: media-murder ('Hundreds Shot at Aboriginal Community: ABC Makes TV Documentary at Yuendumu'). He lovingly recreates the real thing, Jupurrurla making TV at Yuendumu, playing his reggae to the community to signal his intention to broadcast, shooting his own Bob Marley T-shirt, ducking in and out of the picture and so on. This is his idea—and who, in this context, would disagree?—of a 'cultural future' as distinct from a postmodern, Baudrillardian simulacrum. In 'Hollywood Iconography: A Walpiri Reading,' one of the best essays in the collection, he pursues the cultural politics of TV in an imperfectly literate community. Picking up the idea of parallels between oral and electronic societies, he convincingly urges the case that Aborigines *had* good reason to resist the imposition of literacy and that they *have* equally good reason to embrace the electronic media. All this with illuminating comments on the nature of writing and of Walpiri iconography as a form of writing characterized by alliance with, rather than subversion of, orality.

Michaels' essays on the emergence of acrylic art again return to the political question of production and to the Aboriginal communication systems underpinning it, rather than to questions of meaning. Interpretation is, first and foremost, a matter of who interprets. Michaels writes with immense verve and a lot of sensitivity on the role of authority in 'traditional' society. His sensible view, that script, and print in particular, removes itself from the authority of its origin and so necessitates what Foucault termed the author-function, contrasts with Foucault's own dark (and fuzzy) hints of a bourgeois conspiracy in 'What is an Author?' In 'Bad Aboriginal Art' he elaborates, again very convincingly, on the relation of 'authority' and 'authenticity.' Western Desert acrylics can't be judged on art-market criteria of authenticity, which have everything to do with authorship and nothing to do with socio-religious authority. In that sense, there are no good or bad acrylics, only good or bad, ie. authorised or unauthorised, productions. It

seems fair, though one should probably add the caveat that, according to the evidence, 'traditional' artists *do* admit the category of the aesthetic, even if they do not rate it as highly as does the aestheticizing bourgeois culture of modern Europeans. The irony in all of these articles, however, is Michaels' perfectly understandable enthusiasm—even as he dismisses Western notions of authenticity—for the authenticity conferred on the product by an authorised process of production, in turn linked to an authorised and authoritative interpretation. *He* won't interpret the text because others are better qualified to do so. But why privilege *their* terms of reference, rather than *his*, if not to accept Schleiermacher's assumption of the priority of origins? At times, talking about 'alien readings of the text,' for example (p. 116), he sounds much more like Schleiermacher than Gadamer, let alone Derrida.

Indeed the contradiction emerges in its baldest form in the essay originally included in that splendid volume, *Yuendumu Doors*. Quite simply, Michaels here puts his nominalist principles in abeyance, raising all over again those questions supposedly laid to rest by contemporary theory: what if 'authenticity' were a fact, if the 'truth' of the Walpiri could be communicated not via discourse but somehow directly, in a way 'less mediated than the linguistic' (p. 59)? Goodbye to all that post-Saussurean theorising, from Lévi-Strauss onwards. Hebdige draws back from it in amused alarm: it's 'Eric Michaels, closet existentialist' (xxiii). But on this issue I think heresy-spotting, however sympathetic, doesn't help much. I'm impressed rather than concerned by the fact of an apparent startling contradiction. For a start, it puts theory (which I for one find seductive) where it finally *must* belong, on the bookshelf. More important, it shows the ethnographer, whether positivist or postpositivist, at long last considering the *possibility* that Western systems of knowledge may be wrong and the Walpiri right. What's the use of anthropology if it can't at least place one in the position of being *tempted* on this score?

Which brings me back to the discussion of ethnography. Michaels' writing focusses his constant discourse with himself and with others on the role of anthropology. It may well be said that anthropology proper is so tied up with the imperial project that it cannot survive its demise. Still, people continue to 'do' ethnography, and in an age of (Western) doubt, when the earnest, patient dedication, and the arrogance, of the empirical researcher give way to a mannered, fidgety self-consciousness, and to a little humility, what principle can one cling to if not reflexivity? Michaels outlines his methodological assumptions in the essay 'Aboriginal Content,' where he insists he wants to understand 'our' not 'their' media revolution (p. 22). It's not a matter of what the West can tell the Walpiri about TV; it's the Walpiri who teach the West about the possibilities of the medium. The entire ethnographic enterprise turns on reader response to the text, that is, on interpretation as textual construction—with political implications.

That means that totalising perspectives which place the ethnographer in the position of privileged observer are no longer feasible. The point is underlined in Michaels' not overgenerous review of Myers' *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*. In 1995 it may well be so. If that is the case, however, it does not let Michaels off the hook. Instead of providing answers, he argues, examine the questions. I like his examination of the questions, but can't help thinking his version of the 'all Cretans are liars . . .' teaser—'all anthropologists are liars'—leaves him without a theoretical prop. If Michaels as ethnographer tells me that all ethnographers are liars, am I to believe him or not? Do the acknowledged fictions of a reflexive methodology, *because* they are acknowledged, have

the power to effect an impossible *Aufhebung*, somehow (how?) lifting the postmodern ethnographer above that sordid sphere of self-interest which s/he insists *cannot* be superseded?

These are the philosophical dilemmas of consistent radical scepticism. And yet, in the midst of political imbrication, understanding, that hermeneutic always-already-there, *does* happen. Michaels' essays themselves constantly testify to this. They are full of answers, as well as questions. The Walpiri may or may not be impressed, but Michaels' excitement bubbles over with—'*that's the way it is; yes, I understand*.' In Geertz's words (never mind that he is referring to informants, not anthropologists; it comes to the same thing): 'in fact, not all Cretans are liars, and it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something.'<sup>2</sup> I am taking Geertz somewhat out of context, but it makes the point that even in times suspicious of totalization, when the part receives precedence over the whole without which it would be inconceivable, *some* act of synthesis remains necessary, indeed *takes place*, for example in the act of understanding something: Of course understanding is an interpretative act. But anyone who sees it simply as interpretation, ie. as a construct without real correspondence to the original, has simply failed to grasp the phenomenology of understanding, which requires just that element of the *non*-subjective. At this point, both in connection with Michaels and contemporary theory, I wear my heart on a Gadamerian hermeneutic sleeve.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Interpretation of Cultures*; London, 1975, p. 20.