Gillian Cowlishaw, *The City’s Outback* (University of NSW Press, 2009)

I began to read *The City’s Outback* as a welcome analysis of the previously little researched field of urban Indigeneity in which there is a dearth of published information. This is perhaps because the stereotype of urban Indigenous peoples as ‘inauthentic’, and more ‘traditional’ peoples from remote regions as ‘authentic’ has continued to pervade the mindset of the wider public, if not that of some anthropologists and cultural studies scholars. As Cowlishaw points out (3), local Aboriginal people are generally hidden from the urban majority (3) and are represented largely by shocking and negative images. With this in mind, Cowlishaw aims to present *The City’s Outback* as a challenge to the homogenous ‘construction and reproduction of Aborigines as “a problem”’ (3).

This is an admirable aim and one that has been at the heart of the discourse for the last 30 or more years. It is my opinion that getting as many Indigenous stories as possible into circulation helps educate the public and works towards redressing this issue, so Cowlishaw’s work is welcomed for this reason alone. Cowlishaw is also refreshingly open about many of the difficulties of working in this arena. For example, she (110) acknowledges that when doing the fieldwork, she did not think about the purpose of recording some of the life stories other than to provide her interviewees with their own story, told in their own words (110). Thus it is something of a wonder that Cowlishaw was able to produce a book from these field materials at all.

Cowlishaw tells us that she undertook the fieldwork for this project at the behest of her one-time voluble critic and now friend, Frank Doolan, a western New South Wales Aboriginal man then living in Mt Druitt in Sydney’s west (15). Doolan was keen to have the voices of his otherwise silenced local community heard and Cowlishaw considered the opportunity to have Doolan as ‘chief informant’ for the project ‘too good to miss’ (19). Thus Cowlishaw applied for funding for the project, which she acknowledges would not only cover expenses in Mt Druitt, but also sanction the work and ‘confer legitimacy’ on her position in the university where she worked (20). This kind of honesty is rare.

*The City’s Outback* is peppered with small insights into issues of contestation that can occur during such collaborations, something that is usually considered distasteful to discuss. In endeavouring to highlight the intrinsic nature of personal relationships within the research process, she particularly reflects on:

the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, their overlapping and interweaving, their co-constructedness, their self-knowledge, and their everyday reality. (30)

At the same time, Cowlishaw acknowledges that:

Fieldwork is notoriously messy, fraught, painful and exhilarating, but it also entails serious boredom, and some days are ‘wasted’ trying to find people,
travelling to a cancelled event, sitting around listening to banalities and repetitions which must be endured, because they do have significance. (130)

However, Cowlishaw stops short of expressing her frustration or indeed any feelings about such issues, except when doing so is prudent. For example, she cites the instance of a flippant comment made by her about Aboriginal people being very familiar with ‘homes’ [institutions]. A young Aboriginal woman present quickly corrected Cowlishaw by saying that she had never been ‘locked up’, to which Cowlishaw responds, ‘…I tell her I’m sorry. I’m horrified by how easily I can stereotype, hurt, interpellate’ (135). Alternatively, Cowlishaw does admit to ‘feeling bad and angry’ (162) when one of the Aboriginal people employed by her to transcribe some tapes lost two of them.

Nevertheless, in some instances Cowlishaw does at times relate specific instances of her Mount Druitt fieldwork to broader frustrations of cross-cultural work, albeit in tempered phraseology, such as ‘the familiar frustration of working in others’ worlds to other rhythms’ (47).

What most interested me about this book was the way in which Cowlishaw uses it as a launch pad for a defence of the non-Indigenous field worker’s role (65-67), something I believe is long overdue. According to Cowlishaw a critical anthropology has led to a deconstruction of colonial power relations that has caused a change of direction within the discipline. She says:

None of us is innocent of power. All researchers and writers enter fields of historical forces and established understandings. When ‘post-colonial’ critics turn on their forebears they attempt to disown their own involvement in powerful institutions. We cannot escape the conditions that make our intellectual work possible, but we can make these conditions visible. Further, we can try to pull the rug out from under established feet. (66)

In addition, Cowlishaw questions the creation of new cultural stereotypes when she says that:

We have each been saddled with an Indigenous or Anglo identity, one injured, the other apologetic. The (past) suffering of the Indigenous people is the moral ground of our concern. Our emotional orientations are pre-ordained. That they are all exemplars of Aboriginality is assumed, but are we equally exemplars of whiteness? (104)

Again, I welcome the opening of debate on this issue, as I feel it is one that has been avoided in the past.

In this book Cowlishaw ambitiously covers a wide range of issues that prevail in the Indigenous/non-Indigenous working relationship, from Stolen Generations (94-100) to the feel-good sentimentality of romanticizing Aboriginality (182). This attempt to offer ‘a contribution to, and a contestation of, … knowledge [of the discipline] and the anxieties and ideologies that suffice it’ (2) is interspersed with transcript excerpts from the stories of the Aboriginal people of Mount Druitt. I am a little disappointed however at Cowlishaw’s use of altered grammar and spelling, such as ‘they wouldn’t of understood’ (118) and ‘I was fostered, me parents were fostered...
as well and now me daughter’s fostered’ (138). Such methodology can be argued to reinforce historical negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people.

A close read of this book gave me the impression that Cowlishaw was unsure of the purpose of recording the stories and that her interest in the wider issues possibly drove her methodology for the publication. This is not meant as a criticism, but rather the reverse. Knowing as I do from my own work in this area, producing a published text from recorded oral history can be an exceptionally arduous task at any level. While I think that this book is of a different calibre to some of her other work, Cowlishaw should be applauded for undertaking the project and for her frank discussion of the issues surrounding it.

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