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TOTEMISM AND INDIGENOUS SCIENCE

Prof. Dr. Stephen Muecke, University of Adelaide, South Australia

Location: Senatssaal, Grabengasse 1, Alte Universität

Date and Time: Tuesday, 12.09.2017 17.00 Uhr s.t

Organisation: Nachwuchsforschergruppe Das Transkulturelle Erbe Nordwest Australiens (Dr. Carsten Wergin)

About the talk

The notions of 'totemism' and 'Indigenous science' are both untimely. The first—used to characterise the Australian civilisations—is a somewhat dated concept in Anthropology, and the latter is too new to be fully accepted. This lecture seeks to invent the possibility for their relationship.

It will move from a study of the Wolfe Creek meteorite crater in both its Western scientific and Indigenous interpretations, to another example of the role of the bilby in the Goolarabooloo custodians' conflict with a major mining company in Broome, Western Australia. It is argued that the deployment of a puppetry bilby is a bit like the reinvention of a totemic relation. It is an instance of a natural-cultural *extension*, precisely mediating the human and the non-human. The bilby is not a 'totemic' animal (unlike the pelican). But this bilby extension mimics the way in which Aboriginal totemism expresses the idea that the human (the 'pelican clan', say) and the totem animal share the same life-force. This is not a fanciful Indigenous 'belief', that modern science will eventually argue out of existence. Totemism could rather be seen as an extraordinary invention, a solution to the problem of what it means for humans to coexist with other beings. The 'Western' solution is to put humans in cultures and pelicans in Nature. But so-called totemistic societies refuse the singular concept of Nature, and usually do not have a word for it. I want to claim that they have another solution, totemism as an *expert Indigenous scientific construction pertaining to the crucial importance of the continuity of 'nature' and culture*. It may be strange, but is no queerer than the construction that 'Western science' is based on, what Latour and Stengers, after Whitehead, call the 'bifurcation of nature': We 'Moderns' have built up and come to depend on the idea that our cultures (where all values lie) are alienated from inactive, singular, Nature (where all facts lie). Western science's study of the 'Laws of Nature' may have facilitated the removal of human responsibility; Indigenous science, on the other hand, may have invented totemism and kinship laws to make responsibility for non-humans explicit.

About the speaker

Stephen Muecke is Jury Chair of English Language and Literature in the School of Humanities at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. He is Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and author of numerous books and articles. Recent publications are *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), a special edition of *New Literary History* ("Recomposing the Humanities—with Bruno Latour"), 2016, and a new edition of *Paddy Roe's Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, (UWA Publishing, 2016).



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