

Michèle Grossman, *Entangled Subjects: Indigenous/Australian Cross-Cultures of Talk, Text, and Modernity*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013. 350 pp.

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This beautifully written book reinvigorates debates concerning the advancement of Australian (neo) colonialist discourses through textual practices. Bringing theories of textuality and orality together with theories of modernity and colonialism in lively and original ways, *Entangled Subjects* makes its readers newly alert to problematic notions of orality and literacy that persist in associating orality only with Indigenous cultures, and literacy and writing with western cultures. These theories approach orality as a primitive moment in human culture, and literacy as culture's mature manifestation. As this book goes on to show, the subjectivities associated with Indigenous and western cultures are similarly conceived in developmental and dualistic terms. These are not only historical tendencies, but very much alive in contemporary textual relations. Literacy and authorship are still, time and again, held to be the domain of the advanced western subject; the expression of an 'authentic' Aboriginality is rooted in orality—its technique 'the mouth' rather than 'the pencil' (130).

Grossman argues that the maintenance of this dualism between orality and literacy—what she refers to as a frontier zone—is 'complicit with the structures of containment and exclusion that characterise colonialist and neo-colonialist discourses of Indigenous people more broadly' (xxx). Her sustained and nuanced argument has far-reaching implications for the reading and writing practices of non-Indigenous Australians when faced with Indigenous subjects who have not waited to be authorised by whites in order to write, but authorise themselves.

How to read what these men and women write, rather than what is written about them? For, as Grossman points out, Australian Aboriginal people are among the most researched peoples in the world. This means that they are therefore also among the most heavily textualised peoples in the world. Historically and into the present, Aboriginal people are *written about*—by anthropologists, ethnographers and other scholars including literary scholars and theorists—in a way that recalls Roland Barthes's formulation of 'gossip' (3). Grossman goes further, explicitly tying together Europeans' push to write about Aboriginal people with the desire to advance a universalising Euro-centric narrative of modernity. One of the ways that the European subject makes him or herself *as modern* is through textual practices that write the Indigenous subject as not-modern, redoubled by equating 'savage' with orality and 'civilised' with literacy. European subjects inscribe their modernity, Grossman proposes, in the very act of writing about others.

After a fascinating engagement with classic anthropology and its critics—Levi Strauss, Clifford Geertz and Patrick Wolfe, among others—and after a critique of classic theories of oral and literature cultures and their critics—Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Ruth Flanagan—Grossman turns to Brian Street's work on the different uses to which literacy has been put. She does this in order to resist technologically determinist arguments that assume that technologies associated with writing determine writing's uses and powers. In particular, Grossman finds Street's arguments useful when analysing collaborative life-writing texts and the ways in which 'their politics and practices of textual *métissage* have been managed and problematized on the level of the oral/literate "mix"' (127).

What constitutes orality and literacy, textuality and writing, is highly contested, and western assumptions about the limits and capacities of ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ cultures run unchallenged through much scholarship. In *Entangled Subjects* Grossman complicates these terms in order to ‘signal more expansively constituted domains of speaking and writing systems than the traditional oppositional/transitional models of orality and literacy have sanctioned’ (xxvi). Both talk and text are extended in Grossman’s hands into a range of systems of signification and inscription.

Grossman puts into practice some of the possibilities of an expanded approach, in particular through re-reading key examples of collaborative textual productions in Australia. She finds these are especially rich texts through which to tease out the places where orality and literacy are once more resolved along the lines of the frontier zone between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Aboriginal subjects are figured as if constrained behind the lines of ‘orality,’ and the non-Indigenous subject confirmed as *the* writing subject—indeed, as the authorising subject. Grossman shows the ways that this dualism is often reinstated, however inadvertently, in the name of ‘liberating’ Indigenous people and their stories. Grossman insists on the possibilities of moving beyond these limitations, of making generative use of them, and in her analysis of these collaborative textual acts she finds places where something else has been discovered and enacted.

Questions of ‘talk’ and ‘text’ and the relation between the two call our attention to the matter of voice and how it is sounded in the written word. What of the speaking subject whom the reader surely finds in words marked on paper? Michèle Grossman’s own voice can be heard in her writing. In this way her writing is performative, reminding the reader that even a text as formally ‘literary’ as this one is still always shaped by the oral, and the aural. Grossman has made sure that we can hear something of her voice by placing herself in the text from the outset:

I come from a diasporic Hungarian-Jewish-New York heritage . . . Diasporic Ashkenazi Jews come from a long tradition of vivid oral storytelling and folklore; we were all great talkers, and both the family . . . and the community culture in which I grew up possessed healthy caches of Jewish tales, riddles, jokes, and folk histories from Europe and the early years of the New York Jewish ghetto. (xvii–xviii)

Who among her readers would fail to turn their ear towards the text that follows, and trace in it some of the timbre, the accents, of this Hungarian Jewish New Yorker-Australian? The push towards orality is in all of us, it seems. The body is inscribed in the written word as much as in the spoken word and can’t be resolved along the oral/literate binary. The vibrancy of Grossman’s voice in this book shows how very bodily—how very oral—writing and reading really are.

Alison Ravenscroft, La Trobe University