

Questions of Uncertainty

The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race

By Alison Ravenscroft

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Reviewed by Timothy Steains

THE POSTCOLONIAL EYE EXPLORES THE LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND VISION IN white practices of reading what Alison Ravenscroft calls 'Indigenously signed texts' (1). Ravenscroft questions the extent to which white readers can make sense of Indigenous texts due to the radical difference between white and Indigenous racial and cultural identity, as well as the sheer lack of knowledge of Indigenous culture on the part of the white reader. The book attempts to productively highlight the significant gaps in the white gaze on Indigenous cultural practices, emphasising how much 'falls from view' (1). However, in the process of acknowledging 'places where reading cannot go on' (2), *The Postcolonial Eye* asks how the white reader can in fact continue reading, 'not now to trespass or colonise but instead acknowledging radical difference—sovereignty' (1).

Part I of Ravenscroft's book outlines the theoretical argument of how the white seeing and reading 'eye' constitutes the 'I' of the white self. It begins with the image of two Aboriginal girls, Edna Walker and Doreen Barber, at Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland where the girls grew up after being taken from their families. Ravenscroft wants to understand how to read, and write of, this scene of deprivation and suffering, and borrows from W.G. Sebald's interest in 'the literature of the Second World War and its failure, in Sebald's estimation, to figure an embodiment of trauma' (18). Additionally Ravenscroft employs Adorno's arguments about the unspeakable nature of certain types of suffering to argue that the traumas of Indigenous Australians cannot, likewise, be either represented nor properly read or understood by the white reader.

In drawing attention to that which the white reader cannot see, Ravenscroft invokes Lacan's theories on anamorphosis where 'a certain form that wasn't illustrated at first sight transforms into a readable image' (23). Take for example the image of the black urn on a white background that can also be seen as two

silhouetted faces in profile; the urn can be seen in the foreground at one moment, and can also be the background to the profiled faces at another. One cannot view both these images in the one instance, and this 'points to the annihilation of ourselves as all-seeing subjects' (23). Ravenscroft utilises the notion of anamorphosis to argue that there is much, in the Indigenous text, that 'fails to appear for white western eyes' (24).

Ravenscroft argues that the process of reading Indigenous texts interpellates white readers as white. As the book later illustrates, Ravenscroft's definition of 'text' includes that written on paper, skin or canvas, 'it is sometimes a photograph or a film...it is bodies in movement...It can be the country itself' (1-2). The white reader attempts to

stabilise an 'I' for herself around the nodes of race, searching in the text for an image that inspires her to say 'I am this'—the image that in her eyes bears a white face—and just as significantly another image against whom this subject who aspires to whiteness can say: 'I am *not* that'. (26)

However if white readers cannot interpret images of Indigenous people, then this interpellation happens on decidedly shaky grounds. This leads to the assertion that 'there is no certain and stable white subject' (27), and Ravenscroft employs this argument to ask whether it creates room for reading and writing differently:

How can a white subject read and write her other so as to refuse the call to perfect whiteness, so as not to repeat again whiteness in its old forms: whiteness as trespass and possession, as refusing the others' sovereignty, their difference? (27)

Part II continues on the theme of the limits of white vision and knowledge and how this contributes to the unstable constitution of the white subject. Chapter 2 discusses Paddy Roe's story of 'The Donkey Devil', the women only *Yawulyu* Dreaming ceremonies of the Warlpiri, and the art of Emily Kame Ngwarreye. It emphasises how white readers cannot possibly see the 'The Donkey Devil,' which Roe insists lives in the country, although it does not immediately present itself as visible. It focuses on how Ravenscroft cannot share the relationship to land that the Warlpiri women have, and how she cannot understand Indigenous art from the central desert. The following chapter reads Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*; Ravenscroft criticises white critics' attempts to make sense of the novel, and highlights the fact that 'the text works to effect our disorientation, even our disappearance from the scene it imagines' (57). The section continues by exploring the critical reception of Wright's *Carpentaria*, making a pointed criticism of the tendency to read Indigenous Law as magic realism. The novel, Ravenscroft writes, puts 'under strain white readers' assurance that they can

decide what is real and what is magical' (67). Ravenscroft then looks at Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs' influential work *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* and her criticisms cohere around the argument that Gelder and Jacobs' characterisation of the Indigenous sacred as 'always in a position of negotiation' (Ravenscroft 87), undermines the difference and sovereignty of the Indigenous sacred.

Part III begins an inquiry, that animates the rest of the book, into the nature of the white desiring gaze on Indigenous people, bodies and texts. It begins with an examination of Rita Huggins' autobiography *Auntie Rita*, and focuses on the seemingly perverse surveillance of Huggins by various government agency employees during her life. The next chapter begins by looking at Tracey Moffatt's short film *Nice Coloured Girls* and American feminist critic E. Ann Kaplan's reading of it. It highlights the role that women, such as Kaplan, can play in subjecting Indigenous bodies to sexualised and imperialistic gazes. Ravenscroft goes on to interrogate both Mary Gaunt's travel writing and the Australian critics that write about it, noting the perverse way Gaunt objectifies and sexualises the bodies of various 'others' (113). Chapter 8 looks at Agnes Semple's photography of Indigenous people in the Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement. Ravenscroft looks at the way Semple seems to generate perverse pleasure in staging pantomimes that demean Indigenous people.

The final section, Part IV, contains two chapters that explore Kim Scott's *Benang*. The first begins with a discussion of black face in the novel and the way that this performance of race in fact constitutes the performers' whiteness through its construction of the other. Ravenscroft then directs our attention to the character Ern Scat's deeply perverse desire for his daughters and grandson. Scat has sexual relations with these family members out of an obsession with the desire to breed out their Indigeneity. In the second chapter Ravenscroft argues that the text resists and subverts the white reader's enjoyment—their scopophilia—by staging the spectacle of another's suffering in this way.

The Postcolonial Eye makes strong contributions to the field in its argument about the limits of white reading practices. Through her important criticisms of existing scholarship, Ravenscroft raises pressing questions that lead us to think further about the role of racial interpellation in the process of reading. However the second half of the book tends to neglect these issues and concentrates instead on the nature of the white desiring gaze on and in Indigenous texts; especially those gazes that suggest perversion and problematic sexual desire. This critique does not come across as uninteresting or unimportant, but it means that the book divides itself between two seemingly disparate critical interests. Ravenscroft does not fully resolve this tension; others have already noted the lack of a concluding chapter (Maxwell and Kelada 7).

As Maxwell and Kelada have already argued, the book does not attempt a thorough answer to the question of whether the white reader can continue to read in a way that does not 'trespass' or 'colonise'(7). While this reviewer does not expect hard answers to this difficult question, the open-endedness that results leaves Ravenscroft open to criticism. The fact that this book focuses less, as Ravenscroft writes, on Aboriginal people and more on 'the white subjects who look at them' (3), means that Ravenscroft runs a serious risk of re-centring whiteness; as Richard Dyer writes, 'the point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it' (10). Ravenscroft accentuates this risk by often creating significant space for interrogations of her own reading practices, 'this postcolonial eye is my own after all; its vision and its blindness are my own' (3).

Ravenscroft has spoken back to the accusation that her theorisations on racial interpellation are too ambiguous ('Another Way' 3), and yet I still find uncomfortable possibilities for re-centring whiteness in her claims. While Ravenscroft argues for the construction of race in the act of reading, she also writes that 'one never grasps [the ideal of whiteness]; one never possesses an ideal or fully occupies its place' ('Another Way' 3). However, Ravenscroft's argument that 'there is no white reader before the textual processes of his or her formation' ignores the fact that for Althusser, interpellation means that even before the process of being hailed as subjects, 'individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*' (1505). Surely individuals are always already interpellated racially by the 'text' that always exists in the social world outside of the bounds of the book or the image. My concern is that the move to destabilise the coherency of whiteness overlooks the social realities of racial hierarchy and domination. Ravenscroft's position sounds like an all too familiar race traitor argument, and without a clear answer to the question of what this unstable white subject can do, I find myself hard pressed to defend Ravenscroft against Maulana Karenga's point that,

focussing on Whiteness as a concept can degenerate into a project that results in treating Whiteness as simply an intellectual problem of abnormal and contradictory thought and "invention" rather than a social problem of domination, unequal wealth and power, injustice and unfreedom. The problem is not White attitudes but White domination. (Anonymous 26)

Ravenscroft maintains that she makes a space for Indigenous knowledge in white reading practises, she wants to 'give it a space where it can remain what it is—unknowable, unspeakable, invisible' (18). This raises the problem of Gayatri Spivak's question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' While Ravenscroft intends for *The*

Postcolonial Eye to be 'a book of experimental criticism ('Another Way' 1), a lack of theorisation on the possibilities of communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people also means that Ravenscroft could be read as assigning a position from which Indigenous people cannot in fact speak to the dominant discourse. The work in the body of the book claims the opposite of course, Ravenscroft rightly points out that Indigenous readers write to white readers and actively limit the reaches of their reading eyes. What does this say about the tension between the knowable and unknowable aspects of Indigenous texts? Perhaps this isn't, after all, a book only about white readers, but also Indigenous writers. What interplay between knowledges can Ravenscroft thus show us, whilst maintaining the autonomy and sovereignty of her Aboriginal authors?

One could argue however, that the desire for answers to these lingering questions misses the point of the book. As Ravenscroft notes, *The Postcolonial Eye* argues not for the accumulation of knowledge; rather, it wants to imagine a reader who 'relinquishes the objects of knowledge she had previously held onto so dearly' (27). Ravenscroft thus brings to the fore important tensions and unresolved issues in Australian whiteness studies. She challenges readers in the field to further interrogate the many problems she raises, and takes a significant step towards directing the scholarship 'away from assured knowledge and towards uncertainty and doubt and the creativity that these might evoke' ('Another way' 1). Her book embodies this important disruptive work, and will surely engender further critical and creative energy in Australian studies of race.

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