

Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity

Anne Elias

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Reviewed by Erica Seccombe

I BEGAN ANNE ELIAS'S BOOK *CORAL EMPIRE: UNDERWATER OCEANS, COLONIAL TROPICS, Visual Modernity* on the same day I heard Australian Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack's comments at the August 2019 Pacific Islands Forum, at which, among calls for urgent response to climate change, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison had declined to agree to the terms of the Pacific Nations Declaration.¹ McCormack's remark, aimed at Pacific Nations leaders critical of the Australian government's inaction, was that it is Australian aid, along with more fruit-picking jobs, that would secure the survival of Pacific nations people. In his keynote address, the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga, expressed how deeply insulting these words were, with their implication that Pacific Islanders should express gratitude for Australian aid and shut up about climate change. As the ocean levels rise in height and temperature, the small-island nations are experiencing the loss of land and sea territories along with the potential loss of histories, cultures, economies, communities, traditions and way of life. Morrison, McCormack and their political allies might perceive that they stand on richer, bigger and higher ground, but their ambivalence toward these serious issues fails to address that this environmental catastrophe is global.

With coral as its central object of focus, Elias's book leads us through a cultural discourse that reveals how underwater photography and filmmaking in the early 20th century heralded another form of colonisation. It offers an extraordinary framework from an art-historical perspective through which to understand how Eurocentric bravado has led us all into this environmental crisis. *Coral Empire's* unique perspective on early-twentieth-century underwater visual culture provides a perspective from which to criticise contemporary political views (such as those of the present Australian Government), and their perception of underwater life as an inexhaustible commodity to be endlessly exploited, and their

¹ See Kate Lyons, 'Australia Removes Climate "Crisis" from Pacific Islands Draft Declaration', *The Guardian* 15 August 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/15/australia-removes-coal-and-climate-crisis-references-from-pacific-islands-declaration>>.

condescension to traditional owners of the Pacific regions. In a study that provides background to our present crisis, Elias interrogates the agency and rise of modern visual culture in promoting pre-conceived racial stereotyping and human-centric biases toward non-human life.

The narrative of *Coral Empire* is cleverly structured around the underwater photography and filmmaking activities, in the 1920s, of two men, the American John Ernst Williamson (1881-1966) and the Australian James Francis Hurley (1885-1962). Elias found no record of them ever meeting but she introduces them both as similarly masculine, adventurous khaki-wearing image hunters and tireless self-mythologisers who 'were dedicated to expanding the reach of the Western world into territories they imagined it was their right to take' (8). By focussing on Williamson's exploits in the Bahamas and Hurley's in the Great Barrier Reef, the book investigates separate geographic locations that are connected by a long history of British colonisation. Williamson's and Hurley's images and films that captured life beneath the surface of the oceans were instrumental in further promoting the concept of Empire. By creating a modern spectacle of coral reefs off the coasts and atoll islands of the Atlantic and the Pacific, these men presented the underwater tropics as Earth's last unknown frontier that could only be seen to be believed. Because their images were mass-produced and widely disseminated, they also fostered the false perception that these oceanic realms were uninhabited, awaiting to be discovered and occupied.

Elias positions Williamson and Hurley as pioneers within the emerging field of underwater photography and shows how they modernised optical perspective by changing the angle from looking down through the water's surface to a submerged view that brings us eye-to-eye with marine life. Both men play a role in the history of technological invention, where lenses are used to extend human vision in order to see phenomena that occur beyond the normal boundaries of human perception. Elias's research reveals just how influential these two men's marine activities and coral images have been on the development of Western visual culture, tourism and the modern psyche. The cornerstone of her discoveries is a photograph that Williamson took of coral in the Bahamas in 1929, which was used to illustrate an article in the *New York Times*, 'The Coral World Beneath the Waves That the Williamsons Invaded'. The same image was mysteriously appropriated and retitled 'The Treasure Bridge of the Australian Great Barrier' by André Breton for his book *Mad Love (L'amour Fou, 1937)*. In keeping with surrealist-aesthetic devotion to exploring the hidden depths of ordinary things, the underwater world perfectly symbolised for Breton the landscape of the unconscious mind, or the possibilities of the imagination. How Elias explores this mystery and brings another dimension to this seemingly improbable connection with the very coral depicted in this image, I leave for the reader to discover.

Many surprising and bizarre connections are made in this book. Both Williamson and Hurley took inspiration from the French author and playwright Jules Verne's maritime adventure *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Williamson named his submersible device—the 'photosphere'—'Jules Verne' in honour of his hero, and used it to pioneer underwater cinematography, some of which appears in the first feature movie of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (dir. Stuart Paton, 1916). Hurley, like Williamson, was often referred to as 'Captain Nemo'. While they busily promoted themselves as fearless and intrepid explorers of the deep, Elias reveals that 'bravado about underwater photography and underwater exploration belied the insecurities and shortcomings of sometimes-frail heroes' (231). Within each photograph are hidden truths in plain view, hinting at invisible events taking places just outside the frame.

Elias analyses the legacy of the kinds of mindsets that Williamson and Hurley cultivated in the pursuit of dramatic material. They depicted the ocean depths as beautiful but treacherous, populated by such gruesome and predatory creatures as sharks, eels, giant octopuses and giant clams. In doing so they promoted the idea that the sea should be like an aquarium, staged and stocked entirely for our amusement and leisure, with animals ultimately culled for the sake of human interest. Elias makes the point that their negative depiction of the ocean was powerful enough to turn the public against marine life altogether. It is interesting to reflect how this linear way of perceiving the world continues to prevail. Consider how often sharks are described as both evil and the enemy by mainstream media and conservative politicians, and the ongoing debate about shark nets and drum lines being used to make the sea a more pleasurable and safer environment for human beings.

Elias argues that this representation went further than just fostering ideas of non-human life as an expendable and unlimited resource because it projected onto the ocean a system of difference. Even more shameful is how the non-white maritime people of these regions were also typecast in their films and photographs as subordinates. As Elias explains this emerging visual culture promoting this social division was so dangerously influential that Australian children from a very young age, 'learned through popular imagery to recognise and stereotype racial difference and species difference, to imagine both the racial and the animal Other as savage and terrifying, and to displace animality onto the bodies of Indigenous peoples' (109). Thus, these images and films, 'need to be considered in how race-thinking was shaped in Australia' (108). These views of difference (and indifference) to both humans and non-humans in contemporary Western societies derive from these historical attitudes of superiority.

At the heart of this book is an examination of the conceptual thinking of how we have constructed our knowledge of the world around us. In deconstructing

Williamson and Hurley's views of a coral world separated off by the glass of the lens, fish tank or porthole, the author raises questions about how their underwater techniques instilled notions of detachment and distance between the viewer and subject. Elias rethinks the concept of nature through recourse to making explicit the more conscious forms of embodiment that might generate more subjective experiences and connect us more deeply with the living world. From the perspective of diving beneath the surface of the ocean she considers how through the act of immersion, as both a physical and philosophical experience, we can re-imagine ourselves and our place in the world through new ways of knowing. Rather than seeing corals and their environments from a position of human advantage, they can be seen as, 'a powerful agent and participant in the creation of a "political ecology" in which humans and nonhumans are today entangled and not separate' (319).

In response to a future characterised by of environmental uncertainty there is a growing movement in contemporary art to test the effectiveness of employing phenomenological methodologies, such as embodiment and immersion, to connect individuals with ecological concepts or opportunities for self-reflection. So, for me, as a visual artist in the 21st century, I found this book to be of critical significance. We now live in a techno-scientific society in an era of accelerated environmental change that is witnessing the rapid extinction of plants and animals, the melting of ice caps, glaciers and permafrost, and where the rising temperatures are bleaching the beautiful, vibrant coral reefs. Rather than racing to the Barrier Reef to see and believe, it is now more a case of getting there to see what's left in order to believe it ever existed. By examining the history of visual modernity through Williamson and Hurley's photographs and films of the coral reefs, Elias shows just how important it is to interrogate the past in order to understand the present, and hopefully, empower us to change our future and embrace more receptive and open-minded relationships with our planetary environments.

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