

International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies

Volume 8, Number 2, 2015

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

By Alison Ravenscroft, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012

reviewed by Ryan Topper, (PhD candidate)
University of Leeds

Reading Race as a Stranger to Oneself

The first chapter of Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* begins with a description of a photograph, property of the South Australian Museum, series AA346. This photograph is one of thousands taken during the Board for Anthropological Research's Harvard and Adelaide Universities' 1938 expedition. In it, two Murri girls stare at us, one with a shaved head, the other wearing a card marked 'N1474'. What we see in this photograph, the violence of colonial history, is striking, but equally (perhaps more) striking, Ravenscroft suggests, is what we fail to see. "Who were these girls and what happened to them after the camera closed its eye and the photographer turned away?" she asks (7). Although we can see signs of colonial subject formation—exemplified by the name 'N1474'—no matter how closely we look, we cannot see the girls' fate, nor the fate of the researcher behind the camera, the one "who looked upon an image from which he excluded himself but in which he was implicated nevertheless" (7). Furthermore, "How [are we] to bring such a scene into writing?" Ravenscroft asks, implicating herself (as well as us, as readers of cultural studies and co-viewers of this photograph) in the categorical violence perpetrated by the invisible photographer (7).

In her short, opening paragraph of self-referential, close reading, Ravenscroft performs for us her argument, which she then articulates. "I am interested in gaps in representation", she writes, as well as the "stitches that non-Indigenous Australian readers of Indigenous textuality tend to make to cover these gaps" (8). Put another, more specific way, throughout her book, Ravenscroft focuses on the gaps in representation that an Australian 'settler-reader' encounters when interpreting 'Indigenous-signed text[s]' that formally attempt to represent the traumas of colonial race relations (2). Through this focus, Ravenscroft is equally interested in the Indigenous literary and cultural texts under examination, as well as her own affective experience of grasping, by not grasping, these texts. As she puts it, she is drawn to "literary practice where our gaping mouths (agape at times in horror, at others in wonder) are not stopped up with numbers and facts", inferring that what we see in the black and white photograph from the first paragraph—subjects marked by the collection of numbers and facts—misses the point (15). The point is what we do not, cannot, see, or, more precisely, the affective response that arises when non-Indigenous readers of 'Indigenous-signed' texts, despite being given numbers and facts, necessarily fail to see Indigenous subjects.

Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution.
ISSN 1837-0144



© The Author(s) 2015 <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcis.v8i2.127>

Consequently, for Ravenscroft, “the truth of images might lie in what fails to appear as much as what is in view” (11), which means that “fragmentation, gaps and silences” are not constituted by what is left out of the story, but rather, these gaps “are the story” (13).

Ravenscroft’s psychoanalytic premise is the belief that gaps constitute the truth of the text from which they are excluded. Her postcolonial premise is the belief that, in Australian texts, these gaps reveal the complexities of the settler/native relation. Her feminist premise is the belief that, while reading these texts, her affective experience of witnessing her own failure to see that which produces her field of vision should become a hermeneutic focal point. Ravenscroft’s reading imperative can thus be summed up as, do not ignore constitutional gaps—both in the text being read and the reader’s response. This theoretical framework necessarily places Ravenscroft’s work in relation to contemporary theory’s focus on trauma (and our failure to witness trauma).

Perhaps the most widely discussed aporia of psychoanalytic trauma theory is as follows: It is not that the subject misses the traumatic event, but rather, that the traumatic event is produced by being missed and, therefore, any cultural theory of trauma must articulate this constitutional gap, but this gap can only be articulated by pointing out the inability to articulate it (Caruth 1996, 2013; Derrida 1996; Felman & Laub 1992). This aporia is, in (hasty) sum, Ravenscroft’s theoretical lens: She focuses on the trauma of reading Indigenous texts as a non-Indigenous reader and missing the Indigenous traumas that, in its being missed, constitute the texts under observation. Curiously, however, although Ravenscroft’s book necessarily enters the highly debated discourse of postcolonial trauma studies (Craps 2013; Rothberg 2009), she does not announce this theoretical context. At first glance, one might believe Ravenscroft to be more interested in her own acts of reading Australian literature and culture as, in her words, a white subject “coming to read and write itself and its racialised others differently”, than she is in contemporary metacritical debates about such acts of reading (27).

Although some readers may find Ravenscroft’s neglect of the debates surrounding the interpretation of postcolonial trauma problematic, I find it to be refreshing (imagine, a literary critic more interested in reading literature than in debating critical terms!) Furthermore, to claim that Ravenscroft neglects metacritical debates is untrue: Australian cultural studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis take centre stage throughout Ravenscroft’s analyses and, in my opinion, the best parts of the book are the spaces in which she reflects on her own acts of close reading by engaging with Lacanian concepts.

In response to the lack of critical attention given to Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise*, for example—which, according to Ravenscroft, most critics mistake as ‘bad art’ (56)—she argues that the novel’s “unreadability for white readers” is an effect of anamorphosis, a concept borrowed from Lacan’s famous interpretation of Holbein’s *Ambassadors* (46). For me, however, the most interesting part of Ravenscroft’s book is her chapter on Wright’s *Carpentaria*. She argues that postcolonial critics who envision the novel as magic realism unintentionally reproduce the “binary that associates Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality, with consciousness, a wakeful state” (62).

While this common claim (that postcolonial literary criticism is actually neocolonial) may not seem interesting in and of itself, Ravenscroft’s consequential analysis of both Gabriel García Márquez’s and Toni Morrison’s distaste of the term magic realism impressively places Wright in canonical context, raising questions about the global politics of literary

form. “What would be more productive”, Ravenscroft ends up claiming, “would be to return to the idea of the ‘magical’ and ‘reality’ as subjective experiences that are available in any cultural location”, and this ‘return’ leads her to psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity (67). “As Freud said,” Ravenscroft continues, “there is only one reality, and this is a psychic one, where ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’ are one and the same” (68). The desire to cast Carpentaria as magic realism thus misses the ‘magic’ of subjectivity itself: By casting Indigenous subjectivity as ‘magic’, the postcolonial critic unintentionally “disavow[s] the white subject’s own doubleness, her own ‘magic’, her own strangeness to herself” (68). This line articulates the strength of Ravenscroft’s book. Whether responding to Australian cultural critiques, such as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs’ *Uncanny Australia*, or theoretical classics like Joan Copjec’s *Read My Desire* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, whether reading anthropological photographs, blackface performances, literary or autobiographical texts, Ravenscroft unwaveringly interrogates her own experience of becoming, through encountering Indigenous traumas, a stranger to herself.

Australian literature is not my specialty, but as a white, American reader of postcolonial literature, I find *The Postcolonial Eye* disarming—at times, convicting. Anyone interested in Australian culture will find Ravenscroft’s close readings of Aboriginal fiction, film and cultural practices impressive and, for any white critics of Australian cultural studies, Ravenscroft’s Lacanian-influenced reflections about the complexities of her own desire while reading/seeing/producing non-white Australian subjects makes this book a must read.

References

- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 2013. *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Craps, Stef. 2013. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1996. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.