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Vision and Desire in Postcolonial Australia

A Conversation with Alison Ravenscroft

Kira Randolph

Abstract

Alison Ravenscroft, author of *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*, discusses her book with Kira Randolph.

About the Authors

Alison Ravenscroft is Associate Professor in English at La Trobe University, Melbourne, where she is Head of the Department of Arts & Critical Enquiry. Her research interests include Australian (neo)colonial culture, including its reach into the intimacy of everyday life. This interest is currently taking her into areas of difference and embodiment, and the different powers of bodies to feel, see and sense "country"—the term Australian Aboriginal men and women use to refer to a living, sensate world. She is also working with a team of Indigenous researchers to produce the Centre for Indigenous Story: Word, Image, Sound, a unique virtual centre for Indigenous knowledge, supported by La Trobe University. The website of the Centre for Indigenous Story will be launched in late 2014.

Originally from the United States, Kira Randolph is an art history Ph.D. candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral research explores the American reception of Australian Aboriginal art and culture during the forties, fifties, and sixties. Prior to beginning her Ph.D. in 2009, she studied a Master of Arts in Museology at the University of Washington. Her Masters thesis was a comparative analysis of Aboriginal art exhibitions within Australia to those in France and the United States. In addition to her research, Kira has taught classes in Australian, New Media, and Indigenous art.

Vision and Desire in Postcolonial Australia

Alison Ravenscroft in Conversation

Kira Randolph

Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012) makes a significant contribution to the fields of Indigenous studies, literature, and art history through its interdisciplinary exploration into depictions of contemporary Australian race in the arts since World War II. Narrated from the personal, each chapter of this book features a literary or visual scene in order to delve into ideas surrounding the interpretation, representation, and understanding of "an other" across the cultural divides

between settler and Indigenous Australia. This "an" other is a notable distinction made by Ravenscroft—rather than the historically prevalent "the other"—and her positioning is telling of her relation to radical difference. In her words "the postcolonial eye is my own;"¹ she is an active participant in both the seeing and blindness of which she speaks.

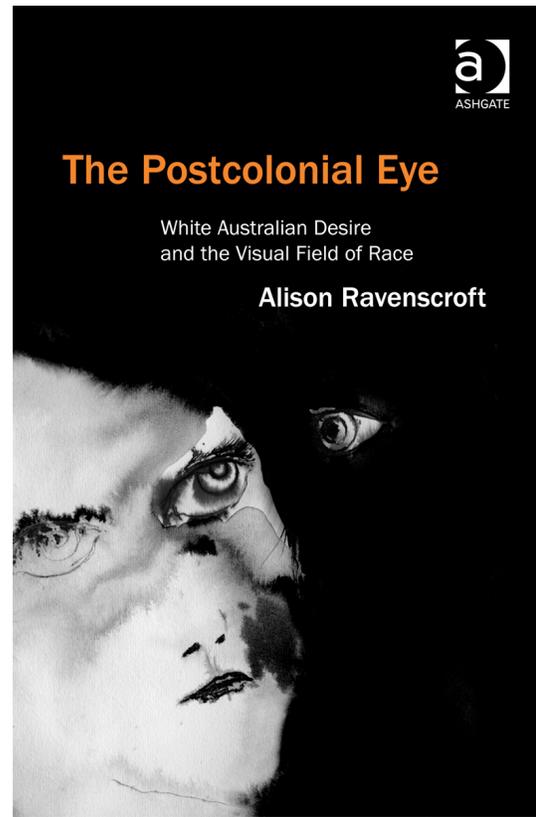
The book comprises four parts, "Part I: 'There is and can be no brute vision'" takes its point of departure from a 1938 Board for Anthropological Research Collection black and white photograph of two girls, which is discussed in relation to W.G. Sebald and post-war German literature. The four chapters in "Part II: When the Other Disappears From My Line of Sight" collectively consider Alexis Wright's first two novels: *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006),² as well as the notion of the sacred in the academic text *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1994) by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs.³ The first two chapters of "Part III: The Image of My Own Desire" are about autobiographical writing with reference to *Auntie Rita* (1994)⁴ by Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, with the final chapter about the photography of Agnes Semple from the 1920s and

¹ Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 3.

² Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1998); Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Artarmon: Giramondo, 2006).

³ Kenneth Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994).

⁴ Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994).



1930s in the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve, Queensland. "Part IV: Whiteness and its Veils" turns to Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), an exploration of the author's Nyoongar and English heritage, and considers it in relation to the reader's eye and notions of perversion.⁵

As is evident from the contents, this is a rich and complicated book that presents many important questions; far more than can possibly be answered. However, these gaps are necessarily indicative of current discourse and Ravenscroft acknowledges that reading and writing about race in postcolonial Australia is wrought with anxieties. In her discussion of *Benang* Ravenscroft concludes: "the text is often illegible. Its objects are indiscernible, one's eye passes over them in the attempt to bring some other part of the scene into focus."⁶ But her book does a great deal to illuminate and investigate the ways that Indigenous representation has been unknowable to white readership and the stitches that have been joined in an attempt to understand.

The following interview provides some of the flavor of Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*.

Kira Randolph: What inspired *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*?

Alison Ravenscroft: *The Postcolonial Eye* was inspired by Indigenous literary and visual arts, which proffer visions of the world so very different to my own. Non-Indigenous readers and viewers can find that the meanings we have always attributed to the world—to country, say, or to body, to flesh and feeling—are unsettled and denaturalized in our encounters with Indigenous arts. This is as terrifying as it is exhilarating, though: to feel the ground of one's own knowledge shift, and with it one's own subjectivity too.

KR: Chapter One opens with a photograph of two young girls from 1938; we find out that their names are Edna Walker and Doreen Barber. Out of the many thousands of photographs that you could have chosen, what was it about this one?

AR: I first saw this particular image in the memoir *Is that you, Ruthie?* by Ruth Hegarty in which she recalls the conditions under which young Aboriginal children lived in the dormitory system on Aboriginal reserves and missions in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷

The image is typical of the series of which it is a part: the Board for Anthropological Research Collection of photographs and other data on Indigenous men, women and children produced by Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell in the 1930s. But this image takes on very different meanings than the ones Tindale and Birdsell might have intended when it is held next to Indigenous men's and women's representations of themselves and their worlds; when read, for instance, in the context of Hegarty's memories of the girls, of their courage and their fineness of feeling.

Such an image morphs again when viewed, say, next to Indigenous novelist Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* which tells another story about young Aboriginal girls in the dormitories than the one Tindale or Birdsell imagined. Wright's vision puts Indigenous Law in the picture. In Wright's novel, a young dormitory girl with a shaved head and shabby dress is a carrier of the Law and therefore a carrier of vital relationships between people, and

⁵ Kim Scott, *Benang* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999).

⁶ Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, 159.

⁷ Ruth Hegarty, *Is that you, Ruthie?* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

between people and country. This young girl has the power to bring water flooding into the great dry lakes. In *Plains of Promise* this girl's power and the power of the Law are not given to us in the form of the fantastic, the magical, or as dream but as matters of fact.

In writing *The Postcolonial Eye*, I was interested in questions of the visual field and what is visible or not, depending on one's subjective position. So, whereas in Tindale's and Birdsell's eyes it seems that a young girl from Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement can be reduced to an object of their anthropometrics, in the eyes of an Indigenous viewer the same girl might be a very powerful figure, one through whom the Law works, the Law of the country itself. I was interested in how non-Indigenous readers/viewers might approach this difference, allowing its effects rather than closing it over.

KR: One of the book's interests regards gaps in representation and the stitches made by non-Indigenous Australian readers to cover these spaces; explain what you mean by this.

AR: I approach reading as a visual practice: reading always involves a scene. So, if the visual is understood to be partial, subjective and shaped along the lines of our desires, then the scene one can see in reading must be partial, too, and similarly structured by desire. My questions then became concerned with what these desires are that structure our ways of seeing, reading, and imagining each other in neocolonial contexts.

The Postcolonial Eye makes a claim: that structuring white Australian vision of others is a powerful belief that we can know all, and see all there is to see, if only we are careful and canny enough. I am interested in what is lost to us because of such a belief in our capacity to see and know others. I am interested in the generative possibilities of a critical approach to literary and other arts that works with the moments that a text refuses to speak rather than against these.

KR: As an art history student, a fascinating part of the book was your reflection on being in a room with an artwork by the late Anmatyerr painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye and feeling overpowered by its beauty. Historically there have been many calls for critical engagement with Aboriginal Australian art, most recently by John Carty.⁸ To what do you attribute this dearth in criticism?

AR: Might Western critical engagement with Indigenous art stall before the question of difference; not only differences in aesthetics but differences in the objects of knowledge? It is easy to think that Indigenous arts are merely figuring the same world as the Western one, except in different aesthetic forms. If that were true, the challenge would simply be to develop a vocabulary through which to speak of these different aesthetics. But what to do once it is recognized that it is a different world that is being figured in this art—different ways of being human, different concepts of matter, of land, embodiment and so on? Aesthetics, then, is not empty of meaning. The forms that Indigenous arts take turn out to be figuring different objects of knowledge and perhaps also different ideas about what knowledge is, and what are its limits.

Aboriginal art has often been approached either as figuring naïve and unsophisticated creation stories or as maps of country—pictograms. More recently, and seemingly more promisingly, Aboriginal art has been approached as abstract art. It seems to me that each of these approaches, though, fails to foreground the urgent question of Indigenous knowledges

⁸ John Carty, "The Limits of Criticism," *Artlink* 33 no.2 (2013): 54-59.

and their differences from Western ones. Indigenous art always confronts me with a visual field into which I am ambiguously drawn and repelled, perhaps because of this sense that I am on the edge of another world altogether than the one I assume.

KR: You have written in many different forms. Given unlimited time and resources, what would your next book be about and what style would it take?

AR: I've started to write on questions of form itself. White Australian men and women still tend to favor realist and naturalistic forms in our efforts to write of ourselves and our times but there are other forms of writing that have more suggestive, generative powers. In this regard, we could take a lead from the Indigenous arts where playfulness, juxtaposition and contradiction, and also silence, are used to accomplish great political, ethical writing.



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