

Falling from View: Whiteness, Appropriation and the Complicities of Desire in *The Postcolonial Eye*

ANNE MAXWELL AND ODETTE KELADA

University of Melbourne

In *The Postcolonial Eye* (2012), Alison Ravenscroft takes up the challenge, emerging from critical race and whiteness studies, of writing as a white woman to interrogate and make visible whiteness. To this end she examines intersubjective reading and viewing practices that privilege and reveal whiteness in ways that perpetuate inequitable racialised power relations and 'limits to vision' (Ravenscroft 1). Specifically Ravenscroft attends to the problem of cultural appropriation as this has been and is continuing to be played out in the Australian context, thereby attempting to answer a fundamental question for postcolonial studies raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak back in 1990: how does a western critic, talk about or represent the cultures belonging to the nations that were or are still colonised without seeming to either occupy or usurp subject positions and sovereignty? (Spivak 9-11)

It is for these reasons that *The Postcolonial Eye* could be said to be timely and potentially even groundbreaking. Ravenscroft has plenty to say about the desire that inhabits white people's 'critical' reading practices. However, many will find what she has to say provocative if not disturbing since it goes to the very heart of motives for reading texts by Aboriginal authors (what she calls 'desire'), and how interpretations by white critics reinscribe imperialist structures of knowledge.

Ravenscroft begins her book by invoking Adorno's idea of the limits to representation and applying it to the anxiety of the white reader who cannot make full sense of Indigenous Australian texts. She then asks 'whether prevailing reading practices are a modern repetition of the relations of colonialism where a coloniser-settler encounters an Indigenous subject as if the self-same?' (Ravenscroft 19). Clearly Ravenscroft thinks so since she then proceeds to try and demonstrate the ubiquitous existence of this dynamic across a wide range of recent white Australian readings of various kinds of texts by Indigenous Australians.

At the same time, she introduces the idea that there is an alternative, more ethically responsible way of approaching Aboriginal texts, one which if practised assiduously, avoids the pitfalls of what most postcolonial critics would call the problem of cultural appropriation.

This is reading as a process through which we bring *ourselves* into uncertainty, through which we cause doubt to fall on our perceptions. This is an idea of reading not (or not only) as that act which brings us into knowledge, but one that puts our knowledge under pressure until we can say: 'I do not – cannot - know the other.' And then to hold with this willingness to be an unknowing reader a willingness to read anyway. (20)

What distinguishes Ravenscroft's argument or position from other recent critics who study Aboriginal texts is her assumption of an unbridgeable and permanent hiatus separating the Aboriginal and white worlds. For example, it is pointed out in Part One of the book that despite there being 'no Indigenous cultures that exist in a 'pre-contact' zone...[t]his book takes seriously the possibility that there are things in Indigenous-signed textuality that we do

not see, even when we are told they are there to be seen.’ (22) This in turn sets Ravenscroft to asking: ‘are there things that subjects constituted as white cannot know or imagine? Are there some things that fall out of view?’ Again such questions are purely rhetorical since she then goes on to maintain there are things missing from white knowledge and experience, which she claims can never be known or experienced precisely because the subjects as such have been constituted as white.

This raises the question of whether the ‘we’ of her book can be constituted otherwise and if so how? This is where Ravenscroft’s argument becomes interesting. On the one hand, she says white readers read as westerners with a consequent predilection for appropriation that is predominantly unconscious, or invisible, but on the other she also says ‘reading is a process that opens up the possibility of change’. (27) According to her, this happens if the white reader says ‘perhaps she is not that white image after all...’ in which case, ‘the subject moves positions vis à vis whiteness’. (27) Here ‘she’ is ‘not pinned down by that perfect image of whiteness’, but through the ‘accumulation of knowledge’ starts to see differently and to relinquish ‘some of the objects of knowledge she had previously held so dearly’ (27) This introduces a shifting logic that is difficult to clarify.

Leaving aside for a moment the question of what she means by ‘white’ and even whether white people all read the same way as she tends to imply, what is being emphasised here is the idea of reading as a process of meaning-making which is also subject-constituting. Drawing on psychoanalytic and deconstructionist feminist ideas and Butler’s theories around gender and performativity, Ravenscroft points out that readers are made in the act of reading, and furthermore the white reader is made white through ‘making—an other’. (25) This in turn allows her to conclude ‘there is no white reader before the textual processes’ (25), which is another way of saying that because whiteness is ‘fantasmatic’ and the product of prevailing discourses, it is never secured and consequently has to be remade over and over again.

That whiteness might be able to undergo some sort of reconfiguration is of course precisely what Ravenscroft is hoping for, with her book serving as the spur if not guide for reading Aboriginal texts or at least whiteness around ‘othered’ textuality. It is an argument that is assisted by the realisation that the acts of reading which lead to self-constitution are visual acts not only because they involve image making, but also because they are essentially ways of ‘looking’ at things. Hence the claim that ‘Reading concerns the production of images, it always involves a scene - a process of selection and arrangement in which some parts of the text are brought into view while others ‘are allowed to fall’ (26).

Obviously the term ‘visual’ is not being used in the sense of ocular so much as ‘view-point, or ‘frame of knowledge’. The implication is that new points of view, or new frameworks of knowledge, have the capacity to change peoples’ subjectivities and hence their approach to representation, for the better. This is promising. However, as argued here, it may depend upon a possible disavowal of whiteness. This in itself can be a debatable move given arguments around white privilege. The fact that whiteness may be socially constructed does not necessarily enable such a positionality or its attendant objects to be relinquished if desired.

Having used the Introduction to set up her basic premise, Ravenscroft then proceeds to provide evidence for her claim that a number of white scholars are reading Aboriginal texts in a problematic because appropriative manner without them being aware of the fact. However, she also provides examples of the kinds of readings that are necessary in order that the

epistemic violences integral to white ways of reading do not occur, or occur with less frequency than is the case at present.

Thus Chapter Two invokes Paddy Roe and his story of the Devil donkey to illustrate the extent of difference between the white and Indigenous visions of the country. Chapter Three is a reading of Alexis Wright's novel *Plains of Promise* aimed at showing the kinds of things that fall from view when white people read texts by Aboriginal authors. In Chapter Four Ravenscroft argues that despite the application of familiar frameworks such as magical realism and the anthropological approach, critics still don't know what to make of Wright's novel *Carpentaria* and get 'lost in the reading' (60). Chapter Five offers a critical reading of Ken Gelder and Jane Jacob's *Uncanny Australia*. Here, Ravenscroft aims to expose what she believes is their underlying anxiety about not being truly settled or 'belonging'. In Chapter Six Ravenscroft turns her critical gaze on the files kept on Rita Huggins by a government agency for more than thirty-two years reading them as exemplary examples of the white raced colonisers' exclusive right to look (including in this case perversely), because they assume the 'black other' is 'unseeing'. In Chapter Seven she continues to turn the critical gaze on the self by examining the desire impelling American critic E. Ann Kaplan's essay on Tracey Moffat's film *Nice Coloured Girls* and Gillian Whitlock's analysis of Mary Gaunt's travel writings. Chapter Eight reads Agnes Semple's album photographs of Cherbourg alongside the memoirs of the Aboriginal girls who were kept there, to expose a disturbing saga of neglect and sadism. The final two chapters respectively outline and criticise the modes of readings of Kim Scott's *Benang* favoured by white readers, while also urging a reading which even as it centres around the white father's sadism and perversions, also foregrounds the political significance of an aesthetics that inscribes silence, invisibility and irrecoverable loss.

Despite the range and variety of the texts examined and the many insightful observations proffered, it soon becomes obvious that the author's critical framework, including the way she approaches the texts, is fairly narrow. Thus although the book does indeed offer at times valuable insights about white criticism, the gaze and aesthetic practices that are thought-provoking for contemporary scholarship on whiteness, it also dissatisfies. We are surprised, for example, that for a book so deeply invested in concepts and theories of whiteness and Indigeneity, there is a lack of real engagement with Australian whiteness and race theory. Particularly anomalous is the failure to engage with the work of prominent Indigenous theorist on whiteness, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (with the exception of two brief footnotes directing readers to see her 'extensive body of scholarship' see Ravenscroft 137n9 and 138n11).

In the seminal *Talkin Up to the White Woman*, Moreton-Robinson writes:

Although white women have theorized for, and about, the social location of Indigenous women and their experiences, they have not written from what [bell] hooks calls 'the location of experience'. She states that 'when initiating theory from the location of experience, one can be less concerned with whether or not you will fall into the trap of separating feminist theory from concrete reality and practice'. (Moreton-Robinson, *Talking Up* 150)

In reading *The Postcolonial Eye*, it becomes evident that problems can arise with articulating 'location of experience' when there is a disjuncture between theoretical language and reflexivity—thus when the 'postcolonial eye' of the title appears conflated uncritically as a

white eye, what prevents it folding back into the white narcissism, universality and the possessive impulse it critiques? Ravenscroft writes:

What has emerged is a book ... about the white subjects who look at them [Aboriginal people], and I am necessarily implicated as one of those white seeing subjects. This postcolonial eye is my own after all; its vision and its blindness are my own. (3)

Ravenscroft clearly attempts to own the vestiges of whiteness as part of the limits of her subjectivity. However, as Sara Ahmed argues with regard to declarations of whiteness, a declarative act is not in itself transcendent. It does not necessarily perform that which it speaks (Ahmed, *Declarations of Whiteness*, 2004). In this case, saying one is the subject of analyses ('indeed I make myself one of my subjects of critique' Ravenscroft 102) does not mean that the author's location of experience is clearly communicated or explored in practice. In this book about white Australian desire, it can feel that despite all concerted efforts to the contrary, it falls into the ways that white women have theorized for, and about, the social location of Indigenous people and their experiences. For example, when Ravenscroft describes the need to 'avert' her eyes from a painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye as it is 'unassimilable' until she has the painting translated for her by a non-Indigenous guide (in this case Biddle who can 'lure her back to the art'), it is hard not to think of tourist exchanges (41-42). The opening questions to the book are a case in point. They indicate the challenges ahead as Ravenscroft asks:

What new ways of seeing might be possible if a white subject were to approach Indigenous cultural practices as a stranger or foreigner might, not now to trespass or colonise but instead acknowledging radical difference—sovereignty? Is that possible or is a white subject destined always to approach Indigenous subjects and their textualities as versions of herself? (1)

This sets up the tone of an enquiry where it may be possible for a subject with the descriptor of 'white' to not colonise, trespass and possess, suggesting that whiteness is able to be constructed (or disavowed?) outside of possessive logic rather than intrinsically colonising in its historic and social formation. Given that racial classifications constructed white supremacy and developed within imperial tropes, definitions of a whiteness able to divorce such traits would benefit from being further elucidated.

A number of the analyses in the book focus predominantly on Indigenous texts, including Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, Kim Scott's *Benang*, as well as a discussion of blackface and images of Aboriginal people. This in turn invites the question: what does it mean for a white author to analyse Indigenous-signed texts as Ravenscroft refers to them, highlighting the ways white readings reveal more about white desire and perceptions? On one hand, this works productively to subvert and unmask whiteness and how it constructs 'Otherness'. But then why does it not feel as revelatory as say Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* which explores images of blackness in white American literature to reveal how black bodies have been used to play out white fantasies and anxieties.¹ There is something disconcerting about a white author using Indigenous texts to focus on and examine whiteness, particularly when based on arguments of radical difference and 'strangeness'. Do these texts then become the grounds for the very critique Morrison made around the presence of the 'other' used for imaginative encounters through which white writers 'think about themselves', operating as a moral yardstick for ethical debate and white self-reflexivity?

(Morrison 51) There is a fine balance to be struck between the possibilities of re-centering whiteness and orientalising while aiming for deconstruction or new ways of seeing.

It is curious that despite the large amount of Indigenous related content, the title omits any reference to Indigenous texts but rather uses the terms of white desire and race. While ‘race’ is in the subtitle, there is no discussion by Ravenscroft of any other ‘races’ or ‘multiculturalism’, as may be thought possible given contemporary debates. The absence of any term indicating the book is about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations can feel like an erasure of the specificity inside the covers. She poses the question ‘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 others’ sovereignty, their difference?’ (27) In the phrasing itself, there is a slippage between the other as possessed, ‘her other’, and the ‘other’ as sovereign subject that is puzzling. Again, knowing how the author engaged with the tensions implicit to such theorising would have added to the book’s critical and intellectual pull.

There is a moment in the book where Ravenscroft is discussing Agnes Semple, the Superintendent’s wife and her photographs at Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement in the 1920s and 1930s. The photographs she argues are composed according to Semple’s ‘lines of sight and her desire, and from them we might be able to trace the coordinates of her viewing position, looking at her looking at her others (And, can you see *my* desiring, seeing “I”?)’ (116). The aside here in brackets exemplifies the tone of a secretive intimacy—the colluding whisper—that can come across as condescending, particularly given it is now well over half way through the book. There is also the problematic use of the word ‘we’ throughout to address the reader. Ravenscroft states in a footnote that the ‘we’ is selected consciously and that rather than the dominating and universalizing ‘we’ of white texts, which suggests as she notes that ‘no one else is in the conversation’, her usage is about implicating ‘ourselves in the critique rather than always locating whiteness in others’ (45n1). This is commendable, however, it is not utilized in a way that displaces or avoids the original critique and given the framing arguments are about radical difference, it often creates an exclusive ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary, speaking as it does consistently to a white readership and ‘eye’. A personal approach with first person voice works when Ravenscroft speaks in her ‘I’, suggesting that the book would have been more engaging with this ‘I’ embodied, locating her own experience in practice. There is a strong tradition of this in whiteness theory. Australian scholar, Fiona Nicoll illustrated the power of ‘I’ in her self-reflexive essay ‘Indigenous Sovereignty and the Violence of Perspective: Coming Out as a White Woman’ declaring:

I’m buggered if I’m going to be stuck out here in the first person pronoun and let you get away with it. I can be perfectly ‘civilised’ in the third person voice. But this is personal. I’m talking to you...Mine? Ours? His? Hers? Theirs? Its? The decision to avoid the first person pronoun was made by me (see how the passive voice creeps in) as an undergraduate student in an academy that was allegedly being transformed by the impact of postmodern theory. (375)

The effect of the ‘we’ is impacted by the way white and whiteness is referred to in Ravenscroft’s book. Intellectually, whiteness and race are framed through the text as social constructs, however at points in the argument there is a tendency to slip into more essentialising discourse. White readers and viewers manifest as a rather monolithic category without a great deal of complexity even while the historical intricacies of such racialised

classifications are clearly articulated. This can be a trap for those interested in writing about whiteness, as Ahmed notes, citing from the text *Offwhite*:

we worry that in our desire to create spaces to speak, intellectually or empirically, about whiteness, we may have reified whiteness as a fixed category of experience; that we have allowed it to be treated as a monolith, in the singular, as an "essential something" (Ahmed citing Fine, Weis, Powell and Wong 1997, xi).

While binaries are dismantled intellectually, the language continues to convey collective divisions and a homogeneity to what white people 'see' versus the 'other' which tends to collapse into what Ravenscroft herself is 'seeing'.

This adds to the dissonance evoked by the arguments around radical difference. Ravenscroft says that she has often been told that the idea of difference can be 'a very dangerous one' associated with exoticising, romanticizing, demonizing (2). She argues for the value of a book that examines what 'whites do before this gap in vision, this place where an other's strangeness cannot be tamed and assimilated' (1). It is a provocative statement, deploying as it does the ideas of difference with 'strangeness' and 'taming'. It is particularly suggestive, however, when it is bound up with so many 'selected' and some might even say 'imagined' instances of White subjects' sadistic 'enjoyment' of 'their' others. A stream runs through the analyses, perhaps due to the book's psychoanalytical influences, of an almost obsessive insistence on sexual perversion and violation of Indigenous bodies. Such traumatic material requires an ethics that does not always come across effectively in the reading. An example is in the discussion of Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* where scenes of rape and torture are juxtaposed and interspersed with academic analysis. Ravenscroft describes Jipp's raping of Aboriginal girls as enabling him to 'stabilise the critical difference' (50). Dressing the girls in dirty sacks is seen as a 'performative gesture' (49), referencing Butler and tied into Ravenscroft's own argument that this is covering over 'their radical differences from him' (50). We are not contesting the arguments here so much as questioning if the way the abstracted theory is applied to the description of the raping and abuse generates a violence in itself. The disconnect between these particular modes of psychoanalytic interrogation and bodily violation can be jarring.

Then there is the question of Ravenscroft's purpose or motive in writing this book. To so profoundly question the ethical basis of the reading practices of white Australian scholars takes nerve, not least when it partially involves taking aim at recognised scholars, including some within one's own community. It is especially so when writers' intentions, implicit or otherwise are extraordinarily difficult to prove using the techniques and methods she has chosen to work with. Ravenscroft's book might draw on a range of contemporary, mainly postmodern and psychoanalytic theorists to mount her general argument, including those specialising in ethics, but when it comes to providing proof of contemporary critics' interpretative violences it relies heavily on close readings combined with masses of assertions and a range of effective (even at times affective) rhetorical techniques that include innuendo, suggestion, and the heavy use of embedded quotations where leading words or phrases are often not in fact part of a quote but the author's own wording. The number of rhetorical questions alone is surprising and certainly more than we have encountered in any one book. The danger of such an approach is that readings can seem over-determined and even predictable. One is left to draw the conclusion that Ravenscroft believes the cause she is fighting for is worth taking risks.

This brings us to the kind and extent of change that is being touted as possible since this seems confusing for several reasons. For example, in the book's opening paragraph the claim is put that there are radical limits to vision and knowledge across the 'settler' and Indigenous cultural divide. The book is consequently arguing for aesthetic practices that allow such strangeness to be; and yet as discussed earlier, the white reader is opened up to the idea of possibly moving subject positions so as not to be pinned down by the perfect image of whiteness, but through *the accumulation of knowledge* start to see differently (27). But Ravenscroft does not suggest what knowledge exactly will be accumulated, or in what ways vision will be different. Nor does she provide any clues as to what form the new subject position of 'whiteness' might take. Also, if as she maintains, one is possessed by knowledge as much as ever possessing it, and living in a cultural context is to be entered into a particular arrangement of matter, then one is left to query how possible it could be to make the changes that Ravenscroft advocates.

Also, Ravenscroft does not explain how she arrives at her claim, resonant in articulation with essentialist ideas, that White Australians are so profoundly 'different' from Indigenous Australians. How does she know this? Given this is so fundamental to her argument it should be explained in more depth. A further question that is not answered is: if 'othering' Indigeneity is taken to the extent of 'radical difference' how can this open possibilities beyond a paralysis in a problematic discourse founded on a colonial paradigm? If two cultures (as presented in this text) are incommensurate, are readers likely to take the view that there is no point in reading given the inherent imposition of wrong (and, according to the analysis here, often perverted) interpretations? This is especially the case if reading is viewed only as a linear act culminating with a recognition or affirmation of a text's unintelligibility or opaqueness.

Finally, what are the circumstances that have made it possible for Ravenscroft to assume a position of privilege and read in a way that appears positioned as more ethical than most? How come she has asked these questions and, as implied by the tone and research presented, no one else? The basis of her authority for knowing how to read in a better way is not anywhere convincingly explained. Vital elements appear missing from her argument including a concluding chapter, which would have possibly clarified some of these points. The kind of critical work that attempts to interrogate whiteness and reveal 'imperial' eyes is invaluable and should be encouraged. However significant gaps here make for fragmented reading that is not always persuasive. To hark back to Ravenscroft's opening questions, if new ways of seeing were able to be unveiled in this book with less apparent 'trespass' or beyond emulating 'versions of herself', then scholars, including these ones, might be tempted to read with more urgency.

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¹ It is worth noting that in *Transnational Whiteness Matters*, Moreton-Robinson critiqued Morrison for the failure to address the treatment of Indigenous people in her analysis (82).