

Another way of reading *The Postcolonial Eye*

In writing *The Postcolonial Eye* I was curious to see what reading can be when it works with difference rather than assimilating it. I was interested in the generative possibilities of a reading practice that attends to gaps, to the places where a text falls silent, the places where the reading cannot go on. In these extraordinary times when Indigenous literature, visual arts and performance are remaking the arts in Australia, it seems to me that the old critical practices can no longer hold, and rather than trying to recuperate Australian critical conventions I thought I would start from another premise altogether. The premise is that these startling, shimmering texts—novels, paintings, dance and so on—cannot be captured within Western modes of thought, and that some of their vital political and aesthetic work lies not in their powers to make Indigenous worlds visible and knowable to non-Indigenous readers, as conventional criticism has it, but in their powers to unsettle such readers' assurance in their own powers to see and to know.

So, I hoped that *The Postcolonial Eye* would be read as a book of experimental criticism, one that looks for ways to effect a shift in predominant Westernised reading practices—away from assured knowledge and towards uncertainty and doubt and the creativity that these might evoke. This is a kind of reading practice that is oriented *not* towards an accumulation of knowledge but towards a discovery of its limits; a practice in which a 'white' reader of Indigenous textuality discovers the places where assumptions of privilege and possession are closed off.

Another reading

My colleagues Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada read the book very differently than I had hoped. There are many reasons why that might be so, including the limits of my own writing powers. But the book's arguments cannot be tested and no proper debate can be opened up if basic premises are as misrepresented as they are in their review of it. Sometimes a vital word or two has been skipped over, a negative for instance which completely reverses the meaning they attribute, or a line of argument is foreshortened rather than letting it run into the next sentence or paragraph, and so on. There are too many of these to speak back to all of them, and anyway readers can go to the book and make up their own minds. There are two or three particular misrepresentations that make nonsense of the book, though, and I will take some time to speak to these.

There is one point that I really take issue with, and this concerns what they find to be the book's 'almost obsessive insistence on sexual perversion and violation of Indigenous bodies', due they suspect to the book's psychoanalytic influences. I want to respond to this because it is an issue that extends way beyond any theoretical argy-bargy about literary criticism, and into the regions of very contemporary Australian race politics.

But first, what do these reviewers say about the reading practice I am proposing? They twice insist that I argue that reading can affect a change in the subject through an accumulation of knowledge. They even italicize their point for emphasis and are careful to specify page numbers where they say my claim can be found. When I turn to these pages, I find quite the opposite:

This is to make a different point that the commonsense view of reading as changing the subject through the accumulation of knowledge. This is instead to describe a process whereby a reader sees differently rather than more. This reader, rather than simply acquiring more knowledge, relinquishes some of the objects of knowledge she previously held onto so dearly. (27)

Their misrepresentation of my argument seriously affects the sense anyone could make of the book's approach, because the notion of accumulation is so very foreign to the reading practices I am experimenting with.

My starting point is that reading is a visual practice: it always involves a scene. I turn to theories of the visual to explore this, including Lacan's theory of anamorphosis which emphasizes *shifts* in one's powers to see. One does not see more when one moves positions in a visual field, one sees differently. What is crucial here is that the shift does not involve accumulation but *loss*: one scene comes into view as another one falls. I work with the Lacanian notion of anamorphosis because it suggests incommensurability between visual fields. There is no one viewing position from which one can see all; and there are limits to the viewing positions that any one subject can occupy. For Lacan, vision has its radical, subjective limitations. If reading is a visual practice, then by extension it too has its limits. This book is about these limits.

Bodies

Elsewhere in their review, Maxwell and Kelada charge me with practising a kind of cultural tourism: that I propose relying on a non-Indigenous guide such as the art critic and anthropologist Jennifer Biddle to help me see the art of Emily Kame Kngwarreye. But if they had read just a little further, to the very next paragraph, they would have found that any hope for this kind of translation of Kngwarreye's artistic vision by looking through a non-Indigenous perspective, however sophisticated, is expressly rejected.

In talking about how non-Indigenous spectators see Indigenous art, I have been interested to revisit theories of embodiment that argue that bodies are made in cultural practices (Vicki Kirby). There is no universal or essential body. There is no appeal to a universal body of feeling either, and no universal power of vision. So, I do not share Jennifer Biddle's faith that Emily Kame Kngwarreye's art insists on a non-Indigenous viewer *feeling* their way to the painting via *affect* shared with the artist. I can, unfortunately, only see Emily Kame Kngwarreye's art through my own body of feeling, made in western cultural practices (including the practice of western perspectival art).

Through cultural practices, embodied subjects (or what Elizabeth Grosz calls psychic corporealities) are made and re-made. Reading might be one of these kinds of cultural practices. But the possibilities for change might not be of the order that would allow someone like myself for instance to see fully those objects of knowledge produced in Indigenous cultural practices. I doubt I could live long enough to so thoroughly re-make my 'psychic corporeality' and the limits and possibilities of my capacities to

see, know, feel. What mindbody re-making would need to happen before I could see the donkey-devil that Paddy Roe speaks of, hear its hee-haw? Alexis Wright's grandmother told her that a tree could act very strangely if it wanted to. It has taken Alexis Wright a lifetime, she says, to understand what this meant. How long it would take me, I cannot guess.

And would the subject who desired to discover the limits of her own knowledge—forsaking some of its objects in the hope of coming to ways of seeing and knowing that would be so new to her—would this subject any longer be quite the 'white subject' she was when she started out?

'There is no white subject...'

Maxwell and Kelada are unable to decide whether I disavow whiteness or essentialise it, although I suspect these two possibilities cancel each other out. Either way, this is to misrepresent the way the book works with theories of whiteness as performative.

When whiteness is taken to be performative, it is seen not as something one *has* or *is*. There is no recourse to essentialising discourses of genetics, say, or to the colour of one's skin or hair. Instead whiteness is taken to be a racist idea, or ideal, and like all ideals, it cannot be possessed. Subjects might approximate ideals, they might approach them, but it is a fantasy to think one ever arrives at an ideal. One never grasps it; one never possesses an ideal or fully occupies its place.

Instead, 'whites' are taken to be those subjects who have been interpellated into whiteness's regime; they have answered its call. They are the subjects who desire to be white and who can successfully negotiate a position in proximity to its ideals. They are the subjects who believe they possess whiteness, and on these fantasmatic grounds demand to be accorded its privileges. In the book I suggest the clumsy neologism—'the-subject-who-desires-to-be-white'—in place of 'the white subject' not because I disavow whiteness but in order to foreground interpellation and performativity. A theory of the performativity of whiteness does not disavow whiteness but insists on its devastating effects, what after Judith Butler could be called its *killing ideals*.

Overall, there is in Maxwell and Kelada's reading of the book a refusal to travel very far with its ideas; a refusal, it seems to me, to be moved. My own efforts at working with these ideas, the places where I have tried to put doubt and uncertainty into effect and where I take up an ironic attitude to my own 'white' authority, these all pretty much disappear in the reading they present here. Even my choice of the book's title is not allowed any deliberate ambiguity despite that postcolonialism is critiqued at the outset of the book, and my own eye is always implicated in the field of vision that I am trying to describe. I am, these critics imply, narcissistic when I use the first personal pronoun, and universalising and essentialist when I use the second person plural. And so on. The book is held to have promise, to be 'potentially even groundbreaking', but I cannot find anything in the review that actually refers to what it is about the book that could be said to shift the ground of contemporary criticism.

Perversion or disavowal, again?

For Maxwell and Kelada there is in the book an obsessive insistence on 'white' men and women's sexual perversion and their violation of Indigenous bodies, attributed to

psychoanalysis's influence. But by far the greatest influence on my thinking has been the accounts of 'white' perversion given by Indigenous men and women themselves. It was Ruth Hegarty's account of her childhood at Cherbourg that brought me to see the acts of some missionaries and supervisors of Aboriginal settlements as being based in sadistic pleasure; Alexis Wright's writings, too, on the rape of girls and of women tied to trees, Kim Scott's accounts of unspeakable violations of women and children, and so on. These are stories that should bring the country down. *The Postcolonial Eye* does insist on them, and tries to find ways of pointing to them without merely repeating the violence of re-presentation. This is one of the ethical questions the book explicitly grapples with.

But that word 'obsessive' implies that my insistence is *too much*. There is a whole book to write in answer to that, but instead I would ask a reader to turn to the writings of Ruth Hegarty, Alexis Wright, Kim Scott and many others. How to bear what is there, written on the page: how to go on reading?

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