

The Aborigines in Journals of Australian Exploration

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IN "PRESENCE AND REPRESENTATION: The Other and Anthropological Writing," Johannes Fabian notes that recent critiques of ethnography, including his, were made possible by the "turn to language" in the discipline of ethnography that prepared the way for the importation of literary deconstructionism (759-60). This paper uses ethnography's critique of its linguistic practices to examine proto-ethnographical writings in journals of explorers. In particular, I want to connect with the critique of realist description, which, Fabian argues,

has been a style of anthropological writing corresponding to a mirror-of-nature theory of knowledge. A kind of knowledge that is *really* created by conventions of writing claims to be the reflection of that which is *real*. ("Presence" 762)

The highly conventionalized writing that pretends it is the unmediated transmission of the real depends upon an effaced, distant narrator. Mary Louise Pratt, analyzing landscape descriptions in exploration journals, writes that the distant narrator is

unheroic, unparticularized, without ego, interest, or desire of its own . . . able to do nothing but gaze from a periphery of its own creation, like the self-effaced, noninterventionist eye that scans the Other's body. ("Scratches" 124)

This paper seeks to question the construction and role of the effaced observer in the journals' production of the "real." It does so by connecting this effaced narrator to the descriptions of distant or hidden Europeans viewing indigenes unaware of their gaze. Both the effaced narrator and the invisible observer are products of the text, and both work to construct description as "accurate." But this desire for distant viewing and narra-

torial positions may be critiqued by destabilizing their classical epistemological assumptions. I argue that psychoanalytic approaches enable the trope of the invisible observer and Freud's analysis of voyeurism to be linked, providing a deconstructive antidote to ethnographic realism.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey discusses the way in which the construction of female as "other" within phallogentric visual discourses invokes pleasure. This creation of the female as object of desire, however, threatens to disrupt this pleasure, as the female "connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (21). Mulvey identifies two ways in which the male unconscious may escape this threat:

preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object . . . or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish . . . (21)

An analysis of the ways in which recognition and disavowal of sexual difference operate need not confine itself to speculations about the unconscious but can be used to interrogate particular discourses and their foundation within phallogentric linguistic practices. Nor does "difference" need to be restricted to the sphere of the sexual. Homi Bhabha argues that there is a structural similarity between recognition and disavowal of sexual and racial difference. Stereotypes of race that play such a prominent part in colonial discourse, he argues, are the fetishization of racial difference, working to mask the anxiety associated with this difference (161-62). I will first deal with the specular interrogation of the Aborigine—the demystification of the threatening object—in journals of exploration before examining how the journals fetishize Aboriginal culture to neutralize the anxiety of difference.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud associates the child's scopophilic investigation of the genital status of other children and adults with sadism (45, 69). Mulvey takes up this point when she notes that the scopic interrogation of the

woman (in this case, indigene) is constructed in terms of a "battle of will and strength" (21) and that this investigation of the "other" is counterbalanced by the devaluation, saving or punishment of the guilty object. The indigene in colonial discourse is invariably devalued, but also constructed as an object to be saved (from his or her ignorance, heathen beliefs, or squalor). The ethnography of exploration journals includes moments of first contact in which scopophilic interrogations are more sadistic than redeeming. The coastal surveyor, Philip Parker King, carries with him a sextant for fixing his position at sea, a theodolite to measure the earth when on inland surveys, and a magnifying glass, the most significant use of which seems to be to ignite Aborigines. King writes, in his *Narrative of a Survey of the Inter-tropical and Western Coasts of Australia Performed Between the Years 1818 and 1822*, that an Aborigine

was a good deal surprised at my collecting the rays of the sun upon my own hand, supposing that I was callous to the pain, from which he had himself before shrunk; but as I held the glass within the focus distance, no painful sensation was produced; after which he presented me his own arm, and allowed me to burn it as long as I chose to hold the glass, without flinching in the least, which, with greater reason, equally astounded us in our turn. (2:142-43)

The instrument of vision that enables knowledge generation about microscopic detail, the magnifying glass, is here (mis)used to establish an economy of pain and visual pleasure. King is the master of the experiment, administering the burn as long as he chooses to hold the glass, while the Aborigine exists only as a passive object of investigation; his subjectivity is never presented and he is neither described as exhibiting, nor is assumed, to feel pain. Moreover, the Aborigine as observing subject is not presented in this episode; even when King is illuminated with out-of-focus light the Aborigine is not credited as being an observer, though his surprise is noted. The sovereign subjectivity of King the experimenter is never threatened by a return gaze that might express a subjectivity of its own. Rather, the Aborigine is an object of examination as he burns, and his stoicism results in the "astonishment" of the party. The visual novelty and pleasure of astonishment is similar to that when the explorers ascend an eminence and are by the splendid view "repaid" for their efforts.

This economy of pleasure is present when King burns the Aborigine; the pleasure is still the explorer's, but the burden of payment is on the Aborigine. What remains in the description is the thrill of novelty for the explorer, but why the Aborigine does not react is a disturbing silence, a mystery that is not explained. The scopic interrogation of the "other" does not emerge as a successful strategy in assuaging the anxiety of difference; rather, the second avenue of escape from castration anxiety, the disavowal of difference/absence and the substitution of a fetish object, forms the basis of colonial ethnography's writing of the indigene.

The second example of the confluence of sight and power I want to examine fetishizes Aboriginal culture, and, being somewhat more complex, needs to be prefaced by two short descriptions—by the explorer and Surveyor-General of New South Wales, Thomas Mitchell, and by his rival, Charles Sturt—which utilize the same topoi. Coming upon a tribe of indigenes, Mitchell notes that they had "exactly the appearance of savages as I have seen them represented in theatres" (*Three Expeditions* 2:108). The confirmation of the accuracy of the theatre ignores the preparatory role that these same theatrical representations have had on Mitchell's perception—the Aborigines have already been prefigured in theatre and thus their appearance (as well as a host of other aspects such as motivation, behaviour, and beliefs) is already known by European observers, including Mitchell. The theatre utilizes the codes of savagery, semi-nakedness, blackness, and so on, for the purposes of display—Mitchell's comparison of their real and theatrical appearance produces the indigenes in exactly the same way, as objects to be seen, enjoyed, and understood as confirming those generalized codes constitutive of savagery. The pleasure of viewing Aborigines and their activities as theatre is also expressed by Charles Sturt, whose description of an Aboriginal camp as picturesque emphasizes that it had the "effect of a fine scene in a play" (*Narrative of an Expedition* 2:79). The importance placed on the observer's enjoyment also raises the question of the observer's metaphorical point of view.

In the first volume of *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, Sturt includes a long and somewhat tourist-like de-

scription of a corroboree. He begins by defending its inclusion, aware that a corroboree description is already a clichéd element in travel narratives:

The several descriptions which have been given by others of these scenes, might render it unnecessary for me to give my account here; but as my ideas of these ceremonies may differ from that of other travellers, I shall trespass on the patience of my readers for a few moments to describe them. However rude and savage as a corroboree may appear to those whom they are new, they are, in truth, plays or rather dramas . . . (1:83-84)

The text seems weighed down by the influence of previous descriptions; one might extend the geographical metaphor of "trespassing" used to excuse infringement on the reader's patience to say that this descriptive passage must create a space for itself, ensuring its significance by holding that it is the product of a new point of view.¹ In fact, the passage creates a particularly privileged point of view for Sturt. He is not simply an observer beyond the proscenium arch, but as he attends "family corroboree, or private theatricals" he is "let into the secrets of what takes place behind the scenes" (1:84). Sturt's intimacy with the Aborigines, then, allows him "stage access" where the mechanics of production are revealed to him. Having moved from the role of regular audience member to that of a behind-the-scenes observer, Sturt finally emerges as stage manager of the entire display:

We had some difficulty in persuading our friends to exhibit, and we owed success rather to Mr. Eyre's influence than any anxiety on the part of the natives themselves. However, at last we persuaded the men to go and paint themselves, whilst the women prepared the ground . . . on their commencing their chanting, the men came forward, emerging from the darkness into the obscure light by the yet uncherished fires, like spectres. After some performance, at a given signal, a handful of dry leaves was thrown on each fire, which instantly blazing up lighted the whole scene, and shewed the dusky figures of the performers painted and agitated with admirable effect . . . (1:84-85)

The description evinces a relishing of the visual consumption of the dance; the performance, safely contained and framed by the proscenium arches of the dominant metaphor, exists in

the description for the pleasure of the explorer, who may with trained eye admire the effect of the scene where the painted figures, frozen by the fire's sudden blazing, resemble elements in a picturesque composition.

Sturt's construction of the corroboree as play is not simply a method of understanding but a strategy of control as it reduces the ritual's suggestiveness, obscurity, and threat to the observer.² Produced as a tame piece of exotica, the corroboree is returned to the sphere of Western knowledge, first as another native "ceremony" and secondly as just like a "Covent Garden" drama. This two-step process, of constructing the corroboree as "strange" though known and then as something well understood, is paralleled by a pleasure economy of sight. The corroboree is valorized according to its aesthetic effect on the explorer's cultured eye and achieves the ultimate accolade of the tourist attraction—it is "well worth seeing." Like the nobleman's park, it is arranged for visual pleasure, and the Aborigines are coerced so that they may become exhibits.

Satisfying visually, the corroboree as ceremony disappoints Sturt. He notes a certain lack of enthusiasm, which he tentatively ascribes to the Aborigines only having recently learned the particular dance. However, he finds his own explanation unsatisfactory and the poor performance remains a puzzle:

But, as I have observed, for some reason or other the thing was not carried on with spirit, and we soon retired from it; nevertheless it is a ceremony well worth seeing, and which in truth requires some little nerve to witness for the first time. (1:85)

The most obvious reason for the corroboree's poor success can be discovered by misconstruing the first sentence above—it is because "I have observed" that there is an understandable lack of commitment on the Aborigines' part. Both King's and Sturt's observations are manipulations of the objects of study. The interference with the Aborigines for purposes of study undermines the separation of the observer and the observed on which empiricism, and the facile claims to accuracy of the journals, depend. Each observation can only be produced with an interference with the Aborigines and Aboriginal lives, and thus the ethnography produced can only be a record of the Aborigines' reaction to the explorer's presence and attempts at manipulation.

What emerges in the explorers' texts under review is the thoroughly textualized status of the indigenes. Rather than being part of the "unknown" land, they are strangely familiar—Sturt has seen them before in the theatre. The consumption of Aboriginal culture is in fact dominated by its textual production; the corroboree cannot speak for itself, but must be spoken for. The domination of an event by the pre-formulated discourse of theatre, and the consumption of the event within these terms, lead to the process by which, as Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*, "a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of previously known things" (58). This is a way of forming new knowledge—King, for example, notes a "curious mound, constructed entirely of shells, rudely heaped together, measuring thirty feet in diameter, and fourteen feet in height . . . supposed to be a burying-place of the Indians" (*Narrative of a Survey* 1:87). The terminology "Indians" does not need alteration, and the mounds, shell middens, are mistaken for grave sites. But Said notes that representing things as version of the already known is not merely a way of producing new knowledge, but of controlling the threat it represents to the established view of the world (59). This threat is dealt with by a substitutive fetish—the corroboree-as-theatre replaces the menacing absence of meaning of the corroboree for the explorers. The fetishization is specifically scopophilic as Sturt's description valorizes the visual impact of the scene in such a way that the pleasurable picturesqueness of the action is in itself satisfying. And lastly, Sturt brings the corroboree under the aegis of the stereotyped "native ritual," the significance of which is already known to the European observer, thus reassuring the reader that all elements of Aboriginal life are open to European inspection.

Ethnographic description in the journals works through the articulations of these fetish/stereotypes, removing the threat of difference the indigene represents. The discursive construction of the ethnographer's status, however, is founded upon the voyeuristic desire to see without being seen. The journals sporadically express the difficulties of observing without interfering. The solution is usually to efface the explorer by having him come

“suddenly” upon Aborigines who are supposedly unaware of his presence. He observes without being observed, or may be welcomed into camps where (he assumes) life carries on as normal. Sturt laments the “degraded position in the scale of human species” into which the Aborigines have been placed, arguing that he has

come suddenly upon them in a state of uncontrolled freedom—have passed tribe after tribe under the protection of envoys—have visited them in their huts . . . and I am, in candour, obliged to confess that the most unfavourable light in which I have seen them, has been when mixed with Europeans. (*Narrative of an Expedition* 2:212)

The Aborigine who mixed with King and his magnifying glass might suggest that King certainly produced an “unfavourable light.” Sturt’s description is remarkable for its self-effacement—others are Europeans, but he is the invisible observer, moving over the land seeing everything, understanding everything. However invisible Sturt may have initially been to his objects of study, the writing of these episodes of “suddenly coming upon” indigenes places them within an already well-constructed field. Mary Louise Pratt has described the similarities in the “arrival scene” in Louis de Bougainville’s eighteenth-century journal and Raymond Firth’s twentieth-century ethnographic writing (“Scratches” 35-43). These episodes are important in the textual demonstration that the native informants are uncorrupted by “civilization” as well as by the explorer himself. In the generalized descriptions of “manners and customs,” descriptions where the (usually male) Aborigine is depicted going about his quotidian duties without regard to the explorer, there is no sense of an interactive observer whose presence might alter “traditional” Aboriginal patterns of behaviour, but rather an extreme self-effacement that Johannes Fabian has called the “denial of coevalness” (*Time and the Other* 35). This effacement of the observer is crucial to the journals’ Cartesian construction of an objective, external reality. Much of the authority of the observations as written, therefore, comes from the acceptance of the possibility of a removed, objective observer. But the story of the unseen arrival as a self-bestowal of a special visual power upon the explorer ironically interferes with the realist philosophy of an

external observer freshly seeing and writing the object of his gaze that it is designed to defend. The journal's story of the unseen observer complements and displaces previous narratives of unseen watchers, and Sturt's story is imbricated with these previous stories in constructing his own observational practices. As a story that may be read back to other stories, Sturt's description is fundamentally allegorical in nature. The inevitable imbrication of any story with others breaks down the naive claims that any piece of writing can be transparent or innocently reproduce what is observed; instead, meaning is created by reference to these other narratives, the significances and valorizations they contain. Jose Rabasa has observed that maps operate as narratives in this sense, repeating and displacing previous figurations, while like a palimpsest displaying these precursors (1). Such a view opens the way to an allegorical rather than realist reading, and the *Atlas* can be seen as "constituting a world where all possible 'surprises' have been pre-codified" (7); the incomplete Mercatorial projection systematizes all space awaiting further inscriptions without itself being altered. Likewise, the ethnography of the explorers takes place in a similarly systematized "space" where constructions of the indigene can be drawn from the medieval catalogue of "others": anthropophagi, sciapods, four-eyed maritime ethiopians, and similar beasties.

The rhetoric of presence that underwrites all ethnographic description is deconstructed by this view of language as intractably allegorical—as James Clifford has written, "allegory prompts us to say of any cultural description not 'this represents, or symbolizes, that' but rather, 'this is a (morally charged) story about that'" (100). "Innocent" observations are inherently allegorical in nature; the black skin of the indigene, for example, already in existence in the European archive, is endowed with several meanings—treacherousness, laziness, and mental inferiority. Sturt's construction of himself as an unseen observer is the keystone for these allegorical presentations of the indigene, for he can pose as the distanced and objective observer reducing all that he sees into neutral scientific data, while these observations act as "morally charged" stories, retelling and complementing the already-known narrative of the indigenes. The credibility or

vraisemblance of any statement about the Aborigine relies, then, on two foundations: on the claim that it is the product of a particularly authoritative, objective point of view and on its connectivity with multiple discourses of the indigene rather than a correspondence to reality. The ethnography of the explorer, therefore, says more about the European and his knowledge-gathering systems than it does about the original inhabitants of the Australian continent. But there is one point of resistance where the solipsistic nature of scopophilic ethnography is threatened—the return gaze of the indigene.

I have argued that the gaze of the explorer-as-ethnographer is fixated within voyeurism. Freud's analysis of the scopic drive in his 1915 article "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" argues that visual experience and its linguistic relations are a complex economy of positions. Robert Con Davis describes this repertoire of positions:

In the first scene, "looking" is a gesture toward control, visual "possession" or "mastery" of an object. It is discrete and without any reciprocal responses, a frozen act. After this initial look takes place, there is a reversal, a seemingly impossible shift from a subject's viewpoint to an object's. This shift entails a virtual "giving up of the object" as a thing to be seen and mastered and a repositioning of "seeing" from a different position. The looker, in effect, becomes an object. (985)

In between these positions of looking and being seen there is a second balancing state, a "mirror-stage" of development where the subject/object positions are equivalent. Each of the positions of looking and of being seen is accompanied by the repression of its opposite. Normally, these positions are cycled through, and not fixed. But the explorer's position (as discursively constructed in the journals) is primarily voyeuristic, fixed within the single position of looking without being looked at. In positing this voyeuristic state as possible only through the continued repression of other positions, Freud avoids the notion of sight as a particularized activity expressive of power or sadism in the Mulveyan sense, opting instead for a schema wherein vision is potentially decentred, the exception being the voyeuristic gaze, which is a denial of repression and a triumph of "ego psychology" and the unified subject (Davis 986). Voyeurism, then, is a refuge from decentred sight and is the continued avoidance of "object loss,"

the possibility of becoming an object oneself for another subjectivity. The greatest threat to the voyeuristic ethnographer comes from the return gaze of the indigenes and the danger of being included within their system of knowledge.

Countering this threat, stereotypes that will neutralize the power of this return gaze are mobilized, though never achieving hegemonic authority. Early encounters with the Aborigines led to the characterization of their sight as poor—the *History of New Holland* says that they had such bad eyes that they could not see others until they were very near (235). The resistance of the Aborigines to the surveillance of the explorers is disguised by the invocation of the stereotype of the “timid” native. Exploration instructions specifically demand that close observation of the indigene is undertaken, and timidity provides an excuse for the explorer’s failure to achieve this; King apologizes for the fact that he has seen no Aborigines, admitting that “it is probable that they were not ignorant of our presence, but from timidity intentionally avoided us” (1:28). The construction of the indigene as inherently timid is useful for the explorer, serving the double function of disguising Aboriginal resistance to the explorer’s intrusive gaze and providing an excuse for his failure to collect ethnographic information. It is also interesting as a case of the crude state of ethnography in the journals; the Aboriginal custom of averting the gaze from recently met people is read as timidity.³ But Aboriginal timidity was a widespread trope used outside exploration journals. George Morgan’s prize-winning poem “Settlers in Australia” utilized the desire of the indigene to be hidden from view, with the characterization of the return gaze as weak, to provide material for a general condemnation of the Aborigine:

And who is he who from the settler’s gate
 Now timorous shrinks and now returns to wait;
 Whose narrow brow and vacant eye declare
 How faint the gleam of mind reflected there;
 Wild are his ways, unlike the ways of men,
 Child of the woods, Australia’s denizen.

(Qtd. in Gibson 149)

Retiring from the explorer’s, or in this case, the settler’s sight is interpreted as a sign of weakness. Morgan is also concerned with

neutralizing the threat of the return gaze; instead of signifying an independent understanding and even judgement, Aboriginal sight is "vacant," the transparency of the eye allowing the explorer to "see" into the indigenous mind. The Aboriginal gaze, then, is reduced in Morgan's poem to another particle of ethnographic knowledge that participates in the self-serving and self-confirmatory reasoning of the European. A certain physiognomy signifies inferiority; the Aborigines possess this physiognomy, therefore they must be inferior—but the association of a certain physiognomy with inferiority comes after contact with other indigenous races and after "inferiority" has been judged already. It is pointless to try to establish an originary moment for this ethnographic process—the "proof" is always elsewhere, receding historically in a diachronic analysis, moving elsewhere in the network of significations in a synchronic one. What can be analyzed is the political triumph of Morgan's poem and similar constructions of the "weakness" of Aboriginal sight and therefore mental powers and how this works to prevent a space for Aboriginal subjectivity in which the explorer may exist as an object of observation and judgement.

When the explorers are inescapably caught within Aboriginal sight they must construct themselves as having a profound effect on the viewers. Occasionally this can be somewhat difficult as, in contrast to the eager visual investigations of the explorer, the Aborigines often survey the Europeans with considerable indifference. Nevertheless, this lack of interest is construed as merely superficial; as John Lort Stokes argues, "notwithstanding the apathetic indifference with which they regarded us, [we] must have appeared a prodigy" (1:81). The double movement of othering is again in evidence—the Aborigines are not like us, they are apathetic, but the ways in which they see us (a novelty and a spectacle) must be essentially similar. Ultimately it is important to move the explorers beyond the range of the Aborigine's understanding; they cannot be subsumed into an Aboriginal system of knowledge without becoming less than a sovereign subject; therefore they are "incomprehensible" to the natives. George Grey, like Stokes, assumes that the explorers' appearance must profoundly affect the Aborigines, writing that "it must

have awakened strange feelings in the breast of these two savages, who could never before have seen civilized man, thus to have sat spectators and overlookers of the every action of such incomprehensible beings as we must have appeared" (1:93). The charge that the Aborigines cannot comprehend the significance of the explorers or their actions is one defence against being subsumed as an object of knowledge into an alien system. But the explorers' emphasis on themselves as spectacle to the Aborigine forces them into an allowance that they will be reproduced narratively.

This admission threatens them with becoming an object of knowledge, but there are effective controls to indigenous narrative. "Savage" legends are already "known" by the Europeans to be errant, superstitious, and parochial. Known, they are an element within a European system of knowledge and therefore less threatening than unknown ways of reproducing information. The explorers, seen by Aborigines, are placed within the normal fantastic myths of the "savage." Stokes is certain that observation of his party will result in new legends (1:81), and George Grey writes that the relation of the story of their appearance "could not have been, to them, a whit less marvellous than the tales of the grey-headed Irish peasant," when he recounts the freaks of the fairies, "whose midnight revels by the forest side or fountain" he has watched intently "from some shrub-clad hill" (1:93). The comparison of the Aborigine with someone from Britain's first colony is significant in itself, but the most interesting strategy lies in the production of Aboriginal narrative as something already "known," as is the story of the fairies. Grey does not compare them in any simple way; rather, the comparison circles around the respective marvellousness of the tales. Yet crucially the very act of comparison is a claim that Aboriginal narrative can be known and, indeed, is known, in the same way as Irish fairy stories have been absorbed into a sphere of ethnographic knowledge. Irish fairy stories, of course, are a form that calls for a particularly condescending understanding, and Aboriginal narrative is here constructed in the same way.

Some explorers admitted the power of Aboriginal sight. Mitchell argues for the superiority of the visual as well as judgement-

tal abilities of the Aborigines, writing that “they have been described as the lowest in the scale of humanity, yet I found those who accompanied me superior in penetration and judgement to the white men who accompanied my party” (*Journal of an Expedition into the Interior* 412). But Aboriginal sight can also be turned towards the explorers themselves. Yuranigh, an Aborigine who accompanied Mitchell, “well knew the character of all the white men of the party. Nothing escaped his penetrating eye and quick ear” (414). Sight as a “penetration” of the land is, of course, a trope explorers use for their own powers of sight, but here the subject is the exploration party, and the perspicacity is the Aborigine’s. Sight is constructed as a violent invasion of what is seen, and the admission that the Aborigine has this power to visually invade the party accords Yuranigh a subjectivity and power rarely given to the indigene. The threat that the perspicacity of the Aborigine represents is dealt with via the construction of the Aboriginal gaze as another of the known attributes of the “savage,” like direction-finding or hunting skills. Aboriginal vision also resembles the sight of the explorer as prescribed in instructions—for example, in Sturt’s *Two Expeditions* (2:187)—a sight that absorbs a multitude of detail. John Lort Stokes describes, in his *Discoveries in Australia*, the observing gaze of Miago, writing that

he watched everything, aye, every bush, with the most scrutinizing gaze: his head appeared to turn upon a pivot, so constantly was it in motion, with all that restless watchfulness for which the savage is ever remarkable. (1:78)

The threatening similarity of the Aboriginal gaze to that of the explorer is resisted by the explorer’s construction of himself as a recorder of information as well as observer—it is this recording and the adding to a growing catalogue of knowledge that differentiates his gaze from that of the “savage.” But despite containment mechanisms, Aboriginal perspicacity does emerge as a challenge to the practices and tools of exploration, though significantly in the work of Lancelot Threlkeld, travelling missionary, rather than in the journal of an explorer. “The local maps,” Threlkeld writes,

which are obtained directly or indirectly from the Colonial Surveyors, have very few natural boundaries laid down, for the guidance

of a stranger; and the compass, is a very uncertain benefit, when standing on the margin of an extensive morass, or when fixed in the dilemma of a thicket. But the blacks, with a perspicacity of vision which appears almost preternatural, track footsteps over bare rocks, and in the darkest or most infrequent parts of the forest.

(Qtd. in Reynolds 34)

The Aboriginal vision matches, and indeed is superior to, the cartographic technology of the Europeans. The perspicacity of the Aborigines is not compared with mapping in the exploration journals; rather, there is a fierce competition between Aboriginal and European visual power.

The confluence within the Aborigine of native sharp-sightedness and an ability to avoid the surveillance of the European shifts the balance of visual power towards the indigene. For the explorer to "discover" he must rip away the veil of the country and peer into its unshielded face. But the Aborigines can avoid this sort of discovery. John Oxley writes that

it is probable that they may see us without discovering themselves, as it is much more likely for us to pass unobserved the little family of wandering natives, than that our party . . . should escape their sight, quickened as it is by constant exercise in procuring their daily food.

(163)

The Aborigines have the ability to survey the explorers without the gaze being returned. The resistance through sight to explorative practices works off the explorers' preconceptions of the "savage" indigene; what might be innocent curiosity is construed as a reconnaissance before an attack, and because of this the exploration parties are subjected to pressure by all Aboriginal surveillance. After revealing how dependent he is on native information, Eyre describes how his party was watched by the Aborigines at an inopportune moment. Eyre was trying to bury some stores that he hoped would be left alone by the indigenes, but they watched and would not depart. "For eight long hours had those natives sat opposite to us watching," writes Eyre, revealing how disabling Aboriginal surveillance could be to the ordinary exercises of an expedition. Thus the natives' return gaze emerges in the journals as a sight/site of resistance, and sight itself becomes a site of discursive contestation between the imperial and resistant indigenous gazes.

The practice of surveying required explorers to ascend hills and to obtain a view that was often expressed as a visual mastery of the land. George Grey writes of a "commanding position" and a "commanding summit" (1:371, 2:63); John Lort Stokes congratulates himself on the fact that he "commanded an extensive view" and that his "view was very commanding" (1:150, 1:171); and Mitchell finds "an elevated point, which seemed to command an extensive view" and later in the journal writes of discovering a "hill quite clear of trees, which commanded a view" (*Journal of an Expedition into the Interior* 237, 292). Ethnographic surveillance has no such requirement for height, yet the adversarial nature of the explorer/Aborigine interaction creates height as a strategic and military advantage. The concept of a "commanding" position is found in Eyre's description of a competitive encounter between his party and a group of Aborigines, which is worth recounting at length:

Our camp had been on the low ground, near the water, in the midst of many hills, all of which commanded our position. There were now a great many well armed natives around us, and though they were very kind and friendly, I did not like the idea of their occupying the acclivities immediately above us . . . I therefore had everything removed to the hill next above them, and was a good deal amused by the result of this manoeuvre, for they seemed equally uneasy as we had been at the heights above them being occupied. In a very short time they had also broke up camp, and took possession of the next hill beyond us . . . I determined [to] take up our position on the highest hill we could find. This was a very scrubby one, but by a vigorous application of the axes for an hour or two, we completely cleared its summit; and then taking up the drays, tent, baggage &c. we occupied the best and most commanding station in the neighborhood. (226-27)

The language of property acquisition is difficult to miss—the two parties "occupy" and take "possession" of the land, and positions are also "taken." The real-estate scramble is not for its own sake, nor to obtain "innocent" scenic views, but to carry out surveillance on the other group; if politics may be defined as "who does what to whom," then this kind of surveillance is an exercise of political power, though here it is "who gets to watch whom." The explorer's final conquest and possession of the highest hill is only an advantage when it is transformed into a

treeless summit—an activity that displays the interdependence of power and surveillance. The technological feat of deforestation is an exercise of physical power that enables surveillance, a power in itself. The final victory of the explorers should not disguise the fact that the passage contains the resistance of the Aborigines to this exercise of power; the Europeans' surveillance is met with a response that demonstrates that the power in the text is not solely that of the colonizing force. The Aboriginal challenge to the explorers' physical position results in the de-naturalization of the narrator/observer's lordly, distant objectivity; the extreme resistance to Aboriginal observation reveals the explorers' fixation within voyeurism and their reluctance to exchange viewing positions.

NOTES

- 1 For a history of the pictorial representation of the corroboree, see Bruce and Callaway.
- 2 Paul Carter has pointed to the way in which corroboree descriptions nullify possible political meanings (164-67).
- 3 Eyre, as usual, dissented from this stereotype, writing that the Aborigines he met possessed a "proud unquailing glance of the eye" (2:217).

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