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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND LITERARY STUDY OF TWO AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S LIFE HISTORIES

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REVIEWS

An Anthropological and Literary Study of Two Australian Aboriginal Women's Life Histories.
Linda Westphalen, 2012. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

This book examines the life-history writing of Aboriginal women in the context of Dreaming and ongoing negotiations about women's status as custodians of stories and connection to Country. Through her detailed and scholarly analysis, Westphalen argues that Aboriginal women's life-writing provides a binding and unbroken connection to people, Dreaming and Country. A central theme of the book is the place of women's autobiographical narrative in Indigenous learning systems.

Westphalen uses a methodological fusion of literary analysis, history and anthropology to examine the life-writing of two Aboriginal women from very different parts of the mainland, where invasion and colonisation, while no less damaging and oppressive, occurred at different rates under different state governments. Alice Nannup was born in the Pilbara region of Western Australia and was an Elder of the Yindjibarndi people of that area. Her life-history, *When the Pelican Laughed*, was published in 1992. Ruby Langford Ginibi was born on Bundjalung Country in north-eastern New South Wales and her three life-history texts—*Don't Take Your Love to Town*, *My Bundjalung People* and *Haunted by the Past*—were published between 1988 and 1999. The purpose of Westphalen's book is to open up new understandings and reading positions for the stories of these women's historical experiences as part of Indigenous women's responses to the colonising project in twentieth-century Australia.

The book begins by discussing the socio-cultural context in which both women wrote. Westphalen argues that the period between the 1988 celebrations of settler Australia's bicentenary and the anniversary of federation in 2001 represented a period of significant introspection for non-Indigenous Australians about Australian identity and history, and that 'many realised that between the fire-works and champagne there were plenty of things to commiserate about' (4). The state of Indigenous health, education, housing, poverty, with revelations about deaths in custody and the Stolen Generations, 'peppered political and social discourse at the time' (4) and as a result what she identifies as a process of decolonisation began. While many non-Indigenous Australians see the recognition of Native Title, the return of Aboriginal lands, the national Apology and financial compensation to the Stolen Generations as integral to decolonisation, Westphalen's definition includes the recognition of Aboriginal women's personal experiences through life-writing as a key means to disrupt the silences about the past that have settled on the present. This is not only important and original; it opens up new understandings and offers new reading positions for these women's historical experiences and for Aboriginal women's life-writing more generally.

The establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1988; the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which began the same year; the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991; the High Court judgment of the Mabo case, which acknowledged that Australia was not *terra nullius*; the

Native Title Act of 1993; the 1996 Wik decision; and the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *Bringing Them Home* are cited by Westphalen as significant parts of a decolonisation process that is ongoing in Australia. It is within this context that Ruby Langford Ginibi and Alice Nannup wrote.

For Westphalen decolonisation is an interplay between 'First Nations and non-First Nations people and groups' (8) that is under constant negotiation, while demanding recognition of historical experiences under colonialism. She is adamant that Indigenous women's life-history writing forms a vital part of these negotiations because the experiences it brings to the historical record disrupt the erasure and silencing generated by colonisation. As a genre, life-writing reclaims identity, authority, connection, tradition, geographical and ontological space, renewal and survival. In this way, Westphalen identifies women's life-writing as a continuation of Dreaming Stories, functioning to educate and to connect people and country. In the twenty-first century, this education and connection for Indigenous people and country can be extended to non-Indigenous people, through new readings of such texts and through a willingness to accept the limitations of Western literary analysis when considering Indigenous writing.

Adam Shoemaker's claim that in the climate of decolonisation Aboriginal writing is 'fluid, creative and unconventional' is refuted by Westphalen (13). Instead, she argues that autobiographical writing by Aboriginal people uses *First Nations* (author's emphasis) conventions for cultural expression, which in Australia have their impetus in Dreaming Stories and oral expression, as life-stories operate to teach, identify and connect. Thus they are only unconventional in the sense that they do not prioritise 'Western' or 'European' conventions and, while colonisation is a contributing factor in the content, form and production of Indigenous life-histories, they are not products of it per se. Instead, they are examples of how resistant cultural discourse can survive through palimpsests.

The palimpsest metaphor drawn on by Westphalen in her analysis of the life-histories of Ruby Langford Ginibi and Alice Nannup serves as a powerful reminder of the ways in which Indigenous stories were 'overwritten' by colonising discourses. Overwritten, however, does not mean erased: 'words are actively removed, yet other words reappear to confuse and destabilise the second, colonising inscriptions, and this can, in turn, forge new meanings' (14). The value of a palimpsest as an extended metaphor for Indigenous women's writing lies in the fact that they are continually interactive, not necessarily linear or ordered, and that they place the reader in a position whereby their interpretation is not based on the search for meaning only but on editing and decoding as well. Studies of Indigenous women's life-histories, as Westphalen aptly points out, reveal as much about the context and cultural influences of the decoder as about the text itself.

By unpacking her own position as a white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist, Westphalen identifies some of the limitations of Western disciplines and methodologies for reading Indigenous life-writing. Feminist methodological practices, particularly those of ethnography and oral history, are useful because they blur the distinction between the researcher and the researched, providing ways for Westphalen to attempt to break down the privileged position of the academic. She notes, however, that feminist political agendas have not always been sympathetic or knowledgeable about the situation of Indigenous women and that the universality of women's subjectivity cannot be assumed, nor can the notion that 'first world feminists' can automatically 'unlearn their privilege' (72).

Westphalen's anthropological, literary and historical study of the life-writing of Alice Nannup and Ruby Langford Ginibi offers an original and nuanced understanding of their

work, and provides an excellent framework for reading Indigenous life-writing in the context of continuing connections to Dreaming, Country and people. This book offers exciting possibilities for reframing and re-reading the space between the colonial past and the decolonising present, and makes a compelling argument for a radical shift in the way in which scholars consider and understand Indigenous women's life-writing today.

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The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race. Alison Ravenscroft, 2012. Farnham: Ashgate.

The Postcolonial Eye is an important, exciting and challenging book that engages head on with the assertions of sovereignty and radical difference made by Indigenous intellectuals such as Irene Watson, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright. Alison Ravenscroft takes these claims seriously, challenging herself—the white subject—to refuse or avoid the 'will to know' embedded in most white/Western practices of reading the other:

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? (1)

To pose this question necessarily destabilises even critical reading practices such as postcolonial approaches, where these assume the colonial as a quality of the past. Ravenscroft's focus pointedly is on the present: on contemporary Indigenous texts, whether novels, life stories, dance ceremonies or paintings, and the white reading practices that continue the colonising move and refuse or co-opt Indigenous alterity. Her aim is to articulate an apparently paradoxical reading practice of 'not reading', in the sense of reading as a practice of meaning and knowledge creation. This turns on its head the conventions of reading as a set of performative practices that 'make sense' of the text for the reader. Only a reading practice productive of uncertainty and doubt ruptures the colonial move of the white subject to know the other.

The book lays out this 'not reading' practice through a contrapuntal method in which Indigenous textualities are juxtaposed with white ways of reading and representation (the 'Eye and the 'I' as the title of chapter 1 puts it). These latter include her own traitorous white readings which work to reveal both the 'I' in the 'eye' of the settler view and the unknowability of the Indigenous, in ways that acknowledge but do not resolve the anxiety this produces for the settler self. Her (not) reading of the Indigenous texts is based on doubt, incompleteness and uncertainty (46), which works to affirm the sovereignty exercised in these texts. It also operates 'to refuse the call to *perfect* whiteness'. Importantly, thus, 'she' retains the subject position of white while 'seeing