

Liz Conor. *Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women*.

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Conor's *Skin Deep* offers to critique the textual descriptions and imagery of Aboriginal women found in the colonial archives, and in particular those descriptions and images that were circulated widely through the increasingly industrialised print media. Conor states that the central argument of her book is that 'colonial racism and gender relations hinge in particular ways and depended on the facility of print to reiterate and thereby entrench meaning as truth' (38). For Conor the 'reiteration of those unverified tropes' (37) that elsewhere she describes as white 'lies' (27, 363, 368) mostly produced by 'white men' (27), 'rationalise the colonial project' (37). Conor seeks to highlight the appalling racism and misogyny evident in many of the representations she scrutinises, and in doing so she hopes to intervene in and disrupt their enduring legacy.

There is no doubting the meticulous and painstaking research underpinning *Skin Deep*. To bring coherence to such a diverse and formidable breadth of evidentiary material is impressive. Chapter One, "'A Full Account of the Inhabitants": Name-Dropping in Early Encounters' examines published descriptions of first-contact encounters, beginning with William Dampier's oft cited passage and tracing its recurrence through various media. This chapter also outlines the text's central thesis. Chapter Two, "'A Species of Rough Gallantry": Impressions of Gender Status,' traces reiterations of the bride capture trope in print culture, and in Chapter Three—"'If they be Facts": Infanticide and Maternity'—Conor tackles persistent accounts of Aboriginal infanticide, and finds little evidence of it other than hearsay. Someone knows of someone who knows of someone else who witnessed or was told etc and it's these accounts that through reiteration in print media come to speak a certain 'truth.' More reliable and far fewer accounts of infanticide are placed sensitively within a ritual context. There is also, however, some overreach in this chapter. Conor argues it is the 'figure of the white mother' that was and is crucial to the administration of Aboriginal affairs and development of Aboriginal policies, right up to the Northern Territory Intervention (161, 154). That might or might not be so, but Conor needed to do a lot more work to substantiate that claim within the context of this book.

Chapter Four—'Footfall over Thresholds: In and Out of the Settler-Colonial Domicile'—is concerned with domesticity and the role of Aboriginal women in settler home-making, particularly in outback settings. It uses the 'leitmotif of unshodable feet' to explore gendered and racialised modes of comportment within the broader context of modernity. Whereas early chapters laboured particular points through different examples, this chapter is more interesting and insightful. The repetition in the early chapters is strategic in that Conor is attempting to demonstrate the recursive nature of the textual descriptions and imagery she is critiquing, but too much of the same by way of example can lead to disinterest in the same way that reiteration of a trope can induce disinterest or even rejection of its supposed veracity, rather than it being understood as speaking an established 'truth' (see 368). Chapter Five—"'Black Velvet" and "Purple Indignation": Sexuality and "Poaching"'—is another interesting chapter. Conor finds that the expression 'Black Velvet' is peculiar to Australia, which will probably surprise many readers who might have erroneously presumed it was a more generic reference to black/white sexual relations. Her analysis comparing colonial and settler attempts to control the desires of

Aboriginal women with Aboriginal women's agency in their intimate relations with Japanese pearl divers is astute. Chapter Six—"Absolute Frights": Appearance and Elders'—considers textual and visual responses to Aboriginal women's appearances, in which there was a contrast between youthful and sexually attractive 'native belle' types and aged Aboriginal women who were described and depicted repugnantly so as to accentuate their supposed repulsiveness and closeness to primates.

Skin Deep offers a detailed analysis of the material under scrutiny. There's much of interest and in some chapters keen insight into the way race relations were (or were not) articulated through print culture. However, there's a politics informing this analysis, which at times is overbearing. Conor writes she doubts that 'much of the material . . . will surprise Aboriginal women' (365). There's little in the text that would surprise any student of Aboriginal history, except by way of a richness of examples to draw on to help substantiate an argument. Conor also writes that she 'was compelled to write this book by the renewed offensive against Aboriginal Australians that commenced with Howard's refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations,' and that she hopes to contribute to the dissipation of 'regimes of knowledge' which 'propagate and reconfigure racialised distinctions within the projects of economic and geopolitical dominance' (369). Partisan history no doubt has a role to play in assuaging the settler conscience, but at some point it can become counterproductive and work against the very things it is striving to achieve. To this end, *Skin Deep* exemplifies in many ways the sort of research made possible by digital repositories like NLA's Trove, which permits retrieval from colonial newspapers of specific search terms. This contributes to the sheer quantity of the evidentiary datasets one can bring to bear on whatever is under scrutiny, but it can also elide contextual details which sometimes render more complex the retrospectively startling phrase or image which supposedly exemplifies, in this instance, racial attitudes and depictions that hardened through reiterations in media culture into 'truths.'

A problem with recovering a 'pattern of meaning' (329) from judicious selections of partial pieces is the tendency to assemble all that aids and abets while overlooking that which might give shade and nuance to the subject of analysis. Conor concedes that in the colonial archive there exist 'many . . . admiring, even fond, images of Aboriginal women' (8) and that 'many . . . attempted to redirect the typeset from disregard to regard' (368; see also 366), but these representations fall outside the ambit of this analysis. And this closing of the mind, so to speak, to if not contrary evidence certainly to that which suggests greater complexity leads to overreach. For example, one of the easy targets is Ernestine Hill. Hill is important because her travel articles and tales, widely syndicated, appeared across a range of newspapers, in the popular and arguably influential *Walkabout* magazine, and ABC radio where Hill, the ABC's travel feature-writer, recounted tales of her travels. And in Hill's lively and evocative descriptions of Aborigines and Aboriginal life there's much to find that is offensive. Whereas Conor sites Hill's portrayals of Aboriginal women in the deep mix of a plethora of contemporary and similarly offensive depictions, a work more sensitive to the broader context in which this material was read or listened to would acknowledge that readers and radio listeners had ready access to a range of other material. Readers were (and are) not passive recipients of whatever information comes their way. They exercise discernment. *Walkabout* for example, in which Hill published some 36 articles between 1935 and 1968, provided much else that qualified and sometimes countered Hill's excesses. It's possible without careful selection of phrase, story, anecdote or image, to find a very different picture of Aborigines emerging from the pages of *Walkabout* than the one which Conor draws from Hill's oeuvre. Furthermore, it's possible to find in Hill's work itself meanings contrary to Conor's reading of it. Megan Morris, at first a staunch critic of Hill, in a more recent article refined her stance, arguing that Hill 'used

travel writing to disseminate opinion and debate about the great public issues of her time: the status of Aboriginal peoples, the state's role in national development, "population" politics and immigration from Asia' (239). There's no sense of any of this in Conor's unrelenting parsing of colonial and settler archives.

There's the occasional beautiful, almost lyrical phrase in *Skin Deep*—'the fortifying regret of tenderfoot occupants' (29)—and also instances where erudition finds the wrong word. Citing an observation that Aboriginal 'women are still more ugly than the men,' Conor opines how 'this perception spun off, entrapping Aboriginal women in an ouroboros of vilification' (335). The meaning is apparent once one's head is clear of pictographic serpents eating their own tail, but in this context it's unnecessarily clunky. Citing a lengthy passage from J. G. Wood's 1880 *Natural History of Man*, and then Wood's refusal to reprint the Angus sketch he is describing so as to not 'shock' his readers, Conor asks 'What exactly did [settlers] feel compelled to hide from view under the guise of decorum, yet imprint in majuscule text?' (327). But it's Conor's emphasis, not Wood's. His text is not majuscule, as Conor immediately concedes. It's her shock at the 'discursive violence against aged Aboriginal women' that is so 'graphic and vicious' in colonial print that leads Conor to read Wood's passage as if it is majuscule. This tells us more about Conor's reading practices than it does about the comprehension of Wood's contemporaries. It's an early twentieth-first-century sensibility imposed upon late nineteenth-century material. In such instances—and there are several—we see the voice of the polemicist, not the rigorous historian apparent elsewhere in the text, and at times this voice oppresses the value which might otherwise be found in the same material if it was handled more judiciously.

Those sympathetic to Conor's politics will find much with which to buttress their already formed opinions. Few opposed to Conor's politics will, if they pick it up at all, bother to read far into it. For the genuine student of Aboriginal history, whether as an interested amateur, professional, scholar or scholar-in-training, it is richly detailed and in the extensive references alone there is much of value. Those who bring a critical eye to the material will wonder about the broader contemporary context in which this material emerged, and quibble about the ready reckoning of this-therefore-that retrospectivity which bedevils so much of today's historiography.

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