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“Theorising the ‘Gap’: Reading Race in Reconciliation Literature and Postcolonial Criticism”

Key words

reconciliation, the sorry novel, bridging spaces, postcolonial, Ravenscroft

Abstract

The “sorry novel” – a term coined by Sue Kossew to describe fictional works by non-Indigenous Australian writers that actively engage with political processes, particularly those pertaining to reconciliation – is explicitly interested in exploring scenes of cultural bridging; spaces which cross the gap purported to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This paper will examine literary depictions of bridging space in the wake of Alison Ravenscroft’s text *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (2012).

The spatial metaphor of ‘the gap’ has framed shifting representations of race relations in Australia since formal reconciliation began in the early 1990s. Originally positioned as a metaphor to illustrate socio-economic differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, early reconciliation discourse tends to treat the gap as a space that symbolises disadvantage; or, more specifically, as a divide which signifies difference and thereby needs to be closed. The metaphor took on another meaning, however, after the release of the influential *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997. The first person accounts of child removal presented in *Bringing Them Home* effectively humanised the previously negative space of the gap, rendering it a zone of transformative potential where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians could empathically meet. Yet, despite being reconstructed as a zone of intercultural communication – rather than just a space inequality – the gap continues to be associated with a desire to normalise or assimilate difference.

Positioned against what Ravenscroft refers to as “current moves to erase the divides between settler and Indigenous peoples and to cover over our differences,” *The Postcolonial Eye* adopts a form of reading that allows cultural gaps to remain intact, or unbridged. Although Ravenscroft is not the first critic to stress the importance of cultural incommensurability, her emphasis on “radical difference” is at odds with much mainstream postcolonial criticism in Australia. As *The Postcolonial Eye* critiques white critics’ attempts to “bridge” cultural divides, it is not surprising that Ravenscroft’s self-confessed “experimental” approach to (un)reading race has been attacked by critics such as Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada for potentially “paralysing” postcolonial literary analysis. This paper proposes, however, that recognising sites of unknowing need not polarise the ways in which people read or write what Ravenscroft refers to as “scenes race.”

Although Ravenscroft’s work poses strong (and important) challenges to non-Indigenous writers, this paper argues that a distinct receptiveness to unknowing is apparent in many examples of sorry literature. For

instance, in narratives such as Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007) and Gail Jones's *Sorry* (2007) – both of which are overtly concerned with probing scenes of cross-cultural interaction and exchange – certain aspects of indigeneity are represented as distinctly untranslatable to non-Indigenous characters and, by extension, non-Indigenous readers. By making room for the enigmatic, Miller and Jones not only demonstrate the innately partial nature of cross-cultural entanglement but also recognise that acts of crossing are not, by extension, acts of revelation; that there are always some things, as Ravenscroft suggests, which must “fall from view.”

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