

Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women

by Liz Conor

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In May 2016, a 'Four Corners' program on national television dealt with the death of an Indigenous woman, who died at the hands of two white men, five years ago. No convictions ensued at that time. The initial anonymity of the woman in media coverage (except as an Aboriginal woman and single mother) and the lack of public outrage mirror the argument, presented in Liz Conor's book, of the disregard and indifference to violence against Aboriginal women. Conor's argument is that, from the earliest colonial representations, Indigenous women have been depicted as racial stereotypes and not seen as individuals. They have been typecast in a 'surface-based, half-knowing' (p. 2) way that has robbed them of their identity and intrinsic value. Knowledge of these women has been only 'skin deep': hence the title of the book.

Ten years in the making, the book was informed by the author's concerns, from around 2007, about the 'fraught period in Australian racial history' (p. 369) from about 2007. Two other factors formed an impetus for her incisive investigation: her settler-historian grandmother's disregard for the Indigenous local history of the Ovens River valley, Victoria, and a haunting image of an unidentified woman in Alice Duncan-Kemp's *When Strange Paths Go Down*. Who was she? The author's intrigue and her sense of injustice spurred her on to a long trail of inquiry about the way Aboriginal women were depicted or disregarded. What she found was misogyny and entrenched racism.

The main body of the work deals with the reiteration of themes in texts and images that denigrate Aborigines. Conor has pinpointed, illustrated, and elaborated on the idea that the stereotypical depiction of Aboriginal women has

maligned the group in one overriding representation in the settlers' interest. To counteract this stance, she offers explanations and contributing academic argument to refute the entrenched viewpoints.

At the heart of the study is the role that the print media played, first in setting down racial distortions, and then by the widely repeated reproduction of them in Australian colonial media. After the introduction of the telegraph, these descriptions and graphic images were projected to a global readership. In her pursuit of the origin (and truth) of the observations concerning Indigenous women in settler print media, Connor found that most accounts could not be verified and that only a few were from 'first-hand' informers. Some of these drew accusations against Indigenous mothers. From her intellectual probing, Connor posits that the secret nature of women's customary rites or rituals led to misunderstanding and therefore to misinterpretation. One area of trenchant inquiry was into a native mother's role in childbirth and childrearing. She offers arguments to suggest that certain clan meanings of actions hid the truth from the eyes of male (and some female) settlers. Among settler women, only those who had borne children themselves were allowed inclusive authority to this knowledge. Daisy Bates *had* had a child, but she did not seem to have enjoyed the necessary inner-sanctum knowledge of the Mirning women (pp. 226–31).

'Bride capture' was another recurring trope that became entrenched in settler interpretations of Indigenous culture, and their social and gender relations. This racialised depiction of brutal enslavement circulated the idea of Aboriginal violence against their women. Connor explores and dissects the hearsay and cites contradictory textual reports that refute a generalised reading. As with rituals to do with childcare and the death of a child, the intricacies of marriage rites were unknown, and could therefore be misinterpreted by settler onlookers. Some informants confirmed that elopement, for example, was known to occur – a happening that may have become confused with 'bride capture'. Connor argues that these racist generalisations and judgements, which supported an ongoing argument that Indigenous people were inferior, encouraged governments to introduce child removal and condoned the appropriation of Indigenous lands. It compounded the popular perception of Aborigines as a doomed and 'dying race' – an idea expedient to the aims of the pastoral imperialists. Connor states that this false notion about Aboriginal women's so-called inferior position in Aboriginal society 'enabled settlers to [literally] get away with murder' (p. 96).

As a way to illustrate how Aboriginal women have been stereotyped, and their identity stripped from them, the author looks at the monikers used from the early nineteenth century to describe them. Those of 'native belle', 'sable siren' and 'spinifex fairy' were often accompanied by visual images from sketches and, later, photography. This young beauty was depicted purely as a physical being, with graceful limbs and an elegant, 'dignified' comportment.

Older women, the elders of the group, were seen merely as ‘absolute frights’ (p. 326). The female workers, who were the backbone of the domestic economy on outback pastoral properties, were caricatured and ridiculed by cartoonists and commentators. Unable to understand the Indigenous need – unencumbered by shoes – to have sensory contact with the land beneath their feet, they depicted domestic workers in white women’s houses as having grossly enlarged bare feet. This seems strange when the muscles of their lower legs were described as ‘deficient’ – giving them the appearance in graphic representation of being spindly. The depiction of all these categories of Aboriginal women is, again, only ‘skin deep’.

In this prescient study, Conor reveals the ‘tissue of errors’ (p. 365) that has been promulgated in ‘longstanding imprints of racialised gender relations’ (p. 366). She hopes that *Skin Deep* will promote a ‘heightened awareness’ of these distortions, as she pleads for the safety of Aboriginal women against violence. In a nutshell, her argument underlines the modern adage of ‘Don’t believe everything you read in newspapers’!

The study is jam-packed with theoretical argument, observations, scholarly quotes and referencing footnotes. Some of this information gels together in long paragraphs which, if broken into smaller thematic chunks, would have brought the interesting mass of information into even more punchy and graphic focus. Well indexed, with a long bibliography and with a good smattering of cartoons and other graphic images, this book will be a boon to researchers in the fields of Women’s Studies and Australian History. Hopefully, it will also reach out further to grab the attention of the wider public.

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