

BOOK REVIEW

Emma Kowal, *Haunting Biology: Science and Indigeneity in Australia*

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Strip away the specificities of the case studies and the theoretical abstractions, and Emma Kowal's argument in *Haunting Biology* boils down to this: there can be no simple, linear progression from colonial oppression, to activist struggle, to definitive decolonial liberation. Coloniality embeds itself in attitudes, in institutions, in objects, and even when we believe we have left it behind, it worms its way back into our lives in unexpected ways. This is a powerful and important argument, and one that will likely ruffle a few feathers.

Haunting Biology aims to answer one central question: 'How are we to understand Indigenous biological difference in the twenty-first century?' (p. 4). For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, doctors, anthropologists and scientists tried to establish the precise ways in which the Indigenous peoples of Australia were biologically distinct from the rest of humanity. Though a wave of anti-colonial activism in the 1960s and 1970s is widely supposed to have put a stop to that kind of research, Kowal shows that there was never a sharp break between the racist science of the past and the putatively non- or anti-racist science of today. She analyses 'both famous and obscure episodes' (p. 4) from this long history, illustrating how racist practices and beliefs, now denied or suppressed, continue to 'haunt' today's researchers. Rightfully, she situates Australian science in a settler colonial context, contending that the ideas and arguments of settler scientists have often reflected 'collective needs and desires' (p. 109), particularly settlers' need to 'feel at home' in a continent they had wrested away from its prior inhabitants.

Kowal wears several hats: historian of science, anthropologist, Indigenous health expert and anti-colonial 'ally'. She draws on an eclectic range of theorists, including (of course) Derrida, as well as Freud, Kristeva and Isabelle Stengers. Kowal has clearly given much thought to the methodological underpinnings of her research, evidence of which is abundant on the page. Yet for all its 'absent presences' (p. 20), the text evinces a respect for tangible, even carnal, materiality: for much of the book, Kowal focuses on bones, blood, hair and skin, reflecting the interests of her subjects.

The 'hauntings' described here refer to both figurative Derridean spectres and literal spirits of the dead. This is appropriate when telling stories about Indigenous people: ghosts, ancestral beings, monsters and sorcerers were important elements of Australia's precolonial cultures and, in many Indigenous communities, remain so today, yet academics (Indigenous and settler alike) have generally evaded writing about them. As Kowal argues, Indigenous perspectives on such entities remind 'Western' scholars that ghosts do not necessarily need to be defeated or destroyed.

This book belongs to what is now a long lineage of scholarship describing the racist and colonial heritage of medicine, ethnography and the life sciences in Australia. In parts, it owes a considerable (and thoroughly acknowledged) debt in particular to Warwick Anderson's 'groundbreaking' and 'magisterial' (p. 131) work *The Cultivation of Whiteness* (2002). But *Haunting Biology* stands out in its insistence on the present, on how this heritage continues to matter now. Settler-controlled museums and universities continue to possess not only the bones, but also the blood, hair and placentae, of Indigenous people; meanwhile, the emergent field of 'Indigenous genomics' promises health benefits to colonized peoples (in Australia and elsewhere) without denying them agency or autonomy. As Kowal amply demonstrates, the meanings and uses of Indigenous people's DNA are 'discursively explosive' (p. 16) in Australia, a nation that still struggles to reckon with its settler colonial nature. In *Haunting Biology*, recent developments in genomics and museology, even apparently progressive or 'decolonial' ones, come under sustained critique. There are real, immediate stakes to this scholarship. Kowal should be applauded for intervening fearlessly yet sensitively in these discussions.

Kowal concludes that 'in the case of Indigenous biological difference, even the most skilled amalgam of science and justice will be haunted' (p. 169). In other words, there is just no way to do this kind of research and come out unstained, even if Indigenous scholars and communities take the lead. And yet, for much of the book, a kind of 'genomic realism' prevails. While Kowal is critical at multiple points of contemporary scientific practice, she nonetheless displays an undue degree of credulity towards some of the claims of today's geneticists, particularly evident in the second and fifth chapters. There is a hesitancy to address the biological essentialism inherent in endeavours to which Kowal has been proximate, such as the founding of the National Centre for Indigenous Genomics. In this vein, Kowal never attempts to explain why interest in Indigenous biological difference resurged in the 1990s after a few decades in abeyance, nor, moreover, why this has escalated further in recent years. If biological essentialism has returned to cultural relevance, we cannot simply blame that on 'hauntings' from the past – it must have real purposes and effects embedded in the conditions of Australian society today.

The quality of Kowal's storytelling and prose are remarkable. A scholarly history of race science, influenced by postmodern theory, could easily become monotonously grim and plodding, but Kowal's writing sustains a brisk readability. There are even times when it approaches the precipice of genre fiction: there are shades of Gothic horror in Chapters 2 and 6 and even espionage thriller in the conspiratorial fifth chapter. A map, a dramatis personae, a timeline and plentiful illustrations also ease the digestion of what could have been a challenging book to process.

Kowal has written a courageous, sophisticated and surprisingly engaging book. But what makes *Haunting Biology* important is that core message: the repressed always return. We cannot banish ghosts (disciplinary or otherwise), nor simply ignore them – rather, we must 'learn to live with them' (p. 170). In this regard, Kowal's book is a fine example of what it advocates.