



Coral Empire

Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity

ANN ELIAS

*"Ann Elias's *Coral Empire* is as intoxicating as a plunge into a reef lagoon: a refreshingly original and compelling analysis of how the underwater coral realm has evolved from a planetary space of fathomless mysteries and alien terrors to become a complex technology-driven spectacle that feeds the rampant imaginations, pleasures, vices, and curiosities of modern humans."*

*Iain McCalman, author of *The Reef: A Passionate History**

"Coral Empire is a brilliantly researched, aesthetically nuanced study of early photographic and film imagery representing coral reefs, one of the most gorgeous areas of the undersea, which is the least explored dimension of the blue humanities. Focusing on how coral came to be captured and exhibited in

visual media of the twentieth century, and expanding to coral's transformed presence in museological displays, Ann Elias shows the power of imagery and exhibition to create our imagination and relation to the inaccessible undersea..."

*Margaret Cohen, author of *The Novel and the Sea**

From vividly colored underwater photographs of Australia's Great Barrier Reef to life-size dioramas recreating coral reefs and the bounty of life they sustained, the work of early twentieth-century explorers and photographers fed the public's fascination with reefs. In the 1920s John Ernest Williamson in the Bahamas and Frank Hurley in Australia produced mass-circulated and often highly staged photographs and films that cast corals as industrious, colonizing creatures, and the undersea as a virgin, unexplored, and fantastical territory. In *Coral Empire* Ann Elias traces the visual and social history of Williamson and Hurley and how their modern media spectacles yoked the tropics and coral reefs to colonialism, racism, and the human domination of nature. Using the labor and knowledge of indigenous peoples while exoticizing and racializing them as inferior Others, Williamson and Hurley sustained colonial fantasies about people of color and the environment as endless resources to be plundered. As Elias demonstrates, their reckless treatment of the sea prefigured attitudes that caused the environmental crises that the oceans and reefs now face.

Ann Elias is Associate Professor of the History and Theory of Contemporary Global Art at the University of Sydney, author of *Camouflage Australia: Art, Nature, Science, and War* and *Useless Beauty: Flowers and Australian Art*, and coeditor of *Camouflage Cultures: Beyond the Art of Disappearance*.

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