

Playing colonial: cowgirls, cowboys, and  
Indians in Australia and North America.

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## **Playing Colonial: Cowgirls, Cowboys, and Indians in Australia and North America**

Ann McGrath

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Playing Colonial: Cowgirls, Cowboys, and Indians in Australia and North America**

*Ann McGrath*

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Growing up during the 1960s in Brisbane, the subtropical capital city of Queensland, Australia, “cowboys and indians” was simply what we played with the neighborhood kids. Although some found it too rough for their liking, few questioned its appropriateness as a children’s game. Between the ages of three and ten, boys and many girls were keen to play. The game involved a lot of chasing, hiding, and pretend killing and dying. In our backyard and in the cool shade under our grandparent’s house, we played with plastic bows and arrows and cap guns with a sharp bang and a peppery “gunpowder” smell. Not always enamored of the boyish aggression, I recall inventing domestic diversions such as “frontier woman gives birth,” which gave me the opportunity to recline upon the grandest squatter’s chair. Unfortunately, only the youngest neighborhood boy agreed to cooperate, and he only the once.

In backyards and open spaces, Australian children thus played out idiosyncratic versions of “cowgirls and indians” (the game will be indicated here by omitting capitalization). Enjoying its heyday between the 1920s and 1970s, it was an outdoor war game with real or pretend horse riding. It usually involved dressing up in shop-bought or homemade costumes, although this could be as minimal as wearing a feather in the hair. It entailed character acting and repetitive plot lines that relied upon a clash between “goodies” and “baddies” and agreed rules. The conflicts were usually between the colonizer/colonized dichotomies of “cowboy” and “indian” but with scope for changing alliances. While the status of indians varied between games, “good” or “bad” cowboys sometimes paired up with “good” or “bad” indians. When found, a player could be “shot” by an imaginary or toy gun or bow and arrow. The game sometimes included making forts, playing in tents, or manufacturing weapons, costumes, or other paraphernalia. It was physical, rough, and noisy—involving indian war whoops, shouting, running, and “wild” behavior. It also had rules—albeit ones ordained by children. The best-remembered rule is that once “killed,” you had to lie “dead” for a fixed amount of time before rejoining the game.

Like its alluring array of hybrid apparel and props,<sup>1</sup> the children’s game of cowboys and indians is a complex cultural artifact based upon a

popularized history of “how the West was won.” Located both inside and outside its legendary location and era, narratives popularly thought to be “real” colonizer experiences were taken up by child performers to play in times, places, and countries usually far removed from the scenarios of Wild West events. Despite the hold of Australia’s legendary bushranger heroes upon the popular imagination, such colonial games were gradually usurped by cowboys and indians and other imported historical games based on movies and, later, television shows.<sup>2</sup> I argue here that “cowboys and indians” was a cultural pairing of empires of the imagination where history became performance and where a global “modern” identity was installed, historicized, and contested by both children and adults.

According to the findings of a wide-reaching survey of Australian and American adults who played the game as children, cowboys and indians was generally played in leisure time in the children’s suburban yards, in bush, vacant lots, or public spaces.<sup>3</sup> When children played the game in Australian backyards, they imaginatively conquered particular places only recently colonized in their grandparents’ or great-grandparents’ living memory. Indeed, as an indication of such sensitivities, whenever the topic of Aboriginal land rights or native title is discussed in Australia, the “threat to our backyards” rhetoric resurfaces.<sup>4</sup> The backyard represents intimate space, privately owned space; it is childhood and growing-up space, connected with discovering selfhood and individual identity. Outside the domestic space of the house, the game was experienced by children as removed from the eye of mother or father—as a space of “freedom.”

This article postulates that the world of cowboys and indians, embedded in modernizing narratives, might represent a specifically transnational, global space of the imagination. It also considers the ways in which its imaginative play is peculiarly implicated in...



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2715 North Charles Street  
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+1 (410) 516-6989  
[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



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