Gender, Labour, War and Empire

Essays on Modern Britain

Edited By

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*For Sonya,
Colleague, Friend, Mentor*

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5 The Colonial Actress: Empire, Modernity and the Exotic in Twentieth-Century London

Angela Woollacott

Sonya O. Rose has been a major influence on recent modern British history, through her generous mentoring of a sizeable cohort of currently active scholars, her always-constructive commentary on the work of younger scholars in the field, and especially through her own imaginative and meticulous research. In 1992 Rose compelled the attention of the field to the interconstitutive process in which gender ideologies and class structures evolved and shaped the daily lives of working women and men in the nineteenth century.¹ In 2003 she recast the central subject of national identity and citizenship in World War II Britain, using social and cultural history methodology to explore the political processes of inclusion and exclusion at a defining historical moment. In this chapter, I pay tribute to Rose's work by addressing some of its themes in the context of my own recent research on gender, women's lives and the colonialism that stretched between Australia and the British metropole. In *Which People's War?*, her study of World War II, Rose considered the controversial figure of "the good-time girl", the trope representing young women who challenged sexual propriety, were accused of selfish indulgence and, especially, linked to interracial sex with African-American GIs present in Britain.² The controversy over the "good-time girl" was a classic instance of debates over the female body, the fusing of issues of sexuality, gender, race and the nation so characteristic of modernity. I take that focus on the female body and female lives as a central theme here. Like Rose, I also consider the imbrication of race and empire in the construction of the British labour force and British culture. Rose shows the central place of the empire in discourses of national identity and reconstruction during the war, as well as the integral role of the dominions and colonies to the war effort, and the recruitment of colonial workers to supply metropolitan demands for labour.³

In the historiographical debates surrounding British national identity since the collapse of empire, the formation of a multiethnic Britain, and whether or not the empire has shaped Britain itself, the temporary and permanent migration to Britain of subjects from the white-settler dominions has been largely overlooked. Tens of thousands of Australian women were drawn to England from the late nineteenth century onwards for diverse reasons including travel, adventure, escaping home and local gendered constraints, and seeking education, training and careers. London as imperial metropole has exercised a consistent pull for Australian women, despite the growing significance of alternative destinations such as New York. Some factors have stayed the same in this particular component of modern, global mobility, and yet we can also identify factors of change – factors that speak to the attenuation of imperial ties and colonial rights, even as the legacies of colonialism are the fundamental reason for the continuation of an Australian community in London today. Australians have been a continuing and communal presence in London despite their changing status and legal rights there, and the shifting racial understandings of the white colonial, which were in turn historically contingent upon race relations in the Australian colonies or states. The presence of white colonials in the metropole has been one vector through which imperial race relations, and the great diversity within the category "colonial", have been realized at the heart of empire.

David Lambert and Alan Lester have suggested recently that one aspect of imperial networks and systems was "imperial careerism". The concept of imperial careerism, they contend, serves to trace "colonial lives over time and space" and to go beyond "dualisms of centre and periphery, global and local". Identifying the mobility of colonial personnel as determined "careerism" decentres both Victorian notions of biography and their usage to shore up empire, and "contributes to an understanding of trans-imperial (and extra-imperial) networks".⁴ The collection of biographical studies Lambert and Lester have edited focuses on colonial governors and their wives, military and other officials, missionaries, a nurse and a labour recruiter, using their stories to suggest imperial decentring, networks and connections. While the collection includes an important subaltern story, that of Mary Seacole, it retains a focus on traditional occupations and the elite. I would suggest that the category of imperial networks could be further decentred through studies of more non-elite occupations such as acting. Transnational theatre circuits constitute a subject of both imperial and popular culture history. From the mid-nineteenth century, travelling

theatre companies connected Britain with its colonies and other global sites, creating the fabric of a shared imperial culture (through staging the same canonical productions across imperial sites, often with the same cast) and jobs for itinerant thespians. Acting has been overlooked as an imperial career, and entertainment circuits have not been fully appreciated as imperial systems. From the late nineteenth century, acting became increasingly significant as a career for colonial women, partly because of the expansion of the theatre and then the film and television industries, and partly because it gradually became respectable. With theatre one of the imperial economic networks of the high modern period, and its facilitation of colonial as well as metropolitan women's travels, a focus on acting as an imperial career brings women into view.

Colonial actresses

Australian expatriates in Britain who have become media icons, such as Germaine Greer, have been the subject of historical work.⁵ But there is less available work on the tens of thousands of Australians who did not become famous, including those who have worked in theatre, film and television – such as the now-unknown Ethel Haydon who in 1898 was hailed as a “charming young Gaiety actress” who, though based in London, “entirely won the heart of Manchester” through her lead role in a pantomime there.⁶ Actresses have constituted a continuing subgroup within the broader category of Australian women in England in the twentieth century, drawn to London for all the attractions of the imperial metropole, with the added pull of London's prominence in theatrical productions of all kinds.

The female body was on display in the period of high modernity, at the same time that women increasingly breached the confines of Victorian gender ideology, becoming travellers, workers, political actors and urban spectators. In both Australia and Britain, as Veronica Kelly has pointed out, young women were increasingly becoming “urban workers with just enough discretionary income to wield their consumer power in the expanding marketplace of cultural choice”.⁷ Theatre, vaudeville and, later, motion pictures comprised much of the public entertainments and new forms of leisure becoming available in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Young working women and others were consumers of these forms of mass entertainment, helping to shape the fan cultures and rapidly changing ideas of fashion and modernity to which they were integral. The female body – both in its most fundamental sense of the women whose work, lives and travel contributed to globally

emerging industries and consumer culture, and in its representational forms – was central.

By 1908 theatrical work had become a sufficiently significant area of employment for women in Australia that, when the magazine *The Lone Hand* commissioned a series of articles on women's industrial work, “The Chorus Girl” was one subject. The “chorus girl” was defined to include “all classes of theatrical aspirants; the girl who ‘walks on’ in drama; the girl who sings in a musical play; and she who is no more than a pair of ballet legs”, and was thought to be essentially “of the same class as the milliner or waitress”.⁸ Commentators of this period agreed that the “chorus girl” was woefully underpaid, especially given the long hours of unpaid rehearsals, yet they pointed out that the job was considered so desirable that stage managers and other gatekeepers were swamped with applicants. The early twentieth-century popularity of the job was related, one observer considered, to its new respectability, in contrast to the older view that stage work was “something that an average girl, decently brought up, would regard with grave suspicion; her relatives possibly with alarm”.⁹ Indeed, by the Edwardian period, theatrical work was sufficiently respectable that it had become a touchstone of nationalist pride. One observer was adamant that the Australian chorus girl was far better talented and trained than her English equivalent, while another asserted: “If I had to select an Australian type of girl who is as representative of the country as the Gibson girl is of America, I think I should point to the chorus-girl. And why not? She is bright, *chic*, vivacious, pretty, and lady-like. What more do you want?”¹⁰

Part of the attraction of the job was travel, despite the fact that the expenses of touring (such as paying for lodgings) meant that women barely survived on their wages and would have little or no savings at the end of a tour, even with travelling allowances. In Australia, the “chorus girl” could “travel and see her native land from end to end, which is an experience worth much to any woman”.¹¹ Touring Australian companies also crossed the Tasman Sea to “Maoriland”, which “though most of the girls are eager” to go for the sake of sight-seeing, “is a very bad financial proposition” because of the travel costs.¹²

Travelling theatre companies took Australian women to a range of countries, but perhaps the ultimate destination was the imperial metropole – which itself incorporated the possibility of provincial touring. Like Caribbean-born writer Jean Rhys herself, as well as Anna Morgan the protagonist of her 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*, other white colonial women may have fallen relatively easily into the world of travelling

theatre companies because they lacked close family and roots in England. Moreover, their separation from family and home may have lessened the risks to moral and social reputation of what some still regarded as the demimonde of the stage door and cheap boarding houses. At a practical level, joining a theatrical troupe may have had the attraction of providing a ready-made network for recently-arrived colonial women. *Voyage in the Dark* is closely based on Rhys's own experience, and her descriptions of touring life are interwoven with a colonial's assessments of England:

After a while I got used to England and I liked it all right; I got used to everything except the cold and that the towns we went to always looked so exactly alike. You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same. There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and rows of little houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky.¹³

Anna Morgan's exile from and homesickness for the Caribbean, her dependence on an uncaring stepmother, and her slide from chorus girl into being the mistress of an affluent businessman, weave together several kinds of precariousness. They include the isolation of a colonial in the metropole, the marginal and spasmodic work pattern of the theatre and the economic vulnerability of a poorly-paid woman who opts for selling sex, albeit to one man. Anna's thoughts constantly return to the Windward Islands, so that impressions of England are interspersed with scenes from home. Descriptions of England centre on their contrast from the Caribbean, such as one of London with: "hundreds thousands of white people white people [sic] rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together".¹⁴ Rhys's negative depictions of London, which contrast with happier memories of her colonial home, raise race as an issue alongside metropolitan class divisions, especially the marginality and poverty of some workers. Colonial women could come to London and find low-level work in the theatre, but Rhys makes clear the financial and emotional precariousness such a life could entail.

Veronica Kelly has analysed the economic imperatives and business practices of the Australian theatre impresarios of the period from the 1890s to the 1920s, showing Australia to have been one "local concentration" in a "global production network" shaped in part by the

empire. While London was the world capital of theatre in this period (increasingly encroached upon by New York), Kelly contends that Australian audiences' very "coloniality" helped to constitute their tastes and demands as modern cosmopolitans expecting to receive the world's best productions. Australia's role in this global system included a willingness to export local talent in return for "the import of intellectual property".¹⁵ Australian actresses need to be seen, then, as mobile agents within an imperial (global) system of entertainment circuits.

Australian women were a constant part of the London theatre industry from the late nineteenth century, occupying roles from the lowest rungs of the chorus to those of leading ladies, and even theatre management. The *British-Australasian* (which in 1924 became *The British Australian and New Zealander*) chronicled the success of Australian women on the provincial and London stages consistently for decades, from noticing that there were "three Australian girls" in the chorus of a "new sketch at the Palace in Manchester" in 1910; to noting Althea Glasby of Sydney's appearance in "The Merchant of Venice" at the Old Vic in 1922, and reporting Clarice Hardwicke's success in a leading role at Drury Lane in 1925.¹⁶ In 1922 the London-based newspaper also reported on the eventual success of Australian Marie Lohr as a theatrical producer, who after several "short runs" finally produced a hit with "that most delightful comedy, 'The Laughing Lady'".¹⁷ By 1928 Joan Luxton of Melbourne had also become a theatre producer, founding the Children's Theatre in Endell Street which claimed to be "the smallest theatre in London".¹⁸ By the 1930s, along with other organs of the Australian media, the *British Australian and New Zealander* proudly began to record the success of Australian women in films, such as "Miss Judy Kelly, the charming little Australian girl who has come across to star in British International Pictures".¹⁹ The fact that none of these names still carry any recognition underscores the number of Australian women – like other colonial women – who participated in the British theatre, film and television industries, and whose historical invisibility is a reminder that the colonial presence was so interwoven into the metropole as to blend in as part of the whole.

The careers of two Australian actresses of the early twentieth century exemplify the many women who took advantage of imperial connections to establish themselves. Mary Marlowe reveals the early-twentieth century availability of acting as an imperial career to a young woman of British descent and respectable yet impoverished class status. Rose Quong, more than a decade later than Marlowe, shows acting to have been available too to an Australian marginalized by racial hierarchies:

the ways in which she responded to racial barriers within the theatre world, and the need to see the category of colonial Australian women in the metropole as ethnically complicated.

Mary Marlowe

Mary Marlowe was born in Melbourne in 1884, to a family that had lost its affluence but sought to cling to gentility. Her education emphasized music, singing and dancing, and in 1907, against her family's wishes, she joined the Julius Knight travelling repertory-theatre company, adopting a career that fitted her impecunious status and seemed to offer glamour and excitement. The reality was often prosaic, as Marlowe travelled with productions to Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, Broken Hill, Bendigo and Ballarat, toured New Zealand, and stayed in cheap boarding houses, learning about the harsher side of life from older members of the company.²⁰

In 1910, with two of her similarly-ambitious actress friends, she left Australia and headed for the great imperial stage in England. After initial work in the provinces, Marlowe finally landed a contract with a London production. In 1912 she returned to Australia to pursue her acting career, only to head back to England and then in 1913 to tour with a production in Canada. In 1914 she tried the New York stage and toured the southern United States. In 1916 she returned to London, where she became a VAD nurse for the rest of the war, and launched her career as a novelist with *Kangaroos in King's Land*, a fictionalized account of her experiences in the metropole. Finally in 1920 Marlowe returned permanently to Sydney, where her long and prominent career included no further acting but journalism, other novels and radio broadcasting.

Marlowe's story exemplifies the pull of the northern hemisphere for an ambitious Australian actress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also speaks to the diversity of that pull: New York was indubitably a magnet, and Australian actresses and singers also worked the imperial entertainment circuit that took them to Canada, India, South Africa and elsewhere. But it was London, above all, which represented the locus of possibility and success. Like others before and after her, Marlowe was drawn specifically to London by her desires for a career, travel and excitement. Her reaction to London, recorded in her autobiography, was thus: "Inscrutable London! Indifferent London! Adorable London!...I hated it. I loved it. I worship the memory of it!"²¹ Working on the London stage represented the acme of colonial theatre.

trical achievement, in part because it was such an elusive quest. Marlowe's search for work included one incident when an American producer was hiring actors at Drury Lane: "Hundreds waited for him three mornings in succession. So did I. On the third morning he saw me as he was going out to lunch. 'The type I wanted. You would have suited me exactly. Sorry, but I've just this moment engaged a girl for the part. Sorry, girlie'." ²²

Theatrical touring in England, according to Marlowe, was even more of an education about grim social realities than in Australia:

In England it was "diggings", and they were mainly situated in the slums. On tour nobody knew us. Nobody wanted to. We were merely the troupe that had come into town.... As I moved from town to town, the lives of these people were woven into a pattern such as I could never find in any other way. Their homes, their aspirations, their desperate predicaments were open for me to investigate. I lived now among the people who struggled for a bare existence in factories and breweries and little shops; in coal pits and mills, in shipyards.... I was part of their daily life and I was - God be thanked - their rent.²³

While aware of English class differences, like other Australians in London, Marlowe was acutely aware of her vexed status as a colonial. Touring Stratford-on-Avon with her upper-class English cousins, Marlowe couldn't resist the opportunity of an empty theatre to try her own voice by projecting a line from Shakespeare. Her female cousin "looked at [her] with an expression which conveyed 'These incorrigible Australians!'"²⁴ More significantly, her first real break came when a theatre impresario, during an employment-seeking interview, goaded her:

I spent my days in theatrical agents' offices chasing the elusive job. It was a brutal business. Eventually I was sent to the Strand Theatre to be looked over by Stanley Cook. The little man was running a farce there and sending a couple of companies on tour in the autumn. He called me a "colonial". That enraged me. We had a heated argument and I was too busy being annoyed to realize he had started the argument to see if I would light up well. That terrible shyness was always a wall between me and managers, but Cook had broken through.²⁵

Her impassioned response to the demeaning epithet "colonial" was so animated that he became convinced of her talent and gave her a six-month contract.

Australians' reactions to English condescension toward them as colonials were one constituent of white colonial identity. This factor of life for Australian women in London changed over the course of the twentieth century but perhaps only subtly. Certainly, complaints by Australian women about being treated as colonials recurred across the twentieth century; even before 1900 it was a theme in the accounts of visitors and longer-term residents. Australians have resisted and resented their categorization as colonials, and refuted particular insults they have perceived to be levelled at them. Both the insults and the resentment, it seems, have been a continuing thread. Australians' resistance to the term "colonials" has perhaps been connected to an unwillingness to acknowledge or examine their own complicity in colonialism within Australia.

Rose Quong

Susan A. Glenn has argued that the burgeoning theatrical world of the late nineteenth century provided an important cultural breeding ground for feminism. By the end of the century, she suggests, theatre supported significant numbers of independent women, who earned salaries robust enough to maintain themselves. While this may not have been true for all the women in the chorus lines, it was the case for successful leading actresses. Material independence enabled social and sexual freedoms. Further, Glenn suggests that the roles provided by the dramatization of anxieties surrounding feminism and New Women lent actresses cultural authority to be transgressive. Both in their theatrical roles and in their own lives, successful actresses created themselves as spectacles, and thus enacted new modern definitions of femininity that lent weight to feminism.²⁶ Actresses adapted available roles, Glenn argues, even taking roles that emerged from misogynist strands in contemporary culture, and using them as vehicles for their own trademark performances.

Orientalism was a pervasive strand of both high and popular culture at the *fin de siècle* and in the early twentieth century. Susan Glenn and Judith Walkowitz have both studied the theatrical rage for Salome in this period, and its meanings in terms of gender, race and the exotic. Glenn traces the figure of Salome in American popular entertainment forms, arguing that it lost at least some of the misogynist and anti-Semitic overtones it had inherited from the 1892 Oscar Wilde play, and became a staple of vaudeville that intertwined issues of female sexuality and Orientalism.²⁷ Walkowitz has studied the popularization of Salome by North American music-hall dancer Maud Allan in London

from 1908 to 1918, analyzing its contemporary meanings in terms of eroticism and the exotic, cosmopolitanism, gender transgression and reactions to feminism.²⁸ The enormous popularity of representations of Salome were part of the *fin de siècle* and early-twentieth century fascination with Orientalism, a fascination that would continue in the inter-war period and to which Australian actress and lecturer Rose Quong catered in her development of professional Chineseness. As a colonial actress trading upon a racially-mixed identity, Quong followed in the metropolitan footsteps of Pauline Johnson, the Mohawk and English writer and actress who performed in London at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁹

Quong, an Australian actor, lecturer and writer, was born and brought up in Melbourne but left in 1924, at the age of 44, with an ambition to make it on the London stage. Rose Maude Quong or Rose Lanu Quong (as she variously gave her full name) was born in East Melbourne in August 1879, the first of four children born to Chun Quong and Annie Moy Quong. Quong's career, which would span Britain, the United States and even China itself, was the result of her marketing of her mixed cultural heritage. She became a skilled purveyor of cultural mixing and cultural difference, casting herself as an essentially qualified interpreter of Chinese culture to the Western world. When Quong arrived in London, she brought with her a successful reputation from repertory theatre in Melbourne, as an actress well versed in Shakespeare and the theatrical canon of the day. Shakespeare was her lifelong first love as a poet and playwright, but her desire to perform on the metropolitan stage as a Shakespearean actress ran up against racial stereotyping. Partly from her own choice and interest, and partly through the repeated suggestions and encouragement of Australian and English friends, Quong carved out instead a niche for herself as a lecturer on Chinese culture and philosophy, an "Oriental" actress and a reciter of Chinese poetry. Her successes – such as acting alongside Laurence Olivier, reciting on BBC radio, appearing on a BBC television programme as early as 1935, publishing two books with a major American publisher, and being cast as herself in a 1971 film – testify to her talent, hard work, energy and determination. But her professional achievements need to be juxtaposed with Quong's separation from her home and family, the marginality of her material standard of living, and the cultural stereotyping that precluded a career in Shakespeare and pushed her instead towards her own careful appropriation of Orientalism.

Quong's explanation of her decision to leave for London might have been given by any number of ambitious Australians, and reveals an

archetypal British colonial sensibility, and conception of London, its attractions and possibilities. "I was crazy on Shakespeare and Dickens. I wanted to go to London. I wanted to meet Ellen Terry and Melba. I needed a new experience, change".³⁰ There is no hint in this capsule explanation for her major life decision to leave the country of her birth, to which she would never return, of any frustration with anti-Chinese discrimination in Australia, or of her desire to develop her own Chineseness. Rather, this articulation suggests a desire to claim and develop her Britishness. Not only were Quong's articulated reasons for going to London typical of the thousands of Australian women making the pilgrimage "home" in this period, her life in London was similar in many ways to those of her British-descended compatriots there.³¹

In fact, compared to some other Australian women in London around the same time, she was better integrated into the Australian community. In her first years there she lived in boarding houses in Earl's Court, mixed often with Australian friends (some of whom she had known in Australia but some not), attended Australian social and community functions, and engaged in all the usual activities of the colonial tourist. Her busy social life revolved around her Australian friends, particularly close women friends with whom she spent much time, some of whom lived either in the same boarding house or another close by. Some diary entries suggest the explicit sharing of an Australian identity. She was invited repeatedly to gatherings of Australian artists at the home of the very successful concert singer Ada Crossley. On at least one such occasion the men in the group sang, then Rose performed scenes from "Macbeth". And she attended significant Australian community events such as an Australia Day church service, followed by a concert by Australian musicians and singers.³²

Despite determined perseverance at contacting theatre directors, critics and agents, and some initial successes, it became clear that she was not going to make it as a Shakespearean or general actress. Her friends and advisers urged her towards a specialized niche career, that of exotic or Oriental reciter, actress and performer. And at the same time, her own genuine interest in Chinese culture and philosophy, and her desire to develop that dimension of her identity led her towards professional Chineseness. In December 1924 and January 1925 she received a sudden flurry of press interest, facilitated by an acting teacher with whom she studied, and was interviewed by *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Graphic*, *The Glasgow Morning Post*, *The Sketch* and *The British Australian and New Zealand*. In the midst of all this and her auditions, she had publicity photos taken by a professional photographer, for some of

which she chose to wear a "Chinese gown". Her quest for the right Chinese outfit to perform in was protracted, partly because some she found did not seem appropriate, and having one made was expensive. In her first years in London she often borrowed items of clothing and props that she thought would produce the right background; her descriptions of these clothes and props sometimes read like a pastiche of "Oriental" objects.³³

Arguably Quong's greatest success came in March and April 1929 when she starred with Laurence Olivier and the well-known Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong in "The Circle of Chalk", a play by the German dramatist Klabund, based on Chinese legend, first translated into English in 1929, and which would later be adapted by Bertolt Brecht. The 1929 production at the New Theatre, which consisted of 48 performances, was probably the pinnacle of her career. The play certainly helped establish her name in London, and her favourable reviews were celebrated in Australia. The Sydney-based magazine *The Home* reported that her "striking success" was "acclaimed alike by critics and public". Moreover, the magazine asserted, Quong had outshone Anna May Wong; she had "scoop[ed] most of the praise from the critics" and indeed "is credited with having popularized the Chinese literary cult in London". The "Melbourne Repertory Society", the review concluded, "may well be proud of the [most?] famous member it has so far produced".³⁴

Quong carefully eschewed the erotic, but in focusing instead on the exotic and Oriental, she also built a career based on her own body. In Quong's case, her body was the signifier of her Chinese authenticity, the essentialist foundation for her carefully constructed performative, diasporic Chinese identity. Quong's modernity centred on her use of ethnicity, but also her claims to cultural and intellectual authority (through lecturing on Chinese culture and translating Chinese literature), a kind of authority not previously much available to women. Quong presents a complicated instance of the gendered politics of Orientalism. Orientalist representations have typically feminized Asians; Asian women especially have been seen as exotic, sensual and submissive.³⁵ Quong cast herself as exotic but not erotic, and in asserting her status as an intellectual cultural authority, in fact presented quite an androgynous figure.³⁶

Conclusion

Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have suggested that a focus on the body is "a way to dramatize how, why, and under what conditions women and gender can be made visible in world history" because

although women have been less visible as historical actors, their bodies "have been a subject of concern, scrutiny, anxiety, and surveillance in a variety of times and places across the world".³⁷ In this chapter, I have placed women's lives and bodies at the centre of imperial networks, especially connections between Australia and Britain. Mary Marlowe and Rose Quong were part of the sizeable phenomenon of Australian actresses and singers drawn by structures of colonialism to the metropolitan northern hemisphere, and the London stage in particular. Most of the thousands of Australian actresses, singers and musicians drawn to London in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries failed to achieve lasting fame, and have been historically invisible. Reconstructing this phenomenon allows us to recognize the period's vast musical and theatrical industries, the structural role of colonialism, and the gendered dynamics in which women sought careers, success, travel and adventure, even as they negotiated issues of respectability. With the privileges they claimed as "white" people (in many of which Quong shared due to reasons of class) freshly reinforced in their consciousness from the imperial racial structures they observed on their voyages to England, and their status as colonials reinforced on arrival, Australian women's theatrical and musical careers were shaped by such self-conceptions. Whether they embraced their colonialness and Australianness, or sought to elide it by, for example, voice training to lose their accents, or both, it was an issue which all had to confront. This episode of women's cultural work reveals the economic significance of the imperial entertainment industry, and the ways in which factors of gender, race and colonialism shaped Australian women's self-conceptions as colonials.

Yet ethnicity complicated the category of "white colonial" through the mixing of ethnic identities. Rose Quong's merging of Chinese, Australian and British identities seems complex in retrospect, but it was a juggling act facilitated by the very prominence of ethnic stereotypes in the high modern period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not least in popular culture. Mass entertainment forms, such as music hall and vaudeville, relied on ethnic stereotypes for much of their production, and humour of the period was often openly racist. Cultural forms were labelled in racist ways. The journalist who conducted the "industrial survey" of chorus girls in Australia in 1908 commented that some had to sing in accompaniment to "a colored comedian's 'barbaric yawp'" and that they were made to learn "a continually-increasing repertory of coon ditties, and such degenerate music".³⁸ If racist stereotypes pervaded both high and popular culture

in the period, so too did notions of ethnic blurring. Renee Sentilles has suggested that what we now recognize as celebrity status emerged in America in the middle decades of the nineteenth century as a product of the penny press, and has grown in cultural significance ever since. Celebrities, Sentilles argues, were created through performance, and as such were able to mix and shift their identities including in racial or ethnic terms. Her own study of the Civil War era actress Adah Isaacs Menken traces the ways in which Menken variously cast herself as white, Jewish and African American, and thus is a remarkable mirror of American culture of the 1850s–60s.³⁹ As Joanna de Groot has recently observed, in the British context, by the late nineteenth century the racial stereotyping that pervaded popular songs and pantomime performances was directly linked to the widespread use of racist images in advertising and visual culture. Together they constituted a set of images which not only reduced and demeaned colonized people, but "played a role in shaping British perceptions of their 'imperial' selves" at home in the metropole.⁴⁰

A few of the Australian women in London in the earlier part of the century were of continental European descent, although usually they did not emphasize this. More recently, in 2001 a Maltese-Australian woman Simone Ancilleri posted a submission on the Australian website "WogLife". Ancilleri's submission was headed "A wog in London", and in it she complains of the difficulties she experienced there as a hybrid or hyphenated Australian. Growing up in Western Sydney, she says, she was "just a wog" and her Australian friends accepted the fact she looked Maltese but had a broad Australian accent, and she had friends "from all different backgrounds". When she went to London she had hoped that she would meet "people of all different nationalities with perhaps an Aussie here or there and not the other way around". Instead she found that her "backpacker's house" was "little Australia", and that her housemates introduced her to their friends thus: "This is Simone and she is from Malta". Her indignant reaction was: "What! I was born in Australia and lived there for 23 years of my life [so] I felt that I deserved to be called an 'Australian'". For Ancilleri, while going to London on a working holiday for a couple of years was "the ultimate Australian cliché", her time there only confused her in terms of ethnic and national identities. She complained: "I can't go to the Australian pub and drink VB or XXXX and holler 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi!' without feeling like a complete fool".⁴¹ Thus while Australian women in London were not wholly of British descent even early in the century, the question of ethnicity versus Australianness is perhaps now more open for discussion.

Australian women arriving in London at very different moments in the twentieth century reacted in strikingly similar ways, evoking at once the familiarity and the imperial nostalgia of metropolitan arrival. In 1901, Australian journalist and novelist Louise Mack reacted this way: "Oh London, London! how did I ever live without you? I no longer say to myself, 'You're in London.' I accept it at last, and surrender to the spell of the City of Mists".⁴² Actress Ruth Cracknell's first reactions on her arrival in 1953 were only a little less romantic: "Arriving in London it was as if every reference point was familiar. A monopoly board come to life, all the reading of the preceding twenty or so years making virtually every street and square and garden familiar, but so much more vivid now that one was a part".⁴³ Romance and fantasy also colour the description, in a recent memoir by television comedian Noeline Brown, of her arrival in March 1965: "As soon as I recovered from my shocking jetlag I started exploring the city. I walked everywhere and loved every minute of it. I was actually Overseas. The little girl who used to hang around the docks and dream about travel was actually doing it".⁴⁴

But some things did change, most importantly from 1962 onwards the rights of Australians to stay and work in the UK. At the turn of the twentieth century a sojourn in London represented "going home". By the early twenty-first century only some of that imperial attachment remains, due to the attenuation of legal ties and cultural identification between metropole and colony. There are other noteworthy factors of change. One important one has to do with "race" or ethnicity, the ways in which constructed racial categories and subordination had very real effects on women's (and men's) lives and ability to travel. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there is no evidence of any Indigenous Australian woman in England. This absence of Aboriginal women is in contrast both to the small number of Aboriginal men who went to England in that period, and also to the small number of Canadian Aboriginal or First Nations women who travelled to England in the same years.⁴⁵ In the latter part of the twentieth century, significantly, a few Aboriginal women made the trip – something that was more possible after legislative restrictions on Aboriginal mobility were removed under the Whitlam Government. But before that government came to power, earlier in 1972, Aboriginal activist and writer Roberta Sykes travelled to England at the invitation of a group of Australian expatriates who wanted to draw attention to Aborigines' subordination.⁴⁶ In recent years, there has been more of an Aboriginal presence in London. Notable events have included the November 2002

visit by Doris Pilkington Garimara, author of the book *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* on which the film was based. And in 2005 the first "Sorry Day" event to be held outside Australia occurred at Lincoln's Inn Fields on 25th May.

Making visible the presence of colonial women in the metropole – even or especially women from one of the white settler dominions – highlights the thorough imbrication of the empire "at home". The female body has been central to modernity, through the sexualization and objectification of women, and the ubiquity of women as spectacle in advertising, theatre, film and television. For colonial women, the growth of theatre as an empire-wide industry opened up travel opportunities and access to the metropole, in jobs that were hard to get, short-term and often poorly paid but which many women saw as a better option than their other limited choices. Putting the spotlight on actresses shows the extent to which colonials pervaded the metropolitan labour force and, at the same time, how issues of political economy, culture and imperialism cannot be disentangled.

Notes

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- 3 Rose, *Which People's War?*, Ch. 7 "The End is Bound to Come": Race, Empire, and Nation". Sonya Rose's work on the empire as part of British history also includes the book she co-edited with Catherine Hall, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006).
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- 8 Beatrix Tracy, "Explorations in Industry: The Chorus Girl", *The Lone Hand* 3 (1 May 1908), 12–13.
- 9 Egbert T. Russell, "The Ladies of the Chorus", *The Lone Hand* 5 (1 July 1909), 284.
- 10 Russell, "The Ladies of the Chorus", 284; and Florence Young, "The Australian Chorus-Girl", *The Lone Hand* 3 (1 June 1908), 143.
- 11 Young, "The Australian Chorus-Girl", 145.
- 12 Russell, "The Ladies of the Chorus", 283.

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- 14 Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, 17.
- 15 Veronica Kelly, "A Complementary Economy? National Markets and International Product in Early Australian Theatre Managements", *New Theatre Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2005), esp. 78, 86 and 91.
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- 17 *The British Australasian*, 7 December 1922, 17.
- 18 *The British Australian and New Zealander*, 22 March 1928, 7.
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- 21 Marlowe, *That Fragile Hour*, 55.
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- 23 Marlowe, *That Fragile Hour*, 70–2.
- 24 Marlowe, *That Fragile Hour*, 59.
- 25 Marlowe, *That Fragile Hour*, 59.
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- 32 Diary entry for 26 January 1925, Rose Quong Papers, Mss 132, Series II, Box 1, Folder 7, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
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