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WORKING PAPER

This is the submitted version of:

Lamond, Julieanne (2011)

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This article has been published in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol 53, no. 4 (2011), pages 387-400. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available through the University of Texas Press.

The Reflected Eye: Reading race in Barbara Baynton's "Billy Skywonkie"

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(forthcoming 2011)

When Barbara Baynton's volume of short stories, Bush Studies, was published by Duckworth in 1902 critics lauded and deplored the realism of the work, often in the same breath.¹ In the majority of contemporary reviews, admiration is tinged with shock and concern. These stories were powerful, surely, but what might they reveal, and to whom? Australian critics were particularly concerned about how Baynton's "sordid" portrayal of life in the outback might be taken as representative of Australian life by readers overseas.² The stories in Bush Studies are deeply unsettling, not least because they are deliberately ambiguous. This ambiguity is one reason the stories have been subject to the process of continued critical reevaluation and dispute noted by Dale. "Billy Skywonkie" is a story the ambiguity of which seems to have infected its critical reception. This essay seeks to make explicit what is often left unclear in discussions of the story: it is remarkable for presenting a narrative told in part from

the point of view of a woman experiencing racism in its intersection with sexual and economic vulnerability in the early years of the twentieth century.

As Elizabeth Webby points out, "Billy Skywonkie" reveals Baynton to be a "pioneer" not only in terms of her representation of sexual exploitation in the Australian outback in the 19th century,³ but also in examining the relationship of this exploitation to race. In light of this, there has been a surprising lack of critical attention paid to the story and more generally to the representation of race in Baynton's work.⁴ This may be because the narrative uncertainty driving "Billy Skywonkie" is about the race of its protagonist: we are never sure whether this is a tale of racial recognition or mis-recognition. It is difficult even to ascertain what is happening in the story because the action hinges on the judgements of characters whose perspectives we are denied, and vital clues are delivered almost entirely via a vernacular so thick as to be deliberately bamboozling. Baynton controls point of view to spring the suggestion of race upon the reader as a hinted-at after-the-fact explanation of people's behaviour towards the protagonist. In the process, she draws us into precisely the same kind of classificatory tangles the protagonist elicits from the

character Billy Skywonkie and his fellow inhabitants of this version of Australian bush-as-nightmare. Reading race in "Billy Skywonkie" therefore also reveals something of Baynton's textual strategies in the collection as a whole. These stories limit our access to the perspective of their protagonists. The effect is to unsettle the reader by refusing to normalize or explain the often terrible behaviour of the characters. Baynton's stories render the bush strange, and they focus our attention on the position of these characters as witnesses to the violence of their society. "Billy Skywonkie" is, like many of Baynton's stories, about people who challenge the apparent passivity of their position by bearing witness.

"Billy Skywonkie" follows an unnamed woman's journey from Sydney to a station (a large outback property) to take up a position as housekeeper. She is picked up at the train station by Billy Skywonkie, a comic figure who becomes her guide in an increasingly fantastic and frightening environment. Much emphasis is placed on people's scrutiny of the would-be housekeeper and their surprised reactions to her. She is clearly not what they had expected, and it is a fair way into the story that we receive intimations that this might be because of assumptions about her race. Tied to this is the realization that "housekeeper" is very

clearly, in this instance, code for "mistress." She is rejected by the "boss" and at the close of the story is poised to return home.

Webby suggests that critics may have steered clear of "Billy Skywonkie" "because it has been seen as primarily 'comic' or 'farcical'" (10). The apparent generic incoherence of the story, which teeters between comedy, realism, fantasy and horror, may account for some of the unwillingness of critics to read it closely. The story begins in a comic-realist style common to the bush writing in Australia in this period:

The line was unfenced, so with due regard to the possibility of the drought-dulled sheep attempting to chew it, the train crept cautiously along, stopping occasionally, without warning, to clear it from the listless starving brutes (93).

This is a journey into a landscape characterised by dryness, dullness, doomed and dying animals, and peopled by itinerant workers: drovers, scrubcutters, commercial travellers. Realist territory. We then meet a procession of increasingly odd, grotesque and variously threatening and

hilarious characters who, individually, might not be out of place in a Henry Lawson story (I'm thinking here of "The Bush Undertaker") but who, taken en masse, represent a world that has more in common with Lewis Carroll's antipodes than with Lawson's. We meet "Mickey the Konk", who appears to our protagonist as "grotesquely monkeyish": "the nose of this hairy little horror, as he slewed his neck to look into her face, blotted the landscape and dwarfed all perspective" (98). At the sly grog shanty⁵ they visit "on the way" to the station we encounter an old woman who seems to signal this story's entrance to the archetypal territory of the fairy tale: she is "a bent old woman, almost on all fours" with a

toothless mouth (the mission of which seemed to be, to fill its cavernous depths with the age-loosened skin above and below). A blue bag under each eye aggressively ticked like the gills of the fowls, and the sinews of the neck strained into *basso-rilievo*...entrenched behind the absorbed skin-terraces, a stump of purple tongue made efforts at speech. When she held out her claw, the woman understood and felt for her purse. Wolfishly the

old hag snatched and put into her mouth the coin... (101-2).

Our protagonist looks at this old woman with "the fascination of horror" and this passage seems to present her point of view: through her eyes this woman, like the Konk, appears to be more animal than human. We are not sure if it is the slewing of the woman's perspective that makes it seem so, but the world of the bush is seen, here, as exaggerated in its awfulness.

Although we see the events of the story primarily through the point of view of the female protagonist, Baynton exercises a high degree of control over how much of this woman's consciousness we are able to access. It is this constant closing down of our access to the woman's responses which creates the core difficulty in interpreting the story. From the moment the denizens of the bush set eyes on her, the unnamed woman whose journey we are following is subject to a level of scrutiny, shock and derision that seems bewildering to the reader. Why is she being treated this way? We see, through the perspective of this woman, Billy attempt to drive off and leave her at the

railway station. She runs after him, fearful of being left alone in the outback:

Yes, he [Billy] was from Gooriabba Station, and had come to meet a young "piece" from Sydney, who had not come.

She was ghastly with bilious sickness—the result of an over-fed brain and an under-fed liver. Her face flushed muddily. "Was it a housekeeper?" (95)

Billy clearly does not associate the woman before him with the "young 'piece'" he has come to meet, but at this point it is not at all clear why. After some moments of scrutiny he concludes: "Damned if I know...but there'll be a 'ell of a row somewhere" (96). This is the first of many mystifying comments and actions in response to people setting eyes on her. Their behaviour, for most of the story, seems inexplicable: a drover at the station ignores her question; Billy almost abandons her; Mickey the Konk does not give her the emu eggs he had brought for her; Billy's mistress Mag stares at her and laughs. This behaviour is rendered mystifying because of the apparent passivity of its object: we do not know what to make of it, because we do not know what she makes of it.

Most mystifying and incoherent (both generically and literally) is Billy Skywonkie himself: a failed weather-prognosticator suffering more than one kind of "mind and body conflict" (99). The status of the titular Billy as a comic figure might have something to do with critics' difficulty in taking this story seriously. He is signposted as a comic character from his earliest description: he is "the rouseabout, wearing his best clothes with awful unusualness" (95). Billy's clothing is described with the kind of mock-ethnographic interest we might find in Lawson, "Steele Rudd" or other bush writers of the period, who have since come to be seen by many as representative of the Australian literary tradition: "There was that wonderful margin of loose shirt between waistcoat and trousers, which all swagger bushies affect." In the next paragraph, he puts "his hands as far as he could reach into his pockets—from the position of his trousers he could not possibly reach bottom. It was apparently some unknown law that suspended them" (96). This description of Billy is a rare instance of introspection on the part of our narrator (as indicated by the generalization about "all" swagger bushies) and serves primarily as a generic marker. The gently mocking tone places us in the world of bush comedy and establishes Billy as a comic, literary and

social "type": the "rouseabout", the "swagger bushie." It is important that Billy is established as representative of bushmen more generally because his chronically confused reaction to our protagonist is a detailed depiction of the intersection of racism and desire and the persistence (and incoherence) of racial hierarchies in this period. But the generic status of Billy as comic--and thus harmless--is progressively undercut throughout the narrative, culminating in the final image of the story of Billy wielding a knife, about to cut the throat of a sheep.

Like Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, "Billy Skywonkie" is a journey away from the known and familiar (at one point, our protagonist longs to take the train "back to civilization") into a place where the rules of logic, politeness, morality are turned upside-down. The unnamed woman is vulnerable and alone in a strange environment in which people and animals seem indistinguishable and talk in riddles, and the people to whom she turns for guidance make very little sense at all. In response to what she sees, and motion-sick from her journey, her own perspective becomes distorted:

A giddy unreality took the sting from everything...She felt she had lost her mental balance. Little matters became distorted, and the greater shriveled (103).

The effect of this loss of perspective is that she seems to lose the ability to make judgements about what is happening to her. In the relationship between our protagonist and Billy Skywonkie Baynton seems to be questioning the social consensus about the real, normal or everyday that is presumed by the idea of literary realism in Australia in this period. Such a social consensus is absent in "Billy Skywonkie." Billy represents a norm that we (along with our protagonist) cannot identify with because it is incoherent, nonsensical.

The capacity of this story to function as a racial critique depends on the extent to which its readers were/are able to recognize the racist vernacular. In this respect Baynton is deliberately ambiguous. Elsewhere in the story benign vernacular terms are translated for the reader ("mustered-bush stocktaking"107) but in relation to the racial references the comprehension of readers is either assumed or elided altogether. These references become increasingly explicit as the story goes on, so as to enable

a reader to identify with the protagonist before they realize she might be Chinese. Our first clue is not in reference to the woman altogether but to crows following after the dying sheep:

"'Blanky bush chinkies!' I call 'em. No one carn't tell 'em apart."

There was silence again, except for a remark that he could spit all the blanky rain they had had in the last nine months. (97)

There is no way to know how to read the woman's silence, here. Mickey the Konk gives clearer voice to Billy's thoughts:

He turned his horse's head back to the gate. "I say, Billy Skywonkie! Wot price Sally Ah Too, eh?" he asked, his gorilla mouth agape.

Billy Skywonkie uncrossed his legs, took out the whip. He tilted his pipe and shook his head as he prepared to drive, to show that he understood to a fraction the

price of Sally Ah Too. The aptness of the question took the sting out of his having had to open the gate. (99)

There is clearly a knowingness at work here between the two men. The implication is that the woman is Chinese ("Ah Too" being a parody of a Chinese name) and that she is sexually available, or a prostitute. Is Baynton including the reader in this knowingness, assuming she does not have to explicitly state the cause of the woman's victimization? Or is she in effect speaking over their heads or behind their backs? Is it only the people she is criticizing who would recognize the terms of the critique?

This question becomes more pointed as Billy becomes increasingly inebriated and his free association reveals the true incoherence and force of racial distinctions in colonial society. After repeatedly sneaking to the back of the buggy (where his bottle is hidden), he tells her:

Jimmy Fernatty 'as took up with a yaller piece an' is livin' with 'er. But not me; thet's not me! I'm like ther boss, thet's me! No yeller satin for me!

He watched for the effect this degree of taste had on her.

Though she had withdrawn her hand, he kept winking at her, and she had to move her feet to the edge of the buggy to prevent his pressing against them. He told her with sudden anger that any red black-gin was as good as a half chow any day, and it was no use gammoning for he knew what she was.

"If Billy Skywonkie 'ad ter string onter yaller Lizer, more 'air on 'is chest fer doin' so" (striking his own). "I ken get as many w'ite gins as I want, an' I'd as soon tackle a gin as a chow anyways!"

On his next visit to the back of the buggy she heard the crash of glass breaking against a tree. (104)

This is a comic portrait of a drunken and confused man whose racism and desire are at odds with one another. Its comedy rests on the incongruity between Billy's words and his actions. Billy is in the throes of another "mind-body problem": "No yeller satin for me!", he insists, while making clumsy sexual advances towards the woman next to him who he clearly believes falls within the category of "yellow" or Chinese. This soliloquy also reveals the ambiguity of the vernacular itself: his wife, we discover, is "yaller Lizer" (a part-Aboriginal woman), which is why

he asserts with such indignation that "any red black-gin⁶ was as good as a half chow any day." Billy argues with himself about the relative merits of variously described racial categories as sexual partners. In the course of this speech he rates (and I apologise for the reprising of racist language here): "yaller piece", "red black-gin", "half chow" and "w'ite gin" with a vociferousness that renders the project ridiculous. The racial hierarchies he asserts are clearly expedient: they make no sense. In the context of this woman's experience, however, it is apparent that despite their incoherence, they constitute a forceful social norm. Indeed, in an environment in which it seems most of the norms of politeness or morality have broken down, the one distinction that forms the basis of some social consensus is a racial one.

Laid out in this way, it seems patently clear that this story should be read as a pioneering representation of the experience of racism in turn-of-the-century Australia. This representation seems all the more radical for the ways in which its protagonist is positioned: the reader is aligned with her as she travels from "civilization" (read: Sydney) into the very strange world of the bush. Her experience of racism (in its intersection with sexual exploitation) is a major factor in establishing the

strangeness of this world. It seems strange because it is only revealed very late that race is a cause of her experiences. In this respect, Baynton invites her readers to identify with a Chinese protagonist before they realize they are doing so. From this point of identification, racism is presented not as taken for granted (as it is in much other Australian writing of the period) but as utterly bizarre, its effects felt to be both humiliating and frightening.

However, this is not the only reading Baynton makes available. Another possibility is allowed here, particularly to readers who persistently read Baynton within an autobiographical frame: this is that our protagonist is being mis-recognised as Chinese. This is the central ambiguity of the story: the answer to the question of why the woman is being treated in this way, and why she is rejected by the Boss and sent home, is left deliberately ambiguous. Whether the protagonist is Chinese or not does not remove the effectiveness of this as a portrayal of the experience of racism; instead of potentially putting a white reader in the position of a Chinese character, it puts a white character into the position of a Chinese person. The possibility of racial mis-recognition is deliberately laid open by Baynton by her limiting of the

protagonist's perspective, her ambiguous comments about her appearance, and her inclusion of the stock comic character type of the Chinese cook.

As noted above, Baynton is extremely selective in revealing the woman's perspective. Like most of the stories in Bush Studies, "Billy Skywonkie" uses third-person narration to manage some tightly-controlled shifts of point of view, as Webby notes. Early in the story we have some access to the woman's inner life: we hear with her the falling of the cattle in the carriage, see the bushman throw his saddle, are "appalled" by the landscape. Yet at the points in which we most want to know what she is thinking, this information is denied to us. In each of the exchanges related above—in which mention is made of her race—we are offered no access to introspection on the part of the protagonist. Billy "watches for the effect" his words have on the woman, but we do not discover what this effect is. As with the portrayal of Mary in "Squeaker's Mate", there seems to be a deliberate decision to deny us a level of introspection on the part of these characters that would clarify the narrative intent of the work. The effect of this decision, when combined with the ambiguous descriptions of the woman's appearance, is to draw the reader into a very similar kind of desire for racial

classification (and subsequent classificatory tangle) that so besets Billy Skywonkie.

The uncertainty Baynton allows in this regard has led most of the critics who have considered the story to overlook or fudge the issue of race. The ambiguity in some of the criticism is telling: Havelock Ellis, for example, describes our protagonist as "the plain young woman with the muddy complexion" (176). "Muddy" is particularly apt, here and in the story itself. In the initial instance of rejection at the train station, quoted above, the woman's illness is an early explanation for her lack of introspection and passivity throughout the story: she is "ghastly with bilious sickness" and her face flushes "muddily". This may also be presented as an explanation for why Billy could view her as insufficiently sexually attractive to take up the position as "housekeeper" to his boss: either her age, her plainness, or her race. Baynton is playing with the uncertainty and guesswork inherent in racial judgements, as she does when our protagonist observes Billy's wife: "It was dusk, but through it she saw the woman was dusky too." (105) "Too", here, associates the colour of the sky with the woman's Aboriginality. Might "too" also be associating herself with the woman?

The willingness of some critics to read this as a story of racial mis-recognition accords with the overwhelming tendency to read Baynton as an "accidental" or autobiographical writer. In order to read this story as autobiographical, it must be a case of mistaken identity. This is certainly how the story is read in Penne Hackforth-Jones' biography, which uses Baynton's fiction as source material. Hackforth-Jones reads "Billy Skywonkie" as an autobiographical account of a journey Baynton took as a young woman:

Answering an advertisement for a housekeeper, she travelled to Sydney and boarded a train for a station near Goorianawa, in the far north-west of New South Wales...

At the next siding there was a cart waiting for her and a young rouseabout announced he had come to meet a "young piece" from Sydney. He peered at her. She was naturally sallow with hooded eyes, and was now very pale from the journey. She asked, "Was it a housekeeper?" (14).

Hackforth-Jones' biographical narrative includes an explanatory sentence about the appearance of the woman in question ("naturally sallow with hooded eyes"), explaining what is deliberately left unexplained in the story. The story elicits a desire for such explanations in order to make sense of the narrative, which is part of what renders it such a difficult prospect for a critic, and such a clever exercise in revealing the perniciousness of racial classification.

The cumulative effect of the ambiguous description of the woman's appearance, the lack of access to the woman's introspection about her treatment and the racial classifications made by Billy and the Konk is to make the mystery of the story—the narrative uncertainty seeking resolution—centre upon the woman's race. The desire for narrative certainty, here, becomes tied up with the desire for racial classification. The reader is led to a situation of wanting to know what the woman looks like so that we can judge "what she is": an uncomfortable position indeed, particularly for a modern reader. No wonder, then, so many critics have steered clear of this aspect of the story.

There is one further complicating factor in the reading of race in "Billy Skywonkie," one which relates to

the generic oddness mentioned above. The final section of the story includes a character by the name of Ching Too--as his name suggests, this character is a version of stock comic stereotype of the Chinese cook. Ching Too is infantilized and parodied for his English, his taste for opium and his clumsy attempts to woo the woman. If this story seeks to confront or uncover racism, how do we account for the inclusion of a stock comic racist character type? Does it make sense for such a character to co-exist alongside a complex, female, Chinese protagonist?

In the first place, the inclusion of the Chinese cook makes quite clear that the repugnance at play here is linked to a fear of miscegenation rather than racism per se. The Boss has no trouble hiring a Chinese person as a cook; he simply does not want one as his mistress. In the trajectory of the narrative the cook seems to inject a note of shambolic comedy into what is otherwise the most troubling part of the story, where the woman realizes the true nature of the job she has applied for: to be sexually exploited by the Boss who is, we are told, "a terror for young 'uns." In the face of this implied violence, the cook seems, like the old woman and Mickey the Konk, to be a figure of the unreality and oddness of the world she finds herself in: we see his dog licking the bacon (he will not

eat it because it is "too slaw" [salty]) and his hen laying eggs on the bed to go along with it. Ultimately, the effect of his inclusion in the story is only to deepen the ambiguity surrounding the woman's race, as can be seen in their initial encounter:

maybe it was a sense of what was in his mind that made the quivering woman hide her face when virtuous Ching Too came to look at her (106).

"Maybe" indicates the unwillingness with which Baynton lets us into the thoughts of her protagonist in these situations. Even when the woman's motivations are hinted at it is with a high degree of opacity: what was "in his mind"? Following from a diatribe on the part of Lizer about Billy's failings, this might suggest an implication that our protagonist had been sexually involved with him. As throughout the story, however, sex and race are not easily disentangled: is this also a scene of racial recognition? Is Ching Too seeing through any attempt she is making to pass as white?

This is one instance of a leitmotif that occurs throughout the story: watching our protagonist being

watched, or being subject to another person's scrutiny. Much of the narrative focus of the story is on the woman being looked at and judged by others, and indeed the reader depends on these judgements to make sense of the narrative. The scene with Ching Too seems to revisit an earlier case of scrutiny between the woman and Mickey the Konk:

Unsophisticated bush wonder in the man's face met the sophisticated in the girl's.

Never had she seen anything so grotesquely monkeyish. And the nose of this hairy little horror, as he slewed his neck to look into her face, blotted the landscape and dwarfed all perspective. She experienced a strange desire to extend her hand. When surprise lessened, her mettle saved her from the impulse to cover her face with both hands, to baffle him. (98)

These scenes of the protagonist hiding her face seem to draw attention to the fact that she is constantly being seen and judged: by Billy, by Mag, by the Konk, by the cook and, climactically, by the Boss. The effectiveness of the story seems to rest on its capacity to allow the reader to feel what it is like to be judged solely and unfairly upon

one's appearance. At the same time, Baynton uses perspective to show that the woman is looking back.

Both scenes of scrutiny--between the woman and Ching Too and Mickey the Konk respectively--focus our attention on how the woman is seen by others. In both she experiences the desire to cover her face, to hide from their judgements or "baffle" them. In the initial instance, however, she does not cover her face. This is very clearly a situation of reciprocal scrutiny, and the woman's would seem to be the clearer eye: "Unsophisticated bush wonder in the man's face met the sophisticated in the girl's." This circumstance provides a way of understanding the story as a whole. Although the woman is subject to the scrutiny of the inhabitants of the bush, these inhabitants are scrutinized by the woman and by the story itself. She is subject to their awful behaviour because of their racial judgements but at the same time she is seeing and judging them. Through her eyes, these people appear grotesque, utterly strange. It seems significant that the character who is responsible for most directly deriding the woman for her race is himself presented (through her perspective) as grotesque and "monkeyish".

A reading of the story in terms of the woman's role as witness is complicated by the final image of Billy and the sheep. There is reference to animals throughout the collection, primarily as victims of violence or neglect. They seem to parallel the fate of the women--or, as Dale notes, to dramatise the fantasies of violence and sacrifice that might underlie these women's experiences. "Billy Skywonkie" is no exception to this. From the outset, dying or threatened animals foreshadow the potential danger of the situation this woman finds herself in. She "realized the sufferings of the emaciated cattle" (94) who are dying, one by one, in the cattle truck. There is a slippage between the literal and the metaphoric in Baynton's references to animals, seen most clearly in the "ewe and lamb" which on first reading may or may not be a euphemism for the dead woman and her child in "The Chosen Vessel." In "Billy Sykwonkie", the woman does not see or recognize but "realize" the sufferings of the cattle, as though she is one of them. As they travel towards the station, Billy Skywonkie remarks that due to the lack of rain there will be "No lambin' this season; soon as they're dropt we'll 'ave ter knock 'em all on ther 'ead!" (97) This reference to the casual violence involved in rural life during drought is an early indicator that this is a world with a

very different moral compass to hers; it also implies a threat to our protagonist, or any children she might bear as "housekeeper" to the boss of the station. The final image of the sheep is a moment of clarity in what is, for the most part, a deliberately confusing narrative:

She noticed that the sheep lay passive, with its head back till its neck curved in a bow, and that the glitter of the knife was reflected in its eye. (109)

This is an image of the edge of violence; it is the moment preceding a killing. Much of the collection focuses on this kind of expectation of violence.

The glitter of the knife reflected in its eye suggests that the sheep (despite its passivity) is cogniscent of its approaching death. It is a witness to its own killing. This is a reflection of the woman's realization of her intended role at the station as physical sacrifice of some sort. Situated at the end of this story it casts into question the effectiveness of our protagonist's escape. Is she witnessing the narrowness of her escape: the violence to which she would have been subject had she stayed? Or is she realizing the experience of the sheep in the same way she

realized the hopelessness of the cattle on the train? Has this awful adventure made her realize that her fate is determined, in this environment, because of her race? As with the endings of nearly all of Baynton's stories this is left deliberately ambiguous. It leaves open the possibility that our comic figure, Billy Skywonkie, with whom she is about to travel back to the grog shanty, might also be capable of violence.

This final image encompasses what is happening in the story as a whole: we are watching someone (or thing) being watched, but also seeing them watching back. We are watching this woman watch the sheep: "she noticed" its passivity, and the reflection of the knife. Throughout "Billy Skywonkie" we watch this woman being watched and judged: we realize her sufferings but only to a limited extent. We see what she is seeing but we can only really infer how she is feeling about it. This is very similar to what is happening in "Squeaker's Mate": we watch Mary watching Squeaker--for example, "she could see him through the cracks"--but do not have access to her thoughts. Why limit their perspectives in this way?

Susan Barrett notes the ways in which readers are denied access to the thoughts of Baynton's protagonists in "Squeaker's Mate" and "Billy Skywonkie" and concludes:

Despite the awfulness of the male characters, the decentering of the protagonist makes it possible for readers unwilling to accept Baynton's views on life in the bush to accept the explicitly stated opinions of the male characters and to dismiss the woman as an unwelcome outsider.

The woman is certainly an "unwelcome outsider" in the story but this is not a view the narrative encourages us to share, and this is because, although we are denied access to the protagonist's thoughts, she is not decentred. In both stories, we are still primarily witnessing the action through the woman's point of view; we simply do not have access to her introspection. She remains, as Barrett notes, "the listening woman passenger" and through this point of view, from the very outset of the story, the behaviour and opinions of those in the bush are presented not as acceptable but as utterly strange.

The woman in "Billy Skywonkie" is, perhaps, Baynton's foil in a similar manner to Mary in "Squeaker's Mate". What is more explicit in this story is how damning the gaze of judgement can be. In that final image, the point is that she "notices" what is happening. She seems to be the passive subject of the gaze but, like Mary, she "holds and looks." The final image of the story is not, as is often suggested in readings of Baynton's stories, simply an example of the collapsing or conflating of woman and sheep. It is also an acknowledgement of the distance between them. This is the critical distance necessary to "notice": to witness. In this respect this image of woman, knife and sheep can be seen as a synecdoche for Bush Studies as a whole--Baynton's writing witnesses the glitter of the knife, the edge of or potential for violence in the world she lived in. The representation of race in "Billy Skywonkie" suggests something about the nature of this act of witnessing. It seems to challenge the idea of passivity. There is a steely certainty in these characters and these stories, about how powerfully unsettling it can be to be watched.

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Baynton. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993. 1-17.

¹ For example, The Literary World claims: "Her skills are extraordinary in the delineation of what is sordid and even repellent and hideous in the solitary conditions of the 'Outback'...Yet we have the tragedy and grim reality of it all presented with the certainty of knowledge." (cited in Queenslander). A.G. Stephens in The Bulletin writes that Bush Studies "ranks with the masterpieces of literary realism in any language" but fails to become "universal in its reference," also indicating some concern about her emphasis on the "predominantly obstetric" nature of life in the bush (14 February 1903, 28 February 1903).

² The Bulletin worries that "foreign readers are sure to refer the descriptions to Australia generally." (28 April 1903). The Town and Country Journal writes "there is surely no need for realism to be revolting", hoping Baynton will turn her pen to better purpose "if only for the sake of the hapless dwellers in the bush, of whose lurid lives and surroundings such books must give to the outside world the worst possible impression." The West Australian, expounding further, writes: "It is surprising how ignorant the Englishman is of Australia and Australians, and it is through books like "Bush Studies" that so much misunderstanding is caused. To read Barbara Baynton's work, one would imagine that each and every one of the "way-backers" of our Australian States were ignorant, blasphemous, brutal wretches, whose sole occupation was drinking and swearing: that their morality was the lowest of the low, and that, in short, they were a very bad lot."

³ Much critical attention has focused on Baynton's dissection of gender relations in the bush, particularly in the stories "The Chosen Vessel" and "Squeaker's Mate." See, for example, Schaffer, Rowley ("Bushwoman").

⁴ Apart from Webby, who offers a brief but incisive reading, "Billy Skywonkie" is mentioned briefly by Sue Rowley ("Gender"), Kay Schaffer, Lucy Frost and Delys Bird, and in slightly more detail by Barrett: only

Rowley and Bird note the racial aspect of the story. Bird describes the protagonist as an "ageing half-caste." Frost describes her as "a woman of no sexual lure" and Schaffer as "an anonymous sex object" but neither notes the racial context of this objectification. No contemporary reviews of Bush Studies to my knowledge mention race, although several note the story to be "graphic" and "sordid."

⁵ Bush hotel, usually illegal.

⁶ Aboriginal woman