

Dreams and Nightmares
of a 'White Australia':
the Discourse of Assimilation
in Selected Works of Fiction
from the 1950s and 1960s

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*A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of The Australian National University*

January 1999

d e c l a r a t i o n o f a u t h o r s h i p

Except where otherwise acknowledged this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for examination elsewhere.

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January 22, 1999

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This thesis is an analysis of the production of assimilation discourse, in terms of Aboriginal people's and white people's social relations, in a small selection of popular fiction texts from the 1950s and 1960s. I situate these novels in the broader context of assimilation by also undertaking a reading of three official texts from a slightly earlier period. These texts together produce the ambivalent white Australian story of assimilation. They illuminate some of the key sites of anxiety in assimilation discourses: inter-racial sexual relationships, the white family, and children and young adults of mixed heritage and land ownership. The crux of my argument is that in the 1950s and early 1960s the dominant cultural imagining of Australia was as a white nation. In white discourses of assimilation to fulfil the dream of whiteness, the Aboriginal people – the not-white – had to be included in or eliminated from this imagined white community. Fictional stories of assimilation were a key site for the representation of this process, that is, they produced discourses of 'assimilation colonization'. The focus for this process were Aboriginal people of mixed ancestry, who came to be represented as 'the half-caste' in assimilation discourse. The novels I analyse work as 'conduct books'. They aim to shape white reactions to the inclusion of Aboriginal people, in particular the half-caste, into 'white Australia'. This inclusion, assimilation, was an ambivalent project – both pleasurable and unsettling – pleasurable because it worked to legitimate white colonization (Aboriginal presence as erased) and unsettling because it challenged the idea of a pure 'white Australia'.

a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

I would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking my original supervisor, Marilyn Lake, for starting me off on this project. Thanks also to my supervision panel of Ann Curthoys and John Docker who supported me with their expertise, editing and intellectual guidance. I am also grateful to Rosanne Kennedy, my supervisor, who created a supportive, yet independent, atmosphere in which to develop and write this work. Thank you to Barbara Nicholson for generously spending time with me discussing the shapes of Australian racism. For offering to read chapters and then undertaking this task enthusiastically and within my deadlines I would like to thank Alison Bashford, Emma Partridge, Adrian Vickers and Ben Maddison.

Thank you to my colleagues in the History and Politics Program at the University of Wollongong for support in the last two years of this thesis. In particular I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the heads of my program, John McQuilton and Adrian Vickers, whose efforts helped enormously in achieving the balancing act of teaching and 'finishing up'.

For intellectual and emotional support I would like acknowledge and thank the 'kill and grill' gals of Tikka Wilson, Cath Styles and Rosanne Kennedy. For two years this group met regularly and read my work, gave me their draft chapters to read and together we discussed our sometimes disparate and other times shared intellectual projects in a rigorous, focused and generous fashion. This is one of the most enriching intellectual experiences I have had and what I have gained (and continue to gain) from the group goes well beyond this thesis.

I undertook my Ph. D at the Centre for Women's Studies at the Australian National University and it has been a wonderful experience and a fine 'introduction' to academia. My shared job with Alison Bashford, the Women's Studies seminar series, my reading group and the centre morning teas with staff and other post-grads were highlights. Thank you to Jill Matthews and Jan Jindy Pettman, the heads of the Centre, who have shaped an impressive intellectual and social environment. I would also like to acknowledge Jennifer Rutherford whose passionate intellectualism I find inspiring.

A bursary from the Western Australian branch of the Australian Federation of University Women is also gratefully acknowledged. This financial assistance enabled me to travel and undertake interstate research.

I would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal Affairs Department of Western Australia and thank them for permission to quote from selected files held in the state Public Records Office. Thanks to Hodder and Stoughton Limited, Transworld Publishers, HarperCollins Publishers and the National Library of Australia for permission to reproduce the illustrations which appear in this thesis.

To Alison, who went before me in this endeavour, thank you, for embedding survival tactics in my mind which resurfaced when needed. Thanks to Beth and Ann for all those phone calls and to Beth thanks for information on the world of copyright, style sheets and for telling me what an 'en-dash' was. Thanks to Reg, Cathie, Kurt, Luke and Mark for ringing, writing, sending fridge magnets and visiting from Melbourne to see if I was still alive. To Splath, thanks for being in the same 'head space' as me. To dearest Judith and Lucy, thanks for all things Cobb Crescent (peace, pizza and patience) and to Cath Ellis thank you for impeccably timed kindnesses.

By the final weeks before submission I was in full Ph. D princess mode and I especially thank the people who put up with me in this incarnation: Debra Grogan for copy editing the final version; Cath Styles for living up to her name and helping me with formatting; Norma Vettoretto for the pain-free lessons in pagemaker; and Andrew Wells (and Lucien) for walking me through a tough day.

Writing a thesis is a long process. My mother, Anne, watched me begin the process and hoped to see the end product. She didn't, but the 'gifts' she bequeathed me of perseverance, commitment to one's dreams and goals and a sometimes frustrating self-sufficiency were important in my continuing and finishing this thesis after her death.

My most special thanks and love go to Emma Partridge. Hers is the intellect, ethics and way of being I admire most in the world. I hope this thesis bears at least some traces of what I have learned from her. That this thesis is completed is testimony to Emma's love and nurturing through the worst of times (which had little to do with my thesis, but sadly coincided with it) and is forever appreciated.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to 'mu and mum.

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Writing a story of 'white Australia':
introduction,
theory and method

i: introduction

Since the ushering in of the Coalition government in the 1996 Australian Federal election, for its first term in office in thirteen years, and the emergence, and then phenomenal rise of Pauline Hanson,¹ more voice has been given to white far-right and moderate rhetoric about how social relations between Indigenous people and white people should be organised. Central in these imaginings is the notion of assimilation. There has been a harking back, in both crude and more sophisticated ways, to a time when relations between the two groups is remembered as being simpler. This has included the return to prominence in governmental and popular discourse of a paternalistic outlook.² There has been a shift away from self-determination as a legitimate form for Indigenous social relations with white people and a move to a new form of racism which suggests that any 'special treatment' for Indigenous people is 'racist' and that all Australians should be treated the same.³

¹ Pauline Hanson lost her seat in the Houses of Representatives in October 1998. But the One Nation Party she set up captured a significant portion of the vote in this Federal election.

² The federal government's removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission control of funding of Indigenous health programs and a suggestion by a Queensland One Nation back-bencher, made in September 1998, that Aboriginal people were happier when just given 'a bit of meat' by pastoralists are just two examples of this shift. This last claim was made by Mr Jeff Knuth, MP and was reported by Margo Kingston, 'Aboriginal slavery: Hanson can't make up her mind', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1998, p. 8.

³ For a contemporary analysis of this trend see for example: Barry Morris and Gillian Cowlshaw, 'Cultural racism', in Barry Morris and Gillian Cowlshaw (eds), *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997, p. 6;

This revitalization of the discourse of assimilation is linked to the question of land and land rights. The shift in social relations in Australia between Indigenous people and white people in the wake of the High Court's 'Mabo' decision and the passage of the *Native Title Act* has rekindled issues of possession and dispossession and revealed the illegitimacy of the original colonialist land-grab.⁴ The conservative government's response to the shift in power over land in Australia works to try and effect closure on these disquieting questions about land and sovereignty with a story of sameness (assimilation) narrated as 'the Australian way of life'. The paternalism of assimilation has resurfaced in government discourse as a safer story for many white Australians than the one which emerges out of the story of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Many white Australians are angry that Indigenous people contest this paternalistic assimilation story.⁵

When I began writing this thesis in 1994 it never occurred to me that stories of assimilation still have the power they do.⁶ Since the 1970s the dominant discourse of Indigenous-white relations has been self-determination, yet there are still amazing pleasures, comforts and controls, as well as anxieties and ambivalences, for many white Australians in imagining assimilation as the way their nation should and will work.⁷ Stories of assimilation continue to do politico-cultural work today. The continuing resonances of the story of assimilation for many white people today suggests that it is important to interrogate the work that discourses of assimilation have been performing in constituting the white Australian nation.

This thesis is an analysis of the production of assimilation discourses in a small selection of popular novels from the 1950s and 1960s, focusing on assimilation in terms of relations between Aboriginal and

Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 15–16.

⁴ Patrick Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation: discursive continuity in the post-Mabo era', *Social Analysis*, Vol. 36, October 1994, p. 93.

⁵ Consider here Prime Minister John Howard's appearance at the May 1997 Reconciliation Convention where incensed by many Australians', especially Indigenous people's, negative responses to his 'Wik' Ten Point Plan, he thumped the podium as he delivered his speech of reconciliation. John Howard, Opening Ceremony Speech to the Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, 26 May 1997. See James Woodford, 'Delegates snub Howard as he says sorry for stolen children and defends Wik', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 1997, p. 1.

⁶ It needs to be stated that this was probably more than obvious to many Indigenous people.

⁷ For an example of academic nostalgia for assimilation see Geoffrey Partington, *Hasluck Versus Coombs: White Politics and Australia's Aborigines*, Quakers Hill Press, Sydney, 1996.

white people.⁸ I situate these novels in the broader historical context of Aboriginal assimilation by undertaking an analysis of the discourse of assimilation in three official texts from a slightly earlier period.⁹ Though the 1950s and 1960s saw significant shifts in ideas about national identity, assimilation and race, the ideas of the 1930s and 1940s were still important ordering tropes. Reading the pre-1945 official texts I map the earlier moment and its links to the later assimilation discourses. This mapping also allows me to set out links between official or non-fiction texts on assimilation and the novels.

The production of discourses of assimilation took place in multiple sites – governments, institutions, academia, popular and high culture. Much analysis has been undertaken of governmental and institutional discourses of assimilation in this period.¹⁰ I focus on the popular fictional sites where stories of assimilation were produced and circulated. Together these novels produce the ambivalent white Australian story of assimilation. As Jane Tompkins puts it, popular fictions ‘offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment.’¹¹ The novels I have chosen represent a range of genre: melodrama, the gritty realism of a film noir style, gothic, historical romance, western; and authorial political perspectives – anti-Communist, left, conservative, paternal. They exemplify some of the key sites of anxiety in assimilation discourses: inter-racial sexual relationships, the

⁸ The texts are: Gwen Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills: the Ternna-Boolla Story*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1953; Edward Vivian Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier* (1953), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1954; Olaf Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn* (1957), Corgi, London, 1959; Helen Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962; Leonard Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1963.

⁹ These texts are: Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, Canberra, 21st to 23rd April, 1937*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1937; A. P. Elkin, *Citizenship for Aborigines: a National Aboriginal Policy*, Australasian Publishing Company, Sydney, 1944; A. O. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (1947), Currawong Publishing Co., Sydney, undated.

¹⁰ See for example: Tim Rowse, *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; Quentin Beresford and Paul Omaji, *Our State of Mind: Racial Planning and the Stolen Generations*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1998; John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997; Rosalind Kidd, *The Way We Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs – the Untold Story*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1997; Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1996; Ann McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines Under the British Crown*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995; Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1990; Partington, *Hasluck versus Coombs*.

¹¹ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. xi.

white family, and children and young adults of mixed heritage and land ownership.

The crux of my argument is that in the 1950s and early 1960s the dominant cultural imagining of Australia was as a white nation. In white discourses of assimilation, to fulfil the dream of whiteness, the Aboriginal people of Australia – the not-white – had to be included in or eliminated from the imagined white community. Ian Anderson pithily summarises this logic:

The growing number of people of mixed ancestry generated a moral panic. The notion of a cultural or genetic throwback threatened the purity of white Australia. This panic induced the emergence of a new form of social relation: assimilation colonization.¹²

Fictional stories of assimilation were a key site for the representation of this 'moral panic', but also for the production of the solution of 'assimilation colonization'. At the centre of this process were Aboriginal people of mixed ancestry who came to be represented as the half-caste¹³ in assimilation discourse. The novels I read work as 'conduct books'¹⁴ – they aim to shape white subjectivities, making normal and acceptable the inclusion of Aboriginal people in 'white Australia'. The figure of the Aboriginal person of mixed ancestry was a major signifier of this possibility. Assimilating Aboriginal people of mixed heritage was an ambivalent project. This figure signified both a threat (to the purity of the white nation) and hope (of a seemingly legitimate mode of elimination of the prior occupants of the country).

¹² Ian Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: de-colonising the symbol', *Art Monthly Australia*, Vol. 66, December/February 1993–1994, p. 11.

¹³ I understand that the term 'half-caste' is problematic. Some Indigenous people have used it as a term of self-identification or used it *within* Indigenous communities. Used by white people, it is offensive to many Indigenous people, operating as it has and still does to deny many aspects of Indigenous culture and legitimacy. An eloquent response to white people's use of the term is made by Tony Birch in his poem 'Half caste' (cited p. 261, this thesis). I use the term not as a descriptor, but rather to make my point about how this term was used by white people to legitimate assimilation and settler colonization.

¹⁴ I use the term 'conduct books' to refer to the style of household manual and etiquette guides directed at bourgeois women readers and designed to provide advice on how to properly conduct themselves and their households. See Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, p. 86.

ii: Writing within colonialism

*The british invasion of this
country brought with it a culture
with a long history of racism.*
Wendy Holland¹⁵

Given that this is a thesis analysing discourses that conceptualize some specific ideas of race and identity, before I go any further I want to say something about the terms I have chosen to mark these categories and identities.

Indigenous self-identification in terms of cultural and racial identity takes a variety of forms: for example a person might identify himself or herself with a specific language group, clan or nation, or as Aboriginal, an Aboriginal person, Indigenous, an Indigenous person, an Aboriginal Australian or Indigenous Australian. There are a number of terms or combinations of terms which are acceptable to Indigenous peoples which I could use in this thesis.¹⁶ The texts I analyse are mostly concerned with the south-east of mainland Australia and so for the most part refer to Koori and Murri people, however some parts of the thesis refer to Indigenous people from Tasmania, other parts of the mainland and the Torres Strait Islands. I have chosen to use the term Aboriginal people, substituting Indigenous people¹⁷ where it is the more appropriate. I chose these broader terms partly in recognition of the carelessness with which white people have represented and often still represent Indigenous people, without consideration for the specificities of cultural affiliation or self-identification. In many white representations of Indigenous people, stereotyped references are layered over inter-textual codes until no real Indigenous person is referred to, just overdetermined signifiers of a pan-Indigenous group.¹⁸ I use the general terms because historically many texts were referring to an imagined pan-Aboriginality or pan-Indigeneity

¹⁵ Wendy Holland, 'Mis/taken identity', in Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles (eds), *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1996, p. 98. The author has deliberately chosen to use lower case letters when naming nations.

¹⁶ For a thoughtful analysis of the politics of naming see Holland, 'Mis/taken identity', p. 190, fn. 2.

¹⁷ In my discussion the term 'Indigenous' includes Aboriginal people from Tasmania, the mainland and the Torres Strait Islands.

¹⁸ Marcia Langton refers to this as the 'mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people'. Marcia Langton, *'Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television ...': An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p. 34.

and I do not want to erase or deny this by the anachronistic insertion of a specific language group or clan.¹⁹ What I hope to achieve is not the denial of the heterogeneity of Indigenous cultures and histories, but a signalling of the failure of white people to recognise this diversity and a tendency to ignore Indigenous modes of self-identification.²⁰

The other group I write about in this thesis are white people. I have not chosen the symmetrical term non-Indigenous or non-Aboriginal people to refer to this group. This term is too broad as it includes all people who are not Indigenous people of Australia, for example the Chinese, people from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the Japanese, Malays and Filipinos, South Pacific Islanders, African-Americans, and people from the Middle East and Southern Europe. All these groups were represented in the non-Indigenous population, however, in discourses of race and nation they have been differently placed in relation to both Indigenous people and Australian-Britons.²¹ The first pertinent issue here is that assimilation strategies in the 1950s and 1960s targeted non-Indigenous, non Australian-Britons as well as Indigenous people. The large programmes of overseas immigration in the years after 1945 included significant intakes of migrants from non-British countries. In dealing with this 'difference' the emphasis in government policy and everyday action was on assimilation to 'the Australian way of life'.²² For my purposes the other pertinent issue is that although the vast majority of non-Indigenous people have been implicated in discourses of Indigenous assimilation (as producers and consumers), the largest and most powerful group in the nation has been, and continues to be, Australians of British heritage.²³ Again the modes of self-identification from which I can choose are various: white, white Australian, Australian, Australian-Briton, Anglo,

¹⁹ The novels are written from a variety of standpoints and some are more careful about naming the Aboriginal people in the story than others, and due consideration will be given to these distinctions in the individual textual analyses.

²⁰ This point is eloquently made by Ian Anderson in his article 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner' where he continually changes the spelling of Tru-ger-nan-ner's name in the article to emphasise the carelessness of the colonizer's listening habits when it came to Koori culture.

²¹ See Ian Ang, 'I'm a feminist but ...: "Other" women and postnational feminism', in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (eds), *Transitions: New Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995, pp. 70–71.

²² Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688–1980*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1983, pp. 158–160.

²³ It was estimated that the proportion of the Australian population of British heritage in 1947 was 90 per cent and in 1978 it was still 78 per cent. A. T. Yarwood and M. J. Knowling, *Race Relations in Australia: A History*, Methuen, Sydney, 1982, p. 290. See also Gordon A. Carmichael, 'So many children: colonial and post-colonial demographic patterns', in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, Harcourt Brace, Marrickville, NSW, 1994, p. 109.

Anglo-Australian, Anglo-Celtic Australian. Not surprisingly cultural and racial identification for this group is not represented as such a pressing issue. We have the privilege of not needing to explain who we are.

I have chosen the term 'white' to use when referring to this group. In Australia, people of British heritage are the group who are most powerfully and securely associated with the term. In choosing this term I do acknowledge that it can operate as a universalising term, collapsing historical, geographical, cultural and class specificities. However, there are two main reasons why I have chosen to use 'white'. The first is that it was a term used in the period and it still has currency today.²⁴ The second reason follows from a comment by Marcia Langton that signifiers of racial identity such as 'white' or 'black' convey more 'emotionally significant meanings more immediately than more thoughtful interrogations might reveal.'²⁵ Given that my thesis interrogates some of the emotionally significant meanings of white in the context of discourses of assimilation it seems appropriate to use this term. I do acknowledge the asymmetry and inherent limits in my choice of terminology, but I hope it reflects some of the issues and politics this thesis sets out to analyse.

I also want to set out the logic which underpins my use of terms referring to racial identities more generally. The most obvious example is the term 'race' itself.²⁶ Recent scholarship interrogating issues of racial identity has problematized the fixed nature of categories of race. The changed status of the word 'race' is often signalled by putting the word in quotation marks (as I have done). The reader is thus given a visual cue which suggests that the term's use has changed and may be considered problematic. For example putting race into quotation marks can suggest that the term is being used with recognition of changes in meaning say from late nineteenth century understandings of race to a contemporary use of the word which includes a critique of that nineteenth century use and meaning.²⁷ In her book *Gone Primitive*, Marianna Torgovnick discusses her decision not to use quotation marks around the word primitive. She writes:

²⁴ Richard Dyer points out, as do many others, the term white is less common today as a mode of self-identification as more white people choose more specific terms to describe themselves. Richard Dyer, *White*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, p. 4.

²⁵ Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', p. 38.

²⁶ Other terms include: half-caste, (un)civilized, progress, purity, savage.

²⁷ For an elegant and persuasive example of this argument see Kwame Anthony Appiah in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, p. 32, fn. 2.

when we put *primitive* into quotation marks, we in a sense wish away the heritage of the West's exploitation of non-Western peoples or at least wish to demonstrate that we are politically correct. But the heritage of Western domination cannot be abolished by wishing or typography.²⁸

Torgovnick goes on to argue that though the practice of quotation marks is on one level sophisticated (by calling attention to the constructed nature of the terms and concepts) it also works to relieve writers of the responsibility for the words they use.²⁹ Informed by Torgovnick's argument I have tried to minimise the use of quotation marks around words which are part of the discourses of assimilation and racial classification which I critique.

A number of Black cultural theorists in Australia, Britain and the United States have argued that white people need to analyse issues of their own power, privilege and complicity in discourses of colonialism and racism.³⁰ bell hooks suggested in 1989 that: 'One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness.'³¹ Closer to home, Langton pointed out that many white commentators have argued that Aboriginality is constructed and yet they fail to articulate how their own identity is produced.³² A growing number of academic and popular works have taken up this challenge. Ruth Frankenberg, Richard Dyer, John Gabriel, Catherine Hall, Vron Ware and others have all written on the various ways in which being white works in the United States and Britain and Australia.³³ They point to

²⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 20.

²⁹ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 20.

³⁰ Hazel Carby, 'Encoding white resentment: *Grand Canyon* – a narrative for our times', in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (eds), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1992; Marcia Langton, 'Well, I Heard it on the Radio'; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston, 1992.

³¹ bell hooks, 'Travelling theories, travelling theorists', *Inscriptions*, Vol. 5, 1989, p. 189. Cited in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, pp. 7–8.

³² Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', p. 37.

³³ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993; Dyer, *White*; John Gabriel, *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998; Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-class: Explorations in Feminism and History*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992; Vron Ware, 'Defining Forces: 'Race', Gender and Memories of Empire', in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996; Ghassan Hage, Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson (eds), *An Inquiry into the State of Anglo-Saxonnness within the Nation*, Research Centre in Intercommunal Studies, University of Western Sydney, Nepean, 1995; Emma

the invisibility of whiteness and its privileged status as the unmarked race in the spectrum of races. Dyer suggests it is important to avoid the trap of making the study of whiteness equivalent to say African-American studies or thinking about blackness;³⁴ white people must acknowledge the privilege that accords with being white.³⁵ My project is located in this field of scholarship. It does not focus on Indigenous imaginaries of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s, but on the logic of white discourse of assimilation in fiction.

Projects, like mine, which set out to contest racism and colonialism, are still implicated in systems of oppression and ongoing forms of colonialism. I can write an anti-colonialist response to representations of the social relations between Aboriginal people and white people and yet still be implicated in the production of those representational systems. This point has been made endlessly – mostly by non-white people. A pertinent example is a piece of artwork by Destiny Deacon. Deacon used the novel *Venus Half-Caste*, a text I analyse in this thesis, in one part of a series called *Blak Like Mi* (1991). Deacon juxtaposes the cover of the hardback edition of *Venus Half-Caste* with an image of herself, an Indigenous woman.³⁶ Deacon's art responds specifically to the title, cover artwork and the theme of Mann's novel. By placing an image of herself next to a white Australian representation of an Indigenous woman, Deacon challenges the stereotypes of black sexuality and Indigenous Australian women's sexuality which this novel produces. Many of the strategies and themes of the novel *Venus Half-Caste* are anti-racist, yet the novel's front cover reproduces an iconic and stereotyped representation empty of dialogue with Indigenous people.³⁷

Langton, in her essay on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people, asks (and answers) the question:

Partridge, 'The politics of positionality and the production of meaning', *Law Text Culture*, Vol. 3, 1997, pp. 26–32. See also Mike Hill (ed.), *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1997.

³⁴ Dyer, *White*, p. 10.

³⁵ The obvious correlation here is to certain strands of the men's movement which suggest that masculinity is in crisis and that in particular white middle-class men are suffering an enormous loss. The failure to distinguish between the perception of a group feeling as if everything is uncertain (because certain long-standing privileges are being removed) and being under-privileged has meant that certain groups of men have argued that they now occupy a space of disadvantage.

³⁶ See Catherine de Lorenzo, 'Delayed exposure: contemporary Aboriginal photography', *Art and Australia*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1993, pp. 57–62. See figure 6 this thesis for an illustration of the cover of Mann's novel.

³⁷ Marcia Langton discusses Deacon's art and the manner in which it 'makes impotent' the white male fantasy of Aboriginal women as 'black velvet'. Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', pp. 50–51.

Can we ever decolonise Australian institutions?
Can we decolonise our minds? Probably not. But
we can try to find ways to undermine the colonial
hegemony.³⁸

Similarly, Ien Ang argues that complicity is a 'structural inevitability' for white women. She suggests that the way to 'come to terms' with this is by 'recognising it as determining the *limits* of political possibilities not as something that we can work to undo.'³⁹ Ang argues 'that the white/"other" divide is a historically and systematically imposed structure which cannot yet, if ever, be superseded.'⁴⁰ This thesis is inevitably part of the production of the very discourses of raced and gendered power which Deacon strikingly critiques and also part of the move to imagine 'an anti-colonialist cultural critique'.⁴¹

³⁸ Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', p. 8.

³⁹ Ang, 'I'm a feminist but ...', p. 66.

⁴⁰ Ang, 'I'm a feminist but ...', p. 66.

⁴¹ Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', p. 7.

iii: Discourses of race relations

Assimilationist policies of successive state and federal governments over several decades explicitly articulated the racism in this country and the rejection of Aboriginal values. However, these moves towards a cultural genocide failed and instead Aboriginals have become successively more visible and vocal.

Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins⁴²

Assimilation is one of an array of ways that white people have structured their relationships with Aboriginal people. White relations with Aboriginal people are often schematized as a linear narrative of progress. Social relations are represented as rolling slowly forward from an evil extermination period through ill-judged moments of separation and exclusion to assimilation and integration, and now having arrived at the end of the road of progress, at self-determination. Such imaginings of race relations are, however, simplistic.⁴³ Though particular periods may be dominated by one mode of thinking about race relations, that mode is never isolated and uninformed by other understandings of race relations. In her book on the idea of race in the United States, Ruth Frankenberg makes the point that chronological understandings of racial thinking are no longer conceptually useful. She argues that although at one time a particular 'organizing paradigm' may dominate, other ways of thinking about race are still available as part of the 'repertoire', and can provide 'discursive elements' if not the dominant 'form or structure'.⁴⁴

Drawing on Frankenberg's idea I argue that though the period of the mid-twentieth century in Australia did see the domination of discourses⁴⁵ which strengthened a process of sociocultural and genetic

⁴² Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1996, p. 5.

⁴³ See: Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, second edition, Routledge, New York and London, 1994; Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*; Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation'.

⁴⁴ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, p. 140

⁴⁵ I am using discourses in the Foucauldian sense of sets or groups of sanctioned knowledges and practices, with some institutionalized force that strongly influence the way individuals think or act in a particular time and space. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976), Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1990, pp. 100–101. Discourses are also identified in terms of the institutions to which they relate, the

assimilation, always implicit in this process, however diffuse, were other discourses of race relations. The situation is complicated further by the fact that responses to Aboriginal people and their prior occupation of the land, in the form of policy directives and practices, have varied over time, region, and colony/state. Whilst one region might be dominated by a particular discourse, another region at the same time could be mobilising another.⁴⁶

I will now establish the discursive context within which assimilation functions. The repertoire of white discourses of race relations encompassed: Romanticism and the idea of the 'Noble savage', Aboriginal people as vermin, Social Darwinism, doomed race theories, protection, the 'civilizing mission', assimilation, self-determination and reconciliation.

Discourses of eighteenth century Romanticism draw on ideas of non-Western people as leading a simple, free existence, which contrasts sharply with the artifice and complexity of Western lives.⁴⁷ The discourse mobilizes a binary of civilized/uncivilized, but at times it valorizes the uncivilized above the civilized. In Romanticism Aboriginal people were positioned as the 'Noble savage'. Built into this discourse is the understanding that this nobility and desirable simplicity will be automatically undone in the face of Western cultures. Aboriginal women were represented in this discourse as unhampered by the sexual mores of Western cultures, persistently represented as sexually available.⁴⁸ Some of the earliest moments of invasion are represented by the British colonizers in terms of Romanticism, though this discourse is framed in terms of other discourses such as imperialist expansion.⁴⁹ However in the short amount of time it took for the white invaders to imagine Australia as bountiful and available, this discourse quickly faded as the dominant discursive mode. The discourse of the Romanticism and the 'Noble savage' resurfaces in

position from which they come, the position they mark out for the speaker and their relation to other discourses. Diane Macdonnell, *Theories of Discourse*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 3.

⁴⁶ This discontinuity is most starkly rendered in the responses in New South Wales and Victoria to Aboriginal massacres in the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia in the 1920s. In the south-east of the country, discourses of protection were the dominant way of imagining social relations between white people and Aboriginal people; in the north there was still a dominance of discourses of violent elimination. J. J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (1978), second edition, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, p. 139; A. P. Elkin, 'Native Policy in Australia', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 2, April 1942, pp. 274–279.

⁴⁷ Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, pp. 30–31.

⁴⁸ Glyndwr Williams, 'Reactions on Cook's Voyage', in Ian Donaldson and Tamsin Donaldson (eds), *Seeing the First Australians*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 41.

⁴⁹ Ann McGrath, 'The white man's looking glass: Aboriginal-colonial gender relations at Port Jackson', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 95, 1990, pp. 189–206.

different times, mostly associated with moments of 'first contact'. It still works today in primitivist narratives which valorize Aboriginal cultures as providing answers to the problems of Western cultures

If the discourse of the 'Noble savage' was not the overarching discourse of Australian race relations for long, then by contrast the discourse which represented Aboriginal people as savage or vermin dominated for an extended period. In this discourse Aboriginal people were represented as not-human, as cannibals and as part of the fauna of the continent.⁵⁰ White groups' vision of their relations with Aboriginal groups were imagined in terms of warfare, violence and concepts of a frontier.⁵¹ One of the central practices which organized this discourse was massacre and elimination. Murder and massacre was often justified in terms of a response to Aboriginal savagery or their status as vermin. For example in Tasmania from the very early nineteenth century, beginning with the sealers and whalers, Aboriginal people were treated violently and cruelly, as less than human. Later, practice moved on to organised murder and the near elimination of the Aboriginal people of the island.⁵² Patterns of expansion into Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia saw continued ill-treatment of the different Aboriginal groups living in these regions, which led to extended and sometimes quite formal 'border' wars and long-term 'guerilla' resistance.⁵³ The discourse of Aboriginal people as savage was used to

⁵⁰ Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations 1788–1993*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, p. 50.

⁵¹ Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders, and Kathryn Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, Australia and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1975, p. 111; Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, p. 37; Henry Reynolds, 'White man came took everything', in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1988, p. 7.

⁵² See for example: Ian Anderson 'Aboriginal Nation(s)?', in Suvendrini Perera (ed.), *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*, Meridian, School of English, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 1995; Maykutenner (Vicki Matson-Green), 'Tasmania 2: "You cannot deny me and mine any longer"', in Ann McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*; Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1982; C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970.

⁵³ James Miller, *Koori: A Will to Win. The Heroic Resistance, Survival and Triumph of Black Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1985; Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra, *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance*, Magabala Books, Broome, WA, 1995; Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1987; Henry Reynolds and Noel Loos, 'Aboriginal resistance in Queensland', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1976, pp. 214–226; Evans et al., *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, chapter 2; Nigel Parbury, *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales* (1986), Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, Sydney, 1988, pp. 56–58; C. D. Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1971, pp. 69–71; Henry Reynolds, 'The unrecorded battlefields of Queensland', in Henry Reynolds (ed.), *Race*

justify elimination warfare over an extended period from 1788 in the east to the 1930s in the north-west.⁵⁴

Strongly associated with the discourse of Aboriginal people as savage was the discourse of Social Darwinism. Drawing on ideas of evolutionary theory Aboriginal people were represented as at the bottom of a scale of human progress which placed white men at its peak.⁵⁵ Further, in a world view which posited the 'survival of the fittest' and competition as natural, Aboriginal people were seen as unfit or unsuited for the struggle and the most likely group to be usurped.⁵⁶

Another discourse which represented Aboriginal survival as unlikely was the discourse of Aboriginal people as a 'doomed race'. The central belief was that the arrival of the British colonizers in Australia, representing the arrival of civilization, led not to the Aboriginal people benefiting from that civilization and moving to a 'higher social state' but to their 'demise'.⁵⁷ There were many different explanations for this demise; sometimes it was simply figured as a mystery, or as the hand of God,⁵⁸ at other times a more rational explanation such as lack of immunity to European diseases was put forward.⁵⁹ Lack of will and the awesome power of Western modernity are also posited as explanations for this doom. What marks this discourse is the idea of colonial innocence. White colonizers are not represented as culpable for the changes, they simply happen. The 'doomed race' discourse was a 'passing away' story, where the cause of death of Aboriginal people was not violence or ill-treatment but their lack of suitability for the new world of modern Australia.⁶⁰ This

Relations in North Queensland (1978), Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1993, pp. 56–62.

⁵⁴ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1990, p. 38.

⁵⁵ See for example: Jeremy Beckett, 'The past in the present; the present in the past: constructing a national Aboriginality', in Jeremy Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994, p. 195; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance, 1788–1994* (1982), second edition, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1992, pp. 87–91; Markus, *Australian Race Relations*; Jean Woolmington (ed.), *Aborigines in Colonial Society 1788–1850 from Noble Savage to Rural Pest*, Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1973.

⁵⁶ Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, p. 177.

⁵⁷ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 13.

⁵⁸ McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 14–15.

⁵⁹ See for example: Susan Janson and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Through White Eyes*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1990; Noel Butlin, *On Our Original Aggression. Aboriginal Populations of South Eastern Australia*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1983.

⁶⁰ See McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 52–53; Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 196.

story has a long history, surfacing at different moments and drawing on changing sets of socio-biological beliefs.⁶¹

A discourse of race relations which emphasised Aboriginal survival was that of the 'civilizing mission'. This discourse was central in Christian and educational narratives of Aboriginal-white relations. The central tenets of this discourse were that all humans were 'eligible for the grace of God' and Aboriginal people, like all humans, were in a fallen state.⁶² It was believed that Aboriginal people had just fallen further, but could be saved. In this discourse the particular mores of Christianity were entangled with more generalized attributes of Western cultures, so that the 'civilizing mission' included religion, education, dress and deportment, family structure, housing and household habits and work. Christian missions argued their responsibility towards Aboriginal people was for the good of Aborigines. The discourse of the 'civilizing mission' was central to colonialism. Colonizers in the early to mid-nineteenth century argued that if Aboriginal people could be Christianized and civilized then they would not disrupt the process of colonization.⁶³ Like the discourses of Aboriginal people as savage and the 'doomed race', the discourse of the 'civilizing mission', whether auspiced by Churches or not, advantaged the spread of European invaders onto Aboriginal land by restricting Aboriginal people's movement and access to their land.⁶⁴

Strongly associated with and sharing many practices of the discourse of the 'civilizing mission' was the discourse of protection. In this discourse Aboriginal people were represented as needing to be protected from the onslaught of white colonization, whether it be physical attacks, European diseases or the evils of Western 'vices'. The practices of protection included setting aside reserves for Aboriginal people which were off-limits to white people, the appointment of protectors and welfare boards to oversee welfare policy and the provision of housing, food and education. Many of the protection practices were carried out by Christian mission groups. Protection discourses were paternalistic, positing

⁶¹ For a contemporary reference see: Frederic Wood James, *Australia's Vanishing Race*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1934. For commentary on this idea see: McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 48–49; Chesterman, *Citizens Without Rights*, p. 19; Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', pp. 106–110.

⁶² McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 9.

⁶³ Jean Woolmington, "'Writing on the sand": the first missions to Aborigines in eastern Australia', in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions; Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, Australian Association of the Study of Religions, Bedford Park SA, 1988, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p.6.

Aboriginal people as child-like. Aboriginal citizenship rights and personal freedoms were 'exchanged' for state control of their lives.⁶⁵

In the twentieth century assimilation has been a central discourse of race relations. With the turn into the twentieth century a slow shift in racial ideas took place in Australia. This shift was driven by external pressure from outside lobby groups⁶⁶ (for example the British anti-slavery groups and international feminist alliances) and a growing, though limited, awareness of the structures, needs and legitimacy of Aboriginal cultures.⁶⁷ The shift also involved an increasing awareness of the cruelty, injustice and racism in both individual colonizer's actions and government policies and institutions. The newly dominant discourse of assimilation emphasised the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the nation. It was at the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare conference that the state and Commonwealth governments officially decided on assimilation as the preferred way to control Aboriginal people's lives.

Assimilation was a multi-faceted discourse deployed for various purposes in terms of race policy in Australia from the 1930s to the 1970s. Its two most prominent meanings were, first, the sociocultural assimilation of Aboriginal groups into the dominant white-Australian culture and, second, a notion of biological-genetic assimilation, which depended on a particular understanding of human genetics and specific prejudices about skin colour. In the first half of the century the focus of assimilation was on a eugenic approach to assimilation, however, in the post-1945 period, with the growth in the process of decolonization and the questionable status of eugenics in the face of the Holocaust, the emphasis in official Australian discourses of assimilation shifted to the sociocultural. A central practice here was integration. Integration emphasized the sociocultural aspects of Aboriginal-white relations and was essentially a cost-cutting measure. It shifted the responsibility for assimilation from state and territory governments to the general white population. White neighbours were to guide Aboriginal people into the white community.

It was not until the late 1970s, when governments started to respond more positively to Indigenous protests about citizenship and land rights that the overt power of assimilationist discourses waned and there were the beginnings of the shift towards a discourse of self-determination.

⁶⁵ Heather Goodall, 'New South Wales', in McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*, pp. 59–60.

⁶⁶ For example see *Aboriginal Welfare*, pp. 6, 7 and 34.

⁶⁷ 'They are occupying the country better than it would be by two or three or perhaps half a dozen white men who would despoil the water, and then be forced to give up their holdings when the first drought rendered them useless.' *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 13.

The discourse of self-determination presumes that decisions about Indigenous people will be made by Indigenous people. Practices include the setting up of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and Indigenous control of funding and decision making for areas such as health, education and housing.

Australia's present conservative Coalition government draws not on discourses of self-determination but on a new discourse which might be called reconciliation. Its central tenet is that Indigenous-white relations have swung too far in favour of Indigenous people and a 'balance' needs to be reasserted. Practices include the minimization of Indigenous control of decisions concerning Indigenous people and the amendment of the *Native Title Act* to limit the impact of the High Court's 'Wik' decision. As Patrick Wolfe suggests the logic of assimilation (and I would add protection, paternalism, 'the civilizing mission') extend into the 'post-Mabo era', both in policy and populist white rhetoric.⁶⁸

Indigenous alternatives

Understandings of white-Aboriginal relations were not restricted to white discourses, but these knowledges and practices dominated the repertoire. Aboriginal people have continually contested white plans for themselves.⁶⁹ They were forced to negotiate the powerful racialized discourses produced by white people. These discourses represented their cultures as dying out, their varied ways of life as inferior and their only hope as lying within white Australian culture.⁷⁰ Aboriginal people challenged the discursive construction of themselves as passing away. They made demands for citizenship, recognition of land rights, access to education, equal pay and equal treatment.⁷¹ Aboriginal people protested at

⁶⁸Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', pp. 93–152.

⁶⁹ See for example: Lorna Lippmann, *Generations of Resistance: Mabo and Justice* (1981), third edition, Longman Cheshire, Sydney, 1994; Faith Bandler, *Turning the Tide: A Personal History of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1989; Irene Moores (compiler), *Voices of Aboriginal Australia: Past, Present, Future*, Butterfly Books, Springwood, NSW, 1995; Robert A. Hall, *The Black Diggers*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997, Epilogue.

⁷⁰ See: Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 196; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 52.

⁷¹ See for example: Jeanie Bell, *Talking About Celia: Community and Family Memories of Celia Smith*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1997, Part 2; William Ferguson and John Patten, 'Cries from the heart: Aborigines claim citizen rights', in Moores, *Voices*, pp. 54–60; Yirrkala Bark Petition in Moores, *Voices*, pp. 70–71; Oodgeroo from the Tribe Noonuccal, 'Aboriginal charter of rights' (1962) in *My People* (1970), Jacaranda Press, Milton, Qld, 1990, pp. 36–37; Mandawuy Yunupingu, 'Yothu Yindi: finding balance', *Voices From the Land*, 1993 Boyer Lectures, ABC Books, Sydney, 1994; Roberta B. Sykes, *Black Majority*, Hudson Publishing, Hawthorn, Vic, 1989.

the breaking up of their families and communities, the removal of their children and their dispossession from their land.⁷² They petitioned governments, wrote letters to Aborigines Protection Boards and their administrators, they wrote to white-owned newspapers and they published their own newspapers.⁷³ Aboriginal people worked, sometimes with white people, in many different organizations designed to improve, change and challenge their status in the white community.⁷⁴ Feminist organizations, trade unions, church groups and citizen's groups worked with Aboriginal people in campaigns to challenge government and individual racist discourses.⁷⁵

Aboriginal people's methods of resistance to white people's presence, and the subsequent threat to their cultures, changed over time. As white institutions were more firmly and fully secured, guerilla warfare gave way to civil disobedience, protest and petition. Interpellated as they were into white systems, Aboriginal people had little choice but to engage with the white discourses of what was best for them. Even today Aboriginal people who wish to contest white visions of their future must do so largely through white legal, administrative and political institutions.

This engagement with white discourse can be seen in the Aboriginal political protests of the 1930s, a decade which saw an intense period of debate on the place of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation. In the early 1930s William Cooper, a Koori man from Cumeragunja, circulated a petition for signing by the 'Aboriginal Population' to be sent to King George V asking him to act on behalf of Aboriginal people to prevent 'the Extinction of the Aboriginal race', to obtain better living conditions and to secure parliamentary

⁷² See for example: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, AGPS, Canberra, 1997; Stuart Rintoul (ed.), *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History*, William Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1993; Beresford and Omaji, *Our State of Mind*, pp. 13–14.

⁷³ See for example Michael Rose, *For the Record: 160 Years of Aboriginal Print Journalism*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1996.

⁷⁴ Groups included the Australian Aborigines League, Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, Northern Territory Aboriginal Rights Council, Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, The Aborigines Progressive Association, The Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. See: Bandler, *Turning the Tide*, pp. 6–14; Goodall, *From Invasion to Embassy*, chapters 17 and 19; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 166.

⁷⁵ For arguments about feminist contestations of the treatment of Aboriginal people see Fiona Paisley, "'Don't tell England!': Women of Empire campaign to change Aboriginal policy in Australia between the wars', *Lilith*, No. 8, 1993, pp. 149–152; Fiona Paisley, 'Feminist challenges to white Australia, 1900–1930s', in Diane Kirkby (ed.), *Sex, Power and Justice*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995. For discussion about trade union challenges see Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds), *Who are our Enemies: Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, NSW, 1978.

representation.⁷⁶ Nearly two thousand Aboriginal people signed the petition.⁷⁷ A few years later Cooper organised a counter-memorial to the sesqui-centenary. On the 26 of January 1938, a group of Aboriginal people from all over New South Wales met in Sydney to mark an Aboriginal Day of Mourning.⁷⁸ At this historic meeting John Patten and William Ferguson co-authored a powerful statement setting out Aboriginal people's rights to citizenship, survival and the illegitimacy of the original and continuing acts of white aggression, dispossession and racism.⁷⁹ This statement provided a foundation document for many different Aboriginal groups in their varied fights for equal rights, equal pay, land rights and self-determination.

After the 1930s the civil rights campaigns continued to grow. Aboriginal people's participation in the various Australian military and military support units during World War II resulted in an increasing momentum in the calls for equal rights.⁸⁰ A focus for demands in the late 1940s was wages. In 1946 the Pindan people of the Pilbara region went on strike for better conditions in the pastoral industry.⁸¹ In 1952 Aboriginal workers in the cattle industry in Darwin struck for better wages.⁸² Aboriginal workers had only been paid cash wages in the Northern Territory since the early 1930s, and repeated attempts by the North Australian Worker's Union for Aboriginal cattle workers to be paid award wages were rejected from 1948 until 1966. However in 1966 an historic decision was made 'to put Aboriginal pastoral workers on the same rates of pay, with the same conditions, accommodation and rations as white workers'.⁸³

Aboriginal civil rights campaigns were integrally linked to issues of land rights. Campaigns for land rights have taken a variety of forms: demands for the transference of title over reserve land; the recognition of

⁷⁶ Letter from William Cooper to The Board of Protection for Aborigines, Perth, Western Australia, AN 1/7, Acc. No. 993, Item No. 368 (1933), Aboriginal Affairs Department, Public Records Office (PRO), Battye Library (BL), Perth.

⁷⁷ The petition was lodged with the Commonwealth government, but it was never sent to George V.

⁷⁸ See for example: Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, pp. 167–168; Chesterman, *Citizens Without Rights*, p. 138.

⁷⁹ Ferguson and Patten 'Cries from the heart', pp. 54–60.

⁸⁰ Hall, *The Black Diggers*, pp. 193–4; Rowse, *White Flour White Power*, p. 108.

⁸¹ Goodall, *From Invasion to Embassy*, p. 274.

⁸² Bandler, *Turning the Tide*, p. 10; Margaret Ann Franklin, *Black and White Australians*, Heinemann, South Yarra, 1976, p. 189.

⁸³ Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, p. 261.

cultural and economic custodianship of country⁸⁴; rights to control or veto mining; and the recognition of prior occupation and dispossession. In the 1960s there were two significant land rights campaigns which galvanized Aboriginal and white support and obtained wide press coverage: the 1965 Gurindji people's walkout at Wave Hill to their sacred place at Daguragu/Wattie Creek and the Yolngu people's protest and (later) court challenge at the leasing of part of their reserve land to Nabalco for bauxite mining in 1963. Other challenges to the colonialist dispossession took place in these decades in the eastern states as well, from Weipa and Mapoon in the far north to Lake Tyers and Cumeragunja in the south. In many ways all these campaigns culminated in 1972 in the Aboriginal tent embassy protests in Canberra.⁸⁵

Another focus for protest and resistance was civil rights. Demands for equal rights culminated in a campaign to change Sections 51 and 127 of the constitution. This was a slow process: the Aboriginal-Australia Fellowship, whose patron was Lady Jessie Street, launched a petition on 29 April 1957 calling for a referendum on the issue; a private members bill was not put up in parliament until 1965 and agreement on a referendum not reached until 1967.⁸⁶ When the decision to call a referendum was finally reached, the 'yes' campaigners had only a couple of months in which to make their case. The referendum items were passed on 27 May 1967. In many ways the referendum to change the constitution was a watershed for white Australians in terms of race relations, politicizing many and providing a focus for political and social groups. Though many Aboriginal activists campaigned solidly for the 'yes' vote, there were others whose focus remained on the daily issues of segregation, housing, health, education and land.⁸⁷

Aboriginal activism over this period was met with resistance from many white officials. For example, William Cooper's letters to the Aborigines Protection Boards in 1933 were met with a response of non co-

⁸⁴ I use the term country in this thesis in the sense in which it is defined and used by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Country means 'place of origin, literally, culturally or spiritually ... "Country" refers to more than just a geographical area: it is a shorthand for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that geographical area'. Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Understanding Country: the Importance of Land and Sea in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Societies*, Key Issue Paper Number 1, AGPS, Canberra, 1994, p. 2. See also Mudrooroo, *Us Mob History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1995, pp. 18–19.

⁸⁵ Goodall, *From Invasion to Embassy*, chapter 24.

⁸⁶ Bandler, *Turning the Tide*, pp. 79–111.

⁸⁷ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, pp. 317–318; Bandler, *Turning the Tide*, p. 95.

operation.⁸⁸ He was subjected to police checks and his appearance and cause subjected to ridicule.⁸⁹ Aboriginal campaigns in the 1950s were also subject to surveillance, especially those associated with trade union and Communist or left political affiliation. Aboriginal people were particularly vulnerable to official harassment because of their unequal status compared to other Australians and the high level of legal control over their lives. Government administrators might officially ignore, refuse permission, subject to surveillance and undermine the Aboriginal people who contested their policies and decisions, but they were forced to engage, some superficially, others intently, with Aboriginal people's ideas. However in the end Aboriginal people were consistently excluded from official discussions about their 'welfare' that shaped their lives. If Aboriginal points of view were not considered it was because white people were not prepared to fully engage with these ideas, not because Aboriginal people had not stated their positions.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ 'It is a matter of indifference to us whether Cooper proceeds with his petition or not, but I think he hardly appreciates the difficulties he is likely to encounter in this great State, particularly, where so many of the natives can neither read nor write. While we do not propose to stop the attempt, Cooper will receive no encouragement from us'. Correspondence from A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Western Australia, to J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Queensland, 3 February 1934, AN 1/7 Acc. No. 993, Item No. 368/33, PRO, BL.

⁸⁹ 'At one of the picture theatres here recently in a Cinesound newsreel a native presumed to be identical with Cooper was depicted on the screen. He spoke about the wrongs of his people, but his arguments were not very convincing, and altogether his appearance in this way was not likely to do much to advance the cause of the aborigines.' Correspondence from A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Western Australia, to J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Queensland, 3 February 1934, AN 1/7 Acc. No. 993, Item No. 368/33, PRO, BL. The information Neville included in his letter to Bleakley came to his attention from a conversation he had with a records clerk in the department who had seen the newsreel at the cinema. The clerk was asked by Neville to record his impressions of the film footage. File note from Dean [family name illegible], record clerk to A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Western Australia, AN 1/7 Acc. No. 993, Item No. 368/33, PRO, BL. Neville notes in his files that a little knowledge about Cooper was gained 'From a confidential report obtained through the Police Department of this State'. Notes appended to letter from William Cooper to Chief Protector of Aborigines, Western Australia, 26 October 1933, AN 1/7 Acc. No. 993, Item No. 368/33, PRO, BL.

⁹⁰ In a moment of *déjà vu* in July 1998 the Indigenous Working Party was excluded from the final discussions on the coalition government's Ten Point Plan on 'Wik', though mining groups and farmer's representatives were consulted. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July, 1998, p. 16.

iv: Desire, ambivalence and anxiety

*Theories of race were
thus also covert
theories of desire.*
Robert Young⁹¹

There were in the 1950s and 1960s two dominant conceptions of how the assimilation of Aboriginal people would be achieved; in Ian Anderson's words: "'fuck 'em white" and/or "train 'em right"'.⁹² Most texts of assimilation figure assimilation in terms of the sociocultural ('train 'em right'). The trope of inter-racial sexual relations ('fuck 'em white') operates as the disavowed discourse. During the 1950s and 1960s the meanings of assimilation slip between these two conceptions.⁹³

There is a particular understanding of sexual relations between couples from different racial backgrounds known as miscegenation.⁹⁴ It draws on mid-nineteenth century bodies of knowledge about race and biology, which represented sexual relationships between different racial groups as dangerous and damaging to white cultures. Within white logic the idea of miscegenation was ambivalent – both attractive and repulsive. Attractive because the 'problem' of Aboriginal people could be imagined as disappearing as colour disappeared. Repulsive because of an association with white degeneration. The need to disavow inter-racial sexual relationships emerges from an anxiety about their threat to pure, secure whiteness. In dominant narratives of race Aboriginality or blackness is represented as unstable, whereas whiteness is represented as unchallenged by the inclusion of another race. In texts of assimilation however, whiteness is represented as unstable. In these narratives white people desire Aboriginal people (in different ways, for example as 'authentic' Australians, through primitivism or sexually). This desire for

⁹¹ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 9.

⁹² Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 11.

⁹³ In tracing the production of discourses of assimilation in these texts I want to emphasise that assimilation is not a monolithic or essentialized system. Rather it is dispersed, fluid, contradictory and multiple. This is not to suggest that the meanings of assimilation were endless.

⁹⁴ The term miscegenation was first used in the United States in 1863 in a political pamphlet written by two anti-Lincoln (pro-slavery) campaigners. The term combines the Latin words *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race). Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 287. The concept of miscegenation presumes that a race is a genetically discrete group and implies that mixing races is not desirable. Gillian Cowlshaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 97.

the Othered group can collapse the differences between white and Aboriginal people and expose the unfixed, impure, inchoate state of whiteness.

In her essay '*Well I Heard it on the Radio*' Langton poses the fascinating question:

What response did the audience of the 1950s have to [the film *Jedda*]? Could there have been a secret identification with *Jedda* among the white women in the cinema audience? Might they have been captivated and fascinated by the story of Marbuk's sorcery and seduction; a seduction so much more exciting and dangerous than the Rock Hudson type of seduction in the Hollywood romance?⁹⁵

Langton is suggesting that there might be a difference between cinema audiences' publicly stated stance on Aboriginal people and unstated desires and identifications indulged in the dark of the movie-house. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes: 'Novels ... have certain advantages that political speeches, legal documents and court decisions lack. They can play with the forbidden and momentarily indulge in the fantastic.'⁹⁶ In turn, readers and audiences of this fiction can indulge normally unspeakable fantasies.

In Australia, myths of national identity are undermined by an anxiety concerning the history of relations between Aboriginal people and white people. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Kay Schaffer suggests that: 'the impulse "to find a national identity" arises out of man's desire, a desire to know origins, beginnings and endings.'⁹⁷ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra suggest that these 'beginnings' which are inset into white Australian myths of origin are always produced in terms of the repression of the illegitimate status of the act of invasion which marks white national 'beginnings'.⁹⁸ These myths are also, as Langton suggests, formed in terms of unspoken and sometimes unspeakable fantasies.

In her question about cinema audiences and *Jedda*, Langton suggests the possibility of individual fantasy. Fantasies can also be social, what Robert Young calls 'group fantasy';⁹⁹ he contends that 'desire is a

⁹⁵ Langton, '*Well I Heard it on the Radio*', pp. 47–48.

⁹⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'Captured subjects/savage others: violently engendering the new American', *Gender and History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1993, p. 189.

⁹⁷ Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 24.

⁹⁸ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. 204.

⁹⁹ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 169.

social rather than an individual product'.¹⁰⁰ Robert Corber and Slavoj Zizek both suggest fantasy provides the 'coordinates' for desire.¹⁰¹ Social organisation and everyday knowledge is permeated by desire and organised by fantasy. Fantasies do not represent individual maverick desires, but are subject to the same discourses which produce the everyday speakable. To put this another way: the everyday and social (say assimilation policy) 'operated ... according to the ambivalent protocols of fantasy and desire'.¹⁰²

Ambivalence is a psychoanalytic term which suggests both a longing for and a hostility toward an other.¹⁰³ In analyses of colonial relations the notion of an other takes on a very specific raced-based meaning, the Other.¹⁰⁴ The colonizing subject is both attracted to and repelled by the colonized Other. This is called splitting.¹⁰⁵ Stuart Hall says of this splitting that in colonial fantasy for every image of savagery there is a matching image of docility. In white people's fantasies of colonized people, the colonized group represent a nostalgic moment before civilization and yet also the potential for the return of savagery.¹⁰⁶ The ambivalent nature of colonial fantasy creates an uncertain space. The colonial power is unsettled by this simultaneous desire and repulsion.¹⁰⁷

Many of the ambivalences which structure assimilation discourses in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s are organized in terms of sameness and difference. This sameness/difference binary is signified by factors such as skin colour, life style and geographic location. The ambivalence is that

¹⁰⁰ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 168.

¹⁰¹ Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, p. 5; Slavoj Zizek, 'The seven veils of fantasy', in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London and New York, 1997, p. 7.

¹⁰² Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 161.

¹⁰³ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 161.

¹⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon argues that 'the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man'. Gayatri Spivak argues that the European subject constitutes himself or herself with the Other as 'the Self's shadow'. I will be using the term 'Other' in the sense that these two intellectuals do. See: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markman, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 161; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern speak?', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995. p. 25–26.

¹⁰⁵ Splitting is a psychoanalytic concept. It is associated with the mirror stage when the child misrecognizes himself as a coherent subject. See Kobena Mercer, 'Reading racial fetishism: the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe', in Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, p. 312.

¹⁰⁶ Stuart Hall, 'The whites of their eyes: racist ideologies and the media', in George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt (eds), *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, Lawrence Wishart, London, 1981, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 2.

white people both long for Aboriginal people to be the same (to assimilate) and fear this sameness. At the same time white people are repulsed by Aboriginal difference and yet still wish for a difference to be maintained. These ambivalent responses can be understood more clearly in terms of the concept of mimicry.¹⁰⁸ Homi Bhabha writes:

colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite* ... mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.¹⁰⁹

Bhabha goes on to argue that the effect of mimicry on the colonial power is that in the colonizer's dream of making the colonial subject recognizable, colonial language/power/knowledge is actually alienated from itself and produces a different effect. There is a wish to figure difference whilst disavowing it. Mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized produces a much more disturbing knowledge for the colonizer of its powers, values and norms, thereby exposing the violence and illegitimacy of its power.¹¹⁰

The concept of mimicry when applied to assimilation in Australia is also about passing. Bhabha's idea of mimicry is used to theorize colonial relations in India. In this space the form of colonialism is Imperial dominion, not settler colonialism, so mimicry does not in his conception include an idea of passing. In deploying the idea of mimicry to analyse assimilationist discourses in Australia a notion of racial passing needs to be included. White desires for Aboriginal people to pass are ambivalent. Within the logic of biological-genetic understandings of assimilation Aboriginal people are meant to pass, they are re-formed as the same as white people and yet they are never quite. This ambivalence establishes a 'multiple belief' which is not negated but rather disavowed in a strategy

¹⁰⁸ A number of writers have critiqued Bhabha's concept of mimicry in terms of its limited idea of resistance. They argue that colonial resistance in this model happens with and through the colonizer's knowledge (mimicry) rather than in obvious opposition to it (insurrection). Keeping these critiques in mind I use Bhabha's idea of mimicry to think about how mimicry affects the colonizer. For a summary of some criticisms of Bhabha's idea of mimicry see Jane Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, pp. 27–28.

¹⁰⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 86.

¹¹⁰ Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', p. 86.

which allows the 'articulat[ion of] contradictory and coeval statements of belief'.¹¹¹

In thinking about discourses of race in Australia produced around assimilation, this thesis also draws on scholarship which analyses racial identity in Australia. Marcia Langton's work *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'* is a key text. Beginning with analyses of the ways in which white people have constructed Aboriginality Langton sets out a theory of 'anti-colonialist cultural criticism'. Though its main focus is contemporary visual artforms, Langton's essay provides a productive reading strategy for the material I am analysing.¹¹² Langton encapsulates the social relations between Aboriginal and white people as characterized by 'elaborate systems of control' fixated on classification.¹¹³ These powerful colonialist discourses of racial and social classification have had high costs for Aboriginal people, tied as they are to the 'history of forced removal of children, denial of civil rights and dispossession of land'.¹¹⁴ In white imaginings of a nation these are the sites which need to be sanitised or disavowed.

Langton also discusses what she calls 'iconising the "primitive"'.¹¹⁵ Drawing on Torgovnick, Langton suggests that identifying with or desiring to be primitive is actually a way for white people to better know themselves.¹¹⁶ This love of the primitive also serves to mask the colonialism and racism which structures the relationship between Aboriginal and white people.¹¹⁷ You can desire something and still systematically destroy it. She suggests that white Australians' understandings of Aboriginal people is self-referential: 'Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists'.¹¹⁸ 'Safe, distant distortions' of Aboriginal people are recycled, retold and represented in conversations between white people. Aboriginal

¹¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Articulating the archaic: cultural difference and colonial nonsense', in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 132.

¹¹² Langton herself suggests her ideas have a wider currency for debate in cultural criticism, anthropology, and government policy. Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 7.

¹¹³ Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 29. Aboriginal academics have replayed this colonialist fixation on classification back to white people. Langton asks: 'Who is Aboriginal?'; Roberta Sykes questions: 'When is an Aborigine not an Aborigine?'; and Anderson inverts the question and asks: 'what is a European?' Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 28; Sykes, *Black Majority*, p. 9; Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 28.

¹¹⁵ Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive* in Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 30.

¹¹⁷ Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ Langton, *'Well I Heard it on the Radio'*, p. 33.

people appear only as stereotype and icon.¹¹⁹ Ideas of who Aboriginal people are reproduced:

from other representations such as “stone age savage”, the “dying ‘race’”, the “one penny stamp Aborigine”, the Pelaco Shirt Aborigine, *Venus Half-Caste*, the Cinesound News Service caricatures, *Crocodile Dundee I and II*, “the received wisdom”. They are inherited, imagined representations.¹²⁰

The figure of the half-caste is a powerful white representation – signifying as he or she does a history of inter-racial sexual relationships. This figure operates as an open secret and to use Michel Foucault’s term, a site of ‘immense verbosity’. Foucault’s analysis of the repressive hypothesis in terms of sexuality is useful in understanding this verbosity. In his *History of Sexuality* Foucault sets out the genealogy of the transformation of ‘sex into discourse’, arguing that by the Victorian age: ‘Sex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence’.¹²¹ The sense of sex as forbidden and needing to be hidden led to ‘an immense verbosity’ being organised around sex, a verbosity which continues today.¹²² It is the idea of the half-caste as the product of inter-racial *sexual* relationships which produces representations of the half-caste as forbidden and yet needing to be kept under surveillance. Even as the figure of the half-caste was at the centre of assimilation discourse this figure was also constituted in terms of shame, hidden knowledge, secrets, mistakes and forbidden-ness. Using Foucault once more but substituting the discourse of the half-caste for sex: ‘What is peculiar to modern societies [Australia] ... is not that they consigned [the half-caste] to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*’.¹²³ In fiction of assimilation the figure of the half-caste is central. In white discourses, the figure represents a shameful past, a difficult present and a hopeful future for ‘white Australia’.

¹¹⁹ Langton names two other ways in which Aboriginality is constructed – conversations between Aboriginal people and conversations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who ‘engage in actual dialogue’. Langton, ‘Well I Heard it on the Radio’, pp. 34–35.

¹²⁰ Langton, ‘Well I Heard it on the Radio’, pp. 34–35. See also Susan Sheridan’s analysis of white constructions of Aboriginality. Susan Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women’s Writing 1880–1930s*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1995 p. 122.

¹²¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 33.

¹²² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 33.

¹²³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 35.

*In the past the Australian
obsession with legitimacy has been
translated into the project of
establishing a distinctively
Australian tradition, complete
with a Great Australian Writer
and a Great Australian Novel,
whose manifest greatness would at
last prove the colonists' right to
belong, both to the metropolitan
centre and in the territory that
they had invaded and colonised,
Australia itself.*
Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra¹²⁴

It is through the production and consumption of national fictions that Australians come to know themselves as Australian. Bhabha takes Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as imagined communities a step further, suggesting that nations 'only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye'. He goes on to argue that it is through 'traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west.'¹²⁵ In *National Fictions*, Graeme Turner describes this process in the Australian context:

there are formal and ideological patterns in Australian narratives that cut across representational forms and media. These patterns are the product of those myths and meanings which have been culturally constructed as Australian: they are the 'national fictions'.¹²⁶

Key Australian national fictions include the idea of egalitarianism and mateship; the primacy of the space of the outback and the bush, *terra nullius*; and the bloody birth of the nation at Gallipoli. The assimilation story also works as a national fiction.

National fictions produce a sense of a unified self/nation. They are 'mobilized in order to construct signs of national identity'.¹²⁷ Commentators such as Bhabha have emphasised the ambivalences and the

¹²⁴ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. x.

¹²⁵ Homi Bhabha, 'Introduction', in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge New York and London, 1990, p. 1.

¹²⁶ Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (1986), second edition, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1993, p. xiii.

¹²⁷ Joseph Pugliese, 'Literary Histories and the Ontologies of Nation', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, Vol. 22, Nos. 3-4, September/décembre 1995, p. 467.

'instability of knowledge', which 'defines the "society" of the nation'.¹²⁸ Unity can only be produced because not all parts of the story of 'white Australia' appear in the national fictions. The 'dark side' of the fictions are repressed (or not acknowledged).¹²⁹ The national fiction of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s denies the link between assimilation, elimination and continuing dispossession.

The production of national fictions is linked to power. As Susan Sheridan argues: 'the excluded other becomes the ground on which the national figure is delineated, the buried foundation on which its structure of power is erected'.¹³⁰ David Trend argues that being able to write yourself into a national story of myth 'constitutes a form of literacy'. In the period I analyse the framework of colonialism, the power of Western knowledge systems and the specificities of the historical relationship between Aboriginal and white groups meant white people were the group with this literacy. It was this group who could publicly imagine the national future. To argue this is not to suggest that no other group had access to this literacy or did not use their literacy to contest and shape the dominant story of nation. Aboriginal people though powerfully interpellated into white discourses of nation, contested these stories and always had stories of their own some of which were not directed to a white audience and some of which challenged the 'official stories'.¹³¹

Didactic fiction

The assimilation stories in these novels produce and help circulate particular white values. Suvendrini Perera argues that fiction functions to manage colonial relations. Perera writes that 'certain fictional practices – the ordering of empire in fiction – prepare for, or make possible a climate for receiving or accommodating empire'.¹³² This thesis analyses novels

¹²⁸ Bhabha, 'Introduction' p. 2.

¹²⁹ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. x.

¹³⁰ Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines*, pp. 121–122.

¹³¹ Priscilla Wald refers to 'official stories' as the authoritative narratives of the nation. She suggests that competing stories which were produced also helped to define what being part of a nation was all about. She refers to the United States, but I believe her idea has currency in the Australian situation. Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995, p. 2. For analyses of Aboriginal writing against national stories see: Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1990; Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989.

¹³² Suvendrini Perera, *Reaches of Empire: the English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 7.

which are quite pointed in their didactic intent to 'manage' race relations in Australia, and as such I think that Perera's argument (referring though it does to non-Australian contexts) is pertinent. Australian assimilation novels help constitute the ways in which assimilation can be imagined and so how it can be implemented. In particular assimilation fiction managed white people's fears about Aboriginal inclusion in the nation (family).

As a group the novels I analyse are heavy-handed teaching texts. Their point is to change the attitudes of white people in Australia towards Aboriginal people, in particular to get white people to accept assimilation. Tompkins describes this type of fiction as having 'designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way'.¹³³ One of the ways these novels achieve this didactic effect is through their use of realism (representing things as they 'really' are).¹³⁴ They are constructed in a powerful realist mode with a strong narrator's voice which seeks to produce the truth effect of the story of assimilation always in the context of a privileged (or national) story of 'white Australia'.

The novels also deploy a variety of subjectivist modes (genre with less insistent claims to truth) – melodrama, gothic, historical-romance, film noir-detective and western. It is in these spaces that some of the more powerful ambivalences and anxieties of the discourses of assimilation are produced. Smith-Rosenberg notes: 'novels do not always achieve closure. Their transgressive possibilities and contradictions may live on in the imaginations of their readers long after and in *spite* of their prescribed bourgeois endings'.¹³⁵ Though the novels I analyse are teaching texts, the logics of their genre produce spaces where competing stories emerge. For example, in the legitimated violence of the gothic space, white hatred for Aboriginal people is briefly given permission to emerge. In the scopic economy of the film noir style novel a voyeuristic desire for Aboriginal women is pornographically visualised before being contained.

Novels can set out to critique assimilation and yet still produce a conservative story. Susan Meyer analyses Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in terms of the way it critiques and yet reproduces the legitimacy of

¹³³ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. xi.

¹³⁴ Hodge and Mishra discuss the double strategy in Australian fiction about Aboriginal people arguing that the combination of a realist mode and a subjectivist mode produced a complex version of Aboriginality where a "subjectivist" form ... represented Aborigines in a positive light ... with subtle but unmistakable indicators of untruth to invert its force [and] a "realist" form ... presented a negative image of Aborigines and then attached markers of strong truth. Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. 39.

¹³⁵ Smith-Rosenberg, 'Captured subjects/savage others', p. 189.

imperialism. Meyer argues that *Jane Eyre* has some radical potential; the novel does not unquestioningly present a conservative ideology, but rather this ideology is 'questioned and then reaffirmed'.¹³⁶ Meyer argues that it is the figurative strategies of colour and race used throughout the novel which shut this radical potential down by suggesting that the violence of colonialism degrades those it oppresses and the colonized transfer the 'stain' of their colonization onto their colonizers.¹³⁷ Even while critiquing colonialism, the place of colonialist discourses can be reinforced. In fact they can work to blame the colonized for their own oppression.

Overall, the novels I analyse reinscribe a colonialist sensibility. The fantastic moments of inter-cultural dialogue and intra-cultural paranoia, perhaps produce moments of pleasure and moments of terror for different readers. However these 'radical' moments are recouped in the end with more conservative imaginings of the social relations between Aboriginal and white people primarily through an authorial voice which is accorded a priority and minimises the heteroglossic or dialogic potential. The story of Aboriginal and white social relations is reduced to the story of Aboriginal engulfment or erasure.

Domestic fiction

The domestic sphere and the family has been a central focus for the production of a 'white Australia', first, in terms of white women as reproducers of the nation,¹³⁸ second, as a site for the anxieties associated with white men having sexual relationships with Aboriginal women and bearing children of mixed heritage and, last, as the site for the implementation of assimilation policy.¹³⁹ The family is often imagined as a metonym for the nation. Domestic fictions can operate to tell a family/national story. Sandra Gilman suggests that domestic fictions are not simple romantic tales, arguing that they often try manage national, racial, social tensions and conflicts.¹⁴⁰ Producing representations in

¹³⁶ Susan Meyer, 'Colonialism and the figurative strategy of *Jane Eyre*', in Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (eds), *Macropolitics of Nineteenth Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1991, p. 163.

¹³⁷ Meyer, 'Colonialism', pp. 161 and 179–80.

¹³⁸ Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines*, p 98.

¹³⁹ See Beckett's argument about the central place of the state in the 'management' of Aboriginal people and therefore in the construction of 'public Aboriginality'. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 193.

¹⁴⁰ Susan Gilman, 'The mulatto, tragic or triumphant? The nineteenth-century American race melodrama', in Shirley Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 223–224.

domestic fiction of the formation of families and the choosing of partners involves a particular historical engagement with, and answer to, the question of what makes a good nation.¹⁴¹ In assimilation stories a careful eugenic configuration of the assimilable Aboriginal woman and working-class white man is represented as a new national/family type.

Domestic fiction does invisible political work.¹⁴² In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong writes:

domestic fiction unfolded the operations of human desire as if they were independent of political history. And this helped to create the illusion that desire was entirely subjective and therefore essentially different from the politically encodable forms of behavior to which desire gave rise.¹⁴³

Armstrong cites Foucault to make her point that the domestic sphere, and sexual relations in that space, were a site in which 'changing power relations between classes and cultures as well as between genders and generations' were produced.¹⁴⁴ The national eugenic politics of the novels I analyse is performed as domestic romance. This creates the sense that the novels are without nationalist, raced or gendered politics; that they are simply love stories. Within the bounds of the conventions and pleasures of romance, family, sex and love, the novels work to domesticate assimilation, to make familiar the inclusion of Aboriginal people in white families and communities. The novels differ in the form of assimilation they produce for their readers, but they make assimilation familiar (of the family).

Domestic spaces and domesticity are important in different ways in the texts I analyse. In *The Scarlet Frontier*, *Beyond Blue Hills* and *The Leaping Blaze* domestic spaces are central to the plot. *Venus Half-Caste* and *Naked Under Capricorn* are not set in domestic or familial spaces, though both novels use the domestic to contrast with the more dangerous, extra-familial space they explore: in *Venus Half-Caste* it is the white-male dominated urban space of the city; in *Naked Under Capricorn* it is the space of the outback. Even with the different spaces available, assimilation takes place in domestic spaces.

¹⁴¹ See also Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, Virago, London, 1986.

¹⁴² Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 36

¹⁴³ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 10.

Sentimentalism is an important form through which representations of domestic ideals are figured. Sentimental fictions are characterized by sensational plots and stereotyped characters; they are set in the private sphere and directed at an intended readership of bourgeois women consumers. Sentimental fiction works to effect political-social change at the level of sympathy for the individual rather than at the level of ideology.¹⁴⁵ Assimilation, in particular inter-racial marriage, perfectly suits the mode of sentimentalism. The texts I analyse deploy some sentimental tropes. Interestingly, there is a self-conscious intertextuality between the 'classic' sentimental American abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Australian discourses of assimilation. For example, P. R. Stephensen in his 1936 essay *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* poses the question: 'Who will write an Australian *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to arouse the salutary indignation against the monstrous treatment and enslavement of our expropriated blackfellows?'¹⁴⁶ A reader/listener to Gwen Meredith's *Blue Hills* series writes to the author a poem which ends:

But to the Aussie Aborigine you never could know
How much you are – their Harriet Beecher Stowe.¹⁴⁷

Armstrong's arguments about domestic fiction also interrogate the ways in which domestic novels work as conduct manuals. Household conduct or instruction books were part of the discourses which produced nineteenth century bourgeois femininity and sensibilities. Armstrong states that domestic novels were propelled by some of the same logics. The social order was produced in these texts through other political and social differences being 'subordinate[d] ... to those based on gender.' Relationships ordered around gender were refracted through romance, sex, family and love. Armstrong therefore argues: 'the power of the middle-classes had everything to do with that of middle class love'.¹⁴⁸ Middle-class sensibilities were produced through stories set in domestic spaces with white women at their centre.

¹⁴⁵ For example in the classic American sentimental text, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the anti-abolition sentiment is created through sympathy for the individual (sometimes martyred) characters rather than an understanding and critique of the economic and social evils of slavery (and certainly not through a critique of the way non-slave holders might be implicated in the slave system). Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. xi.

¹⁴⁶ P. R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self Respect* (1936), Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p. 98.

¹⁴⁷ Correspondence from Anon to Gwen Meredith, undated, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra.

¹⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 4.

*[This] is a beautiful and moving novel,
but its aboriginal characters are
abstractions rather than real
people. This can be justified when
the novelist makes a symbol of the
natives ... but I feel it is scarcely
permissible, however, for a writer
who makes race relations a major
theme.*

Dorothy Jones¹⁴⁹

In this final section I map out the parameters of my analyses of the specific texts I have chosen and set the novels in the context of other assimilation fiction of the period. I end the chapter by drawing these themes together in a brief sketch of the assimilation fiction analyses in the thesis.

Assimilation is a revised way of imagining a 'white Australia' in a world where Aboriginal people could no longer be thought of as dying out.¹⁵⁰ Patrick Wolfe argues: 'From the outset, the chronic negator of the logic of elimination had been the White penis.'¹⁵¹ White men's sexual desire for Aboriginal women resulted in the birth of a group of Aboriginal people, who white people figured as half-caste, as in-between. In the light of this new group the issue of Aboriginal-white relations could no longer be represented as simply about elimination (whether violent or sanitized) but was reordered as a 'problem'.¹⁵² In my analysis of the discourses of assimilation I am going to argue that the assimilationist solution to this 'problem' is organized not only in terms of race, but also in terms of gender, class, skin colour/visibility, geography, generation, age and by other (non-Indigenous) assimilation discourses. In my readings of three official assimilationist texts of the 1930s and 1940s (chapter 2) I offer a map of the ways in which these factors ordered and shaped assimilationist discourses.

Fiction written in the 1950s and 1960s on relations between Aboriginal and white people was shaped by discourses other than

¹⁴⁹ Dorothy Jones, 'The treatment of the Aborigine in Australian fiction', Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Adelaide, 1960. Cited in Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page*, p. 91.

¹⁵⁰ See Rowse where he suggests that assimilation also represents 'a doctrine of nationhood better than it defines a distinct and internally coherent practice of government.' Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, p. 107.

¹⁵¹ Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 112. See also Tamsin Donaldson where she argues that the consequences of 'sexual contact are productive rather than reductive'. Tamsin Donaldson, 'Australian tales of mystery and miscegenation', *Meanjin*, Vol. 50, Nos. 2-3, 1991, p. 341.

¹⁵² Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 117.

assimilation. Before I move on to expand on the outline of assimilation offered in my reading of the official texts, I undertake a reading of a novel which deploys a non-assimilationist discourse of race relations. The first novel I analyse is *The Scarlet Frontier* (chapter 3). This is by far the most conservative novel of my selection. *The Scarlet Frontier* is not concerned with the assimilation of Aboriginal people. In fact using the authoritative genre of historical fiction it rehashes some of the most conservative discourses of the elimination of Aboriginal people. Assimilation, as it is taken up in this novel, concerns immigration. The central question of this text concerns citizenship and Australian national identity and focuses on the rehabilitation of Australians 'stained' by a convict genealogy. *The Scarlet Frontier* ignores current issues of Aboriginal assimilation and instead pursues, in an historical setting, the time-worn themes of pioneer progress, Aboriginal savagery, danger for white women and the necessity of white retaliation. Though not the central theme, my project requires this elimination discourse be set out, first, because it is such a common and popular discourse of the period (Timms' novel is in no way unusual) and, second, because the elimination discourses (whether posited as violent massacre or passive 'doomed race') are what the other novels I have selected write against.

The other four novels all grapple with and put forward particular solutions to 'the Aboriginal problem'. They do so in different ways, taking on differing levels of responsibility and denial. How these novels take up and deploy the categories of gender, class, skin colour/visibility, geography, generations and age affects their narratives and solutions. The way the novels take up (or do not take up) these tropes and categories shapes the way they imagine assimilation.

Assimilation is a gendered project. It is also asymmetrical. It is white *men's* desire for Aboriginal *women* (in a cordoned-off moment in the past) which is represented as having created the 'problem of the half-caste'. Somewhat paradoxically, in the assimilationist future, the half-caste also comes to represent the solution to this problem.¹⁵³ As in the original moment of inter-racial sexual desire, the schema is asymmetrical. Aboriginal women, rather than Aboriginal men, are represented as the half-caste group who signify assimilation and a legitimated site of sexual desire for some white men. Assimilation discourses are also sexualized. It is the female half-caste body which comes to signify the erasure of

¹⁵³ See Wolfe on the shift in representation from a 'dying Aborigine' to 'half-caste menace'. Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 112.

Aboriginality, through the fetishization of its difference as exotic yet desirable. Aboriginal women rather than men are figured as increasingly desirable as they conform more closely to white sensibilities of colour, looks and comportment. Most of the novels I analyse have as their protagonist an Aboriginal woman, usually figured as half-caste, upon which to map white masculine desire for sex with Aboriginal women (assimilation). *Beyond Blue Hills* is the exception. In this novel the half-caste character is a man and his fiancée a white woman. Not surprisingly, this novel does not linger on bodies and their desirability, rather it focuses on science. Neither Aboriginal men's bodies nor white women's bodies are coded in assimilationist discourse as sites (for calculating desirability) that produce inter-racial sexual desire.

Assimilation can be read as a project about 'imagining the nation's bodies and the national body'.¹⁵⁴ The texts I analyse produce stories about a preferred national body – a white body or an apparently white body, or even a white-acting body. In this preferred national body other bodies are confined to the margins. Stories about the body of the nation and the bodies in the nation are anxious. The assimilation narratives of the novels I read produce a vision of the new white nation, but they also produce anxieties about a stubborn Aboriginality, often represented by the trope of the 'return of colour' or the 'throwback'. White people both desire this stubborn trace and wish it away. There is a comfort factor in imagining Aboriginality as ontologically fixed rather than being subject to change.¹⁵⁵ In this logic skin colour, even its trace or potential return, comes to stand for an irrepressible Aboriginality.¹⁵⁶ Yet this continued (potential) presence of Aboriginality means that the project of nationhood – 'white Australia' – will never be achieved. The trace of the Aboriginal remains to haunt the white colonizer.

I argue in this thesis that two calculuses emerge in the narratives of assimilation.¹⁵⁷ One is organised in terms of colour, schematising assimilation in terms of a steady move (as a result of generations of inter-racial sexual relations) from (an imagined) black to (an imagined) white,

¹⁵⁴ Shirley Samuels, 'Introduction', in Samuels (ed.), *Culture of Sentiment*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ This fits with the long history of the marking of Aboriginality as unchangeable and therefore limiting Aboriginality to an ever-decreasing number of 'authentic' Aboriginal people.

¹⁵⁶ Cf discourses of race in the United States where African American heritage is represented as leaving a trace on the body after it is figured as gone. For example the trope in race fiction of dark fingernails as a sign of African American heritage. See Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, chapter 5.

¹⁵⁷ See Sollors who uses the phrase 'calculus of colour' when writing about racial identity in the United States. Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, chapter 4.

through a spectrum of other colours – copper, mocha, charcoal, coffee. The other calculus is organised in terms of the sociocultural and suggests that assimilation is about behaviour. This schema produces a generational time-line of increasingly assimilative behaviours ordered through education, work patterns, clothing styles, neighbourhood and social habits. The two methods of calculation are intertwined but the most powerful representations of Aboriginality are those of skin colour. Aboriginality comes to be represented mathematically through curious quantities of colour. In these biological-genetic representations of assimilation the disappearance of colour signals the disappearance of Aboriginality. In anti-miscegenation discourses of assimilation colour is still an ordering principle. Here it must remain to demonstrably signal no sexual relationships between Aboriginal and white people.

Class is another ordering principle of assimilation; assimilation is to take place amongst the white working class.¹⁵⁸ Narratives of assimilation imagine assimilated Aboriginal bodies as working bodies. In institutions and homes Aboriginal children, teenagers and adults were trained and worked as domestic and farm labourers. Young Aboriginal women in particular were imagined as marrying working-class white men and combining their domestic labouring skills with reproduction to produce fairer skinned children for the next generation of assimilation. Haunting this narrative of Aboriginal women of mixed heritage shifting communities to white working-class families is the story of the break-up of Aboriginal families. In a scene repeated over generations, children of mixed heritage are removed from their mothers, the Aboriginal mother is erased and Aboriginal family sites negated. By way of contrast, assimilation is often figured as problematic within bourgeois families. In *The Leaping Blaze* and *Beyond Blue Hills* the respectability of white families is challenged by histories of miscegenation. In *Naked Under Capricorn* the rich white cattleman secures his bourgeois respectability through his repudiation of his inter-racial sexual relationship. Yet respectability for inter-racial couples is secured in many of these narratives through the deployment of tropes of bourgeois, especially feminine, respectability. New white or white-acting mothers and family spaces are created for Aboriginal children.

Assimilation narratives also rely on a generational mathematics where Aboriginality is represented as a three-generational disappearing

¹⁵⁸ Cowlshaw, *Black, White or Brindle*, p. 97.

act, measured in precise quantifications of halves, quarters and eighths.¹⁵⁹ Inter-racial sexual relationships produce children figured as in-between. This is represented as a 'problem' and yet in the generational mathematics it is also a solution to the presence of Aboriginality – though an ambivalent one – for in time Aboriginality will be erased. The novels I analyse all take up the issue of assimilation in the middle of this generational mathematics, and offer narratives which are designed to soothe white anxieties about this interim period, when assimilation/elimination is represented as still imagined to be a generation or two away. The novels wish away (with various levels of violence and self-awareness) the older generations of Aboriginal people, especially Aboriginal mothers, and focus on the (white) future.

Assimilation narratives about Aboriginal-white relations are ordered by other assimilation and exclusion stories. In the post-1945 period Aboriginal assimilation is imagined in relation to a large non-British immigrant presence and a still excluded Asian (non) presence.¹⁶⁰ Invitations to Aboriginal and non-Indigenous non-white people to assimilate were often informed by the same logics: skin colour, behaviour, comportment and the spectre of eugenic/genetic arguments of the pre-1945 period. However, Aboriginal people as prior occupants of Australia cannot be excluded in exactly the same way as immigrants. As Ang points out, white immigrants often represent themselves as 'native' in relation to external others thereby erasing Aboriginal presence.¹⁶¹

Before I sketch out in more detail the strategies of the four remaining novels I analyse for soothing white people's anxieties about assimilation, I will briefly set out the field from which my small selection of fiction was chosen.

The field of fiction

In his comprehensive survey work *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, John Joseph Healy marks two historical moments in the twentieth century prior to the 1970s when Aboriginal cultures and communities 'attracted the interest of eastern Australia': the mid-1920s and the late-1950s.¹⁶² The

¹⁵⁹ Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 114.

¹⁶⁰ The exception here is India. Long-standing challenges by Indians to Australian government immigration and citizenship restrictions had seen their status modified in the 1920. See Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, pp. 103–107.

¹⁶¹ Ang, 'I'm a feminist but ...', p. 70.

¹⁶² Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, pp. 241 and 139.

earlier moment emerged from white communities in the eastern states politically engaging with and challenging massacres and other atrocities taking place in the north-west of the country. The central novels published in this period were Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*.¹⁶³ The later engagement with Aboriginal issues emerged more from a growing Aboriginal protest movement and white people becoming more aware of 'what was called The Aboriginal Problem'.¹⁶⁴ This thesis focuses on five novels produced in the latter period.

Texts on Aboriginal-white social relations in the 1950s cover a broad spectrum. Non fictional forms include: anthropological writing, travel and adventure writing, history and journalism. Fiction writing takes a wide range of narrative forms: poetry, historical epics, social-realist novels, romance, western, gothic, film noir style detective, short stories and magazine fiction and humorous-satirical fiction. The largest categories are historical and social-realist fiction. The two most eminent writers from this period are without doubt novelist Patrick White and poet Judith Wright.¹⁶⁵

Healy divides the fiction produced in the 1950s and 1960s into two distinct groups – that produced in the western states and that produced in the eastern states. He suggests that much of the writing produced in the west grew out of white activists' association with the Pindan people's strike in the Pilbara beginning in 1946.¹⁶⁶ Works include: F. B. Vickers *The Mirage* (1955), Donald Stuart, *Yandy* (1959), which is a story of the strike, and *Yaralie* (1962); journalist Gavin Casey's novel *Snowball* (1958), which Healy suggests, via B. E. Richardson, was unofficially commissioned by Paul Hasluck as a propaganda piece for assimilation.¹⁶⁷ Two other texts which are central to this *oeuvre* are Randolph Stow's novel about the Forrest River Mission *To the Islands* (1958) and Mudrooroo's (Colin

¹⁶³ Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo* (1929), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1986; Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia* (1937), Pacific, Sydney, 1969. There is extended analysis on these two texts see for example: Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page*, pp. 39–42; Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice, *Aliens and Savages: Fiction, Politics and Prejudice in Australia*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1998, pp. 239–243 and 247–248; Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines*, pp. 142–150.

¹⁶⁴ Kylie Tennant, *Speak You So Gently* (1959), quoted in Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 241.

¹⁶⁵ See Patrick White, *Voss*, The Viking Press, New York, 1957 and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), Penguin Books Ringwood, 1974. Poems by Judith Wright with Aboriginal themes include: 'Bora Ring', 'The Half-Caste Girl' and 'Niggers' Leap: New England'. See Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942–1970*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971.

¹⁶⁶ Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 214.

¹⁶⁷ Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 219.

Johnson's) *Wild Cat Falling* (1965).¹⁶⁸ Mudrooroo's novel is of course distinctive here as it is written by an Aboriginal author.¹⁶⁹

Popular writing produced in this period on the theme of Aboriginal-white relations also includes Ion Idriess, Mary Durack, Tom Ronan, Frank Clune and Bill (W. E.) Harney.¹⁷⁰ These writers all wrote from the point of view of experience living in the north and north-west. Idriess was probably the most well read author in this period. His publishing history begins well before the 1950s and 1960s but his works were continually reprinted in this period.¹⁷¹ Bill Harney, a writer who lived all his life in Queensland and the Northern Territory, was popularised by A. P. Elkin and wrote a series of collections of short stories, including *Content to Lie in the Sun*.¹⁷² He also wrote magazine fiction throughout the 1950s. Harney was a good friend of Olaf Ruhen and Tom Ronan, writers in the same style. This group of writers, along with John O'Grady and Xavier Herbert, wrote popular 'outback' fiction in the short story form and were well published in *The Bulletin* and *Man*.

In the eastern states Vance Palmer was one of the few writers who touched on Aboriginal-white social relations seriously before the war. His novels in this area were written in the 1920s and include *The Man Hamilton* and then later *Men are Human*.¹⁷³ *The Man Hamilton* was reprinted in 1960. The period of my analysis is framed by Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land* (1941) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* by Thomas Keneally published in 1972.¹⁷⁴ In the period of the 1950s and 1960s, Healy notes Dymphna Cusack's *Black Lightning* (1964) as a novel about social relations between

¹⁶⁸ Randolph Stow, *To the Islands* (1958), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1981; Colin Johnson, *Wild Cat Falling* (1965), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1984.

¹⁶⁹ I am aware of current issues surrounding Mudrooroo's cultural identity. For Mudrooroo's response to these claims and his comments on the production of his novel *Wild Cat Falling* see Mudrooroo, 'Tell them you're Indian', in Morris and Cowlshaw (eds), *Race Matters*, pp. 259–268.

¹⁷⁰ See: Margriet Bonnin, 'Ion Idriess: 'rich Australiana'', Susan Dermody, John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska (eds), *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends: Essays in Australian Cultural History*, Kibble Books, Malmsbury, Victoria, 1982; Howard Morphy, 'Proximity and distance: representations of Aboriginal society in the writings of Bill Harney and Bruce Chatwin', in Jeremy MacClancy and Chris McDonough (eds), *Popularizing Anthropology*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996.

¹⁷¹ For example Idriess' 1933 work *Drums of Mer*, set in the Torres Strait was reprinted in 1962 and 1967. His book *The Red Chief* (the story of 'a mighty Aboriginal warrior') was published in 1953. Ion L. Idriess, *Drums of Mer* (1933), Pacific Books, Sydney, 1967; Ion L. Idriess, *The Red Chief* (1953), Pacific Books, Sydney, 1965. See also Webb and Enstice, *Aliens and Savages*, p. 251.

¹⁷² W. E. Harney, *Content to Lie in the Sun*, Robert Hale Ltd, London, 1958.

¹⁷³ *The Man Hamilton* (1928), Rigby, Adelaide, 1960; *Men Are Human*, Ward Lock and Company, London, 1929.

¹⁷⁴ Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land* (1941), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990; Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971.

the two groups. I would add her novel *The Half Burnt Tree* (1969).¹⁷⁵ Cusack's treatment of the issues of dispossession and racism are sympathetic and sophisticated. There is also a body of Australian fiction which weaves Aboriginal characters into the background of their texts, acknowledging Aboriginal people's presence but representing them as marginal. For example, works by Brian Penton and Frank O'Grady touch on themes of Aboriginal-white social relations in their telling of 'pioneer' stories, for example Penton's *The Landtakers* (1963) and O'Grady's *Golden Valley* (1955).¹⁷⁶

In assimilation fiction of this period the trope of the half-caste is a key motif. This figure signifies a range of possibilities. One is a happy amalgam of Aboriginal and white cultures, the best of both worlds. In the popular crime fiction of Arthur Upfield the detective, Napoleon Bonaparte, who is of mixed Aboriginal and white heritage, exemplifies this trope.¹⁷⁷ The detective is figured as drawing on aspects of his Aboriginal and white heritage in the course of his job.¹⁷⁸ Another trope of the half-caste is as lost in an unaccommodating world. In D'Arcy Niland's short story 'A girl I once knew' (1961), for example, an Aboriginal man falls in love with a half-caste woman who continually ignores him, as she is going out with a white man. His approach to the woman stressing their similarity as people of 'the country' is rebuffed and he is beaten up and kicked out of town.¹⁷⁹ The story sets out a common schema of the Aboriginal man as outside the economy of assimilation, propelled as it is by its asymmetrical gendered order of relationships between half-caste women and white working-class men.¹⁸⁰ Sara Champion, an Englishwoman on her way to New Zealand via Australia, wrote a series of satirical novels about Aboriginal-white relations. They also follow the misfit theme. *Come Again* (1951) focuses on a child, Ellen, born of a marriage between a white

¹⁷⁵ *The Half Burnt Tree* (1969), Reader's Book Club, London, 1970; *Black Lightning* (1964), Reader's Book Club, London, 1965.

¹⁷⁶ Brian Penton, *Landtakers: the Story of an Epoch* (1934), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963; Frank O'Grady, *The Golden Valley*, Cassell and Co, Ltd, London, 1955.

¹⁷⁷ Upfield's novels appeared from the late 1920s until the 1960s (he died in 1964). Many of the Bony novels appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See for example: *Bony and the Mouse*, Heinemann, London, 1959; *Bony Buys a Woman*, Heinemann, London, 1957; *Bony and the Kelly Gang*, Heinemann, London, 1960; *Bony and the White Savage*, Heinemann, London, 1961.

¹⁷⁸ For an interesting discussion on the representation of Detective Inspector Bonaparte as half-caste see Donaldson 'Australian tales', pp. 344–347.

¹⁷⁹ D'Arcy Niland, 'A girl I once knew', in *Dadda Jumped Over Two Elephants*, Panther Books, London, 1961, p. 100.

¹⁸⁰ See Beckett's argument where he analyses Neville's ideas of inter-racial sexual relations and notes the exclusion of dark-skinned Aboriginal men. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 200.

man and an Aboriginal woman. Ellen and all her kin lose the land they are entitled to both as the Indigenous occupants and through Ellen's European birthright. At the novel's end Ellen is viciously represented as without hope.¹⁸¹

Social realist texts use the trope of the half-caste to expose the institutional prejudices Aboriginal people face and the challenge of prejudice at the familial level. Some of Dymphna Cusack's novels explore the theme of Aboriginal dispossession through a deployment of the figure of the half-caste in a subtle and thoughtful way. In *Black Lightning* the tension focuses on a once-famous television personality discovering she has an Aboriginal granddaughter living in coastal New South Wales.¹⁸² Douglas Stuart's works *Yaralie* and *Yandy* both have a half-caste figure as their central characters. Gavin Casey's novel *Snowball* focuses on a family of mixed heritage exploring the difficulties of assimilation in terms of economic and social justice and family tensions.

The figure of the half-caste is also deployed to map out the spectrum of Aboriginalities and rank them in terms of assimilability. For example, the figure of the half-caste is usually represented as more assimilable than an Aboriginal person without white heritage, while a half-caste who lives in a white suburb is represented as more assimilated than one who lives in his or her Aboriginal community. Edward Vivian Timms' last work *The Big Country* (1962) uses the figure of the half-caste to set out this schema. The novel has a happy-ever-after ending with the protagonist, Jenny Courage, a half-caste woman, marrying a white man who embodies Ward's 'bush legend'. Mirroring Jenny's happy marriage is the tragic story of the unassimilable Aboriginal woman, who falls for the wrong white man and drowns herself. In the spectrum of assimilability she is too dark-skinned, too undisciplined and too sexual. As a construction of white imaginations, the half-caste is a plastic figure moulded to the specifications of different assimilation narratives, at times threatening, at other times desirable.

The texts

In this thesis I focus on five novels from the 1950s and 1960s. *The Scarlet Frontier* is the only one of the novels that does not have a contemporary setting. It is an historical romance set in Queensland and it produces a

¹⁸¹ Sarah Campion, *Come Again*, Peter Davies, London, 1951.

¹⁸² Cusack, *Black Lightning*.

story of a 'white Australia' through a violent elimination narrative. *Beyond Blue Hills* and *The Leaping Blaze* are two novels which tell stories of the anxiety caused by inter-racial sexual relations in white bourgeois families. These two novels place Aboriginal children and adults in the heart of the white family. Each produces a different solution to the anxiety, the solution reflecting the logic of the novels' different genre. *Beyond Blue Hills* is a melodrama. It negotiates the fears of assimilation and miscegenation through the mobilization of the melodramatic trope of the self-sacrificing mother, but also through the more realist authority of science. The white family, which has an Aboriginal member through marriage is kept white by the anthropological promise of 'fading' colour. *The Leaping Blaze* is a gothic novel which explicitly worries over the terror for a white family faced with the possibility that their family includes Aboriginal members. This text solves the problem of this mixed genealogy through a series of violent acts against Aboriginal mothers and children. Through moments of gothic excess the novel exposes the hatred which can sit at the heart of assimilation discourses.

Venus Half-Caste is shaped by the discourse of sociocultural assimilation. The novel tells the story of an Aboriginal couple who marry and live happily together as an *Aboriginal* couple in a white space (this contrasts with *Beyond Blue Hills* which represents its couple as white). The novel's ending is quite similar to the one Elkin figures in *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, that is, assimilation as full citizenship and sociocultural integration. What is interesting about this novel is the way its ending of domestic bliss is produced. To create a sense of Aboriginal women as socially and culturally assimilable, the protagonist, a beautiful Aboriginal woman is repeatedly described in detail. The novel follows up its own logic here and white men desire the Aboriginal woman, Beatrice, but the novel needs to return to a *status quo* of sociocultural assimilation and so it executes a series of violent acts – killing the white men who desired Beatrice. Shaped by a film noir sensibility of a dangerous woman and men made vulnerable by that woman, this novel produces a story about the possibility of an inter-racial sexual relationship and then closes it down. Like *The Leaping Blaze* the genre allows for excessive violence to bring about the story of a 'white Australia'. The ending then promises the constant surveillance of the Aboriginal couple so that a new outbreak of (white) miscegenist desire is not possible.

Naked Under Capricorn is a novel with a radical intent and potential. Nevertheless, it still erases Aboriginal people as contenders for ownership

of the land. The novel insists on a correlation between colonization and the ill-treatment and ill-health of Aboriginal people. However, it ends up discursively constructing assimilation/elimination as the solution to this destruction and focusing on white people's education and redemption from the sins of colonialism rather than focusing on colonialism itself. The hope is that white people can recover from the failure of their dreams of happy co-existence. A specific Aboriginal pain, that is the elimination of Aboriginal culture, which is implicit in assimilation narratives, only emerges in all these novels in limited spaces. In *Naked Under Capricorn*, this pain is made explicit, but it is overshadowed by issues of white guilt and redemption.

These novels as a group, supplemented by the official texts I have selected, map the broad field of the white discourse of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on the method and ideas I have outlined in this chapter I will now undertake my analyses of assimilation and set out the strategies these texts use to allay white people's fears about a project to which they were ambivalently committed.

Mapping a 'white Australia':
political and government discourses of assimilation

i: introduction

This chapter sets out the parameters of the 'official' white imaginary of assimilation in terms of Aboriginal and white relations in three prominent texts in mid-twentieth-century Australia. These three texts – the report of the 1937 Conference on Aboriginal Welfare, A. P. Elkin's *Citizenship for the Aborigines* and A. O. Neville's *Australia's Coloured Minority* – were influential texts written from the perspectives of government advisers and administrators of Aboriginal affairs. Though conceptualized and published earlier, many of the ideas still formed a significant part of the discourse of assimilation in the period of the 1950s and 1960s. These texts, in their various ways, bring together a half-century of growing worries about 'the half-caste problem'; they enunciate the shift in government and everyday practices towards Aboriginal people from haphazard violence and philanthropy to more regulated and 'modern' practices.¹ Also set out in these texts are the arguments and ideas which underpin the dominant understandings of assimilation as sociocultural and biological-genetic. They exemplify the particular anxieties and pleasures – the ambivalences – of these discourses. These texts produced a particular lexicon of racial difference which would structure debates on assimilation for decades.

The contradictions of the discourse of assimilation – its denial of difference and its concomitant incitement of ideas of differentiation – produce an anxiety about whiteness and the dream of 'white Australia'.

¹ Rowse, exploring assimilation through the practice of rationing argues from a Foucauldian perspective that assimilation practices accord with the 'modernization' of government and the 'implementation of norms'. The peaceful practice of rations (assimilation) replaced the life and death violence of the 'frontier' (genocide/dispersal). Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, pp. 6–7.

The site of this raced worry about difference and assimilation often shifts away from Aboriginal people to non-white Others. I finish the chapter with an analysis of a government organised project in Western Australia in 1937 which sought to locate and keep under surveillance all 'coloured aliens' in the state.

ii: The 1937 Aboriginal welfare conference

*What is articulated in the
enunciation of the colonial present
– in between the lines – is a
splitting of the discourse of
cultural governmentality at the
moment of its enunciation of
authority.
Homi Bhabha²*

The 1937 Aboriginal Welfare conference is the moment where all the Australian governments, except Tasmania which was unrepresented, publicly stated assimilation as their goal in structuring relations between Aboriginal and white groups.³ The conference was held as a result of a resolution taken at the 1936 Premiers Conference which moved that a co-ordinated response by the different state and territory governments to Aboriginal welfare was required.⁴ The conference, held in April 1937, passed twenty resolutions on a range of issues including legal arrangements, drug use, mission activity, financial arrangements, education and employment. It is productive to read the conference in terms of anxiety and in particular in terms of racial anxieties concerning the uncertainty about what assimilation really entailed. The conference proceedings illustrate the multiple ways in which the process of assimilation could be imagined. This multiplicity of imaginings hinge upon an understanding of assimilation either as a sociocultural or a biological-genetic process of 'absorption'.⁵ Most Australian states at this time had laws forbidding inter-racial sex,⁶ and yet in the logic of the

² Bhabha, 'Articulating the archaic', p. 131.

³ Different states had different attitudes to assimilation. For example the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board had been pursuing assimilation policies since 1909 and Victoria from even earlier. Peter Read, 'A double headed coin: protection and assimilation in Yass 1900–1960', in Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus (eds), *All That Dirt: Aborigines 1938, An Australia 1938 Monograph*, History Project Incorporated, Canberra, 1982, p. 17. In the northern areas of the nation there was more resistance to ideas of assimilation. Yarwood and Knowling argue that it is not until the September 1961 meeting of state ministers and Aboriginal affairs officials that assimilation is really taken up in place of separation. Further, it is not until 1961 that a clear definition of what assimilation is is provided by the states. Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, p. 266. Though I agree with Yarwood and Knowling that assimilation was far from complete or uncontested as a policy in 1937 I want to analyse some of the issues that emerge in the representations of assimilation as the national goal.

⁴ Paul Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal Affairs 1925–1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 66.

⁵ See Patricia Jacobs, 'Science and veiled assumptions: miscegenation in WA 1930–1937', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 2, 1986, p. 15.

⁶ Laws prohibiting or regulating inter-racial sexual relations were included in: *Native Administration Act, 1905-1936 (WA)*, Sections 25 and 26, *The Acts of the Parliament of*

fantasies of a 'white Australia' inter-racial sex made sense. In the dominant narrative of assimilation, white men's desire for Aboriginal women was the unacknowledged, often invisible, framework of the story.

The north operated as the focus of racial anxiety for the whole nation. Its real fantasy of erasure was exported to all parts of the nation and fuelled ambivalent stories of inter-racial desire. The Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia dominate the conference discussions and the specific set of relations they articulated become the 'national' story of Aboriginal-white social relations. This 'national' story is represented by a frontier idea of violent exchange and irreconcilable racial difference. The conference revolved around a mostly unspoken white anxiety about miscegenation and the erasure of whiteness. Running counter to and underpinning the repeated story of black 'absorption' into white is the fear of white 'absorption' into black. This story operated in different ways in different geographical areas. In the northern parts of Australia where Aboriginal people made up the majority of the population such a story accorded with population statistics.⁷ In the south and south-east of the continent, the story of 'absorption', white into black, operated as a persistent fantasy, even with the reverse population statistics.

Classification of Aboriginal people is integral to white discourses of assimilation. Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, J. W. Bleakley presented a quite complex and multi-tiered classification to the 1937 conference delegates.⁸ These classifications, which are so common in white

Western Australia, 6 August 1936 to 11 December 1936, Government Printer, Perth, 1937; *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918* (NT), Sections 45, *Northern Territories Ordinances 1911-1918*, (no publishing information); *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act, 1939* (Qld), Sections 19 and 29, *Sessions of 1939 Acts of the Parliament of Queensland*, Vol XXI, Part 1, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1940; *Aborigines Protection Act, 1909-1940* (NSW); *Aborigines Act, 1928* (Vic), Section 12; *The Victorian Statutes, The General Public Acts of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1929; *Aborigines Act, 1911* (SA) Section 34 (This section of the act states that if a 'female aboriginal or female half-caste ... [is] found dressed in male attire and in the company of any male person other than an aboriginal or half-caste' an offence has been committed), *Acts of the Parliament of South Australia Anno Secundo Georgii V Regis A D 1911-12*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1912; *Aborigines Act Amendment Act, 1939* (SA), Section 30 and 34, *Acts of the Parliament of South Australia, 1939*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1912; *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act, 1940*, Section 10, *The Statutes of New South Wales (Public and Private) Passed During the Year of 1940*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1941.

⁷ Aboriginal people outnumbered white people in the Northern Territory for the first half of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century the proportion of Aboriginal people to white people was approximately 20:1 and midway through the century 10:1. Today Aboriginal people make up 25 per cent of the Northern Territory population. See Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 86; Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, pp. 250 and 258; Peter Read, 'Northern Territory', in McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*, p. 296.

⁸ Bleakley's arguments are probably so well organised as a result of the work he had undertaken in writing the 1929 Royal Commission on the conditions of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. J. W. Bleakley, *The Aboriginals and Half-Castes of Central*

Australian discourses of assimilation, operate to construct ideas of who Aboriginal people are. In Bleakley's system there were four categories of Aboriginal people and within the last there were four sub-categories.⁹ He has a group he calls 'primitive nomads' at one end of his scale and at the other a group represented as "'cross breeds" ... with a preponderance of European blood'.¹⁰ The classifications were made up of a variety of factors – cultural, social, biological-genetic, and geographic. In the end the classifications often depended simply on particular moral judgements made by white people. This complex, quantified and apparently rigid classification system is not uncommon in white understandings of Aboriginal people in Australia. Bleakley's classification system is distinctive more for its detail than its difference.

Bleakley's system depended upon an understanding of Aboriginal people as classifiable in terms of a (moral) hierarchy of marriage, work, European education levels and living style, and family structure.¹¹ He argued that the group he designates as 'nomads' need to be left alone on 'sufficiently large tracts of land' though he imagined in the long term that through 'friendly contact' a 'gradual adaptation to the settled life' would take place.¹² The groups Bleakley classified as a middle set – 'detrribalized', 'cross with lower types' – were, he argued, the people most in need of moral supervision by government as they were most susceptible to 'temptations and vices': 'This class needs more than others drastic measures for moral control and protection of females and suppression of miscegenation'.¹³ Specifically he mentioned Aboriginal women as vulnerable and their sexual vulnerability (to white men generally) as the source of inter-racial sexual relationships. He also argued that Aboriginal people without a 'preponderance of European blood' would be more

Australia and North Australia, Parliamentary Paper No. 21, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1929.

⁹ Bleakley's Classification of Aboriginal Peoples:

- a. 'Primitive nomads'
- b. those living on pastoral property
- c. those living in settled areas - 'detrribalised' [p. 8]
- d. 'cross breed'
 1. 'preponderance of aboriginal blood'
 2. 'cross with lower types of alien races'
 3. 'European - aboriginal cross' or 'higher Asiatic types'
 4. 'quadroon and octoroon with preponderance of European blood'.

¹⁰ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 6.

¹¹ For a similar analysis of Bleakley's view on Aboriginal people see Andrew Markus, 'After the outward appearance: scientists, administrators and politicians', in Gammage and Markus (eds), *All That Dirt*, pp. 97–98.

¹² *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 6.

¹³ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 7.

happily absorbed by their mother's people.¹⁴ Therefore his solution to the issue of children born in inter-racial relationships was to place them with their Aboriginal parent, that is, mostly with their mothers.

Queensland state policy, as articulated by Bleakley, was firmly grounded in laws which forbade inter-racial sexual relations. Strict restrictions on inter-racial marriage and sex were put in place in Queensland in 1910.¹⁵ Bleakley imagined the process of assimilation as sociocultural: different groups of Aboriginal people would slowly be provided with the instruments required – 'vocational knowledge and the respectable home background' – to 'successfully make a place for themselves in the civilized community'.¹⁶

A. O. Neville, the Protector in Western Australia, had a different vision of assimilation. Though Western Australia also had laws which restricted inter-racial sexual relationships, Neville imagined them as operating more to 'prevent the return of those half-castes who are nearly white to the black'.¹⁷ The control of Aboriginal people's marriages operated to encourage partnerships between lighter skinned Aboriginal people.¹⁸ The end result was to be that the 'two races' would merge to become the white race.¹⁹ Darker-skinned Aboriginal people (especially Aboriginal men) were excluded from the argument.²⁰ The implication here is of course that they would 'pass away'. Thus an elimination story is implicit in the assimilation story. Neville's plan of miscegenist assimilation is dependant on a common anthropological scientific belief of the time that Aboriginal people 'sprang from [the] same stock as we did ourselves ... not negroid but ... Caucasian origin'.²¹ He suggests that there is 'no such thing as atavism'²² to haunt or worry the policy-makers. Bleakley, on the other hand, deployed the idea of atavism, what he calls

¹⁴ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 68. For contemporary commentary see Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 199.

¹⁹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 11.

²⁰ See Beckett where he argues that the unstated logic of Neville's *Australia's Coloured Minority* is that 'the darkest males [are] left without sexual partners and so unable to transmit their unwanted heredity'. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 200.

²¹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 10. Norman Tindale makes a similar point when he writes that 'aboriginal blood ... is recognised as a forerunner of the Caucasian race', and later that 'primitive Australian ethnic stock is more digestible than the negro elements of some other countries'. Norman Tindale, 'Survey of the half-caste problem in South Australia', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society, (South Australia Branch)*, Vol. XLII, 1940–1941, pp. 67 and 124.

²² *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 10.

'the danger of blood transmission or "throw-back"' to oppose inter-racial marriages or sex.²³ These differing approaches were aimed at the same end – a white population. Neville imagined a white population emerging from the 'ultimate absorption into our own race of the whole of the existing Australian native race';²⁴ Bleakley imagined the white population as complemented by a strictly segregated and separate Aboriginal population.

Dr C. E. Cook was the Northern Territory (Commonwealth) representative at the Conference.²⁵ His position on assimilation was underpinned quite explicitly by an anxiousness about violence. His suggestion of 'solving' the 'half-caste problem' through a policy of 'lifting the half-caste to the standard of whites' was driven by a fear of 'racial conflict and possible revolt'.²⁶ Cook explicitly acknowledged the possibility of the extermination of the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory, arguing that a 'policy of *laissez faire*' – of continuing neglect – would probably lead to the death of Aborigines in Australia 'within 50 years':²⁷

If we leave them alone, they will die, and we shall have no problem, apart from dealing with those pangs of conscience, which must attend the passing of a neglected race. If, on the other hand we protect them ... we shall raise another problem which may become a serious one from a national viewpoint for we shall have in the Northern Territory, and possibly North-west Australia also, a large black population which may drive out the white.²⁸

In more explicit and confrontational tones than were generally adopted at this conference, Cook set out the issue which drove assimilation arguments: the growing Aboriginal population. The white-imagined end of Aboriginal people, that is, their 'passing away', had not come about, instead the Aboriginal population had been steadily increasing since the turn of the century.²⁹ Government officials saw the issue in terms of

²³ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 11.

²⁵ The Northern Territory was not self-governing until 1978. Between 1911 and 1978 it was administered by the Commonwealth. Read, 'Northern Territory', p. 271.

²⁶ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 13.

²⁷ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14.

²⁸ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14. See also general discussion p. 16.

²⁹ F. Lancaster Jones, *The Structure and Growth of Australia's Aboriginal Population*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970, p. 5; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 134–135.

controlling Aboriginal people and that control taking place through the 'conversion' of firstly the 'half-caste' into a 'white citizen',³⁰ then later the 'full-blood' Aborigines would be integrated into white culture. Cook expressed the fear that often drove assimilation policy in the north and west: 'unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white ... the process will be reversed ... the white population will be absorbed into the black'.³¹

Cook was working in a jurisdiction which policed inter-racial sexual relationships. However, the near-absence of white women in the Northern Territory had meant that inter-racial marriages were quite often approved.³² Explanations for such marriages were mostly attributed to the 'lack of white women' which led white men to cohabit with Aboriginal women. Of course the circumstances were more complicated. The point I want to make here is simply that although there was a common acknowledgment of white men seeking Aboriginal women for sexual relationships, there was an absence in these government discussions of sexual desire or choice as an explanation for these liaisons.³³

In contrast to the protectors of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland – all states and territories with large Aboriginal populations – the states of Victoria and New South Wales presented different views about the issue of assimilation. The longer occupation by colonists and the denser colonization patterns had resulted in more marked declines in the Aboriginal populations of the south-east. The white projects of assimilation and elimination were more fully advanced in these areas.³⁴ The government representatives of these states saw their role as designing a good system of assimilation rather than having a debate about who was to be included in the category of the assimilable. Important issues for these states were the attitudes of the white population (articulated as prejudices) towards Aboriginal groups as these attitudes were seen as holding back assimilation. The assimilation policies of the governments of the south-eastern states emphasised the policy of separation – removing Aboriginal children, adolescents, or young adults

³⁰ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14.

³¹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14.

³² *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 35

³³ *Aboriginal Welfare*, pp. 20 and 29.

³⁴ See also: '[Placing] Aboriginal girls in domestic service in Melbourne ... is one of the most successful phases of uplift in Victoria, though this is not the unanimous opinion in other parts. The explanation of our success is that the Southern aborigines have had longer contact with our white civilisation and are consequently not so prone as less favoured girls to go astray.' 'Aboriginal Domestic Trainees', *Uplift, The Official Organ of Aboriginal Uplift Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3, August 1938.

from their Aboriginal families and communities – as a way of instilling ‘white values’.

The discourses of assimilation circulating in the south-eastern states accorded quite closely with A. P. Elkin’s understanding of assimilation. I will use aspects of his treatise *Citizenship for the Aborigines* as a way of examining ideas of assimilation as sociocultural integration.

A. P. Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines*

A. P. Elkin was not at the 1937 conference. His works emphasize sociocultural assimilation, a discourse which was not dominant at the conference, but which was central in government policy in Victoria and New South Wales. Elkin’s ideas were progressive (though still limited) compared with the administrators who dominated the 1937 conference. His ideas became more significant from 1940 onwards when he became a member of the reorganized New South Wales Aborigines’ Welfare Board.

Published in 1944, *Citizenship for the Aborigines* states as its aim the development of a ‘national policy for Aborigines’ and the aim of that policy is ‘full citizenship, with all its rights, privileges and responsibilities – for *all* persons of Aboriginal descent’.³⁵ Elkin’s vision of citizenship is what he calls ‘a positive’ policy – in contrast to policies aimed simply at providing protection from abuse which he calls ‘negative’.³⁶ He outlines ten general principles which underpin this positive policy including: recognising Aboriginal community and spiritual life; improvements in health, education and employment, particularly improving the health and ‘status’ of Aboriginal mothers; equal treatment and justice; explaining to Aboriginal people why they should change and finally providing security for Aboriginal people while they are in the ‘transition stages’ from ‘nomadism to citizenship’.³⁷

Elkin imagined the process of assimilation as taking place differently in different regions – ‘isolated’, ‘marginal or frontier’ and ‘thickly settled’.³⁸ In isolated regions Elkin imagined citizenship coming about through the establishment of Aboriginal communities on ‘inalienable and inviolable reserves’ where:

³⁵ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 43.

³⁶ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 1.

³⁷ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 37.

³⁸ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 45.

they can become self-supporting, develop family, village and community life, receive practical technical, moral and general education and have cultural and economic contact with Australian life.³⁹

In frontier regions Elkin's proposal was simply to 'prevent the dying out of the Aborigines'.⁴⁰ He was quite pessimistic about relations in frontier contact areas, noting white colonizers' propensity for 'punitive parties' and unjust treatment.⁴¹ In 'closely settled regions' Elkin identifies three groups of Aboriginal people – 'detrribalised' Aboriginal people, 'part aborigines' and 'mixed-blood' Aboriginal people. For these groups he explicitly named his aim as 'assimilation'.⁴² He argued that in these regions the 'process cannot be avoided, and ... both whites and mixed-bloods should be prepared and prepare themselves for it'.⁴³ What this 'being prepared' implied was the 'removal of prejudice' on the part of white people and 'uplift' and 'preparation [for Aboriginal people] on Government Settlements for life in the general community'.⁴⁴

Underpinning Elkin's ideas on assimilation was a notion of separate families/communities for Aboriginal people. He does not suggest an 'absorption' of Aboriginal people. This derived partly from his understanding of the importance and validation of Aboriginal systems of belief, attachment to country and kinship systems and from an understanding of white prejudice and systemic racism. His approach validated sociocultural but not biological-genetic understandings of assimilation. In his 1961 address to the Royal Australian Historical Society Elkin states that New South Wales Aboriginal policy had 'assimilation as the goal'.⁴⁵ He explicitly notes that assimilation seemed the 'suitable [word] in sound and in meaning. It was not meant by me to imply absorption by miscegenation. This latter process was the recommendation of the 1937 conference of Chief Protectors with reference to part-aborigines.'⁴⁶

³⁹ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 47.

⁴¹ Elkin, *Citizenship*, pp. 30–35; Elkin, 'Australian Aboriginal and white relations: a personal record', *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 48, Part 3, July 1962, p. 210.

⁴² Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 51.

⁴³ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Elkin, 'Australian Aboriginal and white relations', p. 225.

⁴⁶ Elkin, 'Australian Aboriginal and white relations', p. 225.

In *Citizenship for the Aborigines* Elkin does not explicitly develop his opposition to inter-racial sexual relationships, but a sociocultural assimilationist approach is implicit in his work. Russell McGregor points out that Elkin, as anthropologist, was not interested in discussions of atavism and 'breeding out the colour'.⁴⁷ McGregor suggests this may have resulted from the different conclusion Elkin had reached on the question of the racial classification of Aboriginal people.⁴⁸ Elkin's research was driven by questions of Aboriginal people's potential to fit into white society. By the late 1930s he was convinced that all Aboriginal people had the 'capacity' to assimilate and his efforts for the next decades were channelled into arguments and campaigns for Aboriginal citizenship.

Like other commentators of the time a point of tension for Elkin in the implementation of his assimilation programme was Aboriginal women. One of Elkin's ten points for change focuses explicitly on the 'status and dignity of [Aboriginal] women'.⁴⁹ Here he mounts an argument that inter-racial sexual relations result from psychological issues of inferiority and superiority. Elkin argued that conditions in both Aboriginal and white communities reinforced Aboriginal women's 'outcaste' and 'inferiority conscious' situation. He goes on to suggest that a relationship with a white man gives an Aboriginal woman 'some "hold" over the men of the "superior race," and so compensates in some degree for the inferiority attributed to them as persons of Aboriginal descent'.⁵⁰ In the logic of Elkin's argument Aboriginal women with high self-esteem, 'cohesion and stability of the family' and 'pride in their persons'⁵¹ will not seek sexual relationships with white men. Elkin proceeds for the bulk of the treatise to outline conditions which would encourage the raising of Aboriginal feelings of self-worth. Specifically for women he emphasised vocational training – work 'not ... confined to domestic service or menial tasks'.⁵² He also mentioned 'community interests' such as the 'Red Cross, Ambulance, Library, Church Guild, and Recreation' as adding to Aboriginal women's feelings of self-worth.⁵³ His final point specifically

⁴⁷ McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ Elkin classified Aboriginal people as belonging to a racial category named 'Australoid' compared with other contemporary scientists and anthropologists who classified Aboriginal people as 'primitive Caucasian', McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Elkin, *Citizenship*, pp. 25–26.

⁵¹ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 25.

⁵² Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 26.

⁵³ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 26.

about Aboriginal women emphasised teaching them the importance of 'the family vocation'.

Elkin constructs a vision of Aboriginal people as, in time, being perfectly integrated in the white community, through equal treatment by white people and 'by inner conviction on the part of Aborigines themselves'.⁵⁴ Elkin sees Aboriginal people as being 'ultimately assimilated into the general life of the Commonwealth',⁵⁵ though he imagines they will remain 'clothed in a dark skin'.⁵⁶ As he states himself, he is at odds with the resolutions of the Aboriginal Welfare conference, yet he is pro-assimilation. Two different meanings of assimilation come to inhabit the same term. In some ways it is the (partially unacknowledged) synchronic meanings of assimilation as sociocultural and biological-genetic which allows for its multiple and flexible use in this and later periods. Assimilation is split between two meanings. One can disavow, yet not negate, the other.

⁵⁴ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 108.

⁵⁵ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 90.

iii: Ambivalences and government desires

*'... each State is vitally interested
in the conditions of its aborigines
because of the bearing these
conditions must have upon the
health,
morals and good order
of the community.'*
J. W. Bleakley⁵⁷

Before analysing the third text, I return to the report of the Aboriginal Welfare conference and explore the ways in which it produces a 'multiple and contradictory belief'⁵⁸ about assimilation. The 1937 conference works with a slippery idea of assimilation. In effecting assimilation policies was there was a need to relentlessly catalogue grades of blackness (against an homogenous whiteness). Yet this process in turn produces an uncertainty and destabilization of notions of a 'white Australia'. In 1937 there was a general understanding amongst government policy makers that inter-racial sexual relationships were undesirable; further there was a belief that Aboriginal people – across the range articulated by Bleakley – should disappear, be converted, be absorbed into white society, an idea which contains within it the need either for inter-racial sex or elimination. (This wish can hardly be articulated and so other terms which allude to or suggest miscegenation or death are used.) In the end this is the paradoxical white imaginary of the nation: sex with those who are not white will make the nation white, yet we (white people) can never say we want sex with those who are not white. Or to put the paradox in a different register: 'white Australia' must absorb blackness to be white, yet 'white Australia' with blackness in it will never be white. The 1937 conference as a whole sets up this 'moment of multiple belief', which both seeks to allay the anxiety of difference (we can all be white) and is also 'productive of differentiations' (you are white, you are part-black, you are black).

The first resolution of the Aboriginal Welfare conference of 1937, which in many ways ordered the others, was titled 'Destiny of the Race'. It stated that:

the conference believes that the destiny of the
natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood

⁵⁷ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 6

⁵⁸ Bhabha, 'Articulating the archaic', p. 132.

lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth.⁵⁹

Implicit in the conference discussions and resolutions is the ordering principle whereby people are divided into different racial and hierarchically arranged groups, named in the quote above as 'full blood', 'natives of aboriginal origin' and 'people of the Commonwealth'. As Cook, the Northern Territory representative at the conference, expressed it: 'the policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen.'⁶⁰ In this common assimilationist fantasy the group designated as 'natives of aboriginal origin' (Aboriginal people of mixed heritage) were to be 'converted' into 'people of the Commonwealth', white people. The position of the group marked as 'full blood' was less certain. Again to quote Cook: 'The question arises whether the same policy ['absorption'] should not be adopted in regard to the aborigines'.⁶¹ This group usually appeared in the fantasy of 'white Australia' as positioned to 'pass away', that is, to die out and to be eradicated over time.⁶² In the 'Destiny of the Race' resolution there is a careful demarcation of different Aboriginal groups in terms of proximity and distance from white groups, yet in the context of this conference and more generally, the lines of demarcation are not always clear.⁶³

The inclusion of the group designated 'natives of aboriginal origin' is represented as an effortless and desirable merging into 'white Australia'. Yet this is really a place of deep ambivalence. For it is in discussions of 'absorption' of the group represented as half-caste that anxieties emerge. The image of a stereotyped or archetypal half-caste Aboriginal woman is central to the government narrative of assimilation.⁶⁴ This Aboriginal woman was imagined always in terms of sexual relations with white men which, as I discussed earlier, at different moments were represented as both desirable and problematic. Aboriginal women came to

⁵⁹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14.

⁶¹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 14.

⁶² See also Langton's point that this idea or wish is represented in film and literary culture in the same period. Langton, *Well I Heard it on the Radio*, p. 48.

⁶³ The 1951 Native Welfare Conference had restated the 1937 commitment to assimilation after the hiatus of the 1939–45 war. The 1951 conference articulated a vision of assimilation which was much less ambiguous, emphasising the process as cultural integration: 'all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do ... Many years of slow patient endeavour will be needed before that ideal can be realized.' Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 164.

⁶⁴ 'At the same time the focus on hybridity also describes gender and the sexual division of labour within the mode of colonial reproduction.' Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 19.

be emblematic of ambivalence in discourses of assimilation. H. S. Bailey, Chairman of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in Victoria, argued that the 'principal difficulty' in his state in implementing a programme of assimilation was the incidences of Aboriginal women becoming pregnant to white men. The white men involved were represented as 'hoboes' and 'degenerate whites'.⁶⁵ Bailey argued:

they [Aboriginal women from training centres and working as domestic workers] exemplify the difficulty of absorbing this class of people among the whites in areas where there are large white populations.⁶⁶

Neville's response to Bailey universalises the Victorian representative's example of the results of assimilation policies: 'Every administration has trouble with half-caste girls'.⁶⁷ The 1937 conference passed a resolution for 'absorption' and yet it also quite clearly marked inter-racial sex as a danger and fixed 'half-caste' women and 'degenerate white' men as the densest node of anxiety.⁶⁸

There is another ambivalence in this text which is created by the pleasures and fears of sameness. The logic of the 'Destiny of the Race' resolution is about sameness – about some Aboriginal people becoming white, passing as white, mimicking whiteness. The coeval belief is that Aboriginal people should be or can only ever be 'almost the same *but not quite*'.⁶⁹ White representation here is as site of multiple belief, invoking a logic of sameness and a logic of difference. These coeval beliefs include a wish for the erasure of Aboriginality and the retention of racialized difference; a fear about not being able to see racialized difference and an anxiety that assimilation will never take place, that Aboriginal people will never disappear. I propose that in white discourses of assimilation the Aboriginal people deemed most assimilated produce an anxiety about

⁶⁵ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 12. See also Rowse's point that J. B. Cleland in an address in 1944 considered 'both detribalisation and miscegenation' to flow 'from contact between vulnerable "full-bloods" and degenerate settlers.' Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, p. 34. See also Ann Laura Stoler, arguing about race relations in a different colonial setting, where she suggests that the control of sexual relations in colonial spaces is organised around the control of political infrastructures. The control and discipline of poor white men, including in the domestic sphere, shapes economic/political system of the colony. Ann Laura Stoler, 'Carnal knowledge and imperial power: gender race and morality in colonial Asia', in Micaela di Leonardo (ed.), *Gender and the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.

⁶⁶ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 12.

⁶⁸ See also Elkin's comments on this topic in *Citizenship*, pp. 25–26.

⁶⁹ Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', p. 86.

whiteness; they transform the system of white knowledge about race relations in Australia into a continual uncertainty. Aboriginal people figured as in-between two cultures represent white ambivalences about assimilation.

The story of 'ultimate absorption' is anxious in another way. In including Aboriginal people marked as 'natives of aboriginal origin' in the vision of 'white Australia'; in marking this group as 'appropriate' objects, there is a need or a dependence 'on a proliferation of inappropriate objects' (Aboriginal people marked as 'full blood') which in turn 'ensures [the] strategic failure'⁷⁰ of a 'white Australia'. There is by definition a non-white group. Though this separate group is openly acknowledged (and often welcomed by particular commentators) the presence of a group who are deemed unassimilable challenges the legitimacy of settler colonization. This group recalls discourses of violent elimination, that assimilation discourses hope in part to repudiate, demonstrating their coeval status.

⁷⁰ Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', p. 86.

iv: Ambivalence and national desire:
A. O. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*

*The first thing to note is that
fantasy does not simply realize a
desire in a hallucinatory way ... a
fantasy constitutes our desire,
provides its co-ordinates: that is, it
literally "teaches us how to
desire".*

Slavoj Žižek⁷¹

A. O. Neville's text *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* is probably one of the best known treatises on assimilation written in the period covered by this thesis. Along with the work of A. P. Elkin, Paul Hasluck and Norman Tindale, Neville's work formed part of a loose sociopolitical-intellectual body of mainstream discourse about assimilation.⁷² Neville was the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia in the 1920s and 1930s. He was an autocratic dictatorial Chief who preferred not to devolve power and his period in office was known for its high level of surveillance of Aboriginal people's lives and his strict adherence to the policies of separation and assimilation.⁷³ Neville's decades of involvement in Western Australian Aboriginal welfare departments, both as a field officer and an administrator provided him with a high level of knowledge of the policies and practices of various Australian governments in their desire to solve what he often termed the 'native problem'.⁷⁴ *Australia's Coloured Minority* was written after Neville's time in public office.

Neville's text contains a chapter titled 'Assimilation' which exemplifies some of the contradictions and ambivalences in discourses of assimilation in the period of the 1950s and 1960s. Published in 1947 this text worries over assimilation in ways which produce the same moment of 'multiple belief' which I argued marked the Aboriginal Welfare conference. The text contains the awkward shifts between assimilation figured as a sociocultural process and as a biological-genetic process.

⁷¹ Žižek, 'The seven veils of fantasy', p. 7.

⁷² See, among their works: Tindale, 'Survey of the half caste problem in South Australia'; A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigine: How to Understand Them*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938; Elkin, *Citizenship*; Paul Hasluck, *Black Australians: a Survey of Native Policy in Western Australia 1829–1897*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1942.

⁷³ Sandy Toussaint, 'Western Australia', in McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*, p. 254.

⁷⁴ See Patricia Jacobs, *Mr Neville: A Biography*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1990.

Australia's Coloured Minority is an ambivalent text which at once repeats a story intended to allay the worries over racial difference, while at the same time reproducing (through a narrative organised around raced classification) difference. This appears in the text as an ambivalent desire which projects a longing for the Aboriginal people to be 'absorbed' and a revulsion at this very idea. These contradictions are reproduced in the very structure of the text. There are detailed chapters (which make up the bulk of the text) on the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of Aboriginal integration. This is underpinned by a quasi-scientific discourse of race theory, best illustrated by a series of photographs interspersed throughout the book, which detail the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples as a biological-genetic project, using the construct of skin colour and a miscegenist politics. Whilst wanting to privilege a scheme of sociocultural assimilation the text depends on concepts of blood, colour, generations, inheritance and genetics. Further, the discourse of miscegenation, though presented in the terms of science, morals and need, masks an often barely repressed desire for Aboriginal people or more specifically a desire of white men for Aboriginal women.

Australia's Coloured Minority opens with a waiver, which states that the publisher does not necessarily endorse the views of the author. This odd inclusion suggests the marginality of Neville's views and the taboo nature of his topic. Following is the title page and then a dedication:

Dedicated to
THE "COLOURED FOLKS" OF
AUSTRALIA

"Pity and need make all flesh kin.
There is no caste in blood
Which runneth of one hue,
No caste in tears
Which trickle salt with all"
(Sir E. Arnold)⁷⁵

Neville dedicated his book to a particular a group of Aboriginal people in Australia – 'coloured folks' – who he saw as occupying a position between white and black. Having made a distinction between 'folks' in Australia, the dedicatory verse then emphasised the similarity between all people ('no caste in blood'). The argument that all people are 'kin', though fiercely contested throughout the nineteenth century, was not open to

⁷⁵ Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904).

dispute in Western socio-biological discourses well before the 1940s. What still circulated in the twentieth century debates around race were ideas of 'types', that is, that some groups of people were deemed more 'proximate' to or 'distant' from an imagined central Caucasian or Englishman.⁷⁶ The dedicatory verse links the text with a discourse of monogenesis, whilst at the same time it keeps alive a notion of more radical differences.⁷⁷ For example the idea that there is 'no caste in blood' is quickly undercut in the text. Set out in the text is a complex typology of people which draws on notions of proximity:

There is no marked difference between the blood of the native and ours, all human blood being fundamentally alike ... Even if there were some divergence, like the half empty glass the coloured people are already half empty, and more in many cases, of aboriginal blood.⁷⁸

This passage states that there is no 'marked difference' between Aboriginal and white 'blood', reiterating the point made in the verse that blood is all 'one hue'. Then in the last few lines of the passage there is a hypothetical 'even if there were some divergence' and a reference is made to 'aboriginal blood' suggesting that it is different. Interestingly the text does not mention white or non-Aboriginal blood. It appears in the passage as the universal blood type – 'human blood'. From the outset Neville's text is marked by the paradox of proximity and distance, sameness and difference, mimicry and menace. Blood is all the same, and yet not quite.

The next entry in the text is a glossary. It contains eleven terms, each written in capitals and followed by a definition. The terms are: AUTHORITY; BLACK; CANBERRA CONFERENCE; COLOURED PEOPLE; FULL BLOOD; HALF-BLOOD, HALF-CASTE; INSTITUTION, NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, NATIVES; OCTOROON; QUADROON. These terms mark out Neville's lexicon for the story he is to tell of the 'Australian coloured minority'. They also, in some ways, mark out the basic lexicon of race, from which the mainstream stories of relations between Aboriginal people and white people were constructed in this period and for the next twenty-odd years. They mark the 'discursive repertoire'⁷⁹ within which people are obliged to construct their narratives about race in Australia. The glossary of terms provides the vocabulary for

⁷⁶ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 55.

⁷⁹ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, p. 16.

the discursive framework of assimilation, which informed the government apparatuses for the control of Aboriginal peoples and also the framework for the fictional imaginings of white writers about Aboriginal-white relations.

The not surprising absences in the glossary are white and desire. The former term is implicit in the text as an unstated universal and the latter as a nearly unspeakable idea. There is no separate definition for white in the glossary, though the term white turns up in different definitions. In defining 'quadroon' the glossary states:

Offspring of Half-blood and White parents. Offspring of two persons both Quadroons.⁸⁰

The word white also appears in the definition for 'octoroon' ('Offspring of Quadroon and White parents') and 'half-caste or half-blood' ('Offspring of full-blood Aboriginal and a white person. Offspring of two persons both half-blood'). The white body is present in the stories of assimilation, but it is not the body which is relentlessly visualised. It is an absent presence.

Sexual desire was not defined in the glossary either, but it underpins the text. The pivotal chapter on 'Assimilation' is devoted to it. To arrive at the object of his study – 'Australia's coloured minority' – Neville needs to give some explanation of where this group came from. The text's analysis foregrounds the children who are the outcome of white men's (and sometimes white women's) sexual desire. The children Neville classifies as 'half-caste', 'octoroon', 'quadroon', and 'coloured' are the centrepiece of his tale, and he underplays white people's (and Aboriginal people's) sexual desire in the production of these children. Though in the chapter on assimilation sexual desire is named. The chapter begins:

Miscegenation which produced the grandparents and parents of the existing coloured people of Australia has been going on for over a hundred years and this compels us today to seek a means of adjusting some of its distressing results.

Our men appropriated full blood women from the earliest days of settlement, and now their coloured female descendants are acquiring our men, not by force, but through the natural process of mating and marriage based largely upon mutual affection.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, glossary.

⁸¹ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 43.

The first paragraph which figures the 'original' miscegenist moment generates a sense of assimilation as a pragmatic and necessary response, devoid of desire. Direct references to white people's participation in sex are excluded. Instead it is the passively placed noun miscegenation which produced the 'existing coloured people of Australia'. Inter-racial sexual relations are represented in terms of compulsion, adjustment and distress. The passage structures whiteness as an absence, and white sexual desire as absent.

In the next paragraph the codes are different and produce a different effect. Whiteness appears: 'our men appropriated full blood women'. Desire appears, though it has different shapes for the different groups. White men's sexual desire is represented in terms of a violence – 'appropriated', 'force'. Inter-racial sexual relations in the next generation are represented from the perspective of Aboriginal women and in terms of romance – 'natural', 'mating', 'marriage', 'mutual affection'. This passage suggests white men 'appropriated' Aboriginal women and now the Aboriginal woman who are the children born of those original relationships (Aboriginal women the text marks as 'coloured') are 'acquiring our men'. This passage employs an idea of the sexual desirability of this latter group of Aboriginal women, which the text does not emphasise in the description of the earliest encounters between Aboriginal women and white men.⁸² The text locates an acceptable white, romanticized desire in relation to Aboriginal women who are marked as 'half caste' or 'coloured'.⁸³ This particular group – 'coloured women' – are marked out as inciting desire in white men. It is here that the text produces desire, enunciates inter-racial desire as speakable and acceptable.

In *Australia's Coloured Minority* what drives the 'plot' is a hope to make Australia white: 'we must encourage approach towards white rather than the black'. Stitched into the text's narrative of 'fading [black] colour' is the death of the group marked as 'full-blood':

The fact that the full-blood people are apparently
dying out, while the coloured people are increasing

⁸² See also Neville speaking at the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare Conference: 'Every administration has trouble with half-caste girls.' *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 12.

⁸³ Young gives an example of this same sort of silence and slippage from the mid-nineteenth century. In his example Young notes that no explanation can be given for the original inter-racial sexual relations rather the focus is placed on the continued 'cause' of sexual relations which is attributed to women of mixed European and non-European heritage. See Young, *Colonial Desires*, p. 49.

and all the time slowly approaching us in culture and colour, lessens our problem of assimilation.⁸⁴

One way it 'lessens [the] problem of assimilation' is that it diminishes the frequency with which white people have to think about inter-racial sex as miscegenation. It is easier to imagine Aboriginal people marked as 'full-blood' as dying than to imagine the process of miscegenation.⁸⁵ It is easier to imagine a process of assimilation rather than miscegenation, even though they can involve the same thing – inter-racial sex.

Inter-racial sexual encounters are represented as asymmetrically structured and gendered. Neville notes the incidence of sexual relations between Aboriginal men and white-settler women as negligible, though comment is made on a few cases of which he is aware.⁸⁶ The low incidence of sexual relations between Aboriginal men and white women is attributed to a 'regard' which the 'black man' has for 'a white woman' which is contrasted with the lack of regard that 'the white man ... possessed for the full blood woman'.⁸⁷ As Jeremy Beckett argues, Aboriginal men are not central to Neville's connubial assimilationist economy.⁸⁸ It is presumed that they will 'pass away' leaving no children.

Assimilation is also represented as being about 'colour':

colour plays of great a part in the scheme of things [ie the plan of assimilation] ... we must encourage approach towards the white rather than the black, through marriage.⁸⁹

Here assimilation is specifically represented as about the colour white, in relation to the colour black. Dyer has analysed what he calls 'the colourless sources of racial colour'. Writing about white people he says: 'A person is deemed visibly white because of a complicated interaction of elements, of which flesh tones within the pink to beige range are only one'.⁹⁰ He also makes the point that 'whites are always whites'.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 58.

⁸⁵ It also needs to be noted that the passive notion of 'dying out' is used by Neville, which contrasts with the more active notion of killing, a discourse which white Australians were less and less disposed to use when representing the eradication of Aboriginal cultures.

⁸⁶ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 44.

⁸⁷ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 43.

⁸⁸ Beckett, *The past in the present*, p. 200.

⁸⁹ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 68.

⁹⁰ Dyer, *White*, p. 42.

⁹¹ Dyer, *White*, p. 44.

Whiteness does not change. It is the group designated black whose colour can or does shift – represented above as moving from blackness to whiteness. This is generally how both biological-genetic and sociocultural understandings of assimilation are represented, that is as a stable white colour or culture which other groups move towards, without destabilizing whiteness.

Desire in the text is organised around colour. The narrative of assimilation visualises desire. For example in the passage below the discussion of the benefits of inter-racial marriage are organised around notions of colour and desire:

It is not always wise for people of widely diverse races to intermarry, especially races having different cultures and temperaments. That, however, cannot be said of people already allied to us by association, consanguinity, and ancestry. The young half-blood maiden is a pleasant, placid, complacent person as a rule, while the quadroon girl is often strikingly attractive with her oft times auburn hair, rosy freckled colouring, and good figure, or maybe blue eyes and fair hair. (See illustrations.) In both cases the lads who have been properly cared for are well set up and often good looking. As I see it, what we have to do is to elevate these people to our own plane, and if intermarriage between them and ourselves becomes more popular, then we shall be none the worse for it. That will solve our problem itself.⁹²

The language in this passage works to produce or incite a desire for the groups marked as 'half-blood' and 'quadroon'. The visual language, which positions these Aboriginal women and men as 'strikingly attractive', 'auburn hair[ed with] rosy freckled colouring', as having a 'good figure', 'blue eyes and fair hair' and being 'good looking' figures them as desirable within white systems of beauty. In a gendered production of desire the Aboriginal women in this passage are represented as 'maiden[s]' as 'pleasant, placid' and 'complacent'; the Aboriginal men as 'well set up', that is capable of earning a living. Aboriginal women are figured as passive, Aboriginal men as more active economic agents.

The representations of the women are also hierarchized in terms of a system which places groups who are imagined as more proximate to whiteness as more desirable. The group marked as 'half-blood' are designated as desirable by their behaviour - which is represented as

⁹² Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 57.

'pleasant' and 'complacent'. The group marked as 'quadroon' are designated as desirable by their physical appearance. In fact the text incites the reader to look at these women – 'See illustrations' – in a completely visual production of desire.⁹³ The further away that the groups of Aboriginal men and women can be imagined from an originary miscegenist moment, the more insistent the text becomes in its incitement to look, to desire, to want; to want Aboriginal people and to want a 'white Australia'.

The system of representation which structures *Australia's Coloured Minority* is predicated on a privileging of the visual. Race is represented as nothing more than colour. Yet, of course, it is never just colour; it is also inflected with a hierarchy of morality, class position, gender and sexuality. In the logic of this text when Aboriginal peoples' skin colour is not dark they cease to worry 'white Australia'. This change in skin hue is represented as matching a set of behaviours organised around white notions of decency, work and morality. The shift in skin colour operates metonymically to represent the emergence of shared cultural values – 'the Australian way of life'.

The systems of colour and caste in *Australia's Coloured Minority* is premised on an idea of generational movement and progress:

... a half-blood mother is unmistakable as to origin, her quarter caste or quadroon offspring almost like a white, and an octoroon entirely indistinguishable from one. (See illustrations.) A quadroon child may become a little darker by the time adolescence is reached, but even then would pass as a southern European.⁹⁴

Neville in this quote mobilises the idea of whiteness as the desirable category, a border that Aboriginal people will want to cross.⁹⁵ The shift from a position of being 'unmistakabl[y not white]', to 'almost like a white' and finally 'indistinguishable from [a white]' is presented as desirable, a form of progress. The passage draws on a representational system which argues that it is both logical and desirable to visualise Aboriginal people's move to non-blackness as a generational uplift.

⁹³ Almost all the photographs are of girls and women. The Aboriginal males who appear are very young boys.

⁹⁴ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 59.

⁹⁵ See: 'Because whiteness carries such rewards and privileges, the sense of a border that might be crossed and a hierarchy that might be climbed has produced a dynamic that has enthralled people who have had any chance of participating in it', Dyer, *White*, p. 20.

Yet paradoxically the shift of race difference from being a visible difference to a difference which cannot be seen, though presented as desirable, also produces an anxiety. In the passage above, the first Aboriginal child mentioned is marked as a 'quadroon child'. The adjective 'quadroon' figures the child as different from a white child. Then the point is made that the 'quadroon child' is 'almost like a white'. The difference is negated. Difference has disappeared as an epidermal marking, though it remains in grammar. Yet almost immediately a visual difference is recalled – the 'quadroon child' will become 'darker' with age. The child is finally represented as 'darker' than white and as able to 'pass as a southern European'. The text in the end situates the child in a category where racial identity can still be called into question. This passage sets out the desirability of the idea of no difference between Aboriginal and white groups, yet at the same time it maintains differences by drawing on a common racial grammar. Assimilation (becoming white, being just 'a child') is represented as taking time. In Australian discourses of assimilation it takes three generations. There is a detailed racial vocabulary which marks these generations, then quantifying descriptors of Aboriginality disappear from the vocabulary.⁹⁶ Neville's text deploys this vocabulary and the three-generational logic of sameness, yet he undermines the assimilationist logic of Aboriginal erasure with a reiteration of ideas of difference. Difference is stated and then recanted and then stated again in the next sentence. There is an anxiety associated with assimilation revealed in the changing deployment of the racial vocabulary. The desire for a 'white Australia' is overwhelmed by the wish to still know who is 'really' white.

⁹⁶ See Broome's comments where he notes welfare officers in the 1950s using fractions of 1/128th to mark Aboriginality. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 161.

The abject is everything that the subject seeks to expunge in order to become social; it is also a symptom of the failure of this ambition. The abject is "something rejected from which one does not part".

Anne McClintock⁹⁷

I have argued in the previous section that a fantasy which drives *Australia's Coloured Minority* is a desire for Aboriginal colour to both disappear and to remain. Using an example provided by Neville, I now want to analyse another aspect of these fantasies and anxieties about race in Australia; a different white-imagined blackness which refuses to disappear. One representational strategy for defusing the worry of Aboriginal people in 'white Australia' concerns notions of being 'native'. Aboriginal people can and often do threaten the imagined world of a 'white Australia', but in the end they are figured as 'native' and so can be integrated into a framework of 'native' Australians which includes Australian-Britons.⁹⁸ Assimilation discourse includes biological theories of race to suggest that Aboriginal and white Australian-Britons shared the same heritage.⁹⁹ For example in Neville's text he can imagine with some certainty a world where it is safe to promise that no colour will appear if he is allowed a closed system where 'full-bloods' disappear and a tacitly approved, though still unsettling, process of inter-marriage between Aboriginal people of mixed heritage and white people takes place:

Time and time again I have been asked by some white man: "If I marry so and so (a coloured person) will our children be black?" ... The answer, of course, depended upon whether the woman was of purely European-Aboriginal descent. If that was so, I felt I could safely reply that while no one could be definite in such a case, I thought the chances were all against it happening. That the children would be lighter than the mother, and if later they married whites and had children these would be lighter still, and that in the

⁹⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 71.

⁹⁸ White Australians often link themselves to the cultures of the Indigenous peoples of Australia to give legitimacy to their presence in the land.

⁹⁹ *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 10. As I suggested earlier Neville deploys a Dravidian theory of evolution, which suggests that the Aboriginal people of Australia were Caucasian. For a discussion of these ideas in Australian anthropology see McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 36–37.

third or fourth generation no sign of native origin
whatever would be apparent.¹⁰⁰

In *Australia's Coloured Minority* where the dream is that all will be white in the end, there is another group who challenge the idea of a 'white Australia'. The group who antagonise the visual hope of a 'white Australia' are figured as alien. What operates in this story as the uncalculated or incalculable is displaced from the Aboriginal person to the figures of the 'Negro', the 'Asiatic' or 'Indian'. Neville wrote:

if a white man marries a coloured woman of
Aboriginal descent also possessing some Negro,
Asiatic, Indian or other coloured ancestry, then he
must take a greater risk of atavism on any children of
the union there may be.¹⁰¹

Neville summarises what he sees as the problem more succinctly when he writes: 'the characteristics of the migrant race seem to predominate.'¹⁰² Here the text sets up a dichotomy between the groups imagined as 'native' – Aboriginal people and Australian-Britons – and 'migrants'. It is the outside migrant groups who are represented as unsettling to the prospect of a 'white Australia'. The ever fluid category of 'Australian', which is frequently modified by 'white', has opened here to include Aboriginal people in a specific form of Australian-ness – Australian as 'native'. The boundary of Australian-ness has been strategically shifted to cordon-off or exclude an *Other* group – 'coloured aliens' who now mark the edges of 'white Australia'.¹⁰³

In the late 1930s, Neville, in his capacity as Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia, set out to discover the limits of this alien presence.¹⁰⁴ In June 1937 he sent out a circular (Circular No. 159) to the

¹⁰⁰ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, pp. 58–59.

¹⁰¹ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 59.

¹⁰² Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 60.

¹⁰³ See: 'Given the overwhelming advantage of being white, in terms of power, privilege and material well being, who counts as white and who doesn't is worth fighting over – fighting to keep people out, to let strategic groups in, fighting to get in.' Dyer, *White*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ The fear of the reappearance of unaccounted for alien colour as unsettling the move toward a white nation was played out in other spaces besides Neville's text and practices. Cook at the Aboriginal Welfare conference stated that: 'in the north [there was] a certain amount of negroid strain ... The negroid strain remains.' This was part of his reasoning for the high level of surveillance of inter-racial relationships. See *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 11. Tindale also mobilizes this logic in his argument in 'Survey of the half caste problem'. See fn. 21 this chapter.

principal protector in every district in the state asking for the following information:

I am desirous of learning as quickly as possible the names and particulars of all coloured persons of alien race, including negros [sic] who were living with natives in the relationship of husband and wife, legally or otherwise.¹⁰⁵

This request resulted from a memorandum-based correspondence between Neville, the Solicitor General, the Registrar General and the Deputy Commissioner of Native Affairs in Western Australia. The stated aim was to see if people deemed coloured, but who were not Aboriginal people, were included under the power of the *Native Administration Act, 1905–1936*, and if they were not if they could be. The Solicitor General concludes that 'it would be advisable to see that a door was not left open for coloured aliens to come in and consort with natives and yet it may be necessary to make provision for unknown cases (with children) likely to require determination at your instigation in the future'.¹⁰⁶ The request results in the careful tabulation of the names of all people deemed 'coloured aliens', plus their partner's names and their children's names.

Assimilationist fantasies are unsettled by the possibility of colour returning. This return is represented as coming not just from Aboriginal people, but from the 'coloured alien' who passes through the net of immigration control and opens the possibility of unexpected colour. This logic fuels Neville's relentless cataloguing of those people in the state of Western Australia who are not 'native'. The suggestion is that the 'coloured alien' is not sufficiently under surveillance and accounted for in government discourses of race. This group is represented as an unstable, unknown entity, who can upset the plan for assimilation. They are seen as outside the authority of the Government and thereby outside the plan to make Australia white. This group – and as disparate as they are, they are represented here as the homogenous group 'coloured migrants' – are represented, both politically and in the figurative language of colour and biology, as able to turn up anywhere. Neville's project via Circular No. 159 attempts to track and know in advance where the unexpected may be expected. In his empirical survey these groups are constructed as the true

¹⁰⁵ *Negros & other coloured aliens married to natives*, Circular, AN 1/7, Acc 993, Item 238 (1937), Aboriginal Affairs Department, PRO, BL.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Deputy Commissioner Native Affairs to Commissioner Native Affairs, 17 June 1937, AN 1/7, Acc 993, Item 238, PRO, BL.

aliens in 'white Australia'. As Ang has argued, this works to displace the alien-ness of white people in Australia on to another group, making white people the 'natives' of Australia in relation to 'outside' groups.¹⁰⁷

Reply after reply comes in responding to Neville's question in Circular No. 159 and is attached to the file. Responses note: Re Circular No. 159 nil return; nil; no coloured persons of alien race living with natives, in the relationship of husband and wife, legally or otherwise in this district. Many of the responses are incorrect and instead of answering the question the Protector or police officer takes the opportunity to list all the Aboriginal people in the area. To these replies someone in the government department has added a hand written note: nil. The longest responses are those from the north-west of the state where the presence of Japanese, Chinese, Malay, Filipino and Indonesian labourers has resulted in a number of marriages and relationships. The returns which involved recording the details of relationships between Aboriginal women and Japanese, Malay and Chinese men, are ordered accounts, set out in columns or neat paragraphs detailing names, spouse's names, children's names, ages. The government department now has its information.

Three replies give an account of the whereabouts and history of African-American people living in Western Australian. The responses detail an unclear and uncertain story. No one is quite sure where the people who are being referred to came from. The information produced in response to the Circular represents an arrival which cannot quite be traced. The alien figures are represented as just appearing. This uncertainty produces a mythological feel to the stories. Similarly no one is sure where this group figured as alien now live: some are said to be dead, some presumed to have moved on. In contrast, the originary inter-racial sexual moment is represented as clear. For example in one case everyone knows that William Strachan was an 'american negro lawfully married to Mrs Rose Isaacs of Quandalup' or in another case that William Bodneys' father was an 'American negro' or that 'Mattie or Matilda Herron or Ottern or Herne ... married John James Lowe known as "Major" Lowe about 70 years ago'.¹⁰⁸

After the clarity of the original relationship the narratives become more confused and lineage less certain, strands are lost as children are born, grow up, move around and generations of a family move on. The

¹⁰⁷ Ang, 'I'm a feminist but ...', pp. 69–70.

¹⁰⁸ Replies to Circular No. 159 from Guilford Station, 28/8/37 and Busselton Station, 25 August 1937 and 5 July 1937, AN 1/7, Acc 993, Item 238, PRO, BL.

Police Sergeant who informs Neville of the existence of the Lowe family continues his report:

[they] had a large family as follows. Tom deceased no family, Robert deceased, no family ... Jane deceased married a man named Nannuh supposed half caste and had two sons William Nannuh deceased no family, and David Nannuh who has a large family address unknown. Eli Lowe aged about 70 years residing at Busselton is the only surviving issue of "Major" Lowe, he has a daughter Margaret Lowe. Married a man named Dean and now residing in Perth Mount Lawley District number in family unknown.¹⁰⁹

Though by anyone's standards this is a high level of surveillance, it is still interesting that tracing the presence of people of African-American heritage becomes harder and harder. This letter, kept on file in the Native Welfare Department, is marked with red ticks, underlines and margin scribbling next to the names of the children and grandchildren. At the bottom of the page there is a note from Neville himself asking to see the Deputy Commissioner because 'This is interesting'.¹¹⁰ The government apparatus tried to use the narrative provided by Sergeant Molloy to trace and account for 'Negro-Aboriginal' children and grandchildren. For in the discourse of assimilation, this 'alien strain' is figured as irrepressible, able to emerge sometimes generations hence to 'strongly exhibit deleterious cultural traits'.¹¹¹

The fear which fuels this story is a fear of atavism or 'throwback'.¹¹² This is exactly Neville's point when he writes about sexual relationships between Aboriginal women and 'Negro, Asiatic [and] Indian men'.¹¹³ For Neville, drawing on the Dravidian theory which sees Australian Aboriginal people as sharing an origin with white people, it is African and Asian peoples who are represented as being from a different race or 'species'. It is this group who will not disappear. The marking and tracing

¹⁰⁹ Reply to Circular No. 159 by Sgt Molloy, Busselton, 5 July 1937, AN 1/7, Acc 993, Item 238, PRO, BL.

¹¹⁰ Reply to Circular No. 159 by Sgt Molloy, Busselton, 5 July 1937, AN 1/7, Acc 993, Item 238, PRO, BL.

¹¹¹ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 60.

¹¹² In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young quotes a mid-nineteenth century writer Robert Knox who argued that: 'the products of inter-racial unions ... after a few generations will revert to one or other of the species from which they sprang'. Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations*, second edition, 1862. Young writes that this thesis, put forward by Knox in 1863, 'became the dominant view throughout the rest of the century and beyond'. Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 15.

¹¹³ Neville includes Indians in his group of non-Caucasians. The dominant Dravidian understanding of race posited Indian people as sharing an origin with white people. See for example Cook in *Aboriginal Welfare*, p. 11.

of where the lineage of the 'coloured alien' goes is therefore imagined as vital for achieving the racialized project of 'white Australia'.

The fantasy of a 'white Australia' operates to include some groups previously marked as not-white or not-Australian into the white imaginary. It also produces others, who are seen as outside the assimilationist project. They are the liminal cases, placed outside the boundaries of Australian-ness, outside the imagined 'white Australia'. As Dyer writes: 'If there are only two colours that really count, then which you belong to becomes a matter of the greatest significance'.¹¹⁴ Who counts as white or not white shifts over time and space in these assimilationist dreams. Strategic changes about who is white have been made in different historical moments for particular political ends. The mid-twentieth century in Australia saw a refiguring of the category white to include some Aboriginal people, whilst figuring Other groups – African, African-American, Asian and darker-skinned Aboriginal people as not-white. By insisting on some groups as outside whiteness the threat of the collapse of all boundaries between black and white is averted.

In this chapter I have mapped out the framework of official (government and administrative) discourses of race in Australia in the context of assimilation policies. I have argued that a repertoire of theories, strategies, fantasies and beliefs underpinned the dominant policy of assimilation. Assimilation was an ambivalent discourse. It was deployed to secure a 'white Australia', and yet this dream could never be secured. Feeding white ideas of race relations between white people and Aboriginal people in Australia was a contradictory desire for and repulsion by Aboriginal people. What was often unspoken in assimilation policies was that, although couched in terms of sociocultural assimilation (economics, education, social mores), there was an unacknowledged need (and desire) for inter-racial sexual relationships. At its heart the assimilation project involved family-making. Though Neville, Elkin, the state and territory administrators worry over and dissect issues of colour and class, lineage and caste what they really want is the production of more and more white families.

¹¹⁴ Dyer, *White*, p. 52.

Blood:

elimination, assimilation and the white Australian
nation in E. V. Timms' *The Scarlet Frontier*

i: introduction

At the Aboriginal Welfare conference only Cook, the Northern Territory representative says it explicitly: 'If we leave them alone, they will die'. The other commentators focus, as I have in my analysis, on assimilation, centralizing this discourse. However, the hegemonic story of the day, is the one to which Cook gives voice – elimination. This is the narrative which the delegates are speaking against. As I laid out in an earlier chapter elimination stories draw on discourses of Aboriginal people as savage and vermin thus inviting white violence. Others represent Aboriginal people as nobly unsuited for the modern world and as mysteriously disappearing, thus working to naturalize white colonization. Before I move on to analyse my selection of novels which produce assimilationist solutions to 'the half-caste problem' I will set out in more detail these powerful elimination discourses. I do so through a reading of a novel which deploys discourses of elimination.

The project of *The Scarlet Frontier* is to construct a story of Australian egalitarianism. This is achieved through a narrative of the rehabilitation of groups historically marked as inferior or tainted in Australian discourses of nation, in particular people with convict heritage and non-Australian born, immigrants. The novel deploys the tropes of the convict 'stain'¹ and the unjust British-Imperial class/caste systems to stage a debate about citizenship – who will make a good Australian. *The Scarlet*

¹ Henry Reynolds, "'That hated stain': the aftermath of transportation in Tasmania', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 53, October 1969, pp. 19–31.

Frontier tells a very conservative story about Aboriginal exclusion from the nation. It does not, as the three official texts did, grade the conditions required for Aboriginal citizenship, rather it tells the hegemonic story of 'white Australia' – the pioneering spirit of native-born Australians of 'British stock',² *terra nullius* and Aboriginal elimination.

In this novel blood is the signifier of one's relation to the nation. Blood has multiple meanings in Timms' text. It signifies belonging. The groups whose difference marks the limits of belonging are the children of convicts and people born overseas and it is their 'tainted blood' which is figured in the novel as different and yet able to be made the same. Aboriginal people are excluded from this schema of belonging. Their blood is represented as unassimilable, making Aboriginal people totally outside or in excess of the nation. Here blood signifies difference and exclusion. Lastly, blood signifies violence. Through repeated scenes of bloody frontier violence, Aboriginal people are represented as eliminated (not assimilated) from the nation. Even so the novel is shadowed by moments when the text produces another story; when language slips and produces an anxiety about Aboriginal elimination. However, the project of a 'white Australia' is reaffirmed, through violent scenes which naturalise white exclusivity.

The Scarlet Frontier is shaped by a totally different logic from the later novels I analyse. It creates a justification for elimination strategies and practices. It is an historical novel. By making the story historically distant from the assimilation moment of the 1950s a contemporary legitimization of the discourse of elimination is achieved. Through a story focused on Aboriginal violence and deploying the discourse of Aboriginal people as savage, the novel creates white violence as understandable retaliation. The novel also mobilizes notions of white women as especially vulnerable to Aboriginal violence and suggests that they are the targets of a sexualized Aboriginal male violence. This strategy works to disavow the historical incidence of white men's violence against Aboriginal women, and also less obviously it inverts the issue which underpinned so much assimilationist discourse – the sexual interest of white men for Aboriginal women.

The novel employs a familiar domestic plot. The motif of family and sibling relationships draws on powerful traditions of the nation as a family as well as drawing on arguments of biology and environment as determinants of human behaviour. Within the families there are pairs and

² White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. 71–72 and 158.

trios of sisters and brothers who bear different bodily and psychic manifestations of the effects of their blood: three sisters are born in India, two brothers are born of a convict father, an Aboriginal brother and sister have mixed racial heritage. This doubling and tripling produces the effect of destabilizing identity:³ 'good' characters are undermined by 'bad' ones.

In this chapter I first discuss genre, analysing *The Scarlet Frontier*, and the series into which it fits, in terms of romance fiction and historical fiction. The next section considers the issue of blood and presents a short theory of the meanings of blood. I then move in section four to discuss blood and representations of caste. The last two sections analyse the novel in terms of representations of blood and frontier violence and finally blood and race.

³ Ian Dennis argues that twins and doubles in fiction often represent or are an expression of destabilised identity. Ian Dennis, *Nationalism and Desire in Early Historical Fiction*, Macmillan, London, 1997, p. 2.

ii: Author, genre and plot

His film story followed the old stereotyped form of bullocks and blacks, and introduced nothing new, naturally I have to conform as it was his novel of the film, and not my novel of Australian development.
E. V. Timms⁴

Author

Edward Vivian Timms (1895–1960) was born in Charters Towers, Queensland. The authorial biography on the inside front page of some of his novels tells this short story of his life:

He served in both World Wars – in the First as a lieutenant at the Gallipoli landings and in the Second as a staff major. He wrote many historical novels as well as short stories, film scenarios and radio plays and in 1948 published the first of a series of historical romances based on the early development of Australia. He wrote ten books in the series and was at work on the eleventh when he died on 4th June 1960.⁵

The short biography locates Timms as born in Australia and positions him as involved in two events which in mainstream stories of the Australian nation were integral to the development of the Australian character and nation, giving him a populist credibility for writing his 'Australian saga'.

Timms' novels were extremely popular. The books in the twelve volume 'saga' have been reprinted a number of times.⁶ By the late 1970s the publishers were advertising that 'over 850,000 copies' of the 'Australian saga' had been 'sold around the world' and 200,000 copies in Australia.⁷ Timms was a prolific author and besides the series on

⁴ Correspondence from E. V. Timms to (Mr) Cousins, Angus and Robertson, c. October, 1934, Angus and Robertson Papers, second collection, E. V. Timms File, MS 3269, Doc. 231–233, Mitchell Library (ML), Sydney. Timms is commenting on his undertaking to ghost a novel of Charles Chauvel's film *Heritage*.

⁵ E. V. Timms, *The Pathway of the Sun* (1949), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972.

⁶ My copy of *The Scarlet Frontier* (fifth in the series) shows the original publication and a reprint in 1954. *The Pathway of the Sun* (second in the series) originally published in 1949 was reprinted eleven times before 1975.

⁷ My 1977 paperback reprint copy of *They Came From the Sea* claims on the back cover:

OVER 850,000 COPIES OF THE TIMMS SAGA SOLD AROUND THE WORLD -
AUSTRALIAN ROMANTIC HISTORICAL FICTION AT ITS BEST.

And the front cover of the 1975 paperback edition of *The Pathway of the Sun* claims:

OVER 200,000 COPIES IN THIS SERIES SOLD IN AUSTRALIA.

nineteenth century Australia wrote historical fiction set in Europe, 'humorous fiction' and children's literature.⁸ His Australian fiction was conceived as a twelve-part series on the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century.⁹ The back cover blurb on the 1954 reprint of *The Scarlet Frontier* suggests that the series will cover the 'colourful development of the Australian nation from 1831 up to World War II. The series will comprise probably twelve novels in all.' Given that it took eleven novels to cover a period of approximately fifty years it is obvious that Timms' plans or interests changed. Each novel is a self-contained story, but to hold the series together a family called Gubby appear in every novel.¹⁰ Over the course of the twelve novels the Gubby family travel extensively across Australia, prosper economically, and the children marry. The family participate in the adventure of white Australian nation building.

Romance fiction

Popular romance fiction is often described as formulaic. As Bob Ashley puts it: 'Knowing that the happy ending is coming, but not knowing exactly how, is a basis of the pleasure we get from the stories'.¹¹ The happy ending of romance fiction revolves around the coupling of the heroine and hero in marriage. Across the front cover of the Pacific Books imprint of the Timms series is the phrase: 'A Romance of Early Australia'. The phrase works with a double meaning, marking the early colonial moment in Australian history as romantic but also marking the novels as romance fiction. Each novel does contain a romance or two, including the marriages of the Gubby children.

The crossing of class boundaries is a common motif in romance fiction. Waif girls of uncertain origin, though certain beauty, marry 'up'

⁸ Examples of other fictions include: historical fiction, *The Cripple in Black*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936; humorous fiction, *James! Don't be a Fool*, Cornstalk Publishing, Sydney, 1927; and children's fiction, *The Cities Under the Sea*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948.

⁹ The first eleven novels of the series are: *Forever to Remain* (1948), *Pathway of the Sun* (1949), *The Beckoning Shore* (1950), *The Valleys Beyond* (1951) and *The Challenge* (1952), *The Scarlet Frontier*, *The Fury* (1954), *They Came From the Sea* (1955), *Forever to Remain* (1948), *Shining Harvest* (1956) and *Robina* (1958) and *The Big Country* (1962). E. V. Timms' wife, Alma Timms, completed *The Big Country* after her husband's death and wrote the twelfth novel in the series *Time and Chance* (1971).

¹⁰ In arguing that there is an attempt in these novels to displace Aboriginal people and yet they haunt the texts, the similarity of the name Gubby with one of the Aboriginal words for white people, Gubba, should be noted. Thanks to Tikka Wilson for bringing this to my attention.

¹¹ Bob Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction: a source book*, Pinter Publishers, London, 1989, p. 209.

when noble men fall in love with them and 'take them away from it all'.¹² The genre of romance is then an appropriate form for a series of novels which participate, within limits, in the production of a story of Australian society as egalitarian. Timms' novels are filled with minor English aristocrats and nobles who are represented as having rejected their noble families and fine heritage, and now just ordinary rough and ready workers. Though the texts display a certain Australian pride in egalitarianism, they are also strongly implicated in the pleasures of romance around caste, blood and class. These same classless characters are carefully figured as 'hav[ing] been educated ... hav[ing] been someone'.¹³

The domestic and romance aspects of Timms' Australian saga produce a seemingly apolitical tone. Bronwyn Levy argues that love stories mute the historical conditions in which the gendered individuals negotiate romance: 'love stories are written, as if about relations primarily between ahistorical, albeit gendered individuals'.¹⁴ However, there are also moments of self-conscious political comment in Timms' texts, which are coded as being of national importance, for example the debates around transportation, relations between squatters and small selectors, and the Eureka Stockade. The structure of each novel is such that political themes are presented as authorial pronouncements or elaborate debates between characters. Running parallel with this is the story which takes place in the domestic space. I argue that the novels produce within this domestic sphere, a matching story of the origins and future of the white Australian nation. It is just as political as the public narrative, but because it is a love story it neatly disavows its political power.

Timms' novels operate as a form of national eugenic romance.¹⁵ The representation of the characters as 'Australians' and moreover as 'early Australians' who are part of a nation-building exercise produces a pattern where for a couple to decide to marry is for a couple to decide to produce children for the nation.¹⁶ The couples must therefore be carefully paired, discursively producing appropriate families. These novels depart from traditional romance where marriage overcomes life's obstacles; here marriages are sites of anxiety. The obstacles to mismatched romances are clearly enunciated. Matches that 'fail' – where characters who are attracted

¹² See for example Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction*, pp. 208–209.

¹³ E. V. Timms, *The Challenge*, (1952) Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, pp. 31–32.

¹⁴ Bronwyn Levy, 'Up from under, or on not marrying the racist Aussie boss: strategies for reading romantic fiction, *Hecate*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1987, p. 15.

¹⁵ Thanks to Tikka Wilson for bringing this idea of eugenic romances to my attention.

¹⁶ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 9.

to each other do not marry – are those which are beyond the novels' imaginings of what is good for the nation. For example in *Shining Harvest*, the friendship between an illiterate unfeminine woman drover and a gentrified Englishman does not end in marriage. In *The Scarlet Frontier*, Chris Talbot, the 'bad' convict son, dies, thus ending the romance with one of the Leighton sisters. I suggest that the novels invoke the recognisable and well known language of radical nationalism – a fluid egalitarianism – and offer the reader a systematic representation of this world through the theme of inter-class marriage. However there are limits to this egalitarianism marked by a eugenic schema of suitability inflected with the racialized dream of a 'white Australia'.

Traditional domestic narratives carry with them a notion of women's virtues being able to overcome masculine faults and transform that man into a bourgeois mould.¹⁷ In Timms' novels, the sons of convicts, with their tainted blood, are the bearers of a caste fault. Within the logic of these novels the women who marry the sons of convicts do so because they love the men, and the men are marriageable because they have overcome their humble and tainted origins, in an effort to earn the love of a 'good woman'. In these couplings the rules of the romance plot – especially women's moral virtue and premarital chastity¹⁸ – become of the utmost importance and are somewhat overdrawn. In this way anxieties about the future of the nation (children) can be minimised because certain moral criteria of sexual good conduct and hard work are met.

Historical fiction

Where romance fiction is traditionally emptied of historical context and 'politics', historical fiction embraces these themes as constituting its purpose.¹⁹ Ian Dennis argues of early historical fiction that the reader's interest in the past is rewarded with 'a "higher" truth than previous fictions have provided.'²⁰ Historical novels purport to share the truth of a nation's history. This "'higher" truth' is delivered in a didactic form in Timms' saga. In his analysis of the forms of historical fiction, Harry Shaw argues that one of the three main ways in which history is deployed in this genre is as 'an ideological screen onto which the preoccupations of the

¹⁷ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Popular Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Harvester, New York, 1991, p. 57.

¹⁹ Dennis, *Nationalism and Desire*, p.10.

²⁰ Dennis, *Nationalism and Desire*, p. 70.

present can be projected for clarification and solution, or for disguised expression'.²¹ History is mobilized in *The Scarlet Frontier* to display Australian egalitarianism and to clarify the meanings of a self-consciously white nation being reshaped by non-British immigration. Notions of egalitarianism are produced through a concept of progress. The figures who exemplify Australian national progress through to an egalitarian ideal are the children of convicts and the immigrants. The argument is that the new Australian colonies initially import the patterns of the British-Imperial class/caste system, but evolve into a more free-flowing society where people are judged on achievement, not lineage.

Linked to the novels' historico-fictional celebration of the evolution of egalitarianism in (white) Australian society is a form of history from below or revisionist class history. The various author's statements, which introduce a number of the novels, set out this revisionist class history project. The statements suggest the 'saga' celebrates economic and social progress. Timms is critical of the type of Australian history which is 'filled with heroic moments of the past' and which does not:

as a rule look under the crust of the past to see what is beneath ... supporting all that spectacle of colour and caste and achievement were men and women whose deeds were never sung, whose lives were lived in obscurity, whose humble breasts boasted no stars.²²

In his reworking of the history of British colonisation of Australia, Timms wants to 'expose' the 'rigid social castes of our British forebears' and the role which those 'below stairs' played in the growth and development of Australia. He wants to situate the 'wealth and opportunity' next to the 'cruelty and pain'.²³ Timms seeks to achieve this end by framing his novels in terms of 'big' economic and social events in (white) Australian history – gold rushes, the wool industry, land selection – but taking as his central characters everyman and woman – convicts, criminals, rogues, street urchins – rather than those rewarded with 'stars'.

This fictional history from below is part of the discourse of egalitarianism. The revisionist project of 'look[ing] under the crust of the past' has the effect of representing a naturally evolving egalitarian Australian society which is contrasted with the stasis of the British-

²¹ Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1983, p. 52.

²² Timms, *The Pathway of the Sun*, p. v.

²³ Timms, *The Pathway of the Sun*, pp. v–vi.

Imperial class/caste system. The novels draw on discourses such as the 1890s radical nationalist project and British and Australian academic revisionist social histories. For example, the trope of the increasingly wealthy Gubby family who retain their links with their working class origins provides a fictional mirroring of a radical nationalist myth of Australian society.²⁴ This in tandem with the 'faithful to life' feel,²⁵ created through the historical accuracy of the novels produces for the reader a powerful representation of Australian national life.

In constructing this 'below stairs' story of ordinary men and women the novels disavow another story – the dispossession and exclusion of Aboriginal people from the nation and the exclusion of non-white people from the immigration programme. Australian national identity is not represented in these novels as problematic. In fact the novels suggest a strong and unified Australian identity. Yet there is a subtle anxiety about the Australian nation; who is included, who is excluded. A national identity forged around careful exclusions, both literal and symbolic, is a national identity which will never be completely stable, never sure that it is truly white. These novels play out this anxiety about the certainty of the whiteness of blood which underpins otherwise celebratory images of the Australian 'type'. Written over the two decades of high overseas immigration to Australia, and intense assimilationist policy for both non-British migrants and particular groups of Aboriginal people (especially children), the novels are informed by these anxieties. The novels produce a story about the egalitarianism of the white Australian nation, but they also destabilize the category white Australian. This is an anxiety that comes from claiming the utmost need for purity – pure blood – and then not ever knowing if the standard has been achieved.

Plot

The Scarlet Frontier is the sixth volume in Timms' historical 'saga'. It concerns British colonization of southern Queensland in the 1850s and the resistance of the Aboriginal people of the area, the Kabi.²⁶ The central

²⁴ John Docker, *The Nervous Nineties: Australian Cultural Life in the 1890s*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p. xxi; White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 97; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 273.

²⁵ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 35.

²⁶ The Kabi nation is made up of a group of Murri clans in the 'catchment area bounded by the Burrum, Mary, Noosa, Maroochy and Mooloolah Rivers and all the land in between'. F. J Watson, *Vocabularies of Four Representative Tribes of South-East Queensland*,

characters are three beautiful sisters, Isabelle, Kitty and Molly, born of English parents into genteel poverty in Calcutta. The main male characters are the sons of convicts, Chris and Ross Talbot and an Aboriginal man, Monoboola (see figure 1).

All three sisters have been married or romantically involved but at the novel's start they are all single again: two of the sisters are widows and the third sister has recently ended an affair with the now dead no-hoper Chris Talbot. Kitty and Molly have been living in Australia for some time on a property in Queensland owned by Molly's husband Richard White. It was here that Kitty had her affair with Chris and that he and Molly's husband died. The narrative begins with the arrival of the third and last sister, Isabelle from London after her husband died and the decision of the three women to stay on and run the White's property. Unexpectedly Ross Talbot, brother of the late Chris, is also on his way to the White property to unravel the mystery of his brother's death. The romantic plot of the novel revolves around jealousy and misunderstanding amongst the three sisters. Chris had another lover in addition to Kitty and she does not know if it was her sister Molly or Lilla Salt, the Aboriginal housemaid. There is also a romantic triangle set up around Molly, Isabelle and Ross. Ross is the novel's hero and the romantic twists of the novel concern which sister is most sincerely in love with him and therefore best suited to marry him.

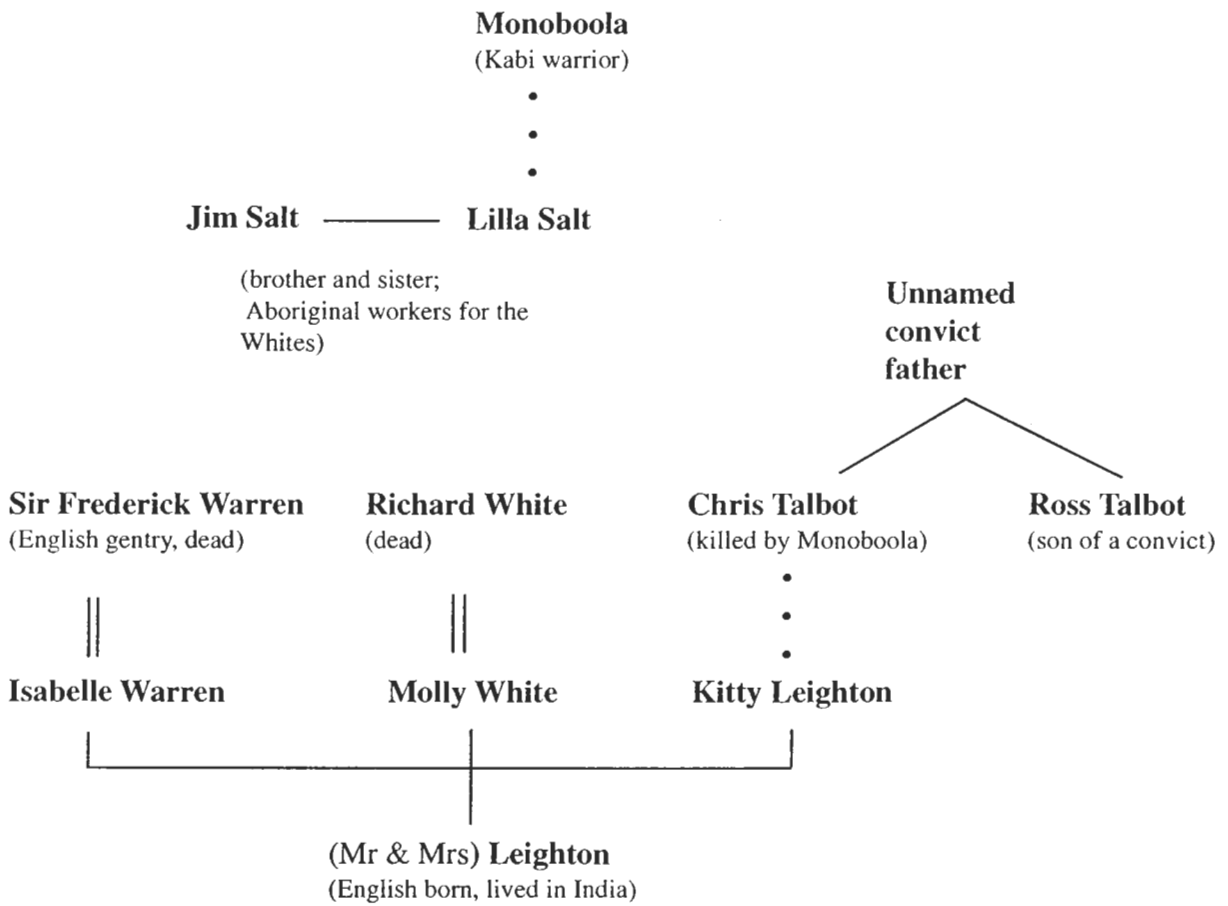
The love story is interwoven with a mystery adventure about the unexplained death of Chris. The discovery that he was speared by Monoboola, the Kabi leader, who is also Lilla's lover, sets off the sanctioned slaughter of the Aboriginal people which makes up the novel's climax. In revenge for his brother's death Ross goes out and kills as many Aboriginal people as he can find. This leads to a responding attack by the Aboriginal people on the White's homestead and so the station owners are 'legitimated' in their wholesale slaughter of the remaining Aboriginal people of the area, in a shoot-out scene reminiscent of a Hollywood western film. This quasi-historical narrative is driven by the imaginary presence of the Aboriginal people in the area. The Murri people's (historically documented²⁷) violent responses to the invasion of their land

Royal Geographic Society of Queensland, Brisbane, 1944, cited in Kay Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 263, fn. 5.

²⁷ See for example: Kidd, *The Way We Civilise*, pp. 5–6; Reynolds and Loos, 'Aboriginal Resistance in Queensland', pp. 214–217.

by the British colonisers give the text an historical back-drop upon which to play out the romance and the courage of the colonizers.

figure 1: The characters in *The Scarlet Frontier*



KEY
 ••• sexual relationship
 = (Western) marriage
 | child of

Blue blood: tr Sp. sangre azul claimed by certain families of Castile, as being uncontaminated by Moorish, Jewish, or other admixtures; prob. grounded on the blueness of the veins of people of fair complexion.
The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

In this novel blood is the trope which is deployed to tell the story of exclusion, assimilation and the Australian nation. Deborah Bird Rose's work on this idea is useful for understanding the manner in which blood is used in *The Scarlet Frontier*. She argues:

Flesh and blood are horizontal dimensions of relatedness in the cultural construction of kinship. Vertically blood has served to signify the transmission of social status. Nobility, in an aristocratic system, is in the blood, demonstrable through genealogies. Similarly, criminality was also defined as 'bad blood' and was seen to be transmitted through families within the lowest class. 'Bad blood' was an essential image in the founding of Australia as a penal colony.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries blood was given two powerful new loads of signification. One was its harnessing to the nation state and nationalism; the other was a re-orientation of bloodlines from the antiquity of the aristocrat to the future of the bourgeoisie.

The 'fetishization of British blood' made it possible to talk about racial and national purity. Marriage between culturally different groups came to be seen as a crime against the nation and the race. In relation to those forbidden to us, it seems we were all white.²⁸

Rose posits a theory about how one group of people's tainted blood became acceptable to the nation. She argues that though 'bad blood' was an 'essential image' of the early white colony,²⁹ in time the horizontal dimensions of relatedness – being the same 'flesh and blood' or family – were extended to convicts and those of the lowest class by the 'family' of the nation. Thus the vertical signification system of transmitting convict

²⁸ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Displacement and Remembrance', Unpublished Seminar paper, Cultural Practice and the Environment Seminar Series, Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, December 1991.

²⁹ See Reynolds, "'That hated stain'", pp. 19–31.

blood from generation to generation lost its power.³⁰ Today the notion of convict blood has all but disappeared as a mode of signification. In fact convict origin has come to stand for a sign of true belonging to the (white) Australian nation.³¹

Other groups' tainted blood has, however, not lost its signifying power. The marking of Aboriginal people as a different and inferior race because of their blood had not been erased when Timms wrote. As Rose argues, the fetishization of British blood means that Aboriginal people are neither kin – in horizontal dimensions of relatedness – nor is the negative signification of their non-British, non-white blood removed.

Rose's 'two new loads of signification' – nationalism and the focus on the bourgeois 'bloodline' – is a useful way of approaching the logic of *The Scarlet Frontier*. The anxieties apparent in the novel's focus on national purity and the problems cross-cultural and cross-class marriage brings to that notion of national purity. The novel, produced in the mid-twentieth-century, uses contemporary discourses of blood (which at this time were frequently applied to the question of Aboriginal assimilation into white culture) as an imaginative device to write about convict integration into Australian society. Or to argue this in reverse: the now safe story of convict and colonial assimilation is used to produce a displaced story about a present anxiety – the assimilation of Aboriginal people and other non-white, non-British people into the white Australian nation.

³⁰ See Russell Ward and Ken MacNab, 'The nature and nurture of the first generation of native-born Australians', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, 1961–1963, pp. 289–308. This article contains an extended argument on the 'extraordinary change for the better in the character' of the children of convicts.

³¹ Some time ago I received a flier at work advertising and providing an order form for a self published book *Fourth Fleet Families of Australia* (Post Office Box 1011, Dickson, ACT, 2602). It was the last in a series which started with the First Fleet. The series compiled and edited by C. J. Smee was advertised as 'Celebrating and Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the Arrival of the Fourth Fleet'. It was further advertised as 'handsomely bound ... gold blocked on face and spine'. Some people will obviously pay for a coffee table momento of their convict ancestry.

Caste (*kast*). 1555. [– *Sp.*
and *Pg.* *casta*, *subst. use*
(*sc. raza, raça race*) of *fem.*
of *casto pure, unmixed*
(*SEE CHASTE*.)]
The Shorter Oxford
English Dictionary

Using a familiar and common idea of its time – blood – *The Scarlet Frontier* rehashes a past social anxiety, that is, the convict ‘stain’, and asks whether a person can overcome the legacy of this inheritance. Ross Talbot, the novel’s hero, muses on his convict heritage:

Convict blood ... Time perhaps would wash away the birth-stain, as it had been called. But not in his time, and perhaps not for him while he lived. Or for Chris. They were the sons of a transported man. That the offence had been slight did not matter. His father had been transported. He shrugged as his sombre thoughts ran on. Both his father and mother were dead. That made no difference to the thoughts and reactions of others. He had according to the uncharitable, tainted blood.³²

Through the trope of ‘tainted blood’ the novel offers a critique of the British-Imperial class/caste system and a celebration of the more egalitarian Australian system, which readers are told has moved away from such ‘archaic’ values. The implication is that Imperial Britain (though no longer transporting convicts) is still caught up in an unfair class and caste stratified system. Isabelle, one of the sisters, says:

I know something of India having been born there, and something of England: but this tremendous country is utterly unknown to me. My first impression is of its vastness, my second of the free and friendly approach and mingling of the people here. My third is an impression of courage, firm purpose and the cheerful facing-up to the trials of living in these parts. I’m sure I shall profit in experience by my stay here.³³

Australia is compared with England and India – the imperial centre and a colony noted for its caste system. The suggestion is that (even without any evidence) Australia is superior to India and England. Australia, with its

³² Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 74.

³³ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 54.

'free ... mingling of ... people', lacks the caste and class system of the other two countries and so represents an improvement for the colonial trio. Since the three sisters and Ross occupy problematic caste or class positions, they especially benefit from or need an open society.

An anxiety which percolates through the novel concerns assimilation and the limits of immigration. Though Australia is represented as egalitarian and open, differences and limits still exist. The rhetorical question which is asked throughout the novel is whether Australians who are the children of convicts (with 'tainted blood') can overcome their origins and meld into white Australian society. Will Australians without convict heritage be gracious enough to welcome these people into their society? The Talbot brothers represent the two possible trajectories of 'tainted blood'. One succumbs to the taint of his heritage; the other overcomes it. The answer to the question of their inclusion in the nation is 'yes', if, like Ross, they work hard for the project of national economic and social expansion. It is their behaviour which makes them worthy of the nation.³⁴

The question about assimilation is posed in terms of the meanings and limits of British blood. This issue is represented through the characters who are British, but born overseas in India. The novel was written at the beginning of the long end of the white Australian policy when the increasing number of non-white immigrants coming to Australia was an unsettled and anxiety-inducing problem for many white Australians.³⁵

The three Leighton sisters were born in Calcutta. They are represented as 'mercurial' in temperament, with 'lively ... blood'.³⁶ The women are portrayed as astonishingly beautiful, but also wilful and a little unconventional. The representations of the colonial-English Leighton sisters figure the women's caste identity as unstable. This is in part produced through representations of the women transgressing gender

³⁴ There is an historiography which analyses the solid economic contribution and good nature of the currency lasses and lads. See Ward and MacNab 'The nature and nurture' for citations.

³⁵ The Colombo Plan and post-war settlement programmes for displaced persons were significantly altered white Australians' perceptions of the nation. Cf correspondence received by Gwen Meredith when she introduced a Polish immigrant into her 'Blue Hills' radio serial: 'I regret that you are again introducing the Polish-Jew "Andovitch" into "Blue Hills". Very few people indeed like your character Andovitch and more especially do they think that Jean deserves something better than a wretched European ... It's not too late to chose [sic] somebody like an Australian, or of British descent.' Correspondence from W. A. Gosling, Poochera to Gwen Meredith, 10 January 1950, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, NLA.

³⁶ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 8-9.

boundaries. For example, the three were taught to ride a horse 'astride' rather than side saddle and prefer the 'vulgar' habit of riding with their 'legs – h'm pardon, sir, [their] limbs – across a saddle'.³⁷ There is a tension between their uncertain colonial status – having 'lively blood' – and a celebration of their colonial status – not being from mainland Britain and the resulting unhampered approach to life (not riding side saddle and running a station in Australia) which is gendered. Nonetheless, as with the convict 'stain', their difference is registered as benefiting this 'tremendous country'. These immigrants are represented as willing to and capable of assimilating into 'white Australia'.

The novel provides a genealogy of the Leighton family, certifying their whiteness by tracing their English/British blood lines.³⁸ Given their Indian birthplace, such a certification is necessary to remove any doubts about their whiteness. British-India is the liminal case for citizenship rights in Australia in the mid-twentieth century.³⁹ The three women as Indian-born are imagined as slightly different – 'lively' – yet they are comfortingly similar to Australian-Britons – citizen subjects of the Empire.⁴⁰ The Leighton sisters represent an Other, whilst really being the same. *The Scarlet Frontier* overtly suggests that Australian-ness is a set of values, a way of life – being egalitarian – and so all people who embrace these values are welcome, but it is underpinned by a logic which suggests that colour still marks an incontrovertible difference.

The Scarlet Frontier can accommodate particular forms of difference – convict origin and a certain gendered otherness – but it does not openly begin to imagine a world where white Australians think about their difference in terms of non-white people. The imagined Australian nation which Timms enunciates over the eleven novels is peopled with morally upright folk of middling to low origin. Their good character and willingness to take on hard work is the mark of their Australian-ness.

³⁷ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 11.

³⁸ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 2–3 and 74.

³⁹ Up to 1945 white British subjects were accorded automatic citizenship rights in Australia. From the early 1920s the status of British-Indians had been a contentious issue, becoming at times a diplomatic row and part of a popular debate. See Yarwood, *Race Relations*, pp. 240–242. In the mid-1930s laws were changed and British-Indians could become naturalised and acquire most citizenship rights. See Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, p. 107.

⁴⁰ See W. K. Hancock's argument that many Australians imagined their place in the British Empire in the mid-twentieth century in terms of themselves as 'citizen subjects', compared with non-white members of the Empire (for example Indians) who were characterized as 'subject citizens'. W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, p. 51. See also, Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 93 for contemporary critical commentary.

There are unacknowledged, though obvious, limits to the parts of the world deemed suitable to provide citizens for the emerging Australian nation. Timms' imagined nation mimics a post-World War II Australia; increasing levels of immigration, with an emphasis on healthy Britons, certified white members of the Commonwealth, or wealthy English (men) if they are willing to work. The historical story of the nineteenth century moment of high British immigration to Australia, and the nation-building associated with that moment, are informed by the current migration program and nation-building exercise of the 1950s. The Talbot brothers, as sons of convicts, mark the limit of those who are born in the country who qualify as Australian. The Leighton sisters mark the limits of the nation in terms of those born outside. These bodies mark the extremes of who is to be included in the (white) Australian nation.

The 'lively ... blood' of the off-beat Leightons or the 'tainted blood' of the Talbot stock can be assimilated into the Australian 'type'. By the time *The Scarlet Frontier* was published the 'tainted blood' of the convict had already been translated into an imagined national trait of larrikin anti-authoritarian strength, which had, in part, produced the heroes of two world wars.⁴¹ British-Indians had challenged Australian bureaucratic definitions of themselves as 'aboriginal native' and earned an exemption which allowed them naturalization rights and Australian citizenship status.⁴² However non-white subjects of the Empire – from everywhere except India – who wanted to immigrate to Australia still had to prove their whiteness through certification; otherwise their being born in a non-white country marked them as coloured.⁴³ Even with a legislative exemption, the social meaning of being English, but born in India, in a novel written in the very early 1950s (when the white Australia policy was still a fact of Australian government policy) is contentious and is the limit of the colour issue in *The Scarlet Frontier*. Aboriginal people in this period also required certification to prove their citizenship and Australian-ness, but this novel excludes them from its imagined nation. I will now explore the manner of this exclusion in more detail.

⁴¹ Tom Griffiths, 'Past silences: Aborigines and convicts in our history-making', *Australian Cultural History*, No. 6, 1987, p. 27.

⁴² See Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, pp. 105–107.

⁴³ See Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, pp. 136. and 241; Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, pp. 95–109; Joseph Pugliese, 'Assimilation, unspeakable traces and the ontologies of nation', in Perera (ed.), *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions*, pp. 237–246.

v: Blood and frontier violence

*in populist lingo the frontier is
the place where wilderness
meets domestication, where the
savage meets civilisation,
where native meets conqueror.
In conventional thought, the
frontier moves, it passes, and
what is left behind is no longer
a frontier. The wilderness or
the savage gives way to a
domesticated and civilised way
of life.
Deborah Bird Rose⁴⁴*

Another meaning of blood deployed in *The Scarlet Frontier*, besides blood as genealogy, is blood as signifying violence. Blood represents the clash of Aboriginal and white peoples in a struggle for the land belonging to the Aboriginal people. This section sets out the different ways in which violence is represented in the novel: white violence against Aboriginal people is represented as a regrettable outcome or side effect of an ordered economic (colonial) expansionist project. Aboriginal violence against white people is represented as only partially understandable (a struggle to keep their land) but mostly it is represented as an incomprehensible savage, sexualised and gendered aggression of Aboriginal men against white women. This particular figuring of blood and violence operates to exclude Aboriginal people from the nation through a logic of genocidal elimination. The focus of the novel is on the complexities of integrating people with convict heritage and British people born overseas into an imagined Australian nation. The blood of the title *The Scarlet Frontier* is these colonisers' blood. The novel draws on nationalist dreams of nations forged through blood.⁴⁵ In creating the story of colonial warfare and white colonisers' defence of 'their' land, the bloody 'frontier' violence in *The Scarlet Frontier* serves to textually represent the elimination of the Aboriginal people, leaving the land and nation to white Australians.

The Scarlet Frontier reveals itself in the Bakhtinian sense as 'in contact with, or anticipation of, another's truth'.⁴⁶ The novel's particular

⁴⁴ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Australia Felix rules OK!', in Cowlshaw and Morris (eds), *Race Matters*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Nations: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 132.

⁴⁶ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, p. 44.

ideas about frontier⁴⁷ violence and Timms' provisional truth about the unfortunate necessity of white retaliation in the face of Aboriginal violence are brought into being against a barely spoken other truth, which is the theft of Aboriginal land. The powerful story of colonization as legitimate dominates the novel. There are particular historical reasons why this novel can be pulled into a unitary narrative of elimination and assimilation against the weak presence of other stories – in particular Aboriginal voices. It is the production of this unity which I will now explore.

The Scarlet Frontier constructs an almost uniformly unsympathetic representation of the losses of Aboriginal people as a result of the invasion of British colonisers. Given the geographic and chronological setting for the novel – the south of Queensland in the early 1850s – these harsh representations are unsurprising. The resistance of the Aboriginal people of this area is recorded in British and colonial records as particularly fierce.⁴⁸ Aboriginal people's retaliation for the murder of their people, the rape of Aboriginal women and the invasion of their country resulted in the deaths of many British colonists. The colonists' reprisals were cruel and broad, with revenge killings and 'frontier justice'.⁴⁹ This novel discursively reenacts and reinforces the colonizers' violence, representing it as necessary and comprehensible.

The Queensland Aboriginal people's defence of their land and community has been turned against them in this novel. Used in tandem with racist myths which persist to this day, of savagery and sexual danger, *The Scarlet Frontier* is structured in a way which makes the extermination, the murder and massacre of the Aboriginal people seem inevitable if the courageous, productive, progressive Australian nation is to come into being. The novel provides little space for a critique of the expulsion of the Aboriginal people from the text and from the future of the nation. There is a sustained narrative about Aboriginal violence towards white colonists and white violence against the Aboriginal occupants of the land, however overall the novel insists on a discursive hierarchy which privileges the

⁴⁷ Richard Slotkin's point about the temporal shift from frontiers as being at first a geographical but later an ideological reference is pertinent point here. By the time these novels were published the idea of a frontier in Australian history was an ideological representation. See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1992, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 9–18; Kidd, *The Way We Civilise*, pp. 5–6; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 42.

⁴⁹ Kidd, *The Way We Civilise*, pp. 8–11; Henry Reynolds and Dawn May, 'Queensland', in McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*, pp. 170–175; Eve Mumewa D. Fesl, *Conned!*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, pp. 69–70; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, pp. 26–33.

authorial voice of white progress and the need for dispossession. This privileges the national myth of the frontier as a dangerous place for white people.

The motif of Eliza Fraser is an example of the narrative of white danger used in the production of the national story of frontier courage.⁵⁰ A form of the Eliza Fraser story is first mentioned in the opening chapter of *The Scarlet Frontier* where Isabelle, in London, is reading a letter from Molly out loud to her husband. The passage begins with a reference to 'two white shepherds', who 'menaced by the blacks, mixed arsenic with flour and gave it to the natives'.⁵¹ This is counterpoised with the story of Eliza Fraser:

She also tells the frightful story of a Captain Fraser who, with his wife and crew, was wrecked on a place called Sandy Island, north of Moreton Bay. The savages killed the captain and many of the crew, ate them it is believed, outraged the woman and kept her for months until she was rescued from a state of the lowest and most horrible degradation.⁵²

This story is followed by another reference to the murder of the Aboriginal people of the area:

It seems the savages have murdered more than two hundred whites since settlement first began, and God knows how many blacks have been butchered. It must be a dangerous country.⁵³

The references to the death of Aboriginal people are references to anonymous deaths – 'dozens were poisoned', 'God knows how many blacks'⁵⁴ – which frame the personalised and individualised deaths of particular white men, and the danger to particular white women – here Captain and Mrs Fraser.

Later in the novel the new arrival, Isabelle, is told another story of atrocities against white women which builds on the Eliza Fraser story. This time the death of Mrs Shannon of Pine River is recounted. The reader is told of Mrs Shannon: 'lying there dead, her head terribly mutilated by a tomahawk, a spear thrust in to her groin, and her unborn child just about

⁵⁰ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 30 and 292. For contemporary commentary of this motif see Schaffer, *In the Wake of First Contact*.

⁵¹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 5.

⁵² Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 5.

⁵³ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁴ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 5 and 6.

to be born'.⁵⁵ This time the story of a white woman's suffering at the hands of Aboriginal people is not framed by references to reciprocal cruelty and murder by the white colonisers but by references to the sexual savagery of the Aboriginal people. The character Monoboola – the Kabi man who menaces the Leighton women's property – is introduced into the story:

one particular individual who is greatly feared, a Kabi man known as Monoboola, which also is the native name for the Mary River. Some shepherds' wives know the name to their sorrow. He has speared two white men, and ravished white women. He's a cunning devil ... and is held in fear and horror by all the white women of that locality.⁵⁶

Then follows the description of the murder of Mrs Shannon and further references to the savage nature of the Aboriginal people: 'Fiendish lust and cruelty ... So you see, you daren't trust a savage'.⁵⁷ The text builds, reference by reference, an image of a land where, in particular, white women are vulnerable to sexual attack, and murder happens for almost inexplicable reasons.⁵⁸ When Isabelle, the last sister to arrive in Australia, sees an Aboriginal person for the first time, the whole encounter is constructed as being about the possibility of danger – and I would argue a sexualised danger – represented by the Aboriginal man:

"I certainly don't like the look of that fellow ... That man staring at me gave me a – a horrible feeling. He seemed to be looking at me all the time. Let's ride away –".⁵⁹

In another section the housekeeper at the homestead says: "'I haven't forgotten the wicked way that Jim Salt used to look at Mrs White – just wicked, it was"'.⁶⁰ In these two examples, Aboriginal men are represented as cruel and sexually violent. The representation of Aboriginal male aggression towards white people is more detailed – the weapons used to kill, the placement and ferocity of the wounds – than the descriptions of white male violence towards Aboriginal people. There is no detail of the

⁵⁵ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ There are references in *The Scarlet Frontier* to Aboriginal people retaliating because their land has been taken and their way of life destroyed, but these are not sustained and are overwhelmed by the references to the inevitability and necessity of progress.

⁵⁹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 161.

⁶⁰ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 275.

painful death of the Aboriginal people by arsenic poisoning. There is no reciprocal narration which states that Aboriginal people would be fearful of and horrified by the (nameless) shepherds who poison them. There are no words of warning which suggest that Aboriginal people 'daren't trust a [white] savage'.

There is a dichotomy set up in the novel which presumes 'innocent' victims and less innocent, or guilty, ones. In dialogue with the stereotyped image of Aboriginal men's sexualised violence is a stereotype of white women. The novel represents their bodies as sites of purity. In the Eliza Fraser story, Eliza Fraser is situated as Mrs Fraser, wife of Captain Fraser, establishing her respectable position in the world. Similarly in the later example of violence at Pine River, the woman is again identified as married – 'Mrs Shannon of Pine River' – and further as a maternal figure. These representations establish the sanctity of the women's bodies. By representing the women as married, white and mothers the novel figures them as undeserving of violence or ill treatment.

By the time the novel's plot has moved on to the revelation of who killed Chris Talbot, the textual momentum for murdering the Aboriginal people is well and truly present. This momentum is established through the repeated and increasingly violent references to a particular gendered danger – white women at the hands of Aboriginal men. There is a second reference to Mrs Shannon's murder by Aboriginal people and a reiteration that the Aboriginal people are hoping to kill white women.⁶¹ In the final chapter where the homestead is attacked by the Kabi people and a shoot-out ensues, the two sisters who are in the house are chosen as the particular targets of Jim Salt and Monoboola to kill:

"Jim Salt also yelled out he wanted Mrs White for himself – there's a bloody nerve for you. And Monoboola wants Mrs Warren – yes; he's out there somewhere. But don't tell those two women—".⁶²

The overwhelming suggestion is that the Aboriginal men want to rape and kill white women and this is figured as justifying a violent white retaliation.

Alongside such extended descriptions of Aboriginal violence against white people, and white women in particular, there are snippets of

⁶¹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 294.

⁶² Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 304.

the voices which Timms' national story cannot fully acknowledge.⁶³ Produced in the margins of the story, in occasional asides, is a disquiet about Aboriginal dispossession. As I stated earlier there are the occasional references to the understandable resentment amongst Aboriginal people who are being moved off their land. This draws on discourses about the connections between the Aboriginal people and their land and a very limited acknowledgment of their right to be there. In the extract quoted earlier, where the Aboriginal man Monoboola is described, in between the references to him as 'greatly feared' and the list of his violent acts is a reference to the link between him and the land. His name it is stated is also the local Aboriginal name for what the colonizers call the Mary River. The novel weakly acknowledges – momentarily – the prior claim of the Aboriginal people to the land.

At its end the novel produces its didactic imperative through the authorial suggestion that the violences perpetrated by the different groups on one another are of a different order. The violence of the Aboriginal people is characterized as extreme and savage – accompanied by gruesome and graphic detail. It is also perpetrated against a series of named, white characters, mostly women. By contrast white violence against Aboriginal people is represented, first, in a much more sanitized form – no names, no explicit language or detail. Second, it is figured as part of an organised and naturalised process of colonial expansion. This metaphor of white colonization as progress is mobilized to justify and make sense of white brutality. The representations of frontier violence produce a legitimating story of white occupation. Third, white violence is represented as an understandable retribution for Aboriginal violence. White violence is only a response. The novel in a shadowy way addresses the question of who owns the land, but the novel's structure makes the question academic, as by the end only one group is left to occupy the country, only one group is left to speak.

Representing patterns of (dis)possession

White death is represented in this novel as the 'days of blood'. I want now to examine how white people are represented as sutured into this land for

⁶³ Cf Phillip McClaren's novel *Sweet Water – Stolen Land* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993) which is an Aboriginal writer's response to white stories of Aboriginal savagery. McClaren's novel reverses the situation as it is presented in Timms' narrative (and countless others). His story of a violent missionary murderer aligns more closely with historical circumstances and challenges white people with a history of their own savagery.

which they have spilt their blood. The 'scarlet frontier' or the 'days of blood' represent a pattern of violence in a particular historical moment and geographic space. Early in the novel Molly explains to her newly arrived sister, Isabelle:

"Some of the richest land in Australia is in these parts and up on the Downs ... this semi-tropical part of Australia has a magnificent future ... However, it can still be a dangerous frontier, and we all know it. But we also know the days of blood will pass."⁶⁴

The 'days of blood' are seen as a phase which will pass. A white character who comes from an area which has been colonized for longer reveals the pattern of Aboriginal dispossession to the reader:

"There are not many natives there now in the wild state. In earlier days there were outrages, but the blackfellow has had to move on – as a tribe, that is – from the settled runs. Quite a number have remained to become semi-civilized and useful stockmen here and there. Some of them are marvellous horsemen, and they have no equal at finding lost stock that has strayed. But the blackfellow is now no trouble in the New England."⁶⁵

Dispossession is represented as starting with British arrival into a 'wild' place amongst a 'wild' people; this is followed by 'outrages', then a moving on of the Aboriginal people who refuse to become 'useful' and the utilisation of the 'semi civilized' Aboriginal people as (mostly unpaid) labourers on the 'settled runs' and so finally the end of 'trouble'. There is a space between the pre-British colonization days and the completed British colonization of the land which is coded as the 'days of blood'. This does not stand for the death of the Aboriginal people but for the death of the white 'pioneers' in their struggle to possess the land.

The shift in land ownership from Aboriginal to white possession is produced through representations of 'taming' the land, making it economically productive, envisioning a quasi-spiritual connection between white people and the land, and constructing a genealogy of ancestors. At one point in the novel one of the sisters, Molly, imagines the country in one hundred years time:

⁶⁴ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 33.

⁶⁵ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 145–146.

"No doubt much of it will be as it is, for it would take countless millions of people to break it up and use it in small pieces. But, the black man will be gone then and those steam railways ..."⁶⁶

Molly's vision includes an economic story which consists of the very slow breaking up of the land for (white) people to use in 'small pieces'. She also mentions the arrival of steam trains, which will link the area with industrial centres and cities. Finally she states that the 'black man will be gone'; this is part of the economic imperative of white colonization. Also fuelling her vision is the establishment of links between the newly arrived colonisers and the land they have taken. Molly describes her arrival in Aboriginal land like this:

I felt the land welcomed me. I knew as the sun went down that night, and we stood with the drays and wagons round us, there were tears in my eyes, for although we stood right in the great heart of the bush I felt that I had come home.⁶⁷

The land of the Aboriginal people is effortlessly transformed to become white immigrants' 'home' through a signification of their immediate affinity with the land. This representation of Aboriginal alienation from their land contrasts with the other colonial space represented in the novel – India. This other British colony is subtly represented as never being 'home' – the Leighton sisters all leave this country – for white colonizers.

The violent struggle for the land and the dispossession of Aboriginal people is displaced and replaced with the construction of a white genealogy and heritage which links white colonizers to this newly acquired land. White people are assimilated. The novel is peppered with references to the 'pioneering' efforts of the British colonisers:

Patrick Leslie, who was the first squatter on the Downs and was followed by Mr Hodgson; John Campbell; the Gore brothers; Elliot, Thane, Roland and others who settled like the Gore brothers on the lower Condamine; William Turner of Helidon; Stuart Russell of Cecil Plains, where James Taylor now is; Denis, who squatted for Coxen and Scougall and founded Jondaryan, Myall Creek and Jimbour – where the lost explorer, Leichardt, once stayed.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 159.

⁶⁷ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 6–7.

The passage continues, ending: 'in time you will see how men and women are conquering this hitherto unknown, untouched and age-old land.'⁶⁹ I have quoted this passage at length to give a sense of its lengthy detail. It is not the only one of its kind.⁷⁰ Further on in the novel the reader is given another list of the men who pioneered the way for the 'men who had followed with their flocks'.⁷¹ The litany begins with James Cook who 'sailed up the east coast'.⁷² It repeats some of the names quoted above – the Gore brothers, Hodgson and Elliot – and adds others. It operates for me like an incantation of the Christian saints names or the biblical genealogy provided in the Book of Numbers, constructing a sense of place and belonging. The white reader is invited to put themselves and their family at the end of the long list of this 'new civilization'.⁷³ Other readers – in particular Aboriginal readers – have no place in the story, they are erased from the land which is represented as 'untouched' and 'unknown'.

This novel operates as a clear example of the white colonisers appropriation of the land of the Aboriginal people, both literally, and figuratively through the construction of stories that eliminate Aboriginal people and then replace them with a list of new arrivals, whose economic and spiritual links to the land are firmly established through colonial discourses of economic growth and a natural affinity to new places. The violence of the process of colonization is not entirely erased – inserted into the stories of pioneering progress are coded references to white violence. The story of white colonization quoted in full above includes a reference to 'Myall Creek', the site of one of the most infamous massacres in white Australian history. Timms cannot write the pioneering story without writing in white violence.

The technique of listing names to create a lineage of white occupation of the land works in tandem with the trope of the new native. Jane Tompkins and others have written about this technique in terms of the fictional works of white Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Tompkins argues that in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, Indigenous people die within the length of the text to

⁶⁹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 37

⁷⁰ These genealogies or lists of economic achievements riddle the novels of the series. Characters in the novels regularly swap long lists of information about the history of the British colonies for the education of the reader.

⁷¹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 93.

⁷² Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 92.

⁷³ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 93.

be replaced with a 'white American couple'.⁷⁴ This is precisely the structure of *The Scarlet Frontier*. Specific to the historical conditions of the novel's production, the white couple of this text are a white Australian-born man and a white immigrant woman. The romance plot of the novel centres on the characters of Isabelle Warren and Ross Talbot. The novel ends with the massacre of the Aboriginal people of the area and then Isabelle Warren pledging that without Ross Talbot her heart would die. These two are represented as the future of Australia; the Aboriginal people as an era past. The cover illustration of the 1954 hardback edition foregrounds a white couple in front of a burnt house, prefiguring the novel's climax (see figure 2). The scene is otherwise empty of people, signifying the 'new start' to be made by the white people after the elimination of Aboriginal people.

Ross Talbot is introduced to the reader as 'an Australian':

An Australian? Momentarily it astonished her to hear a man say he was an Australian. The style was new to her ... It seemed odd and slightly absurd. But it had the instant and salutary effect of correcting the thought that Australia held only immigrants.⁷⁵

The interrogative of the early part of the passage ('An Australian?') is quickly replaced with a statement ('he was an Australian') which confirms the status of people born in the land of British parents as Australian.⁷⁶ There is a lightning change which sees a shift from the absurdity of there being someone who was an Australian (confirming the idea of *terra nullius*) to the comforting idea of the beneficial and healthy effects – 'salutary' – of the presence of white Australians (and a confirmation of the sovereignty of the British claim to the land as one which will promote order and well-being).

Isabelle Warren, as Ross Talbot's complement, is firmly placed as the immigrant entranced by and later committed to the new land she has come to. She is the perfect assimilable immigrant. Isabelle at one point sets out the advantages of the new colony for immigrants – size, no class

⁷⁴ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. 111.

⁷⁵ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 54

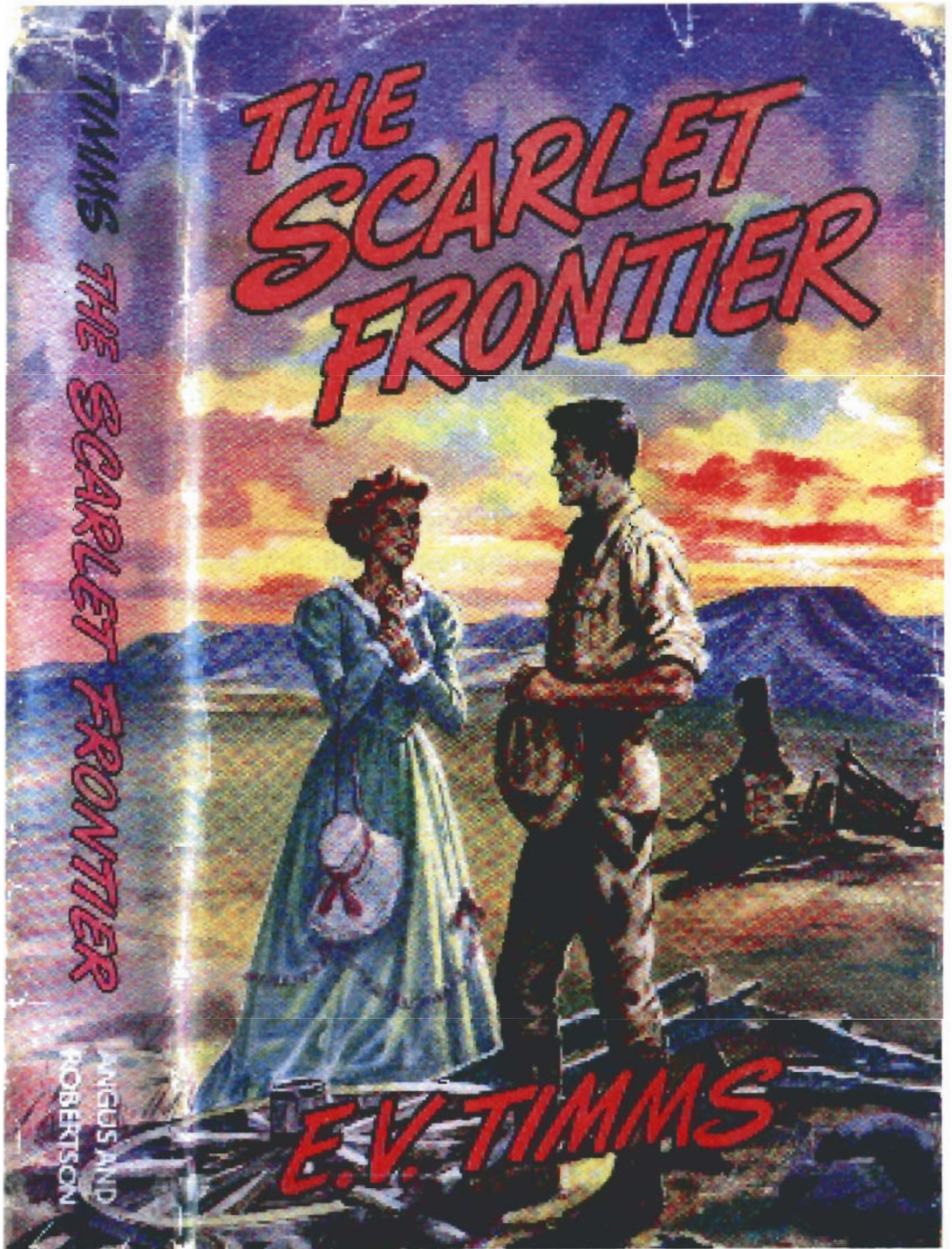
⁷⁶ The term 'Australia' to refer to the continent was used by the British colonizers from the very early nineteenth century. The term 'Australians' referred to Aboriginal people until the close of the eighteenth century. The idea that to be Australian constituted a distinct (national) identity became popular in the period after the goldrushes of the 1850s. J. Holland Rose et al. (eds), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, Vol. 7, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1933, pp. 86 and 270–271. See also Hancock, *Australia*, pp. 44–48.

system, and a place to display courage.⁷⁷ To be able to see these attributes of the land (which have entered white mythology as quintessential to the Australian identity) as advantages and not drawbacks is to have transcended the divide between being a Briton living in a colony and an Australian. This is the opposition which is mobilized in most of the 'Australian saga'. It is not the divide which sees white people in Australia displace (through murder, massacre and neglect) Aboriginal people, but the divide between those white people who identify totally with Australia as their 'native' land and those who do not.

The novel in this way operates as a conduct book – how to be a good Australian and assimilate – in a time of high immigration to Australia. The primacy of the division loyal to Britain or elsewhere/loyal to Australia operates to repress the issue of the illegitimacy of these loyal (white) Australians in their claim to the land. In *The Scarlet Frontier* reference to Aboriginal blood is a reference to the frontier violence and the spilling of Aboriginal and white blood in a struggle for the land. The common colonialist trope of measuring blood as a signifier of belonging is not applied to Aboriginal people in this novel, rather the anxious measuring of blood is, first, about the 'new Australians' spilt blood in their struggle for the land and, second, about the issue of their convict heritage or convict blood.

⁷⁷ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 54.

figure 2: front cover *the scarlet frontier*



E. V. Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1954

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Race (*reɪs*), sb. 2 1500 [Fr. *race* – It. *razza*; of unknown origin.] 6. Without article: *a*. Denoting the stock, family, class etc. to which a person, animal or plant belongs, chiefly in phr. of (noble, etc) *r.* 1559. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Throughout *The Scarlet Frontier* Aboriginal people are represented as savage in opposition to a civilized set of white behaviours. They are figured as violent and cannibals.⁷⁸ The differences between the white and Aboriginal people are characterized by crude binaries, for example, wearing clothes/not wearing clothes. When Lilla and Jim Salt, the Aboriginal house-servants, leave the homestead for good, their departure is marked by the removal of their clothes.⁷⁹ In particular Lilla's naked dash from the homestead back to the bush and her people is cause for comment. The novel represents Aboriginal people as unable to overcome their primitive urges, which it is implied reside in their blood. Henry Reynolds discusses the trope of Aboriginal people reverting to savage ways in *Frontier*:

It was a powerful image, combining the anxiety and hatred of frontier warfare, fear that the blacks would ultimately have their revenge, and the conviction that savages were by nature violent and unpredictable. It continued to haunt colonial society long after the fighting ended and among people who had never experienced it.⁸⁰

Until recently popular white memories of this period have mostly consisted of historical and anecdotal stories of the dangers of the frontier for the colonists. Again Reynolds gives a good example. He analyses the telling and retelling of the rural myth of the white pastoralist who bends to drink from a stream and sees reflected in the still water his 'faithful'

⁷⁸ For example in a reference to early Brisbane: 'Yet this was *the* town of this far part of New South Wales, the town now of free men, but where only a few years before blood streamed from the backs of men and blacks had roasted and eaten a woman'. Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 40. These types of references continue today. See the book, *The Truth*, published in 1997 by Pauline Hanson on the historical 'fact' of Indigenous cannibalism.

⁷⁹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 222 and 236.

⁸⁰ Reynolds, *Frontier*, p. 75.

Aboriginal companion about to kill him.⁸¹ *The Scarlet Frontier* overwhelmingly produces a narrative which suggests that Aboriginal people act in inexplicably violent ways. For example one of the Leighton sisters explains to the new arrival: 'They can be devils, even those who have received the greatest kindness'.⁸² Later in the novel the Aboriginal workers on the sisters' property are described: 'Jim and Lilla hate us whites, and their instincts and natural desires turn to savage rather than to our ways'.⁸³ Lilla and Jim are represented as never completely committed to the project of white economic expansion (life on the station). By the novel's end they have revealed their 'true' selves and are duly punished – both are dead.

The novel produces anxieties about race through its use of the motif of blood. The narrative regularly refers to 'white blood' and 'black blood'.⁸⁴ At one point the mixture of blood which marks Jim Salt, that is black and white blood, is said to be revealed in his 'curiously light almost womanish voice'.⁸⁵ Momentarily the anxiety about the half-caste characters trustworthiness reveals itself in anxieties about homosexuality. Jim Salt's 'mixed blood' impugns his sexuality and masculinity. The suggestion is that he is excluded from both Aboriginal and white (heterosexual) societies. Similarly, one way of reading the representation of Lilla's extremely violent murder by her Aboriginal lover, Monoboola, is as a representation of the savagery of Aboriginal people. It can also be read in terms of white understandings of the exclusion of Aboriginal people of mixed heritage from Aboriginal societies.⁸⁶

In *The Scarlet Frontier* the taint of convict blood and colonial blood can be overcome through hard work and honest living. Ross, 'straight as a – gun barrel',⁸⁷ marries Isabelle Warren; his brother, Chris, the immoral adulterer, who has not overcome the taint, dies.⁸⁸ In contrast, the taint of 'black blood' cannot be overcome. Within the logic of the text 'black blood' overwhelms Aboriginal people and they are inevitably drawn back to

⁸¹ Reynolds, *Frontier*, pp. 77–78.

⁸² Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 31.

⁸³ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 222. Further references can be found on pp. 225 and 233.

⁸⁴ See for example Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, pp. 90 and 254.

⁸⁵ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 94. See also the character of John Whitney in *Shining Harvest* who is also characterised as having a high womanish voice, a sign of his evilness and madness.

⁸⁶ Again see Beckett's argument that white people transfer their rejection of Aboriginal people of mixed heritage on to Aboriginal communities. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 198.

⁸⁷ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 59.

⁸⁸ There is a suggestion that Chris Talbot had a sexual relationship with Lilla Salt.

savagery. At the novel's end, the British-born Isabelle will marry Ross in a happy resolution. The Aboriginal workers of mixed heritage workers, Lilla and Jim Salt, are dead. The logic is that the taint of convict and colonial blood can be overcome and its presence in the next generation of Australian-born colonizers strengthens the stock, whereas the taint of 'black blood' is never overcome for the primitive urges are always there, leaving the possibility of betrayal of the white Australian nation.⁸⁹ In *The Scarlet Frontier* the characters represented as having both Aboriginal and white heritage (Jim Salt and Lilla Salt) are still seen as firmly attached to the Aboriginal group. The logic of this text in terms of how the Aboriginal people are imagined can only be described as extermination. The in-between group in *The Scarlet Frontier* are the children of convicts and immigrants from the empire and it is their plight of being caught in-between that is the subject of this novel.

Unlike the other novels I analyse, the trope of inter-racial marriage or assimilation of Aboriginal people into the white nation is not an issue in this text.⁹⁰ The only blood relations between Aboriginal and white people in *The Scarlet Frontier* are the 'days of blood' – signifying the violent clashes between the Aboriginal people and white people and the unsafe frontier upon which white blood is spilled.⁹¹ Assimilation, the white nation and inter-marriage are represented in terms of class, caste and overseas immigration.

This chapter argues that the trope of blood is an important tool which is mobilised in *The Scarlet Frontier* to make two distinct arguments about who should be and who should not be included in the Australian nation. The metaphor of blood is used to conceptualise and then reconceptualize the idea of Australian-ness and the Australian nation. The

⁸⁹ Cf Ward and MacNab who argue in part that the good character of children of convicts was about the hard work of civilizing 'a virgin wilderness'. Such an argument works to erase the prior occupation of Aboriginal people and hides the fact that the idea of the evolution of an Australian national character was part of the British colonizing project. MacNab and Ward, 'The nature and nurture', p. 292.

⁹⁰ Ten years later in *The Big Country*, the last novel Timms wrote, he reimagines the relations between Aboriginal and white people in terms of assimilation. This last novel has an explicitly pro-assimilation narrative of inter-racial marriage. It begins with a statement by the publisher which says Timms 'was consumed with an urge to write of the plight of the half-caste aboriginal.' [p. 5] In this novel a woman, called Jenny Courage represented as half-caste marries a white man, a drover who is represented as a 'true product of the Australian bush.' [p. 244] What has happened is that Timms has reimagined the middle group not as the children of convicts but as Aboriginal people of mixed heritage. He now sees this group as separate from the Aboriginal people and aligns them with the white group. Having imaginatively placed the group he deems half-caste with the white group, he represents the integration or assimilation of the former group into the latter, in the same way he earlier imagined convict children being integrated into the white Australian nation.

⁹¹ Timms, *The Scarlet Frontier*, p. 33.

meanings of blood shift depending on the particular ways in which the nation is being imagined. For example, in one context blood is a signifier of the violence associated with Aboriginal and white struggles for the land, and with the associated sexualised violence of Aboriginal men. Blood is also a signifier of caste. Here meaning shifts from convict and non-convict to English-born and Indian-born (colonial). Blood is also used with a raced meaning which refers to Aboriginal people and white people and their unreconcilable 'black blood' and 'white blood'. The slipping and shifting of the trope of blood illuminates an anxiety in this novel about what Australian-ness is and who is included in or excluded from the category. The period of the 1950s and 1960s was a significant moment in which the meaning of 'white Australia' was being actively contested and reconstituted in terms of white people's relationship with Aboriginal people and non-British immigrants. The trope of blood is deployed in *The Scarlet Frontier* to reinforce a conservative notion of being Australian, which continues to exclude Aboriginal people and many non-white immigrants from the nation.

Making families white:
melodrama, desire and colour in Gwen Meredith's
Beyond Blue Hills: the Ternna-Boolla Story

i: introduction

In Neville's treatise, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, there is a single reference to an unmarried white mother who brings her child, fathered by an Aboriginal man, to Neville asking what she is to do with the child.¹ 'What shall I do with this?' she asks him. The woman is asking: what shall I do with a child whose skin is darker than mine? Neville can only offer an answer for thinking about inter-racial sex and assimilation in terms of Aboriginal women and white men – and then it is a partial answer and takes place over generations. In the next four chapters I analyse novels that grapple with white Australians' fears and anxieties about assimilation. In this period past actions are represented as having created a 'problem' (the child the white woman brings to Neville); assimilation, both sociocultural and biological-genetic offers an answer which takes generations; these novels provide fictional balms for the stage in-between, the present. In this chapter I analyse the novel from my selection that provides the most comprehensive solution to the anxieties of the day.

In this chapter I analyse discourses of assimilation in terms of families, children and notions of colour through a reading of Gwen Meredith's novel *Beyond Blue Hills: the Ternna-Boolla Story*. I argue that Meredith's novel is propelled by the same fear which underpins the question 'What shall I do with this?' This fear is located in Meredith's novel in two different and parallel stories. The story of the Roberts family has a trajectory which points back to the past, and includes a white mother

¹ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 44.

who asks the question, 'What shall I do with this?', of her Aboriginal step-son. The other story, projected into the future, concerns the Howard family, where one daughter is to marry that Aboriginal step-son, and the textual hope is that the question, 'What shall I do with this?', need never be framed because their children will be fair-skinned.

The maternal – as both presence and absence – orders *Beyond Blue Hills*. As I showed in chapter 2 the figure of the Aboriginal woman was a prominent motif in government assimilation stories. In particular I suggested representations of the 'original' Aboriginal woman as potential mother of children fathered by white men were ambivalent. This chapter focuses on the representation of mothers, children and the idea of colour in white domestic spaces. I argue that in *Beyond Blue Hills* the figure of the Aboriginal mother, who is marked as black, is represented as occupying a cordoned-off historical space of the past. In a moment of excess, however, she emerges into the present of the novel. White mothers are not represented in the novel as occupying the past. (Historically white women did not follow white men into the outback.) White women occupy the present of the novel. But most importantly they occupy the future space of the novel. The white space of the past, represented by Josh Roberts' early years in the outback is cordoned-off because it is saturated with forbidden colour – Aboriginality – resulting from Josh Roberts sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman. The white domestic space of the future is also carefully sealed because it is to be filled only with one (no) colour – whiteness. The past will not repeat itself.

Beyond Blue Hills, as I said, grapples with two particular anxieties about assimilation for 'white Australia'. One is a problem of the future – the potential for colour to appear in children of mixed heritage. On this count Meredith, drawing on the quasi-scientific Australian anthropological discourse, authoritatively imagines the disappearance of colour. The novel's other problem, one which is represented as in the past, is the Aboriginal mother as a site of Aboriginal resistance to the specific assimilation policy of removing children from natal families and communities. The Aboriginal mother is dealt with by refiguring the past and by producing for the reader a story of an Aboriginal mother's compliance with the removal of her children and a 'passing away' (death) of these non-assimilable or unassimilated Aboriginal mothers. The novel turns the reality of Aboriginal resistance to and contestation of removal policies into a fictional willingness to give up children for the sake of a

better life.² White concerns about the unjust nature of aspects of assimilation are assuaged in the novel. The novel participates in the production of white assimilation stories which, through a mixture of romance, desire, science and racism, operate to 'absorb' the black into the white.

The chapter is organised in three main sections. The first concerns plot and genre. Outlining some of the forms of melodrama – maternal melodrama, race melodrama – I analyse the ways in which this narrative form simultaneously limits and enables this novel's assimilation story. The next section focuses on the moments where the novel figures inter-racial families or domestic spaces in the past. The scenes I focus on in this section concern the revelation (to the reader and to some of the novel's characters) of Josh Roberts' past sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman and the knowledge that his eldest son is her child. Using these scenes I concentrate on the novel's representation of the Aboriginal woman in a white domestic space. I argue that her presence, as lover and mother, is figured in a triangular relationship between white men, Aboriginal women and white women, predicated on desire and hatred. In the logic of this novel past inter-racial sexual relations are represented as a problem. They are figured as creating 'the Aboriginal problem', that is, children of Aboriginal and white heritage, which assimilation has been set to redress.

The final section of the chapter focuses on the ways *Beyond Blue Hills* figures inter-racial families in the future. Here inter-racial sexual relations become represented as the solution to 'the Aboriginal problem'. However in articulating assimilation, figured as inter-racial sex the novel mobilises particular presumptions about colour, Aboriginality and cultural worth. In articulating a biological-genetic understanding of assimilation as a solution, the obliteration of Aboriginal cultures, and in particular the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and cultures, is still proffered as a requirement. The contradictory but powerful message is that inter-racial families work best when they are white.

² See Beckett's point about the representation in white discourses of assimilation of children of mixed heritage being rejected by their birth mothers and communities. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 198.

The persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms.
Thomas Elsaesser³

Author

Gwen Meredith (1907–) was the author of the long running Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) radio serial *Blue Hills*. This serial ran from the period of World War II (when it was known as 'The Lawsons') until the early 1970s, when Meredith retired from the ABC.⁴ There was a steady demand for book versions of the radio serial and *Beyond Blue Hills* is the third 'Blue Hills' novel published.⁵ Meredith was a scrupulous researcher for her series and conducted a series of field trips when investigating a new story line. She corresponded with government departments, charity and philanthropic organizations, tourist commissions and the public to get the facts and atmosphere of her serial and novels right.⁶ Meredith considered that offering useful advice was an important part of her role at the ABC. The origin of 'Blue Hills' in the ABC Country Hour meant that there was an emphasis on issues relevant to the bush. 'Blue Hills' was often referred to, both positively and pejoratively, as 'propaganda'.⁷ Over time it 'promoted' rust resistant wheat varieties, Australian participation in the Korean war, Alcoholics Anonymous, participation in the census, cruelty-free cattle de-horning and the end of

³ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury: observations on the family melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, BFI Publishing, London, 1987, p. 47.

⁴ Michelle Arrow, 'Good entertainment and good family life: listener readings and responses to Gwen Meredith's *The Lawsons* and *Blue Hills*', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 58, 1998, p. 39.

⁵ Other 'Blue Hills' novels by Meredith include: *The Lawsons*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948; *Blue Hills*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1950; *Blue Hills in the Sun*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961; *Into the Sun*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965.

⁶ For example after an outback listener to the serial wrote and told Meredith that visitors to a station would have no need to sound their horn to signal arrival this sound effect was dropped. Correspondence from Wilford A. Pegler Jr, 'Bodalla', Onilpie to Gwen Meredith, 30 June 1952, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, NLA. See also Arrow, 'Good entertainment', p. 44.

⁷ Arrow, 'Good entertainment', p. 43.

'colour prejudice'.⁸ It also specifically ignored issues. For example, Meredith took advice not to mention the 'working hours question'.

Plot

Beyond Blue Hills is a melodrama. It is the story of the love between Sally Howard, a white woman, and Anderson Roberts, an Aboriginal man, the son of a white man and an Aboriginal woman. The narrative of *Beyond Blue Hills* is constructed as a simple tale of two people who fall in love and overcome all obstacles in the path of their happiness. The major hurdle which the novel has set up for the characters in their quest for happiness is 'colour prejudice'.

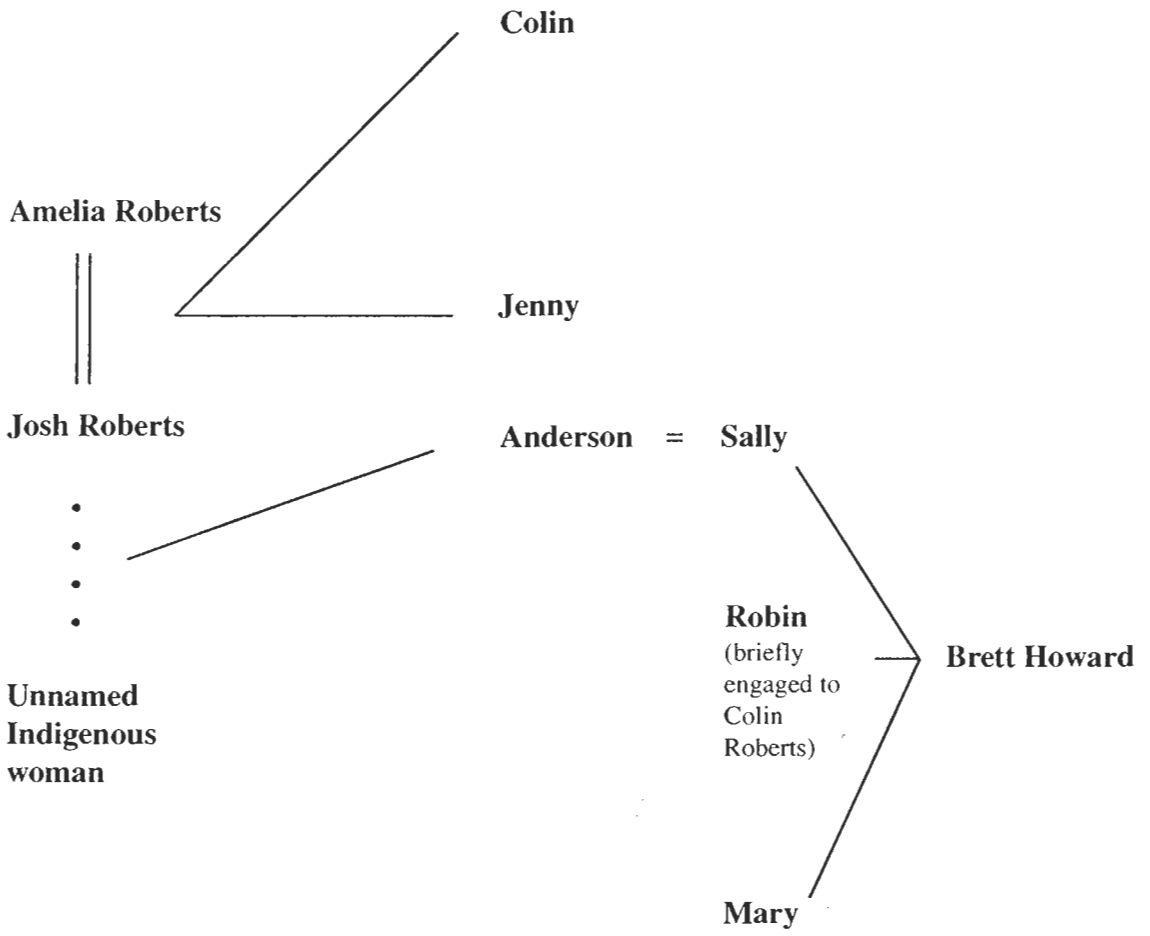
The story concerns two families on neighbouring properties living in 'corner country'.⁹ There is the Howard family – Brett Howard, a widower, and his three daughters – Sally, Robin and Mary; and the Roberts family – husband and wife Josh and Amelia, the wife's step-son Anderson and two more children Colin and Jenny (see figure 3). Josh Roberts had lived with an Aboriginal woman when he first moved to the lonely outback station of Nahweenah many years ago. The novel suggests that Josh's (unnamed) partner had loved him, but as it is explained, loved her son Anderson even more and so had departed leaving Anderson to be raised by his white father as a white child.¹⁰ Josh Roberts then marries Amelia with whom he has two more children. When Sally Howard falls in love with Anderson Roberts her

⁸ Various, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 3, Folder 6, Box 5, Folder 1, NLA.

⁹ Meredith was meticulous in researching the specific geographical, agricultural and social settings for her serial and books, but she also deliberately did not name an exact location. The stations of *Beyond Blue Hills* are located somewhere 'to the north of Broken Hill or in south-western Queensland'. Correspondence John Douglass, Director of Rural Broadcasts, ABC to Gwen Meredith, July 1 1952, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 3, Folder 6, NLA.

¹⁰ The incidence of Aboriginal children remaining to be brought up by their white fathers, though not unheard of, was not common. State legislation designed to control Aboriginal people's lives often included a clause which stated that white men could be made to pay for the support of their children of mixed heritage. See for example the *Aborigines Act, 1911* (SA), Section 36. See also Patricia Grimshaw et al. *Creating a Nation: 1788–1990*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, 1994, p. 143; Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 198. Given the low incidence it is a surprisingly common fantasy in assimilation fiction. See for example: Donald Stuart *Yarialie*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1962; Campion, *Come Again*, (in this novel a child of mixed heritage is raised by her grandfather); Cusack, *Black Lightning*.

figure 3: The characters in *Beyond Blue Hills*



KEY

- sexual relationship
- = (Western) marriage
- | child of

father forbids the match.¹¹ The reason, initially not revealed to Sally (or the reader) is his knowledge that Anderson is a 'quarter caste'.¹² The only people who know this are Anderson himself, Josh Roberts and Brett Howard.

Everyone likes Anderson Roberts, who is portrayed in the novel as the most noble, honest, hard working, intelligent, handsome, white-looking character in the book. But everyone also knows the difficulties of integration – the prejudice and racism that will be directed at the inter-racial couple. These fears are borne out in the plot. After the revelation of the secret of Anderson's heritage the community polarises into prejudiced and supportive. The real fears which imbue the novel are twofold. One fear is projected backwards in time – it is the spectre of the Aboriginal woman who a white man desired – Anderson's mother. The other fear which is projected into the future is about the possibility that the white-looking couple will produce a child whose skin is darker than theirs.¹³ The two moments of greatest tension in the novel concern the revelation to the Roberts family of Anderson's mother as an Aboriginal woman and the scenes where Josh Roberts and Sally Howard go to Sydney University Anthropology Department to have it confirmed as a biological impossibility that Anderson's and Sally's children's skin might be darker than their own.¹⁴

From the point in the novel where the identity of Anderson's mother is revealed the characters are set up to variously discuss the issue and demonstrate the different positions that can be taken up in debates about race, inter-racial sex, and white-Aboriginal relations, all referred to as assimilation. Anderson's step-mother, Amelia Roberts, and Sally Howard's younger sister, recently engaged to Anderson's half-brother, take up extreme positions ending their marital or potential marital

¹¹ Similarly, the incidence of a white woman marrying an Aboriginal man historically has been quite low. See for example: Mary Ann Jebb and Anna Haebich 'Across the great divide: gender relations on Australian frontiers', in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, Harcourt Brace, Marrickville, NSW, 1994, p. 34; Henry Reynolds, *With the White People: The Crucial Role of Aborigines in the Exploration and Development of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1990, pp. 114–116; Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, pp. 44.

¹² Meredith in research notes for the radio serial version of this story refers to Anderson Roberts as a 'half-caste', Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 6. In the novel Meredith refers to Anderson as a 'quarter caste'. Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 125, 155 and 159.

¹³ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 154.

¹⁴ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 224–230. A. P. Elkin, who was professor of Anthropology at Sydney University from 1933 to 1956 was involved in public debates around assimilation. In fact he took part in a number of ABC radio broadcasts on the topic. He would have been a well known authority on this issue. See Tigger Wise, *The Self Made Anthropologist: A Life of A. P. Elkin*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985. Thanks to Tikka Wilson for pointing this out to me.

relations with Anderson's father and brother when faced with the knowledge that Anderson's mother was an Aboriginal woman.¹⁵ Sally Howard's father is portrayed as nobly racist. He holds views which see inter-racial sex as undesirable. His concerns for the happiness of his daughter and for the good of Anglo-Celtic stock in Australia are seen as justified, because of the possibility of the birth of children with darker skin than their parents in marriages between Aboriginal and white people. In a conversation he has with Josh Roberts, Brett Howard is challenged by Josh for not being 'as broad minded as [he] might.' Brett wearily replies:

"Look Josh, I'm getting tired of this. You know perfectly well why I stand in the way of it. The natural outcome of any marriage is children."¹⁶

Anderson himself is constructed by the author as the ultimate apologist for 'the Aboriginal problem'. He is a figment of a white imagination – the perfect Aborigine – apologetic, non-troublemaking, accepting the limitations which his colour make in his life and willing to let his colour 'pass away'.¹⁷ Sally Howard and Anderson's young half-sister Jenny are the headstrong, love-conquers-all spokespersons. Employees of the Howards voice the position of assimilation and separation.¹⁸ Other characters are also represented as drawing a line around their family excluding themselves from the project of assimilation. Colin, half-brother of Anderson, tries to imagine the relationship which produced Anderson: 'Funny to think of the old man – no it was only funny when it was someone else's old man, when it was a joke at the club or somewhere.'¹⁹

I argued in chapter 1 that Young suggests that desire and fantasies are social or group things.²⁰ Though they may be driven by different protocols from the 'real', fantasies and desires are socially produced and ordered by the same discourses. I also argued in that chapter that the white fantasies around race relations are ambivalent – both desiring and repulsed by the ideas of inter-racial sex. In *Beyond Blue Hills* this ambivalence is shared amongst the characters who make up the community of people affected by the possibility of this inter-racial

¹⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p.165.

¹⁶ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p.187.

¹⁷ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 150, 180 and 178.

¹⁸ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p.156.

¹⁹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p.127.

²⁰ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 169.

relationship. For example Josh desires both his Aboriginal lover and his Aboriginal son; Amelia, when she finds out who Anderson's mother is, hates all of them; Sally Howard desires Anderson; her sister is repulsed by that love; and her father shifts his opinion given new information. The ambivalent feelings are not held by one character, but split between the cast.²¹

A marriage between Anderson and Sally becomes possible after a visit to the University of Sydney Anthropology Department confirms that their children will have fair-skin. Here, via the discourse of science, the plot of the novel can shift from the terror of miscegenation to the more manageable problem of sociocultural assimilation. Sally and Anderson do not actually marry in the novel, rather it ends with their mutual declaration of love.²² The ambivalence of the community towards this romantic end can be held in place because each character has a definite opinion or indulges an unequivocal fantasy about the inter-racial relationship. Those characters who hate or are repulsed by the romance between Sally and Anderson are cordoned-off and can be removed from the sphere of the couple. There is no internal ambivalence. The novel is structured so that there is no individual ambivalence (especially within Sally or Anderson) about what they are doing. This simplistic and unambiguous characterization is characteristic of melodrama.

Melodrama

Melodrama as a narrative form is both familiar and mystifying. In his influential book *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks argues that melodrama as a popular form of writing is 'radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone'.²³ Brooks argues that melodrama seeks to 'say everything' and 'to make its signs clear, unambiguous and impressive'.²⁴ This accords with the form of *Beyond Blue Hills*, which is organised around carefully declaimed set pieces, polarised

²¹ Thanks to Tikka Wilson for her thoughts on this idea.

²² Anderson and Sally did marry in the radio serial. The episode was aired in May 1953 and replayed in repeats of the serial in the 1960s. However the actor who played Anderson (Rod Taylor) left to work in the United States not long after the 'wedding', so the characters were not featured in the series after that. Correspondence from Miss Jocelyn Wilson, Hobart, Tas. to Gwen Meredith, 13 April 1955, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box, 10, NLA.

²³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1976, p.15.

²⁴ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 48.

and clear positions, seemingly transparent and unambivalent ideas.²⁵

There are no complex internal dialogues or complicated psychological understandings or misunderstandings. Mary Ann Doane in her work on cinema and 'the woman's film' argues that this 'will to transparency', that Brooks describes, is 'self negating through its very obviousness'.²⁶

Everything cannot be as obvious as it seems. Here she cites the every day understanding of melodrama as excessive, theatrical and artificial.²⁷

Beyond Blue Hills is also a didactic tale about the 'ugly fact of colour prejudice'.²⁸ The novel works to regulate the sexual aspects of assimilation. It produces a system for understanding the 'rules' of inter-racial sex. If *Australia's Coloured Minority* can be read for its representation of inter-racial desire, *Beyond Blue Hills* can be read as a conduct manual for dealing with that desire. Within this regulated system, the novel works to sanction those aspects of inter-racial sex which will produce a 'white Australia'. As Susan Gilman puts it, melodrama does cultural work 'managing social tensions and conflicts'.²⁹

I have said that *Beyond Blue Hills* is a novel which deploys the trope of the maternal, in particular the trope of the self-sacrificing mother. This is exemplified by Anderson's mother, who is represented as leaving her son, her lover and her domestic space for the good of her child. Given this trope the novel can also be read in terms of 'maternal melodrama'. In his study of cinema and 'maternal melodrama', Christian Viviani sets out his idea of the form:

A woman is separated from her child, falls from her social class and founders in disgrace. The child grows up in respectability and enters established society where he stands for progress ... The mother watches the social rise of her child from afar; she cannot risk jeopardising his fortunes by contamination with her own bad repute.³⁰

²⁵ Elsaesser makes a similar point in his analysis of the history of literary melodrama. Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury', p. 45.

²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1987, p. 71.

²⁷ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 71.

²⁸ Gwen Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills: the Ternna Boolla Story* (1953), abridged edition, Pacific Books, Sydney, 1964, p. 1.

²⁹ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 222.

³⁰ Christian Viviani, 'Who is without sin? The maternal melodrama in American film, 1930-1939', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, BFI Publishing, London, 1987, p. 86.

This form of the melodramatic underpins aspects of the representation of Anderson's mother. However, this reading can only be pushed so far. Viviani's study focused on Hollywood cinema of the 1930s, where the maternal figures in the films were white mothers. To continue the Viviani quote from above:

Chance draws them [mother and child] together again, and the partial or total rehabilitation of the mother is accomplished.³¹

The mother watching from afar and the plot of 'rehabilitation' is not represented in the novel of *Beyond Blue Hills*.³² Anderson's mother has not fallen in terms of class. Rather, the arrival of more white people in the area (including white women) leads to the closing-off of acceptance of sexual relationships between Aboriginal women and white men. This makes her presence in an inter-racial relationship unacceptable. What Doane calls the 'undeniable quality of motherliness', that is the unbreakable maternal connection, is broken in this assimilationist tale.³³ It has to be broken for the meta-narrative of assimilation to work. The melodrama of this novel works along a raced trajectory which has different protocols from the class based framework of white melodrama. Ann Kaplan in her work *Motherhood and Representation* notes that maternal love for children can be a "'safe" location for female desire'.³⁴ Again I would argue that the specificities of the raced inflections of motherhood need to be considered. In *Beyond Blue Hills* an Aboriginal mother's passion for her child needs to be denied to secure assimilation. Though maternal sorrow generates some of the affect of this novel, through the trope of the self-sacrificing mother, the specific raced meanings of an Aboriginal mother being separated from her child in Australia in the assimilationist era refuse Viviani's narrative resolution of reunion and Kaplan's notion of safety. That is the point of child removal.

It is important to examine how melodrama as a genre works as a racialized discourse. Gilman, in her work on nineteenth century fiction,

³¹ Viviani, 'Who is without sin?', p. 86.

³² For thousands of the Indigenous children taken by the government from their families and communities the reunion with their mothers was in reality hard or impossible and this is the trauma that so many of those children, now adults, and their parents are now facing.

³³ Doane, *Desire to Desire*, p. 70. This 'undeniable quality' was something which within discourses of assimilation in Australia was deliberately and systematically undermined and made deniable every day.

³⁴ E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992, p. 79.

defines a sub-genre of melodrama which she calls 'race melodrama'. Meredith's work fits Gilman's definition of 'race melodrama'. Starting with a quote from Brooks, Gilman writes:

"the world of the melodrama is subsumed by an underlying manichaeism ... putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things." Both the polarization and the revelation of hidden conflict are essential to the fundamentally unresolved conclusion of the race melodrama, a genre that grapples with still unresolved racial issues.³⁵

Gilman reiterates Brooks' point about melodrama in terms of surface and the obvious. She goes on to suggest that race melodrama acknowledges anxieties and ambivalences,³⁶ arguing that in the nineteenth century United States, 'race melodrama' focused on 'the issue of "race mixture" as a means of negotiating the social tensions surrounding the formation of racial, national and sexual identity in the post-Reconstruction years'.³⁷ Gilman emphasises that the plots revolve around 'the revelation of secret identities, of hidden race mixture'.³⁸ Gilman is writing about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States; however, the idea of the 'race melodrama' dealing with unsettling aspects of unresolved racial tensions is pertinent to a reading of *Beyond Blue Hills*.³⁹

In the mid 1950s, the sociocultural aspects of assimilation, where Aboriginal people were 'absorbed' into electoral rolls, pubs, schools, neighbourhoods and foster homes, created uncomfortable and confronting moments for white people, forced to face their fears. However, in representations of assimilation with specific reference to inter-racial sex anxieties were strongest, and the discourse of assimilation often faltered. *Beyond Blue Hills*, with its romance plot and its unexpected revelations and swift changes in feeling, confronts head on the ambivalence inherent in the idea of assimilation, in particular with inter-racial sexual relationships and children. Further, as a didactic text, Meredith's novel unites politics and a love plot 'assum[ing] an indivisibility of politics from fiction in writing [about] race relations'.⁴⁰ Though carrying a familiar cast of characters in a familiar setting, and deploying fictional tropes which were

³⁵ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 223.

³⁶ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 223.

³⁷ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 222.

³⁸ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 222.

³⁹ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 223.

⁴⁰ Gilman, 'The mulatto', p. 223.

comfortable and familiar to readers this text pushes its romance plot in a way which confronts some of the greatest fears of white Australians.

iii: Children and the past (secrets)

*This woman is just a shell now,
doing the only thing she knows.
Cleaning. She should have been an
Aboriginal grandmother by now,
surrounded by her family, and all
the warmth and love that goes
with it. Instead she says, 'I don't
mix with Aboriginals, you know'.
If the Aborigines Welfare
Board still existed today, its
members might be very pleased
with Jane. She learnt her lessons
well ...*
Coral Edwards⁴¹

In this section I analyse *Beyond Blue Hills'* assimilationist narratives in terms of the anxiety which is produced through representations of a past where a white man had a sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman. This anxiety is figured in *Beyond Blue Hills* as the beginning of 'the Aboriginal problem'.⁴² Traditionally, sexual relations between Aboriginal women and white men have been figured in a time and space outside of the white bourgeois domestic space/family.⁴³ In *Beyond Blue Hills* the spectre of inter-racial sex, here embodied by the Aboriginal women as lover and mother, enters the white familial space. It is how white anxieties about this entry are represented and dealt with in this novel that is the focus of this section.

Secrets

In the first half of *Beyond Blue Hills* the fact that Anderson Roberts' mother is an Aboriginal woman is not spoken. The reader does not know about Anderson's mother. However, there are hints given about Anderson as different; the Howard sisters wonder why he does not socialize in the small community and will not enter their house. It is a secret, a mystery which propels the plot. About halfway through the novel the mystery is revealed to the reader. The reader learns the truth about Anderson's heritage at the same moment that most of the Roberts family including Anderson's step-mother, Amelia Roberts, learn it. The revelation takes

⁴¹ Coral Edwards, 'Is the ward clean?', in Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus (eds), *All That Dirt: Aborigines 1938, An Australia 1938 Monograph*, History Project Incorporated, Canberra, 1982, p. 8.

⁴² Cf the ways in which Neville represents this moment. See chapter 1 this thesis, p. 68.

⁴³ See also Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 43.

place in a scene where Josh Roberts, exasperatedly says to Anderson that there is nothing to stop him marrying Sally Howard. To which Anderson replies:

“If you call abo blood nothing! If you forget that my mother was coloured.”⁴⁴

The scene operates as the paradoxically necessary but unwitting letting out of a secret. To speak/write the secret is to allow it into white domestic spaces (both textual and literal). Speaking/writing the secret (of inter-racial sex) is necessary to set up the conditions for implementing the policy of assimilation. If the group of Aboriginal people, figured as ‘coloured’, are to be integrated into white society then the secret of miscegenation must be acknowledged. This is the necessary project of the novel.

Speaking about past Aboriginal and white sexual relationships is unsettling. Within the novel the unsettling nature of the revelation is signalled by the extreme violence of the scene. To reinforce the sense of the slightly paradoxical unspeakable-ness and need-to-be-spoken-ness of the secret, the scene is set up with a nasty interloper overhearing Anderson’s confession. Roop Adkins, a dissatisfied worker on the property, overhears Anderson’s revelation.⁴⁵ This trope of the eavesdropper acts to guarantee the secret will get ‘out’, but Adkins’ status as eavesdropper also suggests the private and secret nature of the information.

The scene which follows the secret’s revelation is chaotic and violent. It changes from the father-son dynamic of advice about marriage, to the tension and hatred of the family secret being revealed. Roop Adkins yells at Josh:

“Does your wife know that your first woman was a black?”

Anderson made a lunge for him. “You take your hands off me,” Adkins spat. “No nigger’s ever laid a hand on me.”

“Well a nigger’s going to now!” Anderson grabbed him with one hand and, as the other connected with his jaw Amelia and Colin and Jenny appeared on the veranda. Amelia screamed; Colin picked up Adkins and propelled him towards the yard, while Adkins spat out blood and teeth which landed at Amelia’s feet. Amelia was shaking with disgust and anger, and fear. The whole

⁴⁴ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 120.

shouted scene had come to them quite clearly as they had crossed from the station yard to the garden. She had heard beyond possibility of error. And coming back to them through the dark stillness of the night was Adkins's voice still screaming, "Let go of me! I'll get off the place – and glad to! I don't like camping with the blacks. But don't think you're going to hush this up. Old Roberts has an abo bastard ... that's what you are ... just an abo bastard."⁴⁶

The violence is enacted in the scene in a number of ways. First, the language of the scene is crude, and further the whole interaction is shouted. Both Amelia and Adkins scream. There is a physical confrontation which sees Adkins' teeth knocked out. The revelation of the practice of inter-racial sex, though necessary, has a violent and unsettling visceral intensity.

The revelation of the secret also changes the power dynamics of the relationship between Roberts, as employer, and Adkins, as employee. Josh Roberts' social power and class position in relation to Adkins diminishes with the revelation that he has had a sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman. The status of the two men had been based on a class hierarchy which saw the property-owning Roberts as dominant. The revelation of the secret quickly sees the relationship shift to a hierarchy based on race which sees Adkins gaining some power. For example he feels confident enough to insult Anderson and Josh; he also spits out 'blood and teeth' which land at the feet of Josh Roberts' wife.

This pivotal scene where the secret is (necessarily) revealed sees the Roberts family crumble under the weight of the knowledge, and the rest of the novel is in some ways a story of how this family (and white families generally and by extension, the white part of the nation) can recover from the open knowledge of inter-racial sex. The novel sets out to salvage the family/nation in the face of, as one character puts it: 'the whole problem of colour, its unfairness, its bitterness, its sorrow'.⁴⁷

The novel figures the acknowledgment of past Aboriginal-white sexual relationships as traumatic and destabilizing. It works to set up a framework through which (white) readers can come to terms with these historical moments of sexual transgression. Though it is obvious, it needs to be stated that the solution provided in this novel to inter-racial sexual relationships in the past, which are represented as having created 'the Aboriginal problem' of the present, is a solution by and for white people.

⁴⁶ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 156.

Assimilation is represented here as a white solution to white pain. Though the novel suggests it represents the 'bitterness' and 'sorrow' and 'unfairness' of 'colour prejudice' as the pain of all Australians it more specifically represents how white people cope with the results of inter-racial sexual relationships. Again to state the obvious in this novel for Aboriginal people the solution of assimilation is elimination.⁴⁸ It is a solution anathema to so many Aboriginal people.

I will take up the issue of how the novel produces this white narrative of recovery or redemption in the last section of this chapter. I now want to concentrate on the issue of the Aboriginal woman as lover and mother in the white domestic space.

Lovers

I have argued that *Beyond Blue Hills* draws on and helps to produce a particular narrative of assimilation. The novel also explicitly deals with the commonly repressed anxiety within assimilationist discourses of inter-racial sexual relationships and the associated issue of children born of those relationships. Whilst the novel promises its readers a white future, it cannot eradicate a past which includes miscegenation.

In *Beyond Blue Hills* this fear of white men's desire for dark-skinned Aboriginal women is presented in the novel through the incident of Amelia Roberts' revulsion at the knowledge of her husband's inter-racial relationship. Amelia is appalled by the knowledge of who her step-son's mother is, or more importantly who her husband's lover was. What makes Amelia feel 'sick' is the thought that: 'She [Anderson's mother] was desirable. Josh had desired her. And she was black'.⁴⁹ Here the novel explicitly marks one point of difficulty in assimilation narratives as the past desire of a white man for an Aboriginal woman.

The Aboriginal woman who appears in this novel disturbs the story of white Australia in two ways: one is as the sexualized and racialized 'other woman' and the second is as mother. The appearance of the Aboriginal woman as sexual rival is most apparent in a fantasised tussle between Amelia Roberts and Anderson's mother for the sexual attentions of Josh Roberts. It is important to note that Anderson's mother, unnamed

⁴⁸ Cf William Cooper's letter and petition of 1933 where he states quite explicitly that his intention is to stop the 'extinction' of Aboriginal people. See chapter 1 this thesis p. 20. Note also Anderson who refers to the policy of assimilation as a policy of 'fuck 'em white', Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 11.

⁴⁹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 123.

in the novel, only appears as a ghostly figment of Amelia's imagination and as a figure of sentimental nostalgia for Josh. Teresa Goddu comments on this type of phantasmic appearance of what is repressed in the narrative, suggesting that a gothic scene allows for the representation of what is denied in national mythologies.⁵⁰

The rivalry between the two women is played out in a common and familiar way in this passage in the novel:

Amelia looked back at him, saw the rough head and rough hands, hated the uncouthness of him, but saw as well the virility, the devilish attraction, the eyes and hands and mouth that had so easily charmed her, and that she knew could so easily charm any other woman, and had charmed her. Anderson was proof of that ... she never failed to feel the creeping jealousy of the other woman, of all other women. Even in this moment when she hated him, even now that he was old, she could feel the choking flame of it in her throat. And the other woman had been black!⁵¹

In this passage the novel links both women in their desire for Josh Roberts. The charms of Josh are set out – 'devilish attraction', 'eyes', 'hands', 'mouth'. Then through the voice of Amelia it is suggested Josh 'charmed her' (Amelia) and then again that Josh 'charmed her' (Anderson's mother). The women here are both susceptible to Josh's charm. To suggest a difference Anderson's mother is made 'other': 'he could so easily charm any other woman'. To create a further difference the novel insists on her racial difference: 'the other woman had been black'. The unnamed mother of Anderson is the 'other woman'. She is the archetypal family-destroying 'other *woman*'. Yet she is also a specific Other woman – a racialized black woman – who is by definition Other.

As in the passage where Roop Adkins hears the secret of Anderson's mother, the revelation to Amelia of the relationship between Josh and his Aboriginal lover is represented as shifting his social position. After the revelation Amelia is suddenly aware of Josh's 'uncouthness' and 'rough[ness]'. Again he is represented in terms of a racial hierarchy which imagines inter-racial relationships as marking a loss of status. There is an intersection between miscegenation and white degeneration.⁵² Josh's relationship with the other/Other woman has (momentarily) made his

⁵⁰ Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 21.

⁵¹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 122.

⁵² Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, p. 34.

position in white society precarious. However the obliteration of the other/Other woman resecures his social status.

Although the Aboriginal mother can be imagined as a maternal martyr who fades away, the sexualised 'other woman' is harder to write out of the novel, because an often unacknowledged and ambivalent desire for this figure in the white imagination haunts the novel. Amelia Roberts is represented as being continually tormented by a belief that 'other women' had been attracted to or charmed by her husband. She feels an associated 'creeping jealousy' of 'all other women'. This trope of the 'other woman' is familiar in romance fiction. The stock figure operates as a threat to true love and as a signifier of danger to the family home.⁵³ Here the danger is represented as compounded because the 'other woman had been black':

Amelia felt sick. Then the sickness passed and hate slowly took its place, hate that hardened gradually as cooling steel hardens. Josh had betrayed her with a coloured woman. The fact that he had not even known of her existence at the time he lived with Anderson's mother made no difference to her. It was, in her mind, still a betrayal. The whirlpool receded gradually but the figure of the black woman stayed.⁵⁴

For Amelia it is not just about who Anderson's mother is but what her husband did. What has happened is that Josh Howard has betrayed white womanhood, through his preferences for an Aboriginal woman. He had also betrayed the white nation. As with the episode where the secret of Anderson's heritage was revealed the language in the scene above is strong. In figuring the revelation to a white woman of a long past inter-racial sexual relationship the passage forms around the ideas of hate and sickness. Though this novel's project of assimilation requires the acknowledgment of the 'original' moment of inter-racial sex, it remains a violent and unsettling moment.

The evocation of the past romance between Josh Roberts and the unnamed Aboriginal woman, who was his lover and Anderson's mother, becomes a scene of the struggle between white women and Aboriginal women for white men. The construction of the threat of 'the black woman' in these scenes is stark. This archetypal stereotype haunts Josh and

⁵³ Abena P. A. Busia, 'Miscegenation as metonymy: sexuality and power in the colonial novel', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1986, p. 363.

⁵⁴ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 123.

Amelia, and indeed white discourse of assimilation. When Amelia, the white wife, looks at Anderson, her step-son, she sees 'the shadowy figure of the woman [taking] shape behind him' and this 'drie[s] up her sympathy at its source'.⁵⁵ It is here that the stories of the past inform the policies of the present. The novel suggests that the problems which now face 'white Australia' result from white women not following white men into the bush.⁵⁶ Josh Roberts lived with his Aboriginal lover in the early days when most white women would consider the hardships too great and not many white men would consider putting them through those hardships.⁵⁷ Amelia Roberts, who married Josh Roberts when Anderson was seven, is represented as being insulted by the knowledge that a white man would marry her after a relationship with an Aboriginal woman. All other hatred disappears by the end of the novel but the 'figure of the black woman' as sexual rival inheres in the novel and the white imagination.

Mothers

If the ghost of Josh's Aboriginal lover appears in the novel in the form of representations of sexual rivalry, then the ghost of the Aboriginal mother appears via representations of maternal sacrifice. An important fiction which underpins this white narrative of assimilation is Aboriginal people's compliance with assimilation/elimination. This is exemplified in the representation of the Aboriginal mother in this novel. In *Beyond Blue Hills*, Anderson's mother is represented as willingly giving up her fair-skinned child for his own good, recognising that white society is better for children of mixed heritage:⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 123.

⁵⁶ See also Ernestine Hill's summary of the issue: 'If there is any blame for Australia's present half-caste problem, it lies at the self contained flat door of the white woman in the overcrowded cities.' Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1948, p. 230.

⁵⁷ Meredith, pp. 157–158. Cf: 'I am a bachelor farmer who lives alone like thousands of others ... the ratio [of men to women in the outback] is six men to one woman ... The country would be better off if more of [women] concentrated their lives to ['brightening a man's life' rather] than chasing this fickle glamour ... On my estimates there are vacancies for 10,000 such girls ... the men are there [to marry] ... all that is wanted is the girls with the right idea. I suggest that you in your popular serial could give many of them that idea & thus do the country, the men & perhaps the girls a service.' Correspondence from W. F. Lettow, Morawa, WA, to Gwen Meredith, 14 February 1948, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, NLA.

⁵⁸ This myth is still doing work today in relation to the issues raised by the investigation into the 'stolen generations' and arguments put forward suggest that many children gained from being separated from their families and put into 'white' society. See for example Link-Up NSW and Tikka Jan Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child? Stolen Children: Aboriginal Pain, White Shame*, Aboriginal History Monograph 4, Canberra, Australian National University, 1997, pp. 143–145.

"She didn't die ... and ... I wasn't married to her."

So, [Amelia] thought, as well as being coloured, Anderson's a bastard. It made things a little easier. Aloud she said, "And what happened to her?"

"When Anderson was born she decided the only chance for him was to be brought up as white."

"So she had clearer sight than you. And more honesty."

"Perhaps she did," Josh agreed. "She certainly had the capacity for sacrifice. She knew that so long as she stayed with me Anderson wouldn't have much chance, so she left me. She went to a mission, and died there about fifteen years ago."⁵⁹

As I briefly commented earlier in the chapter the melodramatic trope of the self-sacrificing mother is deployed effectively in this novel. Anderson's mother is explicitly marked with a 'capacity for sacrifice'. The novel represents her as sympathetic in contrast to the cold and callous character of Amelia, represented more as 'wicked' step-mother.⁶⁰

It is not unusual for mothers to die in this narrative form: the orphan is a common figure in melodrama.⁶¹ In *Beyond Blue Hills* the trope of maternal self-sacrifice is specifically tied to the story of Aboriginal 'passing away'. Anderson's mother represents the group marked as 'tribal', who are imagined to have 'disappeared' or be 'passing away'.⁶² She represents a 'remnant' group of the original Aboriginal culture. This group is set up against Aboriginal people who are represented as assimilable. Anderson's mother is figured as going to a mission and dying: a perfect example of the representation of white institutional philanthropy as 'smoothing the dying pillow'.

The imagining of an Aboriginal mother disappearing is a common trope of novels of assimilation. Aboriginal mothers often die, disappear or

⁵⁹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 125.

⁶⁰ See for example: 'Some of our members were very upset over the session where this problem of the quarter caste aboriginal was introduced. I think the screeching noisy Amelia just disgusted them as they put themselves in the place of an aboriginal listening in. They wanted to express disgust immediately through the Union of Australian Women.' Correspondence from Union of Australian Women, to Gwen Meredith, 28 July 1952, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, NLA. For contemporary analysis cf Anna Haebich, 'Murdering stepmothers', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 59, 1998, pp. 68–69.

⁶¹ Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury', p. 48.

⁶² In the novel Anderson's mother is represented as being of white and Aboriginal heritage, but firmly associated with a group who are not assimilable.

suicide, leaving the way open for a white mother to step into the breach.⁶³ In a number of Australian novels from the same period plots include the violent or deliberate removal of white children from white mothers. However, in these novels the removal of the child is not represented in terms of a passive or martyred maternal acceptance but with a focus on the relentless search of both mother and child for each other.⁶⁴ In white novels of assimilation there is no equivalent of Aboriginal suffering and searching after Aboriginal children are removed. These removals are more frequently figured as recognised by all concerned as 'best' for everyone.

Yet the State and Territory Protection Board archives are full of cases of Aboriginal mothers, and communities, heart-broken at the wrench of being separated from their children.⁶⁵ Even Neville's treatise, an apology for separation, recognises Aboriginal women's desperate attempts to keep their children, writing of women who 'disguise [their] coloured baby by the all over application of charcoal or boot polish ... in the hope that the authority will mistake her bastard child for a full-blood'.⁶⁶ Aboriginal people's accounts of separation speak of mothers who haunt the periphery of the institutions where their children are taken; of mothers who fight and protest; of mothers searching, waiting and hoping; of mothers, families, communities who never forget.⁶⁷ For the plot of this novel to work, for a marriage to take place and to produce the end result of assimilation (the destruction and disappearance of Aboriginal cultures) the novel relies on the trope of the self sacrificing (Aboriginal) mother, who knows that the interests of her children lie with white society. Yet the novel is haunted by the excess of this trope. In the only gothic moment of the novel the abject (the expelled which never leaves) of this narrative of assimilation – the Aboriginal mother – appears. The novel is haunted by

⁶³ See for example: Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*; F. J. Thwaites, *Where Gods are Vain*, H John Edwards Publishing Co., Sydney, undated; Cusack, *The Half Burnt Tree*; Donald Stuart, *Yaralie*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1967.

⁶⁴ For example in two of the novels in E. V. Timms' 'Australian saga' there is a sub-plot of a white mother's search for her 'stolen' child.

⁶⁵ See Link-Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, pp. 104–107.

⁶⁶ Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, p. 46.

⁶⁷ Testimonial accounts of the pain and suffering of separation appear in every form imaginable – story, song, and now a formal government inquiry. See for example: Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker, MBE*, Grosvenor, South Melbourne, 1977; Charles Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1975; Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History, Stories in the Oral Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Sydney, 1991; Archie Roach, *Charcoal Lane*, Mushroom Records, 1990; Adele Pring (ed.), *Women of the Centre*, Pascoe Publishing, Apollo Bay, Vic, 1990; Glenyse Ward, *Unna You Fellas*, Magabala Books, Broome, WA, 1991; Rintoul (ed.), *The Wailing*; HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*; Link-Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*

an Aboriginal mother who appears over the shoulder of the child from whom she was separated.

At this point the novel needs to move from the haunting moment of the past (Josh's relationship with Anderson's mother) to the narrative of the future (Anderson's marriage to Sally). It begins to refigure Josh's inter-racial sexual relationship and the birth of Anderson not as a personal incident of sexual desire and (later) betrayal, but as the objective, distant, 'half-caste problem'. It is in a hate-filled conversation between Josh and Amelia about the absent Aboriginal lover/mother that this shift is achieved:

Josh thundered at her, "He's my son, and he's more white than anything else! He's my son and I'm proud of him."

"I can only hope you are proud of yourself."

"That's something I wouldn't expect you to understand, Amelia." Josh spoke more quietly. "No I wouldn't expect you to understand that.

Anderson's mother ... I think she did."

"If you're trying to draw a picture of heroism and romance then you can save your breath," Amelia shot at him. "I've seen half-castes and quarter-castes." She spoke with venom, thinking of the woman. "I've seen them huddled on the outskirts of towns. Trash. Black trash – black and coloured trash!"

"And whose fault? Ours!" Josh turned on her in a fury. "Have we ever given 'em a chance? Whose fault is it?"

"Yours! Yours and the like of you for producing them in the first place."

"All right I accept part of the blame. But when you get men and women ----" He broke off. "But there is no point in going into that now. It's done."⁶⁸

The passage begins with Josh's passionate and personal defence of his son: 'he's my son and I'm proud of him'. The pride is couched in terms of Josh's understanding of Anderson as white: 'he's more white than anything else'. When Amelia intervenes she shifts the focus from Anderson as an individual to the idea of a problem. Her words conjure up pictures of children of mixed heritage as 'huddled on the outskirts of towns'; invoking images of neglect, poverty and fringe-dwelling.⁶⁹ In this passage, when Anderson is described by Josh, he is represented as white.

⁶⁸ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 125–126.

⁶⁹ See also Paul Hasluck's comments on the House of Representatives where he spoke of 'thousands of degraded and depressed people who crouch on rubbish heaps throughout the whole of this continent', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 18 June 1950, Vol. 208, p. 3979, cited in Yarwood and Knowling, *Race Relations*, p. 265.

Then when described by Amelia he is reconstructed as 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', as 'black' and as 'coloured'. Here it is not just Josh and the individual instance of his Aboriginal lover which is represented as the issue, but rather 'the likes of you' who have created a whole problem. Josh's sexual relationship is transformed from individual choice of lover to national issue. Josh begins to articulate the issue as one of desire – 'But when you get men and women ----.' Then the passage breaks off. The problem is sealed off as something associated with the past. Josh says: 'It's done'. The textual suggestion is that now the solution to this problem created in the past needs to be put into action.

It is Amelia, a white wife and mother who is the main signifier of hatred towards Aboriginal people. She is represented as hating Josh for his relationship with an Aboriginal woman. She is represented as hating that Aboriginal woman for her availability. In this novel the anger and hatred of the 'black part' which is within 'white Australia', is voiced by a white woman.⁷⁰ Discourses of racial purity and national vigour are gendered. It is the figure of the white woman who often marks the national boundary between white and black. White men have sexual relations that cross race lines. White women must act unambiguously. (An important exception is exemplified by Sally Howard, but she will only consent to sex with Anderson when she is assured that she is not crossing a 'colour line'. I will discuss this in more detail in the next section.)

White women as bearers of the next generation of white children must be securely marked out as racially unambiguous. By a sleight of hand and a deceit on the part of her husband Amelia Roberts becomes the (step-) mother of an Aboriginal child. As the guardian of the boundary between white and black she is – within the logic of the discourses of race purity – necessarily furious that her white family and her reputation has been compromised. She is represented as venomously furious that her husband desired an Aboriginal woman and that he brought the child of that relationship into her white family. For the white woman to be secure in her position as pure, the distinction must be kept between herself and Aboriginal women.

Josh's desire for Amelia and Anderson's mother and his mixing of Aboriginal and white children in the white family has blurred the line

⁷⁰ See also Timms *The Big Country* and the hatred of the white wife for her husband when she learns of his sexual relationship with an Aboriginal woman. Like *Beyond Blue Hills* it is a relationship which took place before the white husband had met his white wife. For further examples of white wives' hatred see also Helen Heney, *The Leaping Blaze* (chapter 5 this thesis); Olaf Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn* (chapter 7 this thesis).

between white and black. The white woman is represented as being the one who hates this blurring, because of the way it mixes her up in the process of past inter-racial sexual relationships. The logic of the novel demands that this mixing (miscegenation) take place in a cordoned-off past. Though the revelation of this mixing is logically necessary it is still a site of anxiety in the novel, expressed through the white woman. The appearance of colour in her domestic space fills Amelia with 'hate' and makes her 'sick'. The logic of the novel demands that the white woman hate the Aboriginal woman because the white woman is marked as the boundary rider of the nation in policing and maintaining a 'white Australia'. In this novel Amelia Roberts is figured in a moment of excess, of hate and sickening jealousy, because to tell the tale of the future, the novel had to revisit the past and in revisiting that past Amelia became linked to that sexually ambiguous past and not the white future.

iv: Children and the future (open secrets)

[In South Pacific] Handsome Lt Joseph Cable from Philadelphia takes a boat to the 'off limits' romantic island of Bali Ha'i and immediately falls in love with Liat, a beautiful young Polynesian girl ... One day they talk happily about marriage. Until her mother 'Bloody Mary' mentions their having children. Cable breaks away and runs back to the boat.
Robert Young⁷¹

In his argument about melodrama in literature and film, Thomas Elsaesser argues that characters in melodrama often fail to act in a way which controls or shapes events.⁷² He suggests that melodrama confers on its characters 'a negative identity through suffering and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings'.⁷³ In these terms the scenes which I have analysed above, of Josh and Amelia in their disintegrating marriage, are pure melodrama. The episodes in this novel which focus on the impediments to Sally and Anderson's marriage operate without the tropes of melodrama. This story of the future (not the past) of the white nation is narrated using the language of anthropology and governmental policies of assimilation.⁷⁴

In the episodes which focus on the future marriage of Anderson and Sally, the question of an inter-racial sexual relationship is figured not as trauma (as it was with Amelia and Josh) but as the assimilation debate. The reason that it can be represented in this way is because Aboriginality ('embodied' by the spectral figure of Anderson's mother) is figured as gone. Through the deployment of a discourse which elides race (culture) and colour, and through metaphors of visibility and invisibility Anderson can at these moments be marked as white. In the following section I explore the novel's strategies for managing the assimilationist future. The strategies include the deployment of an authoritative scientific and anthropological discourse of Aboriginality and the erasure of Aboriginality through its elision with colour.

⁷¹ Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. xi.

⁷² Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury', p. 55.

⁷³ Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury', p. 55.

⁷⁴ See Hodge and Mishra's argument about the difference between realist and subjectivist moments in a text. Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. 39.

Colour and visibility

In line with Neville's treatise *Australia's Coloured Minority* the idea of being coloured in *Beyond Blue Hills* refers to an Aboriginal middle group who occupy a space between Aboriginal and white people, and are defined as being between black and white. In the logic of assimilation colour is what defines Aboriginality. The disappearance of colour equals the disappearance of Aboriginality. But particular shades of skin pigmentation disappear before white people are willing to acknowledge that what they class as the erasure of colour has taken place. A middle group of people exist within the white assimilationist hierarchy who worry the system. They are a group of people who can pass as white before white people are officially willing to let them pass.

Colour is figured as self-explanatory in this novel; yet it is everywhere problematic. Anderson's step-mother says at one point: 'The plain fact is, Josh, that Anderson's coloured?'⁷⁵ This 'plain fact' is in a sentence which is constructed as a question. Similarly in the passage where Roop Adkins screams out the knowledge of Anderson's mother, Amelia 'hear[s] beyond possibility of error' what she had not seen for twenty-odd years.⁷⁶ It would seem that there is nothing plain about Anderson's colour. In fact his colour is not visible to his family or next door neighbours. Anderson's colour is not seen until it is spoken. In other places in the novel the colour of Aboriginal people is also registered but not to be seen⁷⁷:

"I've seen it over and over again in this country.
I've seen quarter-castes and octoroons as fair as full
whites. Oh, I've seen the living proof of it a
hundred times under me [sic] eyes."⁷⁸

In this passage the speaker has 'seen' colour inscribed on bodies which are described as 'fair as full whites'. The colour is not there, but it is. Anderson is coloured even if he is 'as fair' as a 'full white'. Anderson's colour is in him.⁷⁹ It is something that has to be exposed.⁸⁰ Similarly

⁷⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 123.

⁷⁶ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 121.

⁷⁷ See other expressions of this unseeable colour: E. V. Timms, *The Big Country*; Ion Idriess, letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, cited in Markus, 'After the outward appearance', p. 100.

⁷⁸ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 237.

⁷⁹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 229.

Anderson's colour is explained, not seen. Throughout the first half of the novel characters discuss the mystery of Anderson's reticence about socialising with the small rural community, unaware that the reason he does not mix with the Howards is that Brett Howard forbids Anderson to enter his house because he is an Aboriginal man. This is not obvious to anyone else.⁸¹ The paradox of this irrefutable issue of colour is that it cannot be seen. Even those close to the person have to have the colour explained to them. Colour has to be exposed.

In the revelation of Anderson's Aboriginal mother his colour is revealed. I have argued in the previous section that this revelation is necessary if the narrative's story of assimilation is to proceed. However in the shift which Anderson takes from the domestic space of the past (the Roberts) to the domestic space of the future (the Howards) his colour must be hidden away again. It must be eradicated. This story of colour is secreted away.

Beyond Blue Hills emphasises what Patrick Wolfe describes as the 'genetic arithmetic' of assimilation.⁸² This idea, especially prevalent in the 1930s–1950s, suggested that Aboriginality was quantifiable and that Aboriginal people, as a result of sexual relationships with white people and lifestyle shifts over the generations, had diminishing quantities of Aboriginality. In the episodes which follow the revelation to the Roberts family of Anderson's mother being Aboriginal, the conversations, fractured as they are, between spouses, siblings and children and parents, keep returning to the 'quantity' of Aboriginality which marks Anderson. Amelia and Josh argue:

"I never dreamed he wasn't a white child."

"He's three parts white."

"And one part black." She almost spat out ...⁸³

⁸⁰ Rosanne Kennedy in her analysis of Sally Morgan's *My Place* writes about the moment where Morgan's maternal grandmother reveals her Aboriginality and says: 'I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black?' See Rosanne Kennedy, 'The Narrator as Witness: Testimony, Trauma and Narrative Form in *My Place*', *Meridian*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1997, p. 235–260.

⁸¹ Listeners to the 'Blue Hills' radio serial wondered over the issue of Brett Howard's refusal to condone Sally and Anderson's betrothal. Some wrote letters to Meredith and the ABC not certain of what the impediment was, but asking that the romance continue. One correspondent from the outback wrote to Meredith: 'Now to get to the point it is about Anderson Roberts ... The theories [about what the mystery is] in this house vary. Dad says Anderson has been living with the gins and Mum says Dad is revolting for thinking it. But please make it good or you will have many disgusted listeners.' Correspondence from Wilford A. Pegler Jnr, 'Bodalla', Onilpie to Gwen Meredith, 30 June 1952, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 10, NLA.

⁸² Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 114.

⁸³ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 125

These racialized ideas of half, quarter (and eighths) mark out a scale of Aboriginality which is encoded as colour. Anderson has some colour in him. He is, within the biological-genetic narrative of assimilationist still seen to have black 'parts' through which he can be quantified as a 'quarter'. When this colour is gone, then within the logic of these understandings of racial identity, Aboriginality – as culture, history and ethnobiology – will be removed from his person. The deployment of ideas of Anderson's colour being exposed (and quantified) occur in the traumatic scenes of the Roberts family. Amelia Roberts says of her stepson Anderson: 'I never dreamed he wasn't a white child'.⁸⁴ Though Amelia cannot see Anderson's colour, through this white mathematics of assimilation she can know him as 'one part black'.

In the episodes which lead up to Sally's and Anderson's betrothal, the discourse of assimilation in terms of mathematics and quantification is still deployed but is now used to erase colour. As one character ponders: 'She could not feel that he didn't belong. And if he married, his children would belong even more'.⁸⁵ In this story of racial identity the succeeding generations of children of inter-racial relationships will increasingly 'belong' to an imagined 'white Australia' because fewer and fewer 'parts' of them will be imagined as Aboriginal, as coloured.⁸⁶ Aboriginality is not constructed here as cultural. It is something which 'passes away' with the colour. Within the assimilationist system colour is not just a visual thing but a mathematical calculation. It is the apparatuses of governmental power which purport to calculate and decide for Aboriginal people when colour has gone, and with it culture and history.

There is a tension in *Beyond Blue Hills* which is located at the intersection of public policy and private space. Put crudely, the idea of assimilation, *qua* miscegenation, is fine as long as it is not your family who is involved in the process. Two minor characters in the novel, workers on the Howard property, make this point:⁸⁷

"Yes, I think we ought to assimilate our half-castes and quarter-castes and the rest."

⁸⁴ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 125.

⁸⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 156.

⁸⁶ See Anderson's idea of assimilation and the disarticulation of the 'black bits' from Aboriginal 'bodies, historical consciousness and practices.' Anderson, 'Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 11.

⁸⁷ This point is made by two of the most popular and longest appearing characters in the radio serial – Hilda and Joe – so there is a certain power in the statement.

“Well, that’s all right, just so long as it’s not anyone belonging to you that’s gonna give a hand with the assimilating. You’re getting very broad-minded, Hilda, when you know that it can’t possibly affect Em. But if she hadn’t married Ted you’d be getting her away from here just as soon as you could. You’d be moving heaven and earth. And the only one who’d be working harder at it than you would be me.”

After that they sat in silence.⁸⁸

White people are represented as wanting their nation to be white, but they cannot quite imagine how or cannot quite carry out the solution they have devised for the ‘problem’. *Beyond Blue Hills* works very hard to produce a story where a family can accept an inter-racial marriage/sexual relationship. However I would argue that in the end Sally and Anderson’s marriage and sexual relationship is palatable to the white reader because it is figured in the novel as two white people marrying. Though the sexual relationship which produced Anderson operates as an ambiguous moment of shame, anger and incautious desire, which later is represented as colour in a white family, Sally and Anderson’s potential sexual relationship is figured in a way such that colour is erased from their future white family.

Anthropology

I suggested in my introduction to this section that the episodes associated with Sally and Anderson’s potential marriage do not deploy subjectivist techniques or codes of melodrama, rather they use a realist mode, deploying the tropes of science and the discourse of Australian anthropology.⁸⁹ I now want to explore this idea further. I argue that it is through the deployment of the realist form of an anthropological discussion that Anderson can be refigured in the novel as white.

A pivotal scene in this novel is the one where Josh and Sally go to Sydney University to question the professor of the Anthropology Department about the politics and science of inter-racial sex.⁹⁰ It is

⁸⁸ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 156.

⁸⁹ See Webb and Enstice, *Aliens and Savages*, Part 1; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 100–101.

⁹⁰ As I suggested earlier the model here would seem to A. P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University from 1934–1956. Elkin was a popular and well known anthropologist, whose work in the area of assimilation policy and debate included radio broadcasts, public speaking and government consultation. However the views of the fictional Professor Barwin do not accord with Elkin’s views which were antithetical to notions of ‘breeding out colour’ and focussed more on issues of racial

interesting that the father of Anderson Roberts and his fiancée go to the university rather than the couple who are to marry. It is the white people who go to find answers about inter-racial sexual relations. The two visitors question the professor:

“What we want to know is this, doctor. Is there any absolute scientific proof as to whether if there’s been one person of dark blood in a family, an aboriginal, that dark blood works out or not?”

The doctor nodded. “Oh, yes, of course, if there’s no further introduction of colour. If both parents are part coloured there’s always the possibility that both parents might hand on dark genes, and in that case the child could be darker than its parent. On the other hand, it could also be lighter if the reverse happened. But where one parent only is coloured and the other white and each succeeding generation mates with white then each generation must be lighter than the one before, providing, as I said, there is no further introduction of colour.”

Sally found her voice for her vital question. “And, doctor, what about a throw-back?”

He looked up at her and spoke quietly. “Under the circumstances we have mentioned a throw-back, Miss Howard is a biological impossibility.”

“You mean ... it just couldn’t happen?”

“It just couldn’t happen.”⁹¹

In a rather awkward and unsubtle scene the dominant understanding of race relations in Australia are set out for the reader – assimilation and separation. The novel mimics the debates of the time.⁹² Here the argument is that Aboriginality will be ‘work[ed] out’ of Aboriginal people who are the children of earlier inter-racial relationships. Aboriginal people who are not placed in the category of assimilable will be kept separate, so that there is ‘no further introduction of colour’. This ethnobiological-social construct of race relations is put forward as a freedom for Aboriginal

determinism and social assimilation. See: Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines*; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 200. Meredith actually corresponded with Dr Ian Hogbin, a lecturer in the Anthropology Department of Sydney University, and he checked her scripts for the episodes where the fictional Dr Barwin is consulted. He wrote: ‘I have made just two minor alterations – on p. 1 and p. 3. I have altered the word “characteristic” to “skin”: skin colour is the important thing, and we do know something about the genes involved – we do not know much about the genes of lip thickness & one or two other features. These may be associated with dominant genes (as curly hair is) and so might show up — and I think would be unimportant in a person otherwise characteristically “white” ... Thanks for joining in the battle against racial prejudice – in my view the world’s biggest problem.’ Correspondence from Ian Hogbin, Anthropology Department, University of Sydney to Gwen Meredith, 24 July 1952, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 9, NLA.

⁹¹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 225–226.

⁹² Debates about the racial origin of Aboriginal people and the possibility of a return of colour were common and contested anthropological debates in the 1930s. See McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 158–180 for a discussion on the debates.

people and the white people who love them. It is proffered as the solution to 'race prejudice':

"It doesn't matter. But I [Josh Roberts] wish that all these years I'd really known it didn't."

Sally joined them again, "I wish that everyone could know," she said. "I wish that all those people who have it hanging over them and who are afraid because of it, whose lives and minds are warped and run a crooked path could know of this and find freedom through it."

"... I'm fighting the same battle against race prejudice ... Assimilation. It's the only answer that I [Dr Barwin] can see. And in Australia it's an essential answer."⁹³

The novel presents this ethnobiological 'fact' of the disappearance of colour as the moment of redemption and resolution in the story. It is this knowledge which opens the way for Sally and Anderson to marry. By implication it is the knowledge which can save white people from their own racist positions which they have been 'forced' to adopt in the interests of familial and national race purity. Josh Roberts, Brett Howard, Anderson Roberts and Sally Howard are all opposed to the marriage or unwilling to marry because of the issue or possibility of a 'throw-back to aboriginal colour'.⁹⁴ It is the 'only thing in the world that would stop' the marriage.⁹⁵ A promised and certain 'white Australia' in the future is what must be protected. The novel suggests that otherwise 'good' people are forced to enact 'colour prejudice' (for example Brett Howard's refusal to allow Anderson into his house) because of this justified fear. The anthropological knowledge liberates them from their racism.

The scientific knowledge produced near the end is the novel's trump card. It trumps the 'secret' knowledge of Anderson's heritage. It is the answer to the bottom-line question posed by white people when all the other aspects of sociocultural assimilation have been dealt with. The novel can triumphantly say: I promise they will look like us. With the knowledge that 'aboriginal colour works out over the generations'⁹⁶ the promise of a 'white Australia' is secured. After the impossibility of a 'throw back' is confirmed by Dr Barwin the three participants show their relief. They say again and again: '*It doesn't matter*', '*find freedom through*

⁹³ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, pp. 225–227.

⁹⁴ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 187.

⁹⁵ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 189.

⁹⁶ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 188.

it' and '*It's* an essential answer'.⁹⁷ What is *it*? What *it* is shifts; *it* is different for the three characters. For Dr Barwin *it* is assimilation: '*It's* the only answer I can see.'" For the others *it* is less clear. Perhaps the lack of clarity and ambiguity reflects the uncertainty of what this aspect of assimilation – state-sanctioned inter-racial sexual relations – meant for white people. *It* is a series of white people's anxieties. *It* can be colour, which doesn't matter, because it has been scientifically proven to disappear. Or *it* can be 'race prejudice' which doesn't matter because white people have been promised the disappearance of the group many of them fear. 'Race prejudice', 'colour prejudice', fear of Aboriginality, hatred of Aboriginality, desire for Aboriginality, the desire for sex with darker-skinned Aboriginal women, 'the Aboriginal problem', social ostracism – all these will be solved because *it* won't happen. They (multiple *its*) won't happen because *it* (a 'throwback') has been promised to be an impossibility. All forms of discrimination and fear of white people for Aboriginal people are loaded onto the fantasy of the 'throwback' (the return of colour) and then wished away. Science has promised Australia will be white. By taking an Aboriginal child from his mother in the past, and by judicious and carefully arranged marriages in the present, this novel can promise itself no coloured children in the future.⁹⁸

Having figured the future as white the novel can fully indulge the romance-melodrama plot that has always been a potential. Having been given a scientific imprimatur, the love of Sally and Anderson can spill out onto the page. In the final scene Anderson asks Sally to marry him and at the same time warns her of the prejudice she may have to face. The problems which the couple will face can now safely be represented as cultural and social forms of assimilation not miscegenation. Sally responds to Anderson's proposal and warning:

'Other people can do nothing to me. Oh Anderson, don't you realize that if you love me, that if I can have that, nobody else can hurt me? Nobody else

⁹⁷ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 226.

⁹⁸ Cf: 'Though no great fan of serials, I have followed your 'Blue Hills' for years. I think it tells of real people, facing real problems in real places. Also from time to time, information is given unobtrusively. One such piece of information was the fact that Andy Roberts couldn't father a black child unless his wife also had "dark blood" – silly term all blood is red! As this episode was repeated many Australians who have relatives married to dark Australians must have felt very real relief for, no matter how much we admire these people, we must admit that a dark skin is a handicap in our bigoted world. Thanks.' Correspondence from Eric Catterall, Lightning Ridge, NSW, to Gwen Meredith, 6 May 1965, Gwen Meredith Papers, MS 6789, Box 7, Folder 6, NLA.

can ever touch me. I can walk inviolate. If you can love me Anderson, I'll be guarded by a charm.'⁹⁹

The passage suggests in romantic style that it is love which guards or protects Sally. But in this novel, this romantic love is underwritten by a scientific guarantee of colour erasure and the disavowal of Anderson's Aboriginal heritage through the erasure of his mother.

The novel *Beyond Blue Hills* is a sympathetic novel which boldly produces a solution to 'colour prejudice' – through the rather transgressive plot of a romance between an Aboriginal man and white woman. This novel offers a narrative of assimilation, specifically marriage between white and Aboriginal people, as a solution to this prejudice. The solution of the novel is remarkably neat and contained. There are few textual moments of slippage or excess. The splitting of ambivalent feelings between the novels repertoire of characters rather than making them internal to one character means that each individual character's feelings are clear and unequivocal. No characters change their mind on the substance of the issue of inter-racial sexual relationships. This makes choices seem clear; solutions unambiguous.

The scientific information guarantees the (re)production of fair-skinned children and therefore secures the possibility of marriage for Anderson and Sally. This enables those who love Anderson and Sally to openly approve of their marriage, that is to approve of an inter-racial sexual relationship. The scientific discourse also works to change Anderson (or at least to change his future) from Aboriginal to white. In traditional race melodrama such a change would be effected through the revelation of a mistake or coincidence in the past (for example babies swapped at birth).¹⁰⁰ In this novel the change is effected by science. If Anderson and Sally obey the rules, science guarantees a white future.

In proffering this scientific solution to 'colour prejudice' there is some limited acknowledgment in the novel of the pain that this assimilationist solution will bring to individual Aboriginal people. For example the representation of the 'passing away of Anderson's mother, as representative of the unassimilable in 'white Australia', is figured as sad. However the novel makes equivalent the pain of Aboriginal and white people in assimilation. It suggests that both Aboriginal and white people who embrace the assimilation experiment will be on the receiving end of

⁹⁹ Meredith, *Beyond Blue Hills*, p. 243.

¹⁰⁰ Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, p. 307.

prejudice and that the meanings of this prejudice is equivalent for both groups. A specific Aboriginal pain arising from the elimination of Aboriginal culture only emerges in the character of the Aboriginal mother. However, the novel's deployment of the melodramatic trope of maternal self-sacrifice controls and limits the meaning of Anderson's mother in the novel. This specific representation of the separation of an Aboriginal child is figured as part of the long tradition of literary and cinematic good mothers who put their children's best interest above their own. Through individualizing separation, as a private decision made by Anderson's mother, the systemic government policies of Aboriginal child removal are erased and Anderson's mother is represented as the last in a long line of self-sacrificing mothers. There is only one point when the pain of assimilation erupts unexpectedly into the carefully controlled novel. Anderson's mother's appearance over the shoulder of her son is a moment where what is denied by the novel – a specific and massive Aboriginal trauma – emerges onto the page and the mythical status of the national story of assimilation as good for all becomes apparent.

In the late 1990s the trauma of Indigenous child removal continues to reverberate through all Australian Indigenous communities,¹⁰¹ and has significant effects in the wider Australian community.¹⁰² The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families as a central practice of government assimilation policies, enabled by the collaboration, silence, and privilege of white Australians, haunts all Australian history. Similarly, *Beyond Blue Hills* is haunted by the inhuman policy of Aboriginal child removal, upon which its assimilation narrative ultimately depends.

¹⁰¹ HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, Part 5.

¹⁰² See, for example, newspaper, magazine and journals in the wake of the release of the HREOC report *Bringing Them Home*, 26 May 1997 and also on National Sorry Day 26 May 1998. See for example: *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 June 1997; John Bond 'A day to honour the stolen generation', *The Canberra Times*, 7 April 1998, p. 3; Canberra Baptist Church, Apology and response to *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*, <http://www.canbap.org.au/apology1.html>. Accessed 6 January 1999.

Haunted homes:
domesticity, desire and dispossession in
Helen Heney's *The Leaping Blaze*

i: introduction

There is a moment in *Beyond Blue Hills*, which I quoted, when Colin Roberts, Anderson's half-brother, muses on inter-racial sexual relationships, recalling how funny it is to hear a joke at the club about white men who have slept with Aboriginal women. When it turns out that the man who is the subject of such gossip is his father he finds the issue far from funny, almost unthinkable and closes off the thought. If *Beyond Blue Hills*, through its melodramatic plot and deliberately didactic scientific language, managed and domesticated white people's disquiet about inter-racial sexual relationships in *their* families, *The Leaping Blaze* attempting a similar project, produces a gothic horror story.

According to Helen Heney her novel *The Leaping Blaze*, explores 'the question of the assimilation the Aborigine into the Australian way of life'.¹ It does so through the story of a white foster mother's relationship with her 'adopted' Aboriginal daughter. Heney's novel quite openly and deliberately plays with the ambivalences that inhere in assimilation policies – the oscillating feelings of love and hatred, of desire and repulsion. In this text ambivalence is focused on a white foster mother's anger when she belatedly discovers that her foster daughter is actually her father's illegitimate granddaughter. This discovery shifts the relationship

¹ Correspondence from Helen Heney to Angus and Robertson manuscript reader, undated, Angus and Robertson Papers, second collection, Helen Heney File, MS 3269, Doc. 303, ML.

between the two characters from one of philanthropic fostering to familial connection.

In exploring the connections between paternity, assimilation, inter-racial sex and inheritance I will focus on representations of the mother figure and the family. As I argued in the previous chapter the white maternal figure is often emblematic of purity in the discourses of 'white Australia'. In this text, the maternal is a site of gothic excess. Successive generations of white mothers kill Aboriginal children, exposing the terror at the heart of the white family for fostered Aboriginal children.

The Leaping Blaze's narrative structure reproduces one particular point of tension which characterises the project of assimilation. It is a novel about the impossibility of sociocultural assimilation because of the presence of hidden desires for inter-racial sexual relationships and the resulting lack of certainty in national, familial and individual racial identities. Using Teresa Goddu's idea that the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history² I will explore the violent processes of displacement and exclusion that are mobilised to keep a white family, *qua* the Australian nation, white. In *The Leaping Blaze* there are three main sites where these anxieties about the white family emerge in gothic excess: paternal extra-marital sex, a relationship that is understood as incestuous and maternal hatred and infanticide.

Aboriginal-white relations pivot on the issue of land. In national stories of Australian identity and culture, white Australians are represented as legitimately owning the land;³ white endeavour and progeniture are figured as having marked the land as white. This national fantasy is at the heart of *The Leaping Blaze*. However, the text's gothic form exposes the uncertainty of this national self representation of belonging to the land and confirms Aboriginal people's original and continuing occupation.⁴ The maternal killing of Aboriginal child relatives, as potential (re)inheritors of land from which they have been dispossessed, highlights the instability and illegitimacy of the white family's sense of ownership of their property – the Lake. The white owners of the Lake are revealed to be uncertainly white. This moment of revelation undermines the national

² Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10.

³ This legal state of affairs was only partially shifted in law with the 1992 'Mabo' judgement by the High Court which rejected the legal precedent of *terra nullius* and recognised the existence of native title. See for example Bain Attwood (ed.), *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1996.

⁴ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. 24; Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10.

story of a 'white Australia'. Who will inherit Australia becomes the central question of the text.⁵

My argument is that sociocultural assimilation is compromised by white people's uncertainty about their own white genealogies. That is, they are worried by histories of inter-racial sexual relationships. The characters of Mary Foster, Jerry Stokes and Beattie King – the young Aboriginal teenagers and adults who have been subject to assimilation – are the main locus for these anxieties which in particular Evangeline Wade, the white foster mother, generates through her troubled understanding of her family as white. The novel settles these anxieties about uncertain racial identity through the violent, though differentiated, elimination of these three most troubling Aboriginal characters. It also constructs a story of white redemption, white mastery and reasserts a vision of a coherent white nation.

This chapter is organised into three main sections. In the first I discuss the issues of author, plot and genre, exploring in particular the logic of the gothic form and how this relates to the structure of *The Leaping Blaze*. In the next section I argue that *The Leaping Blaze* is an anxious novel. I set out the major sites of that anxiety – the family, mothers, maternal violence, the Aboriginal foster child and property inheritance. Then in the final section I examine the ways in which this novel recontains these anxieties, through violence.

⁵ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 63.

'gothic's horrors are actual, not fictional – written in the flesh as well as the text – any attempt to resurrect them can be painful and difficult.'

Teresa Goddu⁶

Author

Author Helen Heney (1907–1986) was the daughter and granddaughter of journalists. Her father wrote at least two romance novels set in the outback of New South Wales.⁷ Heney's brother and sister were published authors as well. On completing a Bachelor of Arts, Heney lived overseas for some years, first in Britain, then for an extended period in Poland, where she taught English and undertook translation work. After returning to Australia she trained at Sydney University as a social worker.⁸ She wrote five novels,⁹ though her most well known work was her biography of the Polish explorer Paul Strzelecki.¹⁰ Of the five novels, three concern issues of inter-racial social relations. *The Chinese Camellia*, set in Kiama, is about the dissolution of a family after the father is sent the 'gift' of a Chinese concubine. *Dark Moon* is based on the story of the 'capture' of a white woman by Koori clans in Gippsland in early nineteenth century Victoria, and *The Leaping Blaze* is concerned with Aboriginal assimilation.

The Leaping Blaze (1962) was written in the early part of a decade which saw the increased questioning of the success of policies of assimilation.¹¹ The novel is written after the peak of Aboriginal child

⁶ Goddu, *Gothic America*: p. 154.

⁷ See for example: Thomas W. Heney, *Fortunate Days*, Turner and Henderson, Sydney, 1886; Thomas W. Heney, *A Station Courtship: a Pastoral of the Paroo, an Australian Story*, Lock and Bowden, London, 1896. See also Helen Heney, Biographical notes on the Heney family, 1830–1974, MS 2285, ML.

⁸ Helen Heney, Biographical notes on the Heney family, 1830–1974, MS 2285, ML.

⁹ Besides *The Leaping Blaze* (1962) Heney wrote *The Proud Lady*, Collins, London, 1951; *The Chinese Camellia*, Collins, London, 1950; *Dark Moon*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1953; *The Quiet Dust*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1956.

¹⁰ *In a Dark Glass: The Story of Paul Edmund Strzelecki*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962.

¹¹ For example T. G. H. Strehlow in his pamphlet on assimilation (published in 1964, but first presented in 1961) argues that he finds it 'impossible to advocate an "assimilation" concept which involved the complete cultural and physical annihilation of the original inhabitants of Australia'. (p. 2) He stresses that for him assimilation must mean 'a process of education' focused on skill acquisition. His argument emphasises that 'dark' and 'white' Australians will 'mix' on a 'basis of full equality'. (p. 2) T. G. H. Strehlow, *Assimilation Problems: The Aboriginal Viewpoint*, Aborigines Advancement League Inc of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964. This is more in line with Elkin's argument of equal but separate communities. See Elkin, *Citizenship*.

removal in New South Wales¹² and it coincides with the intensification of the questioning of the institutionalization of Aboriginal children and shifts in policy to fostering and integration.¹³ This novel struggles with these issues through representations of the problems of the fostering of Aboriginal children and the creation of a group of Aboriginal people who are 'citizens' and 'half-castes'.¹⁴ The novel ends with the local vicar addressing a portrait of the man who fathered some of the children of mixed heritage who are the focus of the plot:

"You started it ... But even without you, or your wife or Vanne, or the child that I'm almost sure was Mary's father ... the whole thing was bigger and deeper than anything any one of us whites could do. They're the future, those two – the aboriginal problem, whatever road they're wandering on now. We took them, in the name of kindness, and made them something we would only fear and hate once it hit us economically – something we couldn't deal with, or they either. That was our real crime – the one you counted your greatest merit. But even so it is not the end."¹⁵

Captured in this vignette of the vicar addressing the long-dead squatter is the central issue of the assimilation of the early 1960s – the current generation of white administrators, church and civic leaders struggling to deal with the failure of their solution (assimilation) to the earlier problem of inter-racial sexual relationships. This novel contests the notion of Aboriginal people being 'absorbed painlessly but completely in the white population'.¹⁶ It also emphasises the reasons why Aboriginal people might be less than 'enthusiastic' about plans which figure them as collaborating in their 'physical and cultural extinction'.¹⁷ There is an acknowledgment of Aboriginal people's agency and contestation of aspects of assimilation

¹² Peter Read estimates that approximately 5600 Aboriginal children were removed in New South Wales between 1883 and 1969. Heney's novel was published close to the abolition of the New South Wales Aborigines' Welfare Board in 1969 and the shift in the government's child removal policy. Peter Read, *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales, 1888–1969*, New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney, c.1996, p. 13; HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, p. 48. Though it needs to be noted that there was still a very high number of Aboriginal children in 'substitute care' (away from their families) in the post-1969 period and up to the present. See Link Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, p. 141.

¹³ The novel is published five years after an advertising campaign by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board seeking white foster homes for institutionalised Aboriginal children. See Read, *The Stolen Generations*, p. 20; Link Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, pp. 88–95.

¹⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 271–272.

¹⁶ Strehlow, *Aboriginal Problems*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Strehlow, *Aboriginal Problems*, p. 6.

practice. However, the ending of *The Leaping Blaze* rejects Aboriginal people of mixed heritage in its solution to 'the Aboriginal problem'.

Plot¹⁸

The central character, Evangeline Wade, is the white owner of a large property called the Lake. On this property, which has been in the Wade family for three generations, is a private school and housing estate for Aboriginal people. The operation of the Lake as a private 'mission' for Aboriginal people was the result of Evangeline's father – William Wade – who felt responsible for the suffering he had caused local Aboriginal people. He had fathered three children with an Aboriginal woman called Effie and one child had died in his care. The terms of his will included a clause which stated that: 'provision be made out of the income of the estate, at the discretion of my beneficiary, for the care and relief of such native Australians as may seek it'.¹⁹ Evangeline Wade sets up the houses and school in accordance with the will, not out of benevolence but as a way to trap a white man she is in love with, the generous minded Harold Starr, who she knows will come and work as a school teacher for the project. After the settlement is set up, an Aboriginal woman called Dorrie Foster arrives at the Lake with her child Mary. One day Dorrie departs, leaving Mary behind. There is a persistent rumour that Evangeline wanted Mary as her child and competed with Dorrie for her.²⁰

The novel begins with the return of Mary to the Lake. Mary is the only 'success' to come out of the school. After the completion of her education at the Lake she went to Sydney to undertake nursing training, but she returns months short of finishing her training after the abrupt ending of her relationship with a white doctor who had used her for her 'exotic' beauty but would not marry her.²¹ The novel focuses on Mary and her relationship with Evangeline who raised her. It is never clear whether Evangeline is Mary's genealogical aunt or unofficial adoptive mother. The

¹⁸ Contemporary reviewers of *The Leaping Blaze* noted the complexity of the plot. Nancy Cato wrote: 'the author has contrived a complicated plot ... And names are irritatingly similar, so that it takes a long time to sort out the Johnnies and Jerries and Billies and Madges and Marys to be sure which are aboriginal and which are not.' Nancy Cato, 'Dark deeds', *Australian Book Review*, Vol. 2, No. 86, March 1963, p. 86. Nancy Keesing wrote: '*The Leaping Blaze* is one of the most arbitrarily planned books I have read ... By the end of the first chapter the plot has thickened to a point where it is hard to sort out characters, loyalties and implications.' Nancy Keesing, 'Back to the plot, melodrama, malice and madness', *Bulletin*, Vol. 84, No. 40, 15 December 1962, p. 40.

¹⁹ Heney *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 55.

²⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 160 and 179.

²¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 15–16.

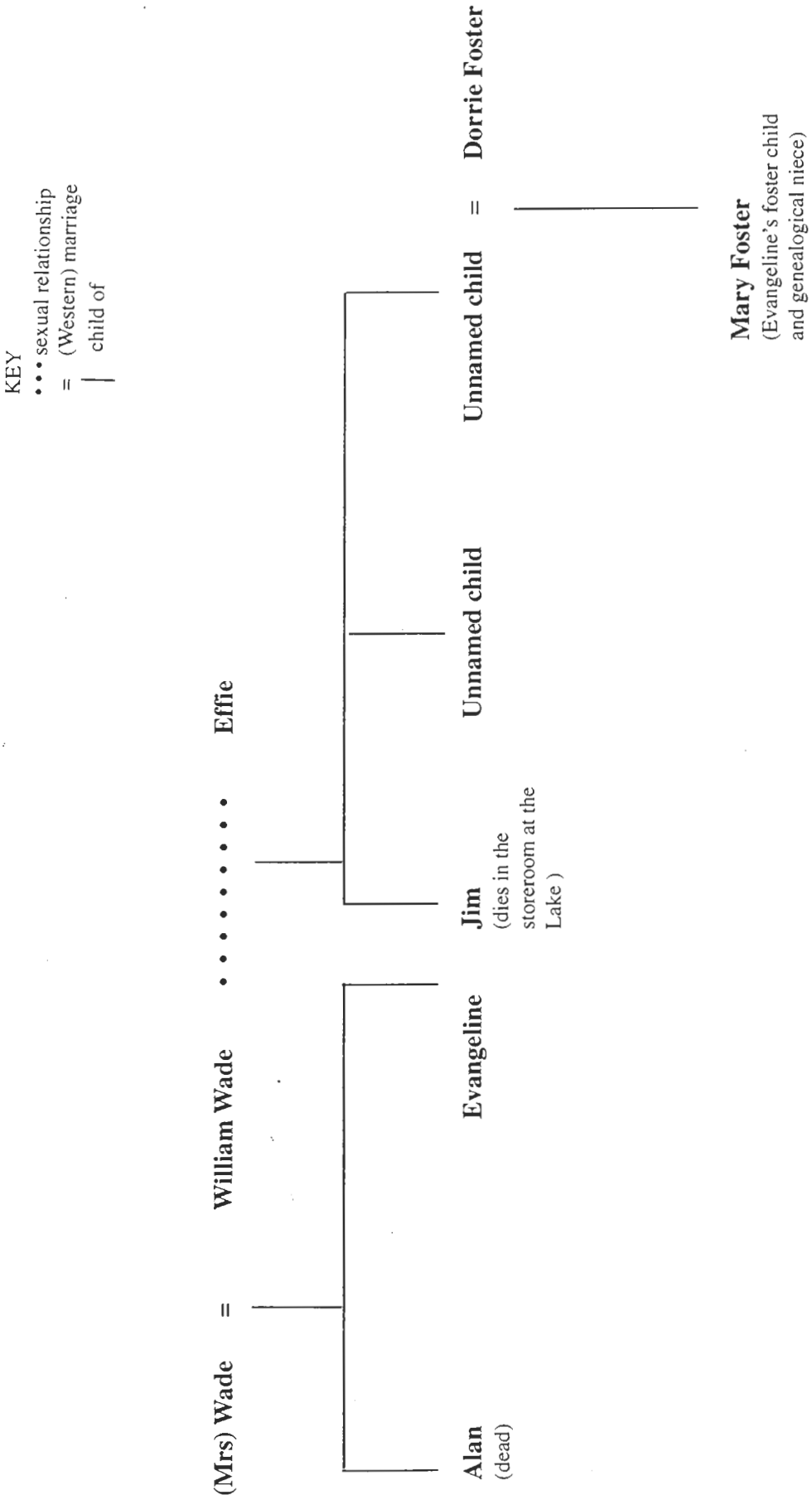
uncertainty about this relationship emerges from William Wade's affair with Effie. Effie had left the Lake suddenly after her son Jim was killed and was pregnant when she left. There is a chance that Effie's and William Wade's grandchild is Mary Foster (see figure 4). It is this tension of knowing and not knowing about family connections, step-relations, illegitimate siblings across race lines which produces the tragic tensions of the novel.²² The return of Mary to the property that she may inherit sets in motion the unsettling events which destroy the family.

Also living at the Lake is Jerry Stokes, a man represented as Mary's opposite. He is an Aboriginal man about Mary's age who has arrived at the Lake in Mary's absence, and who is represented as her most likely marriage partner. Like Mary, Jerry is represented as a lost soul in 'white Australia'. He fought as a commando in the Korean War and has returned to Australia a disturbed man. He is represented as drinking too much, aggressive and antagonistic to the idea of assimilation. Like Mary he has no life in the world outside the Lake. His mechanics qualifications for example are informal, and like Mary, the space represented as his home – the Lake – is ruled by a woman who both hates and desires him. Jerry is represented as the flip side of the 'philanthropic' project at the Lake designed to raise Aboriginal children to be 'good' workers for white people. Mary is diligent and obedient; Jerry is recalcitrant and aggressive.

Harold Starr is the long-serving school teacher at the Lake. He is Evangeline's long-time unrequited love. Married twice, he still does not know of her love for him. Esme and Margot are Harold's two wives: Margot died in child-birth; Esme, who lives at the Lake, is

²² These are also the forms and tropes of classic 'race' melodrama. See: Gilman, 'The Mulatto'; Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*.

figure 4: The Wade family tree



represented as a 'tarty' ex-cinema usherette. She is the mother of Harold's son Garry. Harold is figured as Mary's father or uncle. There is an undercurrent throughout the novel of Harold's incestuous love for her.

Billy King, his daughter Florrie and granddaughter Beattie live in the Aboriginal settlement at the Lake. They are the only Aboriginal people whose country is the area of the Lake. The character of Beattie King is the most caricatured using the stereotype of what Heney refers to as 'the pathetic, unwanted half-caste'.²³ She and Billy work in Evangeline's house. Also associated with the property are the white family of Dan and Madge Conolly and their son Johnny. Dan is the long-time manager of the Lake; Johnny is a mechanic in town, who lives and works with Jerry, and at one time dates Mary, but ends up running off with Esme (see figure 5).

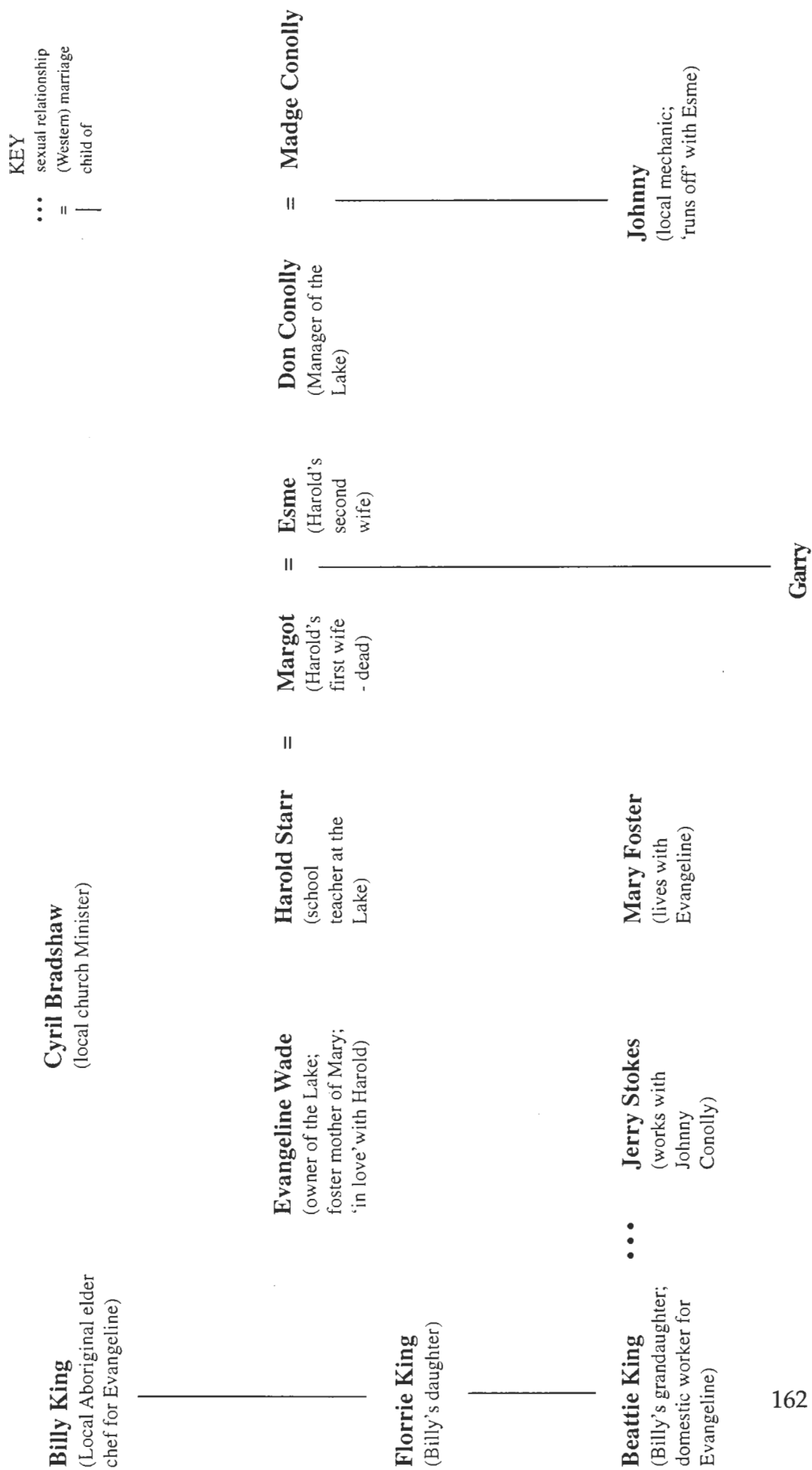
The Leaping Blaze takes place over a number of months, starting with Mary's return in winter and ending on Christmas day. There are three pivotal events in the novel which follow on from Mary's return. The first is the revelation to Evangeline, by Jerry Stokes, of a family secret about the Aboriginal half-brothers she was unaware existed. Second is Jerry's seduction of the housemaid Beattie, her subsequent pregnancy and death. Finally there is the revelation of Harold's desire for Mary, which leads to his seduction of her and precipitates Mary and Jerry's flight from the Lake. All these events and their consequences hinge on Evangeline's ambivalent desire for Mary, Jerry and Beattie.

On the evening of Mary's return Evangeline learns what everyone else in the community of the Lake already knows, the open secret of her family.²⁴ Jerry and Dan Conolly between them inform Evangeline of William Wade's long relationship with Effie, and her own mother's reaction when she learned of the relationship. More than this Evangeline learns the truth of what sent Effie fleeing from the Lake. Evangeline's mother (she is not named in the text) hated the Lake and mostly stayed in Sydney. In her absence William Wade had taken an Aboriginal lover. However at some point Evangeline's mother came to live with her husband. By this time Effie had two sons,

²³ Correspondence from Helen Heney to Beatrice Davis, editor, Angus and Robertson, 24 June 1958, Angus and Robertson Papers, second collection, Helen Heney File, MS 3269, Doc 279–283, ML.

²⁴ This theme of the secret revealed appears in much Australian assimilation writing. See for example: *Beyond Blue Hills*. (chapter 4 this thesis); E. V. Timms (1962), *The Big Country*, The Readers Book Club, London, 1963; Cusack, *Black Lightning*; Campion, *Come Again*.

figure 5: The characters in *The Leaping Blaze*



a ten year old, Jim, and a two year old, and is pregnant with a third child. It is at this time that Evangeline's mother 'tumbled' to the knowledge that Effie's children were also her husband's. One day Evangeline's mother was alone with Jim in the property storeroom. She accused the child of stealing. No one knew what happened, but either the shelves in the room fell on Jim or Mrs Wade pushed the shelves onto the child, who was killed. The pregnant Effie ran from the property with her remaining son, never to return. The coroner finds a verdict of accidental death and William Wade took the blame for having top-heavy shelves in the storeroom. Parallel to Effie's flight, William Wade's wife left the property, already pregnant with Evangeline, also never to return.²⁵

Jerry Stokes knows the story of Jim Wade's death and hates Evangeline Wade for it. He also initially hates Mary for her association with Evangeline. One of the ways in which this resentment and antagonism between Evangeline and Jerry is played out is in a sexual struggle around Mary and Beattie. Evangeline tries to set Jerry up with Beattie to keep him away from Mary. Jerry knows he is being set up and so seduces Beattie, to upset Evangeline, resulting in Beattie becoming pregnant.

The final scenes take place on Christmas eve. Beattie has been looking after Harold and Esme Starr's child, Garry. She has been growing ever more angry at Esme and Johnny Conolly for their illicit affair and the resulting neglect of Garry. Beattie is heavily pregnant and represented as psychologically disturbed. While most of the residents are at midnight carols, she takes Garry from his house, goes to where Jerry is sleeping in his home, douses Jerry in petrol and tries to set him alight. She then takes Garry to the old storehouse where Jim Wade died many years earlier. Beattie sets the building on fire and is about to immolate herself and the boy when Mary arrives.²⁶ While in church Mary had intuited that something is wrong, and headed back to the Lake, with Harold following her. In a scene which references *Jane Eyre*, Mary arrives in time to struggle with Beattie in the already burning storeroom. She saves Garry, but Beattie and her unborn baby die in the fire.²⁷

²⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 29.

²⁶ Issues of colonialism and self destructive behaviour are pertinent here. The toll on Aboriginal people through such actions in Australia is still high. See for example: *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report*, AGPS, Canberra, c.1991; Paul Wilson, *Black Death White Hands* (1982), Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1985. Thanks to Tikka Wilson for pointing this out to me.

²⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 262–263.

In the wake of the death of Beattie and the saving of Garry, Harold seduces Mary in a scene which is figured unambiguously as incest. These final events seal Mary's and Jerry's knowledge that they belong together, but that they do not belong at the Lake. The two of them disappear from the Lake, leaving Evangeline to seek forgiveness and redemption for her part in their expulsion and Beattie's death.

Woven into the plot is the unresolved question of who will inherit the property of the Lake when Evangeline dies. A series of different solutions or outcomes are posited over the length of the novel. This is one of the most unclear aspects of the plot. It is never certain whether Evangeline has changed her will, made Mary her heir, set up a public company or divided the property five ways. With the expulsion of Mary and Jerry from the property, the death of Beattie, the desertion of Esme and Harold Starr, the voluntary departure of Billy King and Evangeline's impending marriage to the local vicar, the question is partially clarified – none of the Aboriginal people will inherit the Lake.

Gothic

The plot of *The Leaping Blaze* is convoluted, hard to follow and excessive. Sentences read twice over are still ambiguous. People are not sure of where they belong, who is related to them or what secrets there are in their past. A productive way of reading the novel is in terms of gothic conventions. Robert Miles defines the gothic as a 'discursive site, a "carnavalesque" mode for representations of the fragmented subject'.²⁸ With a substantial nod to Michel Foucault and Eve Sedgwick, Miles emphasises that gothic sensibilities do not emerge at moments when the self or subject is in crisis, rather the self is always a site of conflict and gothic devices and tropes enable the expression of that conflicted subject.²⁹ The novel's opacity does not mask a truth, rather it draws attention to fractured and unstable sites in subjects and cultures.³⁰

The form of a gothic tale and the stories it contests are historically specific. Though the themes and codes of gothic – horror, the

²⁸ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p. 4.

²⁹ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, pp. 2–3. Cf *Beyond Blue Hills* where conflict and crisis about the ambivalence of inter-racial sexual relation are spread amongst characters rather than being internal to one character as is the case in this novel.

³⁰ Given this textual slipperiness it is worth noting that my plot summary is deeply inflected with my own desires and incoherencies, as a reader from the late twentieth century reading back into the mid-twentieth century.

supernatural, sexual desire, historical genealogies, national pasts, murder and death – are repetitive, there are no essential themes at the heart of gothic. Different texts address different issues.³¹ *The Leaping Blaze* draws on the historically specific circumstances of colonization in Australia and the history of sexual contact between Aboriginal and white people.³² The novel is suffused with an air of mystery, which correlates with the mystery about parentage of many Aboriginal children and adults who have a white parent, and the antithetical issue for many white families of 'discovering' or trying to uncover stories about illegitimate children born of Aboriginal women in relationships with married white men. The novel mobilises an inter-textual, self-referential gothic aesthetic. For example, the trio of Evangeline, Jerry and Mary – the single-mothered family – is represented at one moment through a direct allusion to the creation of the monster by Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's gothic text³³ and as I suggested earlier the gothic ending of Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is replayed in the death of Beattie.³⁴

Gothic scenes 'force you to see what is usually repressed'.³⁵ What is glimpsed is what is usually excluded or absent in the national cultural myth.³⁶ In *The Leaping Blaze* what is glimpsed is the white people's fear that young, educated Aboriginal citizens will expose their savagery towards Aboriginal children and contest them for the land. The manager of the Lake states the fear neatly. He addresses Evangeline: 'Floosies like Florrie, fools like Beattie and Shirley and Clarice and the boy-friends and kids make you feel like the lady with the lamp – or the whip – but those two [Mary and Jerry] are different'.³⁷ Yet gothic literature can (re)secure or coalesce identity, effect closure around disturbing issues, as much as it can 'speak the unspeakable'.³⁸ Garrett Stewart makes this point, stating that

³¹ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 3

³² See Donaldson's term 'sexual contact history'. Donaldson, 'Australian tales', pp. 341–352.

³³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 90.

³⁴ There are striking parallels between the representation of Beattie and Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. For example both are figured as wild, uncontrollable, lacking grace. See Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre, An Autobiography* (1847), Oxford University Press, London, 1961, pp. 370–372.

³⁵ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 20.

³⁶ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, pp. 26–27.

³⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 66–67.

³⁸ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10; Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 3.

gothic tales 'disinfect the same emotive sore spots they have stung into recognition'.³⁹

This text exaggerates differences between Aboriginal and white people, representing both in extremes. The language is affective, designed to excite the emotions and engage the reader. Representations of Evangeline, Beattie, Mary and Jerry are particularly excessive. This distances them from the everyday and produces a space for the expression of the forbidden in the national myths – dispossession, murder and incest. Descriptions of Jerry often conjure up the exaggerated idea of him as both profane and divine. In one scene Jerry is described in a way that compares him to both the crucified Christ and as 'primitive'.⁴⁰ He is also described as like an 'unbroken wild horse'.⁴¹ Similarly, the dying Beattie is represented as disturbed and not human but 'like a wild animal'.⁴² The representations of Mary are also excessive and make Christian allusions, but they work in a different way. Her name and her immaculate dress and beauty invoke images of the Virgin Mary. In contrast her return from a worldly relationship in Sydney and subsequent figurings of her as glamorous and mannequin-like invoke the more ambivalent image of Mary Magdalene. Evangeline is also represented in terms of excess. She is referred to as corrupt and dark and as the lady with 'the whip'. Her behaviour is marked as erratic and excessive. She is figured as quite openly hating the Aboriginal people in her care. In fact representations of Evangeline subvert the whole assimilation dream. Like her mother before her, Evangeline hates Aboriginal children.

The Leaping Blaze 'reveals how national identity is created through abjection'⁴³ repeatedly expelling and denying the Aboriginal body (blackness) which is at the heart of a 'white Australia'.⁴⁴ The novel is saturated with forbidden desires: the sexual desire of white people for Aboriginal people, but also white people's desire that Aboriginal people disappear. As I argued in chapter 1, taking my lead from Foucault, in discourses of assimilation these forbidden desires – often signified by the figure of the half-caste – are spoken about *ad infinitum* though often in

³⁹ Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996, p. 392. Also Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 175.

⁴¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 168.

⁴² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 262.

⁴³ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Cf Hodge and Mishra's idea of 'symbolic annihilation'. Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. xv.

terms of a secret knowledge.⁴⁵ The murderous intent of white people faced with an Aboriginal relative is not frequently voiced publicly in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the gothic sensibilities of *The Leaping Blaze* do produce a space for the airing of this 'deepest desire and fear of individuals and groups'⁴⁶ of the assimilation project. There is a horror for the writer and intended reader in fantasising about the murderous intent of Evangeline towards Beattie, Mary and Jerry. These desires disturb the text. What is disturbed are notions of whiteness as good. Pointedly the novel offers a glimpse of white people's disavowed vision of themselves as terror for Aboriginal people. However, the novel's ending with the death of Beattie and the expulsion of Mary and Jerry from the Lake reasserts white control of the meaning of assimilation. It represses the forbidden and reasserts white dominance as central to the project of a 'white Australia'.

This bizarre and violent domestic novel represents the project of assimilation as compromised by the desire of white people for Aboriginal people, and further that this desire is constitutive of and produces anxieties about the status of white families. Attempts are made to assuage these anxieties by the terrifying erasure (murder) of the Aboriginal people who represent this uncertainty. The next section examines these specific anxieties about white people as compromised by assimilation dreams as they are played out in the domestic plot of uncertain family lines, infanticide, incest and maternal violence.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 35. See also Hodge and Mishra who make a similar point arguing that texts on Australian national identity 'insist on flaunting [their] secrets before the public gaze.' Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. xvi.

⁴⁶ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. xvi.

'Etymologically the verb to domesticate is akin to dominate.'
Anne McClintock⁴⁷

Families

I argued in the previous chapter that the domestic sphere is not peripheral to the production of discourses of assimilation, but a central site of production.⁴⁸ *The Leaping Blaze* is about very specific domestic configurations of assimilation. It enunciates particular domestic fantasies which can be read as expressing white cultural confusion about the uncertainty and break-down of the family, *qua* nation, brought about as a result of inter-racial sexual relationships. In particular father-daughter incest, mother-child hatred, and muddled family genealogies are the gothic devices that signal white fear or ambivalence about the permeability of the boundaries of the white family/nation.

The motif of the family recurs throughout the novel. The text sets up various configurations of the family. These configurations appear as fantasy families that cross class and race lines and are characterised as divine or monstrous. The trio of Evangeline, Jerry and Mary is a family contaminated by the bad mothering habits of Evangeline. The family of Harold, Esme and Garry Starr is poisoned by the poor mothering and refusal of sex with her husband by Esme. The trio of Jerry, Mary and an Aboriginal child is referred to as 'like a black Holy Family'.⁴⁹ The family combination of Billy King, Mary and Jerry is characterised as the perfect Aboriginal family group. Harold Starr, his first wife, Margot and Mary are figured as the perfect adoptive or foster family. There are also absent families: that of Effie and her children all forced to flee the Lake after the murder of one of the children; and the family of Dorrie Foster, her unknown husband and their daughter Mary, made homeless by white hatred.

The text produces pleasures and fears about particular familial arrangements and a certain level of textual mastery in the imagining and

⁴⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 35.

⁴⁸ See for example: Jackie Huggins, "'Firing on in the mind": Aboriginal women domestic servants in the interwar years', *Hecate*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1987-8, pp. 5-23; Read, *The Stolen Generations*; Jackie Huggins and Thom Blake, 'Protection or persecution: gender relations in the era of racial segregation', in Saunders and Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia*.

⁴⁹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 104.

forbidding of particular configurations. For example, the trio of Billy King, Mary and Jerry is represented as an ideal family. Yet the construction of this Aboriginal family actually displaces the King family (father, daughter, granddaughter) as it was first represented in the novel. The novel discursively produces Aboriginal families as plastic; they can be changed at will. It represents the break-up of Aboriginal families upon which assimilation is premised. The family of Billy, Mary and Jerry signifies an unambiguously black family. They are imagined at one point as 'three motionless figures on some dark plain',⁵⁰ placed in an abstract and timeless space without white people. The trope of this trio as dehistoricized and primitivized separates them from the white world, making them the idealized black family for a white nation anxious about miscegenation. This separated and separatist racial world is never fully secured in the text. In its gothic moments the novel exposes that at the heart of the white family is the very thing which has been disavowed – Aboriginality.

The changeability of family formulations also produces anxieties about just how white some white families are. Through its constant shuffling of families the novel exposes the constructed rather than natural status of the white family. The repetition of the motif of families, of continually making and unmaking them, does not stabilize the white family but represents the uncertainty of this formation, which is the core unit of 'white Australia'. The text plays out the crisis around families in the discourses of 'white Australia'. The hard working Conolly family is represented as a securely white family. The Conolly's clear and unambiguous racism marks them as 'pure' white contrasting strikingly with the Wade family. William Wade's children with Effie mean that the extended Wade family includes Aboriginal members. At moments the text writes the white assimilationist desire for cultural integration and refusal of inter-racial sexual relationships. At other moments it indulges the fantasy of transgressing miscegenist taboos. For example, in the moment when Evangeline is represented as desiring Harold Starr he is figured as black. There are certain pleasures in crossing this line, but it also produces uncertainty.

The domestic sphere is an important place where pleasures and anxieties organised around inter-racial desire are played out. In *Beyond Blue Hills*, there is a clear family genealogy and a scientific stamp of approval to defuse the miscegenist fantasy. Similarly the narrative and

⁵⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 174.

plot of that novel are clear in giving readers no sense of confusion or transgression of the family genealogies or therefore the national genealogy. In *The Leaping Blaze* this clarity and certainty is absent. The novel's conclusion comes close to 'purifying' the space of the white family, but only through destroying the progeny, the next generation of both the white family and the Aboriginal family, that is, it succeeds only by making the family and the nation barren.

Mothers

The motif of mothers and mothering is central to *The Leaping Blaze*. I argued in the previous chapter that assimilation policy was premised upon Aboriginal child removal from their mothers or community and placing them in the care of white mothers or institutions (run by white matrons/mothers). One focus of *The Leaping Blaze* is fostering, that is placing an Aboriginal child in a white household. Aside from the white woman and Aboriginal foster daughter the novel represents a number of other mother/child relations that worried the white Australian imagination at the time: the neglectful white working-class mother and child and the white employer and Aboriginal domestic worker. The novel also calls into question mother/daughter relationships that 'white Australian' myths of nation naturalized – the white mother and white daughter.

The raced and classed inflections of mothering in this text are interesting. Esme Starr and Evangeline are represented as the worst of mothers. The characterization of working-class Esme as uncaring is almost comically absurd.⁵¹ She is presented as 'bright and brittle', 'common-place' and only interested in the bright city lights and fun, not the efforts of mothering.⁵² In one scene she stands up, forgetting that her child is on her lap and he falls to the ground.⁵³ Esme is no longer mothering her child at the end of the novel and there is a suggestion that the child could end up being fostered with relatives in the town of Cootamundra.⁵⁴ Evangeline's inadequacies with children are not represented as deriving from her

⁵¹ See Helen Heney's comments on her time as an almoner (social worker) in Sydney: 'they did not think I was good almoner material ... I with my university education and idealism ... was arrogant and insufferable ... All my life I have lived in the structure of Edwardian England ... Well there were "U's" and "Non U's". I mean I'm intolerably snobbish now.' Helen Heney, Oral Interview, *Australia 1938 History Project*, Transcript 2015, tape 1, side 2, 114–590, NLA.

⁵² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 14.

⁵³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 154.

⁵⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 270.

suspect class origins; rather she bears the stigma of her own mother's maternal inadequacies.⁵⁵ She admits to being 'hopeless with young children'.⁵⁶ When challenged about this she replies that if a woman cannot 'handle her child ... one has to look for something unusual in the mother. Something – abnormal'.⁵⁷ The reference alludes to Evangeline's mother as 'abnormal' in having killed Jim Wade. Both Beattie and Mary are represented as good or natural mothers. They fill the gap in Esme's inadequate mothering skills. As Aboriginal women they are represented as not suitable to marry Harold Starr, a white man, but both are figured as sufficiently trained (one as a nurse, one as a domestic labourer) to substitute for the inadequate white mother.⁵⁸

These mother-daughter relationships are all underpinned by the idea of the monstrous maternal.⁵⁹ The maternal is a site of excess. Tania Modleski argues that gothic novels 'serve in part to convince women that they are not their mothers'.⁶⁰ In *The Leaping Blaze* the mother-daughter dyad is figured as an 'inescapable mimesis'.⁶¹ For example, in the story of assimilation, where Mary is separated from her mother and fostered into a white family there is the threat that Mary may still be like her mother, that is, Aboriginal. Similarly, in the story of Evangeline's sexual jealousy towards Aboriginal women – Dorrie Foster and Mary – there is the threat that Evangeline will be like her mother, a murderer. The story of Evangeline's mother's hatred of Effie and Jim in many ways mimics Evangeline's own hatred for Mary and Jerry and Beattie.

⁵⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 73.

⁵⁸ This links with the text's references to Cootamundra. It was at the state-run institution in this town that Aboriginal girls and young women were taught the skills they were to use as domestic labourers in white people's homes. See for example Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*; Edwards, 'Is the ward clean?'

⁵⁹ Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the monstrous feminine – an imaginary abjection', *Screen*, Vol. 27, No. 1, January/February, 1986, pp. 44–71.

⁶⁰ Modleski's argument is that women generally have a stronger sense of the uncanny than men, because the uncanny is about separation anxiety and women have more difficulty imagining themselves as separated from the maternal. Since gothic scenarios replay the idea of the uncanny, women readers of the gothic can disavow their over-identification with an (m)other through their discovery of 'what really happened to the victimized woman with whom [they] have been identified'. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), Routledge, New York and London, 1990, p. 71.

⁶¹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 143.

Maternal violence/white women's violence

From the beginning of *The Leaping Blaze* gothic devices allow the speaking of the unspeakable: that white families are sites of terror for Aboriginal people and that that terror is perpetrated in a paradoxical effort to keep what is already not-white, pure white. The revelation to Evangeline of the secret of her mother murdering Jim Wade exposes the non-whiteness of her extended family. More than this, Evangeline's ambivalence about this mixed genealogy reinforces her hatred and desire for Aboriginal people. This ambivalence is produced in the text in the desire for assimilation (bringing Aboriginal people into the family/nation) and the concomitant revulsion at the possible implications of this miscegenation (a not-'white Australia'). In the moment of violence, when the shelves of the storeroom crash down on Jim Wade, the dream of a 'white Australia' is both secured, through the Aboriginal son's death, and disturbed, through the violent elimination of the person who signified the desire of a white man for an Aboriginal woman. The original scene of violent 'infanticide' is repeated later in the text when Evangeline, who through her psychological abuse and manipulation of Beattie, sends her 'mad' and so to her death.

This trope of violent expulsion by the white woman of the Aboriginal person who disturbs the white story is also faintly figured in two other scenes which take place in the storeroom, one between Evangeline and Mary, the other between Evangeline and Jerry. In one scene Evangeline screams at Mary when she mentions the ghost (Jim Wade) who haunts the storeroom and moves to violently slap Mary, though stops herself.⁶² This anxious scene repeats the white woman's violence against the children and young adults who by their very presence expose the impurity of white families. In another scene a few pages later, Evangeline confronts Jerry in the same storeroom. Here Evangeline is represented as 'attacking him.'⁶³ Evangeline is figured as attacking both Jerry and Mary – signifiers of the new generation of educated Aboriginal citizens, more likely to challenge her authority. Yet in both scenes Jerry and Mary are characterized as 'dangerous to [Evangeline]'.⁶⁴ Representing Aboriginal people as the threat hides the history of white violence towards Aboriginal people.⁶⁵ Those who challenge white stories of

⁶² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 17.

⁶³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 21.

⁶⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ This is a more subtle version of the discourse of savagery and threat I discussed in my analysis of *The Scarlet Frontier*. Though more restrained in this novel this trope of Aboriginal people, especially men, as a threat does the same work of 'justifying' white people's violent retaliation.

genealogical purity and legitimate occupation are tagged as dangerous and expelled.

Aspects of the assimilation process (especially education, employment and access to citizenship) have provided Aboriginal people with more tools to speak back to white people. This spooks white people. It spooks Evangeline Wade. For example in the scene with Jerry in the storeroom Evangeline is represented as 'seized [with] panic' when Jerry enters the room and he is represented as 'block[ing]' her way.⁶⁶ She states explicitly 'I'm not afraid of you'⁶⁷ suggesting he is the threat to her. Then the scene shifts back to the earlier point about the terror white women hold for Aboriginal children when Jerry reaching for a tin soldier that belonged to Jim Wade says: 'A soldier for a black kid who didn't know white ladies were worse killers than men with guns'.⁶⁸ Jerry is represented as deliberately taunting Evangeline with the knowledge of the violence of her mother. The scene figures as 'threat' the challenge to white people posed by Aboriginal people who deliberately contest white systems of assimilation and elimination.

The original death of Jim Wade haunts this novel. The place where Jim Wade died is seen to be haunted and his ghost was Mary's childhood friend. Given the uncertainty and mystery of the departure of Evangeline's half-siblings, every Aboriginal person who comes to the Lake is possibly Evangeline's brother or sister, niece or nephew. Mary and Jerry are the novel's representatives of this possibility. They have returned to worry the white family, to worry Evangeline's white identity: 'They were dangerous to herself ... For a moment she hated them both, then the feeling shifted to the girl alone.'⁶⁹ I now want to discuss the particular anxieties about racial identity associated with Mary in the novel.

Mary Foster

Mary Foster's return to her home at the Lake is represented as upsetting a careful 'equilibrium', setting off an 'uneasiness in the others': 'She's what chemists call a catalyst'.⁷⁰ Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs argue, via Freud, that the uncanny is when the homely (a home space) is made strange.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 21.

⁶⁸ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 14.

⁷¹ Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, p. 23.

Mary's return to the Lake sets off a crisis about her identity amongst the white residents of the Lake as her familiar presence is made strange. Mary, the reader is told, had always been 'considered a full-blooded aboriginal'.⁷² However upon her return suggestions are made, clues given, mysteries unfold, which suggest, though never conclusively prove, that Mary is the granddaughter of William Wade and his Aboriginal lover Effie. A sense of the homeliness and familiarity of the white home is disturbed. The beautiful Mary, with her uncertain heritage, embodies the secret which the (white) Wade family harbours – the unacknowledged fact of having Aboriginal relations. As I suggested in the previous section the revelation of the secret instigates a torrent of hatred and violence against the Aboriginal people who symbolize this transgression.

What drives this plot is Evangeline's ambivalence about her familial relation to Mary. She is both attracted by the idea and appalled by it. Evangeline's see-sawing between stifling love and loathing for Aboriginal people is concealed by a *noblesse oblige* philanthropy, most strikingly represented in her fostering of Mary. As a foster child Mary is referred to by Evangeline as 'my adopted daughter, my heiress'.⁷³ By way of contrast, when Mary is represented as her niece she becomes a 'wretched brat'.⁷⁴ Evangeline demands that Mary stop calling her aunt when she returns from Sydney, a name she has called her since childhood. She makes this demand at the very moment it becomes probable that she actually is Mary's aunt. For Evangeline, the closer social relation of adopted daughter is less confronting than the socially more distant but genealogical relationship of niece. Like her mother, Evangeline is represented as truly appalled and confronted by the idea that an Aboriginal person is related to her in a way which she cannot control. The concept of fostering Mary is in many ways easier for Evangeline to deal with, because it is a relationship she controls. Being related to the same father/grandfather as Mary gives Evangeline no edge. Evangeline operates as a poor adoptive mother, but as an aunt by 'blood' she is terrifying in her hatred of Aboriginal relatives.

Yet Evangeline is also attracted by the idea of her familial proximity to Mary and indulges in fantasies of miscegenation. At one moment she fantasises that Mary looks like Harold. This allows her to follow her

⁷² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 14.

⁷³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 182.

⁷⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 177.

fantasy of herself and Harold as husband and wife, with Mary as their daughter:

Her eyes rested at last on Harold Starr. I tried to make them seem like father and daughter, Evangeline thought, but the likeness was never as strong as tonight.

Harold Starr was as white as she or Esme or Dan. Mary Foster had always been considered full-blooded aboriginal. But tonight, his hair and eyes as dark as hers, his skin deeply tanned, their similarity was extraordinary. He is more like Mary, Evangeline marvelled, than he will ever be like Garry.⁷⁵

Harold is figured here as 'dark' – eyes, hair and skin – and this is seen as linking him to Mary. Mary is represented as more like Harold than his biological son. The text also marks Evangeline as 'dark' – 'dark eyes'⁷⁶ and dark in contrast with her mother's 'sandy' looks.⁷⁷ The uncertainty of who Mary is has worked to unmoor racial identity, which is represented as fluid or interchangeable.⁷⁸ The fear that the self can become the other is made explicit here.⁷⁹ This racial changeability is figured as pleasurable. Evangeline's sexual desire for Harold is figured through the fantasy of being black. Mary is the link which enables this fantasy.

This fluidity of race which pleurably links Mary, Evangeline and Harold contrasts with another discourse of racial identity which appears in the text. Here links between Evangeline and Aboriginal people are again represented as distasteful. On this occasion racial identity is expressed through an ontological positioning of Aboriginal difference as embedded in nature.⁸⁰ The following description of Billy appears when he is described dressed immaculately in a silk scarf and shirt:

He still squatted as his ancestors might have done ... by the string of campfires that glowed backwards in a chain, into the dawn of man's life in warm climates. The bones of his face, the forceful modelling of temple and nose ... had probably undergone no great modification since men left the apes behind; his elegant but subdued body, was alien to [Evangeline's]; the realization of differences between them, never quite so forcibly felt before.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 84.

⁷⁹ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 84.

⁸⁰ See Pugliese's point that representations of Australian national identity are grounded in ontology. Pugliese, 'Literary histories', p. 467.

⁸¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 136.

Billy is represented by a series of physical traits. Aboriginal cultures are represented as static and timeless. The overly physical description of Billy is followed by Evangeline expressing her 'distaste at the thought of Mary, so obviously kin to him, as a blood relation of her own.'⁸²

Through the deployment of stereotypes of the primitive the text produces racial identities as deeply embedded; yet fantasies of ambivalent desire for that different group also see racial identities as potentially fluid. Whiteness can become blackness. The figure of Mary is central to the text's production of these ambivalent ideas on Aboriginal-white racial identity. She is the pivot for the ambivalent desire of Evangeline to possess blackness and her corollary distaste for blackness. At one point the novel indulges in the pleasure of interchangeability and Evangeline fantasises about Harold being black like Mary. In another passage there is an acknowledgment of the disquiet such a feeling leaves. To dampen this disquiet Aboriginal people are positioned as ontologically different from white people, as completely distinct, incompatible and 'alien'. The boundaries between black and white are again clearly marked. The contradictory desires produced in these different passages suggest there exists an anxiety at the heart of white racial identities about the impossibility of completely securing whiteness. This anxiety is played out in the punishment of the figure imagined as threatening that whiteness: the half-caste. In this novel the half-caste figures are Beattie, Mary and Jerry.

Land and inheritance

There is a tension in the novel about who will inherit the Lake property when Evangeline Wade dies. Having never married and having no children, she has no obvious heir. As her adopted daughter, Mary is named as the heir a number of times, and at one point Evangeline makes public announcements that Mary will inherit the property. At other moments there seems to be a suggestion that if Mary did inherit the property this would be the public admission or acknowledgment of the 'dark secret'. Hodge and Mishra suggest that one of the issues which haunts national literature and national notions of identity is the

⁸² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 136.

illegitimacy of white land tenure.⁸³ A version of this issue shapes *The Leaping Blaze*. The dream-like figuring of Evangeline, Harold and baby Garry Starr as family is a fantasy of a white, masculine progeniture ordering the disposal of the property of the Lake. At other moments a more egalitarian dream of re-possession for some Aboriginal people is represented. The overall confusion around the issue exposes the textual uncertainty which surrounds this most important of national questions.⁸⁴

The original dispossession of the traditional owners of the land is marked in the novel as happening in three stages:

When the first Wade had settled at the Lake he had tolerated the natives, then numerous and following their tribal laws. When the property passed to strangers the aborigines had dwindled and lost their hold. When the second Wade was struggling to pull the place together he had needed them. The tribe had still been a reality; the two peoples lived side by side. The third Wade accepted them without sentimentality, imposed rules and sent away those who would not conform. Now the King family – father, daughter and grand-daughter – were the only natives of the original groups left.⁸⁵

There is a gap in this description of change in ownership and occupation of land. The suggestion is that ‘the third Wade’ accepts the Aboriginal people and yet less than a generation later only three remain. The gap is the repressed knowledge of white people’s destruction of Aboriginal societies. The novel papers over this gap – ‘historical horrors’ – with a fragmentary yet powerful vision of the future whereby the traditional owners of the land, the Kings, would repossess their land. Evangeline designs a scheme where the property would be made into a public company and shares given to Mary, Jerry, Billy and Dan Conolly.⁸⁶ Whilst only partially acknowledging the special and particular relationship of

⁸³ Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, p. xvi. Goddu expresses the same issue in American national literature as the question of who will inherit America. Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ Heney herself seemed unclear of how she wanted to organise this aspect of the plot. In her manuscript notes for the novel she wrote: ‘I am not yet clear if the [incident] clears the way for the return of Jerry and Mary, with their struggle to be fought out bringing the wheel of the Lake’s occupation full circle with Garry the shadowy ultimate heir, or whether [the land] should be left as a financial responsibility of Dan, the house empty and Mary and Jerry unknown wanderers fulfilling the wandering destiny of their unassimilated people.’ Correspondence from Helen Heney to Beatrice Davis, editor, Angus and Robertson, 24 June 1958, Angus and Robertson Papers, second collection, Helen Heney File, MS 3269, Doc 279–283, ML.

⁸⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Shares were also offered to Harold, Cyril and Johnny. Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 136.

Aboriginal people to their land, such a solution is suggestive of a co-operative outcome where people with different interests in the land can share it: Dan Conolly who is white but born on that land has a share in it; the Kings whose country it is can continue their custodianship; Mary who through white policies of assimilation does not know her country can occupy it.

The text threatens to resolve itself with the re-inheritance of Mary, Jerry and Beattie (via Billy King) with their land. Instead the ending of incest, death and banishment 'resurrects' the 'violent origins' of white property inheritance. As Goddu suggests 'the gothic ending ... disrupts the neat resolution ... [and] resurrects the violent origins that the national narrative of [Aboriginal people's] disappearance disavows'.⁸⁷ What is resurrected is the violent dispossession of Aboriginal people, represented in the death of Jim Wade. Jim would have been entitled to the land of the Lake as a Wade and perhaps as a custodian of country.⁸⁸ His death at the hands of the white mother of the 'legitimate' heirs secures the property for William Wade's white children and sends the Aboriginal heirs fleeing in fear. Through its excessive tropes of the forbidden, *The Leaping Blaze* exposes what is so often hidden in white national myths of Australia – the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the instability and impossibility of the dream of whiteness. What was nearly erased from (national) memory, what Evangeline had repressed or never heard, a murderous moment of dispossession, has returned and its erasure is violently restaged in the death of Beattie and the seduction of Mary and her banishment alongside Jerry. I now want to analyse these moments of erasure.

⁸⁷ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 69.

⁸⁸ It is not clear in the novel if Effie, William Wade's lover, is originally from the area of the Lake.

iv: Reasserting mastery

*By acceding to the wild fantasies
(in the popular sense) of the
colonizer, the stereotyped Other
reveals something of the 'fantasy'
(as desire, defence) of that position
of mastery.*
Homi Bhabha⁸⁹

In the previous section I have set out the major ways in which ambivalences about assimilation are played out in this novel. As I pointed out in the section on genre, the gothic novel operates to contain the disturbing images it has made visible and recognisable.⁹⁰ I now look at the violent ways in which the threats to a 'white Australia' are resolved in this text. As the next generation of Aboriginal people, Beattie, Mary and Jerry are the most worrying figures for the story of white occupation of Aboriginal land. Each is eliminated from the future of the nation in reasserting white mastery. I will analyse first the violent erasure of Beattie from the text.

Sacrificial lamb

Beattie is acknowledged in the novel as the unquestioned descendant of the Aboriginal custodians of the Lake. Not surprisingly the two major scenes which involve Beattie King, first, the sexual encounter with Jerry and then her death, are the most violent in the novel. The sex between Beattie and Jerry takes place in the converted storeroom, which was the scene of the murder of the young Jim Wade:

Beattie stood still in the middle of the open space turning her head fearfully from side to side. Jerry pulled the rug to the place before the fire and in his turn stood a moment looking round, his strong nostrils distended, his head back, in all the grace of an unbroken wild horse. Finally his face came opposite hers. Then swiftly, with strong hands that had no mercy in them, he caught her by the waist and forced her towards the primitive bed he had made. Before she touched the floor he was stripping off the foolish white woollen dress she had worn in his honour that Mary had compared to a lamb chosen for sacrifice. Presently, their two dark naked bodies were only more among the struggling, writhing shadows of the room. At last

⁸⁹ Bhabha, 'The other question', p. 82.

⁹⁰ Stewart, *Dear Reader*, p. 392; Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 10.

all the shadows lay still and the brief fire of kindling
died to its whispering ashes.⁹¹

Beattie is represented as a 'lamb chosen for sacrifice'; Jerry as sexually aggressive and not-human, like 'an unbroken wild horse'. The focus of Jerry's aggression is not Beattie *per se*, but Beattie in a 'foolish white woollen dress', that is, Beattie in racial drag, Beattie shaped by Evangeline's sadistic sensibilities. When the white dress, symbolising as it does misplaced whiteness, is removed there is a marked shift in the tone of the passage from Jerry's aggressive sexual actions representing forced sex, that is rape, to something more ambiguous. Beattie's dress, which parodically mocks her non-whiteness, is removed, and the already obvious racial drag is revealed for what it is.⁹² Beattie is black. The passage can then mark both Jerry and Beattie as dark – non-white – declaring them indistinguishable from the other 'writhing shadows' of the room, which marks their Aboriginal 'home'. Heney uses the symbol of the white dress, as racial drag, to represent an inappropriate attempt by Beattie to be white. The sex between the pair, with its references to a 'primitive bed', the ubiquitous reference to fires, reasserts a vision of them both as unassimilable and Aboriginal.

Beattie King becomes pregnant as a result of the sexual encounter with Jerry. She and her unborn baby die in a scene reminiscent of the fire scene in *Jane Eyre*:

Beattie stood by the door, lit by the cottage, flames and horribly silhouetted against the fire she had created in the womb of the building. For a moment she wavered, the light grotesquely framing her distended body, Mary groaning, almost unaware of what she was doing, but impelled by something in her own nature, took a step forward towards the dark figure outlined in hellish brightness. At that moment strong hands dark as her own fell on her shoulders.

"Let her go!" Jerry said, pulling her backwards. As he spoke Beattie threw up her arms, falling back. "It's done, anyway," Jerry said, low and steady in Mary's ear.

She felt no relief at another human presence. To anyone else, she might have been grateful. Towards him there was only a raging hate.

⁹¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 168.

⁹² See McClintock where she contests the idea that 'cross-dressing [including in terms of race] always or unproblematically disrupts stable social identities. She argues that cross-dressing does not guarantee the subversion of gender, race or class power.' McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 67. In this sense Beattie's drag is represented as bad and pathetic reinforcing a particular hierarchized race order.

“You killed her – and your child – as much as if you’d choked them!” she cried hysterically.
Jerry stood, his arms folded. “I did it, and that’s for sure,” he agreed quietly.⁹³

There are textual prefigurings of this disaster for the reader, not only in the novel’s title with its reference to fire, but in an earlier passage where Mary recalls an episode in her childhood when Beattie burnt her doll.⁹⁴ There are references throughout the book to Beattie’s skill with fire. The final scenes infer Beattie’s skills – nurturing, providing – which are figured as natural for Aboriginal women have been twisted and made incompetent in the wrong context of the white world.

In the last passages of the novel a parallel is drawn between the original death of Jim Wade at the hands of Evangeline’s mother and the death of Beattie for which Evangeline herself is responsible. Evangeline is represented as having pushed Beattie to the point of madness through her cruel manipulation of the young woman’s emotions. In Beattie’s death the original death in the storeroom is replayed with a more confused matrix of desire, betrayal and death. Like her mother, Evangeline kills an Aboriginal person through jealousy. Like William Wade, Jerry is represented as shouldering the responsibility for the death of this person. After the death of Jim Wade the family and community of the Lake could be pulled back together. In this repeated disaster, the family disintegrates, the community disintegrates, the world of the Lake disintegrates: ‘Everything here is finished’.⁹⁵

Mary is represented in the novel as the figure with the potential to purify, reconcile, to save the Lake community. But it is Beattie who actually purifies the scene, burning down the storeroom, the site of white hatred and Aboriginal suffering.⁹⁶ In the extended fire scene Beattie dies; Garry is removed from his irresponsible mother; Harold and Billy King leave the Lake; and Jerry and Mary are expelled. The plot of the novel operates to clean things out.⁹⁷ The ambivalent pleasures and dangers of

⁹³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 264.

⁹⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 69.

⁹⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 270.

⁹⁶ Meyer in her article on *Jane Eyre* argues that the novel’s resolution sees Jane Eyre return to ‘clean down’ the ‘stained’ house of Rochester (stained by association with colonial wealth). But in the end the great act of purification is carried out by Bertha (the ‘black’ woman) who purifies the house (with fire) though in her ‘great act of cleaning ... she herself is cleaned away by it, burned and purified from the novel’. Meyer, ‘Colonialism’, p. 179.

⁹⁷ Meyer, ‘Colonialism’, p. 179.

the Wade family entanglement with Aboriginal people (through sexual relations and fostering) are terminated.

To achieve closure and reassert the future of the Lake ('white Australia') as white *The Leaping Blaze* must eliminate both white and Aboriginal children. The future generation of Aboriginal people whose country is the Lake, like Beattie, are eliminated to secure possession of the land. However, the 'cleaning down' must go further. William Wade's miscegenist desires have muddled the genealogies and only the expulsion of all the children will ensure a new white start. Evangeline must expel her genealogical relatives, Mary, to remove Aboriginality from the family and reassert white progeniture. And finally she must expel the fantasised white relative Garry Starr, touched by Evangeline's own miscegenist fantasies for the 'dark' Harold.

'Mental incest'

I now analyse the elimination of the other two characters who embody danger to the white world, Mary and Jerry. As I have suggested earlier the motif of incest haunts this novel. The atmosphere of a small community who have occupied the same limited space for generations, and the potential for members of that community to unknowingly be related through the denial of cross-race and cross-class sexual relationships, makes incest an ever-present possibility. It is during the same climactic moment of Beattie's death that the scene of incest is staged. Over the body of his resuscitated baby, Harold declares his attraction for Mary, sayable now that his wife has run off:

Then, blindly Harold put his mouth down to Mary's, his body tensed as he felt her response. Afterwards, neither knew who was the first fully conscious of what, deep down, they had both perhaps always known, but the first movement lay with him ... Her eyes enormous, dark as the night sky outside were fixed on him. As he saw her for the last time he knew her will was wholly consenting, but even through the surge of his long repressed desire he recognised the disaster of what he was determined nothing should stop him doing. At the very last, he saw his deed for the mental incest it was.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 265.

Earlier references have been made to Harold's attraction to Mary.⁹⁹ In one heated exchange Esme Starr accuses her husband of being 'in love with' Mary. In another passage Jerry insults Mary with the quip: 'The next thing is, you'll be getting your dear old teacher to lay you'.¹⁰⁰

Interlaced with the references to the attraction of Mary and Harold for each other are references to the familial relationship that exists between them. Mary imagines Margot and Harold as her 'own people' conflating Harold with the Lake: 'perhaps for me he is the Lake'.¹⁰¹ These references build on ones made earlier in the novel and work to blur the racial identity of Harold and Mary: if the Starrs are Mary's people she is white; if Harold is the Lake he is Aboriginal. A little later Evangeline reminds Mary that Harold and Margot treated her as the 'daughter they never had'.¹⁰² Tied up with the fluidity of racial identity is a notion of Mary as family. When Harold tells Evangeline he 'seduced' Mary and that he is leaving the Lake, he says:

"I took her and washed out every decent thought
I'd had about her – a man she called 'uncle' and
thought of as a father!"¹⁰³

The accusation of sexual abuse of the white carer for his Aboriginal charge (a common occurrence in institutions set up to 'care' for Aboriginal children¹⁰⁴) is quickly defused by Billy King who suggests that Mary just pretended to go along with the 'uncle' thing. He says: 'She was mad about you!'¹⁰⁵ Through the authoritative voice of the Aboriginal elder the meaning of abuse of Aboriginal children by their white carers is undercut and underplayed. By constructing Mary as 'mad about' Harold the novel partly legitimates Harold's actions, whilst still marking it as incest and justifying to need for Mary to leave. The scene also marks Aboriginal sexuality as incestuous and improper, by figuring Mary as 'mad' about her father/uncle.¹⁰⁶

The moment of Mary's seduction by Harold is characterised as the moment of her freedom from the Lake, from the white world and from the

⁹⁹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 35–36, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 92.

¹⁰¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 72.

¹⁰² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 79.

¹⁰³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 268.

¹⁰⁴ See: HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, pp. 194–195; Link Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 268.

¹⁰⁶ Thanks to Cath Styles for pointing this out to me.

suffocating love/hate of her relationship with her 'mother' Evangeline and her 'father' Harold: '[Jerry] dropped his lips to her smoky hair. "I followed you down. I saw you come out. That ended it here, for you. You're clear of them all now – him too."' He stated it simply as a fact.¹⁰⁷ The seduction and betrayal by Harold frees her from the ties to the Lake and the white philanthropic institution/family inheritance which she had called home.¹⁰⁸ The incest scene also operates to relieve the white readers of the burden of Aboriginal people. Mary's rejection of 'white Australia' (figured here as Evangeline and Harold) allows 'white Australia' to rid itself of its responsibility for Aboriginal people, in this case of adopted or removed Aboriginal children.¹⁰⁹ Mary and Jerry can be cast out of the Australian nation with a clear conscience.

Harold's desire for Aboriginality is represented through his desire for his daughter. This is an ambivalent desire. The unequivocal horror of incest legitimates or gives voice in this novel for an expression of the horror of miscegenation, which has been indulged as an ambivalent fantasy in this text.¹¹⁰ The troubled pleasures of the fantasy of the inter-racial sexual relations are represented as horrific, through the trope of incestuous sex. Harold's declaration of desire for his 'daughter' is resolved in the text by Mary leaving the Lake with Jerry. It is the death of Beattie and the incest moment which makes the Lake foreign to Mary and makes Mary foreign to the white Lake dwellers.

'A drunk and a tart'

By the early 1960s discourses of Aboriginal cultural and racial survival were becoming more and more common. Texts produced by both Aboriginal and white commentators and participants argued for the need

¹⁰⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 266.

¹⁰⁸ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 266.

¹⁰⁹ Franchesca Alberts argues that there is an historical precedent for the abandonment of Aboriginal women (as both foster children and servants) when 'they fell pregnant, behaved inappropriately, became adults or when white families moved away'. See Franchesca Cubillo Alberts, 'She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of otherness', Catalogue, Rea, *EYE/I'MMABLAKPIECE*, Boomalli Aboriginal Arts Co-operative, 1997, p. 5. Read suggests that there was sometimes a lack of support and understanding for fostered Aboriginal children at the difficult time of adolescence. This could easily lead to the rejection of Aboriginal children at this time. See: Read, *The Stolen Generations*, pp. 20–21; Link Up NSW and Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?*, p. 151. In *The Leaping Blaze* the young Aboriginal adults are rejected by Evangeline when they are no longer children, but can respond to her and challenge her.

¹¹⁰ Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, pp. 318 and 323.

for the maintenance of Aboriginal communities.¹¹¹ As I argued earlier *The Leaping Blaze* in some sense is a novel which is engaging in these debates. Propelled by the logics of its genre the novel has gone beyond the bounds of the mainstream discourses of assimilation. It has risked too much in its fantasies of inter-racial desire and it cannot produce a workable separate or sociocultural assimilation solution either. Though there is a place for couples like Jerry and Mary in white assimilationist discourse, in this novel they are banished.¹¹²

The novel's ending has Mary remove the trappings of white life – her 'clever town clothes' – and return to the nakedness that in white constructions of Aboriginality signify a notion of the primitive.¹¹³ In earlier scenes Mary is described as wearing clothes which are the same colour as her skin which seem to suggest she is naked, but that also operate to suggest a 'skilful seductiveness' and polished mannequin-ness.¹¹⁴ Now her actual nakedness is constructed not as a sexual image but somehow, as a less complicated nakedness – an Edenic nakedness.¹¹⁵ Nakedness is represented here as primitive, as pre 'the fall'. The clothes which earlier in the novel made Mary sophisticated and beautiful and also made her an object of sexual desire, are now a 'sorry little heap',¹¹⁶ emblematic of a discarded world.

In a common ploy of assimilation discourses these final scenes work to inscribe race in terms of essential differences. The experiment of adoption, of assimilation (sameness), has not worked so evidence of this transgressive experiment is banished from the scene and reinscribed as separate (difference). When Mary leaves Harold after their sexual encounter she goes for a swim in the Lake. This naked swim is the textual refocusing of a world shaken by illegitimate desire. It is the cleansing of Mary – removing the 'stain' of the white world. It is also a cleansing or

¹¹¹ See for example: Elkin, *Citizenship*; Strehlow, *Assimilation Problems*. Though arguments for assimilation were still being put forward in government circles, for example see Paul Hasluck, Address to 1959 ANZAAS Conference Perth, cited in Wise, *The Self Made Anthropologist*, p. 230.

¹¹² Cf the novels *Beyond Blue Hills* (chapter 4 this thesis) and *Venus Half-Caste* (chapter 6 this thesis) both of which establish places for Aboriginal people in their narratives of the Australian nation. *Beyond Blue Hills* does so by relentlessly imagining the mixed heritage couple as white; *Venus Half-Caste* does so by isolating the Aboriginal couple in the country.

¹¹³ See Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, chapter 1 for an argument about constructions of the primitive and the non-primitive. See also chapter 1 this thesis, pp. 28–29.

¹¹⁴ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, pp. 13–14, 172 and 245.

¹¹⁵ See the distinctions made in some art criticism about the difference between nudity represented as art(ful) and being undressed. Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire and Modern Narrative*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1993, p. 139.

¹¹⁶ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 266.

removal of Mary from the white world. It was her clothes that signified entry or acceptance to a white world and now they are gone. The swim is constructed as Mary's acknowledgment of her Aboriginal culture and refusal of white culture. Jerry is also marked as outside the world of the Lake. He is literally 'burnt' (made black) and placed outside a world marked as white: 'in a primitive gesture of freedom his burnt shoulders and strong hands stretched to embrace the landscape from sky to sky'.¹¹⁷ What was prefigured earlier in the text, when the urbanely dressed Billy King, Mary and Jerry are imagined by the vicar as : 'three motionless figures on some dark plane, [near] a small campfire'¹¹⁸ is now enacted. Mary and Jerry are expelled from 'white Australia', from (white) history, from the nation.¹¹⁹

The novel's logic of incompatibility between Aboriginal and white people, and the expulsion of Mary and Jerry have implications for the way Aboriginal people's rights are imagined in the text. In rejecting white culture Mary rejects Evangeline's land which could have been her inheritance. Mary is in the end dispossessed. The logic of the text is that in choosing her Aboriginal heritage, Mary must be landless. Her access to 'land rights' was through the white world, not through any understanding of her rights to the Wade land as her 'country' or by Aboriginal people's prior occupation. The educated, sophisticated and worldly Jerry and Mary are in the end of the novel portrayed as 'a drunk and a tart', 'two primitive figures in nakedness and rags' as they 'vanish completely'.¹²⁰ In the text no challenge is made or allowed by Mary for the property to which she is heir.

White redemption

In this final section I analyse the scene of white redemption. In his text *White*, Dyer argues that white people's struggles towards 'being' are represented as what makes white people both white and human. At the novel's end Evangeline Wade is represented as reaching some sort of

¹¹⁷ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 267.

¹¹⁸ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 174.

¹¹⁹ Elkin, in his treatise *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, has a footnote in a section on the difficulties of Aboriginal people living in white communities which reads: 'This explains why a certain capable nearly-trained part-Aboriginal nurse married a part-Aboriginal man with little prospects, lived in a hovel in the "coloured quarters" on the outskirts of a township.' Elkin, *Citizenship* p. 26.

¹²⁰ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 266.

transcendence, a point of calm from which she can 'start a rational life'.¹²¹ I will briefly examine the cost of this white redemption for Aboriginal people.

In the novel's final pages Evangeline is forgiven for her sins by the local vicar, Cyril Bradshaw. He suggests Evangeline leave the mess she had created (the assimilation project) behind and marry him and start again. The horror story of a child dying is refigured as her redemption. The Aboriginal child, Jim Wade, died for Evangeline's mother and 'showed her the way', so too Beattie has died for Evangeline and showed her the way: 'That poor child paid the price for you, you'll never be free of her, just as your mother was never free of the black kid who showed her the way'.¹²² The novel recuperates the moment of horror as a white learning experience. Beattie's death and Mary's and Jerry's dispossession are erased for the sake of a 'fresh start'.¹²³ Asha Varadharajan points out: 'That the colonizer desires what he fears and abuses is no consolation for the sufferings of the colonized body'.¹²⁴ The white woman's lessons come at a high cost for the Aboriginal people of the Lake.

The Leaping Blaze is written for a white audience. Its forgiving ending is emblematic of what Laura Wexler calls the 'imperial project of sentimentalism', where non-white characters 'were compelled to play not the leading roles but the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption would be enacted for the enlightenment of an audience that was not even themselves'.¹²⁵ This novel sets out to educate white people about racism through the domestic, yet horror-filled, tale of fostering. The novel is fuelled by the constant expression of the ambivalent white desire for Aboriginal people and the desire to be rid of Aboriginal people. The trope of the secret is deployed to allow for the constant speaking of these illegitimate desires. This constant speaking does open up and destabilize the text.¹²⁶ However, these explosive possibilities are contained through the expulsion of the characters – the half-caste – who embody the stigma of this dangerous desire. In stark contrast redemption is offered to the white people tempted by the same dangerous desire.

¹²¹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 271.

¹²² Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 271.

¹²³ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 272.

¹²⁴ Asha Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said and Spivak*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Laura Wexler, 'Tender violence: literary eavesdropping, domestic fiction and educational reform', in Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment*, p. 15.

¹²⁶ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 1.

This novel is about the disastrous cost of assimilation – in particular fostering policies. It stages assimilation as horror and in so doing exposes the sore of white Australian racism. This novel's acknowledgment of desire through the tropes of genealogical mixing and inter-racial sexual relationships does momentarily 'shake up' and 'put into question' the raced identity of the white Wade family. The gothic plot allows voices and genealogical links that are usually ignored to surface and to antagonise the imaginary coherence of the white nation of Australia. The novel's ending which represents binarized racial differences – Aboriginal as 'primitive' and 'mad', and white as 'civilized'; white as within the nation, Aboriginal as outside – refocuses the self-image of an Australian nation with a race-based hierarchy as the proper order of things. Anxious moments – organised around scenes of blurred or uncertain racial differences – are recontained in the violent ending.

Assimilation policy in Australia broke up thousands and thousands of Aboriginal families and Aboriginal people bore almost all of the pain and sorrow of this policy. As Goddu points out, 'gothic's horrors are actual not fictional'.¹²⁷ A reviewer of this novel suggested at the time of publication: 'I rather think that the Awful Secret in Evangeline Wade's family (or something like it) is taken from cold fact'.¹²⁸ The final passage of the novel enunciates the ambivalence of philanthropic efforts made by white people on behalf of Aboriginal people – what begins in kindness ends in fear and hate. The novel plays with and acknowledges the contradictions of white attitudes to Aboriginal people, emphasising the ambivalences which underpin domestic benevolence and philanthropy. The final scene sees 'the Aboriginal problem' ignored in favour of white 'suffering'. Whilst sympathetic to the racism and hardship faced by Aboriginal people (here represented as the hatred perpetrated against Mary, Jerry and Beattie, by Evangeline) in some ways the novel's ending posits as a solution abandonment. The focus is on white redemption. The hope is only that white people can recover from the failure of their assimilation dreams. Mary and Jerry, represented as the 'future' and the 'problem' are abandoned on 'whatever road they are wandering now'.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 154.

¹²⁸ Keesing, 'Back to the plot', p. 40.

¹²⁹ Heney, *The Leaping Blaze*, p. 272.

Scopic pleasure and fantasy:
visualizing assimilation
in Leonard Mann's *Venus Half-Caste*

i: introduction

At the end of *The Leaping Blaze* the Aboriginal couple of Mary Foster and Jerry Stokes are represented as cut adrift from the 'white Australia'. *Venus Half-Caste* has a similarly drawn pair of protagonists, however at the novel's close the Aboriginal couple are not cut adrift but firmly anchored in the nation. The plot of this novel concerns a beautiful Aboriginal woman – Beatrice – who is desired by three men – two white, one Aboriginal. As with *The Leaping Blaze* this novel produces fantasies about the pleasure and danger of inter-racial desire. The solutions offered in both novels to miscegenist desire are violent. In *The Leaping Blaze* Aboriginal people of mixed heritage are the focus for violent punishment for past miscegenation. In *Venus Half-Caste* it is white men who are punished for their (present) miscegenist desire. The Aboriginal woman, Beatrice, endangered by that desire is removed. Her removal does not see her wander aimlessly like Mary and Jerry. Rather the textual solution is to place her in a secure and happy marriage with a wealthy and hard-working Aboriginal man, who takes her away from the city and contains her on the land he has purchased (which is her mother's country).

Venus Half-Caste is part gritty urban tale, part detective story, and part romance. Issues of race relations in Australia are explored through a plot which focuses on sex, desire and violence. It is a graphic novel which, through visual language and fantasy, plays with the notion of white men's desires for Aboriginal women. In many ways the novel draws on a tradition of film noir plots and is therefore open to a psychoanalytic

reading¹ and issues of sex, scopic pleasure, fantasy and femininity. In contrast to this film noir form the novel also deploys realist tropes and attempts to critique race relations in Australia in the 1960s. *Venus Half-Caste* sympathetically portrays Aboriginal people's fight for civil rights, prejudice, stereotyping, Aboriginal people's anger at their mistreatment and illuminates the daily prejudices Aboriginal people encounter. The subjectivist and realist modes in this novel however sit uneasily together. For example in order to demonstrate how unacceptable it is that white men objectify Aboriginal women, Mann lasciviously describes the beauty of Beatrice drawing on raced tropes of scopic and sexual availability, and therefore produces a pornographic representation which ultimately objectifies her. The strategies used to make prejudice visible reproduce ideas of Aboriginal women as signifying a particularly intense sexuality, and of white men who involve themselves sexually with Aboriginal women as in danger of 'the fall'.

This chapter is organised into three sections. The first deals with author, plot and genre. In the next I analyse ways the novel sets out its vision of Aboriginal assimilation. Through a visual schema, drawing on biological-genetic and sociocultural ideas it represent a quantitative typology of Aboriginality, a calculus of caste. There are three Aboriginal women characters – Beatrice, Eunice and Lladia – and this calculus of assimilability is figured through images of their bodies in terms of colour, clothes, deportment and looks.

In the third section I analyse the enacting of white male fantasies about Aboriginal women. I trace how the novel negotiates and closes down the forbidden stories which were opened up by the scopic pleasures of placing the Aboriginal women's bodies in a white-imagined caste system. Although the body of Beatrice is set up as the problem of the novel (the problem for 'white Australia'), it is what happens amongst the men which provides the trajectory and forward movement of the plot and the solution to the problem.² Mann's solution to the contradictions of the body of Beatrice – her visible Aboriginality and her visible beauty, which create an ambivalent desire – is violent. The fantasies of inter-racial sexual relationships and white men's desire for Beatrice are so unsettling in

¹ Tania Modleski argues that film noir emerged in the 1940s transformed from 'hard-boiled detective fiction'. Noir reveals paranoid male fears about the independence of women, focusing on 'taming aggressive ... sexually dynamic "femme fatale[s]"'. Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, p. 21.

² This is Laura Mulvey's argument in her article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory*, Routledge, New York and London, 1988. I will discuss Mulvey's article in more detail later in this chapter.

Mann's imaginary that they need to be shut down or disavowed with moves of excessive violence.

ii: Author, plot, genre

*Male scopophilia has a well defined
and quite specific object – the
female body.*
Mary Ann Doane³

Author

Leonard Mann (1895–1981) went to school and university in Melbourne, served in the military in World War I and afterwards worked as a barrister. In 1929 he became General Secretary of the Victorian Employers' Federation, holding this position through the 1930s.⁴ During World War II Mann worked in the public service in the Department of Aircraft Production.⁵ The biographical note on the back of *Venus Half-Caste* notes that Mann moved from the Victorian Employers' Federation to working for the government, and later became a poultry farmer. This succession of jobs – from representing capital, to working for the government, to a job outside the city – is interpreted as politically significant and marks a 'gradual change in his social philosophy'.⁶ Before the publication of *Venus Half-Caste*, Mann had published six novels and four volumes of poetry. His first novel *Flesh in Armour* (1932) is about World War I and was his most well-received prose work. His second, *Human Drift* (1935) tells a story of the Eureka Stockade. His third novel, a detective story, *A Murder in Sydney* (1937) had a film option taken out on it. The latter three are *Mountain Flat*, *The Go-Getter* and *Andrea Caslin*.⁷ None except *Venus Half-Caste* is concerned with race relations in Australia. The careful enunciation of a shift in social philosophy contained in the biographical note on the only novel in his *oeuvre* about race relations suggests a deliberate positioning of Mann as suitable to enter the debate on 'the Aboriginal problem'.

³ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 141.

⁴ Biography on Mann, Moir Collection, MSS, State Library of Victoria (SLV), Melbourne.

⁵ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, back cover.

⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, back cover.

⁷ Mann's other novels are: *Flesh in Armour*, Phaedrus, Melbourne, 1932; *Human Drift*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1935; *A Murder in Sydney*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1937; *Mountain Flat*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1939; *The Go-Getter*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1942; *Andrea Caslin*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1959.

Scopophilia and voyeurism

The presumption of this novel is that white men like to look at women and in particular at 'other' women. Readers of this novel are invited to participate in this process of looking. The looking helps to firmly establish a calculus of caste. As I suggested in my reading of Neville's visual descriptions of Aboriginal women, in *Australia's Coloured Minority*, this invitation to look also incites a desire for Aboriginal women. Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' posits a theory about the 'pleasure and unpleasure offered by traditional narrative form' for a male identified spectator.⁸ Mulvey's psychoanalytic reading of how masculine spectators are positioned to consume narrative cinema is useful for reading *Venus Half-Caste*. Although Mulvey suggests that aspects of film technology and technique make cinema the form where the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of women is 'built into the spectacle itself', she points out that the 'leit motif' of woman as 'erotic spectacle' is produced in other forms.⁹ Mulvey begins by exploring the relations between 'erotic pleasures in film, its meaning and ... the central place of the image of woman.'¹⁰ She argues that a number of contradictory pleasures are available in narrative cinema, chiefly a scopophilic active and controlling looking where the woman is displayed for the spectator's pleasure, and also a voyeuristic look structured around the spectator's ego ideal, the male protagonist. Implicit in Mulvey's analysis of phallogocentric male looking is the understanding that scopophilia is seen as a normalized pleasurable looking, whereas voyeurism is a pathologized 'secret' looking. In keeping with the gender order, pleasure in looking is divided between an active male and passive female: women are placed as two dimensional 'erotic objects' with a particular 'to-be-looked-at-ness' for both the male characters in the film and the (presumed male) cinema spectators. Men are placed as three dimensional figures with whom the same spectators identify, and as the characters who make things happen within the film.

That invitation to scopophilia and voyeurism is extended in *Venus Half-Caste*. This is well demonstrated by the illustration on the front cover of the novel (see figure 6). The front cover of the hardback edition has a

⁸ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 59. In a later article Mulvey expands on this theory to analyse the place of the female spectator and the processes of identification when a female character occupies the centre of a filmic narrative. See 'Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', in Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory*, p. 69.

⁹ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 62. Mulvey makes no claims for her theory's applicability beyond film. I am using it because I think it is productive for reading this text.

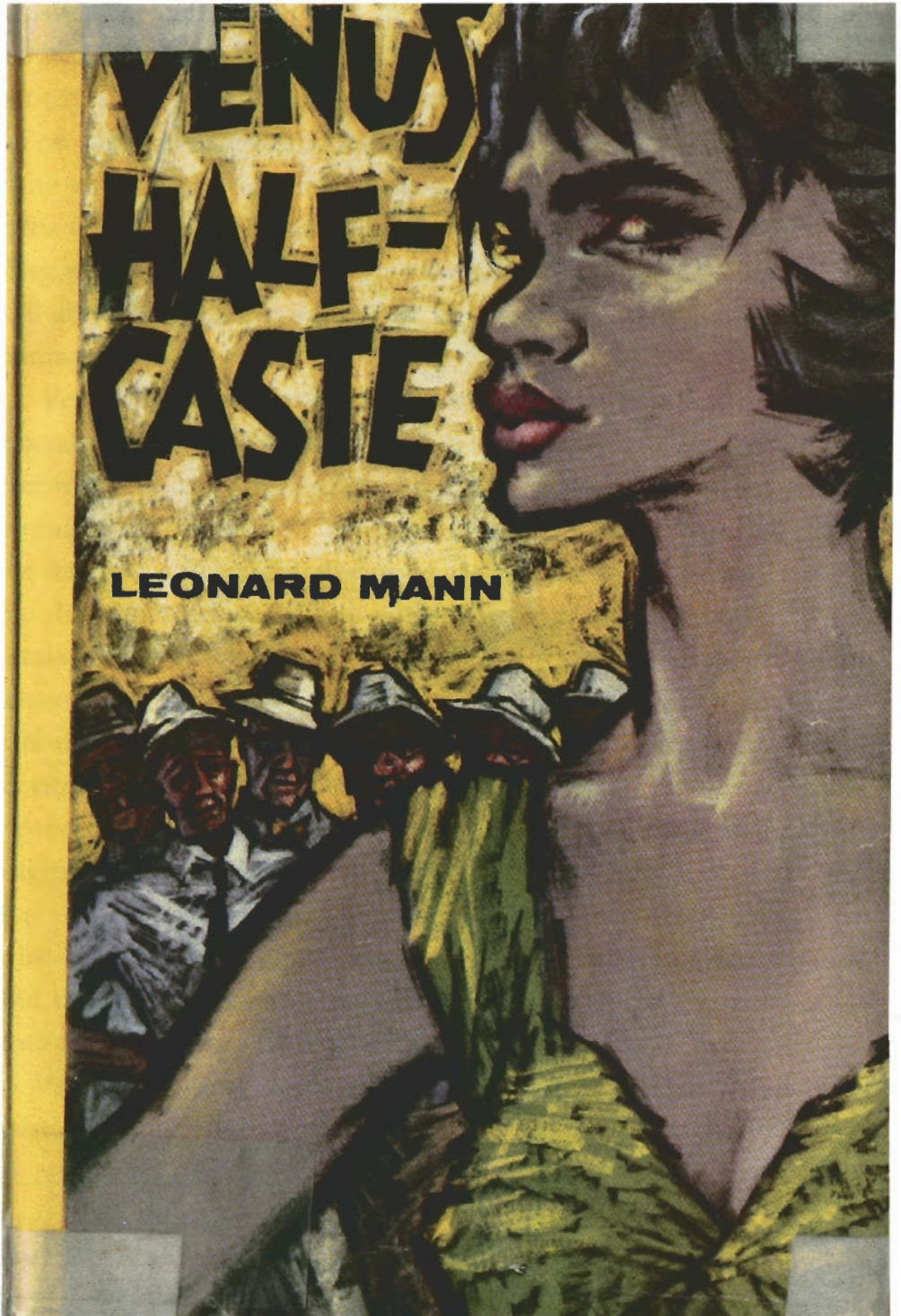
¹⁰ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 59.

foregrounded image of a woman with dark eyes, dark hair, pouting red lips and a visible cleavage. This image fills the right hand side of the cover. In bold type in the top left hand quadrant of the cover, in the space opposite her face are the words 'Venus Half Caste' written in a type which goes above and below the line, at various angles.¹¹ The novel's title almost runs into the image of the woman. The title and the illustration come together at the height of her head; the angles of the letters mimic the angles of her hair. This aligns the image of the Aboriginal woman with the title and suggests chaos, disruption and eruption and strongly connotes primitivism. The title contrasts strongly with the author's name, written below in a smaller square in a linear even typeface, suggesting order and control. Behind the shoulder of the woman, in the bottom half of the cover, are drawn six white men – all similarly sketched in hats, white shirts, and ties – giving the sense of endless repetition, suggesting these men represent all white Australian men. The men are staring at the foregrounded woman. The woman is looking out of the corner of her eye at the reader. The author's name is just above the heads of the six men. His name, 'Leonard Mann', makes a caption for the white men. The cover produces an alignment between the author, the (implied male) readers' subject positions and the white male characters in the novel.

The cover valorises the process of looking. The six everymen stare at the woman, suggesting all white men would and do stare at beautiful Aboriginal women. But there is a danger in looking. There is a danger in centralising the beautiful half-caste woman in the phallic economy of visual pleasure. The second part of Mulvey's argument is helpful here. She argues the erotic object or icon of woman which is valorised in film works to centralise the figure who represents one of the deepest anxieties of the patriarchal social order – castration anxiety: 'the paradox of phallogentrism ... is that it depends on the image of the

¹¹ Mann suggested a number of titles for the novel he submitted in manuscript to the publishers. The other titles were: *Black Cloud on Storm*, *The Half-Castes* and *The White and the Black*. Leonard Mann Papers, MS 10328, Box 1506/3, SLV.

figure 6: front cover *venus half-caste*



Leonard Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1963.

Wrapper design by WHITEAR. Copyright 1963 Leonard Mann.

Reproduced by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Limited.

castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world'.¹² It is the potential of the displayed woman to evoke castration anxiety that is the 'unpleasure' of narrative cinema. The ploys which can be enacted to escape castration anxiety are twofold, either voyeuristic-sadistic or fetishistic. Through voyeurism the 'original trauma' (of the woman without phallus) can be reenacted and so demystified and the guilty object (the castrated woman) punished or saved. Fetishistic responses focus on representing the woman as not threatening.¹³ Mulvey argues that the voyeuristic-sadistic avenue is good for narrative: 'This sadistic side fits well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end.'¹⁴

Venus Half-Caste produces 'pleasures and unpleasures' focused on sexualized racial difference. Lee Edelman argues that raced discrimination – discrimination both in the sense of prejudice and distinguishing between – is 'propped upon ... the privileging of the scopic drive in psychic structuring of sexual difference.'¹⁵ Racial and sexual difference are obviously not the same, but dominant understandings of the former derive from the same visual codes which structure the latter. Bhabha makes links between castration anxiety (sexual difference) and race difference arguing that 'within the apparatus of colonial power, the discourses of sexuality and race relate in a process of *functional overdetermination*.'¹⁶ In *Venus Half-Caste* Aboriginal women represent an overdetermined site of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' – as black and as women. The anxiety which erotic object Beatrice Leddin represents is castration anxiety both sexual (organised around the presence/absence of the phallus) and racial (organised around the similarities/difference of skin colour).¹⁷

Venus Half-Caste deploys both Mulvey's voyeuristic-sadism and fetishistic fascination to contain the anxiety produced by the specularization of the Aboriginal woman. Together these repress the entwined anxieties produced by the figure of Beatrice. The male characters

¹² Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 57.

¹³ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 64.

¹⁴ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure', p. 63.

¹⁵ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 46.

¹⁶ Bhabha, 'The other question', p. 74.

¹⁷ Bhabha argues that the racial stereotype can be read in terms of fetishism. Fetishism vacillates between a hope of similarities/wholeness (we've all got the same colour skin) and an anxiety about difference/lack (we don't all have the same colour skin). Bhabha, 'The other question', p. 74.

push the plot along in a way which sees Beatrice moved to a safe place, where she threatens no one.

Plot

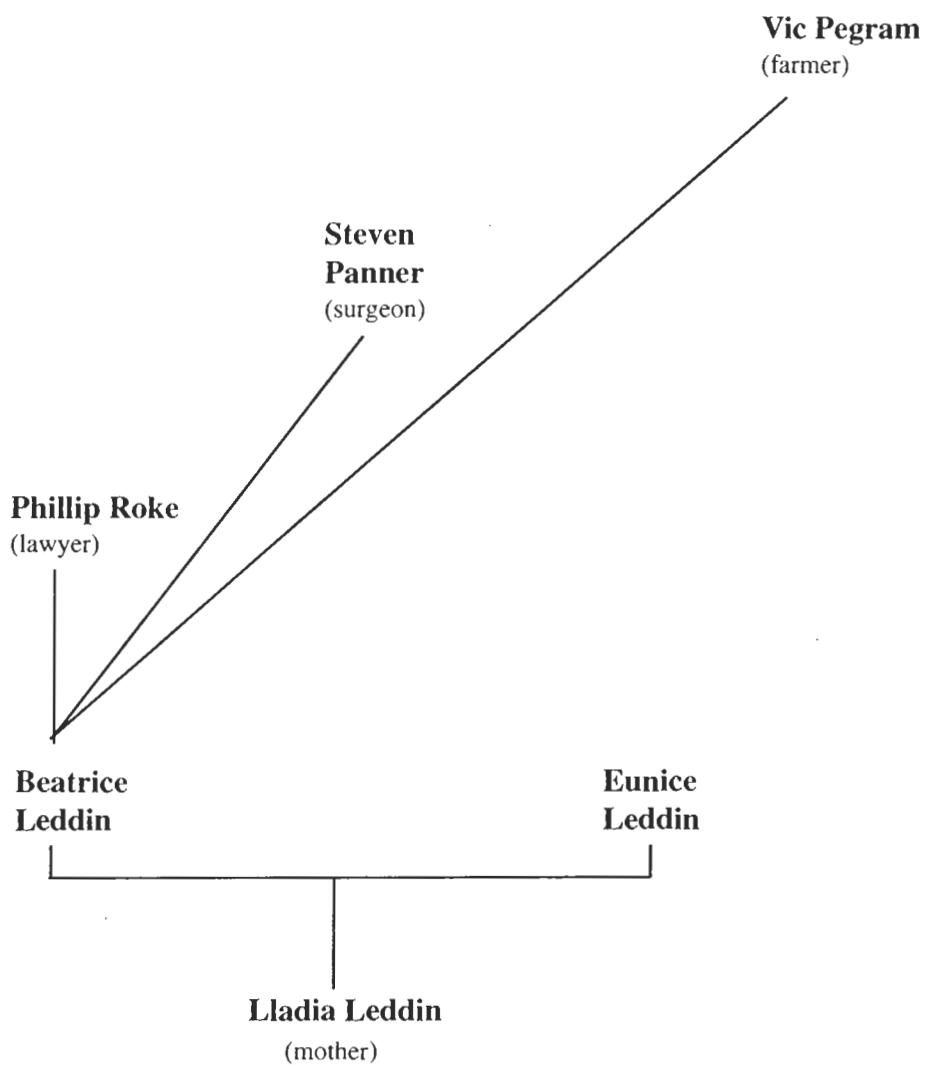
Venus Half-Caste has as its central character Beatrice Leddin (her family call her Sansa). She is represented as 'a beautiful and intelligent half-caste aborigine'¹⁸ who is involved with three men – a young white establishment barrister, Phillip Roke, whose obsession with Beatrice is portrayed as a sexual perversion; a white establishment/maverick 'Collins Street' surgeon, Steven Panner, whose orientalist desire for Beatrice is represented as forming around her colour and difference; and Vic Pegram, an Aboriginal man and cattle drover from the north who is 'like' Beatrice, that is, as Aboriginal people of mixed heritage. Vic marries Beatrice at the novel's end, after the other two men have been killed (Steven by Phillip and Phillip by Vic) (see figure 7).

The novel begins with Beatrice working at a car sales showroom. She has moved with her family from the Goulburn river area to Collingwood in Melbourne. Beatrice had been hired to work in the back garage of Stafford Motors, but when her potential for attracting customers is realised she is moved up to the showroom. Twice a day it is Beatrice's job to walk the length of the showroom and attract customers with her 'exotic' good looks and the supposed sheer incongruity of the sight of a well-dressed and elegant Aboriginal woman. One of the people that Beatrice attracts is Phillip, whose wealthy father owns the showroom. Phillip is portrayed as slightly deranged and still engaged in an infantile struggle for power with his father. He is also represented as sexually immature and perverted. Phillip becomes entranced by the beauty of Beatrice and decides to ask her out, partly because he has begun to fantasise about her and partly to annoy his father, who will be shocked to hear that his only son is dating and then living with an Aboriginal woman.

At about the same time that Phillip asks Beatrice out she meets the other two men who are to influence her life. Steven, the surgeon, meets her one day when she comes to collect his broken car. Steven collects 'exotic' women. He has three other women on his staff who are

¹⁸ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, inside front cover.

figure 7: The characters in *Venus Half-Caste*



referred to as his 'harem' (they are really just the group of women employed in his medical practice). He asks Beatrice to be the staff member to return his car when it is repaired the next day, but is thwarted when her boss blocks the move. Around the same time, Vic, who is boarding next door to the Leddin family asks Beatrice to the cinema. Before seeing the film Vic had decided to seduce Beatrice; after seeing the film he decides that this is not the way it should happen between them. The next day he leaves for country Victoria. Thus the two men, one white, the other Aboriginal, who are 'good' for Beatrice¹⁹ are thwarted from entering her life at that moment, leaving the way open for Phillip.

Phillip asks Beatrice out; they date and end up living together. Their relationship becomes more and more strained as Phillip tries to control Beatrice and make her a 'mistress' who is financially and emotionally dependent on him. His sexual interest in Beatrice is represented as becoming increasingly perverse. When Phillip's father has Beatrice fired from her job, Phillip thinks she will finally be dependent on him. Beatrice, however, is determined to be independent, even though she realises that good jobs are hard to come by for Aboriginal people in the city.²⁰ By chance she meets Steven again in the city and he offers her a job as his chauffeur. The job is very well paid and though no sexual favours are involved, Beatrice understands that most people will presume her job to be a sexual one. With her new-found independence Beatrice leaves Phillip, who begins to show signs of a mental breakdown. After the break-up he becomes obsessed, following Beatrice everywhere, convinced that Steven is her lover and that he must find their 'love nest' and kill Steven, in an 'if I cannot have her nobody can' act of homicide. He decides that he will kill himself as well – a move designed to destroy his father's hopes for a successful son.

Beatrice knows nothing of this. Living back at home with her family she thinks she has successfully dealt with Phillip and his obsession for her. Beatrice's mother, Lladia, knows otherwise. Lladia Leddin, is described as the great-granddaughter of a head man on both her maternal and paternal side. She is characterised as different from the other Aboriginal people in the 'settlement', having a quiet dignity and links to her land and people. Lladia has met Vic and he tells her he is buying a farm in the area which is her country. She travels to Bongatta and finds that the lands where she

¹⁹ See: 'To Vic Pegram ... she is one of his own kind ... Panner, the surgeon, middle-aged and happily married, sees her as a person, recognising her deep loneliness and her fierce pride – and Panner is unable to help her.' Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, inside front cover.

²⁰ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 63.

lived as a child coincide with Vic's farm. Drawing on the powers of the land she 'points the bone' at Phillip and, somewhat reluctantly, at Steven as well to bring about their deaths. Seeing Vic in the distance she decides that he is the man for her daughter and then returns to Melbourne.

Meanwhile, Phillip is stalking Steven. He mistakes the flat where Steven, and sometimes Beatrice, visit a dying patient of Steven's as the 'love nest' and one night he waits outside to kill Steven. When Steven emerges from the flat and sees Phillip with the gun he tells him to give it to him and approaches Phillip with hand out. In his infantile way Phillip is about to give Steven the gun when it fires by mistake and kills Steven. Phillip escapes. However, just as he was not courageous enough to kill Steven, he loses the courage to kill himself. Instead he hides out in a derelict house near the 'settlement' where Beatrice's family live.

Vic by this time has bought the farm in western Victoria. Although he has presumed that Beatrice was romantically linked with Phillip and Steven he has never been able to forget her. Reading about Steven's murder in the paper he assumes that Beatrice may require help and comes to town. Beatrice and Vic finally acknowledge their love for each other. Vic asks Beatrice's father to 'give her over' to him in an Aboriginal marriage ceremony. They also decide that they will marry in the Christian church to make it easier for Beatrice in the country town where they will both live.

Vic also deduces that Beatrice's name will be dragged through the mud in the trial over Steven's death and he decides that this will destroy her and also destroy the potential for their respectable shared life together. He concludes that the only solution is for him to kill Phillip. Vic knows where Phillip is hiding as he had one day by chance seen Phillip poking round some derelict houses near the Aboriginal 'settlement'. He goes one night to these houses, finds Phillip there and shoots him with the gun Phillip used to kill Steven, faking Phillip's suicide.

The novel ends with a scene three years later at Vic and Beatrice's farm. The detective who was working on Steven Panner's murder case is passing through the area and he drops in to let Vic know that he knows Vic killed Phillip, but that the verdict of suicide will stand. The scene also reveals that Beatrice knew that Vic killed Phillip. She says to him: 'We can't forget the things we've done.' And Vic agrees: 'They're all part of us'.²¹ The final scene ends with the two walking hand in hand into their house.

²¹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 286.

iii: Visualizing fantasies: desires of men

A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable “bodies”: her “natural” body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.

Luce Irigaray²²

Producing a calculus of caste

One of the central motifs of this novel is the colour-coded system of race it constructs using representations of Aboriginal women’s bodies. This calculus performs two functions in the text. First, it is through the production, repetition, and representation of ideas and connections between Aboriginality, colour, femininity and sexuality that the novel’s particular solution to ‘the Aboriginal problem’ and the idea of assimilation is produced. Second, men act in response to this visual system producing the tension in the plot and finally the novel’s solution.

Notions of bodies, clothing, looks and manners are mobilised to construct ideas about a raced and classed femininity and this complex hierarchical notion of good and bad femininity is used to fit Aboriginal women into assimilationist discourses and produce a story about sociocultural assimilation. Extrapolating from Armstrong’s point about the ‘familiar field of information’ about the domestic household, which circulated in nineteenth century novels, I want to make the point that *Venus Half-Caste* cannot invoke its calculus (clothes, looks, skin colour, deportment) arbitrarily.²³ The vocabulary which appears in this novel is part of a ‘sophisticated grammar [which] organis[es] that field’,²⁴ that is, the field of race and caste in Australia in the mid-twentieth century Australia. The intertextuality of this grammar – familiar words and symbols organised around stereotyped representations of Aboriginal women’s bodies, femininity and class – allows an economy in the writing in this novel, while still clearly signifying familiar raced, classed and gendered positions.

²² Luce Irigaray, ‘Women on the market’ cited in Solomon-Godeau, ‘The legs of the Countess’, p. 284.

²³ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 86.

²⁴ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 87.

Beatrice Leddin

Textually, what is most important to know about Beatrice is that she is beautiful, sexual, disciplined and of mixed heritage.²⁵ Beatrice is described early on in the novel:

... five feet seven and a half in medium heels, her figure slender but not skinny, breasts significantly protuberant in the tightish, middling-expensive black frock, her face with its half abo features, coloured not brown but rather a smokey, warm dark shade got from the mixture of black and white and all topped by thick black curly, not tightly curled hair.²⁶

This description sets the tone for the references made about Beatrice throughout the novel. She is sexualised and her beauty is coded in terms of particular white standards of feminine desirability – height, figure, hair. Mann emphasised the visibility of her Aboriginal heritage – her ‘features’. The passage ends by repeatedly referring to her ‘mixture’ of ‘black’ and ‘white’ heritage. The last couple of sentences include words such as ‘half’, ‘mixture’, ‘black and white’ and end with a reference to her hair – a common signifier of race, femininity and sexuality – which is ‘thick’ but ‘not tightly curled’.²⁷ Beatrice is constructed as different from but not unknowable to a white audience. She is represented as attractive, but not in exactly the same way white women are attractive, thus keeping a race-based hierarchy in place. Difference is presented as desirable; her difference is in many ways what makes her desirable.

It is her looks, in combination with her clothes, that are most important in the signification of Beatrice in terms of difference. Clothing establishes a class specific and ‘classy’ position for Beatrice, which marks her as different from the other Aboriginal women. The novel makes a distinction between a good-looking Aboriginal woman and a good-looking *well dressed* Aboriginal woman. Armstrong suggests that there are historical links between sumptuary display and social order and that clothes have a role for both men and women in signifying place in society.²⁸ McClintock also writes: ‘class identity is ... relational ... [it is] a

²⁵ Cf bell hooks’ ideas about the representation in American literature of the ‘tragic mulatto’ persona. bell hooks, ‘Seduction and betrayal: *The Crying Game* meets *The Bodyguard*’, in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 56.

²⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 10.

²⁷ The allusion here is to African kinky curled hair. For discussion on gender, race and hair see for example Maxine Craig, ‘The decline and fall of the conk; or how to read a process’, *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 1, Issue 4, 1997, p. 403.

²⁸ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 70.

social invention written in the language of clothes and physical signs'.²⁹ Good and tasteful clothing signifies a combination of things – breeding, quiet wealth, class, innate good taste.³⁰ Beatrice's clothes become more and more expensive as the story unfolds. In the first description of Beatrice the reader is told that the dress she is wearing is 'middling-expensive'.³¹ A dress she wears to a concert she attends with Phillip is described as the sort of dress she would have had no place to wear before she met Phillip.³² A little later there is a description of Beatrice shopping at an expensive store, a habit she has started since living with Phillip.³³ This clothing hierarchy reaches its peak during Beatrice's job with Steven where she earns a large salary and he does not want her wearing a uniform, but rather to continue to wear fine clothes.³⁴ A shift from poor to good quality clothing is the classic Cinderella trope of fairy-tale feminine upward mobility. Its use over the course of the novel reinforces the notion of the suitability of Beatrice to make a shift from Aboriginal to white society. She is so well dressed she must be acceptable in white society.

Though representations of Beatrice and her clothes differentiate her from other Aboriginal women and so align her with a white middle-class feminine sensibility, they also maintain a difference between her and white women. This is another description of Beatrice, this time in the street and in Steven's voice:

... she was walking as if she had her movements under control, not like the other bodies, drifting ... The colours [of Beatrice's dress] ... were soft and rich, the rather full skirt a sort of orange that changed on the torso to a sort of red ... the colours were like those Indian women wore. She was not wearing a hat. This girl was not white, but a darky, a half-caste. He could see her face now. She was no exotic. In a good-looking way she was surely a half-caste abo. He recognized the girl. He remembered too that he had thought she walked very well, with dignity, rather a sort of grandeur.³⁵

Here Beatrice's clothing signifies both a fit with a particular type of middle class/respectable femininity and also suggests a difference. The clothes white women wear are described as 'strident', 'neutral drab shades' or

²⁹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 104.

³⁰ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, pp. 24 and 89.

³¹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 10.

³² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 71.

³³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 106.

³⁴ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 146.

³⁵ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 143.

'mostly white patterns'.³⁶ Beatrice's clothes are different and are described in terms of a culture perceived as belonging outside of Australia. Beatrice's clothes remind Steven of the saris of Indian women who 'belonged to men in the service of the Indian government'.³⁷ Beatrice is marked in this passage as of Australia, 'she was no exotic', and yet she is like the Indian women.³⁸ This contrast of clothing between white women's 'drab shades' and Beatrice's indescribable blendings of red and orange mark her as different. But expensively, exotically different, like the Indian women.

This representation of Beatrice both reinforces and undermines the race-inflected beliefs that beauty and breeding are what Europeans have, what some wealthy Indian women may have and what one Aboriginal woman against 'type' would seem to have. So contradictory is the idea of the beautiful, well dressed Aboriginal woman, in this calculus of caste, that Steven twice confirms Beatrice as half-caste. Beatrice is first signified as not white but a half-caste, then as not Indian and finally it is reaffirmed that she is 'surely a half-caste'.³⁹ The passage proceeds uncertainly as the contradictions of the beautiful clothes and different face are made to fit the racist imagining of who should occupy Collins Street Melbourne.⁴⁰

This point can be extended by integrating McClintock's idea about the 'reciprocity of identity through the economy of the look'. She argues that the 'self comes into being only through being recognised ... class identity [is] ... the product of unequal social power, shaped and legitimated through socially sanctioned rituals of deference and condescension'.⁴¹ Beatrice comes into being as respectable through being recognised as such by Steven. However the double looking attests to the instability of Beatrice's position. Similarly in a later passage Steven chastises Beatrice for getting 'hoity-toity' with him when he scrutinises her and remarks on her skin colouring, providing her with a 'sharp lesson' in power.⁴² The novel at this point produces and reinforces the idea that

³⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 143.

³⁷ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 143.

³⁸ British Indians represented the liminal case in racial classifications in Australia for much of the twentieth century. They were exempted from the category 'aboriginal native' in 1925 and so privy to citizenship rights most Indigenous people and other non-white people were still denied. See Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, p. 107.

³⁹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 143.

⁴⁰ Cf McClintock's idea of the twinning of Victorian womanhood – working-class labour which fashioned and made upper-class clothing. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 98. Beatrice should, in the logic of such narratives, be making the clothes not wearing them.

⁴¹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, pp. 104–105.

⁴² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 148.

however unpalatable the experience of being looked at is for Beatrice ('It was as if he was commenting on something not alive'⁴³) that it is this scrutiny which allows her fit in the calculus to be assessed. In the logic of this narrative Beatrice can only be represented as respectable, as assimilable, if she submits to being looked at.⁴⁴ The misrecognition or slow recognition of Beatrice as respectable and the authorial sanctioning of the scrutinising of her produces Beatrice's respectability, her place in the calculus as tenuous and only available through white eyes.

Each scene in the novel where Beatrice appears publicly is an anxious moment of performance. Representations are split between the assimilationist hope/demand that Beatrice will perform middle-class whiteness well and the hope/fear that she will not. There is an even more worrying hope/fear at work in the novel that Beatrice will not want to be the same as white people or that she will be too much the same. A good example is when Beatrice goes to the concert at the Town Hall. The moment when her coat is taken from her is a moment of anxiety as Phillip, the other concert-goers, and the reader, wonder what Beatrice will be wearing:

It was ... a dark sort of red, dark but not smudged or greyed but pure in tone, that suited her colour and the curling blackness of her hair; one suitable for both an afternoon or an evening that did not require full dress ... He complimented her. "That's a nice dress. The shade suits you admirably. It's just right."⁴⁵

Beatrice has acted as she should in assimilationist logic.⁴⁶ She wears a dress different to the other women's – it suits her 'colour' – and yet it passes as a dress appropriate for a concert – it is 'just right'. The novel produces here the parameters of sociocultural assimilation. Beatrice's skin and hair (her body) stands for and makes apparent her Aboriginal heritage. It is the marker of her difference. A subtle contrast is made between her body and her clothes. Her dress colour is 'pure in tone ... not smudged', but her skin is often described as 'smudged'. The clothes are represented as white women's styles; yet her body is Aboriginal. The

⁴³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 148–149.

⁴⁴ hooks says of a British film director: 'he can make black bodies the site of his political and cultural "radicalism" without having to respect those bodies'. hooks, 'Seduction and betrayal', p. 59.

⁴⁵ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ See also Elkin: 'the general community must be prepared to attend the same concert and picture halls and churches provided that [Aboriginal people] observe the ordinary standards of hygiene and decent conduct.', Elkin, *Citizenship*, p. 38.

novel cleverly represents Beatrice as different, yet assimilated. Her body always signifies her difference, but her clothing and manner, her taste and style signify a malleability, an assimilability. Beatrice is represented as culturally assimilated and yet comfortingly visible as not-white.⁴⁷

Beatrice's fit in the calculus of assimilability is also produced through representations of her as sexually desirable to white men. Representations of her as sexual are produced through techniques of graphic description which emphasise her physicality. An example of this is the image used on the front cover of the novel which I have discussed. A further example is the first reference to Beatrice, on the novel's first page, which describes one of her showroom walks. This description immediately compares her to an infamous nineteenth century painting known as *Chloe*, which hangs in a Melbourne pub. Another worker in the showroom suggests that though Beatrice is regularly looked at she will never be stared at as frequently as the painting. The painting, *Chloe*, which is of a naked (white) woman, is short-hand for a bold and controversial public sexuality and legitimated male looking. The looking continues:

She walked forth on to the show floor. The line of eyes stuck on the outside of the plate glass, began again to goggle, ceased to as she disappeared gradually up the stairs, the last of her the knees and then the calves a bit slender, but shapely in golden nylon, the ankles and the black shoes with medium heels.⁴⁸

The description in a filmic tracking of Beatrice makes her the object of men's gaze, 'goggl[ing]' as each part of her disappears, legs last. The representation objectifies, cuts up and fetishizes her body.⁴⁹

Yet this sexual attractiveness must be limited. If it goes too far it will produce inter-racial sex and the novel does not include inter-racial sex in its vision of assimilation. Beatrice's sexual allure must be contained and disavowed. The construction of Beatrice is therefore split. Representations of her as beautiful, desirable and cultured grate against another commonly circulating idea which the novel also takes up, that Aboriginal women are

⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon wrote: '... I see in these white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why it's a Negro. I am overdetermined from without. I am a slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance.' Frantz Fanon, 'Black Skin White Masks', in Bill Ashcroft et al., (eds), *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, p. 325.

⁴⁸ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ See also Vicki Crowley, 'Histories that tell 1', in EYE/I'MMABLAKPIECE, p. 16.

not beautiful, desirable or cultured. I would argue that these moments in the text represent white anxieties about the possibility of the failure of assimilation. Failure because of Aboriginal people's desire to be Aboriginal, but also because of white people's ambivalence about assimilation and ambivalence about the idea of Aboriginal people being like them. In the case of Beatrice, she is made acceptable to white society through images of her style and beauty, and these descriptions of her are intensified by images of her allure and sexual potential; but shadowing this particular imagining of a beautiful and stylish Aboriginal woman is the undercurrent of repulsion and prejudice where Aboriginal women are always potentially 'humble' and 'dirty'.⁵⁰ Shadowing Beatrice's fit in the white world is an image of her as not good enough, too sexual; as too Aboriginal.

This split image of Beatrice is both produced through signs of femininity and clothes. Though Beatrice is discursively produced as beautiful, well-dressed and confident – assimilated – this image is subtly juxtaposed with another stereotype, an Aboriginal woman who is 'a bit dirty' and 'a bit, humble' – unassimilable. Outside the Aboriginal community Beatrice is always immaculately dressed in colours and styles which enhance her beauty, femininity and difference. In the 'settlement' with her family she is represented as wearing old dresses, shoes and jumpers.⁵¹ There is a desire for Beatrice to mimic whiteness to secure a place in white society, but underlying this is a story that she is potentially, perpetually about to be Aboriginal, that she is really not white. Her 'uplift' is never, and can never be, complete. Representations of Beatrice are split between the fantasy of her as too desirable (the same) and not desirable enough (different). Each possibility depends on the existence of the other. These ideas of desirability and repulsion are not opposites. They are coextensive: desire slides into repulsion, which is underpinned by desire.

⁵⁰ See: 'There must have been a dozen of them in the store. They would have expected to see a lubra in poor, probably dirty things, a bit dirty herself perhaps, ready to cringe, frightened a bit, humble. What they did see was a half-caste girl wrapped ... in a rich golden coat, quietly but confidently glancing over them.' Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 280. Cf Eileen Morgan's memories of moving to a new country town: 'When we first went to Cobargo, we were the only two Aborigine families living in town. It didn't matter how you dressed when you went into the shops in the beginning because you could stand nearly all the time at the counter waiting to be served, because they knew everyone else who come in and they'd talk to them and serve them first.' Eileen Morgan, *The Calling of the Spirits*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994, p. 96.

⁵¹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 111.

Lladia Leddin

If Beatrice 's body and clothes signify an ambivalent imagining of Aboriginal women as assimilable; then the representation of her mother produces a story of an Aboriginal femininity which is unassimilable. Lladia is represented as a woman of the bush, a traditional Aboriginal woman. Like Beatrice, Lladia is described in the novel in some detail:

She was so black, her features so aboriginal, he [Phillip] thought she must be full-blood or near it. Her faded cotton frock had covered her so loosely it could be guessed an almost naked thin body was all that was within it. He had noticed her bare feet ... The girl's walk, the way [Beatrice] held herself, the same as the woman's.⁵²

Lladia and Beatrice are represented as similar to each other – in height, in carriage; but Lladia's body is represented as unassimilated. It is a dignified body and one which the novel signifies as grand, but not like Beatrice's is grand. Lladia's unfashionable clothes, her 'almost naked[ness]' and bare feet, all signify a particular position in this raced calculus which is linked to an unassimilated Aboriginality.

Lladia is represented as being of an old world of Aboriginal people. The easiest way to signify the traditional, within white representational systems of Aboriginal cultures, is as unclothed. At one point Lladia returns to Bongatta, her country, and whilst in the bush discards her clothes. Here her naked body signifies a traditional Aboriginality. Even when she is wearing clothes the white observer imagines she is not. In the white imagination Lladia's clothes are almost *not* there. Lladia's disregard for the clothes of white society signifies her lack of association with that culture. Lladia's naked body signifies a nostalgic past of Aboriginal people. Beatrice 's body – immaculately and smartly clothed – is the signifier, in the white schema, of the future of Aboriginal people.

Lladia's body is dignified through its association with traditional or 'full blood' Aboriginality. It is this association which is represented as lifting her otherwise 'faded' and slightly tattered appearance.⁵³ It is stressed in the novel that Lladia is the daughter and granddaughter of head men and that she is still connected to the ways of Aboriginal people from an earlier era:

⁵² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 30.

⁵³ See Nicholas Thomas' argument that primitivism 'attributes an exemplary status to simple or archaic ways of life ... shares the progressivist understanding of tribal society as an original and antecedent form, but revalues its rudimentary character as something to be upheld.' Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 174.

Lladia was looked up to, for some of them there could remember that her father had been a head one in the remnants of their tribe in the camp on the river near Shepparton and her mother the daughter of one of the powerful in a branch of the tribe. Vestiges of old authority hung about the woman who still knew things the rest had forgotten and lost, old secrets not only of the life of women, but of men, there being no men left capable of receiving them, even if there had been old men who remembered something to hand down.⁵⁴

The representation of Lladia draws on a common stereotype of an Aboriginal person being one of the 'last of a tribe'. This stereotype is used to signify the end of 'traditional' Aboriginal cultures and produce a sympathy for the sad 'passing of the tribe' and its last representative.⁵⁵ The association of Lladia with the 'old authority' locates her outside the schema of assimilation.

The dignity which resides in Lladia is compared with the men who represent another group of Aboriginal people '[in]capable of receiving' the culture of old. What they lack is Lladia's association with a 'traditional' Aboriginal culture, and they also lack Beatrice's discipline and respectability through an association with white culture. (I will elaborate on the representations of this group in my discussion of Eunice Leddin, Beatrice's sister.) Lladia has imparted some of her knowledge to Beatrice, but for the younger woman this knowledge has a 'fairy tale' status and operates 'like a memory of a memory'.⁵⁶ This strategy of representing a schism in Aboriginal culture between a dignified 'traditional' past and a confused present is common. The logic of assimilation is that there is no going back, even if Aboriginal people wanted to; the only solution open to them is some degree of assimilation. The past operates as a romantic but

⁵⁴ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 111.

⁵⁵ See for example Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines: A Lifetime Spent Among the Natives of Australia* (1938), John Murray, London, 1972, pp. xvii–xviii. For critical commentary see: McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, pp. 124–125; Maykutenner, 'Tasmania 2', p. 354.

⁵⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 112. It was not uncommon in this period to represent assimilated Aboriginal people as retaining some aspects of their Aboriginal culture. See for example: 'Assimilation does not mean that Aborigines will necessarily lose their identity as Aborigines or their pride in their Aboriginal ancestry. It does not mean either that Aboriginal language, arts and customs should be allowed to languish. These can and should enrich the whole Australian culture ... the Hon. Paul Hasluck said ... "Assimilation does not mean the suppression of Aboriginal culture but rather that, for generation after generation, cultural adjustment will take place."' Department of Native Welfare, *A Place in the Sun*, Dept of Native Welfare, Perth, c.1968, p. 9.

unreachable talisman. This is figured in the body of Lladia – and old woman, whose culture will ‘pass away’ with her.⁵⁷

Eunice Leddin

If the body, clothes and skin colour of Lladia, through their distance and difference from white custom, represent a (near) past and unassimilable Aboriginality, and if Beatrice’s body is constructed as an assimilable body because of its links to white forms and desires, then Eunice Leddin’s behaviour represents a form of unruly Aboriginal femininity. What is a barely visible part of the representation of Beatrice is given full flight in the characterization of Eunice. She is represented as a sexually active woman bound for trouble. Representations of Eunice suggest an uncontained sexuality, which in combination with a relationship with a man who is represented as ‘low’ mark a near certain downfall.

The representations of Eunice are not extensive. No physical description is given of her, rather she is represented through her actions and behaviour. She is young – ‘a kid’ – and still at school, but already getting into trouble:

Eunice nicking off with that low young Dave
Jaddah up to dirty tricks together you could bet.
What was going to happen to Eunice with no
brains? Like that Veronica Jaddah, seen go out, her
face all painted up, like a, like a bloody idol, with
Micky Barton, who to make his alley good with that
white mob, let them have a go with her.⁵⁸

The images of Eunice are two-edged. She is a danger – ‘up to [her] dirty tricks’ – but also she is in danger – ‘what was going to happen to Eunice with no brains?’ The greatest danger is sexual. Again the representations are ambivalent: one that Eunice will be actively sexual – ‘all painted up’ – the other that she will be sexually used by white men.

What makes Eunice unassimilable is not her body, as with Lladia, but her lifestyle. Using well-worn stereotypes of Aboriginal femininity, Eunice is represented as not clever, neat, punctual or disciplined: ‘the bits ... [Beatrice] had bought for her and Eunice’s room to make it nice were now looking so cheap and nasty. Eunice was damn careless’.⁵⁹ Beatrice has

⁵⁷ See the representation of the Aboriginal mother in *Beyond Blue Hills*, chapter 4 this thesis, pp. 136–139.

⁵⁸ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 54.

⁵⁹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 56.

to make Eunice get up in the morning. Eunice does not display a disciplined middle-class femininity, nor does she display a 'traditional' Aboriginality. There are similarities between Eunice and Beatrice. Like Eunice, Beatrice is not represented as a virgin, a common signifier of bourgeois femininity. Beatrice's respectability however, is established through her elegance, cleverness and discipline. In the same passage where Eunice is figured as careless and a late-sleeper, Beatrice is represented as an early riser, nicely dressed, wearing perfume, her hair brushed and combed.⁶⁰ Her respectability is signified by her body and clothing. Lladia's dignity is signified through her utterly different body – dark and unclothed. Eunice's unassimilability is figured through her reckless behaviour. The representation of Eunice's poor behaviour is produced in the novel as Aboriginal self-critique. Whereas Lladia and Beatrice are observed by white characters, Phillip and Steven, or the narrator, Eunice is represented as observed by Beatrice. Eunice's inability or refusal to shift where she fits in the schema of caste is represented as lack of will or wilful refusal noted by someone who has made the shift.

The novel's calculus of caste is produced through these three Aboriginal women's bodies. Represented in this complex system are different white fantasies. In the schema Eunice and Lladia are represented as too far from white respectability or white standards of beauty to be assimilable. Representations of Beatrice figure her as assimilated. But this assimilation is produced through a salacious and repetitive series of sexual images. The continual representation of Beatrice as assimilable through the construction of her attractive body incites a (near) forbidden desire, which does not sit well in this sociocultural assimilationist plot of sexual separation and cultural inclusiveness. I want to concentrate now on the ways in which this novel tries to negotiate the miscegenist fantasies it has introduced through the incitement to desire Beatrice.

⁶⁰Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 56–57.

iv: Enacting fantasies: desire between men

*We see ... a reinscription of the
fundamental ambivalence of
colonial fantasy, oscillating
between sexual idealization of the
racialized other and anxiety in
defence of the identity of the white
male ego.*
Kobena Mercer⁶¹

In this section I will explore the ways *Venus Half-Caste* shuts down, via the male characters, desire which has been established through the representation of a sexually attractive Aboriginal woman. The novel represents a particular type of sociocultural assimilation, which tacitly denies the appropriateness of inter-racial sex or marriage. Given this logic Beatrice's sexual relationship with the white man Phillip, is marked as perverted; her asexual paternalistic relationship with the white surgeon, Steven, is represented as nourishing for Beatrice (though dangerous for him). I suggest that both these relationships are based on the same race inflected scopoc economy of sexualised pleasure. To paraphrase Abigail Solomon-Godeau, it is no use making a discursive *cordon sanitaire* which separates the licit looking of Steven from the illicit doing of Phillip, because not only are the boundaries between licit and illicit permeable, but 'the mechanisms (psychic, social, economic) that underwrite them are ultimately the same'.⁶² Beatrice must be removed from this white economy of desire altogether.

Beatrice Leddin and Phillip Roke

The relationship between Beatrice and Phillip is represented as signifying the danger and destructive potential of desire (beyond looking) of a white man for an Aboriginal woman. The relationship between these two characters is represented as changing from absurd to pathological. The problem is represented as being about deeper issues than 'colour prejudice'; the deterioration of their relationship is linked directly to sex. The novel constructs a quasi-psycho-sexual argument against inter-racial sex.

⁶¹ Mercer, 'Reading racial fetishism', p. 312.

⁶² Solomon-Godeau, 'The legs of the Countess', pp. 295–296.

Phillip is portrayed as the chief source of the problems which beset the relationship. He is presented from the outset as sexually dysfunctional – he has only had sex with a woman once, an incident which still makes him feel uneasy and eager to never repeat:

... the thin girl had appropriated him. She had taken him ... Only one clear recognition of the night remained; the white naked body in the bed, avidly expecting his. He had been almost immediately and only once ... Safe out of that adventure and able to say to himself 'never again'. He soon, however, began to feel that the experience had been necessary and desirable. That white body now lying naked in his mind he could go to and regard at any time. It was it that had become the substance of his imaginations.⁶³

Phillip's sexual knowledge of women is represented here as based almost solely around fantasy. These fantasies are represented as perverse when they are transferred onto the body of an Aboriginal woman. Having met Beatrice it is not long before Phillip starts to imagine her body in the place of the prone body of the white woman he slept with. The original fantasy woman is described only once with two references to her colour – white – but in fantasising about Beatrice the colour of her skin is the focus:

... [Phillip] admired her naked body, its long curves of flesh, and its colour, continued over the whole body from that of the face, neck arms and hands he had actually and physically seen. The colour, he decided, was black diluted by white rather than brown, yet not cold or neutral; as might be expected, a warm brown, charred black a bit.⁶⁴

The writing here is extremely visual and obsessively detailed. Skin is described as 'black', 'white', 'brown', 'warm' and 'charred'. Colour is deployed to signify racial identity. These colours produce a complex and yet paradoxically crude typology of race. 'White' and 'black' are used to identify white people and Aboriginal people respectively. Yet because the text is labouring with the notion of Beatrice as being of mixed heritage, the emphasis is placed on her being 'black diluted by white' which in this fantasy does not make grey, but rather it makes a colour which white people can identify as half-caste.

Stereotype is used repeatedly to describe Beatrice's body and descriptions of Beatrice's body reproduce stereotypes of Aboriginal

⁶³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 20.

femininity.⁶⁵ Phillip has not seen Beatrice's body. Her body is superimposed on the only sexualised naked body Phillip has seen which is now 'the substance of his imaginations'. Beatrice's body is substituted for the original white body.⁶⁶ This fantasy can be carried out because a stereotype of black feminine sexuality circulates which can be imposed on the white body without reference to the particular black woman's body.⁶⁷ As bell hooks writes: 'Black bodies then, are like clay – there to be shaped so that they become anything that the white man wants them to be. They become the embodiment of his desires'.⁶⁸

The fantasy of Phillip's desire for the sexualised Beatrice operates in terms of an ambivalence. In the textual moment after Phillip's imagining of Beatrice's naked body there is a disavowal: 'But what would it be like when she began to age! Horrible, bestial?'⁶⁹ Racism is interwoven with sexism. The initial sexist insult of an aged woman's body as 'horrible' is particularised to produce old Aboriginal women as 'bestial'. The moment of desire is contained. This is achieved in a crude way, through the denial of the Aboriginal woman's humanity. So disturbing was the moment of Phillip's desire for Beatrice that the immediate reaction is a misogynist and racist denial.⁷⁰

The logic of the novel suggests that white male sexual desire directed in an established relationship with an Aboriginal woman is slightly perverse. The perversity is linked to the possibility of children. Phillip's changing sexual proclivities are represented as tied up with the possibility of Beatrice becoming pregnant. A passage where Beatrice wonders if Phillip is 'abnormal' moves easily on to her thinking about his abhorrence at the idea of having a child with her:

⁶⁵ See: Alberts, 'She is there to entertain', pp. 5–6; Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', pp. 34–38.

⁶⁶ See: '... the practised power of discrimination which consumers of pornography show in their endless search for new sources of arousal which will 'repeat' familiar pleasures. While an image, shot, or sequence that is arousing in one instance may lose its power to arouse repeatedly, each fresh set of images is addressed to our carnal knowledge and memory of similar or related images.' Andrew Ross, 'The popularity of pornography', in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993.

⁶⁷ Langton's idea of intertextuality is useful here. Phillip's fantasy of an Aboriginal body does not depend on knowledge of a specific Aboriginal subject, but only on icons or stereotypes which circulate in various texts, which can substitute for actual knowledge of an Aboriginal woman. Similarly, the text *Venus Half-Caste* produces for readers a similar iconic and stereotyped knowledge of Aboriginal women, which is not linked to knowing actual Aboriginal subjects. See Langton, *Well I Heard it on the Radio*, pp. 32–33.

⁶⁸ hooks, 'Seduction and betrayal', p. 59.

⁶⁹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 20.

⁷⁰ In the gender reverse of this scene Vic's fantasy of sex with a white woman is denied by imagining that they would both be viewed 'as two animals, and himself the worse one.' Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 167.

... something ... had begun to trouble her a lot. It was that he wanted to do it with her properly much less often than he used to. Even when he tried he seemed to be making himself do it, not wanting it. And he was even less good at it. What he wants to do was only look at her and paw her. She had begun to ask herself, getting the idea from some piece of glossy fiction perhaps, whether he was abnormal. When looking up at his face she saw that gloating silly look on it and when she felt his hot quivering hands travelling over her body, she was sure he must be.⁷¹

Then the text's first mention of children:

He was each time he was ordinary, or tried to be, afraid she might have a baby ... Oh he wanted her all right, but her baby, her baby she could have, a half-caste abo kid, he would not want that.⁷²

Phillip, though already portrayed as not wanting sex in his encounter with the predatory white woman, is represented as growing more and more 'abnormal' in his sexual encounters with Beatrice. His desires are to 'look at her', to 'paw her' and to publicly let the world know that she is his and privately to 'gloat' over her as a possession.

Venus Half-Caste represents Phillip's fascination for Beatrice as corrupt and wrong.⁷³ In a fantasy scene where Phillip is imagining 'keeping' Beatrice 'because she satisfied his taste for the exotic', he imagines himself as being gossiped about 'as perverse, almost a pervert'.⁷⁴ What makes him perverted is that other men would 'have liked to go with [Beatrice], but only once or twice, safely, no one ever knowing',⁷⁵ whereas Phillip fantasises about openly living with Beatrice. The established nature of the relationship is the perversity. Anderson writes that the knowledge of inter-racial sex taking place in Australia sets off a 'moral panic'.⁷⁶ In this novel such a desire is represented as slightly off-key. The suggestion is that such desires are to be found in all white men, but perhaps the man

⁷¹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 151.

⁷² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 151–152.

⁷³ See also McClintock's analysis of Arthur Munby's desires for working class Hannah Culwick. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, pp. 136–137.

⁷⁴ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 34–35.

⁷⁵ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 11.

who is already slightly perverse will take up what other white men publicly deny.⁷⁷

The character of Phillip is drawn with a subtly homophobic wash. His dislike of sex with women, his 'stunted' sexual development (he is continually referred to as a 'boy'), his bad relationship with his father, his all-male clubs – suggest ever so obliquely that Phillip may be homosexual. Edelman argues in his essays on gay literary and cultural theory that homosexuality 'in the dominant optic ... comes into focus only as the conflictual undoing of one man's authority by another, it signifies ... a failed, debased or inadequate masculinity – a masculinity severed from the ground of its meaning in a phallic "possession" betokening one's legitimate status as a subject'.⁷⁸ Phillip's authority is undone in his relationship with his father and (father substitute) Steven Panner, and in this sense he becomes homosexual.⁷⁹ In this novel the desire for an Aboriginal woman is located in a man whose masculinity/subjectivity is represented as inadequate. The suggestion is that only an inadequate white man would desire a public relationship with an Aboriginal woman. Phillip is the text's repository for perverse sexual desires; desires which thwart the national dream of a 'white Australia'. His desires cross boundaries of race and sexual preferences and transgress into taboo areas of the white psyche.

Phillip's interest in Beatrice is represented as being about showing her off (and about letting his father know, indirectly that his lover is an Aboriginal woman).⁸⁰ His interest is frequently misread as concern for Aboriginal people. In the scene at the concert hall an establishment matron

⁷⁷ This idea is reinforced by a reading of the manuscript of *Venus Half-Caste* where a substantial passage on white men wanting sex with Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men as wanting sex with white women is edited from the text. Manuscript of *Venus Half-Caste*, Chapters 1–13, p. 345, MS 10328, Box 1506/3, SLV.

⁷⁸ Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Complementing though not mirroring Phillip's homosexuality is a same-sex desire for Beatrice by a Mission sister:

How strange it was! All these years she had been a Sister of the Mission her heart had been wanting someone she could love and it had seized at last on this half-caste girl, all those years that had been a constant struggle to overcome its repulsion of human beings. Oh heart too human that was satisfying its desire, desire like lust, on the one creature who had the necessary attraction.[pp. 251–252].

Like the three men, Sister Agnes also desired the beautiful Beatrice, and like Phillip and Steven part of her attraction to Beatrice is her status as half-caste. Sister Agnes' love, as same-sex desire, is outside a traditional economy of inter-racial desire and so perhaps Agnes does not need to die, as Phillip and Steven do, for her transgression. The love is only passingly acknowledged and peripheral in the textual structuring of inter-racial relationships.

⁸⁰ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 151.

loudly and frequently states that Beatrice is a 'charity protégée of Marion Roke's'.⁸¹ The matron states: 'You'll be interested Sir William, Phillip's mother is much concerned with the lot of the poor aborigines and half-castes. So difficult don't you think?'⁸² The scene, played for racist comic effect, suggests that Beatrice, as a 'charming and distinguished member of the ancient race', is being inducted into 'culture' and that Marion Roke is the organiser of this activity of uplift. Phillip, in helping to carry out the deed, 'was to be admired for being able to do it so bravely alone, without the protection of his mother'.⁸³ The uplift is of course actually a sexual relationship and so the novel puns on dominant understandings of inter-racial sexual relationships. This is not the uplift of an Aboriginal woman but the beginning of the 'downfall' of a white man.

Phillip's interest in the Aboriginal neighbourhood where Beatrice lives, and his eventual death there, wrapped in newspaper in a derelict house, represents a common trope of white men in sexual relationships with Aboriginal women as in decline.⁸⁴ Contrasts are made between the establishment culture and lifestyle of the Roke family and Phillip's descent into crime, madness and poverty. Phillip's decline includes turning to alcohol, neglect of his job, and lack of interest in his appearance. He is represented in an urban equivalent of 'going native'. This trope is common in bush stories of inter-racial desire, in this text it is transferred to the city. In the racially inflected patriarchal social form of the novel, Phillip's masculine authority, represented in terms of his heterosexuality, social status and job, is undermined and he loses Beatrice.⁸⁵

The relationship between Phillip and Beatrice propels the plot into a space of titillating danger for the white reader. The perversity of Phillip takes both Beatrice and Phillip into the orbit of Steven. Steven knows Beatrice is involved with Phillip and wishes to remove her from his harmful influence. Phillip sees Steven as the father figure who has stolen his love object and therefore as a sexual rival and object of jealous revenge. Steven is the novel's half-way point between Phillip and Vic. He provides Beatrice with the space and support to make the move from one to the other. The establishment surgeon is the site of benevolent paternalism,

⁸¹ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 77

⁸² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 76.

⁸³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 90. For a non-Australian commentary see Hugh Ridley, *Images of Imperial Rule*, Croom Helm, London, 1983, pp. 80–83.

⁸⁵ Edelman, *Homographesis*, p. 54.

enabling an appropriate relationship between Vic and Beatrice to emerge and ensure a conventional sociocultural assimilationist future.

Beatrice Leddin and Steven Panner

The relationship between Beatrice and Steven contrasts starkly with Phillip's relationship with Beatrice; Steven is paternal to Phillip's ill-adjusted adolescence. The text on the inside cover suggests that Steven sees Beatrice as a 'person'.⁸⁶ However, the repeated representation of Beatrice in this relationship is orientalist⁸⁷ – she is figured as 'exotic' and as a member of Steven's 'harem'. Like Phillip, Steven takes a pleasure in looking at Beatrice and knowing that his relationship with her is publicly misread as sexual.⁸⁸ In fact the novel's denouement requires that the employment contract be misinterpreted by Phillip, Vic and the police as a sexual relationship, and this in turn depends on the taken-for-granted assumption that the only reason a white man and a beautiful Aboriginal woman are together is for sex. However, to the reader, Steven is represented as a mentor or patron of Beatrice, continuing the job which Sister Agnes started in the Mission school. As with the representation of Mary Foster and her teacher Harold Starr, in *The Leaping Blaze*, the suggestion is that the transfer of knowledge from white 'teacher' to Aboriginal 'pupil' is a 'desire like lust'.⁸⁹

Beatrice is described as part of a 'harem' of women who Steven has collected to observe and protect. Steven is represented as keeping this 'harem' not directly for sexual pleasure, but for visual pleasure: 'Why the harem was just part of his fancy life? And what after all was his fancy life? Sensual pleasure but visual only.'⁹⁰ Steven's pleasure in Beatrice is represented as the pleasure in looking (similar to the group of men on the front cover). His profession as a surgeon establishes a condoned voyeurism.⁹¹ This establishes his clinical eye for looking at women – a look which it is suggested is unmoved by sexual desire: 'The nude woman was just material for his job. How could you think a body beautiful when you

⁸⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, inside front cover.

⁸⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978.

⁸⁸ The issue of Beatrice's new and very well paid job as Steven's chauffeur being misread as a cover for Steven and Beatrice having an affair is brought up frequently in the novel.

⁸⁹ This is how the mission sister Agnes' interest in Beatrice is described. Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 251–252.

⁹⁰ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 147.

⁹¹ His medical specialization is unclear – oncology or gynaecology.

were feeling it to calculate cancer?'⁹² Steven's lack of threat as a sexual predator is signalled by the fact that he finds his wife 'sufficient' for his sexual needs, his physical appearance which is suggested is less than prepossessing and his professional eye.⁹³

Steven is interested in Beatrice's colouring. This is represented in tandem with an interest in the style, colour and suitability of her clothes, which establishes a respectability to this voyeurism. As I suggested earlier Steven's looking helps establish Beatrice's place in the calculus of caste, without disturbing its purely sociocultural assimilationist intent with misplaced miscegenist desire. Like Phillip he establishes the truth of Beatrice as beautiful and half-caste through a repetition of a mantra of colour – 'not brown', 'warm', 'golden fire' 'charcoal'.⁹⁴ But a clear distinction is made between Steven's purely visual interest and Phillip's sexual one. Steven's looking at Beatrice is part of the national project of controlling and marking non-white bodies.

I would suggest however that the repeated mantra of adjectives which attends descriptions of Beatrice's body produces for the reader the same incitement to see her as sensual, as a sexual object, whether it is spoken in the voice of Steven or Phillip. She is represented either way as literally to be devoured on the page. To put an end to her visual consumption, Beatrice is textually removed from the white field of vision. Vic Pegram takes her away.

Beatrice Leddin and Vic Pegram

Vic Pegram is the male complement to Beatrice. Like Beatrice he is represented as an Aboriginal person of mixed heritage. He was born in Northern Queensland, the illegitimate son of a large property owner and an Aboriginal woman named Narboo. Vic is taken from his mother to be raised and educated by the manager of the station. He is educated and as he develops skills in the cattle industry he is given more and more responsibility. Vic has a decent working relationship with his biological father who all but acknowledges that Vic is his son.⁹⁵ Much is made of Vic's heritage and looks: 'Almost black as a full blood in skin, his features those of the immigrant Scottish grandfather.'⁹⁶

⁹² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 147.

⁹³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 146.

⁹⁴ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 148.

⁹⁵ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, pp. 39–40.

⁹⁶ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 41.

Together Vic and Beatrice encompass white understandings of what it means to be half-caste. They embody white assimilationist notions of in-betweenness, both physically and emotionally. Vic's white features and dark colouring are made to signify some type of an emotional limbo: 'he was a point, quite alone, between the black and the white, not wanting to drift one way, not able to go much further the other'.⁹⁷ Represented here is an idea of the children of white fathers and Aboriginal mothers being in part rejected by 'full blood' Aboriginal people as well as suggesting that the children of mixed heritage want to distance themselves from their Aboriginal culture. Beatrice and Vic are also represented as being blocked from entering white society. Such imaginings of the relations of people of mixed heritage are necessary in representing a policy of assimilation which includes a practical policy of separating children from their Aboriginal families. Vic needs to be imagined as rejected by his Aboriginal mother and alienated from his people.⁹⁸ In a textual manoeuvre which mimics the separation policies of this era, Vic is 'removed' not just physically from his mother and moved from her 'camp' to the overseer's home, but also from the area where his family live and for the purposes of the plot shifted from Northern Queensland to Victoria.

Vic is represented by a series of traits which signify Aboriginal suffrage and citizenship status in the post-1948 period.⁹⁹ He is an ex-serviceman with a gallant service record, well-dressed, self-possessed, 'remarkably mature' for an Aboriginal person, a substantial landowner and a resident of Victoria. These traits together mark Vic's assimilation and respectability in 'white Australia'. In an unsurprising understanding of gender roles, it is Beatrice's beauty which is her passport to the white world and it is Vic's property or professional status which is his. Vic acquires status or standing in white Australian society through his acquisition of land which he buys with his inheritance from his white father:¹⁰⁰ 'a man with a farm of his own, and some money too would, though black as the ace of spades, soon come to look only brown'.¹⁰¹ Property makes Vic lighter, from 'black' to 'brown'. It assimilates him.

⁹⁷ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ See Beckett's argument that the rejection of Aboriginal children practiced by white communities is attributed to Aboriginal communities. Beckett, 'The past in the present', p. 198.

⁹⁹ See Chesterman and Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights*, chapter 6.

¹⁰⁰ Vic was left a £20,000 bequest by his father when he died.

¹⁰¹ This reference is made particularly about Vic's chances of marrying a white woman. Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 160.

The status that Vic acquires through his property is structured in terms of a belief in *terra nullius* and colonial legitimacy. Beatrice and Vic go to live on Beatrice's country only after it has been purchased (as alienated land) through the white colonialist legal system. This contrasts strongly with the resolution in *The Leaping Blaze* where the Aboriginal couple, Mary and Jerry, are expelled from their land. The textual recognition of genealogical inheritance would be more unsettling than a monetary land purchase. Both texts in their resolutions deny Aboriginal (native) title.

In acquiring land, Vic acquires some semblance of white power or authority. The land Vic owns is Lladia's and Beatrice's country. In acquiring Beatrice's country he acquires patriarchal authority over Beatrice. The motif of the property contains a layered gendered and raced understanding of patriarchal and colonialist politics.

This patriarchal system of ownership extends in the text to the construction of the relationship between Beatrice and Vic. Beatrice is 'given' to Vic a number of times. First, in the Aboriginal betrothal ceremony between Vic and Beatrice, Beatrice's father gives Beatrice to Vic.¹⁰² Later Vic approaches the mission sister, Sister Agnes about a church wedding to supplement the Aboriginal ceremony and so Beatrice is again given to Vic by a representative of the Christian mission.¹⁰³ There is a third handing over of Beatrice. Another white authority figure, in the guise of the policeman Mellis, gives Vic the job of looking after Beatrice.¹⁰⁴ The private decision of two Aboriginal people to marry is overseen by the white church and white state.

Two white men have died as a result of their interactions with Beatrice. Mellis, the police officer, visits Vic at his farm to let him know that he knows that Vic killed Phillip, but that it will not be followed through, instead Vic's job or duty is to take care of Beatrice. She has been removed from the social and sexual economy of the white city to her country. This way she no longer troubles the white system. Vic is given the responsibility of keeping Beatrice out of trouble and out of the way.

It is at the moment that Beatrice is betrothed to Vic and he starts to control her life, beginning with killing Phillip to save her reputation, that the novel reverts to using Beatrice's Aboriginal name. Her mother had named her Sansa, but it had been changed to Beatrice when she started at

¹⁰² Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 243.

¹⁰³ Mann, *Venus Half-Caste*, p. 250.

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting here the historical incidence of policemen as the 'protectors' of Aboriginal people.

the mission school. Sansa is her non-city name. It signifies her withdrawal from the social economy of the white community and her return to her country and a world without sexual or emotional interactions with white men. When Beatrice is most carefully sutured into respectable white social forms – marriage, land, children – but with an Aboriginal man she is marked in a new way as different – Sansa – to signify the limits of this system of assimilation.

Venus Half-Caste endorses a complex story of assimilation which encourages sociocultural assimilation through integration (here into a country-town community), but not inter-racial sex. Within the logic of assimilation white people must desire Aboriginal people (for example they must want them to be in their community), but Aboriginal people must be desirable in white terms. The novel sets out a calculus of Aboriginal assimilability organised in terms of femininity, looks and colour. This calculus is premised on a visual system which incites white people (in particular white men) to look at and desire a range of desirable Aboriginal femininities. There is also a calculus established in terms of a particular Aboriginal masculinity ordered in terms of property and citizenship.

Yet desire must be limited. It must not be sexual. In *Venus Half-Caste* inter-racial sexual relations are figured as dangerous. Desire for Beatrice is limited through the violent textual containment of the white men who are attracted to her. Desire for the beautiful Beatrice is also contained by the repeated threat that to desire Beatrice is to desire the 'other' Aboriginal woman, her sister Eunice, who is represented as 'dirty' and 'careless'. The image of Beatrice as beautiful is underwritten by this image of her as potentially 'dirty'. These limits mean that racial difference is maintained and can be marked by an ontological schema of skin colour and physical features. Beatrice (and Vic) are always recognizable as Aboriginal. The production of this notion of difference reinforces assimilation as focused on sociocultural integration and not inter-marriage.

Dead centre:
guilt and responsibility
in Olaf Ruhen's *Naked Under Capricorn*

i: introduction

Olaf Ruhen, in a letter to a friend, wrote:

When one is freelancing from a comfortable home one should I think travel to New Guinea or the Northern Territory of Melbourne, or some of the outlandish districts once in a while to get the brains brushed up a bit.¹

The letter suggests that to produce quality creative writing, a writer needs to get away to 'outlandish' places. A joke reference is made to the ubiquitous Melbourne-Sydney rivalry, but essentially these 'outlandish' sites are signified by Papua New Guinea and the Northern Territory.² These spaces are marked as colonial and Other in the white Australian imagination. Asha Varadharajan argues in *Exotic Parodies* that 'the other is [both] the object of empire as well as the means to the colonizer's self definition'.³ *Venus Half-Caste* and *Naked Under Capricorn* both critique assimilation and posit an alternative vision of separate communities. *Venus Half-Caste* promotes its separation solution in terms of the danger of miscegenation for white men. *Naked Under Capricorn* does so in terms of the disastrous effects assimilation has for Aboriginal cultures. However,

¹ Letter from Olaf Ruhen to Oknirrabata, undated, J. K. Moir Collection, Olaf Ruhen file, SLV.

² Ruhen wrote many novels and short stories about these areas. For example *Mountains in the Clouds* is a novel about Papua New Guinea, *White Man's Shoes* is set in the New Hebrides and *Naked Under Capricorn* takes place north of Alice Springs.

³ Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, p. 15.

drawing on Varadharajan, I would suggest that this narrative of separate communities also deploys discourses of the 'Noble savage' or primitivism. For Ruhen separate 'pristine' Aboriginal cultures provide a counterpoint to white greed and provide a means for white redefinition.

Naked Under Capricorn is the story of a hapless man, Davis Marriner, who sets off on an adventure from his family's Brisbane milkbar and ends up owning a large and successful cattle property in the southern part of the Northern Territory. Though economically successful, Marriner is represented as spiritually empty. Marriner's spiritual demise is mirrored by the suffering of the group of Aboriginal people whose land he occupies. Their deaths finally push him to self-reflection, self-knowledge, transcendence and redemption.

Naked Under Capricorn does participate in discourses of assimilation but in a complex way. The novel fiercely contests the dominant Australian narrative of unproblematic colonial and economic expansion. It explicitly links imperial capitalism with Aboriginal suffering. It also exposes the barbaric racism of various white individuals. Yet, as I will show, the novel also reinforces racially coded signifying systems which posit whiteness as progress and blackness as passivity, a taxonomy which naturalises colonial expansion, assimilation and elimination. Though potentially radical, the novel ultimately reproduces colonial discourses and myths of whiteness and Aboriginality. In this framework the characters in the novel who are represented as half-caste are characterized as 'lost' to their Aboriginal culture and therefore needing to assimilate to survive.

This chapter is organized in three sections. In the first I set out the plot and discuss genre. Though not self consciously a western, the novel employs many of the forms and tropes of this genre, in particular a gritty realism. It also draws on some of the conventions of 'race melodrama', but these are framed in terms of an ambivalence – utopia and nightmare. The second section concerns representations of relationships between white men and Aboriginal women. Here I focus on the way white men in the outback are represented as inhabiting a space simultaneously utopic and unstable. The last section focuses on the redemption and purification of white men in the novel. I argue that Aboriginal women are the key to Marriner's acquisition of self-knowledge and the possibility of redemption. In the heterosexual economy of the outback, however, Aboriginal women are always potential sexual partners and so they represent both the pleasure of transgression and the potential for miscegenation. In his journey to utopic redemption Marriner is

accompanied by the Aboriginal man, Activity, who represents and reasserts a less problematic homosocial economy of desire. Analysing the final scenes of the novel I argue that whiteness in this novel is, through the textual sacrifice of Aboriginal people, stabilized and again made powerful and invisible.

*Heroes must be both dominant
and deferential, gentle and violent,
self contained yet sensitive ...
They must bridge, that is, not
simply the division between
savagery and civilization, but the
anxiously guarded (ambiguously
experienced) frontier between the
two worlds usually coded as
masculine and feminine.*
Lee Clark Mitchell⁴

Author

Olaf Ruhen (1911–1989) was born in New Zealand. He moved to Australia in 1947, where he worked as a features journalist for two metropolitan dailies.⁵ Ruhen quit journalism in 1956 to work full-time as a freelance writer. He travelled widely all his life and his writing reflects his destinations. Many of his novels are set in non-urban Australia, the Pacific and Papua New Guinea, places he lived and visited. When researching *Naked Under Capricorn*, Ruhen undertook two field trips, each of three months duration 'one in the wet season and one in the dry, to live with the native cattlemen and work with them'.⁶

Ruhen published widely. His short stories appeared in the *Bulletin*, *The Saturday Evening Post* (USA) and *Man* magazine from the early 1950s. He wrote five novels: *Naked Under Capricorn*, *White Man's Shoes*, *The Flockmaster*, *The Broken Wing* and *Scan the Dark Coast*.⁷ He also wrote documentary accounts of his travels, biography, children's fiction, a 'how-to' manual on writing and edited an anthology of short stories.⁸

Plot

Ruhen's first novel *Naked Under Capricorn* begins with Davy Marriner alone at a desert waterhole, having been robbed and left to die by the

⁴ Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, p. 27.

⁵ William H. Wilde, et al., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, second edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 667.

⁶ Correspondence from Olaf Ruhen to (Mr) Minchin, undated, Olaf Ruhen Papers, MS 7935, Box 6, NLA.

⁷ *White Man's Shoes* (1960), Horwitz Publications, Sydney, 1966; *The Flockmaster*, Macdonald, London, 1963; *The Broken Wing*, Minerva, Auckland, 1965; *Scan the Dark Coast*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1969.

⁸ Wilde, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, p. 667.

party he had joined in Darwin to go 'treasure hunting' for rubies. Marriner is rescued by Jeff Edrington, a cattle drover, who is taking stock south to Adelaide. Marriner joins this experienced bushman on the long desert trek south. They are together for a number of weeks and Edrington begins to teach Marriner skills in desert survival and cattle mustering. He also counsels Marriner on how to deal with the Aboriginal people whose land they are crossing, advising him to be 'friendly'.⁹ Edrington dies in an accident in the desert. His will, written in a copy of Thomas More's *Utopia*, bequeaths his herd of cattle to Marriner.

Marriner continues the trek south. However, after a number of days he reaches a long dry stretch of desert and, unable to cope, lies down to die. Some days later he regains consciousness and discovers he has been rescued and cared for by a group of Aboriginal people. The man who discovered Marriner introduces himself as Activity and explains to Marriner where he is:

'Name belonging me, Activity, boss,' he said. 'That my white-feller name. This my people, Eiliuwarra people. This place, white-feller name, is Bloodwood Plain.'¹⁰

Marriner learns that both Activity's 'white-feller name' and a 'whip pole' well-water system had been endowed by a European man, long gone, who once ran cattle in the area. Marriner tells Activity that he is heading south, and Activity explains to him that there is a large desert to the south in which Marriner will surely perish. Marriner asks Activity to accompany him and show him the way south. Activity suggests Marriner wait until a drover going south comes through. So begins Marriner's twenty year long temporary stop in the desert.

Marriner is introduced to the area by Activity, who becomes his friend and guide. Activity shows Marriner how to look after his cattle, but also imparts to him knowledge of the land; teaching him to speak the Eiliuwarra people's language and to read the tracks of animals and birds. He shows Marriner how the Eiliuwarra people survive in an area in which he had twice almost died.

After a short time Marriner begins to feel attracted to an Eiliuwarra woman he calls Mary. He asks Activity to arrange for him to sleep with Mary, but because of skin differences another Aboriginal woman called Rosie is deemed more appropriate and so sent to Marriner's bed instead.

⁹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 31.

¹⁰ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 55.

In the dark of night Marriner does not notice the difference. He ends up living with Rosie, now called Trubbidy.¹¹ Marriner is fond of Trubbidy though never excessively so. He stays with her over the years and they have a number of children – the first two named Henry and Casey. He also has another child in a one-off sexual encounter with another Aboriginal woman while out droving (see figure 8).

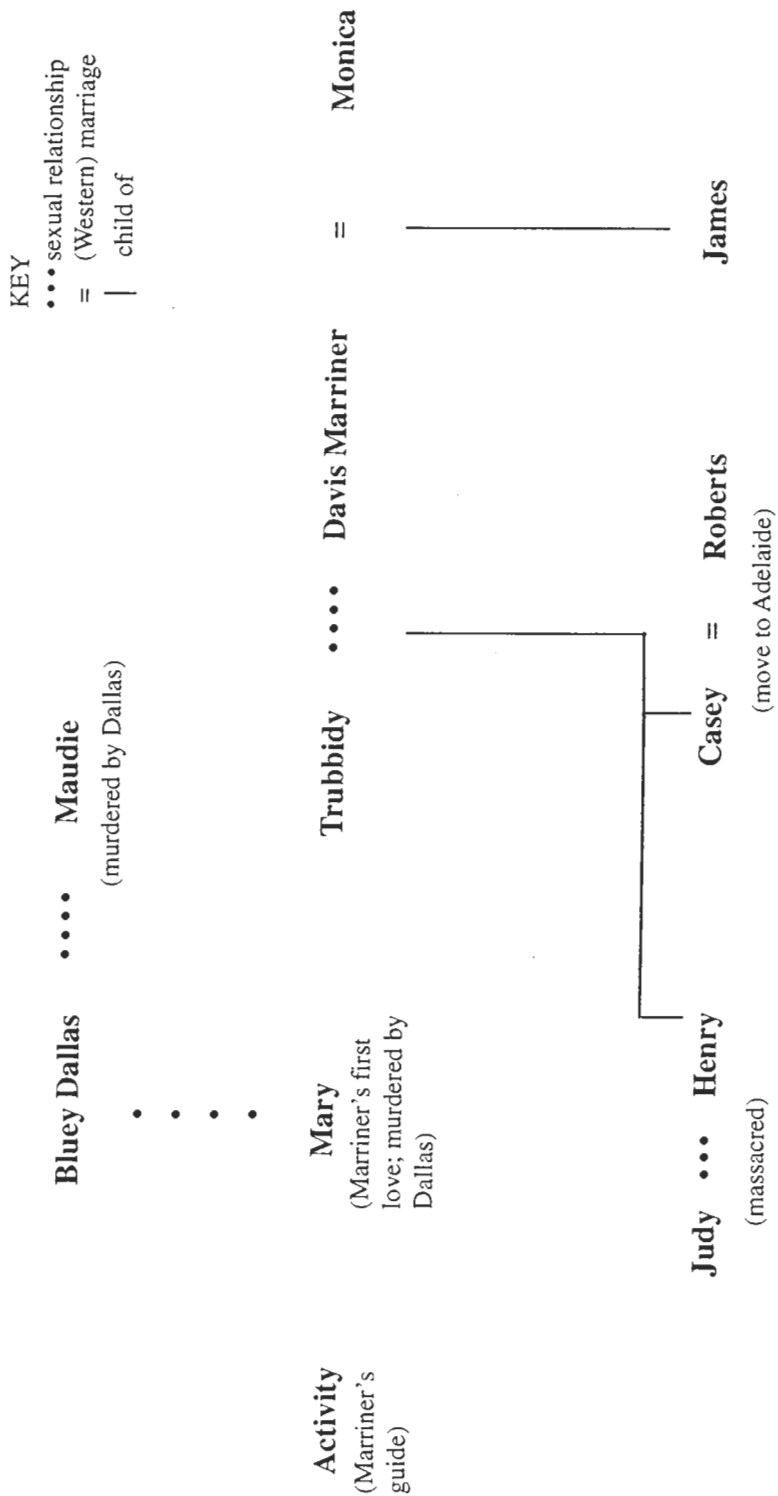
Over this time Marriner, by good luck and the unpaid labour of the Eiliuwarra people, amasses a large cattle empire. More drovers and cattlemen and prospectors start passing through the area. A man called Bluey Dallas takes up land adjoining Marriner's. Dallas is represented as Marriner's opposite in character. Over the years Dallas murders the Aboriginal women he lives with when they become pregnant – an action Marriner is aware of. Marriner's guilt at the end of the novel is in part caused by his lack of action in the face of these outrages.

In time Marriner gains title over the land he has occupied. He eventually marries a white woman. Monica, his wife, arrives and dramatically changes Marriner's lifestyle. Monica despises the Eiliuwarra people, and the women in particular. She refuses to acknowledge Marriner's children with Trubbidy. She is represented as bringing ill-will and civilization into a utopia.

The long climax of the novel involves the death of Dallas. He is killed in a payback for the murder of Mary and Maudie – two of his Aboriginal lovers. This killing precipitates a massacre of the 'suspected' Eiliuwarra people at the hands of a group of white murderers. Killed in the massacre of men, women and children are Marriner's son Henry and his girlfriend Judy, an Eiliuwarra woman. Around the same time Marriner's daughter Casey marries a white ex-manager from Marriner's property called Roberts. Roberts takes Casey away to the city

¹¹ The Aboriginal women in the novel are 'named' by Marriner. The woman he named Rosie, is later nicknamed 'Trouble' because of the 'trouble' she causes Marriner because *he* failed to notice that she was not the woman he wanted to sleep with. 'Trouble' is mispronounced by Rosie as 'Trubbidy' and this is the name she is known by throughout the novel. Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 72.

figure 8: The characters in *Naked Under Capricorn*



and informs Marriner that it is probably best for Casey if she doesn't see her neglectful father as she is 'blossoming' in the city. Marriner therefore 'loses' two children in quick succession. He leaves the property and goes on an extended trip back to Brisbane where he grew up. On returning to Bloodwood Plain he finds Monica has transformed the property – destroying the traces of the life Marriner remembers in his first years with the Eiliuwarra people. She has moved the Eiliuwarra people out of sight of her house and removed the 'whip-pole' well system. Marriner weakly protests arguing that this area was the 'dreaming' for the Eiliuwarra people, but quickly rationalizes that the people who have been moved, are not on 'alien soil' and that the women of the group are probably better off away from the drunken white men who 'debauch' them.¹²

These changes in tandem with the loss of his two eldest children, trouble Marriner. He realises that his presence and that of the other white people who followed him have destroyed the Eiliuwarra people's culture and life. White culture has literally destroyed them as they are massacred, moved off their land and subject to extremely poor health and living conditions. Marriner decides to move on to a place where white people have not yet been, searching for a truly untouched Aboriginal culture. He and Activity move off into the desert and are accepted by the Pintubi people, represented as the people furthest from 'white progress'. Here Marriner is reborn and revitalised, until a prospector, ironically financed by Marriner, arrives with news that there are minerals in the area and that a 'city' of white people are coming. The novel ends with Marriner and Activity moving deeper into the desert in search of the utopia that no longer exists.¹³

The western and utopia

Though not a celebration of the project of frontier expansion, *Naked Under Capricorn* can be productively read in terms of a western and utopic fiction. In *West of Everything* Jane Tompkins analyses the trope of the desert or the empty plain in the western genre. She argues that the 'blankness of the plain' suggests 'a certain kind of mastery ... where a person can remain alone and complete and in control of himself while controlling the external world through physical strength and force of

¹² Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 233.

¹³ Cf nineteenth century Australian novels about the search for a lost civilization in the desert. Docker, *The Nervous Nineties*, chapter 16, *passim*.

will.¹⁴ In *Naked Under Capricorn* the project of possessing the land and making it productive – cattle, gold, minerals – is represented as taking place almost effortlessly. The land yields these things to the white men who seek them.¹⁵ The representation of the desert as empty and flat means that simply by being in that space the white man dominates.¹⁶

Though conquering the land is figured as effortless, the project of being at home in that land and at peace with oneself at the end of the adventure is not represented as so easily achieved. Marriner is troubled throughout the novel. His unease only increases as the project of white expansion continues. Dyer argues that: 'The Western is not all white exhilaration and glorification. It has elements that challenge 'optimism, that drag at the sense of energy and freedom, that complicate any idea of the white man as the citadel of right'.¹⁷ A 'sense of death' accompanies the excitement of the frontier adventure; the land seems laid out before the white gaze, but it is not to be possessed without effort, suffering and loss.¹⁸ In *Naked Under Capricorn* images of death, suffering and loss run through the novel and are all testimony to the cost of white progress.¹⁹ What is represented as the greatest suffering however is Marriner's (the white man's) knowledge that others are suffering. Dyer argues that these moments of white suffering and loss: 'only makes the conquest nobler, an agony of the will defining ... white (male) identity'.²⁰

In terms of the western, *Naked Under Capricorn* focuses on the struggle between two white men, representing two approaches to colonization. Dyer points out that a complexity in the western, which complicates the simple glory and energy model of expansion, is the structuring of the enemy in the western narrative: '[the] greatest threat in most Westerns comes not from the native peoples ... but from within, from bad whites'.²¹ He argues that this is only logical, because to accord 'greatest threat' to native peoples is to suggest that they have qualities

¹⁴ Tompkins, *West of Everything: the Inner Life of Westerns*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p. 75.

¹⁵ For example Marriner is described as having a 'Midas touch', Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 219.

¹⁶ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Dyer, *White*, p. 34.

¹⁸ Dyer, *White*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Ruhen wrote to a fan that his motivation for writing *Naked Under Capricorn* included that he 'was ... keen to put it on record that the great fortunes of the Australian inland were created by the aborigines ... and that the changes which were necessary and on the whole good did involve a regrettable destruction.' Correspondence Olaf Ruhen to (Mr) Minchin, undated, Olaf Ruhen Papers, MS 7935, Box 6, NLA.

²⁰ Dyer, *White*, p. 35.

²¹ Dyer, *White*, p. 35.

which would 'make them the equivalent of white people.'²² The realist thrust of the western also means that it is open to the idea of 'variation in white people; that is, the ways in which some white people fail to attain whiteness'.²³ Dyer contends that for whiteness to operate as the norm, as unremarkable and unmarked, it needs to include an understanding of variations within whiteness. He calls these differences extreme whiteness and ordinary whiteness: 'the extreme, very white white image is functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary'.²⁴ These differences operate in *Naked Under Capricorn* to mask the process of colonization: Marriner's ordinary occupation and dispossession contrasts with Dallas's murderous one. The Eiliuwarra people are never the focus or the enemy of the white colonizers; they are not part of the Manichean dualism of the novel. The Eiliuwarra people are represented as unable to defend their land. The 'duel' to the death is between different types of whiteness – good and bad – and the question is which type of whiteness will be stamped on the Australian outback.

The western is a homosocial genre. One of the underlying themes of *Naked Under Capricorn* is heterosexuality and even more specifically heterosexuality and race, understood as miscegenation. These themes complicate readings of the novel as a western. Dyer contrasts the homosocial western with literature of the south (of the USA) where the foundation myth circulates around reproduction (of slaves, of white families) and where the issues of purity and miscegenation complicate the 'purity of whiteness',²⁵ He is able to separate these two genres in the United States context, but this Australian novel does not fall neatly into either category. Rather *Naked Under Capricorn*, contains elements of both these genres.

The central heterosexual cross-cultural relationship between Trubbidy and Marriner is figured in terms of an ambivalent utopia. Catherine Belsey suggests that utopias in fiction are characterised as 'dream-worlds, fantastic islands and speculative futures' which have the effect of 'throwing into relief the reader's own society'.²⁶ Marriner's sexual relationship with Trubbidy is represented as shifting his relationship to his own culture. Dyer argues that inter-racial heterosexual sex is a site of

²² Dyer, *White*, p. 35.

²³ Dyer, *White*, p. 35.

²⁴ Dyer, *White*, p. 222.

²⁵ Dyer, *White*, pp. 35–36.

²⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p.185.

anxiety in discourses of whiteness. Inter-racial heterosexuality 'breaks the legitimization of whiteness ... If races are conceptualised as pure, then miscegenation threatens that purity'.²⁷ This ambivalence structures white Australian identity. In the near utopic assimilationist space (here the outback) white Australians can never be sure of the very whiteness – be it skin hue, colour or a symbolic whiteness – that their individual identity and their national identity is predicated on.²⁸ Rather, it is the homosocial inter-racial relationship between Activity and Marriner that most closely resembles utopia. It is the two men who together move towards utopia in the novel's conclusion.

²⁷ Dyer, *White*, p. 25.

²⁸ Dyer, *White*, chapter 2, *passim*.

iii: White men and Aboriginal women
(ambivalent utopia)

'... for all my love of the soil ...
I'm simply an invader, and ...
there is no hope of my ever being
able to claim the right to live in
this land unless I infuse my blood
into the aboriginal race.'
Xavier Herbert²⁹

In this section I will analyse points in the novel where white men are sexually linked to Aboriginal women, and explore what this means in terms of the staging of assimilation in the novel. I argue that the staging of relationships between the white man, Marriner, and Aboriginal women draws on ideas of a sexually liberated world and represents his relationships as near utopic. But inter-racial desire is also, in the logic of this novel, problematic. The project of colonialism demands that the question of who owns the land and who will inherit the land be clear; and the project of settler colonialism confirms that the answer to the question must be white people – the colonizers. The utopia of Marriner's early years in the outback has led to the existence of two sets of heirs. His inter-racial sexual relationship with Trubbidity has produced uncertainty, and requires violent discursive manoeuvres to reassert white mastery and contain the attending anxieties of Aboriginal and white inheritors of the land.³⁰

Naked Under Capricorn is a complex novel, which self-consciously represents the anxiety of inter-racial sexual relationships in white Australian society. At one point the classic 'romance' story of miscegenation appears. It is told by Marriner's wife, Monica. Marriner is courting Monica and he is contemplating telling her about Trubbidity. Marriner says to her: 'You don't know all the story', implying that the homosocial story of frontier life is not the full story. Monica replies:

"There are so many stories." She looked mischievous.
"A story about a dark mistress – is that the one that bothers you? ... Don't blame Peggy [for telling me about Trubbidity] – we are the closest friends. But what shocks her is nothing to me. How could you be blamed, I asked her. How can she expect a strong and

²⁹ Letter from Xavier Herbert to Arthur Dibley, 24 March 1936. Cited in Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine*, p. 165.

³⁰ Cf the solution to land ownership in *The Leaping Blaze*, chapter 5, this thesis, pp. 177–179.

red-blooded man to live like a monk, without a monk's consolations? It's a new world. These things don't matter any more."³¹

Inserted into the homosocial ('monk'-like) western is the romance of the inter-racial liaison. Monica refers to the story of the 'dark mistress', and follows with a short stereotyped romance plot of loneliness, desire, naturalised male sexual needs and a modern twist of sexualised beings. In time the novel disavows both the 'romance' of Monica's tale of inter-racial desire and the 'romance' of the sexually sophisticated white woman who can take her place in the bush. What is acknowledged in this passage is the anxiety of miscegenation (though it is Peggy who is shocked) and the danger of the outback without white women. I suggested earlier that reading this novel as a western needed to be paralleled by a reading in terms of the more sexually anxious romance genre. I will now explore these ideas of romance and miscegenist anxiety in representations of inter-racial sex.

Representing inter-racial sex as utopia

As I suggested earlier, relationships between white men and Aboriginal women are represented as something close to utopic in this novel.³² This sexual utopia is contrasted strikingly with the inadequacies of sexual relationships in white culture. A good illustration of this point is when Marriner, Activity, another man called Ngumbanalu and 'two lubras', unnamed, make a trip to Blowfly Creek. At first the creek seems waterless to Marriner but Activity points out a water source thirty feet down a smooth-walled chasm. Water is obtained from the chasm by the two women. The women cover their hands and feet in a sticky mixture of beeswax and sap. They then climb over the rim of the chasm carrying a canvas bucket and using their sticky hands and feet to hold on. They clamber down the wall, fill their buckets with water and climb back.

Watching the two women work transforms Marriner's opinions about the women. Their skill calls them into being for him:

The girls whom Marriner had so far noticed merely as willing and useful attendants thus acquired

³¹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 145.

³² The one book which Marriner carries with him in all his time at Bloodwood Plain is Thomas More's *Utopia*. It was in this novel that Jeff Edrington wrote his will which bequeathed Marriner his cattle, and from this grew Marriner's empire.

personality; became entities. He viewed them with new respect.³³

Their skill is one which Marriner does not share and cannot hope to learn. Activity explains that you have to learn from childhood. He also tells Marriner that he can perform the feat.

The next morning Marriner again watches the two women perform the task. The way these two descriptions of the same task are represented in the novel is telling. The first description is short and matter of fact:

... facing the rock, so that they walked backwards, but otherwise displaying no awkwardness whatever, they went lightly to the water's edge, filled their receptacles, and returned with them to the top.³⁴

A series of words and phrases then reinforce the skill involved – 'surety', 'speed', 'remarkable sense of balance', 'clear head', 'deft agility', 'confidence'. However, because the recognition of these attributes has transformed the women into 'entities' in Marriner's eyes, the next description of the women getting water is very different:

The next morning, before the sun rose, the girls repeated the performance, and Marriner climbed the hill to watch them. Muscles lightly rippling the naked skin, they seemed to gather a new kind of beauty in their exertions; a beauty not at all compromised by the incongruities of their attitudes upon the rock: the buttocks thrust sharply outwards; the limbs moving in a controlled rhythm one at a time; the long lean black thighs, skinny calves, flexing gently about a central equipoise; the feet spread wide; the toes splayed; the delicate fingers like tree roots veined to the rock, with the half-moons of the nails gleaming white. They never stopped an accompaniment of chatter and musical laughter; though the work itself was strenuous and demanding.³⁵

This second description, while still reinforcing the notion of skill, sexualizes the work and the women. The emphasis here is on the sensuous physicality of the women undertaking the task: 'muscles lightly rippling', 'naked skin', 'controlled rhythm', 'lean black thighs', 'flexing gently', 'equipoise', 'delicate fingers', 'gleaming', 'musical laughter'. Not surprisingly the passage which introduces and foregrounds the two

³³ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 66.

³⁴ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 64–65.

³⁵ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 66.

Aboriginal women in the text is voyeuristic and depends on a heightened physical description.³⁶ The transformation of the women into beings has also sexualised them.

In the immediate aftermath of the episode Marriner gives 'white feller' names to Ngumbanalu and the two women – George, Mary and Rosie. This naming is represented as a 'little ceremony of *bruderschaft* [brotherhood]' So 'when they rode out [of Blowfly Creek] they rode as a company, unified in their intent and feelings'.³⁷

The incidents at Blowfly Creek – watching the two women gather water and the giving of European names – form a turning point in the novel. First, Marriner begins to cement his relationship with Activity, whose solicitousness Marriner interprets as a 'hunger ... for an indoctrination in the ways of the white man'.³⁸ It is interesting that although Activity can also obtain water this way, he is not represented as doing so, thus keeping Aboriginal men aloof from the job which sexualizes Aboriginal women and makes them desirable.³⁹ Second, this is the moment at which Marriner notices the women of the Eiliuwarra group – as skilled workers and objects of desire. In a dense set of representations Aboriginal women are seen by Marriner as skilled, human and sexual. These textual representations are figured as interrelated and dependent on each other.

It is not long after this episode that Marriner begins to sexually desire Mary:

By the time they returned to camp, Marriner's eyes and his mind were so continuously engaged with the figure and the actions and even the insignificant movements of the girl Mary – the wild songs fashioned from her husky throat, the manipulations of her fingers in that voiceless communication – that he knew he wanted her for his bed.⁴⁰

Marriner asks Activity to arrange for Mary to come to his bed. He is asleep when a woman arrives:

³⁶ I have made an extended argument about this feature of Aboriginal women's representation in my analysis of *Venus Half-Caste*. See chapter 6, section iii, this thesis.

³⁷ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 67.

³⁸ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 69.

³⁹ In some senses Activity (or Aboriginal men in general) are represented as already having been called into being, made entities in the eyes of white men. This is displayed by Activity in his 'white feller' name, which suggests action and perhaps skill.

⁴⁰ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 69–70.

He awoke, seconds later it seemed to the touch of a skin amazingly soft and satiny; with a musky fragrance of flesh in his nostrils, with the sound of a girl's muted giggling and incomprehensible words. His arms opened to enclose her, happiness suffused his brain and warmed it, as a blush enlivens the cheek; his early upbringing with half its ancient shibboleths receded forever as he established this ultimate communication with the people of the desert.⁴¹

These passages which concern Marriner's first sexual encounter with an Aboriginal woman are curious. The reader is informed that the sexual 'initiation' of Marriner marks his 'assimilation into the country'. This movement has two effects. First, it allows Marriner to be represented as legitimately belonging to the land he will eventually own. Second, this is an inversion of the usual effect of assimilation which is more commonly figured and structured in assimilationist discourses as the process whereby Aboriginal people are 'absorbed' into white society.⁴² The story told here is more palatable to white Australians because it allows the colonizer to imagine himself as open to the effects of another culture; to see the colonizing process as a reciprocal one, thereby masking the extreme violence of assimilation, both as an idea and as government policy.

Ruhen's novel toys with the idea of reverse assimilation. In some ways the heroic qualities, or more importantly the vulnerabilities, of the character of Marriner come from his willingness to assimilate. In dominant discourses of 'white Australia' there was a danger for white people in imagining themselves as open to assimilation into another culture, popularly imagined as inferior to their own. In such discourses white men having sex or cohabiting with Aboriginal women are marked as 'fallen'.⁴³ Indeed this is initially Marriner's view – early in the novel he is appalled by the idea of the 'white man who mate[s] with them'.⁴⁴ The inversion of the notion of assimilation in the novel is a dangerous moment. This danger is figured as reciprocal – both white culture (as represented by Marriner) and Aboriginal cultures are represented as vulnerable as a result of this openness. But this literary effect masks the asymmetry of that danger. The dangers of assimilation for the Eiliuwarra people include the horrors of unfamiliar and devastating illness and the disastrous cultural

⁴¹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 71.

⁴² Thanks to Emma Partridge for this idea.

⁴³ McGrath *Born in the Cattle*, pp. 70–72. Cf representations of Phillip Roke in *Venus Half-Caste*, chapter 6, section iv, this thesis.

⁴⁴ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 31.

dislocation resulting from dispossession, in short dangers which are potentially fatal. In contrast, the 'danger' to the white man being open to assimilation/sex with Aboriginal women is the danger and pleasure of inter-racial desire. For the white man (but not the white woman) to assimilate is to open up the possibility of utopia – a way of being that is better than his own.

The novel represents Marriner as having sex, 'this ultimate communication', not with an individual woman, but with 'the people of the desert'. Indeed, as it transpires, the woman Marriner has slept with is not Mary but Trubbidy (Rosie). Though he was powerfully attracted to Mary, he had in the dark not been able or not bothered to see who entered his bed. Neither her voice nor her body identified her as other than an Aboriginal woman. The text represents Aboriginal women as interchangeable because they are figured only as bodies. Half-asleep Marriner had crossed the boundary of his world into another with a generic Aboriginal woman. The Aboriginal woman operates as the cultural marker of Otherness in this novel. Having sex with the Aboriginal woman marks the moment of knowing that Other.

Textually the moment when Marriner enters the desert is not when he leaves the world of Brisbane, but when he enters the body of the sexualised and racialized Other. It is at this moment that the shibboleths, customs and knowledges he has grown up with are abandoned.⁴⁵ Within the novel it is inter-racial sex which marks a transition from one space to another. The logic of the novel suggests that a white man cannot sleep with an Aboriginal woman and remain attached to the world of 'white Australia'.

These two ideas together – the reversal of the process of assimilation and the use of the universalised white man/black woman trope of inter-racial sex – function to represent the moment of Marriner's desire as emblematic of the generalised inter-racial desire which fuels the process of settler colonization and expansion. Marriner is figured as a white half-caste – beginning 'to identify himself with the black people, to appreciate their feelings ... But even with this acceptance he longed to get away'.⁴⁶ The novel constructs an image of a man torn by two desires. He wants to be where he is yet he wants to escape. He accepts Trubbidy as his wife, yet also wants a white woman as a 'respectable' wife. He learns the language and tribal lore of the Eiliuwarra people, but keeps with him his

⁴⁵ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 74.

one book, *Utopia*. Thus Marriner's assimilation is represented as incomplete and riddled with anxiety. Inter-racial sex is marked simultaneously as a moment of utopia and anxiety.

Assimilation, ambivalence and children

After their first night together Marriner nicknames Rosie 'Trouble'. Ostensibly the nickname refers to the trouble Rosie caused to Marriner's peace of mind when he discovered he had slept with the wrong woman. However, the nickname also serves as a pun or reminder of the 'trouble' caused by inter-racial sex. In my reading it also works as a constant reminder of the trouble Marriner's presence will cause to the Eiliuwarra people. The use of the nickname Trouble complicates the idea of the '*bruderschaft*' formed at Blowfly Creek, an idea which is throughout the novel only partially fulfilled. Disavowed in the textual representation of Marriner's supposed respect and sense of brotherhood with the Eiliuwarra is a notion that the Aboriginal people are 'trouble'.

Aboriginal women are represented in this novel as trouble quite simply because they (and white men!) make the possibility of miscegenation a reality. In a representational system of power, racial identity and colour, inter-racial sex disturbs certainty and blurs boundaries.⁴⁷ 'Pure white' is not assured: 'white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies'.⁴⁸ If the power of white people depends on a link being made between white (parading as human) and power, then in a world of miscegenation, white power is no longer a given. Dallas quite explicitly expresses this anxiety:

"Look mate these coons are right enough if you can take them. They know their place and they'll stay in it. Get a man half-black, half-white; the black part of him hates the white and the white part of him hates the black. And he understands both of them, both black and white. The blacks will stay on their tribal country; the yeller-fellers got no laws, they got no decency. They haven't got a good habit. Get enough of them in this country and the white man's had his day."⁴⁹

Dallas' crude analysis is colour coded. The world is 'black', 'white' and 'yeller'. The colours denote a whole series of moral characteristics as

⁴⁷ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 68.

⁴⁸ Dyer, *White*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 93–94.

much as a skin colour. Whiteness is superiority and a right to rule. Blackness is passivity, docility and an understanding of your lowly place in society. 'Yeller' signifies a lack of morals, lack of decency and bad habits.⁵⁰ In Dallas' view 'yeller' denotes a challenge to his world view of the naturalised binary of black/white.⁵¹ In this view there are two groups who are represented as challenging a white society still grappling with the idea of assimilation rather than elimination.⁵² First, and explicitly stated, is the group who are figured as falling between the opposition of black and white. Second, and implicitly, though still importantly, there is the group of white men who have sex with Aboriginal women, but keep their sense of themselves as white and masculine through hating Aboriginal women. Murderous white men like Dallas are represented as challenging assimilation. It is the melding of 'us' into 'them' and the possibility of whiteness 'fading away'⁵³ and the violence this engenders that is the fear, even in a part of the community where inter-racial sex is common. This is the heart of the ambivalence about inter-racial sex.

The representation of the birth of Marriner's first child with Trubbidy exemplifies the anxiety about whiteness as unstable. Henry, when he is born, is described in these terms:

At its birth it was pink and wrinkled, differing not at all from any of the white babies Marriner had ever seen; and for a little while he deluded himself it was going to be as white as himself; but within a few days the skin had darkened; not into the rich brown colouring of tribal children, but into a dusky medium hue, unlike either white or black, and unpleasantly reminding him of Dallas and his references to 'yeller-fellers'.⁵⁴

In this scene Marriner is represented as disavowing Henry's Aboriginal heritage until his blackness reveals itself.⁵⁵ As Henry's skin darkens, whiteness in this passage literally disappears. It is revealed as a construct and as fluid. The self turns into the Other.⁵⁶ The fearful anxieties of white people – that they will fade away, that non-white people will reproduce

⁵⁰ Dyer, *White*, p. 42 and chapter 1 and 2, *passim*.

⁵¹ Cf Langton's analysis of some Aboriginal people's use of the term 'yella fella' as a "'racial" (not racist) term for a part-Aboriginal person' in 'some restricted contexts in remote Australia'. Langton, 'Well I Heard It on the Radio', p. 37.

⁵² See Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation', p. 112.

⁵³ Dyer, *White*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 104.

⁵⁵ Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, chapter 5, *passim*.

⁵⁶ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 86.

faster than them – are played out differently in the two passages quoted above. Dallas' diatribe represents the racist version of this fear: 'get enough of them ... and this white man's had his day'.⁵⁷ While the novel structurally distances itself from these excesses it repeats the fear in less extreme ways. Marriner's anxiety when Henry's whiteness fades into 'yeller' is the same fear.

It is the children of Marriner and Trubbidy who trouble the clear-cut distinctions between black and white, and who are implicated in the tragic climax of the story. Though these characters are only mentioned in passing for most of the novel, their presence starts to have repercussions as the story reaches its climax. These figures of in-betweenness emerge as a reminder of what is usually repressed in 'white Australia' – miscegenation – and are promptly removed from the novel (Henry dead, Casey made white). The ending figures Bloodwood Plain as occupied only by Marriner's white children thus textually containing the anxiety of white erasure through the erasure of blackness.

Marriner's eldest son Henry and his girlfriend Judy, an Eiliuwarra woman, are murdered in a revenge massacre. After the murder of his son Marriner is for the first time moved to take a stand against the killing of Aboriginal people. He confronts Perrin, the policeman who organised the party who murdered the Eiliuwarra, calling him a murderer. In this angry exchange Marriner vacillates between a demand that none of the eighteen people should have been killed, that it was just an act of revenge on the part of the white community, and a demand that Henry should have been distinguished from the other victims because he 'didn't even look like a black'.⁵⁸ Perrin replies:

"This yeller-feller of yours among them. I'm sorry he got killed. I said that. But you can't make a difference between one nigger and another at a gallop."

"He didn't even look like a nigger," Marriner repeated.

"Well, he was one. It's in the ordinance. 'Any person of mixed blood living in the native encampment, or with the natives, or in a native fashion shall be deemed to be a native.'"⁵⁹

The scene is a muddled moment where the novel displays the anxiety created by the children of mixed heritage. The short scene contains within

⁵⁷ This is an interesting foretelling of Dallas' death.

⁵⁸ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 207.

⁵⁹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 208.

it many of the different attempts which have been made to deal with the issues of inter-racial sex and the children born of these relationships. The novel stumbles as it deals with the issue of the children of mixed heritage.

Henry is represented as looking the same as Aboriginal people, when Perrin says 'you can't make a difference at a gallop'. He is also represented as looking different, when Marriner replies that Henry 'didn't even look like' the Aboriginal people. Then an extract from an Aborigines Act is quoted⁶⁰ setting out that Aboriginality is what you do. Aboriginal commentators have critiqued the white definitions of Aboriginality as being about what Aboriginal people do and how they act. Roberta Sykes in *Black Majority* uses the case of Mervyn Eades to highlight the ways in which Aboriginal people 'changed by law from black to white and to black again as they crossed different state borders'.⁶¹ The white governmental construction of what constitutes Aboriginality has serious consequences for Aboriginal people. In this text racial identity is performance, a performance with very high stakes for Henry. This notion of racial identity as performance is repeated in the exhortation from Perrin, the administrator/protector of Aborigines, which suggests that white people (white fathers) have to make their children of mixed heritage white: 'If you want special treatment for your yellow kids why don't you see that they live with you? You didn't do much for him anyway'.⁶² The novel actually gives an example of how to do something for 'yellow kids' in the episode where a white man marries Marriner's second child, Casey, and so wins for her some of the 'special treatment' (that is being treated as white) which was denied Henry and the other seventeen people who were murdered with him.

The troubling figure of Casey is expelled from the novel in a different way to Henry. Roberts and Casey begin a relationship when he is working for Marriner. Casey is described in the novel as 'growing up a little wild girl, with the tribe'.⁶³ Roberts teaches her to read and write, something Marriner never considered. Casey, through the 'special treatment' of her white husband, is taught to act white. Roberts moves to the city with Casey and marries her. He describes to the visiting Marriner their life in the city:

⁶⁰ See *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918–1938* (NT).

⁶¹ Sykes, *Black Majority*, p. 10. See also: Langton, *Well I Heard it on the Radio*; pp. 28–29; Anderson, 'Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner', p. 10.

⁶² Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 208.

⁶³ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 219.

Here I've got a flat, near the sea. You know what happens? The girl in the flat next door drops in; just like that. Just friendly. She teaches Casey housekeeping. They work together and we all go out together, two husbands and their wives. She's shown Casey how to do her hair. Casey's blossomed. You wouldn't recognize her.⁶⁴

Casey is represented here in ways which link her to a particular vision of white culture. She is located in the city; she is domesticated; she is married; she is neat and respectable. Even her actual person operates to signify her as performing whiteness, for she has been taught 'how to do her hair'.⁶⁵ Casey knowing 'how to do her hair' can be read as Casey knowing how to make herself look white. An earlier description of Casey, spoken by Monica, describes her as 'yellow skin[ned]', with a 'slash of red mouth' and a 'big flat nose'.⁶⁶ When Casey is represented as assimilated, as white, she becomes disembodied. She is marked by a set of bourgeois attributes, not a physical description. The only trace of a physical description left is her hair.⁶⁷ Being white means being unmarked by stereotypical physical traits, traits which are used to represent groups figured as non-white.⁶⁸ Implying that Casey is unrecognisable suggests a physical disguise.⁶⁹ Being white means disguising Casey's blackness or her 'yeller'-ness.⁷⁰ To be disguised as white is to be physically unmarked.

Casey's whiteness is of course contingent on her continuing to perform whiteness. With the residual trace of blackness (her hair) there is a sense of her as passing and therefore able to be found out or revert to being black.⁷¹ Dyer makes the point that whiteness is never stable, and that groups on the edge of whiteness can either be included or excluded and who is included or excluded can change.⁷² Admitting Aboriginal people

⁶⁴ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 229–230.

⁶⁵ Hair is an important signifier of race – in particular the ubiquitous stereotype of blackness and kinky hair. See Craig, 'The decline and fall of the conk'.

⁶⁶ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 162.

⁶⁷ Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, pp. 146–157.

⁶⁸ Dyer, *White*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Goddu, *Gothic America*, p. 86.

⁷⁰ See Ruhen's discussions about casting the actor to play Casey in a proposed film of his book: 'On the question of what I might call photogenic women: It might be difficult. Casey is half-caste, and that would present no problem; as a matter of fact, many a South European type would do. While there have been a few aboriginal – rather mixed-bloods – who have been night club entertainers, some very attractive, most of these look to me to have a negroid mixture.' Correspondence from Olaf Ruhen to Harold Heifetz, film producer, 14 June 1961, Olaf Ruhen Papers, MS 7935, Box 6, NLA.

⁷¹ Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, chapter 9, *passim*.

⁷² Dyer, *White*, p. 52.

into the category white in the years after 1948 depended upon removing them from their culture and land and putting them in towns and cities amongst white people. For Aboriginal women and girls it also meant being taught white domestic skills. Casey's whiteness, her assimilation, is represented as dependent on her being in the city, surrounded by white people, as being married and domestically skilled.⁷³

The stories of Marriner's and Trubbidy's children represent two versions of the solution to miscegenation. Both are white fantasies which privilege whiteness. Henry, the child who stays with his mother's people, and has an Aboriginal lover and a knowledge of the Eiliuwarra lore, dies violently; whereas Casey, who leaves her mother's people and land, becomes a happy and successful assimilated Aboriginal person. Casey, with her marriage to Roberts and the move into white society, is represented by the end of the novel as white. Hers is the only 'success story' for those who are neither black nor white. Assimilation is represented as the only hope for Aboriginal people of mixed heritage.⁷⁴

As I have suggested this novel sets out to critique dominant understandings of colonialism. It demonstrates the disaster that such a project spells for Aboriginal people and represents inter-racial sexual relations as dangerous for Aboriginal people. However in my reading of the text what inter-racial sexual relations really endanger is the regime of

⁷³ See George Morgan, 'A toll of culture: Aboriginal broadacre assimilation' paper presented at Urban Life Urban Culture – Aboriginal Indigenous Experiences Conference, University of Western Sydney, November 1997.

The assimilation of Casey in *Naked Under Capricorn* is part of a common discourse of assimilation. The move to ordain white respectability onto Aboriginal people, women in particular, was widespread in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. In a Western Australian government publication, *A Place in the Sun*, of the late 1960s this idea of assimilation is played out. On one page of this pamphlet is a photograph of a young Aboriginal woman. She is described as the successful winner of an education scholarship. The photograph shows her neatly coiffed and dressed, surrounded by books, smiling pleasantly at the camera. Placed below the photograph is a paragraph of text which reads in part:

Living in squalid shanties on the outskirts of town ... their old way of life gone and most of their dignity with it. [p. 8]

This government text draws on the same ideas of assimilation as *Naked Under Capricorn*. The Aboriginal people still in their own land (or spaces not marked as white) are paradoxically represented as lost. One of the things that they are represented as losing in particular is their dignity. Those who will survive are represented as the ones who have moved away and in particular have become educated in the white system. I am not suggesting that some Aboriginal people do not want or benefit from access to white system's of knowledge, rather I am suggesting this representational logic produces a binary which suggests only elimination or assimilation for Aboriginal people.

⁷⁴ Trubbidy and the other Eiliuwarra people of her generation are represented as lost in their own land.

whiteness.⁷⁵ There is something pleasurable, but unsettling and often deeply repressed, in the desire white men (and less frequently represented, white women) have for sex with Aboriginal people. However, inter-racial sex also appals those same white people for it unsettles the clear division between black and white. Thus, children of mixed heritage are a continuing reminder of that ambivalent desire.⁷⁶ Assimilation and elimination are the solutions which contain the anxieties associated with this ambivalence.

⁷⁵ I do not want to suggest here that assimilation is not dangerous for Aboriginal people. I take this point as given. For an account of the physical and cultural violence of assimilation see Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner'.

⁷⁶ Anderson, 'Re-claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner'.

**iv: White men and redemption
(reasserting utopia)**

“Discovery” is always late.
Anne McClintock⁷⁷

In the chapter so far I have analysed inter-racial sexual desire in terms of ambiguities, ambivalences and whiteness. In this last section I want to analyse the ending of the novel and the textual attempts to resecure white mastery compromised by the violence of the outback experience. Throughout the text a complex set of symbolic representations organised around colour has suggested that Marriner’s whiteness is tarnished and that he is half-caste (through his proximity to an Aboriginal culture). In the final scenes of the novel Marriner becomes white again through knowledge he elicits from the culture he has destroyed: Aboriginal women’s broken bodies symbolize for Marriner his culpability in the destruction of the Eiliuwarra culture and Activity martyrs himself to guide Marriner out of the morass he has created.

Representations of death

Naked Under Capricorn is framed by two scenes of Aboriginal women collecting water at Blowfly Creek. The scenes, played out in different circumstances, are a metaphor for the impact of the ‘white man’ on the lives of the Aboriginal people of Australia. I have earlier analysed the first of these scenes. I want now to consider the second.

Marriner and Activity go out to Blowfly Creek to fix a windmill water pump that has been damaged in a storm. The damage has meant that no water has been available in the area for a while. As the bore is out of action they head for the slanting rock chasm where many years earlier Marriner had watched Mary and Trubbidy get water. Looking into the chasm Marriner sees:

... three black blobs that floated in the water not far below. Then, in horror, he recognized them. They were, the bodies of women, floating buttocks upward, head down and limbs trailing, the hair streamed out in the water. It was unbelievable. It was not to be denied. The hot sun beat on them, the water, green tinged,

⁷⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 28.

sparkled about them with a lively vigour; they floated, dead, without movement in that windless place.⁷⁸

Marriner pieces the story together. The drying up of the well he had built and which the local people had grown accustomed to, and become dependent on, had meant that these women had had to try an older technique for getting water, one that had probably not been used much in their lifetime:

They were too young to have learned the ancient arts; these were not much taught after the cattle came. These people had become alien to their own lands. The smooth cliffs had been a place of play and happiness to those who learned to live with them; now they had become the instruments of torment, the instruments of death; the cliffs and the placid water, and the serene and lovely loneliness of this ancient well.⁷⁹

This scene recalls Marriner's first experience of the well. In particular it repeats the description of the physical features of Mary and Trubbidy in their work – 'the naked skin, the pointed buttocks outthrust ... the long lean thighs, the sensitive fingers' and the laughter.⁸⁰ This reflection is contrasted with the more recent tragedy: 'floating buttocks upward', 'the frantic struggle ... the determined renewal of the assault, the bleeding fingers, the contorted faces, the shrill agony of the useless screams.'⁸¹ Inscribed on the bodies of these two different groups of women, which the novel here entwines, is the story of the 'whole tragedy of the tribe'.⁸²

The Aboriginal women in the well are ciphers. At this moment of epiphany when Marriner sees the dead women in the well they signal to him the arrival of a moment of reckoning with himself. As Toni Morrison argues, for white people images of blackness are 'reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self'.⁸³ The women, voiceless throughout the entire novel (most of the Aboriginal people are mute, if they speak their words are translated by Activity), only make an impact by what their lives or deaths make Marriner feel. The sight of the women originally getting water from the well makes Marriner want to be part of the tribe (through sex) and this feeling of desire is recalled at the novel's end in the

⁷⁸ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 238.

⁷⁹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 239.

⁸⁰ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 239–240.

⁸¹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 240.

⁸² Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 240.

⁸³ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 17.

reiteration of the original sexualised description of Trubbidy and Mary. The sight of the dead women in the well makes Marriner want to leave (through death). Deploying Christian ideology, the text suggests that to reach self awareness Marriner, represented as Christ-like, must suffer, 'die' and be reborn.

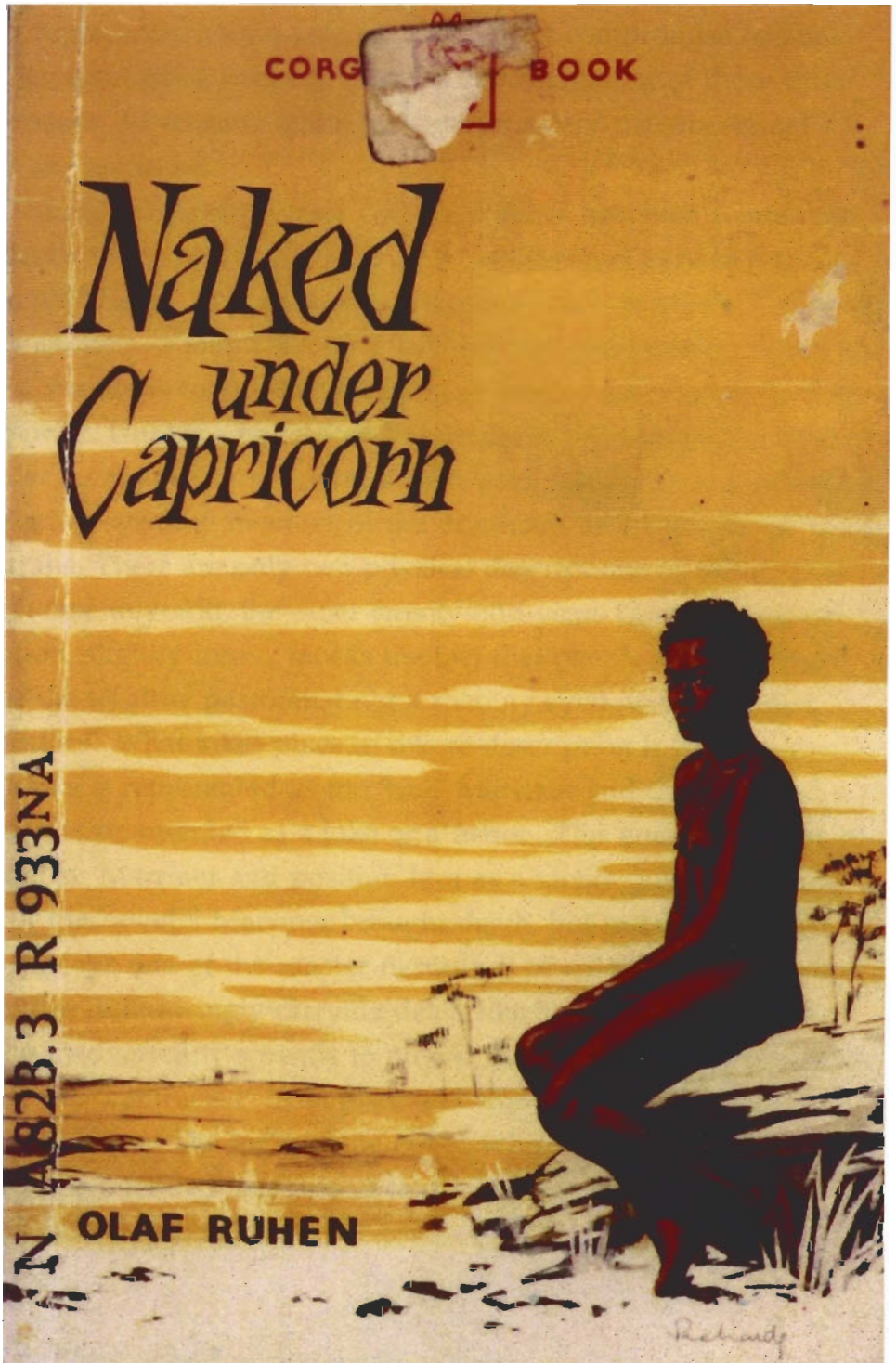
Another example of Aboriginal women's pain as a signifier for white people of their own downfall is provided by the novel's cover (see figure 9). On the cover of the 1959 Corgi paperback the novel's title fills the top left quadrant of the field. In the lower right hand quarter is the single figure of an Aboriginal woman sitting on a rock, completely unclothed, ankles crossed, eyes looking into the distance. The woman's body is slightly contorted. Her hands are placed so that her body is turned away from the gaze of the viewer; her torso twisted towards this gaze. This gives the sense of the woman as caught, torn or undecided. The figure is quite dark, in colour, starkly drawn, with an almost photographic realism, against a washed out watercolour background of yellow sky and earth. This figure embodies the suffering of Aboriginal people – the woman's sad resigned look, her posture which suggests wanting to go but staying. However, the figure also represents the suffering of white people confused by their encounter with Aboriginal people. This reading is borne out by the back cover where a verbal version of this pictorial representation is given:

– the story of the survival of a white man caught
in the grip of the Australian bush
– **and the story of the corruption of a proud
and innocent race ...**⁸⁴

The novel represents Aboriginal women as the harbingers of a message of death and suffering of both Aboriginal people and white people. The Aboriginal women act as a mirror for white knowledge. As such, rather than being an independent subject of the drama, they simply reflect back to Marriner/the reader what he/they want to see in themselves. To paraphrase Varadharajan, this is the moment in the novel where the mastery sought for the colonial project of the outback

⁸⁴ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, back cover.

figure 9: Front cover *Naked Under Capricorn*



Olaf Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, Corgi, London, 1959.

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is vitiated or invalidated by the fantasy of desire.⁸⁵ The insertion of the vision of the original moment of sexual desire (Mary and Trubbidy in the well) into the scene of disaster and the failure of white imperialism locates inter-racial desire as the origin of disaster. This novel juxtaposes what is represented as the original moment of compromise (sexual desire for Aboriginal women) with the representation of these three dead women. To reassert white (colonial) mastery the Aboriginal women are sacrificed.

This novel explicitly sets out the manner in which white men bring death to others. Dyer argues that: 'whites seem to have a special relation with death, to yearn for it, but also bring it to others'.⁸⁶ *Naked Under Capricorn* is emblematic of this troubled relationship. What the novel fails to do is to link this bringing of doom to an explicit notion of white power. Until the novel's end Marriner is represented as a passive bystander, as simply surviving in a hard land, but never as a powerful, land-owning, wealthy member of the dominant and controlling group in Australia. There are only two physical descriptions of Marriner in the text – one in youth, the other twenty-odd years later. The second description, slightly ironic, mocks the fact that people who see Marriner only see the wealthy pastoralist not a rheumy eyed, weak-chinned equivocator.⁸⁷ What takes place in this re-description is that the weak-willed bloke is represented as the 'true' Marriner and the powerful *white* man is represented as a joke or a fiction. This enables readers to feel sorry for Marriner and position him as a victim, just like all the others in the novel.⁸⁸ Marriner brought death, but not deliberately. Ruhen deploys one of the master narratives of colonization. Marriner is figured as unknowingly carrying death like a contagious bacteria which he inadvertently spreads to others. Similarly he is infected with a lack of will 'contracted' from his interaction with the Aboriginal people of the area. The logic of the novel, which in so many ways runs counter to its intended message, is that whiteness has no power.

Marriner's transcendence

In response to the knowledge that he has destroyed the lives of a group of people by his presence and his passive acceptance of the inroads of the mining and cattle industry, Marriner decides to leave his home, families

⁸⁵ Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Dyer, *White*, p. 208.

⁸⁷ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 218.

⁸⁸ Dyer, *White*, p. 208.

and the Eiliuwarra people and sets out to find a new world, similar to the one he wrecked, to see if he can achieve a different end in the new situation.⁸⁹ He takes Activity as his guide in this quest. Activity is represented as eager to accompany Marriner, not just for friendship's sake, but to assuage his guilt for having 'brought Marriner to his tribe': 'it was he who first of all had overlooked the ancient restrictions; it was he who had turned his face towards the promise of a new kind of life. He was the wanderer, he was the adventurer.'⁹⁰ Here Activity is represented as sharing Marriner's white culpability for the colonization of his people and also sharing Marriner's white spirit– as 'adventurer' – which will allow him to survive that colonization.

Marriner and Activity reach the land of the Pintubi people and it is here that Marriner's purification process takes place. His existence among the Pintubi gives him a new lease of life:

In his happiness, Marriner also dreamed his dreams. He was renewed; a youth again without the faults of youth; he had his second chance. And in his phoenix joy he could see clearly the enormities of the sins he felt were now forgiven him.⁹¹

There remains a sense of self-loathing but this is accompanied by the possibility of redemption:

His was the culpability of the bystander; but he was no less to be condemned. The man who watches the rape of the virgin is himself a monster; his culpability is no less than that of a participant. Yet the worst of men may redeem himself. Of his own volition Marriner had discovered the way of redemption.⁹²

Marriner achieves redemption (whiteness) paradoxically through his reconnection with a non-white culture.⁹³ Aboriginal culture is represented

⁸⁹ Slotkin suggests this impetus behind national stories of the frontier. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1973, p. 484.

⁹⁰ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 242.

⁹¹ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 250.

⁹² Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, pp. 250–251.

⁹³ This particular trope of spiritual cleansing is still common in mainstream Australian society today where the white city dweller, jaded and unable to find meaning in life travels to the desert and absorbs the wisdom of Aboriginal groups of people, who the city dweller sees as pure and primitive. See Julie Marcus, 'The journey out to the Centre: the cultural appropriation of Ayers Rock' in Morris and Cowlshaw (eds), *Race Matters*, pp. 41–48. *Naked Under Capricorn* is a 1950s fictional example of a process still common today, where white people siphon off and appropriate bits and pieces of Aboriginal cultures which suit their needs.

as both uncivilized (immanent, unable to change) and civilized (untainted by the greed of white society). White culture occupies the same two positions differently: civilized (dynamic, transcendent) and uncivilized (greedy and immoral). Torgovnick in *Gone Primitive* analyses this dual positioning of white modernity as self-aggrandising and self-loathing. She makes the point that white self-knowledge is acquired by reference to a primitivized Other.⁹⁴

In the final moments of the novel where Marriner leaves all the mistakes of the past behind, signified by his desertion of the Eiliuwarra people, he is accompanied by the first Eiliuwarra man he met – Activity. This seeming contradiction is allowed because of the particular way in which Activity is represented in the novel. When Marriner meets Activity he is marked as already assimilated. For example he already has a white-man name and speaks English and is dressed in European-style clothes: 'torn trousers belted at the waist'.⁹⁵ This strategy works to universalise some aspects of white culture (the English language) and represent them as everywhere already there. Within the logic of the text Activity, as an Aboriginal *man*, reasserts the homosocial good-times of the moment before the anxiety of heterosexual inter-racial relations. He is the perfect Aboriginal person to accompany Marriner. His presence disavows the destruction of colonization and miscegenation and links Aboriginal and white cultures into the future.

Activity and Marriner travel out to a place which 'no one has crossed', and presumably they move on to their death. The last paragraphs of the novel read:

The desert is too wide. To this day no one has crossed it; no one knows what lies within. There is a point, there must be a point, at which the tracks of the camels come to an end; and surely a man would be dreaming who entertained the idea that at that point sparkling waters lie in the tree-dappled sun, and children are at play. It is not impossible, but it remains a dream.

...

The trail led all the long way from Bloodwood Plains to a dream. Its making was the first venture on which Marriner embarked of his own volition in the country of his adoption. Surely it could only have led him to disaster.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 46.

⁹⁵ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 55.

⁹⁶ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 253.

The dream signifies Marriner's ability to strive (to seek the pure state of whiteness). But what awaits him is 'disaster'. Rather than be part of the slow death of Aboriginal people and their cultures, representing immanence and passivity, Marriner and Activity choose a transcendent martyrdom in the desert. Having finally realized that for years he has been tainted with the non-white proclivity of 'acceptance' not 'seeking',⁹⁷ Marriner now actively follows his dream, seeking a utopia of 'sparkling waters', 'sun' and 'children at play'. The novel leaves the reader with this dream-like yearning for a utopia and seems to invite the reader to share in that dream. A dream where an Aboriginal and white man together go and find nirvana. There is great tension here though, for this dream sits uncomfortably in relation to the previous story which represent the process of progress marching inexorably across the country. This is a progress detailed as 'deadly' to the Aboriginal people of the desert.

The final dream is a classic elimination/assimilation narrative. The Eiliuwarra people (and Aboriginal people generally), most graphically symbolized by the women in the well, are represented as 'alien to their own lands'⁹⁸ and are imagined as set to 'pass away'. In fact the women die a violent and fear-filled death. Activity who has allied himself with white culture, survives. He assimilates. The text figures the relationship between Marriner and Activity as reciprocal; Activity has taught Marriner everything he knows, including guiding them to this final nirvana. Yet it is not a reciprocal relationship. As Langton points out a love of the Other or the primitive can serve to mask relations of colonialism and racism.⁹⁹ The sparkling water and tree-dappled sunshine of nirvana is only a white dream, but by sending Activity and Marriner off into the desert together the novel posits it as everyman's dream – a dream for Aboriginal and white cultures.

The image of the dream – for all – is immediately undercut by the final sentence predicting disaster. This is the final example of the way that the novel fails in its mission to comprehensively critique colonialism and ultimately ends up reinstating colonialism as in inevitable and legitimate process. The political critique provided in the novel of the white colonization of Australia and the destruction of Aboriginal people and cultures collapses back into a sympathy and pity for the white man struggling for redemption. The effect is to centralise the issue of how the

⁹⁷ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 218.

⁹⁸ Ruhen, *Naked Under Capricorn*, p. 239.

⁹⁹ Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio', p. 30.

white man, 'stained' by contact with these 'racial "other[s]"' can achieve whiteness again.¹⁰⁰ The three women in the well are just left there, signifying the anxiety of a white nation more troubled by our own guilt than moved to explore and take responsibility for our power.

¹⁰⁰ Meyer, 'Colonialism', p. 180.

Conclusion

*White people don't seem to
understand ... White people must
understand, this country is
Aboriginal people's homeland ...
our land, dreamings, stories,
paintings – all tied to the land.*
Michael Nelson Tjakamarra¹

*You see me
half black
half white
but never whole*

*a corpse
torn apart
to toy with
my body –
an 'intellectual's'
commodity*

*you 'make' me
arranging
re-arranging
my history
and identity*

*I turn to see
myself
I am decapitated
limbless
my body –
reassembled
in gubbah discourse.*
Tony Birch²

In the 1950s and 1960s official public narratives on social relations between Aboriginal people and white people in Australia were dominated by the discourse of assimilation. In the wake of the Holocaust and changing understandings of colonization the discourse of elimination, which had shaped earlier periods, was no longer deployed as the official story and the 'inclusive' narrative of assimilation became the 'organizing paradigm'. Elimination still circulated as a discourse. My reading of *The Scarlet Frontier* demonstrated some of the ways in which a crude elimination discourse was deployed in this period and my other chapters reiterated the ways in which elimination discourse haunts assimilation narratives. I have demonstrated through my reading of official texts of the 1930s and 1940s that assimilation was a partial acknowledgment of the

¹ Michael Nelson Tjakamarra cited in Fiona Nicoll, 'Blacklash: reconciliation after Wik', *Meanjin*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 1998, p. 169.

² Tony Birch, 'Half Caste', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 100, 1993, p. 458.

'problem' caused by white people pursuing policies of elimination and the history of 'sexual contact'. The remaining readings analysed the ways in which my selection of fiction responded to and effected an assimilation solution.

I have argued that assimilation was an anxious discourse. The novels I selected exemplify key sites of anxiety: inter-racial sexual relationships, the whiteness of the white family, children and young adults of mixed heritage (the figure of the half-caste) and land ownership. I have also analysed the strategies deployed in the texts to contain these anxieties and fears. Fictional stories of assimilation were a key site for the production of solutions to the 'moral panic' of 'the half-caste problem'.

The deep anxieties about assimilation were complex and marked by ambivalence. One anxiety was that assimilation would not work. Assimilation was posited in Australian discourse at this time as a three generational sociocultural and biological-genetic transition from black to white. There was a fear that Aboriginality would resurface in the future and this was posited crudely in terms of a 'throwback to colour'. Complementing this anxiety was a wish that assimilation not work. White people did not want assimilation. Drawing on discourses of racial inferiority and superiority and long-standing beliefs in elimination, the hope was for a 'white Australia' with a separate or eliminated Aboriginal population. Another facet of this ambivalence was the fear that Aboriginal people did not want to assimilate and that they would reject white culture. Lastly, there was the ambivalent fear/pleasure that white people or culture would not remain unchanged by assimilation, that white people, especially white men, would become half-caste.

Assimilation also produced uncertainty in terms of land ownership. White Australian national identity is posited on the original illegitimate dispossession of Aboriginal people. The logic of the Australian form of settler colonization was that white people would own and occupy the land.³ Violent elimination operated to ensure that prior Aboriginal occupation and tenure were erased. Assimilation reopened the possibility that Aboriginal people might contest white people for the land. This anxiety reveals itself over and over in the novels. Some of the most violent solutions in the novels are enacted to effect closure on this possibility.

Fiction does cultural work. Using a number of literary theorists who work in the area of race and gender I have argued that fiction is not separate from the 'real' world, but in fact engages with and produces

³ Wolfe, 'Nation and miscegenation'.

narratives which often clearly set out how a 'culture thinks about itself'.⁴ The fiction I have analysed is symptomatic of a white mindset. The novel's solutions to the fears of assimilation were proffered within the limits of the discourses available in the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of race relations, the discourses of the sad passing of the Aboriginal people, protection and the 'civilizing mission', elimination and assimilation were drawn upon. More generally the issue of assimilation was framed by discourses of the family, heterosexuality and legitimacy. In writing fictional texts there is the possibility for authors to write about particular terrors and fantasize about certain solutions that may not be so 'speakable' in the official discourses of assimilation. Assimilation policies were violent, but some of these fictional texts effect closure on white people's anxieties about assimilation at another level of terror, often played out on the bodies of the characters who represent Aboriginal people of mixed heritage. While in official discourse miscegenation was marginal and almost unspeakable, in the novels it features as a central motif of assimilation.

These novels helped constitute the ways in which assimilation could be imagined and implemented without anxiety. The solutions offered to effect closure on the anxieties of assimilation were varied (though as I suggested above, limited). I have argued that the solutions are shaped by the literary genre of the texts, but there are tropes and techniques which the novels share. Gender, class, generation and skin colour are shared motifs for imagining the fear of, and solution to, assimilation in these novels.

The figure of the Aboriginal mother is central in the texts I have analysed. The Aboriginal mother is frequently represented as the agent of assimilation. She is the one who implements the 'policy'. In *Beyond Blue Hills* the Aboriginal mother of Anderson is represented as voluntarily leaving her son so that he can have a better life. Similarly in *The Leaping Blaze* Mary's Aboriginal mother leaves her daughter in the care of a white foster mother. This representation of Aboriginal mothers as voluntarily undertaking assimilation, here actively giving up their children, means that they can be figured as sharing both the desire and responsibility for assimilation, with white people. White people are thus represented as only partially responsible for the resulting trauma.

White women are represented in these novels as thwarting the progressive policy of assimilation. They are figured as repositories for the displaced hatred of assimilation and quite often hatred of Aboriginal

⁴ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. xi.

people. The white wives in *Naked Under Capricorn*, *Beyond Blue Hills* and *The Leaping Blaze* are all represented as venomously angry and hateful towards the Indigenous women who have sexual relationships with their husbands. This hate flows on to the children born of those relationships. The dominant representation of white women in the nationalist stories of 'white Australia' in this period positioned white women as boundary riders for the nation. White women ensured national purity by monitoring the family (the nation) and by producing white children. However, in assimilation narratives representations of white women have another meaning which is as thwarting a *new* vision of Australia as including Aboriginal people.

Young Indigenous women and white men are represented as the linchpins in assimilation stories. White men are figured as the originators of 'the half-caste problem' (through past inter-racial sex). They are also represented as the present 'problem' (through their continued desire for Aboriginal women). Paradoxically, they are also the solution to the 'problem'. Working-class white men are marked as the men who will marry Aboriginal women, effecting the miscegenation, over generations, that will see the assimilation of Aboriginal people. Representations of white men in these assimilation novels hinge on the dual images of the men *as* the danger and *as being in* danger. In *Venus Half-Caste*, which effects a sociocultural solution to assimilation, the white men, Phillip and Steven, are the danger, because they instigate miscegenist desire. In *Naked Under Capricorn* the white man, Marriner, is in danger because his proximity to Aboriginal culture has made him vulnerable to becoming half-caste himself.

Matching the trope of the white man in these assimilation texts is the representation of the young Aboriginal woman, in particular a beautiful half-caste woman. It is on the body of this figure that assimilation discourse is most comprehensively played out. Whereas the figure of the Aboriginal mother, as representative of the original miscegenist moment, is eliminated from the narrative of assimilation, the Aboriginal woman of mixed heritage, who is the child born of these relationships, is marked as desirable and part of the future. In keeping with traditions of women as sites of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' Aboriginal women are relentlessly visualized in these assimilation texts producing first, a desire for these women and second, a calculus of assimilability premised on behaviour, looks, skin colour and deportment. The most obvious examples of this are the characters of Beatrice in *Venus Half-Caste*

and Mary in *The Leaping Blaze*. Aboriginal women characters in *Naked Under Capricorn* and *The Scarlet Frontier* also do the same work. Indigenous men are less comprehensively visualized in the calculus. The focus is on their status in terms of work and capital. Anderson in *Beyond Blue Hills* and Vic in *Venus Half-Caste*, though both physically described in the novels, are positioned as assimilable in terms of their status as property owners. As with the representations of white men the representations of the young Aboriginal women are split between an image of them *as* the danger and *being in* danger. In *Venus Half-Caste* the dual vision of Eunice and Beatrice achieves this effect. In *Naked Under Capricorn* the characters of Mary and Trubbidy are split between a vision of them as endangering Marriner's whiteness (through their sexual attractiveness) and being in danger (from the white men who sexually desire them).

Reading and understanding the logic of these assimilation novels is a small but important part of understanding how race relations work in Australia today. The legacy of the discourses of assimilation, and also elimination, protection and the 'civilizing mission', still have a powerful effect today. More than this, the anxieties that shaped assimilation narratives fifty years ago still haunt contemporary Australia. The novels I analysed all fantasized a perfect closure on the fears and anxieties produced by the ambivalent policy of assimilation. They produced comforting narratives, which represented white people as only partially responsible for the trauma of colonization generally, and assimilation specifically. In these novels Aboriginal people are marked as passive or as willingly sharing with white people the desire and responsibility for assimilation. In assuaging the anxiety of assimilation these novels fantasized the elimination of Indigenous people – sometimes violently, sometimes sentimentally, and sometimes through the sanitized language of science. This produced a story of assimilation, a solution, which could be figured as acceptable to *all* Australians.

This is not the case and the perfect fantasies of these novels are of course not what happened. Though Aboriginal people were on the receiving end of violent assimilation and dispossession policies, they were not eliminated. History did not close as neatly as the texts. With the High Court decision on 'Wik' and the release of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report on the stolen generations, *Bringing Them Home*, what had been so neatly disavowed in these novels returned to the surface of white people's consciousnesses. The authoritative reconceptualizations of the past by the High Court and Human Rights and

Equal Opportunity Commission meant that many white people recognized, or were forced to recognize, the continuous struggle of Indigenous people for land rights and recognition of the brutal costs of colonization.⁵

Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, many white people again move to contain the claims of Indigenous people to sovereignty, for recognition of their land rights and for recognition of the costs of colonization, in particular the costs of the systematic policy of Indigenous child removal. The Coalition government's refusal to apologize to or for the stolen generations, the amendments to the *Native Title Act*, increasing racial vilification and an emerging story of white 'dispossession' are all symptomatic of a refusal amongst many white people to take responsibility for the effects of policies which they have often been complicit in and from which they have, and continue to, benefit. In particular, through the deployment of conservative discourses of history, the Coalition government seeks to seal off the past and repress and deny the links between past actions and present social relations.⁶

Many white people are facing up to, and taking some responsibility for, the pain and loss that policies of assimilation caused. Actions such as the 'Sea of Hands', the establishment of the group Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, and community ceremonies of apology and reconciliation on National Sorry Day on 26 May 1998 are testimony to this. However, many white Australians still refuse to listen to the voices of Aboriginal people.⁷ There is a strong chorus that demands Aboriginal, and sympathetic white people, recognize that assimilation was well-intentioned.⁸ White people, and I include myself here, are long used to seeing themselves as good. Signifiers in the dominant system of racial representation in Australia construct whiteness and white people as good. Most of us find it hard to see ourselves as visions of terror for Aboriginal people. That discourses of liberal minded, well-meaning and well-

⁵ It needs to be stated here that this is by no means the first time that white people in Australia have been confronted with, and then engaged in sustained public debate in response to, powerful Aboriginal demands for the recognition of the illegitimacy and cost of colonization. Aboriginal people's contestation of the bicentenary celebrations and the declaration of a National Year of Mourning in 1988 were well publicised challenges to white understandings of the year as a 'celebration'. As with the release of *Bringing Them Home*, there was wide-spread debate about the issue in news media.

⁶ Frow, 'A politics of stolen time', *Meanjin*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 1998, pp. 360–362.

⁷ See Frow on listening as an 'ethical responsiveness'. Frow, 'A politics of stolen time', p. 364.

⁸ See for example Partington's defence of Paul Hasluck. Geoffrey Partington, 'The interpretation of Aboriginal policies: some problems, Geoffrey Partington replies to Tim Rowse', *Meanjin*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1997, pp. 439–446.

intentioned assimilation are enmeshed in, produced through and limited by discourses of colonialism and racism is not countenanced by many white people in Australia. Denying these limits and arrogantly asserting goodwill does nothing to change the fact that white people were complicit in a process that so many Indigenous people said again and again that they did not want, that they fiercely opposed and that has caused untold suffering.

In analysing white discourses of assimilation this thesis has illuminated the need for white people, in assessing past, present and future social relations between themselves and Aboriginal people to focus, not solely on putting themselves in Aboriginal people's shoes, but rather to acknowledge the view from our own shoes and to analyse more carefully the privilege, power and complicity that attends our own subject position.

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