
‘There’s a black boy dead and a migloo holding a gun’: Death, Aboriginality and History in Australian Adolescent Literature

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In ‘Preying on the past: Contexts of some recent neo-historical fiction’, Peter Pierce argues that, over the last five or so decades, Australian historical fiction has turned away from ‘unconstrained and idealistic affirmations about Australia’s future’ to empathise instead with those figures in the historical landscape who were previously marginalised: ‘victims of imperialism, patriarchy, racism, capitalism’ (1992, p.307). This trend is particularly applicable to historical literature for younger readers, which now often tries to renegotiate history by providing a counterpoint to the meta-narratives of the past (Stephens 2003, xii-xiii). Reflecting and responding to developments in the disciplines of historiography and, more generally, the humanities, texts in this genre are representative of the attempt to interrogate monolithic versions of Australian history – often called the ‘three cheers’ view – in which positivity, achievement and the peaceful settlement of the nation are key themes. At issue in these novels is thus the redressing of past wrongs, particularly with respects to the violent aspects of colonisation when so many members of the Indigenous population either died or were forcibly displaced.

By sharing a desire to correct the gaps and misrepresentations that have dogged traditional versions of Australia’s colonial past, such fictions accord with the agenda of postcolonial historiography which, according to Leela Gandhi, ‘declares its intention to fragment or interpellate’ Eurocentric accounts of history with ‘the voices of all those unaccounted for “others” who have been silenced and domesticated under the sign of Europe’ (1998, p.171). As such, they are informed by a variety

of agendas and interests, and, correspondingly, a variety of textual strategies and practices. Readers are frequently positioned to align themselves with a white protagonist who, after discovering the cruelty displayed towards Indigenous people, attempts to rectify the situation while simultaneously learning to understand and value Aboriginal culture. Sometimes the narrative plot foregrounds ideas about reconciliation (albeit through white frames of reference); at other times, the retelling of a historical event is played out to more accurately represent the ‘truth’, or to provide another interpretation. In novels where the thematising of crosscultural relations is quite self-conscious, the focus is often upon notions of ‘white guilt’, the extent to which the current generation is responsible for the events of the past, and ‘the politics of land claims and power relations’ (Bradford 2001, p.192). At the extreme, the introduction to the colonised other’s perspective can be so radical as to cause the non-Indigenous protagonist to reject their own culture and, thus, their whole way of life.

Each of the three adolescent novels I focus upon in this paper – Melissa Lucashenko’s *Killing Darcy* (1998), Gary Crew’s *No Such Country* (1991) and Mark Svendsen’s *Poison Under Their Lips* (2001) – is equally idiosyncratic in its approach to narrativising Australia’s problematic colonial past. Crew’s strategy is to blend realism with paranormal fantasy so that the horrific stories of the past, which are uncovered by the novel’s Aboriginal and white protagonists, are given an immediacy, and thus a credibility, that is often difficult to convey in purely realist historical fictions. By contrast, Svendsen’s text works

against such historicist assumptions concerning accuracy and credibility, by using extraliterary material to re-present the events of the colonial period in such a way that they blur the line between fiction and history. Like other authors of historiographic metafiction, Svendsen ‘plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record’ (Hutcheon 1988, p.114). Lucashenko’s novel differs from the paradigmatic examples I referred to earlier in that its treatment of death and Aboriginal-Western histories is quite complex. It also uses magical realism to contest colonial power in ways similar to that of *No Such Country*, but, I would argue, it is more effective in creating a departure from the traditions of Western historiography since the mysterious elements of the plot are likely to be disconcerting for white readers, ‘grounded as they are in Aboriginal epistemologies utterly different from those which apply in western culture’ (Bradford 2003, p.197).

It should be clear from my brief appraisal of these three novels that what I am largely concerned with here is the extent to which the attitudes and ideologies of colonial discourse continue to influence contemporary signifying practices. As Clare Bradford points out, of the contemporary Australian books for children and adolescents which attempt to undermine normative assumptions about the features and forms of non-Western textuality, many ‘recycle colonial and Aboriginalist ideologies in their representations of indigenous culture’ (2003, p.195), and many ‘routinely subsume Indigenous identities within Western paradigms’ (2007, p.100). With its insistence on multiple ways of being and seeing, *Killing Darcy* is therefore a useful text to begin my discussion. The narrative is filtered through multiple focalising characters, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, a strategy which produces a dialogical effect, and it is constructed to engage with ‘a number of discourses and meanings, each provisional and incomplete’ (Bradford 2001, pp.188, 211). Its ability to evade several cultural norms associated with

identity is also a striking feature. Darcy Mango, of the novel’s title, is a good example of this particular aspect of the narrative: he is homosexual *and* Indigenous, and thus he occupies a subject position that is doubly inscribed as Other in normative Australian culture.

As the following exchange between protagonists Darcy and Cameron Menzies suggests, the novel’s preoccupation with Australia’s history wars is explicit:

‘Massacres?’ [Cam] asked. ‘That stuff happened around here?’

‘Of course,’ Darcy replied impatiently. ‘What did ya think happened? Think a spaceship come down and kidnapped all the blackfellas round here?’

Cameron, shamed, was silent. He’d never thought too much about that side of the past. To him, history was goldfields, and ‘explorers’. Sometimes he gave some passing thought to Aboriginal languages or Central Australian tribes. And of course he knew that the continent was taken by force, but, well, it was never stated that way, was it? Not to your face. Not about your own home. And not by an Aborigine. (p.123)

The discourses of white-black relations that permeate the narrative are intertwined with a mystery concerning the death of a young Aboriginal boy in the early twentieth century. When Filomena Menzies, who is visiting her father Jon’s horse property in the summer holidays, discovers an old camera that retains images of this event, she and Cam, who is her half-brother, speculate that inside the camera is ‘a murderer’s victim looking for revenge’ (p.100). One of these photos shows their great-great grandfather, Hew Costello, standing over the body of the dead boy with a rifle in his hand and, horrified, the siblings assume from this image that Hew is the killer. In an attempt to find out more, Fil and Cam involve Darcy who,

with the help of Aboriginal elder, Granny Lil, performs a ritual that transports him back to the place and time of the death. The attitudes of each of these characters towards the death are very different, however. Fil's initial solution is to sell the camera: 'It was a million years ago. Who cares? I don't want to know about it' she says to Cam (p.84). Yet Cam's response discloses the sense of responsibility he feels for the murder: 'You gutless cow!' he replies, thinking 'We have to find out what's going on, we can't just ignore it' (pp.84-85). For Darcy, the decision to act is not a matter of choice as it is dictated by Aboriginal Law that he must go back, even though he is terrified because 'where he [comes] from, deaths [mean] payback' (p.124). As he tells Cam and Fil:

[I've got to go] to find out who got murdered, and who did it and why, and how we're involved in it...The camera wouldn't have turned up unless someone's supposed to do something. Youse can't. I ain't got no choice, see. If I run, it'll catch me. Same as you can't sell it – it's come to ya.

(pp.182-183, emphasis original)

The point at which the mystery is solved is obviously an important one; it occurs when Cam and Fil watch their father destroy a dangerous horse and they are overcome by the similarities between the scene they are viewing and the photo. Here, past and present merge as the image of Hew, the sun behind him, 'the rifle, held by the butt' and '[his] hat lying on the ground like a rock' is duplicated by Jon who, '[s]ilhouetted by the rising disc of the sun [...] could have been Hew Costello' (p.213). Framed through ideas about responsibility, authority and knowledge, several aspects of this scene (and its outcomes) draw attention to the complexities in Lucashenko's representation of race relations. The first discloses the kind of tensions and contradictions surrounding issues of white responsibility for the colonial past. For Cam, beginning to appreciate the scale of the

mistreatment of Indigenous people throughout Australian history, and the disadvantages of being Aboriginal, the boy's death has an enormous impact. Irrespective of when it occurred, he feels some sense of responsibility for this event, especially because of his kinship with Hew. This is evident in his slippage between past and present tense when he exclaims joyously '[Hew] isn't, wasn't, a murderer! [...] It's OK [...] It's solved everything' (p.213). However, because the figure of Hew is a metonym for 'white Australia' (just as the novel's setting of Federation and its surrounds is a metonym for 'Australia'), Cam's response can also be seen to bear traces of absolution. The dead horse (suggestive of a 'dead horse matter') also seems to work against the issue of accountability somewhat, as do Jon's open, pleading palms and his apology to Cam over the horse: 'I didn't want anyone else's life on my hands'. The second aspect, dealing with authority and knowledge, a prominent theme in the novel, is an example of how the text has been constructed to resist the polarisation of Aboriginal and Western cultures. Cam '[cannot] breathe he [is] so certain' about the conclusions he has drawn from this scene (p.213), and there is a general consensus among all those involved that he is right. While it is not Cam's feeling of certainty that establishes the truth about the boy's death, but Granny's knowledge of the event (available to her through the orally transmitted stories of the Aboriginal community), authority is, however, shared between both Cam and Gran. Both are also wrong in some ways about the death at the same time that they are also right. Furthermore, no one method of seeking answers is privileged over another since knowledge of the event is pieced together from library records, photos, family lore, instinct, sacred ritual and oral tradition.

As with other novels which are informed by discourses of reconciliation, *Killing Darcy's* lessons about history and race relations are

often heavy-handed (Bradford 2001). However, readers of this text are also positioned to view Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in Australia in terms of their ‘long and tangled history’ as Jon Menzies puts it (p.43). In this instance, the themes of Aboriginality and death highlight the complexities and contradictions marking such cultural exchanges. Darcy, Granny Lil, Cam and Fil all have something to contribute to solving the mystery of the boy’s death: Darcy by determining that the dead boy was Hew’s son, Edward; Granny Lil by revealing that Darcy and the Menzies family are related through the union between Edward’s Aboriginal mother and Hew; and Cam and Fil by deducing that Hew had not shot Edward, but the pony, which had just thrown and killed the boy. Each of them also comes to appreciate and empathise with other cultural perspectives and traditions during this process, part of which involves a questioning of their assumptions about the past. Granny Lil’s mistake about Edward’s death, for example, illustrates how her own cultural bias has (mis)informed her interpretation of this event, and also demonstrates how the past is influenced by, and filtered through, meaning and experience in the present. ‘I don’t see no accident,’ she says, adding a little later:

‘Darcy, use ya head. There’s a black boy dead and a migloo holding a gun. Oh, I know [...] I know ya don’t wanta think ya friends are descended from a murderer. But think about it, boy. They all got blood on their hands somewheres, somehows.’
(pp.196,197)

In Bradford’s view, all too often, Aboriginal culture is homogenised and race relations in Australian children’s texts ‘represented as fixed within a scheme of stark oppositions oblivious to historical and cultural change’ (2001, p.208). However, from such episodes, it is possible to see that, by situating the narrative through a variety of perspectives, readers of *Killing Darcy* can be positioned to view both

Aboriginality and black-white relations in terms of their complexity. The novel can also be viewed in light of Gandhi’s argument that the reparative ability of postcolonial approaches to the colonial aftermath is most successful when it is ‘able to illuminate the contiguities and intimacies which underscore the stark violence and counter-violence’ of the colonial condition, to acknowledge that the coloniser and the colonised exist in an ‘ambivalent and symbiotic relationship’ (1998, p.11, emphasis original).

Crew’s project in *No Such Country* appears similar because it involves several protagonists, both black and white, yet it produces a neat closure which is not only quite different to that of *Killing Darcy*, it also ‘fails to address the trauma of the colonised in its focus on the coloniser’s perspective’ (Bradford 2004, p.7). Crew’s fascination with history is apparent from a number of his novels; in particular, he is appalled by stories involving the mistreatment of Aboriginal people and has acknowledged that he seeks to address the silence surrounding these crimes by awakening modern (and, by implication, white) Australian adolescents to this facet of history (McKenna & Pearce 1999, pp.118,119). Although authorial intent has little bearing on my discussion of these texts, it is interesting that even with such a clear articulation of these objectives, *No Such Country* is nonetheless pervaded with the kind of meanings that support the stereotypical or totalising representations of Aboriginality and cross-cultural exchange that are characteristic of the texts in this genre.

The novel is, in many respects, a small-scale, compressed history of Australia since colonisation, focusing specifically on Aboriginal-white relations. Set in the fictional isolated fishing village of New Canaan, the plot revolves around the secret of the town’s murderous past. Two local girls – Rachel Burgess and Sarah Goodwin – and Sam Shadows, a university student working on an Aboriginal shell midden near the village,

uncover the bodies of an Indigenous clan who were murdered by the men of New Canaan a generation ago. Until this time, the collective community silence about the event and the despotic rule of the priest known as Grey Eye, or the Father (an unsubtle symbol of the Church, the Empire, patriarchy and white power), has ensured the mass grave remains buried beneath the lantana. Besides his anthropological work on the midden, Sam is also in the village to uncover some family history. As an orphan, the only information he has about his parentage is that his teenage Aboriginal mother, Hannah, left New Canaan and sought refuge in a government 'retreat' in preparation for his birth. As the secrets of the village are revealed towards the conclusion, Sam discovers that Hannah – the sole survivor of the massacre – was the last of the Indigenous clan in the area, that she was raped by the Father, and that the priest is actually *his* father.

Brendan McKenna and Sharyn Pearce argue that the Father 'represents the patriarchal corruption that has affected Christianity in the past because it permits men to oppress, to lie, to exploit' (1999, p.121). Thus, besides the predominant theme of cross-cultural relations, *No Such Country* addresses the issue of the Church, patriarchy, and women's oppression. One of the defining features of adolescent novels is the struggle for power between adolescent protagonists and the various social institutions in their lives (Trites 2000, p.8). For Rachel and Sarah this is represented, as it is for all of the females in the text, by their relationship with New Canaan's oppressive males and, most importantly, with the Father. To overcome the entrenched systems of power operating in New Canaan, the girls must therefore defeat the Father and uncover the secrets of the past. Secrets and silence function symbolically to represent the oppression of females in the text, and to reflect the silence about Aboriginality common to colonial discourses. New Canaan seems to be slowly collapsing under the weight of the secret as the

atmosphere of doom conveys. Its symbolic death can be seen in the disasters and deaths which plague the village, and in its derelict atmosphere. The houses are sullen and brooding, and encrusted with salt (p.19), the boat sheds' splintered timbers are pale and fading (p.30), and the church is constructed entirely of pine packing cases (p.48). Of the female characters featured who know about the massacre, Hannah is dead, Eva (Rachel's mother) dies in the opening chapter, and only Miriam Goodwin still lives, although she has withdrawn into silence after Eva's death (p.16). The colonial figure of the silent, suffering Aboriginal feminine is also present in the text. Hannah's story is only shown in the Father's book, and divulged in a letter written by the Matron of the Retreat. Her narrative silence is echoed by her refusal to speak; when she does appear in the narrative, she will not 'engage in conversation sufficient even to name her own child' (p.81). Furthermore, almost everything the reader knows about Hannah is constructed through white frames of reference. Even Sam only relates the little he knows of his mother's history to Rachel and Sarah as a preface to the Matron's letter which becomes the 'real' story. As Robyn McCallum argues, 'the subjectivity of a historical other can only be inferred from the texts and discourses within which s/he is constructed and made present as a subject' (1999, p.230). Readers who align themselves with the kind and beneficent Matron, Elizabeth Hibbert, are positioned to view Hannah in a way which divulges the many colonial ideologies that inform the novel: she is frail and powerless, with a 'simple and childlike manner' containing 'no artifice', is 'utterly naïve and ignorant of all but the most elementary forms of social intercourse', and she takes to her work as a general domestic at the institution 'as though she had performed such menial duties all her life' (pp.81-82).

Hannah's story illustrates how pervasive Aboriginalist discourses and attitudes can be, even in texts like *No Such Country* which are so

patently designed to resist such ideas. By essentialising Aboriginality and universalising Aboriginal spirituality, the narrative constructs Sam's search for his family history and identity in ways which draw upon stereotypes of Aboriginal culture, even though at one point the text is attempting to interrogate such assumptions. On the bank of the lagoon, Rachel asks Sam: '[A]re you so smart that you can tell the sex of birds?', and he replies: 'Naturally [...] Can't all us Abos?'. But this apparently parodic allusion to white imaginings is countered once he adds: 'When I swam in here the other day, it was like I'd done it all my life. Every day of my life [...] I felt at home. Like I belonged' (pp.154-155). Significantly, 'home' for Sam is the site of the massacre, and his Aboriginality is dependent on 'intuition', on being 'at home [...] near the lagoon and that mountain' (p.155) where he can feel 'the heart of the earth' (p.95). Such statements create a homogeneous or singular version of Aboriginality that 'falls back onto colonial views of the undifferentiated Other' (Bradford 2001, p.11) and, by tapping into this romanticised, timeless version of Aboriginality, negates the particularity of the past. In itself this is problematic as such representations construct Aboriginality in ahistorical terms and, in this instance, also negate the seriousness of the massacre.

The conflation of Aboriginality with traditional discourses of femininity in this exchange (highlighted by the association between words like 'intuition', 'naturally', 'heart', 'home') is of more concern, however. Representations of Aboriginality, femininity, and death often occur together in *No Such Country*. This is due to the close alignment of the two major themes – women's oppression and cross-cultural relations – but is also a function of the plot since it is implied that atonement for the murderous crimes of the past, and the erasure of the old patriarchal order (through the death of the Father) is achievable only when the characters of Sam, Rachel and Sarah work

together. These outcomes are also tied to female sexuality, evident when Sarah and Rachel unravel the town secret and prepare to take on the Father, proclaiming '[w]e're women now' (p.154); when the massacre is revealed to Sam in the Father's book only after he bleeds onto it (p.192); and when Miriam leads the girls to the burial site. Here they find her kneeling, 'naked, the shocking white of her skin smeared with blood [...] shoving her fingers between the black rocks that [lie] partially exposed at her knees' (p.128). The sexual overtones that are a feature of this episode are also evident in the description of the massacre, illustrated by the helpless clan's 'shrieking and crying' as the men of New Canaan 'have their way [...] dragging the black bodies, moaning and whimpering' into the sea (p.193).

Hannah's death, too, is constructed in terms of sexuality, as her demise at the 'Retreat for Wayward Women' suggests. As the only Aboriginal woman in the novel, Hannah functions metonymically, revealing the tensions surrounding both miscegenation and white constructions of Aboriginal female sexuality. Such tensions are often manifested as episodes of violence, destruction and death in fictions for Australian adolescents. Bradford notes, for instance, that although interracial sexual relationships are rarely addressed in these texts, the few that do explore the theme are inclined to represent these relationships in tragic terms, sending a clear message that they will not work (2001, p.106). In this instance, death is used as a form of 'punishment' for the sexually transgressive female. The 'sex-leading-to-death' motif is common in literary history, but for Hannah, this is emphasised by her Aboriginality because she alone escapes the fate of the rest of her clan, only to die after falling pregnant and giving birth. Although the Father dies too (he is engulfed in lava and flames when a nearby volcano erupts) he is dehumanised to some extent by the Armageddon-like climax, giving his death an abstract quality and disassociating it from his

sexual relationship with Hannah. Furthermore, the traditionally masculinist image of the devouring Mother Earth in this scene (a symbolic representation of feminine retribution) merely serves to reveal the anxieties regarding female power that are such a characteristic of the text.

These ambiguities undermine the more positive aspects of *No Such Country*, as does the volcanic eruption at the novel's conclusion. Alice Mills sees the town freed of its guilty past by this event (1998, p.29), but because much of the story revolves around Sam, Rachel and Sarah's unearthing of the past, when the volcano covers up the evidence of the massacre and the midden, their efforts are rendered futile, particularly after Sam has told Rachel that 'burial sites and rubbish dumps provide more information about cultures than anywhere else' (p.157). Like the town graveyard, the atrocity of the crime is buried once again, and New Canaan is then, in fact, 'new', and 'no such country', where a large scale massacre of the Indigenous population can occur *and* be covered up, really does exist. The text is a lesson in history as its omniscient mode of narration and hieratic register signify. However, it does not seem to support any meaningful dialogue between past and present, nor interrogate any of the issues it raises. Crew's novels are often constructed to resist ideas about 'historical truths' and unmediated views of the past. As McKenna and Pearce argue, white Australia has 'a national moral amnesia' about the aspects of history that *No Such Country* confronts, and texts like this can assist in righting this wrong, hopefully by inspiring readers to seek out 'the historical truth' like Sam, Rachel and Sarah (1999, p.126). Yet by erasing the village's history altogether, the novel ultimately works against the themes it purports to address.

Given its obvious attempt to critique traditional or ethnocentric versions of the past, the approaches to history that characterise *No Such*

Country are therefore unsettling. Attempts to locate the massacre at a particular time and place are destabilised, for instance, by a sense that past and present exist simultaneously, or are constructed in causal terms. This is represented by the singular temporal setting, the Father's book, in which New Canaan's Indigenous history is illustrated quickly and superficially (pp.192-193), and by the Father himself who, albeit old, has existed from 'the beginning' and lives throughout the novel. The implied analogy between evolution and colonisation, evident in the following passage, also encapsulates these ideas:

There were those who believed the Father had existed from the beginning, that in some dark and primal time he had come up from the sea, flying like a white bird, or a vessel, some said, a white-sailed vessel, and that he had first appeared out of the surf at the entrance to the lagoon.

(Prologue)

In turn, the strategy of framing the reconstruction of the clan's death through a traditional narrative model of adolescent sexual development reduces the gravity of the massacre, as does the shift from 'realism to adventure romance' at the novel's conclusion (Mills 1998, p.29). Most important, however, is the novel's closed ending which positions readers to view the events of the past as 'an old, sad story best forgotten' (Bradford 2004, p.14). Sam and Rachel leave the town together with no plans to return except to visit Sarah; the unrepentant Father dies; and though it is possible that Sam and Rachel will tell the story of the massacre to others, the reader is left in New Canaan with Sarah whose liberation rests with the inheritance of books salvaged from the wool clipper, *Liberty*, an instrument of imperial power.

The final novel I wish to consider here is *Poison Under Their Lips*, one of very few I have discovered in the course of my reading

which explores Aboriginality and death purely from a setting in the past. The narrative of the text follows the events surrounding the murder of an Aboriginal man and the rape of an Aboriginal woman by members of the Queensland Mounted Native Police. While largely the fictional journal of eighteen-year-old cadet Arthur Bootle Wilbraham, the novel is also interspersed with documents such as letters, depositions from actual court hearings, and newspaper articles and editorials that have been sourced by the author from archival libraries. As the juxtaposition between the personal and the official suggests, the novel works to interrogate authorised versions of Australian history; it juggles differing perspectives and uses strategies that position readers to be confused or unclear about the narrative's status as 'truth'. Much of the text is concerned with the discrepancy between official government policy and the ways in which the Native Police put such policy into practice. A good example is the conversation between Judge Lutwyche and Arthur, where the word 'disperse' takes on two very different meanings. The judge begins with a rhetorical question to Arthur: 'So, young Wilbraham, you've come to scourge the blacks for us?'. Arthur's naïve answer, 'Well, to disperse them if troublesome, Sir', causes much hilarity between the judge and the violent, racist Lieutenant Wheeler, the troop's commanding officer. 'Disperse? Quite so, lad, quite so!', the judge responds, adding in an aside to the lieutenant: 'I think you've backed a winner with this one, Wheeler' (p.53). For the judge and, as the reader comes to learn, for Wheeler, the Aboriginals are depraved animals, who in 'social function and intelligence are more closely related to the apes than [the] average Britisher', a view which justifies whatever means they choose to 'breed the last vestiges of the savage out of the [British] race' (pp.53-54).

The ideologies of *Poison Under Their Lips* are quite clear so that exchanges like this one, in addition to the entries in Arthur's journal, only

serve to further emphasise the text's sympathy for the predicament of the Indigenous people during colonisation. Nonetheless, the seemingly straightforward story is muddied by two factors. The first is the position of the Native Police themselves, an armed force made up of (often unwilling) Indigenous troopers under the command of white officers. The complicated power relations (between different Indigenous clans and between Aboriginals and Europeans) that such a grouping produced and/or exploited is self-evident. The role of the Police, ostensibly to keep the peace between Aboriginals and pastoralists in frontier districts, in practice worked to open up the land for settlement. The Queensland Force had a reputation for violent confrontations during which traditional land-owners were either dispossessed or killed; the ways in which they frequently dispensed 'justice' were also questionable. The second factor is Arthur's participation in one such event. After a wild night of drinking at the camp barracks, Arthur awakes to the sound of women screaming and men swearing. Two Aboriginal women and a young Aboriginal man (who is unknown to Arthur, but is called Jemmy by the Troop) have been restrained. One of the women, the object of Arthur's infatuation whom he has named Eurydice, is bloodied and dishevelled. The blame is laid on Jemmy by Lieutenant Wheeler, who handcuffs him, beats him, and then commands one of the black troopers to whip him. Arthur tries to walk away, but is ordered instead to start his 'proper training' and to show the 'filthy nigger what to expect from the Queensland Native Police' (p.31). Seeing what he thinks is devastation on Eurydice's face, Arthur proceeds to kick Jemmy, cracking several of his ribs. Jemmy later dies from his injuries. As Arthur blocks much of the night from his memory, and as the time sequence of his story is jumbled and incomplete, the text's audience is unlikely to garner a clear sense of his role in the incident. Readers are therefore positioned to view Arthur with ambivalence, and this is further confused when his version of

events is contradicted by the text's extra-literary discourse. His struggle between the two dominant models of masculinity that the narrative offers – the bawdy, and sometimes cruel and immoral model that characterises the Native Police and the chaste, humane and devout version that he has been raised by – also creates a tension.

Another contradiction that works against a reading of the narrative in the colonial tradition is the alleged assault of Eurydice and 'her black sister' (p.30). Accounts of the rape and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men are familiar to the colonial texts from which *Poison Under Their Lips* draws its narrative style and subject matter. According to Bradford, such incidents function to imply that white men would never treat women, white or black, in this way (2001, p.82). Thus, when Arthur acts to 'defend [Eurydice's] honour' (p.163), the text appears to reinstate the stereotype of the white man as saviour and protector of Aboriginal women, and to sustain colonial European judgements of Aboriginal culture, namely that Aboriginal women were 'degraded and oppressed within their own societies' (Robert 2001, p.73). However, Arthur (and, thus, the reader) belatedly learns that Jemmy is Eurydice's husband, and that the two women were gang-raped by the Troop's white officers after Arthur's apparent disappearance from the scene. Symbolically, the camp where these incidents occur is called Mistake Creek, and Arthur is too traumatised to remember whether he is also guilty of sexually assaulting the women. In this way, the narrative fulfils a requirement of the postcolonial project in that it not only returns to the colonial scene to revisit, remember and interrogate the 'forgotten archive of the colonial encounter', but it tells a story in which the coloniser 'concede[s] its part or complicity in the terrors, and errors, of the past' (Gandhi 1998, pp.4-5,10). This is neatly encapsulated in a conversation towards the conclusion. Here, the Troop's Sergeant Thomas

is attempting to make Arthur see that Wheeler was once an honourable man. 'But we live in the present and not the past', Arthur counters. 'True', the Sergeant agrees, adding 'but it is the past and nothing else that leads us to where we stand now' (p.185).

In conjunction with the particular features and events of the narrative that I have discussed so far, this textual moment functions to give a sense of the complexity that characterises the origins of settler societies and which marked episodes of conflict during the colonial era, since it suggests that history is not objectively knowable, not a matter of one 'side' being right and the other wrong. At one level, then, the text works to destabilise notions of imperial power and thus to critique monolithic versions of the history of white settlement. This is not to say that it is free of colonial meanings, however. Indeed, although readers are unlikely to support the (often vicious) colonising practices referred to in the journal and the peritextual material, the text's principal claim – that whiteness should not be viewed in superior terms – tends to falter when the narrative's treatment of Eurydice is subjected to examination. Eurydice is central to the narrative because she plays a part in Wheeler's downfall, she appears in almost every entry of Arthur's journal, and she is the reason for his willingness to commit an uncharacteristic act of brutality: she is the 'love that [drives his] actions' (p.163). Yet she is denied a narrative voice and she is often mute, and thus she works to signify the silence and absence that is such a familiar aspect of Aboriginal experience in the colonial tradition. In addition, Arthur does not know the woman's name, so he chooses a name he feels is appropriate. Not only does naming constitute power within colonial discourse (Bradford 2001, p.39), but in drawing on the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice to explain the connections between the pair, the narrative replicates the male-centred plot of a myth which is essentially concerned with the quest for a dead woman. Although, in the end, it is

not Eurydice who dies, but Arthur, as with the mythic Eurydice the Aboriginal woman's downfall is represented here in phallic terms. The myth tells of Eurydice's death after she steps on a poisonous snake while fleeing from the unwanted advances of Aristaeus; in *Poison*, Eurydice must live in exile after her husband is murdered and she is sexually assaulted. 'She bin havem piccaninny', one of the Aboriginal boys at the camp tells a sergeant who is trying to piece together the events of the night: 'That snake bin bit her good' (p.164). In a move which evokes other stereotypes of 'helpless Aboriginal women and predatory white men' (Bradford 2001, p.107), Eurydice is therefore firmly positioned as a victim of imperial and patriarchal power.

The colonial intersection of gender and power, in which the Aboriginal woman is the object of the white male gaze (Bradford 2001, p.107) is also present in the text. In fact, an obvious, but familiar, ambivalence haunts Arthur's descriptions of Eurydice because they are stereotypical fantasies of the racialised Other (particularly as there is little in the text to suggest that the pair interact much at all). Arthur sees Eurydice as his 'beloved dusky virgin of the bush' (p.27), as 'chaste as the driven snow [...] as noble as she [is] savage' (p.86). 'Hers is a proud bearing', he writes, 'almost aloof [...] Eyes so brown as to be almost black, intense and mischievous [...] yet, at the same time, pliable and alluring' (pp.75-76). Such accounts bring to mind Sigmund Freud's trope of the 'dark continent' (a phrase borrowed from colonialist images of Africa) in which the feminine represents unexplored, and thus mysterious, territory. The dark continent trope, Mary Ann Doane argues, 'indicates the existence of an intricate historical articulation of the categories of racial difference and sexual difference'. It welds the erotic and the exotic together in such a way, she contends, as to lay blame with black women for 'the victimization inflicted upon them by white males' (1991, pp.212-213). Eurydice is also represented as the

means to the male subject's absolution – the way to freedom from sin or error – because, irrespective of who fathered her unborn baby, Arthur vows to find her and to parent her child, to beg her forgiveness and be redeemed. Thus, he 'carr[ies] her as [his] wound' (p.194), but at the same time, she is his 'only path to redemption' (p.141). Like other women in the Western tradition, Eurydice therefore occupies a double position; she is 'the agency that heals the wound of death's presence in life' since as a desired sexual object, she 'undoes the work of death by promising wholeness', but by virtue of her alterity, she is also seen as its source (Bronfen 1992, p.69).

According to John Stephens, there is no guarantee that the reinstatement of marginalised figures in the historical landscape will correspondingly lead to 'representations of people in their otherness' (2003, p.xiii). *Poison Under Their Lips*' representation of the ex-centric subject is a case in point, because while the novel seeks to empathise with the victims of the imperialist, patriarchal and racist regimes that dominated past eras of Australia's history, there are nonetheless problems in the ways these issues are addressed. This largely occurs because the racial Other is a female who is not only denied a narrative voice, but is subject to the desirous gaze of the white Anglo male protagonist from whose perspective the story is told. The same may be said of *No Such Country*. Unlike earlier accounts of Australian history, the novel certainly equates colonisation with the decline of the Indigenous population. It also reflects the sense of optimism that characterised the social progressivism of early-1990s Australia. And yet because it is inclined to construct the kind of neat endings and outcomes which effectively 're-bury' the past – and thus to foreclose on the ethical issues raised by such violent events – and because it suggests that 'to expose old wrongs is enough to correct them' (Bradford 2004, pp.1,7), its capacity to contribute to a truly revisionary history of Australia's racial wars is arguable. Just as

importantly, it ‘fails to address the trauma of the colonised in its focus on the coloniser’s perspective’ (Bradford 2004, p.7). It is for this reason I would argue that *Killing Darcy*’s multi-stranded narrative is more effective in positioning its audience to come to an understanding of perspectives belonging to those who are located outside the boundaries, or at the borders of, hegemonic representations of Australian history. The novel’s depiction of relations between black and white (especially concerning death) is marked by complexities, tensions and incomplete meanings, and its use of multiple focalisers serves to politicise and historicise the effects of colonisation upon Aboriginal people both in the past and the present. Indeed, of the three texts I have discussed here, *Killing Darcy* is the most complex, which is perhaps why it is also the most ‘successful’ in dismantling not only entrenched concepts of national history but, to use Bradford’s words, ‘representational and narrative habits and patterns privileging Western over Indigenous perspectives’ (2007, p.119).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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