

Writing From the Contact Zone: Fiction By Early Queensland Women

In her memoir, *My Australian Girlhood* (1902), the Queensland-born colonial novelist Rosa Praed claims to speak for a voiceless – and vanishing – people:

[W]ho cares now about the joys and sorrows, rights and wrongs of savages who cumber the earth no more! There has been no one to write the Blacks' epic; not many have said words in their defence; and this is but a poor little plea that I lay down for my old friends.¹

White critics, especially feminists, have found in such passages evidence of alternative insights which challenge dominant views of colonisation. Dale Spender, for example, argues that many early Australian women writers express an affinity with Indigenous women based on shared gender oppression: 'there is no parallel in men's writing with that of white women who document their affinity with black women as they assist each other in labour, or when they are sometimes obliged to "share" the same master.'² Patricia Grimshaw and Julie Evans make a similar point, although with greater circumspection: 'While undeniably aligned to the colonists' value systems, writers such as Praed, along with Mary Bundock and Katie Langloh Parker challenged accepted wisdom to affirm aspects of Aboriginal lives and cultures, while questioning white behaviour and practices.'³

The domestic and romantic focus of women's fiction certainly ensures a very different view of the colonial enterprise to that of male writers. Characteristically, colonial women writers represent themselves as sympathetic and knowledgeable observers of Indigenous people, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, but we need to question their positioning of themselves as innocent bystanders to the fundamental (masculine) processes of dispossession and the establishment of the colonial order. Mary Louise Pratt has alerted us to the unequal nature of power relations in what she terms 'contact zones', that is, 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today'.⁴ In *The Frontiers of Women's Writing*, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay builds on Pratt's work to argue that women writers on the American frontier were not simply complicit, but agents of

colonialism in their own right. Women's accounts, she claims, 'are implicated in expansionist processes at the same time that they formulate positions of innocence and detachment'.⁵

Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* that white Australia has come to 'know' the 'Indigenous woman' through the gaze of explorers, state officials and anthropologists, and she demonstrates how this textual landscape 'is disrupted by the emergence of the life writings of Indigenous women whose subjectivities and experiences of colonial processes are evident in their texts'.⁶ In this paper, I examine some of the ways in which white women *novelists* also contributed powerfully to shaping the literary imaginative landscape through which Australian readers came to 'know' Indigenous people, and the nature of inter-racial contact, in the period before the publication of writing by Indigenous women began to disrupt the textual terrain. The shaping of the imaginative landscape of the contact zone is a profoundly colonial project: through writing, white women transcend their otherwise marginal political status to become, as Georgi-Findlay puts it, 'authors and agents of territorial expansion, positioned ambiguously within systems of power and authority'.⁷

A preoccupation with the intersections of race and gender is particularly pronounced in writing by white women who grew up in Queensland, the focus of this paper. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a burgeoning of new publishing opportunities for women coincided with a relatively late and harshly oppressive colonial frontier.⁸ These factors, along with the exceptionally decentralised nature of the state, meant that, well into the twentieth century, Queensland women writers were more likely than those from other states to grow up in rural areas and experience frontier conditions, either first hand or through the personal accounts of parents and grandparents. Until Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal) published her first volume of poetry, *We Are Going*, in 1964, white women's depictions of Indigenous women and inter-racial interactions remained undisturbed by Indigenous women's own representation of colonial processes. Literature, then, is a domain in which white women's agency as colonisers is both palpable and susceptible to analysis.

The colonial female sensibility that by the end of the nineteenth century begins to be developed in novels about Queensland emerges first in women's letters and diaries. Rachel Henning, for

instance, in letters written between 1862 and 1865 (shortly after the colony's separation from New South Wales in 1859), depicts an environment in which loyal 'station blacks' – whom she treats with a mixture of condescending affection and mirth – are juxtaposed against the ubiquitous threat of the treacherous 'wild blacks' or 'myalls' beyond the station boundaries. In a manner typical of the educated colonial woman, Henning draws on what she has read of the American frontier to speculate on what lies beyond the frontier: 'The "far north" here is like the far west in America, and strange wild stories are brought down about it'.⁹ The mental geography of the contact zone which is evident in these letters – in particular the opposition of the station and its civilising effects to the wild unsubdued lands not yet under effective colonial control – forms the basis of the textual landscape of novels published by women later in the nineteenth century.

The ubiquitous threat of 'wild blacks' is taken up in the first woman's novel to use a Queensland setting, Louisa Atkinson's *Tressa's Resolve* (1872).¹⁰ Although part of the novel is set in the Gulf Country, Atkinson never visited Queensland; her account is based on the recollections of her husband, James Calvert, who accompanied Ludwig Leichhardt on his 1845 expedition from the Darling Downs to Port Essington. As a brutal frontier society with an extreme climate and hostile Aborigines, Queensland is imagined from the vantage point of gentrified late nineteenth century Sydney as – in more than one sense – beyond the pale. In *Tressa's Resolve*, Aboriginal people are represented not as human beings but as an enveloping and insidious threat: they are metaphorised into the suffocating smoke of the fires they have lit on the plains. Although Elizabeth Lawson argues that Atkinson's novels 'are fully humanist... in that, almost free of racial prejudice, they are also distinctly feminist'¹¹ she fails to acknowledge that the 'feminism' of novels like *Tressa's Resolve* is itself often implicated in colonial expansionist projects. The main purpose of Atkinson's Queensland sub-plot is to demonstrate that the English governess, Bessie Shelburn, who survives a brutal frontier experience through courage and resourcefulness, is an eminently suitable type of colonial woman migrant.

Unlike Atkinson, Rosa Praed grew up on the Queensland frontier, and experienced its violence at first hand.¹² As a six year old child, she was living at Naraigin, the property next to the Frasers, when they were killed by Aborigines at Hornet Bank in

1857. Her father, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, led the brutal and indiscriminate retaliations. In her memoirs *Australian Life: Black and White* (1885) and *My Australian Girlhood* (1902), Praed devotes considerable space to the Fraser killings. She enhances her own proximity to the tragic events by claiming that shortly before the massacre she was taken alone at night by the family's loyal Aboriginal workers, Tombo and Waggoo, to a corroboree where the attack was being rehearsed, and speculates that if she had reported to her parents what she had witnessed, the Frasers might have been spared. Praed's account is highly implausible, but nonetheless offers an insight into the psychological geography which informs the fiction of Praed and other women writers. In Praed's memoirs of the Hornet Bank massacre, the boundaries between the civilising world of the station and the savage world beyond it become blurred as Tombo, Waggoo and six-year-old Rosa move between the two environments under cover of night. The boundaries collapse when Aborigines penetrate the heart of the neighbouring station and kill the Fraser family. The complicity of an Aboriginal servant of the Frasers, and the presence among the attackers of former Native Policemen, further confuse the mental geography of the contact zone.

Praed also emphasises the perilous proximity of savagery to the settlers by explaining the cause of the massacre as the 'seething of foul blood and the unchaining of wild passions' during the local bunya festival.¹³ Specifically, Praed links the bunya festival to Aboriginal cannibalism, a practice which the Moreton Bay settlers believed was rife but for which there is not a single eye-witness account, and she even introduces a sensational new twist into local folklore by suggesting that Europeans were the *preferred* victims of cannibalism:

In Moreton Bay, the depredations of the Blacks were more or less regulated by the yield of the bunya forests. In the good bunya years, there were always more murders... Then the kangaroos, iguanas and other beasts and reptiles of the bush are sacred, but the cattle are the white man's and may be speared and eaten; and the white man – if he be alone and has not his gun ready – may be speared also, and roasted and eaten, to still the craving for flesh food, which seizes men after long abstinence.¹⁴

Although Praed makes some strong criticisms of the colonial enterprise, her memoirs serve ultimately to exculpate the white colonists by demonstrating that they pitted civilisation against savagery. Through her sensationalised accounts of the northern frontier, Praed exercises the colonial power to control

representations of the contact zone, and undermines her self-representation as a sympathetic, knowledgeable and detached spokesperson whose work makes a 'poor little plea' for her 'old friends'.

Praed's fictional work offers the reader a more reassuring post-frontier geography. Aboriginal people are ubiquitous, but have been largely incorporated into the colonial system as station workers. Far from representing a threat, their occasional disruptiveness is represented in highly stylised ways. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, Praed laments that no 'Blacks' epic' has been written, but her own many gestures towards the epic genre seek to amuse her readers with bathos rather than uplift them with heroic values. Praed's early novels include many humorous epic episodes, such as the elopement of a married woman with a lover. In *Outlaw and Lawmaker* and *The Luck of the Leura*, Praed recounts a 'Blacks' Iliad', in which Helen leaves Menelaus for Paris and causes inter-tribal warfare, and she also constructed a short story around this plot: 'A Disturbed Christmas in the Bush' (1890).¹⁵ In contrast to Praed's account of her terrifying early experiences at Naraigin, these 'epic' episodes reinforce the reassuring geography of the station as a safe haven, disrupted only by comic internal conflict among 'station blacks'.

One of Praed's later novels, however, complicates colonial geography again by revisiting the era of frontier warfare. In *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land* (1915) Praed's female protagonist explicitly accuses the colonial regime of theft of Aboriginal land. When Colin McKeith, who scores his gun barrel with a notch for every black-fellow he kills, describes his shooting of King Mograbar, Lady Bridget O'Hara retorts: 'How cruelly unjust. It was his country you were *stealing*.' She continues: 'I don't admire your glorious British record, I think it's nothing but a record of robbery, murder and cruelty, beginning with Ireland and ending with South Africa.'¹⁶ In this passage, Lady Bridget places herself outside the oppressor group by speaking as a member of the colonised Irish race. However, she soon colludes with the 'invader' and 'aggressor' by accepting McKeith's proposal of marriage and accepting her future husband's violent past: 'The black-fellows he has slain – the one jarring note between us – are never to be resuscitated.'¹⁷

In *Lady Bridget*, Praed draws extensively on her own recollections of frontier violence at Naraigin, as well as the experiences of the Jardine family (her sister Lizzie married John

Jardine), to develop the character of Colin McKeith. While initially the reader sees McKeith negatively through Lady Bridget's eyes, the novel subsequently offers an elaborate justification for his vendetta against Aborigines. McKeith, it transpires, is the only survivor of 'one of the most horrible native outrages in the history of Australia'. His father had responded to an Aboriginal mother's plea to protect her two half-caste girls 'because the Blacks wanted to kill and eat them', and this 'act of kindness' had been the family's undoing. In a variation on the theme of the 'Blacks' Iliad', the McKeiths' 'black boy' Jimmy fell in love with one of the 'half-castes', who first encouraged him then took up with a stock-boy. Jimmy took revenge by betraying the white family:

"It was the bunya season again, and the girls' old tribe, under their King Mograbar – a devil incarnate in a brute – I sent him to Hell afterwards with my own hand and never did a better deed" – McKeith's brown fists clenched and the fury in his eyes blazed so that he himself looked almost devilish for a moment. His face remained very grim and dour as he proceeded.

"Jimmy had got to know through the half-caste girl about our ways and doings, and he made a diabolic plot with King Mograbar to get the blacks into the house.... Every living soul was murdered... surprised in their sleep.... My father... my mother... my sisters... God!... I can't speak of it..."

McKeith's response to the tragedy was 'to pursue the wild black with relentless animosity... mercilessly punishing native depredations' to such an extent that he was tried and convicted for 'manslaughter of natives', but later acquitted. As a result of his family tragedy, McKeith argues to Lady Bridget that it was 'the black man and not the white man who was the aggressor' on the Queensland frontier.¹⁸

The novel is narrated from the points of view of several different characters, and the question of whether blacks or whites bear the greater guilt for the frontier wars is left deliberately ambiguous. What is unambiguous is that McKeith's life of violence has rendered him unfit for the marriage based on mateship – here indicating genuine equality between the partners – that both he and Lady Bridget seek. Lady Bridget has promised to forget her husband's murderous past, but her self-righteous goal to be a "bujeri [good] White Mary," whose mission it might be to compose the racial feud between blackman and white' inevitably comes into conflict with McKeith's pathological hatred of Aborigines. His need for moral redemption is underscored by the

return of the 'Blacks' Iliad' theme. In contravention of her husband's express orders, Lady Bridget gives protection to the 'savage lovers', Wombo and Oola, who are fleeing the wrath of Oola's husband, a medicine man. When McKeith discovers the presence of the adulterers on his station, he whips Wombo and drives the couple away. It is only when Lady Bridget walks away from the marriage that McKeith reaches a limited awareness that his attitudes render him unfit to participate in the post-frontier world, and, in particular, for marriage to a genteel woman:

If only he had yielded to her then about the Blacks! If he had curbed his anger, shown sympathy with the two wild children of Nature who were better than himself, in this at least that they had known how to love and cling to each other in spite of the blows of fate! He had horse-whipped Wombo for loving Oola, and swift retribution had come upon himself.... That he should have lost Bridget because of the loves of Wombo and Oola! It was an irony – as if God were laughing at him.¹⁹

At the end of the novel McKeith and Lady Bridget are reunited, and the 'Blacks' Iliad' sub-plot, having served its purpose as a catalyst for the breakdown and rehabilitation of the white woman's marriage, is abandoned inconclusively.

Elsewhere, too, Praed pursues the theme that the white race needs moral redemption, but this redemption does not encompass redressing wrongs done to Indigenous people – indeed, it is premised on their *exclusion* from Australian society. The sub-plot of *Mrs. Tregaskiss* (1897) envisions a future that will bring European and Aboriginal cultures together in Australia, although Aboriginal people themselves will 'cumber the earth no more'. The fantasy is embodied in the 'Tregaskisses' white daughter Ning, 'a queer, elf-like creature' who – brought up largely by the half-caste Claribel – speaks a pidgin composed of 'blacks' language' and English, performs Aboriginal songs and dances and is fascinated by stories about 'Debil-debil'. The child's real name is Angela, but her father calls her 'Pickaninny,' which the child repeats as 'Ning.' At the end of the story, Ning wanders off into the bush, where she is devoured by wild animals.²⁰ Ironically, the child strays into danger because she has forgotten the cautionary stories of *Debil-debil*, which might have kept her close to her family circle, and instead goes looking for the European fairytale world of Christian Andersen's stories along the shores of Lake Eungella. Ultimately, then, the promiscuous mingling of two cultures is shown to be deadly, and Praed's experimental fantasy of a superior race selectively incorporating

elements of a savage culture dies with Ning. The tragic sub-plot reinforces Praed's apparent belief that she is recording the last traces of a vanishing race and culture.

For many years, Rosa Praed was Queensland's only published woman novelist, although from the 1890s a number of other Queensland writers – including Laura Palmer-Archer, Ethel Mills and Lala Fisher – explored similar themes in short stories. In 1899, Lala Fisher responded to English interest in the bush by editing a collection of work by Australian writers living in London, *By Creek and Gully: Stories and Sketches Mostly of Bush Life*. Fisher's story, 'The Sleeping Sickness of Lui the Kanaka', is one of the earliest fictional representations of the use of South Sea Islander labour on Queensland plantations. The narrator, Wilton, who is 'paid to watch over the interests of the sugar industry', decides that a series of mysterious deaths is the result of 'the Kanakas' well-known habit of "caving in". When Lui, the 'native doctor of the herd', becomes ill, Wilton decides to effect his own cure: 'Round and round that bullock-yard I lashed him – lashed his Crimean shirt to ribbons – lashed great weals upon his chest and shoulders and across his arms, until at length my arm refused further service, and fell helpless at my side.'²¹

Although Fisher's collection purports to be about bush life, it in fact marks the beginning of a shift which became more pronounced in twentieth century Queensland writing, from outback to northern coastal settings – reflecting the pattern of colonial expansion. Where outback fiction features arid landscapes and conflict between pastoralists and displaced Indigenous people, coastal fiction explores the possibilities of wet and fecund environments, and their more closely settled, multi-ethnic communities. Harriet Patchett Martin's 'Cross Currents', for example, which also appears in Fisher's collection, concerns an Englishwoman, Alma Belmont, who is shocked on her arrival in Queensland by the omnipresence of Aboriginal people. Her first contact with 'town blacks' is in Bristowe (Brisbane):

She had come across a few of them in Bristowe, town blacks, tame creatures, who spoke English and begged for pennies. She had only just begun to tolerate the young *gins*, with their little brown picaninnies [*sic*] slung over their shoulders, but the old hags with their pipes and their dilly bags, and the spindle-shanked men with their hungry, wolf-like dogs and their waddies, had always remained to her objects of horror.

Staying alone in a customs house on the coast north of the colonial capital, she is woken at night by the sound of footsteps

outside. 'Paralysed' with terror, she faints at the sight of a dance in which

the fighting men became so many grinning demons, with countenances distorted by every vile passion, dancing through the flames and throwing up their arms with wild screams and sudden shouts of fiendish laughter, such as one could imagine proceeding from the devils torturing the damned in the accursed orgies of an Inferno.

Her Australian host however, casually dismisses the corroboree as 'the antics of his black friends', to whom he has given 'leave to assemble when they pleased on the piece of waste ground adjoining the customs enclosure.'²²

'Cross Currents' is an early example of an evolving *urban* geography of contact in which 'partially civilised and harmless' blacks are ubiquitously present as the Other in colonial towns. Patchett Martin's story also reveals that the colonial authorities allocate certain spaces to the amusing 'antics' of Aboriginal people. 'King Billy's' parody of the colonial hierarchy disgusts the English narrator, but is clearly tolerated – indeed encouraged – by the colonials:

She could never understand why "King Billy," who wore a brass plate round his neck with the title duly set forth thereon, should be a *persona grata* at Riverview [Government House], where he was allowed the run of the offices, and quite failed to see what amusement the household could find in his mimic antics when he strutted about on the lawn. "Now, me Honourable William Thornhill. Wait; you see. Now me Governor, Sir George."

What the narrator misses is that such 'antics' demonstrate the subjugation of a vanquished race to the will of the conqueror. Similarly, by allowing corroborees to be performed on 'waste ground' the authorities demonstrate that such activities have been appropriated by the colonial order.

The figures of the 'half-caste' and the 'town black' begin to appear frequently in fiction by white women from the 1890s onwards, and implicitly their presence represents a challenge to the 'vanishing race' theory. By the 1920s the mixed race character had become a lightning rod for hegemonic racial and sexual anxieties, and during this decade Queensland women writers published a series of novels which explore their concerns about racial purity.²³ Most of these novels pre-date better known fictional treatments of this issue, such as Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), Brian Penton's *Landtakers* (1934) and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938).

A radical shift in the mental geography of the contact zone can be observed in novels by Zora Cross, Mabel Forrest, Dorothy Cottrell and Kay Glasson Taylor. In earlier novels, 'black' and 'half-caste' characters are unambiguously demarcated as racial Others but, in the 1920s, characters of mixed race infiltrate the white family and the novels become preoccupied with the dominant national project of investigating racial origins and policing racial boundaries. The appropriation of this subject matter by women is in part an indicator of the increasing status of women as professional writers and participants in social debates. In the 1920s, women writers increasingly take on the role of custodians of racial distinctions and, in that context, represent themselves as knowledgeable and sympathetic spokespersons for Indigenous women, and, in a more general sense, as authoritative interpreters of the contact zone.

The 'authenticity effects' generated in these novels were crucial to their considerable public success. First, the authors' personal connections with the Queensland bush are highlighted on the dust covers and in other publicity. Second, the novels themselves deploy particular literary techniques which convey the impression that the narrators have privileged insight into the emotions and thoughts of racial Others: in particular, sustained use is made of focalisation and first person narration by mixed race characters to draw the reader into a sense of intimacy with the inner world of the characters. Such narrative devices generate a powerful sense of 'knowing' racial Others and, indeed, novels became the main source of knowledge about race and colonisation for generations of Australian readers. At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that these novels are vehicles for a monolithic ideology; rather, their inconsistencies and tensions reflect the gradual supplanting of the 'vanishing race' theory by the emerging policy of assimilation.

Zora Cross's *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (1924) is a colonial saga set in and around the Queensland gold mining town of Hillborough, based on Gympie, where Cross's maternal ancestors, the Skyrings were a prominent local family. The novel begins with a vicious fight between the white Bill Wilson and the Turkish hawker Madrack over possession of Madrack's wife, Mary. Bill Wilson loathes the 'half-caste cur' because he represents the destabilising of racial boundaries: "Australia doesn't mix her blood with yellow nor black, Madrack. There're a whole lot of things like you that want quietly pushing off the earth."²⁴ In the

volatile, racially mixed environment of the frontier gold town, Wilson's attempts to police racial distinctions seem futile. However, when Madrack is accidentally killed by a spear aimed at Wilson by an Aboriginal woman, Mary is free to marry the white man and found a colonial dynasty. Mary's own obscure parentage, and her marriage to a 'half-caste', are suppressed as she is incorporated back into the white community, but she is haunted by the fear that she may have convict ancestry. Gratifyingly, the *mystery of her birth is resolved later by the discovery that she is the grand-daughter of an earl!*

Twenty years later, the racial boundaries demarcated in the opening scene of the novel effectively organise life in prosperous Hillborough: brutish Bill Wilson has been transformed into 'a popular white king' who dispenses largesse to Aboriginal fringe dwellers, depicted by the white narrator as infantile characters who are dependent upon such acts of white charity. The marriage of Bill and Mary's daughter Ann to Michael, who is English born *and therefore must be racially pure, provides the pretext for the narrator's articulation of a stark racial contrast:*

The good old sun ... who had watched the struggle of the native and the white pioneer going on side by side for so many years now, looked down on the laughing, beautiful Ann, advancing, even as her own country, young, clean, honest, and truthful, to mate with England through young Michael – Ann, with all the hope of a crowded, glorious future before her, worthy of all the best earth could give her; and on that poor spectacle of femininity, ugly of form, hideous of feature, flat-nosed, thick-lipped, shapeless of limb, from too long walking, too little food, too much burden-carrying, poor old Sally Snake, moving down the slope of life with nothing to hope for....

Poor doomed Sally Snake, remnant of a race dying so quickly on the advancing wave of another!

The narrator's melodramatic expression of the vanishing race theme, however, is at odds with the omnipresence in the novel of Aboriginal people and their participation in local events such as Ann's wedding celebrations, at which Sally Snake – who appears to have quite a lot of life left in her – performs a 'delightful imitation of Ann dancing the lancers'.²⁵ In *Daughters of the Seven Mile*, like other novels of the period, the text itself seems to be working against the outworn 'vanishing race' ideology, although no clear alternative emerges.

Mabel Forrest's second novel, *The Wild Moth* (1924), was a bestseller which was filmed in 1926 by her fellow Queenslander, Charles Chauvel, as *The Moth of Moonbi*. The message of this

novel is the necessity of pure breeding: in the 'back blocks' everyone is '[t]abulated, marked off. Black or white. Neutral tints are not allowed.'²⁶ *The Wild Moth* recounts the stories of two women from a Queensland country town: the white Dell Ferris and a nameless 'half-caste' prostitute. As in *Daughters of the Seven Mile*, there is a violent opening scene in which shocking racial and sexual possibilities are broached. Dell is physically attacked and perhaps raped by the man she believes to be her father, Black Ferris. She seeks the protection of 'fair-faced' Tom Resoult, who shoots and kills Black Ferris in self-defence. Dell's dark colouring, however, hints at the possibility of racial impurity, and only the discovery, at the very end of the novel, that Dell is the child of her mother's adulterous affair with a dark Irish artist removes the impediment to her forming a relationship with Tom.

No such fortuitous ending, however, awaits the 'handsome yellow half-caste', who is represented as a doomed outcast. She too is in love with Tom, but he – apparently alone among the local men – angrily rejects her solicitations. The jealous 'half-caste' attempts to kill Dell but is thwarted by her full blood cousin, Dell's servant Josephine. The encounter between the cousins is a moment of epiphany for the 'half-caste': she has been trying to live the life of a white woman, but the sight of her black cousin abruptly reminds her of her own origins:

No tears, no fury, no white girl's blood could wash away the stain.

She was "own cousin" to this ebon, dancing pure-blooded black gin before her. Had she been Eurasian, half Maori, Samoan, it would have been different – but Australian aboriginal in Australia! It was like negro blood in America.

As the 'half-caste' despairingly flees from Josephine, towards the flooded river, the focalisation continues for several pages:

Why was the world all so cruel to the between-colours, for whom there was no room in Heaven nor in earth?... God in Heaven keep her from falling into the hands of more of her kin, her hated black blood!

Finally she slips and drowns in a flooded river, dragged under by her fine European clothes. We last see her 'face downwards in the tide, twisting, turning over, under, very still now, face upturned, wide golden eyes staring unseeing to the slowly darkening skies, from billabong to river, from river outwards, onwards to the sea.' Although the reader is invited to see the fate of the 'half-caste' as tragic, the inevitability of her death is reinforced by the narrator's privileged access to the character's own innermost thoughts. Thus, although the reader does not even learn the name of the

'half-caste', she 'knows' through this novel that 'there [is] no room in Heaven nor in earth' for 'the between-colours.'²⁷ In the realm of fantasy, however, Forrest suggested that relationships transgressing racial boundaries might be possible: in the short story 'The Little Black Man', a black gaelic goblin 'who does not like talk about the White Australia policy' has his love for a pink waterlily sanctioned by her kiss!²⁸

The contradictory and shifting nature of the ideology underpinning women's novels of the 1920s is also exemplified in Dorothy Cottrell's work. Her second novel, *Earth Battle* (1930), explores the survival of Aboriginal people and the land's resistance to colonisation. Set in western Queensland during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, the novel chronicles the 'splendid' yet 'hopeless' quest of Old HB, 'one o' the worst men in Queensland', to 'own and master' a piece of property called Tharlane. As in *The Singing Gold*, Cottrell suggests in *Earth Battle* that Aboriginal people have been wiped out. Old HB, who, in 'the early days of Queensland settlement' had seen many such skeletons 'lying where "justice" had been dealt', is moved when he comes across the skeleton of a very old man:

He had been trained in fierce contempt for the black man, and yet – and yet – it seemed to him rather rough that...there was left of the Dark People only the stains of smoke and the shadows of traced hands on the cave-walls...and picked bones on a rock!

He saw the white man's flocks spreading out and out across the face of the Commonwealth, nibbling riches from the wilderness; saw a new nation drawing wealth from these flocks and from the corn and wheat that followed the spreading of the flocks.... And he saw also the people who had stood still so long (because in their sunny march of nomadic days there was no need for them to advance), saw them suddenly inundated by this other people, with virtues and vices and arts a million years ahead of the little blue stone axe... And he saw the white tide of the new people trampling, driving, cheating, hewing out a new world wherein there was no room for the soft-eyed Dark Folk, a new swift world in which they could not learn to live, and he saw them forced northward and westward ever to the desert and the fringes of the Gulf – beyond which was the sea!²⁹

Despite Old HB's articulation of the 'dying race' theory, *Earth Battle* is, ironically, full of evidence of the survival of the 'Dark Folk'. The 'half-caste' Baada, the survivor of a massacre of Aboriginal people by troopers, is the mother of fourteen living children by a white man, Old Backs. She inhabits a fluid racial space:

As years passed, she had grown fat and very ugly, while her skin darkened until she might have been taken for a "full black," and men called her Mother Backs, and she called herself "the first white woman on the Black Ant Creek," and was very hospitable.

White men are also drawn to Baada's beautiful daughter, Georgina, who becomes pregnant to one of them, and marries another. The fact that Baada and Georgina are fecund mothers of healthy children ambiguously undercuts the vanishing race theme that is strongly present in other parts of the novel: cave paintings and skeletons, despite dominant assumptions articulated by the white characters, are not all that is left of the 'Dark Folk' whom they dispossessed. By contrast, the white women in the novel are either childless, the mothers of sickly or retarded children, or die in childbirth. The scantiness of white fertility reinforces Cottrell's theme of the precariousness of the colonisation of Queensland, which is contrasted with the 'strongly settled lands of New South Wales' where men stare 'strangely' at the unaccustomed sight of black Baada and her children.³⁰

In a sequel to *Earth Battle*, a novella entitled *The Night Flowers* (1930), Cottrell takes one of the sub-plots forward a generation. Chum, a young white woman, is in love with two sons of 'quarter-caste' Georgina: the 'dark, passionate and beautiful' Donnie and the 'fair and blue-eyed and steady' Martin. Dark Donnie – who is constantly in trouble with the police – kills Chum in the mistaken belief that she has betrayed him. The novella concludes with Donnie setting off to kill himself by riding over a cliff, along with the 'half-breed prostitute dancer' Josie whom he has kidnapped, in order to rid the world of 'cruel and bad things'. Assimilation can work, the novel appears to suggest, only if the taint of 'colour' is bred out.³¹

Kay Glasson Taylor's novel *Pick and the Duffers* (1930) also engages with contemporary debates on assimilation. Set on a Queensland cattle station, the novel presents racial geography as fluid and deceptive. Although she was raised and educated to assimilate, the 'nearly white' Bella has chosen to live with the Coomera tribe, while her brother, Dickon Dixon, is a book-keeper and tutor who successfully passes as white. Warde Maynard, the illegitimate son of Dixon and a station owner's daughter, is adopted and raised as white by his grandfather, and tutored – unbeknown to the boy – by his father, Dickon. However, despite being brought up as white, Warde becomes increasingly obsessed by 'one horror': the fear that he has 'coloured blood'. Warde is spared the confirmation of his fears when he is shot and killed by a 'half-

caste', Yellow Harry, who is jealous that the boy is accorded the privileges of whiteness denied to those whose skin denotes their mixed race. Warde is killed during his courageous attempt to cover up the crimes of his cattle duffer grandfather, and his selfless nobility is constructed as evidence of an inner whiteness which transcends skin colour. When eleven-year-old Pick reassures Warde that he is not 'yellow', he says 'you're the whitest man I know'. Station owner Neil Warren uses the same language to Dickon when he discovers the truth about the tutor's ancestry: 'You're a real white man. I don't give a hang for anything else.'³²

The revulsion against their 'black blood' that is often expressed by characters in this group of novels reflects the assimilationist assumption that people of mixed race aspired to be white. Some of the novels written by Queensland women in the 1920s go further, cautiously suggesting that assimilation can work in some circumstances, especially where the mark of 'colour' – typically a sign of 'bad blood' and therefore linked to character flaws – has been bred out. With some exceptions (such as Warde Maynard in *Pick and the Duffers*), characters who can successfully pass as white survive, while those with darker skins frequently die in tragic circumstances: for example, fair blue-eyed Martin lives but his dark brother Donnie commits suicide in Cottrell's *The Night Flowers*. In Taylor's *Pick and the Duffers*, Bella – who was educated to be white – is unusual in choosing to live in a camp. She reflects: 'One drop of black blood makes a blackfellow, they say, and I think they must be right.... I couldn't even remember my own people, but they called me back to them.' Bella's daughter, the beautiful blue-eyed Wirri, might also pass as white, but station owner Neil Warren, for whom she works as a parlourmaid, offers a word of caution:

"Wirri is white enough, and pretty enough – now. She's young. But if you want to see what she'll be like in another ten years or so you can come down to the camp with me and take a good look at Bella.... It'll open your eyes all right. They only want a dash of the tar-brush to make them black."

Dickon Dixon, who himself successfully passes as white, also sounds a note of caution about the difficulty of eliminating 'colour':

"I was educated like a white man, and brought up like a white man, but there's just the touch there, and though it never told in me it came out in my son. That's why I never told him. He died happy because he didn't know."³³

The geography of contact thus becomes internalised within the white or 'nearly white' body in women's novels of the 1920s. More successfully than any frontier massacre of a white family by Aborigines, 'blood' conveys the racial Other into the bosom of the white family.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some of the ways in which early white women novelists from Queensland contributed to shaping the literary imaginative landscape through which Australian readers came to 'know' Indigenous people, and the nature of inter-racial relationships in the contact zone. The writers discussed here typically represent themselves both explicitly and implicitly as sympathetic and knowledgeable spokespersons for Indigenous people, and position themselves as observers rather than participants in the violent processes of colonial expansion. However, through their shaping of the imaginative landscape of colonialism, women writers were active participants in the ongoing colonial projects of subjugating Indigenous people and managing public perceptions of that process. The appropriation of race issues by white women writers is an indicator both of the increasing standing of women as professional writers, and of the credibility with the white Australian public of their claims to be knowledgeable interpreters of the contact zone. White women writers thus become, in Georgi-Findlay's terms, 'authors and agents' of colonialism. In Australia, the privileged status of whites, including white women as spokespersons for Indigenous women and detached chroniclers of colonial processes, remained unchallenged until the recent explosion of publications by Indigenous people, especially the life writings of Indigenous women.

Belinda McKay

Notes

¹ Mrs Campbell Praed, *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902, p 73.

² Dale Spender, 'Rosa Praed: Original Australian Writer', in Debra Adelaide (ed), *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988, p 204.

³ Patricia Grimshaw and Julie Evans, 'Colonial Women on Intercultural Frontiers: Rosa Campbell Praed, Mary Bundock and Katie Langloh Parker', *Australian Historical Studies* 27.106 (April 1996), pp 79-95.

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p 4.

⁵ Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996, 8, p xi.

⁶ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000, p 1. See also her chapter, 'Tellin' It Straight: Self-Presentation Within Indigenous Women's Life Writings', pp 1-31.

⁷ Georgi-Findlay, p x.

⁸ Belinda McKay, "'The One Jarring Note': Race and Gender in Queensland Women's Writing to 1939', *Queensland Review*, 8.1 (2001), 31-54.

⁹ David Adams (ed), *The Letters of Rachel Henning*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, p 161.

¹⁰ Louisa Atkinson, *Tressa's Resolve*, serially published, *Sydney Mail*, 31 August-7 December 1872.

¹¹ Elizabeth Lawson, 'Louisa Atkinson: Naturalist and Novelist', in Adelaide, p 81.

¹² The colony appears in a number of her novels under the 'transparent mask' of 'Leichardt's [sic] Land': see Mrs Campbell Praed, *Policy and Passion: A Novel of Australian Life*, 3 vols, London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1881, p iv.

¹³ Mrs Campbell Praed, *Australian Life: Black and White*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1885, pp 50-65 and *My Australian Girlhood*, pp 54-62.

¹⁴ Mrs Campbell Praed, *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life*, Colonial Edition, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902, pp 27-28. See Belinda McKay and Patrick Buckridge, 'Literary Imaginings of the Bunya', *Queensland Review*, 9.2 (2002): 67-68. Gordon Reid identifies many inaccuracies and improbabilities in the accounts of the Hornet Bank massacre by Praed and Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior in *A Nest of Hornets: The Massacre of the Fraser Family at Hornet Bank Station, Central Queensland, 1857, and Related Events*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982. The mixture of terror, guilt and fear which underpins Praed's recollections is also highly evocative of what Robert Dixon terms 'colonial psychosis' (Robert Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001, p 17).

¹⁵ Mrs Campbell Praed, *Outlaw and Lawmaker*, [1893]; London: Pandora, 1987, 214-215; Mrs Campbell Praed, *The Luck of the Leura*, London: John Long, 1907, pp 195-196; Mrs Campbell Praed, 'A Disturbed Christmas in the Bush', in Mrs Patchett Martin, ed, *Under the Gum Tree: Australian 'Bush' Notes*, London: Trischler and Co., 1890, pp 11-22. Praed was not the first to look with amusement at the childlike love lives of Aboriginal people.

¹⁶ Mrs Campbell Praed, *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land*, [1915]; London: Pandora, 1987, p 47.

¹⁷ Praed, *Lady Bridget*, pp 62, 80.

¹⁸ Praed, *Lady Bridget*, pp 30-31, 62, 65.

¹⁹ Praed, *Lady Bridget*, pp 274, 94, 168, 285.

²⁰ Praed, *Mrs Tregaskiss*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1897, pp 4-5, 12, 138.

²¹ Lala Fisher, 'The Sleeping Sickness of Lui the Kanaka' in Lala Fisher, ed, *By Creek and Gully: Stories and Sketches Mostly of Bush Life Told in Prose and Rhyme. By Australian Writers in England*, Colonial Edition, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899, p 259.

²² Harriet Patchett Martin, 'Cross Currents', in Fisher, ed, *By Creek and Gully*, pp 21, 23. An earlier version of this story, entitled 'A Night in a Custom House' appears in Harriet Patchett Martin, ed, *Under the Gum Tree: Australian 'Bush' Notes*, London, Trischler and Co., 1890, pp 79-95.

²³ Not until the publication of *Sugar Heaven* in 1936 by Communist Party member Jean Devanny was a real alternative to hegemonic racial politics broached in novels by Queensland women. *Sugar Heaven* charts the political re-education of the female protagonist, Dulcie Lee, who initially refuses to believe that 'our early settlers used to hunt the abos as they now hunt kangaroos and wallabies'. Set in multi-racial North Queensland, Devanny's novel exposes the way in which the 'psychology of superiority in the Britishers' justifies 'the domination of one race, or one country, by another', and suggests that 'racial antagonism' underpins the capitalist system (Jean Devanny, *Sugar Heaven*, Sydney: Modern Publishers, 1936, p 159. A critical edition of *Sugar Heaven* appeared from Vulgar Press in Melbourne in 2002.)

²⁴ Zora Cross, *Daughters of the Seven Mile: The Love Story of an Australian Woman*, London: Hutchinson and Co., [1924], p 16.

²⁵ Cross, pp 127-128, 137.

²⁶ Mabel Forrest, *The Wild Moth*, London: Cassell, 1924, pp 13-14.

²⁷ Forrest, *The Wild Moth*, pp 15, 191, 198-199.

²⁸ Mabel Forrest, 'The Little Black Man', in Mabel Forrest, *The Green Harper*, Brisbane: Gordon and Gotch, 1915, p 20.

²⁹ Dorothy Cottrell, *Earth Battle*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1930], pp 17, 39, 196-197.

³⁰ Cottrell, *Earth Battle*, pp 132, 24, 22.

³¹ Dorothy Cottrell, *The Night Flowers*, Elsinore, CA: Elsinore Leader-Press, 1930, pp 3, 4, 14.

³² Kay Glasson Taylor, *Pick and the Duffers*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1930, pp 29, 234, 272, 266, 274.

³³ Taylor, pp 234, 29, 272-273.