WRITING NATIVE: THE ABORIGINAL IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL NATIONALISM 1927-1945
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ABSTRACT

WRITING NATIVE: THE ABORIGINAL IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL NATIONALISM 1927-1945

Writing Native explores how Australian interwar nationalist representations of the Aboriginal engaged key political and aesthetic paradigms of the early twentieth century: communism, fascism and modernism. Critics often interpret nationalist engagements with Aboriginal culture as a recent phenomenon, tied to the dismantling of the white Australia policy and the rise of the liberal multicultural state. However, I uncover a longer and more politically varied history. Moving from the far left to the far right, I demonstrate the centrality of representations of the Aboriginal within attempts to imagine alternatives to liberal capitalist modernity in Australia from diverse political perspectives. In doing so, I offer a new way of thinking about the relationship between Australian cultural nationalism and modernist cultures in the first half of the twentieth century. While Australia has often been seen as provincial and disconnected from modernism, I attend to the disavowed global formations that informed Australia’s construction of its own provinciality. I consider the transformations of literary form and political commitment that were wrought by the material conditions of the settler colony, demonstrating some of the ways that the key political ideas and aesthetic formations of the early twentieth century were remade in the context of the Australian settler colony. Composed of three detailed case studies, the dissertation examines communist writer Katharine Susannah Prichard’s writings about Aboriginal labor on outback station properties, the publication
of Xavier Herbert’s classic protest novel *Capricornia* by the ultra-right wing *Publicist* group, and the disavowed modernist aesthetics of the Jindyworobak poetry movement.
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INTRODUCTION

When Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* was published in 1938 reviews from across the political spectrum praised the novel’s passionate indictment of social and racial injustice. Although the novel portrayed a world enormously remote from the southern and coastal cities that were the centre of Australia’s literary culture, critics read the novel as bringing into focus a long hidden but nonetheless crucial truth about Australian history and culture. As one critic from the Melbourne paper, the *Sun*, put it “This reviewer has no firsthand knowledge of northern conditions, but there is no reason to doubt that Herbert writes the bitter, heart breaking truth. If he does, then we as Australians are convicted of the slow murder of a once happy race of people.” Despite, or perhaps because of, the novel’s tone of condemnation, critics saw in *Capricornia* something that was essential, true and in some important way *national*; central to Australia as a nation. The most frequent way of talking about the novel was in terms of its Australianness or, as one critic said, its “full bodied Australianity.” What the *Bulletin* called “a home grown color problem” was seen as integral to Australian history and culture. Reviewers took a certain pride in seeing the injustice towards Aborigines as a specifically Australian problem. According to the Wagga Wagga *Daily Advertiser*, *Capricornia* gave readers something “solid” in providing an account of “Australia’s greatest internal problem, the declining aborigine race and the growing body of half-castes and quadroons.” For the novelist and cultural critic Miles Franklin, *Capricornia* promised to become an “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,”
setting forth “heavier charges against Australia’s treatment of Aborigines than all the investigators and witnesses inside or out of the Official Committee have done to-date.”\footnote{This account of Capricornia’s initial reception is based on the reviews of the novel collected by the Publicist newspaper in its initial promotion of the novel. See “Capricornia: Reviews of the Commonwealth Prize Novel” in the Publicist May 1938:11-16. The story of Capricornia in the Publicist is recounted in detail in chapter two of this dissertation.}

Sixty years later, on the 26\textsuperscript{th} of May 1998, the first National Sorry Day occurred on the anniversary of the release of Bringing them Home, the report from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission into the history of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and the devastating effect of these practices on both individuals and communities. Something of this history was in fact already recorded in Herbert’s novel from sixty years before but Bringing them Home was the context in which this history was officially acknowledged and brought to broad public consciousness. Thick in the air at the National Sorry Day event was the call to the then Prime Minister, John Howard, for an official government apology and his continuing refusal to make this gesture. In the absence of an official apology, Sorry Day and the surrounding “Sorry” movement allowed individuals and community groups to acknowledge and mourn the pain and loss of this history. The movement also allowed settler Australians to admit responsibility and regret for the nation’s past and make a promise that these events would not occur again. An enormous amount of public interest and public affect was generated around these events.\footnote{For example, more than one thousand “Sorry Books” - special note books in which individuals could record a personal apology - were produced in 1998 alone, and over a million apologies were collected in these books.} We might argue that for the people that Gooder and Jacobs have aptly called “the sorry people,” being sorry and being shamed by the past was a new way of relating to Australia’s history and of participating.
in a public national culture. The “Sorry” movement, which is still current, seems to
encapsulate a new form of Australian settler nationalism in which settler guilt and the
desire for absolution are the key affective structures and in which the Aboriginal is
constructed as a figure that has been harmed, but also as a figure that can offer
forgiveness.  

The “Sorry” events and the broader movement for reconciliation between settlers
and indigenous people are usually seen as part of recent a history that includes the 1992
high court ruling that recognized indigenous prior ownership for the first time and
overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* in which Aboriginal people were regarded as
inhabiting but not occupying the land within a legal framework (Mabo vs State of
Queensland No.2). The broader context is that of Australian liberal multiculturalism,
beginning in the 1960s with the dismantling of the white Australia policy and the radical
revisions of Australian attitudes to racial difference. We can argue that the “Sorry”
movement, the reconciliation movement, and the (liberal) discourses around Native Title
are motivated by a late liberal optimism, that Australia will be able to accommodate
multiple, different, and sometimes discordant communities, individuals, and life worlds
within a single socio political-frame and within the one nation. As Elizabeth Povinelli
argues, the discussion around Native Title has never just been about property rights and
legal status, but is also about how the nation relates to its past and its future. As she
describes it, in 1997 politicians responding to the Native Title ruling,

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3 For an account of the “Sorry” movement and its relationship to Australian nationalism
see Gooder and Jacobs “On the Borders of the Unsayable.”
urged the public to look beyond “simple property rights,” beyond their pocket books and beyond the actual conditions of Aboriginal social life. They should consider, instead, the question of national honor, national history, and national shame looming just beyond the economic and social struggles, and recognize the value of ancient indigenous law that would finally free the settler nation from its colonial frontier and confirm its contemporary reputation as a model (post) modern multicultural nation (Cunning 41-2).

Here, as elsewhere, Povinelli demonstrates that contemporary investments in traditional Aboriginal culture, which include the (symbolic) commitment to Native Title, the “Sorry” movement, and also particular forms of commodified Aboriginal culture, especially in the art and tourism industry, are central to the way that contemporary Australia understands its ideal self and positions itself on a global stage.

But the reviews from Capricornia published in 1938 suggest a longer history to the discourses of national shame and redemption that surfaced during the “Sorry” movement and that continue to inform the discussions surrounding Native Title and reconciliation. More broadly, Capricornia’s reviews and indeed the novel itself suggest a longer and far more varied history of nationalist investments in the figure of the Aboriginal and the Aboriginal past. For despite what we might now register as the familiarity of some of the language and affect that critics brought to the novel on its release, Capricornia in fact emerged from a radically different political context than the “Sorry” movement or the reconciliation movement, a context that was in no sense the obvious precursor of liberal multiculturalism. Capricornia was published by the ultra-
right wing Publicist publishing company for whom supporting this Australian novel was part of a broader project of building a white ethnic nationalist movement in Australia. Thus Herbert’s protest novel about the mistreatment of mixed-race populations living in Australia’s Northern Territory was also firmly implicated in the interwar fascist movement, in what now looks like an incongruous overlapping of contradictory political positions. However, in 1938 writing about Aboriginal populations was not necessarily part of a commitment to racial and cultural pluralism, but might rather be about envisioning national autochthony and identity. Reading these two anecdotes side by side, the one from 1938 and the other from 1998, not only suggests that there exists a longer history of nationalist investments in the Aboriginal, but also that the context that surrounded these older investments, and thus the meanings that were then attributed to the Aboriginal and the Aboriginal past, might be significantly different to those that surround and animate contemporary nationalist appropriations of the Aboriginal. The purpose of this dissertation is to uncover that longer history.

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Writing Native is about representations of the Aboriginal in Australian literature from the period between the First and Second World Wars, and the role these representations played in projects of nationalist imagining. To the dominant white Australian nationalism of the period, Aboriginal people were clearly outside the nation, and represented a perceived threat or “Other” to aspirations to a homogenous and “white” Australia. Yet as the perceived bearers of the “spirit of the land”, “timeless” traditions and “deep history,”
they also offered cultural nationalists the possibility of imagining a distinctive Australian national culture. My dissertation argues that while Aboriginal culture and people were systematically excluded from Australian society in this period, representing Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal bodies was central to the way in which white cultural nationalists imagined a distinctive national literature and culture in Australia and attempted to break cultural ties with Britain. In the early twentieth century, representing the Aboriginal made it possible to imagine the white Australian native.

At the same time, these representations troubled precisely the fantasy that white Australians could belong authentically and unproblematically to the Australian place. As well as representing a native national culture the Aboriginal invoked ongoing histories of colonial violence and dispossession and thereby undermined the very claims to legitimate belonging that motivated these projects of cultural appropriation. Thus this dissertation not only uncovers a history of nationalist appropriations of the Aboriginal but also attends to the deep instability in the relationship between representations of the Aboriginal and representations of the nation in the interwar period. The title of this dissertation, *Writing Native*, references the doubled significations of “native” within settler nationalist discourses. “Native” may refer to settler fantasies of identity and belonging and, at the same time, to the indigenous peoples and lifeworlds displaced by the settler. The word “native” thus highlights one of the central paradoxes of settler-colonial identity: the terms in which the settler subject seeks to assert her independence from the metropolitan culture and claim to belong to the settler nation also invoke that other figure from which the settler must differentiate herself, the indigenous, or the Aboriginal. The Aboriginal functions simultaneously as a symbol of authentic belonging...
and as a challenge to the legitimacy of the settler, marking her status as an interloper who lays claim to a land to which she has no right.  

The history I tell revises the dominant account of Australian nationalist investments in the Aboriginal, which interpret these as a relatively recent phenomenon, coterminous with the dismantling of the White Australia policy, the rise of the liberal multicultural state, and the recognition of Aboriginal native title. *Writing Native* attends to a moment that predates the dismantling of the White Australia policy and the recent reconciliation movement and traces a more politically varied history. I focus on the relatively short period between the wars because this is when writers first explicitly linked the figure of the Aboriginal to the nation. There have, of course, been representations of Aboriginal figures and culture by non-Aboriginal people since even before the first settlement at Botany Bay in 1788. But it is in the period from the 1920s to the 1940s that Australian cultural nationalism becomes explicitly invested in the Aboriginal figure, Aboriginal culture, and an Aboriginal past as aesthetic and cultural resources in the construction of a unique national identity.

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4 There have been a number of discussions of the structure of settler nationalism and the settler subject as negotiating the relationship between Aboriginal culture and the culture of the metropolis. For example, Alan Lawson argues that what he calls the “Second World of the settler” is “a place caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity: the originating world of Europe, the imperium, as the source of the Second World’s principle cultural authority; and that other First World, that of the First Nations, whose authority the settler not only effaced and replaced but also desired” (158). See also Stephen Slemon. However, one of the main intentions of both Slemon and Lawson’s discussion of the settler colony is to negotiate a place for the study of the settler colony in postcolonial studies in the academy and this is not my primary aim. For example, Slemon states: “It would seem that the argument being made by Spivak, Bhabha, Sharpe, and others about the ambivalence of literary and other resistances – the argument that resistance texts are necessarily double, necessarily mediated, in their social location – is in fact nothing less than an argument for the emplacement of Second World literary texts within the field of the postcolonial” (147).
This dissertation provides readings of texts by Katharine Susannah Prichard, P.R. Stephensen, Xavier Herbert, and the Jindyworobak poets. In so doing it explores how Australian interwar representations of the Aboriginal engaged three key political and aesthetic paradigms of the early twentieth century: communism, fascism and modernism. Moving from the far left to the far right, I demonstrate the centrality of the Aboriginal within attempts to imagine alternatives to liberal capitalist modernity from diverse political perspectives. By attending to these transnational political and aesthetic contexts, my dissertation also offers a new framework for thinking about the relationship between Australian cultural nationalism and international modernism. While critics have argued that interwar Australian cultural nationalism turns away from the international in order to construct a self-sufficient and isolated national culture, I argue that the figure of the Aboriginal sits at the core of a series of disavowed global contexts. In the interwar period the Aboriginal functions, paradoxically, both as a figure for Australian national isolation and as part of an internationally circulating set of ideas about labor, race, nationalism, nativism and primitivism.

In short, this dissertation does two main things. First, it tells a neglected historical story about the way Australian cultural nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century constructed the Aboriginal as a figure for the nation. In three detailed case studies I show the way that these representational projects were refracted though the contexts of fascism, communism and modernism. Second, in telling this story, this dissertation also offers a new way of thinking about the relationship between Australian nationalism and modernist cultures in the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that we should attend to the disavowed global contexts in Australia’s construction of its own provinciality. In
doing so we not only uncover a broader context for Australian literary nationalism but we also enrich our understanding of global modernist cultures. I attend to the transformations of literary form and political commitment that were wrought by the material conditions of the settler colony. I thus demonstrate some of the ways that the key political ideas and aesthetic formations of the early twentieth century were remade in the context of the Australian settler colony.

For this project I have examined a series of literary texts: two novels, a play, and a series of poems by the Jindyworobak poets. I have also looked at contemporaneous statements attempting to define and situate these literary projects. These statements appear as published documents that take the form of manifestos, pamphlets, and essays. I have also looked at unpublished materials, mainly letters and notebooks, in which writers discuss their literary aims. The desire to establish and define a national literature emerges as a primary concern throughout this material. Therefore I read both fictional and nonfiction texts as self-consciously engaged in the project of inventing a nationalist literary tradition.

I have also tried to reconstruct something of the intellectual and political context within which these writers worked. For chapter one and two I have looked at the small scale political papers on the left and the right that provided the public forum for radical politics in the period. For chapter three I have examined the Jindyworobak’s many small scale publications and I have also looked at the reception of the movement in the broader Australian literary community. As well as examining these local intellectual, political, and aesthetic forums I have tried to lay out the broader intellectual and political traditions and contexts that inform and underlie my primary texts. These may be traditions with
which writers were actively and self-consciously engaged: for example Prichard was actively thinking about the relationship between a Marxist analysis and Australian material conditions throughout her life. But these traditions may also function as a set of underlying, but not wholly self-conscious, presupposition. For example, Rex Ingamells brought a largely unconscious set of ideas about the nature of a national language to his literary nationalist project that have their origins in the history of European nationalist thought.

The remainder of this introduction lays out some of the key debates in which I intervene before providing a summary of my chapters. I begin with a discussion of the shifting political cultures that surrounded nationalist investments in the Aboriginal in the twentieth century, focusing particularly on the way in which liberal multiculturalism has reframed the question of the Aboriginal in Australian settler culture. I suggest that this recent history has obscured the longer and more politically varied history that this dissertation engages. I then move to a discussion of Australian modernism and the social and cultural contexts of the Australian interwar period. I propose that we read interwar Australian insularity and hostility to modernism as itself a disavowed engagement with global modernity. The final section of this introduction discusses the artist Margaret Preston whose writings about Aboriginal art in the interwar period were some of the earliest attempts to link Aboriginal culture to national culture – an impulse that, I argue, runs through all the writers considered in this dissertation. Preston’s writing also demonstrates the way in which the nationalist construction of the Aboriginal placed writers both inside and outside the circuits of global modernism. Preston thus stands, in this introduction, as a meta-example of the awkward and often disavowed affiliations
between Australian cultural nationalism and global modernism that pertained in this period.

**Indigenous Difference Inside and Outside Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism in Australia developed as the official policy mainly in response to large scale immigration programs after the Second World War and it has been able to accommodate Aboriginal difference up to a point. However, its ideologies have had difficulty in responding to Aboriginal claims based on colonial dispossession and prior sovereignty. For while multiculturalism has had some success in accommodating the demands of different racial and cultural groupings in Australia, particularly those made by immigrants, the demands arising from the histories of colonial dispossession raise a set of questions that it is not equipped to answer. These include the questions of how to incorporate property rights and legal practices that precede European settlement, and how to recognize continuing cultural differences, within a modern nation state governed by the rule of law and which recognizes the equality of all its citizens. Indeed, while the model for community that underpins the liberal democratic nation state involves indivisible sovereignty and uniform political rights for all citizens, modern Aboriginal

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5 In the first half of the twentieth century a series of strict immigration restrictions – referred to collectively as the White Australia Policy – prohibited non Anglo immigration to Australia. The post Second World War waves of immigration which have included large numbers of Southern European and East and Southeast Asian immigrants have changed the ethnic and cultural makeup of the Australian population and have, arguably, been accompanied by significant changes in both popular and official attitudes to racial and cultural difference in Australia. On the history of the White Australian policy see Gwenda Tavan’s *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia*. 

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politics may lay claim to the different political and legal status of indigenous communities (Moran “As Australia Decolonizes”).

Scholars in indigenous studies have argued that the dominant frameworks for accounting for cultural difference and historical injury within liberal multiculturalism in fact obscure the dispossession of land that is the underlying basis of the settler colonial society. For example, Jodi Byrd argues that under liberal multiculturalism various excluded or marginalized identity positions, based in race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on compete for redress and inclusion within the hegemonic structures of power. But when indigeneity is reduced to one oppressed identity among others, the question of originary dispossession is foreclosed. Speaking out of the context of the United States about the tendency to think about Indian identity in terms of race, Byrd argues that “when the remediation of the colonization of American Indians is framed through discourses of racialization that can be redressed by further inclusion into the nation-state, there is a significant failure to grapple with the fact that such discourses further reinscribe the original colonial injury (xxiii).

Nonetheless, as several critics have argued, contemporary Australia nationalism often sees its capacity to respond to the political demands of indigenous people and to incorporate a traditional Aboriginal presence within the modern nation as testament to its success and maturity. For example, Anthony Moran argues that while “historically ... nationalism excluded Aboriginality and all other non-white minorities ... a new form of nationalism is evident in public events such as the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics (2000) which promotes a multicultural Australia, with Aboriginality and Aboriginal traditions afforded a special place” (“Psychodynamics 668). Similarly,
Elizabeth Povinelli argues that multiculturalism in contemporary Australian society is represented as “a political testament to the nation’s past misdeeds and its recovered good intentions” (Cunning 18). Within this framework, state recognition of traditional indigenous customs and land rights comes to represent a redemption of the nation’s shameful past, and the triumph of the liberal multicultural state to enable the rational coexistence of different and competing cultural lifeworlds.

And yet I would argue that the questions that are raised around the relationship between indigenous and settler Australians in contemporary Australian society are not questions that are limited to the context of late liberalism and the struggles of multiculturalism. The reconciliation movement brings together a series of ongoing traumas to do with the history of colonial dispossession that have existed within settler nationalist discourse from its moment of inception. Colonial dispossession is not simply a problem for liberal multiculturalism. It is, arguably, the very foundation of settler nationalist discourse.

Thus this dissertation attends to an earlier moment in Australian settler nationalist representations of the Aboriginal. I focus on a set of literary and cultural texts and debates from the interwar period that turned to the Aboriginal as the core of Australia nationalism. In so doing, I shift the primary site of enquiry away from state and legal discourses to literary representations and debates. The official policies on Aboriginal people in the interwar period saw Aboriginal difference as a problem for the nation and aimed, in various ways, to manage, exclude, or assimilate the Aboriginal population.6

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However, within literary nationalist debates, which were preoccupied with defining a uniquely Australian national culture and identity, the Aboriginal was constructed as a figure for the nation. The earliest explicitly nationalist appropriations of the Aboriginal in Australia took place within literary nationalism.

The texts I read encode the emergence of an unstable nationalist investment in the figure of the Aboriginal that has continued into the present and in this sense the dissertation might be read as a prehistory of the contemporary moment. Nonetheless, the political traditions that framed these representations differed significantly from contemporary liberal multiculturalism. Early nationalist representations of the Aboriginal emerged from the political margins, in conversation with communism and fascism. These political contexts are not the obvious predecessors of state sponsored liberal multiculturalism. Rather they were political traditions that pitched themselves in opposition to the liberal state. Thus, I argue that while nationalist investments in the Aboriginal mean something new in the contexts of late liberalism and multiculturalism, they do no begin from this moment. I suggest that rather than representing a “new form of nationalism,” as Andrew Lattas has put it (“Aborigines” 50), the contemporary appropriation of Aboriginality and Aboriginal traditions in fact represents the translation of an older form of nationalist discourse into the frameworks of late liberal capitalist modernity.

The questions and preoccupations that these radical interwar political frameworks brought to the Aboriginal were quite different from those that have gained priority within the liberal framework. Within the communist discourses, explored in chapter one, the question of labor takes priority. Prichard’s writing reflects on the failures of the
Australian left to account for the autonomous economic status of indigenous workers. On the extreme right, explored in chapter two, the history of Aboriginal Australia is appropriated in service of white ethnic nationalism. Rather than being made to represent racial or cultural difference, here the Aboriginal is placed at the core of a set of fantasies about white national autochthony. Chapter three turns away from explicitly political discourses in order to explore the Jindyworobak poetry movement in the context of modernism. While the terms with which the Jindyworobaks invoked the Aboriginal were not explicitly political, they nonetheless attached to the Aboriginal a set of fantasies about a unique, homogenous, and self-identical national literary identity.

The primary aims of this project are to trace the emergence of a nationalist investment in the Aboriginal in the early twentieth century and to uncover a neglected history of non-liberal engagements with the Aboriginal. And yet in attending to this history we also learn something about the political frameworks themselves and the way that they were refracted through nationalist debates in Australia. Despite the apparent divergence between communism and fascism, their common interest in the Aboriginal reveals certain continuities between them. As several critics have argued, despite the common-sense view that communism and fascism represent the opposite extremes of a political spectrum, they in fact share certain intellectual and political terrain: both respond to what they see as liberalism’s dehumanizing and alienating abstraction of the individual from the community. Michael North summarizes:

The attack on industrial capitalism and liberal democracy as atomizing, demeaning, and dehumanizing, and the corresponding search for an organic
system of social relations are, as Raymond Williams has shown common “both in this kind of conservative thinking and in Marxist thinking: The common enemy (or, if it is preferred the common defender of the true faith) is Liberalism”

(*Political Aesthetic* 5)

In interwar Australia radical politics on both the left and the right is animated by the idea that because of its geographical isolation Australia might inhabit a different political fate to that observed when looking towards Europe and the centre of the British Empire. In various ways, Australian nationalists at the radical edges of politics argued that Australia could escape the fate of European modernity and all it entailed – war, capitalism, alienation, economic instability and decline. The figure of the Aboriginal sits at the core of these fantasies about Australian geographic, social and political isolation and self-sufficiency.

**Australian Modernism and Australian Provincialism**

This section explores in more depth the turn to isolation and provinciality in Australian literature and culture between the wars, and argues that this self conscious provincialism constituted an implicit response to and theorization of modernism and modernity. The writers I discuss in this dissertation are all, in various ways, invested in the production of Australian provinciality. In recent work on Australian modernism that attempts to situate Australian modernism in a global field, the desire to open up the study of Australia in the twentieth century to global trends and debates is achieved through a focus on diasporic
figures and cosmopolitan contexts. However, I argue that this approach overlooks the deep investments in isolation and provinciality that were infused throughout Australian interwar culture. I thus suggest another approach in which we read constructions of Australian provinciality as itself a mode of orientation towards the world that inscribes a response to global modernity, though in terms that are often saturated with disavowal.

Critics often read Australian literature between the wars as manifesting an “inward turn,” away from an internationally oriented sensibility and towards a conservative and consolidating set of nationalist preoccupations. For example, Peter Pierce argues that after the First World War “Fiction ... turned inward, to the remote parts of the continent, and backwards in time, to that pioneering era in which proto-national values supposedly were formed” (143). We can add to this description the increasing preoccupation during the interwar period with defining what Australian literature was and should be. The period saw not only a glut of literature (poems, novels, and plays) that took the Australian nation as its subject, but also a series of tracts, manifestos, and pamphlets that attempted to lay out the conditions for an Australian national literature independent and distinct from other literatures. These writings tended to be directed at a local Australian audience and often concerned themselves with outlining the conditions for a self-sufficient literary community.⁷

The inward-looking nationalism of interwar Australian literature was mirrored in the broader culture, which was dominated, both culturally and politically, by a conservative and aggressively maintained parochialism (Macintyre, Oxford History;

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⁷ In this dissertation Stephensen’s *Foundations of Culture in Australia* discussed in chapter two and Ingamells’ *Conditional Culture* discussed in chapter three are the two exemplary examples of this kind of writing.
Brett). As historian Stuart Macintyre comments, “In politics, as in art and literature, Australia became a haven from the modern frenzy. The universities, the galleries and the libraries remained quite removed from the stirrings of awareness among a new generation of intellectuals – indeed they saw themselves as defending the existing order against the scribblers” (*Oxford History* 227). The loudest pundits of culture in Australia were aggressively anti-modernist and saw their role as defending a tradition of realism in literature and the visual arts against the influence of modern aesthetic movements, which they saw as both symptom and reflection of the chaos of modernity and war. At the core of this was the belief that realism was a mode of expression naturally continuous with an organic and pastorally oriented national community. Modernism, on the other hand, was cosmopolitan, industrial and carried with it all the baggage of European civilization in decline. To quote the landscape painter Julian Ashcroft, modernism was the “scum rising to the surface of the melting pot as a result of the turmoil caused by war” (quoted in Maicntyre, *Oxford History* 227).  

The overt commitment to national insularity which dominates Australian interwar culture can make it difficult to situate Australian literature in relation to transnational aesthetic contexts and debates. The contexts of modernism and the international avant-garde seem to be either violently excluded from Australian culture, or else hopelessly belated, arriving in Australia evacuated of their initial radical potential and appearing in Australian art and literature in the form superficial stylizations. This, for example, is the

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8 For a detailed account of conservative Australian responses to modernism see John Williams *A Quarantined Culture*. 
framework that structures Bernard Smith’s classic history of Australian painting as a history of Australian responses to British art.\(^9\)

Recent work on Australian modernism has attempted to revise accounts of Australian culture as isolated, conservative, derivative, and caught in an inevitable and perpetual time-lag.\(^10\) The editors of the recent collection *Impact of the Modern* aim to situate Australia “not only as an import culture, but also as a vital and generating centre of international cultural innovation” (xvii), in order “to contribute to a more outward looking, international phase in Australian studies” which looks beyond the nation “as the principle organizing category” towards, “new models of decentered global flows and networks characteristic of such fields as the new imperial history, transnational history and globalization studies’(xiii). And yet, as Tanya Dalziell points out, “the nation is not something that can be easily sidestepped when speaking about ‘the modern’ in Australia” (254). Indeed what this kind of counter-history ignores is the passion and persistence with which Australian writers, from across the political spectrum, and from within various aesthetic traditions, claimed geographic and cultural isolation as the defining feature of Australian history and experience.

\(^9\) Debates about modernism in interwar Australia have focused on the visual arts, both at the time and in subsequent interpretation, hence the attention to the visual arts in this introduction. Another influential interpretation of Australian modernism as a belated and superficial response to European modernism is Humphrey McQueen’s *Black Swan of Trespass*. As Tim Rowse has argued, McQueen’s account reads much of Australian modernism, prior to and outside of Margaret Preston, as “surface modernism” (29), as “mere echoes ... of the results of some Europeans’ or Americans’ engagements with the questions of modern life” (Rowse, “Modernism” 29).

\(^10\) For example Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly’s (eds.) *Impact of the Modern*; Ann Vickery’s *Stressing the Modern*; Philip Goad, and Andrew McNamara’s (eds.) *Modern Times*. 
But can we take Australian discourses of insularity at face value, as though these claims to cultural independence, geographic singularity and protected isolation reflect actual historical, cultural, and indeed geographical conditions? J.S. McDonald’s 1931 essay on the landscape artist Arthur Streeton provides an almost comical example of the construction of Australian isolation and provinciality by the conservative anti-modernist establishment. McDonald was the influential director of the National Gallery of Victoria and an outspoken polemicist against modernism. Here he describes Streeton’s panoramic landscape paintings as presenting an Australian alternative to modernity:

To me they point to the way that life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories. But we have to be like the rest of the world, feeling out of it if we cannot blow as many get-to-work whistles, punch as many bundy-clocks, and show as much smoke and squalor as places that cannot escape such a curse.

I am for the Streetonian view, for his pictures to me are like the descriptions of Australia I should expect from Theocritus set to music by Mozart...

If we so choose we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility.

Let others if they are bent upon it mass produce themselves into robotry; thinking and looking like mechanical monkeys chained to organs whose tunes are furnished by rivetting machines.

We do not need to do these things. We have the pastoral land, and if we do
not realize it sufficiently well, we have Streeton’s pictures to stress the
miraculousness of it. That is it; ours is the world’s Pastoral and all it implies of
herds and flocks and vines and hives, orchards, olives and grain. (“Arthur
Streeton” 97)

McDonald’s anti-modernist polemic contains within it a defense of Australian
provinciality. McDonald mocks the desire to keep up with “the rest of the world,”
suggesting that in its isolation Australia has been granted an elect fortune: to bypass
modernization, standardization and mass production. Other places, he claims “cannot
escape such a curse.” His claim that “we have the pastoral land” invokes a real historical
belief that Australia could and indeed should base its economy in agriculture, and that its
main role was as an agricultural outpost of the British Empire (Macintyre, Oxford
History). But this reflection on contemporary conservative ideology is extended to a more
extreme claim about Australia’s potential escape from modernity. Indeed the central
thrust of McDonald’s pastoral sensibility is not towards describing Australia’s particular
place in a world economy, but rather towards fantasizing its escape from world history.
McDonald moves between descriptions of modern industry and descriptions of a classical
aesthetic; between the specter of racial threat represented by the mechanical monkey and
the fantasy of a pure Arian racial line; between the factory and the bundy clock, and
“hives, orchards, olives, and grain.” In this he designates for Australia the time of myth
rather than the time of world history and all that is here associated with it:
modernization, standardization and racial threat.
And yet even this most hyperbolic construction of Australia’s escape from modernity cannot help but perform a certain theorization of modernism and modernity. While modernism is constructed as Australia’s “Other” it nonetheless can only be expelled from the Australian scene by being obsessively defined and discussed. McDonald associates modernity with the alienated labor of the factory, with urban chaos, and with the ascendancy of the machine over the individual. Modern artistic expression is represented in the image of a mechanical monkey chained to an organ, an image that invokes both the specter of Africa and the merging of human and machine. Thus while the explicit and intended work of the anti-modernist polemic is to articulate and ensure Australia’s escape from modernity it also necessarily carries, nested within it, a theorization of modernism and modernity.

In this dissertation I argue that the paradoxical interdependence of antimodernism and modernism in interwar Australian culture suggests another model for thinking about Australian literature’s global situation. Rather than searching hopefully for figures and aesthetic practices that transcend the national or escape the provincial, we might instead look for the disavowed global contexts that are in fact contained within Australia’s construction of its own provinciality. We can think, then, about the relationship between the provincial and the transnational not as an opposition but as a paradox. Identifying with the provincial conceives of itself as a way of turning away from the world and escaping world history. At the same time, provinciality is also a mode of orientation towards the world, a way of positioning oneself, or being positioned, in relation to the centre. As such it maps the world in a certain way, in terms of centers and peripheries, distance and proximity. Provinciality then is not a timeless and ahistorical phenomenon,
or a geographical effect of the “tyranny of distance” (Blainey). Rather it is produced by Australian writers and artists as a historically contingent response to modernity and world events.

**Margaret Preston’s Aboriginal Modernism, or “Art is not Cosmopolitan”**

For the writers that I consider, the production of Australian isolation and identity depended, to a large extent, on the construction of the Aboriginal as a figure for the particular, the autochthonous and the self identical. The nationalist appropriation of the Aboriginal positions Australian cultural nationalism both inside and outside of the circuits of global modernism. For the Aboriginal served as a figure for an uncontaminated local culture and at the same times as part of a set of internationally circulating ideas to do with nativism, primitivism, race, labor and nation. The paradoxical construction of the Aboriginal as both a local and a global figure is well illustrated in the writing of the celebrated interwar Australian artist, Margaret Preston, who was perhaps the first to explicitly link the Aboriginal to an Australian national culture. In this section I examine some of Preston’s writings on the Aboriginal and Australian art. These writings serve as a meta-example of the awkward and often disavowed relationship between the Aboriginal as constructed by Australian cultural nationalism and global modernism.

Preston was, arguably, the first non-indigenous artist to use the palette and forms of indigenous Australian art. Her engagement with indigenous art allowed her to move towards an increasingly nonrepresentational and “modern” style and Preston has at times
been considered one of the first truly “modern” Australian artists. Nonetheless the style and directing concerns of her art sit awkwardly with some of our received ideas about modernism. While her engagement with Aboriginal art, at times, put her in conversation with modernist primitivism, she did not usually see herself as participating in international modernism. Rather, in her writings for magazines including “Art and Australia” and “The Home” she describes herself as creating a domestic art in order to ground a provincial, national identity.

In an essay on Australian painting written in 1925, “the Indigenous Art of Australia,” Preston lays out a claim for Aboriginal visual culture as the basis of an Australian national art:

In wishing to rid myself of the mannerisms of a country other than my own I have gone to the art of a people who have never seen or known anything different from themselves, and were accustomed always to use the same symbols to express themselves. These are the Australian aboriginals, and it is only from the art of such a people in any land that a national art can spring. (60)

Preston’s words reflect the persistent anxiety of many Australian artists and writers that Australian culture was an inferior, though ultimately indistinguishable, subset of British culture. Preston turns to Aboriginal art precisely because it is not British and will, she hopes, rid her of her British cultural inheritance. Preston argues that the “Australian aboriginals” constitute the basis of an authentic nationalist tradition. Later in the same

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11 This is the argument Humphrey McQueen made in The Black Swan of Trespass.
essay she states “art is not cosmopolitan” (64). The Aboriginal, then, is for Preston the basis of a culturally pure national Australian art and an alternative to the diluting cosmopolitanism of European derived Australian styles.

But Preston in fact arrives at the Aboriginal through European art and European modernism. Like most Australian artists ambitious in their trade Preston studied in Europe, from 1904 to 1906 and then again from 1912 to 1916. In the same essay she defends her use of Aboriginal patterns and styles by recourse to the cultural authority of the European modernist and European primitivism:

Would France be now at the head of all nations in art if her artists and craftsmen had not given her fresh stimulus from time to time by benefitting from the art of her native colonies, and not only her own colonies, but by borrowing from the colonies of other countries?
Java has been drained to provide fresh ideas for the craftsmen of the great nations. The indigenous art of Cochin China has given modern sculpture in France a new life. Germany has a national peasant craft, her agrarian policy keeping this always for her. These people have always been the base of German art, but even with such an asset, the art papers of Germany are full of illustrations of the native crafts of Central Africa, showing the need of fresh stimulus and a return to simple symbols. In the beginning was the rough idol crudely carved from wood by the negroes of the Upper Nile centuries ago, and in the end the limpid, smooth, perfect sculpture of the Greeks. So why be scornful of our heritage? (60)
In stark contrast to her discussion of the non-cosmopolitan basis of Australian art, Preston here situates her own work within a network of global borrowing and appropriation. In this context the Aboriginal is not a figure for the national and the particular. Rather, the Aboriginal joins the indistinct and global category of the primitive: the German peasant, the central African native, and the negro of the Upper Nile. The primitive here is not primarily a nationalist category, but rather an aesthetic resource for the global western world: modern sculpture in France is enlivened by the indigenous art of Cochin China, and while German art does draw on its own peasant tradition it also imbibes the “native crafts” of Central Africa.

Nonetheless, Preston’s aesthetic style and the use she proposes for Aboriginal art places the Australian Aboriginal in a definitively localized space. Preston situates her own Aboriginal art in the domestic sphere, arguing that art in its beginning must come from “the home and domestic art” (64). Stating that “the preconceived ideas generated from schools of art must be placed aside” (61), she presents the reader with a number of examples of a local domestic art that would arise directly from an engagement with Aboriginal design. These include a pair of “jolly mats that are gay and original” made by weaving a West Queensland shield design with raffia into two black mohair house mats (61), designs for a handkerchief armlet, furniture coverings, woven baskets, book covers, bookplates and an array of other objects for “domestic decoration” (61). Thus while the essay situates Australian art in relation to a European avant-garde it is not in fact directed towards the formation of an Australian avant-garde, or even addressed to a professionalized artist class. Rather it proposes an amateur culture of art, that begins in the domestic suburban home. Preston’s prose is instructional, informing the reader how
they might decorate their own houses to suggest an “Australian atmosphere” (62). It points to colours and specific designs, and emphasizes the accessibility and simplicity of Aboriginal design. Preston proposes that Australian art could find its beginning in “the simple things in life” (64), in an accessible amateurism in the local suburban home. In this way the construction of Aboriginal “isolation” paves the way for an elaboration of Australian local culture and provinciality.

What might seem to be the contradiction between Preston’s engagement with European high modernism and her commitment to local domestic arts demonstrates the way that modernism is remade in the settler-colonial context, a remaking which in many ways shows up and undoes some of the critical commonplaces about modernism. For example, Michael North’s convincing argument that for Stein and Picasso and the European and American avant-garde more generally an identification with “Africa” provided a way to “disidentify with countries and families whose traditions seemed stifling” (*Dialect* 278) makes no sense in Australia where primitivism paves the way not to an exclusive, bohemian, anti-traditionalism, but rather to a nationally identified, locally oriented culture. Further, Preston’s primitivism does not lead to the radical destabilization of representational conventions, often seen to result from the introduction of African art and design into western art. Rather, it is invested in localizing and enlivening a culture of amateur, domestic design.

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12 A similar point is made by Catriona Moore, who argues that “in the Dominions, modern settler-artists like Preston ... appropriated Indigenous cultures through bourgeois, feminist tropes, associated with provincial, suburban experience.’ And that ‘at the very least regional modernisms require a more democratic, broadly contextualized approach that goes beyond the forlorn search for avant-guard practices” (62).
But there is also a more profound contradiction in Preston’s writing about Aboriginal art between her attempt to locate Australian art within the field of European modernism on the one hand and on the other to claim that Australian national art could be totally self identical. Furthermore, her construction of Aboriginal culture as wholly isolated, as a “people who have never seen or known anything different from themselves,” overlooks the historical conditions of her own interests in Aboriginal culture and design, a history that is structured by colonialism and thus implies an already hybridized Aboriginal culture existing within the conditions of modernity. These contradictions articulate the double work that the Aboriginal is asked to do in Australian cultural production. The Aboriginal is implicitly seen as part of a global conglomerate of primitive and colonized people, but is also claimed as a figure for Australian geographic isolation and cultural purity. The Aboriginal must be entirely specific, and utterly untouched by “foreign” influence, but also completely translatable, the thing that will become a universalizable sign for Australia in the broad cultural field. For Preston, the Aboriginal must both signify local specificity, and at the same time introduce Australia to the world.\footnote{We might argue, further, that Preston projects onto the Aboriginal figure what she cannot claim for herself or for the Australian artist more generally; a singular relationship to the Australian place. The Aboriginal as the figure for Australian art emerges as a symptom of the disavowed cosmopolitanism of the Australian artist, and the Aboriginal artist becomes something like an alter-ego for the white Australian artist, a figure onto whom she can project what she cannot in good faith claim for herself: the experience of geographic isolation, a singular and uncontaminated relationship to the Australian place.}
Chapter Outlines

Chapter one, “Different Workers,” discusses the communist novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard’s writings about Aboriginal labor on remote outback station properties. The chapter focuses her two most important fictional texts about Aboriginal Australia, *Brumby Innes*, a play, and *Coonardoo*, a novel. Drawing on insights from subaltern studies about the difficulty of representing the non-modern indigenous subject, I show that Prichard’s Marxist commitments were both mediated and challenged by the figure of the laboring indigene. Rather than reproducing the orthodox political solutions that she advocated elsewhere, her outback writings comprise meditations on silence, inarticulacy, and rage. The chapter attends to a series of contexts that Prichard responds to in her fictional writing. These include the debates about race and labor in the Communist Party of Australia and the emergence of an explicit position on Aboriginal Australia; the economy of the outback station and the cross cultural dynamics of the exchange of rations for labor; and Prichard’s own ambivalent attempt to locate Australian communism in relation to Australian radical nationalism. I argue that Prichard’s fiction works to expose the limits of the Australian left’s capacity to respond adequately to the conditions of Aboriginal labor and Aboriginal suffering. Prichard’s fiction fails itself, however, to come up with a language that could represent Aboriginal interests. Nonetheless, her texts stage a series of problematics: about translation and mistranslation across cultural-economic transactions; about the stress literary forms and political paradigms undergo when confronted with the material and historical conditions of the Australian settler
colony; and about what it means to be politically committed to representing the Aboriginal.

Turning from the left to the overlooked history of the Aboriginal invoked by the far right, my second chapter, “White Aborigines,” discusses Xavier Herbert’s anti-racist protest novel *Capricornia* and the story of its publication by the ultra-right wing *Publicist* group. In this chapter I unpack the unlikely logic by which a deep identification with the Aboriginal and the struggle for Aboriginal rights coexisted with an emergent fascist nationalism, and indeed became the core of a set of fantasies about white Australian ethnicity and the great Australian novel. The chapter begins with the writings of P.R. Stephensen, Herbert’s publisher, an activist for Aboriginal rights, and also the editor and main pundit for the fascist sympathizing *Publicist* newspaper. I unravel the entwined relationship between Stephensen’s investments in Aboriginal politics and his desire for a white Australian ethnicity outside of a European heritage, demonstrating the work Herbert’s *Capricornia* did to negotiate these two unstable investments. I then turn to the novel itself, which, I argue, operates as a crossing point for various discordant inscriptions of Australian space and nation. Structurally and thematically, *Capricornia* stages the white man’s search for an Aboriginal son who would provide him with retrospective access to a legitimating and autochthonous Aboriginal genealogy, although one that is paradoxically “fathered” by the white man. *Capricornia* thus places the Aboriginal at the centre of a fantasy of white Australian ethnicity and belonging. However, the novel’s geographic imagination displaces this insular, nationalizing genealogy. *Capricornia* performs a critical remapping of Australia’s north that dislodges national space for the more porous and indeterminate lines of region, tracing a series of
economic, geographic and affective transactions from Australia’s north coast to the islands of Southeast Asia and beyond. Thus while the Publicist made an impassioned identification with Australian spatial experience the basis for a vision of white Australian ethnicity, Capricornia undermines the apparent solidity and identity of national space.

Chapter three, “Local Moderns,” turns to the interactions between literary nationalism and modernist form in an account of the Jindyworobaks, a nationalist poetry movement that argued that Aboriginal language and spiritual traditions should form the basis of a national poetic language and style. The Jindyworobaks are usually considered as working outside of the circuits of both global and Australian modernism. However, I situate the Jindyworobaks in relation to modernist projects of localization in the 1930s, considering how localism and nativism are complicated and remade by the historical situation of the Australian settler colony. The Jindyworobaks’ “provincial modernism,” I argue, provides one of the earliest articulations of a model of the world as a conglomerate of de-centered local cultures, in contrast to an older imperial model of the world as organized around centre and periphery, or metropolis and dominion. The Jindyworobaks’ efforts to imagine and embody a native settler culture led them directly to an appropriation of the Aboriginal figure which becomes, in their oeuvre, an emblem for a locally oriented, native culture. Nonetheless, in its literary manifestation the Aboriginal signified unpredictably and in excess of its designated role. In the poetry of Rex Ingamells, founder of the Jindyworobak movement, the Aboriginal cannot simply signify nationalist belonging, but rather carries an accusation against both the settler culture and the very project of the Jindyworobak group. Thus the project of localization for the Jindyworobaks is one riven by failure and ambivalence.
Chapter One

Different Workers: Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Station Writings

In 1926 Australian novelist and communist Katharine Susannah Prichard travelled to Turee Station in the Kimberley region of North West Western Australia. A journey into a remote landscape, which lay about two thousand kilometers north of Perth where she spent most of her life, the trip took her to the end of the railway line at Meekathara and then some four hundred miles further by truck. The three months she spent living in the region provided the basis for the novel Coonardoo, a play Brumby Innes, and two short stories. In this body of work, which I am calling her station writings, Prichard tried to represent something of the life and the labor of the outback station, a world where Aborigines and settlers lived and worked together. Prichard’s writings from this period are some of the earliest attempts to try to represent the racial and cultural dynamics of the world of the outback station and the conditions of Aboriginal labor.

This chapter is about Prichard’s representation of Aboriginal subjectivity and society in the context of the outback station economy in Coonardoo and Brumby Innes, the two most important texts to come from her time at Turree Station. I argue that in these writings Prichard works to expose the failures of the Australian left to account for the conditions of Aboriginal labor, revealing the gap between the conditions of life lived on the outback station and the assumptions of left political discourse and political analysis in Australia in the 1920s. While Prichard’s writing exposes the limits of the political language of the contemporary left, it still fails itself to come up with an alternative

14 For a biographical account of this journey see Ric Throssell Wild weeds and Windflowers (1982).
language that would speak to the conditions of Aboriginal labor. Prichard’s Aboriginal characters, unlike the white characters of her other novels, are never granted political agency. In *Brumby Innes* the gap in political discourse is presented as a challenge that the white activist must answer. In *Coonardoo*, Prichard gives us cultural relativism in the place of politics and leaves us with a representation of Aboriginal cultural authenticity that exists outside of the space of politics and history.

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Prichard’s political commitments are laced through her writing. From the formation of the West Australian branch of the communist party in 1922 until her death in 1969 Prichard was a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). As many critics have noted, her commitments to the party were steadfast and unwavering, and she saw her writing as an active contribution to the struggle (Buckridge, Ellis, Lever). After 1933, when she travelled to the Soviet Union, Prichard became increasingly faithful to socialist realist doctrine, arguably to the detriment of the literary and aesthetic quality of her work. However in the 1920s and early 1930s, the period of her trip to Turee station, Soviet aesthetic debates were not widely available in Australia (Buckridge, Lever). In her early work, Prichard, like most Australian writers at the time, wrote in the absence of any concrete sense of a Soviet cultural program for writers. Yet, as Buckridge has argued, the dynamics of political commitment in her earlier writing are no less serious for this, although they are perhaps less consistent. Prichard’s early novels, *The Pioneers, Black*
Opal, Working Bullocks, Coonardoo, and Haxby’s Circus are all in some sense about labor in Australia.

In an influential essay on Working Bullocks, Pat Buckridge argues that the novel can be read as “something of an unguided experiment in committed literature, revealing in sharp relief the provisional strategies and makeshift solutions with which political purpose seeks to constrain the indeterminacy of writing” (86). This sensitive assessment might form a starting point for readings of any of Prichard’s early novels which can all be read as nondeterministic attempts to think through the political role of literary activity and the politics of literary style. There are a number of questions that Prichard’s writings seem to pose. The first is the question of form and the perceived political implications and efficacies of particular formal modes; the second is how to form a socialist commitment in response to Australian material conditions; the third, where the committed communist writers should locate herself in relation to a left wing nationalist tradition that made claims to a certain kind of vernacular socialism.

These questions take on particular difficulty in Prichard’s writings about Aboriginal Australians: Coonardoo (1929), Brumby Innes (1927), and the two stories “The Cooboo” and “Happiness,” both written in 1927 and published in 1932. The writings were all produced before the Communist Party of Australia came up with its first official position on Aboriginal Australia in 1931. Thus, these writings constitute some of the earliest attempts by a communist to think about what a political commitment to

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15 “The Cooboo” and “Happiness” were first published in Prichard’s Kiss on the Lips and Other Stories (1932). Prichard also wrote four other short stories about Aboriginal Australia. However, these stories were written and published significantly later and so fall outside of the historical moment I am interested in here. All of Prichard’s Aboriginal stories are reproduced in Katharine Susannah Prichard: Stories, Journalism and Essays.
Aboriginal Australia might look like. Effectively, Prichard faced a set of theoretical difficulties that occupy the core of Marxist discourse to do with formulating where non-modern populations, agrarian, peasant, aboriginal, sit within a Marxist framework and within a Marxist understanding of social transformation.

Marx is often understood as presenting a unilinear account of historic transition where non-modern and non-western populations are inevitably incorporated into capitalism through colonialism and the world market.\(^\text{16}\) There is a question then about whether, within a Marxist framework, it is possible to think about the fate of the peasant or the aboriginal as something other than destroyed and superseded by capitalist development and whether it is possible to think about peasant and aboriginal populations as historical agents. Marx argued, famously, that the contradictions of industrial capitalism would give rise to its own overcoming, that the working class would be “trained, united and organized by the very mechanisms of the capitalist process of production” (Marx, *Capital* 929). But the question of whether resistant and revolutionary political energies might emerge at the margins of capitalism, and whether it was possible to conceive of and mobilize a politically radical peasant or aboriginal population

\(^{16}\) For example, from “Manifesto of the Communist Party”:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Tucker 477)
remained relatively un-theorized. Recent work on Marx by Kevin Anderson has brought to light a late Marx whose understanding of historic change and political resistance was far more complex and multilinear than the Marx of the communist manifesto. However, the writings that Anderson focuses on are relatively obscure, and this was not the Marx that informed communist discourse in Australia in the 1920s. The question of where non-modern populations sat in relation to capitalist modernity and the energies of revolution was one with which early communists in Australia who looked to the Aboriginal had to reckon.

In writing about Aboriginal labor, Prichard faced two broad problems of representation. Borrowing from Gayatri Spivak, we can characterize these in terms of the two different but connected senses of the word “representation”: “speaking for” or political proxy on the one hand and representation as mimesis on the other (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 276). In terms of speaking for the challenge was to recognize and give an account of Aboriginal political interests. Prichard was writing in a context where Aboriginal labor relationships were unregulated, inconsistent and idiosyncratic, and there

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17 Toward the end of his life Marx himself would take on these questions, and in certain writings like the letter to the Russian activist, Vera Zasulich, in 1881 about the fate of the Russian commune, he revised the idea of single and inevitable line of modernization, where every society must pass through all stages of production in succession. In this important letter Marx says that the trajectory of capitalist historical development laid out in Capital Vol. I should be understood as restricted to Western Europe. Arguing that the Russian peasant commune was “the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia,” Marx opens up the possibility of pre-modern social forms themselves giving rise to a different version of modernity (Letter to Vera Zasulich).

18 In “Can the Subaltern Speak” Spivak argues for the necessity of holding onto the irreducible discontinuity between these two senses of representation (vertreten and darstellen), claiming that to collapse these terms is to hold onto the fantasy of an undivided subject whose “desire and interest coincide” (276) and who might unproblematically speak and act for themselves. Collapsing these terms obfuscates the need for political representation and also the inherent inaccessibility of the subaltern subject to the western intellectual.
was little established political discourse on Aboriginal labor and Aboriginal rights, either from the communist party or from the left more generally. Prichard’s writings both stage and are themselves evidence of the gap between the political discourses of the left and the conditions of Aboriginal labor. In terms of mimesis, Prichard struggled with how to represent traditional Aboriginal subjectivity and society within a language and a set of generic forms that were in many ways foreign to these subjects. Prichard’s station writings stretch their own generic boundaries (the play, the short story, the novel). Moving between standard English, a pidgin language, and the Aboriginal language of the region, between drama and ethnographic display, and between novelistic and anthropological description, Prichard’s writing pushes beyond a set of generic and linguistic limits in an attempt to mimetically encompass its subject.

In her broader oeuvre Prichard often commented on the documentary capacity of literature and the inherent political efficacy of realism, as if to represent the conditions of labor mimetically was necessarily also to speak in the interest of the worker. However in her writing about Aboriginal labor, a gap opens up between literary and political representation that undermines this easy correlation of literature and propaganda. In this sense what might be read as a failure of political imagination can also be read as throwing into relief what Spivak sees as the irreducible discontinuity between the two senses of representation. In seeking to represent the Aboriginal both politically and mimetically, Prichard opened up a fault line in her own project which exposed the limits of her socialist realism and also the limits of the Australian left’s response to Aboriginal labor conditions.
This chapter is structured around two main sections, “Contexts” and “Readings.” The first lays out a series of contexts that Prichard was responding to in her station writings: the debates about race and labor in the CPA and the emergence of an explicit position on Aboriginal Australia; the economy of the outback station and the cross-cultural dynamics of the exchange of rations for labor; and Prichard’s own ambivalent attempt to locate Australian communism in relation to Australian radical nationalism. The second offers a series of readings of Brumby Innes and Coonardoo, Prichard’s two most important texts from this time. I focus on the way these texts draw attention to a gap between the political discourse of the left and the conditions of Aboriginal labor. I then trace some of the representational strategies Prichard adopts in response to this gap. I argue that ultimately these representational strategies take Prichard away from political representation and towards a problematic investment in a cultural authenticity existing outside of the space of politics and history.

PART 1: CONTEXTS

White Labor and Colored Labor in the Early CPA

This section surveys debates around race and labor in the communist party in the period surrounding Prichard’s station writings. I focus on the conflicts between the CPA and a generally racist union movement over white and colored labor in Australia, and the gradual emergence of a specific position on Aboriginal labor from the CPA in the early 1930s. I finish with a discussion of a subsidiary discourse on traditional Aboriginal
society and primitive communism that emerged in relation to discussions of Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

In the 1920s the CPA struggled to render the conditions of Aboriginal labor and Aboriginal political interest in communist discourse. Prichard then was writing in a context where there were few if any established models for thinking about the conditions of Aboriginal labor and the responsibility of the party or the committed activist towards Australia’s Aboriginal population. The absence of a stable political discourse in her station writings must be read in relation to the more general confusion, formlessness and instability of discourses on Aboriginal labor on the Australian left in the 1920s. As I will demonstrate, Prichard’s writings stage the absence of a political discourse that might speak to the conditions of the labor relationships of the station economy.

While there was no stated position on indigenous Australia until 1931, throughout the 1920s there were ongoing debates about race and labor in the CPA. These debates however, were dominated by the conflicts between the communist party and the union movement about the role of immigrant labor in the workers’ struggle and so tended to obfuscate and confuse the specific conditions of Aboriginal labor. Throughout its first decade the CPA was committed to forming alliances with the union movement and left wing and labor organizations to extend its influence and make immediate gains for workers: increased wages, better working conditions and so on.\textsuperscript{19} There were, however, deep ideological rifts between the labor movement and the communist party, not the least of which was that the union movement saw itself as working specifically for the interests of white labor within a narrowly conceived national economy. From the perspective of

\textsuperscript{19} This was referred to as the united front. On the history of the Communist Party of Australia see Stuart Macintyre’s *The Reds.*
the CPA, the union’s commitments to white labor were counter-revolutionary, and contradicted a class based analysis of the economy. The instructions from the commintern were to “inculcate a fraternal attitude to all workers, [and] to demonstrate that the international proletariat knows no race prejudice” (qtd. in Markus 146-7). Racial exclusivity was seen as working in the interests of capital to divide alliances and confuse interests within the worker movement.\(^{20}\)

In its early years, the CPA made several attempts to work with and gain the support of non-white and immigrant workers. By the middle of its first decade the party was working systematically with Italian, Greek and Russian immigrants and attempting to form alliances between Australian workers and workers in the Pacific.\(^{21}\) Despite this, there was very little sustained attention to the specific conditions of Australia’s indigenous population until relatively late.

Part of the difficulty of forming a coherent position on Aboriginal labor was that the problems that inhered in the racism of the union movement only spoke inconsistently and indirectly to the conditions of Aboriginal labor. This meant that the party’s attentions

\(^{20}\) On the Communist Party of Australia and race see Macintyre, Markus and Boughton. \(^{21}\) The CPA and the radical left of the union movement joined with the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in 1927. This was seen as part of a fight against white Australia and an attempt to shift the Australian worker away from “his” race and class based alliances and place him in relation to an international proletariat. For example:

No tactic can correctly regard “White Australia” as a political force or as a popular conception to which homage should be paid (even when concerned with safeguarding hard won class gains locally). Every activity must conceive, not only within the Communist International, but also and especially within the general organization of workers of the respective countries, the creation of bodies of exchange and consultation. Ultimately as objective there must be a regular body emerged from all the national Pacific union organizations, which will give and maintain radical direction and shape the international activity of the Pan Pacific workers. (From “Pacific Workers’ Interests” \textit{The Communist} September – October, 1925 : 11)
to the prejudices and exclusions of “white Australia” did not in any real sense confront the conditions of Aboriginal labor. The position of Aboriginal labor in the union movement was ambiguous. Officially unions did not tend to exclude Aboriginal members in the way they excluded Chinese, Japanese, Kanaka, Afghan and other “colored alien” workers, sometimes even stipulating that Aboriginal people should not be barred from membership. However, in practice things were less inclusive. Andrew Markus has argued that “in the early twentieth century, the mainstream labor movement ... paid lip service to the special obligations owed to Aborigines but acquiesced in the imposition of inferior conditions” (142) and he cites a number of examples of attempts either to exclude Aboriginal people from union membership, or to fix Aboriginal wages at a lower rate. More importantly, and as I will go on to discuss, in this period Aboriginal people were without citizenship rights and many Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry worked for rations rather than for wages. In this sense the legal and social position of most Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry meant that the economic differences between white and Aboriginal labor were much more profound than those differences represented by belonging or not belonging to a union. Consequently, the efforts of the party to tackle racism through a reform of the union movement in many ways obfuscated the conditions of Aboriginal labor.

22 For example in 1894 the Australia’s Workers Union stipulated “The union shall be open to all bona fide wage-earners, male or female, except Chinese, Japanese, Kanakas, Afghans, and other colored aliens. (This shall not apply to Aborigines, Maories, American negroes, or to children of mixed marriages born in Australia)” (quoted in Markus 140-1).
23 For example the AWU in Queensland negotiated with the Chief Protector of Aborigines to fix a minimum wage for Aboriginal pastoral workers at two thirds of the Queensland award; in the Kimberly, it was requested that white labor always be given preference over Aboriginal labor, and that the employment of Aboriginal shearers be forbidden when there was a European shearer available (Markus 143).
From the late 1920s there were a number of attempts to introduce the specific question of Aboriginal labor into the debates about race and labor taking place in the party. These early gestures towards a program on indigenous labor extended the party’s position on exclusionary union politics specifically to Aboriginal workers. But there were also some attempts to give voice to the specific conditions of indigenous labor. Various party newspapers began to talk about Australia as founded on colonization and dispossession, and the language of slavery was frequently evoked to describe the labor conditions of Aboriginal people.²⁴

A party position on indigenous Australia was formalized in 1931 in the “Communist Party’s Rights for Aborigines: Draft Program of Struggle Against Slavery.”²⁵ This was the CPA’s first expression of an explicit position on indigenous Australia, indigenous labor and the struggle for Aboriginal rights. The statement formalized the discourse about slavery and equal wages that had begun to appear in the communist press into a series of explicit demands. But it also put forth a number of demands which were directed towards what we would now call self determination: demands for cultural autonomy and the reclamation of Aboriginal land. Thus we can see the 1931 draft program as attempting two main tasks. The first was to grant the equal social and economic rights that would draw Aboriginal people into the mainstream economy and thus into the international workers struggle. Here the party responded to the various laws and practices that marginalized Aboriginal labor, demanding equal wages

²⁴ See for example “Aborigines Ruthlessly Exploited” Workers Weekly 16 May 1930: 5; “Slave Labor Imagined and Real” Workers Weekly Sep. 11 1931. For an overview of the CPA’s approach to Aboriginal labor in this period see Boughton.
and the “cancelation of all licenses to employ Aboriginal people without pay,”
“prohibition of slave and forced labor,” prohibition of indentured labor, payment of
unemployment benefits, and the granting of various civil rights: full citizenship rights,
abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board, prohibition of the kidnapping of Aboriginal
children by the A.P.B., and the liquidation of missions. The second category of demands,
directed towards self determination, has generally been understood as attempting to
respond to the Commintern’s policies on the National Question, specifically the
“recognition of the rights of all nations, regardless of race, to complete self
determination.” (qtd in Boughton 147) This position opened up the theoretical possibility
of thinking of Australia’s indigenous population as constituting its own national group,
with its own distinct interests and the right to form its own autonomous direction. These
demands included rights to cultural, educational and legal autonomy, as well as the
handing over of tracts of land to become “independent aboriginal states and republics”.

What the relationship might be between these two classes of demands was never
formally articulated, and what may have been the implicit contradiction between the
demands for civil rights and the protection of the state on the one hand, and the demands
for cultural and legal autonomy on the other were never theorized by the CPA. The broad
rhetoric of the statement erred towards the demands for inclusion and economic and
political assimilation. Claiming to “[Speak] in the name of black and white workers of
Australia,” the demands are couched in a generalized language of race that renders it
consistent with the communist party’s broader commitments to non-white labor. And
while the particular demands are fully respondent to Australian conditions and policy, the
statement also attempts to locate indigenous people in an international economy, calling
“the aboriginal race, the original inhabitants of Australia ... among the most exploited people in the world.”

There was one further way in which the Aboriginal appeared in communist discourse in Australia in the 1920s. This was in relation to discussion of Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, and Fredric Engels’ classic interpretation of that text, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels’ study of the prehistory and emergence of the modern family structure linked changing kinship structures to a Marxist understanding of stages of production. Drawing on anthropological accounts of the kinship systems of the people of Mount Gambia, South Australia and the Darling River in Queensland, the text includes several passages on the organization of Aboriginal society as an example of the punaluan family, which is presented as characteristic of a hunter gatherer society. In the Australian communist press, the discussion of Engel’s text is not part of a discussion of a living and contemporaneous population. Rather, it forms part of a more theoretical discussion about conceptualizing revolutionary historical transition and a post-revolutionary society.

Guido Baracci, one of the founding members of the CPA, recommended Engels’ text for the image it presented of radical social shifts, because while it was difficult for “the ordinary many, who has never known anything other than the relations of bourgeois society ... to envision the possibility of communism,” Engels’ account of social transformation made the transition to communism easy to conceive. Once aware of history’s “colossal changes” and “the vast social revolutions which have inaugurated new epochs of human development ... it is but a step for such a man to become a
Morgan and Engels’ descriptions of precapitalist social organization were also presented as “analogies” for a postcapitalist and post revolutionary world. Writers projected modern political aims onto images of premodern society as a way of trying to conceive an alternative social order: “we find no analogy between the social system we hope to establish and the various systems of oppression and exploitation which have existed during the period of civilization. In order to find analogies we must throw our minds back to the liberty, fraternity, and equality of the ancient gentile system, which Morgan found in actual existence among the Iroquois.” A discussion of Aboriginal society appears at times as part of this generalizing discussion of nonmodern society as “primitive communism” or as otherwise utopic or emancipated. “There were not always class struggles,” one article states: “To our remote ancestors of the era of human development we may call savagery, class struggles were unknown. The Australian aborigines represent the survival of this stage.” While Engels and Morgan provided a framework that made the Aboriginal relevant to these theoretical discussions of historical transition, these writings were not part of the discussion of Aboriginal labor. In the discourse surrounding Engels’ *Origins of the Family* in the early Australian communist press the Aboriginal is a figure for the prehistoric and is not by definition contemporaneous with modern capitalist society. Rather than a contemporary social or historical reality, Aboriginal society is a conceptual tool for thinking critically about modern capitalist society, historical relativism and a revolutionary transition beyond

capitalism. However, as I will go on to show late in this chapter Engel’s text also has another incarnation in Prichard’s *Coonardoo* where its discussion of kinship provides a way for her to think about the difference between Aboriginal and settler society.

**Rationing and the Station Economy**

The demands for equal wages made by the communist party responded particularly to the conditions of the outback station economy. Yet this was also the context that posed the greatest challenge to Marxist paradigms. As this is also the world Prichard writes about, we need to outline briefly its broad economic structure and typical labor conditions.

From the late nineteenth century through to the mid twentieth century, the Australian pastoral economy relied on the labour of Aboriginal people, particularly in the remote areas of the country. The long history of the emergence of the labor relations of the station economy is too complicated to be detailed in this essay. It was often a largely ad-hoc relationship and there were differences not only amongst the different states and the Northern Territory, but also from station and station. However, there are a number of basic characteristics of the labor relationships of the outback station that are important to detail in order to understand the specific economic and social situation about which Prichard was writing.

On remote outback stations, Aboriginal people were often the majority of the labor force. Typically Aborigines worked as stockmen and domestic servants, but there
were also a range of other labors performed. These people tended not to be “employed” in the traditional sense where labor is “sold” in exchange for wages. Rather they worked for payment in kind: for rations of flour, tobacco, tea, small amounts of meat, and also clothes and blankets. The CPA frequently understood the use of Aboriginal labor on station properties as slavery, and there were aspects of the relationship that fitted this description, as the labor was not fairly remunerated. However, Aboriginal people were not in any sense “owned” by the people they worked for, and while labor was often coerced, Aboriginal people were not chattel.

Tim Rowse argues that we will misunderstand the history of the pastoral station, and particularly the history of rationing, if we understand it simply in economic terms. Rowse reads rationing as a practice of colonial governance, transferred across a wide variety of colonial institutions: the pastoral lease, the scientific or anthropological party, the mission, the police station, and the welfare settlement. Rowse argues that from the 1890s rationing began to replace outright violence as the primary way for colonists to manage and control relationships with indigenous people. While it was sometimes conceived as compensation for labor, and sometimes seen as a step towards assimilation, a form of training in capital and “civilized” work and desire, it was not generally seen as an economic transaction (White Flour).

More importantly, perhaps, there were several non-rationalizable aspects of the relationship between Aboriginal people and white station owners and workers that were not congruent with an analysis of free and alienated labor under capitalism. Aboriginal people working on stations usually retained hunting rights and often supplemented their

29 On the broad range of labors performed by Aborigines in the pastoral industry see Labour History. Special edition “Aboriginal Workers” 69 (1995).
rations with bush food. The nomadic work of droving and mustering required workers to travel across the country, allowing them to visit sacred sites and retain and build on their connections to Country. And yearly seasonal cycles meant that during the wet season, when Aboriginal labour was not required on the stations, Aboriginal people would leave the station for “walkabout”, to visit sacred sites and hold ceremonies. While the movement of the pastoral industry into Aboriginal land was part of the colonization of Australia, it was not, in this period, totally devastating to Aboriginal people in the way that the colonial encroachments in the south were. The pastoral industry enabled many Aboriginal people to stay on their land, and there were ways in which their culture adapted to incorporate the work and lifestyle of the pastoral industry. Ann McGrath has shown that many Aboriginal people living and working on station properties understood themselves to be sharing the land with pastoralists.

Furthermore, Rowse argues that the intended projects of assimilation and colonial governance contained in the rationing relationship were often undermined and countered by the cross-cultural dynamics of the rationing relationship. As a simple exchange of material goods, rationing was not always understood by both parties in the same terms:

30 “Country” refers to Indigenous Australians’ understandings of traditional lands as “lived in and lived with” (Rose 7) As Deborah Bird Rose describes it “People talk about country in the same way that they would speak about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country” (7).

31 On cultural coexistence on the pastoral station see also P. Smith and Foster. We should note that for Marx, the precondition of capitalist exploitation is the expropriation of the peasant from the soil, “when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians” (Capital 876). This history is detailed in section 8 of Capital 1, “So-Called Primitive Accumulation.” The culture of land sharing in the Australian pastoral industry is a significant variation of Marx’s story of primitive accumulation.
Rationing brought donors and receivers into close and even habitual contact without requiring their mutual understanding ... I believe that it is essential to our understanding of the Central Australian frontier (and possibly other frontiers) that there was no necessary congruity of orientations among the parties to this most mundane of cross cultural relationships. I do not claim that there could never be such congruity; rather I suggest that congruity of understanding between the donors and the receivers would be a contingent feature of rationing situations, not essential to their abiding structure. Rationing need be no more than the passage of goods, requiring only the most minimal degree of intersubjective accord. An important consequence flows from this characterization of rationing as technique: if rationing did not require a bridge between donors’ and receivers’ understandings, then it was difficult for assimilationists to build a tutelary practice upon that relationship. Indigenous recipients could preserve their own understanding of why they were rationed, of what their entitlements were, and of what were proper uses of the received goods. (White Flour 5)

The failure of rationing to bring about the homogenizing cultural accord sought by assimilationists points to the more general interpretive instability of the cross cultural encounter on the Australian frontier. The lack of intersubjective accord that Rowse points to renders the rationing relationship a space where meaning is both translated and unmade in the space of transaction. The extent to which Aboriginal recipients preserved their own understanding of the rationing relationship and their entitlements suggests that
the exchange of material objects between parties might as easily incorporate the settler into Aboriginal understandings of obligation and reciprocity as assimilate the Aboriginal into capitalism and settler society. This is not to discount the real power differentials in the relationship. However, it is to read rationing as an encounter of the “contact zone” where different economies of the object and different understandings of the relationships formed in exchange are at play (Pratt).  

The emphasis on wages in the CPA both overlooked and obfuscated the more ad hoc practices of land sharing that existed in the pastoral industry and the ways that Aboriginal people, while working in the pastoral industry, might maintain non-modern ties to the land and understandings of exchange. The idiosyncrasy of the rationing relationship was that, alongside what was undoubtedly capitalist exploitation and state biopolitical management, it encompassed nonmodern modes of being, forms of exchange and understandings of land use. As I go on to show, Prichard’s station writing struggles to find a way to represent the dynamics of exchange and exploitation on the station property. Her writings articulate the limits of labor discourse and speak to the conditions of Aboriginal labor and lives lived between modern and non-modern life worlds.

32 William Pietz’ important series of essays on the fetish provide a theoretical elaboration on the exchange of material objects between mutually uncomprehending cultures. Pietz traces the emergence of the idea of the fetish to fifteenth century trade between Portuguese sea merchants and the inhabitants of the West African coast, arguing that “the concept of the fetish originated in a mercantile intercultural space created by ongoing trade relations between cultures so different as to be mutually incomprehensible” (“The Problem of the Fetish, I 24). The fetish is thus a response to the problem of the social value of material objects in situations of the encounter between radically different social and cultural worlds. My chapter does not focus on economies of the object but is rather concerned with the representation of the labor relationship. However, Coonardoo in particular would warrant a more extended reading of scenes of exchange. For a reading of the unstable economies of the impassioned object in Australian literature and exploration narratives see Alice Brittan’s “B-b-british Objects: Possession, Naming and Translation in David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon.”
Prichard and Radical Nationalism

The final set of contexts we need to consider before we turn to Prichard’s station writings is Prichard’s engagements with Australian radical nationalism, a tradition of radicalism that emerged alongside the push for federation in the 1890s and that laid claim to a vernacular, left wing Australian political tradition.

In her attempt to imagine a home grown literature of commitment, Prichard identified herself strongly with the radical nationalist tradition of the 1890s. The commitments of writers like Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Bernard O’Dowd to unions, workers and realism, provided Prichard with what she saw as a national ancestry to the communist political struggle in Australia. Prichard saw this tradition as “[laying] the foundation of an Australian literature that was to be based on realism, a hatred of economic injustice, and a desire for social progress” (Straight Left 132). And she saw the task of the Australian writer inheriting from this tradition as writing in direct concord with the workers struggle, to “go on from Lawson, stimulate a wider and clearer understanding of the struggles of the working class, celebrate their triumphs, give our people a proud and joyous consciousness of their objective” (Straight Left 133).

Prichard’s celebration of Lawson, Furphy and O’Dowd as forerunners of the communist struggle was also part of an attempt to imagine Australia as in some way inherently socialist, and to identify what I call a “vernacular socialism” that inhere naturally in Australia’s history and the character of her people. This becomes particularly clear in an essay Prichard wrote in conversation with chapter 33 of Capital Vol. 1, “The

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Modern Theory of Colonialism.” Prichard’s essay, aptly called “The Anti-Capitalist core of Australian literature,” looks to Marx himself to support the idea that socialism inhered in Australian material and economic conditions. Marx had argued that “the essence of the free colony” consisted in the surplus of land available to claim and own by ordinary settlers who would therefore form a class of small independent landholder rather than a class of free laborers available for exploitation by the capitalist (Capital 934). As he saw it, when “the bulk of the soil is still public property, and every settler on it can therefore turn part of it into his private property, without preventing later settlers from performing the same operation”, the worker, not forced by necessity to sell his labor will, “work to enrich himself rather than the capitalist” (Capital 930 - 934). Following this claim, Prichard argued that Australia’s “anti-capitalist core” was “inherent in the economic conditions associated with our history.” Marx’s observations form the basis of her celebratory reading of nineteenth century Australian history as a story of convicts and poor immigrant farmers become independent property owners, though still innately hostile to the capitalist and the large property owner: “Grants of land and bonuses for men with families proved a tempting bait for poor British farmers, who became free settlers. With the discovery of gold, there was a shortage of labor for the landowners. Hired laborers before long could themselves become small landowners” (“Anti capitalist core” 107). 34 There is also a willed slippage in her essay between what she sees as the

34 In certain ways, Prichard’s appropriation of Marx here is based in a misreading of the original text. Marx’s stated aim in this chapter is to demonstrate a theoretical point about the preconditions for capitalist accumulation in the Old World, not to provide an account of the material conditions of the Australian colony. Marx finishes this chapter by stating explicitly:
anti-capitalist economic conditions in Australia, and a national character type, predisposed to oppose capitalism. Prichard sees a specifically Australian socialism as inherent in the colony’s convict origins, in “the fact that many of the convicts were political offenders, Chartists, Irish rebels and trade union organizers” (107).

The anti-capitalist nationalist tradition that Prichard identified with did not contain any real account of the history of colonization, or the continuing history of Aboriginal Australia. The central images of this tradition were to do with the white man on the land who, in some sense, replaces the Aboriginal as a figure for autochthony. However, the willed absenting of the Aboriginal from this tradition is more foundational than her exclusion from a set of nationalist images. Prichard’s reading of the material conditions of Australian anti-capitalism was itself based in a repression of both the history of land seizure and also the exploitation of Aboriginal labor. Prichard, like Marx himself, worked from the assumption that the colony was “still public property” (930), or as Marx put it at another point, “virgin soil” (930). This reading repeated the legal fiction of *terra nullius* or “no man’s land”, just as the claim that the settler would “work to enrich himself rather than the capitalist” elided a consideration of the use and exploitation we are not concerned here with the condition of the colonies. The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World, and loudly proclaimed by it: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker. *(Capital* 940)

The qualification here reduces the status of the previous analysis of the colonies in America and Australia to a theoretical example, which is taken up only in the service of what it can tell us about the nature of capitalism in the Old World. 

35 For a reading of the way the white man on the land becomes a substitute figure for the Aboriginal in Australian art and literature see McLean.
of Aboriginal labor by settlers. In short, Prichard’s investment in a vernacular Australian communism inhering in the material conditions of Australian settlement and carried by an Australian radical nationalist tradition was blind to the history of colonial occupation and primitive accumulation in Australia. As I will go on to show, in Prichard’s station writings we see her grappling with the relationship between Australian radical nationalism and the conditions of Aboriginal labor. These writings betray an unwilling ambivalence about the failures of this tradition to speak to the material conditions of the outback station.

PART 2: READINGS

Untranslatable Defiance: Prichard’s Brumby Innes

In a 1926 letter to her friend and fellow Australian literary activist Vance Palmer, Prichard writes of a play she is composing during her stay at Turee station. The letter comments on the ease with which the scene of the Nor’West offers itself up for dramatic interpretation and the effortless mimetic veracity of her play: “The thing wrote itself” she comments, and “I couldn’t help it ... it’s true in every word and detail really” (Prichard, Brumby Innes ix). Prichard’s comments on the source for her play, Brumby Innes, anticipate other things that Prichard would say about literature throughout her life, particularly about the documentary capacities of literature. As she put it some years later: “I prefer always to live among the people and the places I write of: use notes taken at the time, and try to discover the thoughts and reactions of people under my microscope to
situations they have been through, or may have to encounter. The law of libel necessitates variations from the original, of course. Otherwise I am concerned to draw as I see” *(Straight Left* 121).³⁶

The play’s central character had a source in Brumby Leake, a man Prichard had met during her time in at Turee station. Brumby Leake was “the real thing,” a figure so ripe for dramatic portrayal that even his name would be perfect if not for the risk of a libel case: “His name is Leake. It fits so – ‘Brumby Leake.’ And I’ve got to find one that won’t run me in for libel” (*Brumby Innes* xiv). But the name “Brumby,” a colloquial term for the wild bush horse with strong nationalist overtones, also references the nationalist myths of the Australian left, and the figure of the white man who works the land. The brumby evokes the skilled horsemanship of the outback cattle worker, and is also an image of settler indigeneity: the brumby is an introduced animal that has escaped the bounds of domesticity to become in some sense native. Prichard’s decision to keep Brumby’s name, then, was not just about her commitment to mimetic veracity, but also to make a comment about the relationship between the myths of the nationalist left and the conditions of the outback station. The play is principally about Brumby Innes and his relationships with the small white community on and around the station, and the Aboriginal community who work the station. Brumby Innes is a violent drunk and a womanizer. In the course of the play Brumby kidnaps and rapes a young girl, and shoots an Aboriginal man. There is a comment then, in this name, about the moral culpability of the nationalist left and its failure to acknowledge its complicity in Aboriginal suffering.

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³⁶ These comments were originally made in a letter to Michael Kowen at Ohio State University. They were reproduced as an essay titled “On Purpose and Propaganda” in Prichard, *Straight Left*. 
I read Prichard’s *Brumby Innes* as staging the non-passage between, on the one hand, Australian labor debates and the myths of an Australian vernacular socialism, and on the other hand, the conditions of Aboriginal Australia. In this sense, despite Prichard’s claim for the effortless mimetic veracity of the story she told, I argue that the play also has something to say about failures of representation, both literary and political. *Brumby Inness* thus operates in the realm of negative spaces. The play emphatically displays the limits of the left and the ethical demand made by Aboriginal suffering. And yet on transforming this demand into political agency or action, Prichard is radically inarticulate. I read *Brumby Innes* as representing the failure to translate suffering into political language, and as staging defiance with no access to political language.

In the play’s second act a folk song celebrating unions and workers is juxtaposed with a scene of visceral Aboriginal suffering. Exchanging tall stories over a bottle of whiskey, Brumby Innes, Jack the station stockman, and May and John from a neighboring station burst into song, “with all the spirits of a stockman who thinks his game the finest on earth” (74). The scene, in many ways, forms a mirror to the opening of the play, a detailed portrayal of a corroboree gathering, a paradigmatic traditional Aboriginal ceremony. In the second act, the performance of a folk song by the white characters seems to stand in for the folk traditions of white Australia. The song, “Shift Boys Shift,” is about an itinerant worker going from job to job across the country:
I’m travellin’ along the Castlereigh, for I’m a station hand,
I’m handy with the roping pole I’m handy with the brand,
For I can ride a rowdy colt, or swing an axe all day,
But there’s no demand for station hands along the Castlereigh. (74)

The political sentiment of the song is with the worker, the station hand who follows the demands for work across the country. But to the extent that the song is made to stand in for a white Australian folk tradition, this politics is presented as in some sense inherent to the Australian worker. Appealing to various nationalist sentiments about the white man on the land, the song approximates what Russel Ward called “the typical Australian”: the myth of the egalitarian, easy going, practical jack of all trades. In the song, the station hand becomes the bearer of a vernacular socialism that has as much to do with myths about national identity as it does to do with labor conditions and workers’ rights.

While the four white people take centre stage and compose the main action of the scene, at its edges Polly, one of the Aboriginal domestic workers, is clearing up and washing the dishes, Mickina, the man Brumby Innes has shot, lies passed out and bleeding in a bunk, and we hear cries from Wylba, the woman Brumby has raped and locked in the store room. Thus the action on the stage is organized around two different groups of characters. A group of white characters who are in the throes of celebration and drunken reverie and who pour forth the language of folk legend and leftist politics, and a group of Aboriginal characters who are either working (Polly) or suffering (Mickina and Wylba). Though positioned on the edges of the stage the Aboriginal people vie for the audience’s attentions. The stage directions stipulate that in the course of the scene, the
sounds of Wylba’s wails will rise up to compete with the sounds of the song (76). Given the narrative turns of the play, this merging of voices signifies dissonance far more than consonance, and so the audience is asked to think about what the relationship might be between the two groups and between the sentiments expressed and celebrated in the song, and Aboriginal pain and suffering.

Thus situated, the people who sing the song seem to have little claim to the kind of left politics the song expresses. Most importantly, there is a clear disconnect between the kind of labor represented in the song and the labor that is taking place on stage, performed by Polly. The Aboriginal domestic worker exposes the raced and gendered limits of the myths of the Australian left. The language of labor politics present in the song is shown to be detached from the actual material conditions of labor, and exposed as nothing more than the language of self-servin identity and of nationalist myth.

One verse takes up the question of colored labor and the union, and so explicitly introduces the language of race into the scene:

I asked a cove for shearin’ once, along the Marthaga,
‘We shear non-Union here,’ says he. ‘I call it scab,’ says I.
I looked along the shearin’ floor before I turned to go,
There was eight, or ten, damned Chinamen, a shearin’ in a row. (75)

The sentiment of the song here is consistent with the leftist white-Australian mythos that excluded colored labor from the unions, and that was described in the previous section. Prichard’s play does not offer an explicit comment on this position, but only represents it
as part of the landscape of the outback station. What is important is that the dynamics of racial exclusion that are represented in the song do not speak to the dynamics of racial exploitation that are present on the stage. While the exclusion of Chinese labor from the Australian union movement is clearly stated and thus, we might imagine, can be clearly opposed, Aboriginal exclusion is enacted dramatically, but not in any real sense articulated. Thus the scene suggests that the problematic of exploited Aboriginal labor, so clearly present in the dynamics on stage, cannot be approached simply by addressing the racial exclusions of the Australian union movement. The dynamics of Aboriginal exploitation are unrepresentable in Australian labor debates. Falling outside of both the inclusions and the exclusions of Australian union politics, Aboriginal labor is foreclosed, rendered radically inarticulate in the terms of Australian labor politics.

It is useful here to refer to Spivak’s understanding of subalternity. While the term has perhaps been evacuated of meaning through repeated use and misuse, a definition she offers in a more recent article on the legacy of the subaltern studies group is useful in its specificity. Spivak defines subalternity as a position “where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis for action” ("Scattered speculations” 476). The definition makes explicit the sense in which subalternity is a position, or perhaps more accurately a nonposition, in relation to power and political representation, rather than an identity. As Spivak points out, subalternity precludes identity because identification is, in some sense, the very act by which the subaltern breaks its bonds, or overcomes a subaltern positioning. In this scene what is at stake is the way that political language, which we might understand in terms of what Spivak calls a “line of mobility,” bypasses the labor relationships of indigenous workers
on station properties. In the play this exclusion can be staged physically in the dynamics on stage and thus, we might argue, reaches a degree of articulation. But it cannot be articulated in language, even the problematic language of racist exclusion. Moreover the access to lines of mobility is completely foreclosed.

On this note the scene bears comparison with Prichard’s writing from the same period about the white rural working class, in works such as Black Opal and Working Bullocks. In these works we see the comparative ease with which Prichard translated the conditions of the white rural working class into the language of political action. Superficially it might seem that Prichard approached this class with the same set of political and literary objectives that she brought to the Aboriginal station worker. For example, Working Bullocks, Prichard’s novel about white workers in the West Australian Karri forests, takes a small and marginal rural community for its subject and seeks to represent the specific culture of that world. It pays particular attention to the unique language of the white Karri community in an effort to record what Prichard called “the living speech of our people”.37 Like her station writings, Working Bullocks was based on ethnographic style research that Prichard conducted by spending time living with the people, and the novel makes a similar claim to documentary status, to represent the actual conditions and the culture of the world it takes as its subject.

The significant difference, however, lies in the way each text deals with political agency. Working Bullocks tells a story about the political awakening of the white Karri workers: their coming to class consciousness and then to political action. Reflecting on a

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speech by Mark Smith, a socialist agitator and mouthpiece for the struggle, Mary Anne Colburn, an older woman whose two sons have been killed in work accidents, feels “as if a curtain had been lifted before her eyes”:

The way Mark put it you could not help seeing he was right. The wrong of the social system the workers were living under was perpetuated because a few people had seized the power and persisted in wielding it so that they and their kind might have a superabundance of food, clothing, houses to live in, ease and leisure, while thousands of men, women and children went in rags, toiled all their days, and even in the karri lived in shacks of bagging and waste timber, as poor as any you saw in a slum. Why shouldn’t the workers change all this? Insist on another deal of cards? (205)

Here political analysis is the basis for political conversion. Mark’s propagandistic discourse is effortlessly recognized by the Karri workers who, “could not help seeing he was right”. His speech unites, assimilating a rural lumpenproletariat to a workers’ class, the karri to the slum. In Working Bullocks the language of political representation translates seamlessly into class consciousness and then political action, as the workers follow Mark into a strike. In Brumby Innes, by contrast, political language cannot be the basis of political consciousness because political language is itself a site of exclusion; as such the easy translation of oppression into political consciousness and action cannot occur.
Brumby Innes does make some space for Aboriginal protest and defiance, but it distinguishes this from political representation. Wylba’s cries, which rise above the sound of the singing, form a stream of insults in her native tongue, which gradually drown out and put a stop to the singing:

WYLBA: (crying from the storeroom, her voice rising above the singing)
Walygee booger! Walygee booger!
MAY: What’s that?
WYLBA: (her voice rising to a scream of imprecation as she bangs on the door)
Munyin-bunna. nunki. nunki, Chungee-chungee!
BRUMBY: (pouring himself another drink) Eh?
WYLBA: (continuing her tune of rage and despair.) Walyina, booketera, kundi, kundi, spa!
BRUMBY: (maliciously, as he drinks) Oh that! That’s one of old Polly’s kids. (Jerking his head towards POLLY, who is washing and putting away tea things at the bench under the window) She shut her up in the store – for stealing the sugar, or something ...
WYLBA: Chungee-chungee, belyee, mari, koo!
POLLY: (slowly and clearly, facing BRUMBY, her voice flat, without emotion)
Liar. (76)

The opposition and protest contained in this scene is unmistakable, as is the condemnable disavowal in Brumby and May’s refusal to hear it. Prichard translated the stream of
insults, loosely, in the glossary to the play: Walygee booger means “false, bad chap,” Munyin-bunna is a “filthy swear word,” nunki nunki means “loathsome, dangerous” and chunsee-chunsee means “jagged penis” (105-7). But she also added that the anger expressed in the scene should be untranslatable, stipulating that “this defiance of Wylba’s is in filthy language – quite untranslatable. So long as she hurl something at Brumby, it doesn’t matter what she says” (106). Prichard’s aside here suggests that what is important in the scene is not Wylba’s words but rather the affect she performs. The claim “it doesn’t matter what she says” supposes a universal language of visceral opposition and rage that needs no translation. At the same time, Prichard stipulates that Wylba’s language is “quite untranslatable,” a claim which implies the more difficult possibility that Wylba’s protest might be misheard by the audience, just as it is ignored by the figures on stage. Prichard’s decision to dominate the scene with untranslated Aboriginal language holds in suspense the real difficulty of political representation that is being worked through in the scene, even as it makes space for protest. The scene stages a double problematic: on the one hand we have a political discourse which bears no relationship to the conditions and suffering of a laboring group; on the other hand we have suffering that has no access to the language of politics.

Polly’s single word to Brumby, “liar,” cuts through Wylba’s screams and is perhaps the clearest and most articulate moment in the scene. Polly’s accusation refers us not only to the lie Brumby has just told May about how Wylba got into the store room, but also to the broader lies of the song about the claims Australian nationalism makes to the working class and to a progressive and liberatory politics. Nonetheless, the protest cannot move beyond pure oppositionality. The implicit language in the arrangements of
bodies on stage and the expressions of suffering and defiance represent something of the conditions of Aboriginal labor. But there is no path from this embodied language to the language of political representation and political action. This is significant in the oeuvre of a writer who put so much faith in a realism that would both reveal the conditions of exploitation and be political efficacious.

The negative spaces rendered in *Brumby Innes* seem to constitute a question or a challenge that Prichard tried to answer in *Coonardoo*. In the next section I read *Coonardoo* as responding to, reframing and at times moving away from the questions that emerged in Prichard’s play.

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In broadest terms Prichard’s *Coonardoo* tells a story of love across racial and cultural lines. The novel begins when Hugh and Coonardoo are both children and describes them playing together on the station, Wytaiba, and it traces the parallel development of two people profoundly tied to each other. When Hugh’s mother dies Coonardoo goes to him one night to comfort him and they conceive a child, although the child is never Hugh’s son within the Aboriginal kinship system. To Hugh, “Coonardoo is like his own soul ... dark, passionate and childlike ... the only living thing he could speak to ... the only creature who understood what he was feeling, and was feeling for him” (68). Their sexual union is described in terms that suggest universality and the transcendence of difference. As Hugh takes Coonardoo in his arms he is described as giving “himself to the spirit which drew him, from a great distance it seemed, to the common source which was his
life and Coonardoo’s” (71). But in Coonardoo Prichard is also concerned to render those aspects of Aboriginal society and subjectivity that remain inassimilable to the genre of western romance. The novel contains frequent switches into an anthropological mode to explain the specific differences of Aboriginal subjectivity and culture. Further, aside from the relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo, the novel is concerned with representing the daily life and working conditions of the outback station. The novel ends in tragedy when Hugh attacks Coonardoo in a jealous rage and ultimately kills her.

The character Brumby Innes exists in the background of Coonardoo as Sam Geary, the owner of a neighboring property and a shadowy villain in the novel. Sam Geary appears at various points throughout the novel. He attempts to take Coonardoo away from Wytaliba and there is a scene where he rapes Coonardoo. But Geary remains a figure in the background, supplementary to the main action of the novel, and likewise, rape is outside of the novel’s central dilemmas. In this scene Geary is lecherous, “heavy and drunken in the doorway, his eyes glazed ... an old man with his hair on end, his face red, swollen and ugly” (203), but his attack is neutralized with a language of natural and overpowering heterosexual desire that betrays an obvious debt to D.H. Lawrence: “As weak and fascinated as a bird before a snake, she swayed there for Geary whom she had loathed and feared beyond any human being. Yet male to her female, she could not resist him. Her need of him was as great as the dry earth’s for rain” (203). Prichard’s previous attempt to write about rape as a social and ethical imperative is in this moment sidelined by her attempt to imagine the Aboriginal woman’s sexual desire.

The novel’s turn away from rape is symptomatic of a broader shift in focus that occurred when Prichard turned from play to novel. While in Brumby Innes Aboriginal
subjectivity is inaccessible, in *Coonardoo*, Prichard takes on the challenge of representing Aboriginal subjectivity and society. However in doing so she also moves away from the more difficult questions that suffused *Brumby Innes*: questions of Aboriginal rage, white political responsibility and the failures of translation. In *Coonardoo* rage is replaced by innocent bewilderment, politics is replaced by personal tragedy, and the problem of translation is foreclosed by the novel’s sentimentalizing investment in cultural authenticity.

This section offers two readings of *Coonardoo*, both of which take up Prichard’s representation of Aboriginal difference and the labor of the station economy, and her failure in *Coonardoo* to think politically. The first reading explores Prichard’s representation of rationing. I argue that Prichard’s depiction of the cross cultural dynamics of labor and exchange on the outback station continues the project laid out in *Brumby Innes* to think through the limits of the representational categories of the left to speak to the conditions of Aboriginal labor. However, while Prichard negates conventional labor politics, she is unable to come up with a usable alternative and what emerges in the place of politics is a paternalistic investment in Aboriginal cultural authenticity. In the second reading I turn in more detail to Prichard’s representation of Aboriginal subjectivity and difference. Particularly I am interested in the challenges that Prichard’s representation of Aboriginal difference poses to the novel’s broad narrative arc and its adoption of the love plot. In this reading I trace the tension between the novel’s love plot on the one hand, and on the other its rendering of anthropological difference. I argue that in *Coonardoo* the adoption of an anthropological mode of discourse provides one response to the limitations of labor discourse and socialist realism. At the same time,
Prichard’s rendering of anthropological discourse fails to provide the basis for a political language that would speak to the conditions of Aboriginal labor.

**An Imperceptible Overlordship: Rationing in *Connardoo***

Prichard’s *Connardoo* stages an analogous problem to that of *Brumby Innes*, to do with the failure of categories of political identity, and particularly of class, to translate into the space of the station economy. However, in *Connardoo* the stakes of this failure are not political representation but rather the representational challenges posed by the cross-cultural dynamics of the rationing relationship. In *Connardoo* Prichard attempts to imagine a model of exchange that is outside of the economic in order to represent the idiosyncrasies of the rationing relationship and the coexistence of modern settlers and Aborigines in the outback station economy. Rationing, in *Connardoo*, is not based in exploitation or in abstract exchange, but rather is a personalized transaction that operates according to a law of mutual generosities. This delicate transaction, Prichard suggests, allows for radical differences in interpretation and thus for the persistence of traditional Aboriginal modes of understanding and being within the broader sphere of the white pastoral economy. I argue that a slippage occurs between Prichard’s description of the cultural dynamics of rationing on the one hand, and on the other a defense of rationing as a good mode of colonial governance, necessary to protect Aboriginal culture from the encroachment of capitalist modernity. Significantly, this slippage suffuses the whole novel and Prichard, while trying to fill a gap in the representation of Aboriginal labor, ends up affirming white “overlordship” not only as beneficial but also as natural to
traditional Aboriginal culture. The arduousness of Prichard’s representational task takes her a long way from her usual politics.

In an interaction between Hugh Watt and his wife Mollie, Hugh explicitly differentiates the relationship between the white station owners and the Aborigines who work the station from a class relationship, and he explicitly differentiates rationing from wage payment for labor. Mollie has only recently moved to the Nor’West. Her inability to understand the rationing system demonstrates the failure of the outsider, arriving in the Nor’West with a set of conventional interpretive frameworks (possibly those of the reader), to recognize its unique dynamics. Mollie misunderstands many things about the Nor’West. She marries Hugh for his property and what she sees as his class status, failing to recognize the constant hard work and social isolation of the outback station, and its total disconnection from the life of the landed gentry that she has projected onto it. Particularly, Mollie misunderstands the labor relationships of the Nor’West and the position of the Aborigines. On arriving from Geraldton she thinks of the Aboriginal domestics as her servants: “And fancy having so many servants! Elated at the thought of her dignity, Mollie bustled the gins about as Mrs Armstrong had bustled her about so often” (99-100). Mollie’s misunderstanding is here instructive, demonstrating the inapplicability of the social and labor categories of the city to the relationships of the Nor’West.

Hugh is horrified to find out that Mollie has worked the women all day and has them calling her Ma’am. He explains the very different way in which labor is organized and understood on Wytaliba:
“But these people are not servants,” Hugh told her, “not in the ordinary way. We don’t pay them, except in food, tobacco, clothing. Treat them generously, feed them well, give them a bit of pain killer and a dose of castor oil when they’ve got a binghee ache, and they’ll do anything in the world for you. But you must never work them too hard – specially the gins. They’re not made for hard work, can’t stand it.” (104)

Hugh insists that the Aborigines are not employees or “servants” because rationing is not a form of wage payment for labor. Yet he also explicitly differentiates Wytaliba from an economy of exploitation. (For example, there is no suggestion of the slavery that is evoked in the Communist draft program.) Indeed one of the reasons he is so shocked with Mollie is because she has worked the women all day and as he puts it, “we never work them as late as this. After midday as a rule, they never do a tap” (102). Hugh presents the economy of the station to Mollie as an exchange of one generosity for another. You must “treat them generously, feed them well … never work them too hard.” In exchange “they’ll do anything in the world for you.” In Hugh’s account, rationing is closer to a gifting relationship than to a situation of employment. It is not an exchange of equivalent values, but neither is it an exploitative transaction. Rather, both sides seem to give and receive excessively, to pay more than the given value but also to receive more than they are owed. Describing an economy of surplus and abundance, Hugh presents the rationing relationship as enabling a non-rationalized co-existence.

In his vision of coexistence, Hugh imagines a space of transaction that is not homogenizing, and a way of negotiating across difference in the absence of cultural
accord. Indeed Mollie’s mistake is not simply to misunderstand the particular labor
dynamics of the Nor’West, but also more fundamentally a failure to recognize difference,
both the difference of the rationing relationship but also the difference of the Aborigines.
Mollie misconstrues her relationship with the Aboriginal people on Wytaliba because she
identifies too closely with the Aboriginal house-girls. Taking up her position as mistress
of the homestead, she refers back to her own experience as a servant in the town of
Geraldton in order to set the Aboriginal women to work, seeing them as versions of her
younger self; as Mrs Armstrong had “bustled her about,” she “bustled the gins about”
(99-100). Hugh, on the other hand, does not understand the Aboriginal people as like
himself but rather as radically different, and his way of dealing with the Aboriginal
workers is directed by an intention to accommodate that difference.

However, there is a slippage that occurs in Hugh’s account from the attempt to
point out the inadequacies of an economic or class analysis in understanding the rationing
relationship, to a defense of the rationing relationship as a good mode of colonial
governance necessary to protect Aboriginal people from the incursions of capitalist
modernity. What emerges as a priority for Hugh is a vision of the capacity of rationing to
protect Aboriginal cultural authenticity and the integrity of Aboriginal beliefs and
practices. Hugh describes the relationship between the white people and the Aboriginal
people as one of mutual trust, a keeping of “faith.” In Coonardoo, keeping the faith is
both a commitment to the rationing relationship as his mother has run it, “an overlordship
imposed, gradually and imperceptibly until the blacks recognized and accepted it, by
conditions of work for food and clothing” (112), and at the same time a protection of
traditional Aboriginal practices. In the novel, the two things are rendered very nearly
Rationing is the form of transaction that enables a traditional Aboriginal society to exist within the sphere of white settlement: “As Saul and his mother had dealt with the Wytaliba folk, so he would deal with them, Hugh promised himself. He would keep faith as they had kept faith with him – and the Gnarler sing round their camp-fires in the uloo, through the years ahead as they had done for all the years he could remember” (112). But the price of this protection is subordination to white overlordship, and there is no suggestion here that Aboriginal people might want to challenge white power or to look after themselves.

Hugh’s perspective is more than just a character’s point of view. His understanding of the station as a space of benign cultural protection suffuses the novel and structures its broad geographical imagination. Prichard locates Wytaliba in a space outside history, a move which allows her to present the dynamics of the rationing relationship as wholly personal, and to reaffirm Hugh’s reading of rationing as a mode of good governance operating in the personalized realm of mutual generosity, trust and faith. Hugh imagines that rationing might protect the Wytaliba Aborigines from the incursions of modernity. Prichard enacts this desire in novelistic terms when she dislocates the novel’s setting from the scene of history.

In the novel’s preface, Prichard cautions her readers that the Aboriginal people in this novel are different from those they may have seen or know. Particularly she distinguishes the people she writes about, a people “in their natural state”, and “on isolated stations of the Nor’-West”, from the Aboriginal people living along the transcontinental railway lines that had recently been extended from Adelaide to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and also from Adelaide to Alice Springs:
People who see the blacks only along the transcontinental line or when they have become poor, degraded and degenerate creatures as a result of the contact with towns and the vices of white people, cannot understand how different they are in their natural state, or on isolated stations of the Nor’-West where they are treated with consideration and kindness. (xiii)

The division she draws here reproduces a pervasive discourse about the difference between tribal people, “in their natural state,” and the Aboriginal people living in towns, and about the inability of Aboriginal tribes to withstand contact with settler society and the encroachments of capitalist modernity, represented here in the image of the transcontinental line. The metaphor at work here is that of the frontier, which is organized spatially such that only Aboriginal communities in the most remote recesses of the continent, furthest removed from the networks of transport and communication, are considered authentic, still uncorrupted.38

But, importantly, Prichard also significantly revises the idea of the frontier. The novel is not set on the other side of the frontier strictly speaking, but rather on an outback

38 Patrick Wolfe has argued that the discursive logic of the Australian frontier renders the spatial coexistence of settler and Aboriginal society anomalous. For “as a linear metaphor that expressed the invasion’s zero-sum polarity, the frontier divided “us” and “them” into discrete and homogenous domains whose relative proportions were constantly shifting in favor of us” (Settler Colonialism 169). Wolfe points out that the movement of the frontier was not seen as moving into Aboriginal land but rather as continually pushing the Aboriginal back beyond frontier lines, or “eliminating” the Aboriginal. Variations of this discourse structures aspects of nineteenth and early 20th Century anthropology. As Wolfe puts it, “anthropological paradigms rendered it anomalous that historical indigenous people should exist in the same space as white people” (173). The traditional Aborigine exists on a vanishing horizon, always just beyond where you might set foot. See also Hamilton.
station property where Aboriginal and white people work together within the national pastoral economy. Thus in this passage she suggests that contact with white culture is not always destructive and that there may be certain kinds of lived interaction between white and Aboriginal people that actually preserve Aboriginal cultural authenticity. The Aborigines in Prichard’s novel, though still “in their natural state,” are not in fact beyond the lines of white settlement as generally conceived. Rather, in Coonardoo, their “natural state” is predicated on a particular kind of relationship with the settler population, which the passage here describes as “consideration and kindness.” Implicitly this is a valuation of a mode of protection based not in state institutions nor the economic, but rather in sympathetic and personalized relationships. In Coonardoo the basis of this relationship is rationing.

We can read the novelistic construction of Wyalbaha as a revision of Prichard’s own journey to Turee station, a revision that worked to remove Wyalbaha from the scenes of destruction wrought by modernization. As Prichard’s son, Ric Throssel, tells us in his biography of his mother, Prichard took the train from Perth to the end of railway line at Meekathra and then drove a further four hundred miles by truck. The “blacks along the railway line” that appear in the novel’s preface can thus be read as referring to scenes Prichard have would have witnessed along this journey, although these scenes of cultural deterioration never appear in the novel proper.  

39 As historian Fiona Paisley has shown the development of the railway gave white feminists a new awareness of the conditions for Aboriginal women and directly led to campaigns for the “protection” of these women, particularly from the sexual abuse of white men. The extension and modernization of the North-South line and the trans-Australia lines in the 1920s made remote areas of the continent newly accessible to tourists and travelers from the South and drew the attention of a previously oblivious population to the terrible living conditions of Aboriginal people. The railways were
Indeed, Prichard only mentions the people living along the railway line in order to say that they are not the subject of her book; after the novel’s preface, there is no railway line in *Coonardoo*. Wytaiba is more remote than Turee station, most significantly because there is no train to Wytaiba. When Hugh goes to school in Freemantle, and when Mrs Bessie goes down to see him, the journey is a 300 mile buggy ride to the nearest town, a mail truck and then a boat down the coast. And when Mrs Bessie, Hugh and his fiancé travel back to Wytaiba from the south, we learn that just the buggy ride from the town is a ten day journey (33). Transport technology shrinks landscapes. By removing the train line, Prichard stretches out the landscape of her novel, making the country bigger and making Wytaiba farther away.

Prichard’s description of this journey obfuscates any sign of encroaching modernization. The journey is described as taking them:

- further and further over the wide planes of red earth with drifts of wind grass, yellow as the chickens Mrs Bessie was carrying in an old dress basket.
- Across the sandy swales of red rivers, beyond the blue walls of distant hills, lying straight as if ruled against the sky, the horses plodded, the buggies lurched and swayed, coming at last to the bare hills of the Dog Toothed Ridge, the creek extended through Aboriginal land, breaking up the country and sapping the water supplies with little regard for the people already living there. The growing population of mixed race or “half caste” children fathered by railway workers and itinerants and seen from the windows of a railway carriage suggested a culture of sexual exploitation and the breakup of the Aboriginal family (Paisley). Prichard was one of a generation of white women whose awakening to the conditions of Aboriginal people was directly related to the extension of the railway line.
crossing and to first sight of the white roofs and scattered buildings of Wytaliba homestead. (33)

In the space between Freemantle and Wytaliba, Prichard gives us a pluralized landscape of indefinitely repeated feature - “wide planes,” “red rivers,” “distant hills.” This is a landscape of abstract shapes rather than specific details; a landscape drawn as a horizon rather than as a surrounding environment. Keeping the novel’s focus fixed on the horizon, Prichard elides the presence of any figures along the way.

It is only as we cross the creek that the indefinite landscape gives way to the singular domain of the Wytaliba homestead, the protected space that Prichard has carved out for her story. In Coonardoo Prichard pushes the outback station back in space and time in order to imagine a scene of cultural interaction that takes place outside of the economic and the political.40 Thus, Prichard reproduces Hugh’s reading of rationing on a narrative level. In its broad spatial construction, Coonardoo situates the rationing relationship as Hugh understands it, as a carved out and protected space of benevolent overlordship.

The naturalization of white authority in the novel is perhaps best captured in the scenes of cultural translation that surround Prichard’s use of the term “Mumae.” The Aborigines on Wytaliba call Hugh’s mother, Mrs Bessie, Mumae. Hugh explains: “they used to hear me calling her mummy, I suppose when I was a kid. But Mumae means

40 Importantly, while this is a journey that takes us beyond the encroachments of capitalist modernity it does not take us across the frontier as it is usually conceived, but rather into a space of timeless domesticity – that of the homestead. The way in which the language of the frontier is co-joined with the language of domesticity in the novel warrants further analysis.
father in their dialect too, and mother was proud of their name for her” (103). For Hugh this name, and the use of proper names more generally, is evidence of the familiarity and intimacy of his and his mother’s relationship with the Wytaliba Aborigines. As he puts it, “we sling off the man who makes his abos ‘sir’ or ‘boss’ him. He’s a new chum, or a sleeping partner” (103). Hugh has “grown up with most of them,” and so for Hugh the familial relationship encased in the name “Mumae” reflects the lived closeness between the two groups. But the term Mumae also bears with it an enactment of both difference and power, however much Hugh sees it a simple expression of familiarity.

Mumae, and the other names that the Aborigines have for the whites on Wytaliba, are not exact proper names nor even family names but rather hybridized derivatives: the Aborigines call Hugh “Youie;” Mollie “Mullie;” and “Mumae” also means “father” in the Aboriginal dialect. Thus the familiarity encased in the Aborigines’ use of proper names and family names is also cut across by difference. The name “Mumae,” then, signifies the persistence of Aboriginal culture and difference within the field of lived intimacy.

But “father,” Mumae in the Aboriginal dialect, also names for Mrs Bessie a social role and a structural position. Prichard defines “Mumae” twice in the novel, once in the words of Hugh, and once from the perspective of the Wytaliba Aborigines:

Mumae the blacks called her, because Hughie did as soon as he could talk.
Mumae in their dialect meant a father and was not Mrs Bessie, father and mother to her son, the woman master of Wytaliba since Ted Watt had died so long ago, before Hugh could speak. Soon after he was born indeed. (3)
In this account the Wytaliba Aborigines call Mrs Bessie Mumae not just because they are mimicking Hugh, but because they recognize and assent to Mrs Bessie’s authority, her role as father and master on Wytaliba. Thus the difference carried in the Aboriginal word is one that fully assents to white power and “overlordship.” Paternalistic white governance emerges here as internal to Aboriginal language and culture. While translation and mistranslation register the unfixedness of meaning in the cross cultural encounter, they never upset the order of power. As the name of the father is the location of authority and law, Mumae signifies a naturalized and familiarized colonial authority.

The cultural politics of translation here significantly revises that in *Brumby Innes*. In *Brumby Innes* the possibility of mistranslation posed an unanswerable challenge to the white woman activist seeking to report on the conditions of Aboriginal labor. Here, by contrast, the cultural dynamics of mistranslation renders the white woman’s domestic overlordship both good and natural to traditional Aboriginal culture.

**Anthropology and Love in Coonardoo**

In her attempt to represent the complex cross-cultural dynamics of rationing and labor on the outback station, Prichard ended up writing an apology and justification for paternalistic colonial power. However, at the level of form the implications of Prichard’s attempt to represent Aboriginal difference were perhaps more radical. In this section I turn in detail to Prichard’s rendering of Aboriginal subjectivity and difference. In the previous section I was concerned with how Prichard framed the relationship between white people and Aboriginal people in the outback station economy. Here, by contrast, I
am interested in her attempt to imaginatively enter the space of Aboriginal subjectivity and culture, and the challenges and revisions to the novel form and the broad structure of the love plot that are necessitated by this project.

Named after its central female character, Prichard’s novel draws on and references a long tradition of novels named after a central heroine whose identity and sexual maturation structures the narrative and carries the sympathetic identifications of the reader. But Prichard’s *Cooonardoo* is also significantly outside of the tradition of the realist novel in its subject and particularly in its attempt to represent Aboriginal subjectivity. A standard claim about the emergence of the novel genre and its “rise” to prominence is that the novel is intimately linked to the emergence of the modern individual. Prichard’s Aboriginal characters are not modern individuals and one of the ambitious tasks of her novel is to represent the difference of Aboriginal subjectivity.

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41 As Dorothy Hale puts it: “Pamela, Clarissa, Jane Eyre, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Charlotte Temple, Jane Talbot, Ruth Hall, Maggie, The Girl of the Streets, What Massie Knew, Sister Carrie, My Antonia, Lolita –these are of course not just the names of individuals, but girls and women whose sexuality fuels three centuries of novel writing” (566).

42 There are different ways of telling this story that variously emphasize shifts in the means of production, developments in political and philosophical thought, the emergence of modern versions of gender and sexuality, and the rise and spread of the modern European Empires, but there is a general agreement that modernity heralds a new way of seeing the world that emphasizes the perspectives of individuals who see themselves as unique and isolated rather than communal or defined by their social location, and this shift is integral to the novel genre (Hale). In his very influential study, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt argues that “vast transformation of Western Civilization since the Renaissance ... has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one – one that presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times in particular places” (31).

43 As Susan Lever has argued, in making a traditional Aboriginal woman a central character,
Coonardoo Prichard’s Aboriginal character cannot occupy novelistic discourse in a simple and transparent way. Rather Prichard draws on a number of anthropological source texts, and in her attempt to both to render Aboriginal difference and to translate it for the reader she makes periodic shifts into an anthropological register.

In this reading I trace a tension between the novel’s adoption of the love plot on the one hand, and on the other its rendering of Aboriginal difference. While the novel’s love plot moves in the direction of reconciliation and the transcendence of difference through eros, in its descriptive anthropological mode the novel details radical incommensurability: Hugh and Coonardoo do not understand their relationship in the same way. In Coonardoo the interpretive stability granted by a discourse of romantic love is undermined at every turn by the different and incompatible codes of social meaning and kinship that both parties bring to the event. This is not just a tension between different subjects, but is in fact a tension between two different modes of discourse, between that of novelistic plot on the one hand, and that of anthropological description on the other. Criticism of Coonardoo, from first reviews right through to recent postcolonial reconsiderations of the text, tends to be based around interpretations of the love plot. Thus another task of this section is to break open the kinds of reading practices that can be brought to Prichard’s novel, and to take seriously the difficulty and radicalism of Prichard’s representation of Aboriginal difference.

From the outset Prichard declares that her major character does not think in the language of the novel and its readers; she not only sings in a language which needs to be translated for the readers, but we are told that Youie, her white childhood companion, is going away “farther than she could think” (p.2). That is, Prichard has set herself the ambitious task of writing a novel from the subjectivity of a character for whom the novel form and its language are alien. (61)
When *Coonardoo* was first published in 1927 the interracial love story and frank depiction of sexuality stirred controversy. Socialist poet Mary Gilmore, who in other places wrote romanticized accounts of traditional Aboriginal society, called the novel “vulgar and dirty,” and in his review of the novel for the Bulletin Prize in 1928, Cecil Mann derided the novel for trying to make an Aborigine into a “romantic figure”: “with any other native, from fragrant Zulu girl to fly-kissed Arab maid, she could have done it. But the aboriginal, in Australia anyway, cannot excite any higher feeling than nauseated pity or comical contempt” (both reviews quoted in Throssel 54). Central to the contempt heaped on the novel by both reviewers was an overwhelming discomfort at what they read as the novel’s attempt to make an Aboriginal woman into a conventional romantic heroine, and to base a traditional love story around that figure. The readings were plainly racist in their dismissal of the possibility of interracial desire, but they were also unsubtle and imposed onto the novel a conventional romantic love plot that is belied by the text’s depiction of anthropological difference.

However, Prichard’s novel continues to be read as a love story. More recent reinterpretations of the novel in many ways imitate its initial reception, seeing an allegorical interpretation of the central love plot as the key to understanding the text although they are no longer disgusted by it. We can trace two main phases in these contemporary responses to the novel. The first is exemplified by feminist critic Drusilla Modjeska, who looked back on the early reception of *Coonardoo* in her introduction to a 1990 reissue of the novel. Modjeska argues that it was the novel’s love story specifically that made the novel both so controversial and so progressive. For critics like Gilmore or Mann,
The problem, it would seem, was not so much that Katharine Susannah Prichard exposed the widespread exploitation of black women by white men, but that she wrote of the love, albeit unacknowledged and twisted in on itself, between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. No one would deny that white men used black women for their own sexual gratification. Love, it would seem, was the real indecency. (Prichard, *Coonardoo* v)

For Modjeska the love story was progressive and politically affecting because it invited readerly identification. While Aboriginal people on outback stations might seem foreign and remote to a mostly white, mostly urban readership, a love story, especially a failed one, “tells us something about the failure of love in which we are all complicit” (viii). Dismissing in one breath the significance of the novel’s depictions of racial and sexual exploitation and its rendering of difference, Modjeska’s reading holds up “love” as a force that transcends the racial and cultural distinctions within the novel and also transcends the space between white urban reader and the outback station world that the novel depicts.

Modjeska’s criticism is an example of a particular kind of feminist recovery work done on Australian women writers during the 1980s.44 More recently, several critics have drawn on postcolonial paradigms to question Modjeska’s celebration of the novel. Both Susan Sheridan, in her important book *Along the Faultlines*, and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, in their postcolonial reading of the history of Australian literature *Dark Side of

44 For example, see also Modjeska.
the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind, have produced readings that question the idea that an inter-racial love story is necessarily progressive or transcends basic settler colonial paradigms. While these readings challenge the particular value judgments that both Modjeska and the early racist critics brought to the novel, they also continue to see the love story as both the narrative centre of the novel and the main locus of its interpretive meaning.

For Sheridan sexual love is the metaphor through which Prichard imagines white possession of the land. In Coonardoo the titular character is over and again associated with land and landscape, and thus, “the fantasy of interracial love becomes a kind of justificatory myth for white settlement, a myth of reciprocity and harmonious sharing which would ‘naturalize’ and cover over the history of land seizure and exploitation of the Aborigines” (145). For Hodge and Mishra, the love story between Hugh and Coonardoo as “willing and equal union” produces newly configured and reconciled national genealogies. The novel, they argue, “takes for granted that the only genealogy that can confer legitimacy is the willing and equal union of Whites and Aborigines” (56). Thus Hugh and Coonardoo’s relationship offers “a radical new basis for the legitimacy of the Australian nation” (56). According both to Sheridan and to Hodge and Mishra, Winni, Hugh and Coonardoo’s son, is a figure for the nation, an allegorical communion of black and white Australia and the logical genealogical inheritor of Prichard’s Australia.

As I have emphasized, the fundamental similarity between all these readings, despite the ideological and disciplinary shifts that they so clearly demonstrate, is that each takes an interpretation of the allegorical significance of the love story as the key to understanding the novel. Each reads Coonardoo as at its core what Doris Sommer calls a
“national romance”- a story in which figures who represent different races, regions or social positions transcend social difference through romantic love and thus become allegorical figures for national reconciliation.\textsuperscript{45} The fact that the broad form of the national allegory has structured most readings of the novel, despite the way that the novel refuses this form, says something about the ongoing power of this idea as both a sentiment and as a template for narrative form.

I argue that the love story that operates mainly at the broad level of plot is undermined by what I am calling the novel’s anthropological mode, and Prichard’s attempt to represent the radical difference of Aboriginal subjectivity and society. What is important to understand is that in its anthropological mode, Prichard’s novel moves not in the direction of reciprocity, reconciliation or union, but rather towards a reading of radical difference and incommensurability. Thus while from Hugh’s perspective the relationship is a romance driven by desire that transgresses the bounds of racial segregation and cultural difference, for Coonardoo the relationship remains within the bounds of an Aboriginal kinship structure.\textsuperscript{46} While Hugh is drawn to Coonardoo by

\textsuperscript{45} Sommer coins the term “national romance” to describe a genre of fiction that combines a love story with a national allegory. Here nationalism and eroticism are mapped on to one another such that a love story becomes a way of telling the “story” of the nation. Its classic examples, in Latin America, is a “stories of star crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like. Their passion for conjugal and sexual union spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan minds along with hearts” (5). The national ideal is grounded in narratives of “natural” heterosexual love and marriage becomes a way of imagining nonviolent national conciliation.

\textsuperscript{46} Elizabeth Povinelli has theorized a broadly pervasive cultural binary that opposes a dominant liberal conception of love as an “intimate event” to what she calls the “genealogical grid.” For Povinelli the construction of love as an “intimate event” “figures the social as a set of constraining surfaces, encrusting and deforming the true destination of the self” (\textit{Empire of Love} 177), while simultaneously calling into being a version of the human subject that can only achieve true form above and apart from any social
unconscious forces of desire, such that Coonardoo is “like his own soul,” Coonardoo’s relationship with Hugh is not motivated by “love” or even “desire” in the sense that either Hugh or the romance novel would recognize. The novel provides the reader with an anthropological account of traditional Aboriginal kinship structures and laws, in which a woman may be “lent” to a stranger by her husband for the night, without this incurring the resentment of either party, and this is the explanation that is given for Coonardoo’s actions. Coonardoo goes to Hugh out of “hospitality,” because her husband sends her there, because “Warieda send ‘m”(70).

Similarly, Winni, the child that Coonardoo bears by Hugh, is not a figure for reconciliation or a new national hybrid, and to read the character in this way is to project a particular kind of nationalist consciousness onto the novel that is not evident in Australian fiction until Herbert’s Capricornia in 1938. Rather, the novel draws on anthropological knowledge in order to explain Winni’s place in an Aboriginal kinship structure. We are told that the Aboriginal woman’s husband “by way of hospitality may lend her to a distinguished stranger, or visitor to the camp; but any children she might have would be her husband’s children” (23). Hugh himself recognizes that while “he would like nothing better than to claim the youngster, treat him as a son” (138), this cannot be achieved unproblematically because “there was Warieda” (138), Winni’s Aboriginal father. When Hugh asks the question, “Were his love and pride greater than

grounding, a human subject that emerges through “exfoliating its social skin” (176-7). This particular discourse of love is the basis of much progressive liberal politics, particularly the discourse for gay rights. However she also suggests that the idea of the “intimate event” defines itself through reference to, and derives much of its ideological force from, the construction of the “genealogical grid,” that is, from “discourses about the genealogical society” (199), which find their clearest expression in anthropological discourses about the kinship systems of colonized people.
Warieda’s ... could he do for Winni what Warieda was doing, fit him for an independent life in his natural surroundings?” (138), the novel subjects itself to a discourse of radical relativism that calls into question the moral priority of monogamy and of strictly biological models of progeny and parenting. On a structural level we can argue that the energy of the national romance that works towards the transcendence of difference through romantic love comes into conflict with the novel’s cultural relativism and its commitment to the authenticity of its Aboriginal characters.

Prichard’s representation of the difference of Aboriginal kinship organization had a number of sources that I will briefly outline. At the core of the text’s understanding of Aboriginal kinship structures is the claim by the anthropologists Walter Baldwin Spencer and Fancis James Gillen that Aboriginal people do not link paternity and conception to sexual intercourse - as the novel puts it, that “the blacks, unenlightened by white people, do not associate the birth of children with any casual sexual relationship” (*Native Tribes of Central Australia* 23). It is this particular anthropological claim that stands behind the text’s understanding of Coonardoo’s relationship with Hugh, and it is this claim that allows the text to place Winni, Hugh’s “son,” so firmly within the Aboriginal family. It is also around anthropological discourses of paternity that the text thinks through questions of Aboriginal authenticity.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ In the *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), Spencer and Gillen made an observation that for the Aboriginal people of the Arunta tribes, the “idea firmly held that the child is not the direct result of intercourse, that it may come without this” (265). The anthropologists found that rather than linking pregnancy to sexual intercourse, these particular tribes believed that spirit children residing in the landscape entered the woman as she passed through certain locations. The insight was repeated in several other texts that the two men wrote including *The Native Tribes of North Central Australia* and *The Arunta*, and for Spencer at least, who lived beyond Gillen, the “discovery” was found to extend beyond the Arunta tribes and became something of a truism about Aboriginal
The novel’s broad commitment to kinship and understandings of sex as the core of Aboriginal difference also suggests the influence of Engels’ *Origins of the Family*, which, as I have already indicated, was influential in Australian communist discourse in the 1920s. Prichard herself never claims to be drawing on Engels’ text, but her serious commitment to the party and to questions of Aboriginal difference makes it likely she would have come across the book, and she would certainly have assimilated the discourse about the text that appeared in the Australian communist press. As outlined earlier, in the broad discourse of the CPA, the discussion of Engels’ text was largely theoretical and was not connected to discussions of a contemporaneous Aboriginal population. However, Engels’ descriptions of Aboriginal kinship provided Prichard with the basis for the structure of Coonardoo’s tribe, a contemporaneous social world. Engels also provides a framework through which to approach the question of Aboriginal sexual difference. As I

culture. In *The Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*, published fifteen years after the original statement, Spencer wrote that the belief was “universal” amongst the Northern Territory tribes, and that there were similar beliefs among tribes in Queensland and Western Australia. Spencer and Gillen’s claim had a resonance that travelled beyond anthropology. In broader circles it became proof of the primitive backwardness of Aboriginal people. For example, in *Totem and Taboo* Sigmund Freud paraphrased Frazer’s use of Spencer and Gillen in order to state, “people who had not yet discovered that conception is the result of intercourse might surely be regarded as the most backward and primitive of men” (143). However, for Spencer it was also a way of indexing the authenticity of the anthropological subject. In *The Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* he claimed that the Aboriginal understanding of conception was “of course, naturally, a belief that was one of the first to become modified when the natives have been for some time in contact with white men” (26). The fact that Spencer attributed the changes in this belief to “contact with white men,” and implicitly, the birth of light skinned babies, speaks to a more general anxiety about sexual contact between white men and Aboriginal women, while at the same time overwriting a culture of sexual exploitation with an image of Aboriginal culture “naturally ... modified” by “contact” with settler culture.
will demonstrate, his addresses to the bourgeois moralist about the historical relativism of sexual morality structures Prichard’s own approach to Aboriginal sexual difference.

In the novel’s core moment of anthropological description, Mrs Bessie, who is thinking about the difference between Aboriginal understandings of sex and her own, outlines the kinship structure of the Wytaliba Aborigines:

She was disgusted by practices she considered immoral, until she began to understand a difference to her own in the aboriginal consciousness of sex. She was surprised then, to find in it something impersonal, universal, of a religious mysticism.

From her birth every girl was destined to pass, Mrs Bessie knew, within defined limits of tarloo and descent to mateship with one of her kinsmen. Families on the creek were Banninga, Burong, Baldgery and Kurrimurra. A Banninga woman might be given to a man who was Kurrimurra. Their child would be Burong and could not mate with either a Banninga or a Kurrimurra. Beyond that there was room for choice. The men who were nuba, or nova, to her might never touch her, but they were permissible husbands in case of death or absence of the man to whom her father had given her. Her husband, by way of hospitality, might lend her to a distinguished stranger, or visitor, to the camp; but any children she might have would be her husband’s children. The blacks, unenlightened by white people, do not associate the birth of children with any casual sex relationship. (22-3)
The passage is one of a number of moments in the novel where we shift into an anthropological register and it lays out a set of information about traditional Aboriginal kinship, ceremony and practice. In this case, the reader is provided with information on the organization and structure of Coonardoo’s tribe and on Aboriginal understandings of sex and paternity. The information conveyed in this passage is necessary for the reader to understand how Coonardoo thinks about her relationship with Hugh and the paternity of her son. In this sense a condition of the text’s representation of Aboriginal subjectivity is a number of periodic shifts into an anthropological mode.

But the scene is also an account of a white woman coming to terms with difference, and so it models for the reader a way to think about Aboriginal difference without judgment, and a way of overcoming what the novel calls “white woman prejudice” (22). We can read Mrs Bessie as a figure for the anthropologist in *Coonardoo*. Throughout the novel we see her observing the Aboriginal ritual world from its edges and we see this world through her eyes. Mrs Bessie watches the Wytaiba Aborigines in ways that mirror the place of the participant observer, “from her veranda” and from “the far side of the fire, at a little distance from Warieda, and the rows of women, children and dogs huddled together” (24). In this scene the anthropological perspective is presented as a way of coming to terms with Aboriginal difference. Subject to the anthropologist’s eye, what seems “immoral” reveals itself as a complex and self-contained structure with “defined limits.”

This passage bears a strong resemblance to Engels’ description of the kinship structure of the Kamiloroi people of the Darling River, one of his examples of the

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48 On the construction of the participant observer in anthropological discourse see Clifford’s *Predicament of Culture*. 88
punaluan family. Like Prichard’s, Engels’ description is of a kinship structure organized around four moieties, generationally split, and rotating from one generation to the next: “The first two sections are husbands and wives of one another by birth; according to whether the mother belonged to the first or second section, the children go into the third and fourth; the children of these last two sections, which are also married to one another, come again into the first and second section” (109).

But the more important similarity is in the way both writers frame their description of Aboriginal kinship and sexual practices as a lesson in a certain kind of anthropological relativism. In both cases the author uses a description of the organization of Aboriginal sexual practices to instruct the bourgeois reader in a particular way of comprehending different sexual moralities. What Prichard stages through the eyes of Mrs Bessie, Engels aims directly at the bourgeois moralist:

this group marriage, seen at close hand, does not look quite so terrible as the philistines, whose minds cannot get beyond brothels, imagine it to be ... All that the superficial observer sees in group marriage is a loose form of monogamous marriage, here and there polygamy, and occasional infidelities. It takes years, as it took Fison and Howitt, to discover beneath these marriage customs, which in their actual practice should seem almost familiar to the average European, their controlling law: the law by which the Australian aborigine, wandering hundreds of miles from his home among people whose language he does not understand, nevertheless often finds in every camp and every tribe women who give themselves to him without resistance and without resentment – the law by which
the man with several wives gives one up for the night to his guest. Where the European sees immorality and lawlessness, strict law rules in reality. (109)

Like the scene in Coonardoo, the passage models a particular way of translating difference into universality. Both passages move from a position of bourgeois prejudice, to enlightened anthropological understanding - a move that we can assume is intended for the reader also. And in both passages the particular practice of “lending” the wife to a stranger (Prichard), or “giv[ing] one up to a guest” (Engels) is the central example of Aboriginal sexual difference, and posited as the biggest challenge to bourgeois morality. Engels’ presupposition here is that difference can be not only grasped but in some sense overcome or nullified through anthropological understanding. Beneath the surface of a social world that appears chaotic and immoral, the anthropologist discovers “controlling laws” that, once apprehended, reveal not only the sense and morality of another model of sexual organization but also its familiarity. The enabling paradox of this model is that while social difference needs to be understood on its own terms (the bourgeois moralist fails in this when he sees Aboriginal society as a version of the modern brothel), in understanding difference according to its own underlying principles, the difference is in some sense translated and overcome.

The novel presents anthropology as a way of approaching difference. In the face of incommensurability it recommends a rationalizing cultural relativism. However, the novel’s tragedy rests precisely on the failure of rationality and what it presents as an impasse between white and Aboriginal understandings of sex and the family. Thus although Prichard can recommend, through Mrs Bessie, a rational encounter with
difference through anthropological relativism, in the love story surrounding Hugh and Coonardoo, this difference will manifest as a psychological crisis for the settler subject that is, in the end, written brutally on the Aboriginal woman’s body.

In the novel’s climactic scene, Hugh attacks Coonardoo and “possessed by a rage, unreasoning and devastating” (209), drags her across the fire, and then drives her away from Wytaliba. Prichard works with a model of the subject where repressive reason is always in conflict with the forces of unconscious desire. Hugh’s anger is written as the violent outpourings of a repressed man: Hugh’s cruel language pours “in a torrent” (210); his fury is a kind of possession, a “madness,” “devastating” and “unreasoning” (210). The novel asks us to read Hugh’s rage as the manifestation of a series of repressions. Significantly, Hugh’s repressions throughout the novel are not mainly sexual, but rather to do with his high minded commitments not to “tamper with” (139) the integrity of the Aboriginal belief system. For example, Hugh’s determination not to alter Aboriginal understandings of paternity means he will not father Winni, despite feelings toward the boy which are “too passionate and overwhelming to be reasoned about” (138). Hugh attacks Coonardoo because he has overheard the Aboriginal women talking about Sam Geary and Coonardoo and the night that “Geary ... took Coonardoo” (209). But the fury of this scene is only partly that of a betrayed husband or lover; it is fuelled more substantially by the devastating effort of Hugh’s so called rational commitments to Aboriginal cultural purity. The rage and brutality of the scene collapses the clear separation of cultural relativism and violence, inscribing one within the other.

We might argue that Hugh Watt’s crisis is that he wants both to love but also to protect the Wytaliba Aborigines. His rage emerges from the point where his rational
investments in the cultural authenticity of the Wytaiba Aborigines is crossed by the energies of eros. While the novel attaches this conflict to Hugh specifically, making it his own personal and psychological crisis, we can argue that this is also the driving contradiction of the novel itself. Coonardoo similarly brings together the energies of the love plot with a commitment to anthropological relativism. In the novel’s ending it is the body of the Aboriginal woman that bears the burden of resolving this contradiction. As Leigh Dale has argued, the violence that is visited upon Coonardoo’s body signifies the “truth” of Hugh’s desire: “the writing is a literal inscription of Hughie’s anxieties and desires upon Coonardoo’s body” (136).

Coonardoo herself has no way of understanding Hugh’s anger and until the end she remains “protected” from the dilemmas of a white conscience. Coonardoo meets Hugh’s accusation with a simple affirmation “Eeh-mm” (209), and we are told that she is “unable to understand the madness with which Hughie had attacked her” (209). The woman will die in a state of bewilderment, still wondering why Hugh has turned on her with such brutality: “What was it? What had happened to Youie that he should treat her so? Did he not want her?” “What had she done?” “Was it Youie to knock her around like that?” (230-231)

Like Brumby Innes, Coonardoo leaves us with an injured Aboriginal woman who is inarticulate in the terms of the text. Brumby Innes gives us political language and representation only as an absence. Nonetheless the play demands that the Australian left to reckon with the gap between political representation and Aboriginal suffering. In Coonardoo the very question of politics is foreclosed, replaced with a sentimentalizing discourse about cultural authenticity. To the extent that the novel makes cultural purity a
driving value, it participates in the same brutal logic of absolutes that drives Hugh’s attack on Coonardoo. *Coonardoo* has no place for the Aboriginal rage that shocks through *Brumby Innes*. Indeed, in *Coonardoo* the scene of rage is transferred to the white man, and consequently oppositional protest is rewritten as the personalized psychological crisis of the settler subject. In *Brumby Innes* we have rage with no access to political language; in *Coonardoo* we are left with injury and abuse that has no access to rage.
Chapter Two

White Aborigines: P.R. Stephensen, Xavier Herbert and the Publicist

This chapter explores the way ideas about Aboriginality informed right wing nationalist and fascist projects in Australia in the 1930s, unpacking the unlikely logic by which a deep identification with the Aboriginal and with the political struggle for Aboriginal rights emerged as the core of a set of fantasies about white Australian ethnicity and the great Australian novel. The story thus moves from left to right, from the way the Aboriginal was both approached and displaced by Marxian labor discourses, to the contradictory history of the Aboriginal invoked by Australia’s far right. Broadly speaking, this shift in political affiliation also encompasses a shift away from discourses invested in Aboriginal difference and traditional Aboriginal society, to discourses that emphasize common genealogies for white and Aboriginal Australia. Paradoxically some of the nationalist discourses most invested in Australian whiteness also relied heavily on an ambivalent identification with the Aboriginal.

I take as a case study the publication of Xavier Herbert’s classic protest novel of the North Australian frontier, Capricornia, by the right wing fascist group surrounding the Publicist newspaper. The story thus also moves geographically, from the far north of Western Australia, Prichard’s Nor’West, to Sydney, Darwin, and the Northern Territory: to the relationship between the extreme political right and the emergent Aboriginal rights movement in Sydney, but also to the hybrid and cosmopolitan sub-tropical zone of the north-Northern Territory, above the Tropic of Capicorn, that provided the setting for Herbert’s novel.
The *Publicist* was an ultra right wing nationalist newspaper based in Sydney that ran from 1936 to 1942. The paper promoted a deep investment in white Australian ethnicity and broad sympathy with national socialist Germany. The *Publicist* group went on to become the Australia First Movement, probably the strongest manifestation of an organicist ethnic nationalism Australia has seen. The agenda of the *Publicist* newspaper was not always consistent, shifting between different issues and with different writers. The paper particularly wavered between an anti-British nationalist agenda and an ambivalent investment in monarchism. However, what the paper perhaps displays most strongly is the desire to establish an ethnic basis for the Australian nation, outside of and beyond a European inheritance. The *Publicist* sought an ethnic Australian identity that would emerge through a bound relationship to the Australian landscape and the shared sentiments of common blood. It advocated a strong anti-British nationalism and an Australian born, racially homogenous and specifically white national population.

Published in 1938 by the “*Publicist* Publishing Company,” and hailed over and again in the *Publicist* newspaper as the Great Australia Novel, Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* is now considered a classic of twentieth Century Australian writing. Herbert’s long novel is multifarious and contradictory and it beties any attempt at quick summary. But it has at its core an enraged protest on behalf of the mixed race population in the Northern Territory, what it calls “the twenty thousand half-castes in the country” (95), who were born from sexual relations between mostly white men and Aboriginal women. Its characters variously embody and voice protest against what one character
calls “the mad pride in colour” (214), the dogged and inhuman commitment to the fantasy of a white Australia and the racist exclusions it depends on. As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey has neatly summarized, quoting Maureen Perkins, “in Herbert’s work, and in his letters, one can observe a certain skin politics where ... ‘seeing all colour, including white, and challenging colour’s power to demarcate boundaries of community goes hand in hand with naming hypocrisies of the past’” (158). In the context of the rising call for Aboriginal citizenship rights during the 1930s, the novel provides a damning portrait of both the individual and political neglect visited on Australia’s mixed race population: the failure of white fathers to take responsibility for their mixed race children, but also the failure of the state-based systems of so-called “Aboriginal protection.”

The critique of the ideologies of white Australia in Herbert’s novel seems to directly contradict the insistence on white national homogeneity that saturated the Publicist. But the novel nonetheless emerges from the pages of the Publicist as the triumphant manifestation of its nationalist agenda. The paper suggested not only that Capricornia was a “great” national novel but also that its subject, a resounding protest for Aboriginal Australia, was the Australian novel’s proper subject. Further, in the discourse surrounding Capricornia, the Publicist group made the Aboriginal rights movement central to its own nationalist agenda.

This puzzling historical convergence asks us to think about the place of the Aboriginal in right wing nationalist and fascist projects and in the history of the Australian novel. At the core of this enquiry is a question about what happens to the organicist mode in nationalist thought – the idea of national cultures as vital living entities, biologically linked and regenerated, and grounded in a particular landmass –
when it is translated into the space of the settler colony, a space that is constituted so fundamentally by migration and displacement. In the discourse surrounding the publication of *Capricornia* by the Publicist we can see a conjunction between three incongruous social discourses. Drawing on ideas about the ethnic nation from Europe and national socialist Germany, the Publicist worked to solidify a biological discourse about a white Australian type; drawing on the history of Australian cultural and literary nationalism, it produced a literary discourse about the great Australian novel - who was fit to write it and it what its proper subject would be; and in conversation and political solidarity with the early activists for indigenous rights, it contributed to a new political discourse about Aboriginal citizenship rights.49

*Capricornia* itself can be read as a crossing point for various discordant inscriptions of Australian space and nation. The novel’s plotting makes an identification with the Aboriginal central to a fantasy of white Australian ethnicity and belonging. Structurally and thematically, *Capricornia* stages the white man’s search for an Aboriginal son who would provide the white father with retroactive access to a legitimating and autochthonous Aboriginal genealogy, though one that is paradoxically “fathered” by the white man. At the same time, the novel’s geographic imagination enacts a displacement of the insular and unilinear nationalist narrative that structures its central plotting. Alongside its nationalizing genealogy, Herbert’s novel can also be read as performing a critical remapping of Australia’s north that dislodges national space for

49 In the 1930s Aboriginal people were unable to vote in federal and most state elections and were not counted in the national census. In some states Aboriginal people were subject to special laws that restricted their legal, economic, and civil rights and many lived on special reserves where they were subject to further restrictions. The special status of Aboriginal people in the Australian constitution was not amended until 1967.
the more porous and indeterminate lines of region, tracing a series of economic, geographic and affective transactions north from Australia’s north coast, to the islands of Southeast Asia and beyond. This regional remapping stands in direct contradiction to the Publicist’s nationalist imagination. While the Publicist made an impassioned identification with Australian spatial experience the basis for a vision of white Australian ethnicity, *Capricornia* undermines the apparent solidity and identity of national space.

To understand these historic convergences I use the interpretive framework of the assemblage. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Jasbir Puar explains the assemblage as “a series of dispersed but mutually implicated networks, [which] draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces” (211). An interpretive framework that resists “knowing, naming and stabilizing identity across space and time” (212), the assemblage allows us to move beyond interpretations that would reduce unlikely convergences to the idiosyncrasies of the personal biography on the one hand, or resolve ideological contradictions as necessary elements of a flexible but broadly consistent discourse of Australian “whiteness” on the other.\(^{50}\) The history of *Capricornia* in the Publicist has been taken up in some excellent biographical work on both Herbert and the Publicist’s main pundit, P.R. Stephensen (De Groen; Munro). I depart from this biographical work by opening up some of the major writings of Herbert and Stephensen to close reading, and emphasizing the particular narrative strategies that

\(^{50}\) On the discourse of whiteness in Xavier Herbert’s letters and novels see Probyn-Rapsey.
emerge at the convergence of incongruous and in many ways incompatible political affiliations.\textsuperscript{51}

In attending to the Aboriginal that was invoked by the far right I also address an oversight in much recent work on Australian nationalist investments in the Aboriginal. Most of this work has been framed in response to the landmark 1992 High Court ruling which recognized indigenous prior ownership for the first time: \textit{Mabo v. State of Queensland} (no. 2.). Studies making this recent political event the primary impetus for an analysis of the relationship of Australian nationalism to the fact of prior Aboriginal occupation focus, understandably, on the history of liberalism and the multicultural state. On the one hand, critics have emphasized the continuities between an explicitly colonizing state and the politics of native title and reconciliation, pointing out the way a liberal political agenda inherits and rescripts the violence of colonial dispossession. On the other hand critics have also pointed to the profound shifts evidenced in the contemporary investments in traditional Aboriginal culture, paying particular attention to the new kinds of nationalism that inhabit the liberal multi-cultural state.\textsuperscript{52}

As Anthony

\textsuperscript{51} This chapter is also informed by historical studies of the \textit{Australian First Movement} and the \textit{Publicist} by Barbara Winter and Bruce Muirden.

\textsuperscript{52} For example, Patrick Wolfe argues the landmark status of this decision conceals the profound continuities between more explicit state practices of “extermination” leveled at indigenous people in earlier colonial periods, from massacre to the deliberate removal of mixed race children from their families, and the ongoing practices of state control that are imposed on indigenous people (1994); Povinelli argues that what she calls a “liberal politics of recognition” and the “mechanics of state recognition” control what aspects of Aboriginal culture can be “incorporated safely into the national lifeworld” (“Governance of the Prior”: 21); Anthony Moran emphasizes the way that contemporary nationalist investments in a traditional Aboriginal presence can be mapped onto the historic shift away from the white Australia policy and the aims of a culturally and racially homogenous nation; Gooder and Jacobs trace the shifting public affect of the Australian settler population’s relationship to the nation’s colonizing past, focusing particularly on the demand for a national apology; Andrew Lattas and Annette Hamilton both explore
Moran has observed, while “historically ... nationalism excluded Aboriginality and all other non-white minorities ... a new form of nationalism is evident in public events such as the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics (2000) which promotes a multicultural Australia, with Aboriginality and Aboriginal traditions afforded a special place” (“Psychodynamics” 668).

I depart from these recent studies by emphasizing nationalist appropriations of Aboriginality that pre-date the dismantling of the white-Australia policy, Mabo, and the recent reconciliation movements, and that fall outside of the domain of the liberal state. 53 Heather Goodall has pointed out that until the 1960s, an “interest in traditionalism in any culture and the search for essential cultural and social traits, made the right ... far more receptive than the left to the assertion that [Aboriginal people] had entitlements based on their difference from white Australians, a major one being their traditional association with the land” (270). Following this suggestive observation I contribute to the project of exploring moments in Australia’s colonial history where non-indigenous identifications with the Aboriginal coexist, albeit unstably, with non-liberal political traditions and with an older style of nationalism that was complicit with the ideologies of white Australia. 54

the appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality in contemporary popular and public discourse as ‘a new form’ of nationalist primitivism (Lattas “Nationalism”; Lattas “Primitivism”; Hamilton). There is an exception to this in the field of art history, which has produced several sustained studies of the long history, from invasion and settlement to the contemporary period, of Aboriginal appropriation (McLean; Thomas).

53 I use liberal here in the broadly colloquial sense to mean the state-sponsored protection of individual rights oriented towards an inclusive vision of human rights. I do not mean the Australian Liberal Party, which falls on the “conservative” side of political lines, speaking in broad terms. For a good introduction to the history of ‘liberal’ as a term and particularly what it has come to represent in contemporary debates see Singh.

54 For example John Hirst has described the way that the Australian Natives Association, a nineteenth century nationalist organization for Australian born white men, played with the word “native” by calling their social functions corroborees and using Aboriginal
The chapter begins with an account of the relationship between the *Publicist* and the movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights. Focusing on the writings of P.R. Stephensen, I unpack the narrative strategies that made an identification with Aboriginality and the movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights compatible with a discourse of white Australian national ethnicity. I then turn to the paper’s publication and promotion of Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* in order to demonstrate the work the novel was asked to do to make the movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights useful to a literary and ethnic nationalist agenda. This is followed by a reading of the novel that demonstrates the way in which its broad narrative arc speaks to the preoccupations and political affiliations of the *Publicist*. In the final section I move away from the *Publicist* in a reading of the novel’s spatial imagination, in which Herbert’s critical remapping of Australia’s north displaces national space for the more porous lines of region.

“The spirit of the place”: P.R. Stephensen and the *Publicist*

The *Publicist* newspaper was the main arena for a group of extreme nationalists who circled around the wealthy financier William Miles and the writer P.R. Stephensen during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Stephensen, a literary and cultural nationalist, is best remembered for his three part polemical essay, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, in which he set out a program for a national literary culture based in what he called, after D.H. Lawrence, “the spirit of the place” (*Foundations* 11). Stephensen’s overwhelming motifs to decorate their meeting rooms in an ‘Australian’ style. See also Bruce Scates on William Lane, Frank Bongiorno on Bernard O’Dowd, and Robert Sellick on the Jindyworobak poetry movement.
preoccupation in this essay is with national individuation: to articulate what makes Australia different from Britain and to assert Australian nationalism’s “right to exist” (19). He locates Australia’s unique claim to national identity in what he terms the “Australian-born” (31) and particularly in the Australian-born writer’s ability to write authentically and unselfconsciously about the Australian place, to “draw directly from Australian life and not from a bookish literary idea in imitation of the English poets” (29).

The category of the “Australian-born” can be understood as Stephensen’s attempt to claim a unique ethnic identity for the Australian settler subject and to claim for Australia not only a cultural identity but also a racial identity outside of “Englishness.” As Robert Young has recently argued, the idea of Englishness was invented in the nineteenth century as a form of long distance identity for the subjects of the British white dominions, such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. “Englishness,” he argues “was created for the diaspora – an ethnic identity designed for those people who were precisely not English but of English descent” (1). Stephensen can be read as trying to decouple the settler-colonial subject from the kind of diasporic Englishness that Young identifies through claiming a distinctive Australian ethnicity. Stephensen did this by making “place” the basis of national ethnicity, claiming that landscape and environment transformed the physiological makeup of the Australian body, directing it along new ethnic and genetic lines. “Our background such as it is,” he says, “is operating on us subtly to produce a new version of the human species” (*Foundations* 32), and he predicts that not only a “new nation” but also “a new human type is being formed” (50).

Unsurprisingly, this preoccupation with ethnic identity was tied in with a preoccupation
with ethnic homogeneity. For Stephensen, Australia was “the only continent on the earth inhabited by one race under one government, speaking one language” (18).

Despite its investments in biologizing nationalist discourses, *Foundations of Culture* is first and foremost an essay about national literature. Stephensen emphatically linked Australia’s national status to its national literature, claiming: “a nation, in fact, without a literature is incomplete. Australian without a literature remains a colony, no nation” (16). And the essay’s centre is a fierce rebuttal of a set of arguments about Australia’s cultural and literary inferiority presented by G. H. Cowling, Professor of English Literature at the University of Melbourne. Yet despite the ways in which literary nationalism might have moved Stephensen away from biologizing nationalist discourses, in *Foundations of Culture*, Stephensen explicitly linked literary identity with ethnicity, indeed suggesting that the two were mutually interdependent. Australia’s ascent to literary independence, he suggested, would be achieved in symbiosis with the emergence of an Australian racial type: as a result of “physiographical factors,” which “work slowly” but work nonetheless, “ultimately the Australian race will be quite different from the ‘English’ race and hence Australian literature will be quite different from the merely English literature of England” (141).

In the *Publicist*, Stephensen translated his ideas about an indigenous literary culture into an explicit political program for the bio-political management of the Australian population. In a country of migrants, the “Australian-born” became the figure-head of a eugenics-style program to create a future Australia that was homogenous,

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55 The explicit comparison here was the United States of America. Stephensen also states, “Australia has no large minorities – of Negroes, Jews, Italians, mixed Europeans – no historical Spanish, French or Puritan influences: all mighty facts in America” (13).
unique and, most importantly, born on and of Australian soil. Opposed to all immigration, the Publicist promoted population growth through programs for early motherhood and reproduction. In their “twelve points,” a policy statement published in the Publicist in November 1938 and also printed as an independent leaflet, they make this position clear:

The Australia-First groups do not look to immigration as a solution of Australia’s population problem, but recommend, instead, an intensive campaign for the encouragement of early marriage, endowment of motherhood, and child welfare, combined with the statutory elimination of females of child bearing age from industrial employment at wages lower than are paid to males (“Twelve Points” 9).

Such models of biological management were seen as controlling the racial and genetic make-up of future generations, excluding foreign elements, and at the same time promoting a native national culture. Australian birth was the basis for a vision of a national population that would not be based in imported cultural and human influences but would be bred up organically on Australian soil.

The Publicist was pro-Australian and anti-British; it criticized democracy and it demanded national racial purity; it was fiercely anti-Semitic and it expressed unreserved admiration for Adolf Hitler and the axis powers. By 1937 the paper was pro-Japan and by 1938 it was explicitly pro-Hitler. The group’s support for the axis powers was an expression of its anti-British sentiment and its commitment to a German blut und boden style nationalism as a model for Australian nationalist culture. In June 1938 the paper’s...
financier, William Miles, began printing Hitler’s major policy speeches in full. As Stephensen saw it, Hitler’s speeches provided a testament to the fact that “something deeper than economics” was both the cause and the solution to national “stagnation and discouragement”. He argued that while in Germany, “blood” could form the basis of national affinity, in Australia, where the people are “too mixed in inheritance for blood to provide a defining feature,” the basis must be found in “place”: “this place, Australia, has a differentness, able to be imparted to those who are born of its soil” (Stephensen “Spirit of the Land” 8). Stephensen’s notion of “the spirit of the place,” provided a model of ethnic nationalism to hold up against what he saw as the inadequacies of race to differentiate the Australian nation. This nationalism was not based in the idea of “blood” per se, but it retained many of its associations and symbolic resources. One’s place in Stephensen’s Australia could be guaranteed only by birth; Stephensen’s Australia would be an organic and vital community that was both perpetuated and horizontally connected by the “cycle” of heterosexual reproduction.

56 The Publicist printed Hitler’s speeches of 20th February 1938 and 30th January 1939, in full and translated into English spread out over several months: June 1938, pp.13-16; July 1938, pp.11-14; August 1938, pp.14-16; September 1938, (pp.12-14); May 1939 (pp.2-3); June 1939 (pp.11-15); July 1939 (pp. 15-16); August 1939, (pp.14-16); September 1939 (pp. 14-17).
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Figure 1: Front cover of Publicist July 1938
The Publicist and the Early Aboriginal Rights Movement

Given their sympathies with some of the worst and most racist extremes of twentieth century nationalist thought, it is prima facie puzzling that the Publicist group were among the key non-indigenous supporters of the struggle for Aboriginal citizenship rights in the 1930s. This aspect of the Publicist’s activities has been little commented on in histories of the movement (Winter; Muirden). The Publicist published key statements of the Aboriginal citizenship rights movement by Aboriginal activists Jack Patten and William Ferguson (Patten and Ferguson), and Stephensen worked closely with Patten and Ferguson to organize the Aboriginal Day of Mourning, a protest scheduled to coincide with the national sesqui-centenary celebrations on Australia Day in 1938. The Publicist Press also funded and printed the paper of the Aborigines Progressive Association, Abo Call, which, in the words of the paper’s main editor, Jack Patten, was “established to present the case for Aborigines from the point of view of Aborigines themselves” (“To All Aborigines” 1). These involvements in the early Aboriginal rights movement were not insubstantial. The Aboriginal Day of Mourning is now widely considered to be the first mass civil protest by Aboriginal people and a major turning point both in Aboriginal political organization and in white Australia’s awareness of Aboriginal concerns (Attwood; Burgman; Goodall). The Abo Call enabled the Aboriginal rights movement to reach a far broader audience than had previously been possible, allowing organizers to

57 For example in Barbara Winter’s The Australia First Movement and the Publicist 1936-1942 the group’s support for Aboriginal rights and its investments in Australian literature are posited as “beyond the scope of this book” (11). Bruce Muirden’s The Puzzled Patriots: the Story of the Australia First Movement also de-emphasizes this aspect of the group’s history.
communicate with remote communities beyond the reach of travel and introducing a widespread and scattered Aboriginal population to a shared language of protest and civil rights and to a set of common goals (Goodall).

The contradictions in the Publicist group’s commitment to Aboriginal citizenship rights are several. Not only did demands for the national inclusion of a black Australian population contradict the Publicist’s stance on white Australia, but, perhaps more significantly, the Aboriginal rights movement challenged the very possibility of white national legitimacy. There was also a fundamental ideological contradiction in the Publicist’s support for the Aboriginal rights movement. The early struggle for Aboriginal citizenship rights drew on a liberal rhetoric of individual civil liberties and uniform political rights that were blind to race. In 1938, the Publicist published, both in the paper and as a pamphlet, Patten and Ferguson’s statement for the Aborigines Progressive Association, “Citizenship Rights for Aborigines!” True to its title, the statement protested the idea that race should form the basis for citizenship and the enjoyment of the protection of the state: “the typical Aboriginal or half-caste, born and bred in the bush, is just as good a citizen, and just as good an Australian as anyone else” (Patten and Ferguson “Citizenship” 7). Couched in the language of equality, it criticized “racial prejudice” and stereotype, rejected any real basis for racial distinction and demanded equal inclusion for Aboriginal people in the Australian nation and equal recognition under the law: “we ask – and we have every right to demand – that you should include us, fully and equally with yourselves, in the body of the Australian nation” (5). By contrast the Publicist was critical of liberal democratic principles and explicitly distanced itself
from the idea that the nation could be created through the actions of a democratic and impersonal state (Winter).

However as well as mobilizing a liberal rhetoric of social equality, the early Aboriginal rights movement also made the greater and more primary claim of Aboriginal people to the land. Insisting on the moral culpability of the settler invasion, and evoking something akin to prior ownership, Citizenship Rights states: “you came here only recently, and you took our land away from us by force. You have almost exterminated our people but there are enough of us remaining here to expose the humbug of your claim, as white Australians, to be a civilized, progressive, kindly and human nation” (5).

In such claims to prior occupancy Patten and Ferguson undermined the moral and legal foundations of Australia. Yet, paradoxically, it was precisely in those moments where the Aboriginal rights movement claimed the special status of Aboriginal people and their rights to the land, that their language and projection of identity was closest to that of the Publicist nationalists. Patten and Ferguson’s statement drew on the symbolism of origin and a deep temporal connection to the land: “You are the New Australians, but we are the Old Australians. We have in our arteries the blood of the Original Australians, who have lived in this land for many thousands of years” (5). While a statement like this insisted on the priority of an Aboriginal claim to the land, it also displayed an uncanny similarity to the lexicon of the Publicist nationalists. Both drew on a language of origin, and of connection to the land carried by blood.58

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58 For a reading of the some of the similarities and differences between the discourse of the indigenous rights movement and the discourse of ethnic nationalism see Ronald Niezen (2000).
Indeed we might argue that while the early Aboriginal rights movement made its central demands in terms of individual democratic rights, it always also claimed the special status of Indigenous people as a group, and their unique claim both to the land and to a different kind of political recognition. In this sense the Aboriginal rights movement poses a challenge to liberal political models. A common sense of the limits of liberal democratic principles explains something of the affiliations between the Aboriginal movement and the far right despite what seem to be the obvious ideological divergences.

For the Publicist it was the capacity for the Aboriginal to encapsulate a fantasy of ethnic national belonging that made the Aboriginal rights movement attractive to its nationalist agenda. Further it was around this capacity of the Aboriginal to signify a deep temporal connection to the land that a political affiliation, a desire to lend support to a minority political movement, was transformed into something closer to an identification with and an appropriation of the position of the indigene. As we will see, in Stephesen’s cultural output there is a constant slippage between the desire to claim the Australian-born as a white native figure and an invocation of the native as Aboriginal. The cover image of his Foundations of Culture is telling. The image shows a Hermes figure leaping from a map of Australia, as if to symbolize the new emergence of a white European ancestry on Australian soil. But the figure also has stereotypically Aboriginal features and holds not a staff, but a spear. This image thus presents native Australian identity as a hybrid of European and Aboriginal traditions. In the next section I turn in more detail to Stephensen’s ambivalent identification with the Aboriginal and to Stephensen and the Publicist’s attempts to resolve the contradictions between their affiliations with the
Aboriginal rights movement on the one hand and their investments in whiteness on the other.

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Figure 2: Cover image for first edition of P.R. Stephensen’s *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1936)
Aryan Aborigines

The Publicist attempted to assimilate the Aboriginal into their vision of a racially homogenous white national culture in a number of ways. Firstly, the Publicist explicitly differentiated Aboriginal people from ethnic immigrant populations through the trope of native birth. The Publicist claimed that as Aboriginal people were indigenous they should not be grouped with “ethnic” immigrant populations. Nonetheless there was some uncertainty about where an Aboriginal population should be located in relation to the Publicist’s stance on racial and cultural homogeneity. While an Aboriginal population could be made to fit with Stephensen’s figure of the Australian born, it nonetheless challenged the implicit racial dimensions of that figure. Here the Publicist’s proposals were similar to those presented in contemporaneous official discourses. The Publicist advocated biological assimilation as the best way eventually to eliminate the Aboriginal from a purportedly white national population, in terms that resonate with official policies of “breeding out the colour.”\(^{59}\) Point 10 of the 1938 “twelve points” was

“HOMOGENEITY”: “the Australia-First groups oppose formations of distinct ethnic racial minorities by immigrants to Australia. (As regards aborigines, who are indigenous,

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\(^{59}\) See for example proceedings from Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities held at Canberra 21-23 Apr 1937*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra. While there are key similarities between the Publicist’s stance on assimilation and the “breeding out the color” policies, we should note that official assimilation policies were based on strict control over Aboriginal people’s lives, and did not, at least in the immediate present, involve granting equal rights or citizenship to Aboriginal people. By contrast the Publicist group advocated citizenship and civil and social equality alongside biological assimilation, for example committing to “educate our Aborigines, concede them complete civil and social equality, cease exploiting them and encourage them to interbreed with whites” (*Publicist. August* (1936): 6.).
a raising of status, leading to ultimate absorption is advocated)” (9). This aim is indicative of the unstable terms with which the *Publicist* simultaneously saw the Aboriginal population as a threat to white Australian identity, and differentiated between the Aboriginal and the immigrant.

A second solution was provided by contemporary discourses of racial classification and specifically by the theory that Aboriginal people could be classified as Caucasian or as Aryan (Winter 19, 84). This theory was drawn from the idea circulating at the time that Aboriginal and white Australians had common Indo-European roots deriving from an original migration from India. In its usual form this theory postulated that the racial affiliates of the Dravidians of Southern India had spread North West to Europe and South East to Australia (McGregor “Aboriginal Caucasian”, W. Anderson).  

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60 This theory had its origins in the linguistics discovery of the common roots of Sanskrit and the major European languages. In the Australian context, the theory of a racial relationship between the “Aboriginal” and “Caucasian” “type” comes from late nineteenth century evolutionary biology. In 1893 Alfred Russel Wallace, a forerunner of Charles Darwin in proposing evolution through natural selection, proposed “the three great divisions of mankind, Negroid, Mongolian and Caucasian” as “well marked types” (McGregor, “An Aboriginal Caucasian” 12). Some variation of this theory was repeated regularly until the 1940s, although its interpretation and emphasis was subject to change depending on the investments and techniques of the scholar. As Russell McGregor argues,

the theory of Aboriginal - Caucasian relatedness could serve a number of purposes: to emphasize the relevance of Aboriginal studies as the study of the Europeans’ own past; to bolster claims for Aboriginal rights and justice; and to lend scientific credibility to proposals for the biological absorption of half-castes. This is not to suggest that the postulated racial relationship was nothing but a rhetorical flourish appended to social and political argumentation; merely that it could serve such rhetorical purposes as occasion demanded. Scientific ideas of race, as applied to the Australian Aborigines, were not only ideologies of exclusion and difference; the Aborigine was not unambiguously constructed as a racial “Other.” For certain purposes, it was desirable to emphasize their similarity and connectedness to Europeans, and racial science could be called upon for this
However, as well as providing a way to assimilate the Aboriginal to a vision of national homogeneity, the theory of Caucasian roots or, as the Publicist group saw it, Aryan roots, for Aboriginal people also provided a powerful vector of identification, as it offered a way for white Australians to claim an Aboriginal genealogy. This worked inversely to most theories of racial affinity and particularly those official discourses aimed at assimilating the Aboriginal population into the settler one through practices commonly referred to as “breeding out the colour” (Wolfe, “Nation and MiscegeNation”; McGregor “Breed out the Colour”). Rather than emphasizing the ways that Aboriginal people were “like us” and might therefore be biologically absorbed by the white population, it argued that “we” were in fact “like them.” It did not just bolster a push for assimilation but in fact enabled a deeply desired, fantasized identification with the Aboriginal and her unquestioned claim to be born of the land. An Aboriginal genealogy grounded the Publicist’s narratives of national autochthony and redirected white Australian genealogies away from Europe, offering an alternative inheritance that maintained the Australian continent’s insular integrity.  

The direct political implication of this branch of racial theorizing could at times be politically progressive, providing a scientific buttress for the idea that Aboriginal people could be successfully included in a more or less homogenous national body. Aboriginal Activists William Ferguson and Jack Paton drew on a version of race relatedness theories in their “Citizenship Rights for Aborigines” when they stated, “Aborigines can be absorbed into the white race within three generations, without any fear of a ‘throw back.’ This proves that the Australian Aboriginal is somewhat similar in blood type to yourselves, as regards inter-marriage and inter-breeding” (7).  

61 On nationalist discourses of insularity and the ‘island nation’ see Suvendrini Perera’s *Australia and the Insular Imagination.*
We might argue that through racial recoding, the figure of the Aryan Aborigine resolves the persistent slippage between the figure of the native settler and the figure of the Aboriginal. Stephensen’s unpublished novel, *The Settlers*, makes this apparent and also shows the usefulness of the Aryan Aborigine to nationalist narratives, as in the following explanation of humanity’s origins by the eccentric drunk Dr Morpeth:

Life began here. This is the Oldest Continent. There used to be a land bridge from here to Asia. Man evolved here from tree-marsupials which had evolved into monkeys and apes. *On the Australian plains Man learned to walk upright*: Then he crossed to India, the home of the Aryan race … *The Aryan race began in Australia*. Australia is the original home of the white man. In coming to this land we are returning home. *Australia is home to the white man*. Marvelous things will happen as a result of this homecoming. (Stephensen n.d: 116; emphasis in original)

Revising the customary view that the Aryan migrations originated in Southern India, Stephensen imagines Australia as the first point of origin, the seat and birthplace of mankind. As Stephensen’s biographer, Craig Munro, has argued, the theory allowed Stephensen to reconcile his racism with his respect for Aboriginal culture, and to assimilate the Aboriginal to a white nationalism (123). But this attachment to the idea of the Aryan Aborigine was more than personal idiosyncrasy; it also provided a way to imagine a new originary national moment and a trajectory of national history that was marred by neither colonial violence nor British cultural influence. Dr Morpeth’s
emphatic statements, “Life began here. This is the Oldest Continent,” effectively cut out the rest of the world. If the Aryans were returning to their place of origin when they settled in Australia, then European history receded in significance to become little more than an interval in the greater evolution of the Aryan race on Australian soil. Thus the doctrine of Aryanism was detached from Europe and transplanted to Australian soil for the sake of an Australian national trajectory in which the Aryan Aborigine was really just the settler cast backwards, grounded in a million year tradition. As Dr Morpeth puts it to his friend the Vicar, “You and I vicar, are Australian Aborigines of a million years ago; gone white in the cold latitudes” (116).

The complex dynamics of Stephensen’s identification with the Aboriginal can also be seen in an article by Stephensen published in the Publicist in 1937 on the topic of native Australian birth. The article included a table of the birth places of the Australian population at the 1911 census showing that 82.90% was Australian born and arguing that birth was the primary source of national belonging. In this article the deference to the category of birth place can once again be seen as aiming to counter the perceived inadequacy of race based models of nationalism to differentiate the Australian nation, while maintaining the symbolic resources of birth and kinship as the basis of national community and belonging. The article stated that the “English-speaking World has more than two major types. Australians are already a third distinct kind of ‘Saxon’ cross-bred, locally modified” ("The Bunyip Critic" 4). In other words, the figure of the Australian born formed the basis for what was essentially a race based, ethnic nationalism that could nonetheless be differentiated from a British racial and cultural heritage.
The article was accompanied by a photo of Stephensen standing next to an Aboriginal man with the caption, “One of these two is PR Stephensen” (figure 3). The picture is a joke. Although the two men are similarly attired in casual spots coats and akubra style hats, race signifies far more strongly than national attire and there is no doubt which man is Stephensen. But there is also a playfulness here, and a will to believe that the shadow, cast by the hats, which falls similarly across the eyes of both men, might actually confuse their identity. The suggestion is made that at least in theory, either of these men could be the rowdy nationalist voice behind the paper and that either man could be the true Australian native.

The picture indicates the way the idea of the Australian born always evokes an identification with the Aboriginal, as well as the way that the Aboriginal was explicitly mobilized to differentiate Australia from Britain. However, as Diana Fuss’s important work on identification reminds us, identification always works along multiple and contradictory vectors. The caption, “One of these two is PR Stephensen”, is also a disidentification, or perhaps an identification disavowed. For only one of the men could be PR Stephensen: the Aboriginal man had been summoned only that he might be displaced.
We might argue that Stephensen’s appropriation of the Aboriginal never really disrupted his investment in white national homogeneity. In *The Settlers* the Aryan-Aborigine is simply a temporal extension of the white settler; in the picture discussed above Stephensen’s flirtation with racial difference is overwritten by his claim to singularity. However, there were occasional moments in the *Publicist* where the paper’s turn towards the Aboriginal and the political discourse for Aboriginal rights disrupted an otherwise homogenizing nationalist discourse.

In 1936 Xavier Herbert had an unsigned letter published in the *Publicist*. The letter utilized the recognized categories of the *Publicist* group and articulated many of the same preoccupations. Stating that “the Aboriginal though black is not a Negro. Or anything like a Negro. He is kin to the so called Aryan, as the result of cross-breeding
plainly shows,” Herbert reproduced the Publicist’s concern to draw a racially distinct line between the Aboriginal and other black populations. However, the letter also made explicit, in a way that Stephensen never did, the unstable logic behind the Publicist’s investment in the Aboriginal:

The abo. cross is the prime factor in making Australians of today different from Europeans by just the little difference that matters. Let us remember that the so-called “Pure Merino” is a cross breed. We should therefore be proud of the Aboriginal blood in our nation. The Euraustralian type, of the third, fourth, fifth and sixth generation, is much more common in every part of Australia than is commonly realized. Thus the Aboriginal is perpetuated and can never become extinct … Intermarriages between white men and lubras should definitely be encouraged. (COMBO)62

In a hyperbolic extension of the terms of Stephensen’s nationalist project, Herbert made the Aboriginal central to Australian national identity. Stephensen flirted with an Aboriginal identity without ever displacing the centrality of Australian whiteness and the ideologies of national homogeneity. Here Herbert both extends and inverts the terms of Stephensen’s ethnic nationalism such that the Aboriginal becomes the very core of Australian national identity. In place of Stephensen’s “Australian born” Herbert gives us the “Euraustralian type”; in place of the Publicist’s discourses of assimilation, Herbert proposes the perpetuation of Aboriginality through the intermarriage of white men and

62 Signed by COMBO and included in bibliography under that name.
Aboriginal women. The letter was signed by the name COMBO, a derogatory name for a white man who has sex with Aboriginal women. Here, and in his reference to “lubras,” Herbert puts the distinctly unrespectable sexual relations between white men and Aboriginal women at the centre of his nationalist stance, replacing anxiety and expulsion with celebration. And as a linguistic derivation of the word “combination,” COMBO also suggested an attempt to formulate a relationship between settlers and Aborigines that was not inevitably driven by an investment in homogeneity.

The Publicist’s identification with the Aboriginal and the movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights always threatened to undermine the paper’s claim to white Australian ethnicity and belonging. At the same time Stephensen’s writings not only worked to resolve these contradictions, but also made the Aboriginal and the political discourses about Aboriginal rights useful to fantasies about Australian whiteness. Stephensen’s promotion of Herbert’s Capricornia in the Publicist saw this identification between the Australian born and the Aboriginal restaged in relation to a discourse about Australian writing and the Australian novel. It is here that we now turn.
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Figure 4: Advertisement for *Capricornia* printed alongside Adolf Hitler’s Speech to the Reichstag, June 1938.
Capricornia in the Publicist

The Publicist’s avid promotion of Herbert’s Capricornia sat at the intersection of its investment in a white literary nationalism on the one hand, and its complex identification with the Aboriginal and the political movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights on the other. Herbert’s novel itself drew on the standard tropes and figures of a white masculine nationalist tradition, while at the same time imagining a new Aboriginal belonging in a hybridized Australian nation.

Capricornia, the name Herbert gives to the region north of the Tropic of Capricorn in the Australian Northern Territory, is a homosocial society: a masculine world of railway gangers, fettlers and hard drinkers; of graziers, stockmen and itinerate wanderers, all unfettered by domestic ties. And Norman Shillingworth, the mixed race hero of the novel, is very nearly the Australian bushman ideal, although in Aboriginal skin. In his influential reading of the novel, Vincent Buckley calls Norman Shillingworth “the best example in our literature of what is usually supposed to be the typical Australian” (25). Here Buckley refers to the similarities between Norman Shillingworth and what Russel Ward characterized as the distinctive Australian type in his 1958 The Australian Legend, a study of Australian national culture which put the “bushman,” the white man on the land, at the centre of Australia’s national self image.

The Publicist presented the publication of Capricornia as a national literary feat, advertising it as “thoroughly, completely, brilliantly Australian!”, “the novel of the Spirit
of the Land,” and calling it “an epoch-making Great Australian novel.” And it claimed a kind of ownership over the novel, publishing numerous articles and reviews, and tracing the novel’s every move on the national and global literary scene as if the fate of Australia’s entire literary reputation depended on its reception.

Stephensen wrote an extended review of the novel, presenting it as an answer to the call he had made so resoundingly two years before in *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, for a literature of the Australian born. He saw in *Capricornia* an unselfconscious and organically generated Australian style that belied Australia’s perceived cultural inadequacies and dependence on Britain. *Capricornia* was “the story of an entire land and all its people” and, as he put it, “a few more books like *Capricornia* will pull Australian literature out of its Colonial boghole and will set us on the right track to nationhood” (Stephensen, “Capricornia” 7). For Stephensen, *Capricornia* was not only the unmistakable work of a true Australian born author, but could only be fully experienced and appreciated by an Australian born reader: ‘the characters in *Capricornia* are Australian characters, springing from Australian soil and circumstances. They could not be imagined as living in any other land: neither could their portraits be recognized except by Australian readers” (7). The national community that Stephensen projected in both the novel and its readership was carefully delimited along gendered lines and he drew on a standard opposition between masculinity, realism and the national on the one hand and femininity, romance and a derivative colonial mentality on the other (Sheridan).

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63 Full page advertisements for *Capricornia* were printed in the *Publicist* December 1937, p. 20; February 1938, p.16.
64 Reviews and articles about *Capricornia* in the *Publicist*: July 1937 (p.20); September 1937 (p.16); November 1937 (p.5); May 1938 (pp.11-16); June 1938 (p.9); October 1938 (p.14); November 1938 (p.3); December 1939, (p.14).
Stephensen praised the novel’s humour and “lack of sentimentality” as “thoroughly masculine and nothing but masculine” (7).

Stephensen’s review of the novel noticeably deemphasized its representations of Aboriginal Australia, focusing instead on the ways in which it represented a white, masculine nationalism. But the Publicist also linked Capricornia with its own Aboriginal rights agenda. An unsigned article called “‘Capricornia’ The Aboriginal Question” made this connection explicit, attributing the Publicist’s support of the Aboriginal rights agenda to the edifying qualities of Herbert’s novel: “Our particular interest in this submerged national question has been aroused by Xavier Herbert’s masterly novel of North Australia – “Capricornia” (“Capricornia” 5). The novel’s release was deliberately scheduled to coincide with the Aboriginal Day of Mourning on the 26th January 1938. The Publicist used the momentum of the Aboriginal rights movement to help promote the novel, and also used the novel and its author to publicize the call for Aboriginal citizenship and to raise awareness of the historic and contemporary mistreatment of Aboriginal people. The novel was presented as a crucial contribution to the Aboriginal rights movement, the paper even evoking Aboriginal approval of the novel and its political work: “the Aborigines themselves believe that CAPRICORNIA will help to arouse Australian “conscience” – if Australians have any conscience” (“Xavier Herbert in Sydney” 14).65

In the Publicist’s promotion of the novel we can also see an attempt to link the Aboriginal rights movement with the discourse of national literary identity. According to one article, to refuse the demand for Aboriginal citizenship rights would be “to perpetuate British atrocities in Australia”:

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65 See also Herbert’s radical critique of the Northern Territory legal system’s treatment of Aboriginal people, “Lynch Em” published in the Publicist May 1938: 12.
Our particular interest in this submerged national question has been aroused by Xavier Herbert’s masterly novel of North Australia – “Capricornia” – which is now in the press and will be published shortly at The Publicist Bookshop. Fair treatment of Aborigines puts white Australian decency to the test. (“Capricornia”: 5)

For the *Publicist*, the novel not only drew attention to the movement for Aboriginal rights, but also made an interest in Aboriginal rights part of a specifically anti-British nationalist agenda, a way to differentiate between bad British colonial violence on the one hand and a specifically white “Australian decency” on the other. Notably, the Aboriginal rights movement was explicitly disassociated from any threat it might pose to the paper’s white Australia agenda. Rather, the implication was that support for Aboriginal rights would provide a test of white national legitimacy and a way of imagining white Australia’s break from its British legacy.

Nonetheless there was a tension between making the novel stand for the Aboriginal rights movement and attaching the novel to a nationalist agenda. The *Publicist* advertized the novel as “for the sesqui-centenary” and as coinciding with “the 150th Anniversary of the founding of Australia as a British Colony.” But it also attached the novel to the Day of Mourning, a day staged in direct protest at the nationalist celebration. While *Capricornia* did of course voice a protest in the name of Aboriginal Australia, this attempt to attach the Day of Mourning to a nationalist agenda overlooked one of the basic claims of the protest: as was stated on a poster for the event, “the 26th day of January,
1938 [was] the 150\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the seizure of our country.” Front and centre of the Day of Mourning was the claim that the nationalism signified in the sesqui-centenary celebration was founded on the dispossession of Aboriginal people from the land. Further while the Publicist invited the white Australian nationalist to identify with this protest and to attach it to a certain kind of anti-British republicanism, the Day of Mourning was constructed as a day of protest specifically and exclusively for Aboriginal people. The poster for the protest puts an invite out to Aboriginal people only: “Aborigines and persons of Aboriginal Blood only are invited to attend” (“Day of Mourning”). The paper’s attempt to make the novel signify within these two opposing agendas throws into sharp relief the contradictions in its larger attempt to situate the Aboriginal within a nationalist agenda.

An interesting contrast to the history of Capricornia in the Publicist is the history of Capricornia in Abo Call, the newspaper of the Aborigines Progressive Association, funded and printed by the Publicist Publishing Company. Despite its financial links to the Publicist, Abo Call was edited by the Indigenous Aboriginal rights campaigner Jack Patton, and was primarily a paper by and for Aboriginal Australians. Abo Call printed an excerpt from Capricornia in every one of its six issues from April to September 1938. The place of Capricornia in Abo Call is not the subject of this chapter but it is worth mentioning because it throws into relief the contradictory accounts of Australia that assembled around this novel. The Abo Call celebrated Capricornia’s achievement as the winner of the “Commonwealth Prize,” and in this sense recapitulated some of the Publicist’s enthusiastic promotion of the novel’s achievements. But the novel presented in the Abo Call was also quite different from the novel celebrated by Stephensen in the
Publicists. Rather than emphasizing a nationalist experience of the land, these extracts foreground the dispossession of Aboriginal land and the narratives that surround Aboriginal characters.

In June 1938 a series of fragments from the first chapter of the novel were presented under the subheading “The End of Three Tribes,” “showing how the Aborigines looked on the coming of the whitemen.” Each fragment was twice headed: “I. Settlement of New Westminster (End of the Karrapillua Tribe);” “II Settlement of Port Zodiac (End of the Larrapuna Tribe); III Settlement of Flying Fox Island (End of the Yarracumbuna Tribe)” (Abo Call “The End of Three Tribes” 4). The primary subject of the novel as it was presented in Abo Call was thus the direct correlation between settlement and massacre, and the novel was given as faithfully representing an Aboriginal perspective. In August the paper presented an excerpt centered on the story of Tocky Differ. As the paper framed it, “Tocky is the tragic heroine of Xavier Herbert’s great novel ‘Capricornia’ – the ‘black-velvet’ novel of the Australian Northern Territory. One of several great episodes in her life is in her escape from the Aboriginal Compound of Port Zodiac and her long walk by the railway track to her home at Red Ochre (cattle station)” (Abo Call “Tocky’s Escape and Long Walk Home” 4) Here the novel became a story of Aboriginal heroism and particularly of an Aboriginal woman’s clever escape from an oppressive state institution. This kind of excerpting displaced the masculine nationalism that was more commonly associated with the novel and which will be the subject of the next section of this chapter. The excerpts printed in Abo Call were sometimes full episodes and were sometimes assembled fragments, but in each case the
work of extraction reframed the novel in terms of the paper’s representation of Aboriginal experience.

**Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia***

The identification between the category of the Australian-born and the category of the Aboriginal which is made implicitly in the *Publicist*, is the explicit subject of Herbert’s novel. *Capricornia* has been read as telling the story of a son’s search for his father. The novel’s central narrative thread follows Norman Shillingworth’s “search for a father,” to quote Harry Hestletine (1), as well as “the search to recognize and accept [his] full racial identity” to quote Elizabeth Lawson (29). As both Lawson and Hestletine have emphasized, Norman grows up believing he is the son of a Javanese Princess and an Australian war pilot. In the course of the novel he realizes he is actually the son of the “lubra,” Marowallua, and the morally flawed but characteristically Australian Mark Shillingworth, also known as Jack Ramble, the name he takes after he has murdered a Chinese shopkeeper. Norman’s journey of personal disenchantment is at the same time a narrative of nationalization. As he throws off his cosmopolitan pretentions (made fun of in the chapter title “Grandson of a Sultan”), and leaves aside his fantasy of the family romance, he is reconciled to his humble but, at the same time, most national of origins. In this journey Norman passes through a series of substitute father figures. Jock Driver, Oscar Shillingworth, Bootpolish, and Andy McRandy all act as surrogate fathers for a period before Norman discovers and is reconciled with his “real” father, Mark Shillingworth. In this reading, *Capricornia* is the story of a son’s search for his father;
but alongside this, I will argue, is the father’s search for an Aboriginal son through which he can claim to belong to the land and thus the nation.

The central role of the paternal figure in Herbert’s nationalist imagination can be seen in a moment about halfway through *Capricornia*, when Andy McRandy, one of Norman’s paternal surrogates, tells Norman that he should not be ashamed of his Aboriginal heritage:

> It’s certainly nuthen to be ashamed of … I aint kiddin’ … And it aint nuthen new. Plenty of people’ve discovered the worth of your Old People. And plenty more will. Listen Sonny, the day’ll come in your own time when your Old People’ll be recognized as our Old People too, as the Fathers of the Nation. (372)

Andy’s mode of fantasizing a shared genealogy for white and Aboriginal Australia epitomizes Herbert’s nationalist vision; and the benevolent paternalism of his advice to Norman stages what is perhaps Herbert’s central moral concern: responsible paternity and white men bringing up their Aboriginal children. Herbert’s novel opens up a space for the Aboriginal boy in the nation but it is a space conceived and conceded by the white father: as a stock figure for the Australian bushman ideal, Andy represents an imagined national paternal ancestor. But here Andy also anticipates another paternal lineage through his own adoption of Aboriginal ancestors. There are in fact two alternative national paternal genealogies in this scene. When Andy says “your Old People” might
become “our Old People too,” Andy looks forward to the day when something specifically Aboriginal might become the inheritance of all Australians.  

This question of where to locate a national paternal lineage, and of who gets to be the father, is prefigured in a letter Herbert wrote to Stephensen (Inky) in 1936 in response to Stephensen’s *Foundations of Culture*:

> A moment ago I concluded your book *Foundations of Culture*. What can I say about it? ... 

I’m working to found a gigantic organization called the Euraustralian League, comprised of so called Halfcastes and Quatercastes and of any white fellas who can bring themselves to believe that there is nothing like Australia and that the culture of the land will grow like gum-trees from the soil. 

The Euraustralians – or yeller-fellers as the transplanted Pommies call them – are a great race. There are something like 20,000 already in the land. Properly organized, they should in a few years’ time be able to wield some weight. Mainly what I am concerned about is to select artists from amongst them. There must be some. I feel it is only from them that the true Australian art can come. Imagine Capricornia written by a half-caste. Or the Song of the Golden Beetle. We are not Australian, Inky. Only those lucky people are. They are, I should say, the most vigorous race of people on earth. I love them and envy them their nationality.

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66 Herbert’s biographer Frances de Groen notes a similarly contradictory double identification in Herbert himself in his desire to identify as a “blackfella” with an “Aboriginal soul” on the one hand and as a white paternalistic figure on the other: “his paternalistic sometimes racist rhetoric suggests that he was unaware of the contradictions between the roles he was playing as a ‘blackfella,’ as the savior of the Aborigines and as a white bureaucrat” (104).
Curse the fate that arranged that I should be a colonial Pommy! God help me, and all like me who were conceived by a Dreaming place Spirit and born of foreigners. There is no help for us, except that we place on our poor Aboriginal souls, through a lubra into a yeller feller – a true Australian.

Will you work with me to organize this Euraustralian race so that it will rise on up and increase and multiply and eventually sweep the Pommies back into the sea?

( Herbert “Letter to Stephensen”)

Herbert’s biographer Frances de Groen has commented on Herbert’s tendency to fictionalize in his letters and in this light it is important not to take Herbert’s words too literally. And yet Herbert’s idea of the “Euraustralian” can be read as a literary response to the same questions that had directed Stephensen’s polemic and his writing for the Publicist. How could Australia establish itself in cultural independence from Britain? What makes a national culture, what makes a national literature and where could Australia locate the source of its unique claim to national identity? Like Stephensen, Herbert drew on the symbolic resources of place, on “the culture of the land” that he hoped would “grow like gum-trees from the soil.” But he found the main answer to these question in the “yeller fellers” or “Euroaustralians” as he calls them, the something like twenty-thousand mixed race Aboriginal people who were the subject of his novel, Capricornia. In other words, for Herbert the symbolic recourses of place are inadequate and the figure of the “Euraustralian” allows him to imagine a national blood-line. Herbert’s model of national identity is biological, a matter of parentage, and the Euraustralian represents for Herbert a national genealogy born of the soil and transmitted
by blood, and a counter to the “transplanted pommie,” the colonial heritage that Herbert regretfully identifies as his own.

Further, Herbert suggests that in having a child by an Aboriginal woman, or “begetting a yeller feller,” he might himself become part of the “true Australia” to come. While his Euraustralian ideal had rendered him an exile, “not Australian” but “born of foreigners,” he also proposed a solution in which an Aboriginal son would pass his “nationality” back to his father. And yet, we can note that strangely it is not from the line of the Aboriginal woman that this imagined yeller-feller’s Aboriginal soul will originate, but rather from Herbert himself. For as he states “we place on our poor Aboriginal souls, through a lubra into a yeller feller – a true Australian” (my italics). Further, the true Australian art to which this national coming man will contribute will be nothing other than Herbert’s own novel: “Imagine Capricornia written by a half-caste.” What Herbert actually proposes is an auto-genealogy, a circular model of descent whereby father and son form a closed circuit that necessarily passes through an Aboriginal woman but ultimately displaces her, in order to endlessly confer Aboriginality back onto the father.

The strange formulation of national legitimacy transferred to the white father by his Aboriginal son provides a starting point for a reading of Herbert’s novel that allows us to locate it in relation to the ethnic nationalist agenda that surrounded the Publicist. In Capricornia, Herbert imagines an autochthonous and patrilineal genealogy for the Australian nation. He looks for this genealogy not in the space of a national past but rather in the formulation of the mixed race Aboriginal son returned to his white father. For Herbert, the Aboriginal son provides the settler subject with a link to an Aboriginalized national past that might both overwrite and redeem the founding colonial
violence of the Australian nation. The Aboriginal son grants the father access to an autochthonous line of Aboriginal forefathers that, re-scripted as a national inheritance, provides a grounding national genealogy and legitimates the settler subject’s occupation of the land.

Critics who have read Herbert’s novel in terms of Norman’s search for his father usefully draw out the way that, despite its unwieldy and chaotic style (its excessive length, its huge cast of characters, and its multifarious voices), *Capricornia* contains a more conventional novelistic narrative of a boy’s search for his father and his familial heritage. But these readings also reduce the novel to the exploits of one central character. The novel in fact contains a double narrative, a double search. If much of the novel is concerned with Norman’s search for his father, a significant portion is also taken up by the ramblings of the settler subject, Mark Shillingworth, both away from and then back towards his Aboriginal son. And if Norman’s displaced wanderings are slowed by the reconciliation with his father and the discovery of his “true” identity, similarly Mark’s own criminal misadventures only cease with his return to Norman and Red Ochre, the family station. Finally if Norman’s return to his father provides a conventional conclusion to the novel in a story about fully realized identity, Mark’s return to his son concludes the novel with a narrative of redemption. For the novel pitches its moral outrage at white fathers, white men who refuse to take responsibility for their mixed race Aboriginal children, what the character Peter Differ calls, “this very real and terrifically important thing” (95). And it is also Mark, the white father, whom the novel finally redeems. In other words, the novel’s structuring preoccupations, like those of the letter, are with both the identity and the moral redemption of the white father.
As such, Herbert’s central moment of utopic nationalist imagining takes place at the moment when Mark Shillingworth is faced with the return of his son. Andy McRandy and Norman Shillingworth have joined Mark Shillingworth and Chook Henn by their campfire for a drink, a yarn, and “a good Australian tune … one’t expresses the Spirit of the Land” (376). The scene reads like a nationalist set piece. The four men – two swaggies, a station owner and a half-caste Aboriginal boy – come together around the fire for a stirring rendition of the nationalist folk song, “Waltzing Matilda,” about a swagman who steals a sheep and drowns in a “billabong” (creek) to escape the “troopers” (police). The song all but reduces the group of hardened men to tears. Of different classes and races, the men are shown to be of one and the same land through their affective relationship to a national myth. Chook Henn, here going under the alias Joe Mooch and taking on the role of concertina wielding bard, presents an extended theory on the national significance of the song:

You notice the two minutes’ silence after it? Well, accordin’ to this professor feller, and I can vouch for it meself, that’s always observed by born Australians, because we sort of look on the Jolly Swagman as a cobber that’s been martyred. Accordin’ to this professor feller, we look on stray things knockin’ round, such as sheep drinkin’ at a billabong, or anybody else’s chooks, and things like that, as public property, or rather property of the tribe, same’s the Binghis do things that’s knockin’ round the bush. So the Jolly Swagman’s the typical Australian, doin’ just what he thinks is right, like a Binghi spearin’ a kangaroo or somebody’s bullock. And the Squatter and the Troopers are the outsiders, the imported people,
the foreigners what have a strong sense of property and a different way of looking at things. See? (376)

Casting the Jolly Swagman – the archetypal white man on the land – in the mould of the Aborigine, or “Binghi” as he puts it here, Joe Mooch writes Aboriginality into the Australian legend. The Aborigine offers the born Australian a model of nativeness as opposed to the Squatters and Troopers who are “outsiders,” “imported people” or “foreigners.” Perhaps most significantly, Herbert characterizes the “born Australian” by his attitude to property, or more specifically by his disregard for conventional notions of property and ownership. Herbert was aware of the violence of Australia’s invasion, beginning his novel with scenes of massacre, and he was at times haunted by its legacy. Here, however, he presents a fantasy relationship between Aborigines and settlers that is not haunted by originary dispossession but in which both groups possess an equalized sense of belonging to the land simply through birth. The question of property or legal entitlement to land becomes a colonial error and a projection of imported people and foreigners, “what have a strong sense of property and a different way of looking at things.”

In Capricornia Herbert also presents the pairing of a white father and his Aboriginal son as the source of a new and redeemed inheritance for the nation, one that

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Herbert’s fantasies of genealogical hybridity also resonate interestingly with the “breeding out the colour” policies that were becoming prevalent in official discourses on Aboriginality in the 1930s. Cecil Cook, the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory from 1927-1939, coined the term “breeding out the colour” to describe processes of administered biological assimilation. For an account of the relationship between Herbert and Cook that accounts for the logical continuity between state policies of “breeding out” the colour and Herbert’s desire to “breed in” Aboriginality see Probyn-Rapsey.
can overwrite colonial history with national genealogy. Through this pairing Herbert imagines a new set of national forefathers, but one that never upsets the white settler’s prerogative to be the father. Andy McRandy imagines for Norman the figure of the “Great Bunyip, the Spirit of this Southern Land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefather from the beginnin’ of time, and now the Lord of us who’s grown up in your forefathers’ place and goin’ the same old manly carefree way” (366). For Andy, the “Great Bunyip” is a mythological progenitor for an inclusive “us who’s grown up in your forefathers’ place.” And yet the phrase “us who’s grown up in your forefathers’ place” could also be read to mean “we who have grown up to take the place of your forefathers”, or usurped your forefathers’ position. What is more, “place” also has a spatial meaning that might be read as pertaining to land. “Us who’s grown up in your forefathers’ place” can be read as “we who have grown up on your forefathers’ land and taken their position.” Through Andy’s formulation the possibility of assuming a place in a genealogical fantasy displaces the question of place as disputed land. Indeed the novel can be read as reconciling questions of legitimacy and land tenure through a narrative of paternal genealogy.

Thus at least on one level, the novel ends by tying together paternity and land tenure. On arrival at Red Ochre, wretched and spent, Mark Shillingworth is finally taken by the police for the murder of the Chinese store keeper Cho See Kee. He will be acquitted of this crime because of the incompetence of the Capricornia legal system, but also because the novel wants to offer him a qualified moral redemption for his return to the Aboriginal son he abandoned eighteen years ago. The novel ends with the reconciled father and son battling to save the property from the legal fees of their court cases, when
the good news of an economic boom for graziers in the north secures both their futures. The story of a search for legitimate paternity ends with a story about the legitimate retention of property and land, about keeping the property in the Shillingworth family. Herbert himself had fantasized about the national legitimacy that might be conferred on him by an Aboriginal son. In Capricornia the relationship between a white father and his Aboriginal son enables Herbert to imagine the settler subject’s valid possession of the land. Reconciling white paternity and Aboriginal progeny provides a legitimating narrative for the nation.

The patrilineal line must, however, bury the mother. In the final scene the skeleton of Tocky O’Canon and her baby shockingly interrupts the novel’s attempt at a happy ending, when Norman finds his lover and their child dead in the stock tank where they have hidden from the police. Here Norman, our all-Australian coming, man must literally imbibe the dead bodies of the Aboriginal woman and child, “a human skull – no – two – a small one and a tiny one. And human hair and rags of clothes and a pair of bone filled boots. Two skulls, a small one and a tiny one. Tocky and her baby” (577).

In his letter to Stephensen, Herbert’s attempt to conceive his own Aboriginal son required him to both to evoke and displace the figure of the “lubra.” In Capricornia this same impulse towards an autochthonous patrilineal line manifests not only in the death of Tocky O’Cannon that concludes the novel but also in a plethora of dead women throughout the novel. Almost all the Aboriginal women die in Herbert’s novel, and all the Aboriginal mothers die. Not only Tocky O’Cannon but also “little Naw-nim’s [Norman’s] mother” (46) and Connie Differ who is left for dead at the compound hospital. These deaths are in the novel to make a social critique and to draw attention to
what Herbert calls the nation’s “mad pride in colour” (214) and the “foul neglect” (214) of Aboriginal and mixed race people. However they also are also a structural condition of the intensely patriarchal nature of Herbert’s nationalism, which depends on the annihilation of women.

Tocky’s bones return us to the scenes of murder at the beginning of the novel and the violence of the colonial encounter. The “bone filled boots” are a haunting repetition of “the bones of half the Karrapillua Tribe” lying beneath “the first white settlement in Capricornia” (1). While I have argued that Herbert’s patrilineal fantasy displaced questions of colonial dispossession, Tocky’s skeleton also marks the contiguity of Herbert’s nationalism with colonial violence for national genealogy, staging the imbrications of one with the other. The novel ends with the “crows in a gnarled dead coolibah nearby” and their dismal cry, “Kah! – Kah! – Kaaaaaah!” (577). The image of the dead coolibah tree, burnt out home of the Jolly Swagman, undercuts Herbert’s earlier moment of utopic nationalist imagination.68 If Waltzing Matilda provided a meeting point for father and son within the space of national myth that displaced colonial violence onto the British Other, here the nationalist myth can only signify death.

This reading of the novel places Herbert’s Capricornia and the narrative around Norman Shillingworth at the centre of a set of right wing nationalist fantasies in the 1930s that revolved around the category of the Aboriginal. As I have shown, the Publicist group’s investment in a white Australian ethnicity came into conflict with their interest in the movement for Aboriginal citizenship rights. Various narrative strategies made it possible for writers like Stephensen and Herbert not only to assimilate Aboriginality to

68 The lyrics to Waltzing Matilda that appear in Capricornia are: “Once a Jolly Swagman camped beside a billabong,/ Under the shade of a coolibah tree” (374).
fantasies about the Australian born in the white Australian nation, but indeed made the Aboriginal useful to narratives of white Australian legitimacy and belonging.

Stephensen and Herbert’s particular nationalist fantasies operate at the intersection of biopolitics and territorially although they produce different narratives around this convergence. In Stephensen’s *Foundations of Culture*, an investment in what he calls “place” is the basis of his projection of a white Australian ethnic ideal to hold up against the fear of colonial inadequacy. In the *Publicist* the idea of the Australian type was increasingly attached to an insular nationalist fantasy and the expulsion of foreign bodies, and while the trope of the Australian born invoked the Aboriginal it never displaced the fantasy of Australian whiteness. By contrast, in Herbert’s novel and his other writings from the period, the Aboriginal is central to a nationalist imagination. Here the genealogical fantasy about an Aboriginal inheritance answers a pervasive anxiety about Australian territorial illegitimacy, such that the plotting of national genealogy displaces the question of disputed land.

But if in its genealogical imagination, *Capricornia* can be read as enacting a fantasy of national territorial possession, its geographical composition troubles and undermines this unified and unilinear narrative construction. In *Capricornia* a series of geographic mappings dislodge national space, offering in its place a series of counter geographies that displace nation for the more porous and indeterminate limits of region. In its critical remapping of Australia’s north *Capricornia* not only offers a counter to the insular geographic fantasies that saturated the *Publicist*, but also produces a spatial composition that dislodges its own nationalist sermonizing.
Herbert’s Counter-Geographies

“What if the ground beneath our feet turns out to be the sea?” (Suvendrini Perera)

We can begin to unpack the unstable relationship between the geographic imagination of the novel and the Publicist’s nationalism by turning in closer detail to an advertisement for the novel that was printed in the Publicist after the novel’s release:

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Figure 4: Advertisement for Capricornia in the Publicist Feb. 1938
The advertisement presents a map of “Part of the Land of Capricornia” above a series of enthusiastic promotions of that novel that work to inscribe it within the paper’s nationalizing project. Referring to the novel as “thoroughly, completely, brilliantly Australian!” and “the novel of the Spirit of the Land,” the promotion imagines a correspondence between the map, the geographic conceptions of the novel, and Australia, suggesting that “Capricornia” can be read as a metonym for national space. The reference to the “Spirit of the Land” invokes Stephensen’s notion of the “spirit of the place” which appeared in his *Foundations of Culture*, and suggests the novel will enact the same projection of national identity onto spatial experience that Stephensen had outlined in this essay. That is, the advertisement suggests that it will present a unified and unifying spatial experience as the basis for a coherent national identity.

The map also appeared in the dust jacket of the novel, both for the *Publicist* Publishing Company and subsequent republications. The visual details of the map displace this equivalence between Capricornia and nation in a number of ways. Firstly, the map does very little to locate Capricornia within a recognizably Australian space. Focused in on the two hundred square miles that contain the main narrative action of the novel, Herbert’s map dislocates the region of Capricornia from a recognizably national map. There is no reference here to the familiar shape of the Australian continent; and while there is some similarity between the map of Capricornia and maps of the Northern Territory in the broad lineaments of the coastline and in the placing of Port Zodiac as a spatial equivalent to Darwin, the correspondence is loose and ambiguous. In particular a spatial equivalence is absent from the visual and topographical details of the map. The names and positions of places, geographic features and towns bear no correspondence to
anywhere in the Northern Territory; the rivers, mountains, tablelands and towns marked on the map of Capricornia appear in the novel, but they have no actual spatial or cartographical equivalent. Thus we can argue that while the map matches the geographical imagination of the novel, more or less, it does not, except in its broadest conception, match the geographic or cartographic layout of any real place. The map thus marks “Capricornia” as an imaginary rather than historical place, and displaces the one to one equivalence that the Publicist constructed between Capricornia and Australia.

The displacement of national space enacted by the map is also evident in the narrative of the novel. In Capricornia the “Spirit of the Land” is the name of a boat that runs the path between the north coast and a series of off-shore islands (23). Thus rather than working to inscribe Australian space as a coherent and unique basis for a national identity, as suggested by the novel’s promotion, the Spirit of the Land in fact works to render the borders of Australian space indistinct. The geographic trajectories traced by the boat and its captains, Mark Shillingworth and Chook Henn, extend the boundaries of Capricornia beyond a clearly delimited landmass to the surrounding seascapes, to the islands that dot the Capricornia coastline, and indeed further north to Southeast Asia and beyond. Thus while the “Spirit of the Land” is taken up by the Publicist as epitomizing the correspondence between its own nationalist vision and that of the novel, within the novel itself the name can also be read as an ironic commentary on the porous boundaries of national space, and the disavowed dependencies between “land” as an object of nationalist identification and the indeterminacies of a surrounding seascape.

In her discussion of what she calls Australia’s “insular imagination,” Suvendrini Perera describes a fantasy of national solidity and singularity that operates through
Australia’s impassioned identification as an island nation. Perera suggests that the idea of a clearly defined and unified land mass operates a compensatory fantasy, a “unifying figure” that confers coherence on multiple and incommensurate histories and populations: “Against the temporal asymmetries of colonial societies (who came when? who was here before?), the island is a sign that projects spatial completeness and membership in a collectivity” (17).

While Australia’s island status is experienced as a geographical truth, as though its borders are natural and given, it is in fact the effect of ongoing practices of territorialization. As Perera argues, in Australia, carefully maintained ideologies of an ocean bound nation state work to protect the nation from racial and spatial contamination, expelling foreign bodies (and we should think here, as Perera does, of the ongoing anxiety about refugee boats in Australian waters), but also to enclose indigenous people within clearly demarcated boundaries. The plotting of a singular island continent overwrites more multifarious histories and experiences of space: in particular the trade routes that precede and exceed the history of Australia’s European settlement, and the indigenous understandings of “country.”

It is significant then that in the place of a national map, which would stress a spatial integrity and provide the grounds for a national history, Capricornia gives us a regional map that situates Capricornia less at the “top end” of the Australian island continent than south of a region that stretches north from the north Australian coast to south east Asia and then further north to China and Japan. I would argue that in Capricornia Herbert’s geographical imagination works to map and materialize the lines

69 “Country” refers to Indigenous Australians’ understandings of their traditional lands. See footnote 30.
of transaction between Australia’s north and the region that stretches above it, and simultaneously to dematerialize and demythologize the grounds of national space.

While “Capricornia” remains a largely imaginary place, the novel nonetheless locates it within a well realized world historic scene. This broader geography of the novel is mapped out by the movements of characters and also through the novel’s tracing of a series of affective, economic and historical ties to a region which stretches north from Capricornia to Asia. For example, we can note that Mark Shillingworth and Chook Henn spend their time between Port Zodiac and a series of islands off the coast. On Flying Fox Island they attempt to infiltrate the trepang business, fishing for “the great sea-slug, prized by wealthy Chinamen as a delicacy and aphrodisiac!” (23), then plan (and fail) to “set up a new camp on Chineri Island in the Tikkalalla Group and to fish for pearl-shell on the shallow banks that lay between there and the Dutch East-Indies” (53). At the Red Ochre station, which will eventually be inherited by Norman Shillingworth, Oscar Shillingworth breeds cattle to be shipped to the Philippines, although business falls on hard times when the war slows trade in the region. Further we can note that Norman Shillingworth is born on Flying Fox Island and grows up believing he is the son of a Javanese princess. While the novel will eventually undermine this fantasy, and reinstate Norman more clearly within the nation’s geographical borders, here it nonetheless entertains imaginative and affective ties to south-east Asia.

In contradistinction to the novel’s materialization of a regional mapping, the novel repeatedly dematerializes and undermines the solidity of national spatial experience. In the novel’s opening, a satiric account of the settlement of Australia, the ground quite literally turns out to be the sea. Herbert’s incompetent pioneers blunder from one site to
the next spreading chaos and violence, and “having several times to abandon land they won with slaughter ... go slaughtering again to secure more” (1). The pioneers’ attempts at territorial possession are over and again undermined by what Herbert calls “the violence of the climate” (1), what turns out to be the shifting levels of river and tide during the wet season. Three times Herbert’s pioneers lay claim to a patch of land and settle a town they call “New Westminster” and three times the settlement is “swept into the silver sea by the floods of the generous Wet Season” (2). The pioneers move on to found “Britannia and Port Leroy”; “All were eventually swept into the Silver Sea” (2). These acts of territorial possession and settlement are also acts of mapping and naming, expressed in the novel by a grammar that marks the transition of geographical space into a named historical place: “what came to be called the Caroline River,” “what came to be called Willnot Platteau” (2). But the depiction of the seasonal waters, whose swell both undermines and overwrites the pioneers’ inscriptions of the land, renders the very possibility of colonial possession uncertain, as the distinction between land and its ocean surrounds is made shifting and porous.

The Aboriginal that Herbert’s pioneers encounter in the shifting landscapes of Australia’s far north is always already involved in networks of transactions to the north. Rather than neatly contained within the border of the Australian continent, the Aborigines of Capricornia, we are told, are “more numerous than in the South and more hostile because used to resisting casual invaders from the near East Indies” (1). The statement counters the distance, both geographical and historical, of Australia’s north and south with a demonstration of the social and geographic proximity between Capricornia and the

70 Paul Carter has argued the act of naming works to transform “space” into “place ‘punctuating’ the landscape and making it into a “space with a history.”
East Indies. It writes the Australian frontier as a space that is always already crossed, and the Aboriginal as a figure always already hybridized. Rather than the space of a singular and overdetermined encounter between colonizer and colonized, the frontier of Herbert’s opening is one already historically rich with encounter, invasion, and resistance.

Herebert’s counter-geographies extend beyond an explicitly spatial discourse to the novel’s staging of Capricornia’s social makeup. Redrawing the cartographic boundaries of Australian space is then also a project of rethinking the ethnic and cultural makeup of Australian society. The main narrative of the novel is preceded by a list of the novel’s characters. With over one hundred entries the list serves as both an early instigation of the novel’s excessive and multifarious vision and also as an ordering of that impulse, a containment of its chaotic energies within the categorical confines of the alphabetized index. Yet as a form that implies equalization, the index also works to displace the necessarily hierarchical ordering of novelistic plot. In the list Norman and Mark Shillingworth, whose narrative arc, I have argued, plots a fantasized national genealogy, are rendered equivalent to all the minor characters in the novel.

The list provides a description of each character’s job or their position in Capricornia society and also gives their racial inheritance (although not, predictably, if they are white). While indexing race mimics broader official practices of racial classification, Herbert’s taxonomic detail also works to counter and exceed the given categories of official classification, which the novel calls at various points “the law of the land” (63). For example, the entry for Fat Anna details: “A laundress and woman of independent means, living on the Port Zodiac waterfront. Classified as an Aboriginal, though daughter of a Japanese. Foster mother for a time, of Norman Shillingworth” (xvi).
The entry for Bootpolish reads, “Aboriginal stockman, of Red Ochre station. A member of the Mullanmulluck tribe” (xv). These listings displace an official discourse that can only recognize categories of white and non-white. The list uses the individual’s racial and ethnic biography to specify legacies of migration beyond those of the white settler, mapping the multiple lines of travel, migration and difference that cross the space of Capricornia. The list invokes China, Greece, Japan, Germany, Spain, Scotland, France, the Philippines, as well as the original lands of the Yarracumbunga tribe, and the Mallanmullak tribe.

The horizontal ordering of the list stands in direct opposition to the fantasies of autochthony and depth that inform the narrative surrounding Mark and Norman Shillingworth and structure the Publicist’s investments in the novel. I have argued that the narrative of father and son gives us a fantasy of nation as genealogy that refers back to a single point of origin grounded in the Australian landscape. By contrast, the list refers outwards, beyond the borders of the continent nation, and brings these multiple lines of transaction and difference to bear on Capricornia space, registering what Paul Battersby has called the “still under recognized cosmopolitanism of Australia’s north” (14).

While the novel’s central narrative arc encodes a fantasy of national autochthony and insularity, at various points the novel’s nationalist imaginings are interrupted by voicings of an alternative understanding of the makeup of Australian space. These counter-voices bear a close relationship to the list, encoding a multitude of de-centered perspectives rather than a single narrative line. For example on Mark Shillingworth’s
return to Red Ochre station, before he is reunited with his son, the Chinese cook Cho, voices a protest against the white man’s undisputed claim to the land:

You can’t talk big-fella white man longa me. Might be longa town you can sing out all Chineeman all-same dog, all same pig – but no can do it here. Whiteman him nussing here. Thisl station belong colour-man. Me-h’m partnel longa boss. Thad one dere him boss – halfcarse. Me Australian – gottim all same light sit-down this one countly same’s you. Papa belong me Chineeman. Papa belonga you English. All-same. Folliner. All-i- more betel you nick off yourself you big fella bulsh –gwan – hoppit! (470)

Cho’s decisive declaration, “White man him nussing here,” marks out Red Ochre station as a space apart, and as the place for an alternative ordering of the legacies of national exclusion. His statement, “Papa belong me Chineeman. Papa belonga you English. All-same. Folliner,” presents a flattening out of difference such that all differences are rendered equivalent. As a whole the statement performs a revision of the significance of the “same.” In the place of “all same” as a marker of racial hate and exclusion (“Chineeman all-same dog, all same pig”), Cho gives us “all same” as a marker of equivalence, a universalization of the foreign that overwrites the white Australian’s claim to exceptionality and to legitimate belonging.

The question of the Aboriginal and whether there might be a prior or more primary claim to the land than that made by the foreigner is left ambiguous here. The category of the Aboriginal is replaced in Cho’s statement by the half-caste (“halfcarse”)
who is easily assimilated into a generalized community of the “colour-man”; that is into a community formulated around an expansive understanding of race, rather than in relation to understandings of land priority. In fact the idea of the prior as the marker of priority and legitimacy is displaced here by a formulation of Australian in terms of the right to “sit down this one country”; that is in the terms of surface rather than depth, and in terms of a temporary emplacement rather than in terms of priority and belonging. While Cho’s statement can be read as performing a further displacement of Aboriginal sovereignty, it also displaces the terms of white nationalism. For narratives of autochthony, priority, and legitimacy could be directed towards fantasies of white Australian belonging as easily as they could be made the basis of Aboriginal rights claims.

We can argue that rather than encoding a single nationalist vision, *Capricornia* in fact functions as a crossing place for radically different ways of imagining Australian space and Australian history. On the one hand the novel’s central plotting enacts a nationalist genealogy that makes the Aboriginal a sign for white autochthony. On the other hand the novel also performs a series of powerful displacements of precisely this narrative. Nonetheless, we can argue that an interpretation that foregrounds the novel’s white masculine nationalism begins at the moment of the novel’s publication. Further we might say that the Publicist’s appropriation of the novel obscures other possible readings of the text, such as that produced by the Abo Call. This chapter has begun to excavate the various discourses and counter-discourses about Australian nationalism within and surrounding the novel.
Chapter Three

Local Moderns: The Jindyworobak Poetry Movement and Australian Modernism

I hold to the thesis that cultures are created locally, and that every contribution to world culture (even in a future world political and economic unit) must be distinct with the colour of its place of origin.

Ideas like men and women are formed locally, no matter how much they travel. There is a universal concept of humanity and world culture, but it does not destroy individuality, either of persons or places or nations.

P.R Stephensen *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (17) [emphasis in original]

Whither Australian Poetry?

In 1941 the Jindyworobak poet and critic, Victor Kennedy, sent out a survey to almost thirty Australian poets on behalf of the Jindyworobak club. Entitled “Whither Australian Poetry?”, the survey asked its recipients to comment on modern poetry and “the new verse”:

A great change has come over poetry in our day, not only in form and technique but in aim and outlook. Poetic theory has been revolutionized as well as poetic
method. The “modern poets” have practically taken over the field, and new values have replaced the old. What do you think of the new verse?\textsuperscript{71}

One of the respondents to the survey was the Angry Penguin and aspiring modernist poet, Max Harris.\textsuperscript{72} Harris was annoyed by the way the survey collapsed the figure of the poet into the world of literary societies and book clubs. His dashed-off reply was disparaging, bordering on contemptuous:

I’m really a nice boy but the air smells of dilettantism and literary clubs. AND I DON’T LIKE THAT SORT OF SMELL. I may be wrong but I can’t help it ... As it is, Patrick White and myself are probably the only internationally acknowledged exponents of new verse techniques. A few others are imbued with a contemporary spirit and genuine creative power but they waste it because they are technically inefficient. The rest, including 90\% of the Jindys and other literary bodies (or should I say corpses), just stagnate on, and call the smell of decomposition .... POETRY.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71}“Whither Australian Poetry?” Rex Ingamells Papers (MS 6244). State Library of Victoria. Vol.3
\textsuperscript{72} Max Harris was an Australian poet and critic involved with the Angry Penguins, a modernist literary and arts movement that formed around the journal of that name. Founded in 1940, \textit{Angry Penguins} was committed to publishing experimental writing and particularly to the promotion of surrealism in Australia. Max Harris is best remembered now for his involvement in the Ern Malley affair of 1943, a literary hoax that was intended to humiliate Harris and undermine the modernist impulse in Australia. For an account of Max Harris, the Angry Penguins and the Ern Malley affair see Michael Heywood’s \textit{The Ern Malley Affair}.
\textsuperscript{73} Max Harris. Response to “Whither Australian Poetry?” Rex Ingamells Papers (MS 6244). State Library of Victoria. Vol. 3
Harris’s response was rude and arrogant, but it also contained a number of familiar assumptions about the relationship between Australian literature and modernism.

Firstly, Harris’s response contends that, with just one or two exceptions, Patrick White and himself in particular, Australian writers are out of touch with international modernism. Secondly, Harris assumes that modernism and the modern verse are international fields of concern. He suggests that participating in the culture of modern verse requires a cosmopolitan sensibility. It means being aware of what is going on overseas and also aspiring to international recognition and cultural purchase. Thirdly, Harris assigns modernism to a professionalized and elite intellectual and artistic class. Harris’ modernism does not suffer amateurs, or the “technically inefficient”, and it is diametrically opposed to the conservative, bourgeois, dilettantism of the literary society or book club.

Harris’s response is structured around a set of oppositions that continue to inform accounts of Australian modernism. On the one side we have metropolitan modernism, cosmopolitanism, international culture, the elite, the avant-garde, and the contemporary. On the other side we have national literature, jingoism, provincialism, backwardness, and a dependent and derivative mentality. The underlying spatial organization of these terms is that of the centre and the periphery, or the metropolis and the dominion, and Australia is always burdened by association with the second set of terms.

That a survey issued under the Jindyworobak banner would evoke this response from Harris is perhaps not surprising. The Jindyworobaks were a nationalist poetry movement, invested in local literary communities and the poetics of place. Rex Ingamells, the movement’s founder, argued that Australian poetry needed to base itself
firmly in what was specific about the Australian place rather than in a European derived repertoire of metaphors and images. And he proposed that an affinity with Aboriginal culture and spirituality could provide the basis for a national poetic language and style. The poetry the movement produced tended toward traditional forms, and was almost always nationalist in its subject matter. To hazard a generalization, the Jindyworobak sensibility was pastoral and romantic rather than urban and modernist, and their affiliations were almost opposite to Harris’ identifications with an internationally oriented modernist elite.

Yet Kennedy’s survey suggests that the Jindyworobak group did in fact see themselves as participating in a culture of modern verse, for the survey can be read as aiming to index the culture of modernism in Australia. Nonetheless, the modernity that Kennedy evokes under the Jindyworobak banner is very different from the modernity Harris lays claim to: while Harris suggests that Australia’s modernity can be measured in direct proportion to its participation in metropolitan culture, Kennedy’s Jindyworobak survey suggests that a kind of modernity might inhere in the circulation of provincial, local and national cultures. How are we to understand these two differing claims to the modern and to the culture of modern poetry in Australia? And does the Jindyworobak group have any claim to the culture of modernism in Australia?

We might begin to answer these questions by comparing Harris’s response with the quote from P.R. Stephensen that prefaces this chapter. Stephensen’s nationalist tract, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, was written five years previous to Kennedy and Harris’ correspondence, and it was a major impetus for Rex Ingamells’ initial Jindyworobak manifesto, *Conditional Culture*. Stephensen suggests a very different way
of formulating the relationship between local and world culture. For Stephensen all
culture is local first and foremost, and one’s access to an international or “world culture”
comes not from identification with the metropolis but rather from a commitment to the
national and the local.

While Stephensen’s essay tends to be understood in relation to the history of Australian nationalism (Munro), its broad sensibility bears a resemblance to a global late modernist revaluation of provincial and local cultures. As several critics have argued, in the period from the late 1930s through the midcentury modernist energies were redirected away from the transnational and cosmopolitan towards landscape and the consolidated local (Davis; Esty; Falci; Londe; J.Marx). In perhaps the most important of these accounts, *A Shrinking Island*, Jed Etsy reads British modernism in the 1930s as manifesting an “anthropological turn,” away from the outward looking and universalizing energies of high modernism, and towards an interest in the particularities of a bounded national culture:

the anthropological turn names the discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture – one whose insular integrity seemed to mitigate some of modernism’s characteristic social agonies while rendering obsolete some of modernism’s defining aesthetic techniques. (2)
Etsy argues that the late writings of Woolf, Eliot, and Forster contain the seeds of an emergent culturalism: an awakening auto-ethnographic gaze that makes England itself an object of anthropological knowledge.

Etsy’s account suggests a modernism that begins to collapse the structure of oppositions that Max Harris works within, replacing the hierarchy of imperial center and colonial periphery with a model of dispersed local cultures. Nonetheless, the history he tells remains focused on Britain as the fading center of imperial power. For Etsy, this emergent culturalism is an ameliorating response from an ex-world power to the loss of its own centrality. His book provides an account of “a major literary culture caught in the act of becoming minor” (3).

But what might the culture of localization look like in the settler colony? In this chapter I argue that the literary projects of Stephensen and the Jindyworobaks can be read as attempting an analogous task to that described by Etsy, to define and enact a self-contained and localized culture, in this case Australian. Situating the Jindyworobak movement in relation to the late modernist culture of localization provides a way to think about the relationship between Australian literary nationalism and global modernism that displaces their rigid opposition. Nonetheless the task of localization necessarily has a different meaning in Australia from the ex-center of empire. In Australia, the representation of provinciality may not signal the collapse of British imperial power but rather its persistence. And nativism cannot function as an un-problematically redemptive and consolidating discourse because it leads directly to the figure of the Aboriginal and thus to the ongoing history of colonial dispossession.
This chapter situates the Jindyworobak poetry movement in the context of modernist projects of localization in the 1930s in order to think about how these discourses function in the settler colony. I read the Jindyworobaks as what I call “provincial modernists”. While the Jindyworobak group has often been understood as disconnected from, even antithetical to, modernism, I argue that the Jindyworobak movement provides a new formulation of the relationship between the local and the modern that makes a commitment to local and parochial cultures the basis of a response to modernity. Focusing primarily on the manifestos and thematic statements produced by the group, I argue that the Jindyworobaks theorized the local in new ways. In these statements the local becomes both a value in itself and the point of access to international and world culture. A commitment to the local is presented as a response to modern social conditions; it is given as an alternative to a jingoistic nationalism associated with empire and war on the one hand, and as a counter to a muddling cosmopolitanism on the other. I suggest that the Jindyworobak movement provides one of the earliest articulations of a model of the world as a conglomerate of de-centered local cultures, in contrast to an older imperial model of the world as organised around centre and periphery, or metropolis and dominion. Their efforts to imagine and embody a native settler culture lead the Jindyworobaks directly to the figure of the Aboriginal. At the core of the Jindyworobak project, embedded in its very name, was an appropriation of Aboriginal culture. In the Jindyworobak oeuvre the Aboriginal becomes an emblem for a locally oriented, native culture. Nonetheless, I suggest that in its literary manifestation the Aboriginal signified unpredictably, and in excess of its designated role.
The chapter begins with an account of Rex Ingamells’ attempt to delineate a national poetic language that would respond to the environmental conditions of the Australian landscape. I then look in more detail at the movement’s relationship to modernism, exploring its ambivalent repurposing of the key forms and formats of the European avant-garde for an inward-looking and self-consciously provincial poetry movement. Following this I flesh out the idea of the Jindyworobaks as provincial modernists by showing the way in which their commitments to the local manifested in their on-the-ground practices: in their publication and distribution methods and in their attempts to create poetic communities in suburbs and rural areas throughout Australia. In the second half of the chapter I explore the way in which the Aboriginal functioned in their attempt to construct a localized culture and aesthetic. While the Jindyworobaks’ use of the Aboriginal for their local nationalism was complicit with a colonizing dispossession of Aboriginal land, I show that there was an innate tendency towards ambiguity in their appropriating project. In Rex Ingamells’ poetry the Aboriginal does not simply signify nationalist belonging, but rather carries an accusation against both the settler culture and the very project of the Jindyworobak group itself.
Environmental Values

“Jindyworobak” is an aboriginal word meaning “to annex, to join,” and I propose to coin it for a particular use. The Jindyworobaks, I say, are those individuals who are endeavoring to free Australian art from whatever alien influences trammel it, that is, to bring it into proper contact with its materials. (Ingamells, Conditional Culture 4-5)

The Jindyworobaks entered the Australian literary scene in 1938 with Rex Ingamells’ manifesto-style essay on Australian poetry, “Conditional Culture.” Ingamells took the name “Jindyworobak” from an Aboriginal word in the glossary of The Vanished Tribes, a collection of re-told Aboriginal stories by James Devaney (Devaney and Wenban). Ingamells defined the word, after Devaney, as “to annex, to join,” and he defined the task of the Jindyworobak movement as one of “joining” the language of Australian literature to the specific environment and materials of the Australian place.

Ingamells’ central argument was that Australian poetry needed to take its inspiration directly from the local Australian landscape rather than relying on European-derived poetic metaphors, symbols, and images. Ingamells argued that when Australian poets turned to the Australian landscape with an English literary tradition behind them, they were unable to respond properly to the specificities of Australian place. Australian writers, “describing the bush with much the same terminology as English writers apply to a countryside of oaks and elms and yews” (6), produced empty imitations of European poetry rather than poetry that responded to the Australian environment. The English
language and literary tradition evoked for Ingamells what he called “the pageantry of the Old World” (6), a historically dense line of European-derived references and associations that clouded the Australian poet’s ability to experience the Australian environment. The persistence of an English poetic idiom, he argued, did not simply hamper the development of an Australian poetic tradition, but also prevented the development of an authentic, lived relationship with the Australian landscape. An English poetic vocabulary, he argued, “clogs the minds of most Australians, preventing a free appreciation of nature” (5).

Ingamells coined the term “environmental values” to describe the sensibility of the Australian poet whose language achieved proper “thought contact” (5) with the Australian environment. Australian literature, he argued, should base itself in an “affinity” with the “natural distinctiveness” of the country, “its quintessence ... lie[s] in the realization of whatever things are distinctive in our culture and their sublimation in art and idea, in culture” (6). “Environmental values” encompassed two basic interrelated ideas: firstly that Australian poetic language should respond directly to the Australian environment; and secondly that Australian poetry should be clearly different from other kinds of poetry, and particularly from English poetry. These two aims were presented as following naturally from each other. For Ingamells the proper subject of a national poetry was landscape; and what distinguished the Australian landscape from the English landscape would also distinguish the two national poeties.

Ingamells’ emphasis on the importance of indigenous landscape to a national culture makes Conditional Culture similar to earlier statements on national culture by
P.R. Stephensen and Vance Palmer.\textsuperscript{74} Indeed Ingamells repeatedly stated his indebtedness to Stephensen’s \textit{Foundations of Culture in Australia} throughout his career.\textsuperscript{75} Like these critics, Ingamells was invested in establishing what set Australia apart from its European heritage; and like them also, he found the main answer to this question in the indigenous landscape. What Ingamells called “environmental values” was not dissimilar from what Stephensen called “the spirit of the place” (11). However there were significant differences in Ingamells’ Jindyworobak position. In a previous chapter I argued that for Stephensen a belief in the “Australian born’s” deep and almost blooded affinity with “place” formed the basis of an Australian ethnic ideal. By contrast, Ingamells’ project was primarily a poetic one, to do with orienting Australian poetry towards the indigenous landscape. Ingamells was a poet; his aesthetic program was based in poetry; and the problem he set out to answer through the Jindyworobaks was at its core the problem of a national poetic language.

The concerns and presuppositions that guided this project also had a longer romantic lineage. Ingamells’ belief that a language might be natural to both landscape and nation and the bearer of national destiny recalls German and English romantic nationalism, as well as Emersonian ideas about natural language.\textsuperscript{76} In particular, his sense that Australian nationhood depended on a national linguistic identity recalls Fichte’s 1808 \textit{Address to the German Nation}, which made linguistic descent rather than blood the

\textsuperscript{74} See for example Vance Palmer’s 1905 essay “An Australian National Art” reprinted in John Barnes’ \textit{The Writer in Australia}.
\textsuperscript{75} In particular see Ingamells’ account of his debt to Stephensen in the 1948 \textit{Jindyworobak Review} (10).
\textsuperscript{76} See for example Frank Waldo Emerson’s \textit{Nature}; Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s \textit{Address to the German Nation}; William Wordsworth’s “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”.
bearer of national memory and national destiny. Fichte’s address articulates a series of presuppositions that carry through twentieth century nationalism and that can be seen as animating the particular preoccupations that run through Ingamells’ poetic program: the basis of the nation is its cultural life; linguistic purity is fundamental to the integrity of national identity; a national language is the bearer of national history and national destiny.

Writing in the wake of this nationalist tradition, Ingamells was dismayed that the English language carried the history and identity of the wrong place: of England rather than Australia. At the core of Conditional Culture lay the questions of how to make the English language, with all its histories and associations, speak to the Australian landscape; and how Australia, a settler culture, could distinguish itself from the language and culture of the metropolis from within that language and culture. His attempt to answer this question resulted in a paradox, to which we now turn.

Ingamells’ project assumed a national poetics would create a line of direct access to the natural environment. The idea of “thought contact,” like the claim that Australian literature must “annex” or “join” itself to the Australian landscape, implied the possibility of a direct and unmediated contact between language and landscape. Yet, at the same time, the idea that the English language stood between the Australian poets and their

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77 Fichte argued that linguistic descent rather than blood or the drawing and redrawing of state lines constituted a nation’s cultural and spiritual identity. Fichte provides one of the first articulations of the idea that language is the bearer of cultural memory and language carries the nation through time, connecting a national past to a national destiny: ‘it is not the issue of prior ancestry of those who continue to speak the national language, but only the fact that this language continues to be spoken without interruption for men are formed by language much more than language by men’ (49).

78 On the postcolonial inheritance of this traditional of nationalist thought see Pheng Cheh’s Spectral nationality: passages of freedom from Kant to postcolonial literatures of liberation.
environment, governing their relationship to the landscape, granted language the capacity
to construct, even determine, the poet’s relationship to the natural world. Ingamells saw
the English language as historically, culturally and geographically specific and thus
recognized that language was not transparent but opaque with its context. In other words,
while Ingamells’ project sought a wholly transparent language, his project was motivated
by his recognition of language’s historicity and lack of transparency.

The stress of this paradox sent Ingamells in search of a language that would erase
its own mediating function, a language that would be an avenue not to its own conflicts
and specificity, but simply to the experience of the landscape itself. He wrote:

Pseudo-Europeanism clogs the minds of most Australians, preventing a free
appreciation of nature. Their speech and thought idioms are European; they have
little direct thought-contact with nature. Although emotionally and spiritually they
should be, and, I believe, are more attuned to the distinctive bush, hill and coastal
places they visit than to the European parks and gardens around the cities, their
thought-idiom belongs to the latter not the former. Give them a suitable thought-
idiom for the former and they will be grateful. Their more important emotional
and spiritual potentialities will be given the conditions for growth. The inhibited
individuality of the race will be released. Australian culture will exist.

(Conditional Culture 5)

In this quote we see Ingamells turning to idiom, that is to language, to solve the problem
of mediation. Ingamells suggests that the right idiom will enable a more direct
relationship between nature and consciousness, one that will enable the free growth of an uninhibited national individuality. Like South African writing of the same period described by JM Coetzee, Ingamells here “pursues the quest for an authentic language ... within a framework in which language, consciousness and landscape are interrelated” (7). We might argue that the idea of the “thought idiom” suggests for Ingamells a form of mediation not wholly reducible to language. And yet it also implies a recognition that consciousness itself cannot be thought outside of some form of linguistic construction. While Ingamells seems to strive here for an unmediated relationship between language and landscape, which he calls “thought contact,” his notion of “thought idiom” only implies a different strand of mediation. Ingamells’ logic here is tautological, for it suggests that the problem of mediation will be solved by mediation.

We can see this paradox most clearly if we turn to Ingamells’ attempts to put the Jindyworobak program into practice. In *Conditional Culture* Ingamells argued that Australian poetic language was hampered first and foremost by a specifically poetic English vocabulary, which he called an “established range of verse vocabulary” (7). Thus he suggested that what needed reform was not the English language in its entirety, but the English derived “idiom” and the “incongruous use of metaphors, similes and adjectives,” which he referred to as “the biggest curse and handicap upon our literature” (6-7). While assigning the problem to a specifically poetic language provided a way to manage the ambivalent relationship between Australian literature and the English language, the question remained of where exactly the line fell between the incongruous metaphor or foreign poetic vocabulary and what needed to be seen as a neutral language, if the English language was not going to be deemed altogether unsuited to the Australian place.
Ingamells’ response to the dilemma he had set for himself was to become a classifier and categorizer, obsessively engaged in the destabilizing practice of dividing the language against itself.

*Conditional Culture* is organized around readings of a selection of poems. These readings can be understood as attempts to define the limits of a properly Australian poetic vocabulary. Arguing that, “the very achievements of English poetry have been the fetters of Australian [poetry]” (7), Ingamells read these poems for what he saw as the foreign idiom, the incongruous metaphor, simile, or adjective. What this meant in practice was that he singled out certain words within the poems as foreign interlopers, and suggested others as substitutes. Of George Essex Evans’ “On the Plain” he says that: “‘Armour white,’ ‘frontiers of the night,’ and ‘jeweled ground’ are inexcusable” (7). Of A.E. Hausman’s “Fancy’s Knell,” an English poem, he argues that while the imagery is “beautiful” and “appropriate” to the poem’s English setting, it makes no sense in relation to the Australia place. Were the line “When light in lances/ Across the mean was laid” to be read in relation to Australia, “lances” would need to be changed for “‘lances’ cannot be associated with the Australian landscape, which is primitive, and has no European associations. ‘Spears’ is obviously the right word” (7-8).

We might argue then that Ingamells’ belief in the possibility of a finite and unmediated relationship between language and landscape, when put into practice, gave way to a paranoid project of classificatory taxonomy. In his work as a reader, Ingamells became deeply engrossed in projects of classification, which aimed to determine whether or not particular words and particular poems could be read under the Jindyworobak
banner. His desire for an organic language emanating from the land itself manifested in practice in a top-down and mechanical project of classification and small correction.

Ingamells’ project of classificatory reading extended to his editorial work for the Jindyworobak press. In deciding what should be published under the Jindyworobak banner, Ingamells’ primary criterion was not aesthetic quality or interest but rather the poem’s faith to an Australian idiom. In the preface to the 1939 *Jindyworobak Anthology* Ingamells commented, “I am determined to reject poetically better non-Australian verse in favor of poetically mediocre Australian” (2). The question of what counts as Australian verse is decided by the exclusion of certain words and phrases that Ingamells has deemed unsuited to the Australian landscape. He implores the poet to remember his pet aversion, which is “to be exhorted to hear the ‘matin’ songs of magpies and regard ‘majestic’ and ‘stately’ gums. Certain words and phrases, belonging to the poetic diction of England, can, with their very definite Old World associations, give only false impressions of our outback” (2).

For the 1944 *Jindyworobak Anthology* Ingamells devised a classificatory system that organized Australian poetry under four different headings, each of which marked a degree of affiliation with the Jindyworobak program:

1) *Positive Jindyworobak verse*, in which Australian environmental values are faithfully observed;

2) *Neutral verse*, in which environmental values are no issue;

3) *Un-Jindyworobak verse*, in which the environmental values of other countries are represented;
4) *Anti-Jindyworobak verse*, flouting Australian environmental values. (2)

The list works as a rubric or a set of evaluative criteria that promises a stable classificatory system for Australian poetry. The term “Jindyworobak” appears here as an organizing principle against which all Australian poetry, indeed all poetry in the world, can be measured and positioned. Yet at the same time, the terms of the rubric remain surprisingly contentless. For example, there are no criteria here to determine what would count as a faithful observation of Australian environmental values as opposed to the environmental values of another country; nor are there criteria to distinguish between the exclusion of environmental values as opposed to their flouting.

In the years that followed the heralding of the Jindyworobak movement by *Conditional Culture*, the Jindyworobaks would produce many accounts of their purpose and identity. The Jindyworobaks released three manifesto style pamphlets that provided “definitive” accounts of the movement, *Conditional Culture, Flaunted Banners* (Kennedy) and *Jindyworobak: Toward and Australian Culture* (Gifford). Almost all of the fifteen annual anthologies they put out contained a new articulation of the Jindyworobak program, and Ingamells himself published several self-mythologizing histories of the movement. The most blatant of these was his *Handbook of Australian Literature*, published in 1949. Pitched as an overview of the history of Australian literature from the 1780s to the contemporary period, the book named the Jindyworobak movement the most important event of Australian literary history, and presented it as the culmination, and answer to the question of, an Australian national tradition.
Ingamells’ desire for an organic poetics of the land was pitched, implicitly, in opposition to modernism and modernity. And yet the Jindyworobaks’ propensity to articulate and rearticulate their status as a movement could not help but invoke modernism and the fairly recent history of the European avant-garde. Indeed, the contradictions that subsisted in Ingamells’ desire for an organic and self-identical national language lead him and the movement more generally away from poetry itself and toward a program of definition, classification, and small correction. The aesthetic and material forms that were best able to house this taxonomic task were the manifesto, the pamphlet, and the small scale magazine or anthology. These were forms directed towards polemic and definition, and that could be easily and cheaply produced, revised, and distributed. Nonetheless, these forms also invoked modernism and implicitly placed the Jindyworobaks as a modern movement. In the next section I turn explicitly to the relationship between the Jindyworobak movement and modernism by attending to a number of places in the Jindyworobak archive where the Jindyworobaks explicitly articulated a relationship to modernism and what they saw as modern world culture.

The Jindyworobaks’ Local Modernism

There are several obvious ways in which the Jindyworobak movement echoes some of the standard characteristics of modernism. These include its claim to a new and youthful aesthetic; its use of the little magazine and manifesto forms, familiar from contemporary and avant-garde literary movements; and the links to primitivism in its use of Aboriginal language and celebration of Aboriginal culture. Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poetry in
particular, which forms the subject of the final section of this chapter, produced an a-signifying and abstract poetics that was strongly co-resonant with various modernist impulses. In all of these ways, the Jindyworobak movement can be read both as an example of a locally generated modernism, and as a place where the innovations of the European avant-garde, as they were refracted through debates about modernism in Australia, were self-consciously engaged with by Australian cultural nationalists. However, as well as resonating with some of the recognized characteristics of modernism, the Jindyworobaks also framed themselves in direct response to modernism. It is here, in these moments of self-conscious dialogue with modernism, that we clearly see an Australian cultural nationalism that undoes the standard opposition between modernism and nationalism. The Jindyworobak movement emerges as a cultural movement that was both inward-looking, directed towards the local and the national, and at the same time in dialogue with the broad international culture of modernism. In this section I survey the way in which the Jindyworobak group formulated its relationship to modernism and theorised the place of local culture in modernity.

The most explicit attempt to formulate the relationship between the Jindyworobak movement and the European avant-garde came from Victor Kennedy in *Flaunted Banners*, a manifesto-style pamphlet produced for the group. The “flaunted banners” of Kennedy’s title are the series of modern movements or “isms” that he calls “the banner bearers of modernity,” and for Kennedy “the Jindyworobak Club seems to be the newest of these” (3). Here Kennedy locates the Jindyworobak movement as the direct successor of the European avant-garde, drawing attention to the Jindyworobak movement’s appropriation of its forms and formats: the manifesto, the pamphlet and the dedication to
articulating and rearticulating its status as a movement. In his claim for the “newness” of Jindyworobak movement, Kennedy inevitably echoes Pound’s modernist battle cry “make it new.”

But Kennedy is also cautious about the affiliations he draws. Claiming that “the Jindyworobak movement does not go all the way with the banner bearers of modernity in overthrowing all restraint and discipline; nor in decrying what has been done in the past” (10), he elects a measured affinity with modernism. What we might see as Kennedy’s tempering appropriation claims certain “modernist” characteristics (the manifesto, the little magazine, the self-identification as a movement), but also retains a commitment to ideas often seen as antithetical to metropolitan modernism, notably landscape and the nation. For Kennedy the “new technique” that the Jindyworobak movement espouses is based in an organic relationship between form and content where technique will form “an integral part of the subject” (10). This is essentially a rearticulation of Ingamells’ “environmental values,” where Australian poetry must take its language and form from the landscape itself. However, Kennedy denotes this romantic vision as an explicitly modern impulse.

That Kennedy sees the Jindyworobak sensibility as a proper response to a set of modern and modernist social and aesthetic conditions can be further demonstrated through reference to an extended passage from *Flaunted Banners*. In this passage Kennedy positions the Jindyworobak movement as a response to the conditions created by the Second World War:
While we are fighting the second world war, within a generation of the first, do we imagine for a moment that the great subterranean cross-movements that have erupted so disastrously are going to be reconfigured and remain unappeased? Is it possible to think that the signs of social decay and breakdown so apparent may yet be passed over lightly with our good intentions of doing something in the old way after the war? These social conditions are even now throwing up new techniques to cope with new and vastly changing phenomena. And unless it is grasped and a clean break made with worn out forms and habits of thinking, disintegration, widespread misery and repeated explosions will continue to wreck every sense of order our philosophies have given us. (11)

When Kennedy demands that a “clean break” be made “with worn out forms and habits of thinking”, he echoes various modernist celebrations of rupture and renovation. And yet this is not exactly his claim. Kennedy’s insistence on a break with “the great subterranean cross-movements,” here figured as the disastrous “signs of social decay and breakdown,” evokes nothing so much as the history of Australian anti-modernist criticism, which has always diagnosed modernism as a destructive, exhausted and decaying social form (Walker). What Kennedy demands we break with is in fact modernism itself, and particularly the ceaseless and destructive energies of the avant-garde. At the same time, he insists that this must not be a nostalgic impulse, an attempt to do “something in the old way.” Therefore Kennedy demands a double break; he insists that the Jindyworobak movement must separate off not only from the pattern of break up and break away that is seen to characterise the European avant-garde, but also from “old ways” that are
superseded and inadequate to the task of providing meaning in a world ravaged not only by epistemological and aesthetic disruption, but also by two world wars.

Kennedy thus locates the Jindyworobak group as coming in some sense after modernism. The newness that he lays claim to is the newness of something after the avant-garde, not post-modernism, but a new or renewed traditionalism. It is here, after modernism, or in the culture of late modernism, that we can locate the Jindyworobak valuation of local culture.

The Jindyworobaks’ clearest theorization of local culture came in an essay called “Bird’s Eye View” written by Rex Ingamells’ brother, John Ingamells, for the Jindyworobak little magazine Cultural Cross Section. Quoting Carlyle on Goethe, John Ingamells argued that the poet gave his creativity visible shape by giving it “a local habitation and a name” (emphasis in original 6). John Ingamells’ claim was similar to his brother’s idea of “environmental values,” but he restated this idea as an orientation to the nearby and a revaluation of the parochial. John Ingamells argued that the Australian poet would achieve a “universal sentiment,” “if not through some narrower, more parochial outlook, then through the poet’s (or artist’s) incidental association with some more immediate environment” (7).

For John Ingamells, the universal sentiment found in the local environment would also be the basis of an international culture. If the universal in art and literature was achieved through an engagement with the local environment, then true internationalism could only be reached between cultures that were themselves locally grounded. Quoting J.K. Ewers, a teacher and writer, John Ingamells argued that “internationalism cannot be founded if the component parts are insufficiently well-rooted in their own tradition to
strengthen the whole structure” (6). The formulation here, somewhat counter-intuitive, is that internationalism is attained by focusing on the local and parochial rather than by reaching out to the world. Like P.R. Stephensen, with whom I opened this essay, John Ingamells argued that Australian art and literature would enter the sphere of international culture not by trying to define itself more closely with the metropolitan centre, but rather by turning inward towards local subjects.

While the internationalism that John Ingamells proposed here was specifically non-isolationist, it was also differentiated from what was seen as the muddling cosmopolitanism of a certain kind of modernism, what he called in this essay a “T.S. Eliot style concoction” (7). The crucial difference was in the dedication to local and individual identity. Australian literature, he argued, must have “a marked individuality with regard to local themes,” and its “individuality [must be] developed first or the flavour of our literature [will] be diluted” (7). Thus the model of world culture that drove the Jindyworobak program was not one based in a celebration of hybrid and cosmopolitan global identities, but rather in clearly individuated national identities, grounded in their locality. For Victor Kennedy, Australia would develop forms based in its own environment and only then “be added to the great stream of world literature” (13). At the same time the Jindyworobaks also explicitly differentiated their nationalism from the aggressive and jingoistic patriotism associated with war. 79 In Conditional Culture, Ingamells sets Jindyworobak apart from the “pre-war nationalism and self consciousness”

79 In the minds of its critics, the Jindyworobak movement’s atavistic investments in land and identity had overtones that could sometimes associate them with fascism and fascist nationalism, particularly after the outbreak of the Second World War. A.D. Hope in particular, the movement’s most vocal critic, did accuse the Jindyworobak movement, and particularly the Jindyworobak poet Ian Mudie, of fascist nationalism. See for example A.D. Hope “Sequel to the Australian Dream.”
that “led to the expression of superficial, larrikin sentiments” and “jingoism” (2), sentiments that he sees as both out of date and also too easily directed towards “war” and the “jingoism of Empire” (2).

Thus what I am calling the localism of the Jindyworobak movement was presented as an alternative to both jingoistic nationalism and cosmopolitanism. It resisted isolationism, chauvinism and the ideology of war on the one hand, but also held onto certain notions of local authenticity and national identity, shrugging off any association with cosmopolitanism. At the crux of the Jindyworobaks’ modern localism was a reformulation of the relationship between the provincial and modern world culture. Implicitly, this was a radical remapping of the world. It collapsed the metropole–colony model, the dominant way of understanding Australia’s relationship to an international culture, and replaced it with a map of de-centered local world cultures conceived of as equal “component parts” (6). John Ingamells argued that “Australian literature must take all cultures into account – Chinese as well as English and American as well as aboriginal or Pacific – and yet still have marked individuality with regard to local themes” (7).

T.S Eliot would present a similar sentiment less than a decade later in his “Notes Toward a Definition of Culture,” stating that “just as we recognise that the parts of Britain must have in one sense, a common culture, so we must aspire to a common world culture, which will yet not diminish the particularity of its constituent parts” (136). Another voicing of this sort of idea came from the Irish poet Patrick Kavanaugh who celebrated the “parochial poet” who “never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish”, takes his place among the great poets of great civilisations (282).
The connections between Eliot and Kavanagh and the Jindyworobak group are tenuous at best. For the Jindyworobaks Eliot remained a figure of the modernist cosmopolitanism that they were trying to get away from despite his later turn to the local. Kavanagh is not mentioned anywhere in the Jindyworobak archive. What I am suggesting by quoting these figures, however, is that there are strong co-resonances between the ideas of the Jindyworobak group and certain broader trends in late modernist literature. The Jindyworobak movement’s attempt to define a local Australian literary identity was not just a naive provincialism, but was also part of an attempt to theorise world literature and culture in a particular way. It is here that the Jindyworobak movement can be seen as anticipating – albeit awkwardly – the turn to the local as the point of access to the world that characterises much mid-century poetry.

**Thirty Seven Wattle Trees: The Jindyworobak Press and the Jindyworobak Club**

In 1938 Kennedy wrote to Ingamells, that what Australian poetry lacked was a proper “forum,” as “those who take poetry seriously in this country seem to be set far apart.”

Part of what Ingamells attempted and in many ways succeeded in establishing through Jindyworobak was a context that brought together a dispersed population of both professional writers and amateur enthusiasts into something like what Kennedy had termed a “forum” on national poetry.

The Jindyworobak publishing venture was based on small-scale print runs that were personally funded and locally produced and distributed. Between 1938 and 1953

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Jindyworobak brought out fifteen annual anthologies and published around forty single-authored collections of poetry. It also published three treatises defining the Jindyworobak movement, Rex Ingamells’ history of Australian literature, and an anthology of Australian poetry for use in Australian schools.

The submissions to the Jindyworobak anthologies were always based on an open call and Ingamells published a lot of young and new poets; the subtitle of the 1938 anthology was “Poems by Young Australians Today.” Reading through the anthologies today, one notes that poets and poems central to the history of twentieth century Australian poetry are published alongside amateur poets whose verse was never published anywhere else. Max Harris, Judith Wright, James McAuley, and Mary Gilmore were all appeared alongside countless amateur enthusiasts.

The cheaply produced, single-authored collections never ran to more than three hundred copies and Jindyworobak never made a profit. These were funded by a combination of sales and private donation and the investment of authors who often funded their own Jindyworobak publications. Ingamells himself, although earning only a teacher’s salary, invested significant personal funds in the movement. There was, he confessed in a letter to Mary Gilmore, “little method” in the distribution of Jindyworobak books.81 Writing to the journalist and media magnate Keith Murdoch requesting an annual endowment, Ingamells confessed that “the only Jindyworobak bank account is my personal bank account.”82 Fellow Jindyworobak Kenneth Gifford, who was a lawyer, encouraged Ingamells to better manage the business and eventually helped Ingamells to

82 Rex Ingamells. Letter to Keith Murdoch. 28 September 1943. Rex Ingamells Papers (MS 6244) State Library of Victoria. Vol. 4
set up a club account. But the business was for the most part run by Ingamells from his home in his spare time and using his spare cash.

The movement’s amateurism, however, was not simply the result of Rex Ingamells’ ineptitude and his inability to professionalise the business or expand the press beyond the bounds of a DIY style enterprise. The Jindyworobaks’ cottage industry style productions expressed the ideologically motivated desire for a literary culture based in local community and a literary market that was not dependent on the transnational flow of capital from the British metropolis. The amateurism of the Jindyworobaks can be read as part of a self-conscious cultivation of a locally oriented and accessible space of poetic community.

The most explicit manifestation of Ingamells’ desire to create an amateur-driven local poetic culture was the Jindyworobak club. Ingamells envisioned a national poetry club with many regional branches where members would gather at regular meetings to share verse and discuss Australian poetry. This effort was for the most part unsuccessful and served mainly as a small source of revenue and a mailing list for Jindyworobak publicity. However, there was an uncommonly active branch in Broken Hill, a mining town with a strong workers’ movement and a tradition of evening class community education initiatives. Activities at the fortnightly Wednesday night meetings included “reading of poetic quotations by members and endeavouring to place the source” and “original poems and selections from Australian authors.”

At a meeting of the Jindyworobak club in Broken Hill, probably in 1939, “thirty seven wattle trees, seeds from the tree growing on the grave of Adam Lindsay Gordon at

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Brighton, Victoria were distributed to members.” Gordon was a nineteenth century Australian poet. This anecdote, although incidental, embodies the connections the Jindyworobak movement sought to draw between poetry, community and the local environment: the tree from the poet’s grave, distributed at a suburban poetry meeting, to be taken home and planted in a backyard plot.

The Aboriginal and the Local

The emblem for the Jindyworobak press was a crude silhouetted image of an Aboriginal figure by a campfire. All of the Jindyworobak small scale publications contained this image.

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**Figure 5: Jindyworobak Logo 1941**

Accompanied by the name, “Jindyworobak” and the place of publication (Melbourne, Adelaide etc.), the image placed the figure of the Aboriginal at the center of the

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Jindyworobak press’s construction of the idea of local culture. Indeed, the Jindyworobak logo, I argue, made the Aboriginal an emblem for the local.

The use of the Aboriginal as a sign for local culture is broadly displayed in the visual aesthetic of the Jindyworobak group, particularly in the cover art produced for Jindyworobak publications. Most Jindyworobak publications used images of Aboriginal figures, or Aboriginal tropes and designs for their covers. This style of cover design did much of the work to construct a chain of association and equivalence between “Jindyworobak,” “Australia,” and the Aboriginal.
The most striking of these covers were produced by Margaret Preston, who is discussed briefly in the introduction, an artist who, aside from her work for the Jindyworobaks, is famous for her imitation of Aboriginal visual design. Preston is often credited with being one of the first non-indigenous artists to incorporate Aboriginal imagery into her visual art. The cover work Preston created for Jindyworobak publications combined Aboriginal imagery with the amateur and domestic aesthetic of the Jindyworobak group. For example, the cover for Ingamells’ *Come Walkabout*, below, showcases Preston’s characteristic Aboriginalized line work bordering a crudely rendered image of two a dimensional landscape dotted with animals. The abstractions of the landscape are countered by the two homesteads on the right side of the picture plane so that the cover references both the Aboriginal and the domestic, producing an indigenized domestic landscape. In covers like this, the Aboriginal was not a human figure in the landscape but rather an aesthetic style.

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Figure 8: Cover by Margaret Preston for Ian Mudie *The Australian Dream*, 1943

Figure 9: Cover by Margaret Preston for Rex Ingamells *Come Walkabout*, 1948
The Jindyworobaks’ use of the Aboriginal was structured by a logic of substitution. The project assumed that the European content might be simply removed from Australian culture and replaced by a set of equivalent Aboriginal images and associations. For example, on the cover to Ian Mudie’s *Corroboree to the Sun*, below, the classical imagery is localized by placing an Aboriginal rather than a European figure at the centre of the image. The cover can usefully be compared to a very similar image produced for *Vision*, an Australian poetry movement from the previous decade, which aimed to imbue Australian poetry with classical European imagery. Mudie’s cover can be read as a reworking of the cover from *Vision*.

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This image was removed because of copyright restrictions.

Figure 10: Ian Mudie *Corroboree to the Sun*, 1940  
Figure 11: *Vision* Magazine No.1, May 1923
The logic of substitution also structured the poetry produced by the Jindyworobak movement as demonstrated by Mudie’s poem, “As are the Gums.” Included in the collection *Corroboree to the Sun* the poem requests a cultural localization similar to that performed on the collection’s cover. The poem asks that the figures of classical myth, Odin, Osiris, Pan, make way for an Aboriginal spiritual tradition:

> Once alien gods, Odin, Osiris, Pan,
> came crowding in upon our entering heels.
> Kill them, oh land, free us, and let us be
> of you, and of your totem gods of stone and tree. (*Corroboree to the Sun* 11)\(^{85}\)

This stanza in many ways exemplifies the structure of the Jindyworobaks’ appropriation of the Aboriginal. The European tradition is set in opposition to an Aboriginal tradition which is asked to localize Australian poetic language, providing it with a repertoire of symbols and images that emerge from the Australian landscape rather than from a foreign tradition. We might argue that Mudie’s poem imagines the course of aesthetic history as organized by a series of displacements and substitutions. The poem imagines two displacements: firstly the displacement of the Aboriginal by European culture; and secondly the displacement of the European tradition in Australia by an Aboriginal tradition of the land.

The second displacement also transforms the Aboriginal totem gods into the poetic resources of the white poet. The closing request directed at the land itself, “let us

\(^{85}\) Reprinted in Brian Elliot (65)
be/ of you, and your totem gods of stone and tree,” is not made by an Aboriginal voice but by the voice of the nationalist poet. As such, it asks that the custody of this tradition be transferred from the Aboriginal to the Australian. We might argue then that the poetic project of the Jindyworobaks is structured by a logic of doubled substitution. Firstly, the English and European imagery of Australian poetry is removed and replaced with an apparently equivalent set of Aboriginal words and associations, totem gods and substitutes for Odin. Secondly, the white Australian poet takes the place of the Aboriginal as the true indigenous inhabitant of the landscape. The contradictory relationship between these two impulses is obvious. While the first is about writing the Aboriginal into the Australian landscape, the second is about writing the Aboriginal out, evacuating the Aboriginal so that the settler can take her place.

The Jindyworobaks’ most reified construction of an Aboriginal cultural tradition available as a poetic resource and cultural inheritance for the Australian poet was “alcheringa” or “dreamtime.” “Alcheringa” was also attached specifically to the language of nation. The Jindyworobaks took the concept of alcheringa primarily from Spencer and Gillen’s Arunta, the 1927 republication of the anthropological classic, The Native Tribes of Central Australia. Their sense of what alcheringa meant, however, was vague and generalized and not closely tied to this anthropological study. As Patrick Wolfe has argued, the idea of alcheringa or dreamtime was widely disseminated throughout early twentieth century anthropological discourse without any necessary empirical truth (“On Being Woken Up”). In the Jindyworobak oeuvre, alcheringa was one of a set of almost interchangeable terms referring to a generalized understanding of an Aboriginal tradition that could be appropriated by the Australian poet. Terms like totem, corroboree, doowee
[dream spirit], tjuringa [sacred object], dreamtime, and alchera [an alternative term for alcheringa] all stood for a culture of the land and an alternative to a European cultural and literary tradition.

In the glossary of his 1940 collection of poems *Corroboree to the Sun*, Ian Mudie defined alcheringa as, “the time of myth or dreamtime, in which the totem ancestors arose. Dreamtime is also the present and the future” (33). This definition exemplifies the way that alcheringa could function for the Jindyworobaks as a way of envisioning the temporality of nationalism; that is the nation as both an accumulation of historical tradition, and as the embodiment of a contemporary and projected future community (B. Anderson; Bhabha). As Homi Bhabha has argued, the temporality of the nation is always split between the pedagogical and the performative, that is between narratives of the nation’s people that stress their “historical origin in the past” and narratives of the people as contemporaneity, “as that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process” (208-209). The continuing popularity of the idea of dreamtime in Australian nationalist discourse is based in the way that this concept has been constructed so as to embody the structure of national time.

Indeed we can argue that while the Jindyworobaks’ construction of alcheringa and Aboriginal culture was part of an attempt to stress Australia’s difference from Europe, it was motivated by the desire to imagine the Australian nation according to a European model. James Devaney’s description of the “alchera concept,” an alternative term for alcheringa, for the 1948 *Jindyworobak Review* expresses this ambivalence:
European writers have centuries behind them. We have not. The Jindyworobak, native born like the original Australians, identified like them with this land and no other land, feel a far past of our own in the Alchera concept. They interpret the genius of the country. This and only this is our land and it is older than Europe.

Although framed as an encapsulation of Australia’s difference from Europe, alchera functions here in exactly the same way as European nationalism, representing a timeless lineage equivalent to the “centuries” that lie behind the European writer.

In the poetry of Ian Mudie alcheringa is animated specifically by the language of ethnic nationalism. From “Underground”:

Deep flows the flood,
dee under the land.
Dark is it, and blood
and eucalypt colour and scent it.
Deep flows the stream,
feeding the totem roots,
deep through the time of dream
in Alcheringa.
Deep flows the river,
deep as our roots reach for it;
feeding us, angry and striving
against the blindness
ship-fed sea bring us
from colder waters. (Corroboree to the Sun 4)\textsuperscript{86}

Patrick Wolfe argues that dreamtime’s widespread resonance in anthropological and popular discourse is due to the way it corresponds to colonialist ideas of Aboriginal irrationality (Wolfe, “On Being Woken Up”). But by the late 1930s its popularity had as much to do with its usefulness to Australian nationalism. It was the capacity that poets like Mudie invested in the concept of alcheringa to house this lexicon of blood, roots and soil that made it so popular in the literary nationalist imagination of the Jindyworobak poets. The irony, unacknowledged, was that the language they drew on to try to envision Australia’s essential difference and its escape from European history was in fact the language of fascism, and thus a language that was fully implicated in the emerging tragedies of European history.

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But there was a deeper problem in the Jindyworobaks’ appropriation of the Aboriginal. This was evidenced in the violence that attended many of the Jindyworobaks’ images of Aboriginal culture. For if the visual culture of the Jindyworobak group made the Aboriginal present to a localizing nationalist imagination, the poetic language of the Jindyworobaks often absented the Aboriginal figure from the Australian landscape. The Aboriginal culture the Jindyworobaks imagined in their poetry was not a living or

\textsuperscript{86} Reprinted in Brian Elliot (ed.) The Jindyworobaks (68).
peopled culture. Names of Jindyworobak collections and poems included *Forgotten People, The Vanished Tribes* and “All the Blacks are Gone”. The poems were full of images of Aboriginal ghosts, empty corroboree sites, and the degenerate remains of a past culture.

The need to remove the very figure put forth as the emblem of national culture points to the ambivalent denial that lay at the core of the Jindyworobaks’ appropriation of the Aboriginal. In a discussion of the Australian pastoral that bears relevance to the Jindyworobak movement, Ivor Indyk outlines the deep anxieties that surround the figure of the Aboriginal, or, as he calls this figure, the dispossessed:

[the] figure of the dispossessed ... unsettles the affirmations of the pastoral song. Though there have been times when the Aboriginal has played no part in the Australian pastoral, this effacement has been rare and partial. For the most part it is the persistence of the Aboriginal figure which is remarkable – appearing sometimes as a shadowy, spectral presence, sometimes dramatically heightened by fear or guilt, and more recently as a figure arguing on its own behalf for a revision of the pastoral order – and always as the embodiment of an aboriginal claim, a claim to priority (838).

The remainder of this chapter discusses the ambivalence that structured the Jindyworobaks’ appropriation of the Aboriginal. I argue that a tension runs throughout the Jindyworobak oeuvre between, on the one hand, the Jindyworobaks’ attempt to render the Aboriginal useful to their nationalist program, and on the other hand, the capacity of
the Aboriginal (as figure, as trope, or as linguistic sign) to signify in excess of its designated role and to evoke a series of anxieties about the priority and legitimacy of the settler poet. On the one hand, the Jindyworobaks’ appropriation of the Aboriginal was firmly complicit with a chauvinistic post-colonizing nationalism that continued the work of colonial dispossession and appropriation in the aesthetic realm (Sellick). And yet at the same time, it had the doubled effect of signifying the illegitimacy of the settler’s very presence on Australian soil, and voicing a subtle accusation not only against the settler presence in Australia but also against the very practice of poetic appropriation that had summoned the figure of the Aboriginal in the first place.

**Dark Ghosts: Elegy and the Aboriginal**

In *Conditional Culture* Ingamells’ wrote:

> They are now a forgotten people. One by one the tribes have vanished from their hunting grounds. No longer do the tribes go out before the dawn to stalk the kangaroos; no longer do they fish, with their spears or nets, in the river or billabongs or at the edge of the sea. They no longer hold their sacred corroborees under the twisted fire-reflecting branches of massive gum trees or among the stunted mallee. The blacks that remain are degenerate, puppet people, mere parodies or what their race once was. (16)
The elegiac mode provided one way that the Jindyworobaks drew on the symbolic potential of the Aboriginal while at the same time eliding a series of anxieties about priority and legitimacy. By writing about Aboriginal people and culture as though they were no longer alive, elegy performed a double gesture. It simultaneously wrote the Aboriginal into Australian landscape poetry while at the same time writing the Aboriginal out of the contemporary landscape itself. Elegy evacuated the land of its human presence through a shift in tense that marked the Aboriginal as already gone, and it also marked the speaker or the poet not as colonizer or illegitimate usurper but rather as mourner.87

In Ingamells’ poetry, the figure of the poet confronts the Aboriginal primarily as a ghost, so that imagining the Aboriginal is also imagining the Aboriginal no longer there. From Rex Ingamells’ “Imagery”:

When winds moan all the night
and clouds choke the stars and the moon,
I do not imagine witches and warlocks
and hellish rite and rune,
but mark how lonely Nature is
for vanished sons and daughters,
who live no more and hunt no more

87 Much work on the trope of the vanishing Indian in the American context makes a similar argument. For example Lora Romero states that “the elegiac mode performs the historical sleight of hand crucial to the topos of the doomed aboriginal: it represents the disappearance of the native as not just natural but as having already happened” (Romero 385). See also Max Cavitch American Elegy: the Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman and Renee L. Bergland The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects.
by her hills and her river-waters. *(Sun Freedom 19)*

The stanza is shaped around the familiar coupling of opposition and substitution that structures much of the Jindyworobak output. “Witches and warlocks” are countered with “vanished sons and daughters,” and the poet claims that he imagines this Aboriginal presence rather than the presence of the old world. But the Aboriginal that he imagines here is one that has “vanished,” so that to imagine the Aboriginal is in fact to imagine her absence. Nonetheless, if the Aboriginal has vanished from the land, she is nonetheless present in the imagination of the poet who “marks” her absence. Writing the Aboriginal ghost has a two-fold effect: to remove the indigene from the land and to re-house her in the Australian poet’s imagination. 88

The ghost or the spirit was the primary form taken by the Aboriginal figure in Jindyworobak poetry. These persistent spirits formed a counter to the abandoned corroboree sites and un-peopled river banks. In *Conditional Culture*, Ingamells claimed that while “a culture itself, for the most part, died with the tribes, something of its spirit has been preserved” and continued such that “an assimilation of much of that spirit with many of our own expressions is essential to the honest development of Australian culture” (17). We can argue that the Jindyworobaks divided the category of the Aboriginal into dead culture on the one hand and persistent spirit on the other.

For Ingamells the ability to perceive Aboriginal ghosts is the special ability of the Australian poet:

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88 Renee L. Bergland makes a similar argument about the place of Indian ghosts in the American poetic imagination in *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000)
How could a stranger hope to understand

Dark ghosts go with me all about the land. (*Forgotten People* 9)

Here the “dark ghost” or the figure of elegy marks the difference between the national poet’s special perception and the blindness of the stranger. The ability to perceive the Aboriginal ghost and the ability to write about the Australian landscape were presented as one and the same.

The division of the Aboriginal into a dead culture on the one hand and a persistent spirit on the other also enabled the idea of an Aboriginal inheritance for the settler culture. While the image of the dead Aboriginal must and did to some extent evoke colonial violence and dispossession, a ghostly haunting, what the Jindyworobaks sought in it was not the specter of history but rather the basis of national autochthony and spiritual depth. Nonetheless the violence that subsisted in this imagery could not help but unsettle the Jindyworobaks’ attempt to construct a benign localized aesthetic. In the next section we turn our attention to the poems in which the ambivalences of the Jindyworobak movement are most clearly displayed: Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems.

**The Poet in the Museum**

This final section returns us to the questions of landscape and poetic language that opened this chapter. Ingamells’ attempt to resolve the problem of linguistic mediation led
him to use Aboriginal words, which, he believed, possessed a closer relationship to the Australian landscape than English words. In perhaps the best known of all his poems, “Into Moonawathimeering,” Ingamells uses a combination of English and Aboriginal words, placing a series of untraslated Aboriginal words in an English narrative context:

Into moonawathimeering

where antinga dare not tread,

leaving wurly for a wulban,

tallabilla, you have fled.  (*Sun Freedom*)

Ingamells wrote three poems using this form and they were all published alongside his first statements about the Jindyworobak movement. The Aboriginal language poems represent Ingamells’ first and perhaps most concerted attempt to achieve in poetic form the task he set for himself in *Conditional Culture*: to find a poetic language that could refer directly to the specificities of the Australian landscape.

But although posited as a solution to the problem of linguistic mediation in the settler colony, the poems seemed to reference nothing so much as the violent structure of colonial appropriation. In these poems the Aboriginal words which have been removed from their original linguistic context are deadened and asignifying. The words in fact function very much like ethnographic objects which carry a trace of their own excision: their removal from one context and rehousing in another.

That Ingamells’ poems would reference the ethnographic object, and by extension the museum, is not surprising. Ingamells came to the Aboriginal primarily through the
museum and the culture of ethnographic display. Ingamells had, throughout his life, very little to do with contemporary indigenous communities or people. But the museum provides more than the context that Ingamells writes out of. In this section I will argue that the museum and the ethnographic display case inform the very structure of Ingamells’ poetic project.

This final section provides a reading of Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems in the context of the museum. I begin with a discussion of Ingamells’ explicit writings on the museum and his uncertainly about whether the museum was the source of a redemptive nationalist tradition, or whether by contrast it could only invoke a violent and shameful colonial history. I move then to a discussion of the semantic structure of the ethnographic artifact and the museum display case, arguing that the uncertainty that permeates Ingamells’ writing about the museum subsists also in the very structure of the ethnographic artifact. Finally I turn to the Aboriginal language poems themselves. I argue that these poems reference the museum display case in their form, and that like the museum display case they waver uncertainly between offering up a redemptive and enlivening nationalist tradition to the poet, and referencing a history of excision and appropriation. In Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems and in his writings about the museum, an Aboriginal presence emerges voicing subtle accusation against the poet and against the Jindyworobaks’ project of appropriation.\(^\text{89}\)

\(^{89}\) My reading owes much to several readings of primitivism that have drawn attention to the blurrings of racial hierarchy and identification in the primitivist project. See in particular Anne Cheng *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* and Sieglinde Lemke *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (1998).
In *Conditional Culture* Ingamells writes about seeing Aboriginal artifacts in the museum and reflects on the place of these objects in Australia’s history and in the Jindyworobak project:

> When I see woomeras, spears, bullroarers, boomerangs, dillybags, message sticks, tjurungas and wax figures in the aboriginal sections of our museums, and when I read scientific treatises and pioneer reminiscences dealing with aboriginal rites, initiation ceremonies and so on; I am strongly conscious, often unhappily so, of much of our colonial tradition. As a people it is our duty to be familiar with these things. In them must spread the roots of our culture. Our culture must make artistic realizations of these things and the spirit permeating and engendered by them acceptable to the world. (17)

In this passage Ingamells seems to move from a critique of colonialism and “our colonial tradition” to a celebratory call for the aesthetic appropriation of Aboriginal culture. Appropriation appears here as a redemptive solution to colonialism. However, there inheres in Ingamells’ prose a deep ambivalence about what the Aboriginal artifact signifies. Ingamells implies, in concert with the larger Jindyworobak effort, that Aboriginal artifacts can provide “roots” for “our culture,” the basis for a national spiritual awakening. And yet he also suggests that these objects carry with them a reminder of a colonial tradition, and quite possibly a violent and shameful one. The relationship between these two sets of associations is unclear in Ingamells’ statement, and, I would
suggest, this lack of clarity highlights a broader indeterminacy in the Jindyworobak project.

Further when Ingamells says that “as a people it is our duty to be familiar with these things,” it is unclear exactly which “things” he is referring to. Does “things” here refer, in an unspecific way, to all that is unhappy about Australia’s “colonial tradition,” or to the ethnographic artifacts as talismans of “spirit”? Moreover, what did it mean to call these ethnographic objects “things”? In reducing them to an itemized materiality in this way, was Ingamells not also in some sense highlighting the history that, extracting these objects from their culture and context, made them into mere things in the first place? Certainly the cold itemization of objects that opens the statement suggests nothing so much as the culture of museum display. For the list does not differentiate between the ethnographic objects proper, “dillybags,” “message sticks,” “tjurungas,” and the wax figure: the dead effigy that belongs in the museum diorama and thus signifies the culture of display.

The confusion of articulation in this passage reflects something of the paradoxical structure of the ethnographic artifact. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett offers a definition of the ethnographic artifact that draws attention to its status as an object that has been detached from an original context and that becomes “ethnographic” by virtue of a process of re-contextualization. Ethnographic artifacts, she tells us, are “objects of ethnography ... [that] become ethnographic by being defined, segmented, detached, carried away by ethnographers” (17-18). The structure of the ethnographic artifact presents a particular dilemma to the collector and to the culture of display more generally as to how to mark the borders of the ethnographic object:
The artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt. Where does the object begin and where does it end? This I see as an essentially surgical issue. Shall we exhibit the cup with the saucer, the tea, the cream and sugar, the spoon, the napkin and placemat, the table and chair, the rug? Where do we make the cut?

Perhaps we should speak not of the ethnographic object but of the ethnographic fragment. Like the ruin, the ethnographic fragment is informed by a poetics of detachment. (18)

As a part excerpted from a whole the ethnographic object works metonymically, evoking an absent context. The value of the ethnographic object, we might say, is its capacity to refer to more than itself, to be both an object “here” in a museum and also to evoke a larger context, traditionally some version of the context or “culture” from which it has been removed. As Mark Sandberg states in a reading of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analogy, “ethnographic objects bear the marks of having been carried off; they are objects that so clearly have belonged elsewhere that they continue to evoke that distant context when put on display. That is both their attraction and their essential paradox: they are both here and there at the same time” (83).

Nonetheless, we might ask whether the “distant context” that is evoked by the ethnographic artifact is always that which is predicted or intended. While the “art” of excision and display might be to order the significations of the artifact and to control how it is read, there is still a question of how much its significatory potential can be regulated.
Returning now to Ingamells’ statement about the Aboriginal object in the museum, we can note that these artifacts offer him something that he calls “spirit”; but they also refer him to the history of colonial appropriation, and to museum display practices. Furthermore, when he labels the artifacts “things,” he references the objects’ capacity to remain mute, or not to refer anywhere at all. As Anne Cheng argues in her reading of Picasso’s encounter with the primitive artifact in the Trocadero, objects are troubling because they “promise life ... but they also embody/embalm life’s passing, or its failure to stick” (19). The de-contextualized artifacts Picasso encounters in the Trocadero “register the ways in which objects reference culture and the subjects that animate them and yet, at the same time, remain inert to those investments” (19). In the end, perhaps what is most troubling to Ingamells about the Aboriginal objects in the museum is not that they will evoke the wrong thing but rather that they will evoke nothing at all, that the excision implied in the removal from their context might actually be a death.

A similar confusion about the referentiality of the ethnographic artifact structures two stanzas describing a museum display case from Ingamells’ poem “Native Section.” The poem reflects the context in which Ingamells would have encountered these artifacts. Baldwin Spencer introduced the diorama or the ethnic life group to the Melbourne museum in 1914 in an attempt to “humanize” the Aboriginal collection; similar styles of display soon appeared in museums around the country (L. Russell). The ethnic life group was a three dimensional display that included wax mannequins holding and wearing various artifacts in a reconstructed scene set against a painted backdrop. These displays were intended both to seduce and to captivate the gaze of the museum viewer, while at the same time educating her in the function of these artifacts and their place in the society.
from which they were drawn.\textsuperscript{90} However in Ingamells’ poem it is unclear whether the poem offers a description of the wonder of the display case, a cold index of museum objects, or a more disturbing image of a hostile and vengeful effigy possessed by the anger of a dispossessed population, or, perhaps more accurately, by Ingamells’ own guilt:

Possum-hair girdle,
dillybag,
bough-built gunyah,
totem-crag
grace the Museum’s clean glass cases;
with dark and sullen waxen faces.

Lubras crouch
on well-placed stones,
as if they have life in their bones –
and a dusky, waxen

\textsuperscript{90} As Anne Griffiths outlines, the life group diorama display promoted a synchronic understanding of the artifact displayed as a part of a contemporaneous social field, rather than positioned, out of context, in an evolutionary series. However, the life group also represented native life as static, simple, and capable of being grasped through a single, childlike image. Life groups reduced the need for long and labored explanatory material; rather, the ethnographic object appeared as part of a wondrous imaginative scene that seemed to offer itself up to the viewer unmediated.
birrahlee
sprawls beside
its fathers knee. (*Sun Freedom* 22)

Ingamells begins with an index of artifacts, not dissimilar from the list that begins his description in “Conditional Culture.” The objects are located within a poetic reconstruction of the museum display, which, to borrow again from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, draws on the art of mimesis to “expand” the ethnographic object’s boundaries to “include what is left behind” (20). The objects are placed in relation to a reconstructed family scene. The careful arrangement of figures promises life, so that we can imagine the figures just momentarily paused in their daily activity, as the lubra crouches, and the baby sprawls. The poem both engenders the figures with life through the use of active terms (crouch, sprawl) and wonders at their life-likeness (“as if they have/ life in their bones”). The fascination that Ingamells references and evokes has something to do with the circular relationship between the artifact and the mimetic representation of the human form, through the wax dummy. As Mark Sandberg has argued, mannequins helped to efface the “‘object-ness’ of both artifact and dress, giving them a context that approximates an original connection to the body,” but likewise, “without the props to activate the viewer’s imagination, the mannequin remains a dummy; with them, the figure simulates agency and consciousness” (20).

But this description of the wonder of the display case is complicated in two ways: by the objects’ tendency to remain inert within the mimetic scene, but also by the capacity of the mannequins to register hostility and, we might argue, to register
Ingamells’ own self accusation and guilt. While the poem evokes wonder, it also seems uncomfortably aware that what it is actually describing is a careful arrangement of wax figures. The structure of the first two stanzas of the poem is that of an inventory and it flattens out any categorical difference between various classes of object – a possum hair girdle artifact, a reconstructed gunyah, a wax figure. Like Ingamells’ description of the museum in *Conditional Culture*, the poem is unable to clearly separate the wax figures from the ethnographic objects.

But the ease and comfort of this scene is undercut most strongly by the “dark and sullen waxen faces.” For as well as rendering the literal wax that moulds these figures, these dark and sullen faces suggest muted rebellion and a recalcitrant resentment. Most striking then is the sense, encapsulated by the poem, that the museum display might be uncanny and disquieting rather than wondrous and enlivening. The anxiety that haunts this poetic rendition of the museum display is not that these objects are dead, but rather that they might be hauntingly alive after all. This is a different kind of haunting from that in Ingamells’ elegies with their benign and nostalgic ghosts. “Native Section” implies that the animation enabled by the circular relationship between object and human form might not contain the seeds of spiritual renewal but rather active hostility and vengeance. The discomfort that is evoked in this scene speaks to what Michael Taussig calls “the wonder of mimesis [which] lies in the copy drawing on the character of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (xiii).

“Native Section” can be read as an uncomfortable allegory for Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems. These experimental poems are essentially in English but
have a large number of Aboriginal words inserted into an English narrative frame. Although not typical of the Jindyworobak oeuvre, which was on the whole far more conservative than these poems, Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems are in many ways the logical conclusion of his conception of a national poetics that would find its roots in an Aboriginal past. While “Native Section” described the museum directly, Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems reference the museum display case in their form. The lingo-semantic structure of the poems reproduces the signifying structure of the museum’s ethnic life group as a series of Aboriginal words, which are mostly un-translated. These words function like linguistic artifacts that are housed and animated by a familiar English linguistic context.

“The Old Innerah” was first published in the short running Adelaide magazine, *Chapbook*, along with Ingamells’ two other Aboriginal language poems and the first articulation of the Jindyworobak program. The poem’s title, “The Old Innerah,” can be loosely translated as “the old woman.” and the poem recounts a series of static images of an Aboriginal woman performing a number of different activities. For example, she “eats the komora” (wild berry); she sees “But-the-wark” (the mopoke owl), and “couch upon dirrawan [uneven place], she makes/ with dayooiri [grinding stone] flour for her nardoo [seed] cakes”.91 The poem reproduces the temporal structure of the Aboriginal life group, which represents Aboriginal life as a series of static, ahistorical images of Aboriginal people performing “traditional” activities:

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91 These are the translations that Ingamells provided in the glossary of *Sun Freedom* (1938). Interestingly, there was no glossary provided with the original publication of the poem in *Chapbook* as I will go on to discuss.
Flat upon her moolona,
Innerah eats the kombora.
By dunawalla, ankle-deep,
she catches Brooween asleep.
Crouched on dirrawan, she makes,
with dayoori, flour for her nardoo cakes.

She sees Korinya scuttle by,
brown Kerriki poised in the sky,
and loves to mark Koala play
and But-the-wark tease night away.

Yet best of all is weeroona
with Wijiwijipi in sight,
where Buln-buln struts about bimbimbie
fine as late allinga night (Sun Freedom)\(^\text{92}\)

When the poems were first published Ingamells provided a translation of some of the Aboriginal words, enough perhaps to give a general sense of the poem’s literal meaning. But he also left several of the words untranslated in accordance with his belief that what mattered more than the literal definition of the words was the “atmosphere” that inhered

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\(^{92}\)“The Old Innerah” was first published in *Chapbook: An Australian Magazine* Adelaide, 1936; the poem was then also reproduced in Rex Ingamells’ *Sun Freedom* and in Brian Elliot (ed.) *The Jindyworobaks*. 
in them. The explanatory statement he included with the poems declared that his aim was, “to express something of the Australian place spirit which baffles expression in English words, so often strongly coloured by European associations. The native words I have chosen seem to me to have in them much of the striking quality of Australian primevalism” (Chapbook). The poems and their minimal translation betrayed a belief that the objectness and materiality of language would carry in it an inherent trace of its referent, and further that the Aboriginal words would confer something onto the English language that housed them. In this sense Ingamells imagined that the Aboriginal words would function like the artifacts he saw in the museum; and that although detached from their socio-linguistic context, they would nonetheless evoke something of that context. It is notable that almost all of the Aboriginal words Ingamells used were nouns. There is a significant overlap between the objects he references, often the very objects he had seen in the museum, and the capacity to treat words themselves as artifacts that might be detached, carried away and rehoused.

Moreover, the relationship between the Aboriginal words and their English framework in this poem mimics the relationship between the artifact and the narrative context provided by the museum diorama or life-world. If in the life-world a context-rich dramatic scene works both to expand the borders of the artifact and to translate and animate it as an object of use, here the English narrative frame performs a similar work of translation through context. Further, as in the museum life-world, the work of translation and contextualization in the poem is disavowed so as to give the impression of unmediated access to the artifact and the world of which the artifact is presented as a part. Ingamells’ decision not to translate the words does not in fact render them entirely
meaningless or foreign: their meaning is delimited by the narrative context and also by a poetic structure that works to determine their rhythm and pronunciation. Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems are all constructed around a simple form and rhyme scheme so that the pronunciation and emphasis of the Aboriginal words is laid out in the poem’s meter.

Despite the work of translation achieved by their form, Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems remained largely nonsensical and in this sense these poems were perhaps the place where the Jindyworobak project most clearly failed on its own terms. Critics were scornful of these poems and they were the object of ceaseless parody and ridicule. However, a failure, perhaps more significant and certainly more interesting than Ingamells’ failure to be taken seriously by his colleagues, was the discomfort that persisted in poems intended to convey a redemptive spirit of place.

“Moonawathimeering” was the most significant and ambitious of Ingamells’ Aboriginal language poems. Rather than housing a series of Aboriginal nouns in static images, the poem attempts to use Aboriginal words to tell an Aboriginal myth. The title “Moonawathimeering” translates literally as “land of the lost” and the poem tells of a man who has been cast out of his tribe and off his land, but who escapes “into moonawathimeering,” a land of sanctuary into which his avengers will not follow him:

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93 See for example, A.D. Hope’s two scathing reviews, “Cultural Corroboree” (1941) and “Corroboree in Parnassus” (1944). See also Max Harris’ “Directions in Modern Poetry: Dance Little Wombat.”
Into moonawathimeering
where antinga dare not tread,
leaving wurly for a wilban,
tallabilla, you have fled.

Womballunga curses, waitjurk –
though we cannot break the ban,
and follow tchidna any further
after one time karaman.

Far in moonawathimeering,
safe from wallan darenderong,
tallabilla, waitjurk, wander
silently the whole day long.

Go with only lilliri
 to walk along beside you there,
while douran-douran voices wail
and Karaworo beats the air. (Sun Freedom)\(^{94}\)

\(^{94}\) Rex Ingamells’ “Moonawathimeering” was first published in Chapbook: An Australian Magazine Adelaide, 1936; the poem is also reproduced in Rex Ingamells Sun Freedom and in Brian Elliot’s (ed.) The Jindyworobaks.
As well as retelling an Aboriginal story, this poem can be read as saying something about the plight of the metonym or the extract. In lines like “tallabilla, you have fled” the literal meaning, “outlaw you have fled,” is less readily apparent than the sense in which the line describes the word’s evacuation of its own meaning, an evacuation that is achieved precisely through the word’s extraction and relocation in the poem itself. It is significant that the images of this poem are those of fear and flight, banishment, disorientation, and silent displacement. We can read this poem as offering a meta-commentary on the place of the metonym, or by extension the artifact, which, rather than being tethered to that whole of which it is a part, or to that which it represents, in fact constitutes an indeterminate and thus unmoored signifying system. Displacement and indeterminacy is not experienced here as generative of a chain of association, as it might be, but rather as an arrest of meaning. The line “tallabilla, waitjurk, wander/ silently the whole day long” evokes for us wandering not as the opportunity for discovery, but rather as a condemnation to live perpetually in the wastes of indeterminacy and thus in silence.

In the second stanza, our invitation to “follow tchidna” is arrested before it is delivered by a ‘ban’ that won’t be broken. Here the poem experiences its own recalcitrance and its failures of meaning not as constituted by its own form, but rather as an imposition, as the work of a supernatural accusatory force. As the narrative’s central figure is condemned to silent wandering by an angry vengeance party, so the poem presents its own arrest of meaning as the work of a hostile and vengeful force. The silent hostility of the poem recalls the accusatory presence of the sullen waxen faces in “Native Section.” In both cases recalcitrance is experienced as indictment and the poems turn an accusatory gaze on the poet and indeed on the poem itself.
We might argue, then, that when Ingamells tried to write with Aboriginal languages, as when he tried to write about the Aboriginal object, he could not help but write out of his own historical context and, from there, produce texts of accusation and guilt. Ingamells’ appropriation of Aboriginal language and culture was a work of cultural pillage as many critics have pointed out. And yet this accusation was also embedded in the poems themselves. As a result the poems are not simply the failed products of cultural appropriation but also provide a pained commentary on the guilt that plagues the settler nationalist.

Conclusion

The Jindyworobak poetry movement invites us to reconsider some of the terms in which we think about and discuss Australian modernism. Rather than looking for figures and aesthetic practices that transcend the local, escape the national and undo the centre-periphery divide, we might instead think about the local, and indeed the provincial, as distinctively modern ideas, and as ideas that begin to have a particular meaning and relevance around the period of the Second World War and into the mid-century. In short, I have suggested that rather than trying to deny the provincialism of Australian modernism, we instead take that provincialism seriously. The Jindyworobak movement provides an example of a provincial modernism that is not simply backward but rather

95 For example, remembering the Jindyworobak movement in 1975, Judith Wright wrote, “the contact between cultures had already despoiled so much of Aboriginal legend and living that the idea of raping what was left, to give character to their writing, was embarrassing to some of the more sensitive” (146)
constitutes a particular way of locating oneself in the world, and in relation to world cultures.

We are also now in a position to return to a question that opened this chapter: what does the culture of localization look like in the settler colony? For the Jindyworobaks the construction of the local was rife with difficulty and ambivalence. For while the local was, at times, a way to think about Australia’s position in the world outside of the British Empire, the attempt to fill out a local cultural tradition led the poets to the Aboriginal, and the Aboriginal referred to the ongoing legacy of colonial dispossession. Put simply, we might argue that the Aboriginal in the Jindyworobak oeuvre never signified as intended.

A perceptive response to the problem of meaning making in the Jindyworobak project came from William Hart Smith, a later figure in the Jindyworobak movement. A stanza from a longer poem, “Candle on a Stump”, can be read as commenting on the crisis of meaning that was entailed in the Jindyworobaks’ use of the Aboriginal:

Grey sheep nibble among the stones:
not the reed flute, not the broken white columns
not the legendary heroes, not the familiar names,
but a black stockman with a chew of straw,
his warm lips pursed in silence. (Elliot 106)

The poem is unmistakably of the Jindyworobak style for the way that it opposes a European heritage with an Aboriginal presence. Here the series of negations revoke the
pastoral and the classical as a way of imagining the Australian scene. The “nots” function as an evacuation of the European tradition. But that which should sing in the place of these familiar but futile verses – the Aboriginal – is recalcitrant. As Ivor Indyk has argued in his reading of this poem, the “hybrid offspring” here is “familiar yet uncommunicating” (847). While the images of the reed flute, the broken white column, the legendary heroes, the familiar names, evoke a discourse and poetic tradition that is rich and abundant, the stockman is both silent and terrifyingly singular. The poem focuses hopefully on his lips and on the straw – reed like – in his mouth. But he will not capitulate to the production of poetry and will not speak, metaphorically, for an alternative cultural tradition. As a stockman, he is too reminiscent of the European derived pastoral tradition he is asked to revoke and fails to approximate a “dreamtime” image. But in his silence he remains utterly foreign.
CONCLUSION

“At some basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.” (Edward Said Culture and Imperialism 7)

When the permissible narratives will not fit the case, we take a step back – short of already formed narratives, as it were – and look at the broad strokes by which such narratives are put together. (Gayatri Spivak “Will Postcolonialism Travel?” Other Asias 113)

For the writers represented in this dissertation the fact of colonial dispossession constituted the very ground on which they worked. Thus even attempts to redress this history, to protest or offer recompense for colonial violence, or to include Aboriginal people – both living and historical – within the nation, might in fact re-inscribe the history of colonial dispossession. My central aim in this dissertation, however, has not been to demonstrate the inevitable logic with which the history of colonial violence repeats itself, again and again. Rather my aim has been to attend to the particularity of various representations of the Aboriginal and various attempts to imagine a relationship between the Aboriginal and the nation.

To this end I have examined the way in which a series of transnational contexts shaped Australian representations of the Aboriginal in the interwar years. I have suggested some of the ways that these contexts affected how writers thought about the
Aboriginal, the nation, and the history of colonialism in Australia. I have also shown how the material and historic conditions of the Australian settler colony put pressure on conceptual, political, and aesthetic frameworks whose origins lay elsewhere, ultimately conditioning the revisions they would undergo in Australia. Thus the history I have told in this dissertation is not only one about the way that the world comes to bear on Australia, but also one about the way that political and aesthetic formations travel and are transformed by this journey.

My readings have also attended to variances produced by regional difference, suggesting that colonial relationships both looked and functioned differently depending on where in Australia writers were located and where they turned their sights. These differences, which were historical, economic, and every day, affected the ways in which writers thought about Australian colonialism and Australian nationalism and thus shaped the set of preoccupations and meanings they brought to bear on the Aboriginal. Thus the rationing economy that Prichard encountered in Australia’s North West, the hybrid and multiracial society of Herbert’s “Capricornia,” and the Aboriginal objects in museum display cases that informed and troubled Ingamells’ poetry, represent variant formulations of colonialism in Australia. The representations these writers produced emerged regionally from geographically differentiated historical situations.

I want to finish by suggesting that the facts of historical particularity and geographical variance mark the limit of theoretical attempts to define the settler colony as a distinct kind of colonial formation. This project is, oftentimes, motivated by an attempt to redress the, perhaps, unacknowledged historical specificity of the dominant theoretical frameworks within postcolonial studies. For as Robert Young points out there were at
least two radically different kinds of colonies in the British and other empires that warrant different analytical frameworks:

Within its overall structure of domination, colonialism can be analyzed according to the distinction ... between its two main forms of colonization and domination, motivated by the desire for living space or the extraction of riches. All colonial powers tended as a result to have in practice two distinct kinds of colonies within their empires, the settled and the exploited, the white and the black, which would be treated differently” (Postcolonialism 19).

While Australia is an example of the former, that is a colony established for living space, many of the founding texts in postcolonial studies emerge from and reflect on the latter kind of colonial formation, the “exploited” colony.

This, at least, is Patrick Wolfe’s claim. In his influential analysis of the structure of the settler colony, Wolfe claims that the dominant paradigms of postcolonial theory emerged from historically specific situations that bear only a superficial resemblance to Australia or other settler colonies. Wolfe argues that postcolonial theory emerges from the situation of the “dependent” colony (Settler Colonialism 1), loosely equivalent to what Young calls the exploited colony. Wolfe argues that the dependent colony is premised on the extraction of native labor, while the settler colony is premised on the

96 Two recent books that have used Wolfe’s theoretical framework as a starting point are Lorenzo Verancini’s. Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview and Lionel Pilkington and Fiona Bateman’s Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture. Wolfe’s argument is not uncontested. Two good and very different critiques of his argument are Elizabeth Povinelli’s “Reading Ruptures, Rupturing Reading” and Udo Krautwurst’s “What is settler colonialism?”
appropriation of land. He claims then that “for all the homage paid to heterogeneity and difference, the bulk of ‘post’-colonial theorizing is disabled by an oddly monolithic and surprisingly unexamined notion of colonialism” (*Settler Colonialism* 1).

Wolfe argues that in the settler colony the colonized, indigenous population, which is not primarily a source of labor, is considered dispensable. Thus, he claims the settler colony is structured by a “logic of elimination” (*Settler Colonialism* 167) which seeks to wipe out the indigenous population and replace it with a settler population. For Wolfe colonialism is a “structure and not an event” (*Settler Colonialism* 2) and the logic of elimination can be traced through a series of historically diverse situations, from massacre on the frontier to Native Title legislation. As he puts it, “Australian settler colonialism evinces the primacy of a cultural logic of elimination, a sustained institutional tendency to supplant the indigenous population which reconciles a range of historical practices which might otherwise be considered distinct” (“Nation” 96).

Wolfe’s effort to pluralize postcolonial studies is called for. The limit of his project, however, lies in his attempt to produce a new master theory that would firmly define and distinguish the structure of the settler colony. For while articulating the difference of the settler colony is crucial to understanding Australia’s colonial history, I would also argue that a paradigm that seeks to establish the absolute difference between the settler colony and other kinds of colonial formations risks producing a falsely homogenizing account of Australian colonialism, one that imagines the settler colony to be a self-evident historical category that reiterates the same colonial formations over time and space.

97 Wolfe makes this argument both in “Nation and Miscegination” and in *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*
Thus, for example, by the logic of his own argument, which claims that Aboriginal people will be “eliminated” rather than exploited by settler colonialism, Wolfe is forced to suggest that the use and exploitation of Aboriginal labor by the Australian cattle industry constitutes a “contradiction” rather than an “integral component” of settler colonialism (Settler Colonialism 29). Wolfe thus shuts down any consideration of the actual structure of colonial relationships in the cattle industry. Furthermore, the way Australian colonial relationships differ regionally is obscured by Wolfe’s argument, which projects a retrospective nationalizing logic onto Australia history. Australia was a series of separate colonies and territories prior to federation in 1901 that were governed independently and even after federation legislative control over Aboriginal affairs remained with the states until relatively late. The differences in relationships of colonial governance across Australia are obscured by the search for a single underlying structural logic to settler colonial relations. Wolfe’s formulation of the structure of settler colonialism can produce only paranoid readings, in the Sedgewickian sense: readings that see the same structure repeated over and again without significant variance.

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98 Udo Krautwurst also points out these limits in Wolfe’s argument.
99 Eve Sedgewick defines paranoid reading as a style of reading which is guided by the assumption that to uncover the systemic workings of any particular phenomena is in some sense to alleviate its power. Paranoid reading is anticipatory and contiguous. Moving simultaneously forwards and backwards over large terrains, the imperative of paranoid reading is to prevent surprise. For the paranoid “no time could be too early for having-already-known, for its having already-been-inevitable, that something bad would happen; and no loss could be too far in the future to need to be preemptively discounted.” (9) Thus despite its faith in exposure as a good in itself, the paranoid reader is unable to do anything other than expose the same phenomena again and again: “it can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than proving the same assumptions with which it began.” (13) As such, it is unable to see or account for anything that does not fit within its monomaniacal purview. Paranoid reading “blots out any sense of the possibility of alternative way of understanding things or things to understand” (10).
Attending to the specificities of colonial relationships across time and space suggests that there is no necessary historical or structural logic to settler colonialism that can be given in advance. In this dissertation, I have produced a taxonomy of representations of the Aboriginal that were politically ambiguous and regionally various. One of the central aims of this dissertation has been to show the way that the Aboriginal was constructed as a figure for the nation in the interwar period. But while these writers might claim that their own literary constructions represented the nation overall and as a whole, my aim has been to particularize and historicize these narrative projects.
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