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BLACK WOMEN AND WHITE WOMEN ON THE AUSTRALIAN FRONTIER

Myrna Tonkinson

In "'And the lubras are ladies now'", Diane Barwick states that one consequence of the decision, taken in 1860 by the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines, to force settlement of Aborigines on mission and government stations, was that Aboriginal women developed close and equal relationships with White women.¹ Barwick described relationships on the mission stations, contrasting the situation with that found in other parts of Victoria thus:

... there was always a marked barrier between native women in the camps and white women in homesteads or towns. A negligible number ever entered kitchen or parlour and then only as nursemaid or servant. The wives and daughters of the missionaries and teachers were the first European women to treat them as friends and equals and because of this were extremely effective exemplars ... The dress, tasks and interests of all females at the station were similar, and a genuine camaraderie developed ... Indeed, the managers often lamented that the white women 'kept no distance' ... The warm and lasting affection mutually felt by the women ... contrasts with the social distance noticed by Aboriginal girls sent away to domestic service after 1874: there they were merely servants.²

Barwick's description, based largely on missionary and government accounts, is intriguing because it conveys an image of sisterhood between Aboriginal and White women that is rarely encountered. In fact, there is a dearth of substantial descriptions of relationships of any kind between Black and White women in the vast literature, past or current, historical, biographical or fictional. This gap is curious and warrants explanation: is it due to an absence of data or a lack of interest on the part of those who have written about the frontier, race relations, and related subjects in Australia? It is particularly noticeable in accounts dealing with the frontier, since these often include some discussion of relationships between White men and Aboriginal women.

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² Barwick 1978:56-7.

A thorough examination of the available sources is not possible here, nor can all the pertinent issues be explored in detail. However, it is worthwhile to examine some of the published material for clues. Here I focus primarily on the Northern Territory, where the frontier is most recent, and I shall also draw upon oral history evidence I gathered from some Central Australian Aboriginal women.

The available evidence suggests that the apparently egalitarian relationships that Barwick describes between White missionary women and Aboriginal women on the mission stations in Victoria were rare, and are best explained as the result of the extraordinary circumstances of institutional life. In the closed society of the mission stations, both Whites and Blacks very likely diverged from their traditional behaviour. For the Whites, especially, the pool of potential friends of their own background was small. The mission stations, then, fulfilled most needs, so perhaps too much weight should not be given to descriptions of friendly relations among the women of the two groups. After all, the Aboriginal women whom Barwick describes were very much products created and moulded by the missionaries, albeit apparently willing subjects in that experiment. They seem to have been more tractable than the men, conforming more readily to European expectations, thus gaining the approval of the missionaries. Aborigines on the stations, especially the women, adopted the habits of dress, personal hygiene and housekeeping, the lifestyle and religion of the Whites.³ This is hardly surprising, especially in the case of those who were placed as children in dormitories, where they were 'carefully reared and trained to live as Europeans'.⁴ Having discouraged the maintenance of traditions among people separated from their land, restricted in their movements and dependent on them for subsistence, the missionaries had perfect conditions for creating Black clones of themselves, and as Barwick makes clear in the article, they were particularly successful with the women. There nonetheless remains a question of whether there was indeed genuine equality in the cordial relationships between the women of the two groups.

One of the women Barwick mentions, Bessie Flower Cameron, had been raised and educated by a missionary couple in Western Australia and sent to the Victorian missionaries as a teacher, along with some Aboriginal girls who were seen as suitable wives for some of their Aboriginal converts. Friedrich Hagenauer, a Moravian missionary, took charge of Bessie's life. Her former guardians, the Camfields, suggested the possibility of her marrying a young White missionary, since she was well educated and a 'lady'. Hagenauer, however, balked at this, preferring to wait for 'a good educated young Black man suitable for her'. He and the other Victorian missionaries were ambivalent about how to treat Bessie Flower. They considered her to be too good for most Aboriginal men and some White men. (Her first suitor, whom she wished to marry, was deemed unsuitable by Hagenauer for two reasons: he was uncomfortable about interracial marriage, and the young man was working class.) Yet Bessie was not accepted as a full member of White society on the mission stations. Attwood shows that although Bessie was able to express her views, the missionaries clearly were in control, even of her choice of a husband.⁵ Although it is likely that, in matters of marriage, the White women of the Mission were similarly constrained, there is evidence that Bessie Flower's status was below that of her European peers. For example, she was the only teacher who also was assigned domestic chores and acted as a nursemaid to her guardian's children. By being singled out for special attention, as an

³ Barwick 1978:54-8.

⁴ Barwick 1978:58.

⁵ Attwood 1986:18-19, 23-24. Barwick uses the spelling 'Bessie', while Attwood uses 'Bessy'. I use the former here, except when quoting Attwood.

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Aborigine, Bessie Flower ended up being lonely and unhappy. She could not find companionship among the Aboriginal women on the station, Ramahyuck, where she eventually settled after marrying an Aboriginal man approved by Hagenauer. Yet, she 'could not win over the missionaries as she once could; loved and petted as a child and admired as she grew up, Bessy found that as an adult her society was no longer sought as it had formerly been'.⁶ It was not uncommon for matrons or missionaries to have favourite Aboriginal children, and for mutual devotion to develop, but adulthood tended to bring tensions and even estrangement.

Notwithstanding the closed system of the mission stations in that era, and even when an Aboriginal person had attained an educational level well above the average for Whites, was a Christian and could hold her own in White society, there were limits on her relationships with Whites. A fundamental inequality prevailed. As Attwood says of the attitude of Hagenaur, Bessie Flower and her husband 'were "better class" Aborigines, but no Black was exempt from his policy of "paternalistic superintendence"'.⁷ Such views were not conducive to the cultivation of friendships between the missionaries and their converts.

Women on the Frontier

There is an ever-increasing number of books and articles about Aboriginal women and about pioneering White women, and sometimes both groups are discussed in the same work.⁸ However, there is seldom any examination in these works of the relationships between the two groups. On the other hand, much has been written about relationships between Aboriginal women and White men. This is probably partly a consequence of the fact that the sex of the participants made for very different levels of intensity in their interaction. As in all colonial situations, the relationships between the settlers and the indigenous people in Australia were marked by sharp sexual differences. To reduce these differences to their simple essence, the men of the dominant group usually interacted freely with both sexes, and often intimately with the women, of the dominated group, while the women of the dominant group tended to remain more aloof and to have only formal contact with the dominated, especially the men. As will be discussed below, British notions regarding class and gender relations, as well as race, influenced behaviour on the Australian frontier.

Relationships between Blacks and Whites on the Australian frontier have been described in many published works, whose main focus has been on group relations or on the relations of particular Whites with often undifferentiated, anonymous Aborigines (the ubiquitous 'natives', 'blackfellows', 'boys', 'gins' and 'lubras'). There are not many accounts of friendship between White and Aboriginal men. Even when they worked together on remote stations a rigid hierarchy was usually observed. Aboriginal workers were referred to as 'boys', regardless of age or experience. Where meals were provided, the Aborigines ate theirs at the woodpile while the Whites ate in the kitchen or dining room. The historical record, based as it is on documentary materials, has a strong European bias making it virtually impossible to establish contemporary Aboriginal viewpoints. In addition, there is a male bias, even in many women's accounts. Recent and current oral historical work partially offsets these imbalances. It is indisputable, however, that relationships between Whites and Aborigines were fundamentally unequal; the prevailing racist ideology informed

⁶ Attwood 1986:33.

⁷ Attwood 1986:30.

⁸ See, for example, James 1989.

all relationships. The Whites considered themselves to be superior and, even when they conceded humanity to the Blacks, did not consider them worthy of friendship or other relationships based on equality. This view is illustrated by the following comments of Matt Savage, who from the early years of this century spent many years in the north of Western Australia and the Northern Territory as a drover and stockman, before finally settling on his own property in Central Australia:

When I first arrived in the northwest a white man was not expected to speak to a black at all, unless it was to tell him what to do. If you had a normal conversation with one of them, the other fellows would say you were becoming too familiar and probably you would not last very long in your job. This did not apply so much to the black women who, after all, did have their place in the scheme of things. But the boys were little more than slaves, and other than that they were of no account at all.⁹

On the frontier most White men were single and they greatly outnumbered White women. As Savage points out, Black women 'had their place in the scheme of things'. Relationships between White men and Aboriginal women are complex and marked by hypocrisy. The women assumed a variety of roles, most commonly as domestic servants, stockworkers and sexual partners; often the same woman would perform all these roles. There was official disapproval of sexual liaisons between White men and Black women, and, in certain circles, social ostracism could be the fate of a White man who was known to have sexual relationships with Black women, as Herbert vividly describes in his novel *Capricornia*. Such relationships were seldom based on equality. In some cases intimacy between an Aboriginal woman and a White man would be concealed by their behaving in front of visitors as master and servant. But often this was no mere pretence because in actuality the White man simply exercised his *droit de seigneur* with women in his employ.¹⁰ Many such men denied being fathers of mixed-race children borne by the women.¹¹

Both legally and socially Australian frontier society had conventions that militated against lasting and equal relationships between Black women and White men. Most states enacted laws prohibiting marriage between them, and there were restrictions on the hiring of Black women by White (and Asian) men, aimed at preventing sexual liaisons between them. There are many accounts of these regulations being circumvented by White men, including instances of them travelling with Aboriginal women disguised as men. Ted Egan's song, 'The drover's boy', poignantly conveys an example of a relationship of devotion that had to be hidden in this way.¹² As Evans succinctly shows, Australian society's evaluation of sexual relationships between White men and Black women was virtually the reverse of those between White men and White women.¹³ Thus

the most tolerated pattern was ... prostitution - the taking of 'black velvet' ...

A less frequent and far less condoned arrangement was concubinage, where a man and woman lived together and perhaps raised children. These [white men]

⁹ Willey 1971:52.

¹⁰ Willey 1971:20; Strehlow 1969:109.

¹¹ See, for example, Strehlow 1969:109-10.

¹² Egan 1986.

¹³ Evans 1975:107-9.

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were contemptuously known as 'Combos' ... Yet, the actual marriage of a European male to an Aboriginal female was regarded as a far worse disgrace.¹⁴ Such a marriage would result in the man being rejected by other Whites or, at the very least, his acceptance being subject to the woman's exclusion from social interaction. Harney reflects on this issue and the sensitivities it could arouse.¹⁵ Among other reasons for the opposition to marriage or cohabitation of White men and Aboriginal women was the notion that such liaisons constituted an insult to White women.¹⁶ White men entering such relationships were seen as cutting off their ties to White society and, especially, White women; their degradation was irrevocable.¹⁷

Mason offers an excellent analysis of sex between colonisers and colonised in a number of societies.¹⁸ He criticises those who assume that 'sex across racial lines' signifies relaxed racial attitudes. Although patterns of such relationships varied from one colonial situation to another, depending to some extent on attitudes to sex and other social and cultural factors in the subject group as well as in the dominant group, certain features occur everywhere. Most significantly, it is the women of the colonised group who are invariably available to or demanded by the male colonists. This was the case with the Spanish in Mexico and much of Central and South America, the Portuguese in Brazil and parts of Africa, and the British in many parts of the world, including Australia. As Mason says, 'there is a dual standard between the sexes. White [sexual] freedom is male; it does not indicate respect but, on the contrary, a profound contempt both for the black man and the black woman'.¹⁹ Inglis makes a similar point about Papua, where, she says, 'many of the liaisons [between White men and Papuan women] are evidence ... of contempt, of sexual and racial patronage'.²⁰ In the colonial situation, then, the non-White woman was the victim of both sexism and racism; as a woman of the subject group, she became the embodiment of the 'damned whore', with the White woman as 'God's police'.²¹

British notions about class and about sex across class lines provided a basis for the rules the British imposed in colonial contexts. While males, especially aristocrats, had sexual access to women of lower status, a woman was considered 'deeply depraved' if she had sexual contact with her social inferiors. Marriage across class boundaries was outrageous, while illicit sex would be tolerated, and even humoured, if the man was higher in social status than the woman.²² Such attitudes were to be found in Australia, but their expression was constrained by circumstances such as the imbalance between the sexes in the White population, with frontier areas being in many instances virtually all male. The population density was low and distances between settled areas were great, particularly in remote regions; consequently, the norms of 'respectable' society could often be ignored with impunity. Nevertheless, legal and social restrictions resulted in illicit, usually casual, liaisons being the most common form of sexual relationship between White men and

¹⁴ Evans 1975:107-8; cf. McGrath 1987:70-72; Mason 1970:88.

¹⁵ Harney 1961:65, 67.

¹⁶ Cf. Inglis 1974:13-14.

¹⁷ Evans 1975:108-9; McGrath 1987:72; Herbert 1938:36.

¹⁸ Mason 1970:88-102.

¹⁹ Mason 1970:88.

²⁰ Inglis 1974:13.

²¹ Knapman 1986:169-75.

²² Mason 1970:101-3.

Aboriginal women. Coercion, including rape, was not uncommon.²³ Relationships of mutual affection and respect did occur, but were the exception. More representative of frontier White male attitudes to Aboriginal women would have been the anecdote told by Matt Savage about the manager of a station who rejected the idea of having Aboriginal people eat with him in the dining room. When his interlocutor pointed out that he had sex with the women, the manager replied, 'Of course, but I don't get intimate with them'.²⁴

Men's social class was implicated in sexual relationships across racial lines. It was often asserted that only the 'lowest' White men would enter into sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women, and any resulting children would inherit the 'worst traits' of both - hence part of the concern to limit their number and 'rescue' them. Although there is ample evidence that men of all classes turned to Aboriginal women for sex, it seems that working-class men were more likely to have open relationships with Black women, and less opportunity, and perhaps motivation, to conceal any lasting liaisons.²⁵ In any case, working-class men were more numerous than middle-class men; and although they were subject to the prejudice and stereotyped views of the dominant classes, in the outback they could usually ignore these attitudes.

In describing the experiences of White women in Fiji, who were initially very few in number and later became more numerous, Knapman has severely criticised what she says has been a common tendency among scholars to blame them for the deterioration of relationships between the Fijians (and many other non-White colonised groups) and White men in the colony.²⁶ Knapman cites a number of examples, including two from Australia, of researchers claiming that the arrival of significant numbers of White women spelled the end of harmonious interracial relationships (including sexual ones), even 'the ruin of empires'.²⁷ Such claims were certainly not common in the literature on Australia. It was expected that the presence of White women would change frontier relationships, and this was welcomed and strongly encouraged, at least by officials. Historians and others writing of White women's presence in Australian frontier areas have generally not attributed any responsibility to them for poor race relations, Knapman's examples notwithstanding.²⁸ Rather, their influence is usually described as benign or else is not mentioned at all. Officials concerned about miscegenation and the resultant proliferation of children of mixed descent looked to White women to solve the problem. For example, in his report on 'The Aborigines and Half-Castes of Central Australia and Northern Australia', J.W. Bleakley remarked that, with regard to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women and the 'breeding of half-castes', it was necessary to develop conditions that would encourage White women to brave the hardships of the outback. 'One good white woman in a district will have more restraining influence than all the Acts and Regulations'.²⁹

Whether or not White women were physically present, powerful images of them were important factors in the relationships between White men and Aboriginal women. There was a pervasive tendency to focus on the differences between European and Aboriginal culture and people, and when people were considered, the greatest differences were perceived

23 Evans 1975:106; Reynolds 1981:58.

24 Willey 1971:20.

25 See McGrath 1987:71-2.

26 Knapman 1986.

27 Knapman 1986:1-18; cf. Inglis 1974:13, 18.

28 Knapman 1986:8-9.

29 Bleakley 1929:27, see also Stone 1974:156.

between the women. Invidious comparisons, both explicit and implicit, of Aboriginal women and White women, were frequently made. The Aboriginal women's contribution was seldom acknowledged. As McGrath observes: 'The white woman who did accompany the men to the frontier has been stereotyped as an heroic pioneer and idealised as "the sacred white woman". No such acclaim, however misdirected, was extended to the black women.'³⁰ One exception is Matt Savage's reflection on his partnership with his Aboriginal wife: 'But what woman of my own race would have stood by me in the bush as Ivy has done? She was part of my life in a way no white woman could have been'.³¹ However, this was unusual. White women, perhaps because of their very absence, were idealised as the embodiment of the best in White society. As Knapman says of colonial Fiji, 'Whilst some white women were more ladylike than others, the "white woman" was a lady. She was the symbol of all that was purest and most refined in European society'.³²

Sharply contrasting stereotypes were attributed to Aboriginal and White women by White men. Thus White women were considered delicate and unable to survive, let alone work, in the harsh climate, while Aboriginal women were seen as able to undertake work normally done by men. White women were thought to endure rather than enjoy sex, while Aboriginal women were seen as sexually uninhibited - indeed, uncontrolled. (Inglis, in her account of sexual and racial relationships in Papua, provides evidence that strongly parallels the Australian example. In fiction set in Papua the 'heroes married, and therefore respected, *only* white women. At the same time, male writers built the notion of "the White Woman", an object frail, respectable, passionless, calm, cool, clean and unable to stand either the hardships or the wild passions of the tropics'.³³) Not only were these stereotypes inaccurate, but they were widely contradicted or disregarded by their proponents. Most White men, while celebrating the idealised White woman, took advantage of the labour and the sexuality of Aboriginal women. Behavioural contradictions of the stereotypes abound. For example, the rape and coercion of Aboriginal women by White men does not accord with the images of the women's attitudes to sex. Regarding women's work, Hill catalogues the feats of a number of White women showing that many of them ably performed traditionally male tasks.³⁴ Of course, the actuality is almost irrelevant to the force of ideas and attitudes.

The presence of White women on the frontier did not necessarily result in changes in relationships between Aborigines and whites. For example, there was no disappearance or even diminution of sexual contact between Black women and White men, but perhaps greater pains were taken to conceal it and greater tensions ensued for all concerned. There are many allusions (often subtle) to sexual rivalry between White women and Aboriginal women, in fiction and in historical and biographical works. Invariably, the White woman is the legal wife, who either comes onto the scene after her husband has cohabited or has had a sexual liaison with one or more Aboriginal women (and sometimes has had children by them), or is present when such a relationship begins. The novel *Coonardoo* conveys dramatically a number of related themes: the impossibility of the Black woman, Coonardoo, and the White man having an open, socially acceptable relationship, though they loved each other and he had fathered her child; his choice of respectable marriage; the

30 McGrath 1978:6.

31 Willey 1971:113.

32 Knapman 1986:135.

33 Inglis 1974:14.

34 Hill 1951:388-409.

suspicion of his White wife; and the hurt, frustration and despair of the Black woman.³⁵ There are numerous instances of Aboriginal women assisting White men to establish stations while cohabiting with them, then, when the place was fit for a White woman, the man marrying one and installing her in the homestead. In some cases the Aboriginal woman would be sent away, or her children, especially girls, would be sent away so as not to be an uncomfortable presence for the man and/or his wife. Bleakley describes such a case:

... a white stockowner lived openly for years with a half-caste woman, who had seven children by him. Some of the children he sent away and placed in employment. Recently, however, he turned the woman adrift with a sum of money and married a white woman.³⁶

While there is extensive popular knowledge about such situations in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, there is often no acknowledgement in formal terms or in published accounts. It is interesting to compare, for example, the very different brief references to Louis/Lewis Bloomfield and his family in James and in Strehlow.³⁷ The children of unions between Aborigines and Whites were seldom recognised and even less likely to inherit the fruits of their parents' labour. They were often brought up as the children of their mothers' Aboriginal husbands, sharing their poverty and economic prospects, regardless of the financial circumstances of their natural fathers.³⁸ This placed the White and Aboriginal mothers on entirely different footings, even in cases where their children had the same father.

It was assumed that life in an institution was preferable for children, especially girls, of mixed Aboriginal-European parentage to being brought up in 'the Blacks' camp' by their own mothers. The interaction of sexist and racist attitudes is demonstrated in the way some White officials, all male, perceived the 'half-caste problem'. Their assumptions about appropriate sexual relationships show the peculiar bias earlier referred to: White women were the exclusive property of White men and had to be protected from Black men - although there was not the hysteria about this in Australia that there was elsewhere; for example, in the United States or Papua New Guinea. The expectation was that White women found Black men so repugnant that there was no need to fear them voluntarily entering into sexual relationships with Aborigines. On the other hand, Black women were expected to be available to White men willy-nilly. If their preferences were considered at all, they were assumed to welcome these attentions. The female offspring of such liaisons were seen as needing 'protection', which was at least partly sexual. There was great concern that such girls might mate with or marry Black men when they should more appropriately be available to White men who could not find White women, or at least should find partners among men who were also part-European.

The virtual absence of friendships between Black and White women in colonial Australia, at the same time as sexual relationships between Black women and White men were widespread, is an apparent paradox. Yet it makes sense in the logic of colonial relations. In all colonial situations there is an assumption by the colonisers that they are inherently superior to the colonised, so inequality between members of the two groups is intrinsic to the system. Since friendship is founded on notions of affinity and equality

35 Prichard 1929.

36 Bleakley 1929:27.

37 James 1989:76; Strehlow 1969:110.

38 Cf. McGrath 1987:72, 91; Strehlow 1969:108-9.

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between individuals, it is not a condition to which colonial settings are conducive. On the other hand, sexual acts can occur in a variety of social circumstances, and sexual access to colonised women has been the prerogative of White men.

In reading the literature on the Northern Territory, one gains little sense of White women interacting with Blacks of either sex. When they were present they were most often the wives of White men and they usually assumed the position of housewife, and sometimes nurse, teacher, missionary, or store manager. Accounts like those written by Jeannie Gunn show a vast social chasm between the Whites and Blacks.³⁹ Gunn conveys a kindly but patronising attitude towards the Blacks; there is no hint of any affinity with the Aboriginal women whom she mentions. In any case, her books describe a world of White men, where she was 'the little missus', viewed with awe and curiosity, with some male Chinese servants and 'a few Black "boys" and lubras' constituting a shadowy presence at the periphery, except for the child Bett-Bett, an amusing toy for whom she felt some affection. Gunn clearly wished for company, and developed friendly relationships with the 'rough untutored men' employed on Elsey Station, relishing occasional visits from White women, despite class differences which she notes.⁴⁰

McGrath makes a tantalisingly brief reference to friendships developing between Aboriginal and White women when the latter were left alone on their stations for long periods with only the Aboriginal women for company.⁴¹ Occasionally, bonds of friendship would grow between the 'missus' and one of her servants, but normally the White woman maintained a sharp social distance between herself and the Aboriginal retainers. Ernestine Hill's *The Territory* contains many references to White women, although it, too, is primarily about male pioneers and the references to women are mostly in relation to men. A chapter entitled 'Women of No-Man's Land' is devoted to stories about White women. The book also refers frequently to Aborigines, again in relation to Whites, most of them male. A chapter, 'Blackfella Dreamin' contains descriptions of many aspects of Aboriginal society and culture. Despite the large number of anecdotes and references, however, there is virtually nothing in the book about how White and Aboriginal women related to one another. In an intriguing anecdote about a Mrs Andy Ray of Mainora Station, Hill remarks that, rather than taking an interest in the rich sources of anthropological data around her, Mrs Ray 'taught the lubras to speak English, to make their own dresses, to care for their bonny babies, and to live white'.⁴² Some elaboration on this assertion would have been welcome and might have thrown light on the nature of the relationships Mrs Ray had with the anonymous Aboriginal women. Was this another case of 'lubras' becoming 'ladies'? It is very unlikely that the women to whom Hill refers would have enjoyed the status of equals with Whites, no matter what achievements the latter might have deemed them to have made.

A recent book by Barbara James describes a number of pioneering White women in the Northern Territory; some Chinese women are also included, as are a few Aboriginal women.⁴³ Although she frequently mentions the contributions of Aboriginal women to the development of the Territory, nowhere in the book is there any evidence of partnership or friendship among the women of the three groups.

³⁹ Gunn 1908, 1948.

⁴⁰ Gunn 1908:130-1, 138-9.

⁴¹ McGrath 1987:64.

⁴² Hill 1951:398; emphasis added.

⁴³ James 1989.

Among the women discussed by James is Annie Lock. Her story gives an indication of the risks incurred by White women who mingled freely with Aborigines. Lock was a middle-aged single woman who went to Central Australia to do missionary work among Aborigines. Among local Whites she was the object of suspicion and ridicule, and when she gave evidence in the inquiry into the Coniston massacre she was subjected to vilification and harassment. Lock criticised the behaviour of White men towards Aborigines and pointed out that sexual relationships between White men and Aboriginal women were often implicated in disputes between men of the two groups. For asserting this, Lock engendered not only the hostility of White residents of the Centre, but also an implied rebuke from the Board of Inquiry, which claimed that a White female missionary living among 'naked blacks' contributed to a lowering of respect for Whites. Other White women who lived and worked among Aborigines in the 1920s and 1930s were Daisy Bates and Olive Pink, both of whom did research and attracted attention and criticism as eccentrics, but not the attacks on their moral character that Miss Lock suffered, presumably because they were more observant of the prevailing mores.

Another woman on her own was Ida Standley, who, in 1914, was the first teacher in Alice Springs and commanded great respect. (She was not with a man, but had been married). Mrs Standley taught both Aboriginal and European children, but separately. She had Aboriginal women working with her, and was devoted in her efforts on behalf of them and the children, but there is no evidence of her having anything like the kind of relationships with the women that Barwick describes for the Victorian women - any more than did any of the other women mentioned here. Ida Standley was well remembered and spoken of fondly by several old Aboriginal women whom I interviewed in Alice Springs in the late 1970s. However, it was as 'Mrs Standley', kind and caring but in a superordinate position, that she was described. Such women were in any case exceptions among a minority female population. The majority of White women in frontier areas were there with White men, and their relationships with Aboriginal people were mediated by the men, or, at least, the available accounts are mediated in this way.

Away from the frontier, many White women took an interest in the welfare of Aborigines, especially women and children. A number of women's organisations, and humanitarian organisations in which women were active, lobbied governments and sought to influence public opinion to bring about improvements in the living conditions of Aborigines. In 1933, for example, a number of individuals and organisations were exhorting the Commonwealth Government to improve conditions for Aborigines in the Northern Territory. A Mrs Bryce, of the National Council of Women, argued that most murders of non-Aboriginal men by Aborigines were in retaliation for 'interference with black women'. She urged the appointment of female Protectors of Aborigines, because 'men shut their eyes to such things and protect one another', but J.A. Perkins, the Minister for the Interior, rejected this proposal.⁴⁴

Doubtless, some White women who were living in frontier areas also sought to ameliorate the conditions of Blacks. Indeed, most mission stations were run by men with the assistance of their wives, and children's institutions in many parts of the country were run by married couples or by women. There is, however, little recorded evidence of White women perceiving anything like a relationship of sisterhood with their charges, challenging the system on their behalf, or empathising with them in any way. Even official rules that separated children of mixed descent from their mothers apparently did not evoke any significant outcry from White women, who might be expected to have had some empathy

44 Australian Archives. CRS A1 35/1388.

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as mothers. Indeed, when a Federal Minister for the Interior appealed for volunteers to take fifty 'octoroon children, White in appearance and outlook [but] housed with and treated as natives at the Government Half Caste Home', a number of offers were received from White women, but no concern was expressed for the wishes of the children or their mothers. This idea was eventually abandoned.⁴⁵

An Aboriginal View

Many Aboriginal women worked as domestic servants in the homes of White people, although Australia did not have as widespread and entrenched a system of native servants as did many other British colonies.⁴⁶ When children of mixed Aboriginal-European descent were placed in institutions, one of the stated goals was that the girls could be trained as domestic servants. They were taught to sew, cook and do other household chores. Hill writes of pioneering White women 'teaching the young camp lubras to work in the kitchen, garden, house, laundry and even [at] the sewing machine'.⁴⁷ Barwick, too, describes Aboriginal girls and women acquiring skills in sewing, 'household management' and other tasks from the Europeans on the missions.⁴⁸

There are occasional comments in the literature on the contribution made by Black women, as servants, to White women's adjustment to frontier life.⁴⁹ McGrath also describes the extensive and arduous duties of many Aboriginal women working on stations as domestic servants.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Gunn conveys a picture of the Aboriginal houseworkers on Elsey as dilatory, indolent and unskilled.⁵¹ The Aboriginal view would probably be somewhat different, as the following examples suggest.

Maggie Ross, whose mother was an Aranda Aborigine and whose father was White, was born in the early years of this century, and spent much of her childhood at Hermannsburg and on stations with her mother. After her marriage (to a man of similar ancestry), she worked in mines, stations, with camels carting supplies to railway builders, in a hotel as a launderer, and in various other occupations. Maggie was clearly a very resourceful woman, a hard worker and a keen observer of people. She told me many stories about her experiences, relationships and observations. On the subject of relationships between Blacks and Whites, Maggie Ross made many observations, including the following:

All them White man had native woman. Soon as he bin makin' money and all that, get 'im all White woman then [it was like that] when me bin kid. All about, bin use 'im bloody native! Whole lot bin get half-caste woman now [and put the Aboriginal woman out of the house] ... They all about bin feedin' ... in the woodheap ... All the White lady bin proper like it too! [The Aboriginal women] bin all started workin' for lady then ... Soon as he get White woman, well that native [woman] start workin' with that White woman: cookin' and that, learn [teach] 'em and everything [to the White woman] ... Yeah, they [White women] myall, bloody myall; can't cook a

⁴⁵ Australian Archives. CRS A1 34/6800.

⁴⁶ Cf. Knapman 1986.

⁴⁷ Hill 1951:403.

⁴⁸ Barwick 1978:54-5, 58.

⁴⁹ McGrath 1987:49-50.

⁵⁰ McGrath 1987:64-7.

⁵¹ Gunn 1908:51-5.

bloody lizard, can't make a bloody johnny cake, whole lot of 'em - nothing! Yes, all the native lady bin cookin' 'n showin' 'em. You know why? Well, them White men bin learnem them native, and they start cookin' bread and everything. White lady bin come myall, can't cook nothin' ... Got to have a look [in a book] first to cookem cake! Hahaha! The Black woman bin learn fast how to cook bread, cakes, everything ... Oh, they [White women] gave 'em [Black women] clothes ... learn 'em how to sew. .. That's all White lady bin come up and mendem clothes and everything, but can't cook a bloody tucker, nothing ... All the [Aboriginal] woman bin washin' clothes, cleanin', cartin' water ... waterin' garden, White lady never do nothin'. Big queen ...

Maggie spoke positively of a few White women, but she had no relationships that could be called friendship with any of them. She provided further illustrations of the gulf separating Black and White women when she talked of the daughters of some of her contemporaries who were passing as White women and had rejected their mothers, along with all Aboriginal people: 'That mob never look after mother. No, all White lady [in] Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney ... wouldn't say hello to you.'

One of the women to whom Maggie was referring told me several times the story of a trip she made to Adelaide to see a daughter who was living as a White woman there. The daughter agreed to meet her in a shopping centre, rather than take her home. This woman was deeply hurt and almost incredulous at her experience. Yet to some extent her daughter's behaviour is explicable in terms of official policy and dominant values in the society, even today. This woman's daughter is the product of a policy that sought to separate children of mixed Aboriginal-European descent from their Aboriginal mothers and integrate them into White society as domestic servants or in other similar roles. There was also a policy by some officials to 'Whiten' the Aboriginal population, thereby effecting their disappearance as a distinct group.

This woman's daughter would have been seen as suitable material for this experiment, since she was a 'quadroon' or 'quarter-caste' who could pass as White. As well, it was probably convenient for the father, a White pastoralist, to have this daughter away in Adelaide, since he did not acknowledge his children by his Aboriginal lover. He had married a White woman and was part of respectable Central Australian society. Now married to a White man and with children, the daughter presumably saw her mother as an embarrassment, or worse, as potentially destructive to the position she has secured for herself in White society. Such is the ultimate irony of a system of ideas and values that classifies and separates people on the basis of colour: that a mother and daughter would find themselves on the opposite sides of this social gap.

Conclusion

From the accounts of Maggie Ross and others it seems that, while friendly relations between White and Black women were not uncommon, there were seldom friendships of an egalitarian kind. The Aboriginal women refer to the White women as 'Miss' or 'Mrs' So-and-so, and the use of a title was unlikely to have been reciprocated. No Aboriginal woman whose life history I have elicited has reported anything that could be described as friendship based on equality with a White woman. Rather, there are relationships of mistress and servant, custodian and charge, teacher and pupil, occasionally mentor and protege, or co-workers. Often they were rivals, though this was usually a veiled or even unwitting rivalry and, as I hope I have shown in this paper, whatever the outcome, such contests were inherently uneven. As discussed above, White women and Aboriginal women were typically ascribed diametrically opposed traits and status. That White men had sexual access

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to both did nothing to bridge that gap; rather, it probably contributed to the perpetuation of it and to a compounding of the hypocrisy of colonial relations.

In this paper I have attempted to discover and explain evidence for and against relationships of sisterhood - friendship based on equality between Aboriginal and White women. There is surprisingly little detail in the literature on relationships of any kind between women of these two groups. It is more common to find references to those relationships between women that were mediated through men, as the objects of sexual jealousy or as makers of invidious comparisons. Barwick's description of easy familiarity between Black and White women, to the slight bewilderment of White men, is one of the few exceptions to what seems to have been a rule of strict separation. However, the evidence has by no means been exhaustively explored, so it would be worthwhile to pursue and describe, in the meticulous way exemplified by Diane Barwick, the gamut of relationships between White and Aboriginal women in Australia.

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