‘Black Velvet’ and ‘Purple Indignation’: Print responses to Japanese ‘poaching’ of Aboriginal women¹

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In 1936 a flurry of newspaper reports alleged widespread prostitution of Aboriginal women and girls to Japanese pearlers. The claims had a dramatic impact. Within weeks of them being printed a report was placed before the Department of the Interior. A vessel was commissioned to patrol the Arnhem Land coast. The allegations were raised at the first meeting of State Aboriginal protection authorities. Cabinet closed Australian waters to foreign pearling craft and a control base was established in the Tiwi Islands. Japanese luggers were fired upon with machine guns and a crew detained in Darwin. These escalating events occurred within five years of a series of attacks on Japanese by Aborigines (culminating in the infamous Caledon Bay spearing of five trepangers, along with the killings of two white men and one policeman on Woodah Island), and only five years before Australian and Japanese forces waged war. Much ink was spilt over the course of this print scandal, and while reports made use of established language such as ‘vice’ and ‘outrage’, a telling omission was the commonly known phrase ‘Black Velvet’. The lapse could be considered a deliberate attempt to mask the expression’s explicit reference to the tactile sensations associated with illicit white contact with racialised genitals. However tracing its use reveals that the phrase exclusively pertained to white men’s sexualisation of Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women were not ‘Black Velvet’ to Japanese men, indicating this colloquial language played a role in establishing settlers’ sense of proprietorial ownership of Aboriginal women’s bodies – quite literally, for whom Aboriginal women were out-of-bounds.

The pearling scandal played out principally in print and this article focuses on that media coverage to provide both context and contrast to the use of the term ‘Black Velvet’. It examines reports of this episode as it unfolded along Australia’s northern coastline to show how frontier sexuality was mapped onto national borders and racial and gender identifications. As Ann Stoler argues in her work on carnality and imperial power, ‘the management of the sexual practices of colonizer and colonized was fundamental to the colonial order of things and [that] discourses of sexuality at once classified colonial subjects into

1 Terms historicised in this article remain offensive and have continuing power to offend. This article attempts to dispel and challenge the meanings conveyed by the term ‘Black Velvet’ by tracing its use in print media and thereby intervening in the attitudes it disseminated.

distinct human kinds while policing the domestic recesses of imperial rule'.² This paper draws attention to the impressions in print of these categories, to print's expressions and suppressions. It divulges the role of colloquial language or slang in the ordering of social kinds – referring to the grouping of people by shared traits that are socially determined.³ It argues the epidermal enmeshments of interracial sexuality constantly undermined those categories which were reiterated and racialised through colloquial language. The racial designations shored up by the oblique use of 'Black Velvet' in print construed Aboriginal women as susceptible to white men's purportedly unrestrainable seduction and soliciting, as distinct from their depiction as vulnerable to 'Asiatic' degeneracy and aggression. Meanwhile Aboriginal men, said to be the real instigators of the traffic in Aboriginal women, were accused of prostituting their women and thereby of profligating their own property rights, not to mention of instigating unsanctioned trade. The presence as much as the absence of 'Black Velvet' in print shows that colloquial language was a means for white colonisers to boast ownership over Aboriginal women's bodies. The scandal erupted around the trade in pearl shell yet the two were construed as commodities and overlaid with a sense of settler entitlement to the bounty of the land that expressly denied 'Asiatics' right of entry.

Print coverage of the Japanese pearler scandal negotiated a conflict between foreign trade and the territorial claims of settler-colonialism as played out through sexual access to Indigenous women. It showed that these incursions of capital introduced competing claims from other nation-states, in Japan's case with escalating imperial ambitions. The relations then forged between competing masculinities on the northern frontier pushed to the fore the intimacies that trade invariably relied on and the challenges they posed to established and tolerated patterns of interracial sexuality, blithely and even boastfully encapsulated in the colloquialism 'Black Velvet'. As Ruth Balint has argued:

At the farthest edge of the continent from the centers of European power, pearling and the seascape it inhabited came to embody the possibility of the erosion of officially sanctioned notions of home and nation, a threat personified by the presence of Asian men and their unions with Aboriginal women.⁴

A study of newspaper reports of these interracial sexual unions reveals the discrimination against, and regulation of, relations between peoples without citizenship, Asian and Aboriginal, under the white Australia policy.⁵ Scholars such as Ann Curthoys, Regina Ganter and Minoru Hokari have argued that the history of Australia's northern shore reveals the complex interplay of migration, diaspora and identity. This history realigns the axis of colonial history from the binary of indigenous/settler relations to the conflation of identity categories

2 Stoler 2002: 145.

3 Haslanger and Saul 2006.

4 Balint 2012: 544.

5 The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* (Cth) and *Naturalization Act 1903* (Cth) excluded Aboriginal people as well as people from Asian countries from citizenship. See Reynolds 2003: xi.

forged by multiculturalism and migration.⁶ The 'interior frontier'⁷ accustomed by settler/Indigenous exchange was impinged by the exterior frontier presented by the pearlers, yet internalised by the intimacies and heterogeneity initiated along its contact lines. Within print reports non-white interracial sex could only be imagined as prostitution or sexual aggression and these were then configured as a hostile infringement of national borders. The sexual labour of Aboriginal women, always inferred as an aberrant trade between Aboriginal and Japanese men, was drawn into diplomatic tensions and, as I will show, newly imagined on the nation's daily pages within a metaphors of 'poaching'. In stark contrast sexual unions between white men and Aboriginal women were either silenced, decried by humanitarians on rare occasions, or culturally inscribed by the euphemism 'Black Velvet'.

If the circulation of social types, such as the 'Lubra',⁸ 'Piccaninny',⁹ 'Jacky Jacky' and 'King Billy' among many others, was a mainstay of the enterprise of colonial print culture, the term 'Black Velvet' stood apart. Unlike 'Stud' or 'Gin Stud'¹⁰ it did not denote a type but rather, like 'Bride Capture', referred to a racialised social phenomenon, specifically sexual. 'Black Velvet' was barely present in print and given its common usage the omission, I will argue, is telling of more than simply editorial tact. 'Black Velvet' evoked a racialised register of touch, not only of Aboriginal women's surfaces, but also of white men's contact. Clearly it already specified interracial sexual relations since Aboriginal women were never said to be 'Black Velvet' to their own men.¹¹ Rather Aboriginal men were said to consign their women to 'Black Velvet' by trafficking them. The expression made slanting reference to the genital interior of Aboriginal women as inducing a particular sensation in white men. While white women were clothed and trimmed in black velvet, Aboriginal women were assigned nakedness by this expression, their surfaces made more tactile by their colour. But when the faltering usage of 'Black Velvet' is contextualised in the print scandal around Japanese pearlers it reveals that this contact was colloquially restricted to white men.

In Ann McGrath's classic and wide-ranging history of the interracial sexual relations referenced by 'Black Velvet' in the Northern Territory, she notes the term originated as nineteenth-century military slang, naming an Irish infusion of stout, champagne and cider.¹² From the first, the term belonged to a fraternity of men. It seems a stanza from Henry Lawson's 1899 'Ballad of The Rouseabout' first inscribed it in Australian print (since his verse nearly always appeared initially in newspapers) as the recourse of the lonely bush itinerant. Yet a number

6 Curthoys 2000; Hokari 2003.

7 Stoler 1997: 199.

8 See Conor 2013b.

9 See Conor 2012.

10 'Stud' denoted Aboriginal women on pastoral stations kept for white station management and hands, much as 'buck' referred to single young Aboriginal men. The Northern Territory register of wards was colloquially known as *The Stud Book*. Barker 1966: 324.

11 They were however said to be captured brides and ceremonially violated by Aboriginal men. See Conor 2013a.

12 McGrath 1984.

of authors, such as Victorian squatter Edward Curr, had earlier commented on the skin of Aboriginal women as 'particularly velvet-like to the touch'.¹³ The first overt referencing in print of 'Black Velvet' as the trade in Aboriginal women's bodies appeared in 1907 in Perth's *Sunday Times*. An anonymous feature by two 'Pressmen' reflected on their travels through the Ashburton region to Onslow, Western Australia. On a number of station homesteads, they had heard of 'special gins' reserved for 'the managers' benefit'. It was in this context of 'evil association' that these white male journalists parsed 'black velvet' from 'jokes' shared between managers and station hands to print. Aboriginal women were thus characterised in terms of the 'susceptibility of the "black velvet" about the place while the powers-that-be wink the other eye'.¹⁴ Even without the prior impress and reiteration of print to propel 'Black Velvet' into common parlance, it here appears with a knowing wink.

This half-knowing had long cloaked settler expression about interracial sexual activity and white sexual aggression. Indeed in print readers had long been advised that details of sexual engagement by settlers were beyond permissible description and thus unprintable. In an emigrant's guide of 1849 the shepherds and stockmen of the bush are described as so degenerate with vice, and their activities of such 'barbarism' as to 'dare scarcely be alluded to in print'.¹⁵ Evidence given in court regarding the aggravated assault on an Aboriginal woman in 1881 in Singleton, New South Wales by a group of men was 'unfit for publication', notably because it 'disclosed a state of things highly discreditable to the parties implicated'.¹⁶ A suppressed language of guarded references to unmentionable acts fed a prurient interest in the native woman, while it served to protect otherwise 'discreditable' white men by drawing a veil of half-knowing around their activities. Both the traditional rites ascribed to her sexuality, such as 'Bride Capture', along with this illicit but tolerated sexual access by white men, construed the Aboriginal woman as a figure of sexual excess utterly devoid of agency. It was never considered that Aboriginal women of their own volition might form intimate relations with men of their choosing that were meaningful to them in terms of attraction, pleasure, or attachment.

Recent scholarship has explored the 'spectrum' of sexual relationships in frontier and post-frontier settings, which ranged from abduction and aggravated rape to consensual, companionate marriage, between settler men and Aboriginal women. Arguably lack of consent disrupts any such continuity since aside from penetration, pregnancy and venereal disease, no other commonality exists between sexual assault and sexual relations. However, in the print coverage examined, Aboriginal women's consent is almost impossible to gauge for a number of reasons. Firstly, interracial sex comprised such a violation of social

13 Curr 1883: 283.

14 'Gadfly', 'Through the Ashburton', *Sunday Times*, 16 June 1907: 12.

15 Mann 1849: 16.

16 The Bench found both defendants guilty, and sentenced John Trunley and Gerald Thompson to each pay a fine of five pounds, in default one month's imprisonment. *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, 3 November 1881: 7.

norms it was confused with violation itself. Secondly, Aboriginal women were characterised as so devoid of chastity or modesty as to be unable to be 'outraged'. Thirdly, they were routinely typed as 'chattels', as so subjected by their men's tyranny any agency was subsumed beneath Aboriginal men's trafficking of their bodies. Frontier sexual activity has been documented mostly within pastoral, mining and sealing scenarios, but also within the domestic labour of Aboriginal women in settler homes.¹⁷ Indigenous women's sexuality had long been seen as a frontier resource, a 'necessary evil' required for irrepressible colonial manliness in regions unpopulated by white women. 'If you were to put rams in with ewes what would you expect?' one sheep farmer explained to the South Australian 1899 select committee adding that 'men are placed in positions where for ten or fifteen years they never see a white woman. In the interior, there are a lot of these flash young lubras about, and you can hardly expect men not to touch them'.¹⁸ Aside from the indignation of a handful of sympathetic humanitarians or piously appalled missionaries and clergy, Aboriginal women's sexual encounters with white men were secreted away from the wider public, or given glancing acknowledgement as a 'necessary evil' in remote regions long believed to endure a 'frightful want of females'.¹⁹

The pearling print scandal rent apart the veil conventionally drawn across interracial sexual activity. The concealment had been enabled by what Regina Ganter identifies as 'the indistinctness between corroboration and reiteration' in the characterising of all interracial gendered contact as prostitution. Ganter finds in missionary and ethnographic publications a 'mirroring of accounts which then became cemented as the master narrative of race relations of the pearling and *bêche-de-mer* industry of North Queensland'.²⁰ When the 'lubras on luggers'²¹ episode broke a new element was introduced to the degenerate frontier – non-white interracial sex. The print panic that ensued revealed that Aboriginal women were debarred to 'Asiatic' men. It exposed that much of the impetus for the 'protection' and 'assimilation' regimes: the regulation and containment of Aboriginal women's sexuality, was in fact rhetoric. Yet when it came to 'Asiatic' men this 'protection' was emphatically enforced. Their purported aggression was publically exposed under nationally inscribed limits of access.

Under the Protection Acts of state administrations a number of legislative measures were designed to guard women and girls from any sexual activity with white men, be it consensual, contractual or abusive (usually involving their removal to training homes and reserves). In 1934 the Minister for the Interior JA Perkins issued an exhaustive statement of the Commonwealth's policy in dealing with the Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory under which the protection of Aboriginal women 'from moral abuse on the part of Europeans

17 McGrath 1980; Merry 2003; Haskins 2001.

18 *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines' Bill*, Adelaide, 1899, (Paper No. 77) Item No. 854 cited in Berndt and Berndt 1951: 54–55.

19 Mann 1849: 16.

20 I found this same dynamic in play in representations of bride capture, Conor 2013a. Ganter 1999a: 267.

21 *Canberra Times*, 25 August 1936: 1.

and other races' numbered as the fourth objective.²² However, 'Asiatic' men's sexual involvement evidently presented a far worse evil.²³ The press treatment of the pearling incident underscored that hand-in-glove with the transition from Protection era to Assimilation administrations went the active repression of this practice in public discourse – except when it involved 'coloured aliens'. The racially delimited slang 'Black Velvet' was indicative of this cordoned access. The pearling incident offered an opportunity to reconfigure and reinforce a discourse of colonial chivalry – 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' as Gayatri Spivak describes it.²⁴ Yet here the 'brown men' were not just the Aboriginal men accused of prostituting their women. 'Brown men' also referred to the Japanese men who were labour and trade competitors and non-assimilable to national masculinity. The scandal provided another opportunity to shift culpability from white men to brown.

The 1936 print scandal was presaged by prohibitions in Western Australia on co-habiting and marriage between Japanese men and Aboriginal women in that state's *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA) which created longstanding regulation and discrimination against interracial couples,²⁵ along with the concentrated removal of their children to missions and reserves.²⁶ It presumed that women who engaged in consensual relations were prostitutes. Miscegenation became a heightened concern for administrators just as the assimilation regime adopted by some states sought to resolve the half-caste 'menace' through a policy based on biological absorption. In addition, for Europeans sexual activity by 'natives' outside marriage was delimited to one-off prostitution, longer-term concubinage or abduction and rape. They largely ignored their obligations once their sexual involvement drew them into kinship and totemic relationships based on reciprocity and ongoing outlay. Their subsequent sexual activity with unsanctioned women, or their failure to meet their obligations, could be met by violent reprisals from Aboriginal men.²⁷

Despite decades of unheeded reports of violence toward Aboriginal women by white pearling masters²⁸ it was Aboriginal women's sexual activity with 'alien' men, particularly 'Asiatics', which finally prompted dramatically contrasting government interventions and media exposure. Aside from the Pearl Shell Fisheries Acts in Western Australia in 1871 and 1873, prohibiting Aboriginal women from pearling operations and vessels,²⁹ and an 1898 amendment to the

22 *Courier-Mail*, 4 January 1934: 13.

23 In debate on the *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA) pastoralists successfully lobbied to reduce the minimum fine for cohabiting from 50 to five pounds. Haebich 2001: 239.

24 Spivak 1988: 296.

25 The story of the marriage of Okamura and Mary Masatora of Broome and that of their children and grandchildren is told by Nakano 1980. For a more detailed telling of their story and that of many such marriages in Broome see Ganter 1999b; Ganter 2006. See also Choo 1995; Stephenson 2003.

26 Balint 2012: 544; *Canberra Times*, 25 August 1936; Kaino 2011.

27 See McGrath 1984: 252.

28 See Kwaymullina 2001: 57.

29 *An Act to regulate the hiring and service of Aboriginal natives, engaged in the Pearl Shell Fishery; and to prohibit the employment of women therein 1871*(WA), *Pearl Shell Fishery Regulation Act 1873* (WA). It was these interventions that led to the uptake of Asian and Islander labour on luggers to replace Aboriginal divers. The appointment of a Commission of Inquiry occurred in 1883. Hill 1994.

Pearl Shell and Beche-de-mer Fisheries Act 1881 (Qld) in Queensland prohibiting 'aliens' from procuring boat licences,³⁰ violence against them had met with pervasive apathy, evasion, resignation, and rhetoric. Instead the focus of anxiety was on Asian-Aboriginal cohabitation, but this was itself precipitated by state ambivalence towards Aboriginal employment in the pearl-shell industry. Also shaping reactions was the competition for depleting shell beds outside the 3 mile territorial limit with the more organised, efficient and entrepreneurial Japanese divers.³¹ The print scandal on Aboriginal prostitution to Japanese men punctured ongoing diplomatic tensions around the numerical dominance of 'Asiatics' in the industry – yet the crews were exempted from the provisions of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth).³² The prostitution scandal broke as fears of espionage and alien intrusion, debates over territorial boundaries and poaching, and Japanese technological, numerical and market dominance reached a climax. But these resource, property and trade relations were applicable also to women's bodies, and their distribution and allotment also came under state jurisdiction.

Any accusation of indecency by white men had long been dismissed with the argument that native women did not know 'how to set a true value on chastity'. More to the point, Aboriginal men 'shared in the wages of iniquity earned by their women'. These notions were transferred from nineteenth-century middle-class constructs of prostitution which abnegated procurers of all responsibility. Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1866 served as the blueprint for a raft of legislative attempts in colonial Australia to regulate a pool of disease-free women for the sexual outlet of men – particularly men serving in Her Majesty's army or navy – through the creation of a prostitute register, compulsory medical examination and confinement in 'Lock' Hospitals. The prostitute was thought to be at once 'the necessary object of "normal" male sexual needs, yet representative of an aberrant form of female sexuality'.³³ Across racial lines however, 'native' women were always already 'fallen', and in failing to privatise and constrain sexual access within monogamous marriage it was 'native' men who were deemed most culpable. This line of argument appeared in print in 1885 after four 'respected and industrious pioneers' were murdered on the Daly River by 'blood-thirsty savages'. These settlers were afterwards suspected of 'outraging' and abducting Aboriginal women by the Aborigines' Friends' Society. Their defender, Alfred Giles, scoffed at any suggestion of a 'violation of chastity and purity where chasteness is unknown'. The very idea of 'chastity among their women' he famously said was 'preposterous. Not less preposterous, therefore, is the idea of the black women being outraged, unless it is by stopping their supply of tobacco.'³⁴

30 *Pearl Shell and Beche-de-mer Fisheries Acts Amendment Act 1898* (Qld). As Ganter found, Japanese pearlers got around this legislation through 'dummying' or nominal ownership of boats on behalf of Japanese captains. Ganter 1994: 130.

31 See Ganter 1994.

32 See Ganter 1994: 107.

33 Daniels 1984: 3.

34 Alfred Giles, *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 6 March 1886: 3.

In 1905 a *Royal Commission on the condition of the Natives* undertaken by Walter Roth, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, altered the language by which the sexual traffic of Aboriginal women and girls became public through print. Measures had been taken to protect Aboriginal women from 'blackbirding' by Australian pearlers and 'Asiatic aliens'³⁵ in Western Australia.³⁶ It was in press reports of this inquiry that prostitution between the 'gins and the Malay and other Asiatic pearling crews' was first aired to the wider public.³⁷ Soon after the Northern Territory Aborigines Ordinance of 1911 prohibited white men and Asians from 'habitually consorting' with Aboriginal women, and in 1933 such 'carnal knowledge' became an offence.³⁸ The *Northern Territory Aborigines Act 1910* (SA) prohibited persons of the 'Asiatic or Negro' races from employing Aboriginal women.³⁹ Already in 1899 concern had been expressed about 'houses' in Mackay said to be servicing Kanakas and Japanese. Raymond Evans found that the Queensland government imported Japanese women to serve as 'suitable outlets' for the 'sexual passion'⁴⁰ of 'coloured alien' or migrant workers. He claims that in 1897 over 100 such women, known as *Karayuki-san*, were operating in Childers, Innisfail and Cairns.⁴¹ Despite a ban placed on the immigration of Japanese women to Queensland in 1898 (and any prostitutes by the *Immigration Restriction Act*), Japanese prostitutes on Thursday Island were said to enjoy 'a remarkably prosecution-free existence'.⁴² Any assurance that sexual activity could be channelled through appropriate racial conduits however was undone in 1910, by the journalist Frank Fox who reported that the 'Malay proas, Chinese junks, and Japanese sampans' were behind the 'vile treatment meted out to the natives'.⁴³ This focus on Japanese aggression can also be situated in the context of Australia's federation movement from the 1890s and Japan's vehement protest against the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, which grouped their nation with Africa and Polynesia as inferior to Western countries.⁴⁴ Anxieties already elevated due to Japan's naval and military victories against Russia and China⁴⁵ were heightened by the marked dominance of Japanese contract labourers in the pearling, trepang, mining and sugar industries from the 1880s. Their exemption from the *Immigration Restriction Act* was in part to appease the British who as allies of the Japanese could be influenced by their demands which included that their émigré nationals be protected from exploitation.⁴⁶ The Japanese, determined

35 Cited in Kwaymullina 2001: 56.

36 Hill 1994.

37 'The Australian Blacks', *The Nation* 80(2077), 20 April 1905: 310.

38 McGrath 1984: 268.

39 McGrath 1984: 265.

40 Cited in Evans 1984: 139.

41 Under the 'Queensland Vagrancy Act under section 50 (v) [*Vagrants, Gaming and Other Offences Act 1931* (Qld)]', any house in which an 'Asiatic' woman lived could be considered a brothel. Ganter 1999b. Ganter has found Japanese women were classified as prostitutes merely by their presence. Ganter 1998.

42 Cited in Nagata 2004.

43 Fox 1910: 140.

44 Lake and Reynolds 2008.

45 See Murakami 2001; Lake and Reynolds 2008.

46 See Ganter 1994: 108.

to assert national prestige, curtailed the prostitution of Japanese women along Australia's northern shore, signing the 1912 *Convention Against Traffic in Women and Children* and repatriating many women.⁴⁷

Illicit trafficking however did not merely imply the crossing of borders but the contravention of otherwise racially discrete identities, all too often within borders. In 1930, Mary M Bennett published her generalised account of Aboriginal women 'wronged' on stations, supplementing their 'meager resources by trading in prostitution' to withstand semi-starvation.⁴⁸ Bennett reported on the 'illegal recruiting of natives and other abuses' on the northern coastline by pearling luggers.⁴⁹ Bennett's complaint was not specific to the race of the perpetrators or procurers however. She gave evidence at the Royal Commission of Enquiry (1934-35) into the 'Condition and Treatment of Aborigines' in Western Australia headed by HD Moseley. The Moseley commission was undoubtedly another turning point in the public disclosure of interracial sex. Bennett argued prostitution of Aboriginal women was 'universal' in the outback and that the *Aborigines Act* purported to protect women, yet, 'some of the police were among the worst offenders'.⁵⁰ Thus it was just as mounting evidence of the crimes and misdemeanors of white men was exposed to public view that Australian newspapers seized upon the prostitution of Aboriginal women to Japanese pearlers.

In 1934 a Presbyterian missionary on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Rev Robert H Wilson, told a reporter that the 'chief source of danger was the visiting Japanese' who were a 'menace to the natives'. In a descriptive shift from more explicit understanding about the abuses by white men (which had by now prompted an ordinance prohibiting the entry of white men into Aboriginal Reserves in the Northern Territory and their 'consorting with native women'⁵¹) Wilson wrote of the Japanese, 'They have very low standards so far as women are concerned, and they ill-treat the aboriginal women in such a way that they arouse the anger of the aboriginal men. Then the natives wreak their vengeance on the first white man who comes along.'⁵² In the same year the *Argus* reported the chief protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, Dr Cecil H Cook, tightened the regulation of Aboriginal women and 'half-castes' ostensibly to afford them greater protection. Cook drew attention to the 'grave problem presented by the unrestricted inter-marriage of alien coloured races with aborigines and half-castes'. The result he stated was a 'hybrid coloured population of a very low order' which constituted a 'perennial economic and social problem'.⁵³ Children born of Asian fathers and Aboriginal mothers did indeed pose a problem to protectors advocating assimilation through biological absorption. For unlike the 'half' and 'quarter-caste' girls whose children's and

47 Nagata 2004.

48 Bennett 1930: 115.

49 Bennett 1930: 118.

50 *Argus*, 23 March 1934: 10.

51 *Argus*, 14 May 1936: 7.

52 *Courier-Mail*, 12 January 1934: 6.

53 *Argus*, 30 June 1934: 17.

grandchildren's aboriginality would ultimately be purportedly extinguished by their successive partnering with white men, these 'half-caste coloured aliens' embodied miscegenation with none of the perceived benefits of assimilation – of 'breeding out the colour'.⁵⁴ Indeed they constituted a new and unwelcome racial element in Australia, combining two elements already targeted for eradication, first through the *Immigration Restriction Act* and secondly just as the policy of assimilation was being adopted by most states.⁵⁵

The protective sentiment particularly towards 'half-caste' Aboriginal girls – earmarked for marriage with white men to produce paler-skinned children – intensified as the presence of Chinese, Malay, Koepanger (single men indentured from South East Asia) and Japanese pearlers grew along Australia's northern coast. Referred to as the 'flotsam and jetsam of the Pacific'⁵⁶ they comprised the undifferentiated entity 'alien', and 'Asiatic'.⁵⁷ Under the *Pearling Act 1912* (WA) it was illegal for Japanese to own an interest in a pearling operation or even to rent boats. The divers worked under extremely difficult conditions. Over 600 Japanese men died between 1878 and 1941 working in the Torres Strait.⁵⁸ They sought sea pearl oyster *Pinctada maxima* which was the principal material in the production of buttons and knife handles, before plastic became common fare. By 1920 80 per cent of the world's supply of mother-of-pearl shell came from the northern port town of Broome.⁵⁹ The pearling industry was under pressure from the onset of World War One when markets contracted. As the world economy slid into depression in the 1930s, the market came under additional pressures, both from the production of plastic substitutes and Japanese cultured pearls.⁶⁰

Within the stratification of ethnic identity the 'Asiatic' was beyond even 'low-caste' European-heritage men, in imaginings of the corruption of Aboriginal women. Lorna Kaino argues relations of reciprocity and exchange that had been established from trade and co-habitation between Macassan traders and Aborigines continued in relations with the Japanese, Malaysians, Indonesians, Chinese and Singaporeans, Timorese and Filipinos now in the pearling and trepang industry.⁶¹ In the interwar period however Koepangers were accused

54 It was in the 1932–33 report of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory that Cecil Cook made his now infamous call to 'breed out the colour'. However it is less known that his statement was a defensive response to Asian-Aboriginal cohabitation. The full statement reads, 'In the Territory the mating of an aboriginal with any person other than an aboriginal is prohibited. The mating of coloured aliens with any female of part aboriginal blood is also forbidden. Every endeavour is being made to breed out the colour by elevating female half-castes to the white standard with a view to their absorption by mating into the white population'. Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for the Year Ended 30th June, 1933, <<http://archive.aiatsis.gov.au/removeprotect/59849.pdf>> (accessed 14 June 2013).

55 The *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901* (Cth) instigated deportation of Melanesians living in Queensland from 1906, see Reynolds 2003: xi. <<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-15.html>> (accessed 15 June 2013).

56 *West Australian*, 31 July 1937, cited in McGrath 1984: 277.

57 Schaper 1995: 117.

58 Nagata 1999: 30–43.

59 Schaper 1995: 112.

60 Moore 1994.

61 Kaino 2011.

of spreading venereal disease to 'half-caste' girls and the introduction of opium and gambling among 'detribalised' men was attributed to the Chinese. The Administrator of North Australia Lieutenant-Colonel RH Weddell endorsed this view. He told a Legacy Club Luncheon in 1934 that the visits of foreign pearling crews caused a 'mixture of races', along with the introduction of 'Asiatic diseases'.⁶² He argued that it was 'interference with aboriginal women' that had caused the disturbances with Aborigines on the northern coast.

By 'disturbances' Weddell was referring to the 1932–33 killings of Japanese that followed a string of deaths of up to 75 non-Aborigines within mutinies and escapes over decades.⁶³ In 1932, eight men were murdered in three separate incidents: five Japanese trepangers at Caledon Bay, and two white men and later a policeman investigating their deaths on Woodah Island in north-east Arnhem Land. Police, delayed by the wet season, pursued the men at Blue Mud Bay, where Constable Stewart McColl was speared in July. The police were later accused of handcuffing four women who were left under McColl's watch with two Aboriginal trackers while their party went after the suspects. McColl is believed to have released all but one woman, Japarri, who called out for help (just before her death she told Ted Egan intercourse did not take place). McColl then fired on her husband Dagiar, who speared him.⁶⁴ Accounts of the spearing of five Japanese trepangers later credited the testimony of the Aboriginal men who said they were responding to the Japanese beating and firing on them, as well as the mistreatment or misuse of their women. Yet the defence of women, even as a proprietary right by Yolngu and Djalkiripuyngu men, was not credited as evidence in the subsequent trials that convicted Dagiar, Merara (later quashed) and three sons of Wonggu (also eventually released).⁶⁵

An outcry among southern advocacy organisations led to Tuckiar's (Dagiar) death sentence being overturned in the High Court. Yet Dagiar mysteriously disappeared in Darwin and it is widely believed he was lynched by police.⁶⁶ A raid was proposed by the Administrator of Darwin⁶⁷ and by the owner of the lugger the Japanese crewed since, he insisted, they were 'honourable men', 'murdered while engaged in a peaceful occupation', and the natives 'must be taught a lesson otherwise there will be no chance of settling the wild parts of Australia'.⁶⁸ With the Coniston massacre of 1928 still fresh in people's memory a groundswell of denunciation for the practice of indiscriminate punitive raids sprang up, spearheaded by anthropologist Donald Thomson.⁶⁹

62 *Argus*, 16 August 1934: 4.

63 See Ganter 1994: 45.

64 Dewar 1993.

65 Egan 1996.

66 Markus 1987.

67 Dewar 1993.

68 Quoting Mr Keppert in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1933: 13.

69 Attwood 2005. Also protesting calls for a punitive expedition were the Association for the Protection of Native Races, unions, the Council of Churches, the Church Missionary Society, the British Commonwealth League and the Anti-Slavery Society. Prime Minister Lyons denied a punitive expedition was being considered, but rather an 'arresting party' would be despatched. In *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1933: 13.

As Mickey Dewar argues, sympathy arising from the 1932 Caledon Bay case was expressed in terms of Aboriginal men protecting their women from violent Japanese,⁷⁰ even though Fred Gray, an English trepanger fishing at the site and friendly with the Balamumu, stated the elder Wonggo did not complain of Japanese violence against women or of them reneging on any payment.⁷¹ Thomson's report taken from Wonggo (father of the three warriors jailed for life and then released after Thomson's advocacy) attested to his defending his land and people from 'the white and Japanese despoilers of their women'.⁷² Significantly, as the pearling scandal unfolded sympathy turned against Aboriginal men who were scapegoated as 'trafficking' to the Japanese who simultaneously 'poached'. Aboriginal women were cast as abused and without recourse to protection except by white men. A series of reports emerged in the press from September 1935 including 'Blacks Sell Womenfolk to Luggers Crews', in the *Argus*;⁷³ 'Reports of Sale of Lubras', in the *Sydney Morning Herald*;⁷⁴ 'Black Women Exploited', in the *Herald*;⁷⁵ 'Lubras on Luggers' in the *Canberra Times*;⁷⁶ 'Japanese Pearl Poachers', in *Daily Telegraph*;⁷⁷ 'Lubras Sold. Japanese Hamper Mission Work. Barter Increases', in the *Sydney Morning Herald*;⁷⁸ 'Lubras on Pearling Vessels', in the *Northern Standard*;⁷⁹ and 'Native Girls in Luggers', in the *Herald*.⁸⁰ Run together the semiotics of these headlines show a suturing of poaching to prostitution. An illicit sexual trade drew a competing masculinity to the nation's unprotected and vulnerable shores. Colloquial language, such as 'Lubra', designated the sexuality of Aboriginal women as an exploited yet squandered commodity by 'Blacks', who like the Japanese comprise a category evacuated of all else but sexual vice. Yet nowhere did the Australian colloquialism 'Black Velvet' appear throughout this print scandal.

A closer analysis of two of these newspapers' reportage reveals the discursive workings in this shift of culpability for the abuse of Aboriginal women to 'Asiatics' aided by Aboriginal men. In September 1936 an interview in the *Canberra Times* with Monseigneur Gsell, Principal of the Bathurst Island Catholic Mission Station, imprinted in the wider nation. It bannered, 'SORDID TRAFFIC IN ABORIGINAL GIRLS: Barter With Japanese Luggers'.⁸¹ He claimed girls as young as ten years were sent to the luggers and gave the instance of one girl who leapt from a lugger and 'got ashore four times in an effort to escape, but eventually was speared in the leg by a native and dragged back to the Japanese'. Gsell claimed that at first the girls protest vigorously, but eventually they 'await

70 Dewar 1993: 6.

71 'Tragic Story of the Caledon Bay Massacre', *Advertiser*, 13 October 1933: 23.

72 Donald Thomson, 'Wonggo of Caledon Bay: An Arnhem Land Episode', *Age*, 25 July 1959: 18.

73 *The Argus*, 20 September 1935.

74 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September 1935.

75 *Herald*, Melbourne, 24 September 1936.

76 *Canberra Times*, 25 August 1936: 1.

77 *Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 1936.

78 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 1936.

79 *The Northern Standard*, 25 August 1936.

80 *The Herald*, 21 June 1937.

81 Gsell had in fact been reporting on the growing trade since 1928. See Morris 2010.

the arrival of the luggers of their own will, attracted by the lucrative gifts they receive from the Japanese'.⁸² Unusually Gsell introduces consent, yet it is here posed around the vulnerability of children, since adult women's consent was only raised in terms of the violation of men's property. The women were thought to have no property in their own persons, and no modesty by which to protect it. The sexual vulnerability of children did not persist as a driver for government intervention since miscegenation rather than child protection was in fact the primary moral impetus. By 1936 the call for coastal patrols of foreign vessels due to the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women was hitched to notions of border protection and national identity as articulated through the white Australia policy. Gsell provided potent imagery of a sexual and racial transgression mapped onto a remote, unprotected border. It is little wonder Aboriginal men were initially suspected of colluding with invading Japanese during the war years.⁸³

The 1936 *Canberra Times* article was brought immediately before the House of Representatives by Mr McCall (United Australia Party, NSW) who was assured by the Minister for the Interior, Mr Paterson, that 'inquiries were already being made, and that the allegations would be fully investigated'.⁸⁴ Gsell called for more funding for the mission's rations as a means to undercut recourse to prostitution. But for the *Argus* Gsell's revelations of 'interference with lubras' spelled 'flagrant invasions of territorial waters by the Japanese'. The paper sent its 'special representative' in Darwin to assess the effectiveness of patrols by the *Larrakia*, the federal government's patrol-boat, but deemed it ineffective and futile and pointed to the 'urgent need for effective policing of the northern coastline of Australia'. The *Argus* said the women had told their representative that they were either attracted to the 'lavish supplies of tobacco' or 'beaten into submission by their husbands who had been promised food by the Japanese'.⁸⁵ Once again it was the 'aborigines' readiness to trade their women' that focused attention. The possibility of women's relations of mutual exchange with Japanese was overlooked. It was certainly never considered that the encounter between Japanese men and Aboriginal women might be enacted within diverse relations as distinct from each other as consensual cohabitation, contractual soliciting, or abduction and rape.⁸⁶ Aboriginal women and Japanese men each were assigned singular sexual modalities – prostitution and violation.

By June the following year the *Canberra Times* detailed a report on the trafficking of Aboriginal women to foreign and Australian pearling luggers, prepared by Captain Haultain from a patrol launch, and placed before the Department of the Interior. Paterson flew north to investigate the 'alarming proportion' in the traffic in Aboriginal women. He argued that the Commonwealth Government needed to enforce the Aboriginal Ordinance to 'protect the natives from their simple

82 *Canberra Times*, 25 September 1936: 5.

83 See Morris 2004.

84 *Argus*, 16 September 1936: 5.

85 *Argus*, 21 November 1936: 27.

86 Ganter details the extensive familial networks created through cohabitation in Ganter 2006.

greed for the luxuries of the white man'.⁸⁷ Here a begrudging acknowledgement of economic motives was subsumed under moral causes: but greed not need incited men to 'barter' their women and girls. A special vessel, the *Vigilant*, was under construction in Sydney expressly to patrol the Arnhem Land coast to 'eliminate the traffic in Aboriginal women'.⁸⁸

The *Canberra Times* was quickly dissatisfied with government response to the affair, airing the Rev JW Burton's address to the Australian Missionary Conference in which he accused the Commonwealth of 'shirking its responsibilities and creating a "STAIN ON OUR HONOUR"'.⁸⁹ Like 'velvet', 'stain' is evocative language alluding perhaps to a kind of racial incontinence. The *Argus* too reported Burton's address in which he spoke of the treatment of 'our' Aboriginal women by 'salacious brutes' from luggers claiming his evidence of their mistreatment, if published, would cause Australians to become 'purple with indignation'.⁹⁰ Paterson however rebuked Burton arguing, as of old, 'it was the aborigines themselves who acquiesced because the men freely bartered their women to the crews of the luggers in return for flour tobacco &c'.⁹¹ Again the question of women's consent was subsumed under the property rights of their men, who however, misused those rights. Gsell instituted a novel approach in which he targeted children for education by buying 135 little girls as brides to 'save them from child marriage, polygamy and prostitution'.⁹² Gsell was later referred to as 'the Bishop with a hundred wives'.⁹³ As Ganter found in her study of Moravian missionary Nicolas Hey at Mapoon and the prohibitions he placed on polygamy, Gsell had likewise 'successfully appropriated the role of the male elders in allocating material resources and regulating sexual relations: he had restructured social relations from polygamous gerontocracy to monogamous patriarchy'.⁹⁴ Meanwhile 11 Japanese luggers were fired on with 'several bursts of machine gun' at Guribah Island in early April 1937 and 17 luggers boarded. They were assembled, the 'restrictions against illegal landings on the Australian coastline' were explained to them, and then they were released, to avoid 'international complications'.⁹⁵

87 'Lubra Traffic', *Canberra Times*, 24 June 1937: 4.

88 *Canberra Times*, 2 May 1938: 2.

89 *Canberra Times*, 6 April 1937: 2.

90 *Argus*, 6 April 1937: 10.

91 *Argus*, 8 April 1937: 12.

92 *Argus*, 6 April 1937: 10. 'Owner of 121 "Wives". Monsignor Gsell In Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 1937; 'Father Gsell's 150 Wives. Subterfuge by a missionary on Bathurst Island', *Parade*, May 1966; 'NT mission priest bought "wives" by the hundred', *Daily Mirror*, 13 August 1980. John Morris argues these girls were thereby exempted from the promise-system of betrothal and could later marry young men of their choosing. See Morris 2004.

93 The reference came in 1950 from the NT administrator Abbott who described Gsell's system of buying baby girls from the elder men to stop the 'tribal practice of handing young girls of six or seven over to the old men of the tribe.' Gsell removed them to the mission station, 'where the nuns looked after them, and as they grew up they married Christianized native boys.' Any mention of prostitution to Japanese seems forgotten by 1950.

94 Ganter 1999a: 279.

95 *Argus*, 6 April 1937: 9.

Riled, the *Argus* then attacked the government for the 'cool manner' in which the Federal Ministry admitted the traffic in Aboriginal women to foreign craft was 'common knowledge for years', even of Japanese 'invading' Aboriginal reserves. The *Argus* fulminated,

yet the Cabinet is only now preparing to consider this hideous scandal, which is a disgrace to Australia's name. There has been evidence in the recent episode of a disposition to be lenient with the intruders so as to avoid possible international complications. Australians generally would not desire the Government's solemn duty of protecting the aborigines to be left undone because of such unworthy timidity.⁹⁶

The Anglican Synod of Ballarat was likewise incensed demanding, 'Why is it that the great British Empire behaves like a damned coward when it faces any foreign power in the world except Germany?' The Rev BH Dewhurst also criticised the failure of Australian authorities to 'take prompt action to protect aboriginal women in the north against raiders from another country'. Mr Dewhurst insisted, 'Whoever heard of a Government that allowed nationals of a foreign power to interfere with its women and decline to make a protest?'⁹⁷ Within a week their calls would be answered. The Aboriginal Ordinance was amended to allow for the confiscation of 'foreign pearl shell poachers' found illegally in the vicinity of Aboriginal reserves on the coastline of the Northern Territory or Western Australia. Australian territorial waters were thus closed to foreign vessels as a 'protective measure' afforded to Aboriginal women from the 'attentions of the crews of foreign pearling craft' by their 'invasion of these waters' from Darwin to Arnhem Land.⁹⁸ Paterson briefed delegates to the 1937 Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities,⁹⁹ the first meeting of the heads of the state Aboriginal protection and welfare boards. And in early 1941 Vestey's agreed to relinquish its lease over Melville Island and the Tiwi Islands were gazetted as Aboriginal reserve with a control base established at Garden Point.¹⁰⁰

On 10 June 1937 two more boats were captured in Boucaut Bay, Arnhem Land, and escorted to Darwin. The crew was released, reportedly because there was no room at Fanny Bay gaol.¹⁰¹ Paterson continued to stress the difficulty of government intervention in Aboriginal men trafficking their women. He wrote to the Ballarat branch of the Labor party assuring them that 'nothing is being left undone to protect aboriginal women, despite the practice of selling them engaged in by their own kith and kin'.¹⁰² He asserted to the *Argus* a month later that 'The Patrol Service has come to stay', as long as 'a vestige of the traffic in

96 *Argus*, 7 April 1937: 6.

97 *Argus*, 15 April 1937: 12.

98 *Canberra Times*, 21 April 1937: 1.

99 *Canberra Times*, 22 April 1937: 4.

100 See Morris 2004.

101 They were the lugger Takachiho Maru No. III and the sampan Seicho Maru No. 10. *Argus*, 21 June 1937: 8.

102 *Argus*, 7 May 1937: 7.

aboriginal women remained, a traffic which is carried on by male aboriginals who barter their women for flour and tobacco, and must be utterly stamped out'. Patterson was determined, he said, to enforce the law against 'any person, white or coloured, who engages in unlawful poaching or immoral trafficking in aborigines [who] may expect the penalty of the law'.¹⁰³ He was reported as saying 'protection would now be afforded aboriginal women from the attentions of the crews of foreign pearling craft' adding that steps would be taken to 'assure prompt action to deal with vessels found illegally in territorial waters'. Poaching specifically invokes the illegal removal of resources by 'aliens'. Trafficking, as distinct from trading, invokes the illegal exploitation of contraband materials across borders. The new measures were run together in print reports: 'Action to provide for the effective policing of valuable pearlshell beds in Australian territorial waters and to guard against interference with aboriginal women by the crews of foreign pearling luggers, was taken yesterday by the Commonwealth Government, under amendments of the Aboriginal Ordinance proclaimed in a special Commonwealth gazette.'¹⁰⁴ Placed together, notions of trespass over Aboriginal women's bodies was seamlessly sutured over the trespass of national sovereignty.

In March 1938 a new charge was brought against a Japanese lugger intercepted near Melville Island in the Darwin Police Court and reported under a *Canberra Times* headline 'LUBRAS ON LUGGER'. Women testified that they had rowed out to the lugger but as their 'evidence was conflicting' and 'Musmumoto', in charge of lugger D 45, denied their being on board, the case was dismissed.¹⁰⁵ As noted, throughout this print panic the idiom 'Black Velvet' was never used in relation to Japanese and Aboriginal sexual exchange, despite its prior appearance in print, nor were the terms 'combo' or 'burnt cork' applied to their unions. Instead references were made to poaching and trafficking, evoking the contravention of national borders.

After the hostilities of World War Two commenced the image of Aboriginal men was rehabilitated. Japanese were accused of having 'fraternised with the aborigines, whose women they wronged. Pretending friendship, they were a most evil influence along the coasts of North Australia'. However the 'blackfellows of North Australia' were said to have since 'proved their worth as "allies"' and as 'good companions' to Australian soldiers in guarding the northern coast.¹⁰⁶ Indeed during the war men from Caledon Bay were pictured in 1944, in *Wild Life* magazine. The 'fine character in the faces and bearing of these men' showed they 'prove to be noble and loyal'. Their previous reputation for ferocity derived from 'a determination to preserve their land and their kindred from the depredations of intruders, whether white or yellow'. Needless to say their 'main grievance was the visits of the Japanese pearlers, who used to carry off their women'.¹⁰⁷

103 *Canberra Times*, 22 June 1937: 2.

104 *Canberra Times*, 22 April 1937: 4.

105 *Canberra Times*, 8 March 1938: 4.

106 Barrett 1942: 12.

107 'People of the Territory', *Wild Life*, June 1944: 175.

By 1958 the revised opinion on the Caledon Bay men presented them as having 'refused to lend their women' to the Japanese trepangers who slighted them by thinking 'presents of tobacco gave them the right to take any native woman they wanted'.¹⁰⁸ As Aboriginal men became defenders of the northern coast they were reinstated as defenders of their women. Japanese men presented an image of frontier masculinity as invaders who had sought access to Aboriginal women's bodies. It was an image that settler-colonial men could least face about themselves and perhaps for this reason had to be resolutely repelled.

When fighting with Japan ceased and panic about 'alien coloured' sexual transgression subsided, 'Black Velvet' was revealed to the public, almost as the unveiling of a national secret, by *People* magazine in 1956. *People* was a Fairfax publication and the first Australian weekly to feature a topless model. Its exposure of 'Black Velvet' was bound to excite salacious interest. The article by Walkley award-winning journalist Harry Cox was bannered: 'Black Velvet' and bylined ': the name for seduction in the outback and means degradation of a once proud people'.¹⁰⁹

Cox argued this 'hush-hush' practice was known all over Northern Australia and went back to the first white settlers. But due to the impacts of 'persecution, ill-treatment and near slavery', as well as epidemic disease –but most importantly the growing presence of white women –the phenomenon of 'Black Velvet' had declined. 'The white man is no longer lonely',¹¹⁰ Cox declared, but for the 'aboriginal harlot' it was too late. By giving her money or trinkets she had learnt she could 'make a trade of it'. Culpability shifted on to the women, who now instigated the trade in their own persons. Nevertheless Cox found an exemplar in the prospector and 38 stone 'Tiny Swanson' to convey a sense of side-show excess for white men who married Aboriginal women (who were still indistinguishable from procurers).

108 Clem Cleveson, 'The Skull of Peace', *People*, 19 February 1958: 7.

109 Harry Cox, 'Black Velvet', *People*, 14 November 1956: 27.

110 Cox 1956: 28.

Figure 1: Harry Cox, 'Black Velvet', *People*, 14 November 1956.

Source: Courtesy of Bauer Media.

Figure 2: Harry Cox, 'Black Velvet', *People*, 14 November 1956.

Source: Courtesy of Bauer Media.

Swanson was well known in the Northern Territory for strongman feats, but perhaps most famous for requiring a 2 ton crane to lift his body into his grave (he died of kidney failure at 58 years). A report on his death included a cartoon and Cox described his living arrangements as anarchic with chooks and a drunken pig roaming through the shed that was the marital home. The cartoon showed Tiny carrying his pet kangaroo under one arm, and his wife, Ruby, under the other.¹¹¹

111 'Territorians in mourning for Tiny', *Sun-Herald*, 12 December 1954: 48.

Clearly 'Black Velvet' continued to describe marginal sexual relations now within the remotest reaches of the interior. Though it specified white-Aboriginal sex, it took in the full 'spectrum' of sexual activity when it came to Aboriginal women, from rape, to prostitution and marriage.

The obscured, yet widely circulated term 'Black Velvet' operated linguistically as slang euphemism – an intended innocuous phrase that replaced an offensive social relation. It specifically masked the widely known, yet publically repressed, phenomenon of interracial cohabitation, as well as white men's sexual aggression. From this survey of the comparatively blinding print exposure of Japanese men's sexual unions with Aboriginal women and girls, 'Black Velvet' euphemised a register of touch that was racially specific not just to Aboriginal women but, as it transpires, to white men. As such for white men exclusively 'Black Velvet' denoted Aboriginal women as a collective, tactile surface of moral oblivion, devoid of the interiority of values, family attachment, responsibilities for custodianship or law, let alone sexual agency. The specifically white men either 'interfering' in, or forming enduring attachments to, black women's bodies, instituted an epidermal economy that went largely euphemised. Yet this sexually transmitted colloquialism consummated colonial entitlement to the resources of the land. The right of extraction – a tenet of settler-colonialism – found ready application to the bodies of Indigenous women through such expressions. Its restricted use conveyed the 'multi-national' localities of northern-shore pearling communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and the Torres Strait, and the role of Indigenous women in creating 'a place of conjunction or a site of convergence between different places, cultures, and nations'¹¹² that had to be suppressed under white Australia.

The halting, restricted use of 'Black Velvet' demonstrates that sexual and political dominance are indeed a 'homology' in Western Colonialism, replete with hidden truth claims.¹¹³ Yet it also reveals the role of language, its expressions and its suppressions, in adding to the porousness and incompleteness of colonial state power that Antoinette Burton has emphasised in her work, 'due as much to the permeability of national/colonial borders as it was to the political instability of political regimes grounded in a normative heterosexual order'.¹¹⁴ In its racialised denotation it attempted to shore up the borders of 'an unregulated "promiscuity" of categories [that] was occurring in the tropics'.¹¹⁵ Its very elision in the instance of Japanese and Aboriginal sexual unions attempted to map sexual and racial coordinates, through boastful colloquial classification, of territorially distinct, nationally discrete sexual domains linked to permissible trade and protected territory. The possessive impulse thus permeating its meaning, we can see, was flouted by Aboriginal women through the varied intimacies with which they engaged the Japanese pearl fishers into their economies and bodies. By the term 'Black Velvet' settlers alliterated their attempt to render Aboriginal women's

¹¹² Hokari 2003: 95.

¹¹³ Haskins and Maynard 2005: 206.

¹¹⁴ Burton 1999: 2.

¹¹⁵ Gibson 2002: 169.

desires, their connections, their dealings, along with their victimisation, as surface effect. In their intimacies with the Japanese Aboriginal women resisted the touch of white men as any claim to possession.

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