'I'd grown up as a child amongst natives': Ruth Heathcock (1901-1995) – disrupting settler-colonial orthodoxy through friendship and cross-cultural literacy in creolised spaces of the Australian contact zone

Growing up in the small River Murray town of Wellington, South Australia as the twentieth century turned, Henrietta (Ruth) Sabina Heathcock (nee Rayney) enjoyed a childhood shaped as much by Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal friends and elders, as by her close-knit Anglo-Irish family. The Rayney family lived on the eastern, Aboriginal, side of town, where Ngarrindjeri had lived for millennia, and where, in the 1880s, a group of Ngarrindjeri families from nearby Point McLeay Mission had been granted hard-won title to farm the land and raise their families (Jenkin 1979, 229-231). Wellington, indeed, was one of a number of pockets across colonial Australia where lived processes of negotiation and exchange between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers blurred social boundaries and mapped dynamic inter-cultural terrains on the frontier (see for example Hughes 2012, Balint 2012, Ryan 2011, Landon and Tonkin 1999, Yu 1994). Reflecting on her childhood friendships forged in Wellington in the first two decades of the 1900s, Ruth Heathcock recalled, 'I went to school with Aboriginal children. Skin colour? It was all the same to me. I didn't even know it existed' (Hughes 1986).

In the following article I explore continuities in the nature of cross-cultural intimacy over time by examining the friendships that Ruth Heathcock sustained with Aboriginal people at Wellington, and later across a range of other sites. These played out against a backdrop of restrictive race-based legislation that attempted to foreclose possibilities for such connectivity in early and mid-twentieth century Australia.

As a white female child born at the stroke of Australian federation, January 1901, Ruth's destiny was supposed to take a profoundly different turn, prescribed by prevailing ideas around whiteness, race and gender that underpinned the policies of a nascent nation, excluding Aboriginal people from its symbolic borders (Hughes 2012, Grimshaw 2004). In his survey of recent transnational literature on settler colonialism, Scott Morgenson highlights the importance scholars have placed on gender and sexuality as 'intrinsic to the colonisation of indigenous peoples and the promulgation of European modernity by settlers' (Morgenson 2012: 3). Earlier, invoking her cogent phrase 'the white woman's burden', Antoinette Burton identified the expected role for white women in the colonial regime as that of 'civilising the other', pivotal to an oppressive intersection of patriarchal and colonial hierarchies (Burdon 1992: 23-25). This point is echoed by Ann Laura Stoler in her call for scholars to attend more closely to the intimate dimensions of colonialism, and how 'sex, sentiment, domestic arrangements, and child rearing figure in the making of racial categories and in the management of imperial rule' [emphasis mine] (Stoler 2006: 23). Conversely, though, as I aim to show, it is possible to trace how the intimacies of women’s friendships forged across the colonial and neo-colonial divide might also give rise to more subversive creolised or hybrid domestic arrangements and enable child rearing practices that destabilise established power relationships, unroll racial categories, and disrupt ‘imperial rule’.

In doing so, I explore some influences of the interwoven world of Heathcock’s childhood and its many afterlives through a fabric of relationships across a range of historical and contemporary ‘contact zones’ (Pratt cited in Allen 2001: 5). I focus particularly on how the influence of intimate friendships forged with Aboriginal children and their families in the critical years of her early childhood informed an alternative, ‘creolised’ sense of personhood, and an evolving commitment towards an indigenised framework of relationality. Ruth’s long life, covering all but six years of the twentieth century, played out, for the most part, atypically and in remarkable contradistinction to patriarchal assumptions on white girlhood and womanhood at the time of federation referred to above. Her childhood relationships and deep learning from these rich cultural spaces gave her a framework for continuing engagement with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory at Marranboy, Darwin, Roper River and Borroloola. Leaving South Australia at 29, Ruth travelled to work in the Northern Territory as a nurse during the interwar period. Most of that time was spent working with Aboriginal people, often collaboratively and at their behest (Hughes 2005: 89-93). Her resulting close
friendships with Aboriginal women in these years fuelled a personal activism in response to systemic injustices. We will look at how Ruth employed covert networks and used mobility in this intercultural, highly relational work. As Diane Bell has earlier suggested, heralding later feminist work on the history of emotions, women’s investment in relationships ‘suggests the operation of another economy, one of the emotions, generated within the intimacy of households, but played out with consequences for all in the larger society’ (Bell 1987: 260) [emphasis mine]. Beginning with Ruth’s childhood in Wellington and through the prism of a series of domestic contact zones – some within institutions where she worked – including the Point McLeay Mission; the Khalin Compound; and the Roper River Police Station, and finally in her Adelaide home in the seaside suburb of Marino—I explore how such affective relationships were forged and sustained in partnership with Aboriginal people, and frequently took on dimensions analogous to kinship. In this I deploy the theoretical frame of an ethics of risk as defined by feminist theologian Sharon Welch (1990), and located in the Aboriginal knowledge-value of sharing (Grieves 2009, 25, 28, 45). Finally I indicate how this intersubjectivity formed an ethic of living that has been passed down intergenerationally. In particular, I trace ways in which, what I term, ‘a resonant cross-cultural literacy’ has been transmitted across multiple generations of Ruth’s extended family, through her Aboriginal kin at Roper River, as well as in the families of two of her Aboriginal women friends, Laura Kartinyeri and Norah Durubul. Charting these ‘economies of emotion’ (Bell 1987: 260) at a micro-historical level from the time of federation into the 21st century, allows us to consider and navigate alternative routes the Australian nation might have taken as it attempted to leave behind its colonial past, arguably shaping a different, perhaps a more distinctly bicultural or creolised, present.

Until quite recently (Hughes 2005, Cole et al 2005) Ruth Heathcock’s significance as a non-Indigenous woman in the Australian contact zone has missed out on close historical attention, other than in a much earlier and highly romanticised, popular ficto-biographical account by Hall (1968). This is chiefly because of the covert nature of her activism, in particular her deeply hidden medical work with leprosy patients, undertaken against the law from 1934-1943, which left few conventional historical sources. This article extends my previous work on Heathcock (Hughes 2005, 1986), engaging with new questions around friendship and transgenerational knowledge transfer. Much of what we know of her time in the Northern Territory from 1930 to 1943 has been sustained through oral records of Aboriginal people in the Roper River area, and at Borroloola. Remarkably, also, illuminating shards from her earlier life in South Australia have surfaced in present-day recollections of the descendants of Ruth’s Ngarrindjeri childhood friends. These afford insight into how memory itself is shaped by intimate economies, and reveal a continuity of cross-culturally engaged networks over time. Additionally I have consulted members of contemporary Aboriginal communities in South Australia and the Northern Territory to better understand the important role Aboriginal women played as agents of change in forming diplomatic relationships with white people, and to apprehend how such cross cultural friendships might contribute to a more positive hybridity than that theorised by Stoler (2006). Ruth herself in the 1980s recorded a number of oral history interviews (in Baker 1999: 134, 201-2; Heathcock 1983) and deposited a small body of written and photographic material with AIATSIS in the decade before her death. Further, I also write from a position of having known Ruth as a young filmmaker in the 1980s when I collaborated with elders in the Ngukurr community in telling their shared history (see Hughes 1986).

As suggested by these disparate sources, Ruth’s role in interwar Australia, and over following decades, differs markedly from that of her contemporaries. Ruth’s individual activism is not fully explained by the framework of maternalism that scholars have applied to other feminist activists of the period (Paisley 2000; Moreton-Robinson 2000: 94-105; Jacobs 2005). Interwar feminists Mary Bennett, Constance Cook and Bessie Rischbieth, for example, were women of mobility and means who used international feminist networks to vigorously campaign for protection for Aboriginal women and children from the exploitation of white men (Holland 2001). Others, such as Annie Lock and (slightly earlier) Janet Matthews operated, albeit sometimes precariously, within the mission system (Bishop 2008; Grimshaw 2011: 14-16.). In contrast, Ruth’s activism appears to have grown through living in ongoing proximity and connection with Aboriginal people and ultimately was governed by the rules of kin. The distinctive way Ruth Heathcock worked professionally was also informed by Aboriginal exchange relationships involving reciprocity and kinship obligation. However, this is not to state that her position was free of the inescapable ambiguities and power relations inherent in the settler colonial state. Indeed, at the time when Ruth most ardently flouted the legislation requiring enforced isolation of leprosy patients, she was married to a police officer with dual responsibility as a sub-Protector of Aborigines.

Making locality: Wellington, a first mapping of the world

Ruth’s childhood home of Wellington lies within the rich eco-system of the South Australian Lower Murray. Wellington is a significant site for the Ngarrindjeri, where the Country of a number of clan-groups intersect, and where the Murray River as a living body flows or ‘urinates’ (Berndt and Berndt 1993: 9) into Alexandria, and out to the Coorong wetlands, before emptying through its sea-mouth into the Great Southern Ocean. It was the site of the first ferry crossing in the colony. Because of Wellington’s strategic location for both black and white communities, due to important access to water and its transport, the colonial government of South Australia established an early sub-protectorate there in 1842. Scottish-born policeman George Ezekiel Mason (1811-1876), who had lived at Wellington since 1839, just three years after the colony began, was appointed sub-protector and established his small house in the centre of the
Ngarrindjeri community (Bell 1998: 80). Many contemporary Ngarrindjeri consider Mason an empathetic man for his times (personal communication Ellen Trevorrow 2013, personal communication Muriel Van der Byl 2013). Mason spoke of the fine intelligence and humanity of the Ngarrindjeri people and his relaxed protectorate was characterised by a lack of missionary-style intervention that differed considerably from the nearby Point McLeay Mission established in 1859 (Jenkin 1979: 86-94). Mason’s obituary published in 1876 gives insight into the entangled beginnings of Wellington, at about the time Ruth’s parents arrived there:

To the fact of a chief of one of the tribes named Mulea, when Mr. Mason first went amongst them, superstitiously imagining and insisting that Mr. Mason was a near relative of his, and well-known to his tribe, who had died and jumped up a white man, may perhaps be traced the great influence Mr. Mason possessed amongst them, as the black chief considered it his especial duty to protect and assist him at all times as far as he was able; and to render the friendship more secure and valuable according to their tradition, names were exchanged, Mr. Mason became ever after among the blacks Mulea, and Mulea was always called by the natives, Mason. (The Register, July 29, 1876: 5c) [emphasis mine]

What the obituary does not tell us is that during the 1840s Mason formed a substantial relationship with the accomplished Ngarrindjeri woman Louisa Karpany, of similar age to him, while both remained married to others (Bell 1998:80). Karpany was a woman of immense knowledge and respect who had successfully negotiated the juncture between disparate worlds with the coming of invaders to her country. Karpany and Mason had two children, George Karpany and Margaret Mack, (better known as Pinkie because of her fair skin), from whom many present-day Ngarrindjeri descend. It is not known what Mason’s wife Agnes (nee Litchfield) thought of this, but she continued to live at Wellington many years after his death. During the colonial era black and white mixed, mingled and lived alongside each other in an array of mediated relationships. Indeed, what some might perceive as ‘settler’ cultural spaces and social formations were in fact creolised, existing differently in each world. William McHughes (a close relation to Louisa Karpany), for example, constructed the local limestone Anglican chapel at East Wellington, as well as other buildings in the district. A Ngarrindjeri stonemason, much in demand, McHughes built the chapel on his own initiative, and without payment. The chapel was a locus of community and kin, of overlapping communities and sacred spaces, and it was here the Rayney family worshipped. The purposeful roles Wellington Ngarrindjeri took in co-shaping the town attest to a negotiated history that speaks less of dispossession than of a continuing sovereignty, in which the ellipsis of margin and centre was fluid and dynamic, emblematic of what Homi Bhabha terms a third space (1994, 17-18). From its inception Wellington’s history was one of double vision, mixed heritages and cultural crossings.

This was the world into which Ruth was born. Such inter-cultural impulses constituted her ‘first mapping of the world’ (Malouf 1990, 298) and persisted long into the twentieth century when many Ngarrindjeri, including Mason and Karpany’s children and grandchildren, continued to live on the Karpany clan-estate of Marrunggung, East Wellington. Significantly too, Ruth’s childhood, took place in the years before the introduction of the SA Aborigines Act of 1911, and the more marked segregation that followed, affording greater opportunity for such cross-cultural friendships. Her family’s home adjoined the Marrunggung community where, as we saw earlier, Ruth attended school with children of the Ngarrindjeri families who had left the segregation of Point McLeay Mission in the late 1880s. Experiences of biculturality as normative contradicted the wilful silencing of Aboriginal presence at a national and constitutional level. In a school photograph from 1913 (figure 1) we see Ruth, the middle child of six children, raised principally by her mother Emily Soar who encouraged freedom and independence in her daughters. Her father John Frederick Rayney, who worked as an engineer on the construction of the Murray Bridge in the 1870s, died when Ruth was six. Ruth described herself as a ‘tomboy’, pushing boundaries of ascribed gender, socialised among Aboriginal playmates and their elders (personal communication Ruth Heathcock, 1984). Within the home, Lynette Russell has observed, ‘people are at their most vulnerable, yet the power structures within the home can invert those which occur external to it’ (2007:1). Ruth’s childhood friendships opened rich interactions with Ngarrindjeri families and knowledgeable elders, arguably bringing awareness of cultural and intellectual traditions, kin formations and understanding of reciprocity, which profoundly influenced her later thinking.
In her senior years in Adelaide, Ruth often talked about Louisa Karpany’s considerable, if perhaps symbolic, influence on her life. Karpany, aged more than one hundred, died at Wellington in 1921, when Ruth was twenty. She had been a yatuki, (young woman) when the British explorer Charles Sturt entered Lake Alexandrina in his whaleboat in 1831. Petrified, she hid in the rushes witnessing this strange harbinger of change, but when the brunt of colonisation came was quick to adapt, like many pragmatic Aboriginal women, adopting a role of cultural ambassador on the frontier. In Ngarrindjeri society women have been shown to hold equivalent power to men (see Bell et al 2008). In post-Federation Wellington Louisa’s capable presence and embodied history, reaching back to a world before colonisation, spoke to Ngarrindjeri women’s authority and the gendered, spiritually animated nature of country and waters. Ruth was child of independent mind, who sometimes questioned those in charge. ‘No God wouldn’t say that!’ she once protested, interrupting a sermon. Even so she clearly respected Louisa Karpany’s formidable mien.

My word she was severe when we used to go out there and fish as children on the Murray… Dear old thing, when I knew her she was elderly. She wore a blanket over her head. Her head was bald like an egg, and there was one white curl. Did she ever have a voice! And she’d pick up a stick like this and we were scared stiff! (personal communication August 1987)

Ruth’s childish memory does suggest that Louisa Karpany, attentive to the River and the hazards of transgressing rules around powerful, dangerous spaces, cast a strict and watchful eye over Ruth and her playmates, most likely among them Karpany’s own grandchildren, in particular Ruth’s friend Laura Kartinyeri (nee Sumner). The capacity of elders to maintain right ways of being and behaving on country have long been shown to be central to upholding land and society (see Bell 1998: 262-286).

Between the wars

In her teenage years, with the outbreak of the First World War, Ruth undertook farm work and, once war was over, left for Adelaide to train as a nurse, graduating with triple certification in 1924. As she had hoped, nursing soon provided her with the professional mobility to expand her horizons, and to work closely with Aboriginal people. Initially this was at the Point McLeay Mission, and eventually with the larger population in Australia’s north. Nursing and missionary work endowed single women with a mobility not widely available to them in interwar Australia. Nurses could also engage publicly with Aboriginal people, without the fear of social ostracism, as increasingly racialised policies of white Australia took firm hold (Grimshaw 2004: 26; Hughes 2012: 269; Bishop 2008: 229).

Ruth returned from Adelaide in early 1929 to fill a position as ‘nurse in charge’ at the Point McLeay Mission hospital, a 30-kilometre boat ride across Lake Alexandrina from Wellington on the Narrung Peninsula. During the previous decade the mission had passed from the relatively benevolent administration of the Aborigines’ Friends’ Association (AFA) to state government control, after which living conditions rapidly deteriorated from active government neglect (Jenkin 1979: 234-70). The AFA had found it difficult to find a nurse to take on the responsibility of running a small hospital on her own (Cooke to Sexton 1928). Accustomed to kin-like relations with Ngarrindjeri at Wellington, Ruth found it difficult working within the tightly regimented boundaries imposed by its superintendent William Penhall, and stayed at Point McLeay...
for only a year. However, during her short tenure there, in which her mother accompanied her, she enjoyed a close affinity with people, including many who knew Ruth from childhood. Indeed, some Ngarrindjeri mistakenly assumed Ruth was Aboriginal because of her connectedness to many of the mission residents and her ease with cultural protocols (personal communication, Steven Hemming, 2004). Pinkie Mack, Louisa Karpany’s daughter, renowned for her putari (midwife/female doctor) skills was living at Point McLeay over this period, delivering babies, as was her daughter Laura Kartinyeri, Ruth’s childhood friend. Hilda Wilson, the revered Ngarrindjeri elder and storyteller born in 1911, recalled Ruth’s time at Point McLeay, ‘Sister Rayney? I can just remember her; she was lovely’ (Hughes 2009: 76). As the twentieth century wore on such relationships were more difficult to maintain and Ruth found herself working within increasingly institutionalised Aboriginal communities, where she responded by subverting and seeking to humanise the rigid operational regimes that prevailed.

Into the second contact zone

Ruth left Point McLeay Mission in July 1930 to take up a position with the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) in the Northern Territory at the Maranboy hostel, near Katherine. What is commonly known as the Top End of northern Australia represented a later phase of the colonisation process. In 1930 Aboriginal people comprised more than eighty percent of the total Northern Territory population. In this sense, it was like stepping back into the frontier contact-zone of her early childhood. At Maranboy Ruth met her future husband, English-born First World War veteran of Gallipoli, Mounted Constable Edward (Ted) Heathcock, when he came to the hostel for medical treatment. Ted had worked in the Northern Territory since 1920 and shared her empathetic stance towards Aboriginal people, which drew them together. ‘He was an English gentleman, and he was as good to the blacks as he was to the whites,’ she once said, ‘and he treats you as if it’s the first day he ever met you’ (cited in Hughes 1986). They married in November 1931 at nearby Mataranka.

Early the following year they were appointed as relieving matron and superintendent at the notorious Kahlin Compound in Darwin. Under Cecil Cook, recently appointed Chief Protector (1927-39) and equally as fastidious as William Penhall, Ruth found herself, as at Point McLeay, working once more in an institutional setting that wilfully curtailed Aboriginal people’s autonomy and futures. With its prison-like wire fence, the Kahlin Compound was established to house the increasing number of mixed-descent Aboriginal children forcibly removed by the state from their families (Cummings, 1990, Haebich 2000: 387-93). For the most part, these children lived segregated lives in sub-human conditions. Ruth purposefully sought to make a difference for the individuals within her sphere. In her autobiography Yanyuwa elder Hilda Muir, then a child at Kahlin Compound, wrote of the brutality and horror of the place, noting the change to a different ethos of care when the Heathcocks’ took over:

the Heathcocks... made such a difference to our lives. Mounted Constable Ted Heathcock and his wife Sister Ruth, a nursing sister, took over and stayed for about two years. This was when I was about twelve. After she’d been there for a while Sister Ruth started making frocks for the girls. As we were getting a little grown up she decided we should be wearing frocks, so she started making them from her old uniforms. Up until then we’d never worn anything but clothes made from thick dungaree or khaki material. My first frock was pleated and I felt really smart in it. I liked how I looked. When she gave it to me, it was the first time I felt like a human being. I felt like I was being recognised as a young woman for the first time. Sister Ruth showed us compassion, caring and real love. It was wonderful after what we’d felt when the awful ones were there. Whites being kind and loving was a new experience for us. We now felt like we were living in a family environment rather than a mob of cattle in a yard. (Muir 2004, 63-64)

For Hilda Muir this intervention came at an important transition between girlhood and womanhood. Hilda Muir remembered these small kindnesses and almost half a century later she visited Ruth in Adelaide with a rug she has crocheted for her (Magarey 1993). In working with children at Kahlin, Ruth drew on a different kind of relationality to previous matrons, one informed by notions of kinship and responsibility developed in the friendships of her Wellington childhood. The Heathcocks hoped to have this temporary appointment extended. However, Cecil Cook, noting Ted’s lack of discipline over the children (perhaps referring to their frequent excursions to the beach) refused this. The Heathcocks were transferred to a further relieving position at the Leprosarium on Channel Island established by Cook in his other roles as the Northern Territory’s Chief Medical Officer and Chief Quarantine Officer. After their short stint (August – November 1934), Ruth and Ted were next posted to the Roper River Police Station, considered to be the most remote station in the Northern Territory.

On the border of the Arnhem Land Reserve, Roper River was far removed from the institutional gaze. Their small corrugated iron home was part of the tiny police station building on the river bank at Roper Bar. Roper Bar, in the nineteenth century, had been a significant river crossing for droving cattle, and was a base for workers on the overland telegraph line in 1872. Massacres of Aboriginal people were frequent during this period (Camfoo and Camfoo 2000: 1; Harris 1998, 1-9; Reid 1990, 47-60; Roberts 2005: 150–166). In response to the killings the Church Missionary Society established the Roper River Mission in 1908, fifty kilometres from Roper Bar (Harris 1998: 9-12). A fluid camp of mostly Alawa, Mara, Warndarrang, Ngandi and Nungubuyu people lived close to the police station, with camp dwellers moving
regularly between ritual obligations on Country, cattle work, work at the police station, or time spent on the mission. Here, Ruth employed Aboriginal women in her home assisting with running the station, especially during the long periods Ted was away on extended patrols. Far from administrative surveillance, in this feminised space her friendships with the women and their families flourished. Often the wives of Ted’s police trackers, the women contributed to an economy of exchange in which Ruth, drawing once again on her childhood experiences, reciprocated, offering medical care and working where possible within an Aboriginal-led framework (personal communication Rosalind Munur 2003, Hughes 2005: 93-95). Fracturing the colonial power relationship of white mistress and Indigenous domestic worker, the women became her extended family, from whom she learnt language, culture and certain aspects of women’s Law, and often received direction. Norah Durubul, a senior law woman and the wife of the police tracker Jupiter (Yabida) took a particular interest in instructing Ruth. Norah’s granddaughter, Ngukurr elder Rosalind Munur, divulged that Ruth ate bush food and spoke Aboriginal languages; people considered her to be ‘really relaxed, just like an Aboriginal person’ (personal communication Rosalind Munur 2003), much as she had been thought of at Point McLeay. Norah adopted Ruth into her family, naming her ‘Pitjiri’, after the file snake (Acrochordus javanicus) that floats on the water in the wet season.

At Roper River people afflicted with leprosy lived in hiding, and were cared for by their families, going without treatment for fear of banishment to Channel Island. Ruth had taken a professional interest in leprosy epidemiology after studying at the Torrens Island Quarantine station in Adelaide as a trainee nurse. In her three months on Channel Island in 1934 she had been once more exposed to the false stigmatisation of leprosy. She was now a lone non-Indigenous voice articulating the difference in the way leprosy was perceived by the two cultures and the primacy of people’s deep attachments to place and family. She considered banishment to Channel Island tantamount to a ‘double-death’ and advocated the healing of perceived by the two cultures and the primacy of people’s deep attachments to place and family. She considered banishment to Channel Island tantamount to a ‘double-death’ and advocated the healing of being on country (Hughes 2005: 86). As Suzanne Saunders points out: ‘Unlike the white community, Aboriginal people had no longstanding tradition or fear associated with leprosy. It was to them a new disease which they accommodated within an already developed understanding of the cause of illness generally... [which] did not provoke rejection’ (Saunders 1990: 71).

Through the initiative and mediation of Norah, Cara, and the other women at the police station and their networks, people afflicted with leprosy were brought to Ruth for medical treatment at discrete times when Ted and the police trackers were away. As trust grew that Ruth would not report them, nor tell her policeman husband of their whereabouts, patients also came from northern and central Arnhem Land (personal communication Ruth Heathcock 1984, personal communication Rosalind Munur 2003). At these times, the police station became a surprisingly different kind of social household, taken over by the women. During Ted’s absence it transformed into a distinctly cross-culturalised and feminised space, in which colonial laws and policies were inverted. In administering medical treatment outside the ambit of public health policy, Ruth demonstrated that, without abandoning her professional code, she upheld Aboriginal Law and authority of senior women such as Norah above the recently imposed minority white laws. This was in spite of the fact that her husband was an official enforcer of those laws. Ted himself was respected but was never trusted to the same extent as Ruth (Hughes 2005: 88). Marriage to a police officer, however, lent a helpful cloak of invisibility to Ruth’s work with the women, and their distance from the administrative centre of Darwin also gave her a valued independence and autonomy.

Sustained by deep bonds of friendship Ruth and the women remained committed to this enterprise for almost a decade. Here at Roper Bar we find women on both sides of the racial divide engaging in what Sharon D. Welch defines as an ethics of risk, characterised, she claims, by ‘three elements each of which is essential in order to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds’:

- a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic-risk taking. Responsible action does not mean the certain achievements of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, for the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes.

(Welch 1990: 20)

In 1937 when the Heathcocks were rotated to another police station at Borroloola, more than 300 kilometres south along the Gulf of Carpentaria, Norah and Cara accompanied Ruth. The strong ritual obligations that connect Borroloola and Roper River families and Country allowed the women to utilise their networks to continue to care for the leprosy sufferers (personal communication, Rosalind Munur 2003). Police records from 1943 reveal that Ruth went camping with Norah for an extended period in 1943 (Mackinnon to Littlejohn NTRS/F77/88/43), suggesting not only the depth of their friendship, and the sharing of knowledge on Country, but perhaps, too, an opportunity to locate and attend to the sick.

World War Two raged in the Pacific and late in 1943, following the Japanese air raid on Darwin the previous year, Ruth received a War Office request to leave Borroloola. She refused and had to be forcibly evacuated to South Australia under a warrant (Hughes 2005: 98). Ted was seconded by the Army for the top secret Northern Australian Observation Unit, headed by the anthropologist WEH Stanner, and in 1944 was transferred to Alice Springs as part of that effort. There he died suddenly from a perforated gastric ulcer in June1944 (https://sites.google.com/site/ntpmhsociety/our-rich-history/places/maranboy, accessed February 6, 2013).
Reconnecting in the south: post war years and beyond

Deeply in shock from losing Ted and severed from Norah and her other close friends in the north, Ruth was now a widow without independent means. On her own, and lacking an ‘official position,’ she found it difficult to return to the Northern Territory after the war. Initially she went to Murray Bridge, close to Wellington in Ngarrindjeri country, where she helped her younger sister Marie to care for their elderly mother. Soon after she was granted a war widow’s block at Marino on the coastal fringe of Adelaide where she erected a simple weatherboard home, known as The Chalet, into which Marie and their mother Emily also moved. Ruth continued her nursing career at a variety of institutions in Adelaide over the next two decades, and remained engaged with Aboriginal people throughout the rest of her life. At Murray Bridge she was able to reconnect with her childhood friend, the respected elder Laura Kartinyeri (personal communication Les Eineman 2013). In Adelaide, bringing the worlds of north and south together, Ruth developed a new friendship with another Ngarrindjeri woman, Inez Jean Birt (nee Rankine) the wife of Gordon Birt, a former Mounted Constable who had worked with Ted at Borroloola in the 1940s (personal communication Inez Birt 2001). Ruth also travelled back to Roper River several times, initially in the 1960s, visiting Norah at nearby Nutwood Downs Station, where Norah lived with her granddaughter Ivy Bennett. Norah died there in 1971, aged approximately 81 (personal communication Michelle Bennett 2012). Ruth herself lived to be 94, passing away in Adelaide in 1995.

What do we make of a life lived so differently? In turning again to Stoler’s (2006) thesis on the deeper significance of intimacy, domestic economies and child rearing in colonised spaces, we can take a generational perspective to pursue the broader long-term implications of this story and its affective trajectory. In doing so we explore some patterns of that have emerged on both sides over the ensuing decades, drawing on my own acquaintance with Ruth in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as on personal accounts from family members, including from Norah’s descendants at Ngukurr. Thus, in the passage to children, classificatory kin, and friends of what might be considered an intangible heritage of engaged cross-cultural literacy arising from relationships ‘grounded in community’, we begin to see a matrix of ‘conditions of possibility for desired changes’ (Welch 1990: 20) operating into the future.

Intergenerational entanglements and intersectional spaces

Reciprocity and sharing had become a way of life for Ruth; in retirement she kept an open house, receiving a steady stream of visitors to The Chalet on most weekday afternoons. Often there were more visitors than chairs for them to sit in. Anyone was welcome and she enjoyed hearty discussions about current events, all things spiritual, and the knowledges shared with her by Aboriginal people. Although Ruth did not have biological children she played a major role in raising her niece and nephew, and later their children in South Australia. She also fostered the granddaughter of a non-Aboriginal friend. Such extended family might be considered as related, in a classificatory sense, to her old friend Norah’s Roper River clan, through the bonds of kinship that had been extended to Ruth, as was explained to me by Norah’s granddaughter Audrey Bush (personal communication Audrey Bush 1997).

It was Kenise Neill, Ruth’s foster daughter, who alerted me to the concept that Ruth’s particular way of child-rearing was embedded in a cross-culturalised domestic space, and that perhaps the broader effect of this might be locatable across the generations. Kenise, a Sister of the order of St Joseph in South Australia, contacted me at my office at Monash University in 2009 to raise the possibility that Ruth employed a set of child rearing methods that were distinctly influenced by Aboriginal lifeways and Aboriginal women’s practices of nurturing learning and self-sufficiency, grounded in play, tacticity and story. She revealed that Ruth had fostered her in 1957, as a month old baby, raising her until she was five, and Kenise had regularly stayed in touch with Ruth across her childhood and adolescence. Aboriginal friends frequently visited Ruth, and Kenise remembered that until she left Ruth to live with her grandmother, she had also assumed herself to be Aboriginal. Kenise has since spent considerable time in remote Aboriginal communities in her current position as Director of Therapeutic Services with Aboriginal Family Support Services (a grass roots community organization established in Adelaide by Aboriginal women in 1978). She felt that those early years with Ruth cast a fertile skein of influence on her present life, and wished to explore this avenue further (personal communication Kenise Neill, 2009). Kenise exhibits a keen sense of social justice and speaks out often on how ‘the treatment of Aboriginal people still today breaches the most basic human rights’ (http://sjaroundthebay.org/?p=1546 viewed February 2, 2013).

Norm Sharrad, Ruth’s nephew, ‘looked forward to Christmas for the entire year’, relishing his childhood summer holidays, always spent with Ruth and Marie at The Chalet: ‘Every day was magical. We’d walk along bush trails and along the beach to Glenelg. Ruth made damper and taught me about bush medicines, and which plants could heal your sores’ (personal communication Norman Sharrad, June 2012). Norm continued this tradition, sending his children to Ruth for the summer.

Norm’s daughter Serena, born in 1977, formed a particularly strong bond with Ruth. Serena Eineman (nee Sharrad) is a capable young woman of thirty-six, working as a cook in Murray Bridge while studying Law and raising a family. If I attempted to fictionalise a fitting ending to this story across the generations, from the time of Louisa Karpany and George Mason through to the twenty first century, I could not have invented anything that so compellingly ties together its themes of friendships, family formations and the productive
hybridity of new social spaces in the nation that can emerge from cross-cultural relationality. When I located Serena for my research for this article in June 2012, she had only a month earlier married Les Eineman, her partner of several years. Les Eineman is a Ngarrindjeri man and a great grandson of Laura Kartinyeri (nee Sumner) (1905-1995), Ruth's childhood friend, the granddaughter of Louisa Karpany and Mason. Serena and Les have eight children (personal communication Serena Eineman 2012). Three or four generations on, this is a family now descended from Rayney, Mason and Karpany lines, confounding and dissolving the simplistic notion of frontier categories of race.

At Roper River Norah’s descendants (and Ruth’s classificatory family) too, have a long legacy of cross-cultural outreach and endeavour. This is especially evident in the agency of the women. Norah herself, born about 1890, grew up as witness to the ‘killing times’ of the multi-national cattle company invasions of the 1890s, and as a young woman took an active role in negotiating the establishment of the Roper River mission on her Country in 1908, before working with Ruth (personal communication Rosalind Munur 1997). Cara, Norah’s daughter, bolstered from her experience of assisting Ruth, became the first Aboriginal nurse on the Roper River Mission in the early 1950s before her sudden death in 1953. Expanding her skills as an historian to new audiences and territories Rosalind Munur, Cara’s daughter, collaborated with me on a documentary film in the 1980s. She later adopted me as a classificatory daughter through my connection to Ruth, so that we might have a proper relationship as we continued working together on subsequent ventures (Hughes 2013). Of Rosalind’s children her oldest daughter Audrey Bush, an impressive and devout ritual expert, has most notably continued the strong leadership role of her forebears, working on Country to bring healing to groups of disengaged youth from southern cities, and inviting small groups of cultural tourists to her traditional homeland.

Conclusion

Tracing the personal trajectories of some of the actors in this story, over a period of more than a century, and across a variety of historical and contemporary ‘contact zones’, evidences ways in which embodied practices of being, seeing and belonging, arising from sustained cross-cultural engagement, can reverberate through successive generations, reshaping identities on both sides of the frontier. It affords insight into ways in which creolised spaces transmitted through gendered spaces of intimacy, friendship and the familial carry new possibilities for cross-cultural engagement and anti-colonialist change in the present. Explored from this longitudinal perspective, Ruth Heathcock’s story demonstrates the potential for intimacy over time and across racial divides to resist the mechanisms of ‘the specific nature of settler colonialism in Australia and its sharply racialised boundaries’ (Grimshaw 2011: 24). As such it has a particularly important place in the history of cross-cultural engagement with significant implications for the way we continue to read the nuances of the contact zone within the wider story of settler colonialism, gender relations and the Australian imaginary.

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