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Micro-histories and things that matter: opening spaces of possibility in Ngarrindjeri country.

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Abstract

At the intersection of biography and micro-history, this paper explores patterns of cross-cultural absence and presence in the testimonies of Indigenous and settler-descended women born around Lake Alexandrina, South Australia, in the period immediately following Australian Federation of 1901. When placed in dialogue with one another, new cross-culturally nuanced narratives emerge from within the women’s domestic spaces and everyday lives that exhibit agency and negotiation; producing an historical understanding that is localised, embodied, and very often oppositional to Federation’s imperative to create a nation based on cultural pillars of whiteness.

In her illuminating biographical work and feminist scholarship Margaret Allen extends the field of micro-history to afford exceptional insight into the way intimate biographical traces, embedded through memory and place, shed light on the transnational nature of localised colonial histories. Prising open historical fault-lines, her work deepens and troubles understanding of racialised and gendered colonial encounters on the margins and in the fabric of mainstream society, drawing attention to frontier worlds and inter-personal histories in which identities and whiteness were, and continue to be, unstable categories (Allen 2001, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Allen’s thesis is particularly relevant to the time of Australian Federation. ‘There is a key issue of importance in the process of Federation’, Patricia Grimshaw reminds us, ‘that goes to the heart of the creation of Australia as a triumphant white colonial project: Federation was a significant turning
point because it was the moment of consolidation of white policies towards Aborigines that all but extinguished a promised path to citizenship’ (Grimshaw 2002, 26). It was also a turning point in the national narratives when an exclusive ‘white’ nation was imagined in place of Australia’s Indigenous foundation and its more ambiguous, diverse and culturally mixed settler-reality. Contradicting Alfred Deakin’s ambition at the turn of the nineteenth century to unify ‘a people one in blood, race, religion and aspiration’ (La Nauze 1965, 142), fluid new ‘creolised’ societies uniquely fashioned by negotiated exchanges between Indigenous and ‘settler’ peoples flourished in pockets away from metropolitan centres: although these were rarely of equal power relations (Hughes 2010b, Reynolds 2003, Taylor 2002).

Building on Allen’s work, in this article, I turn to a microcosm of social relations of, and between, Ngarrindjeri and settler-descended women growing up around Lake Alexandrina at the cusp of the twentieth century, in Federation’s wake. Focussing on lived-relationships and lived-places across cultures, my purpose is, in Catherine Hall’s terms, to ‘unpick imperial histories’ and reveal the ‘other [negotiated] possibilities always there’ (Hall 1996, 76). In this way I will desegregate the way we think about history. I investigate key moments from the stories of three white women from the Lake—Dorothy Pavy, Thelma Paterson and Ruth Rayney—exploring patterns of cross-cultural absence and presence revealed when their stories are placed in dialogue with those of Ngarrindjeri women. I am particularly interested in how both personal agency and official legislation shaped Indigenous-settler relations in domestic realms.

Feminist standpoint theory’s strategy of privileging the margins in order to critique, disrupt and displace the ‘centre’ is intrinsic to my process (Collins 1991). My intent is to reclaim previously undervalued and under-recorded cross-cultural relations expressed through women’s lived experiences. Indeed, it is in the fluidity and intersubjectivity of this exchange-process—in which these three women participate—at the interface between storytellers, history-writers and ‘country’, that meanings are made.

It is also an approach used by historians who focus on women’s history in an Australian postcolonial context. Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins and Fiona Paisley, for instance, persuasively argue for a biographical approach in order to pursue ‘a nuanced reading of the entanglement of white and Indigenous subjects in history’. Building on prior work of Diane Bell, Diane Barwick, Vron Ware and others, they contend that a biographical approach allows scholars to not only reclaim women from the historical record, but also brings critical perspectives generated by ‘lived experiences, embodied knowledges and cultures of the everyday’ to unravelling colonial encounters (Cole, Haskins and Paisley 2005, xiv).
Lake Alexandrina in South Australia exemplifies a fluid society with a mixed and entangled history (Hughes 2010a). Part of the vast Lower Murray eco-system, where Australia’s largest river system spills into interconnected lakes, Alexandrina and Albert, and the Coorong coastal wetlands before emptying into its sea-mouth, it is part of the lands and waters of the Ngarrindjeri peoples. From 1859, and certainly by the time of Federation, many Ngarrindjeri had moved onto the Point McLeay Mission. Others, however, lived in so-called settler towns where black and white mixed, mingled and lived alongside each other in an array of mediated relationships. Threads from these bicultural, creolised societies continued into the Federation era and, although entirely absent from the ‘official’ historical record, can be found in the personal records and memories maintained mostly by women which often form one of the only entry-points into these more complex histories.

The project on which this paper is based began with a personal epiphany beside Lake Alexandrina in the spring of 1997: one with broader implications for the way racialised, gendered and classed histories are locally and intimately constituted. I had taken the oldest living Ngarrindjeri person, the revered storyteller Aunty Hilda Wilson, then 86 and becoming a friend, home to country, to the Aboriginal community of Raukkan (the former Point McLeay Mission) on the southern edge of Lake Alexandrina, where she was born in 1911. As we stepped onto the shore she led me to a spot where her mother Olive Rose Varcoe (nee Rankine), would pick rushes with her sisters and country-women, weave baskets for sale and personal use, wash clothes in a kerosene-tin over an open fire, gossip and laugh, care for children and discuss important business. She told me of sitting patiently alongside her great grandmother Ellen Sumner, born in 1842, at large ceremonial gatherings overlooking the Lake near the spot where we stood. From her, she learnt the song Pata Winema. Hilda claimed to know the meaning of only one lyric, lieuwen—to ‘sleep’ or ‘rest’ (personal communication Hilda Wilson 1997). Many believe this was adapted as a cursing song against whites (Bell 1998, 155).

Gazing across to the Lake’s northern edge, I recognised the faint but familiar outline of Norfolk Island-pines, a miniature jetty and the small rise of the town of Milang: the place of my grandmother’s childhood, and also of parts of mine. As a child I floated on these same waters invested, I thought, with ancestral powers. Oblivious to the mission across the shore, the lives and continuing presence of Ngarrindjeri communities along its waterways, or indeed of my family’s role, as second-wave settlers to Milang in the 1850s in Ngarrindjeri displacement, I day-dreamed an invented frontier, where my great-great grandmother and Ned Kelly were lovers.

Dorothy Pavy—’Football was all there was’
The name Milang is appropriated from the displaced Ngarrindjeri name, Milangk, ‘place of sorcery’. For me it became a site of ‘transformation’ and revised identity. Born at Milang in 1909, just two years before Aunty Hilda Wilson, my grandmother, Dorothy Johnson (nee Pavy), was still living and with a lucid memory. Significantly, her birth was fourteen months before the passing of the South Australian Aborigines Act, 1911, that aimed to separate Aboriginal and settler peoples in the wake of Federation’s whitening imperative. What, I wondered, were the points of meeting, and of departure, in these women’s stories and in the stories of other women from the same time and same place? How had their lives paralleled or intersected? Mixed and mingled? Too much recent historical work, Bain Attwood contends, starts from the assumption that

we already know about the whites’… Yet to understand Aborigines properly we must know the intruders well (and vice versa) and, as in any cultural contact, by definition we can only know the two peoples completely in their points of meeting. (1989, 147)

The 1911 Aborigines Act SA—along with the acts passed in other Australian states and territories—initiated a profound value shift. This is reflected in narrative patterns of memory and forgetting, effectively returning to the ideas encapsulated in the terra nullius concept, enshrined in law for much of the 20th century that sought to overwrite the erstwhile informal bicultural experimentations of the colonial period. This became evident when I visited my grandmother soon after taking Aunty Hilda Wilson to the Lake. Excited by my discoveries, I bombarded her with a stream of questions:

‘Nanna do you remember Aboriginal people living around Milang, when you were a child?’

I began.

‘There weren’t any’, she replied, with a terminating firmness.

However when I proceeded to tell her about accompanying Aunty Hilda to Raukkan, she interrupted excitedly: ‘I’ve been to Point McLeay!’, although she still made no mention of Aboriginal people.

‘What for?’

‘The football!’ (personal communication Dorothy Johnson 1997)

As it happened, on several occasions Dorothy crossed Lake Alexandrina to watch her brothers and cousins in the Milang team play against Hilda Wilson’s brothers and cousins in the Point McLeay team which Hilda’s father, Wilfred Varcoe, captained, and her grandfather, William Rankine, umpired (personal communication Hilda Wilson 1998). My grandmother described the
Milang vs. Point McLeay matches as ‘wild’, suggestive of the boundary-crossing inherent in the theatre of the occasion. Despite the drama of the oval and its players and the act of crossing the Lake by wood-powered steamer boat, and the imagined pleasure and difference of these culturally transgressive inter-community events, my grandmother had internalised a construction of colonialism’s grand narrative that there weren’t any Aboriginal people around Milang (the same genealogy of silence that led me to collapse the Lake with a white male anti-hero). So strong was this fiction that she failed to connect vivid memories of football matches, often followed by picnics and dances, between the two communities, at a time when she said ‘football was all there was’ with an Aboriginal presence, despite overwhelming lived evidence to the contrary.

A photograph of the Milang football team, taken in 1897, featuring Dorothy’s father, Tom Pavy, and William Rankine, Hilda Wilson’s grandfather, reveals that a third of the players were Indigenous. Also in the photograph is Ben Rigney who ran the mission butcher shop in conjunction with Milang butcher Ted Burgess, my grandmother’s cousin-in-law. The photograph, reproduced here with the permission of descendants, presents a valuable window into this mixed society and hints at the creolisation, negotiation and co-existence in a transcultural world that was largely overwritten in Milang’s later, twentieth century, collective remembrance and construction of local ‘white settler’ identity.

Hilda and Dorothy had been children on the same football ground, barracking for their families and their teams during the 1910s. Australian (Rules) Football later played a major part in both their lives as mothers and grandmothers of talented players (among Hilda’s descendants, for example, there have been at least four prominent AFL players). Yet their lives met briefly, if only in story; and Dorothy’s life story was populated with silences and absences. It was only with the prompting of Hilda Wilson’s memories that the gaps in Dorothy Pavy’s remembering could be filled.

Having retrieved her experiences of cross-cultural football, my grandmother went on to recall a very early memory of ngowanthi or wurlies on the Lake, on the present site of the Milang Caravan Park, stretching across the foreshore to Lake Plains where her family had previously farmed. Late nineteenth century drawings and photographs record these Indigenous homes and their Ngarrindjeri occupants, but little written documentation exists of domestic inter-personal relations
between the families, estimated to comprise around 200 people (taped interview, Burgess c1980), and the very recently arrived European townspeople, the *kringkari*, who ‘shared’ Milang from the late 1840s to at least the mid 1910s.

In Dorothy’s memories, the wurlies had ‘vanished’ by the late 1910s, but Hilda Wilson’s oral history provides names, faces and voices to at least one of the families in the wurlies: those of her great-grandparents Ellen Sumner and John Rankine and their children William, George, Abel, James, Henry and Rose Rankine. Theirs is a rich family story that stretches forward from Ellen Sumner to descendants, who now assert themselves in contemporary Australian society, for instance, the AFL football players Michael O’Loughlin and Adam Goodes.

Ellen Sumner, songster, law-woman, midwife and important cultural broker, gave birth to four of her children beside the lake, where Dorothy remembered the wurlies to be, among them Hilda’s grandfather William Rankine. Like their countryman David Unaipon, the Rankines were bi-cultural and politically active, as were many other women and men of this generation. Largely through self-education, they eloquently deployed the language of power to protest against the injustices of dispossession and the escalating imposition of white regulatory systems on Indigenous lives. William Rankine, for instance, fought against the removal of children and the introduction of the *Aborigines (Training of Children) Act*, SA (*The Register* December 21, 1923).

My grandmother’s story is full of silences; her very sense of self is deeply positioned within the collective forgetting of a settler colonial framework in which Ngarrindjeri are rendered absent from the present and recent past, an acute example of the ‘cult of disremembering’ that W. E. H Stanner identifies as the ‘great Australian silence’ (2009, 182).

Part of the problem for white women from my grandmother’s generation in speaking about alternative experiences is that they often lacked what historian Penny Summerfield identifies as an external ‘framework of composure’; access to a larger narrative that indexed and validated personal events that might diverge from the gridlock of national and patriarchal history (Summerfield 2007). When Dorothy’s voice and silences are placed in dialogue with Hilda’s, however, it is quite surprising how many of their experiences intersect. When stories are put back into place we begin to experience a different framework of understanding and composure, and a new cross cultural-history emerges through the practice of re-*placing* narratives and suturing together segregated stories. This suturing reconnects land, body and story, and prepares the possibility of allowing wounds to begin to heal.
Thelma Patterson: Teddy’s little girl

Not all white women’s experiences and patterns of remembering were like those of my grandmother. Thelma Paterson, born in 1906 at Point Sturt, and Ruth Rayney, born in 1901 at Wellington, exhibited a much more engaged biculturalism, which can possibly be attributed to their individual agency and to the timing of their births in relation to the moment of Federation.

After the football matches it was Thelma Paterson (nee Jolly) who would dance with the Ngarrindjeri players. Thelma Paterson, Milang’s oldest resident, was born almost three years earlier than my grandmother and spent most of her life beside the Lake. Unlike Dorothy, Thelma had consciously staked out a narrative territory divergent from the settler meta-narrative. Her story is woven with rich cross-cultural strands that traced their origins to the Lake’s early colonial past. Her story is significant for the moment of rupture it contains that allowed an other-voicedness, which enabled her to step outside the prescribed boundaries of coloniser and colonised. Central to this alternative understanding was her account of an event from 1907, when she was cared for by a Ngarrindjeri man, Edward Gibson, in a family emergency and became ‘Teddy’s little girl’. This was a story Thelma had not often recounted, possibly because among her peers she had not always had a receptive audience to share it with or, indeed, because those who would remember its protagonists had gone. It remained vivid and active in her memory, although she was only eighteen months old when it occurred, and much of it is remembered from stories told by her parents whose experiences were shaped by the Lake’s history in colonial times. Thelma told me:

There was one old chap, Teddy Gibson. He was a colt breaker. He done a lot of colt breaking for old Mr Burgess who had the butcher shop. I knew Teddy, I thought he was lovely. Although he was black he was beautiful to me. He was a lovely old man. He used to come over to our place quite a bit when we lived at Point Sturt. [He lived] down on the Lake shore towards the end of the point. It was more towards the Hindmarsh Island side, on the water’s edge.

Old Teddy was on his own, a bachelor. He just lived on wildlife. He looked after himself. He had a tent. He was a bonza old fella. He was really a genuine man. If he got a goose or geese in those times he’d bring it over to granny and she’d cook the goose, and he’d come over and have his dinner with us because he’d brought this goose over.

My cousin [Ted Stewart] lived with us and one night he wanted to have a drink of water. Granny went under the pillow to get the matches to light the candle. There was a snake under there and he bit her on the finger. Dad went over and got Mr. Pearce, he got a bootlace,
and he tied it tight so the poison wouldn’t get further and he got his razor and cut it. Dad had to drive a horse and cart up to Strath to Dr. Schon. Teddy looked after me from 8 o’clock in the morning till they got home at night.

Mum said to Teddy, ‘Now you’ll give her breakfast, won’t you?’

‘Yes I will Beatie’, he said.

He got Ted my cousin off to school and then he took me around his rabbit traps in a bag on his back. Like an onion bag, it was. Mum said I was a real little piccaninny.

He was a great old fella. He used to often come over and Mum had him for a meal. And then when we came up here to Milang, he used to call me ‘Teddy’s little girl’. I used to be Teddy’s little girl. He’d stand there on top of the hill where Joan [Williams] lives, and it was all sand, and he’d get a big orange and he’d roll it down to me. And I’d go up to meet him. I thought the world of old Ted. I can remember him all right. He’s buried up there in the cemetery, out the back part. (Personal communication Thelma Paterson 2000)

Thelma’s depiction of her family’s warm relationship with Ted Gibson celebrates reciprocity and a kind of kinship in a bi-cultural domain where social exchange and relationality disrupt the self-other binary. This is simultaneously contested, however, by its framing with the qualifying disclaimers: ‘although he was black he was beautiful to me’; ‘but he was black’, which imply an external social context and an audience for whom the confluence of black and beautiful is not normative, and in which Gibson is deemed exceptional. Such slippage expresses the tension between the lived reality of domestic space and the public ‘double cultural zone’ Thelma occupies as a white woman. For Thelma portrays Gibson as not other but self, inside her extended family network, as a valued part of its sociality and economy. He shares the family dinner table, to which he also contributes resources such as geese and swans. While game is traded for a cooked meal, friendship and conviviality are sutured. Indeed, Gibson’s granddaughter Marj Koolmatrie spoke about similar practices of sharing being a part of community life at Raukkan during her childhood a decade later (Brodie 2002, 22).

During a crisis, Thelma’s parents entrust their children to him, rather than to the Pearce family, the property owners who lived nearby. Through this association Ted Gibson appears to have incorporated Thelma (‘Teddy’s little girl’) within an Indigenous kinship system, as an adopted or classificatory granddaughter. This provided her with an expanded and revised sense of identity and belonging, something she held dear throughout her life. The concept is reflected, perhaps more ambiguously, in her mother’s description of her as ‘a real little piccaninny’. Thelma’s incorporation
in an Aboriginal extended family provided her with a formalised cross-cultural conduit and a promise of bi-culturality. Unfortunately, the social forces of the early-Federation period, with its emphasis on white Australia, suppressed such possibilities. It is possible, however, to vividly, if fleetingly, glimpse from Thelma’s account an everyday domestic practice of bi-culturality as normative in the domestic sphere of her early childhood, and as an uncommon but not unique experience of frontier life. This is further demonstrated in Ruth Rayney’s story.

**Ruth Rayney**

Ruth Rayney (later Heathcock) was born on January 12, 1901, eleven days after Federation. Throughout much of her long life, which covered most of the twentieth century, she actively resisted policies legislated ‘on behalf’ of Aboriginal people. As a nurse and policeman’s wife in Arnhem Land in the 1930s Ruth instigated, with local Aboriginal women, a successful covert operation to treat Aboriginal people afflicted with leprosy in defiance of repressive public health policy (Hughes 2005; 2010b). Her story demonstrates a radical, engaged border-crossing and deeper cross-cultural relationality than is revealed in the lives of Dorothy and Thelma. It adds a further more tightly woven layer to the larger narrative of settler-descended women at the cultural interface, as she was able to operate successfully in both cultures and enjoy an insider-knowledge within each.

Ruth was born and raised in Wellington, where the Murray River ‘urinates’ into Lake Alexandrina, a confluence significant to four large clan groups of the Ngarrindjeri. Wellington had a large Ngarrindjeri population before and after colonisation and a sub-protectorate was established there between 1842 and 1862, with Scottish-born policeman George Ezekiel Mason appointed as sub-protector. Mason spoke of the intelligence and humanity of the Ngarrindjeri and his protectorate was characterised by ‘laxity’ and lack of missionary-style intervention in the lives of the Wellington Ngarrindjeri with whom he lived (Jenkin 1979, 86-94).

Empathetic with the Ngarrindjeri, Mason formed a substantial relationship with the respected and accomplished Ngarrindjeri woman Louisa Karpany, while both remained married to others. Karpany and Mason had two children, George Karpany and Margaret Mack (better known as Pinkie because of her fair skin) whose descendants now form a large Ngarrindjeri dynasty. Between 1846 and 1854 Mason fathered two daughters both named Margaret, one white and one black, and Wellington’s history was, from its inception, one of double vision, cultural crossings, mixed heritages, blurred boundaries (Hughes 2010b). This creolisation persisted into the mid-
twentieth century when many Ngarrindjeri, including Mason and Karpany’s children, continued to live on the Karpany clan estate of Marrunggung, East Wellington.

It was this cultural context into which Ruth was born. The modest Rayney household was next to the Marrunggung community, and Ruth attended primary school with children of Ngarrindjeri families who had left the segregation of Point McLeay Mission in the late 1880s, after a concerted fight to ‘reclaim’ and farm portions of land close to their clan estates. Her experiences of biculturality as normative contradicted the silencing of Aboriginal presence and history at a national and constitutional level. She told me:

I went to school with Aboriginal children. Skin colour? It was all the same to me. I didn’t even know it existed. I’d grown up as a child amongst natives. (Hughes 1986)

The waters and landscape, including the built environment of Ruth’s childhood, was one in which recent European transformations were modified by Ngarrindjeri innovation. What some might perceive as ‘settler’ cultural spaces and social formations were in fact creolised. William McHughes (a close relation to Louisa Karpany), for example, constructed the local limestone Anglican chapel at East Wellington (on his own initiative and without payment) where Ruth’s family worshipped, as well as many other buildings in the district. The active and visible role Wellington Ngarrindjeri took in co-shaping the town in multiple ways attests to a negotiated history that speaks less of dispossession than of subsequent resistance and repossession, in which the ellipsis of margin and centre as the nineteenth century turned was fluid and dynamic.

The Ngarrindjeri of Ruth’s childhood were not marginalised in fringe camps, as at Milang and other places, or merely ‘passive’ victims of European dispossession (as my grandmother may have perceived), but strong, exceptionally dynamic people who re-negotiated, de-centered, and decolonised power, through the productivity of their cultural practice and lived experiences.

The connective waters of Lake Alexandrina suggest that this is more a shared social space than a liminal one; a creolised history than a segregated one. If we investigate the intersections of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women’s experiences (in conjunction with those of their men), a rich and diverse field of productive exchange is revealed which offers hints and revelations that defy the logic of the colonial paradigm. These challenge and extend our understanding of cross-cultural relationships beyond the assumptions dominant in Australian society and official histories.

Together the women’s stories imagine rich intersubjectivities and the potentiality of encounter, in the ‘unpicking of imperial histories’. Without an understanding of the interwoven
threads of the past and what has shaped continuities and discontinuities through time, further
genealogies of silence are created and there can be no cross-cultural future. Women’s stories,
however, can reclaim ‘the past’, bringing past and present into dialogue, articulating what has
formerly been suppressed and hidden. The reclamation of ‘hidden histories’ provides strategies for
negotiating a future that undermines the colonial hegemony, contributes to a sense of well-being for
the Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors alike, and disrupts fundamentally the triumphal narrative
of ‘white Australia’ and the power of forgetting.

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