MIXED METAPHORS: OTHER MOTHERS, DANGEROUS DAUGHTERS AND THE RHETORIC OF CHILD REMOVAL IN BURMA, AUSTRALIA AND INDOCHINA

PENNY EDWARDS

In 1927, in Alice Springs, Australia, a Police Sergeant named Robert Stott penned the following assessment of 'the half-caste female', a term he applied to the daughters of white fathers and Aboriginal mothers: [She] is more lustful than her full-blooded sister. This does not in any manner apply to the Male Half-Caste. Stott's damning portrait was written in the confidential world of police communiqués. Two years later, in the French Colonial Protectorate of Cochinchina (now southern Vietnam), the British playwright and performer Noël Coward whiled away the hours in a 'pleasant little café and brothel combined' in Saigon during his first grand tour of Asia. On his return to London, in December 1929, Coward turned his memories to music in what he described as a 'reasonably successful' song, Half-Caste Woman.

The opening verse conveys the gist:

Laugh a bit, drink a bit, love a bit more
You can supply our need.
Chaff a bit, sink a bit, what's it all for?
That's your Eurasian creed
Half-caste woman, living a life apart, where did your story begin?
Half-caste woman, have you a secret heart, waiting for someone to win?
Were you born of some queer magic, in your shimmering gown?
Is there something strange and tragic, deep, deep down?
Go to bed in daylight, try to sleep in vain
Get up in the evening, work begins again,
Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor Richman Poorman Beggarman Thief...

Stott's impressions were written for private record in the Northern Territory, and Coward's for public consumption in the Metropole. Across the oceans, in British Burma, an aspiring writer in the Indian Imperial Police was making his own mental notes about women of mixed descent, for future publication. Published in 1934, George Orwell's Burmese Days bridged the worlds of colonial police experience and Vaudeville theatricality in its depiction of an outpost of empire in its dying days. The atmosphere of moral

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1 Research for this paper was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. I would like to thank Vicki Grieve, Hannah McGlade and Kaye Price for their comments on my ABC research proposal as circulated to them in 2002, which contains key arguments contained in this essay. I apologise at the outset for any offense caused to readers by the derogatory language contained in some sources cited in this paper.

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2 AA CRS A1 27/1106, Stott to McLaren, 6 January 1927.

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whites in a majority situation and led to separations on a colossal scale. But no statistic can communicate personal grief. In all three domains, the separation of mothers from their children against their will, wreaked incalculable emotional damage on individuals and families, and had broader cultural ramifications for the transmission and safeguarding of indigenous languages and living practices.

Colonialism’s Colour Barriers: Keeping White Minorities White

For Portugal, France and Britain, India was the first site of sustained sexual and marital contact between Europeans and Asians and, from the sixteenth until the early nineteenth centuries, such liaisons, cohabitations and the upbringing of children were not only tolerated but encouraged as a social norm, leading one observer to conclude, in 1813, that ‘a third of the [European] people in this country are either married to this race or have children grown up by Hindoo stanee women’. Mid-nineteenth century Britain had prided itself on what one commentator described as its ‘mongrel half-breed race’. In France, prior to the massive consolidation and imperial expansion of the late nineteenth century, the notions of race, nation, culture and civilisation were flexible, porous, and overlapping. But both countries displayed fears of mixed race populations as either dangerous to the putative ‘nation’ or politically threatening to the state.

Fears of ‘the métis’ as a potential destroyer of colonialism dated to at least 1802, when one leading colonist warned that ‘the mixing of Races’ could alter and dissolve not only individuals and families but entire ‘Nations’. Twelve years later, another French commentator blamed ‘women of colour’ for destroying ‘the gains of white nations who receive them’ and altering ‘the physique of these nations’. These views laid fertile ground for later reactionary intellectuals who refracted their readings of early imperial history onto Indochina. Among them was the novelist and Indochina-watcher Claude Farrère, who blamed the fall of Portugal’s sixteenth century empire in India on two evils: miscegenation and the Inquisition. Accepted alliances between ‘men of Europe’ and ‘women of Asia’, Farrère argued, were particularly ‘deplorable’ in India, where ‘an inferior species emerged, the Eurasians, who have kept to

7 Peyroux de la Coudrenière Mémoire sur les sept espèces d’hommes et sur les causes des altérations de ces espèces, Paris, 1814, pp. 45-46; see Darcy G. Grigsby: ‘Whose colour was not black or white nor grey. But an extraneous mixture, which no pen can trace, although perhaps the pencil may: Aapsie and Delacroix’s Massacres of Chios’, Art History December 1999, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 676-704.
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about the ‘decline’ or ‘vanishing’ of the Burmese race. In settler colonies, such theories lent an aura of destiny to the brutal liquidation of indigenous peoples. Assertions that the Aborigines were a ‘dying race’ billed Europeans as God’s messengers sent to ‘smooth [their] pillow’. This metaphor was redolent of the visual rhetoric of European romanticism and late Victorian pre-Raphaelite art, and resonated with the cherubic, white-faced heavens depicted on European frescoes in such missions as the New Norcia monastery in Western Australia.

These much mooted theories about racial vanishings allowed European intellectuals, administrators, and settlers to project their own hushed or unspoken fears of being swamped, eradiated, and extinguished as a race by the non-European, indigenous majority. The resultant siege mentality fostered an obsession with erecting cultural barriers and racial boundaries, and the notion of miscegenation as both a sexual and cultural enterprise infused statements on a range of subjects from bodies to buildings, such as one French traveller’s condemnation of British Indian architecture as a ‘fornication’ of styles comparable to the progency of prostitutes.12 This obsession with keeping the other ‘other’, was deeply intertwined with physiological notions of whiteness and non-whiteness.

In Burma and Cambodia, each with minority white populations, the butressing of cultural and racial insularity through assertions of white difference was a vital mainstay of sustained domination and subjugation of the indigenous populations. For the most part, whiteness was maintained in urban enclaves, where it was placed in isolation and nurtured like a sick plant capable of withering under the influence of the climate, or through contact with indigenous peoples, at any given moment. Where town-planners sculpted colour barriers into the landscape through the establishment of French Quarters or British clubs that literally fenced off the other through brick and mortar, individuals sustained their sense of difference through a more subtle set of practices centred on the body.13 The colonial obsession with whiteness, so brilliantly caricatured by the French novelist Marguerite Duras in her portraits of colonial life in Indochina, became enconced in an elaborate dress code regulated by civil service rules on uniform. Appropriate dress through the maintenance of proper ‘whites’ was one way of preventing oneself from ‘going native’, as was fastidiousness in such scenarios as dining in the middle of the bush with a starched white linen tablecloth, the shielding of one’s skin from

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sunlight through solar topics (pith sun helmets) and white gloves, which one French colonial encyclopedia recommended as a good means of preventing contact with ‘the natives’. Whiteness, the traditional colour of mourning in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma, was to be maintained through a whole panoply of materials, from hats to shade the face, long sleeved and long-skirted dresses of muslin and other white materials which at once pronounced whiteness and protected ‘fair complexion’.14

In Australia and other settler societies, by contrast, as white populations increased in numbers and spread over increasing swathes of territory, blackness became something to be quarantined in enclaves, cordoned off and set at a third remove. Policing and securing such racial frontiers were critical to the formation of a ‘new’ and ‘enlightened’ nation at Federation, a celebration of Anglo-Celtic cultural ideals that was to be forged in opposition to the ‘savage’ anterior world of ‘the Aborigines’.

In all three colonial domains, the existence of mixed race populations threatened to undermine such simplistic formulations and so, potentially, to unravel white domination. This threat was compounded by notions held, at least in some European quarters, that Asian races were ‘unassimilable’, and that this conjoining would result in the gradual absorption of the ‘French’ race by the Vietnamese’, for example. Travelling through Cochinchina in 1901, the writer Pierre Loti wondered if the French troops he saw would ‘leave some métis behind them, who will slowly infiltrate French blood into this unassimilable yellow race’.15 Various terms ‘Half-Caste’, ‘Eurasian’, ‘Anglo-Indian’, and ‘Anglo-Burman’ in Australia and British India, or métisse, Franco-Cambodgienne and Franco-Annamite in Indochina, the progeny of European settlers and the colonized represented a problematic category who challenged the crystalline boundaries and purported civilizational hierarchy of ‘English’, ‘French’, ‘Burmese’, ‘Cambodian’ and ‘Aboriginal’ races and cultures.

One of many intra-colonial imports, the derogatory term Half-Caste originated in British India in the late eighteenth century. Coined to describe people of mixed European and Indian origin, it became widely used in Australia, its passage probably facilitated by the cross-posting of a number of administrators from India to the Australian Colonies. Its French equivalent, métisse (for females) or métis (for males), first coined in the seventeenth century to describe the children of Portuguese and Indians, denotes a greater sense of fluidity. Although it carries a softer connotation of mixing rather than of loss, in time with prevailing bourgeois and official attitudes on mixed-race, the term took on a derisive inflection.16 By the first decades of the twentieth century, both terms, when invoked in the feminine, conjured a figure of moral laxity, lasciviousness, deviousness, teachery, racial instability and political infidelity. Invoked in policy statute, census, colonial Vaudeville, pulp fiction and higher literature, this figure functioned as a repository of white racial psychoses: she was the dark ‘vixen’ to the white ‘virgin’.

But the perceived immorality and inferiority of the ‘Half-Caste’ were not seen as simply biological traits. In the European enclaves of Australia, Cambodia and Burma, it was widely believed that gender and culture – maternal influence and the malignancy of indigenous milieu – helped shape the ‘horror’ of the ‘hybrid’. Such perceptions, and their pseudo-scientific justifications in the emerging body of eugenics, formed the root of policies of segregated education and maternal separation for mixed-race children.17

In her recent book Broken Circles, Anna Haebich has highlighted the plural dimensions of the stereotype of the ‘half-caste’.18 While it is true that official discourses, news media, missionary literature and fictional portraits occasionally depicted the child of mixed descent in a positive light, what was deemed ‘positive’ in most such depictions was the white inheritance or the other element in the mix that diluted the ‘Aboriginal’.19 As Aboriginal artist Djon Mundine recently wrote, ‘For the “other” a mixture is always a diatonic, a loss, and a person between two worlds and never belonging to either.’20

The forced removal of part-Aboriginal children from their homes was not aimed at the elimination of the ‘Aboriginal race’ – it was assumed in the Darwinian discourse that ‘fullblood’ populations would eventually perish – but at the eradication of a ‘Half-Caste race’, often characterised as a ‘sinister third race’, through its whitening and enlightening. From the 1880s onwards, the reports of Australian colonial officials increasingly evinced the belief that the part-Aboriginal had inherited the ‘worst of both races.’ Typed by the pronouncement by anthropologist Daisy Bates – ‘the only good half-caste is a dead one’ – ideas linking interracial marriage with racial contamination began to spread in Western Australia from the 1900s, and triggered increasing hostility towards people of Aboriginal and European descent. 21 West Australia’s growing ‘Half-Caste’ population was a priority concern of the Calcutta-born Prinsep, a son of the British Indian empire. Appointed West

17 For a meticulously researched and nuanced reading of individual cases of mixed-race relations in late nineteenth century Cambodia, see Gregor Muller ‘Visions of Grandeur, Tales of Failure: The Establishment of French Colonial Rule in Cambodia and the Life Story of Thomas Carman 1840 – 1877’ (Doctoral dissertation, University of Zurich, 2002).
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Australia’s first Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1905, Prinsep campaigned for, inter alia, prohibitions on sexual contact between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men and acquired the power to send children of mixed descent to missions. Prinsep’s concerns were later championed, and powers expanded, by Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia Anleron Octavian Neville (1915–1940), more recently known as the chief British protagonist in Philip Noyce’s film Rabbit-Proof Fence.

In French Indochina and British India, parallel prejudices were rife. From 1870 to 1910, the colonial governments of Burma and Cambodia issued several circulars prohibiting European officials from conjugal liaisons with native women. When such warnings did little to stem the expansion of a mixed-race population, lobbyists seized upon education and segregation as the key to eradicating this social evil. The cultural politics of miscegenation and race legislation revolved around interpretations of race as a cultural commodity, and in particular the primacy of milieu (social and cultural environment) as a crucible of ‘race’ and national character. In documenting what she terms the ‘politics of abandonment’ in early twenty century French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, Stoler has demonstrated how the discourse of ‘abandonment’ centred almost exclusively on the mother, rarely the European father, and referred to not an act of physical abandonment but to the exercise of maternal choice to raise the mixed-race child within Indigenous milieu. By assuming responsibility for the care of her child, refusing to hand it over to a missionary or state institution, and thus denying it a European upbringing, Indigenous mothers in colonial Southeast Asia were accused of ‘abandonment’. Cultural concerns were paramount. The juxtaposition of two races and cultures in one being or style of living subverted the notion that white and non-white existed on two separate civilisational planes. Colonial bureaucrats interpreted such unions not as a levelling of cultures but the ‘dragging down’ of European values. The universal policy response was to recommend the ‘uplift’ of the half-caste. But notions of the primacy of cultural milieu as a crucible of race were not unique to colonized Southeast Asia.

The Aboriginal Protection Act of 1886 classified Half-Castes living with Aborigines as Aboriginal Natives. From 1905, legislation towards Aborigines in West Australia assigned racial classification to ‘Half-Castes’ not on the basis of biological origin but on the basis of domicile. ‘Half-Castes’ dwelling in Aboriginal communities were automatically categorised as Aboriginal. Those few who lived as ‘Europeans’ and frequented white society and were conversant with European culture were categorised as ‘European.’ Similarly,

‘Half-Castes’ who associated with Aboriginal natives were affected by a broad range of discriminating legislation.23

The Other Women: Colonial Stereotypes of Indigenous Mothers

As Doreen Mellor and Anna Haebich have stressed, mother’s love and the mother figure were of central importance to those directly affected by child removal policies in Australia. ‘The ironic counterpart to this longing,’ Mellor and Haebich continue, ‘was that it was often an unknown and disengaged white paternal heritage that had determined their fate, both within their family and at a broader policy level.’24 Colonial gender ideology was a major determinant of such policies and practices. The colonial discourse of abandonment centred on assumptions about the inherent unsuitability of Indigenous women as mothers; their lack of the ‘refined,’ ‘maternal’ instincts or domestic training of European women; and the presumed ‘immorality’ of the indigenous mother which had led to her consorting with the European father in the first place.

In British India, French Indochina and Australia, gender-specific constructions projected the native mother as maternally lacking and sexually voracious.25 In all three domains, a thriving literature and rich mythology projected children of part descent as the composite of all the vices and none of the virtues of native and white ‘races.’ As the potential carrier of further mixed-vice children, the heir of her native mother’s maternal lack, and the transmitter of cultural and colour contagion, it was the female of part descent who was most feared and reviled, leading to the colonial caricature of the ‘Half-Caste Woman’ or ‘Métisse’.

Underpinning the homogeneity and longevity of this trans-colonial motif were pan-European, middle-class paradigms of gender and notions of a woman’s proper place as the biological reproducer of her race and the primary transmitter of ‘national’ character and culture to her children. It became commonly accepted in European official circles and elite white society, in Australia as in Cambodia and Burma, that the abandonment of Half-Caste offspring was the result of Indigenous maternal neglect, as opposed to European paternal rejection. Such stereotypes, and in particular the colonial construction of ‘the Indigenous women’ as maternally lacking, found useful political currency in exonerating European males from their paternal and moral responsibility for the upkeep of their children.

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The fact of colonial stature and the fiction of colonial literature were mutually reinforcing. The mothers of these ‘Eurasian tarts,’ as one of Orwell’s characters describes them, are Burmese women who are depicted as ‘passive,’ feline, doll-like, childish, sexually promiscuous, the sites for realization of a white-man’s ‘boyish pleasures’. Empty of emotion, they are drawn to liaisons with white men either by sexual lust or financial greed. The offspring of such unions, ‘the Eurasian girl,’ is characterised in the figure of Rosa McFee, whom Orwell’s chief white protagonist, Flory, had seduced and dumped. Another, vehemently racist character, Ellis, castigates a fellow club-member for ‘running after Eurasian tarts,’ in particular ‘some smelly little bitch called Molly Pereira’. These passing references to Eurasian tarts and their correlation with ‘the dirty black brutes’ by which Ellis refers to the Burmese, provide a literary foil for the pure, white, virginal figure of Elizabeth, an English woman holidaying in Burma, who figures in Flory’s imagination as a potential spouse and soul-mate. The disparity between Elizabeth’s whiteness and the colonised’s dark, dirty, and backward world is given further emphasis by her own reaction to two Eurasians in the market.

[Elizabeth:] ‘Such extraordinary creatures!... One of them looks almost white. Surely he isn’t an Englishman?’

[Flory:] ‘No — they’re Eurasians — sons of white fathers and native mothers. Yellow-bellies is our friendly nickname for them.’... 

[Elizabeth:] ‘They looked awfully degenerate types, didn’t they? So thin and weak and cringing; and they haven’t got at all honest faces. I suppose these Eurasians are very degenerate? I’ve heard that half-castes always inherit what’s worst in both races. Is that true?’

[Flory:] ‘I don’t know that it’s true. Most Eurasians aren’t very good specimens, and it’s hard to see how they could be, with their upbringing. But our attitude towards them is rather beastly...we’re responsible for their existence.’

[Elizabeth:] ‘But after all, you aren’t responsible. I mean, only a very low kind of man would — er — have anything to do with native women, wouldn’t he?’

The saliency of these assumptions in French Indochina is reflected in a lesser-known work, published the same year as Burmese Days. In his novel, *Sous le soleil des bondes* (Under the sun of the monks), R. Dorssene declared that ‘Native women — however charming the little Cambodian dolls might be — can never replace mistresses of our race...in tenderness or pure sentiments’ and based an entire story around the sincerity and true paternal love of a French man for his *métis* daughter, and the daughter’s fickle nature and shallowness. That shallowness is reflected in her own passionate affair with another ‘insignificant métis’, ‘boastful and pretentious, the son of a French business man of modest means, established in Phnom Penh, and an old Cambodian with short hair.’ The identification of even such minor details — the short hair of the Cambodian mother, a traditional coiffure routinely castigated as un feminine — points to some essential lack on the part of the native mother. Linking the character flaws between the French man’s daughter and her mixed-race suitor is their descent from ‘mothers of an identical race.’

Not only the indigenous mother, but also her mixed-race children were seen in gendered as well as racial terms. For obvious demographic reasons related to the earlier mentioned male-dominated gender imbalance of nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial populations in all three countries under review, most mixed-race children were the offspring of European father and indigenous mother. As such, they were seen as heirs to all the perceived moral and character ‘flaws’ of the indigenous female and none of the purported finer feelings of the European female. The effect was compounded in the *métis*, or mixed-race girl, who was presumed destined to perform to the stereotype of the morally lax indigenous mother.

As the 1897 Statutes of the Cambodian Society for the Protection of Abandoned Children put it, ‘the mother’s example of debauchery, sloth and immorality’ would turn the girls to ‘prostitution.’ These views changed little in the next two decades. In 1913, M. Ch. Graveille, director of the Bank of Indochina, and founder of the Cambodian Society for the Protection of Abandoned Métis, maintained that the ‘half-whites’ (demis-blancs), the children of French fathers and Asian mothers, impose a double philanthropic and political duty on European administrators and colonists. Graveille, who was himself married to a Cambodian woman, argued that if left to their mother’s care, the ‘mètis’ returned to the family and social milieu of women who ‘are, and remain, fatally, the decimated and declassified. Their usual fate is to have several white ‘husbands’, to lead — the most fortunate among them — to the end of their youth, to some more definitive union with an interpreter who is flattered and seduced by their slightly Frenchified elegance and manners. But what happens, in all of this, to the child, boy or girl...? ... One rushes to blame the fathers, in most cases. For my part, I find the fathers have more excuses.’ Such views of maternal lack resonated with the text of policy documents, colonial literature and official correspondence in British Burma, where mixed-race girls were singled out as ‘brazen hussies’ and seen as particularly needy targets of moral education. Some commentators, such as the Australian G. E. Morrison, visiting Burma in the 1890s, constructed a hierarchy of ‘half-castes’, asserting that ‘the best half-caste in the East is, of course, the Eurasian of

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25 Orwell, G., *Burmese Days*, Harper Brothers, New York, 1934, pp. 53-54, 72. By contrast, the established British colonial wife, epitomised by Mrs Lackerstein, is ‘scandalmongering’ ‘yellow and thin,’ a nagging presence who spies on her husband, and ‘lives twenty years in the country without learning a word of the language’.


British parentage,’ a fact he attributed to the ‘physically powerful, courageous, energetic and enterprising’ English fathers.33

In Australia, parallel scorn was directed at Aboriginal mothers. ‘The mother being the black parent’ of the ‘half-castes’, asserted Natalie Robarts, author of The Victorian Aborigine as he is (1913), ‘the moral tendencies lean towards the native’. What was not inherited was inculcated, as ‘the child, being brought up among an indolent, lazy people, contracts these habits’.34 Similarly, official opinions diagnosed Aboriginal women with an ‘inborn inclination to prostitution’. This view in turn fostered another common calumny—that Aboriginal mothers cared much less about their children than non-Aboriginal mothers.35

Unsurprisingly, this official ideological discourse clashed with observations by philanthropists, activists, and by the victims of such policies, whose life narratives often cast not themselves—but their mothers—as the abandoned party. As Anglo-Burman Maureen Baird-Murray (1933–2000), removed from her mother’s care to a Catholic convent against her and her mothers’ wishes on her father’s orders at age five, recalls: ‘Rightly or wrongly, I have always felt that my [Burmese] mother was deprived of her two children and finally abandoned. Dying so young (she was not quite thirty) hers was a sad, short life.’36 In the early 1940s, when Japan invaded Burma, a teenage Anglo-Burman named Colin McPhedran and his mother and siblings joined tens of thousands of evacuees in a march to India across treacherous terrain. His mother died en route. But with the war not intervened, he later reflected, separation would have likely been enforced by his father through a gradual breaking of ties in which ‘boarding school in Rangoon might have been simply the first step in a deliberate plan to remove us altogether from our mother’s Burmese influence’. ‘[B]oarding school in England’ was the fate of many Anglo-Burmese children, who were sent ‘home’ against the wishes of their heartbroken Burmese mothers.37 One such mother was Daw Tee Tee, the wife of the British scholar Gordon Harrington Luce, who felt a vast emptiness in her own life after leaving her two children, aged nine and ten, in Britain for their boarding school education, her concerns doubtless compounded by the humiliation of her children’s rejection by the first school they approached due to their mixed descent.38 Daw Tee Tee filled this emptiness in her life by

38 National Library of Australia, MS 6574, Box 1. Manuscripts of Gordon Harrington Luce, Letter from G. H. Luce to his sister Ethel, August 27 1926. The headmaster at Harpenden, wrote Luce, admitted the children pending reference to the Governing Body which, being

establishing a home for disadvantaged Burmese boys, whom she taught to call her not Director, Matron or Headmistress but ‘Mother’.39

Not all Europeans exonerated fathers. A number of journalists, activists and philanthropists were quick to point to the responsibility of European fathers for acts of abandonment, and some emphasized the presence of willign mothers, relatives and the benefits of remaining in immediate or extended family environments within Indigenous society. Writing in 1906, the respected colonial commentator Jean Ajalbert pointed to ‘the birth of thousands of children, often abandoned – by force of circumstance, by soldier-fathers, by civil servants who gain promotions, get new postings, are repatriated, or dead...’40 The following year, A. Brou, President of the Society for the Protection of Métis in Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, stated categorically that ‘their Vietnamese mother is too attached to the [metis] child to abandon it... That there are abandoned métis is entirely due to French fathers.’ Australian writer, educator and activist Margaret Montgomery Bennett echoed these sentiments in the 1930s, stating ‘what Australia’s Aboriginal half-caste daughters need is their own mothers who love them, and their own homes among their own people.’41 The following decade, a church leader in Australia observed that ‘woman is always blamed’ when ‘trouble arises between a white man and a native woman’ but acknowledged that ‘When a child is born it is most difficult to get the white man to pay anything towards the upkeep of his half-white offspring.’42

Despite such recognition of white paternal responsibility, theories abounded that, if children of part descent were not removed early enough from their mothers, they might, as one Australian official pontificated, ‘imibe the characteristics of the gin’.43 This transmission of maternal immorality, presumably through the mother’s milk as well as her purported bad blood, enabled administrators and the general public to blame Indigenous mothers, daughters and morals when mixed-race girls returned from domestic service pregnant, and so to dismiss the idea of policy failure while simultaneously exonerating the white male. Where blame did fall in the male camp, it was generally directed towards the Asian Immigrant community. Trans-colonial stereotypes of Chinese and other ‘Asiatics’ as unscrupulous womanizers mostly Bishops and Captains, hold antediluvian views on racial matters or else saw possible objections from other parents and turned us down.’ The children were accepted by another school, Keswick. In the decade following their departure, their mother changed from a ‘giddy social figure’ into someone with very little energy, who would spend most of her time in her room, sewing and reading, or dealing with the accounts of the children Home. See MS 6574, Box 1, Luce to February 14, 1935.
42 The Future of the Aborigines of Australia, Presbyterian Church of Australia, Board of Missions, Aborigines Department (n.d.) p. 17.
43 Gin is a pejorative term for Aboriginal woman.
deflected attention from European sexual contacts with Indigenous populations.44

A key, common element to these discourses centred on the domicile, and on colonial or missionary visions of the nation, state, society or religious realm as a family unit. Partha Chatterjee has juxtaposed the private and public worlds or spheres, charting a contrast between the private, cultural world of the home of the colonized and the public spheres of engagement in the office, civil service, or law courts which required a direct traffic with western conceptions of the nation.45 But in many colonial regimes, such spaces were never sacred nor were they ever completely secure or partitioned from the state. Indeed, many homes were rudely broken. Wrestling children from their homes and mothers would ensure their incorporation into civilization and their ‘uplift’. The ideal domicile was not only ‘European’ in cultural outlook; it was also bourgeois in its nuclear dimensions. By the early twentieth century, the primacy of the nuclear family as the ideal unit of colonial living was well established. This acceptance of the nuclear family in official, philanthropic and missionary discourses in colonized Asia, Australia and metropolitan Europe, multiplied those familial arrangements or transactions that could be called ‘abandonment’ by white officers, and especially reinforced notions that it was not proper to leave one’s child in the care of extended families or broad kinship rings. In the name of such impropriety, administrators, missionaries and philanthropists wrested children from their cultural circles and moved them towards existences within, or as appendages to, nuclear families. In mission schools for girls, this family was headed by a God who was commonly conceived as a white-bearded, white male patriarch, and whose handmaidens - sisters, female teachers, nurses and nuns - often oversaw the obliteration of indigenous languages and the training of their charges in feminine pursuits.

‘Purifying’ girls of mixed descent: White Soap, Whitewash and White Lace

In British Burma and French Indochina, as in colonial and Federated Australia, official policies and practices focused not so much on passing mixed race children off as white – this was deemed an impossibility – but on facilitating their passage away from indigenous mothers and milieu, through their often enforced separation and institutionalization in missions, state homes, and boarding schools, so that they might pass through the various stages of ‘civilization’ and ‘uplift’ (or, in French, relevement) into what was only ever at best, through European eyes, a simulacrum of whiteness: in Homi Bhaba’s memorable phrase, a state of being almost the same, but not quite white. In French Indochina, British India and Burma, and the Dutch East Indies, constructions of whiteness entailed popular narratives of impasse: the impossibility of passing as white was reiterated in such terminology as the mètis, déclassé, Mischlingskinder, Half-Castes.

In her recent work on the children of Indonesian mothers and Dutch fathers, Pamela Pattynama has examined narratives of passing as white in the Dutch East Indies, where the ‘whiteness’ of white society was clouded by centuries of interracial contact and officially endorsed concubinage. As a consequence, Pattynama argues, many of the ‘almost white’ mixed-race people passed themselves off as white, by denying and disavowing their indigenous ancestry. Pattynama reads such attempts at entering a ‘white’ society as a form of masquerade, where what is masked is one’s mother. ‘Native mothers did exist, for her (Indo) children existed, children who made her into something else and obscured her, who remained silent and repudiated her, in accordance with the unwritten but relentless code of society.’46

In apparent contrast to this wilful repudiation, children of mixed race in French Indochina, British Burma and Australia were subject to an institutional grounding in ways to repudiate their mother. At its most brutal, as in Australia, this involved enforced separation and complete removal, a literal obscuring of the mother so that the child would be socialized to pass as white. The erasure of maternity from memory was a strategy endorsed by Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville as follows:

Many working half-caste girls having infants fathered by white men came to me to discuss the disposal of their children. When I explained to them that separation was inevitable for their children’s sake, most of them saw the matter as I did, and on giving them up made and kept a promise to them not to molest them in any way. I found that these children in their new surroundings had no difficulty picturing themselves as white children, and any picture of their mothers which they might have retained at first rapidly faded from their minds.47

Here, the mother becomes the focus of danger to her daughter and the state: she is vilified as a potential molester, while the state – as embodied by A.O. Neville, and in his title - is the protector. This is a reverse gender image of a common state of affairs, whereby molestations by white men rendered Aboriginal girls pregnant.

Where these policies were not executed or enforced by the state, as in Burma and Indochina, but were implemented by missionary and philanthropic societies, children were educated into whiteness, usually at the insistence of their father. This ‘re-education’ often involved long periods of separation, or absolute severance, from the mother, and the partial or full repudiation of the ‘mother tongue’ and indigenous cultures. What was learned instead was often the ‘father tongue’, and with it the notions of racial hierarchy that were, in the


Milked Metaphors

In early twentieth-century, deeply engrained in much European thinking, and reflected in a vision of Christendom and the Judeo-Christian ideal of charity, mistreatment of children was a normative practice. The mistreatment of children was not only common but also a means of social control. In many societies, the mistreatment of children was seen as a way to ensure obedience and compliance with social norms.

In the colonial context, the mistreatment of children was seen as a way to control and subjugate the colonized population. The mistreatment of children was often used as a punishment for disobedience or acts of resistance. The mistreatment of children was also seen as a way to ensure the subordination of the colonized population to the colonial administration.

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prostitution to European men, and the success of child welfare agencies such as the Vigilance Society, founded in 1912 to ‘eradicate prostitution and kindred evils’ and establishing a home for girls in need of protection.”  

In the 1920s, a British policewoman became Secretary of the Vigilance Society, and established a hostel which taught needlework and embroidery to its 43, mostly Anglo-Indian, inmates.

As an antidote to such presumed proclivities, education in European modes of ‘femininity’ and to European gender norms and expectations was deemed a necessity. Schooling in the ‘womanly’ arts of needlework, for such ‘female’ vocations as good wives and industrious house-maids, became a principal policy device for the moral ‘elevation’ of mixed-race girls in British Burma and French Indochina as in Western and Central Australia, where daily lessons in washing, ironing, sewing, and dressmaking were a feature of Australia’s earliest mission schools for ‘half-castes’, from 1913 onwards.

Such curricula were designed not only to keep the devil’s hands busy in Godly pursuits, but to furnish mixed-race girls with the skills to clean the houses of white people and to serve as the spouses of white men. Critical to Cecil Cook’s policy of ‘breeding out the colour’ was the preparation and training of the ‘female half-caste’ for service as a spouse, which in turn would allow ‘their absorption by mating into the white population’ and ensure her elevation to ‘a standard where the fact of her marriage to a white will not contribute to his deterioration. . . .’ As Peter Read puts it, ‘Cleanliness was salvation, purging the worthlessness of a black body’. Institutions that failed to provide sufficient domestic training were criticised for turning out ‘half-castes’ whose persistent character failings meant that they could not compare with ‘the ordinary white girl’. A similar regimen for indigenous and mixed-race girls existed in the Dutch East Indies, Cambodia and Burma, where state and missionary education impressed European norms of femininity, maternity and matrimony upon indigenous and mixed-race girls. Domestic service was also seen as a means of ironing out the licentiousness of such dangerous daughters. Even while

refuting the tendency of ‘thoughtless people’ and the Australian media to ‘damn coloured girls as voluptuous men hunters’ and a ‘potential danger to all men’, A.O. Neville stressed the need for the education of mixed-race girls in ‘sewing rooms, dairy or as domestic staff’.

But this was not all fine lines in elegant lacemaking. Taking the ‘indigenous’ out of the girl often involved attempts to break her spirit. Baird-Murray recalls her treatment as a young girl newly separated from her Burmese mother, by a Sister Seraphina who, ‘foaming at the mouth – possessed by some demonic force . . . made effective use of cane ruler and right hand’ and would hit her, throw her across the room, ‘sometimes making her temporarily deaf,’ for the crime of not speaking English. Here, indigenous mothers were doubly to blame: not only had they bequeathed their children a native tongue, but they had failed to discipline and punish. Such twisted logic made corporal punishment more than a necessity: it was a ‘gift’ which compensated for the lack of regimentation and discipline in Burmese families, as reflected in the lengthy lectures of Mrs Sybil Bulkeley, a spokeswoman for the Mother’s Union and co-founder of the National Council of Women in Burma (1926), who berated Burmese mothers in her audience on being too soft, emphasised the need to discipline and punish young children, and advised that ‘whipping is necessary for a very bad fault.’ Such vicious treatment, where the bodies of mixed race girls became the targets of pedagogical or religious wrath, was also common in Australia. ‘Flogging was everyday’, recalls Daisy Ruddock from Kahun Home, Darwin, remembering her time there aged 8, in 1924. Other forms of punishment included shaving girls’ hair and the whitewashing of faces.

In Australia, the forced removal of children from their mothers by law enforcement officers prompted further physical damage in the injuries that dispossessed Aboriginal mothers inflicted on themselves, beating their foreheads with stones and tusks in mourning rituals. Outside of such institutional projects, some white men took the policing of racial borders into their own hands, with tragic consequences. As Tex Camfo, born in circa 1922 of Aboriginal and Asian descent, later recalled ‘When my sister was born . . . some white men raided our camp and they killed my sister. They grabbed her by the leg and banging her up against the tree . . . In those days when there were half-caste, they used to kill us.

58 British Library NIOJRC MSS EURO D 12305 undated speech by Mrs. Bulkeley. See also MSS EUR D 11839 Burma Travel Notes compiled by Ethel How-Martyn during her visit to Burma, February 3-6 1936; news-cutting on Miss Nicole Jones, A Woman Police Inspector.
60 Austin, T., op cit., p. 242, ref. AA CRS A659 4/1 408, Cook to Weddell, 26 June 1933.
62 Austin, T., op cit., p. 82, Robert Stott to McLaren, 29 Oct 1926.
64 Neville, A.O., op cit., p. 130.
65 Baird-Murray, op cit.
66 British Library India Office Records Collection MSS Euro D 1230/5 “Address to be Translated into Burmese for the Mother’s gathering of St. Michael’s SPG Mission” September 29, 1926; Sybil Bulkeley “The Mother’s Union Maymyo Branch – a meeting of Thursday 9 October, St. Gabriels, address by Mrs. Bulkeley.
67 Austin, T., op cit.
Mixed Metaphor

The fact of colonial statute and the fiction of colonial literature were mutually reinforcing. The mothers of these ‘Eurasian tarts,’ as one of Orwell’s characters describes them, are Burmese women who are depicted as ‘passive’, feline, doll-like, childish, sexually promiscuous, the sites for realization of a white-man’s ‘boyish pleasures’. Empty of emotion, they are drawn to liaisons with white men either by sexual lust or financial greed. The offspring of such unions, ‘the Eurasian girl,’ is characterised in the figure of Rosa McPhee, whom Orwell’s chief white protagonist, Flory, had seduced and dumped. Another, vehemently racist character, Ellis, castigates a fellow club-member for ‘running after Eurasian tarts,’ in particular ‘some smelly little bitch called Molly Pereira’. These passing references to Eurasian tarts and their correlation with the ‘dirty black brutes’ by which Ellis refers to the Burmese, provide a literary foil for the pure, white, virginal figure of Elizabeth, an English woman holidaying in Burma, who figures in Flory’s imagination as a potential spouse and soul-mate. The disparity between Elizabeth’s whiteness and the colonised’s dark, dirty, and backward world is given further emphasis by her own reaction to two Eurasians in the market.

[Elizabeth:] ‘Such extraordinary creatures! ... One of them looks almost white. Surely he isn’t an Englishman?’

[Flory:] ‘No – they’re Eurasians – sons of white fathers and native mothers. Yellow-bellies is our friendly nickname for them...’

[Elizabeth:] ‘They looked awfully degenerate types, didn’t they? So thin and weakly and cringing; and they haven’t got at all honest faces. I suppose these Eurasians are very degenerate? I’ve heard that half-castes always inherit what’s worst in both races. Is that true?’

[Flory:] ‘I don’t know that it’s true. Most Eurasians aren’t very good specimens, and it’s hard to see how they could be, with their upbringing. But our attitude towards them is rather beastly... we’re responsible for their existence.’

[Elizabeth:] ‘But after all, you aren’t responsible. I mean, only a very low kind of man would – or have anything to do with native women, wouldn’t he?’

The saliency of these assumptions in French Indochina is reflected in a lesser-known work, published the same year as Burmese Days. In his novel, Sous le soleil des bontes (Under the sun of the monks), R. Dorsenne declared that ‘Native women – however charming the little Cambodian dolls might be – can never replace mistresses of our race... in tenderness or pure sentiments’ and based an entire story around the sincerity and true paternal love of a French man for his métisse daughter, and the daughter’s fickle nature and shallowness. That shallowness is reflected in her own passionate affair with another ‘insignificant métis’, ‘boastful and pretentious, the son of a French business man of modest means, established in Phnom Penh, and an old Cambodian with short hair.’ The identification of even such minor details – the short hair of the Cambodian mother, a traditional coiffure routinely castigated as un feminine – points to some essential lack on the part of the native mother. Linking the character flaws between the French man’s daughter and her mixed-race sibling is their descent from ‘mothers of an identical race.’

Not only the indigenous mother, but also her mixed-race children were seen in gendered as well as racial terms. For obvious demographic reasons related to the earlier mentioned male-dominated gender imbalance of nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial populations in all three countries under review, most mixed-race children were the offspring of European father and indigenous mother. As such, they were seen as heirs to all the perceived moral and character ‘flaws’ of the indigenous female and none of the purported finer feelings of the European female. The effect was compounded in the métis, or mixed-race girl, who was presumed destined to perform to the stereotype of the morally lax indigenous mother.

As the 1897 Statutes of the Cambodian Society for the Protection of Abandoned Children put it, ‘the mother’s example of debauchery, sloth and immorality’ would turn the girls to ‘prostitution’. These views changed little in the next two decades. In 1913, M. Ch. Gravelle, director of the Bank of Indochina, and founder of the Cambodian Society for the Protection of Abandoned Métis, maintained that the ‘half-whites’ (semi-blancs), the children of French fathers and Asian mothers, imposed a double philistine and political duty on European administrators and colonists. Gravelle, who was himself married to a Cambodian woman, argued that if left to their mother’s care, the ‘métis’ returned to the family and social milieu of women who ‘are, and remain, fatally, the deaconed and declassed. Their usual fate is to have several white ‘husbands’, to lead – the most fortunate among them – to the end of their youth, to some more definitive union with an interpreter who is flattered and seduced by their slightly Frenchified elegance and manners. But what happens, in all of this, to the child, boy or girl? ... One rushes to blame the fathers, in most cases. For my part, I find the fathers have more excuses.’

Such views of maternal lack resonated with the text of policy documents, colonial literature and official correspondence in British Burma, where mixed-race girls were singled out as ‘brazen hussies’ and seen as particularly needy targets of moral education. Some commentators, such as the Australian G. E. Morrison, visiting Burma in the 1890s, constructed a hierarchy of ‘half-castes’, asserting that ‘the best half-caste in the East is, of course, the Eurasian of

[24] Orwell, G., Burmese Days, Harper Brothers, New York, 1934, pp. 53-54, 72. By contrast, the established British colonial wife, epitomised by Mrs Lackersteen, is ‘scandal-mongering’ ‘yellow and thin,’ a nagging presence who spies on her husband, and ‘lives twenty years in the country without learning a word of the language’.


[26] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., p. 160.

Mixed Metaphors

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A key, common element to these discourses centred on the domicile, and on colonial or missionary visions of the nation, state, society or religious realm as a family unit. Partha Chatterjee has juxtaposed the private and public worlds or spheres, charting a contrast between the private, cultural world of the home of the colonized and the public spheres of engagement in the office, civil service, or law courts which required a direct traffic with western conceptions of the nation.\textsuperscript{45} But in many colonial regimes, such spaces were never sacred nor were they ever completely secure or partitioned from the state. Indeed, many homes were rudely broken. Wrestling children from their homes and mothers would ensure their incorporation into civilization and their 'uplift'. The ideal domicile was not only 'European' in cultural outlook; it was also bourgeois in its nuclear dimensions. By the early twentieth century, the primacy of the nuclear family as the ideal unit of colonial living was well established. This acceptance of the nuclear family in official, philanthropic and missionary discourses in colonized Asia, Australia and metropolitan Europe, multiplied those familial arrangements or transactions that could be called 'abandonment' by white officers, and especially reinforced notions that it was not proper to leave one's child in the care of extended families or broad kinship rings. In the name of such impurity, administrators, missionaries and philanthropists wrested children from their cultural circles and moved them towards existences within, or as appendages to, nuclear families. In mission schools for girls, this family was headed by a God who was commonly conceived as a white-bearded, white male patriarch, and whose handmaids - sisters, female teachers, nurses and nuns - often oversaw the obliteration of indigenous languages and the training of their charges in feminine pursuits.

'Purifying' girls of mixed descent: White Soap, Whitewash and White Lace

In British Burma and French Indochina, as in colonial and Federated Australia, official policies and practices focused not so much on passing mixed race children off as white - this was deemed an impossibility - but on facilitating their passage away from indigenous mothers and milieu, through their often enforced separation and institutionalization in missions, state homes, and boarding schools, so that they might pass through the various stages of 'civilization' and 'uplift' (or, in French, relevément) into what was only ever at best, through European eyes, a simulacrum of whiteness: in Homi Bhaba’s memorable phrase, a state of being almost the same, but not quite/white. In French Indochina, British India and Burma, and the Dutch East Indies, constructions of whiteness entailed popular narratives of impasse: the impossibility of passing as white was reiterated in such terminology as the métisse and déclassé, Mischlingekinder, Half-Castes.

In her recent work on the children of Indonesian mothers and Dutch fathers, Pamela Pattynama has examined narratives of passing as white in the Dutch East Indies, where the ‘whiteness’ of white society was clouded by centuries of interracial contact and officially endorsed concubinage. As a consequence, Pattynama argues, many of the ‘almost white’ mixed-race people passed themselves off as white, by denying and disavowing their indigenous ancestry. Pattynama reads such attempts at entering a ‘white’ society as a form of masquerade, where what is masked is one’s mother. ‘Native mothers did exist, for her (Indo) children existed, children who made her into something else and obscured her, who remained silent and repudiated her, in accordance with the unwritten but relentless code of society.’\textsuperscript{46}

In apparent contrast to this wilful repudiation, children of mixed race in French Indochina, British Burma and Australia were subject to an institutional grounding in ways to repudiate their mother. At its most brutal, as in Australia, this involved enforced separation and complete removal, a literal obscuring of the mother so that the child would be socialized to pass as white. The erasure of maternity from memory was a strategy endorsed by Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville as follows:

Many working half-caste girls having infants fathered by white men came to me to discuss the disposal of their children. When I explained to them that separation was inevitable for their child’s sake, most of them saw the matter as I did, and on giving them up made and kept a promise to them not to molest them in any way. I found that these children in their new surroundings had no difficulty picturing themselves as white children, and any picture of their mothers which they might have retained at first rapidly faded from their minds.\textsuperscript{47}

Here, the mother becomes the focus of danger to her daughter and the state: she is vilified as a potential molester, while the state - as embodied by A.O. Neville, and in his title - is the protector. This is a reverse gender image of a common state of affairs, whereby molestation by white men rendered Aboriginal girls pregnant.

Where these policies were not executed or enforced by the state, as in Burma and Indochina, but were implemented by missionary and philanthropic societies, children were educated into whiteness, usually at the insistence of their father. This ‘re-education’ often involved long periods of separation, or absolute severance, from the mother, and the partial or full repudiation of the ‘mother tongue' and indigenous cultures. What was learned instead was often the ‘father tongue’, and with it the notions of racial hierarchy that were, in the


Australia’s first Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1905, Prinsep campaigned for, inter alia, prohibitions on sexual contact between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men and acquired the power to send children of mixed descent to missions. Prinsep’s concerns were later championed, and powers expanded, by Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia Auberon Octavius Neville (1915-1940), more recently known as the chief British protagonist in Phillip Noyce’s film Rabbit-Proof Fence.

In French Indochina and British India, parallel prejudices were rife. From 1870 to 1910, the colonial governments of Burma and Cambodia issued several circulars prohibiting European officials from conjugal liaisons with native women. When such warnings did little to stem the expansion of a mixed-race population, lobbyists seized upon education and segregation as the key to eradicating this social evil. The cultural politics of miscegenation and race legislation revolved around interpretations of race as a cultural commodity, and in particular the primacy of milieu (social and cultural environment) as a crucible of ‘race’ and national character. In documenting what she terms the ‘politics of abandonment’ in early twentieth century French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, Stoler has demonstrated how the discourse of ‘abandonment’ centred almost exclusively on the mother, rarely the European father, and referred to not an act of physical abandonment but to the exercise of maternal choice to raise the mixed-race child within indigenous milieu. By assuming responsibility for the care of her child, refusing to hand it over to a missionary or state institution, and thus denying it a European upbringing, Indigenous mothers in colonial Southeast Asia were accused of ‘abandonment’. Cultural concerns were paramount. The juxtaposition of two races and cultures in one being or style of living subverted the notion that white and non-white existed on two separate civilizational planes. Colonial bureaucrats interpreted such unions not as a levelling of cultures but the ‘dragging down’ of European values. The universal policy response was to recommend the ‘uplift’ of the ‘half-caste.’ But notions of the primacy of cultural milieu as a crucible of race were not unique to colonized Southeast Asia.

The Aboriginal Protection Act of 1886 classified Half-Castes living with Aborigines as Aboriginal Natives. From 1905, legislation towards Aborigines in West Australia assigned racial classification to ‘Half-Castes’ not on the basis of biological origin but on the basis of domicile. ‘Half-Castes’ dwelling in Aboriginal communities were automatically categorised as Aboriginal. Those few who lived as ‘Europeans’ and frequented white society and were conversant with European culture were categorised as ‘European.’ Similarly, ‘Half-Castes’ who associated with Aboriginal natives were affected by a broad range of discriminating legislation.

The Other Women: Colonial Stereotypes of Indigenous Mothers

As Doreen Meller and Anna Haebleich have stressed, mother’s love and the mother figure were of central importance to those directly affected by child removal policies in Australia. ‘The ironic counterpart to this longing,’ Meller and Haebleich continue, ‘was that it was often an unknown and disengaged white paternal heritage that had determined their fate, both within their family and at a broader policy level.’ Colonial gender ideology was a major determinant of such policies and practices. The colonial discourse of abandonment centred on assumptions about the inherent unsuitability of indigenous women as mothers; their lack of the ‘refined,’ ‘maternal’ instincts or domestic training of European women; and the presumed ‘immorality’ of the indigenous mother which had led to her consorting with the European father in the first place.

In British India, French Indochina and Australia, gender-specific constructions projected the native mother as maternally lacking and sexually voracious. In all three domains, a thriving literature and rich mythology projected children of part descent as the composite of all the vices and none of the virtues of native and white ‘races.’ As the potential carrier of further mixed-vic children, the heir of her native mother’s maternal lack, and the transmitter of cultural and colour contagion, it was the female of part descent who was most feared and reviled, leading to the colonial caricature of the ‘Half-Caste Woman’ or ‘Métisese’.

Underpinning the homogeneity and longevity of this trans-colonial motif were pan-European, middle-class paradigms of gender and notions of a woman’s proper place as the biological reproducer of her race and the primary transmitter of ‘national’ character and culture to her children. It became commonly accepted in European official circles and elite white society, in Australia as in Cambodia and Burma, that the abandonment of Half-Caste offspring was the result of Indigenous maternal neglect, as opposed to European paternal rejection. Such stereotypes, and in particular the colonial construction of ‘the Indigenous women’ as maternally lacking, found useful political currency in exonerating European males from their paternal and moral responsibility for the upkeep of their children.


Forum
Performing Race:
Hybridity, Miscegenation and Desire