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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Blood Call and 'Natural Flutters': Xavier Herbert's Racialised Quartet of Heteronormativity

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## Abstract

National belonging for Xavier Herbert was intimately tied to interracial sexuality. 'Euraustralians' ('half-castes') were for Herbert a redemptive motif that could assuage the 'awful loneliness of the colonial born' by which he hinted at the land claim of settler-colonials as spurious. Herbert's exposure of the spectrum of interracial sex—from companionate marriage to casual prostitution to endemic sexual assault—in his novels *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) was unprecedented and potentially game-changing in the administration of Aboriginal women's sexuality under the assimilation era. But his deeply fraught masculinity was expressed through a picaresque frontier manhood that expressed itself through this spectrum of relations with Aboriginal women. For all his radical assertions of a 'Euraustralian' or hybrid nation, Herbert was myopic and dismissive of the women attached to the 'lean loins' he hoped it would spring from. He was also vitriolic about the white women, including wives, who interfered with white men's access to Aboriginal women's bodies. In this article I examine how Herbert's utopian racial destinies depended on the unexamined sexual contract of monogamy and the asymmetrical pact to which it consigned white men and white women, and the class of sexually available Indigenous women, or 'black velvet', it rested on in colonial scenarios of sex.

## Keywords

**Xavier Herbert; interracial sex; Aboriginal women; white masculinity; assimilation**

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In an uncharacteristic concession to propriety, Xavier Herbert changed the title of his 1938 novel from the neologistic 'Black Velvet' to *Capricornia*.<sup>1</sup> His shying away from the title is telling of the veil conventionally drawn across interracial intimacies, not to mention the repression of the catchphrase, Black Velvet, widely used in print media of the time.<sup>2</sup> Black Velvet was commonly understood to refer to white men's unfettered sexual access to Aboriginal women who were 'easy for the taking' as Ernestine Hill put it in 1943.<sup>3</sup> But Herbert's change of title doesn't accord with how readily he pursued themes of cross-racial sex in both *Capricornia* and his 1975 novel *Poor Fellow My Country*. Herbert imagined he pitted both works against the hypocrisy and dissembling around white men's sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, while detailing the pain of desire and love as felt across the racial cleave. He was unusually attentive to the experiences of 'half-caste' children left unacknowledged by their white fathers, trying to comprehend their identities under the assimilation regime. Yet he complicates the narrative of abandoned 'half-caste' sons (as in his novels they were invariably boys) with profound jealousy of their blood call to the soil—their inborn auchtochony. A whorl of affect pervades Herbert's writings on interracial sex, particularly of British-heritage men's belonging, which occludes questions of territoriality and occupation with desire and genesis. Throughout, the allure of Aboriginal women is glanced, its command over white men scanned. Aboriginal women's desirability becomes the grounding for Herbert's quartet of racialised heteronormativity in Australia's north that this article probes.

Much of the scholarship around Xavier Herbert has focused on his fixation with national belonging, rather counter-intuitively, of the 'half-caste' son providing a genesis of 'breeding in' for their white fathers. As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey has written, white fathers were envisaged by the administrators of our north and west as 'providing Australia with a future "aboriginal inheritance" that would solve some aspects of white biological (and cultural) inferiority related to living, thriving and belonging to this country'. But as Probyn-Rapsey also notes, the individual white men themselves were 'made to disappear within this biopolitical vision; made *into* matter by being disappeared into *white matter*, a 'thing' to be administered, manipulated, bred in and worried over'.<sup>4</sup> It is this dissembling and obfuscation that Herbert fancied he railed against in his writings. Thus in *Capricornia* the character Peter Differ gives an impassioned defence of interracial sexual relations to Oscar Shillingsworth, uncle to the 'half-caste' Nawnim, aka Norman, whose genesis in the casual sexual relations between white men and Aboriginal women forms the spine of the book, as such relations do in *Poor Fellow My Country*. Differ puts the confronting question, 'what chance' do 'half-caste' women have to be anything else but whores? He contends: 'Moral sense is something taught. It's not taught to half-caste girls. They're looked upon from birth as part of the great dirty joke Black Velvet.' Differ decries that decent white men can't 'woo and marry one honestly' without being labelled a 'combo'. Complaining it makes his 'guts bleed', Differ explains that despite there being 20,000 'half-castes' in Australia this common practice is hidden. He lambasts Oscar's shrugging and shirking saying: 'You're like the majority of people in Australia. You hide from this very real and terrifically important thing, and hide it, and come to think after a while that it doesn't exist. But it does! It does!' Differ laments that the men who raise their kids are despised while the rest 'go combo, mainly on the sly'. Herbert believed the exposure of interracial sexual relations, particularly in Northern Australia, was a radical departure from repression of colonial intimacies. Yet as Probyn-Rapsey documents, in his squabbles with Northern Territory Chief Protector (from 1927 to 1939) Cecil Cook it becomes clear that the role of the white fathers of 'half-castes' in securing a racially homogenised future through famously 'breeding out the colour' were hardly repressed; rather they were a preoccupation of

state policy, policed through draconian policy. The underlying assumption about the desirability of Aboriginal girls was arguably less overtly stated. On this point Herbert indulged his shared fantasies as if intending to goad the authorities.

As Differ points out, the visible evidence of interracial sex was under everyone's noses. It was also creating a stir. Herbert was writing at a time when the 'half-caste' population grew exponentially, from 9,000 in 1911 to 23,000 in 1936.<sup>5</sup> Humanitarians, clergy and administrators in the state protector and welfare boards had made sexual relations between white men and black women a central rationale for their various interventions into Aboriginal families, with tragic and enduring consequences. But in Differ's tirade it is taken as a given, an unquestioned reality, that white men in remote stretches must have a sexual outlet. If white women weren't accessible in the outlying reaches of the north, men's only recourse was to Aboriginal women, or to become 'sexual pervert[s]'—that is, homosexual. He calls these relations with women 'quite natural flutters' demanding, 'How can they [the men] help it?', yet he rues that any resulting kids are 'just ignored'.<sup>6</sup> A quartet emerges of four fixed positions, which, like bed posts, buttress the continuance of heteronormativity in the lawless terrain of the pastoral, mining and pearling frontiers.

At stake was not only the citizenship of resulting children, but also how black women's citizenship might be tied into their sexual partnering with white men since traditionally women followed their husband's nationalities and citizenship. As Katherine Ellinghaus notes in her history of white women marrying Indigenous men in the United States and Australia, 'the way their relationships were viewed is revealing of the inherently gendered and raced notions of national belonging'.<sup>7</sup> As noted, in keeping with the state and territory Aboriginal Protection Boards of the north and west Herbert's novels make national belonging a central preoccupation. He was impelled to impart to his readers his solution, which he touted as unique: a creole hybrid race he called the 'Euraustralian', the issue of white men and their Aboriginal mistresses and, less often, wives for, as Ellen Smith has noted, Herbert rather conveniently dispatches the Aboriginal mothers of Norman and Prindy.<sup>8</sup> Since it was assumed white women would never marry Aboriginal men they were both disqualified from any such sexually entwined citizenship. In the racialised quartet of heteronormativity Herbert constructs, white women and black men are asexual. In the absence of white women, black women mitigate against the unthinkable, white homosexuality. Their fertility then presents a problem to the nation that Herbert recasts as the solution to national belonging—after discarding them. Herbert idealises a racialised, heteronormative sexual quartet wherein white men marry white women but fuck black women, black women marry no one and fuck white men, black men fuck no one but prostitute their women to white men, and white women fuck no one but complain bitterly about who everyone else is fucking. Needless to say Herbert's uniquely national roundbed depended on gendered and sexual constructs that serviced startling sexual arrogation by white men as propagated by Herbert. It also assumed the sexual allure of black women, which Herbert shamelessly exoticised.

The marriageability of Aboriginal men to white women was curtailed by a mesh of prohibitions including their education and class mobility, unlike in the United States where white women married educated, sometimes wealthy, even slave-owning, Indigenous men.<sup>9</sup> But in Australia, as Ellinghaus and Catriona Elder have argued, the emphasis was less on *cultural* assimilation through such means as education and more on a eugenics-based program of *biological* assimilation.<sup>10</sup> Elder distinguishes between these different but dominant emphases within assimilation discourse as 'socio-cultural and bio-genetic'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Ellinghaus documents in relation to education, the romantic attachments that might be fostered between

young adults in the classroom was one of the reasons white parents stated Aboriginal children should be excluded from public schools in turn-of-the-century New South Wales, in a case of sociocultural exclusions precluding bio-genetic inclusion.<sup>12</sup> Such exclusions had been presaged in the earliest years of incursion. Ellinghaus describes the first educator in the new colony of New South Wales in 1814, writing to Governor Macquarie to lament that even educated Aboriginal men could not 'make themselves respectable in their new Society. They were generally despised, especially by European females ... No European woman would marry a Native, unless some abandoned profligate'.<sup>13</sup> Obviously the creole children Herbert touted as a kind of Australian master-race were more likely to issue forth outside the sanctity of marriage. Herbert seemed to want his wedding cake and to eat it too, for he sought both the legitimization of interracial sex through marriage, but kept up a ribald wink towards 'Black Velvet'—white men's unfettered sexual access to Aboriginal women.

Herbert thus differed from the aspirations of protectors C.E. Cook and A.O. Neville in that he seemed less concerned about legitimating interracial sex through the marriage of Aboriginal girls to working-class white men. Under Neville's long reign as Protector (1915–1936) he placed 'half-caste' girls from training homes (who had been removed from their families) into white homes as domestic servants. Generally, however, when 'forced out among men' such programs were known by administrators to 'expose them to ruin'.<sup>14</sup> Neville was similarly unperturbed, famously stating: 'The child is taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their own environment. At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back into service so that it doesn't really matter if she has half a dozen children.'<sup>15</sup> For C.E. Cook, however, it was marriages rather than casual relations that were targeted in his administrative regime of the Northern Territory during the period Herbert was writing.<sup>16</sup> While in Queensland, under the protection of segregationist J.W. Bleakley (Chief Protector 1914–42) the 1901 interracial marriage clause had attempted to prevent white men 'harbouring' Aboriginal women who were already tribally married. Over the period Herbert penned his two major works the state protection boards, despite their different emphases, intensified controls over interracial sex, ostensibly as a protective measure against the manifest abuse of Aboriginal women and girls, generally scapegoated onto 'lower order whites'. In effect, these controls were a means to realise a racially homogenous White Australia under the pitiless regulations of the various states' assimilation regimes.

The sexual schema Herbert both eroticises and exposes was thus variegated and contradictory. Even putting to one side the complexity of interracial sex, white men's access to black women was at odds with the sexual mores of the period, particularly those that dominated Australian notions of gentility from the south-east urban centres of Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart. Companionate marriage and romantic monogamy were the order of the day. Curiously, *Poor Fellow My Country* was published the same year the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cwlth) made provision for the current system of no-fault divorce. But before this, under the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1959* a spouse seeking dissolution of marriage had to prove marital fault through fourteen grounds of which adultery was but one. The 1975 act was the culmination of decades of reform to laws originating in Victorian-era sexual politics, such as the *British Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857*. At the time Herbert was writing *Capricornia*, sexual relations outside marriage, let alone across race, were subject to the double standards, gender inequity and ecclesiastical codes inherited from Victorian Britain.<sup>17</sup> Heteronormative monogamous marriage was the sole permissible expression for European sexual relations—for all the 'proliferation' of sexual practices and identities since

documented as pervading the Victorian era and beyond.<sup>18</sup> But throughout this era of colonial expansion marriage was of course profoundly racialised. Polygamy comprised the third line in conceptions of savagery (along with cannibalism and infanticide) from the time of the exploratory voyages. As I've elsewhere detailed, exotic marital rites such as bride capture and child bestowal were of particular fascination for Europeans within the burgeoning native 'marriage-rites genre'.<sup>19</sup> These entirely unsubstantiated tropes were reiterated over decades and continued to have purchase into postwar Australian cultural production—they were a favourite motif in the cartoons of Eric Jolliffe, for example.<sup>20</sup>

European and, by extension, colonial strictures around heteronormative monogamous marriage were set in contradistinction to primitive marriage 'rites'. In Ann McGrath's analysis of the variegated formations of coupling across the Australian frontier she shows the dependence of eighteenth-century notions of civilised marriage on rebuffing those of the primitive, and discusses the significance of property to the ordering of monogamy. 'Property, and the institution of marriage, mutually confirm each other.'<sup>21</sup> European marriage law passed on inherited property through the agnatic bloodlines that monogamy, particularly women's monogamy, guaranteed. Primitive polygamy arguably disqualified Indigenous men's property in women's bodies and by extension in land tenure. And it was property, particularly as invested in land, that was contested under settler-colonialism. Monogamy, inheritance and the custody of children were thus critical to the settler-colonial project; not separate from but integral to its claims over land. It is this very enmeshment of property forms in land and child custody that plays out explicitly in both the state assimilation regimes of 'breeding out' and Herbert's yearning to 'breed in' Aboriginality.<sup>22</sup> Aboriginal polygamy, along with the commonly held belief that Aboriginal men prostituted their women, was thus a means to dismiss Aboriginal men as rightful possessors of their women. In Herbert's quartet of racialised heteronormativity Aboriginal men were not entitled to, or capable of, holding such 'property', and by extension also not entitled to or capable of holding land. But if the settler-colonial project rested, as Patrick Wolfe has argued, on a 'logic of elimination' of the indigenous, Herbert's advocacy for interracial trysts meets Wolfe's description of that 'chronic negator of the logic of elimination' namely 'the white man's libido'.<sup>23</sup> But under assimilation these children could be 'absorbed' so this logic went unthreatened. Herbert's desire presumes an object.

The desire white men felt for Aboriginal women was no mere 'flutter'. It was centrally important to the colonial enterprise and Herbert wanted to portray its expression as repressed and needing release. He denounces the fawning of white women in polite society for repressing what was freely spoken of by bushmen and assiduously administered by the state protection boards. As Ellen Smith has noted, the traditions of frontier masculinity were homosocial. Ideally, north of the tropic of Capricorn was 'unfettered by domestic ties'.<sup>24</sup> This masculinist setting 'drew on a standard opposition between masculinity, realism and the nation on the one hand and femininity, romance and a derivative colonial mentality on the other'.<sup>25</sup> The necessary outlet for white men embodied by black women initially threatened to upend the settler project since the inheritance of Aboriginality was also the inheritance of first occupancy. Until the cynical and scientifically spurious (yet state enforced) administration of biological absorption—of 'breeding out the colour'—this desire was discouraged and repressed. Under C.E. Cook's assimilation regime 'half-caste' girls were removed from camps to training homes where they could be instructed in home-making and 'elevated to a standard where the fact of her marriage to a white will not contribute to his deterioration'. Their 'absorption' into marriage would also stop such girls from becoming a 'native reservoir' of disease. Rather than debilitate the white race, miscegenation would add qualities of value: intelligence, stamina, resistance



to tropical harshness and skin cancer. Cook noted, 'a large proportion of the half-caste female population is derived from the best white stock in the country' (assumedly including men unwilling to acknowledge their offspring).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Cook was so enthusiastic about his breeding program that in 1933 he was accused by the Victorian Aboriginal Group of pressing girls to marry white men they had never met.<sup>27</sup>

But Herbert's fantasies for race destiny did not advocate absorption of the black race into the white but rather to give rise to a new race, the hybrid 'Euraustralian' who brought together the best traits of European and Aboriginal, embodied in the golden boy, Prindy, around whom the narrative of *Poor Fellow My Country* turns. The policy of assimilation feigned that white men would marry the Aboriginal women they had sex with. Since they rarely did, the policy then depended on the removal of 'half-caste' children—ostensibly because they weren't recognised by their white fathers—and on regulating Aboriginal women's sexuality through controlling their sexual contact and marriages. Cohabiting was prohibited under the Aborigines ordinance, and marriage needed the consent of the Chief Protector in most states. As it transpired, white fathers became 'highly unreliable and irregular servants' to the policy of assimilation. As Probyn-Rapsey points out, the protection boards 'could not keep up with the sheer complexity of white men's lives, as they interacted (violently, illicitly, sympathetically, lovingly) with the Aboriginal women and children they were imagined to "breed out"'.<sup>28</sup> She adds that the policy of child removal cultivated rather than incited the indifference of fathers.

In *Poor Fellow My Country* Herbert exposes the prevailing notion among outback men that Aboriginal women were 'easy for the taking', in the rape of Nellyerri by one of the Knowles brothers.<sup>29</sup> In this passage, Herbert exposed the violence undergirding interracial sexual relations. He does not connect these acts to the incursion of miners and frontiersmen into Aboriginal homelands; his female protagonist is as itinerant as the miner who assaulted her. The incident does, however, draw the link between the expropriation of Aboriginal women's domestic and ultimately sexual labour, with the extractive ethos endemic to colonial occupation.

Herbert also differed from the protectors who believed that white women, when introduced to remote regions, provided a sort of sexual containment that would stem the flow of white men's desire toward Aboriginal women, envisaged in this schema as a mere outlet. Glancing acknowledgement had been made from early immigration guides, all the way through to the wrath of mid-twentieth century clergy, that interracial sex with Aboriginal women was a 'necessary evil' in remote regions suffering from a 'frightful want of females', namely white women.<sup>30</sup> Thus for J.W. Bleakley, an influx of white women 'would do more to eliminate or reduce the moral abuses than all the laws'.<sup>31</sup> White women were still God's Police on the later frontiers, a sexual reservoir that pooled white men's desire within permissible parameters. In one public lecture it was remarked, 'very few of the pioneers who have spent many years in the Interior without the company of white women can claim not to be the fathers of half castes'.<sup>32</sup> The motif of the licentious black woman crossed pervaded the states and persisted over decades. In Richard Dyer's analysis this construction of white sexuality figures white men as perennially struggling against their 'dark drives' to 'go native' whereas white women were 'not supposed to have such drives in the first place'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed sexuality disturbs their racial purity, for they are the 'bearers of whiteness' principally.<sup>34</sup> It is blackness that is hypersexualised; as Franz Fanon put it, 'sin is Negro as virtue is white'.<sup>35</sup> The 'Hottentot Venus' or Saartjie Baartman, the nineteenth-century icon of hypersexualised black femininity, elicited both fear and attraction and made explicit the 'connection between beastiality and unbridled sexuality'.<sup>36</sup> Primitive sexuality was allegedly profligate and unrestrained—wherever there remained

Indigenous peoples and spanning the period from exploration up until Indigenous activists challenged the notion. In one public lecture it was claimed, 'One of the darkest features in the aboriginal character is its gross sensuality'—marked as it was by accusations of polygamy, bride capture and child bestowal.<sup>37</sup> These stable tropes were still ready-to-hand for Herbert in the mid twentieth century. He reinscribed these tropes, but celebrated them, his protagonist Jeremy Delacy remarking in *Poor Fellow My Country*, the 'blacks' are the 'true bacchanalians'.<sup>38</sup>

In openly expressing white men's desire for Aboriginal women Herbert laid bare the causal chronology that impelled the assimilationist regime. While that desire was widely assumed as simply about the essential need for male sexual outlet, Herbert explicitly intervened into the structuring absence of interracial sex: Aboriginal women's desirability. This distinct arena and modality of racialised sexuality, so intrinsic to settler-colonialism, is graphically and amorously detailed by Herbert; racialised beauty is central to 'the foundational genderedness of settler-colonialism'.<sup>39</sup>

For Herbert it wasn't simply the irrepressible virility of the priapic pioneer, or his lack of outlet in white wives, that excited the trysts he so lovingly details. Herbert intimately described Aboriginal women's sexual allure which he both racialised and revered. On his first trepanger expedition Mark Shillingsworth (Norman's father) approaches a 'native camp' to purchase some tourist memorabilia and is offered a 'comely' girl. Herbert's description is a lingering blazon of yearning which he evidently derived considerable pleasure from writing:

One who was observant and aesthetic would have gloated over the perfect symmetry expressed in the curves of the wide mobile nostrils and arched septum of her fleshy nose, would have delighted in her peculiar pouting mouth with thick puckered lips of colour reddish black like withered rose, in the lustrous irises and fleckless white-of-egg whites of her large black slightly-tilted eyes, in her long luxuriant bronzy lashes, in the curves of her neck and back, in the coppery black colour of her velvet skin and its fascinating musky odour, and might have kept her talking in order to delight in her slow, deep, husky voice, or laughing in order to delight in the flash of her perfect teeth and gums and the lazy movement of her eyes.<sup>40</sup>

Nellyerri, the mother of the exquisitely beautiful hybrid boy, Prindy, is similarly salaciously detailed, as is Jeremy Delacy's Aboriginal wife Nanago. The public expression of this sexual rapture for Aboriginal women was, for 1938, highly unusual. It figured in the postwar cartoons of Eric Jolliffe and the paintings on black velvet by Martinos, and of course in the widely circulated expression 'Black Velvet,' as I have detailed elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Yet the open expression of white men's desire for Aboriginal women was uncommon. Without this desire there would hardly have been cause for the assimilation administrations, which centrally attempted to manage the rise in 'half-caste' children whose whiteness in particular went unfathered; that is, attempted to manage the spectre of illegitimate whiteness in these children. It goes without saying, and of course it did, but Aboriginal women's desirability is of pre-eminent causation in the settler-colonial schema. There had been many thinly veiled declarations of enthrallment to the 'native belle' which I've elsewhere described, in publications emanating from the South Sea voyages of Cook and others.<sup>42</sup> This desire for Aboriginal women was there, albeit draped in classical conventions, in artworks such as Augustus Earle's circa 1826 *Woman of New South Wales*. The native belle was purportedly unselfconsciously beautiful: her's was a natural beauty, not one of artifice. Images such as a photograph of the woman, Juanju, originally taken by photographer J.W. Lindt (1845–1926) were circulated over decades, with various captions including 'A Brunette Beauty—The regular oval features and beautiful eyes of this aboriginal

girl might be the envy of many of her white sisters' and 'a perfect type of aboriginal girlhood'. Settlers clearly had an investment in Aboriginal beauty, ranging from sexual desire to romantic nostalgia for a natural femininity that was thought to be vanishing. Herbert salvages this unwitting beauty as a kind of exotic redemption from the ruin of the tribal.<sup>43</sup>

Beauty was racialised within this visual schema: it entered into the vista of the native. The exploratory, surveying gaze and colonialism's 'conquest of the world as perspective',<sup>44</sup> along with scientific racism and ethnological scrutiny, had shaped the lens through which Indigenous women were seen and perceived as racially distinct. But the overt sexualisation of their beauty, the unguarded expression of European desire, was rare. Significantly, most expressions I have found in the visual register appeared in the span of years between Herbert's two major novels. A glazed ashtray nakedly referenced the desirability of Aboriginal women (see Figure 1) and was as such very rare—indeed I think this may be the only public image of an Aboriginal woman in lingerie prior to the fashion model Samantha Harris in 2016.<sup>45</sup> Pervading the colonial scene was the unstated frisson (and mostly nostalgia) for visual access to the near-naked bodies of traditionally living Aboriginal women.

But the native belle type was bookended by women who were scorned and derided for their 'primitive' appearance. Conventions of the ignoble savage inhabiting the antipodes endured from early accounts dating back to Dampier's evaluation of the people at King Sound as 'having not one graceful feature in their faces'.<sup>46</sup> This was still quoted uncritically



Figure 1 Glazed ashtray, Australia, date unknown. Source: Private collection of Colin Chestnut, Sydney; photograph: Liz Conor



in 1947 in the magazine *Walkabout*. These precedents shaped Herbert's description of Mark Shillingsworth's conflicted desire. He wrestled with himself for 'seeing beauty in a creature of a type he had been taught to look upon as a travesty of normal humanity'.<sup>47</sup> Mark directs all his conflicted contempt towards the Aboriginal man who had offered the girl to him, 'hating him for a procurer' and thinking him 'utterly base'.<sup>48</sup> Herbert unusually, however, adds the caveat that Mark couldn't know this exchange was part of their 'customs'. Having suggested that offering women was traditional, he then claims the Aboriginal man was only doing 'what he had learnt to expect to be asked of him by every whiteman with whom he had ever come in contact'. Herbert notes that Mark also hadn't realised 'the man and his kind might love their womenfolk just as much as whitemen do, even though they were not so jealous of their conjugal rights'.<sup>49</sup> This venturing into the possible meanings Aboriginal men and women might attribute to interracial sexual exchange would not be seriously analysed until Ann McGrath's recent study, *Illicit Love*.<sup>50</sup> McGrath does not resile from the pervasive abuse of Aboriginal women, noting that on the frontier they were a 'second appropriation' after the land wars.<sup>51</sup> But she recasts interracial sex from the other side of the frontier, explaining that 'Aboriginal women and men reconfigured their usual kin and land relationships to allow women to engage in marriages with men of other nations ... bringing lawless insiders under their system of law, they developed a transnational form of marital diplomacy'.<sup>52</sup> By other nations McGrath is referring to the hundreds of Aboriginal nations as well as European migrants. Since marriage is the most 'vital principle' in Indigenous law, it is essential in making outsiders insiders.<sup>53</sup> Thus, 'Indigenous-colonizer marriage had the potential to deliver, at least for a time, a kind of dual sovereignty'.<sup>54</sup> This committed monogamous marriage is quite distinct from Herbert's racialised quartet, which assigned Aboriginal women the place of prostituted exotica.

McGrath also argues that Aboriginal women in their marriages 'had far greater freedom of movement, choices in sexual activity, and overall autonomy than a white Australian wife of the early twentieth century'.<sup>55</sup> While the 'comely' girl offered to Mark Shillingsworth could only be imagined as an object of exchange, Herbert differed from the settlers and humanitarians who could only perceive these arrangements 'as promiscuity or commerce, as prostitution'.<sup>56</sup> Herbert may not have quite grasped that potentially 'these unions marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between sets of nations, drawing outsider participants into obligations toward kin, inspired landscapes, and law', but he saw another potential, that of conjoining two ways of being and sharing proudly in the ensuing offspring who drew white men into a national belonging through forging kinship relations to the original inhabitants. Herbert also did not arrive at the startling claim by McGrath that Indigenous sovereignties 'lived on in love'.<sup>57</sup> Instead, any claim for a continued Aboriginal sovereignty through the continuance of bloodlines on country was quashed in favour of white men feeling familial ties to country through acknowledging their hybrid children. In an argument of McGrath that applies more readily to Herbert, formalised marriage implied 'a new form of governance that was premised upon imperial and colonizing hierarchies. It was embodied in, and underwritten by, new forms of gender and marital relations'.<sup>58</sup> Herbert was nevertheless unusual in allowing for Aboriginal women's consent, agency, returned desire and requited love by not reducing their sexual diplomacy to always simply prostitution.

In *Poor Fellow My Country* Herbert overlays his challenge to double standards about interracial sexual relations with passionately held notions of national belonging. He directly advocates a 'creole nation' of 'Euroaustralians' instead of 'being just lousy copies of the stock we came from'. His protagonist Delacy expounds: 'In my opinion a beautiful breed of people could've been created if only our forefathers'd had the courage to breed with the Aborigines

like men, instead of like dirty little boys ... and one that would've loved the land because they truly belonged to it ...<sup>59</sup> Cross racial intimacies all came about because of 'the traditional woman-lending' of Aborigines, which is how, he argues, the country was actually settled. Delacy explains: 'You're bound, as a blackfellow, to lend your women to a trusted stranger who has none ... Use of his women by others means nothing to a blackfellow [it's] more to do with friendship, relationship or trade.'<sup>60</sup> And the women themselves? According to Delacy, they rather expediently prefer the white man every time, 'even if he's rubbish'.<sup>61</sup> Of course this depends on long-standing European constructs of promiscuous 'primitive' sexuality, which is what Delacy drew on when he described the 'blacks' as 'true bacchanalians' as mentioned above.<sup>62</sup> Delacy then asks: 'Have you ever thought what the Australian nation would have been like if the pioneers had succoured their hybrid offspring?' He answers: 'The boss' bed could've been the foundation of harmony ... and a new society.'<sup>63</sup>

Ellen Smith has traced Herbert's racialised schema for sexual belonging to white literary nationalism of the period, specifically Herbert's links to his Nazi-sympathiser publisher P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen.<sup>64</sup> In Stephensen's newspaper *The Publicist* Smith finds an ethnic nationalist investment in Aboriginal presence, culture and even rights. Rather than simply bolstering a push for assimilation, *The Publicist* depended on the figure of the Aryan Aborigine, or Dark Caucasian, as theorised by anthropologists, to canvass their 'deeply desired, fantasised identification with the Aboriginal figure and her unquestioned claim to be born of the land'. They sought a narrative national autochthony through an 'Aboriginal genealogy' which 'redirected white Australian genealogies away from Europe, offering an alternative inheritance that maintained the Australian continent's insular integrity'.<sup>65</sup> This European incursion onto Aboriginal lands was thus a homecoming, since Europeans and Aboriginal Australians both originated in India. Identification with an Aryan Aborigine mobilised the Aboriginal figure to differentiate Australia from Britain, yet was 'summoned only that he might be displaced'. *Capricornia*—which Stephensen scheduled for release to coincide with the Aboriginal Day of Mourning on 26 January 1938<sup>66</sup>—is 'structured by a search for the father' but, most crucially, it is a story 'about a white man's search for an Aboriginal son'.<sup>67</sup> That narrative also depends on the racialised quartet in which Aboriginal women are desirable and expendable. It is the white father who sires the Aboriginal son, the mother passes on, either to other white men or to death.

Having bemoaned the lack of white women as the cause of the irrepressible sexual activity of white men, the entrance into remote areas of white women who saw the use of Aboriginal women as exploitative could only stall such a quest as Herbert's for naturalisation. Delacy complains: 'the trouble was there were the white women to reckon with. Eventually they'd come looking for their men, find them Gin Jockeying, as they say, empty out their black rivals ... and call in the police at any show of resentment. That's how the country was settled, man ... settled and civilized.'<sup>68</sup> But this repression of a distinct national sexuality by white women was only effective for as long as white men tolerated it. The problem was that Anglo-Celt men were too afraid of their 'prudish harridan' white wives:

Whereas it was the missus who put the stockwhip round the dusky interloper she found with her old man in this country, the Spanish-bred master would put it around his wife for intruding in his private business. I feel sure that but for the fear of women, our forefathers would have been proud enough of their half-breed bastards at least to feed them ... or rather honest enough in their pride, because the pride is there still ... in secret. I stress this thing about our women, because it's the crux of this thing...<sup>69</sup>

So, with Aboriginal women (and their men) suitably compliant, their men happy to share, and white men perpetually rampant, it is only white women who inhibit the realisation of a nation authentically inseminated in the 'lean loins' of the land, which would thereby rectify white men's spurious claim to it. This is a curious development in Herbert's racialised sex quartet. He seems to agree that white women needed to have a presence on the frontier and to validate that presence with the only occupation then available to them, marriage. He seems to be calling for formalised non-monogamous marriage with white women and their acceptance of white husbands' extramarital relations with Aboriginal women, who presumably weren't married themselves to their menfolk, ensuring any children could then be the apple of only their white father's eye, not to mention provide some sort of umbilical connection to their country.

While at first glance Herbert novels are a paean to interracial intimacy including marriage and a nativist identification with miscegenation, it is worth heeding Ann Stoler's caveat that 'hierarchies of privilege and power were written into the condoning of interracial unions, as well as into their condemnation'.<sup>70</sup> Within Delacy's marriage to Nanago her tolerance of his affairs with white women is descriptive of the frontier sexual utopia Herbert inscribes, with its dependence on Aboriginal women who were not 'jealous of their conjugal rights' over white men.<sup>71</sup> Herbert wanted to debunk the racially inscribed binaries between 'desire and reason, native instinct and white self-discipline, subversive unproductive sexuality and productive patriotic sex',<sup>72</sup> yet he was unable to do so without deploying a robust and unquestioned gender dichotomy as it had been conventionally enforced through monogamy—singularly imposed on women—which itself rested on racialised notions of civilised versus primitive conjugal rights. Indeed, when Delacy leaves Nanago in her country she corrects his belief that she had ever really been his wife: she'd only been his servant. When he exhorts her to return to her country she says it is lost and then insists: 'You are my country.'<sup>73</sup> Even though Herbert sought to connect with the land through intimacy with Aboriginal women, in the end it is white men's desire that provides belonging to that country for Aboriginal women. Perhaps for Herbert, it is as Ellinghaus has observed: in marriage women adopt men's citizenship. Even in an openly acknowledged long-term intimacy such as Delacy's to Nanago, Herbert implies there are transfers of citizenship and sovereignty, yet all benefit white men and their incursion and occupation of the northern pastoral and mining frontier. If what Nanago tells Delacy is to be credited, Aboriginal women lose their country and their sovereignty in partnering with white men, while white men insinuate themselves into their wives' sovereignty through siring sons with them.

Arguably this dispossession rendered Aboriginal women and girls sexually vulnerable to white men. Neither their tribal marriages were credited nor were their relations with white men formalised under Herbert's rather baffling quartet. As floating desireables they had little protection and as the frontier progressed northward their exposure intensified. In testimony to the 1898 South Australian Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines Bills, Mounted Constable Thorpe had reported the 'old blacks' had said young girls of eleven to fourteen years old had been infected with syphilis after being 'run down and ruined' by 'unfeeling brutes'.<sup>74</sup> He had added that young girls were deliberately infected with gonorrhoea by stockmen who held some superstition that by imparting the disease they would be relieved of it. On the interwar northern pastoral frontier girls were no less vulnerable. Official reports recurred of so-called Drover's Boys, girls as young as eleven, dressed as boys and infected with venereal diseases contracted from white men.<sup>75</sup> Even worse, as far as protectors were concerned, were sexual relations between Aboriginal women and the 'Asiatic'

and fears (in the decades Herbert wrote) of a 'piebald Australia' between Aboriginal, Japanese, Chinese and Malay. As I've elsewhere observed, unlike white/black sex which was generally shrugged at, relations between Aboriginal women and Asian men caused media panics, diplomatic rows and were 'too awful to contemplate'.<sup>76</sup> For humanitarians, however, the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women came principally from white men. Olive Pink, anthropologist and humanitarian in the 1930s, contended that sex between races was simply wrong; 'male licentiousness is responsible for the fact that there is a native problem at all ... Were there no white males there would be no "native problem"'. Venereal disease and miscegenation, she wrote, were leading to the 'extermination of the native race. And at no distant date.'<sup>77</sup>

Wolfe argues that in settler-colonialism we do not encounter territoriality without land, but 'at a particular stage in its development the colonial contest in Australia became concentrated on the colour-coding of bodies that testified to sexual relations between male colonizers and Indigenous women'.<sup>78</sup> He contends that 'the single most important contradiction to have obstructed the logic of elimination was quintessentially gendered. This was the sexual abuse that male colonizers visited on Indigenous women everywhere.'<sup>79</sup> The rapaciousness that Veracini calls the 'settler libidinal investment on the notion of "virgin land"'<sup>80</sup> is certainly borne out in the colonial account, despite its partiality. Yet between the lines indications of women's agency can also be found. In the Kimberley in Western Australia pastoralists unwilling to compete with earnings from men's income from prostitution demanded the Aborigines Department regulate interracial sex—to reassert control over Aboriginal labour.<sup>81</sup> While Herbert would have us believe any prostitution was traditional wife-lending, there is little to indicate that Aboriginal women may have been negotiating sexual relations with white men to their advantage. Diane Bell found that older women refuted the characterisation of their liaisons with white men as prostitution. These encounters were their decision and sometimes initiative and they enjoyed themselves and the goods thereby procured. Nor did these relations impinge on their marriage contracts with their own men.<sup>82</sup> The other insignia of Aboriginal women's chattel status—child bestowal—was also refuted by the women Bell worked with; women had a decision-making role in any bestowal practices.<sup>83</sup>

Herbert's novels are set in the historical milieu when assimilation was formally adopted as a federal policy. Yet rather than aspire to eliminate Aborigines through his advocacy of interracial marriage Herbert proposed to father a creole race, idealised through combining the best racialised characteristics of his white rationality and black 'intuition'. Despite his own marriage to Sadie Norton, Herbert applied himself to his scheme of hybridisation and crowed about it, crediting himself as 'the biggest gin-rooter in the territory'.<sup>84</sup> He also wrote about it with tumult and splendour, taking out national prizes. As Ann Stoler has demonstrated, sexual matters are 'foundational to the material terms in which colonial projects were carried out'.<sup>85</sup> In Herbert's novels the 'intimate interface of colonial relations'<sup>86</sup> are laid bare, including the incipient moment of the racialised sexual quartet: Aboriginal women's exotic desirability. For all his vainglorious quest to 'transplant' 'poor copy', that is 'pommies' into his 'brooding'<sup>87</sup> matriscape of national belonging, Herbert fancied his writing was an intervention into the disingenuous silence around interracial sex that pervaded the frontier and its aftermath. But Herbert retreats from fully endorsing the legitimacy and sanction of marriage, seeking instead to quell the stigma and disapproval directed at 'combos'. He confirms Stoler's argument that 'it is not interracial sex that was seen as dangerous but its public legitimation in marriage. Similarly, it was not the progeny of such unions who were problematic but the possibility that they might be recognized as heirs to a European inheritance.'<sup>88</sup> So Herbert quests to insert himself into Aboriginal inheritance. He thus inscribes a distinctly nationalist 'affective

politics<sup>89</sup>—a regime of emotion that shored up his white male privilege—that depended on a quartet schema of sexuality that secured white men’s desires for extramarital liaisons with Aboriginal women. These should serve to bind white men to country that they obversely inherited from the ensuing children they felt pride in, yet did not raise within the homes of their own white families.

Despite the revival of aspects of assimilationist policies, particularly those enshrined in the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention of 2007 and its subsequent incarnations, Herbert’s works have since slipped from the national imaginary. Yet the fervid, vivid and contradictory writing of Xavier Herbert depended on a racialised quartet of sexual stationings all of which privilege white men’s desires and inheritance. It sounds many warnings about the desires of white men, their basis in exotic beauty and the ways they compelled the draconian administration of colonised women’s sexuality.

## About the author

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## Notes

1. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1990, [1938] p. 95.
2. See my discussion of this repression in Liz Conor, *Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women*, UWAP, Perth, 2016.
3. Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1943, p. 230.
4. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, *Made to Matter: White Fathers, Stolen Generations*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2013, p. x. The Northern Territory Chief Protector of Aborigines Cecil Cook is quoted in this passage, 1935, p. 3.
5. Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002, p. 227.
6. Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 95.
7. Katherine Ellinghaus, *Taking Assimilation to Heart: Marriages of White Women and Indigenous Men in the United States & Australia, 1887–1937*, Nebraska University Press, Lincoln, 2006, p. xi.
8. Ellen Smith, ‘White Aborigines’, *Intervention: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 97–116.
9. See Ann McGrath, *Illicit Love: Interracial Sex and Love in the United State and Australia*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2015, p. 357.
10. Ellinghaus, p. 119; Catriona Elder, *Dreams and Nightmares of a White Australia: Representing Aboriginal Assimilation in the Mid-twentieth Century*, Peter Lang, New York, 2009, pp. 48–55.
11. Elder, p. 48.
12. Ellinghaus, p. 119.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
14. Rev. John Heinrich Stähle quoted in Ellinghaus, p. 126.
15. A.O. Neville quoted in Chapter 7 of *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, April 1997, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-chapter-7>.
16. See also Ellinghaus, p. xxiii.



17. Margaret Harrison, review of Henry Finlay, *To Have but Not To Hold: A History of Attitudes to Marriage and Divorce in Australia 1858–1975*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2005, [https://www.law.unimelb.edu.au/files/dmfile/30\\_2\\_10.pdf](https://www.law.unimelb.edu.au/files/dmfile/30_2_10.pdf).
18. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Allen Lane, London, 1976.
19. Conor, *Skin Deep*; See also N. Ruddick, 'Courtship with a Club: Wife-Capture in Prehistoric Fiction, 1865–1914', *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2007, pp. 45–63, p. 45. Lisa O'Connell, "'Matrimonial Ceremonies Displayed'", *Popular Ethnography and Enlightened Imperialism*, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002 pp. 98–116; Shino Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male in the Enlightenment World*, Pickering and Chatto, London, 2012, pp. 71–8.
20. See Eric Jolliffe, *Witchetty's Tribe: Aboriginal Cartoon Fun*, Sungravure, Sydney, c. 1967.
21. Quoted in Ann McGrath, 'Consent, Marriage and Colonialism: Indigenous Australian Women and Colonizer Marriages', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1–23.
22. This distinction is made by Probyn-Rapsey, who argues this 'incorporation of others is simultaneously depicted as elimination and expulsion, a "breeding out" that is also a "breeding in"', Probyn-Rapsey, *Made to Matter*, p. 29.
23. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, Cassell, London, 1999, p. 181.
24. Smith.
25. Ibid.
26. Anderson, p. 236.
27. Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 172.
28. Probyn-Rapsey, *Made to Matter*, p. xii.
29. Hill, p. 230.
30. *Mann's Emigrant's Guide to Australia; including The Colonies of New South Wales, Port Phillip, South Australia, Western Australia, and Moreton Bay*, William Strange, London, 1849, p. 16.
31. McGregor, p. 98.
32. Dr W.D. Walker quoted in McGregor, caption btw pp. 146–7.
33. Richard Dyer, *White*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 28.
34. Ibid., p. 29.
35. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, New York, Grove Press, 1967, p. 139.
36. Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 21.
37. Public lecture by Edward Stone Parker, Mechanics Hall Melbourne, 10 May 1854. Excerpt in Sharman Stone (ed.), *Aborigines in White Australia: A Documentary History of the Attitudes Affecting Official Policy and the Australian Aborigine 1697–1973*, Heinemann Educational Books, South Yarra, 1974, p. 73.
38. Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, William Collins, Sydney, 1975, p. 108.
39. Wolfe, p. 164.
40. Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 19.
41. See Conor, "'Black Velvet" and "Purple Indignation": Sexuality and Poaching', in Conor, *Skin Deep*, pp. 284–325.
42. Liz Conor, "'This Striking Ornament of Nature": The "Native Belle" in the Australian Colonial Scene', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 7, no. 2, August 2006, pp. 197–218. Wallis sailed in 1767 and is known for 'discovering' Tahiti, Bougainville in 1768, and La Perouse in 1785.
43. See Stephen Muecke's discussion of how modernity incorporates and represses the ancient as represented by traditional Indigeneity. Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004.
44. Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*, Sage, London, 1997, p. 22.
45. See Nadia Salemm, 'Bras N Things unveils sexy shoot for Body Bliss line with Steph Smith, Tahnee Atkinson', News Corp, 10 May 2016, <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/fashion/people/bras-n-things-unveils-sexy-shoot-for-new-body-bliss-line/news-story/cfc93eb76aa91db61fd41fd1a7431969>. Accessed 2 November 2016.

46. William Dampier quoted in W. Charnley, 'The Antiquity of the Aboriginal', *Walkabout*, 1 February 1947, p. 30.
47. Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 19.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. McGrath.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
59. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 110.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
64. Smith.
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 54.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, p. 76.
71. When they part she weeps that she is losing her country, and when he says she can return she says that he is her country. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 1294.
72. Stoler, p. 157.
73. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, pp. 1283, 1294.
74. Mounted Constable Thorpe, report to the South Australian Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines Bills, 5 March 1898, printed in Stone (ed.), p. 113.
75. Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2000, p. 293.
76. Liz Conor, "'Black Velvet' and 'Purple Indignation': Print Responses to Japanese 'Poaching' of Aboriginal Women", *Aboriginal History*, vol. 37, 2013, p. 51–77. MP Charles Carty, 1930, quoted in Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Palgrave, London, 2010, fn 55.
77. Olive Pink cited in McGregor, p. 241.
78. Wolfe, p. 165.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
80. Veracini, p. 87.
81. Haebich, p. 214.
82. Dianne Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1983, p. 98.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
84. Cited in Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 'Some Whites are Whiter than Others: The Whitefella Skin Politics of Xavier Herbert and Cecil Cook', *JASAL Special Issue* 2007, p. 168.

85. Stoler, p. 14
86. Ibid., p. 15.
87. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 109.
88. Stoler, p. 39.
89. Ibid., p. 142.

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