

American Boomerang: Searching Aboriginal Sydney, 1928

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For a few short weeks in March 1928, the complex and contradictory “rules” of Australian interracial sex became front page news. “White Girls with Negro Lovers” screamed one headline.¹ The catalyst was the Sonny Clay Orchestra, the first African American jazz band to reach Australia, on contract to the Sydney and Melbourne Tivoli Theatre. The Commonwealth Investigation Branch (IB), alarmed by the musician’s appeal to young white women, kept the band under surveillance.² In Melbourne, Victoria Police pounced, raiding the musician’s residence and arresting five white women for vagrancy. Within twenty-four hours, the government revoked the musicians’ visa and the band were on the Sydney overnight express, ready to catch the first steamer back to California. At the same time in Canberra, the Federal government ushered in a ban on the entry of all black jazz musicians that would not be lifted until 1953.³ Returned Servicemen’s League passed resolutions denouncing the “weak-minded and frivolous” white women for derailing the White Australia mission of racial homogeny.⁴

Of little interest to the tabloid newspapers was the story of the African American musicians’ friendship with some Aboriginal Sydney women, or, at least, I assume they were Aboriginal, certainly they were described as “coloured”. I know this because, on March 23, 1928, when the overnight express pulled into Sydney’s Central Station, members of Sonny Clay’s band were met by a contingent of photographers, reporters, police and protesters —

¹*Truth*, March 31, 1928, p.1. ²For history of IB see: Frank Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, (London: Angus & Robertson, 1983); David Dutton, "The Commonwealth Investigation Branch and the Political Construction of the Australian Citizenry, 1920–40", *Labour History*, 75, 1998; David Dutton, *One of Us?: A Century of Australian Citizenship*, (Sydney: University of NSW, 2002). ³See: Deirdre O'Connell, "Contesting White Australia: Black Jazz Musicians in a White Man's Country", *Australian Historical Studies*, 47:2, 2016, 241-258. ⁴"Negro Bands in Australia", *Age*, April 2, 1928; Jane Carey, "'White Anxieties and the Articulation of Race: The Women's Movement and the Making of White Australia'", in Carey, Jane and Claire McLisky, *Creating White Australia*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009).

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all white, all men, and all hostile.⁵ The only people lending moral support to the musicians were a few black women. "There were one or two affectionate meetings between some of the Negroes and coloured women," noted a reporter.⁶ Clearly, they had met before.

The details are scant, yet the implications are intriguing: a jazz age connection between black America and black Australia. How I tried to identify these women, pin down the facts and figures, convert circumstances into some semblance of certainty. But the archive leaves no trace. Nothing — not even a first name. And without an individual life, there can be no biographical account, only informed speculation and plausible narratives; likelihoods buoyed by solid statistics, cultural context, circumstantial evidence, processes of deduction, and the historical scholarship of my esteemed colleagues, John Maynard, Heather Goodall, Victoria Haskins, Roslyn Poignant, Russell McGregor and others. From this inquiry emerges, if not the identity of these women, then an appreciation of the lives of several possible candidates: their place in the social geography of Sydney in 1928, engagement with modernism, and relationship to White Australia's sexual politics of race.

It is possible that these women may have been associated with the "coloured"

Britishers who lived in and around Woolloomooloo: the daughters and granddaughters of a small group of West Indian merchant seaman who had settled in Sydney before implementation of the White Australia policy. The 1933 Census, for all its oversights and gaps, counted a total of twelve, unmarried West Indian women between the ages of fifteen and thirty in New South Wales; another nine were of African American descent.⁷ However, probability alone, suggested that these “coloured women” were Indigenous Australians. According to the 1921 Census, 106 “half caste” Aboriginal women lived in Sydney, compared to 62 men.⁸ Twelve years later, the number had risen to 200 women and 145 men.⁹ Granted,

⁵ *Daily Guardian Pictorial*, March 27, 1928; *Herald*, March 28, 1928, p.1. ⁶ “Negroes Arrive in Sydney”, *Sun*, March 29, 1928, p.2; *Herald*, March 28, 1928, p.1 ⁷ Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, June 30, 1933, Part XII — Race, (Canberra, Commonwealth Govt Printer, 1933), pp.907, 920-922. [Hereafter: 1933 Census - Race]. ⁸ Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, April 2-4, 1921, Part V — Race, (Melbourne, Acting Govt Printer, 1921), pp.298-99, 322-24. [Hereafter: 1921 Census - Race]. ⁹ 1933 Census – Race.

these figures did not capture the transient population, or the people designated “white” or “full-blooded.”¹⁰

These rates of growth dwarfed in comparison with the European population. In 1928, Sydney’s population had topped 1.2 million and was growing at a rate of 30,000 people per year, most of them British, with a small percentage of southern Europeans.¹¹ To meet the demand for housing, a building bonanza pushed out the limits of the city, a ring of free

standing Californian bungalows from Gordon to Como. The march of progress overran orchards, market gardens, poultry runs, and Aboriginal bush camps.¹² Instead, local progressive associations drew on imperfectly transcribed Darug words to name their new suburbs: Jannali (place of the moon), Killara (always there), Warrawee (stop here), Mount Ku-ring-gai (black duck people).¹³ But still, the new settlers could not escape reminders that they walked on another's land. In a Cronulla subdivision, builders dug up Aboriginal remains.¹⁴ In a North Bondi back yard, a family unearthed ancient human skull.¹⁵ In Frenches Forest, children stumbled upon some sort of Aboriginal initiation ground.¹⁶ The destruction of cave drawing and rock art along the harbour foreshores roused antiquarians to action.¹⁷

The largest proportion of Aboriginal women living in Sydney, almost fifty per cent lived in white households, labouring as domestic servants in the leafier suburbs of Sydney.¹⁸ One lived in Drummoyne. Another in Hunters Hill. Five in Woollahra and four in Mosman.¹⁹ Almost all were one-time wards of the state who had been "rescued" by the Aboriginal Protection Board from "degradations" of Aboriginal missions and camps.²⁰ In the name of

¹⁰ See: Richard Madden and Fadwa Al-Yaman, *How Statisticians Describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Seminars on Health and Society: An Australian Indigenous Context. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2006.

¹¹ "Population of Sydney", *Barrier Miner*, Nov 4, 1930, p.1. ¹² "Opening up our land to Sydney's growing population", *Telegraph*, June 3, 1928. ¹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sept 6, 1921 ¹⁴ "Aboriginal Relics at Cronulla", *The World's News*, April 5, 1924. ¹⁵ "Skull Discovered", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Aug 31, 1929. ¹⁶ *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, May 21, 1926, p.9. ¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mar 16, 1922. ¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 29, 1924. The article claimed that 200 Aboriginal domestic servants resided in Sydney in 1924. Also see: Victoria Haskins, "A Better Chance? Sexual Abuse and the Apprenticeship of Aboriginal Girls Under the NSW Aborigines Protection Board", *Aboriginal History*, 28, 2004, 33-58; Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights, 1919-1939*, (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2000). ¹⁹ 1933 Census - Race. ²⁰ *Sydney Mail*, May 24, 1922

protection, with the goal of absorption, the Board separated “quadroon” and “octaroon” children from their families since the beginning of the decade. At the Cootamundra Girls Home or Bomaderry Children’s home or the welfare home at Parramatta, Aboriginal girls were taught to aspire to whiteness before assuming their place as lowest ranks of the class system as domestic servants.²¹ The system hinged on the segregation of the sexes: boys were sent to situations in the country, and girls sent to the city, working for a sixpence a week, five or six times less than their white counterparts.²² The Aboriginal Protection Board (ABP) confirmed that they deliberately kept wages low. The government retained half of their salary specifically to prevent the girl from going back to the bush.²³ There’s was a lonely existence, isolated from each other, their communities and families. One wrote to the matron who raised her, describing the material comforts of her employer’s Sydney home, and her deep longing to the return to the Bomaderry she was raised. She begged the Matron to allow her to return.²⁴ Even when they reached the age of eighteen, the APB often refused to release the young women, despite persistent requests from their mothers.²⁵

There were few matrimonial prospects for these girls, noted a 1924 report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “Most of the luckless girls must dismiss all thoughts of marriage from their minds”.²⁶ If these women married at all — and so many of them did not — it tended to be to white men. As mothers, many would sidestep the uncomfortable question of their ancestral heritage. They were adept at laying a table with fine linen and cutlery, but less

familiar with the lay of their country back in Pilliga, Kempsey, the Richmond River, Foster, or Cabbage Tree Island. An APB official agreed that their outlook was not very bright. “What do you propose instead” he shrugged, “in camps the girls will fall prey to dissolute whites...The freedom of young people is conducive to immorality.”²⁷ The APB position led the Herald reporter to wonder whether the “apprenticeship system” was “accelerating the extinction of

²¹ For discussion of ‘biological absorption’, see Russell McGregor, “‘Breed out the colour’ or the Importance of Being White”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 33:120, 2002, 286–302. ²² *Truth*, Jan 5, 1925 ²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 29, 1924. ²⁴ *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, Oct 3, 1928. ²⁵ *Truth*, Jan 5, 1925 ²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 29, 1924. ²⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 29, 1924.

the Aboriginal race?”²⁸ Without question, anxieties about interracial sex and the female sexuality lay at the heart of the system.

Of course, the apprenticeship system often exposed these young women to sexual predation. Some domestics bore children to their employers, who in turn were removed by the Protection Board. Some tried to kill their employers.²⁹ Many more ran away in fear of sexual assault. As the case of Gladesville maid, Matilda Williams, revealed, judges and juries rarely convicted white men for assaulting black women.³⁰ Under cross-examination at Darlinghurst Quarter Sessions, the defence suggests her assault was “merely a figment of the girl’s imagination”, that she had been sent to Cootamundra at age of 12 because she had been deemed “uncontrollable”, and had a history of running away from her employer.³¹ In contrast, judges were quick to pass down harsh sentence on Aboriginal men taking young

brides.³²

The other half of Sydney's Aboriginal women were in one of several places. A cluster of Aboriginal families lived in inner city, working class districts — by 1933, eighteen females and thirteen males live in and around Woolloomooloo, and another thirteen females and eight men resided in Redfern; though tiny in relative terms, their numbers continued to increase over the coming decades.³³ They came from the Wiradjuri nation in the west country, others from the North coast, around Port Stephens and Kempsey way, working, living and dying alongside their white neighbours: same churches, factories, and docks. Some were school educated, wise to ways of the *whitefella*, and drew on their experiences in the trade union movement to organise a lobby group of their own.³⁴

Another cluster lived in the few remaining Koori camps. A 1924 photograph taken at Quakers Hat Bay on Middle Harbour captured three women in loose fitting checked smocks, sitting on the steps of a rough-hewn wooden shed, five barefoot and shiny-eyed children

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 29, 1924. ²⁹ *Evening News*, May 17, 1923. ³⁰ *Daily Examiner*, Sept 4, 1928. ³¹ *Truth*, Feb 6, 1921.

³² "Half Caste Girl", *Daily Examiner*, June 4, 1927. ³³ 1933 Census – Race. ³⁴ Pamela Nixon, *The Integration of a Half-Caste Community at La Perouse, N.S.W.* Thesis (M.A.) — University of Sydney, 1948, 85; Shirley C. Smith, *Mum Shirl: an autobiography*, (Richmond, Vic. : Heinemann Educational, 1981).

around them.³⁵ For decades, a Roper River woman named Lucy lived in a paper bark gunyah of the foreshores of Hunters Hill, until finally persuaded in 1925 to move into an unlined two room cottage, built for her by public subscription.³⁶

Thirty minutes by train from down town Sydney, then an hour's walk through the immigrant suburbs of Padstow, was a bushy tributary of the Georges Rivers known as Salt Pan Creek. Two Aboriginal families owned blocks of land, their sturdy weatherboard cottages formed the nucleus of an Aboriginal camp that grew in numbers after in the mid-1920s.³⁷ A 1925 article counted a core of twenty-five people: the husbands, wives and children of eight families, each living in a little hut on the sandstone escarpment, made of galvanised iron, hessian bags and packing cases. Another few men in their own circle lived closer to the creek.³⁸ Oral histories gathered by Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow depict a refuge for Aboriginal people seeking to escape the harassment and paternalism of the Aboriginal Protection Board. Unsurprisingly, they were a political lot, part of a vocal network of malcontents from Northern New South Wales to the Burragorang Valley.³⁹ Many had travelled widely and had seen other ways of living; generally men outnumbered women, nine females to sixteen males, according to the 1933 census.⁴⁰ They made ends meet fishing from the river, crafting artefacts, and collecting gum tips and wildflowers to sell in the city.⁴¹ In the months the Sonny Clay Orchestra were in Sydney, the state government constructed a new electrified railway line across the Salt Pan Creek, opening up rural Canterbury to a thousand new homes a year; within months, authorities traced an outbreak of Ptomaine Epidemic the prawns from the tributary.⁴² Two undated photograph of the Salt Pan Creek

³⁵ Photograph: Aboriginal Family at Middle Harbour, 1924, courtesy of Father O'Connell, Dublin, cited in The Quakers Hat Bay Town Camp, A History of Aboriginal Sydney, <https://historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/north-coastal/quakers-hat-bay-town-camp>

[accessed May 2, 2019]. ³⁶ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Sept 30, 1925. ³⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 31, 1931. ³⁸ "Salt Pan Creek", *Evening News*, Oct 17, 1925. ³⁹ Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience: Aboriginal people on Sydney's Georges River*, (Sydney, New South Wales: University New South Wales Press, 2009), 125.; Dianne Johnson, *Sacred Waters: The Story of the Blue Mountains Traditional Owners*, (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2006), p.53. ⁴⁰ 1933 Census – Race. ⁴¹ Goodall, *Rivers and Resilience*, 120, 130-132; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Nov 7, 1924; *Truth*, Feb 14, 1926. ⁴² *Truth*, June 3, 1928; *Evening News*, Mar 20, 1928.

community showed seven youngsters in their Sunday best: ringlets, blazers and bright white frocks.⁴³

Sydney's largest and best known Aboriginal community could be reached by tram from Circular Quay, that trundled east down Oxford Street, south through Moore Park, along the newly built houses for returned soldiers on Anzac Parade, through the freshly sectioned sub-divisions of Matraville, past Long Bay Gaol and the Chinese market garden to a fishing hamlet on the north head of Botany Bay: La Perouse.

Beyond the commercial wireless receiving station, and the monuments to white settlement that littered the headland, lay the sheltered cove of Frenchman's Bay, a six-acre gazetted reserve⁴⁴ run by the Anglican Church's United Aboriginal Mission. About eighty Aboriginals lived under the 'protection' — Dharawal and Gundungurra people largely, with links to the South Coast, Burragarong Valley, and the Blue Mountains.⁴⁵ The 1921 Census counted 39 females and 42 males. By 1933, the population had grown to 71 and 68 respectively — and would continue to grow. By 1947, the community had doubled in size. There was no monuments here to the first people here, only three proud Moreton Bay Figs. Old people worked in its shade, children played around it.⁴⁶ The residents lived in one

roomed tin shacks with earthen floors, perhaps covered by an old carpet, and a curtain for privacy, the walls lined with newspaper and hessian bags.⁴⁷ Their material possessions were few: a battery run wireless set counted as a coveted luxury item. Water was drawn from the Mission tap and heated in copper basins and tubs. There was electricity, no oven or stoves.⁴⁸ Extended families eked out a living by harvesting fish and oysters the sea, and crafting souvenirs for the tourist trade, mostly around a communal fireplace: a complex net

⁴³ Photograph: Ellen Anderson's grandchildren, Ellen Jnr and Tom Williams Jnr are the very young children in the front, Mitchell Library), State Library of New South Wales, [PXA 773 / Box 1, Part 2, 78]. ⁴⁴ Monuments included the grave to of the first white man to die on Australian soil; the pillar that marked the last place where white men saw French explorer, Captain J. F. G. de la Perouse alive; the spot where Captain Arthur Philip replenished the water supply for his fleet of convict ships in January 18, 1788. See: Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005). ⁴⁵ *Freemans Journal*, Sept 30, 1920; *Evening News*, Jan 16, 1928. ⁴⁶ A collection of writing by members of the aboriginal community, *La Perouse: The Place, The People and the Sea*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988). ⁴⁷ Nixon, *The Integration of a Half-Caste Community at La Perouse*, 1948; James Harle Bell, *The La Perouse Aborigines, PhD Thesis* — University of Sydney, 1960. ⁴⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan 5, 1922.

of close knit families, many were kinfolk, one way or another, united by prejudice of the white community, and proud of their ancestral links to their great warrior tribesmen.

Only a handful of white people lived in area: a few storekeepers, Mr Ryan, the policeman who managed the reserve, and Miss Harriet A Baker, a thin bespectacled missionary of unwavering faith who, for thirty years, had sacrificed worldly pleasures to “blaze a trail for civilisation” and “evangelise the Aborigines”.⁴⁹

There is a case to be made that members of the Sonny Clay Orchestra first met the

young Aboriginal women at La Perouse. Each Sunday, the Sydney's Aboriginal community, from the Mission to Salt Pan Creek, stood ready to do business with the thousands of day-trippers who descended on the headland to enjoy its seaside charms. A line of enterprising stallholders set up shop in the parkland opposite the tram terminal, locally known as The Loop. The Snake Man of La Perouse earned his crust toying with death, allowing deadly snakes to bite him in exchange for a coin donation in the hat. (He lived to a ripe old age although snake bites took the lives of three previous operators). Beside the snake man, Aboriginal warriors exhibited their hand-crafted weaponry: boomerangs, womerahs, spears, shields, and nulla nullas, decorated with the blackened pokerwork designs of wattles, waratahs and animals. Another display showcased the handicraft of the women: generous bunches of wildflowers, handwoven coolamons, vessels for water and food, bowls carved from gnarly knots of eucalypt trees, intricate shellwork — baskets, boxes, and necklaces tiled with perfectly formed shells gathered on shores on Kurnell and Botany Bay.⁵⁰

Always in earshot was a gum leaf band. Four men each held two eucalyptus leaves between their lips, the force of the air through the gap in the middle liberating a sweetness that trilled like a harmonica, buzzed like a kazoo, slurred like a trumpet. Few horn players could fail to be mystified by its simplicity, humbled by its cleverness, and uplifted by its song.

⁴⁹ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Sept 1, 1928. ⁵⁰ Maria Nugent, "An Economy of Shells: A brief history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shell-work and its markets, 1880–2010", in [ed.] Natasha Fijn, Ian Keen, Christopher Lloyd, Michael Pickering, *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II: Historical Engagements and Current Enterprises*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012).

American visitors to La Perouse reported being treated to a gum leaf quartet who extemporised with moan of the didgeridoo, the whirl the bullroarer and an ancient chant by two wizened men.⁵¹ Yet La Perouse was not immune to modern American popular culture. One gum leaf band astonished overseas visitors when they struck up a selection of well-known American airs. A precocious young lad with a fine soprano voice who went by the stage name “Piccaninny Pete” danced the Dixie Stomp.⁵²

The world came to the northern headland of Botany Bay: Japanese princes, Methodist missionaries, Samoan pastors, cruise ship passengers, and sailors of all nationalities. The black boxer Jack Johnson was a regular visitor during his 1907 and 1908 sojourn in Sydney. He trained at a hotel in Botany Bay and every day jogged along the shore of the bay to La Perouse. By the time he left Australia, the heavyweight championship belt now his, he had acquired a fine collection of boomerangs and weaponry. “The Australian natives must have been geniuses to invent such weapons”, he told the press, before elaborating on his plans to build a flying machine.⁵³

When the American Pacific fleet docked in 1925, a steady trickle of sailors wound their way to La Perouse, some personally chaperoned by blackfellas they had met in the streets and drinking houses in the docks. Their demand for boomerangs kept the reserve’s artisans busy.⁵⁴ The fleet’s Commander-In-Chief even wrote a personal note not to Wes Simms thanking him for the inscribed boomerang, delivered to him by a Californian

seamen.⁵⁵

The boomerang held a special place in the American imagination. This was the decade of when nonstop solo flights made celebrities of Charles Lindbergh and Bert Hinkler, and the US press carefully explained and illustrated the wonderful aviation principles of the boomerang⁵⁶ — the perfect marriage of a propeller and wing that soared through the air with

⁵¹ *Freemans Journal*, Sept 30, 1920; “Aboriginal Display at La Perouse”, *Mankind*, Mar 1, 1931; “Tourists Gum Leaf Band”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 29, 1932. ⁵² *Sunday Times*, Jan 22, 1928. ⁵³ Jeff Wells, *Boxing Day: The Fight that Changed the World*, (Pymble, NSW: Harper Collins, 1998). ⁵⁴ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, August 31, 1925. ⁵⁵ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Sept 30, 1925. ⁵⁶ For example see: “Celluloid Boomerangs”, *Urbana Daily Courier*, Feb 26, 1910; “On Principle of Boomerang”, *Lead Daily Call*, Jan 20, 1920; “Why the Boomerang Returns to the Thrower”, *Hamilton Ohio Journal News*, Dec 18, 1922, p.11.

the speed of an arrow, turned in circle and double loops, figure eights and double figure eights, to return to the thrower’s feet. A discovery “the savage accidentally made in their experiments and developed by them without any scientific knowledge of the mechanical laws in operation”, wrote the *Washington Times*, employing the same primitivist logic that negated African American jazz from the ranks of artistry and innovation.⁵⁷

A North Queensland man named “King Bill” was the first boomerang thrower to thrill Americans, so accurate he could knock a derby hat from the head of a spectator. From the late 1890s, he was a fixture of US circuses and Wild West shows, held in virtual captivity by a shamelessly exploitative manager, until finally felled by his own boomerang during a display in a Brooklyn park in 1906.⁵⁸ In 1899, after years of daily practice, a white Chicago

lad became the first “civilized boy” to master the throw, and was able to make the boomerang loop and twirl within the confines of a vaudeville theatre.⁵⁹ Six years later, an American inventor patented a four-pronged cross stick that “moved through the air in graceful curves and returned the thrower”, his American “boomerang” attracting sales of four million and inspired a national pastime.⁶⁰

In Australia, the image of the boomerang was first and foremost a symbol of a national identity; its distinctive shape joined the waratah and kangaroo to decorate mastheads, ashtrays and coat-of-arms. Across the Pacific, the semiotic meaning of the boomerang locked into a different orbit, the embodiment of a principle that bridged the sacred and profane. US department stores staged “Boomerang Weeks” to flag bargains so irresistible, that the shopper would keep coming back.⁶¹ Economists spoke of a “boomerang” when pondering “the self-correcting mechanism of the industrial order” otherwise known as boom and bust.⁶² Political strategists referred to the “boomerang” to described the self-serving antics of machine politicians at Tammany Hall. While preachers could not resist

⁵⁷ *Washington Times*, Oct 23, 1918. ⁵⁸ For account of King Bill's life see: Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). ⁵⁹ “Boomerangs”, *National Rural and Family Magazine*, Feb 16, 1899. ⁶⁰ *Topeka Daily Capital*, Aug 7, 1921, p.24. ⁶¹ *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 21, 1922, p.81. ⁶² *The Post Crescent*, May 16, 1923, p.4.

mentioning “boomerangs” while pondering Galatians 6:7: “whatsoever a man soweth, that

shall he also reap”.⁶³ Playwrights, too, chose the “boomerang” over Cupid’s Arrow to warn that a shameful past would one day come back to smack a girl right in the face.⁶⁴

Smitten by the science and poetry of the boomerang, time and again, American tourists in Sydney expressed a desire to meet a “genuine” Australian Aboriginal and see their well-practiced hand launch the boomerang on its elegant path of ellipses and twists — and always, always, fulfil its symbolic duty and returned to the feet of the thrower.⁶⁵ Naturally, they headed to La Perouse.

I can only speculate on the likelihood that members of the Sonny Clay Orchestra put their Sundays to good use and rode the tram to La Perouse to see the boomerang throwers and learn a little more about their black brothers and sisters. Hundreds of American visitors had made the trip, so why not them? But as to the moment the bandsmen met the “coloured women”, I can offer nothing. The racialized construction of memory has created silences, obliterating and rendering invisible people’s lives.

But oh, how I would love to report that the young women were some of the La Perouse girls who appeared in a 1903 photograph. Eight girls between the ages ten and three, plus a baby on the knee, all in spotless white frocks, ringlets and ribbons: Florrie Saunders, Louey Simms, Ollie Simms, Duckie Ashmore, Emma Jane Foster, Mary and Mary Ellen.⁶⁶ By 1928, the girls were adults, perhaps already too burdened with the responsibilities of parenthood to be socialising with the American jazz men. Perhaps not. If only there was a 1915 or 1918 photograph of the mission’s “girlies”.

And what can I make of the 1916 portrait of Sophie Williams and her father Tom

Williams, taken just after he enlisted into the 33rd Battalion of the Australian Army. Tom Williams was a masterful crafter of boomerangs and womerahs, lived a house adjoining Salt

⁶³ *The Gaffney Ledger*, Aug 14, 1928, p.1. ⁶⁴ *The Atlanta Constitution*, Mar 7, 1920, p.7. ⁶⁵ "American Tourists "Must See" Aborigines", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Dec 1929, p.9. ⁶⁶ "Gillum Moore, Charlie Golden, Jane Timbery and local children", *A History of Aboriginal Sydney*, <https://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/south-coastal/1880s>, (accessed Apr 20, 2019).

Pan Creek, and sold his artefacts at The Loop each week.⁶⁷ In 1928, Sophie was eighteen. Could she have accompanied her father to La Perouse one Sunday and there accepted the black American musician's invitation to come see the show?

And why can't I shake that feeling about the Porter Sisters, Gwen and Edith.⁶⁸ Two state wards who two appear in an Aboriginal Welfare Board (AWB) photograph taken in a Circular Quay studio sometime in the mid-1920s. From the sweep of their fringe, to the bow of their lips, from their co-ordinated outfits to the confident glint in their eyes, they claimed their place in the modern world. Another photograph of Gwen Porter in a loose domestic shift cut a striking figure, her powerful, dramatic eyes evoking the glamour of a Hollywood starlet. Unlike most of the other AWB portraits of domestics, the Porter sisters betrayed no hint of submission, of discomfort or uncertainty. Nor were they dewy-eyed, or grateful and wistful. Or dowdy or trussed up or art-directed. Rather they present as uncompromising, united and strong. In another portrait, a girl known only as Sally had a similar stare: canny enough to

comply but determined not to conform.⁶⁹

In 1928, Gwen was twenty-two and Edith was nineteen. No longer in domestic service, they lived in Sydney's eastern suburbs, both as single women. A 1947 obituary celebrated Edith as "particularly bright and well-informed".⁷⁰ Did her curiosity about the world reach as far as Sydney's Tivoli Theatre to see the Harlem styled revue?

Or perhaps it was Bessie, the burst of "happiness and sunshine", who grew up at Bomaderry Children's Home and, in 1925, was placed in domestic service at the Haberfield home of T.E. Colebrook, the president of the Australian Aboriginal Mission.⁷¹ The Matron of the children's home had difficulty finding "situations" for their "girlies", so the Colebrooks took on a total of three. Unlike other Aboriginal domestics, Bessie had companions, elderly employers, and a comparatively light work load; in January 1928, Colebrook was bedridden,

⁶⁷ Goodall, *Rivers and Resilience*, p.122. ⁶⁸ AWB Photographs, NRS 30, Aborigines Welfare Board, 1883-1969, NSW State Records and Archives. [Henceforth: AWB Photographs]. Not their real names in accordance with NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs policy. ⁶⁹ AWB Photographs. Not her real name in accordance with NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs policy. ⁷⁰ "Obituary", *Macleay Chronicle*, Oct 1, 1947, p.2. ⁷¹ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, June 30, 1925; May 31, 1928. Not her real name in accordance with NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs policy.

months away from death. Did this peculiar set of circumstances series offer Bessie and her friends the freedom to tune into Sonny Clay Orchestra's broadcasts on the radio, then slip away to the Tivoli to discover a previously unknown world.

And if not Bessie, or the Porter sisters, then which one of the scores of domestic

servant featured in the Aboriginal Welfare Board portraits: young fresh-faced women holding bouquets, or standing next to artfully arranged vases of lilies, or a table set for high tea. Some in starched uniforms with matching scalloped apron, collar and cap. Others costumed in cloche hats, dropped waisted dress, long beaded necklaces and Mary Jane shoes — a publicity exercise in which they appear “integrated” and “assimilated”. After the photo has been taken, indicated one note, the girls would remove their dresses for the next sitter.⁷²

There were other candidates as well. “The shingled girl of nineteen” that a *Daily Guardian* reporter spotted at the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association’s inaugural conference in Surrey Hills in 1925.⁷³ She was another modern girl, one of two hundred people demanding Aboriginal self-determination. “We want to work out our own destiny”, AAPA president Fred Maynard told the gathering, calling for an end to the forced separation of families at the hands of the Aboriginal Protection Board, and the sexual abuse suffered by Aboriginal domestic servants.⁷⁴

Small scraps of information survive — none complete enough to make a coherent picture but revealing enough to suggest the centrality of inter-racial sex in any schema.

Yet, the white Australians were all but blind to *this* inter-racial sex scandal, even while fixated on sex across the colour line. Novels, newsprint, films, scientific and sociological research invoked visceral disgust, melodramatic horror, spicy titillation, despair for the future, while chronicling isolated incidences and broader patterns of interracial sex.⁷⁵ At best, interracial love was a social and moral taboo. At worst, it was a violation of natural

⁷² AWB Photographs. ⁷³ *Daily Guardian*, May 7, 1925. ⁷⁴ *Daily Guardian*, May 7, 1925. ⁷⁵ Also see: Liz Conor, “Blackfella Missus Too Much Proud”: Techniques of Appearing, Femininity, and Race in Australian Modernity” in Alys Eve Weinbaum et al (ed), *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, And Globalization*, (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

law, an agent of degeneration and decline. The consequences for those who crossed this line varied depending, firstly, on the combination of race and gender and secondly, on the environment: whether the interracial relationship played out within the bounds of the ‘civilized world’, or beyond it.⁷⁶

A January 1928 edition of *Smiths Weekly*, a men’s magazine cast in a larrikin mould, published three items that captured this double standard. The first, a short story titled *The Black Madam Butterfly*, was a portrait of a pitiful Aboriginal woman — “the joke of the stockmen and body servant for the lord and master” — and her tormented relationship with a white bushman who used her to satisfy his sexual needs, before settling into a respectable marriage with a white townswoman. The storyteller wallowed in her pain before dismissing it as unfortunate but inevitable; that’s just how things played out in the bush.⁷⁷

A few pages on, a cartoon showed a white stockman admiring the ginger hair on a baby ‘fathered’ by an unkempt Aboriginal man. Blind to this breach of ‘unwritten law’, the black man shrugged off the insult to his honour.⁷⁸ Any sympathy the magazine showed to the *Black Madam Butterfly* was now an easy laugh. Another few pages on, the story “Migrant Girl Saved from White Slaver” told of a hapless British girl in a Far Eastern port, *en*

route to Australia, who was lured away by two Asian slave traders. Thankfully, an AIF veteran came to her rescue, scooping her up in his arms, the woman foolishly resisting, only to realize later that, if not for her hero's clear thinking, she too would be a "plaything for the scum of the Orient".⁷⁹ These two tropes played out in countless miscegenation dramas: one was the ruin of a white girl. The other gave free reign to white male fantasies with highly sexualised women of colour "beyond the outposts of civilisation".

⁷⁶ See Chapter 6, "White Power, White Desire: The Political Economy of Miscegenation" in Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London: New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 142–158; For discussion of interracial sexual liaisons in Australia during WWII see: Chapter 10, Kay Saunders, "In a Cloud of Lust: Black GIs and sex during World War II" in Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi (eds), *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 178–190. ⁷⁷ "The Black Madame Butterfly", *Smith's Weekly*, January 21, 1928, p. 10. Also see: Marilyn Lake, "Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man", *Australian Frontiers: Journal of Australian Studies*, 49, 1996, pp. 12–20. ⁷⁸ Cartoon, *Smith's Weekly*, January 21, 1928, p. 24. ⁷⁹ "Migrant Girl Saved from White Slavers", *Smith's Weekly*, January 21, 1928.

However real-life events blurred the boundaries between these two worlds. Unlike the romance of the South Sea Adventure, the white settler state of Australia was both coloniser and colonised, placing 'the outposts of civilisation' within the nation's boundaries. Well into the late 1920s, disturbing reports trickled through from Central Australia. Missionaries bore witness to physical abuse, hunger, sickness and sexual coercion — and a surge in the number light skinned children born to Aboriginal women.⁸⁰ Evidence submitted to the 1927 Royal Commission into the deaths of thirteen women and sixteen men at the

hands of the police at Forrest River Mission chronicled a grisly “battle in an ongoing frontier war.”⁸¹ In August 1928, at a remote outpost known as Coniston, at least seventeen Warlpiri tribesmen would die in a punitive police raid to avenge the deaths of two white settlers, both of whom had roused resentment for their mistreatment of Aboriginal women and girls.⁸²

Statistics confirmed the scale of interracial sex between white men and Aboriginal women across the country — a trend simply called the “half-caste problem”.⁸³ In NSW, authorities found the figures particularly troubling. Fifty years earlier, “full bloods” outnumbered “half-castes” by a ratio of three to one. By 1907, there were two “half-castes” for every “full-blood”. Of course not every sexual relationship between white men and black women was founded on the power imbalance, but a comparative chart in the 1933 Census indicated that, despite the mass deportation and non-white immigration restrictions, the overall numbers of non-whites barely changed, as the mostly rural Aboriginal ‘half-caste’ population doubled in twenty years.⁸⁴ Contrary to predictions of a vanishing race, Aboriginal numbers were increasing — a trend the Australian United Mission called a “racial tragedy”.⁸⁵ Sometimes tabloid newspapers chastised “black hearted” white men for their immoral behaviour, but at no point were bushmen stigmatized for derailing the White

⁸⁰ “Make Jesus glad fella again”, *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Aug 1, 1928. ⁸¹ Kate Auty, “Patrick Bernard O’Leary and the Forrest River massacres, Western Australia: examining ‘Wodjil’ and the significance of 8 June 1926” *Aboriginal History*, 28, 2004, 122–155. ⁸² Bill Wilson, Justin O’Brien, “‘To Infuse an Universal Terror’: a Reappraisal of the Coniston Killings,” *Aboriginal History*, 27, 2003, 59–78. ⁸³ For discussion of ‘half caste’ population in interwar period, see: Warwick Anderson, “Ambiguities of Race”, *Australian Historical Studies*, pp. 143–160; Tony Austin, ‘Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and Half castes in the Northern Territory, 1927– 1939’, *Aboriginal History*, 14:1, 1990, 104–122. ⁸⁴ 1933 Census – Race. ⁸⁵ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, May 31, 1927.

Australia mission. Quite the opposite: across the arts and popular culture, the stockman and drover were deified as an idealised racial type.⁸⁶

Surely the discussions between the “coloured women” and black Americans musicians who greeted each other with such warmth and affection at Central Station touched on the flagrant hypocrisy over the “rules” of interracial sex. Certainly, Sonny Clay addressed them when he spoke to the press, calling his deportation “a frame-up from start to finish”, and defending the musicians’ rights to intimacy across the colour line, as long as they “treated them as gentlemen should.”⁸⁷

Just what insights into the sexual politics of Australian race relations might have the “coloured women” offered the musicians can only be speculated upon, but regardless of their circumstances, each had a compelling tale to tell, particularly when compared to the American experience.

The women forcibly removed from their families and pressed into domestic service could explain the APB policy of absorption. Essentially it was an exercise in selective, state-sanctioned miscegenation structured around the reproductive practices of mostly Aboriginal women. According to American race logic, the idea of absorbing the black race into the white was simply not possible; one drop of blackness was enough to disqualify whiteness. But in Australia, miscegenation was also a path whereby the Aboriginal race would disappear. The logic hinged on the flawed assumption that Indigenous Australians were primitive versions of

Caucasians and distinct from the African race.⁸⁸

A connection with the La Perouse community would expose a black American to minutiae of racial segregation, Australian style. Visitors to the mission could not stay long; the policeman, Mr Ryan, would see to that. A little bit of Prohibition America lived in Aboriginal Mission Australia: no liquor, no gambling and after six in the evening, no whites, especially the white men who preyed on the girls. And certainly no members of the

⁸⁶ Russel Ward, *Australian Legend*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958). ⁸⁷ *Canberra Times*, March 29, 1928, p.1. ⁸⁸

Katherine Ellinghaus, "Absorbing the 'Aboriginal problem': controlling interracial marriage in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries", *Aboriginal History* 27 (2003), 183-207.

Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association who bad mouthed the missionaries and Protection Board with their talk of citizenship rights and the vote.⁸⁹

At the time of the musician's visit, white anxieties about the state's surging "half-caste" population imperilled the security of the La Perouse community.⁹⁰ In early 1928, Randwick Council announced plans to revoke the zoning of the Aboriginal reserve and relocate the residents to a more isolated location. Not far from the mission, the construction of an exclusive eighteen hole course was underway, and thhe suburb had been subdivided, ready for suburban development.⁹¹ Opponents of the plan labelled it a shameless land grab, yet the mayor insisted he only wished to protect the residents "privacy"; a coded way of say that the Aboriginal people needed to be kept under even stricter supervision.⁹² "In keeping

with the instincts of the race”, the council had found a “more natural” alternative: a boggy exposed beach nearby.⁹³ The residents steadfastly refused to leave; all fifty-three adult residents signed a petition.⁹⁴ “La Perouse is their legal right”, defended the mission’s president with an uncharacteristic feistiness. “The reserve may be closed, their homes pulled down; but the people will never be moved.”⁹⁵ As public sympathy swung behind the residents of La Perouse, the embattled mayor entreaties became shriller: the missionaries were “closing their eyes to the increased half caste population” — only strictly enforced segregation could prevent the birth of even more half-caste babies.⁹⁶

If the American musician’s relationship with the Aboriginal women connected them to the Salt Pan Creek camp or the urban Aboriginal communities in Redfern and Woolloomooloo, they might have found the politics of Harlem alive in Sydney. In 1920,⁹⁷ two young men, Tom Lacey and Robert Usher formed the Sydney branch of Marcus Garvey’s

⁸⁹ *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Mar 31, 1926 “The enemy of souls has agents at work everywhere. They teach erroneous doctrine and thus, confuse the minds of the dark folk. Others paint pictures of imaginary grievances and dupe the native folk into forming organisations which they assert will have the effect of immediate emancipation.” ⁹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Apr 4, 1928. ⁹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 11, 1928. ⁹² *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, Mar 31, 1928; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Feb 14, 1928; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Feb 10, 1928; *Evening News*, Jan 16, 1928. The mayor’s supporters agreed that the seaside resort was “too valuable...to tolerate unsightly shacks”. For revocation of Aboriginal land in 1920s see: Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 194–199. ⁹³ *Evening News*, Jan 16, 1928. ⁹⁴ “La Perouse Aboriginal Protest”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Apr 4, 1928; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mar 4, 1928. ⁹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Feb 4, 1928. ⁹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 2, 1928; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Feb 16, 1928. ⁹⁷ *The Voice of the North*, Oct 10, 1927.

Universal Negro Improvement Association, a black nationalist fraternal organization founded

in Harlem. Both corresponded with Garvey's wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, their insights informing a series of articles in *Negro World* detailing how "the white rulers" were "killing off the black Australian". Their friend, Fred Maynard had also studied the writings of Marcus Garvey, In 1907, he dined with Jack Johnson, and in the early 1920s had formed the AAPA to assert the right of Aboriginal self-determination, calling for a Royal Commission into living conditions and petitioning the state leaders, over for the restitution of Aboriginal land.⁹⁸

The hypocrisy that underlay the rules of interracial sex most burned Fred Maynard. His submission to the Royal Commission on the Constitution on February 22, 1928 revealed his torment. His writings focused to the "shocking breach", the "horrible abuses" that began when authorities invaded the sanctity of a person's home and departed with their daughters. "These girls of tender age and years...are torn away from their parents and homes...and put into service in an environment as near to slavery...tracked down and caught by the police... A life of slavery, misery and despair...only kept in these positions by the fear of the police." He dwelt upon the reserves: "breeding place of crime...of lying and deceit". Women told him that "their first step towards...a life of shame were at the injunction of those in charge...of the settlements."⁹⁹ When he wrote these words, the Sonny Clay's band were beginning their Melbourne Tivoli season, and in Investigation Branch were in the midst of the surveillance operation, panicked by the thought of white women consorting with black men. At the time Fred Maynard too, was the object of ongoing NSW Police harassment.

The issue for Fred Maynard was personal as well as political. As his biographer, John Maynard reveals, as a young girl, his mother worked as a domestic servant in a fine house

and fell pregnant to her employer. Fred's father, an English labourer, was paid to marry her. His aunt, Caroline Phillips was a fifteen- year-old domestic servant when she too fell pregnant to her employer. She gave birth, alone, in a water closet and dumped the newborn

⁹⁸ John Maynard, "Frederick Maynard & the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA): One God, One Aim, One Destiny", *Aboriginal History*, 21, 1997, 1–13; Also see: John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*, (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 27. ⁹⁹ Fred Maynard, AAPA, *To the Royal Commission on the Constitution* (a handwritten note with caps and eclipses), Feb 22, 1928, National Archive of Australia.

in a cesspit. Indicted for attempted murder, she was sentenced to three years hard labour in Darlinghurst goal, dying five months into the prison term.¹⁰⁰

In March 1928, few, if any, Indigenous person in Sydney was untouched by the double standards interracial sex. Anxieties about the "half-caste problem" threatened to undermine their communities and destroy their families. For women, in a particular, these standards curtailed their freedom of movement, and increased their exposure to physical violence. The wave of moral hysteria about a few white girls "consorting" with African American men, only highlighted the silence around their plight, enabling them to pinpoint the inner workings of white male privilege.

Against this backdrop, the newspapers made their second and final reference to the black musicians and "coloured" women.

It was the morning of Saturday, March 31st, 1928 at Sydney's Circular Quay, and the ten members of the Sonny Clay Orchestra joined hundreds of other passengers to board the

San Francisco steamer.¹ A throng gathered on the dock to give them a hearty send off. Amongst them were a number of customs officers under instruction to intervene should “difficulty” arise, a photographer from the Truth, a reporter from the Sun and two dozen or so young women. If officials anticipated a protest, it was not like the one they would witness:

The only demonstration...was made by the Negroes themselves. They lined the deck rail of the steamer and shouted advice to their friends on the wharf on how to remain in Australia. They were a noisy crowd, laughing and joking and calling out to their friends. Each of the Negroes held a big bunch of streamers and, holding the streamers on the wharf, were women, *several of whom were colored*.¹⁰¹ (my emphasis).

The musician’s showed flamboyant disregard for the gravity of their deportation, joking about the buffoonery of the Australian authorities, particularly the policeman who led

¹⁰⁰ John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom*, pp.10-12; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Oct 27, 1875. ¹⁰¹

“Noisy Farewell”, *The Sun*, March 31, 1928.

the raid. If the rest of the musicians’ “advice” continued to lampoon defenders of White Australia, then the display was profoundly political in intent. For the musicians, it was an opportunity to expose the government’s plan to rid the country of a sound and style popularly associated with “primitive” modernism. For the white women, it was an act of defiance in the

face of moral hand wringing in the press. For the black women, it was a rare chance to mock the posturing of the conquering race and pour scorn on the misplaced hysteria and double standards that underlay the 'rules' of interracial sex. Their visibility, alone, proclaimed their place in the modern world.

The American reading of the Boomerang was instructive here: reap what you sow. No matter how hard authorities tried to push the race question away, it kept coming back.

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