



Book review

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey. *Made to Matter. White Fathers, Stolen Generations.* Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013. 978-1-920899-97-4

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It is rare to come across studies of important themes in the context of a national culture, such as the Australian, and think, why has this not been examined properly before? Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's *Made to Matter. White Fathers, Stolen Generations* represents such a study. While stolen generations have been the subject of many studies in the wake of the *Bringing Them Home Report* released in the mid-nineties, the stolen generations' white fathers have not attracted such scholarly attention. There are many reasons for this neglect, which could presumably include: the spotlight was on the direct victims of this atrocious and cultural-genocidal policy culminating of course in Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology; as Probyn-Rapsey points out some white fathers would disown their "half-caste" offspring, others would own up to them at the risk of attracting attention from the white authorities, whose vigorous pursuit of white justice is mercilessly laid bare in the dramatized autobiography, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, and Baz Luhrmann's fictional account *Australia*.

These early twenty-first century retrospective accounts stand in marked contrast to a very weird mixture of white accounts from the earlier decades of the twentieth century typically saturated with the bushlore of limited literary quality: critical self-reflexivity, let alone Saidian critical consciousness, is hardly a trademark. The unique insights into life in "remote corners" of Australia which they do offer tend to be deeply qualified by the self-

congratulatory nature of the autobiographical white male. This would have been less problematic if there was other subject material available for a critical engagement with life on the “frontier” when the outback was a largely inaccessible place for the vast majority of Australians. But there are few accounts which might offer more sobering insights. This makes Probyn-Rapsey’s study of the narrations about and narratives of the white fathers of non-white children in the Australian outback an important contribution to nuance these uncounted accounts. Yet the question which haunts the book is also how to counter the self-narratives of the white fathers in view of the absence of material that might question the premise of these narratives. What also haunts the book is an unresolved question about how to deal with the more or less openly autobiographical material of Bill Harney, Matt Savage, Roger Jose etc alongside fictional work, particularly Xavier Herbert’s. Finally, how does one carry out a critique of this strident form of white masculinity produced during an era when life in the bush was envisaged as a contrast to the conventions of Australian city culture? Arguably, looking at these accounts today constitutes a form of doubly embarrassed state in the wake of the critical assessment from a far more racially aware contemporary academic discourse.

Chapter 1, “Husbands”, explores the difficult relationships between white men who fathered non-white children and the authorities. It homes in on the patrolling of “sex on the frontier” by Protectors embroiled in their own difficulties of managing “whitening” discourse, alongside racially based shame and guilt. The “white fathers” trod a difficult balance between acknowledging their offspring, when they desired to do so, and not landing themselves in difficulties with the race obsessed authorities. The highly select passages from a limited number of narratives raise the question as to what extent these are merely examples of responses to the wider, white community and its bureaucracies and to what extent they are in any shape or form representative—and if they are—of what?

Chapter 2, “The Combo”, details the life of Bill Harney, a larger-than-life character closely connected to the bushlore of the Northern Territory. His double role as patrol officer and married to an Aboriginal woman, Linda, combined with his many publications about life in the outback makes him a particularly ambiguous figure. The same ambiguity characterises his presence in the chapter. How is he to be trusted as a narrator? Does he represent authority or does he represent an Australian proto-type (if not stereotype), the anti-authoritarian figure convinced of his own self-reliance and the futility of “regulating the bush”? Are the numerous examples surrounding his life with Aborigines, his engagements with them, simply just that—examples? Or is the point to tell through the voice of Bill Harney a counter-narrative of white-indigenous contact zones in the Northern Territory?

Chapter 3 “Black Sheep” gets its title from Nicholas Jose’s book about Borroloola. The chapter opens with a refreshing discussion about the construction of whiteness, part of which is fed by “the bushman legend” in outback Australia in academic literature. This is a useful exercise because it frames and questions the autobiographies of white men in the “frontier years” of outback Australia. The chapter shows the many layers of ambivalence that not only haunts the narratives of white “bushmen”, but also a deeper level of ambivalence surrounding their accounts, not least when it comes to the sexual relations with Aboriginal women, and the general structural violence that characterised the Australian frontier. The question is whether some of this ambivalence might have been worked through more productively using the theoretical frame that opens the chapter. The reader is frequently lost in the overt attention to details that threaten to overwhelm the frame.

Chapter 4 “Jim Crows” approaches Aboriginal white Australian relations from a different perspective. Engaging far less directly with specific accounts, it instead discusses how closeted white-Aboriginal relations can be understood from a variety of theoretical points, using, among others, Sara Ahmed, Denis Byrne and Judith Butler. The direct American implication entailed by using “Jim Crow” could perhaps have been discussed in order to convey the differences between racial frontiers in the US and Australia. Overlaps are easy to spot in terms of race relations and suppressed white desires matched against blackness cast as the abject. Yet the book is premised on the uniqueness of the conditions shaping the appalling race relations in outback Australia.

The “Conclusion” begins with the reconsideration of the limitations of the discourses of reconciliation, which are, by their very nature, a national preoccupation. It moves on to consider the role of families, and gender roles across the Aboriginal non-Aboriginal divide, and finally it considers the role of narratives in addressing what futures might be imagined through the renegotiations of the contact history. It makes references to the works considered in the 4 chapters highlighting the troubled relationship between bush-based predominantly white male narratives and the broader national discourse, whose relationship became increasingly tenuous during the time of the Jim Crows, black sheep and combos, let alone in the decades that followed.

Made to Matter is an important book not least because it draws attention to an overlooked aspect of twentieth-century outback contact-zone history.

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