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Some Whites Are Whiter Than Others: The Whitefella Skin Politics of Xavier Herbert and Cecil Cook

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It is a striking paradox that the white man credited with inventing the phrase “breed out the colour”, Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1927 to 1939 in the Northern Territory, should be represented as an albino. Frances de Groen’s *Xavier Herbert: A Biography* introduces Cook (friend and foe to Herbert) as a “tall albino, conspicuous for his ruddy face, snow-white hair and pale blue eyes (one of them glass)” (59). And in an edition of Herbert’s letters Cook is presented as a “striking and controversial figure (he was an albino with a glass eye)” (de Groen and Hergenhan 467). When I first came across the idea that Cook was an albino I thought it strange, funny even, that the man known for “breed out the colour” had no colour himself. It sets in motion a series of delicious paradoxes, as in: *the man who invented the phrase “breed out the colour” had a “problem” with whiteness; he needed colour but professed the need to “breed it out” of Aboriginal people; he was attempting to “pass as white” by dyeing his hair; his “Englishness” (albion/albino) was “un-Australian”; his skin epitomised the unsuitability of the Territory for white Australians; he was the bearer of a genetic disorder (an excessive corporeal whiteness), while his role was to order, (genetically, socially and by skin), the future “stock” of the Territory as ideologically white; and so on.*

Photographs of Cook from 1923 and 1928 do not, however, show him with snow-white hair (Austin 111, see also National Archives of Australia). Ann McGrath, who interviewed Cook before he died confirmed that he did not appear to be a person with albinism (2005, 2006). Tim Rowse, who wrote the entry on Cook for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* had not heard this idea before (2005, 2006) and neither had Suzanne Saunders who has written about Cook and Herbert’s relationship (1990). Saunders had interviewed Cook’s daughter about his work and she did not mention it (2006). This leads me to conclude that Cook’s “albinism” is *possibly* a fiction of Herbert’s¹ or it is an association built upon an image of extreme or excessive whiteness that inhabits Herbert’s fiction, politics and letters. While the attribution of

albinism to Cook's body is, I believe, a misreading, it is also instructive and revealing, because it inadvertently capitalises on (or makes literal or corporeal) Herbert's interests in securing Australia for a certain kind of whiteness—one that did not lack "colour", by which is meant, more accurately, indigeneity.²

Countering the rumour of Cook's albinism is not the point of this essay ("countering" myth-making with fact would mistake its peculiar logic). Rather than looking for the truth beneath the story, it is fruitful to examine what lies beside it, poetically and politically, and in relation to the cultural context in which Cook and Herbert lived, and to how whiteness, skin and belonging intersect at a time when "colour" was a topic of conversation, conservation, administration and mobility.

Herbert's novels *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) demonstrate a fascination with skin colour; skin that signals belonging, heritage and foreignness as well as at-home-ness. Skin is described throughout his work in a way that highlights, for the contemporary reader, the differences between 1930s Australia and "now". Gillian Cowlshaw points out that today there is a notable "silence around skin colour which, like a trace element, marks the presence of anxious denial" (12), and Maureen Perkins doubts "that the colour of skin often goes unnoticed, though it often goes unremarked" (174). In Herbert's fictional world of the Northern Territory during the 1930s there is little reticence when it comes to describing how skin "looks" and embodies a person's place within an colonial hierarchy managed by a small number of "whites", themselves "internally differentiated" (Frankenberg 4). Aboriginal people's skin is described in *Poor Fellow My Country* as yellow, black, and "cream caramel" (9) and in *Capricornia* as "honey coloured" (27), "the colour of the cigarette stain on his finger" (27) and as "perfection" (*Poor Fellow* 10).³ Whiteness is not "undefined" or invisible (Dyer 1997) but is red, yellow, brown, "carroty" (*Capricornia* 3), purple, dusty, ruddy, crimson, and like "pale faced cows" (512). Whiteness is propped up by solar topees "more a badge of authority than a hat", suits of "bright white linen everyday" (*Capricornia* 9), a mincing talk (9), a walking stick, and of course the exclusion of non-whites and the "low" whites who "consort" with them. In Herbert's work, and in his letters, one can observe a certain skin politics where, as Perkins puts it "seeing *all* colour, including white, and challenging colour's power to demarcate boundaries of community goes hand in hand with naming hypocrises of the past" (175).

Herbert also pays attention to Aboriginal perceptions of whiteness. Basil Sansom argues that Herbert brings "Aboriginal constructions to whitefella perceptions . . . like two filmstrips secretly running in parallel. Herbert then

cross-edits" (94). This cross-editing, this seeing of colour and positioning of skin, is not without a particular political vision. Herbert's nationalism positions Aborigines as "essential" (Mudrooroo viii) to Australian-ness and as the "perfection" required for a "new" Australian body politic; a "light-skinned breed, even tanned Caucasian . . . Surely a beautiful creature to any eye but the most prejudiced in the matter of race" (9). By comparison with this image of perfection, *white* bodies, particularly those made red rather than brown, are sources of fear, foreignness, maladaptation and disproportion. In *Capricornia*, Jock Driver, a "North-country Englishman" (53) is perceived by Nawnim/Norman in terms of his odd-bodiedness:

What troubled Nawnim was his [Jock's] colouring. His mouth was as *red* as fresh raw meat, and thick lipped and wide and constantly writhing. Nawnim was used to lean-faced, *brown* faced, thin lipped, small-eyed *white* men. Jock's face was as *red* as a boiled crayfish, even *redder* than it usually was in this climate in which it was as foreign as a gumtree in his native fogs, because it had lately been put under the blood rousing influences of salt-wind and grog. The *redness* of his face set off the *blueness* of his bulging eyes and the *blackness* of his hair and the *whiteness* of his large prominent teeth. His teeth looked like a shark's to Nawnim, his eyes like a crab's. When he approached the bedroom Nawnim turned sick with fright. Jewty must have been given a turn too. She rushed to the bed and snatched up her baby and trod on Nawnim's little hand. Nawnim yelped, heaved away, struck his head on the underneath of the bed, and rolled into view bawling. Diana screamed and clutched at her mother's hair. (55, emphasis added)

Part animal, drunk, red faced (rather than brown) with thick lips (rather than thin), Jock Driver makes Nawnim "sick with fright". If the "tanned Caucasian", "the light skinned breed" was "perfection" in Herbert's eye, then the red, sun-scorched, wind-burnt white skin that belonged to the foreigner, particularly the English, was disturbing, laughable and ridiculous. Jock's colouring in the above excerpt is primarily red, white and blue, familiar and yet as "foreign as a gumtree in his native fogs". Here Herbert achieves in fictional terms what he imagined the Euraustralian league⁴ might achieve politically—to "sweep the Pommies back into the sea" (Herbert, qtd. in de Groen 104).

Others, whose whiteness warrants comment and evokes fear, include Dr Cobbity in *Poor Fellow My Country*: "a biggish man, but with a little round head and very red face that looked like a tomato on a long stalk. So striking were his blue eyes in the red face that when he looked straight across at girls, they cringed visibly" (230). He has "intense blue eyes out of the brick-red face" and a "glassy stare" (252). Dr Cobbity is based on the real life figure

of Dr Cecil Cook, who had one glass eye but was not an albino. Herbert ridicules him as Cobbity in *Poor Fellow my Country* and Dr Aintee in *Capricornia* (Saunders):

Dr Aintee held no high opinion of the great black and brindle family he fathered . . . he regarded them merely as marsupials being routed by a pack of dingoes . . . Most of the dingoes hated him for interfering with their rights as the stronger animals; the marsupials regarded him as a sort of devil devil, and trembled at mention of his name. (272)

Cecil Cook appears to have been startling, striking and shocking to other whites too. Northern Territory chronicler Tom Cole describes him as being excessively white: “a figure of somewhat striking appearance, standing over six feet in height, and although barely forty, displaying a shock of snow white hair above eyes of an almost startling blueness” (101). The attention paid to the whiteness of the *other* white body is particularly interesting, made strange and odd within a perceived “normal” range of whiteness. How and why does *his* (Cook’s) whiteness become worthy of comment? Where is the point at which “seeing white” becomes not so much a displacement of white privilege (as critical whiteness studies attempts, see Probyn) as much as a fetishisation, a displacement of the *horror* of white privilege (or ideology) on to the *excessively* white, the white body that is “not-at-home”? Sara Ahmed points out that skin is not “simply invested with meaning as a visual signifier of difference (the skin as coloured, the skin as wrinkled and so on)” (44), but that it functions “as a border or frame” (45) that separates self/Other and is analogous to the ordering of social spaces, “homelands” (46). Unmarked bodies belong and “strange bodies” threaten, are expelled and incorporated (as “strange”). In the context of Herbert’s novels, the excessively white bodies are *strange*—compared with the lean and brown whites—and the extremely white body marks the brown and lean white body as closer to home, closer to the ordinary and the “accustomed to”.

In the literature of other politically charged environments the figure of the albino is sometimes deployed to unsettle racial categories and white privilege. The South African writer Breyten Breytenbach, imprisoned for his anti-apartheid activism, uses the figure of the albino to encapsulate the “freakish” nature of his political existence. In *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach is not “seen” by other Afrikaners who do not feel his difference because his white Afrikaner body is marked as “same:”

I was the faceless face in the crowd, I was the invisible man. Around me there was the space of death. I was a zombie only, a visitor from another planet—painfully aware of pretending to be regular and accepting as normal the ways of the unruffled bigot. (94)

Breytenbach utilises the figure of the albino to contextualise his disguise, “passing for white” in a society where whiteness is ideologically built upon accepting apartheid as a norm. Here Breytenbach’s “albinism” thus signals his critical distance to those he resembles in corporeal terms, and also his proximity to the black South Africans who are the recognisable “terrorists” in Afrikaner terms.

Bonnie Tu Smith argues that the figure of the albino functions as a form of racial “disorientation” and that “ethnic writers like Wideman seem well aware of the benefits of such inescapable regrouping”. She points out that the albino “transcends or circumvents the polarities of black and white . . . it moves us to the fluid of ‘both/and’” (89). With deconstructive potential, the attribution of albinism to Cook draws attention to his problem with whiteness in his role as Protector, turning him into his own ideological ghost. But this also taps into an older tradition of perceiving albinism as a rather sinister manifestation of excessive whiteness, whiteness that is “out of place”. Melville’s discussion of the “Albino man” in *Moby-Dick* (1851), situates him as “more strangely hideous than the ugliest abortion”, and ends with the question of “[w]hy should this be so?” The quandary of albinism conjures up the quandary of whiteness which, in Toni Morrison’s reading, is the value of Melville’s text—he critiques whiteness in its *ideological* form as much as its corporeal form. In American literature Morrison finds that: “Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). Richard Dyer points out that whites are often represented as the “living dead” (211) as profound ambivalence is attached to the “absence” that is associated with whiteness. Such ambivalence haunts people with albinism. The absence of whiteness (which is also the privilege of invisibility) is cast upon the “figure” (never a “real” person) of the albino. They are the hypervisible, the extra-ordinarily “white” white.

Albinism is intensely racialised, while not being particular to any racial group. In western countries it is often associated with white people. In the US, NOAH (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation) informs its readers that African-Americans with albinism are sometimes accused of trying to “pass as white”. Their website points out that Hollywood depicts people with albinism as villains; for example the nasty side kick in *Cold Mountain*; the twins in *Matrix Reloaded* and more recently Silas in *The Da Vinci Code*. There is also the very white Lucius and Draco Malfoy (“mudblood haters”) in the Harry Potter films. Activist Luna Eterna catalogues the negative accounts of people with Albinism in literature, film

and other popular culture texts. The Skinema website (which focuses on depictions of skin conditions in cinema) also criticises the stereotyping of albinism in films which situate people with albinism as vampiric, with red eyes,⁵ and as being associated with death, sadomasochistic cruelty, fascist eugenicism and evil. Black supremacist writing can also collapse the differences between albinism and ideological, extreme, whiteness. Echoing the “science” of melanin theory, African-American writer Frances Welsing situates white people as “albino mutants” with “defective skins” (122) and argues that the source of white supremacy is the inadequacy of white skins to produce “colour”, which is both desired and loathed.

People with albinism are substitutes or scapegoats for a fear of “ideological whiteness” or “extreme whiteness”, which both Morrison and Dyer (212) write about. At times their own readings seem to collapse the differences between ideological whiteness and albinism. Dyer points out that “extreme whiteness”, by which he means “taut, tight, rigid upright, straight (not curved), on the beat (not syncopated), controlled and controlling” (222) whiteness, lets “ordinary whiteness” off the hook:

The extreme image of whiteness acts as a distraction. An image of what whites are like is set up, but can also be held at a distance. Extreme whiteness is, precisely, extreme. If in certain periods of derangement—the empire at their height, the Fascist eras—white people have seen themselves in these images, they can take comfort from the fact that for most of the time they haven’t . . . The combination of extreme whiteness with plain, unwhite whiteness means white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity’s most average and unremarkable representatives. (223)

Cook’s alleged albinism collapses the difference between ideological whiteness and albinism (turning one into the other) and perhaps this is why I laughed when I first read about it. The other side of the joke is that it releases readers (“ordinary whites”) from connection to “freaks” of scientific racism—such as Cook and A.O. Neville, Chief Protector (1911-1940) in Western Australia—whose “extreme” whiteness contrasts with, disconnects and distances my ethics, my time and my whiteness from theirs. Laughing at the “freaks” we assert our own presumed “normalcy”. Here albinism functions as a highly visible substitute or a scapegoat for things about whiteness that are unsettling (and therefore might remain *unseen*, “ordinary” and invisible). As Dyer notes: “the extreme, very white white image is functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary” (222).

DR CECIL COOK, “MY OLD FRIEND”/ “MY OLD FOE”

Cook was a student of medicine at the University of Sydney until 1930, from where he graduated with a specialist interest in leprosy. Leprosy is a disease that initially manifests in the skin as hypopigmented white spot—as Chinua Achebe notes, “the polite name for leprosy was ‘the white skin’” (54)—and manifests socially in the form of ostracism. As Chief Medical officer, Chief Health Officer and Chief Protector of Aboriginals and Quarantine Officer in the Northern Territory (1927-1939), Cook’s interests in race and health coalesced biopolitically; maintaining and preserving life in a particular form (Foucault). Cook arrived in the Northern Territory at a time when it was administered by the Commonwealth Government, explaining why his policy of “breeding out the colour” (where Aboriginal or “half-caste” women were to be married to “men substantially of European origin”) (Cook 2) is so important in establishing that the Commonwealth Government bears responsibility for the policy of biological assimilation. As Tony Austin has pointed out, the Commonwealth Government appears to have been happy to let Cecil Cook get on with things. Austin has described Cook’s policy to encourage “half-caste” women to marry white men as “an ultimate eugenic solution” (“Cecil” 113). Cook saw such marriages as able to arrest the “deterioration of the white”, who was threatening to become “less than white” by consorting with Aboriginal women and not forming nuclear families based on marriage. Cook argues that these white men are “prepared to marry half-caste females and make decent homes” and that there “can be no objection to such a mating” because the result is “the white man rearing a white family in good circumstances instead of a half-caste family under degrading circumstances” (3).

In his promotion of mixed race marriages, Cook had to sell “colour” to his colleagues, to the press, to the Territory and Commonwealth because, as Austin outlines, in many ways Cook was arguing *for* racial “mixing” at a time when it was still seen as racially “polluting” in the popular white imagination (“Cecil” 115). During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, governments and medical experts worried that the “white race” was not going to be able to populate the tropical northern regions of this country: susceptibility to the heat and tropical diseases were blamed for the white man’s inability to labour as effectively as his “coloured” counterparts. It was for this reason that Kanaka labourers were brought in at the turn of the century to work on the sugar plantations of northern Queensland. Warwick Anderson points out that while the Act of Federation made Australia white by Parliamentary decree, politicians and leaders worried that

the North would always be “less-than-white”, a situation that would have been attractive to Herbert, rather than a source for anxiety. By contrast, in 1929 former Prime Minister (1915-1923) Billy Hughes wrote in *The Splendid Adventure: A Review of Empire Relations Within and Without the Commonwealth of Britannic Nations*, that Australia was a “white island in a vast coloured ocean” and needed to “build dykes through which the merest trickle of the sea of colour cannot find its way” (qtd. in Anderson 164). In 1911 Professor Edgeworth David of the University of Sydney argued that the white race in the tropics would eventually become black but that it might take a few thousand years. In the meantime, he concluded, it was necessary to sacrifice “‘comfort, health and even life’ to keep Australia as white as possible” (qtd. in Anderson 95).

The White Australia policy relied on eugenicists’ fears of racial “degeneration” and “swamping”. Morrison’s observation that whiteness is “formed in fright” is prescient here. Cook warned that “unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black”. Such rhetoric of fluidity (“dilution” or “swamping”) was not uncommon during this period, the heyday of scientific racism in which the body (skin, hair, blood, brain, skull shape and size) were racial quantifiers, with skin colour being a particular focus.

In Cook’s Territory, where whiteness was to be “administered”, the white Australian/Territorian was not realisable in the present. The white men, and the Aboriginal women that Cook and Neville sought to marry them to, were in a sense positioned as spectral traces of a future imagined group—biopolitically imagined as at home in future white skins *without* Aboriginality. Cook wrote of the “granting of full citizenship to a *generation* of persons who may *fairly* claim it” (5, emphasis added). They were to be future whites made by “realising an objective” (5). For Cook’s future whites, “aboriginal inheritance” meant white skin that was resistant to both cancer and Aboriginal culture. Cook argued that the children of “mixing” possess many positive strengths, such as “the aboriginal inheritance brings to the hybrid definite qualities of value—intelligence, stamina, resource, high resistance to the influences of tropical environment and the character of pigmentation which even in high dilution will serve to reduce the at present high incidence of Skin Cancer in the blonde European” (3). Skin, stamina and intelligence would make a better type of Australian, a Max Dupain “Sunbaker” (1937), not so prone to an early grave. With the *inadequacy* of white skin came its biopower, for then it had to be managed, corrected and

selected to survive by the incorporation of Others, and here incorporation of others is simultaneously depicted as elimination, expulsion, a “breeding out” that is also a “breeding in”, thereby demonstrating Ahmed’s point that “there are different forms of expulsion, all of which also involve prior acts of incorporation” (52). Aboriginal people who chose to, or who were compelled to,⁶ identify as white took on the inadequacy of white skin. Australian historian Henry Reynolds recalls his father “keeping out of the sun so his status as a white man could not be doubted” (xxi).

Cook’s policy to “breed out the colour” made him deeply unpopular with whites and Aboriginal people for very different reasons. His control over the lives of Aboriginal people (to marry, to keep their children, to stay with family, to be imprisoned on reserves) was extensive. Hilda Jarman Muir writes of his paternalistic control in marrying off Aboriginal women:

Dr Cook, the Chief Protector, played the role of father to us. He liked to arrange marriages for girls from the Home, usually to white men. Everyone knew that Dr Cook arranged marriages for white men and they then got good positions working as domestics for public servants. Dr Cook would choose special half-caste girls to line up. Like a police line-up, then men looked at them, and then chose the one they liked. Then the half-caste girls and the white man would get married with Cook’s blessing and the man would get a good job. It wasn’t romantic, but it was a good way of getting out of the Compound. Sometimes he even found a nice house for the white men as an extra pay-off for marrying a half-caste ward from the Home. Really this was a way of breeding out the colour in us. That was the official policy in those days. (67)

For some whites, plans to allow mixed race marriages confined the “labour” of “breeding out the colour” to a particular class of white man. A letter writer to the Editor of the *Northern Standard* in 1933 from “Mother all white” reads: “Just because the settlers out back, railway fettleers, and bushmen, generally have a hard and oft-times lonely life, are they a lower order of beings than the officials of Darwin, that they should be picked upon to do the uplift?” The correspondent goes on to ask that Cecil Cook encourage his own son to do the “uplift job”. In another letter, “Fair Play” encourages Cook to marry a “half-caste” girl himself.

Herbert was generally supportive of Cook’s ideas (“my old friend”) but when it came to Cook’s refusal to employ Herbert as a patrol officer or to work at any of the Aboriginal reserves he became Cook’s harshest critic (“my old foe”). Herbert wrote to anthropologist Professor A.P. Elkin that Cook was an “overgrown, clever, bumptious, boy” (Elkin Archives, 23 Jan 1937) and

four months later: “The man is a monster in his attitude to the unfortunate people he is employed to protect. He not only does not understand them, but detests them. Small wonder they hate or fear him” (Elkin Archives, 21 May 1937). Herbert spread many rumours about Cook including that he was a philanderer, an alcoholic and a mismanager of Aboriginal affairs (Saunders and de Groen). Herbert commented to Elkin that, “I have been trying to plumb the strange fellow’s character for years” (Elkin Archives, 6 September 1937).

Herbert built his own public persona on “larrikinism, violent controversy and a hyperbolic masculinity” (de Groen 180). He also saw himself as a neglected champion of Aboriginal people in the North, noting that, “I have slaved and suffered and impoverished myself for the cause of the Aborigines” (qtd. in de Groen and Hergenhan 86). In addition he professed to be singularly heroic in his concerns: “who but myself in all this wide country dares a curse about the heart burnings of a boong?” (qtd. in de Groen and Hergenhan 89); and as a result being singled out for contempt by fellow whites: “I have won nothing but suspicion and contempt from everyone for my sympathies for the Abos” (Elkin Archives, 22 Dec 1937). Self-aggrandising in his devotion to the “cause”, Herbert wrote to Elkin of *his* suffering:

I suffer from the plight of these unfortunates all the time, till there are moments when I feel like spending my last few pounds on rifles and ammunition and leading a mob of them forth to die nobly taking their revenge on the stony hearted swine that oppress them. (Elkin Archives, 6 September 1937)

In his letters, Herbert typically positions himself as an expert diagnostician (like Cook) of the “problem”, but not part of the problem itself: he is on the side of organising Aboriginal deaths by political sacrifice (theirs not his). Their suffering becomes his, and he is the “slave” and the impoverished one. As de Groen points out: “His paternalistic and sometimes racist rhetoric suggests that he was unaware of the contradictions between the roles he was playing as a “blackfella”, as the saviour of the Aborigines and as a white bureaucrat” (104). These positions are not contradictions if we think of Herbert’s promotion of a white Australian nationalism that was founded on Aboriginality (without Aborigines) and on a specific form of “native” whiteness (without paternalistic Englishness).

Herbert’s attempts to position himself as expert on Aboriginal affairs (to win him work) is accompanied by a slippage where instead of *representing* the Aborigine, he *becomes* the Aborigine: “I have a blackfella’s mind” and “I can

see things in a blackfella fashion” (qtd. in de Groen 104). He played up this image as well. Writing to his friend Arthur Dibley Herbert recalls that he had sent a wire to publisher P.R. Stephensen “with a few encouraging words in Abo in it—just to prove that I am the Blackfellow he said I was” (de Groen and Hergenhan 88). De Groen observes that this “man of many masks” (xii) strongly identified with half-castes in terms of his own illegitimacy and in his perceptions of the “bastard” nation like Australia comprising rapacious white colonisers and dispossessed indigenes” (xii). This identification with “half-castes” such as Norman Shillingsworth (*Capricornia’s* protagonist) may well have complicated his championing of Aboriginal rights given what he wrote to Elkin about half-caste “hate” of Aborigines:

Halfcastes invariably hate Aborigines, the imagined cause of their debasement. I know of very few halfcastes in this country who can be anything but cruel to a blackfellow . . . Halfcastes are a deep study in themselves. Except for a few who have been reared in camps, they have nothing in common with the natives. Psychologically they are just white orphans with a special sort of shame in their race that drives them mad. (Elkin Archives, 22 Dec 1937)

Identification with “half-castes” leads Herbert to ponder his own inferiority as a white man. He writes to Stephensen: “I love them and envy their nationality. Curse the fates that arranged that I should be born a colonial pommy” (de Groen and Hergenhan 70); and to Dibley:

Is he [Dan, Herbert’s halfcaste work mate] not a born bushman? Is he not infinitely superior to me in his knowledge of moving boulders & shoveling earth and splitting logs? I find that my comparative ignorance in these matters irks me. (de Groen and Hergenhan 26)

Herbert’s whiteness and the “heritage” of the half-castes continue to provoke him to question his belonging: “Truly, I’ve come to envy these half-castes their heritage, so much so that, for all my love of the soil & all my pride in being born of it, I must confess that I’m simply an invader” (de Groen and Hergenhan 71). Herbert’s conclusion here, that he is “simply an invader” confirms Tony Birch’s stunning observation that if “the white Australian tries to find his Aboriginal face in the mirror, he may come to see his own face as the face of the oppressor” (177). In Herbert’s case, his failure to find his “Aboriginal face” also inspires in him an apparent desire to “assert myself in other ways”. Later he writes to Arthur Dibley, “there is no hope of my ever being able to claim the right to live in this land unless I infuse my very blood into the Aboriginal race” (de Groen and Hergenhan 71). And he writes to Stephensen: “Some day I shall father a Euraustralian so as to truly root myself in this dear earth and so as to legitimise my bastard

white fella genius” (de Groen and Hergenhan 71). Rather than looking for his *own* Aboriginal face in the mirror, he sought legitimation by reflecting back the gaze of a “Euraustralian” child. Herbert presents *himself* as a mirror, a tool by which to capture, narcissistically, a national gaze.

Had Herbert’s desire to father a “Euraustralian” been known to Cook he would have come under some suspicion, as it was Cook’s job to “manage” white/Aboriginal relationships. Herbert once described himself as “the biggest gin-rooter in the Territory” (Richards qtd. in de Groen, 63). If he did have relationships with Aboriginal women then he would have been one of the problematic white men that Cook sought to domesticate through marriage, by marrying them and their families to the white nation. As he was already married to Sadie, any child of Herbert’s would have come under the control of the Protector and possibly a member of the Stolen Generations. While Cook was attempting to “breed out the colour”, Herbert was more interested in “breeding in” the indigeneity, allowing us to question what the differences might be between these apparently opposed strategies (particularly when, as Ahmed points out, each expulsion of the Other is simultaneously an incorporation). Both strategies sought to secure a white presence in the Northern Territory. Both were based on a sense of the natural (either in science or in law) illegitimacy of the white presence in the Territory; both sought to make Aboriginality work for whiteness, to provide it with roots, heritage, stamina of skin and intelligence; and both are biopolitically interested in the maintenance of life in a particular form. Herbert’s “son of the soil” nationalism was not so far removed from Cook’s State sanctioned future vision of a White Nation, in that both placed Aboriginal people at the source of white belonging. Cook was paternalistic (“he was a father to us”) while Herbert wanted to father “Euraustralians”—a dialectic that does not unsettle or displace whiteness but articulates it. The two are conjoined by opposition, an opposition that maintains power over what it excludes from the dialectic—Aboriginal voices in the matter. Between the two white men, Cook and Herbert, is a relationship of homosocial intimacy (Sedgwick) rather than the rupture that is (melo)dramatised. As Herbert is reported to have said, “I have loved him too much in my time & have only suffered for it” (qtd. in de Groen and Hergenhan 120).

As de Groen and Hergenhan point out (xi) Herbert’s identification with Aboriginal people as their superior interpreter and as possessing them as well as imaginatively inserting himself as the figure of the half-caste, renders his whiteness both critically self conscious and blind to its appropriations.

Basil Sansom describes Herbert as “self-consciously expert in the grammar of Aboriginal cultural practice” and his work as:

[t]his whitefella author takes over (appropriates, steals, purloins, pirates, lifts, liberates or loots) the dynamic that inheres in Aboriginal ridicule stories” and then demonstrates “a purloining author’s consequent discomfort and haunting unease”. (88)

The haunting unease that Sansom finds in Herbert’s work is detectable in relation to Herbert’s desires to “wreck” Cook: “I shall wreck Cook with it, & all of his cronies” (de Groen and Hergenhan 130). It was Cook who was Other—he could not survive under the Northern Territory sun, he was *really* white, whereas Herbert aspired to be something else.

The red (burnt), white (skin) and blue (eyes) depiction of Cook in Herbert’s work (and in what follows it) operates as oblique criticism directed at Cook’s controversial policies, and severs him from the kinds of “whiteness” that Herbert perceived to be deserving of a voice in the Nation—a kind of whiteness that was informed by Aboriginality, if not appropriative of it. The rumour about Cook being an albino works through the maligned figure of the albino (and his/her status as social outcast) to insist, spectrally, visually, that the interest in Aboriginality said more about a threatened and threatening form of whiteness. Or, to be more precise, *two* differently threatened and threatening forms of whiteness that are on the surface “opposed” (one “whiter” than the other) and yet conjoined by their commitment to make “something” of Aboriginality in the name of a white Australia. For the strange comment about Cook, a stranger-making comment, betrays another biopolitical line of thinking during the 1930s which was to “breed in” rather than “breed out” Aboriginality. The logic of incorporating Aboriginality (while excluding Aboriginal people), forms the ideological backbone of Herbert’s “son of the soil” white Australian nationalism, a form of nationalism that excludes Aboriginal people (but not Aboriginality), excludes the English (but not “ordinary” whiteness) while positioning them at its territorial borders.

Herbert’s depiction of white skins and bodies can tell us something about the competitive nature of white belonging in Australia, by which I mean not principally the white competition with Aborigines to belong, as much as its other manifestation—the white competition with *other whites* to see which of them belongs “more” than the other. Who is more at home? Who is more “foreign” in relation to Aboriginality? Such competition to identify, to be “at home”, requires encounters with “strange bodies” to act as contrast, to be,

precisely not “at home or in place” (Ahmed 46). This competition between whites (to be less Other, less strange, less foreign, less “the invader”, less white) requires a possessive interest in Aboriginality itself—a promise of “true belonging” that, like a prize, is symbolic, silent⁷ and squabbled over.

Such an observation holds true today. Mary Ellen Jordan notes that amongst whites in the North there “was a covert, relentless competition among Balandas [non-Aboriginal people] where each tried to prove that they were better at talking to Aboriginal people than the others—more ethical, less racist, less patronising, more egalitarian . . . I was disgusted with myself for buying into it and made an effort to stop” (139). Kim Mahood recalls her skin name “gives me a link, a way of being here that circumvents my whiteness. It has allowed me to claim a kind of belonging that I have never felt. I have used it to claim a certain credibility among urban friends for my knowledge of Aboriginal society . . . I have invested myself with its glamour” (125). Jordan and Mahood contextualise the “shame” of this narcissism, where the white knower of Aboriginality congratulates themselves on their capacity to know the Other, without the Other ever having to speak.

Cook’s and Herbert’s relationship (sometimes friendship, sometimes enmity) is an example of these tensions between whites over Aboriginality and Aboriginal people. It is significant that this tension manifests some seventy years later in the form of Herbert’s biography (and letters) which mark Cecil Cook’s body as “strange”, as excessively and painfully white—an “unliveable” body in the context of Darwin’s climate. Cook, the “albino” comes to stand for that which is “outside” of this political community of the future. Cook’s illegitimate whiteness contrasts with Herbert as a “son of the soil”, father of “Eurastralians”. In this way, whiteness competes, with different accounts of itself, for access to a legitimacy conferred by other strangers. Herbert promoted himself and his access to Aboriginality as a source for difference from men like Cook and ideological forms of whiteness that threatened and excluded him. The racialisation of whiteness functions here as a form of Othering where some whites are whiter than others. In Herbert’s *oeuvre* it appears that strange white bodies were central to making other white Australian bodies more “homely”.

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NOTES

- ¹ It is possible that Herbert is the source of this rumour. Certainly Herbert did spread other rumours about Cook, including that he was a philanderer, an alcoholic and a mismanager of Aboriginal affairs (See Suzanne Saunder's discussion of their relationship, 1990). De Groen writes that Herbert constructed a "romantic smokescreen of legend" (xi) that he built around himself and others. Thanks to Frances De Groen for help in attempting to locate sources for the idea of Cook's albino body. Cook himself noted that "Mr Herbert's muddled prolixity, in which lies half truths and distortions of the truth are so inextricably mixed as to render categorical denial ineffective" (Cook to Abbott 24 May 1937, quoted in Saunders 62).
- ² Patrick Wolfe makes the important point that it was only Aboriginal people who were the targets of biological assimilation, as other people with "colour" were not. Therefore, it was *indigeneity* that was desired, not "colour" *per se* (1994, 2001). This is particularly clear in the case of Herbert's longing to assimilate into indigeneity.
- ³ Skin has other meanings in *Poor Fellow My Country*. In the opening pages it is corporeal while in the next few pages it refers to kinship: "his place in the relationship system" (10). Stephen Kinnane notes that the removal of children as part of the Stolen Generations relied on the erasure of one meaning of skin for another: "My grandmother was placed by her skin, *Nangarri*, and then taken away to a place where her skin meant nothing more than colour" (11).
- ⁴ Herbert championed the Euraustralian League's potential to politicise and unite those of both Aboriginal and European descent.
- ⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* online perpetuates the misapprehension that people with Albinism have pink coloured eyes. It defines Albino as being, 'A human being distinguished by the congenital absence (partial or total) of colouring pigment in the skin, hair, and eyes, so that the former are abnormally white, and the latter of a pink colour, and unable to bear the ordinary light'. See the homepage of the International Albinism Center at the University of Minnesota, <http://albinism.med.umn.edu/>, for discussion of albinism's signs and symptoms, which do not include pink eyes.
- ⁶ The Aborigines Departments compelled families to suppress Aboriginality by tying "exemptions" to the avoidance of Aboriginal kin (Gifford 74). There it is recorded that Chief Protector A.O. Neville (Western Australia) "knew" that a family was passing for white and that he encouraged them to do so by threat of surveillance. Harry Dimer had to apply for a permit to employ Aboriginal workers, as any white was expected to.
- ⁷ Silent not in the sense that Aboriginal responses to this question of white belonging are not forthcoming, but in the sense that competition *between* whites privileges white access to Aboriginality, rather than Aboriginal people as interlocutors.

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