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Robyn Morris

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### **Abstract**

Issues of representation have been central to critical discussions regarding a contemporary politics of difference. As Monika Kin Gagnon notes, 'at issue is visibility, visibility, and power, and what is often referred to as a politics of knowledge; it problematises who defines and who determines cultural value' (23). Simone Lazaroo's fiction brings to visibility issues of representation, especially the way race and gender are intertwined as artificial constructions of difference within Australian cultural and historical discourse. This article examines how Lazaroo's novels engage in a triangulated contemporary representational politics through an articulation of 'relations of difference' in which characters of Asian, Aboriginal and Anglo ancestry interact and react to racialised and gendered inscriptions of otherness.

ROBYN MORRIS

## Relations of Difference: Asianness, Indigeneity and Whiteness in Simone Lazaroo's Fiction

Issues of representation have been central to critical discussions regarding a contemporary politics of difference. As Monika Kin Gagnon notes, 'at issue is visibility, visuality, and power, and what is often referred to as a politics of knowledge; it problematises who defines and who determines cultural value' (23). Simone Lazaroo's fiction brings to visibility issues of representation, especially the way race and gender are intertwined as artificial constructions of difference within Australian cultural and historical discourse. This article examines how Lazaroo's novels engage in a triangulated contemporary representational politics through an articulation of 'relations of difference' in which characters of Asian, Aboriginal and Anglo ancestry interact and react to racialised and gendered inscriptions of otherness. This essay therefore explores how Lazaroo criticises the hyper-visibility and sexualising of the Asian female body by the dominant white, Anglo-Australian society and the concomitant erasure of the Indigenous body and culture in stories of nation in *The World Waiting to Be Made* (1994), *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), and *The Travel Writer* (2006). These works signal Lazaroo's ongoing interrogation of the politics of both relations of difference and looking relations.

*The World Waiting to be Made* is set predominantly against a backdrop of Australianness that has not yet moved towards fully embracing official Multiculturalism. Australia is depicted instead, as a nation still intent upon protecting and perpetuating the supposed natural purity of whiteness associated with The White Australia Policy (WAP) which was one of the first legislations to be introduced by the new Australian Government of 1901. This Bill was not dismantled until the early 1970s and was predicated on preserving the purity of the imported 'white blood' in Australia and provided a nebulous scale for various citizens of the empire to distinguish between white and non-white, majority and minority, citizen and alien, right and wrong. It is the residue of this policy that adversely impacts upon the unnamed Eurasian narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* after her family is move from Singapore to Australia in 1966. From the moment of arrival, her family is read as physically bi-racial. The narrator spends her teenage years searching for stability of place, rejecting her father and her darker-skinned twin sister, and donning various disguises in an

attempt to assimilate into whiteness. The narrator's skin becomes a movable and performative border as she mutilates and bleaches her skin to a socially suitable degree of whiteness. In the context of contemporary race politics, 'skin' is read as 'the outermost sheath, the "corporeal" dress of human beings' (Benthien viii). Claudia Benthien further argues that 'skin is understood less and less as a given. Instead it is seen increasingly as a dress — something that is worn, something a person carries around' (ix). The narrator's recollection of her angst-ridden years at school and at work in Australia describes an overwhelming desire to achieve 'normality' by erasing her 'strangeness', or what she describes repeatedly as her abnormal 'Asianness' (Lazaroo 1994 107). The narrator states that 'there were several darknesses about my appearance that I would have to alter if I wanted to obliterate my origins and be accepted [...] I would have to aim for as close to iridescence as depilatories and chemical warfare on my natural colouring would allow' (99). The narrator's ongoing act of whitening her of-colour body emphasises that perceptions of skin difference, particularly within the realm of Australian identity politics in the 1970s, had yet to move towards a degree of acceptance of skin difference.

The depiction of the narrator's painful journey to adulthood in suburban and outback Australia allows for a critique of the way the 'of-colour' is policed and categorised as deviant and other to the white body in the realm of the social and the political. Just as important, is the way this novel emphasises, through satire, how this same white body, at the very centre of racist discourse in Australia, refrains from marking itself. As Nicolas Mirzoeff so succinctly puts it, '[t]he perfect body in Western culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racialised other' (2004 135). It is the exploration of the ongoing racism directed against the Eurasian narrator that lends the novel a degree of political edge. Whiteness is ratified in the official dialectics of governmental policies and Lazaroo analyses its appropriation and championing at the (unequal) level of Australian citizenship.

*The World Waiting to be Made* gestures towards Lazaroo's fictional engagement in subsequent work with triangulated discourses of subjectivity by also drawing into the narrative, not so much Indigenous characters, but issues surrounding Indigenous dispossession and containment in the Kimberley/Broome region of Western Australia. The narrator's teaching outpost is located on, what the Headmaster tells her on her first day, 'use to be no-man's land. Native Welfare pulled together a couple of desert tribes and tribes from the west to make it viable' (178). The history of the detrimental and inherently racist governmental policies such as the *Native Welfare Act 1954 WA*, which allowed for Chief Protectors (usually the police) to remove 'half-caste' or Aboriginal/Anglo-Australian children under the age of sixteen to reserves, settlements or institutions and the notion of the land as vacant and awaiting possession and taming is not explored in any great detail within this novel but Lazaroo is vitriolic in her depiction of the differences

between the manicured white colonialist homes, the school that is described as ‘an oasis’ (177) and the contrasting poverty of Aboriginal living conditions. From the school’s ‘patch of screaming green lawn’ (178) the narrator can see ‘the Aboriginal settlement, fenceless yards of earth around doorless houses, old iron bed frames subsiding under trees’ (178). At her first school meeting, the notion of keeping up an implied white standard of manicured and lush, green lawns within the harsh desert landscape is reiterated by the Headmaster: ‘[y]ou see the pride we have in our lawns and back in town [...] Which brings us to lawnmowers. Everybody should have their own. It’s like this: you don’t lend your wife out, you don’t lend your lawn-mower out’ (179). These carefully kept lawns become ‘each resident’s responsibility to upholding civilisation against the wild yonder’ (177). As the Headmaster, in his uniform of shorts and long socks, had earlier lectured to his new employees: ‘[f]rom experience. It’s like this: if you don’t keep up certain standards up here, you can quickly forget where you come from’ (178).

The Eurasian narrator is an ‘outsider within’ (Stephenson 2007 13) this small community and the return to questions of origins or where you are ‘from’, is not only a dominant theme in the novel but an important issue to address when analysing relations of difference. The girl is just as othered by the white community in this remote geographical location as she was during her teenage years in Perth.

I looked around the small group of teachers. Where *did* they come from? Two couples and two other singles, the men sitting back with their legs comfortable apart, the women crossing their ankles or knees. Each person neatly clipped, the women’s hair either permed, frosted or layered. There were women who had mastered the art of salad preparation, I knew; and men who knew how to set up a shed. We’d all been churned out of Perth’s suburban sprawl and two or three teacher training institutions, but in most other ways they were not from the same place as me.’ ([italics original] 178–79)

This critique of hierarchies of place or origins is furthered in the sense that Lazaroo aligns the girl’s sense of otherness to that of the Indigenous community. When a young Aboriginal boy is described by one of the teachers as ‘the missing evolutionary link’ (180), the narrator is once more reminded of her own outsider status: ‘I felt suddenly alone. That was the kind of joke meant to develop bonds between the teller and the listener. Why couldn’t I laugh? I’d felt marooned by that kind of joke somewhere before’ (180). This thematic of Asianness and Aboriginality as outsidership (to the implied dominant ‘insiderness’ of whiteness) and the question of a hierarchical basis of origins within this novel becomes an essential part of Lazaroo’s criticism of the triangulated and colour-based relationship between people of Asian, Indigenous or Anglo-Celtic ancestry. This is, perhaps, an under explored thematic within Lazaroo’s fiction but it is also an essential and critical entry into identity politics in an Australian context.

Lazaroo’s work is, arguably, more focussed on the confluence of gendered and racialised stereotypes, particularly the sexualisation of the Asian female body

by white maleness. In *The World Waiting to be Made*, the narrator's protracted sense of social displacement is exacerbated by her perceived inability to conform to prevailing cultural and gendered expectations. Throughout her teenage years she gradually removes the familial ties, she rejects her father's searing hot curries and she tells her school friends, 'He's not my real father, you know. I am adopted' (51). She wears tight jeans despite her father warning her that she would be 'unmarketable' well before she was married (82). Her bodily difference is now equated with an assessment of her sexual desirability and the narrator observes that when Max Swift, her first serious boyfriend, initially saw her, he 'passed his tongue once over his lips as he appraised me' (161).

Racially submissive and gendered stereotypes are continuously imposed upon the narrator. Her body is read as both sexually available and sexually exotic. While being outfitted for a costume for a multicultural parade in which she reluctantly takes part in Broome, she is asked by a pub patron 'can you do the things the strippers in Thailand do with bananas?' (194). This question replicates the depiction of Cynthia, a Filipino woman in Stephan Elliot's film *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* being watched by both fascinated and repulsed male pub patrons as she attempts to shoot ping-pong balls across the crowded bar from her vagina. Both the question posed to the Eurasian narrator and the depiction of Cynthia, the stereotyped mail-order bride in *Priscilla*, is an Orientalist conjuring of the ghosts of Madame Butterfly and Suzie Wong in the extreme. This is a type of representation that Said has described in *Orientalism* as 'a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her' (6). This form of racialised stereotyping transforms the narrator's body into 'a screen onto which they [people like the pub patron, her boyfriend Max, her school teachers and her neighbours], project their own fantasies of another exotic kind of life' (*WW* 200). The repetition of such scenes throughout the novel, and indeed in a popular film such as *Priscilla* works towards painting a picture of a racist and racially intolerant culture while also exemplifying the character annihilation that occurs from these repeated attacks.<sup>1</sup>

When viewed as an ongoing stream of racism, these episodes suggest that there is no such thing as an authentic 'Asian' identity other than that imagined by the Anglo West. Stuart Hall argues that identity is not fixed:

[Identity] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.' It belongs to the future as much to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (112)

The narrator's search for a non-fractured identity involves a double form of exile. Labelled as 'a mix' (160), '*chap cheng*' or 'in-between' (40) she is rejected because

of her bi-cultural heritage in Singapore and yet, while in Australia, she struggles for recognition outside of a stereotype which 'fixes' her as a consumable, exotic blend of East and West. Jacqueline Lo notes that the term 'Eurasian' is a 'polite' reference to a culturally hybrid person while the terms 'mongrel', 'half-breed' and 'half-caste' are used in less polite circles (2002 298). More so, the act of '[p]athologising the Eurasian as depraved, [and as] inheriting the vices of both races, and the virtues of neither, resembles the construction of the Creole as the "tragic mulatto" in North America' (Lo 2002 299). The narrator's visible mixed race origin positions her as an object of sexual desire but also, as she experiences in her Kimberley teaching position, a racialised/demonised other.

Lazaroo's third novel, *The Travel Writer* (2006), explores how the West has viewed, consumed and constructed Asian female corporeality through the eyes of the white, male sojourner. *The Travel Writer* plays with the notion of writing as truth and the story gives voice not just to the published articles of the male travel writer, Walter Humphries, but also to the woman Ghislaine de Sequeira, who falls in love with him in Singapore, has his child and makes a living for herself and her daughter by writing obituaries. It is their daughter Isabelle, who writes her mother's life story. Suffering from unrequited love (and an early pregnancy), Ghislaine purposely seduces the tea-taster Rupert Balneaves, who visits her father's farm high in the hill tops of Malacca [to] where she has been banished to protect her from Humphries. In differing ways both Balneaves and Humphries ingest the exoticness that Ghislaine symbolises through the metaphor of consumption. While Rupert tastes the East, Walter observes and writes about it through the eyes of the white coloniser.

Littered throughout the novel are the many articles that Walter has had published about his interpretation and reaction to the 'Orient'. In particular, an article he entitles 'A World of Choice in Singapore' describes for his reader the exoticness of Asian dance halls and dance girls. Its strategic placement within the novel can also be read as a form of 'critical ironising' (Wah 113), a term coined by Fred Wah and a strategy employed by Lazaroo to criticise, through satire, historical textualisations of the Suzie Wong stereotype. Humphries notes that the dance halls in Singapore's Chinatown offer the expatriate bachelor 'drink, food, entertainment and especially women' (70). More telling is his added comment that these women, 'from white through to black and all shades in between — are *his* for the choosing' ([emphasis added] 70).

This suggests that Humphries' implied readership is white and male and these readers are further told that for just seventy cents the 'expatriate' can listen to the sounds of 'some Oriental chanteuse howling songs from the silver screen' (70). Humphries writes that this musical blending of East and West 'reinforces the sense that the World is yours for the taking as you eye the hostesses, also called taxi dancers, who sit on chairs on the circumference of the floor' (70). Having already drawn on Orientalist assumptions that accord the white, Western male

the power in this racialised/sexualised looking relation, Humphries reinforces his Orientalist perspective by describing the dancer's cheongsams as 'tantalising yet demure', worn 'tight enough to reveal their curves' and who wear 'just enough eyeliner and rouge to enhance their Oriental beauty' (70). They are, in Walter Humphrey's estimate, 'a pleasure to behold' (70).

The process of equating 'the Orient' with the exotic, with Asian, with cheongsam-clad females and with sexual voraciousness, is embedded and normalised within the cultural archives of Western art, literature, photography, film and also, in contemporary mass media.<sup>2</sup> Humphries' image of the female taxi dancers waiting to be 'chosen' by a white male provides Western audiences with a visual feast of a passive, to-be-acted-upon racialised, sexualised and gendered Asian otherness. Lazaroo's ongoing and developing body of work exposes the othering practices of white domination in Australia and beyond its white-washed shores, and is a principal part of an emerging corpus within the Australian literary scene. Lazaroo theorises the process of identity formation by linking it to the visual while simultaneously examining the pervasive colour-blindness of Australia's dominant political and social power structure.

It is this examination of the politics of the white male gaze, the Orientalised female body and also the obscuring of Australia's Indigenous culture and people that Lazaroo explores in her second novel, *The Australian Fiancé*. Lazaroo's use of the photographic metaphor in *The Australian Fiancé* allows for an examination of the way that otherness is fixed and coded through the visual.<sup>3</sup> The novel signals that this coding is more often a misrecognition that requires contestation and criticism. The racialised look, as the novel progressively suggests, is an external imposition culturally inscribed by and through the colonising power of white vision, and the difference between seeing and being seen is based on inequitable power relations. As Jonathan Crary writes, 'vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification' ([italics in original] 5). This notion of procedures of subjectification is raised by Lazaroo in an email interview when she states that:

I did work for a while as both a writer and photographer, although initially an amateurish one. Also I had memories of watching my father develop prints in his darkroom. I was looking at the different ways of seeing things with these two people. I hoped for the photography to function as a metaphor — one particular art-form. Also it provided both promise and limitations as a tool for seeing. The failure of both characters to capture an accurate image of one another, this provided a parallel to the failure of their photos to capture the things they wanted them to.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between a Eurasian girl from Singapore and an Australian pearling master's white son in the Western Australian town of Broome in 1949 is battered by a divisive discourse of racialised othering that codes this relationship as unnatural and detrimental to the ideology of a civilised whiteness in which

Broome tries to blanket itself. Upon arrival in Australia the Eurasian girl is asked by an immigration officer if she can tell him what percentage of her is English blood. The very notion of who is considered 'right' or 'white' enough to enter Australia is explored in the course of the narrative through the character of a Eurasian girl, her Japanese/Eurasian daughter, the Indigenous workers and the pearling master's homestead called 'Elsewhere'. The Eurasian girl's mixed Singaporean/Malay/English ancestry, her past life as a Japanese war prostitute and her unacknowledged, part Japanese, part English/Singaporean daughter who is the result of this enforced prostitution, come under scrutiny and redefinition by the fiancé, his parents and the wider Broome community.

While Lazaroo is careful to accord the Eurasian girl a measure of autonomy, one troubling aspect of this novel is the narrator's orchestrated meeting with the wealthy Australian male on the docks in Singapore. It is this meeting that is in danger of pandering to a white gaze or audience rather than encouraging a reassessment of the politics of constructing otherness. The Eurasian girl is first described as looking at the wealthy Australian as he disembarks. She notices his monogrammed luggage, his expensive clothing and his air of confidence during the entire process. However, just as she looks at him, he is looking at her. When she is asked by the Australian if she would like to accompany him for a drink she also realises that while she was watching him, 'he had been watching her for some time from some place on the deck, amid the clamour and bustle of the ship's mooring' (19). Although there is a power in his gaze that hinges on colonialism and heterosexual desire, her gaze is one of longing to escape. As he walks to her along the dock that first time she believes that 'what she has hoped for so long may finally be coming true' (19). It is on the wealthy Australian that she pins her hopes of escaping the barely suppressed shame she has internalised during her enforced prostitution. This articulation of the girl's hopes of escape from her present rehearses a myth of the poor Asian girl who requires 'saving' from the excesses of herself and her culture by a gallant and liberal, 'white knight'.<sup>5</sup> It is symbolic that when she and the fiancé initially meet on the dock, he walks towards her with his camera slung around his neck — a prosthetic eye that physically separates them but also a device that eventually enables him to construct an image of what he thinks she should be. Representation, as Monika Kin Gagnon suggests, has multiple meanings:

Aesthetic re-presentation is the process and products of making signs in various media such as art, literature, film, and video. It also refers to discourses or systems of knowledge, such as history, or education. Further, a politics of representation suggests an ideological dimension to images, texts, and discourses: representations do not simply 'communicate' or 'express' ideas, but rather are also 'constitutive,' in the sense that they contribute to the formation of subjectivities; they are ideological, in the way they privilege dominant values of a society. Representation can also be understood as political representation, making reference to how citizen' interests are acted upon by designated individuals. (23)

In linking how the girl is ‘acted upon’ by the Australian fiancé — that is, how her subjectivity is constructed by and through the prosthetic eye of the camera and both the organic/cultural eye/gaze of the wealthy white Australian fiancé, — Lazaroo highlights that it is through white visualising practices that the ‘other’s’ identity is fixed as either a black or white image; one that cannot be negotiated accorded to hierarchies of racial dominance.

Lazaroo’s work is politically motivated in the way it links the racialised gaze to that of gender. She calls attention to the fetishistic impulses of ownership and sexual possession underlying the white Australian fiancé’s assertion when he first meets the unnamed Eurasian narrator. His statements, ‘I like to look at you’ and ‘how he’d always hoped for a greater *intimacy* with Asia’ ([italics original] 28) are doubly objectifying in their confluence of gender with exotic, sexual otherness. His statement reifies a Eurocentric image of ‘the Orient’ as a geographical site ‘for wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe’ (Said 190). Said’s description of a pre-Romantic association of the Orient with ‘sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy’ (118) still has currency for the way it notes how the Orient is inherently feminised. As Gina Marchetti observes in her discussion of contemporary Hollywood’s representation of sex and the ‘yellow peril’, ‘in the Western imagination, the entire continent becomes an exotic, beckoning woman, who can satisfy the male Westerner’s forbidden desires and ensnare him’ (67).

This is a major point in assessing the representational politics of *The Australian Fiancé*. For while on the surface the fiancé tells the Eurasian girl he is in Singapore looking for pearl divers, Said’s comment about wayward sons looking towards Asia as a site of sexual exploration may be applied to the fiancé’s motives for visiting Singapore. When the Eurasian girl asks him about other women he has known, he tells her that ‘the ones from the good families don’t do it or they pretend they’ve never done it with anyone before. The barmaids and the others don’t bother to pretend’ (137). In this novel there is an ongoing linkage between Asia and Asian women as sites of sexual conquest and of ‘good’ white women as sexually inexperienced or virginal. It is important to the politics of this novel to remember also that the fiancé is in Singapore looking not just for pearl divers. This is at once his purpose and cover. What is implied is that he is also looking for exoticness. He desires an Orientalised lover — never a wife. Aki Uchida argues that during World War II and the Vietnam War, the Orientalisation of Asian women both disseminated and further entrenched the West’s historically active racism against Asians (165). More particularly,

the casting of the local women in terms of whores and prostitutes [...] perceiving them as dolls [...] useful toys or something to play with [...] enhanced the feeling that Asians are other than human and therefore much easier to kill. The use of the Oriental woman also helps to place the white woman back home on a pedestal, as superior beings to Asian women. (166)

Although the novel is not didactically or overtly anti-racist, Lazaroo's representational politics remain generally critical of the continued historical correlation between Asian women, idealised femininity and a hyper-sexuality within Western culture. The narratorial focus on the way the Eurasian girl is objectified and framed by whiteness signals that an 'oppositional gaze' (hooks 205) is operating within the novel — one which indicates Lazaroo's more subtle engagement with the politics of race and racism.

One further point that is perhaps elided by the 'romance' between the Australian male and the Eurasian girl is the issue that the Australian visited Singapore both as a 'wayward' son of Empire but also as the dutiful son of a pearling master. He needs the skill and expertise of Japanese divers if his family's pearling business in Broome is to survive the post-war downturn. Stephenson writes that 'in the colonial and post federation periods Asian labourers were exempted from the 'White Australia' policy because the pearl-shelling industry could not survive without the exploitation of cheap Asian (and even cheaper Aboriginal) labour' (2007 7). Peta Stephenson acerbically notes that 'economic convenience did not, however, breed social acceptance.' (7) and in the post World War II period,

territorial anxieties were transferred to the control of bodies. The Asian pearl-ers' exemption from the dictates of the 'White Australia' policy did not protect them from strict cohabitation laws [...] Relationships between Asian men and Aboriginal women, in particular, were regularly characterised as wanton, wasteful, disruptive and indicative of resistance [...] any kind of intercourse, whether commercial or carnal, that operated outside the control of white hegemonic interests exhibited a kind of threatening fertility, one that broke down law and order because it transgressed the racialised categories that secured them. (2007 208)

In *The Australian Fiancé* Lazaroo links the erasure of Asianness in stories of nation to that of Indigeneity describing both as the 'doubly vanquished' (105). While it is permissible for the fiancé's father to have sexual relations with an Aboriginal woman, it is not permissible, in the mother's eyes, for her golden-haired son to have sexual relations with the Eurasian girl. This is where the phrase 'keeping up the standards' (read no racial mixing, no diluting of whiteness, no miscegenation) first articulated in *The World Waiting to be Made* is resurrected once more in *The Australian Fiancé*. The mother tells the Eurasian girl;

It is very easy for your standard to drop in a town like this [...] To go native. She shows me the magazines full of Margarets and Bettys trying to beat the dust and put the horizon in its place; blond Margarets and Bettys and brunette Margarets and Bettys; housewifely and temptress Margarets and Bettys. All the King's daughters, the daughters of Empire varnishing, always varnishing. Fingernails, floors, stoves, eyelids, everything about them so shiny they can see themselves in all the surfaces. (133)

At the parent's home an Aboriginal/Indonesian/Japanese housemaid describes the Eurasian girl as the 'boss boy's flank' (92). The housemaid's reaction, that she 'can't believe it' (92), and the unofficial labelling of the Eurasian girl as the fiancé's concubine within the wider township of Broome is a reflection of the

racist ideology prevalent in post-World War II Australia in which a ‘half-breed’, ‘mixed blood’ woman of Asian or Aboriginal descent was never meant to marry the boss or his son. The Eurasian girl acknowledges the racism underlying this ideology; ‘I am the suspiciously alluring foreign body in which his blood might become mixed’ (119).

The Eurasian girl is not the idealised white woman called Margaret or Betty. Instead, she is described by the fiancé’s parents as a ‘temptress’ (183), ‘prostitute’ (181) and ‘woman of little trust’ (179). The girl’s body is doubly colonised from without, firstly by the Japanese soldiers and then by the white Australian fiancé. However, this act of judging the girl as an untrustworthy temptress to whiteness, makes inconsequential not just the brutal act of enforced prostitution during the Japanese occupation of Singapore, but indeed the white Australian male’s colonisation of the Eurasian girl’s body. She is marked as a morally corrupt threat to the representational whiteness of the fiancé. Rejected by the fiancé, she is forced to return home when the Immigration Officer refuses to renew her Certificate of Exemption. The fiancé, to the relief of his parents, is now free from his brief but potentially dangerous liaison with the Eurasian girl. He remains in the protective boundaries of his nation and eventually marries a white, Anglo woman, just as his mother had envisaged. This is where the notion of relations of difference hinges on an ideological assumption in which the sanctioned relations are those between whites and intercultural relations between white/European, Asian or Indigenous communities are elided in stories of nation. In this sense, the Indigenous community becomes what Stephenson defines as the ‘internalised other’ and the Asian community, ‘the externalised other’ (2007 208).

The paralleling of Asian and Indigenous experiences as one of subjugation under white, colonial rule in Lazaroo’s fiction while important, once more resists a rather crucial and critical distinction as articulated by Stephenson, and that is the very acknowledgement of an implication in Indigenous dispossession by peoples from the Asian diaspora within Australia. Stephenson writes that, ‘the recognition that all migrants, past and present, are implicated in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Australians is also important in undermining the black/white binary of Australian historiography’ (2003 68). While the father’s Aboriginal mistress tells the Eurasian girl that she too knows ‘how invisible this family makes you feel’ (195), Lazaroo’s implied criticism of the way both the Eurasian girl and the unnamed Aboriginal woman are named and defined as ‘other’ within the Broome community is somewhat undermined by her insistence in labelling the novel’s main characters by their racial descent.

Names such as the ‘Eurasian girl’ or ‘Australian fiancé’ detract from the poetics of resistance otherwise offered by the narrative. While Lazaroo states that not using first names ‘was an attempt to get under the skin’<sup>6</sup> of her characters, it could be conversely argued that this is precisely what Lazaroo, unintentionally or not, has done. She has set up a racialised dichotomy and perpetuated a naming

process based precisely on skin difference. In naming the male protagonist as ‘the Australian’ or ‘the fiancé’, and being mindful of the novel’s post-World War II setting, Olivia Khoo argues that the Australian male is ‘identified either by his nationality (always positioned as white), or by his heterosexual desire and their romance’ (77). In contrast, the female protagonist is ‘symbolically infantilised and racialised (without nationality, without citizenship)’ (Khoo 77), through the constant description of her as the ‘young girl’, and the ‘Eurasian woman’. She is perceived as sexualised and racialised, an exotic hybrid. At their first meeting, and not long after she agrees to be his guide, the fiancé asks her, ‘What kind of Asian are you?’ When she states ‘I am Eurasian’, he responds with ‘Ah. Eurasian. East meets West. Like in the Noel Coward song’ (28). Coward’s ‘Half-Caste Woman’, is quoted later in the novel:

Where did your story begin?  
Half-caste woman  
Have you a secret heart  
Waiting for Someone to win?  
Were you born of some queer magic  
In your shimmering gown?  
Is there something strange and tragic  
Deep, deep down? (141)

Coward’s words also conjure the ghost of Suzie Wong, defining the Asian woman as alluring but dangerous — an exotic Eastern woman with a past history and one who, similar to the Eurasian girl, requires saving from her prostitute past. It also suggests a sense of unease, conjuring another Western stereotype of the East — that of the inscrutable, secretive Asian woman who dilutes the purity of whiteness through her sexual allure. This is problematically borne out in the novel. During their first sexual encounter:

They approach one another’s bodies as if they’re approaching new countries, skins jumping at changes in climate, ears and eyes overwhelmed [...] she slides like a fugitive under the white starched sheets that crackle like paper. It’s as if the young woman’s afraid he will see something about her she wishes to keep concealed [...] She has heard all about foreigners falling for the Orient before. Here today, gone tomorrow. But it is not just her body she’s concealing as she huddles under the sheets. (49)

It is in such depictions of the Eurasian narrator that the representational politics of the novel move from an interrogative stance to perhaps an act of complicity with stereotypical and Orientalised constructions of a racialised and gendered otherness. *The Australian Fiancé* is problematic but only in the way that the novel’s exploration of an interracial liaison ends by sending the ‘threat’ the fiancé’s pure white lineage posed by the Eurasian girl back to Singapore. This is once more paralleled to the fiancé’s mother’s expulsion of her husband’s Aboriginal mistress from their home. The woman begs for food at the kitchen door but when the mother sees her she chases her off by training the garden hose on her. The Eurasian girl witnesses this watering down of the ‘other’ woman’s

threat to whiteness and is astounded when the mother excuses her actions by stating ‘Just a spot of cleaning up I have to do every so often’ (134).<sup>7</sup>

What begins to emerge in a study of Lazaroo’s fiction is this notion of a white preoccupation with ‘cleaning up’ our backyards; a racial cleansing that has negatively impacted upon the Indigenous population since first contact and those arriving on Australian shores from the Asian diaspora. This process of ‘cleansing’ or rendering invisible is an inherent part of the white-washing of relations of difference within historical, cultural and social discourse. It is however, a relationship that seeps into the fabric of nation and rather than staining, it is as Lazaroo suggests within her fiction, a relationship that embellishes stories of nation, some of which are, as yet, still to be told. Lazaroo’s work is important in discussions of Australian identity formation for its exploration of acculturated representations of both Asianness and Indigeneity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Another example of the conflict and debate arising from reactions to the way white maleness is represented as morally superior to, and the saviour of, a sexualised Asian femaleness is Dennis O’Rourke’s ficto-documentary, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992). In this film, O’Rourke, who is a white, middle-aged, Australian male records his encounter and eventual romance with a young female, Thai prostitute, Aoi. The film plays out, albeit problematically, the archetypal cross-cultural encounter evoked in *The World of Suzie Wong* and one that Lazaroo attempts to satirise in *The World Waiting to be Made*. This encounter, in Ien Ang’s response to O’Rourke’s film is ‘overdetermined by the conflict-ridden divisions of male/female; rich/poor; white/coloured; first world/third world; Western/non-Western; dominant/subaltern’ (1997 1). More telling to the polemics of unequal power relations at work and indeed reified in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. The filmic audience only sees Aoi, much like the representation of Suzie Wong, and Cynthia in *Priscilla*, through the desiring eyes of the white, Western male.
- <sup>2</sup> See Griselda Pollack, *Vision and Difference* (2003).
- <sup>3</sup> See Robyn Morris, ‘Reading Photographically: Translating Whiteness through the Eye of the Empire’.
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian\\_literature\\_reviews/77620](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian_literature_reviews/77620), accessed 10 December, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of the role of the ‘white knight’ in Hollywood films, see Gina Marchetti (1993) who examines the way filmic narratives reaffirm the difference of Asians to white Americans. Marchetti argues that following World War II the appearance of Asians in Hollywood films acted as a strategy of avoidance, one clearly linked to the guilt arising over the treatment of racial tension between African American, Hispanics, Native Americans and white Americans (6). Noting that the classic Hollywood realist film participated in the construction of hegemony and power and is inextricably linked to the discourses of race, sex, class, gender and ethnicity (7), Marchetti observes that films such as *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* and *The World of Suzie Wong* deal with a similar and fundamental crisis that involves the dominant white American culture attempting to reconcile a liberal humanist value system with an overall dominance of this system by the white, middle class male (218). This hierarchical subject position is codified in these films by ‘saving’ the white woman

from moral degeneration and preventing her sexual liaison with an Asian male, and also by 'rescuing' the non-white woman from the perils of her culture and assimilating her into the 'superior' American culture (218).

- <sup>6</sup> [http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian\\_literature\\_reviews/77620](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian_literature_reviews/77620), accessed 10th December, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* for a discussion on the role of the white woman in upholding standards of Empire.

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