

THE PASSING OF THE HALF-CASTES: GAVIN CASEY, LEONARD MANN AND THE POSTWAR 'HALF-CASTE' NOVEL

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KEEP THE BREED PURE. The half-caste usually inherits the vices of both races and the virtues of neither. Do you want Australia to be a community of mongrels?
The Bulletin (1901)¹

I did what I set out to do—to make their passing easier and to keep the dreaded half-caste menace from our shores.

Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1944, 37)

The old-fashioned term 'halfcaste,' as applied to persons of mixed Aboriginal and European descent, is going into the discard.

Frank Clune, *The Fortune Hunters* (1957, 119)

Frank Clune's forecast has proven to be correct—and so too therefore, on the discursive level, has that of Daisy Bates. Although the phrase 'half-caste' is yet to disappear entirely from the communal vocabulary, over the past few decades it has been exorcised from everyday conversation and print discourse. The reasons for its relegation to the discard aren't difficult to surmise. Clearly the shift that has occurred in mainstream Australia's racial policies, practices, and attitudes in recent times renders the genetic determinism inherent in the notion of the 'half-caste' untenable, along with its traditional implication that the people it designates are inferior to both whites and so-called 'tribal Aborigines' or 'full bloods.' Moreover, persons of mixed descent have been, since at least the late 1960s, increasingly inclined to embrace their Aboriginal heritage openly even as they also aspire to be accepted fully as members of the wider Australian society. Virtually no-one speaks of 'half-castes' or 'mixed bloods' any more, and few even invoke the more neutrally inflected 'mixed descent' label. As Vicki Luker has observed, 'by calling someone a "half-caste," the speaker could be understood as denying that person's indigeneity or more generally as discounting the survival of an indigenous identity and tradition' (325). A person who is of mixed descent is likely to be regarded, and to regard himself or herself, as 'Aboriginal,' with no qualifying adjectival subcategorisation.

Yet when Clune was writing most Australians still employed the term and in varying degrees credited its misguided essentialist connotations. The current near extinction of the phrase 'half-caste' and its now long discredited cluster of associated concepts has had the consequence of obscuring the degree to which mainstream Australian society struggled, through much of the twentieth century, to confine persons of mixed descent within its categorical bounds. For as the century wore on and 'full bloods' and 'tribal Aborigines' appeared, as Daisy Bates famously put

it, to be 'passing,' the so-called 'half-castes,' and their conceptual siblings the 'fringe dwellers' and the 'detrribalised natives,' emerged as the dark Others whose loitering presence continued to besmirch the dream of an all-white Australia. A 1937 Conference of State and Federal Ministers identified two separate Aboriginal populations, 'full bloods' and 'half-castes' (Hollinsworth 116), and focused upon what it termed the 'part-Aboriginal problem of identity' (Rowley 16). In the decades immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War there was a noticeable increase in press coverage of what was often termed the 'half-caste problem' (Rowley 38). Many—perhaps most—white Australians were made vaguely aware that in their actual land, if not its mythic self-image, descendants and relatives of the Indigenous people still resided. Even so, such distant awareness provoked primarily dimness and myopia. Most white Australians encountered the half-castes rarely, if at all, and those who did tended to see them as translucent phantoms, as though their much desired departure was vaguely discernible through the veil of their obdurate endurance.

It was not until after the Second World War that a significant body of print and screen narratives focusing upon mixed descent Australians was placed before the public. Their belated appearance was a facet of the quickening of literary interest in Australia's Indigenous peoples that marked that period. Previously, Aboriginal characters of any sort had been rare in Australian fiction, and when they did appear their roles tended to be minor. Among texts regarded as being of 'literary' importance Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) are the only noteworthy exceptions in this regard, although the Aboriginal characters in both of those novels, while prominent, are not focal; the 'Bony' novels of crime fiction writer Arthur Upfield which began to appear in 1929 in which the main figure is a part Aboriginal super sleuth named 'Napoleon Bonaparte' may well have been more culturally significant. In the two decades that followed the War, however, beginning with Bill Harney's *Brimming Billabongs* (1947), book length narratives that focused primarily upon Aboriginal subjects became a modest but nonetheless noteworthy publishing phenomenon.² The emergence of such texts in these years attests to a growing inclination on the part of the mainstream society, or at least of a considerable proportion of its citizens, to challenge or revise longstanding racial stereotypes and assumptions. The famous referendum of 1967 that was to result in the granting of full citizenship rights to all Indigenous Australians signified that by that point an enormous shift in public opinion had indeed taken place. And perhaps the most important implication of that referendum result, beyond its inherent weakening of the myth of white racial superiority, was that even the most despised and overlooked of Indigenous Australians, those who inhabited the limbo spaces between mainstream society and traditional (or 'tribal') communities, must be incorporated into the body politic. For as most commentators on race relations have noted, it was less the supposedly doomed traditional Aboriginals than their betwixt and between relations who had, in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, most bedeviled white Australia's effort to legislate and imagine itself into a purely Caucasian future.³

The postwar public's acceptance of the fact that 'half caste' and 'fringe dwelling' Australians would not and should not be legislatively discriminated against constituted a crucial turning point in Australian social history. Yet the narrative texts that registered that shift, and perhaps helped to accelerate it, have in most instances been ignored or regarded dismissively by literary

scholars and cultural commentators—with the inevitable result that their collective significance has passed all but unnoticed.⁴ While to a degree this omission can be ascribed to the perceived lack of literary merit in most of them—academics and critics of the postwar period (and well afterwards in many cases) did think in such terms—it seems at least plausible that the very subject matter conditioned some of those judgments. Aboriginals, whether 'tribal' or 'half-caste,' simply were not interesting figures for extended literary critical consideration. This oversight wasn't necessarily due to racist attitudes, but the omission appears to reflect a Eurocentric cultural bias. But whatever the reason for the failure to incorporate this body of material into studies of Australian social and literary history, its consequence has been that a number of significant literary narratives have been largely or entirely ignored. Even if only as telling markers of the change that was occurring in the social milieu that produced them they warrant, individually and collectively, careful (if belated) attention. Several, however, repay close analytical readings. FB Vickers' *The Mirage* (1955), for example, a novel about two half-castes⁵ who pursue the ever receding dream of acceptance into mainstream society, is both a strikingly effective work of naturalistic realism and a discerning fictional critique of race relations in the Australia of its time. And similarly impressive are two more popular novels that followed (and were probably influenced by) *The Mirage*: Gavin Casey's *Snowball* (1958) and Leonard Mann's *Venus Half-Caste* (1963). The discussion that follows here aspires to justify the claims that both of these now largely forgotten works were of considerable cultural significance in a time when Australia was revisiting and revising longstanding assumptions about the position of its most oppressed minority, as well as provocative and well crafted works of fiction. In inducing readers to identify with fictional representations of the nation's most marginalised demographic group—through first person narration in some, and in others through the personalising lens of free indirect discourse—the 'half-caste' novels accorded a class of previously despised and unwanted Australians at least a modicum of social legitimacy and human dignity.

Snowball is set in 'Gibberton,' a small outback town the precise location of which is not made known; occasional references to 'the north' indicate that the setting is in one of the southern states, or perhaps a southern region of Western Australia, somewhere between 'a coastal city' and 'the goldfields.' The locale is left indeterminate because it is iconic; the object is to present a sense of the racial tensions and the attitudes of blacks and whites toward one another in what might be termed 'heartland' Australia. Those socially engrained tensions are explored through three intersecting narrative threads. One traces the competing claims of a half-caste war veteran and a white male schoolmaster to the affections of a recently arrived white schoolmistress; another deals with the relationship of another veteran, who is white, with a half-caste girl; and a third dramatises the fate of a half-caste prizefighter whose ring prowess makes him, briefly, a local hero, until a near tragic incident involving a white girl consigns him to the lowest racist categorisation possible for an Australian black—that of the would be ravisher of white women. As can be seen from even so brief an outline, the novel focuses upon the threat of miscegenation as a means of highlighting issues arising from white Australia's longstanding abhorrence of the land's original inhabitants—and, as well, the inevitability of friction between the two major social groups so long as one refuses to share power and prestige and the other refuses to vanish. The issue of miscegenation thus functions as an obvious signifier of racism and social divisiveness. More subtly however, and contrariwise, the prospect of white marrying black signifies potential social cohesiveness. In this respect sexual desire encodes social desire—an

urge to reach across the longstanding rift between white and black in hopes of hastening into being an Australia in which Aboriginals have been assimilated into the mainstream society.

Casey's eponymous Snowball is not the most important character in the narrative. He is the focal figure only in brief stretches—most importantly, at the start and in the closing pages—and even then he is usually an object of external narratorial scrutiny: the reader is not encouraged to partake vicariously of his inner experience of himself and the world. 'It was many years since he had had the least impulse to revert to nudity but now, at the idle and useless end of his life, he liked his feet to be free, with their spreading toes gripping the soft dust when he walked' (1): this is not recounted from his point of view, but rather reported, albeit sympathetically, by an interpretive narrator. Snowball appears to have few original or distinctive thoughts and qualities, and such psychic activity as he experiences is made to seem simple and hardly worth entertaining imaginatively. The effect is to encourage in the reader a patronising impression of him. His resemblance to the famous Uncle Tom stereotype compounds the effect. Unthreatening, simple and 'good,' the lovably nicknamed figure is a disarming presence, a house pet. A white reader needn't stoop to the level of imaginative empathy to approve of him, and to thus condone his loitering habitation of Australia is to validate—to a carefully limited degree—the ongoing residency of all those Aboriginal Others he typifies. For despite the authorial disclaimer in the text's Preface—'My coloured people...are not...meant to be "typical" mixed blood,' Casey asserts therein—the figure of Snowball is clearly more symbol than self, an embodiment of most half-castes of his generation.

But not of all half-castes. Others, younger than Snowball, are presented as individuals who cannot easily be confined within familiar stereotypes or regarded as lacking in subjective complexity. There are more than a dozen characters whose thoughts and impressions are not merely recounted, but shared with the reader, and several are half-castes. Yet there is no 'main character' for the reader to identify with; the narrative progresses primarily by shifting the focus serially from one character's impressions to another's. The proliferation of contrasting personalities and viewpoints, and the roughly equal attention accorded to several of the more important black and white characters, convey two significant implications: Aboriginal half-castes are, no less so than whites, individuals rather than generic racial specimens; and they are also, no less so than whites, possessed of active and varying inner lives. In this respect the very structure of the novel has a tacitly democratising thrust: the dark-skinned others are, as narrative constructs, treated as equals of the whites, each possessed of his or her defining perspective on situations and unfolding events. The reader, listening in on and occasionally sharing vicariously the thoughts and perceptions and emotions of such a range of persons, is compelled to defer respectfully to all, at least on the imaginative level.

And the range is designedly broad. The inner ponderings of even relatively unimportant characters, both white and black, are at times paraphrased and dramatised—briefly at least. A Sergeant Rollo, for example, the town's highest-ranking policeman, is seen to harbor relatively tolerant views of the town's coloured people—'no active dislike of blackfellows' (19)—or at least to believe that of himself. By contrast, the secretary of the Road Board, Mr Bridges, abhors

them actively and prides himself on it. Forced to socialise politely with a visiting celebrity, a boxer who happens to be African-American, he is overheard by the reader speculating that it would be best if the visitor were to administer a severe beating to the local half-caste who is to be his opponent in an upcoming fight, so that the latter's 'fancy notions' about himself might be battered out of him (157). There is a degree of textual sympathy accorded the Sergeant, who is made to seem decent and fair in his attitude toward Aboriginals, though unconcerned about the fundamental inequities in the town's social arrangements; the Road Board Secretary, by contrast, is manifestly a thoroughgoing racist who is rendered unlikable in his petty obsession with keeping the 'niggers' (his favored term for Aboriginals) segregated from white areas. Yet the reader is compelled, albeit fleetingly, to view situations and events through the eyes of both, and the very limitations and idiosyncrasies of their respective viewpoints contribute to the overall aim of representing the town as a community of differing, and often dissident, individuals.

Significantly, the white characters who are given considerable textual exposure, and thereby accorded greater respect, are those who are critical of the racial mores that most of the other white townspeople espouse and embrace. Jerry Hickory, the local school's headmaster, sees clearly the injustices and indignities inflicted upon Aboriginal people, and as well the obstacles facing any who might try to depart from their socially mandated roles. Similarly critical of the town's racial code is Greg Stapleton, the returned war veteran who in partnership with his Aboriginal army friend Jack Charles is attempting to establish an innovative small business venture. But the most important of the white characters is the new schoolteacher, Lorrie Welch. As a well educated newcomer fresh from a more tolerant social environment in the city she is appalled by what she perceives of the treatment of the local Aboriginal people by most of the whites—and as well by what seems to her a passivity on the part of the Aboriginals themselves in the face of the injustices and humiliations routinely dealt them. Probably because her feelings about relations between the races are meant to anticipate and articulate those of a sympathetic white reader, hers is the perspective that is on display most frequently and extensively. The textual empathy accorded her underscores her own inclination to project herself into the minds of others—particularly the Aboriginal people who receive so little respectful regard from other whites. And, chief among these, Jack Charles:

Her heart ached for Jack, as she began to see in her mind the tight, blighted, cautious, funless world to which circumstances and his own stolid, loyal decency had condemned him. She looked at his patient, swarthy, sober face, and it was easy to imagine the laughter that must have lit it up during the canteen nights of his army days, through the years when a digger hat had made him the equal of all the young men who wore digger hats. (74)

Lorrie's heart aches for Jack not solely out of concern for the injustice of his position as a non-white in a racist society. She is deeply attracted to him. Nonetheless, the passage is calculated to advance what may be the narrative's fundamental aim: to entice the reader into apprehending the world as a half-caste Australian might. Engaging with events through Laurie's eyes we find ourselves eavesdropping upon her as she herself attempts to eavesdrop, imaginatively, upon the

mind of a black person. We are thus encouraged—indeed, compelled—to do the same, not only with regard to Jack, but to the other important non-white characters.

Just as there is no unified 'white' perspective with regard to matters of race or of social relations more broadly, so too, the novel strongly intimates, do the Aboriginals vary and differ in their ways of understanding and dealing with the town's social arrangements, and as individuals. Jack Charles is depicted as a person of considerable integrity and personal courage and, more significantly, as deeply reflective about his situation and that of 'abos' generally. With regard to the latter, it is somewhat surprising that his notions about most of the half-castes who are forced to live on the settlement on the town's outskirts are almost indistinguishable from those of most whites; he regards them as being 'just about as lazy and unstable, as unworthy of citizenship' (81), and 'disease-ridden and dishonest, and sly and treacherous as well' (82). The major point of difference between his attitude and that of the town's whites is that while he doesn't like the settlement people he does 'understand' them because when younger 'he had almost become one of them' (82), until exposure to the more egalitarian ethos of military culture both enlightened and embittered him about what Aboriginals face at home. To a degree it appears that the text may be ascribing such negative impressions of half-caste Australians to one who is himself of mixed descent by way of conceding a few points to the common white outlook; it seems unlikely that an Aboriginal would think quite that negatively about other Aboriginals if indeed he understands them and their circumstances. Perhaps implausibly then, but nonetheless subtly and ironically, prejudices about half-castes are thrown into relief as such when seen as deeply embedded in the mind of a half-caste—and called into question by his only vaguely sensed perplexity. But more importantly, the apparent inconsistency in Jack's views serves to characterise him as a complex and conflicted individual. Torn as he is between identifying with the dark-skinned people less fortunate than himself and mentally incarcerating them within the society's reigning racial stereotypes, he is made to seem too emotionally fraught to be dismissively regarded. Because he is thus disturbed, a reader's inclination to stereotype him is itself unsettled: he is no Snowball.

No less inwardly complex than Jack is the novel's most imaginatively conceived character, the African-American ('negro') boxer Tiger Charles, whose shrewdness and sensitivity pass unremarked by whites. Though a celebrated figure in Australia his social standing is precarious; like Aboriginal Australians, and perhaps even more readily given his country of origin, he is regarded as a 'nigger' despite his lauded accomplishments and his social sophistication. The incorporation of the Tiger Charles character serves several ends. It extends further the range and variety of non-white perspectives explored in the narrative; it links Australian racist prejudices and practices with those prevalent in the nation that was internationally infamous for its oppression of dark skinned people; and it reinforces the implication that racist stereotypes that obscure individuality and subjective complexity are communal delusions that have no basis in reality. Perhaps most significantly, Tiger's impressions of race relations in Australia as contrasted with the analogous social patterns in the United States carry with them the persuasive force of one whose own experiences as a non-white in two racist societies provide a particularly advantageous perspective: he can compare and contrast the situations in the United States and Australia critically. The America comparison often served white Australians as a rationalising

means of downplaying the oppression dealt to Aboriginals by construing it as less onerous than that to which American black people were subjected. In Tiger's view, however, the comparison is not entirely flattering to mainstream Australian complacency about its treatment of its non-white inhabitants. Through Tiger's eyes the novel provides an unusual, discomfiting twist upon the American model that is calculated to make white Australian readers wince—and, of course, think.

However, it is the inner turmoil experienced by Jack's younger brother Benny, the promising local boxer who acquits himself well against the more experienced Tiger, that most challengingly assails entrenched mainstream notions about Aboriginal and half-caste Australians. Benny is less reflective than Jack, hence less inclined to speculate upon the unjust treatment meted out to people such as himself. In part this is simply because he is younger and has not had the military experience that opened Jack's eyes. But it is also due to his status in the town as a special sort of Aboriginal, a local sporting hero in a society that worships athletic prowess irrespective of the achieving athlete's race. It is a privileged position that has its limitations, as he vaguely senses: 'lately he had been increasingly aware that people—the white people, the important ones—chilled in their attitude towards even a champ when he was surrounded by his dusky tribe' (203). He is nonetheless encouraged to think that he has a chance to partake of the white world that he finds highly desirable. And that world is incarnated in the figure of a white woman to whom he is attracted, the wife of his fight manager. To him her attractiveness, significantly, is not sexual, but rather domestic—and, by implication, social. Regarding her, he sees a 'harmony of pink, amiable skin and red lips and white, even teeth' (119) rather than an object of forbidden erotic desire. It is the aspect of 'harmony,' reinforced by the pacifying amiability of her appearance and the reassuring evenness of her teeth, that holds his attention. She embodies the clean and neatly arranged kitchen that is her domain, and the kitchen in turn signifies vividly a way of life, denied to most of his people, in which the ravages of time and wear can be effortlessly countered.

The pattern of the lino was the same as that on the stuff Myrtle had bought for the kitchen at home. But at home the new kitchen floor-covering was rapidly going grey, the same as everything else. Here, the green was still as bright as the fretwork of sea water on white sand, fading into intricacies of colourless cleanliness that might have been bleached by the sun, instead of by the eager, conscientious mop and scrubbing brush of Plugger's wife. Yet Benny never saw Marge mopping or scrubbing, and his mother seemed to mop and scrub all the time, endlessly, without getting anything lastingly clean. (119)

These are mostly impressions, not thoughts articulated in words. And here as elsewhere they convey broad implications about the social circumstances that condition the everyday lives of white and Aboriginal people, the latter in this instance personified by Benny. But rendered thus, from his perspective—with Benny, the reader beholds this specific scene, these specific kitchen patterns and colours, and reflects upon it all with reference to his own domestic environment—the passage and others like it do more than generalise from Benny's particular responses; they

also cast him as a sensitive individual beset by bewildering thoughts, impulses and desires. He is very different from his brother Jack. Yet like Jack, he is no Snowball.

The narrative's insistence upon compelling the reader to see things Benny's way, both literally and figuratively, is of crucial importance in a scene that enacts one of the most basic myths held by white Australians about Aboriginals: the belief, as one of the more enlightened whites in the town muses, that 'all black men wanted, in their hearts, to rape white women.' So strong is the obsession of white men with the dogma of that bestial urge, he further reflects, that it must be rigorously policed: 'The hair on the backs of their red necks rose if they saw a coloured man look at a white girl from a distance of less than about fifty feet' (231). Benny, because of the aura attached to him in his status as a town celebrity, gets a much closer look than that at a white woman. A waitress recently arrived from Sydney attracts his eye because she reminds him of his manager's wife. She is willing to partner him more than once at a dance in his honour, and even flirt mildly and allow him to walk her home afterwards. At the moment of parting he makes a timid attempt to kiss her and she, reacting in horror, says shrilly "'Keep your hands off me, you dirty big nigger'" (215). Little in the account of her previous words and actions has foreshadowed either the bigotry or the cruelty of that exclamation. The reader is clearly intended to be almost as rudely taken aback as Benny himself is by it—especially as the incident is viewed largely from his perspective, and he has been characterised as anything but dirty or rapacious. The disjunction between the racist stereotype informing her outburst and the complex human being who bears the brunt of them is stressed in the account that follows, which relays his inner responses.

For a moment the words didn't seem to find the track between Benny's ears and his brain. They didn't register, like a clean, one-punch knockout, of which the victim knows nothing until later. But when their impact hit him it was harder than any knockout. They rang in his head, fierce with all the hate and scorn an aboriginal never seemed to escape altogether, as long as he stayed in his own country. (215)

The perspective here is certainly external to Benny; his thoughts and feelings are interpretively observed from without rather than verbally enacted, and clearly the generalisation about what Aboriginals 'never seemed to escape' comes from a mind other than his. Reader identification with him is thus tempered by awareness that he is an object of scrutiny and analysis. Notwithstanding, it is with Benny's reactions, not those of the white girl, that the text concerns itself, and that alone compels a degree of reader empathy. Whatever fear and revulsion she might be feeling is of no narrative concern; it is the cruel psychological damage done to Benny that is thrust—almost literally so—to the foreground of the reader's attention.

Benny's ill-judged attempt to transgress the most sacred taboo of racist mythology, that of erotic contact between a black male and a white woman, results in his forced expulsion from the town and, by implication, from modern Australia. Under cover of darkness he flees to the far north, hoping that the enraged townspeople who chase after him will have neither the means nor the

will to carry their pursuit of him that far. The incident and its immediate aftermath, which sees a near riot of white against black, mark the limit of Australia's capacity to tolerate a fully multiracial society. The clear implication is that assimilation is a dubious and at best distant prospect. By mutual agreement marked by mutual reluctance and regret, Jack and Lorrie end their miscegenatory flirtation with one another. Only the alliance between Greg Stapleton and his half-caste lover Josie remains extant by the end of the novel, and its viability in the future is by no means assured. At the narrative's close Snowball rides off into what he in his generic simplicity foresees to be a 'more promising future' (250). His hazy, facile optimism, however, runs counter to the dominant implications of the novel as a whole.

In *Venus Half-Caste* Leonard Mann, like Gavin Casey, filters narrative events through an interplay of diverse character viewpoints. In Mann's novel, however, there are only three principal characters—one white and two half-caste Aboriginals—an economy that allows for more extensive exploration of the minds and souls of each. To the latter end as well, each chapter (with the exception of the final one) recounts events largely from the perspective of a single character—usually one of the main characters—with no embellishments from an observing narrator. *Venus Half-Caste* thus mirrors and enhances the democratising thrust of *Snowball's* strategy of placing readers within the minds of both non-whites and whites. Rarely is there an all-seeing external narrator to turn to for enlightenment upon a character's thoughts, perceptions, actions and responses. In order to construct and reflect upon the larger picture unavailable to any of the characters individually the reader must regard the subjective evidence provided by each as being of equal relevance and gravity. The perspectives of the two half-caste characters are limited and their assumptions and analyses are often problematic—but they are no less discerning than those of the white characters, and generally rather more so. A responsive reader has no choice but to imagine them as complicated, autonomous individuals rather than types.

As indicated by the teasingly salacious title, the novel revolves around the figure of a beautiful young Aboriginal woman of mixed descent. Beatrice Leddin, at the start of the narrative, is literally showcased. She works in an automobile agency performing various light menial tasks, and each day she must attend to some tidying and arranging in the long showroom exposed to the street. Her daily ritual, which she thinks of as a performance, has attracted a fan base of viewers on the footpath outside, and she is aware that this aspect of her brief has less to do with keeping the showroom presentable than with attracting public attention: 'the real purpose of this,' she reflects, 'was to show herself off before the goggling eyes along the stretch of plate glass window' (10). In part she can perform this role, that of a pulchritudinous advertising image that lives and breathes, because of her good looks; like 'Chloe' in the famous painting that hangs above the long bar in an old Melbourne pub, to whom she compares herself, she is arrestingly gorgeous. But in the eyes of her voyeuristic beholders there is more to her attractiveness than simply a striking face and an appealing figure; with her 'half abo features, coloured not brown but rather a smokey, warm dark shade got from the mixture of black and white' (10), she exudes the allure of an exotic Other. As Catriona Elder observes, 'difference is presented as...in many ways what makes her desirable' (179). In this regard she appears as an instantiation of a 'half-breed' archetype familiar in American race mythology (albeit less so in Australian)—that of, in Peter Kareithi's cogent exposition, 'the smoldering sexy heroine whose partly white blood makes

her “acceptable,” even attractive, to white men, but whose indelible “stain” of black blood condemns her to a tragic conclusion’ (8).⁶

The tragic conclusion does not eventuate, however. In this as in other ways the novel constructs Beatrice as a living embodiment of a favorite construct of the white imagination only in order to puncture the image and hint at the human complexity it is designed to obscure. For contrary to Elder’s reading, the voyeuristic gaze that she endures is not authorially sanctioned (182), but highlighted as such and critiqued.⁷ As the narrative moves toward its climax it increasingly appears that Beatrice’s exotic hybridity is indeed impelling her toward exactly the fate meted out in many ‘half-breed’ narratives to uncomfortably alluring off-white Others for the purpose of ethnic cleansing. Philip Roke, a wealthy but psychologically disturbed white man, becomes her lover until she finds it necessary to break with him. After he has, in a jealous haze, murdered her employer Dr. Panner, an older white man with whom in fact she is not actually romantically involved, he sets out to kill her as well. She is saved from his rage by Vic Pegram, the other important half-caste character; and at the close of the narrative she and Vic are poised to lead their life together in circumstances conducive to at least some measure of contentment and dignity. In this respect, as in others, the text effectively debunks both of the mythic categories into which she was seemingly cast by its teasingly ironic title. Just as there are in actuality no Venuses (or Chloes), there are no half-castes—other than in the social mind that has fabricated them and that insists upon superimposing its mythic constructs onto actual individuals.

The disparity between the mainstream society’s racist typology and the complex individuality it obscures is most strongly conveyed, as noted above, by the text’s strategy of relating events from the perspectives of the two major part-Aboriginal characters. Of its thirty-two chapters, nine are narrated with Beatrice as the focalising perceiver, and nine more through Vic’s eyes. Both are shown to be actively reflective, not mere passive recorders of what happens to them and passes before them. Beatrice is not only very aware of the fact that the automobile agency is exploiting her exoticism in order to attract potential customers, she is also, to a degree, willing to permit it for her own reasons. Similarly, when Philip becomes interested in her she knows that it is primarily because she is a half-caste, and she is actively, almost connivingly, receptive to his racist fantasising. She is a thoughtful, active agent, and even reminds herself that ‘she would, tough as hell, go anywhere so long as it was out of the muck’ (64). As the reader gets to know her vicariously it becomes apparent that no social stereotype can explain or contain her. The only mythic figure that seems remotely expressive of her public persona and the inner subjectivity it veils is that of a character in the Japanese film *Ugetsu* that she and Vic go to see on their first date. *Ugetsu* features prominently a seductive spirit princess who returns to earth to lay claim to the happiness she never could experience while alive. A ‘ghost who can be seen’ (109), she is a fitting symbol of Beatrice’s halfway/nowhere status, and of her effort to pursue whatever fulfillment is possible for one of society’s translucent half-castes. It is particularly significant that Beatrice is not tagged with the delimiting metaphorical reference by a narrative voice external to her (as is the case with Prichard’s character Coonardoo, the ‘well within the shadows’). In more than one instance she makes the connection herself, an act of introspective imagination that at once establishes the relevant points of similarity between the two as figures of narrative and highlights the critical difference between them: a ghost is a mythic soul without substance, pure

unhauntable psyche. By contrast, Beatrice, constructed as an earthily complex actual individual, can be haunted, worried, psychologically fraught.

Vic Pegram's reflections, responses, and behaviour are markedly different from those of Beatrice—not simply for the obvious reason that he is male. He has thought more deeply than she about the position of their people in Australian society, and developed in consequence a greater sense of disaffiliation from it. In part his capacity for reflectiveness is ascribed to his unusual life circumstances. The son of an Aboriginal woman and a white station owner, he was raised as a station black until, in his adolescence, his father tacitly acknowledged their relationship—though only obliquely and informally—by conferring special privileges and responsibilities on him. He was sent to an agricultural college where he obtained a diploma and, after a stint in the army, was staked enough capital to buy the outfit of a contractor-drover—empowered, that is, to be an active agent in Australia's socioeconomic system. Not long afterwards, the death of his white father brought a bequest of twenty thousand pounds. It did not equate with the inheritances of his white half-siblings, but it was a sum that, along with the vocational training he derived from his college studies, positioned him advantageously to establish himself as a small agricultural landholder. Acting on advice he remembered hearing from his father about attractive properties to be had in the south, he has, at the story's start, relocated to Victoria in quest of a cattle-sheep farm within his price range.

Unusually and perhaps uniquely for an Aboriginal man, therefore, he has the means to buy his way into whatever modicum of respectability society will permit him. And the means are cultural as well as financial, for he has been imbued with white cultural values—colonised, in effect. The mainstream society, embodied in the guiding hand of his white father, has instilled in him the restless ambition it regards as admirable and essential in its members, and he can only imagine material success and a degree of acceptance within that society as ways of assuaging it. His is, however, a troubled subalternity, aware of itself as such and thus not entirely the product of robotic social programming. The novel makes it clear that he occupies, somewhat haplessly, 'a point, quite alone between the black and the white, not wanting to drift one way, not able to go much further the other, but made by the old man's hand ambitious for he did not know what' (41). Yet significantly, this isn't what a distant narrative voice observes about him; himself capable of the critical distance upon self and situation that enables a degree of autonomy, his is the consciousness that makes the judgement. He is fully aware of his mixed (or at least confused) feelings with regard to adopting white values and goals. And the reader, confined within his point of view through lengthy stretches of narrative, is compelled to acknowledge (at least intuitively) that the searchingly introspective mind of this half-caste cannot be regarded as a mere receptacle for society's prescriptions and proscriptions. Psychologically he is an active agent, and he seeks a niche in the mainstream society that will bear the imprint of his own distinctive self-image.

Vic's restive ambivalence about fitting in with whites disturbs a standard view held by many white Australians of the time—the assumption that Aboriginals would happily seize the opportunity to 'assimilate' were it truly on offer to them. The narrative implies that he presses

onward with his socially endorsed goal of becoming a productive landowner primarily because he craves direction and achievement of some sort, and there can be for him no returning to traditional Aboriginal ways (although not because he feels the white ways are superior). Yet at the same time that he sees himself as disaffiliated from traditional Indigenous culture, he nonetheless identifies with 'abo' Australia sociopolitically. In a remarkable passage he is heard mulling upon the lot of those racial outsiders who like himself have attained a partial entry into white Australian society:

The half-castes were on the black side of the fence, outside of the white in Australia. Even those men like himself in the cattle industry were; though, being in cattle and necessary for it, they had to be reckoned with and admitted that far. They had worked their way in. They had got a place for themselves inside the boundaries but there was an inner fence and within that they were not allowed. They belonged to the people, the homeless people outside, the poor degraded people of all the settlements. They were his people. They owed nothing to the whites, absolutely nothing... (216)

No longer literally or culturally among the degraded outsiders, he is nonetheless *of* them politically. Though on the verge of thrusting his way into full superficial acceptance by white society to an unprecedented degree for a dark skinned Other, his true allegiance, his real citizenship, is with those on the black side of that inner fence.

To the extent that it is possible to do so, he therefore determines, he will occupy both his actual property and his social position on his own terms—as, albeit discreetly, a proud resident alien rather than a token inductee. And the extent of his disaffiliation from mainstream Australia becomes clearer to him, and to the reader, as a result of the protective role he assumes with regard to Beatrice. Initially attracted to her because of her beauty, Vic comes also to admire her willingness to strive to create a niche for herself in a society that offers little scope for the ambitions of a half-caste woman. His admiration becomes deep concern when he becomes aware that she is under threat from her white ex-lover, Roke, who has gone into hiding after committing the murder—and, no less importantly, under threat of being implicated in Roke's crime if the latter is apprehended. Fearing that a drawn out and inevitably sensationalised trial featuring a 'half-caste Venus' will scar Beatrice, and as well shame and demoralise all black Australians, he sets his mind on hunting down and killing the murderer. He knows that the act must not only be committed with secrecy, but that for Beatrice's sake it must be made to look like a suicide.

Fittingly therefore, the narrative developments in the closing sections of *Venus Half-Caste* appear to deliver the melodrama portended in the novel's title. In keeping with the text's gesture in the direction of the thriller genre, the action is imaginatively conceived and effectively paced, particularly in a sequence in which Vic stalks Roke late at night in an abandoned house and shoots him in a way that will incline investigators to conclude that the death was self-inflicted. But there is little anxiety attached to the encounter between the two, for there is no doubt that

Vic, who as a war veteran is more adept at physical violence than his targeted victim, will emerge victorious. The most vividly felt tension is racial and political. It derives from Vic's efforts to outwit a white policeman who is exceptionally shrewd and, more broadly, a powerful social system that has rarely been effectively opposed or outmaneuvered by black Australians. Detective Sergeant Mellis, a far more formidable foe than the psychologically hapless Roke, senses something not quite convincing about the apparent suicide once the corpse is discovered and comes to suspect Vic. Although no racist bias is associated with his suspicions he does think in racist generalisations about Vic and Beatrice, and it is clear that he represents, at least in Vic's mind, the mainstream white society that will always seek to oppress Indigenous Australians. To Vic, and to the narrative, the contest is unequivocally a race war—albeit discreetly so and on a small scale.

Remarkably for a novel of its time, the text conscripts its readers to serve on the black side of the conflict. As the narrative moves toward its climax, chapters conveying Roke's perspective disappear, and most of the action is seen and experienced through Vic's eyes. When he stalks Roke in the darkened house it is his mind that we are compelled to inhabit, his plans, apprehensions and impressions that become ours. A contrasting white person's perspective that is presented in one entire chapter and a portion of the closing one, that of Mellis, does little to displace the reader's sense of affiliation with Vic, who has been more prominent throughout the novel and has been characterised more substantively. Mellis's thoughts tell us relatively little about him as an individual, but a lot about the society's customary and semi-official views of non-white Australians. As he ponders the case, for example, he simply assumes that Beatrice had been Dr. Panner's mistress, on the basis of 'the way she was dressed up, a half-caste abo' and her appeal as 'a rare specimen, a collector's piece' (254). The reader knows that he is shrewd, and that yet, shrewd though he is, his white preconceptions have led his reasoning about her astray. In the final chapter, after events have played out almost exactly as Vic had planned and neither he nor Beatrice is charged with any wrongdoing, the two have married and settled on his farm. Vic has outwitted the mainstream society and won his covert war. Mellis, suspicious of Vic's possible involvement in the death of Roke, pays them a visit in an effort to satisfy his curiosity—and just possibly to elicit some incriminating conversational slip. His quest is a failure; Vic's capacity to remain psychologically resolute in the face, literally, of a powerful white authority figure, enables him to deflect the attempt at entrapment. Mellis remains convinced that Vic is the murderer, but admits to himself he can do nothing. What is more importantly established in this climactic encounter—an encounter which, though entirely verbal, is essentially a showdown—is the self-subverting inadequacy of his blinkered vision of Vic as an 'abo.' In the course of the conversation he perceives that the underlying reason for his curiosity, and the motivation for having come well out of his way to confront Vic, has been 'a desire to look carefully at this black fellow Pegram, to consider the character of the man, to find out what he really was' (283). It is as though the impeccably crafted breach of white law he knows Vic to have achieved has opened his mind just a little with regard to what a 'black fellow' might 'really' be—a man with a 'character,' an individual no less complex and resolute than himself.

Of course, the reader has from the start been in a position to know Beatrice and Vic better than the white characters can. As noted earlier, the discrepancy between white society's voyeuristic

vision of Beatrice and her inner conception of herself is established on the very first pages of the novel. At the end the point is reinforced by the apparent failure of even the shrewd Mellis to exploit fully the hunch that Vic must be more than he seems from a racist perspective. Though consciously curious about 'the character of the man,' he had come to behold him mostly with the objectifying gaze of his own social caste, as simply a murderer: 'Mellis looked into the murderous eyes in the black face' (273). This too is voyeurism, of a kind. Mellis wants to behold the character of the black man in its unadorned psychic state—a nakedness predicated upon the assumption that if a black man kills, it must be due to a primal murderousness only thinly clothed by his civilised veneer. His subsequent impression that there might be more to Vic's motivations than an inherent lust for violence leads only to dim partial insight, not enlightenment. The text urges the reader to see more fully. In the closing lines of the novel Vic admits to the hitherto uncertain Beatrice that he was indeed Roke's killer with the chilling assertion 'I had to. He was an enemy,' and he immediately adds, shakily and hoarsely, a qualification: 'When I had done it I felt like I had killed a boy' (286). Behind the eyes that Mellis sees as murderous there is a thoughtfully reflective mind that knows the difference between homicide and the taking of a life in combat—and, as well, a soul that shrinks at the human tragedy that the pragmatic, rational mind had decreed and effected.

As noted at the outset of this discussion *Snowball* and *Venus Half-Caste* were not the only narratives of the time in to focus upon mixed descent Australians and attempt to present contemporary social experience through "half-caste" eyes. The trend initiated by Bill Harney's *Brimming Billabongs* and FB Vickers' *The Mirage* was accelerated by other texts: Xavier Herbert's *Seven Emus* (1959), Lyndon Rose's *Country of the Dead* (1959), Joe Walker's *No Sunlight Singing* (1960), Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961), Donald Stuart's *Yarialie* (1963), Raymond Aitchison's *The Illegitimates* (1964), and John Patrick's *Inapatua* (1966)—as well as, of course, *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) by Mudrooroo (then known as 'Colin Johnson').⁸ These works were remarkable not merely because they featured part Aboriginal characters prominently, as did other contemporaneous texts such as Dymphna Cusack's *Black Lightning* and Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*—but because they did so by compelling readers to project themselves imaginatively into the minds of part Aboriginal Australians. It may be speculating too broadly to conclude that because white readers of these books imagined themselves to be experiencing the social universe as 'abos' did, their preconceptions were greatly altered and their political views changed accordingly. Attitudes deeply engrained are not easily susceptible of alteration, and imagined worlds can be put aside once the covers of a book are closed for good, and these novels were, of course, the sorts of texts that tend to attract the attention of those who are already in sympathy with their social aims. Yet in the two decades following the end of the Second World War, culminating in the referendum of 1967 that for the first time endorsed federal authority to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal people, mainstream Australians did display an unprecedented willingness to incorporate within the nation's body politic the descendants of the land's original inhabitants. If the profusion of novels featuring 'half-caste' characters and problematising the assumptions underlying the concept wasn't clearly a major catalyst for the effort at legal and cultural repatriation, it was certainly at least tellingly reflective of one of the most meaningful social transformations in Australian history. In many respects that transformation is far from complete, of course; tragically, some of the conditions described in these novels prevail still, as do racist attitudes that nurture them. Nonetheless, the demise of the once powerful racial construct signifies the all but total interment of the notion that

Australia cannot, will not, and should not be a multi-ethnic society. And ironically, it seems no great surmise to suggest that the passing of those once menacing mythic creatures known as 'half-castes' was not only reflected in, but actively accelerated by, postwar narratives that featured so prominently representations of them—or more precisely, of Indigenous individuals routinely mistaken for them.

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¹ Quoted in Broome, 93.

² Elsewhere I have discussed the postwar emergence of the "Aboriginal narrative" at greater length. See Pascal, "The Telling of Marmel's Story," *Australian Literary Studies*, 24:2 (2009), 54-68; and "Narrating the Nowhere People: F.B. Vickers's *The Mirage* and 'Half-Caste' Aboriginals," *Antipodes* June 2013, 59-67.

³ See, for example, Rowley 28-46, 232-3; Luker, 314-6; and Goot and Rowse, 32.

⁴ Representative examples of standard reference works that fail to note the emergence of Aboriginal-centred narratives in the postwar era include Ken Goodwin's *A History of Australian Literature* (1986), *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (2008), and *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009). Even two of the specialised studies of Aboriginal presences in the national literature have failed to identify the genre as such; see Adam Shoemaker's *Black Words, White Page* (1989), and Hodge and Mishra's *The Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1991). JJ Healy's *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (1978; rev. 1989) does call attention, albeit rather vaguely, a "category" of books that attempted "to create openings for Aborigines, as persons of culture, to step out into the full view of Australians" (250). However, Healy's study considers only a relatively narrow range of writers, slighting or ignoring several of the most interesting works, including the two that this discussion focuses upon; and he is oblivious of the sub-category of the postwar "half-caste narrative."

⁵ At this point I choose to abandon the practice of enclosing the tendentious term 'half-caste' in inverted commas, as it should be clear that it is meant to refer to a cultural construct, not to actual persons of mixed descent.

⁶ The only significant literary predecessor to Beatrice in this regard is the eponymous main character in William Hatfield's 1935 novel *Black Waterlily*—a gorgeous half (actually quarter) caste woman who, her exotic nickname notwithstanding, is usually taken to be completely white. Her 'blackness,' her Aboriginality, manifests itself only as a sort of primal sexual allure that is enhanced immeasurably by the purity of its caucasian bodily host.

⁷ Elder's reading of *Venus Half-Caste* is flawed in its insistence upon viewing the novel's treatment of voyeurism as itself voyeuristic and 'salacious.' To claim, as she does, that the text is complicit in the 'showcasing' of Beatrice and that it constructs her as nothing more than an object of the male gaze is to distort—really to invert—its implications. See Elder, 178-201.

⁸ To this list might be added Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), in which substantial narrative attention is given to the character of Alf Dubbo, a half-caste artist. While Dubbo is indeed a significant creation, and the reader is compelled to view the world from his perspective, he is one of several such focal characters, and the novel does not attempt, through him, to explore the situation of Aboriginals or half-castes more broadly.