Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp':
Representations of ‘Shared Space’

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The life of Rebecca Forbes is an ‘event under description’ that can only be thought about through the ways it has been reported and described.1 Her life has been of interest to white Australians primarily because she was a white woman ‘sharing space’ in an Indigenous community through her marriage to a man of full Aboriginal descent. Her life is of interest to this author because, like Rebecca, I am a white woman sharing relationships with Adnyamathanha people within and beyond the context of research. In this article, I examine representations made of Rebecca’s life in a newspaper article found pasted into an anthropological field journal belonging to Norman Tindale. The article illustrates public constructions of Rebecca’s life in both its content and its context. The oral history of Rebecca’s oldest grandchild is also privileged, on the basis of the privileging it receives by other Adnyamathanha people involved in this research. Through the interrogation of Rebecca’s successful sharing of space with Indigenous people, and through the process of conducting research in a cross-cultural context, I seek an understanding of ways in which non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians may ‘share space’ together.

The article

The newspaper article ‘White woman lives as a lubra in Native Camp’ — unfortunately clipped of its dateline and other identifiers — was pasted into the 1938–9 field journal of Norman Tindale, the South Australian Museum’s ethnologist. Tindale was accompanied on this fourteen-month, 16,000-mile field trip by anthropologist Dr J B Birdsell of Harvard and their respective wives.2 The purpose of the expedition was to enable Tindale to observe the adaptation of ‘half castes’ into ‘white community life’ and to allow Birdsell to conduct ‘biological research on problems of race mixture’, which he intended to analyse mathematically.3 Their wives were to conduct inquiries into women’s lives.4

The article in Tindale’s journal describes Rebecca Forbes’s emigration from England, the circumstances of her marriage and her life in ‘a native camp’ at Beltana, in the northern Flinders Ranges of South Australia. The summary below the headline read:

Married at Bourke 25 years ago to her aboriginal lover, Jacky Witchetty, a white woman is still living the life of a lubra in a native camp and refuses to return to civilisation. She is believed to be the only white woman to have gone completely native.5

An article about a woman’s racially mixed marriage, ‘half-caste’ sons and widowed life among an Indigenous community would seem an ideal subject of study for the field trip; however, the words ‘Adv c 1940’, handwritten on the
cutting and the only clue to the article’s origins, suggest that the article was included in the journal retrospectively. The article names Yandama, west of Tibooburra, as ‘in this district’, and adds the specifier ‘(SA)’ to the location of the Ram Paddock Gate camp, suggesting a north-western NSW origin of publication. Tindale’s field trip visited neither Beltana nor Tibooburra. The presence of the clipping in the journal suggests that it was of anthropological interest, but it seems that Tindale did not pursue the matter further.

Cross-cultural relationships

In 1938, the year Tindale began his field trip, influential anthropologist A P Elkin coined a term for the ‘absorption’ of people of mixed descent into European society: assimilation. The word would soon find its way into legislation. Birdsell’s tentative field conclusions in 1939 ‘indicated that there was no reason biologically why the absorption of the hybrid Australian into the white population should not occur’. South Australia passed the *Aborigines Act Amendment Act (1939)*, which broadened definitions of Aboriginality to include all those of Indigenous descent, but also included a process for gaining exemption from the Act. The legislative process of assimilation encouraged the movement from Indigenous identity and lifestyle to white or European identity and lifestyle. It said nothing about a white person choosing to adopt an Indigenous lifestyle and identity. Similarly, when Birdsell claimed that ‘if every Aboriginal in Australia, including full bloods, were crossed once with a white, both the Aboriginal and half caste problem would tend to disappear’, the unstated assumption of colonial eugenic theories was that the whites involved in this equation would be men, partnered to Aboriginal women. Belief in the hierarchy of races fostered the assumption that no white person would choose to adopt an Indigenous lifestyle; coupled with patriarchy, this configuration offered women movement ‘up’ the social hierarchy through partnership with a sexual ‘superior’ of the same or ‘higher’ race. A white woman partnered by a black man was inconceivable within this grid of ideology.

The application of legislation that regulated relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people was highly specific to gender as well as to race, although this is not always apparent from its wording. Some states outlawed marriages or permanent relationships between Aboriginal people of full descent and non-Aboriginal people; other states allowed marriage but not cohabitation; and in others, people of full Aboriginal descent could only marry those of similar descent. In outback South Australia, local legends were created through the arrest of white men ‘on the smell of a gin’, when police convicted men for cohabiting with Aboriginal women on the evidence they gained by sniffing the bedclothes. When this legislation was applied to white men, they largely abandoned their Aboriginal partners rather than be convicted or married. White women who married or had sexual relationships with Aboriginal men received different treatment: such relationships were considered a perversion and were assumed to be rape unless it was strenuously denied by the female partner.

The earliest recorded Australian case of a white woman’s involvement with an Indigenous partner involved a teenage girl who declared her love for a young
Aboriginal man and vowed to marry him when she was old enough. She left home
to give birth, but was found by local authorities and returned to her father. Her
attitude and behaviour were considered deviant, and her lover was portrayed as
passive. While he could not be prosecuted, police files indicate a willingness to
find other reasons to arrest him.

Official records do not vilify the couple; however, scholars of interracial sexual
relationships in Australia and North America suggest that ‘forbearance for that
which is not approved’ — ‘tolerance’ — best describes official public responses
to interracial marriages, although private responses may have been more
extreme. In pre–civil war America, white women involved in sexual
relationships with Afro-American men were assumed to be deprived or of low
class, and their lovers were assumed to be passive. Following the franchise,
racist propaganda developed the perjorative term ‘miscegenation’ to describe
interracial relationships, portraying black men as the active agents in relationships
with white women, often with connotations of violence and rape. White women
were stereotyped as passive and vulnerable victims, requiring white men to protect
them. By the turn of the century, some interracial marriages between white women
and educated and professional Native American or Afro-American men became
acceptable indications of ‘absorption of white culture’. In Australia, Aboriginal
men represented very little threat to white male-dominated settler society; neither
did they generally have access to education or middle-class status. Perhaps as a
result of their social disadvantage, nearly all historical cases of marriage or sexual
relationship between European women and Aboriginal men describe the woman
as deviant or of low class, and the men as passive.

The most infamous case of interracial marriage between a white woman and an
Aboriginal man in Australia is that of Jimmy Governor and Ethel Page, who were
married in Gulgong, New South Wales, in 1898. Ethel was young and pregnant;
Jimmy was a hard-working man of mixed descent who was raised on an
Aboriginal Mission station with notions of becoming ‘absorbed’ into white
society. Despite Ethel’s parents’ support of the marriage, Ethel was severely
verbally abused at the local Gulgong Show. After Jimmy complained to the police,
an apology was printed in the local paper. Not long after this affair, Ethel’s
parents moved from Gulgong to Dubbo, and the Governors sought work and
accommodation further away from the town. They were employed on the Mawbey
property, where Jimmy did fencing and Ethel worked as housekeeper. The women
of the household reputedly said to Ethel, ‘any white woman who married a
blackfellow was not fit to live, and ought to be dead’. Jimmy murdered the
Mawbey women in 1900, and gave as his reason: ‘Mrs Mawbey was saying things
about my wife. She say white woman no good marry blackfellow’. While some
commentators argue that Jimmy’s actions were motivated by frustrated attempts at
social mobility through employment, evidence suggests that extreme and
provocative attitudes toward the Governors’ interracial marriage were also
influential. Jimmy’s actions were far from passive, and newspaper reports
portrayed his violence, representing Ethel as vulnerable, weak and poor:

I am only a poor white girl and I haven’t much education. White men don’t care
about having poor wives, and no white man ever asked me to marry him. Jimmy
was the only man ever asked me to marry him.
Newspapers described Ethel as plain, but court proceedings describe her as ‘anything but unprepossessing in appearance’. Allegations were made that the second child she was carrying was not Jimmy’s. During her brief marriage to an Aboriginal man, Ethel was represented as deviant, poor, low-class, uneducated, unattractive and immoral. ‘Toleration’ in Australia came at a price.

Another case of a relationship between a white woman and an Indigenous man occurred the following year in Northern Queensland at an Anglican mission. Ethel Gribble, the sister of a missionary, became involved with an Indigenous man named Fred Wondunna. Her brother, Ernest Gribble of Yarrabah, responded by forcing her to marry a coworker instead. When Ethel’s husband died not long afterwards, she reunited with her Aboriginal lover. By 1907 Ethel was pregnant, but Gribble refused to marry them. The couple fled to Sydney, where they found a Congregationalist minister who would perform the ceremony. As Christine Halse, Gribble’s biographer, notes:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, marriage to an Aboriginal man meant Ethel would be denounced as a whore and a disgrace to her sex and race. She would become a pariah, ostracised forever from polite society. Ethel dismissed these objections.

In 1927, the Australian Board of Mission (ABM) still held that marriage between a ‘white girl’ and a ‘coloured man’ was ‘eccentric and utterly unsuitable … and we can safely say that such a marriage would be regarded with entire disapproval and regret by the vast majority of missionaries’. A bitter irony of this case is that while Ethel was pregnant and arguing with her brother for the validity of her wish to marry Fred, Ernest Gribble himself was engaged in an illicit affair with a young Aboriginal woman named Janie Brown (previously Jeanie Forbes). Ernest Gribble went on to receive awards for his service to Aborigines; Ethel’s love was interpreted as the result of a nervous breakdown, her marriage eccentric, and herself a whore. Her existence was erased from ABM records.

Such were the experiences of, and attitudes toward, marriages between white women and Aboriginal men when Rebecca Forbes emigrated to Australia. Shipping records show that Rebecca arrived in Brisbane in 1908. Her own marriage to an Aboriginal man at Bourke, New South Wales, six years later required special permission, according to the article in Tindale’s journal. Official ‘tolerance’ is evidenced by a presiding magistrate and two policemen, who are recorded as witnesses. Unofficial attitudes could be expected to cast Rebecca as sexually deviant, poor, low-class, uneducated or as lacking in an effective white male to control her choices; her husband, Jack, may have been seen as a passive partner. Rebecca was not a role model for the ‘white community life’ that social anthropologist Tindale was so keen to promote to ‘half-castes’, nor does she tally with Birdsell’s gendered strategies to achieve a ‘white Australia’ through assimilation. Tindale, Birdsell and their wives have no use for her story, although its presence in the field journal shows that they could not ignore it either.

**White woman captive or ‘good whitefella Missus’?**

The newspaper clipping found in Tindale’s journal employs another trope applicable to aberrant white women: it claims, twice, that Rebecca is ‘the only
white woman to have gone completely native’. She has become a ‘wild white woman’. Kate Darian-Smith draws on the narrative of Rebecca’s life written by Ernestine Hill,31 describing it as an inverted captivity narrative.32 Captivity narratives were a popular literary genre in the nineteenth century in England and its colonies. They ‘provided Europeans with imaginative models through which to respond to the perceived threats of interracial intimacy and the inversion of racially based colonial structures of power’. White women, symbols of both civilisation and white male property, were constructed as objects of desire for violent and powerful black men, who sought to ‘capture’ them. These narratives functioned to maintain racial segregation and white dominance in situations of white minority on the frontier.33 Captivity narratives support the claim that ‘Theories of race were also covert theories of desire’;34 they are evidence of the colonial obsession with the imagined Other. Such narratives make much of the material condition of captivity: nakedness, dirt (which disguises the skin’s true colour) and a lack of soap and domestic utensils.35 These markers of ‘wildness’, combined with threats of sexual intercourse between captor and captive, were hallmarks of the genre and drew upon ancient images of savages in the European imagination.36 These were the sorts of narratives that sold thousands of books and newspapers.

However, the article in Tindale’s journal is free of any details of Rebecca’s material condition that conform to the captivity genre. Its most judgemental reference to Aboriginal practice reads: ‘This unusual woman had to destroy all possessions and articles of her husband when he died. Even his photograph was burnt’. It even explains Rebecca’s ‘refus[al] to return to civilisation’ rationally: ‘she would have the worries of rent, high cost of living, and would establish a social barrier between herself and her people’. After the headline, there are no textual markers of captivity. Despite the expectation the headline creates, the reporter does not portray Rebecca as ‘wild’ or ‘Other’ in her lifestyle and concerns. Nor do other commentators. In 1938, a United Aborigines Mission (UAM) tract by Margery West describes Rebecca as ‘one of the most interesting characters one meets in this native camp’, with her hut kept ‘spick and span’.37 Rebecca’s obituary in the UAM monthly magazine read:

It is with regret that we mention the death of Mrs R Forbes, for many years a resident among the people of this tribe. It was Mrs Forbes who first wrote to the SA Council requesting that Missionaries be sent to work among these people. It was our privilege to minister to this very old lady, particularly in her last days and hours, and she witnessed to the fact that she was trusting Christ as her personal Saviour.38

The most radical claim the article makes for Rebecca is in relation to her identity. She is named throughout as Mrs ‘Witchetty’, an emphasis upon her Aboriginal name, as opposed to the European name used in her obituary. The article reports that she took part in ‘all tribal rites, corroborees etc’. Rebecca is quoted as saying that she did not want any barriers between ‘herself and her people’. The term ‘lubra’ itself implies a complete identification between Rebecca and Aboriginal people, though whether it was used by Rebecca herself or by the newspaper’s subeditor is open to question. The article begins and ends with references to Rebecca’s English heritage, stating that she came from London but no longer writes to her family, further suggesting Rebecca’s estrangement from
Her European roots. The article describes Rebecca’s transformation of identity through allegiance, but it lists sufficient markers of whiteness — relating to appearance, style of articulation and lifestyle concerns — to engage readers sympathetically.

Hill’s narrative of Rebecca’s life tackles the issue of identity even more directly. Hill quotes Rebecca as saying: ‘If, as they say, a wife always takes her husband’s nationality, I am an Australian, actually the only real white Australian there is’.39 Hill was writing in the midst of a national debate to amend the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act (1914) to enable British-born women to apply to retain their nationality on marriage to an ‘alien’ husband.40 Despite the legislative changes that would have enabled Rebecca to once again claim her British nationality, she chose to retain that of her husband. By so doing, she created a new category of identity in which her relationships with others were grounded.

Hill’s account of Rebecca’s life was based on an interview conducted at Rebecca’s home at Nepabunna in 1932. The account was published first in Sydney’s Sunday Guardian Sun on 18 December 1932, and later in her famous book of travel-writing The Great Australian Loneliness (1937), under the heading ‘[The] Strange Case of Mrs Widgety [Witchetty]’.41 The article in Tindale’s journal may have been based on Hill’s work, as it follows the same narrative, but it differs markedly in its voice, language, spelling and detail. It lacks the prurient overtones of Hill’s account, which serve to pique the reader’s curiosity, in the mode of narratives of colonial desire. In the article, Rebecca has ‘gone native’ in a remarkably civilised way, best described as ‘unusual’, as opposed to Hill’s more sensationalist depiction.42 In her records of the emblematic ‘Others’ encountered in her travels,43 Hill describes Rebecca’s life as a ‘strange’ and ‘astounding human document in the annals of the Australian Outback’.44

In her book, Hill uses the figure of Daisy Bates as a template and a foil for interpreting Rebecca. As the epitome of the ‘good whitefella Missus’, Bates also transgresses racial boundaries by being ‘constantly among the natives’; however, importantly, she could not ‘exist in a blacks camp’.45 The ‘good whitefella Missus’, articulated by Aeneas Gunn in The Little Black Princess,46 refused the ‘white man’s burden’ of forcing colonised peoples into imitations of the colonisers’ culture and habits.47 Bates had anthropological rather than assimilationist concerns, and she advocated segregation as a means of protecting Indigenous women from sexual contact with white men, encouraged the continuation of traditional cultural practices, and consciously refused to impose her own Christian religion on Indigenous people.48 Bates rigidly maintained boundaries between camp life and her personal life: ‘Each day Bates would dress formally and cross into the Aboriginal world’.49 Other white women who received the title of ‘good whitefella Missus’, like missionary Annie Lock, were also at pains to demonstrate where they drew their boundaries. V E Turner of the UAM defended Lock against the allegation that she had claimed she ‘would be happy to marry a black’.50

Her lone condition makes it imperative that she keep her name above slander so one of her first actions on going to a new camp is to take one or more native girls to be her companions, giving them the protection of her care, while they give her the
protection of their presence, from any calumny that her solitude might have provoked. A boundary is set around her camp beyond which a black man might not intrude. Not that she distrusts the Aboriginal, but she does distrust the imputations of the whites.\textsuperscript{51}

Despite the comparison with Bates that Hill invites, Rebecca Forbes conforms to very little of the ‘good whitefella Missus’ legend. She does offer some services to the community: ‘I do their little bit of writing now and then, about donkeys and jobs and supplies; my mustard plasters are very popular when they’re cold sick, and at baby time I’m the head serang’.\textsuperscript{52} However, Rebecca made no attempt to change the cultural ways of the community in which she lived, and even encouraged her sons to participate in its cultural life and language. She did not disperse rations; she collected them along with everyone else. She had no special relationship with the white missionaries who lived nearby. In the photograph that accompanies the newspaper article, Rebecca’s relations are shown to be black, not white. Most importantly, she shared her private dwelling with her Indigenous son and, earlier, with her Indigenous husband. M E McGuire comments that in a century of writing, Rebecca is the only woman who has broken the taboo of placing herself without barriers under the black male gaze, and that Hill was ‘bewildered’ by this choice.\textsuperscript{53} Her refusal to draw boundaries between her identity as a white person and her life with Indigenous people places Rebecca outside the mode of ‘good whitefella Missus’.

Rebecca continues to elude her biographers. She cannot easily be portrayed as sexually deviant, disempowered, poor, captive, wild or even as a ‘good whitefella Missus’. The best that can be done is to represent Rebecca as claiming for herself a new identity, one that goes beyond the common social constructions. She is a ‘white … lubra’, ‘the only real white Australian there is’. This claim was not merely a device created by journalists to solve the problem of representing Rebecca; oral history sources independently verify that Rebecca herself made this claim:

And I said to her one day — she was sitting in her hut having her cup of tea — and she said something, and I said
‘Oh here comes the pommy blood to the foreground, oh stubborn!’ you know,
‘I’m not! I’m an Australian! I’m an Australian Aboriginal, I’m not a pom!’ [said with force]
She set me right in no uncertain terms. But I mean I wasn’t being disrespectful, I was just being smart, you could call it.
An Australian Aboriginal?
She always classed herself as one of the mission people.\textsuperscript{54}

The newspaper photograph: Rebecca as ‘white lubra’

The photograph accompanying the article in Tindale’s journal is another site through which to interpret Rebecca’s life. Four figures are lined up, from tallest to shortest. The three males, all Indigenous, wear hats, shirts, coats and trousers, and the man and older boy are perhaps smoking clay pipes. The man’s clothes appear to be dark grey; the boys’ are middling grey. Rebecca is the second-tallest figure in the photograph. She wears a hat with a brim, a white dress and a long pale coat.
Though she may have ‘gone native’, this is not reflected in her appearance, which is far from unkempt. The man and the youngest boy are holding spears and boomerangs, although one Adnyamathanha man doubts that they are Adnyamathanha artefacts; instead, they look more like artefacts from central Australia. These artefacts, along with the arrangement of the people according to height and colours of clothing, suggest that a directed pose has been struck. Nonetheless, the pose does not conform to general constructions of photographs of Indigenous people shown at exhibitions in the early twentieth century. In such photographs, ‘natives’ often posed wearing skins in a ‘hunting expedition’ or ‘family around the campfire’ scene, or else as a decontextualised head and shoulders on plain background, the subject sad and melancholy, considering their fate. Neither does the photo conform to assimilationist protocols: the subjects are not posed in front of furniture, the woman seated. They are outside. The white person present is not the tallest, nor is she centred in the frame, with her Indigenous companions kneeling in front, or to the side, or in the background. The photo is an icon of shared space: white and black, tall and short, European clothes and Indigenous artefacts, all in an outback outdoor setting. Perhaps the photographer and journalist were at a loss to depict this woman and her family within the colonial discourses available. Perhaps the image and article present a new juxtaposition of symbols in order to illustrate the novel concept of the ‘white lubra’.

The photograph creates several ambiguities in the article’s representation of Rebecca’s life. While the image is reasonably clear, the identities of those pictured within it are not. The subtitle of the photo suggests that Rebecca lived in the camp at Beltana. Her son and daughter-in-law did live there, but probably not until after 1937. Family can’t remember her leaving Nepabunna to visit Beltana even then. Nepabunna is the more likely setting for the photo and is probably the location mentioned in the article. Perhaps the journalist did not travel to interview Rebecca at all, and simply picked the nearest town on the map. The Nepabunna mission may have declined to support the article, finding the presence of a white woman in their mission camp hard to explain. The journalist may have altered Rebecca’s location so that her sharing of physical space with an Indigenous community was not so obvious, particularly if she lived in one of the places reserved for Indigenous people only (although Indigenous people who lived in such areas were still under white supervision). Rebecca’s granddaughter does not recognise the Indigenous people pictured with her, although an Adnyamathanha elder believes them to be Jack Forbes and Rebecca’s two sons. If this were the case, the photograph must have been taken much earlier, before Jack died around 1931, and while her sons were still young boys. It seems certain that the woman pictured is Rebecca. The confusion over the identities underlines the main point: the photo accompanies the article not because it is a pictorial record of the interview but because it represents the way the article wishes to construct Rebecca. The photograph shows Rebecca among those she calls ‘her people’, those with whom she belongs.
A hermeneutics of solidarity

The discourses available to twentieth-century European journalists to describe interracial relationships could not be applied adequately to Rebecca Forbes. These discourses created a ‘Self and Other’ binary based on constructions of racial hierarchies, which expressed nineteenth-century ideologies articulating the superiority of European and white ‘races’ over other ‘races’. In this context, cultural hybridity was not explored beyond the sexualised and repressed motifs of ‘colonial desire’, nor was its exploration encouraged, because the language of such investigation would undermine the hierarchical racial relationships that were crucial to the colonial project. It was not possible to articulate Rebecca’s life in terms of both her British heritage and her Indigenous family and community; nor was it possible to adequately describe her life in terms of only one or the other. This was the struggle for her would-be biographers in the mid-twentieth century.

For this author, the struggle to write Rebecca’s biography is two-fold: firstly, to capture the meanings of her life in the contexts in which they were lived; secondly, to interpret these meanings in the contemporary context, where the discourses of postcolonialism offer ways to explore the hybrid nature of her life. In the process, the hybrid nature of the author’s own speaking position becomes apparent: not only researcher or friend but both, and bound by the ethics of both. The research does not represent a momentary curiosity that will pass, along with its relationships; instead, it is a commitment to an ongoing relationship with the Adnyamathanha community with whom Rebecca chose to live out her life. The author is white, in a postcolonial society, but is challenged to make choices of solidarity with an Indigenous community. Diane Bell describes her advocacy anthropology in similar terms:

the negotiations around what can be used and what can’t; and around who wants to be included and under what conditions; in addition to driving from community to community, chasing down obscure references, getting access to tapes, photographs and special collections — these are all time-intensive and at times extremely frustrating … but as I get to know people better, as they visit my place and I theirs, as we chat on the phone, go shopping, work through photographs and documents together, we move beyond that. The work begins to feel more and more like participant-observation fieldwork and I want to keep going.60

In the wake of severe criticism from the academic Indigenous community, Bell describes the development of relationships that change the type of research she engages in, and leads to increasing commitment on her part — both to the extremely controversial project and to the community she engages with. She does not go so far to use the word ‘friendship’, but the overtly partisan stance she takes in her work (well backed by the evidence she presents) belies a commitment to those she describes as having become partners, financially as well as in other ways, of the joint venture that her book represents.

A number of Indigenous biographers have also had ‘hybrid’ relationships with their research subjects and the communities who give witness to these lives. Stephen Kinnane61 and Sally Morgan,62 among others, are both academics and the grandchildren of those they research. Their writings foreground both roles and the relationships they engender with the places and people who inform the research. For non-Indigenous authors like myself, the issue is not the fact of hybrid status
but the negotiation of hybrid relationships. The challenge of Rebecca’s life is that
perhaps it is only through such relationships, and the changing solidarities they
entail, that those of European descent in Australia can truly belong\textsuperscript{63} and be ‘real
white Australians’.

In the end, the authors of the article preserved in Tindale’s journal described
her as they found her, and as the accompanying photographs suggest: a fairly
ordinary white woman who chose to locate herself totally within an Indigenous
community. That choice is not an expression of an eccentric personality or dire
circumstances. Instead, as her granddaughter suggests, it was a deliberate and
conscious decision formed even before Rebecca left England’s shores; a choice
only strengthened by her deep loyalty to her husband and their community.

Representations of Rebecca in family memory: Granny

The memories of Rebecca Forbes as Granny, which are held by her family, do not
represent Rebecca as unusual or strange. She was a woman who made deliberate
life choices: ‘My grandmother Rebecca reckoned, if she meets her first Aboriginal
man she’s going to marry one. I think she done that! Yes, so she knew what she
was coming out for’.\textsuperscript{64} Portrayed in the newspaper article as having forsaken her
English family some sixty years previously, Rebecca was recently memorialised
as a woman held deep in the bosom of her Australian extended family. After much
conversation over wording with a family friend, an English immigrant himself,
Rebecca’s granddaughter showed me the final words she had chosen for the
plaque erected at Rebecca’s gravesite in 2002:

\begin{quote}
In loving memory of Rebecca Forbes nee Castledine. Born Bow England 1876.
Died Nepabunna 1959.
Loving wife of Jack Witchetty Forbes, fond mother of John and Raymond,
mother-in-law of Joyce, dearest grandmother of Daisy, Daniel and Darryl and
loving great and great great grandmother.
Peacefully sleeping. A true friend and companion of the Adnyamathanha.\textsuperscript{65}
\end{quote}

The family friend was intrigued by Rebecca’s story after reading The Great
Australian Loneliness, because his own grandmother was a cockney of the same
age, but had chosen to stay in England. He showed me a photograph of the plaque,
which included an extra line he had chosen: ‘From the Land where time begins to
the timeless land’. Rebecca was born ‘within the sound of the Bow Bells’, in the
heart of the old City of London, but she grew up further down the river Thames,
in the shadow of the Greenwich Observatory, from where time and latitude are
measured throughout the world. This extra line on the plaque represents a journey
from civilisation to wilderness. Rebecca’s family, however, represent her as
deeply embedded in a loving and beloved family and community. As her grand
daughter recalls:

[Rebecca] had two sons. She married with the Aboriginal stockman there from
Winbar station. She worked at the deaf and dumb orphanage at Sydney there, she
was the cook, and when that closed down, and she had to get another job, she went
to the station. She must have been just a housemaid there. There were a lot of
Aboriginal people working there and she must have met one of them, like my
grandfather, and on this marriage certificate here, old grandfather Forbes was a

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Rebecca wrote weekly letters to her daughter-in-law (all of which were burned when she died), packed trunks for each of her grandchildren for when she died, crocheted rugs for them using a hook made from bicycle spokes, and had a say in the naming of her only granddaughter after Daisy Bates. Her grandson remembers her writing to her sisters in England. Rebecca told her grandchildren about the king and queen in England, about snow, and about her trip to Australia on the boat, where she peeled potatoes. Her granddaughter showed me a letter in Rebecca’s hand, written for an Adnyamathanha man named Ted Coulthard to the ‘Protector of Abo’ in December 1930, as negotiations were under way between the mission and pastoralists for a permanent piece of land for the Adnyamathanha community. Rebecca’s family is proud of the role they understand Rebecca played in the eventual securing of a permanent camp for the community. Rebecca’s grandchildren also commented on Rebecca’s Christian faith; her regular attendance at worship, her friendship with the first UAM missioner, and her children’s attendance at Sunday school.

**Representations in oral history: in black and white**

Rebecca fitted into Indigenous community life well, keeping peace with everyone, and was not highly distinguishable from other women in the camp, apart from retaining a strong accent. Gertie Johnson, an Adnyamathanha elder, remembers when Rebecca arrived:

When she come in, she [had] got married, [and] got her two boys. The two boys growed up here, [at] Mt Serle. We all went to Ram Paddock Gate and stayed there. She used to deliver the babies [for] all these Aborigine [women]. She used to get up in the night time and deliver it. She was really good help for the people. They taught her a lot of other [things]. Yes, she was good woman — a white woman — to come and stay with us …

He [Jack Forbes] went away and he told the people he’s going to go away and marry the white woman. And they told him ‘Nah you wouldn’t get a white woman’, see. But he did get one, [and] he bought her with the two kids. And she was a good woman and she used to tell them ‘This is my people, I lived around with them’.57

Rebecca remained in her original dwelling at Nepabunna while the rest of the community gradually shifted closer to the mission houses, but she was visited by others on their way to the creek, and went out collecting bush tucker with the women. She went to the missionary’s store on Saturdays for her rations like everyone else, and to church on Sundays. She wore the same style dresses as other women of the camp, long like Daisy Bates, but with well-darned black stockings.
She never threw away shoes, and gathered quite a collection. She liked living on her own, with time for reading the newspapers the missionaries passed on to her, and writing letters. She always had a whole wall stacked with wood she collected for the fire that she cooked over at the door of her hut. She gave vegemite soup to hungry children at her door; others remember wishing she’d offer them a bit of her ‘lump of cake and cup of tea’, as she called it in her strong Cockney accent. She was grateful when other families bought her a rabbit or two, and she loved eating kangaroo tail cooked in the coals when her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren came to visit. When her boys went through initiations, she took part as a mother, although her boys’ aunts also performed some roles for her, which they understood she had not been trained to do. All mention her midwifery and nursing skills. As she became older, she is remembered as ‘a nice old lady’. Some remember being scared of her, because she threatened to chase cheeky children away with a stick with wire at the end of it. Others remember that if they were ‘cheeky’ to her, she would threaten to tell their parents.

These recollections, while positive, are not remarkable. Interviewees did not think it was odd for a white woman to be living in the community; she fitted in, married the right way, and was just always there, they said. Some felt she should have been buried in the Mathari cemetery, as that was her moiety; others thought it appropriate she was buried next to the other udnyu (white person), Mr Page. None thought she should have been buried anywhere other than Nepabunna. Rebecca’s ‘whiteness’ was not a dominant interpretive lens for her shared domestic and community life among the Adnyamathanha: ‘She grown up with us, was one of us’.68

Non-Adnyamathanha interviewees recall her as ‘shy’, or a person they knew about but never met. The then postmistress from Copley, the nearest rail town to Nepabunna, recalled that Mrs Forbes might be the subject of gossip as locals came to pick up their mail, although she only remembers seeing her once, around 1926, when she herself was still a girl living at the Copley Pub: ‘I can remember her coming in when her two sons were small. She stayed at the hotel — it was when we were in the hotel — and she seemed very shy, very shy, and I can remember the room she was in and all’.69 Rebecca was said to dislike having her photo taken, and she avoided white people such as anthropologists when they came into camp.

Non-Adnyamathanha interviewees tended to cast Rebecca’s marriage as an impulsive mistake, after which there was no going back:

When [Rebecca] took her annual leave, she went into Louth and Jacky — Witchetty Jack was his Aboriginal name or Jacky Forbes when he took that name — caught up with her in there and they went on a bender, and gave the policeman a pound to be their best man when they got married the next day.70

The impression given is of a lonely, reclusive, even embarrassed person who could no longer face other white people. One anecdote from a long-term resident of the Flinders seems to undermine such an impression:

One time, some men from the station were going looking for Jack Witchetty, to do some work … They went up to their camp and asked for ‘Witchetty’. ‘That’ll be Mr. Forbes’, she said to them! No white man ever called him ‘Mr. Forbes’ in his life!71
Rebecca’s determination in her choice of family was expressed by a very old Barkinji woman in Wilcannia in the 1960s, who remembered, ‘That white woman cut me out!’ in the competition for Jack Forbes’s affection. The son of the manager on Winbar Station said, ‘She could never understand why her family shouldn’t be as good as any other’.

Memory as representation

While historic documents like the article found in Tindale’s journal freeze in time particular representations of Rebecca and her public identity, a person’s representation in memory continually evolves through the conscious and unconscious processes of selection, minimisation and exaggeration, creating a coherent narrative of a life to fit the individual or community’s current need. It is, says Salman Rushdie, a kind of truth, because it creates its own reality. Authors like Drusilla Modjeska and Inga Clendinnen, who deal with their own memories in the genre of ‘memoir’, both acknowledge that memory ‘warps’ over time and that fiction is a viable method to deal with gaps in memory in order to build a coherent narrative. Researchers who rely on the memory of others through recording oral history tend to be more rigorous in their approach to truth and memory. Oral history recordings capture individual and community memory at a particular moment in its development, transforming it into historic record. The memory becomes open to the same tests of veracity that all historical documents must undergo. Beyond evidence of ‘fact’, oral history has its own inherent truth as social meaning of its time and place, representing subjective truth which is itself a valid historical record. By developing a representation of the daily life of Rebecca Forbes based on oral histories, the author is consciously building an image of the social meaning Rebecca held to those who continue to remember her.

To Adnyamathanha people recording their oral history, Rebecca is an ordinary member of their community life, an appreciated participant in their history. To European people recording their memories about her, she is a perplexing mystery that begs some explanation. To her family, she is a granny to be proud of for the choices she made.

Concluding representation: an ordinary woman

Representations of Rebecca through the sources considered in this paper lead to some conclusions that inform contemporary thought about intercultural shared space. Even in the 1930s, Rebecca may have symbolised a new way to be ‘a real white Australian’ by choosing to share domestic space with Indigenous people. The key elements of her legitimacy as a white Australian are her active choice to form relationships with Indigenous people and the admission of Indigenous people into her domestic sphere. Without adopting Birdsell’s strategy for biological assimilation, Rebecca’s story can be read to endorse intimate relationships as an appropriate site for shared space.

In creating a shared domestic space, Rebecca was understood to give up her claims to colonial privilege and participate in a domestic space on Indigenous, rather than European, terms. The juxtaposition of symbols in the photograph accompanying the newspaper article undermines the dualism that might be
expected from that statement. ‘Aboriginal terms’ — in the 1930s, as now — are hybrid and dynamic variations within a culture and across cultures. To be accepted within an Indigenous community, Rebecca was not required to give up markers of ‘whiteness’ such as European clothing or her native tongue. To be accepted within colonial society, however, Rebecca was expected to make none or very little accommodation to any non-European cultural practices. ‘Living as a Lubra’ allowed her to continue most cultural practices she was familiar with, while also adding Indigenous practices and allowing these to inform the beliefs and assumptions of her English upbringing.

In many ways, it is not surprising that the anthropologists Tindale and Birdsell made no comment on the article they found. If they had met Rebecca, there would be no more to report other than that she read, crocheted, visited her friends and looked forward to visits from her sons, who worked on stations. Like the journalists who interviewed her, they would have found a woman with ordinary concerns. She was not exotic, nor eccentric, nor an activist, like her contemporaries Daisy Bates or Olive Pink. Her life, as those who inquired into it reluctantly discovered, did not conform to a romantic adventure, a captivity narrative, a hagiography of a saint, or even to ideas of a ‘good whitefella Missus’. In that, there is great comfort for ‘ordinary Australians’. If this ordinary Rebecca can make choices to share her domestic life with Indigenous people and communities and to allow a synthesis of cultural practices and beliefs to occur through the experience, then so can we all.
Notes to pp 58–64

‘White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp’: representations of ‘shared space’
Tracy Spencer

3 ibid.
5 Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Journals 1938–9, AA 338/1/15/2: Tindale, 2, pp 1076. Contains a clipping of this article pasted into the journal, without date, source or author information.
7 Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Journals 1938–9, AA 338/1/15/2: Tindale, 2, pp 1108–9. Contains a clipping from the Mail, 8 July 1939.
9 ibid.; clipping from the Mail, op. cit.
10 Brock, op. cit., p 135.
21 ibid., pp 219–20, 25.
22 ibid., p 30.
23 ibid., p 135.
24 Ellinghaus, op. cit.
26 ibid., p 138.
28 ibid., p 85.
Notes to pp 64–68

29 ibid., pp 85–7.
30 Advertiser, Wednesday 5 July 1939, op. cit.
41 Hill, op. cit., p 275.
42 ibid., p 271.
51 ibid., p 7.
53 McGuire, op. cit., p 146.
55 Personal communication with Buck McKenzie, Flinders Ranges, 2002.
58 Transcript of interview with Daisy Shannon, Quorn, 2001, pp 6, 12.
59 Personal communication Daisy Shannon, Quorn, 2002. ‘I don’t know who the Aboriginal people in the picture are: they’re not my father or uncle or grandfather. That’s certainly Granny
though’. Personal communication Gertie Johnson, Nepabunna, 2002. She thought the photograph was of Jack Forbes, Rebecca and their two sons.

60 Bell, op. cit., p 23.


64 Transcript of interview with Daisy Shannon, Quorn, 2001.

65 ibid.

66 ibid.


70 Personal communication, Frank Warwick, Adelaide, 2002.


73 Personal communication, Frank Warwick, Adelaide, 2002.


75 Drusilla Modjeska, Timepieces, Picador, Sydney, 2002.

76 Clendinnen, op. cit.


Author’s note: ‘Personal communication’ refers to informal conversations regarding the research. ‘Conversation with’ refers to formal but unrecorded interviews. ‘Transcript of interview with’ refers to formal and taped oral history interviews conducted for this research.

Indigenous Youth and Ambivalence in some Australian Films
Dave Palmer and Garry Gillard


9 ibid., p 12.


11 S Mickler, The Myth of Privilege: Aboriginal Status, Media Visions, Public Ideas, South Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre, 1998; D Palmer, ‘Youth work, Aboriginal young people and