Contents

Contributors................................................................................................. v
Introduction
Creating White Australia: new perspectives on race, whiteness
and history................................................................................................... ix
Jane Carey & Claire McLisky

Part 1: Global framings: Australian whiteness
in an international context........................................................................ 1

1 White, British, and European: historicising identity
   in settler societies .................................................................................. 3
   Ann Curthoys
2 Reworking the tailings: new gold histories and the cultural
   landscape .................................................................................................. 25
   Benjamin Mountford & Keir Reeves
3 Trans/national history and disciplinary amnesia: historicising
   White Australia at two fins de siècles .................................................. 44
   Leigh Boucher

Part 2: Whiteness on Indigenous missions
and reserves .................................................................................................. 65

4 Colouring (in) virtue? Evangelicalism, work and whiteness on
   Maloga Mission .................................................................................. 67
   Claire McLisky
5 ‘A most lowering thing for a lady’: aspiring to respectable
   whiteness on Ramahyuck Mission, 1885–1900 ................................. 85
   Joanna Cruickshank
6 Calculating colour: whiteness, anthropological research and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve, May and June 1938 ................................................................. 103
   Fiona Davis

Part 3: Writing and performing race: creation and disavowal ................................................................. 121

7 Theatre or corroboree, what’s in a name? Framing Indigenous Australian 19th-century commercial performance practices ........................................................................ 123
   Maryrose Casey
8 The Wild White Man: ‘an event under description’ ......... 140
   Maggie Scott
9 Perpetuating White Australia: Aboriginal self-representation, white editing and preferred stereotypes .................. 156
   Jennifer Jones

Part 4: Gender and whiteness ................................................. 173

10 A word of evidence: shared tales about infanticide and others-not-us in colonial Victoria ................................. 175
   Marguerita Stephens
11 White anxieties and the articulation of race: the women’s movement and the making of White Australia, 1910s–1930s .............................................................. 195
   Jane Carey
12 Whiteness, maternal feminism and the working mother, 1900–1960 ................................................................ 214
   Shurlee Swain, Patricia Grimshaw & Ellen Warne
Contributors

Leigh Boucher is a lecturer in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University, Sydney. He is the co-editor (with Katherine Ellinghaus and Jane Carey) of Re-orienting whiteness (Palgrave, 2009) and is currently researching the relationship between historical writing, settler colonialism and political rights in the 19th-century British world.

Jane Carey holds a Monash Fellowship at Monash University where her current research explores the politics of population in British settler colonies. She is the co-editor (with Katherine Ellinghaus and Leigh Boucher) of Re-orienting whiteness (Palgrave, 2009) and has published articles in Gender and History and the Women’s History Review.

Maryrose Casey lectures in theatre and performance studies at Monash University. Her research focuses on the practice and cross-cultural reception of theatre by Indigenous Australian practitioners. Her publications include the multi-award winning Creating frames: contemporary Indigenous theatre (UQP 2004) and with Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll, Transnational whiteness matters (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

Joanna Cruickshank is a lecturer in history at Deakin University. She has published on 18th- and 19th-century religious history in Britain and Australia. Forthcoming publications include an article on the friendships of British Methodist women in the Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies, a co-authored chapter (with Patricia Grimshaw) on Moravian missionaries in far north Queensland and a book on the 18th-century hymn writer Charles Wesley, to be published by Scarecrow Press in late 2009.

Fiona Davis is a postgraduate student in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her PhD thesis topic is ‘Black, white and shades of grey: the story of cultural exchange on Cummeragunja, 1900–1950’.

Patricia Grimshaw is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne, where for several decades she taught Australian and American history and contributed to the Gender Studies Program. She has written extensively on women’s history, and engaged with the history of settler colonialism and whiteness studies. With Shurlee Swain and Ellen Warne, she is currently completing a book, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia’.

Jennifer Jones holds an ARC Post Doctoral Fellowship at the Australian Centre, School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her project examines rural women’s cross-racial collaboration in the Country Women’s Association of NSW during the assimilation era. Jennifer’s first book, *Black writers and white editors: episodes of collaboration and compromise in Australian publishing history*, was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing in 2009.

Claire McLisky is a white Australian woman descended from colonial-era Scottish and English settlers. She grew up on Bundjalung land in northern New South Wales. In early 2009 Claire was awarded her PhD in Australian history, from the University of Melbourne, with a thesis exploring faith, power and subjectivity in the lives of Protestant
missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews. She has recently set off for two years travelling, living, and working overseas.

Benjamin Mountford is a Rae and Edith Bennett Travelling Scholar, reading for a DPhil in Imperial History at Exeter College, Oxford. His doctoral research examines the importance of 19th-century perceptions of China in shaping an Anglo-Australian understanding of the British Empire.

Keir Reeves is a Monash Research Fellow co-housed in the Tourism Research Unit and the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University. Keir is the exhibition reviews editor for History Australia, and an editorial board member of Sporting Traditions, and the Heritage Council of Victoria. He is a contributing co-editor of Places of pain and shame: dealing with difficult heritage (Routledge, 2009) and Deeper leads: new approaches in Victorian goldfields history (Ballarat Heritage Services, 2007).

During her studies at the University of Melbourne, Maggie Scott was inspired by lecturers such as Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Jane Carey to pursue research into historical and contemporary Indigenous resistance to colonialism, critical race theory and alternative narratives of history. In 2008 Maggie completed a thesis encompassing some of these interests in the story of William Buckley. She currently tutors ‘Writing Angles’ and ‘Popular Culture and the Moving Image’ at RMIT and is adapting her thesis into a screenplay.

Shurlee Swain is a professor at Australian Catholic University and a Senior Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. She has written extensively on the history of women, children and welfare, and is currently completing a book with Patricia Grimshaw and Ellen Warne, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia.’
Marguerita Stephens was a working gardener before returning to study history at the University of Melbourne. Her PhD on race relations in colonial Victoria, with a close focus on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, was awarded the Dennis-Wettenhall Prize for Research in Australian History, 2004. She holds a Research Fellowship in the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne and is a participant in the Manuscript Sponsorship Program at the University’s Writing Centre for Scholars and Academics.

Ellen Warne is a lecturer in history at Australian Catholic University where she teaches in a range of Australian and international history units. She has written on Christian women’s use of maternal activism to achieve political aims in 19th- and early 20th-century Australia, and is currently completing a book with Shurlee Swain and Patricia Grimshaw, ‘Balancing acts: working mothers in twentieth-century Australia’.
A word of evidence: shared tales about infanticide and ‘others not us’ in colonial Victoria

Marguerita Stephens, University of Melbourne

What constitutes evidence in history? Or, rather, what constitutes enough evidence? In rejecting an established ‘fact’ of history, how much doubt has to be marshalled against the grain to undermine that fact? The established fact under challenge here is that infanticide was a practice so common amongst Australian Aboriginal peoples in both the pre- and post-contacts eras as to be deemed customary. For much of the 19th century the practice of infanticide stood as a key marker of Aboriginal savagery, primitiveness, and evolutionary ripeness for extinction; or alternately, it identified first nation Australians—and their children—as objects for colonial salvation and recuperation. An alternate version of the narrative is that infanticide was adopted by the Australians in the wake of the white invasion as a way of disposing of infants of mixed descent, and that so much killing occurred that it was a direct cause of the demise of many clans.¹

¹ Until the late 1880s, the term ‘Australians’ was used in ethnographies as a generic term for the Indigenous people of the Australian continent. For example, Edward M. Curr’s four-volume The Australian race (1886), or Samuel George Morton’s ‘Hybridity in animals considered in reference to the question of the unity of the human species’, published in The American Journal of Science and Arts (3 May 1847) and read before The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, November, 1846, where Morton said: ‘Perhaps no two human races are more remote from each other than the European and Australian’. As debates about Federation took hold, the term became associated with immigrant ‘Australians’.
Against what have recently again reissued as ‘facts’ about Australian infanticide in its various manifestations, I want to suggest, as have others, that the idea that Aboriginal parents (mostly women, less often men) were prone to killing their infants is essentially a projection about the habits of imagined others. I want to argue, further, that the idea took wing, somewhat ironically, because it was a projection about others shared by Aboriginal people and Europeans. Colonial power relations ensured that this shared projection about the habits of ‘others not us’ would become transformed into a ‘fact of history’, with enormous implications for Aboriginal people.

That infants were sometimes killed is likely: it is a universal fact of history that infanticides occur in most societies. What is at issue here is the frequency of the practice. In short, was it so commonly practised by first nation Australians as to be rightly considered as a custom in either the pre- or post-contact era, or is it more correctly identified as an occasional and circumstantial event, a ‘custom’ existing only in imagination yet enabling a range of colonial interventions, including the removal of Aboriginal children from their kin? I want to cast doubt on the veracity of the trope by drawing attention to a series of textual slippages that illustrate the way infanticide became embedded in European myths about the Australians. In particular, I want to draw attention to the impact that one erased word has had on the development of the trope.

Recent contributions to the debate about the extent and circumstances of infanticides amongst Aboriginal clans have come from both sides of the political divide in Australia. In 1997, Pauline Hanson republished Daisy Bates’ testimony about infanticide and maternal cannibalism despite it being long discredited. Two years later Justice O’Loughlin of the Federal Court rejected evidence led by the

Commonwealth in the Stolen Generations test case that the child Peter Gunner had been rescued by authorities in the 1950s after his mother had attempted to kill him by putting him down a rabbit burrow. As the court sat, a former Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Howson (1971–72) publicly argued that as late as the 1960s, ‘part-European babies had not been allowed to live’, and that some thousands of children had been rescued by government welfare officers, not stolen.

As anthropologist Annette Hamilton argued in the early 1980s, ‘infanticide is a subject that catches the imagination … To this day many white Australians suppose that Aborigines simply killed off any babies they did not want.’ Hamilton found to the contrary that late-19th- and early-20th-century mission records from northern Australia revealed ‘a rising number of part-Aboriginal children around stations and settlements’ whose ready placement within family genealogies undermined the logic of claims that children of mixed descent were routinely killed in the early contact era. She concluded that infanticide was ‘exceptional rather than typical’ amongst first nation Australians.

Despite these findings, the issue persists and has come to some prominence again of late in two significant texts that position infanticide as an act of agency, to varying degrees, and as an expression of cultural continuity. In 2007, Lynette Russell argued that ‘one of the many ways Aboriginal women involved in the sealing industry … demonstrated

---

4 Peter Howson, ‘Rescued from a rabbit burrow: understanding the “Stolen Generation”’, *Quadrant* (June 1999): 11–12.
their considerable agency was in the practice of infanticide. Russell argues that ‘although infanticide might be unpalatable today’ and that many of the reports may be exaggerated and based on ‘projection and transference’, nevertheless ‘its practice is a matter of historical fact’. Against Protector George Augustus Robinson’s reports that Aboriginal sealing women were compelled to kill newborns by the European males who held them as captives or ‘slaves’ on Bass Strait Islands, Russell argues that ‘this oversimplifies the issue and denies the woman autonomy of action’. Russell argues that ‘the practice could be considered a form of cultural continuity’ and that in killing infants, women exercised some degree of resistance, agency, or power over their own bodies, and over the men—Aboriginal or European—who attempted to control their lives. Russell also suggests that while:

such actions might well have emerged from desperation, we should be vigilant in acknowledging the possibility that the reporting of it was exaggerated and that such exaggeration might have begun with the women themselves.

Russell’s argument that Bass Strait infanticides—admitted to Robinson by Aboriginal women and their European partners—may have been an expression of women’s agency, however limited, and of cultural continuity, draws on the work of anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw. In the late 1970s, Cowlishaw undertook fieldwork in Arnhem Land. Finding

9 Ibid. 32.
11 Russell, 33.
12 Ibid. 33–4.
13 Ibid. 32.
‘almost no reliable contemporary evidence’ about Aboriginal abortion and infanticide practices, and reticence on the part of women to speak on those subjects, Cowlishaw turned to ‘early’ sources to uncover pre- and post-contact practices.\(^\text{15}\) She surveyed around 30 testaments from late-19th-and early-20th-century missionaries, explorers, government officials and settlers. All but one source fell into the date range 1874 to the 1970s. While the reports were of variable credibility, they were nonetheless, she argued, so ubiquitous as to warrant a conclusion that a ‘high level of infanticide’ was once widely practised across the continent.\(^\text{16}\)

Cowlishaw grouped the explanations given for the practice in these sources under six headings: that infants born too close to the previous child were killed because women could not suckle and/or carry more than one child at a time (the most common explanation); that twins, deformed, or illegitimate newborns (including post-invasion infants of ‘caste’) were killed; that girls were killed; that first-borns were always/often killed; that a younger child was killed and eaten to preserve the life of a weak or sickly older child; and that a child would be killed if it caused its mother pain before or at birth.\(^\text{17}\) Cowlishaw’s survey included contributions from Taplin (in 1874 and 1880), Stanbridge (1876), Howitt (1880 and 1904), Dawson (1881), Palmer (1884), Gason (1886), Curr (1886), Spencer and Gillen (1899, 1904, 1914 and 1927), Roth (1903 and 1906), Mathews (1904), and Goodale (1971). Crediting these explanations to varying degrees, Cowlishaw advanced a further explanation: that infanticide was an expression of resentment by women and girls over their exchange between men, that led them ‘to deny their male kin, especially husbands and brothers, their infants.’\(^\text{18}\) ‘By killing her

\(^{15}\) Ibid. 263 and 271.
\(^{16}\) Ibid. 281.
\(^{17}\) Ibid. 264–7.
\(^{18}\) Ibid. 281.
infant’, argued Cowlishaw, a woman denied her husband ‘her reproductive powers’. It was, then, a contumacious act of agency.

As Cowlishaw rightly identified, the belief that infanticide was customary and frequent amongst pre- and post-contact Aborigines across the continent was an established orthodoxy amongst settlers by the later decades of the 19th century and it persisted into the 20th. But what is the quality of the evidence in these texts? Take Taplin’s 1874 account from South Australia, for example. A missionary to the Narrinyeri people of South Australia from 1858 to 1873, Taplin wrote that infanticide was ‘very prevalent among the Aborigines before the commencement of this colony’ with as many as one-third to half of all infants being killed. Those killed included deformed infants, one of twins, children of ‘caste’ (of whom there can have been few before the commencement of the colony), ‘illegitimate’ children, and, most commonly, ‘every child … born before the one which preceded it could walk was destroyed, because the mother was regarded as incapable of carrying two.’ Indeed, he wrote, somewhat credulously, (for his informant was surely a woman speaking back to power, and perhaps, as Russell suggests, exaggerating for reasons that are now not clear):

One intelligent woman said she thought that if the Europeans had waited a few more years they would have found the country without inhabitants.

‘[T]he most horrible cruelty’ was deployed in killing the newborns, wrote Taplin, with the usual method involving the insertion of ‘a red hot ember’ into each ear of the infant. Yet in his own years amongst the Narrinyeri, he counted only one ‘murder’ of a child, a deficit which he attributed to deliberate concealment: his testimony therefore spoke of things unseen.

19 Ibid. 279.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
In Gippsland in the 1870s, Alfred Howitt’s Kurnai informants assured him that ‘they never knew an instance of parents killing their children, but only of leaving behind new-born infants’. Howitt concluded that those left behind were necessarily left to die—rather than being taken up by kin, for example—and declared that the Kurnai ‘undoubtedly, were guilty of infanticide’. Howitt’s assertion became a key point of evidence in the public debate between British and American social evolutionists, J.F. McLennan and L.H. Morgan, over the origins of human culture, a debate in which infanticide was deemed a fundamental marker of primitiveness. Towards the end of the century Howitt circulated an ethnological questionnaire. The relatively few replies to his question on infanticide practices were laced with reticulated ‘common knowledge’ and included one from a South Australian correspondent who ‘inferred from the remarkable gap that appeared in the ages of children’ amongst the Kaura of the Adelaide region, that in ‘hard summers the new-born children were all eaten’. It was upon such flimsy evidence that the discourse moved into the 20th century.

**The origins of the discourse**

Infanticide had been a marker of ‘barbarism’ since at least the 1780s with respect to India, where it was paired in British thinking about India with the practice of sati. In 1823 Thomas Buxton called for the accumulated...
despatches on Indian infanticide from 1789 to 1820 to be tabled in the
House of Commons, signalling renewed interest in the practice by
metropolitan moral reformers. However, as Satadru Sen argues, it was in
the 1830s that female infanticide in India was ‘rediscovered’. ‘It was’, she
argues, a discovery ‘viewed as … a trophy of empire, and a major marker
of racial/cultural difference’ in which female children became part of the:

terrain on which British and Indian elite males could confront each other,
and on which the colonizing mission could be justified, extended and
contested. This was not so much a conversation about children’s lives, as it
was about the legitimacy of the interventionist state.27

Its discovery enabled ‘an elaborate regime of surveillance and policing,
with certain castes and communities being defined as ‘infanticidal’ and
aberrant.28

In the Australian colonies, the development of a popular discourse
about Aboriginal infanticide followed a similar chronology. It was set
running in 1798 by David Collins (Judge Advocate at Sydney Cove from
1788 to 1796) with a description of the killing of an infant at Sydney
Cove. The child’s mother had died ‘of a consumption’ in the wake of the
devastating smallpox epidemic that had all but annihilated the clans in
the immediate vicinity of Sydney Cove. The suckling infant, clearly dying
of the same disease, was stoned and buried with its mother, the father
having been unable to find a wet nurse for the child. ‘We have every
reason to suppose the custom always prevails among them’ wrote
Collins.29 The assertion was immediately reiterated by population theorist

Infanticide, British Parliamentary Papers, no. 264, 1812–13; Satadru Sen, ‘The savage
family: colonialism and female infanticide in nineteenth century India’, Journal of Women’s
27 Sen, 55.
28 Ibid. 53 and 58.
29 David Collins, An account of the English Colony in New South Wales (etc), vol. I (London:
Cadell and Davies, 1798), Appendix XI, 607–8. See also Inga Clendinnen, Dancing with
Thomas Malthus who theorised about ‘the difficulty of rearing children in savage life’. He wrote:

Women obliged by their habits of living to a constant change of place and compelled to an unremitting drudgery for their husbands, appear to be absolutely incapable of bringing up two or three children nearly of the same age. If another child be born before the one above it can shift for itself, and follow its mother on foot, one of the two must almost necessarily perish for want of care.30

As in India, the trope of the ‘infanticidal’ native was rediscovered in the Australian colonies in the 1830s. On the edge of the settled districts of New South Wales in May 1830, a European stockman told the explorer Charles Sturt that two Aboriginal men camped nearby had killed and eaten a child just prior to Sturt’s arrival. Sturt questioned the accused ‘as well as I could’. Admitting that he had no ‘corroborating’ evidence, he nevertheless recounted the tale, concluding that ‘the very mention of such a thing among these people goes to prove that they are capable of such an enormity’.31 Sturt’s looseness with the quality of evidence, his failure to admit the limitations of translation, and the willingness with which this anecdote was admitted into his published narrative speaks of more than naivety: it speaks of an imperial will to power in the rendering of the inhuman and expendable ‘other’.

By the mid-1830s similarly unsupported accusations featured in testimony to the long-running British Select Committee on the Condition of Aborigines in British Colonies. Despite speculation by witnesses and commissioners that infanticide was a major cause of the decline of the Australian clans of New South Wales, only one actual killing of a newborn was unearthed and that by a white convict stock keeper motivated by fear that the evidence of his illicit dealings with

---

31 Charles Sturt, Two expeditions into the interior of southern Australia during the years 1828, 1829, 1830, and 1831 vols. 1 and 2 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1834), 89–90 and 222–23.
Aboriginal women would see him returned to incarceration. At Port Phillip in March 1840, European men accused of abducting young girls from the clans claimed that they were rescuing those ‘who would otherwise have fallen victim to the tomahawk of the unfeeling savage’. The discourse received a particular fillip when, around 1842 or 1843, a circular questionnaire from the British Association for the Advancement of Science was received in the Australian colonies, prompting the Chief Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip, George Augustus Robinson, to request his Assistant Protectors to seek out information about the practice of infanticide. Entitled ‘Queries respecting the human race’, the circular was composed between 1839 and 1841 by a committee that included the young Darwin and the venerable philologist J.C. Pritchard, whose four volumes had traced the dispersion of the varieties of mankind across the globe. ‘Querie’ XVIII of the circular requested colonists, mariners and travellers to ascertain whether ‘infanticide occur[s] to any considerable extent [amongst indigenous peoples], and if it does, to what causes is it to be referred, want of affection, deficient subsistence, or superstition?’ The Queries were directed, with some urgency, particularly to settlers in lands where the extinction of Indigenous peoples was anticipated. It was at the behest of Robinson that Assistant Protector William Thomas spoke with Billibellary, the ngurungaeta or senior man and speaker of the Wurundjeri, in October 1843 about the practice of infanticide. Thomas’

---


33 Port Phillip Gazette, 4 March 1840 and 7 March 1840.

34 British Association for the Advancement of Science, ‘Varieties of human race: queries respecting the human race, to be addressed to travellers and others ...’, Report of the Eleventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science held at Plymouth, 1841 (1842), 332–39.
record of this conversation with Billibellary stands out as the single most significant exception to the array of hearsay reports about infanticide in the records of settlers in south-eastern Australia. It is upon this record of conversation that historian Richard Broome recently based his conclusion that the colonial occupation had brought such despair to first nation Australians that women took to killing a large proportion of their infants.35

By 1843 so few infants survived that Thomas had, indeed, come to fear that the clans near Melbourne would die out. Yet Broome’s assertion that infanticide was a significant contributor to their demise and that women drew on traditional practices that warranted the killing of infants ‘when children were born too close together, as the younger could not be carried while the older was still unweaned and lacked mobility’ rests on the perceived logic of an explanation first proposed by Malthus and repeated across two centuries.36 The traction of the explanation lies in the largely unchallenged fiction that ‘hunters and gatherers’ existed in an unremitting state of displacement, rather than as people who moved in extended family communities in a prescribed seasonal round, carefully cultivating the bounty of their ancestral lands.

The case of the Kulin
By the late 1830s the political influence of the British evangelicals was on the wane. One of the last acts of the faction that had legislated the

35 Richard Broome, Aboriginal Victorians: a history since 1800 (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 32.
36 Broome’s Aboriginal Victorians is only the most recent. See also Howitt and Fison, 190; Howitt, The native tribes of south-east Australia, 750; Frank J. Gillen, ‘Notes on some manners and customs of the Aborigines of the McDonnell Ranges belonging to the Arunta Tribe’ in E.C. Stirling ed., Report on the work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia, part IV, anthropology, ed. Walter Baldwin Spencer (London: Dutton and Co.; Melbourne: Melville, Mullen and Slade, 1896), 161; Walter Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, The native tribes of Central Australia (London: Macmillan, 1899), 61; George Taplin, 10–2; J.H. Wedge, Field notebook, 1835, in John Batman Papers, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.
abolition of slavery in 1833 was to establish an Aboriginal Protectorate in the newly occupied Australian colony of Port Phillip. When the Protectors arrived at Port Phillip early in 1839 flush with hopes of redeeming their ‘sable brothers’, they met not only a barrage of opposition from settlers but indifference from their wards. The clans eagerly accepted the rations and tools of the newcomers, but saw little reason to abandon their own life ways. In the face of disappointment, wrote Manning Clark, these ‘high-minded men of goodwill … [soon] became the men with a sorrowful countenance’. In a sense, the furrows on their sorrowful countenances iterate the line that they, and others, came to draw between Europeans and ‘others’ as their hopeful commitment to universal brotherhood transformed into a demarcating paternalism.

Since early 1839 Protector Thomas had faithfully counted the number of births and deaths amongst ‘his’ two clans—the Wurundjeri (or Woiwurung) of the Yarra valley and the Boonwurrung of the eastern arm of Port Phillip Bay. Each quarter he reported the numbers to the Chief Protector in a quarterly report. By 1843, Thomas was aware, as was Billibellary, that deaths outnumber births ‘at least eight deaths to a birth’, and there were almost no young infants in the two clans now; even when the women fell pregnant, they mostly returned after birthing without offspring. In his journal of May 1839 Thomas had vehemently rejected ‘a lie’ put about by ‘that Sydney Journal who has asserted that the Aborigines of Australia are less than the brutes in the scale of Existence void of natural affection, destroying their own offspring to save them the trouble of rearing them’.

As the medical lists of Thomas’ clans record, men and women, youths of both sexes, small children, and infants were infected with syphilis, ‘the loathsome disease’ that arrived with the invaders.\textsuperscript{40} It was a disease known to destroy fecundity and infant viability; yet by October 1843 Thomas had suspended his disbelief about the accusations of widespread infanticides, and he too admitted the possibility that the women were deliberately killing their newborns. It was in that context, and under direction from Robinson, that Thomas sat down to talk with the Wurundjeri clan leader, Billibellary on the 7 October 1843. In his Quarterly Report to the Chief Protector of December 1843, Thomas wrote:

I had a long conversation with Billibellary, Chief of the Yarra tribe on the belief that the Blacks killed their infants. He acknowledged that they did so and named who had had children since I had been among them, 8 in number (two only are now living). He said they had two ways of doing so, one by twisting a cord several times round their necks, the other by putting a karnya (opossum rug) over their heads. He said that the [women] made away with them. The Blackfellows all about say ‘that no good have them pickanniney, no country for Blackfellow like long time ago’. I pointed out to him how wicked it was and that God when they died would ask them where those pickannineys were they had killed. I told him that there was country enough for Black and White people if they would but stop in one place. He said if Yarra Blackfellows had a country on the Yarra that they would stop on it and cultivate the ground. He told me that there were three [women] who would soon have pickannineys and he would see that they did not kill them.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} See for example, Medical Report of Cases Treated by H.G. Jones, Medical Dispenser, to the Aboriginal Natives Melbourne or Western Port District from 1st to the 31st May 1842, VPRS 12 Box, Folder 13, Victorian Public Records Office, Melbourne. Those infected with ‘pseudo syphilis’ included infants.

\textsuperscript{41} Thomas to Chief Protector Robinson, Quarterly report, 1 December 1843, VPRS 4467, 1840–49, Victorian Aboriginal Protector Returns, Victorian Public Records Office, Melbourne; Broome, 32–3.
This would seem to be an irrefutable ‘confession’ as Thomas called it. But this quarterly report was not Thomas’s first version of this conversation with Billibellary. Thomas’ original journal entry of the conversation has one minor, but significant, difference from the quarterly report he delivered to the Chief Protector in December 1843. Thomas’ original journal entry of 7 October 1843 concluded with these words:

Billibellary promised that he would endeavour to make them let their children live—he said that there were 3 who would soon have pickaninys, Murry, I spend this day with the Blks at the creek.  

This original entry suggests, therefore, that it was to three women of a visiting clan from the Murray River, not to women of his own clan, that Billibellary promised to speak, in his role as ngurungaeta, in an endeavour to convince them to let their infants live.

Once Melbourne became the most intense site of colonisation in the region, the presence of non-Kulin clans at the nearby Merri Creek was not uncommon. On Sunday the 3 September 1843, a month prior to the conversation, Thomas recorded that ‘[t]he Blacks are beginning to come in [to the Merri Creek] Billibellary & others a few days since—Now the Murrys & part of Yarra’. Six months earlier, in March 1843, a party of 200 ‘perfect strangers’ from the ‘Australian Alps’ had arrived at the Merri Creek and the Tanderrum ceremony had been performed by the Wurundjeri, in welcome. The ‘Murry’ clans had perhaps come to Melbourne late in 1843—into country not their own—in response to an invitation from Superintendent La Trobe, delivered by the Wesleyan missionary, Francis Tuckfield, who, in May 1842, had travelled along the Murray River seeking an alternate location for the failed Buntingdale mission. On his return, Tuckfield informed La Trobe that the northern clans, who had limited contact with Europeans, had an ‘unusually large

---

42 Thomas, Journal, 7 October 1843.
43 Ibid.
proportion of children’ and were ‘entirely free’ from the venereal diseases that had taken such a toll in the occupied districts.44

The contrast between the number of children and infants amongst the federated Kulin clans at the Merri Creek, within sight of the town of Melbourne, and the numbers amongst the distant clans still largely unsullied by the impacts of colonialism, could not have been more stark; nor could the cause of the barrenness amongst the former have been more apparent. In recording his conversation with Billibellary, Thomas noted that they had, together, counted only eight infants born to the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung since Thomas arrived amongst them five years earlier; one only now survived.45 Given that tragic decline of fertility, how unlikely is it that there would have been three women ‘who would soon have’ babes in October 1843 when the conversation took place? It is a reasonable conclusion, therefore, that when Billibellary spoke of women killing their infants, he, like Thomas, was speculating about the unseemly habits of others.

Aboriginal people frequently disparaged or expressed fears about ‘wild blacks’—a covering term in translation for foreign, and often near-neighbouring, clans. Wesleyan missionary Joseph Orton noted the suspicions of Aboriginal people he met at Port Phillip that those beyond their own country were murderers or sorcerers who would strike in the night. They were ‘dreadfully afraid lest we take them among “wild blackfellows” as they call them’, wrote Orton. Thomas too recorded that the man Gellibrand had told him ‘that if wild Black fellow … got that hair he [Gellibrand] should die’.46 Protector Edward Parker also inadvertently alluded to one source of the European imaginary of Aboriginal savagery

45 Thomas, Journal, 7 October 1843.
when, in 1845, he told a parliamentary enquiry into the condition of the Aborigines of New South Wales, that there were ‘great differences … observable among the different tribes’, with reference to the ‘painful subject’ of infanticide. ‘The Pangurang natives on the lower Goulburn country’, he wrote, ‘even by the acknowledgement of their enemies, are free from this crime’. Yet he accepted his own clan’s accusations that their Kulin neighbours and enemies, the Daungwurrung of the upper Goulburn River, were ‘addicted’ to the practice, so much so that they now had only a ‘small portion of children’.47 Parker’s evidence suggests how closely the fears and accusations of settlers articulated with the fears and accusations made by Aboriginal clans against people they each regarded as beyond the pale.

Like Thomas’ quarterly report of December, the journal entry of October 1843 also recorded Billibellary’s despair at the loss of the upcoming generation of his clan, but in different words. According to Thomas:

he [Billibellary] said that Black [women] say now no good children, Black fellow say no country now for them, very good [one word illegible] & no more come up Pickaniny.

There is, arguably, significant slippage from the meaning of the words ‘now no good children’ and ‘no more come up pickanniny’ in the original journal entry, to Thomas’s reworked statement in the quarterly report that the women ‘made away with them’. The first, in passive voice, offer the possibility of an understanding that since their world had been turned upside down they were no longer to be blessed with viable newborns; the second channels meaning towards the more active intervention of infanticide.

What we have in the exchange between Protector and ngurungaeta, I suggest, is two cultured men, jointly speculating about the uncouth habits

of outsiders. Billibellary may well have been surprised, had he read Thomas’ report to the Chief Protector, to realise that Thomas had interpreted their conversation about the habits of ‘others’ as a confession about the practices of his own clan. Instead of two men mutually looking outwards, Billibellary, and the women of his clan, now became objects of surveillance and sometimes of repugnance. In quite literal terms, this moment represents a ‘re-orientation’ of the Protector from being a partner in a mutual project of protecting the clans in concert with the Wurundjeri leader, to being a principal agent in a white project of objectification, surveillance, and soon, of ‘rescuing’ and incarcerating Aboriginal children.

Thomas similarly collapsed cause and effect two years later when he told a New South Wales parliamentary enquiry that, from his own observation, the few infants born to his Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung clans were usually ‘rotten with disease’ and mostly died before they were a month old—a characteristic of infants born with congenital syphilis—and his statement to the same enquiry that ‘should there be a birth the infant is artfully put out of the way’ because ‘as they state, “of having no country they can call their own”’.48 In each case, the space between the two versions allows for a devastating wave of infant deaths that came from forces other than wilful, even despairing, maternal intervention.

By the time the conversation between the two men took place at the Merri Creek there was considerable pressure on Thomas and others—fed materially by the British Association’s ethnological circular—to discern the practice of infanticide. Aboriginal denials, on the other hand, fell on deaf ears. An Aboriginal man, Mahroot, closely questioned about infanticide practices by the New South Wales enquiry of 1845, vehemently denied that the dearth of children amongst his southern Cadigal clan was due to infanticide.49 His voice was overborne by that of

48 Thomas, Reply to circular, 55.
John Bede Polding, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, who, with humanitarian intent, testified that the Aborigines no longer had a ‘desire to have their children to survive them’ because of ‘a deep sorrow prevailing in consequence of a rapid … destruction taking place amongst them’. Polding admitted that he had not spoken with Aboriginal people on the subject and that his opinion was reached through ‘making myself a black, putting myself in that position’.50

While correspondents to that enquiry reported local hearsay about infanticides in approximately equal numbers to those who reported no instances in their district,51 authoritative knowledge about the Australians now increasingly categorised them as infanticidal. Increasingly, reiteration alone stood as evidence and ethnographic description gave way to ethnographic prescription that placed the Australians amongst the lesser varieties of humankind with habits appropriate to their station. With all the authority of Chief Protector and with a high degree of credulousness, Robinson also reiterated cases he had heard second hand to the enquiry. It was Robinson who linked the purported threat of mass infanticides with the project of rounding up the children of the Aborigines of Port Phillip. ‘Half-castes’, he told the committee, were ‘invariably its victim’, and ‘it would be exceedingly desirable could this fine race be removed to an asylum for protection and instruction’.52

In 1858, testifying before a Victorian parliamentary enquiry, the ageing William Thomas again told the committee that the Boonwurrung and the Wurundjeri clans ‘made away with’ their children and that they now had ‘few, if any, births to fill up the ranks of the dead’.53 He baulked

50 Evidence of Polding, Minutes of evidence, ‘Report from the Select Committee on the condition of the Aborigines’ New South Wales Legislative Council, 1845, 6–8.
51 Replies to circular, Question 17, ‘Report from the Select Committee on the condition of the Aborigines’, New South Wales Legislative Council, 1845, 22–59.
53 William Thomas, Minutes of evidence, Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines, 1858–59, Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1858–59, 3; William
at separating children from their kin, but, he argued, ‘nothing short of removing them a considerable distance from their tribe can … avert … the extinction of the aboriginal race’.\(^{54}\) He warned however, that the people would not consent to part from their children without ‘great bribery’ or kidnapping.\(^{55}\) Like Thomas, the authoritative Anglican Missionary Committee recommended ‘a central establishment for the reception of the native children from all the tribes’ where ‘the young … may become estranged from their own customs’. While some on the Anglican committee initially doubted the justice of the plan, their reticence dissolved when ‘one important fact’ was impressed upon them by a leading member, G.W. Rusden: namely ‘that half-caste male children, borne by aboriginal women, are usually destroyed’.\(^{56}\) That intelligence was at odds with Rusden’s own reply to the committee’s circular (which essentially duplicated the British Association Queries of 1841) in which he reported that ‘the blacks allege that it [infanticide] was uncommon’ and that ‘many of them are too affectionate to think of it for a moment in the case of their own children’.\(^{57}\) And so, despite the doubt surrounding such accusations, the practice of ‘rescuing’ Aboriginal children from their kin and incarcerating them in training institutions began in earnest in Victoria with the establishment of a central children’s asylum at the heart of the government Aboriginal station Coranderrk at Healesville in 1863.

That infanticide was one of a range of family-size limitation methods amongst the Australians (along with abortion, polygamous marriage, and

\(^{54}\) Thomas, Evidence to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines, 1858–59, in Thomas, Reply to Circular, 40.

\(^{55}\) Thomas, Minutes of evidence, 3; Thomas, Reply to circular, 51.

\(^{56}\) Anglican Committee Report [untitled], Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines, 1858–59, Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1858–59, in Reply to Circular, 40.

\(^{57}\) George W. Rusden, Evidence to Select Committee of the Legislative Council of Victoria on the Aborigines, 1858–59, Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1858–59; Reply to Circular, 51.
strict customary sexual regulation, for example) is likely; that some women resorted to killing infants or children as an act of ‘desperate agency’ in either the pre- or post-contact periods is also likely; that it was customary and prevalent is not supported by the balance of evidence. What was, in all likelihood, an exceptional and incidental practice amongst Aboriginal people, rather than a matter of common custom, was raised up by the interaction of European and Aboriginal fears of the other into a morally and racially defining trope that marked whole communities as ‘infanticidal’, and as people whose common rights could be morally suspended. For more than 200 years this discourse has done an inordinate amount of work in constructing the Australians as a people ripe for colonisation and dispossession. From the mid-19th century, it underwrote the institutionalisation of generations of ‘rescued’ Aboriginal children. With that project of incarceration, Aboriginality became anathema to social inclusion and citizenship in the radically democratic and radically White colonies of Australia.