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### **‘Impossible, now, to read the Rosetta Stone’: cultural hybridity and loss in the Ernestine Hill Collection**

#### Abstract:

When journalist and writer Ernestine Hill died in 1972, thirty-two boxes of her papers and photographs were archived in the University of Queensland’s Fryer Library. I accessed the Hill Collection after reading her travel narrative, *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1937), curious to learn more about the jaunty young woman who set off, reputedly with a swag and a typewriter, to record stories about life in Australia’s vast open spaces during the early 1930s. As I sifted through notebooks, correspondence, unpublished drafts of novels and plays and photographs of out-of-the-way places, a portrait of a much older, world-weary woman with a complex vision of national identity emerged.

This paper uses the notion of the palimpsest as a touchstone for exploring the Collection’s relationship, as fragmentary hypotext, to Hill’s published texts and its implications for a renewed understanding of her complex yet thwarted project of cultural hybridity and nation-building. Hill’s vision displays an evolving consciousness about intercultural relations and national identity when pivotal texts *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *The Territory* are re-read in reference to material such as her unpublished novel *Johnnie Wisecap* within the Collection. This approach raises further questions about confronting textual loss and the challenge of incorporating divergent textual materials into cultural and literary history.

#### Biographical note:

Eleanor Hogan is a Research Fellow at Swinburne Institute for Social Research. She has a PhD in English from Melbourne University and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Goucher College, Baltimore. Her writing has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Inside Story*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Australian Book Review* and *ScreenHub*, and her book, *Alice Springs* (2012), was published in NewSouth’s ‘Cities’ series.

#### Keywords:

Archive – Australian literature – Ernestine Hill – hypotext – hybridity

## Introduction

In her last surviving letter to her son, Robert, journalist and travel-writer Ernestine Hill states:

Nearly all my work just needs sorting, weeding, one copy of each, manipulation for posting and printing – sorting above all. Chapter and verse ... I am submerged in notes and folders ... It's too good for Australia to be left behind or thrown out (UQFL18.E.1).<sup>1</sup>

Much of this writing – notebooks, drafts of novels and plays, letters to family and friends, photographs of camels, pearl luggers and out-of-the-way places – made its way to the Fryer Library after Hill's death in 1972. As her comment – 'it's too good for Australia to be left behind or thrown out' – suggests, Hill thought the material was significant enough to be kept in the national interest. In her notes, she says it represents 'my sixty years of travel and memories within Australia, gathering histories, folk lore, knowledge at first hand, interwoven with researches and reflections to leave a picture of my native land as close as possible to truth' (UQFL18.A.73.52). She believed this writing, much of which was unpublished, captured the essence of an Australia that was quickly passing and had universal resonances that needed to be preserved.

I visited the Ernestine Hill Collection (UQFL18) after reading her travel narrative, *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1937), curious to learn more about the jaunty young woman who 'in July 1930 ... first set out, a wandering "copy-boy" with swag and typewriter ... dangling from a camel-saddle, jingling on a truck', hitching a lift on whatever conveyance was available to report on life in Australia's vast open spaces (Hill 1942: 7). A journalist, Hill sprang to prominence during the 1930s when she travelled throughout northern Australia, dispatching stories to syndicated southern newspapers. Over the next two decades Hill published a series of travelogues, becoming the front-runner of a wave of travel writers whose writing opened up the interior for a largely urban, southern-based general public (Bonnin 1980; Morris 2006; 2014). Hill's early reportage was associated with sensationalistic stories about a (false) gold rush in central Australia and, in concert with Daisy Bates, about Aboriginal cannibalism, which she later downplayed, confessing it was the work of a 'wicked and ruthless journalist' (Bonnin 1980: 25).

But I found few traces of the thirty-something wandering copy-boy from *The Great Australian Loneliness* in the Hill Collection. Much of the Collection relates to Hill's mid and later years, and as I sifted through its thirty-two archival boxes and parcel of photographs, a portrait of an older, world-weary woman emerged. By the late 1940s Hill's personal and professional fortunes were waning and, in the two decades between the publication of her last travel book, *The Territory* (1951), and *Kabbarli* (1973), her memoir of Bates, she puddled about, writing notes for different projects and re-drafting chapters of manuscripts that were never published. She wrote to family members that she had '[o]ceans of great work here – 18 books gathered and planned (they'll be done)' but that she was lacking the 'motive power for arranging, "packaging", negotiating ...' the material (UQFL18.E.2; UQFL18.E.8). Her letters from this period portray Hill, boxed up in a guesthouse or hotel room, bemoaning her

lot, struggling with deteriorating mental and physical health, wiring friends and relatives for money and fending off publishers' requests for completed manuscripts: 'No good collecting and collecting – they want the books' (UQFL18.E.2). The material evokes the image of a writer, snared in her own web of semiosis, endlessly scribing but unable to articulate her complete vision.

Trying to reconcile this persona with the better-known figure of Ernestine Hill of her earlier, popular travel-writing days, I began to contemplate how the Collection might illuminate gaps within existing narratives about this historical literary figure. But rather than examining the Collection's biographical material for what it might reveal about the impact of her later personal circumstances on her capacity to write, I was interested in how the unpublished content she was so desperate to preserve might re-frame her contribution and legacy as a writer. I was also curious to know how this material related to her published works such as *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *The Territory*, and whether it might elucidate some of their conundrums. As a feminist with an Indigenous policy research background who had lived in and written about the Northern Territory, I was fascinated by the proto-multicultural vision of northern Australia in Hill's writing. In *The Great Australian Loneliness*, she observes the split between 'smug, colour-conscious White Australia below the twentieth parallel, and black, white and brindle struggling together above it' (Hill 1942: 340). Yet aspects of Hill's work now seem quaint and Orientalising to contemporary sensibilities, and her notions about national identity and race are anachronistic and outmoded, couched within white supremacist terms (Gall 2013; Morris 2006; 2013; 2014). In particular, Hill subscribed to the 'doomed race' theory that prevailed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (McGregor 1998), which maintained the inevitability of white colonisation and the extinction of the 'primitive' Aboriginal race. Given Hill's youthful if sometimes misguided perspicacity in commenting on these issues, I wondered how reading the Collection might address paradoxical elements in her published work and inform an understanding of her overall vision.

### **Ethnomania and the Hill Collection**

Sifting through the Collection was like looking at the messy underside of an embroidery sampler. Hill herself thought the material would defy interpretation, writing to a family member: 'I sometimes now think I'll leave sixty years of fragments that nobody can make out fully, in sequence – maybe it won't matter. I can't even "turn it into money"' (UQFL18.E.8). Her many notebooks and folders include jottings, sometimes in her own almost indecipherable shorthand, which are short and telegraphic, like random incidental thoughts. They include interjections such as: 'He always employs blacks – he pays them nothing a week and they feed themselves' (UQFL18.A.26.24). Often in these raw observations Hill is more frank, more pointed in commenting on frontier race relations than she is in her published works. To me this material suggested the irruptions of a political unconscious: the expression of what was unutterable or difficult to utter at the time.

My other main impression in encountering the Collection concerns the ethnographic or ethnomanic impetus that informs Hill's desire to preserve her material. Alongside

the ‘quick slant’ of unpublished manuscripts Hill rehearses periodically like an incantation throughout her letters and notebooks, she includes much ethnographic detail: ‘Folk Lore Lists and Synopses, of my own gathering throughout Australia, to be classified into aboriginal and white Australia’ (UQFL18.A.16). In *The many worlds of R. H. Mathews* (2011), Martin Thomas coins the word ‘ethnomania’ to describe the ‘frantic energy’ that gripped laypeople such as Mathews and Bates in the early twentieth century in studying races and civilisations (44-5). The ethnographic intent behind Hill’s archival desire and activity reflects the influence of self-taught anthropologist Daisy Bates, with whom Hill collaborated on a series of syndicated articles about her life and work, which became *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938). In her final years, Bates implored Hill to assist her in transcribing her memories of Aboriginal culture and Hill visited her for this purpose in 1947, but found the older woman was failing. Struggling later herself to assemble her own ‘sixty years of fragments’, Hill contemplated writing to Canberra for ‘assistance of the sort I gave Daisy Bates’ (UQFL18.E.8), which implies she saw her work as possessing similar ethnographic value. Hill’s desire for her material to be given a permanent resting place after her death suggests she envisaged the Collection as imaginary repository of sorts: her own Great Australian Imaginary or attempt at preserving a bi-cultural *tjukurrpa*.

Hill began her roaming reporting and amateur ethnography when the extension of roads and railway lines was disturbing the dreaming tracks and changing the lived experience of the country. In *The Great Australian Loneliness*, she describes sitting on ‘an upturned petrol tin under the stars’, attempting to capture the corroboree dances before they disappeared: ‘there was always something to scribble in my note-book by the light of those crackling fires’ (Hill 1942: 182). While protesting that she’s ‘no anthropologist’ in *The Territory*, Hill explains her rationale in preserving fragments of a now-inaccessible imaginary that is the ‘aboriginal mind’:

We can only see flashes and fragments of old traditions, happy in our researches when one scrap of a jigsaw fits another. Impossible, now, to read the Rosetta Stone. I am no anthropologist, and these stray notes of mine, gathered mainly from blacks and from a few observant whites in many days and many ways of roaming, are no attempt to set a figure in mosaic, but only a bower-bird’s playground of shining bits and pieces, facets of the aboriginal mind (1963: 348).

In emphasising the impossibility of reading an Aboriginal Rosetta Stone, Hill recognises the thwarted and necessarily incomplete nature of her enterprise. Her description of her bower-bird-like, ethnographic activities resembles an understanding of writing as the creation of a palimpsest: of ‘literature’s existence in the second degree, its non-original re-writing of what has already been written’ (Allen 2013: 107). Extending the notion of the palimpsest to the Hill Collection as ‘a bower-bird’s playground’ provides a useful touchstone for exploring its relationship, as fragmentary hypotext, to her published texts and examining why Hill struggled to finish what she saw as her contribution to ‘the idea of Australia’.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss how reading the hypotextual material of the Hill Collection – which relates to the later period of her life – can re-frame the

paradoxical elements in her published work and inform an understanding of her overall vision. This paper is based on three research trips to the Fryer Library, each of a week's length: consequently it will not offer a comprehensive reading of the Hill Collection, whose immensity is beyond treatment within a relatively short time-frame or paper. It limits discussion of the Collection's significance to Hill's representation of Aboriginal and white settler relations in reference to *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *The Territory*. The paper finishes with an investigation of why *Johnnie Wisecap*, 'a history, a novel, of the Aboriginal race' (UQFL18.E.8) which fills four archival boxes and sprawls over 1,400 folio pages, remained incomplete, with implications for Hill's vision of Australia. Re-framed as palimpsest, the Hill Collection represents a complex yet thwarted project of cultural hybridity and nation-building.

### **Doomed race theory, miscegenation and frontier conflict**

Hill's writing, published and unpublished, displays an evolving consciousness of the detrimental impacts of white settlement on Aboriginal populations, although there are contradictory elements in her representation of race (see also Gall 2010: 220; 2013; Morris 2014). Even in her first book, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, Hill professes, unlike many of her non-Indigenous contemporaries, to prefer Aboriginal people's ethic, proclaiming 'here are your true Communists' (1942: 170). She also comments favourably in *The Loneliness* about the capabilities of full and mixed descent Aboriginal people, saying it's a disservice to suggest they're less intelligent than other races. She observes that half-caste<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal people often work in an under-acknowledged capacity as stockmen – and women – 'playing a very considerable part in the colonisation of a country that is actually more closely theirs than our own' (227-8).

At the same time, Hill perceives the increasing number of 'hybrids' as the result of miscegenation to be symptomatic of the passing of Aboriginal people and their culture. She perpetuates then popular beliefs about the inevitable demise of Aboriginal people: 'the aboriginal is doomed' and 'Australia is no longer a black man's country, and the twentieth century has no room for Palaeolithic man' (180; 185). In common with 'doomed race' theory adherents such as Bates and Baldwin Spencer, whose views she discusses in the *Loneliness*, Hill did not foresee the emergence of mixed descent Aboriginal people as a sign of survival and the continuation of culture. Instead she perceives the 'steadily-increasing propagation of half-breed races' as the 'overwhelming problem of the North-west and North of Australia at the moment...the half-caste is the sad futureless figure of this lonely land' (226-7). The burden of miscegenation falls on the half-caste, Hill writes, because he or she is '[u]nrecognised by his father and unwanted by his mother', and trapped 'half-way between the Stone Age and the twentieth century' (226; 227). As a social problem, commentators such as Bleakley, Walker and feminist reformers Bennett and Cooke attributed miscegenation to the greater ratio of white men to white women in northern Australia, which was thought unfit for 'civilised' female habitation (Bleakley 1929; Holland 2002; Lake 1996; McGregor 1998: 124-34). 'Without the salvation of

understanding, without the influx of white settlers in large numbers, its future is a theme unthinkable' (224), Hill writes in *The Great Australian Loneliness*, which serves at one level as a pamphlet to encourage white women, armed with their bright frocks and accordions, to bring civilisation to the frontier.

Where Hill's writing, published and unpublished, is more provocative is in its increasing awareness of the role of frontier violence in destroying Aboriginal culture and populations. In *The Great Australian Loneliness*, Hill is quite veiled about frontier conflict, which she frames as 'human dramas in a tragic country, white against black, black against white, eternal triangles, tribesmen's enmities, the grim battle of the pioneer' (1942: 164). In recounting the Duracks' colonisation of the Kimberley, she claims that a state of peaceful co-existence now exists, attributing any original hostility to the local Aboriginal people: 'the blacks were bad indeed' (123). She asserts that 'troubles' between Aboriginal and settler populations merely 'arise through a conflict of understanding. The Australian black is a gentleman at heart' (224).

Writing fifteen years later in *The Territory*, Hill is less muted, recounting instances of white brutality against Aboriginal people in Territorian history, such as Rodney Spencer's murder of an Aboriginal man for stealing rice during the gold rush days and the Barrow Creek massacres. In keeping with a commitment to impartial reporting (Hill 1942: 36), Hill describes the injustices, perceived or otherwise, experienced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters in both accounts. But in reference to the Spencer story she observes no records were kept of white murders of blacks until 1911 'and after that the verdict "Not Guilty" is so monotonous that it seems a matter of course', underscoring that: '*No white man has been handed in the north or north-west for murder of a native*' (1963: 381). She is more direct in her condemnation of the grim revenge for the murders of two white settlers and an Aboriginal labourer at Barrow Creek. A party of white men retaliated by 'herding all blacks before them' to a range which 'for grim and sufficient reason, is on the map for ever with the name of Blackfellows' bones' and '[m]en, women and children were shot into annihilation for hundreds of miles around' (133).

While these statements represent a progression from Hill's somewhat benign commentary on frontier violence in *The Great Australian Loneliness*, they are more embedded and less explicit than some of the unpublished material in the Hill Collection. For example, the phrase 'Blackfellows' bones' used in *The Territory* echoes the words in a fragment titled 'The Old Woman's Eye' in a folder of 'General notes' about raids and massacres in Queensland:

#### THE OLD WOMAN'S EYE.

Aboriginal skeletons and skulls, with broken shards and widows' caps, unearthed by oil searchers in Bedourie sands of the Queensland Far West, are relics and remembrance of the "Tintapperty" punitive raid and the infamous Black Police camps of Queensland's earlier days.

"A Stone Age graveyard," somebody suggests. So it is – with a vengeance – a graveyard that covers over a thousand square miles of "blackfellows' bones," one of

the many in Australia, marking the famous victories of the oldtime punitive raids, the battles so easily won, with guns.

A white man believed killed by blacks could be avenged a thousand to one.

(UQFL18.A.29.3).

The last sentence recalls the annihilation Hill describes in *The Territory* but her account of frontier atrocities in this unpublished snippet is much more graphic and direct, underlining the disproportionate ratio of black to white murders that went unchecked and unrecorded during the ‘oldtime [sic] punitive raids’.

Hill is also progressive in her belief that Aboriginal people should be able to live on their own lands to counter the erosion of their population and culture. These views reflect the influence of Bleakley, Pink and others’ advocacy for the creation of segregated reserves to ensure Aboriginal people’s survival (McGregor 1998: 114-22; 242-4). Some of their propositions, such as those of Mary Bennett and the Aboriginal Protection League’s petition for an Aboriginal Model State, recognised the significance of Aboriginal people’s connection to country. (Holland 2002: 298-9; McGregor 1998: 119-20) In her notes for her unpublished novel, *Johnnie Wisecap*, Hill also observes the lack of acknowledgment of this fundamental right:

The natives of Australia have never been recognised as having any legal title to their tribal lands... In the N.T. long leases of large areas, many tribes not a square foot to call their own of well-defined countries that had been theirs from time immemorial (UQFL18.B.31.23).

Although Hill’s ideas are bound up with notions of the necessity of segregating Aboriginal people to maintain racial purity, her outlook is remarkably forward-looking, anticipating future calls for a treaty and recognition of land rights. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine how the strain between progressive and colonialist elements manifests in *Johnnie Wisecap*, the manuscript she regarded as her most important work, and its significance for re-framing her vision.

### ***Johnnie Wisecap*: hybridity as the death mask of whiteness**

*Johnnie Wisecap*, a novel about an albino Aboriginal man, critiques the impact of white colonisation on Aboriginal people beyond the scope of *The Great Australian Loneliness* and *The Territory*. A gothic romance in the tradition of *Frankenstein*, *Johnnie Wisecap* queries what vision of Australia is possible following colonisation’s destructive sequelae, including the hybrid’s creation through miscegenation. Narratives that feature a white Indigene, often ‘a white or European character living among, learning from or taking on the qualities of Indigenous characters’ are, as Gall notes, ‘a consistent feature of Australian settler-colonial cultural texts’. While these ideas were present in late nineteenth-century publications such as *The Bulletin*, they were directly promulgated by the Jindyworobak movement from the late 1930s to the 1950s during Hill’s publishing career, although Gall observes that by contrast her ‘account of Indigenisation has particularly complex and contradictory dimensions’ (2010: 217, 219).

Hill's inspiration for *Johnnie Wisecap* came from an 1890 *Argus* story ('An Albino Aboriginal' 1890), which recounts an 'Albino discovered by A. McPhee, 200 miles from the coast in the far north, taken to Melbourne and exhibited' (UQFL18.B.19). *Wisecap* is set in late nineteenth-century colonial Australia, and the narrator like McPhee meets a mysterious man of indeterminate racial identity living 'outside of everything' – in the Kimberley: 'He was a mystery. Some said he was a white man, A German or a Swede. Some said he was a half-caste or a blackfellow. All agreed he was mad' (UQFL18.A.33.3). Johnnie is not a 'half-caste' however but a full descent Aboriginal man lacking dark pigment.

The narrator hears how an unscrupulous pearler kidnapped Johnnie Wisecap and took him to Melbourne to exhibit as a freak at the Bourke Street Palace of Varieties. An anthropologist, Professor von Weinckel, learns of Johnnie's servitude and pays to free him. He invites Johnnie to live with him and his daughter, Erika, a blue-stocking linguist, in his suitably Gothic mansion in Gotham Road, Kew. After a make-over as a Victorian gentleman, Johnnie is happily employed translating Aboriginal lore and language for Erika in exchange for learning English and German.

The Professor gives a highly controversial public lecture, titled 'God's doomed children', at the 1888 Centenary celebrations, in which he castigates successive waves of settlers for stealing Aboriginal land and decimating Aboriginal people. 'Do you come as swarms of locusts to devour and strip bare in thoughtless greed? ... 'eliminat[ing] nations of men over whom you hold the power of life and death by the cowardly gun'? (UQFL18.A.33.760), he asks and few escape his ire – whether they be pioneers, pearlers, police or missionaries. He casts white colonisation damningly as the 'Christian invasion' (UQFL18.A.33.760) and when asked about Batman's treaty, observes that 'the rental was never paid nor was it claimed' (UQFL18.A.33.790). He looks forward to the bicentenary, asking:

How many of the truly tribal will be living in 1988? Of the rivers and hills and plains of a thousand tribes, what patch of their home ground will be free of the white man's dominion, for his own use and profit driving into exile every man, woman and child? Of a thousand aboriginal languages, of the age-old poetries and prayers, which will they remember? Not one (UQFL18.A.33.777).

Hill's insights, which the Professor expresses, are highly prescient, not only for 1888 but for the 1950s when she wrote *Wisecap*, and are more in keeping with 1988 sensibilities and aspects of self-determination era discourse.

However, *Wisecap* overlays Hill's earlier concerns about the hybrid's position with assimilation period anxieties about the successful integration of Aboriginal people within white society. Like the 'half-caste' in the *Loneliness*, Johnnie falls between two cultures: 'The whites reckon he's black an' the blacks reckon he's white' (UQFL18.A.33.27). Hill takes this further by presenting Johnnie as a 'noble savage' within polite Melbourne society, where he can pass as white but must 'black up' to convince white Australians he's Aboriginal: to draw a crowd for the Centenary lecture, Erika suggests that Johnnie perform a corroboree dance – in blackface. People are intrigued by Johnnie and ask to meet him, and Erika, who possesses a certain savvy for popular science events, proposes that her father hold a 'semi-scientific

evening' to present Johnnie to Melbourne's social and intellectual elite. Again concerned about proving Johnnie's Aboriginality given his whiteness, she suggests Johnnie point the death bone at the guests. The Professor protests that he can offer blood tests to prove his Aboriginality, but Johnnie grudgingly agrees to perform the ritual despite being fearful of the death bone's power. When Johnnie 'points the bone' without blackface the cultural takes precedence over the physical as a basis for identity. However, this act also suggests he must elaborately perform his identity for the dominant white settler society to acknowledge his Aboriginality.

Nevertheless the 'death bone' incident signifies the threat to the hegemony of whiteness that the Aboriginal hybrid presents. Tellingly the novel references *Frankenstein*, with the Professor suggesting that the Aboriginal hybrid is a monstrous creation that will kill its white master:

But what of us?...a mechanism we are ourselves contriving in our cunning and skill, like Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" will outwit and destroy its creator, or a chemical formula evolving superhuman strength and will, emanating from man then alien, will make a vanishing race of him. Endless change. Inevitable (UQFL18.A.33.910).

Shortly after the 'semi-scientific evening', the Professor dies and Johnnie somewhat belatedly realises that his 'hand had pointed the death-bone at his friend!' (UQFL18.A.33.1254). This incident emblematises the threat that the creation of the Aboriginal hybrid signifies to White Australia: the overwhelming predominance of the hybrid in the North that Hill fears in *The Great Australian Loneliness*. As *Wisecap*'s sub-title, 'deathmask of a race', implies, Hill fears that Johnnie's absence of pigment and ability to pass for white prefigures the passing of Aboriginal people. His whiteness means confronting the death-mask of essentialist notions of racial and cultural identity.

The challenge of miscegenation to the 'white master' is also intimated quite literally through Erika's announcement to her father that she and Johnnie are to marry: 'He is my Abelard and I his Heloise' (UQFL18.A.33.1244). Erika is unaware that Johnnie has been falling in love with her during their mutual cultural exchange: 'Erika taught him the handshake that must be given in love. So it begins. She will later teach him the *waijela* kiss, with electric effect' (UQFL18.B.18). Johnnie initially resists Erika's proposal that he point the deathbone at their guests then relents – 'She was too near and her hand was too warm ... the coiled braids of her hair like little yellow snakes in the spinifex, *yammajee*' (UQFL18.A.33.984). Believing that he has seen her merely as a linguistic 'mind', Erika kisses Johnnie, who responds by blowing on her face in an Aboriginal expression of romantic love.

When she tells the Professor of their love, he is aghast, and asks what she will do if their children 'are blackfellows ... It would ruin your life' (UQFL18.A.33.1301). No doubt seeking to present Johnnie as a more palatable spouse, Erika claims the Professor's blood tests were inaccurate and that Johnnie is in fact Jaan Thorsen, the son of a shipwrecked 'Dutchy skipper', who had an alliance with an Aboriginal woman (UQFL18.A.33.1274). Erika announces she and Johnnie will sail the world, compiling dictionaries together: 'I have no wish for children, do not be afraid – any woman can have children ... Very very few can produce volumes upon volumes of

Aryan languages and literatures, and of other notable nations...’ (UQFL18.A.33.1304). The Professor chokes after this revelation, and dies shortly afterwards.

*Wisecap* stops short of two envisaged final chapters, with Johnnie deserting Kew ‘swinging a boomerang instead of a cane’ (UQFL18.A.33.1317) as he heads north to the Kimberley. Hill’s cousin, Louise Campbell, suggested to me that Hill may have failed to complete the manuscript because she was squeamish about depicting the inter-racial sexual relations between Johnnie and Erika, which was where the story was headed, should they set sail on their joint dictionary-writing venture. According to Campbell: ‘Robert [Hill’s son] and I became convinced that *Johnnie* was never finished partly, at least, because she couldn’t handle the implications of Johnnie Wisecap’s sexual life’ (2015). *Johnnie Wisecap* upends *The Great Australian Loneliness*’s 1930s solution of sending white women to the outback to halt miscegenation by marrying white men. Instead it presents the then unsettling prospect that assimilation and increasing inter-racial contact might result in a highly educated white woman coupling with an Aboriginal man, reversing the trend for these relations to be portrayed in terms of an exploitative dynamic between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. Discussing women’s novels from the 1920s to the 1950s, such as Katharine Susannah Pritchard’s *Coonardoo* and Mary Durack’s *Keep Him My Country* (1955), Susan Sheridan observes that: ‘It’s striking how these fictions involving sexual relations between black and white all deny to the white women characters any active desire’ (1988: 329). Unconsummated though their union might be, *Johnnie Wisecap*’s prefiguring of inter-cultural sexual relations is subversive for its time.

### **The intercultural mosaic and the ‘idea of Australia’**

Hill’s difficulty in resolving these elements suggests why, in addition to her failing health and mounting financial problems, she never finished *Johnnie Wisecap*. Embracing hybridity raises questions about confronting cultural loss and the challenge of incorporating divergent understandings of history, identity and place into her ‘idea of Australia’. In the case of *Johnnie Wisecap*, it means countenancing the expression of what was then socially and historically unutterable. Hill was aware of the difficulties involved in crafting an intercultural mosaic, comparing gathering ‘stray notes’ to collecting fragments in a bower-bird’s playground. But she does not question her self-appointed role as scribe or her potential for cultural appropriation: from her perspective, her project’s urgency in the face of the ‘Vanishing Race’ vouches for its necessity. These and other aspects, such as her subscription to the doomed race theory and her anxiety about the end-point of miscegenation, render much of her work problematic.

Adam Gall writes that while ‘Hill’s work is so concerned with futurity ... imagining Aboriginality as “fast disappearing” has largely, though not comprehensively, given way to quite different, if still contestable, accounts of indigenous futures’ (2013: 198). Although Hill’s published writing is highly problematic in certain respects, the value of re-reading it in relation to the Hill Collection lies in what the many-voicedness of

the archive or hypotext might reveal, not just about the paradoxes and contradictions of the narrative and historical personae of Ernestine Hill, but the shifts within the 'idea of Australia' that her life and writing spanned, and beyond. Her vision displays an evolving consciousness about intercultural relations and national identity that is, for example, far-reaching in pre-empting aspects of the self-determination era's critique of colonisation when her earlier published texts are read in conjunction with later unpublished material and ephemera within the Hill Collection. This approach raises further questions about what might be lost culturally if texts such as Hill's are not read in conjunction with archival hypotext. To return to Hill's image of cultural translation as confronting an inaccessible Rosetta Stone with its post-Saussurean overtones of the hermeneutical enterprise of 'seeing through a glass darkly' – the veil of signification – without ever having direct access to the thing-in-itself. The process is flawed, not least because of the damage inflicted through colonisation, but it's Hill's acknowledgement of her activity's necessarily incomplete and partial nature that provides a touchstone for reading text and hypotext, and makes her vision compelling.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Material from the Ernestine Hill Collection is pre-fixed with 'UQFL18' and followed by a reference to a folio page number.

<sup>2</sup> 'Half caste' is a racially pejorative term but is used where cited within Hill's work in reference to historical policies of miscegenation.

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