

Sex and Violence in the Black Australian Novel

Abstract for chapter 7

In order to illustrate the development of this theme of sexual and larger cultural violence, the historical novels written by Black Australians are discussed before the brutality of the contemporary scene is examined.

The relationship between sex and violence is an ancient one and Black Australians (like all peoples) are not immune from the perversion of sex into violence. The authors under discussion show that these forms of cruelty have marked the post-contact world of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One can only hope that the sex-related violence reflected by these novels will be recognised as being a White Australian problem just as much as it is considered to be a Black Australian one.

Keywords

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There is, I believe, a fundamental ambivalence towards sexuality in modern Western culture, an ambivalence which is exemplified by the often brutally invasive nature of its language describing love-making. As numerous commentators have observed, sexual relations – theoretically in the realm of love – have often been perverted into forms of violence.¹ In contemporary Australian society, this destructive ambivalence persists both linguistically and actively, as belligerent and violent slang terms for intercourse, and rising rape and incest statistics both attest. Put crudely, in White Australian culture, to achieve victory in the so-called ‘battle’ between the sexes males far too often feel they must both complete and control the sexual act.

What of the original, indigenous Australian society: that of the Aborigines? Some anthropologists and ethnographers, such as Geza Roheim, have maintained that sexual relations in traditional Aboriginal society were equivalent to the habitual rape of women by men:

Marriage and rape have become almost identical concepts among the Central Australians . . . In the unconscious, the penis is a spear, a weapon. Coitus is therefore rape and the symbol of marriage is a spear.²

If this were true, then it could be argued that Aboriginal contact with Western civilisation has at least partly improved the situation. However, there is strong evidence to the contrary, and clear indications that Roheim’s description is inaccurate. For example, despite the powerfully patriarchal nature of traditional Aboriginal society, a number of anthropologists have concluded that sexual relations were treated with considerable reverence and respect, as an integral component of ceremony and ritual. Significantly, in Robert Brain’s words, ‘In Black

Australia sexuality, not marriage, has been ennobled with elaborate preliminaries of courtship, songs and the visual poetry of rituals and ceremonies'.³

From a eurocentric perspective, some traditional love song cycles compare favourably with the greatest examples of amorous poetry ever written in English. On a more practical level, in traditional Aboriginal culture, one of the most common positions for sexual intercourse involved the male lying on the ground while the female squatted on his penis – hardly a posture conducive to rape. Finally, with reference to the common tribal custom of subincision:

The ethnographical evidence seems to suggest that the subincised penis is considered an imitation vulva . . . The wounded penis in some parts of Australia is actually called 'vulva' and the bleeding that occurs when the operation is repeated during ceremonies is likened to women's menstruation . . . Black Australian rites recognise that men feel a need to express their femininity and women their masculinity . . . White Australians on the other hand theoretically follow a 'myth' of the pure male and the pure female, a myth based on a misguided belief in exaggerated sexual differentiation . . . This refusal to accept a degree of bisexuality is so extreme that it results in bitter sexual antagonism and a neurotic belief in the superiority of one or the other sex.⁴

There was a significant amount of violent ritual in traditional Aboriginal society that had at least a partly sexual base; however, by its nature, it was restricted to special ceremonies. It is therefore possible that there was less *overall* potential for sexual violence in pre-contact Black Australia than there is in contemporary White Australia.

Of course, traditional Aboriginal culture is now retained only very locally, primarily in central and northern Australia. Nowhere are there Australian Aborigines untouched by modern White Australian culture, whether via its doctors and community advisors or by its miners and liquor salesmen. As a significant proportion – arguably, the majority – of Aborigines are now urbanised, it is therefore not surprising to find that the five novels under discussion in this chapter are written by urban-dwelling Black Australians. All of these books have been published during the past twenty-five years and all exhibit a distinctive world-view which, though not Aboriginal in traditional terms, does incorporate elements of the Black Australian cultural past and present into a unique contemporary synthesis. An important connective thread in all five of these novels is the theme of a special Black Australian identity, forged as a result of both historical and contemporary attacks on the Aboriginal way of life. All three novelists are to some extent

'integrated', in the sense that they have been influenced by White Australian teachers, authors, editors and publishers, let alone by the media and the political system. But Johnson, Bandler, and Weller are all aware of the extent of their integration: this self-knowledge has enabled them to succeed in a culturally foreign form of creative expression, and has steeled their resolve to preserve and celebrate that distinctive Black Australian identity which they retain.

In their works, these authors portray sexual relations as a mirror of violence in a way which exemplifies how attuned to this form of contemporary brutality they have become. This approach shows how incisively all three writers have examined the White Australian world, as well as their own. Two of them, Colin Johnson and Faith Bandler, project the image of that violence back into history to illustrate how self-sufficient peoples were removed from their homes, killed, violated, and transplanted to foreign and unwelcome shores. It is noteworthy that, in Johnson's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, a clear parallel is established between the rape of the Tasmanian Aboriginal women and the metaphorical rape of their land, sacred sites and heritage. Johnson and Bandler emphasise that in the traditional social and spiritual context sexual intercourse was highly revered, and that the arrival of Europeans in Australia cheapened, degraded, and perverted its beauty and purpose.

Sexual and cultural violence is dealt with in historical novels such as *Wooreddy* and *Wacvie*, but the treatment of the subject is relatively muted when compared with the direct, searing sexual and physical brutality of Aboriginal novels set in the contemporary urban environment, particularly Johnson's *Long Live Sandawara* and Weller's *The Day of the Dog*. It is ironic that, though they were the instigators and perpetrators of much of that violence, few White Australians have had the bravery and insight to recognise and describe it accurately until very recently. Thus, Aboriginal novelists, in their best work, play the important role of illustrating the sometimes base, raw reality of Australian social violence. Sexual relations as the reflection of that violence are so pre-eminent in these novels primarily because they are stories of cultural clash in which white mores are dominant. Were they stories of traditional Aboriginal culture, the theme would likely not be present, nor would it be necessary. These novelists directly, perceptively, and disconcertingly hold a

mirror up to European violence, sexual jealousy, physical brutality, and authoritarianism.

This is not to say that Aborigines were devoid of violent passions and were perpetually peace-loving before the advent of whites in Australia. But I contend that the behaviour which novelists such as Johnson and Weller describe: the excesses of violence and liquor, and the degrading of sexual relations – allegedly ‘deviant’ or ‘antisocial’ behaviour according to white sociologists – is actually a response largely in European terms to an untenable situation created by White Australians. In this sense, it is sadly ironic that Aborigines are now satirised and harshly punished for emulating too enthusiastically the ‘deviant’ behaviour of their white mentors. In order to illustrate the development of this theme of sexual and larger cultural violence, the historical novels written by Black Australians – Faith Bandler’s *Wacvie* and Colin Johnson’s *Wooreddy* – will be discussed before the unrelenting brutality of the contemporary scene, imaged most clearly in Archie Weller’s *The Day of the Dog*, is examined.

Wacvie is a fictionalised biography of Bandler’s father, Wacvie Mussingkon, who was transported from the Pacific island of Ambrym in the New Hebrides to the Mackay area of Queensland, in 1883.⁵ Stylistically, *Wacvie* is the most simple and most reserved of the Black Australian novels. One of the book’s strengths lies in Bandler’s keen eye for detail and colour, but her work is flawed by an over-emphasis upon culinary and housekeeping minutiae in the houses of the Queensland plantation managers. At times it appears that she is more concerned with her fictional menu than with the squalid living and harsh working conditions endured by the kanakas outside the owner’s mansion. There is also a rather too ready idealisation of traditional Ambrymese life, described in Utopian terms which strain credibility:

In the main they knew no sickness. Childbirth was without pain. Their teeth did not decay. Their days were an endlessly repeated cycle only broken by their desire for food. They fished, cooked and ate; they danced, sang and made love.⁶

Whatever the possible attractions of life in Melanesia before the arrival of Europeans, one has difficulty believing that it was as perfect as Bandler’s description suggests.⁷

Bandler has stated in interview that she was keen to illustrate the institutional violence of the labour trade, both through its impact upon the Pacific islands and upon the transported individuals themselves.⁸

She does so effectively, as when she describes the white overseer in the fields:

Unmercifully, with all his strength, he flicked the whip across the sweating, flannel-covered backs, and vehemently cursed them in the new language, repeating over and over the two words: 'Black Bastards! Black Bastards!' (p. 25).

Bandler also gives examples of individualised cruelty and shows very clearly how such violence can breed a like response:

Suddenly the overseer was standing over her. Cursing, he ordered her back to work. Then, with his highly polished boot, he kicked her.

Emcon gently put her baby back in its cane trash cradle. Then she picked up a knife and with all the strength she could muster, she plunged it into the field master, at the same time calling to the other women for help (p. 40).

Sexual exploitation of one race by the other also takes place in Wacvie's world. The whites use their black servants as sexual chattels and transform sexual relations into a crude form of bartering. The whites – both male and female – offer minor privileges or concessions in return for sexual favours. There are a number of dimensions to this relationship of manipulation and exploitation. First, as Bandler aptly illustrates, the European women on the cane plantations could wield as much sexual power as could the men, especially as there were many more available black men than women working in the fields. Her description of the owner's wife's post-coital bliss effectively reveals how meaningless sexual relations between the races had become:

Maggie waited for her husband's snores but they didn't come. She was feigning sleep, afraid that he might take from her the pleasure still lingering from having successfully seduced one of the black men that afternoon. She was unaware that none of them were happy about taking pleasure with her, that they considered she didn't really know how to excite a man. She didn't know that each man had come to her thinking he might as well take his share, since others would have her if he didn't. Even if the piles of red flesh, flabby thighs and blue veins were repulsive, it was free and he was usually rewarded with some of Russell's tobacco or a bottle of his rum (pp. 52-53).

The second major aspect of the sexual power play described in *Wacvie* is that Black Australians themselves began to perceive the potential of intercourse as a tool for gain, a means of advancement. For example, Emcon, who earlier murdered the overseer in the fields, reacts to the advances of the sugar refining company chairman in the following way:

'Well?' Fox whispered. His hands twisted in hers and she tightened her grasp. But he was listening. She would use this man like a tool, like her kitchen tools; she could use him to make things better for her people (p. 75).

Thus, sexual relations between owner and servant can be seen as a reflection of their imbalanced power relations. The sexual act is transformed by the whites into a means of asserting their authority; by the blacks, into a means of attempting to make relations between the races more equitable. The European debasement of Black Australians' sexuality accompanied the exploitation of their labour, the restrictions on their freedom, and the introduction of alcohol and gambling, all of which had the effect of maintaining white supremacy. Wacvie is perceptive enough to realise that the dangers of drunkenness and gambling are far greater than physical ones. He pleads with his fellow-workers not to attend the horse races: 'If we come to this place, the money the white man gives us for working, he will now take back – then we can't start to work for our own ground – and our freedom' (p.109). However, *Wacvie* is at base an optimistic novel, for it shows how, with persistence and bravery, that freedom was achieved.

Colin Johnson's *Wooreddy* is a very different novel, which details the progressive enslavement and virtual annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Both *Wacvie* and *Wooreddy* end with the death of the eponymous character but Wacvie's death signifies the sacrifice which has made liberty possible; Wooreddy's, the awareness of the ending of the traditional world for the Tasmanian blacks. Yet the matter is more complex than this for, as I noted in Chapter Six, the spirit of Doctor Wooreddy lives on and makes it possible for Johnson to write with a distinctive Aboriginal pride and world-view. The corpse of Wooreddy may be buried in a shallow grave but a symbolic spark of light representing his spirit or soul shoots 'up from the beach' and flashes 'through the dark sky towards the evening star'.⁹ As this example illustrates, the structure and informing ideas of Johnson's book are far more symbolic and intricate than are those of Bandler's novel.

In *Wooreddy* the violence wrought upon traditional Aboriginal life is said to be the result of a generalised malevolence inspired by *Ria Warrawah*, the evil and dangerous spirit most wickedly manifested in the ocean. The *num*, (that is, the 'ghosts', or white men) are thought to be agents of this malevolent force, given their spectre-like appearance and their ability to traverse the ocean with ease. Hence, initially, the Tasmanian blacks of Johnson's novel accept the sexual violence done to

their women as being a result of the unavoidable dictates of fate:

Mangana's wife had been raped and then murdered by *num* (ghosts), that came from the settlement across the strait. What had happened had had nothing to do with her, her husband or her children. It had been an act of *Ria Warrawah* – unprovoked, but fatal as a spear cast without reason or warning (p. 10).

Mangana laments because a supernatural being cannot be killed by a human, because all his people are under the curse of an evil deity:

They were under the dominion of the Evil One, *Ria Warrawah*. They killed needlessly. They were quick to anger and quick to kill with thunder flashing out from a stick they carried. They kill many, and many die by the sickness they bring . . . A sickness demon takes those that the ghosts leave alone (p. 11).

As the novel progresses, Johnson relates how Wooreddy gradually comes to realise that the *num* are human as well – often violent, cruel and rapacious – but still human. He gains this knowledge largely through an observation of the Europeans' treatment of Aboriginal women, who were initially less afraid of the *num* as they were protected by their femaleness from the forces of *Ria Warrawah* in the ocean. In many cases, these black women were fatally mistaken to be unafraid, for the whites viewed them as valuable only in sexual terms. In the following passage describing the rape of Truganini, Johnson illustrates both European sexual greed and Wooreddy's gradual enlightenment concerning the corporality of the whites:

On the soft, wet beach-sand a naked brown-skinned woman was being assaulted by four ghosts. One held both her arms over her head causing her breasts to jut into the low-lying clouds; two more each clung to a powerful leg, and the fourth thudded away in the vee . . . The doctor noted with interest the whiteness of the ghost's penis. He had accepted the fact of their having a penis – after all they were known to attack women – but he had never thought it would be white . . .

He was beginning to find the rape a little tedious. What was the use of knowing that the *num* were overgreedy for women just as they were overgreedy for everything? He could have deduced this from the record of their previous actions and they did appear fixed and immutable in their ways (pp. 20-21).

Significantly, Truganini does not resist these rapists; like Emcon in *Wacvie* she learns the material value of sexual availability. But she pays an important price in so doing. Though she does not realise it, Truganini's agreement to debase her own sexuality – to make prostitution a virtue because it is a necessity – renders her incapable of sexual tenderness even with other Aborigines whom she loves. When Wooreddy finally successfully woos and marries her:

The woman accepted her fate with a numbness worthy of Wooreddy. In the past she had found sex to be a weapon useful for survival and felt little pleasure in it. She gave her body in exchange for things and that was where the importance lay. Her husband's love-making meant less than the rape that had been inflicted on her. She hated the men for doing that, and was indifferent to what Wooreddy could or would do (p. 47).

Wooreddy, for his part, is confused and distressed by his wife's frigidity, and cannot fully appreciate the psychological trauma she has undergone:

Wooreddy did not know that Trugernanna had only endured the rough embraces of ghosts, and so many older women had died that she had remained ignorant of the different sexual positions. The man, almost twice her age and having already had one woman go to the fire, wondered at her lack of knowledge and movement (pp. 46-47).

Significantly, though disappointed, he does not reject her for her sexual coldness:

Each day Wooreddy made love to his wife, but her lack of response began to bore him. After all, he was a doctor with a knowledge of love-making and he had already been married. Now it all seemed for nought. Finally, he accepted the fact that they were together, not for love, but for survival (p. 48).

A number of conclusions follow from Johnson's treatment of the theme of sex as it relates to violence. First, the author clearly implies that Black Australians were traditionally experts in the art of lovemaking and only the invasion of the Europeans extinguished this talent. Second, the whites rape not only women but, in symbolic terms, practically everything else with which they come in contact. They appropriate terrain as easily and as completely as they conquer individuals:

Bruny Island belonged to the ghosts. The land rang with their axes, marking it anew just as Great Ancestor had done in the distant past . . . The ghosts had twisted and upturned everything (p. 25).

Third, even well-meaning whites were unable to give real help to the Tasmanian blacks because of their persistent but paradoxical belief in the child-like intellect, yet licentious nature, of the Aborigines. One of the real strengths of Johnson's novel is his satirical treatment of George Augustus Robinson (officially the Protector of Aborigines), whose policies ultimately ensured the sterility and near genocide of the race he was allegedly preserving. One of Robinson's most enthusiastic converts was, of course, Truganini, who readily accepted the juvenile role Robinson assigned her: 'the word 'fader' constantly fell from her lips when Robinson was within hearing' (p. 33). But Meeter Ro-bin-un,

as Wooreddy calls him, is no saint: his reaction to Truganini is constantly and comically sensual, as when she and other women emerge from an oyster harvest in the ocean:

Robinson's mouth went dry and his ruddy face paled as the women rose like succubi from hell to tempt him with all the dripping nakedness of firm brown flesh . . . 'Very good; the *num* replied, meaning not the harvest of the woman, but her body (p. 43).

As Johnson makes explicit, the whites are no less licentious, and may well be more so than the blacks to whom they impute this 'sinful' trait.

There are many examples of brutality in the novel: axe murders of Aboriginal mothers and children; retaliations against white shepherds by Wooreddy and other remaining blacks; and the final scene, in which Unmarrah is publicly hanged. In all cases, Johnson maintains careful control over his material, and sexual relations are an accurate reflection of both the invasion of the whites and, occasionally, of the dwindling havens remaining to the blacks: 'Wooreddy enjoyed Walyer's firm body as much as she enjoyed his. Somehow, both found a tenderness which they had thought lost' (p. 121). Thus, even in the face of the ending of their world, Aborigines who remain sexually undefiled by the whites can still find solace in each other's sensuality.

What is noteworthy about Johnson's first, and in a number of ways least successful novel, *Wild Cat Falling*, published in 1965, is that such a sexual haven does not exist. The nameless part-Aboriginal protagonist, recently released from jail, seems to have internalised all the brutality of his surrounding society and the institutional violence of life in boys' homes and prison, so that he rejects any opportunity for tender intimacy with women. This rejection applies equally to black and white females. In all cases he feels, not love, but anger, bitterness and disgust in his sexual relationships. In fact, his aversion to sex – accentuated by its constant association with drunkenness – is so severe that it produces acute feelings of nausea:

Some of the men came in with a few more bottles and the women gathered round like flies. A big full-blood gin cottoned onto me.

'Give us a drink, yellor feller. Just a little one and I'll be nice to you . . . Come on . . . Jesus, that was good. Just one more. Come on . . .'

Shrieks of laughter, sound of breaking bottles, angry argument and drunken couplings . . . Warm brown breasts and heavy nipples rising and falling in drunken sleep . . . I staggered out, vomited and stumbled to a tap . . .¹⁰

When a drunken white girl tries to seduce him at a university party, his repugnance is just as strong:

She pushes open a door and I feel for a switch. 'Don't need any light,' she says.

I understand her now. She pulls me down with her onto a bed and sighs as her arms twist round my neck. My body is as warm as hers but my mind is detached and cold. This time I don't feel anything like hate or love. Only feel sick. I throw off her stranglehold and fling myself out the door (p. 93).

The most disturbing aspect of the protagonist's attitude towards sex is his transformation of sexual overtures into aggression, of intercourse into attack, of love into hate. The clearest evocation of the synthesis between sex and violence occurs when he is in bed with a part-Aboriginal woman, Denise:

God, I feel awful and I want to be alone, but she's here and I suppose I have to sleep with her – oh damn . . .

The bottle falls to the floor and she leans back against the wall. Her breasts jut under her jumper and desire floods into me. I want her and hate her for making me want her. I pull off her clothes and take her violently, like it was rape. Hate her. Hate her. Love her. It is finished. I fling away from her and she lies like a discarded doll. There's no more wine blast it! When I get drunk I usually end up with a chick, but why should this girl mean something to me? I want to be unmoved by everything – like a god (p. 59).

This scene is one of the most lucid and distressing examples of the blending of sexual and violent impulses in contemporary Australian literature.

In *Wild Cat Falling*, violent sex is always triggered by overindulgence in alcohol; throughout all of Johnson's work, intoxication is always linked with cruel, excessive or pitiful behaviour – often sexual abuse or attempts at seduction. It is significant that this alcoholic trigger for sexual violence is, in *Wild Cat Falling*, described very much as a Black Australian problem. In his later novels, liquor is described as a curse introduced by White Australians, which sapped the strength and purpose of the blacks. In both *Sandawara* and *Wooreddy*, it is therefore considered to be at least as much an historical White Australian problem and, therefore, a contemporary white responsibility. This is not to say that there is an implied advocacy of, for example, repressive drinking laws for blacks. Rather, the implication is that White Australia must bear the onus for the wasted life of an alcoholic ex-convict like the character Tom in *Sandawara*, and that it should provide financial support for his rehabilitation.

Fifteen years elapsed between the appearance of *Wild Cat Falling* – the first published Aboriginal novel – and Johnson's second book, *Long Live Sandawara*. In the former, Johnson's style is, for the most part, spare and direct, although his Beatnik idiom has dated very rapidly. As has been noted, in the latter he ranges from urban Aboriginal slang in the contemporary segments to near-epic prose in the historical sections of the book. It is in some ways unfair to consider the two halves of *Sandawara* separately, for the historical and contemporary segments provide such a successful counterpoint, but for the sake of this argument such an artificial division will be made. It is striking that, in the historical portion of the book, sexual relations are hardly mentioned, although – as was discussed in Chapter Six – the violence of the liberation struggle against the white settlers and police outriders is described in great detail. In addition, the theme of alcohol as a weapon in the invasion arsenal of the Europeans is emphasised. Drunkenness can be seen as a form of disease which, like other diseases, removed Aborigines from their own territory. Johnson makes this obvious in the historical segment of his book, in which the guerilla leader Sandawara permits his followers to drink the liquor captured from a raided party of settlers:

He lets the liquor be passed around among his people, unaccustomed to any sort of drug. He should stop it, but hell exists deep within his mind. He has known the viciousness of the white man – thus comes despair and the desire to experience to the full a moment or two of heightened life before death.

He drinks deeply of the whisky, feeling the warmth spreading like a fever through his numb body. The ways of the white men begin to prevail in the gorge. The natural disciplines, the obedience to the Law, passed down from the very dawn of humanity, disappears from the river flat.

Scenes as riotous as in old England erupt in shrieks and cries of alcohol pain kicking out in spasmodic violence . . . This is his earth, his people and the white man's hell.¹¹

Unlike the historical segment, the contemporary section of *Sandawara* contains, in Blanche d'Alpuget's words, 'lashings of casual sex'¹² and a considerable amount of violence as well – especially during the novel's climactic bank robbery but, unlike in *Wild Cat Falling*, the two are disparate. It is adolescent, exploratory sex described in minute detail, virtually sex for its own sake.

Furthermore, Johnson's descriptions of sexual relations in *Sandawara* are often intentionally humorous, both because of their frequency and

the choice of location for the love-making. For example, Rob and Rita have an insatiable appetite for each other which is amusingly paralleled with their constant cooking. They make love incessantly, but it almost always seems to be in the kitchen:

The couple are in their territory, the kitchen, where Rob's trying his hand at kangaroo stew and dumplings. He wants to try something simple, something Rita can't spoil. Often he wishes that she wouldn't offer to help him every time. She's always brushing against him, and the kitchen table's becoming rickety from their constant screwing (p. 29).

At one stage in the novel it appears that Johnson is writing a primer of adolescent sex, as two girls, Sally and Jane – neither more than thirteen years of age – become initiated into the sexual activity of the so-called 'crashpad'. What is noteworthy is not only the explicitness of the author's description, but also the matter-of-fact attitude which the girls have adopted towards sex. Intercourse is, initially, hardly more interesting for them than watching television:

The youth manages to get the girl on to her back. He gets off her jeans with a lot of help, then plunges ahead. He bangs away and Jane lies beneath him wondering why this activity is supposed to be wonderful. Sally stares at her friend jealously. No one ever takes any notice of her. Why haven't they got a telly in this place? She doesn't want to sit there watching them do it all night. She wants it done to her too . . .

Sally hasn't really got past the fumbling stage before. Well, once or twice and then she hadn't found it much fun. It was something to endure and part of life (p. 86).

Some have argued that Johnson over-emphasises the character and frequency of the sexual encounters in such Aboriginal urban communes, and that the reader is occasionally made to feel like a voyeur. Interestingly, such arguments have actually been voiced by Black Australian readers. In Johnson's words, 'Aboriginal criticism of *Sandawara* is often about the amount of sex in it . . . Aborigines criticise it from what they know or what they want to see themselves as, rather than from historical fact'.¹³ However, in interview, he has maintained the accuracy of his depiction: 'That's the way it often is with young people today. It's realistic; it's like that'. He adds, 'most of the characters are based upon real-life individuals',¹⁴ even Ron, the humorously grotesque derelict of the novel.

If sex in *Sandawara* is not a mirror, or a concomitant of violence – as in the other Black Australian novels – what is its purpose? To begin with, the Aboriginal concept of sex as a refuge from a hostile white

world is again emphasised: when the police raid the crashpad, it is the under-age girls whom they take into custody. When Alan, the leader of the group, rescues Sally and Jane at the holding centre, he symbolically and audaciously makes love to each in the dormitory before helping them escape. Alan is important to Johnson in another sense as well. As the new Sandawara, or liberation fighter, he is far more in touch with his Aboriginal heritage than are the other urban blacks. As a consequence of this traditional connection, he is described as being by far the most accomplished lover, despite his young age. When Sally climaxes with Alan, it is far more than a level of television excitement that she achieves, although the description risks becoming a cliché: 'Suddenly the ceiling and floor seem to meet. She gives a scream and her mind goes blank for an instant' (p. 92). The third use of sex in the novel is a more sociological one: though it often appears gratuitous and, therefore, meaningless, in Johnson's fictional world intercourse is always harmless and always a means of escaping from the boredom, poverty, and depression of urban Aboriginal life. Not only is sex free, but it is described as a far more wholesome and unifying 'high' than alcohol or drugs. The social implication clearly is that in the pre-AIDS era in which the novel is set, unrestricted, casual sex is fortifying in a rebellious commune such as this one, and helps to form a sense of group identity and solidarity.

One of the chapters in Johnson's novel is entitled 'Love and Guns'. It is a convenient epithet for the second half of the novel, which moves from sexual exploration to a brutal slaughter in gunfire at the end. All of the members of Alan's group are mown down by the police in a gory massacre as they try to rob a bank. Only Alan – the modern Sandawara – survives this baptism of fire and thereby grows to maturity. In Johnson's words:

Alan didn't really know what violence was like until it hit him in the face. His youth dies then and this is paralleled by Sandawara's death: all his loving world is wiped out by their gunfire.¹⁵

The violence at the close of *Sandawara* is brutal, excessive, and graphically described. But because the book is replete with satire and irony, the tone of the novel as a whole is not overly harsh. In fact, the blood-bath at its end has a distinct air of unreality, of attempting to push an ideological line too far. Johnson obviously feels that these mass deaths are essential for Alan's illumination, but there is no logical

sense in which they can be considered inevitable or even likely, and this strains the credibility of the end of his book.

Archie Weller's first novel, *The Day of the Dog*, does not suffer from any such internal inconsistency or strain. It has a searing, pressing inner momentum and a stylistic force which carries it inexorably forward. There is no other Aboriginal novel in which a sense of being foredoomed is so clearly conveyed. Whereas Johnson's contemporary characters in *Sandawara* choose their future in an undramatic, easygoing way, Weller's protagonist, Doug Dooligan, is relentlessly pressured back into the criminal world by ties of family, friends, and the dictates of his own false pride. The most apt metaphor for *The Day of the Dog* must be a spider-web. It is an image which surfaces repeatedly in this extremely violent, disconcerting and linguistically precise novel. Of Doug and his mates Weller writes:

No-one owns them. They are their own bosses. They have cobwebs in their hair and minds and, spiderlike, they dream up new dastardly deeds for their initiation. They paint on lies and blood from fights, to make themselves look elegant with patterns from their new Dreaming. They dance to their gods of flashing lights and hopes.¹⁶

From the day he is released from Fremantle jail, Doug is far more a vulnerable insect than a spider. He is open to exploitation from all quarters, as his girlfriend laments: 'Them boys just use ya up; ya people use ya up, ya think I don't see that?' (p. 116).

If Doug is the pawn of others, the women in the novel are even more so the physical and sexual property of men. Valerie Yarrup, for example, endures the drunkenness, the violent rages, and the infidelity of 'Pretty Boy' Floyd:

Floyd pretends to sulk, which is the closest he will get to telling Valerie: sorry about hitting you and running out on you and stealing all the time. But just try to see the good things about me.

Valerie, who knows her man, accepts and coils up beside him, wrapping an arm around his elegant neck (p. 96).

The Day of the Dog is a novel which illustrates, not violent sex as in *Wild Cat Falling*, but sex in the midst of an overwhelmingly violent life. This means that the love which Weller implies should accompany the sexual act is normally absent in this novel, for those such as Floyd just do not have the vocabulary or the basic ability to convey their affection. As Doug muses: 'Poor Floyd, so young and unable to express himself in any way except through violence – even to express love,

the tenderest yet cruellest of emotions' (p. 78). Hence, one night Floyd sleeps peacefully with Valerie, the following night he beats her, and the next night he is forgiven: the world which Weller describes is an extremely brutal, cruel and male-dominated one.

The only character in the book for whom sex and love actually coalesce is the protagonist, Doug Dooligan. He and his girlfriend, Polly, have a very passionate relationship and their sexual experiences are described as being on a different plane from those of their friends:

They both think it is the best lovemaking they have ever experienced; not out loud, like a rooster crowing at the death of gentle night and all her warm secrets, but soaring silently in circles of inner joy like a godly eagle, swift and high above earthly matters (p. 66).

Furthermore, in a book in which men treat their women as expendable sexual objects, Doug surprisingly shows that his love is more than just the afterglow of intercourse, as he confides in Polly: 'If ya love a girl, then ya don't 'ave to make love all the time. If you do, that's not proper love, ya know' (p. 52). This may not be a particularly profound concept, but in Doug Dooligan's world such an attitude borders upon the heretical.

Violence is ubiquitous in *The Day of the Dog*. Gangs feud with gangs, individual blacks take on others to prove their masculinity, and the police harass the Aborigines constantly. They hound Doug and make it clear that their aim is to get him back behind bars as soon as possible. On one occasion, after belting him by an old railway bridge, one of the special constables hisses, 'I hate your guts, you little mixed-blood misfit, . . . If it's the last thing I do I'm putting you back in Freo, where snivelling gutless snakes like you belong' (p. 87). Weller emphasises this theme in the novel and writes of it so persuasively because it is a type of abuse which he has personally observed and endured. When asked in interview about the special police squad in the book, nicknamed 'The Boys from Brazil', he replied:

Yes, there were some police called the three stooges . . . and . . . they used to be the 'Larrikin Squad' when I was younger, and they used to give people a really hard time. They even called my foster brother in one time and they said, 'Come 'ere, David', and he came down; and they wound up the window of the car with his head in it, and . . . took off. He put his foot flat on the floor – this was just for fun.¹⁷

The police harassment in the novel is so severe that even when Polly and Doug are peacefully sleeping in each other's arms in his bedroom – another example of Aboriginal sexuality as a temporary refuge from the persecution of the outside white world – detectives burst into the

room without a warrant to interrogate them both about a car theft. The symbol is patently clear: even the most private and intimate Black Australian relationships are open to police abuse and authoritarianism. Even their sexuality is degraded by the detectives, as Weller illustrates:

Carnal knowledge. There they were, making what they thought was beautiful love, and all along it was just 'carnal knowledge'. People have to spoil everything (p. 100).

In this novel, sex is not just a symbol of exploitation or of Doug's attempt to find peace and solitude in the face of the white world of authority and the black world of crime. As in *Wooreddy*, the image of rape is associated with the wanton destruction of nature, in order to satisfy White Australians' innate aggressiveness. Weller's description of land-clearing is very revealing:

The youths revel in the hard work and in each other's company. They have not been together just by themselves for a long time. Amidst the tortured screams of the dying trees, as the chainsaw's teeth bite into their virgin bodies, and the rumbling of the old faded red dozer smashing into the trees, knocking them senseless, and pushing them into broken piles, their raw yellow roots jaggging obscenely into the air, and the thudding of the cruel axe, – amidst all this Doug no longer needs the friendship of the bush. In all its silent dignity it draws away from the youth who so badly needed a proper friend. Now he laughs as he slaughters the trees with his companions (pp. 151-152).

Finally, sex is also used by Weller as a potent image of temptation and rejection, which sets in motion the events leading to the blood and destruction with which the novel ends. Doug finds comfort and fleeting happiness in his sexual relationships with other Aborigines, but in his seduction of the white waitress at the Halfway House, he degrades himself, demeans the woman, and makes the sexual act totally meaningless and damaging. Angelina's attitude towards sex is made painfully clear by the author – it is no more than exploitative physical stimulation: 'She will go with anyone if he has the money. A quick hello, a bit of fun, then a clean goodbye; it's quick and clean love that can be used over and over again with no worries'(p. 140). But the absence of worries in this case necessitates the absence of any affection and commitment, so that what Doug and Angelina experience is little more than mutual masturbation:

Naked, they struggle into the back seat, giggling from the whisky and the difficulties encountered. On the plush sheepskin covers, he reaps the reward that his money and patience sowed and grew. They love and drink and love and sleep; at least, they make what they think is love (p. 143).

This mutual exploitation provides a fine example of the degradation of sexuality through its transformation into a commercial undertaking – a theme which one can trace throughout the Black Australian novels under consideration in this chapter. The passage illustrates another major, related theme, which is the frequent association of alcohol with repellent sexual contact, in which one partner designedly takes advantage of, or inflicts violence upon, the other. Third, sex is often a mirror of power relations, be they of owner and servant, rapist and victim, or prostitute and customer. Most of the Aboriginal novels show how such relations were introduced into Australia by Europeans, were originally inimical to Aborigines, but have now been adopted as part of black adaptation to White Australian society. Fourth, temptations of liquor, of cars, of wealth, all play a major part in motivating both crime and materialistic sexuality in these books: the man steals the car or money to impress the woman, and assumes that the expected sexual reward will be forthcoming. Hence, the White Australian consumer culture helps to entrap Black Australians in illegal modes of behaviour, in order to live up to the image of success which it portrays. Fifth, the theme of symbolic or actual rape surfaces in all the Aboriginal novels and, again, the initial aggressive impulse is described as coming from the Europeans. Finally, authority structures such as the prison system and the police force are frequently perceived by Aborigines as potent forms of institutionalised, systemic violence, which severely circumscribe Black Australian freedom.

The relationship between sex and violence is an ancient one. Despite, and perhaps because of, the durability of the connection between the two, Western cultures still suffer from disturbing rates of rape, child molestation, incest and physical abuse related to sexual conflict. Black Australians are by no means immune from the perversion of sex into violence. On the contrary, as these authors have shown, the post-contact world of the Aboriginal people has been marked by these forms of cruelty to an alarming degree. Today, crimes of a sexual nature – almost all related to alcohol and drug abuse – are rife in a number of Aboriginal communities, as they are in the larger Australian society. Therefore, what is noteworthy is that White Australians now have the opportunity of observing the impact of their mores upon a rapidly adjusting foreign culture in their midst. It can only be hoped that the sex-related violence which these novels mirror will be recognised as being a White Australian problem, just as much as it is considered to

be a Black Australian one. If, by their candour and directness, these authors can help to raise awareness of the extremely damaging nexus between sex and violence while they entertain the reader, they will have performed a valuable service. It is a testament to the artistic skill of Johnson, and, in particular, Weller, that such an important theme has been handled so effectively in these books. Through their work the Black Australian novel is evolving as a significant alternative form of literature in contemporary Australia.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (London, 1971), and Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, (London, 1971).
- 2 Geza Roheim, *Children of the Desert*, ed. Werner Muensterberger, (New York, 1974), pp. 232-233.
- 3 Brain, *Rites Black and White*, (Ringwood, 1980), p. 177. Further support for this observation is provided in R.M. Berndt's *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, (Melbourne, 1976). See, in particular, the Preface (pp. xi-xx) and Chapter One, 'A Perspective of Aboriginal Sexuality', pp. 3-15.
- 4 *ibid.*, pp. 144, 146.
- 5 Although Bandler is not an Aborigine, her work merits discussion here because she descends from another dark-skinned Australian minority group, the Pacific Islanders. I am therefore examining *Wacvie* in the context of *Black Australian* literature, as defined in the Introduction. Bandler's second novel, *Welou, My Brother*, (Adelaide, 1984), traces the same fictionalised episode of history as *Wacvie*. For this reason, and as it does not add any material relevant to the theme of sex and violence, it has not been included in this discussion.
- 6 Faith Bandler, *Wacvie*, (Adelaide, 1977), p. 7. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included in parentheses in the body of the text, immediately after each citation.
- 7 In fact, in terms of historical accuracy, Bandler's description of Pacific Islander life in nineteenth century Australia is also completely misleading. See, for example, Patricia Mercer's review of the book in *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, part 2, 1978, pp. 181-182.
- 8 Telephone interview with Faith Bandler, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 9 Colin Johnson, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, (Melbourne, 1983), p. 207. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be given in parentheses immediately following each citation, in the body of the text.
- 10 Colin Johnson, *Wild Cat Falling*, (Sydney, 1979), p. 74. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included in parentheses immediately following each citation, in the body of the text.
- 11 Colin Johnson, *Long Live Sandawara*, (Melbourne, 1979), pp. 81-82. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included in

- parentheses immediately after each citation, in the body of the text.
- 12 Blanche d'Alpuget's review of *Long Live Sandawara* in *24 Hours*, quoted on the back dustcover of *Wooreddy*, (Melbourne, 1983).
 - 13 Personal correspondence with Colin Johnson, 24 August, 1982.
 - 14 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, Brisbane, August 1980.
 - 15 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, Brisbane, August, 1980.
 - 16 Archie Weller, *The Day of the Dog*, (Melbourne, 1981), p. 44. All further quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be included in parentheses immediately after each citation, in the body of the text.
 - 17 Personal interview with Archie Weller, Perth, February, 1983.