CHAPTER 10

Conceiving the Nation

Visions and Versions of Colonial Prenatality

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It behoves every wife the instant she knows she is about to become a mother, to set the house of her health into as perfect order as it is in her power to do.


... [E]verything concerning women has one solution: it is named pregnancy.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883)

In the context of late-nineteenth-century Australian colonization, women’s maternity provides a crucial but overlooked dimension in both contemporary Victorian and retrospective historiography and literary studies.¹ British and American scholarship over the past twenty years has extensively investigated anxieties regarding degeneration, imperialism, and the ideology of motherhood that circulated at the source of empire in Britain. However, the feedback or alternatives effected by the colonial experience have yet to be integrated wholesale into accounts of women’s history and literature. Intra- and intercolonial interactions (politically and culturally) often provided more reformist or radical possibilities for women’s emancipation and full citizenship than those at the imperial metropolitan center.²

¹ Motherhood is foregrounded as a contributing feature of Australian nation building in the work of four Australian revisionist feminist historians, Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath, and Quartly’s Creating a Nation. They open their volume with an (unsubstantiated) anecdote about a birthing indigenous mother, thus memorably employing a literary approach in order to establish the context of their historical retrieval.

² Vida Goldstein and Catherine H. Spence are two examples of influential white Australian women who positioned their pro-suffrage drives within a global arena, advising English
As Elleke Boehmer notes, “With few exceptions postcolonial theories of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance have privileged the relationship of European self and other; of colonizer and colonized” (1). Many imperialist paradigms were reworked in the unique conditions provided by the colonized spaces to reveal both nuanced and oppositional relationships. The basis for imperial roles—man as provider and woman as domesticate—was affected by the impossibility of faithfully replaying the exported imperial family model in a colonial landscape. Australia’s geography and climate frequently demanded such reconfigurations. From the strain on imperial values, a space emerged wherein feminine and masculine roles altered, a space that is articulated in particular literary and polemical representations of rural (bush) women’s motherhood.

Women’s maternity and motherhood consolidate the acquired territories in colonization. Contemporary instruction manuals for girls, wives, and mothers of the period might suggest a colonial replication of the British imperial project, yet the representation of motherhood in some contemporary colonial fiction points to a reworking of the “female metaphor” (Hein 458) due to the specific adaptations the colonial context engendered.

and South African movements that were some decades behind the Antipodes in achieving the vote for women. Spence also lectured on suffrage throughout the United States and Canada (Australian Woman’s Sphere [April 1901]), and John Docker identifies the extent to which Australian women’s journalism and conference attendance reveals active contributions to a worldwide exchange (4–6).

Elleke Boehmer addresses the interactions of colonized people through placing peripheries at the center in relation to India, South Africa, and Ireland.

Sue Rowley has argued that images of women as mothers in bush mythology “are almost invariably represented in the home” as, from the 1890s, “increasingly, it became difficult to represent women within nationalist mythologies except as mothers” (76). While my focus does not address Australian nationalism, I do aim to highlight resistances and alternatives to this relentless maternal domestic anchoring in Barbara Baynton’s short story “A Dreamer.”

Australian didactic texts include Mrs. Annie Everett Ellis’s The Australian Baby, and the Old Housekeeper’s Australian Housewives’ Manual and Men and How to Manage Them.

As Susan Stanford Friedman has elaborated, the childbirth metaphor has served the artistic needs of both women and men in terms of articulating human procreativity. This insinuates an equivalent valuing of creativity and (pro)creativity which, throughout Western literary history, has not been the case. At every turn, woman is debilitated or devalued by her birthing capacity in relation to her creative powers while man’s creative powers are celebrated in the form of literary couvades, what Günter Grass has termed the “headbirth.” A uniquely female experience is appropriated linguistically so that it becomes indicative of aspects of male sociocultural identity—according to sex-gender power relations which privilege men. Following on from Friedman, Hein identifies how women have been confined (in their childbirth capability) to a noncreative procreation: “Ironically, the language of procreation, commonly used to describe the activity of the artist, has been used in a manner that excludes women from that activity. Insemination, fertilisation, conception, gestation, incubation, pregnancy, parturition—all parts of the birth process—are invoked to denote
Furthermore, this fiction might be viewed as resisting the imperial models of womanhood as it articulates female autonomy within the socially codified anonymity and silencing ascribed to women’s maternity—what Julia Kristeva, from a twentieth-century vantage point, describes in this way:

Silence weighs heavily none the less on the corporeal and psychological suffering of childbirth and especially the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm. . . . A suffering lined with jubilation—ambivalence of masochism—on account of which a woman, rather refractory to perversion, in fact allows herself a coded, fundamental, perverse behaviour, ultimate guarantee of society, without which society will not reproduce. (183)

The anonymity to which she refers is that of the birthing female—conduit for the perpetuation of the species—her offspring accorded a specific and viable social identity after birth, in relation to men. Of course Kristeva, as a late-twentieth-century mother, theorizes maternity and childbirth in “Stabat Mater” from a revisionary position within the academy, whereas late-nineteenth-century women’s representations were inscribed within a marginal discourse of pregnancy.

In Victorian women’s fiction, pregnancy is a rare topic because of the protocols of modesty to which respectable women were expected to adhere and, if treated at all, is referred to euphemistically or to further reveal aspects of a male protagonist. The focus on maternity resides in the

an activity that is also theologised as the paradigmatic male act of will” (458) This has had implications upon the processing of women’s maternity in relation to nation building. The appropriation of reproductive metaphors for the imperial and colonizing enterprises reveals the literal falsity and inadequacy of their application when reviewed in terms of the childbirth (female) metaphor for creativity.

7 Occasionally, in Victorian women’s life writing (diary entries and letters), articulations about experiences of pregnancy and childbirth can be found. For an Australian example, see The Diaries of Ethel Turner (author of the children’s classic Seven Little Australians [1894]) where Turner first acknowledges her pregnancy as “Felt queer all the morning and had to lie down” (July 9, 1897) and her labor as “I was seventeen hours ill; the last eight being exquisite agony. Pain will always be a matter of comparison now; I believe I should be able to smile over a trifling matter like having a limb sawn slowly off. They used a 2 oz. bottle of chloroform on me but it scarcely had any effect. I was never quite unconscious a moment. . . . They owned that I had a very bad time being so small” (February 7, 1898). Diarist and explorer Emily Caroline Creaghe was just twenty-two when she arrived with her husband, Harry, in the Northern Territory in 1883 as part of a six-month exploration party. Having just suffered the death of her first son, she was pregnant for most of the trip—undertaken on horseback—a fact her diary omits except for one allusion of “feeling squeamish” frequently on the return trip (James 57, Cadzow 233n21).
outcome—the child—who confirms the mother’s social status—“fallen” if she bears her child out of wedlock, or respectable if she fulfills the socially expected result of a marriage and her biological destiny. Dale Spender in her study of women’s writing and experience affirms the textual marginality of maternity in general:

Given the number of novels in which childbirth is of central significance it is staggering to find that the event itself is virtually invisible. Women labour between the lines, children are born outside the pages, and rare even is the record of women’s response to such a momentous occasion. Fear, pain, post natal depression—anger? Little can be learned about these aspects of women’s relationship to childbirth from women’s fiction. (115)

Furthermore, the transmission of childbirth knowledge has been predominantly oral, depending upon intergenerational hearsay, advice, and myth. As a topic beyond the firsthand experience of men, its problematic elaboration has affected the treatment of maternity in the male-dominated “public/published realm” (Spender 115). Therefore, it is important to offer critical attention to literary representations of prenatality. Two short stories, by white indigenous Australian women writers, offer this rare opportunity. “A Cross Line” in Keynotes (1893) by George Egerton and “A Dreamer” in Bush Studies (1902) by Barbara Baynton8 use pregnant protagonists to illustrate the uneasy relationship between expected and enacted maternal roles. Ambivalence and anxiety regarding pregnancy traverses both their respective European and Antipodean settings, yet the differing narrative treatments reveal the conservative maternal role to which Egerton’s heroine subscribes compared to her colonial counterpart, Baynton (although

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8 George Egerton was born Mary Chavelita Dunne in Melbourne, Australia, in 1859. Jennifer Plastow writes that she “grew up travelling around the world” (Todd 209). She traveled with Henry Higginson, a violent and alcoholic bigamist, and eloped to Norway in 1887, where he died in 1889. Egerton remained in Norway studying the works of Strindberg, Ibsen, and Bjornson, meeting Knut Hamsun, whose novel Hunger she translated after returning to London in 1890. Moving to Ireland with her husband George Egerton Clairmont in 1891, her first collection of short stories, Keynotes (London: E. Matthews and J. Lane, 1893), was published, followed by Discords (London: J. Lane, 1894). Her son was born in 1895 and her marriage ended. She married Reginald Golding Bright and, as Charlotte Rich notes, “after her marriage to Bright, she turned to writing plays, which were likewise unsuccessful” (Rich 134n1). Egerton died in Sussex in 1945. Barbara Baynton was born in 1857 (but claimed it was 1862), married three times, and died as Lady Headley in 1929, dividing her time between Britain and Australia from 1904. She began writing in the 1890s. In 1896 her first story was published in the Bulletin, and upon visiting London during 1902–3 her collection of short stories, Bush Studies (London: Duckworth, 1902), was published.
as Harris notes, “[I]t was she [Egerton] who was viewed with the greatest animosity by the keepers of conventional morality and the guardians of traditional literary decorum” (1968, 31).

Egerton’s tale represents women as caught in a masquerade of role-playing which stifles their instincts and essential womanhood to produce—what she later terms, in the same collection—“a struggle between instinctive truths and cultivated lies” (“Now Spring Has Come,” Keynotes 40). The narrative is focalized through a married woman in the first stages of pregnancy. Daydreaming on a riverbank one summer afternoon, she is interrupted by a passing man who seeks her advice on the best place to fish, an exchange that implies their attraction. This adulterous impulse leads to the woman’s scrutiny of her husband and to musing over the compromises women must make in marriage despite “the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman” (“A Cross Line” 11). Later in her career, Egerton stated that her project as a writer had been to render experience from a uniquely female perspective: “I realised that in literature, everything had been done better by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her to tell: the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her” (Gawsworth 59). Egerton renders these internal states of female consciousness in “A Cross Line,” which, daringly for the 1890s, articulates sexual passion and its outcomes in both women and men. Egerton allows her heroine a fantasy life that becomes increasingly associated with primitivism and eroticism in order to ratify her sexuality just as her maternity promises to curtail it. The heroine imagines herself first as Cleopatra, then in Arabia astride “a swift steed” (19), and finally as a demonic dancer who goads her male audience to frenzy. These fantasies are set against her domestic situation, her stolid husband, and her

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9 It should be remembered that black Australian women’s maternity and motherhood operate at tragic counterpoint to any narratives of memoir and fiction generated by white settler women such as Baynton and Egerton. Black indigenous mothers were systematically disempowered with little recourse to justice. Grimshaw, McGrath, Lake, and Quartly briefly address the decimated black indigenous population in terms of a decrease in black women’s maternity. They attribute the significant decrease in black women’s motherhood to the fact that, from the 1830s, it became increasingly difficult for black men to find black wives (in a culture where polygamy was common) and that black women’s cohabitation with white men lessened the number of available wives. In addition, “The differential impact of diseases and application of food taboos that affected women’s protein intake, along with the stresses of pregnancy and childbirth, contributed to the low numbers of women giving birth” (Grimshaw and Evans 142).

10 Iveta Jusova argues convincingly that “Egerton’s interest in Nietzsche’s notion of the re-assertion of the body and senses often sets her model of women’s behaviour directly against the traditional restrictive ideal” (42).
eventual choice to remain with him rather than escape with her would-be lover. Her narrative acknowledges how material and social realities shape women's lives and deny them access to a power which she posits as witchery: “Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, an untameable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture—the keynote of woman's witchcraft and woman’s strength” (22). Martha Vicinus notes, “Throughout her work, the highest compliment Egerton could give a woman was to declare her a witch, in the sense of being bewitching” (Vicinus x)—a radical reclamation. Conversely, Iveta Jusova argues that Egerton’s allusions to ancient and oriental cultures fix her literature within patriarchal cultural forms, for “places where women could express their drives and desires freely are the same imagined places where Victorians typically situated their desires and fantasies. . . . [They] were familiar images in nineteenth-century English culture, although they were usually marginalized and vilified” (Jusova, New Woman 62).

In contrast, Baynton’s story, “A Dreamer,” explores maternal rather than sexual instincts through a lone pregnant woman’s struggle in stormy weather to be reunited with her mother. Like Egerton’s heroine, she is nameless—evoking Kristeva’s maternal anonymity—yet the minutiae of perceptions around which both writers construct their narratives dissolves any Everywoman generalization. Internal states of consciousness are accessed through the characters’ detailed and particular experiences. In the opening of her story, Baynton’s protagonist disembarks a train where “[p]assengers from far up-country towns have importance from their rarity” (Baynton 46). The woman is returning to where she was raised, to visit her long-neglected mother—the reasons for the neglect are not specified. Her mother’s home is in an isolated hollow on the banks of a river—some distance on foot—which the pregnant woman walks. The stormy conditions have swelled the river, and the wind and rain create difficulties for the woman in orientating herself in a place she once knew well. This strangeness of landscape mirrors the woman’s anticipation of her maternity, her own changing form. As she battles to cross the flooded river and is almost swept away, the surety of a reunion with her mother inspires her and drives her on. The story has no male characters apart from the station porter and references to the central character’s absent husband. Her nostalgia for her own childhood as she anticipates seeing her mother again is devoid of any father. The maternal power of the text resides not only in the clearly self-sufficient, female-only bush family, but also in the act of will on the part of the protagonist to reconnect with her mother as she herself is becoming one. In late-nineteenth-century terms, the woman’s active and physical endeavors in dangerous conditions defy the passivity ascribed to
pregnant women. However, the story is ultimately a tragedy. She arrives too late—her mother is dead—attended by women who are strangers to the protagonist.

When read alongside contemporary maternity discourses, these short stories also reveal how representing maternity exposes the constraints of genre, not only in their choice of subject matter—by centralizing an obvious outcome of female sexual functioning—but also by highlighting the limitations of linear realist and naturalist narrative forms. Both writers use the short story form (to which late-nineteenth-century women writers contributed innovatively)\(^{11}\) as a means of feminizing fiction writing, and their narratives anticipate subsequent modernist techniques. Their stylistic and thematic differences reveal the contrasts between writing from imperial and colonial contexts, and the effect this contrast has upon the potential scope for rendering women’s experiences in an imaginary located beyond patriarchal culture.

Pregnancy and childbirth still remained the one area of which men could have no firsthand knowledge. However, the increased interventions of male-dominated social institutions claiming authority and expertise ensured that pregnancy became increasingly scrutinized and supervised in both Britain and Australia. Men dominated representations of both nation building and maternity. At the source of empire, the ideological function of the male-authored imperial mother responded to a falling birth rate, disastrous performance by troops in the Boer War,\(^{12}\) and increasing infant mortality in poor social sectors.\(^{13}\) Anna Davin’s groundbreaking essay “Imperialism and Motherhood” identifies motherhood as a crucial aspect of both the iconography and practice of empire maintenance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The mother was ascribed a responsibility for imperial race-rearing. While the entrapment of biology

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\(^{11}\) Investigations into the late-nineteenth-century short story form in relation to Egerton include Wendell Harris, Ann Heilmann, Iveta Jusova, Rosie Miles, and Charlotte Rich.

\(^{12}\) See Arnold White: “In Manchester district 11,000 men offered themselves for war service between the outbreak of hostilities in October 1899 and July 1900. Of this number 8000 were found to be physically unfit to carry a rifle and stand the fatigues of discipline” (102–3). Sir John Frederick Maurice in “Where to Get Men” and “National Health: A Soldier’s Study” highlights the two most common grounds for rejection of potential army recruits (bad teeth and flat feet) as attributable to an inadequate supply of milk during infancy and the ignorance of mothers in caring for their babies. Late-twentieth-century women historians Carol Dyhouse, Jane Lewis, and Pat Thane have comprehensively addressed how this dilemma created patterns of social control based upon maternal supervision.

\(^{13}\) See Maternity: Letters from Working Women, edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies. This collection testifies to the experiences of working-class motherhood in the last decade of the nineteenth century.
was insurmountable for women, the circumstances in which maternity was fulfilled differed greatly according to class. The malnourishment of working-class manhood was attributed to working-class women’s “mal” mothering and as working-class women needed improving in their mothering skills, middle-class women were deemed ideally able to undertake an imperial mission to tutor them. By the end of the century, all women appear to have been telescoped into the role of mother. This became a dominant paradigm for women, whether as biological mothers giving birth and rearing children, as sisters vigilant over the moral purity of their brothers, or as social workers and welfare instructors. Thus, the future of the empire became the responsibility of women via motherhood, and they were urged to excel in this capacity. A range of medical and didactic texts, produced by both women and men, sought to prescribe optimal mothering practices, addressing a middle-class audience at a time when concerns about working-class motherhood were being implemented in interventionist social policy. Medically trained and untrained women writers produced extensively in this genre in the late nineteenth century—whether or not they had actually experienced childbirth themselves. As

14 By 1909, Sir John Seelby had coined the term “Army of mothers” and in 1912 Dr. Caleb Saleeby referred to “virgin mothers” (*Woman and Womanhood*), acknowledging the network of unmarried, childless women who operated as social health missioners and maternal supervisors.

15 A range of these include: *Maidenhood and Motherhood* by Mrs. Robert Stephenson (1887), *Woman in Health and Sickness: or What She Ought to Know for the Exigencies of Daily Life* by Robert Bell, MD (1889), *Motherhood: A Book for Every Woman* by Dr. Alice Ker (1891), *A Woman’s Words to Women* by Dr. Mary Scharlieb (1895), *Educate Our Mothers or Wise Motherhood* by Mrs. Hannah Pearsall Smith (1896), *The Power of Womanhood; or, Mothers and Sons* by Ellice Hopkins (1899), *Motherhood* by Charles J. Gleeson, MD (1901), and *Feminology: A Guide for Womankind, Giving in Detail Instructions as to Motherhood, Maidenhood, and the Nursery* by Dr. Florence Dressler (1903).

16 These texts presuppose, for the most part, that all women require educating in maternity and that working-class motherhood threatens to be the most inadequate sector in this respect. They fashion motherhood into a specialization for women under the ideological guise that this is to be their foremost contribution to empire maintenance. Intriguingly, they frequently downplay the crucial function of girls in the continuation of the male-centered empire (except as producers of sons) in their advocacy of the ideal—an indefatigable, thrifty, energetic, and devoted motherhood—one which many of the recipients of the advice would have found to have been at odds with actual mothering experiences.

17 This customarily positioned nineteenth-century women’s maternity in relation to the male-dominated medical profession whether or not the doctors happened to be women. Practical handbooks from the fin-de-siècle period (which were generally produced by medical experts) tend to approach pregnancy and childbirth as potentially a diseased state or as an anatomical description. One example, *A Handbook for Mothers: Being Simple Hints to Women on the Management of Their Health during Pregnancy and Confinement* (1893) by Jane H. Walker, MD, devotes only 13 pages (out of 199) to labor and childbirth.
didactic manuals have long instructed women in submissiveness, this manifestation was a means to ensure that women perform as strongly and creditably as possible within their narrow role as mother. The colonial context also registered anxieties regarding its Anglo-Saxon population. As the British Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1903) ascertained, the causes “which led to the rejection of so many recruits for the army on the grounds of physical disability” (Nicholls 75), the New South Wales Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate (1903) in Australia grew out of concerns regarding a decrease in the white population. A constituent of the colonizing enterprise, motherhood crucially legitimized invaders’ claims to invaded territories. A nation of white people was literally created (and imported) while the black indigenous population was concurrently decimated through genocide and miscegenation.  

However, the Australian colonial context produced intricacies of population growth and decline that were vastly different than those in Britain, derived as they were from a legacy of genocidal settlement policies as well as franchised white female citizenry, beneficiaries of reformist political agendas. As black mothers were discouraged from producing and raising their families through the policies of miscegenation and dispersal introduced from the early twentieth century, white women were scrutinized for restricting their pregnancies. Sue Rowley charts how pregnancy and childbirth increasingly became the State’s responsibility: “Over the decade of the 1890s, women’s practices of birth control and family limitation became public knowledge, and men began to formulate a role for themselves in controlling reproduction” (89). As Neville Hicks notes, the Royal Commission’s report concluded that “the cause or causes of the Decline of the Birth rate must be a force or forces over which the people themselves have control” (21).

The Australian press did not directly connect female fertility with a perceived demise in population growth. Nor was the mother represented

18 For accounts of the population debate, see Bain Attwood, C. L. Bacchi, Mary Cawte, Colin Forster, and Neville Hicks.

19 Henry Reynolds and David Day have sought to estimate the actual decimation of the black indigenous population as a result of colonization. Highlighting the catastrophic reduction in numbers, Day writes, “It was estimated that there were just 60,000 Aborigines remaining in Australia by 1888. The estimates of the Aboriginal population in 1788 vary from 300,000 . . . to the more recent estimates of between 750,000 and 1,500,000. . . . By 1860, some 4,000 pastoralists with their 20 million sheep had occupied 400 million hectares of inland Australia” (130).

20 Australian women gained the vote decades before their British and American counterparts. For a contemporary account of the political context, see William Pember Reeves.
unilaterally as a site of blame as she was in Britain. The *Sydney Morning Herald* identified drought conditions and compulsory unionism as the primary reasons for nonimmigration from Europe (hence affecting population growth), rather than women’s lack of reproduction or inadequate child rearing. Letters from readers to various mainstream newspapers voiced concerns over emigration from the state of New South Wales as emanating from the government’s favorable bias toward workers rather than women’s reluctance to subscribe to maternity.\(^\text{21}\) Just as late-nineteenth-century Australian white women took the lead with contraception and pregnancy termination in marriage, they exercised their political and employment rights. In an era of reformist politics, paid working women were present in vast numbers in the Australian state machinery of health, education, municipal authorities, and public service so that the reproduction of the State did not merely entail choosing marriage as it had earlier in the century.\(^\text{22}\) The differing approaches of the Australian political state toward its population produced manipulations of women and children that contrasted to the British system.

While similarities *are* identifiable in concerns expressed over urban public health and infant mortality rates in fledgling Australian coastal cities, the example of the white settler rural mother—central to Baynton’s short story—offers a unique strand to the fabric of women’s history at this time. Baynton’s literary representation of experiences outside the cultural mainstream entered the slipstream of white pioneer women’s resilience and contemporary motherhood discourse. With their portrayals of a pregnant woman, Baynton’s “A Dreamer” and Egerton’s “A Cross Line” explore this relatively occluded dimension—a woman’s approaching maternity, at a time when the connection between articulations of nationhood and motherhood proved intimate.

\(^{21}\) The range of correspondence on this subject may be sampled in the following newspapers: *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 21, 1903, 10C, July 24, 4B, July 29, 9G, July 30, 8C; *Daily Telegraph*, March 28, 1903, 8E, June 17, 10D, June 18, 3G, June 19, 8D, June 25, 3G, June 27, 11F, June 30, 8D, July 2, 6C, July 7, 3E, July 8, 9D, July 11, 13D, July 14, 8C, July 15, 5B, July 31, 3A, July 27, 5F, July 29, 6C and 9G, July 30, 7C; and the *Evening News*, March 18, 1903, 4A, July 16, 4A, July 23, 4A, July 31, 4A, and August 3, 4A.

\(^{22}\) See Alistair Davidson and Luke Trainor. Edna Ryan has drawn attention to the multitudes of women workers who were excluded from official statistics as they were engaged in “invisible work” such as prostitution and also home industries: child minding, and fostering of children for which the government paid relatively well. She notes that “[b]etween 1891 and 1901 ‘only 6,000 men moved to Sydney as against 17,000 women.’ . . . This had the effect upon the service sector of the workforce which increased in size without the wages bill to employers increasing to the same extent” (262).
“A Cross Line” and “A Dreamer”

Although they were born and raised in Australia, Baynton and Egerton spent the majority of their adult lives in England and Europe, were often first published in London, and received acclaim for their work there. Susan Sheridan has noted how Australian colonial women writers such as Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, and “Tasma”—contemporaries of both Egerton and Baynton—faced an oft-repeated charge that they “wrote for an English audience” as they were published by houses like Heineman and were included on the circulation lists of Mudie’s and other libraries (Sheridan 51). Even contemporary critics have perceived an imperial-centered derivativeness. Attributing this to economics, John Scheckter refers to the “subsidiary nature of much colonial publishing,” which led many authors to write for “English and imperial markets, rather than for local Australian audiences; not wanting to appear unsophisticated or provincial, such writers tended to adopt a detached, touristic, and often ironic viewpoint based upon English models and English values” (20). Egerton and Baynton’s two stories undo Scheckter’s claims. The alternative writing strategies these women writers employ reveal an attempt to access subject matter and themes beyond that which can be articulated in the realist mode, and in ways not necessarily registered or sustained in contemporary novels.

Innovations that emerged from colonial marginality were in tension with the imperial halter that was placed around the necks of many British-based writers. Baynton’s story is necessarily articulated using the recognizable cultural forms and expected content for a woman writer available to her in the late nineteenth century. Yet in rendering a woman’s relationship to her unborn child, the Australian bush context and its challenge to imperial domestic roles serves Baynton well, so that she represents what is a traditionally hidden and essentialized dimension of women’s experience more radically than in Egerton’s European setting. In representing this relationship, Baynton’s text offers an example of female sexual functioning that dismantles the dominance of masculinist cultural agendas in which female identity is signified solely by a woman’s relation to a man. Baynton’s heroine’s instinctive desires and sexual power are transferred to the bond with her mother and unborn child, producing a spiritual and imaginative continuum which excludes the male presence. In contrast, Egerton’s narrative figures the pregnant woman only in relation to men, whether as potential lover or actual father of her unborn child, figuring female sexuality as dependent upon a heterosexual completion as a couple, even after conception. Although alluding to the protagonist’s pregnancy, Egerton
scripts a conservative outcome in the family triad of mother-father-child as the heroine suppresses her desires after she realizes she is pregnant.

Both short stories present nameless pregnant women who do not actually give birth within the scope of the narrative and whose state creates a yearning for their own (dead) mothers. They disengage their heroines from the generalizing ideology of motherhood to focus upon personal desire, individual experience, and their relation to their approaching maternity. The women are, however, denied the inheritance of and access to their mothers’ knowledge of childbirth. While the female protagonist’s consciousness is central to both narratives, Egerton’s use of asterisks to fragment her text creates elliptical points, gaps in her narrative and in the female and male characters’ understandings of each other. Her use of parentheses, reminiscent of stage directions in plays, underscores her instruction to the reader as to how the interactions are to be read.

“Do not I understand you a little?”
“You do not misunderstand me.”
“That is something.”
“It is much!”
“Is it? (searching her face). It is not one grain of sand in the desert that stretches between you and me, and you are as impenetrable as the sphinx at the end of it. This (passionately) is my moment, and what have you given me?”

The economy of detail and lack of orientation tempt the reader to work through a maze of minimal clues like an eavesdropper upon a conversation, encouraging an unconscious scrutiny of how one reads, the tools that are used, to forge a satisfactory relationship with a text and make it meaningful. While Egerton’s episodic narrative technique might defy the ordering imposition of realist linearity, it creates a logical progression in its own terms. As only the reader and the protagonist are privy to the compromise the author creates, the fragmentation produces a bond rather than distance between them. As shall be demonstrated, this indeterminacy between the actual female and male speakers contrasts with the communion Baynton’s heroine achieves through exclusively female-female (daughter-mother) identification. Egerton’s woman’s impending maternity forces her to accept crossed lines of communication with her husband—“he looks uneasily at

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23 Egerton’s mother died when she was sixteen, eighteen years before she wrote “A Cross Line.” As a result, Rich notes that “she played the role of stepmother to a large number of younger siblings” (123).
her, but doesn’t know what to do” (32)—compared to her potential lover, whose vision of their life together excites “the freedom, the freshness, the vague danger, the unknown that has a witchery for me, ay, for every woman!” (27). Her fantasy of taking power and running away with him is unrealized.

Although Egerton may be “positing inherent erotic and/or maternal desires and female identity grounded in sexuality,” as Kate McCullogh suggests (206), the woman’s desires are curtailed by the limitations of her material reality—a wife and hence financially dependent upon her husband. Egerton sets her protagonist’s unexpected pregnancy against her sexual desire rather than incorporating maternity as an aspect of female sexuality. McCullogh attributes this complex tension as emanating from “the outsider’s critique of dominant British gender codes” which she supports with reference to Egerton’s own multinational and multicultural life experiences (207). Indeed, Egerton’s “outsider” experience of living in Norway and settling in England has been well documented; yet the fact that she was born and raised in Australia remains primarily unregistered. Eurocentric literary criticism does not engage with this greater dimension of Egerton’s personal migration pattern, one which embraces experience of being a colonized and gendered subject. Although Jusova argues in detail that Egerton—as daughter of a Welsh woman and an Irish man—defies an imperial identity, she ignores her initially colonial one.

While Egerton uses the situation of her protagonist to probe the constraints around the subversive potential of female sexual identity, her pregnant woman is uneasy with her condition. McCullough suggests that Egerton depicts maternal desire as the most authentic, natural state for a woman; that this is a valorizing representation which incorporates a concurrent sense of self-loss. However, Egerton has set textual parameters of conflicting inner desires and external compromise. As a writer she falls short of the potential of her project to redefine womanhood; to create a viable Everywoman as a motif to which male social-shaping has no direct access. Later she reflected upon her aims and disingenuously claimed, “[O]ne is bound to look at life through the eyes of one’s sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual psychological functions. I came

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24 Jusova argues that “her mother being from Wales, her father a rebellious, bohemian, and penniless Irishman with scorn for conventional English tastes and values, and herself born in Australia, where the relations between Irish and English populations were particularly vexed—served to problematize any simple sympathetic identification with English bourgeois interests and conventional sensibilities” (“George Egerton,” 28), to deliver a somewhat simplistic glossing over of the demographic, national, and cultural affiliations that comprised Egerton’s native context.
I would unlock a closed door with a key of my own fashioning. I did. My imitators forged theirs to a different end” (Gawsworth 58).

In contrast to Egerton’s heroine, Baynton’s nameless, pregnant protagonist experiences desire for the motherhood that her own mother has already experienced in a matrilinear narrative. “A Dreamer” portrays a female subjectivity that reaches beyond realist narrative conventions to render an experience culturally coded as unknowable—a woman’s anticipation of childbirth—and articulates her relationship to her own mother and the unborn child she carries. The title evokes the realm of unconscious yearning activated in the heroine, simultaneously suggesting the impossible wish of reexperiencing the all-powerful maternal presence of infancy that she herself now provides her own unborn child. In doing so, Baynton reworks a number of literary conventions which characterize late-Victorian women’s writing through the imagery, activity, subject matter, and context she renders. It is clear, both literally and literarily, that the challenge to the domestic desideratum posed by the Eurocentric New Woman figure already had a practical and circumspect working model of resistance in the Australian Bush Woman. Conditions endured by women in isolated locales challenged the idea that women should not undertake manual work, irrespective of social position. Contrary to advice offered in *The Australian Baby* (1902) by Mrs. Annie Everett Ellis—that the prenatal woman should “[g]ive up her more feverish pleasures” (12)—Baynton’s solitary pregnant woman battles unaided through a stormy night, in an isolated bush landscape, to cross a flooded river to visit her mother whom she has neglected. The boundaries between incorporeal and tangible, reality and imagination are continually blurred as the woman attempts to negotiate the countryside of her girlhood, which is now unfamiliar.

The power and agency of maternal protection is recorded in the woman’s psyche as she struggles through the storm of the antagonistically personified landscape. A cacophony of maternal voices protectively surrounds her. First, “From the branch of a tree overhead she heard a watchful mother-bird’s warning call” (46), followed by “Bless, pardon, protect and guide, strengthen and comfort!” Her mother’s prayer” (48), and “Then a sweet dream-voice whispered ‘Little woman!’” (50). Baynton narrates the daughter as actively identifying with her mother through her own impending motherhood as she faces near death in the flooded river. Resisting the essentializing alignment of women with nature, Baynton’s protagonist exerts her defiant will against the climatic, geographical hindrances and the supposed encumbrance of her own pregnant body. This heroine challenges notions of conventional female passivity and private domesticity that prevailed in didactic texts and acceptable models of
Victorian femininity. Baynton’s story also portrays a female subjectivity that transcends patriarchal imperatives—that of a woman’s relationship to her own mother, intensified because of her own unborn child. Baynton’s story activates Egerton’s “terra incognita of herself.” Frost might argue that “[t]he images convey feeling without analysing it. This is a difficulty with the story as a whole. Too many questions are left unanswered” (63). Yet to focus primarily upon conventional literary standards is to disable the rare perspective the story offers. Gaps or fault lines that gesture toward marginalized stories frequently represent distinctive female experience—areas of the narrative that evoke rather than explain.

As Baynton’s pregnant woman defies nature, Egerton conversely consolidates the link of women to nature. Birth in this story is transcribed in terms of animals’ parallel experience. Nature functions as tutor to humans in birth and nurture, demonstrated in a hen and its chicks, which stir the husband’s paternal feelings. His delight in the newborn chicks contrasts with the revulsion the woman feels.

“Aren’t they beauties (enthusiastically)? ‘This one is just out’ showing her how it is curled in the shell, with its paddles flattened and its bill breaking through the chip, and the slimy feathers sticking to its violet skin.

She expresses an exclamation of disgust, and looks at his fresh-tinted skin instead. He is covering the basket, hen, and all. (9)

His first response to her nausea is, “‘What is it’ (anxiously)? ‘If you were a mare I’d know what to do for you. Have a nip of whisky?’” (8). Concealing the graphic reality of the chicks’ birth from the woman evokes Victorian social mores, which discouraged women’s knowledge of their own physical functioning. Unlike Baynton’s heroine, whose “elated body quivered” (47), Egerton’s protagonist displays no sense of elation at her pregnancy. Her impending motherhood in fact creates a desire for escape from all maternal markers. As an overt and tangible outcome of female sexuality, pregnancy is not celebrated but acquiesced to. This attitude undermines Martha Vicinus’s assertion that “Egerton was never interested in guilt or punishment; rather, her works celebrate the potential in women, not the possibly debilitating consequences of living the life of a New Woman in an old world” (Vicinus ix).

Baynton, in contrast to Egerton, removes her character from the contexts of class and gender roles so that the woman is left with one truth—that she will be a mother and she has a mother. However, fused with this indubitable prospect of mothering-motherhood-nurture is an incipient threat to this sense of continuity in neglect—death—motherlessness. The
precariousness and arbitrariness of the outside world operates at counterpoint to this inner certainty as the heroine negotiates once-familiar surroundings.

Once she had known every hand at the station. The porter knew everyone in the district. This traveller was a stranger to him.

If her letter had been received, someone would have been waiting with a buggy. [S]he saw nothing perhaps the porter had a message! [H]e was locking the office door, but paused as though expecting her to speak. [S]he hastily left him. (45–46)

Baynton loads up the signs of impending loss. The woman in particular notices the funeral parlor workers: “They work late tonight, she thought, and, remembering their gruesome task, hesitated, half-minded to ask these night workers, for whom they laboured. Was it someone she had known?” (46). The ownerless dog with whom she shares a feeling of kinship and the “watchful mother-bird’s warning call” (46) all serve to underscore the isolation of the woman and herald her ultimate orphaning.

The woman’s relationship with the forces of nature, encompassed by the bush landscape, is uneasy. She keeps losing her bearings and then remembering them. Her memory is fallible and the landmarks illuminated by the lightning, questionable. “Still it was the home of her girlhood, and she knew every inch of the way. [S]he went on, then paused. Was she on the right track? . . . [W]hen she should have been careful in her choice, she had been absorbed. . . . [I]f this was the right way, the wheel-ruts would show. . . . [S]he believed, she hoped, she prayed, that she was right” (47–48). This uncertainty parallels her initially divided loyalties. She is torn between consideration of her husband and child and her urgent quest to reach her mother in such adverse weather. However, the quest for reunion with her mother surpasses all. “What mattered the lonely darkness when it led to mother! [H]er mouth grew tender, as she thought of her husband she loved, and of their child. Must she dare! She thought of the grey-haired mother [T]his dwarfed every tie that had parted them” (49). The communion the woman seeks privileges an intergenerational continuum between women as being of paramount importance over the husband-wife bond. Baynton’s aesthetic is unambiguously matrilineal.

“A Cross Line” infuses the pregnant woman’s sexual power in her fantasy of unobtainable and objectified femme fatale figures: Cleopatra and a Salome-like figure who “bounds forward and dances, bends her lissom waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves, be it good or evil” (21). In contrast, “A Dreamer” portraits ecstasy
and reverence in the anticipation of reaffirming daughterhood and motherhood. Baynton employs extreme language to denote the excitement of the woman’s pregnancy and her anticipated reunion. The daughter worships her mother at the time when her own body is becoming one.

“Daughter!”
“Mother!”
She could feel loving arms around her, and a mother’s sacred kisses. She thrilled, and in her impatience ran. Then the child near her heart stirred for the first time. The instincts of motherhood awakened in her. Her elated body quivered. (46–47)

Baynton places the anticipated reunion in the realm of the sacred, which in turn introduces the reader to the woman’s pregnancy and shifts the parameters of expectation about what her body should and should not do. The impetus for her character’s desperate actions almost surpasses the means that Baynton has—as a late-Victorian female writer—to narrate them. To render this mother-child bond across two generations, she evokes other areas of heightened human emotion: religious experience and facing one’s own mortality. The heroine’s ambivalent relationship with the elements further severs the late-nineteenth-century ideological shackling of women to biological essentialism. The storm simultaneously aids and impedes her in her quest: “An angled line of lightning illuminated everything, but the violence of the thunder distracted her” (47). The wind carries her forward yet takes her breath away. This dynamic causes her to doubt her instincts in negotiating her route, and there are terrors in the tempest. “Malignantly the wind fought her, driving her back, or snapping the brittle stems from her skinned hands. The water was knee-deep now, and every step more hazardous” (49). To defy the inclement weather and dangers of the flooded river, she draws totally upon the inspiration derived from the transcendental identification with her mother. Her physical endeavors serve as her penance for her prior neglect of her mother—“There was atonement in these difficulties and dangers. . . . Long ago she should have come to her old mother and, her heart gave a bound of savage rapture in thus giving the sweat of her body for the sin of her soul” (49).

The personification of nature and the geography throughout, and the woman’s personal battle against the storm, blur the boundaries between human and natural world so that there is overwhelmingly a sense of will, a quality more generally associated with masculinity. As the heroine faces death, it is her mother’s voice whispering “Little woman” that refocuses

25 See Hein.
her and enables her to reach the other side of the river. Yet she arrives too late. Her mother is already dead: “The daughter parted the curtains, and the light fell on the face of the sleeper who would dream no dreams that night” (53). Because mother and daughter are not reunited, their spiritual bond remains an idealization, a fantasy of matrilineality. The cultural occlusion of the mother-daughter bond is greater than the individual project written against it.

Like Egerton, Baynton produced her text at a time when motherhood and maternity were key issues for women reformers and constituted an area of anxiety. Motherhood as most desirable endpoint for a woman’s destiny was concurrently challenged by the late-nineteenth-century exceptions to this role—evident in aspects of the New Woman figure and the suffrage and socialist movements. Baynton’s pregnant woman is fulfilling her natural biologically prescribed role as conservative discourse would deem most appropriate, yet she is not behaving as convention and medical and didactic texts would have advocated. Mrs. Ellis declares that “[i]t behoves every wife the instant she knows she is about to become a mother, to set the house of her health into as perfect order as it is in her power to do” (9). The pregnant woman in Mrs. Ellis’s text must aim to keep herself continually placid, serene, and trustful, for fear of passing on negative characteristics through a concept of heredity that is channeled into prenatal maternal behavior and attitudes. Baynton subverts the notion of delicacy, modesty, and passivity ascribed to pregnant women. There is no sense that the woman’s pregnant body hinders her. Further, while the storm unequivocally hampers her journey, her primary concern is shown not to be that of potentially losing her child but rather that loss of her own life will prevent her reunion with her mother. The references to her mother evoke the self-sufficient bush woman who copes with all tasks, an adaptive feminine subjectivity and a common motif in fin-de-siècle Australian literature. There is no male presence in Baynton’s narrative except for the porter at the train station and the mention of the pregnant woman’s husband. The woman recalls her childhood only in terms of her mother planting trees along the riverbank, fixing overflowing tanks, and diverting water during floods for the drier months—a skill which the woman herself has acquired.

Why had not mother diverted the spout to the other tank!

Something indefinite held her. Her mind went back to the many times long ago when she had kept alive the light while mother fixed the spout to save the water that the summer months made precious. . . . After she had seen mother, she would come out and fix it. . . . (52)
Egerton’s heroine by contrast is still in the throes of morning sickness, “stopped every moment by a feeling of faintness” (30). Her pregnancy is morbidly oppressive to her: “And what a sickening pain she has; an odd pain. . . . Supposing she were to die. . . . Strange how things come to life . . . she buries her face in her hands and sits so long a time” (33). She is suffocated by the diminished identity that her motherhood will offer her while she yearns for “the freedom, the freshness, the vague danger, the unknown that has a witchery for me, ay, for every woman!” (27).

Egerton’s story opens with a contrast between female and male modes of perception. The protagonist is daydreaming and evoking imaginary interior worlds that transport her beyond her immediate surroundings. Her first perception of the stranger (who becomes her potential lover) is aural as he disturbs her reverie. “It seems profane, indelicate, to bring this slangy, vulgar tune, and with it the mental picture of footlight flare and fantastic dance into the lovely freshness of this perfect spring day . . . why, it is like the entrance of a half-tipsy vagabond player . . .—the picture is blurred” (1–2). Egerton’s omniscient narration is impressionistically rendered from the outset, and here she makes the first of many references to the woman’s active fantasizing as a means of transporting her from a mundane actuality. “Her mind is nothing if not picturesque; her busy brain, with all its capabilities choked by a thousand vagrant fantasies, is always producing pictures and finding associations between the most unlikely objects” (1). Egerton employs the technique of direct speech without indicating who says what, thus making the reader a witness to an oral exchange, which she punctuates with free indirect narration and impressions focalized through either character.


“No, seldom over a pound, but they are very game.”

“Rare good sport isn’t it, whipping a stream? . . . ”

She smiles assentingly. And yet what the devil is she amused at he queries mentally. (5)

As a potential disruption to her marriage, the man disturbs the clarity of her wifely identity by activating her desire for freedom. The domesticity she finally chooses because she is pregnant refocuses her fantasizing energies onto preparing baby clothes and expelling the marker of her sexual
power, the potential lover. Egerton conveys the agitated isolation this produces—“oh, she wants some one so badly to soothe her”—which results in a yearning for the impossible, “[t]he little mother who is twenty years under the daisies” (52). Her pregnancy evokes death and isolation, not only that of her mother but also the death of her individual self and her desires. This is distinct from the kind of isolation that the colonial prenatal mother faces in Baynton’s text, which clearly derives from her trek in the bush where her pregnancy is incidental to her overall mission.

Egerton’s impressionistic technique seems to have failed to sustain a whole body of work, to render viable alternatives to a patriarchal cultural repertoire. In the opinion of Elaine Showalter, Egerton and other radical women writers of the fin-de-siècle “have not fared well with posterity” (194). Egerton’s career was brief and Showalter feels that “her lack of growth seems perversely deliberate” (124) as, “In the end, she could not please anyone” (215). A. A. Phillips similarly described the “lack of bulk” of Barbara Baynton’s fiction (Baynton 30). Egerton anchored her work in female subjectivity. Although she contributed to the short story genre in ways that anticipate modernist introspection and incompleteness, her creativity seems to have been curtailed as she curtails the desires of her heroine in “A Cross Line.” Having supported herself through writing after achieving success in the 1890s, she lived until 1945 without ever replicating her fin-de-siècle fame with the reading public.

Until the late twentieth century, women rarely wrote explicitly about pregnancy in fiction. The textual enigma of childbirth points to its existence beyond the cultural forms available to late-Victorian and early-Edwardian colonial women. Records of childbirth are at best rare and euphemistic or metaphorical. Modesty, the crucial signifier of Victorian femininity, inhibited the widespread articulation of such material. Written accounts primarily resided in journal entries, advice manuals, and letters—the traditional areas of women’s writing that have fallen outside the generic boundaries of the conventional canon. Fictional renderings of pregnancy and childbirth are ambiguous and understated, never overtly represented. Childbirth itself does not occur within these narratives, and what to expect from the actual birth process is absent in both fiction and polemic. The focus is upon its result—the physical separation of the mother and child and the context of socialization, the family.

Woman’s primary role as mother not only supports and advances imperial and colonial enterprises, but also is habitually underacclaimed and omitted from the concept of history making. The devaluing of the female creative metaphor, childbirth, to reproduction and not production within a patriarchal ordering, has consistently prevented the articulation
and recognition of women’s integral contribution, except to serve an ideological function. The persistent anchoring of women to biological inevitability meant that their contribution to late-nineteenth-century social and national development was limited. Although childbirth was a key dimension in establishing a white settler colony, its importance was devalued—maternity was simply something that women were born to and did not actively forge—whereas men built nations and made history through feats of conquest, agriculture, industrialization, and economics. In male-dominated discourse, women are represented as merely following the natural course their physiology dictates. Men, by contrast, create by overcoming the impossible (indigenous resistance or geographical hardship), their creativity emanating from an exertion of will. Through imposing form upon inchoate matter—discovering territories or building a nation—men achieve transcendence while women fulfill their natural function.

Maternity clearly requires alternative acts of enunciation when it is easily converted into male-dominated discourse. For this reason, these short stories represent an intriguing exception to the norm. As both demonstrate, “literary textual articulations” (Boehmer 23) of maternal experience can indeed rework conventional narrative forms or expose the limitations in rendering a female-only experience such as pregnancy. Baynton’s text aspires to a sublimation of the mother-to-be that is beyond Egerton’s representation, despite the latter’s association with narrative innovations in representing fin-de-siècle women’s psyche and sexuality. In contrast, Egerton’s pregnant protagonist, oppressed and constrained by her condition, does not fulfill Egerton’s own thesis that woman should map the terra incognita of herself. As a writer, Egerton sought to redefine womanhood as a hitherto uncharted subjectivity that male writers could not access. However, in her writing, her character’s independence becomes curtailed into an unwelcomed and conventional domesticity.

Displaced from both imperial center and its replication in the colonial metropolis, Australian rural mothers negotiated vastly different circumstances socioeconomically and geographically to their British counterparts. Although attempts were made to maintain urban protocols, the link to the feminine civilizing role was frequently tenuous and necessarily reworked to ensure survival. Pioneer women survived in isolated and often dangerous climatic conditions. Baynton’s literary representation acknowledges a version of this actuality—albeit dramatically rendered in gothic overtones. Women’s daily realities and the ideologies transmitted in didactic texts produces an interface at which fictional renderings such as “A Dreamer” became possible. In portraying a pregnant woman’s struggle with the forces of nature, and her willed transcendence to achieve a mother-daughter
reunion against all physical and climatic odds, Baynton places her heroine in an Australian sublime in matrilineal terms. As Hein argues, the exertion of will to actively shape one’s surroundings is customarily represented as a male-dominated experience, both in terms of social power and creativity. A final discouraging note is struck, however, for while the female characters resist the constraints of socially prescribed feminine behavior, the illusory quality evoked by the title “A Dreamer” and the woman’s compromise in “A Cross Line” dilute their liberating potential.

Two short stories, of course, constitute only a sample of the power of the peripheral—women’s writing, colonial women’s writing—and its modes of self-invention within the context of the late empire. In noting the sociohistoric circumstances of late-nineteenth-century Australian women, Grimshaw and Evans suggest that the merit in reviewing certain women writers resides in the fact that “at specific moments, they did diverge from prevailing codes in ways that are worth noting.” Moreover, these women “offered fragmentary alternative readings that contested spaces of the dominant colonial” (81) and, in Egerton’s case, the imperial center. In differing degrees, Egerton’s and Baynton’s fiction exemplifies such divergences and underscores the significant ways in which maternity is an intrinsic constituent to any conceptualizing of the imperial-colonial enterprise. Through focusing upon women writers’ articulations of pregnancy, preparations for maternity and responses to the prenatal mother-child bond, these stories acknowledge and restore a key aspect of white settler women’s participation in Australian colonization to feminist literary history.

**Works Cited**


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