

## Getting off the Verandah: Contextual Australian Theology In-Land and In Story

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Tracy Spencer

**Abstract:** In 1998, Stephen Pickard posited the verandah as an appropriate image from which to explore “Gospel and Spirituality in an Australian setting”. A post-colonial reading of the verandah in Australia reveals it is not an image to support positive encounter between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This article argues that images of lives immersed in inter-cultural relationships provide more productive material for a contextual Australian theology, and one that could be called a “theology of decolonisation”. Using this material from the life writing I am producing of the lives of two English immigrants – Rebecca Forbes and Jim Page, who lived and died amongst the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Ranges in the first half of the twentieth century – I will argue that for immigrant European Christianity in Australia, an immersive encounter *in* the country and on the terms of Indigenous Australians is necessary before a post-colonial contextual theology by non-Indigenous theologians can arise in Australia. I suggest models of decolonisation put forward by critics of both colonising and colonised heritages, and discuss methods in metaphoric and contextual theology to achieve a theology of decolonisation for non-Indigenous Australians.

### INTRODUCTION

A BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH of a timber homestead on the Darling River in Western New South Wales shows the structure skirted by generous verandahs. Frank Warwick, who showed it to me, was the five-year-old son of the Manager of Winbar Station in 1913. Recalling the staff there, he said:

Oh yes. Becky would probably have worked very much with Mum. Oh yes she would've worked very much with her in the house, but Jacky wouldn't have...

He wouldn't have very often come up near the house. If he'd wanted to see Dad he'd have let him somebody know "I want to see the boss" and he'd have looked him up. No, no.<sup>1</sup>

Becky is one of the subjects of my "life writing", an English immigrant who after a few years in Sydney, made her way out west and "back'o'Bourke" to work as a housemaid at Winbar. That was where she met her husband, Jacky – Jack Witchetty Forbes – a man of full Indigenous descent working as a colt breaker on the station. They married in 1914 in Bourke before the Registrar with two policemen for witnesses.



**Winbar Homestead with its Verandahs, c. 1914**  
Photo courtesy of Frank Warwick

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1. Frank Warwick, "Transcript of Interview with Frank Warwick 240602", ed. Tracy Spencer (Adelaide: 2002).

## A POSTCOLONIAL READING STRATEGY

Frank's brief lesson in spatial, racial and gendered station geography reminds us that few, if any, spaces in Australia are not inscribed by colonialism. That includes the iconic Australian architectural feature of the verandah, which has been proposed as a space of openness and engagement.<sup>2</sup> Against the "centric" focus of spirituality in Australia, Stephen Pickard offers the coast, and its architectural manifestation, the verandah, as an appropriate site for Australian spiritual renewal, because it represents the domestic space of most Australians, and is perceived as an open and potentially permeable boundary.<sup>3</sup> Pickard's project is to use the metaphor of the verandah as a culturally relevant description of the Christian God, and a subsequent model for the community of God, the Church. He says: "In speaking about the verandah God I have implicitly described a vision of what the Church is called to be.... [a place where] East meets West, North meets South."<sup>4</sup>

The verandah was already a translated colonial artefact when it reached Australia in 1793 via several British colonies.<sup>5</sup> It was theorised as a place of protection, security and safety from stranger, Indigenous people, or country itself.<sup>6</sup> It enabled the householder to observe that which lay beyond, without themselves being seen. The structure supported the colonial panoptic gaze, which was also a profoundly theological idea, employed by Australian explorers in their journals to describe a "Providential God", who, watching their efforts, revealed the country to them, and saved them from starvation, thirst and losing their way.<sup>7</sup> From their natural promontories, explorers posed as a new Adam naming the new country and, by mapping and making biological classifications, asserted imperial language, history and geography onto the space they claimed "*terra nullius*" – Latin for "no one's land" – even as they relied on Indigenous guides to reveal the country to them and

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2. Stephen Pickard, "The View from the Verandah: Gospel and Spirituality in an Australian Setting", *St Marks Review* Winter (1998), 7.

3. Philip Drew, *The Coast Dwellers: Australians Living on the Edge* (Ringwood VIC: Penguin, 1994), xiii. Drew asserts that it is characteristic of Australian expression that "edges are open boundaries", although he does not reference this assertion.

4. Pickard, "The View from the Verandah", 9.

5. Philip Drew, *Veranda: Embracing Place* (Pymble NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1992) 43.

6. Brian Hudson, "The View from the Verandah: Prospect, Refuge and Leisure", *Australian Geographical Studies* 31.1 (1993): 71. Behaviour theorists like Appleton suggest "prospect-refuge" theory to explain the aesthetic appeal of verandahs where biological survival depends on being able to observe landscape, prey and predators from a hide-like structure, planning responses at leisure; and on being able to be protected from inanimate threats of weather conditions.

7. Roland Boer, *Last Stop before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, vol. 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 77, 83.

find them food and water to survive in it.<sup>8</sup> From built promontories like verandahs, Europeans were able to supervise what they had possessed.<sup>9</sup> The successive bounding of space – house, yard, paddock fence – becomes symbolic for the British settler of Selfhood within the bounds, and Other beyond them. This psychology was expressed nationally in what journalist C. E. W. Bean in 1910 described:

that country [beyond 400 mile circle from coast], though it makes up the inside of Australia, they call the “outside” country, because the centre of Australia is uninhabited, and this is the country which is on the farthest outskirts of civilisation.<sup>10</sup>

When Pickard, following Phillip Drew’s argument, asserts that Australians have fallen prey to the centric mythology which first centred on London, and later Uluru, he ignores – as does Drew – the inverted and Antipodean sense of centre and margin in Australian consciousness. The geographic centre – the outback – is the marginal country beyond the “frontier”, that imaginal space where “imperial culture [is] unravelling at its edges”.<sup>11</sup> The imperial centre aligns with the “inside country”, which Pickard associates with the coast, the domestic space, and with the verandah. “Inside” is the settler society; outside is Other.

#### FRONTIERS AND CONTACT ZONES

Paul Carter, like Mary Louise Pratt, signals frontiers as places of communication and contact rather than separation.<sup>12</sup> They are where the limits of self are negotiated in encounter with the “other”. Pratt terms these “contact zones”, defined as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict...[and where] subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other”.<sup>13</sup> They are the antithesis of the verandah: they are not close to the centre of self but at its margins, beyond the fence lines; they are unprotected; social interactions are under negotiation and not yet

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8. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 202.

9. Boer, *Last Stop before Antarctica*, 73; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 60.

10. C. E. W. Bean, *On the Wool Track* (London: Alston Rivers, 1910) x.

11. Brigid Hains, *The Ice and the Inland: Mawson, Flynn, and the Myth of the Frontier* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2002) 173.

12. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987) 158.

13. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6, 7.

regulated; subjects see and experience each other at close quarters not at a distance; and categories of resident and visitor are not finally assigned.

Despite Pickard's desire to identify the verandah as an image of inclusive social interaction, this postcolonial reading of its function and meaning suggests it is far from an in-between or neutral space that hosts genuine and open-ended encounters between self and Other. That is more likely to happen in the contested and shared space of a contact zone, where Bhabha says: "stories [are] still being written, nations still being constructed".<sup>14</sup> Peter Read reminds us that "contact zone" locations are all around us, when he recounts that the "hairs on the back of my neck rose" when his friend Dennis Foley "began unfolding his living Gai-mariagal culture on site after site of my own childhood" on a visit together to Sydney's northern beaches.<sup>15</sup>

#### THEORISING HISTORIES IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Postcolonial theories like those of Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, where the histories of oppressed and oppressor are read in the context of one another so that the nexus of ideology and power in a colonial setting may be broken, allow new and liberating discourses to emerge.<sup>16</sup> This article follows this approach, so that images and metaphors from experiences in the contact zone in the "outside" country are read in ways that liberate new responses to Indigenous dispossession.<sup>17</sup> The images and metaphors I offer emerge from hybrid life writing of the lives and deaths of two English immigrants – Rebecca Forbes and James Page – in the Adnyamathanha community of the Northern Flinders Ranges, in the early twentieth century. Becky and Jim's lives and the places they inhabit become the "space of openness and engagement" that the verandah could not.

I acknowledge that the term "postcolonial" applied to the Australian context raises serious critiques<sup>18</sup>, and agree that "Colonial ways of knowing...continue to linger in contemporary discourse"<sup>19</sup> and in more

14. Hains, *The Ice and the Inland*, 5.

15. Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 22.

16. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2003) 15.

17. In the Mabo judgement Justices Deane and Gaudron stated: "Dispossession is the darkest aspect of the history of this nation. The nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement of, and retreat from, those past injustices." Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: UQP, 2002) 63.

18. Anita M Heiss, *Dhuluku-Yala: To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 43, 44.

19. Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003) 24.

complicated ways than a simple binary of oppressor/oppressed may negotiate.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the “post-” is misleading if it is read as implying a current absence of ways of colonising contemporary Indigenous land and culture. Postcolonial theory is a “convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world”,<sup>21</sup> but is also a constructive tool for coloniser theorists to understand their past and present from a colonised perspective, albeit one limited by the postcolonial bias for English texts.<sup>22</sup> This renders postcolonial methodologies strategies for a “pedagogy of decolonisation” within English discourse.<sup>23</sup> The nuanced sensitivities that Homi Bhabha brings to the construction of hybrid subjectivities of the subaltern in postcolonial studies are also relevant to the Australian situation.<sup>24</sup> In a positive sense, the processes of “transculturation” which describe “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture”<sup>25</sup> and use these to serve their own cultural objectives,<sup>26</sup> explains the dynamism and resilience of Aboriginal cultures summarised by Michael Dodson:

alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourses in which we continue to create our own representations, and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorised versions.... Self-representations of Aboriginality are always also acts of freedom.<sup>27</sup>

“Representations of Aboriginality” by non-Indigenous writers have been subjected to close criticism by Indigenous literary critics.<sup>28</sup> My life writing of Becky and Jim necessarily engages with written representations of individuals and communities in which they lived. As a white

20. Saeed Ur-Rehman, “Decolonising Post Colonial Theory”, *Kunapipi* No. 2 XX.2 (1998).

21. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004) 14.

22. Ur-Rehman, “Decolonising Post Colonial Theory”.

23. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 34.

24. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 15. Sugirtharajah cites Spivak who asserts that a “pure subaltern” voice cannot be heard because of the necessary constraints that hybridise the subaltern voice in order for it to be heard in the dominant discourses. See also Fiona Probyn, “How Does the Settler Belong?” *Westerly* 47 (2002) p. 84.; Muecke quoted in Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines*, 181.

25. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.

26. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) 77.

27. Michael Dodson, “The End of the Beginning: Re(De)Finding Aboriginality”, in Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003) 38.

28. Heiss gives a thorough treatment of the views of a wide number of Indigenous academics on the topic. Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala*, 10-14.

writer/researcher I concur that my textual representations of Indigenous people and lifestyle are significantly limited by my own level of enculturation in Adnyamathanha culture, and I seek to make that apparent in several ways through the text (for example, my own and my subjects' struggles with *yura ngarwala* language). I also make claim to significant friendships and relationships with Adnyamathanha people both prior to and beyond the period of research, which, as Jackie Huggins has said, is a feature of "the best books written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals".<sup>29</sup> I continue to engage in the "formula" Huggins suggests to remain ethical, accountable and appropriate throughout this project.<sup>30</sup> While my project does focus on "interactions between blacks and whites" which Christine Morris suggests *is* appropriate for white writers, writing the lives of white subjects who engaged with issues and practices of Indigenous law and culture, also requires some representation of these areas, which Morris warns non-Indigenous writers to "stay away from".<sup>31</sup> The text of these life narratives produced by my project does not resolve these difficulties, but instead foregrounds the sources, authorial voices and processes of production of the text to facilitate maximum transparency of the author's speaking position, and the partial nature of any representation.

#### MEETING IN-LAND

The previous contrapuntal analysis of the colonial verandah, and Frank Warwick's testimony, suggest it is unlikely that Becky and Jack – a white woman and an Indigenous man – would ever have met on the verandah at Winbar Station.

So where and how might intimate relationships like those between Rebecca and Jack occur? Perhaps at the Winbar station horse yards where Indigenous stock men worked and house maids visited, perhaps along the river plied by paddleboats and native canoes. Ernestine Hill's account suggests wherever they met, upon their marriage they went to live in an Indigenous "camp" near Bourke.<sup>32</sup> For missionary Jim Page, the answer is clear. His relationships with Adnyamathanha developed at a camp called *Minerawuta*, in Adnyamathanha country, where, as one Adnyamathanha Elder puts it, "The missionaries came to us with

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29. Jackie Huggins, "Respect Vs Political Correctness", *Australian Author* 26.3 Spring (1994): 12.

30. Huggins, "Respect Vs Political Correctness", 13.

31. Willa McDonald, "Tricky Business: Whites on Black Territory", *Australian Author* 29.1 Autumn (1997), 12.

32. E Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness: A Classic Journey around and across Australia* (Potts Point: Imprint, 1940), 272.

nothing: we had to give them everything."<sup>33</sup> The men of the community helped him erect his tent – thin flaps of canvas between inside and out, rather than solid walls surrounded by a “safe” structure from which to view the surroundings without being seen. Sites of immersion in Aboriginal country and camps offer an alternative metaphor to the colonial verandah from which to develop a theology of decolonisation for Australia.

#### DECOLONISING THE CONTACT ZONE

Within the settler Australian pilgrimage to Australia’s centre may lie a desire to engage with their Indigenous “other”, either to rehearse colonialism, or perhaps to enact decolonisation. Margaret Somerville’s cultural tour with Nganyinytja in the Anangu Pitjanjatjara Lands performs decolonisation in an intentionally liminal and dynamic space. Difference is preserved but relationships forged while living (briefly) together on Anangu land.<sup>34</sup> This is not unlike what Germaine Greer suggested could be “the shortest way to nationhood”, although her account moves beyond sitting in the dirt together, to urging non-Indigenous Australians to learn Indigenous culture, albeit one she describes in romantic and static terms.<sup>35</sup> Deborah Bird Rose describes an instance of “decolonisation” in the story of Mal the non-Indigenous farmer who joined with Indigenous people to protect Mt Dromedary from logging. During this process, he heard their stories of dispossession and acknowledged his own role in that; he heard them articulate spiritual attachment to the land that provided a language for him to do likewise; and both groups expressed their love of the mountain.<sup>36</sup> In this example, Rose is advocating decolonisation as “the unmaking of regimes of violence that enforce the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place” so that morality can be restored to colonising agents by relinking time, place and consequences of actions.<sup>37</sup>

“Decolonisation” in contemporary Australia is figured as restorative for both colonised and coloniser, rather than Franz Fanon’s original use of the term to describe a process where members of the colonising nation would leave the country and the previously colonised peoples

33. Gertie Johnson, “Conversation with Gertie Johnson 010802”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Nepabunna: 2002).

34. Margaret Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999), 53; Probyn, “How Does the Settler Belong?”

35. Anita Heiss, “Whitefella Go Jump”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 18 September 2004; Mark McKenna, “Greer’s Arguments Not So Germane”, *The Age* 4 October 2003.

36. Deborah Bird Rose, “Love and Reconciliation in the Forest: A Study in Decolonisation”, *Hawke Institute Working Paper Series* 19 (2002), 14.

37. Rose, “Love and Reconciliation in the Forest”, 15.

would subvert colonial representations and reclaim from their pre-colonial past a unified and cultured subjectivity.<sup>38</sup> It also differs from the United Nations concept of decolonisation as a process towards self-government by previously colonised peoples.<sup>39</sup> Mick Dodson argues for Indigenous Australians to forge Indigenous subjectivity as a dynamic expression of “transculturation”, nurtured in resistance and relationship to non-Indigenous politics of representation.<sup>40</sup> In Aotearoa, decolonisation workshops focus on “decolonising knowledge” by “challenging colonial understandings and constructions”, particularly those “internalised” by the colonised.<sup>41</sup> As both Fanon and Ashis Nandy elaborate, colonisers are also detrimentally constructed through colonisation, and that while decolonisation begins with the colonised, it must end with the colonisers.<sup>42</sup> Challenging the internalized colonialism of non-Indigenous Australians becomes a responsibility for non-Indigenous Australians engaging in a journey towards a true “post-colonialism” in Australia.

The examples above suggest that decolonisation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians occurs in places acknowledged as belonging to Indigenous people, and where non-Indigenous people are hosted by Indigenous owners. They are occasions of proximity and immersion, where separations of self and other are transformed in emerging inter-subjectivities.

#### STORIES OF DECOLONISATION AS “STORY” THEOLOGY

If these are the notions of decolonisation relevant to Australia, then how might a theology proceed from this basis? Decolonisation is told in “real life” stories of people engaging with people and having their subjectivities, if not their governance and place of residence, transformed. A theological method dealing with this material must also be grounded in stories of “real life” transformations. Further, decolonisation requires a contrapuntal reading of shared histories to enable new and liberating discourses to emerge. Cultures are relativised in the

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38. Benita Parry, “Problems of Current Theories of Colonial Discourse”, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 9 (1987): 30.

39. United Nations Unit on Decolonisation, “History”, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpi/decolonization/history.htm> (Accessed 29 July 2006).

40. Dodson, “The End of the Beginning”.

41. Jessica Hutchings, *Decolonisation and Aotearoa – a Pathway to Right Livelihood*, [http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/1s3\\_jessica.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/1s3_jessica.htm) (Accessed 29 July 2006).

42. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 29-30.

process, guarding against the risk that a contextual theology can become captive to its cultural context and unable to offer critique.<sup>43</sup>

Doing theology by telling and writing stories is not a new theological method. Denham Grierson claims that since the narrative-symbolic form was the original mode in which God was apprehended, then poetic and non-rational forms of theology need to be restored to Christian discourse.<sup>44</sup> Further, the uncanny juxtapositions of contrapuntal texts create the dynamic of metaphor, where the slippages between unfamiliar elements create what John Dominic Crossan has called "the dark interval", the space of possibility, when the assumptions of the old world are shattered and the new configurations are not yet known, within which "God has room to move".<sup>45</sup> Sallie McFague has brought together literary theory of metaphor with theology to articulate a "parabolic" or "Metaphorical theology". The parable, as an extended metaphor, particularly in the form of poem, novel and autobiography, can engage the reader in "being interpreted" by the alternate logics which emerge from the juxtapositions.<sup>46</sup> McClendon, speaking particularly about biographical forms of theology, describes how the key images or metaphors of a life in some way exemplary of Christianity, can release new articulations of faith which in turn can modify systematic doctrines.<sup>47</sup>

While McFague has been criticised for failing to illustrate her theological method through literary texts,<sup>48</sup> others (whom she refers to) have

43. Clive Pearson, "Christ and Context Down Under: Mapping Trans Tasman Christologies", in Andrew Dutney (ed.), *From Here to Where? Australian Christians Owning the Past – Embracing the Future* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988). J. B. Metz's call for a "polycentric Christianity" where Otherness is acknowledged rather than assimilated, and key issues in a location determine theological priorities, has been taken up by Pakeha theologian Neil Darragh. Darragh outlines a theological method that defines his speaking position, and issues of particular import to Pakeha New Zealand, as the foundation from which a contextual theology proceeds, with some dialogue with non-New Zealand theologians and theological traditions in the later stages of the process. Other theologians, like Torrance and Mostert, sound a note of concern that cultural and contextual concerns will bias the Christian expression and relativise "truth" without the control of universal theological traditions. See Alan J. Torrance and Hilary Regan (eds.), *Christ and Context: The Confrontation between Christ and Culture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993); Neil Darragh, *Doing Theology Ourselves: A Guide to Research and Action* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 1995).

44. Denham Grierson, *Uluru Journey: An Exploration into Narrative Theology* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1996), 125, 126.

45. John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Allen, Texas: Argus Communications, 1975), 171.

46. Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975).

47. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1974, 1990 (New Edition), 87-101.

48. David J Brommell, "Sallie McFague's 'Metaphorical Theology'", *Journal of American Academy of Religion* LXI.3.

amply done so throughout the centuries of Christian theology. Jesus' parables, Paul's stories, St Augustine's *Confessions*, and more recently "Third World", "Asian" and "story" theologies all articulate theology through the medium of parabolic story itself, not as allegory, or illustrative, but as theology essentially rooted to the specificities of the textual artefact and its production. Ricoeur has argued that the literary form of parable cannot be reduced to abstractions, and Dodd concurs, arguing from Julicher that even the biblical evangelists were incorrect in inserting allegorical explanations of Jesus' parables, as in the case of the redaction of the parable of the sower.<sup>49</sup> "Metaphors don't 'have' a message, they are the message."<sup>50</sup>

Stories need these specificities of their content to function as a world within a world,<sup>51</sup> creating in Ricoeur's term a "world before the text" for readers to creatively inhabit and where they can experience "redemption through imagination".<sup>52</sup> By inhabiting an imaginative world that combines disparate elements of reality in its metaphoric construction, new meanings can emerge for the reader that transform their perspective and identity. In this way, Ricoeur has argued, parabolic texts, including biblical material, are potentially revelatory not because they have deposits of inspired truth, but because they "enact a productive clash" between the world of text and world of reader.<sup>53</sup> The historical specificities of narrative histories,<sup>54</sup> or folk stories,<sup>55</sup> allow new theological insights to emerge from lived experience which can inform and form faith practice.<sup>56</sup>

Other Australian contextual theologies have explored elements of this approach to theological method. Don Carrington's "Jesus' Dreaming" reads cultural "dreaming" stories in the context of Biblical stories and visa versa – to develop new "hermeneutical insights" for a culturally relevant Christian theology.<sup>57</sup> David Hunter draws on Paul

49. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 3.

50. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 71.

51. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 134.

52. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 7.

53. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 9.

54. Alan J. Torrance and Salvador T. Martinez (eds.), *Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways*, vol. 12 (Singapore: ATESEA, 1993), 37-43.

55. C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

56. Stephen Pickard, "The Australian Spirituality Quest: A Theological and Personal Reflection", *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies* 20 (March 1998): 16; Pickard, "The View from the Verandah", 5.

57. Don Carrington, "Jesus' Dreaming: Doing Theology through Aboriginal Stories", in Jim Houston (ed.), *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1988), 271.

Ricoeur to suggest a contrapuntal reading of Stolen Generations history – “retelling it from the point of view of the other” – so that the story of the past can be re-membered with new meaning, for both the children and families who suffered, and for the church organisations and members who participated.<sup>58</sup> Norman Habel turns his theological attention to the issue of reconciliation, intentionally bypassing Pickard’s “Aussie verandah” to conclude that: “The way to the soul of Australia, it seems to me, is a pilgrimage back through the landscape, through the stories, through suppressed memories to sites of resistance and suffering, the silent sacred places in Australia’s history.”<sup>59</sup>

Protestant theologies like Pickard’s have adopted key images as metaphors – verandahs, “God Downunder” and “Postmark Australia”<sup>60</sup> – but without a contrapuntal or postcolonial reading of these images from the perspective of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Australia. Catholic theologians have looked for a metaphorical reading of Australian culture which illuminates “continuity between divine grace and human culture”<sup>61</sup> but without the benefit of polyphonic constructions of that “culture”. Indigenous Australian theologies reflect a cultured reading of both the Bible and historical Christian faith, which it interprets in the light of contemporary Indigenous experience, providing the kind of retelling that Hunter suggests can transform non-Indigenous church members.

A theology of decolonisation seeks to bring these aspects of metaphorical and story theology – key images, readings of Australian cultures and histories – together in parabolic stories that invite the reader to be transformed in the space that opens up between the world of the text and their own life. Parabolic stories of Becky and Jim offer such decolonising theologies.

#### BECKY’S STORY AS PARABLE FROM THE CONTACT ZONE

Becky is deliberately represented as ordinary, privileging the ways in which she is remembered in Indigenous oral history, over the ways her

58. David Hunter, “‘Can Forgiveness Bring Healing?’ Paul Ricoeur on the Future of Memory and Two Case Studies from Australian Mission History”, in Winifred Wing Han Lamb and Ian Barnes (eds.), *God Downunder: Theology in the Antipodes* (Adelaide SA: Australian Theological Foundation, 2003).

59. Norman C. Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia’s Soul* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publisher, 1999), 152.

60. Pearson, “Christ and Context Down Under”; Andrew Dutney, “Postmark Australia”, in Andrew Dutney (ed.), *From Here to Where? Australian Christians Owning the Past – Embracing the Future* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988).

61. Geoffrey Lilburne, “Contextualising Australian Theology: An Enquiry into Method”, *Pacifica* 10 (October 1997): 351.

life is exoticised by European Australian writers.<sup>62</sup> This in itself creates the first juxtaposition and “clash” between the expectations of the reader and the world of the text. The text I am producing in the project refuses to portray Becky as “unusual”, although it is the uniqueness of her choice of marriage partner in that era that one could expect to have intrigued a reader in the first place. It is her unmaking of the boundaries between British colonial Self and Indigenous Other that makes her life a subject for inquiry. How can you live an “ordinary life” in the contact zone? In the slippage between expectation and text, a new social norm arises which Becky reportedly calls being “a real white Australian”. The reader is being challenged to reconsider the basis of non-Indigenous legitimacy in Australia, and to choose legitimacy through relationship with Indigenous people, and all that implies about hybrid subjectivities, alternative epistemologies, non-Indigenous responsibility to explore and understand their history in this country, and the construction of shared past in the midst of present relationships.

FOR YOU, I will start the story of Becky Castledine when she is migrating from England to Australia on the SS Oruba in 1908.

Flinders Ranges, 2003

On the back step of a house in Hawker, I heard the story of Rebecca’s trip from an elderly Adnyamathanha woman, recalling the “Mrs Forbes” she knew when she was a girl.

*She came from a big family – maybe 9, 10, 12 kids. Her Mum and Dad said, like white way to send them off when they’re grown. She trained as a nurse and then came out with her friends looking for nursing jobs. She worked in the children’s hospital in Sydney. I think she said 1906 she came, six weeks it took.*<sup>63</sup>

The English archives documented that both Becky’s parents had died, of a “fatty heart” and alcoholism. Two siblings were in Canada, and her youngest sister in a Children’s home. Another sister would follow her to Australia later on, but they did not meet again. I corresponded with that

62. Tracy Spencer, “‘White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp’: Representations of ‘shared Space’”, *Journal of Australian Studies* 82 (2004); Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*; Norman B. Tindale, *White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp*, Field Journals, Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition Journal 2, Adelaide Museum Archives.; Meaghan Morris, “Panorama: The Live, the Dead and the Living”, in Paul Foss (ed.), *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture* (Leichhardt NSW: Pluto Press, 1988).

63. Sylvia Brady, “Conversation with Sylvia Brady”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Hawker SA: 2003).

sister's daughter in Tasmania, passing on addresses between Adnyamathanha cousins in South Australia, and Canadian cousins searching out their genealogy.

#### Flinders Ranges, 2001

Becky lived in a verandahed dwelling in Leichhardt in Sydney until 1913 – one of those single fronted terraces where the verandah makes the house colder and darker than it might otherwise have been. Picture Becky on a train, zigzagging over the Blue Mountains, making a slow arrow across the high plains, until the fence lines drop away and a line of dark soil and messy eucalypt crowns signal a muddy river, somewhere over and down from the lip of its high banks.

“Back’o’ Bourke”, in the “outside” country of New South Wales, Becky found work in the homestead on Winbar Station, on the banks of the Darling River. A central corridor joined the front verandah to the kitchen which opened to a back courtyard area also called a verandah, near which the workers ate, and where Becky boiled clothes in the copper.

When I asked her granddaughter, Daisy Shannon, why her grandmother might have come to Australia in the first place, and then travelled inland, she said:

*My grandmother Rebecca reckoned, if she meets her first Aboriginal man she's going to marry one. I think she done that! Yes, so she knew what she was coming out for.<sup>64</sup>*

Imagine Becky and Jack meeting at the branding yards where Jack is breaking in horses, dressed flash, and his dark skin shiny with sweat.

They married in front of the Registrar in Bourke 1914, with two police as witnesses, where Jack made “his mark” with an “X” and gave his name as Jack Forbes.<sup>65</sup> They married again Aboriginal-way in the camp Jack took Becky to, receiving their firesticks, and listening to the corroboree that went all night.<sup>66</sup>

#### Western NSW, 2004

Jack took Becky back to his own country, “Corner Country” where NSW, Queensland and South Australia meet. While Becky kept to herself on the stations where Jack found work, she was common gossip in the white population. “Ah well”, said an old timer at Tibooburra, as I shared a cold

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64. Daisy Shannon, “Transcript of Interview 1”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Quorn SA: 2001).

65. Marriage registered in New South Wales, Australia. No. 3726.

66. Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, 175.

meat salad with him and his wife, “there was a Mrs Witchetty who went off living with the blacks and eating what they ate and that sort of thing....



**Jack and Rebecca Forbes and their sons Jack and Raymond**  
Photo courtesy of Daisy Shannon, Jack and Rebecca's granddaughter

I reckon there might have been a newspaper article – they only got news once a month up here back then – and she had the long dress and everything, come out from England. She wanted to marry a pure Australian: she wanted to marry a pure Aborigine. She was a real Australian and she got a real Australian all right.”<sup>67</sup>

On expedition through that region in 1938-39, anthropologist Norman Tindale found a news clipping about Becky headed “White Woman lives as a lubra in blacks camp”, and pasted it into his field journals.<sup>68</sup> By then, Becky was long gone; Mrs Forbes travelled further west with Jack and their two sons to the Flinders Ranges of South Australia, where the Forbes’ family joined the Adnyamathanha community.

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67. Bill Thomson, “Conversation with Bill Thomson”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Tibooburra SA: 2004).

68. Tindale, *White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp*.

In 1932, journalist Ernestine Hill travelled to “a blacks camp in the heart of the Flinders Ranges” to interview “The most astounding human document in the annals of the outback.”<sup>69</sup> “The Strange Case of Mrs Widgety” was published in *The Sunday Guardian Sun*, and later in Hill’s book, *The Great Australian Loneliness*.<sup>70</sup> The United Aborigines missionary at Nepabunna mission where Mrs Forbes now lived – one Reg (R. M.) Williams who would later become an outback icon – was angry that Hill had posed as Mrs Forbes’ sister to obtain an interview with the otherwise reclusive widow.<sup>71</sup> Hill writes the interview in “Mrs Witchetty’s” own voice, so that her account of her life ends with:

I don’t worry. The path has led into strange places, but I have no regrets. If, as they say, a wife always takes her husband’s nationality, I am an Australian, actually the only real white Australian there is.<sup>72</sup>

#### Flinders Ranges, 2002

An Adnyamathanha woman produced a sketch for me that she had made of Mrs Forbes hut at Nepabunna mission. Then she reiterated for my tape recorder a story she had told me first over the fruit aisle in Woollies at Port Augusta, how Mrs Forbes used to invite her and other young girls inside for “a cup o tea and a lump o cake”, and how the tea was sipped out of white enamel mugs with pink flowers printed on them.<sup>73</sup> The sketch showed that Mrs Forbes’ hut had no verandah: Mrs Forbes had a box she sat on outside, moving it with the moving shade cast by the hut. The shadow reaching marks on the swept ground told her when the mailman was coming, when the store opened, when her son would be riding his pushbike home for the weekend.

#### Flinders Ranges, 2001

Mrs Forbes life was not remarkable: “[she] read, crocheted, visited her friends, and looked forward to visits from her sons who worked on stations”.<sup>74</sup> She retained her Cockney accent, wore black stockings, stockpiled government ration blankets, and participated where she was able in the initiation ceremonies when her sons went through the Law. Granny Dolly, one of the oldest Adnyamathanha women, remembers “Mrs. Forbes used to catch her own kangaroo and rabbit – and bush tucker

69. Ernestine Hill, “The Strange Case of Mrs. Widgety”, *The Sunday Guardian Sun*, 18 Dec 18 1932.

70. Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*.

71. R. M. Williams, “Conversation with RM Williams by Phone on 13/08/01”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Phone: 2001).

72. Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, 175.

73. Margaret Brown, “Transcript of Interview”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Leigh Creek: 2002).

74. Spencer, “White Woman Lives as a Lubra in Native Camp”, 74.

– she used to go out with the old ones and learnt that way. She was a good one.<sup>75</sup> She also learnt to deliver babies: many of the older Adnyamathanha people I interviewed crowed “Mrs Forbes, she got me!”

But Granny Dolly’s face clouded when I asked her about where Mrs Forbes was buried, on a hill opposite the current Nepabunna cemetery, with only one other grave laid at right angles to her own. “Mrs. Forbes should have been buried this way”, she said, indicating a direction with her hands which I later discovered was the appropriate burial position for those of the south wind moiety, the Mathari. “I told her son that. And she should have been buried with our people (in the Mathari cemetery) because she grown up with us, was one of us.”<sup>76</sup> But Rebecca had asked to be buried with Jim Page, the first white missionary to establish the community at Nepabunna, who had suicided and been buried there in 1935.

I had the light weight of a squirming child on my lap as Granny Gertie looked wistfully beyond us and out the window to the bare slopes where the old huts used to be. “She was really good help for the people. They taught her a lot of other [things]. Yes, she was good woman – a white woman – to come and stay with us.”<sup>77</sup>

Murraylands, 2004

You can read the epitaph placed on Mrs Forbes grave by her grandchildren and great grandchildren in 2004. It says: “A true friend and companion of the Adnyamathanha.”

#### JIM’S STORY AS PARABLE FROM THE CONTACT ZONE

The second grave lying at right angles to Mrs Forbes is crowned with a carved mulga wood cross. Down its silvered vertical are engraved the words “*Jesus saves*”. Across its arms, reads *James Page 22 Dec 1935*. Jim Page’s story, while not recounted in this article, can also be rendered as a chiasmic parable, pairing the assertion of salvation for a man who died by suicide, with the salvation won for Adnyamathanha through Jim’s affirmation of their culture and religion, remembered by Adnyamathanha as saying:

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75. Dolly Coulthard, “Conversation with Dolly Coulthard 16701”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Copley: 2001).

76. Coulthard, “Conversation with Dolly Coulthard 16701”.

77. Gertie Johnson, “Transcript of Interview 17701”, ed. Tracy Spencer (Nepabunna: 2001).

You people got your own God, like you worship a God, and I worship the same God as you do, but only you do it in a different way.<sup>78</sup>

Jim's arguments in the missionary magazine for itinerant missionaries rather than settled mission stations come into dialogue with Adnyamathanha interpretations of his death as "he didn't want to leave us" and the permanent place in the community memory he achieved by being buried there. The ongoing search for a suitable well to sustain the community during Jim's time forms a metaphor in conversation with biblical imagery of Living Water and water in the wilderness. A narrative from lived experience, recounted through oral histories as well as archival material, that turns on such juxtapositions, creates a parabolic theology that can only be read in the parabolic text, and not be extracted from it. Like the parable of Becky's story, Jim's parable unsettles the reader's expectations of a "good" missionary as achieving something for the people, in terms of either the mission's own ideology, or contemporary expectations of social improvements for Indigenous people. Instead, the text produced will turn on Jim's tragic suicide, which itself evokes notions of sacrifice, atonement and redemption. Like those hearing the story of Jesus' passion, the reader is challenged to think about success and failure in new categories, and is encouraged to read success through relationality within Indigenous community that endures beyond the death of a life.

#### PARABLES AS A THEOLOGY OF DECOLONISATION

These parables focus especially on decolonisation for non-Indigenous Australians, through assuming identification between reader and the primary subjects Becky and Jim. Confronting their internalised colonial scripts regarding non-Indigenous identity, and non-Indigenous roles in relation to Indigenous people, readers are presented with images of identity and relationship in Becky and Jim's lives which provoke readers to enact decolonisation within their own lives. Is this theology? The text of these contemporary parables is deliberately literary, rather than religious, in order to convey stories in a form accessible to mainstream Australian society. Biblical parables adopted language to achieve this task in their day. The text intentionally remains a description of a life, rather than commentary upon it, in keeping with the intrinsically incarnational emphasis of Christianity. The juxtapositions created in the text, and between text and reader, create "room for God to move" where

<sup>78</sup> Cliff Coulthard, "Transcript of Interview 191001", ed. Tracy Spencer (Iga Warta: 2001).

new understandings of humanity begin to answer pressing ethical and moral questions confronting Australians.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A "POST" COLONIAL THEOLOGY  
IN AUSTRALIAN LIFE WRITING

Despite the debates in theological method, it seems that theologies that address critical questions in postcolonial Australia will be unequivocally drenched in memory, history, story and landscape that are peculiar to this country. It will not be a passive observation or polite distance from the events and people who share this history, but immersive experiences in "contact zones" where Indigenous and non-Indigenous encounter each other and a "new self experience".<sup>79</sup> It will use metaphors that attend to their postcolonial readings, and extend these into parables through which a theology of decolonisation is expressed. This is the kind of immersive experience the stories of Jim and Becky are about, and the sort of immersive experience the telling of their stories engenders. Their stories enlarge the meanings of doctrines like incarnation and redemption with images and phrases that resonate with Australian experience. The stories of Becky and Jim engage you in contrapuntal narratives that have emerged from the Australian contact zone, and ask you to locate yourself and the Spirit of Christ within that story.

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79. Hilary Regan (ed.), *Christ and Context*, 235.