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# 'Still I Am Not Tragic': Indigenous Australian Women's Sovereignty in Marie Munkara's *Every Secret Thing* and *A Most Peculiar Act*

*Fatema Johera Ahmed*
Monash University

**Abstract**

In this paper, I examine the representation of the Indigenous women characters in two novels by Indigenous Australian writer Marie Munkara, namely *Every Secret Thing* (2009) and *A Most Peculiar Act* (2014). Munkara's novels are set in the early phase of the colonisation of Australia and trace the takeover of Indigenous lands and lives by the Catholic Church and bureaucrats employed by the office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines. I argue that colonial constructions of white femininity disempowered both settler and Indigenous women. Despite being doubly colonised because of their race and gender, Munkara's female characters maintain their sovereignty by engaging in decolonising practices. Indigenous women's resistant subjectivity works in tandem with their connection to their lands to expose white ways of knowing as not the universals they are taken to be. They reveal that acquiring the coloniser's language and imitating white cultural practices do not take away from their Indigeneity. Rather these are signs of Indigenous people's dynamism and syncretism; they are means by which Indigenous women survive colonisation, maintain their sovereignty, and even creatively counter the colonial imposition.

**Keywords:** Marie Munkara, sovereignty, gender, settler colonialism, Indigenous Australia

Indigenous Australian women's writing challenges stereotypes of Aboriginality in white discourses and creates the space for resilience and survivance. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes that Indigenous writing serves "two transformative functions – healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society – both components in the process of decolonization" (2009, p. 15). In this article, I examine Marie Munkara's representation of how Indigenous women maintain their sovereignty in the face of their everyday reality of colonisation in her novels *Every Secret Thing* (2009a) and *A Most Peculiar Act* (2014a). As epistemic subjects, a positionality denied to non-western people, Indigenous women's resistant subjectivity and connection to their lands expose white ways of knowing as not the universals they are taken to be. I argue that colonial constructions of white femininity disenfranchised both white and Indigenous women. I demonstrate that by continuing to operate from within their Indigenous epistemology and ontology, Munkara's Indigenous characters show that acquiring the coloniser's language and imitating white cultural practices do not take away from their Indigeneity. Rather these, together with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, are means by which Indigenous women survive colonisation, maintain their agency and right to self-determination, and creatively counter the colonial imposition. The two novels by Munkara I study in this article show that prior to the British invasion in 1788 of what is now referred to as Australia, Indigenous women enjoyed an autonomous role and that this is the standpoint from which they continue to operate in the contact zone.

Historically, Indigenous women were the primary providers of food. Their place in the community was comparable to, and equal with, Indigenous men (Payne, 1992, p. 65). They had their own ceremonies and sacred sites; they were consulted on issues pertaining to the community and enforced laws broken by other women (Behrendt, 1993, p. 28). The theft of Indigenous lands took place concurrently with the denigration of Indigenous people by the European invaders. The relative absence of white women in the outback meant Indigenous female bodies were coded as inherently "rapable" and "radically unchaste" (Puren, 1995, p. 24). Terms like 'black velvet', 'gin', and 'lubra' were used to refer to Indigenous women that white men had sexual liaisons with (McGrath, 1984, p. 233). Together, these terms along with "the influences of a patriarchal and imperialistic culture" (Armstrong, 1996, p. ix) constructed Indigenous women as sexually rampant beings (Lake, 1993, p. 382), denied their subjectivity (Rooks, 2012, p. 50), and contributed to the overall deterioration of their status and power (Huhndorf and Suzack, 2010, p. 3).

Questions of consent were ignored, or became, at best, ambiguous, as some Indigenous women, or their husbands acting on their behalf, entered into sexual agreements with white men during the early phase of the colonial contact (McGrath, 1984, p. 236). Indigenous women were essentially regarded as prostitutes, a view that absolved the colonisers of responsibility or guilt as long as they paid a small fee or with a supply of food like tea, sugar, and flour (p. 236). Indeed, the colonialists held that "her treatment as a concubine... [was] far more humane than that which the Aboriginal wife received from her husband" (Threlkeld, 1974, p. 49). Conflict over Indigenous women between Indigenous and white men additionally meant that interracial

sexual relations became a major cause for misunderstandings and frontier violence (Behrendt, 2000, p. 354). Given the unequal nature of the colonial encounter, Indigenous women were also often the first to learn the invaders' language and ways, and were then able to broker understanding between their communities and the intruders (McGrath, 1984, p. 248). In instances where Indigenous women 'consented' to interracial sexual relations – as depicted in Indigenous literature, like Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), Jeanine Leane's *Purple Threads* (2011), Ali Cobby Ackerman's *Ruby Moonlight* (2012), and Dylan Coleman's *Mazin' Grace* (2012), and the two novels by Munkara studied in this article – white patriarchy and the processes of colonisation impacted the relationship negatively.

The sexualisation of Indigenous women during the early phase of the colonial encounter continues to make them vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence in the contemporary world (Huhndorf and Suzack, 2010, p. 5). Larissa Behrendt explains that colonial notions about Indigenous women meant that white judges in the present day have "been quick to accept claims of devalued Aboriginal women's sexuality that has lowered the standards applied when determining whether consent had been given by Aboriginal women to sexual encounters" (2005, p. 249). Rather than addressing these issues, white middle-class feminists tend to simplistically attribute the oppression of Indigenous women to their men. By subsuming Indigenous women and their politics as a sub-set of the category 'woman', mainstream feminism elides the fact that white women have been just as responsible for the dispossession of Indigenous women as white men (Behrendt, 1993, p. 31).

Indigenous storytelling offers a counter to the "colonial myth", that is, the "story of imagined White superiority" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 3). Munkara's female characters demonstrate gender-specific strategies of agency that talk up to the colonialists while seeking to create and sustain spaces of humour that resist the positioning of Aboriginality outside of the category of the human. Her first novel, *Every Secret Thing* (2009a*)* depicts the early phase of the colonial encounter between Indigenous people and the Catholic Church as the latter, referred to in the narrative as the mission mob, tries to colonise Indigenous people's lives and lands under the pretext of salvaging their 'heathen' souls. Indigenous people are referred to as the bush mob in the narrative. The missionisation process operated according to the rationale that "[i]f a people do not recognise the name Jesus Christ ... then it is the duty of the Christian to take their land and bring them into the light" (Pascoe, 2018). The missionaries in *Every Secret Thing* adhere to this logic in their disregard for Indigenous people's say in the matter as they wrest control over the education and care of Indigenous children and duly convert them to Christianity. The colonisers' renaming of their Indigenous wards with 'proper' Christian names stems from their anxiety that "[n]ative names create a sense of presence, a tease that undermines the simulations of absence and cultural dominance" (Vizenor, 2009, p. 5) that settler colonialism is based on.

The 'philanthropic' mission even appears to have some success as some of the children take an interest in Christianity and express the desire to take the cloth. But this is far from the case as the children use this opportunity to retaliate against the mission mob's infringement of their

lives by assimilating and reworking the Catholic theology. One of the Indigenous girls at the mission school, Sara, devotes her time at the mission school equally between ecclesiastical studies and exploring her sexuality with multiple Indigenous partners. Having discovered a "canonical loophole" (Munkara, 2009, p. 10), she decides to relieve herself and Father Macredie of the anguish both feel during each confessional session and the harsh penance he subsequently imposes on her. Sara does this by bypassing the Catholic confessional altogether and going straight to God for forgiveness. From her first-hand observation of the missionaries and study of the scriptures, she enlightens the other bush children that "[y]ou could murder or rape and pillage, do what you liked, but if you sucked up to his Godliness's arse and showed even a modicum of repentance your slate would be wiped clean" (p. 9). Unlike the Catholic Church's mortification with the flesh, Sara reasons that neither sexual nor spiritual activities detract from the other. The balance she strikes contrasts with the male missionaries, who denigrate and (s)exploit Indigenous men, women, and children, but continue to schizophrenically regard themselves as culturally, intellectually, and spiritually superior to their wards. In this way, Sara maintains sovereignty of the mind even if she may not have sovereignty over her affairs.

While Sara's rebels in private, other Indigenous children openly challenge the missionaries. Baptised and renamed 'Mary Magdalene' by the mission mob, Wuninga gives birth to what the latter note to be the first 'pale-skinned' baby. The missionaries are confounded at this point. The nuns' constant surveillance, together with Wuninga's strict residence in the girls' dormitory, which prevents her interaction even with her own family, should have meant that no men, Indigenous or white, had access to her. The mission mob surmise that the new-born 'half-caste' is the product of one of the male missionaries' indiscretion and threaten Wuninga with fire and brimstone to divulge her sexual partner's identity. Since Indigenous people's autonomy and sovereignty are granted some semblance of recognition only when they take the form of the coloniser's political tools and expressions, Wuninga counters the mission mob's belligerence by using their scriptures against them (Ahmed, 2018, p. 74). Her knowledge of the Bible and ingenuity come to her rescue as Wuninga makes known to them that her pregnancy is a miracle, similar to that of Mother Mary's virgin birth of Jesus Christ. What this means is that any doubts about Wuninga's explanation would similarly question the veracity of the Immaculate Conception that the Christian faith so delicately hinges on. At this juncture, the western brand of rationality and emphasis on positivist knowledge would appear to discredit the authority of the Bible, containing not just Wuninga but even Biblical women to the Eurocentric angel/whore dichotomy.

Wuninga's explanation, on the other hand, is wholly congruent with the Indigenous world of reference for it acknowledges that the world is populated by both human and nonhuman life forms as well as spirits (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, p. 280). Indeed, "spirituality is a physical fact because it is experienced as part of one's life" (p. 280) so that Wuninga's "virgin birth for [God's] only begotten daughter" (Munkara, 2009, p. 37) is entirely plausible in the Indigenous worldview. Anne Brewster explains that "such knowledge is incommensurate with a rational belief system and as such it is tacit resistance to western ways of thinking" (1996, p. 9). Unable

to discredit Wuninga's claim, the missionaries writhe in their helplessness as they discover that they no longer have hegemony over the interpretation of the Holy Word and cannot prevent Indigenous people from drawing on Biblical stories to make sense of their everyday experiences (Ahmed, 2018, p. 75); nor can they wield it as an authority over the former 'pagans' who have now become their spiritual equals.

The narrator reveals that Wuninga's sexual partner was a Macassan trepang harvester and that the missionaries refused to consider this possibility because of their "colonising, conquering mentality" (Behrendt, 2000, p. 353), which neurotically drove them to legitimise their own foundational stories pertaining to their 'discovery' of, and 'belonging' to, Australia. Their "possessive logics of patriarchal white sovereignty" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xi) require that they instate themselves as the first settlers and erase other non-Indigenous presence, including the six centuries of contact between Maccassan trepang harvesters and Indigenous people. The colonialist mentality, which has the missionaries clamouring that "No, the Maccassans have never been there… apart from the bush mob we were the first" (Munkara, 2009, p. 38), would rather there be suspicion and discord within the clergy than consider other more plausible reasons for the child's existence.

Indigenous people's lack of concern about who fathered Wuninga's child, in contrast, showcases cultural gaps between the two communities concerning women's sexual autonomy. Despite the missionaries' attempt to instil in Indigenous people a mortification of the flesh, Indigenous people find the missionaries' inquisitiveness distasteful apart from constituting an invasion of Wuninga's privacy. Given their collective identity, one elderly Indigenous female onlooker's private misgiving that "[n]ext thing they'd be asking who she slept with" (Munkara, 2009, p. 36) rightly anticipates that the missionaries' prying into Wuninga's activities is not a one-off incident. The bush mob are perceptive that there was "one set of rules for the mission mob and one set for the bush mob" (p. 19). It becomes apparent to them that the missionaries' 'benevolence' was targeted towards making Indigenous people their eternal subjects, not their spiritual 'equals.' Hence, the Church's authority is at stake when it is unable to punish Wuninga's transgressive sexuality as a warning to other Indigenous women. Indigenous people's indifference to the arrival of the new-born is arguably also owing to their recognition of the centrality of Wuninga's reproductive capacities to the overall survival of their community. Indeed, Indigenous women's "lives carry the meaning of the great human cycle of life, death, and rebirth, an ongoing process that Christianity forces into a linear paradigm of individual sin, guilt, death, and redemption" (Kidwell, 1994, p. 149).

Meanwhile, the male missionaries' mistreatment of women, Indigenous or otherwise, exposes their misogyny as embedded within the "institutional pyromania" (Munkara, 2009a, p. 49) that has a long history of silencing 'troublesome' women. The Church's systematic de-sexing of women who join its ranks, for instance, is based on the Brothers' staunch belief that one "couldn't really call the nuns women" (p. 42). Though they had joined the 'humanitarian' mission, the Sisters are, or consequently become, bereft of their capacity for empathy and

compassion. Not only are they not affectionate toward the Indigenous children they are put in charge of, *Every Secret Thing* portrays them as deficit in their vows of compassion. As with the narrative's exploration of the Brothers' hypocrisy and mean-spiritedness, the Sisters are depicted as far from godly in being motivated by malice and their desire for mastery in their interaction with the bush children, just as they are, in turn, dominated by their male colleagues. An illustration of this is Sister Annunciata's regular mistreatment of twelve-year old Taringa, baptised as 'Ignatius'. She attributes his resistance to her authority, in the rare instance when she is able to detect it, to "chronic interbreeding" (p. 5), because she believes that he has every reason to be grateful to her for 'civilising' him and saving him from a 'heathen' life in the bush.

The missionaries' power relations with Indigenous people can be said to have generated from colonial love; that is, "an imperialist, dualist logic, [that] dangerously fetishizes the beloved object and participates in the oppression and subjugation of difference" (Ureña, 2017, p. 86). This expression of love is predicated on conquest and ownership; it requires that the colonised other submit to being "accepted by another as their possession," which is "the willingness to turn oneself into such a possession and accept the other person as a gift" (Gräbner, 2014, p. 53). That colonial love was not limited to the religious sphere alone is apparent from Munkara's second novel, *A Most Peculiar Act*, which depicts interactions between Indigenous people and European bureaucrats employed by the Chief Protector of Aborigines to overlook the 'well-being' of Indigenous people. This narrative is set in the time leading up to the Japanese bombing of Darwin during the Second World War. Similar to the female missionaries in *Every Secret Thing*, Munkaradepicts the dehumanising impact of colonisation on settler women in the secular sphere in *A Most Peculiar Act*. It was the responsibility of the male patrol officers, working under the direction of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, to compel Indigenous people to become 'civilised' and assimilate western culture "instead of clinging to their primitive ways like stubborn children" (p. 14). Likewise, white women were expected to fulfil their domestic and reproductive responsibilities by establishing 'civilised' Christian homes in the settler state.

A white woman who grew up in the colony, Drew Hepplewaite's attempts to penetrate the public sphere in *A Most Peculiar Act* are reminiscent of settler women's demands for "the feminisation of 'native' administrations" (Holland, 2001, p. 27). One such demand was the appointment of white women as the Chief Protector of Aborigines during the 1920s and 1930s (p. 27). Drew succeeds in becoming the first woman patrol officer to be employed by the Chief Protector of Aborigines albeit by misrepresenting herself. She secures her job not because the settler state accommodates her aspirations, but by taking advantage of her ambiguous name to pretend to be a man. She achieves this by falsifying a 'manly' resume that none of the extant male patrol officers can match up to. The presence of Indigenous women in the frontier, who were regarded as sexually promiscuous and, therefore, more in need of surveillance and control (Haggis, 1990, p. 107), can be said to have contributed to the relaxation of the Eurocentric angel/whore binary in Drew's case. Incidentally, Drew is able to remain in her post when her ruse is discovered because the Chief Protector does not want to admit that he had made a mistake by appointing her.

In working to 'uplift' Indigenous women as per her job description, Drew's expression of colonial love refuses to recognise the agency of Indigenous people and prevents the formation of alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. She contributes instead to the consolidation of whiteness in the settler state while shedding the very 'femininity' she is valued for. Her racial affiliation bestows her with colonial authority in spite of her gender-based marginalisation. As a white settler woman, who is simultaneously colonised and colonising, the negative effects of her employment are more widespread than that caused by the male patrol officers. The 'improvements' she proposes to the racist policies as part of her 'white woman's burden' further cements Indigenous people's disenfranchisement. They parody the rhetoric settler women spewed about being better situated by virtue of their femininity, especially their motherhood, to make a case for their participation in the public domain and supervision of Indigenous women's affairs (Jacobs, 2009, p. 87). Drew's actions disprove Eurocentric notions that white women needed to be protected from 'hypersexualised' Indigenous men in the frontier. Drew is stopped only when her male colleagues, who had hitherto neglected their duties, intervene in her plans with the aim of discrediting her because they feel threatened by her success.

With "right-wing red-necked racist" (Munkara, 2014, p. 50) philosophies, Drew nevertheless remains hell-bent on maintaining a racially segregated society, making matters worse for Indigenous people and further deteriorating relations between the settler state and Indigenous people. For example, her decision that Indigenous people must be taught to use pit toilets and stop "crapping everywhere like animals" (p. 58) has no basis in reality. In one scene, she is surprised at the absence of any odour at the Indigenous camp after watching an Indigenous child urinate in the open. Drew responds with characteristic lack of intellectual curiosity by blatantly proceeding with her original plans rather than seeking to understand why her racist formulations have been unmet. In so doing, she side-lines her own empirical experiences to maintain her preconceived notions about Indigenous people's 'inferiority'. Drew's feminist-like emergence from the margins and incapacity to converse with Indigenous women displays the process Jackie Huggins labels "intellectual colonisation" (1998, p. 29). By this Huggins refers to the conversion of settler women's ideological predispositions into the universal female view by purporting to speak for Indigenous women and overlooking how this behaviour renders Indigenous women invisible (p. 25-36, 58-70).

In the end, Drew avoids being discharged from her duties for her aggression towards the male patrol officers by initiating an illicit affair with the married but much-unfaithful Administrator. For all her bravado she is only able to keep her office by securing the protection of a man higher in rank than the Chief Protector, who see this as an opportunity to remove her from her post. This suggests that the position of power she occupies is tokenistic at best, and that the power play between white men and women in a patriarchal society is essentially of a sexual nature. Theorising about the colonial construction of Indigenous women, Jean Barman writes

that "Aboriginal women's agency was sexualized. In the extreme case their every act became perceived as a sexual act and, because of the unceasing portrayal of their sexuality as wild and out of control, as an act of provocation" (1997/1998, p. 264). *A Most Peculiar Act* demonstrates that this description more aptly applies to Drew and reveals how its handling of white women was a precursor for western patriarchal practices vis-à-vis Indigenous women.

In contrast, Tarrti, an old Indigenous matriarch in *Every Secret Thing*, continues to command respect among the bush mob in spite of what could qualify as her 'mistake' for allowing the missionaries to build their Church on land she is custodian of. The narrator discloses that as a woman with agency Tarrti engineered this event to spite Jerrekepai, an Indigenous patriarch, because the latter had passed her up in favour of a more docile woman from the community in their youth. That is, Jerrekepai's opposition to the missionaries when they first appeared meant that Tarrti took it upon herself to permit their presence because she was "automatically and virulently opposed" (Munkara, 2009, p. 18) to anything he thought or wanted. In spite of the disastrous consequences of her actions, Tarrti's warnings about an impending cyclone put the bush mob's speculations that had been going on for weeks to rest. This kind of authority is typically imagined as male in the coloniser's culture. Tarrti's knowledge of the land becomes critical to the bush mob's survival when the cyclone eventually strikes. Having mocked her weather forecast as the "ramblings … of a silly and unsophisticated old woman" (p. 56), the mission mob barely survive the calamity hiding in an overflowing toilet. Meanwhile, the church, the building one would presume to be the most sanctified for the mission mob's God is housed there, is blown away by the cyclone, an incident that underscores their un-belonging to, and unlawful occupation of, Indigenous land.

Equally insightful is the Indigenous narrator's commentary in *Every Secret Thing* that Indigenous people never thought to ask the invaders to leave even as they, Tarrti included, are increasingly disenfranchised by the clergy's misdemeanours. This implies that Tarrti's transnationalism and engagement as a cultural broker with the missionaries may have been in keeping with the bush mob's cultural protocols for dealings with visitors. Tarrti's decision to warn the mission mob in this context stems from Indigenous cultural protocols of reciprocity and relationality. The non-hierarchical basis of Indigenous people's duty of care posits a challenge to the racial hierarchy through which the colonisers claim their superiority. Limiting Tarrti's action to that of colonial complicity, on the other hand, denies the wholeness of her experiences. However, such national origin stories continue to be circulated by the settler state as they depict Indigenous people as passive being, or equally worse, as being desirous of the invasion.

It is when the clergy decides to solve the 'problem' of the 'half-caste' children they (pro)created with Indigenous women that the first cracks appear in the bush mob's defence against the invaders in *Every Secret Thing*. Jeanette Armstrong's observation that the attack on the intimate spaces of the Indigenous family happened by denigrating women's role (1996, p. x) sheds light on this process. The valorisation of Indigenous women's responsibilities within their community is vastly different from the western feminist's activism for rights (Udel, 2001,

p. 43). Clara Sue Kidwell explains that "[a]lthough feminists might deny this equation of anatomy and destiny, the fact is that the female reproductive function is a crucial factor in determining a woman's social role in tribal societies" (1994, p. 149). This is all the more so when the disappearance of Indigenous people is necessary for the Australian settler state to assert its legitimacy. The transference of 'half-caste' children to another mission, deceptively named the Garden of Eden, then in *Every Secret Thing* is, by the same act, the discarding of their Indigenous mothers and the denial of their right to motherhood.

When Marigold, one of the 'half-caste' children who was forcibly removed by the clergy in order to be interpellated with a white subjectivity, returns to her community after two decades of traumatic experiences in white households, her biological mother's apparent indifference to her presence comes as a shock to both Marigold and the reader. Based on Munkara's own experience as a member of the 'Stolen Generations' with her mother, Marigold's story in *Every Secret Thing* is an inversion of the 'happily ever after' that mainstream narratives associate with family reunions. Munkara departs from this trajectory to focus on the challenges associated with the trauma of Marigold's and her mother Judy's severance. After living as a domestic in white households with no memory of her early years with her Indigenous family, the physically, sexually, and psychologically abused Marigold is appalled by the poverty and squalor she finds Judy living in. Following a lifetime of being meddled with by the Church and state's racist policies, Judy becomes even more defensive as she perceives that her daughter, who has been indoctrinated to consider Aboriginality as savagery, is wary of her living conditions.

Having once been denied her right to mother, Judy maintains her sovereignty over her emotions by keeping Marigold at arm's length while simultaneously teaching her, as is traditionally expected of an Indigenous mother, the ways of the community. The narrator explains that "[t]he pain of losing [Marigold] had solidified and turned into a mountain of indifference" (Munkara, 2009, p. 170). Munkara refrains from translating this trauma in *Every Secret Thing* to prevent the assimilation of these stories by mainstream readers as typical Australian "battler stories" (Schaffer, 2002, p. 5), She conveys its unspeakable nature by not offering Marigold and Judy any scope to heal together. Their inability to communicate in the narrative resists the trope of suffering mothers and vulnerable children that is understood to be transcultural in its reach and used to mediate the traumatic legacy of child removal and assimilation in Australia (Kennedy, 2008, p. 162). Through her anticolonial response to the 'Stolen Generations' narratives, Munkara exposes the limits of empathy by disallowing readers any scope to identify with Marigold or Judy, whereby readers avoid examining their own complicity as beneficiaries of colonisation (Ahmed, 2018, p. 98-99). As an outsider to her own community, Marigold is thus dumbfounded when Judy self-flagellates, as per Indigenous cultural response to grief, in response to the mission mob's decision to confiscate a pet pig that is a nuisance to the entire community. Unable to deal with what she interprets as abandonment, Marigold leaves her mother a second time in the end. The absence of a resolution leads one to conclude that "[p]erhaps some traumatic experiences can only be acknowledged and survived" but not shared (Kennedy, 2008, p. 167).

As with institutionalisation, sterilisation, and the formulation of policies that advocated the biological absorption of Indigenous women through their marriage to lower-class white men into the invader society, domestic servitude in white households was another space where Indigenous women were contained to assist in the disappearance of Indigenous people (Haskin, 2007, p. 125). It was held that domestic service with the white mistress as the knowing subject, in addition to Indigenous women's removal from their culture and country, would train them to become disciplined subjects (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, p. 281). The impersonal nature of the power relations between the sixteen-year-old Indigenous girl Sugar and her white mistress, Penelope, requires Sugar to play a secondary role as a servant to support Penelope's 'superior' position as a settler wife in *A Most Peculiar Act*. Here too the supposedly utopian relationship of the kindly mistress and her loyal servant is estranged by colonial characterisations of Indigenous people as bringing disharmony to spaces of white order and domesticity. Ironically, Penelope's oppressive attitudes and behaviour reveal that it is not Indigenous people but she and her fellow white socialites who are agents of disorder within both settler and Indigenous communities.

Penelope's dependence on Sugar negates her attempts to master her underling in the space of inter subjectivity. An instance of this is Penelope's conviction that Sugar is a carrier of contagious diseases. In order to continue benefitting from her Indigenous domestics' labour, Penelope's misgivings are assuaged by having Sugar wear gloves at all times, whereby she cedes her demands for hygiene and cleanliness to Sugar. However, her incapacity to invigilate Sugar in the kitchen from her self-containment in the 'civilised' space of the parlour renders Penelope more vulnerable than she thinks she is. Sugar and the other Indigenous servants rely on their awareness of Victorian society's policing of social hierarchies to shift the power relations. The rigid demarcation of space that separates white women from their domestics is utilised by Sugar to 'contaminate' the wine she courteously offers to Penelope's white guests by drinking directly from every bottle first. Sugar relies on the invaders' sociality and readiness to accept the offer to (re)fill their glasses to secretly overturn the dreaded physical contact. She resists the dual processes of individuation and dehumanisation she is subjected to by drawing on her own "experiences and knowledge of another standard of being human" (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, p. 281).

In the end, Sugar's exposure to white virtues and cultural norms coupled with her experience of racialised intersubjectivity in white cultural domains do not overwrite the values and behavioural codes she was taught by her Indigenous family and community. Since an "Aboriginal woman's relationality is… never based upon the tolerance of others but the experience of the self as part of others" (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, p. 279), Sugar warns the white socialites, who form the crème de la crème of the imperial order, at Penelope's party about the impending Japanese aerial bombing of Darwin. At this critical juncture, when European hegemony is challenged by a new aggressor, Sugar's calm and knowledge of the land embody her sovereignty as she leads the hysterical white partygoers to the safety of the caves. This scene conveys the "incommensurate difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people… and those who have come here" (Moreton-Robinson, 2010, p. 30).

Sugar's rescue of the white imperialists delinks the thwarting of the Japanese attack on Darwin from Eurocentric narratives about the defence of white sovereignty to the actions undertaken by Indigenous people to defend their lands. As the concluding scene of *A Most Peculiar Act*, the bombing of Darwin during the Second World Warforegrounds Indigenous people's subjugated knowledge that they do not want to be invaded a second time over: they had "lost too much already to turn traitor and face going through it a second time. Better to just stick with the devil that you already knew" (Munkara, 2014, p. 168-9). Though she saves them, the partygoers remain ever oblivious to Sugar's feelings and agency. They disregard her presence as they speculate that Indigenous people will join the Japanese to overthrow white hegemony. The restoration of the colonial hierarchy between Sugar and the colonialists inside the cave as they await the Japanese invasion point to the pervasiveness of the colonial mentality as well as the roadblocks that stand in the way of achieving true reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia so long as settlers cling to their white privilege (Ahmed, 2018, p. 84).

Munkara's female Indigenous characters in both the novels examined in this article contend with different but complementary methods of assimilation, which were implemented by the missionaries and bureaucrats to destroy Indigenous cultural and social domains, and, thereby, undermine Indigenous communities. In spite of these challenges, there is no doubt that Munkara's female Indigenous characters are active agents and exercise self-determination in their interaction with the colonisers. While Indigenous women traditionally enjoyed privileges within their community in *Every Secret Thing*, this changed significantly with the colonial encounter. In spite of this the Indigenous female characters demonstrate that they "never totally lost ourselves within the other's reality" (Dodson, 1994, p. 9). The Indigenous women characters are adept at negotiating with and surviving in different white cultural spheres. Sara, Wuninga, Tarrti, Judy, Marigold, and Sugar all exhibit the "warriorship of Aboriginal women's lives" (Bunda, 2018, p. 4) by maintaining their sovereignty and identity despite also assimilating the coloniser's culture to different degrees. Though this is, in the mainstream, often equated with a loss of 'authentic' Indigeneity, the narrative's exploration of the women's subjectivity makes evident that they have "enacted a sovereignty of endurance" (p. 5) by operating from their Indigenous standpoint. Further, Indigenous women endured and survived colonisation because "there was an intimate understanding of the sovereign self – one that acted with dignity, in resistance if required, with kindness, in remembering our identities, with intellect and strategy for change" (p. 5). Hence, the stories in *Every Secret Thing* and *A Most Peculiar Act* do not conform to gendered colonial narratives but Indigenous ones in explicating how Indigenous women overcame the "dispossession of ourselves from ourselves" (p. 5).

In instances where Indigenous women have been emotionally and psychologically damaged by colonisation, they continue, as sovereign women, to mobilise against the colonising processes in effect within their communities and homes. The fragmentary and episodic nature of Munkara's novels also contribute to the process of reclaiming epistemic equity. Due to the omniscient storyteller's use of the third-person to access both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

characters' perspectives, readers are able to delineate an alternative history of a community's collective cultural and political resistance to the invasion. The narrator additionally states that certain stories are recounted multiple times and produced much mirth within the Indigenous community; this suggests that these stories teach current and future generations to negotiate colonisation (Ahmed, 2018, p. 96). Munkara, therefore, undertakes to rewrite narratives of conquest by reclaiming Indigenous women's activism and showcasing how they even defeat the coloniser on multiple occasions using their ingenuity and imagination though the latter remains unaware of this. In conclusion, Indigenous women survive ruptures to their intimate spaces and challenge colonial memory by asserting their sovereignty: their "[d]ifferent ethics, behaviour and values repudiate the moral and intellectual hegemony that effects such domination and oppression" (Moreton-Robinson, 1998, p. 285).

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