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**Abstract**

*In July 1900, Jimmy Governor and his brother Joe commenced their murderous rampage across central New South Wales, killing nine women and children, maiming others, and raping a teenage girl. They were pursued for three months across 3000 kilometres, taunting their hunters with clues, letters and tricks. The last men in the state to be proclaimed outlaws, their pursuit and capture fascinated and terrified a nation on the eve of its Federation.*

*After his conviction, Governor's execution was delayed until after the conclusion of Federation celebrations; even a fragile nation understood the perilous symbolism of launching nationhood whilst hanging a transgressive black man.*

*This article re-examines the crimes, evidence and trial of Governor, and the intense media reportage around them. It reveals a perpetually contested claim for control: of the family, the workplace, race, nation and empire.*

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### **Besieged at home: Jimmy governor's rampage**

On the night of Friday 20 July 1900, 25 year old James Governor, known as 'Jimmy', usually described as a 'half-caste' Aborigine, went to the home of the Mawbey family in Breelong in south-east Australia. He went there with his brother Joe and another Aboriginal man named Jack Underwood. They were armed with a tomahawk, an unloaded rifle, and a heavy club called a boondi or a nulla nulla. The Mawbeys were the white owners of a small land holding and had employed Governor to build fences around their property.

In the house that night, Governor and his accomplices bashed Mrs Mawbey in the head and neck five times with the tomahawk. Part of her brain bulged out of a fracture in her skull, and a neighbour had to press it back in place with a kitchen knife until she died three days later. Her 14 year old son, Percy, intervening in the attack, was bashed on the forehead and the neck, cracking his skull, nearly severing his head from his body, killing him instantly. Elsie Clarke, Mrs Mawbey's 18 year old sister, was hit in the face with the tomahawk, surviving, but left permanently deaf. Mrs Mawbey's 16 year old daughter Grace escaped through the front window with the schoolteacher, Ellen Kerz, aged 21. Governor gave chase, and clubbed them both on the pathway leading from their home. Kerz died immediately of her head injuries; Grace two days later of hers. Grace's 11 year old sister, Hilda, also ran from the house whilst her mother was being attacked, and was chased to a nearby creek where she stumbled, and where five blows to the head by the club-wielding Governor killed her.

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Mr Mawbey was not at home. His eight year old son, Albert, escaped the massacre and ran to get him from the nearby inn where he slept with two older sons, Reggie and Sydney. Their brothers Cecil, 7 and Garnett, 4, slept through the attack in the kitchen at the back of the house. George Mawbey, a 13 year old cousin, escaped injury by hiding under a bed.

Governor's wife, Ethel, a 17 year old white woman, the mother of his child, the Mawbey's domestic servant, may or may not have been an accomplice to these murders. The following morning, Ethel Governor and her baby, Sidney, were captured and taken into custody. Her complicity is disputed, and contradictory statements and admissions were made during Governor's trial. In exchange for her testimony she was released without charge following his subsequent conviction.

Governor and his two accomplices were on the run. Jack Underwood became separated from the brothers and, eight days later, was arrested and imprisoned by civilians near Redbank. Following his trial he was sentenced to hang. Jimmy and Joe continued on what has been described as a 'rampage' or 'horror' for three more months, murdering two more men, a heavily pregnant woman, and a child. Jimmy also raped a 15 year old girl.

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encouragement.

They became the objects of what has been described as ‘the largest manhunt in Australian history’,<sup>2</sup> covering 3000 kilometres, mobilizing a professional and volunteer army of 2000 police, hunters and trackers. They taunted their pursuers, leaving notes and clues; they were spotted frequently by local residents and workers, boldly allowing themselves to be seen and pursued, only to outwit their hunters and disappear further into the bush. They broke into homes, some occupied, some abandoned in their wake, and cooked themselves meals, or ordered meals to be cooked for them at gunpoint, helped themselves to supplies, used shaving equipment, and left messages and gifts of ammunition for their hunters. Jimmy was captured alive on the 99<sup>th</sup> day of the search. On the 103<sup>rd</sup> day of the search, his brother Joe was shot dead. For his crimes Jimmy Governor was tried and hanged.

This narrative of his crimes is not necessarily a collection of uncontested facts. Much of it I have derived from the most recent biography of Governor, by Laurie Moore and Stephan Williams, titled *The True Story of Jimmy Governor*.<sup>3</sup> Jimmy Governor has now moved into Australian popular memory. His crimes have been adapted into anonymous ballads, epic verse, acclaimed fiction and feature film.<sup>4</sup> Artefacts from his rampage are preserved in museums. Local histories are filled with minutiae, rumours and personal claims upon the Governor story. Fred Schepisi’s film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was based on Thomas Keneally’s novel of the same name, that novel based loosely upon

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie Moore and Stephan Williams, *The True Story of Jimmy Governor* (2001) Allen and Unwin, back cover.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> The ballads and verses are collected in *ibid.* Jimmy Governor is the source for Thomas Keneally’s novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) Flamingo, and Fred Schepisi’s film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978).

the Governor story as it was told in Frank Clune's 1959 biography.<sup>5</sup> Colin Johnson, the indigenous writer now known as Mudrooroo, after seeing the Schepisi film wrote, 'The image lingering on is that of a berserk boong hacking to death white ladies'.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Jimmy Governor traces the perpetual contest of management. Whether referring to the management of the family, the workplace, race, nation or empire, beneath Governor's story undulates the perpetual exchange of control. This article examines who is in charge, where and when, how that control is acquired, preserved and articulated.

Control is the colonial project, the perpetual fantasy and desire of the colonial subject. Control, when it is possessed, is always in danger of being lost. The fantasy of control is also the fantasy of *appearing* to be in charge, or of possessing the elusive, intangible *something* that prevents control from falling into the hands of the other. South-eastern Australia, with its clustered population of white settlers and squatters, its Aboriginal camps, and its transient migrant workforce, remained in a state of siege until Governor was apprehended. Whilst Governor's whereabouts were unknown, whilst anyone could be his next victim, whilst his motives were unclear, Governor retained possession of the lost piece of control. Once he was captured, interviewed, tried, imprisoned and hanged, White Australia got it back. This article examines what happened in the protracted historical moment in which the vital fragment changed hands.

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Clune, *Jimmy Governor* (1959) Horwitz.

The image that lingers from James Governor's story now illustrates a colonial dialogue in which Governor does not participate. The story of his life is reduced to a series of episodes – terrifying axe-murders and an almost-forgotten rape – in the larger narrative that we now call 'colonial conflict'. Jimmy Governor has become a character in the larger history of 'contact'. He is a figure of Aboriginal resistance, he is a bushranger, he is a 'half-caste', he challenges colonial rule, he is a moderately-famous figure who, for several months at the turn of the last century, delayed the white penetration of the Australian frontier.

'James Governor' is produced by law. He only exists for us through his crimes. Without his transgression, he disappears. There is no extra-legal Jimmy Governor; law always defines what is within and beyond its own boundaries. Governor is always in-relation-to-law. Every instance in which he appears, all of the evidence of his existence, becomes a crime text. The bodies of white women (his victims, his wife), the police and his hunters, newspaper accounts of the chase, his confession, his trial, his execution: these are all elements of the genre.

Comprehending Jimmy Governor's behaviour is necessary for the ultimate colonial reclamation of control that followed his rampage. That he was out-of-control was a necessary episode in the larger colonial narrative that concluded with white sovereignty. The transgressive black man is a colonial desire; he produces the managerial white man

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<sup>6</sup> Colin Johnson, 'Chauvel and the Centring of the Aboriginal Male in Australian Feature Film' (1987) 1(1) *Continuum* 50.

who restrains him, thus writing the standard colonial narrative. Jimmy Governor satisfied the formula of mytho-historical production: desire + action + text = folk criminal. He played a designated role, populating colonial history with a stock character in the narrative that invented 'Australia'.

It has not gone unnoticed that Governor's rampage occurred at the same time that Australia was involved in the Boer War, our first overseas military engagement as a nation, provoking debates about Australian national identity, imperial loyalty and the rugged Australian masculine type. Also at that time, Australia was reaching the end of several years of public and legislative debates and a constitutional convention about Federation, which again brought into focus questions of nationalism, national identity, character and fealty. After their convictions, Governor and Underwood were kept in custody much longer than usual, their hangings postponed until after the Federation celebrations had concluded. Even in 1901, the colonial managers were not unaware of the perilous symbolism of kicking off nationhood with the execution of black men. Nevertheless, the hanging of Jimmy Governor symbolised the white resumption of control, momentarily seized by an axe-wielding black man at large. More than anything, Governor's death was reported as something *normal*. It was anticipated and, when it occurred, it confirmed that the state killing of black men was commonplace in the colony.

### **Jimmy Governor Hanged at Darlinghurst**

[By Telegraph]

Sydney, Friday

Jimmy Governor was executed at 9 o'clock this morning. He slept well last night, and had a good breakfast. He had nothing to say, and walked firmly to the drop, smoking a cigarette. He was accompanied by the Rev Canon Rich. Just before the cap and rope were adjusted Jimmy threw the cigarette from his lips. The bolt was then drawn and death was instantaneous [sic] [...].<sup>7</sup>

The story of Jimmy Governor demonstrates that Australian national identity and white legitimacy were produced – at least in part – by black transgression. ‘Australia’ is a manufactured entity, a fantasy and a site of panic. ‘Australia’ lies at the heart of those political, legal, personal and moral anxieties from which it works tirelessly to untangle itself. Constructed from a compendium of legitimacies – history, cartography, law, property, empire, text, memory – ‘Australia’ is the forum in which competing legitimacies are fought over, and where the towering monument of laconic and easygoing masculine endeavour overshadows a cowering and frail polity. In this fantasy, Aboriginality becomes the locus of danger, problem, crisis and horror. This casting of Aboriginality as one of those freaky tricks of nature that we come to expect from antipodean adventures is supported by the relentless western logics that circulate around notions of justice, family, property and statehood. The indigene as deviant, as mutant, insoluble problem, inexplicable aberration, berserk boong hacking to death white ladies in their homes.

Suppressing out-of-control black men came to be seen as an act of ‘nation building’.<sup>8</sup>

Terry Threadgold wrote,

the Governor murders, like Australia’s convict past, are a very real problem for imminent nationhood. In some way the story has to be made to be a narrative of masculine control and power, of national success, not failure. This I suggest is why women have to be seen to have caused their own murders and why institutionalised masculine white racism cannot be acknowledged.<sup>9</sup>

Very specific nationalist practices can be identified in this story, illustrating how white men cast themselves in the role of being in charge. The white woman was either the sacrifice who enabled the white man’s fantasy to be realised, or else she was the trap into which the black man fell, nevertheless enabling the white man to profit from the black man’s capture.

The nationalist fantasy spun from Governor’s crimes required that, when the white man’s gaze was averted, the white woman could not protect herself, and for her inability to embody the nation she paid with her body and her life. The ideal nation was made possible by the violation of the vulnerable corpus of white womanhood. The sacrifice of

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<sup>7</sup> *Singleton Argus* 19 January 1901.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia’ in Robert Gooding-Williams (ed), *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (1993) Routledge 16, citing Ruth Gilmore.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Threadgold, ‘Black man, white woman, irresistible impulse: media, law and literature in the making of the black murderer’ in Pheng Cheah, David Fraser and Judith Grbich, (eds), *Thinking Through the Body of the Law* (1996) Allen and Unwin, 176.

white women in the national project, and the elimination of the troublesome black obstacle, enabled the dominance of white masculinity to appear to be the only possible outcome of this staged struggle. As Ghassan Hage wrote on Australian nationalism, the white manager 'transforms [himself] from mere competitor in the field to the natural governor of the field: born to rule the nation'.<sup>10</sup> The black murderer, the unnatural 'Governor', can only ever assume that his capture, control and elimination is inevitable. He can only ever be a plot device, a dramatic moment of suspense, after which the narrative returns with relief to its familiar trajectory.

Governor confounded colonial categories. For every dichotomy posed by his crimes and context – black/white, lawless/lawful, hero/nemesis, mad/sane, uncontrollable/under control – Governor was *both* and *neither*. Some accounts of the Governors' conduct during their rampage leave reporters – and managerial readers – bewildered. What kind of axe-murderers behave like *this*? A boundary rider named Martin Davidson was approached by the Governors pointing their rifles at him. A newspaper reported:

Davidson said, "I suppose you are going to murder me now?" and they replied, "We don't know about that; we don't want to do that. We want your saddle though." The boundary-rider gave them the saddle. When they asked, "What about your horse?" he said, "I don't want to tell you any lies, if you use him he will probably fall down and break your neck." The Governors intimated that if that were the case they would leave the horse

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<sup>10</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society* (1998) Pluto Press 67.

alone. The Governors then made inquiries as to the number in Davidson's family, and before leaving him they exchanged hats with him.<sup>11</sup>

Another account describes how one of their robbery victims easily negotiates some loose change from their plunder: 'The Chinaman asked for the small money back for the road, and was given 1s 9d in threepenny pieces'.<sup>12</sup>

A certain satisfaction emerges from those reports in which the abhorrent violence of their conduct was moderated by unexpected acts of restraint, assuming a degree of 'civility' in their otherwise 'wild' conduct. Postcolonial theory might explain these as acts of hybridity, in which the out-of-control native 'replicates' the behaviour of the colonial manager, terrorizing them 'with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery'.<sup>13</sup> Such acts were described by Homi Bhabha as 'strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power'.<sup>14</sup> But these are only ever *acts*, pleasurable performances of civility by an otherwise-ungovernable subject.

In his historiographical work, Hayden White examined the concept of the 'Wild Man', who was always *between* and *beyond* the categories constructed to enable social classification. He was imagined by the national manager as someone at the limits of the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Murders by Blacks', *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 August 1900.

<sup>12</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 August 1900.

<sup>13</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817' in Henry Louis Gates Jr, (ed), *Race, Writing and Difference* (1986) University of Chicago Press 1986, 173.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

tolerable, but his location at the limits served the explicit purpose of constructing a boundary zone; the wild man, even if not *within*, was always *near*. For White,

the Wild Man is conventionally represented as being always present, inhabiting the immediate confines of the community. He is just out of sight, over the horizon, in the nearby forest, desert, mountains, or hills. He sleeps in crevices, under great trees, or in the caves of wild animals, to which he carries off helpless children, or women, there to do unspeakable things to them. And he is also sly: he steals the sheep from the fold, the chicken from the coop, tricks the shepherd, and befuddles the gamekeeper. In medieval myth especially, the Wild Man is conceived to be covered with hair and to be black and deformed. [...] But in whatever way he is envisaged, the Wild Man almost always represents the image of the man released from social control, the man in whom the libidinal impulses have gained full ascendancy.<sup>15</sup>

He is both feared and desired. He is the dangerous spectre in the dark who keeps the rest of us *here*, unified and vigilant, insisting that we remain in charge.

The terrifying stereotype is a colonial commodity, where the native must be uncontrollable *by nature*, and not acting out ideological responses to colonisation. Abdul JanMohamed wrote, ‘All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) Johns Hopkins University Press 166.

difference but as characteristics inherent in the race – in the ‘blood’ – of the native’.<sup>16</sup> That the native is intrinsically transgressive regenerates the colonial fantasy, endlessly reported in colonial narratives employing what Bhabha recognised as ‘those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts’.<sup>17</sup>

Governor’s accomplice, Jack Underwood, in his testimony, demonstrated how the transgressive black man might manipulate colonial fantasies of wild men:

[...] Jimmy said they were not going to be copped. When they get to the foot of Nulla Mountain they would slip off their clothes and blacken themselves all over, let their hair grow long, also their whiskers, put eagles’ feathers in their heads when they see any blackfellows; they are going to live like that for 20 years, when they will come back to see their brothers. [...].<sup>18</sup>

Underwood here acknowledged and employed white fantasies of the Wild Man, demonstrating his discursive command of paranoid colonial fantasies. His reported statement reminds us of the impossibility of an unmediated account of Governor’s crimes. He was always in a dialogue with the managerial subject: the policeman, the lawyer, the journalist. It is a status best articulated in Frantz Fanon’s work: ‘it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other’.<sup>19</sup> And also: ‘not only must the black man

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<sup>16</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature’, in Gates, above n 13, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994) Routledge 72-3.

<sup>18</sup> *Singleton Argus* 25 August 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Charles Lam Markmann trans 1967 ed) Grove Weidenfeld 17.

be black; he must be black in relation to the white man'.<sup>20</sup> It is this 'in relation to' that describes the constant mediation of the transgressive black subject. Bhabha wrote that '[t]he Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse'.<sup>21</sup> The other, in colonial narratives, is always engaged in a dialogue with the manager. Even with the best of intentions and the most careful of methodologies, representing this other, Bhabha conceded, 'demands that, in analytic terms, it is always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination'.<sup>22</sup>

James Governor's behaviour forces us to scrutinise the competing legitimacies of native or indigenous claims to land and sovereignty against the claims of an invader, settler or coloniser, legitimated as claims to sovereignty by positive acts of common law, or else gaps in common law, wherein law's absence validates the claims of invaders or squatters. Governor's crimes aroused a panic about white claims to legitimacy. Reports of this sort did not deny the illegitimacy of colonial claims to land; rather they conveyed an urgent tone of panic, a sense that it was too late to retreat, and a need to dig in and fight.

### **The Breelong Tragedy**

### **Motives for the Crime**

### **Various Reasons Given**

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 110.

<sup>21</sup> Bhabha, above n 17, 31.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*.

[...] A more sensational rumor is to the effect that the blacks at the instigation of Jimmy Governor resolved on an attempt to murder all the white settlers in the district because ‘they have stolen our country’.<sup>23</sup>

Imagining the national space forces us to rethink notions of ‘home’, of authority, of legitimacy. Ghassan Hage invites us to connect thoughts of home with ideas of nationalism; nationalism being the power to arrange one’s home as one desires. I suggest that it is also necessary to think about homeliness and nationalism together with sovereignty. It is not only that sovereignty enables those in power to act as they desire; it is that they must also act as sovereignty *requires*. In other words, they must order their home so that their authority is rendered permanent, unquestioned, legitimate. It is not only about dominating or ordering homely spaces; it is the violence of asserting that those spaces are one’s home, and not the home of another. Sovereignty classifies who is *at home* here, who are the guests, and who are the intruders. James Governor’s crimes force us to re-examine colonial assumptions about who is *at home* in this space; who is *in charge*. It is at the nexus of these two concepts – being at home, and being in charge – that our assumptions about family and property become necessarily implicated in an attempt to locate sovereignty.

The colonial encounter in Australia is the story of two competing sovereignties: one is ‘Aboriginal’; the other is ‘legal’. The struggle to be at home and in charge is really the

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<sup>23</sup> *Singleton Argus* 26 July 1900.

staking of a superior claim to legitimacy. Consider the complex of homely anxieties at stake in this newspaper report:

### **The Blacks**

During the week the Governors have continued their go-as-you-please tournament. [...] They stuck up one farmer near Dungog and yarned with him for a couple of hours, while being regaled upon the best food in the dwelling. Jimmy is said to be getting quite portly, and his chest swells with pride when he speaks of his efforts to regain his stolen country.<sup>24</sup>

Contests over sovereignty have since been diverted into clean-handed adversarialism, where native title becomes the tool for managing competing claims to national space. Native title, through its captivating legal magic, is that hastily built machine which simultaneously manufactures sovereignty and dispossession. But the story of Governor's crimes illustrates how the struggle for sovereignty was played out 82 years before Eddie Mabo lodged his statement of claim in the High Court, by a black man with a tomahawk.

Governor's crimes aroused a colonial panic about both the corporeal security of the colonists and the legal integrity of their land occupation. Whilst Governor was at large and out of control, he was in charge of the national space. As long as settlers feared that, when he said it was 'his' country he really meant it, their legitimacy, their homeliness,

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<sup>24</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 21 September 1900.

was under threat. For 99 days following the Mawbey murders, settlers reported relentless, all-consuming worry. Everything unknown became a threat. Fear was broadcast to the reading public.

### **Wee Waa, Wednesday**

Two men met the coach from Narrabri to Walgett at 3 o'clock this morning, and asked how far it was to Pilliga. It was too dark for the coachman to see whether the men were black or white.<sup>25</sup>

As the hunt for the Governors dragged on, the settlers grew restless and doubted the capacity of the police to keep control.

### **Correspondence Presented to Parliament**

A large bundle of papers was laid on the table of the Legislative Assembly yesterday by the Colonial Secretary with an intimation that it contained the whole of the correspondence in the shape of telegrams, reports, and letters received by the Inspector-General of Police in connection with the scare caused by the Breelong blacks and the efforts made to capture them. The correspondence embraced some remarkable suggestions as to what methods should be adopted in order to capture the outlaws.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 August 1900.

<sup>26</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 August, 1900.

Reporters weighed in on the fitness of the personnel sent out to hunt the Governors: ‘It is farce to send out into the wilds to chase the Governors men who have been in the habit of sleeping in double beds; or men who do not care about leaving main roads, because of the lack of accommodation in the bush’.<sup>27</sup> Criticisms of the government and the police were also apparent in the number of people who took measures to ensure their own safety.

### **The Blacks**

[...] A resident of Nelson’s Bay, writing under date yesterday, says that the residents of Port Stephens are preparing a fitting reception for the Governors. He jocularly adds that, as the residents have never had a visit from any white Governors, they do not desire an official visit from two black ones.<sup>28</sup>

The Governors, for almost 100 days, became the sole obstacle to attaining the national fantasy of control and homeliness. The obstacle, in this instance, is cast as something natural, organic; it is autochthonous, born from the land. The dominant theme in explanations of the Governors’ elusiveness is their superior competence in the rough terrain. As the chase proceeded, the hunters – initially confident of a swift capture – gradually conceded that they were out-performed by the Governors, before attempting to make their own claims upon territorial mastery.

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<sup>27</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 7 September 1900.

In the earliest reports after the Mawbey killings, the landscape was assumed to be controlled by the settlers: ‘Mr Mawbey, speaking of the country, said he thought there was little chance of the murderers escaping, as the place was well populated. There were some good hiding places, but he thought the blacks would not have sufficient provisions to hide for any length of time’.<sup>29</sup> The same day, Alderman A. W. Miller of Ashfield ‘who knows the district’ gave an interview to the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

[...] The country is very scrubby. [...] If blacks committed the crime they would probably make their way to the other [Gilgambone] camp, and I do not regard them as being safe there. The blacks cannot keep secrets, and if they are concerned the matter will soon come out. As a rule the blacks who visit that part occasionally are peacable, but under the influence of spirits they become very savage.<sup>30</sup>

But as the pursuit continued, the tone of the news shifted, wherein reports contained admiration for the Governors’ audacity and skill, and bemusement at the impermeability of the landscape for white men.

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<sup>28</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 21 September 1900.

<sup>29</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 July 1900.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

## Country About Wollar

For 13 miles to the Goulburn River the country is probably the wildest of any in Australia, and with this country the fugitive blacks are known to be thoroughly acquainted.<sup>31</sup>

## Prospects of the Search

[...] They know every inch of the country, which is for miles and miles impracticable almost for a dingo.<sup>32</sup>

Near Gulgong, the Governors 'were observed walking on the top wire of the boundary fence in the early dawn'.<sup>33</sup> The Governors could 'run for miles on the steel ribbons of the railway line, with no sign of their passing. Barefoot in the bush they walked single file, the second treading in the footsteps of the first. Then they might put their boots on and walk backwards for a while, or mix with a flock of sheep, or hide their tracks with debris'.<sup>34</sup>

The *Singleton Argus* reported 'the Governors go about the country in a perfectly cool manner, and when met by a carrier a few days ago they were walking leisurely along eating oranges'.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, their hunters were reported to be hungry and afraid:

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<sup>31</sup> *Singleton Argus* 31 July 1900.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Moore and Williams, above n 2, 59.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* 66.

<sup>35</sup> 'A Threat by the Outlaws', *Singleton Argus* 25 August 1900.

### **Hardships ‘Beyond Imagination’**

[...] In one place it took us five hours to get to the top of a mountain; the horses frequently got hung up in the vines, and we had to cut them out with a tomahawk. The hardships that the police and civilians had to put up with were beyond imagination. We were for three days at one time living on nothing but flour and water. We could, of course, often have shot game, but were frightened of letting the blacks know our whereabouts.<sup>36</sup>

Whilst the Governors fled their hunters, white settlers evacuated the countryside out of fear of the Governors’ proximity. Flight was a strategy employed by both the killers and the colonists, destabilising any settled notions of who was at home. Certain news reports seemed almost to concede that the Governors had single-handedly besieged the colony.

### **Panic in the District**

[...] Several schools are closed, as the children will not be allowed to attend. Everyone is armed. People even in the very centre of the towns are carrying loaded revolvers. [...] Above all is a feeling as of an impending calamity or the arrival of news of a fresh horror, for it is well known that

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<sup>36</sup> *Singleton Argus* 18 October 1900.

the blacks have a grudge against numbers of people in the district, and may seek revenge.<sup>37</sup>

### **Mr O’Sullivan’s Experiences**

The Minister for Works, having toured the districts, reported, “There was a reign of terror around Cassilis and Merriwa, and many women and children were living in these towns in consequence of the depredations of the black bushrangers. Houses were empty, dogs were dying on the chains, and cows were sick with milk fever, through not being milked”.<sup>38</sup>

There were scores of similar reports, each implying clearly that it was the Governors who were *in charge*. Having terrorised white families in their homes, and driven other white families from their homes, the Governors asserted that they were at home here. Robbing a hut near Nundle, Governor left a note for the police that read simply, ‘You asses, go home’.<sup>39</sup>

Yet this command of national space by the Governors sits unsteadily with their legal relations to space, borne out by their race and their class. On the one hand, Governor’s livelihood depended upon a land management practice that the High Court confirmed in 1992, and reconfirmed in 1996, extinguished any title to land that indigenous Australians

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<sup>37</sup> *Singleton Argus* 2 August 1900.

<sup>38</sup> *Singleton Argus* 8 September 1900.

<sup>39</sup> *Singleton Argus* 8 September 1900.

may have held.<sup>40</sup> The Mawbey family were expanding their land holdings, taking over the farms abandoned by local selectors who had fallen into debt. And it was to fence these new boundaries that James Governor was employed.<sup>41</sup>

The Mawbeys were affirming their sense of homeliness by building a fence around what was theirs. But the Governors' complicity in the Mawbeys' scheme for possession was followed by resistance – through violence, disobedience and elusiveness. Their own claim to feel at home here required that they precluded their white competitors from feeling homely; the black fencers had fenced them in. And the white man who is – or feels – unhomed retaliates with violence and with law.

Their ungovernability had grave consequences for the indigenous people of the district, and particularly for members of their own family. For as long as the Governor brothers were out of control, the colonists took every measure to ensure that the rest of the colony's Aborigines were under close management.

### **The Wollar Blacks**

The local authority of the Aborigines Board has been instructed to issue rations to the Wollar blacks “until the adult males can obtain some suitable employment.” The fatherly interest of the board in its dusky children is unique. [...] Just as if Jimmy and Joe Governor had not closed every

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<sup>40</sup> *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1, *Wik Peoples v Queensland* (1996) 134 ALR 637.

avenue of employment to the race whose lands we have stolen. No sane man or woman would employ an aboriginal after the larks of the Governors. If they did their future troubles would be of their own seeking. There is only one honest course open to the Government, and that is to make a suitable reservation and supply rations perpetually to the remnants of an overrun race.<sup>42</sup>

In the escalating panic, the *Mudgee Guardian* wrote that 'it was the duty of society to remove the remaining members of the sin-sodden family from the site and surroundings of their humpy. It will be a gross blunder with an act of gross inhumanity if the outcast half castes of Wollar are allowed to remain in the district. [...] If they are left to roam about the country and more especially about Wollar, future tragedies are only a matter of time'.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Black Outlaw**

#### **Two Brothers Arrested**

Mr See states that two brothers of the Governors had been arrested as a precautionary measure, and that they will be lodged in the Mudgee gaol. This step has been taken owing to certain boasting statements made by the brothers who seem to look with favor on the success with which the

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<sup>41</sup> In Moore and Williams, above n 2, 22-25.

<sup>42</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 19 October 1900.

<sup>43</sup> *Mudgee Guardian* 16 August 1900, cited in Moore and Williams, above n 2, 94.

murderers have so far eluded the police. Any other blacks who may show a tendency to sympathise with the murderers will also, Mr See states, be looked after by the police so as to prevent them getting into mischief.<sup>44</sup>

One of Governor's primary rivals for control were the police, to whom the role of enforcing colonial authority devolved. Partly because Governor identified the police with that role, and partly because of his long-standing personal acrimonious relationship with the police, his police hunters bore much of the brunt of his anger. Governor challenged the authority claimed by the police, refusing to recognise that the authority of the police was either apparent or agreed upon. He had, for a short period, been a police tracker with the NSW Mounted Police. Although he disavowed his former police status, Governor nevertheless carried it as a burden upon his present claim to uncontrollable criminality.

Reports suggest that much of the Governors' time on the run was spent ridiculing and frustrating their police pursuers, leaving deliberate clues and writing notes and letters taunting their hunters. In one note, Governor wrote, 'Sub-Inspector Morrow is b\_\_\_\_ f\_\_\_\_, you are a b\_\_\_\_ c\_\_\_\_ Sub Inspector Cameron, Dubbo. I know you had 150 police at Wollar, and 35 men at Culgong [sic]. I was reading all that news.' This was signed 'Jim Governor'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Singleton Argus* 21 August 1900.

<sup>45</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 10 August 1900. The modified language appears here as it did in the *Advertiser*.

Beside Bohena Creek, Governor left a stick and the imprint of his knife in the sand to signal his presence.<sup>46</sup> As police climbed after them up a mountain near Castle Creek, the Governors fired a shot to indicate they were close by, then shouted abuse and scorn at the police who, although searching till dark, did not find them.<sup>47</sup> On at least three occasions, the police were ambushed by the Governors, to receive taunts and commentary about their incompetence. A newspaper reported, ‘The Governors continue to show the most utter and supreme contempt for the police and their methods’.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout, and even after, the pursuit, Governor maintained an open dialogue with his hunters, offering clues, correcting false reports and undermining the competence of the police. One newspaper reported that, after robbing a carrier at Merrigula, ‘They gave him a note, and told him to take it to the policeman’s wife at Tambar Springs. She has the note now, and it contains a description of the police tactics at various places where they boast of having seen the blacks, and also that they read the Mudgee paper. The note is of a threatening nature and is written badly with a lead pencil. The spelling is bad’.<sup>49</sup>

Another reported the Governors offering gifts of ammunition to their hunters: ‘the Governors gave Mrs Bayliss a number of rifle cartridges, asking her to given them to the police at Cassilis, with the compliments of the Governors’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> In Moore and Williams, above n 2, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 75.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Incidents of the Pursuit’, *Singleton Argus* 4 October 1900.

<sup>49</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 August, 1900.

And clues as to their route:

Before leaving the blacks told the men to inform the police that they were going up on the tableland, in the direction of Heckford's Corner Range, between the Allyn and Williams Rivers.<sup>51</sup>

And whereabouts:

[...] When they took the flour from Breese's, they spilt some of it out, and it is alleged tramped in it to flour their feet, in order to make their tracks plainer!<sup>52</sup>

Or foiling the pursuit:

Before leaving Tomalla they securely fastened all the gates with fencing wire.<sup>53</sup>

They left notes threatening to return and take vengeance upon people who had abandoned their homes out of fear of the Governors' wrath: 'You dog, I shoot you also',<sup>54</sup> 'we will have your scalp – Jimmy Governor'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Singleton Argus* 28 August 1900.

<sup>51</sup> 'Another Robbery Committed', *Singleton Argus* 22 September 1900.

<sup>52</sup> 'Incidents of the Pursuit' *Singleton Argus* 4 October 1900.

<sup>53</sup> 'One of the Latest Exploits', *Singleton Argus* 15 September 1900.

<sup>54</sup> 'The Merriwa Murders', *Singleton Argus* 28 July 1900.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Black Outlaws – A Message from St. Clair', *Singleton Argus* 18 September 1900.

Newspapers interpreted Governor's participation in this contemptuous correspondence as giving him the upper hand, adding humiliation of his hunters to his repertoire of elusive strategies.

### **Incidents of the Pursuit**

[...] The police have been made the recipients of the most insulting messages from the fugitives, who up to the present have not evidenced the slightest difficulty in puzzling the trackers.<sup>56</sup>

One note purported to contain anti-authoritarian motives, demonstrating Governor's claim upon the bushranging mythology, a practice associated with white anti-British, usually Irish-Australian folk heroism:

Sir Inspector General this is my cause I have taken to the bush, they wanted me to register my dog, and horse, and would not let me go free on the train and they took the set that they all have now on me at Dubbo. Now I am a bushranger and if I get a shot at U.J. Dowland, he is not the only crack shot, he who see me first, gets hell. Put this in the Sydney Mail. So they all can see it.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Singleton Argus* 4 October 1900.

<sup>57</sup> *Gulgong Advertiser* 10 August 1900.

So compelling was his correspondence to his readership that one report suggested that some notes were the work of practical jokers.<sup>58</sup> Here, it appears that Governor had inspired an entire oppositional discourse. Through his transgression and elusion, he oversaw the manufacture of a community united in their scepticism of police methods and, of necessity, their lost confidence in colonial claims to being at home and in charge.

When Governor was eventually captured, it was by a group of civilian hunters, and not the police. One of the hunters, Thomas Moore Jr, reported that Governor told him, ‘I congratulate you for your capture. I am glad the cockies captured me. I did not want the bloody Police to get me. They couldn’t run down a bloody poddy calf’.<sup>59</sup>

In the dialogue between Governor and his hunters he refused to accept his role as the object of disciplinary control, constantly taunting his hunters and engaging reporters in disputes. Throughout the chase he maintained a torrid correspondence with those who sought to manage his transgression. After one robbery, two notes were found, addressed to the police ‘from the Breelong murderers’. One was in fact a letter from Jimmy to his wife Ethel, offering to surrender if she came to see him.

’To the police of N.S.W.,’ the first letter runs, and continues – ‘My dear Ethel. You did not now suppose you was free, dear, when you was with me; you never think that you was at home. I have been good to you, and

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Extraordinary Stories’, *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 August, 1900.

often say the Lord take me away. I hope he got you. You know you are going fast, dear. I suppose you glad, but I am not. I feel sorry for you, dear Ethel. If the police are willing to send you in the mountains with a sulky, I will come back with you to Dubbo Gaol, and will then give the tale of murder. The police must not come in the ranges with my wife when they come with the sulky. If they give my farewell to enjoy myself, they can have me then, and I will tell all about the murder. If you do that, put it in the paper, and I will see it, and tell when to send my wife to get me. I go to that, the wilful truth, while the Lord is in Heaven. I will go to Dubbo. Then, when all is over, they can put the rope round my neck, and that will settle the murder. If they send my wife out, I go; if the police come, I won't. Dear Ethel, you tell me to get away; that was, between New England and Queensland.<sup>60</sup>

Governor's use of the media to transact marital negotiations reveals a great deal about his own managerial confidence. The newspapers were not published for him. Reports of his pursuit were not directed to him. Nevertheless he read them, he corresponded with them, he corrected them, and he used them to communicate with others.

Governor's correspondence gave him command of the dialogue in which he addressed the colonial authority that sought to control him. When he used the news media to

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<sup>59</sup> In Moore and Williams, above n 2, 121.

<sup>60</sup> 'Remarkable Letters – An Offer to Surrender', *Singleton Argus* 6 September 1900.

transmit his contempt for his hunters, he asserted his dominance. One note, apparently written by Joe, was found by the police after an unsuccessful shoot-out with the brothers.

The *Singleton Argus* reports:

### **The Breelong Blacks**

On returning to the hut the bewildered officers were still more surprised that while the shooting had been going on, Joe had actually sneaked round and robbed the hut, and left the following note: “Before me and Jimmy approach the Government to dictate terms of peace, we have decided to visit Singleton, for the purpose of seeing the great improvements which, according to the Argus, are now being carried out at Lambert’s shop in John-street, and also, spend a few pounds there in Cards and Presents for our friends”.<sup>61</sup>

Governor’s dialogue with his hunters operated as the ‘exchange of looks between native and settler’; what Homi Bhabha described as the ‘paranoid fantasy of boundless possession’.<sup>62</sup> The paranoid fantasy is the colonial encounter. It is the perpetual transaction of property, control and meaning. It is the homely space that everyone claims for themselves. It is the fantasy nation delimited by a frontier so imperceptible as to be boundless. It is Jimmy Governor’s assertion that he would surrender on his own terms. It is the colonist’s certainty that, once the transgressor was intercepted, they would regain

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<sup>61</sup> *Singleton Argus* 27 October 1900.

<sup>62</sup> Bhabha, above n 17, 44.

possession of the nation. It is the colonist's gift of language to the native. It is Governor's subversion of that language for his own ends. It is the colonist's duty to intercept and eliminate Governor publicly, fortifying the fantasy space, identifying it as a white space, reclaiming the sovereignty of law.

Crucial to this violent reclamation of the nation for whiteness was the valuation of the property in white womanhood. In the contest between Governor and his hunters, the body of the white woman was always corporeally or spectrally present. The employment of white women in the colonial project is well documented and acknowledged, as white women became mobilised as active agents in the field of imperial oppression. Bhabha wrote that the body of the white woman 'screens (in both senses of the word) the racist fantasy'.<sup>63</sup> Much of the panic around James Governor's crimes constitutes worry about white women. These women became simultaneously the agents of patriarchal and colonial oppression, as well as its victims. As victims, white women were assembled as 'proof' of the necessity of the patriarchal colonial project. As agents, the murdered, the raped, the robbed and the violated became mute prosecutors of colonial authority.

Most of the people killed by Governor on his spree were white women and girls. Whilst on the run he raped a 15 year old girl. His wife was a 15 year old white girl when he met her, and pregnant the following year when they married. Colonial fantasies depend upon the volatile fusion of the terms 'white' and 'woman'. Kate Darian-Smith, in her work on

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<sup>63</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation", in Homi K. Bhabha (ed) *Nation and Narration* (1990) Routledge 316; and Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, above n 17, 166.

colonial captivity narratives, writes that white women were ‘both symbols of European civilisation and chattels of patriarchal capitalism’.<sup>64</sup>

As well as having this value for colonial expansionism, white women also appeared in colonial texts as ‘the object of indigenous or primitive sexual desire’.<sup>65</sup> The value of white womanhood was pegged to escalate whenever *both sides* staked a claim upon her, or at least appeared to do so. White penetration of the frontier, white occupation of the land, white violence against the indigenous inhabitants, had little *colonial* currency without white women there to imbue the homely qualities that entitled white men to employ the civilising rhetorics of imperialism.

Most attempts to explain Governor’s rampage look to his wife, Ethel, and the taunts they both received over her decision to marry an Aborigine. This relationship invoked notions about white women as objects of property, and whiteness itself as an asset to be acquired, possessed, and for ownership of it to be contested. The Mawbey women, in taunting the Governors about their cross-racial union, identified in themselves an entitlement to manage – or to attempt to manage – miscegenation. The terms in which they allegedly spoke suggested that a particular value was ascribed to white womanhood, and that Ethel Page had undervalued the commodity of her self and her sexuality when she married James Governor. Furthermore, the taunts demonstrated that the Mawbeys identified the

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<sup>64</sup> Kate Darian-Smith, ‘Material Culture and the “signs” of captive white women’, in Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn (eds) *Body/Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific* (2001) Routledge 183.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

family itself as an institution bonded to property, to entitlement, and subject to colonialist management.

Sam Ellis, a friend of the Governor family who wrote an account of their life, described the Governor marriage:

Ethel, Jimmy's wife, told me the history of their courtship and of many white girls she beat to him and what a heroine she thought herself when she became legally married to him in the Church of England at Gulgong. She fully believed in the sanctity of their marriage.<sup>66</sup>

A newspaper article titled 'The Mysterious White Woman' purported to report on the reasons of the Church of England minister who married them:

### **The Mysterious White Woman**

Rev. F.T Haviland, C of E, married the Governors. "[...] He only consented, it is said, to perform the ceremony at the earnest solicitation of the girl's mother, who, for reasons which may be understood, wished to save her daughter's reputation. One naturally wonders what manner of woman the mother was who insisted on uniting her daughter for life to a low-bred savage aboriginal".<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ellis' account cited in Moore and Williams, above n 2, 27.

<sup>67</sup> *Singleton Argus* 26 July 1900.

Ethel herself apparently made the following disclosure in an interview:

### **The Woman's Sad Story**

'I am only a poor girl and I haven't had much education. White men don't care about having poor wives, and no white man ever asked me to marry him. Jimmy was the only man who ever asked me to marry him'.<sup>68</sup>

The Governor marriage, and comments alleged to have been made by members of the Mawbey household about their marriage, became the earliest and most-repeated motive for Governor's rampage.

### **Motive for the Crime**

#### **Revenge Suggested**

The only motive young Mawbey could ascribe for the deed was that he had heard that a European woman was living in the blacks' camp, and that she had made attempts to ingratiate herself with the Mawbey family, but her advances were not encouraged by Mrs Mawbey and the other victims. Probably some of the blacks had noticed this, and took this terrible means

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

of avenging what they may have regarded as a slight on their white woman.<sup>69</sup>

## **The Breelong Tragedy**

### **Motives for the Crime**

#### **Various Reasons Given**

[...] Again, it was stated that the Mawbeys had twitted the black man's wife with living in the manner she was doing at the camp, and that the blacks resented this, but whilst something of this kind might have been said it is not thought likely that it would have reached the ears of the blacks, or that even if it did they would have taken such revenge.<sup>70</sup>

The alleged conduct of the Mawbey women, however, assumed an expectation that they were entitled to manage whiteness. Both James and Ethel Governor, in their statements, suggested that the intrusive racial managerialism of these white women had them bring upon themselves their axe murders.

After his arrest, Governor was alleged to have made the following statements to Sub-Inspector Saunders:

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<sup>69</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 July 1900.

<sup>70</sup> *Singleton Argus* 26 July 1900.

‘My missis was always telling me that Mrs Mawbey used to get on to her for marrying a blackfellow. She said that Mrs Mawbey said that any white women who married a blackfellow wasn’t fit to live. That made me very wild, and so we went and killed them.’ He said, “The school teacher and the Mawbeys were always poking fun and laughing at us. I was never a loafer, like some blackfellows; I always worked, and paid for what I got, and I reckon I’m as good as a white man. I was run into it’.<sup>71</sup>

At his trial, Governor gave evidence that, on the night of the murders, he went to the Mawbey home to confront Mrs Mawbey about comments she’d made to Ethel:

Prisoner: ‘[...] And I said, ‘Did you ask her what sort of nature did I have, black or white, or what colour was it?’ And with that Mrs Mawbey and Miss Kerz wheeled round and laughed at me like that – (with a sneering laugh) – and before I had the words out of my mouth I struck Mrs Mawbey with a nulla nulla, and Miss Kerz says, ‘Pooh! You black rubbish! You want shooting for marrying a white woman’. With that I hit her with my hand in the jaw and knocked her down. Then I got annoyed, and lost my temper and everything, and I did not know nothing after that’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Jimmy Governor – Trial at Darlinghurst – Sentence of Death Passed’, *Singleton Argus* 24 November 1900.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

Ethel Governor, giving evidence at Governor's trial, was questioned by the defence lawyer. She was asked about Mrs Mawbey's and Miss Kerz's comments to her during her domestic service in their home: 'Did they ever say anything about you ever marrying a blackfellow? – They said it was a wonder that a nice-looking girl like me threw herself away on a blackfellow. (Laughter).'<sup>73</sup>

Even after his conviction, interest in Ethel remained high. Her demeanour as a prison visitor was reported: '[...] Once his wife was seen leaving the gaol with the child in her arms, but she appeared cool as a woman who had been discharging some ordinary business duties'.<sup>74</sup>

Whilst on the run, Governor is reported to have encountered a 15 year old white girl named Isabella Burley, whom he raped, or 'ravished', or 'seduced'; the crime was constituted differently at the time, and in any case his behaviour here attracted legal sanction because of his clear violation of property to which he was not entitled. Rape of white women was treated as an incursion into white man's property.<sup>75</sup> It was *this* crime that was a turning point in the pursuit. The reward for the capture of Governor and his brother increased from £200 to £1000.<sup>76</sup> The Attorney General filed in the Supreme Court to have the Governors declared outlaws and within a month they were formally gazetted

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> 'Jimmy Governor – Hanged at Darlinghurst', *Singleton Argus* 19 January 1901.

<sup>75</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation* (1994) McPhee Gribble 148

<sup>76</sup> Reported in 'Increasing the Reward', *Singleton Argus* 27 September 1900.

as outlaws. This meant that they were no longer suspects but perpetrators, and that if they failed to surrender to police, they could be lawfully shot on sight by their hunters.

In the conflation of whiteness and womanhood, and the property interests in both, Jimmy Governor's alleged rape of this white girl was reported in a manner that linked this crime to an attack on racial purity. (I say that this rape is 'alleged' as, besides the newspaper accounts of it, there appear to be no charges laid against Governor for rape once he was arrested, and no reported testimony from his trial mentions it). Exclusivity is regarded as the fundamental tenet of property, and the exclusivity of whiteness is what, in the work of Cheryl Harris and Kimberle Crenshaw, creates a property interest in its protection.<sup>77</sup>

The serial violation of white women drew the panic about possessing racial exclusivity into the discourse of colonial security of management. The white man could not be at home and in charge whilst white women were within the sights of black predators.

### **The Blacks Doubling Back**

[...] The house in which live [sic] the man whose daughter was recently assaulted by Jimmy Governor is quite unprotected not a single policeman having been there. The man has been advised to move his family, but up to Thursday he had not done so. This is foolishness on his part, for Jimmy

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<sup>77</sup> See especially Cheryl I. Harris, 'Whiteness as Property' (1993) 106(8) *Harvard Law Review* 1707, in which Kimberle Crenshaw's work on this theme is also cited.

warned the girl that he would return and murder her if she made his crime known.<sup>78</sup>

This report can be read as an attack upon both the masculinity and the patriotism of the father of the rape victim. His continued failure to protect his family from violation locates him as an obstacle to the attainment of the national fantasy of white management.

Further, the frailty of white fantasies of national control becomes apparent in reports of the vulnerability of white women as a civilising population in the landscape. Two female roles appeared in newspaper reports: the frontier homemaker and the bush schoolteacher.

### **The Incident at Cowley's**

[...] Joe Governor stood over Mrs Cowley, while, in terror, she cooked them a meal. Jimmy guarded the male members of the family, and made very light of the escapade in which they were the chief actors. [...] The ordeal which Mrs Cowley went through cannot be easily imagined. It gave her a great shock, and, as she says, it is beyond explanation how she managed to bear up under the strain.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Singleton Argus* 9 October 1900.

<sup>79</sup> *Singleton Argus* 25 September 1900.

## Female Teachers in the Country

Notice has been given by Mr Whiddon of his intention to ask the Legislative Assembly the following question to the Minister for Public Instruction:- ‘Having regard to the danger that female teachers are often exposed to through being placed in schools in sparsely-populated districts, as evidenced by the recent case of assault, and the more terrible murder of Miss Kerz at Gilgandra, will he confer with the officers of his department with the view of seeing that, as far as possible, male teachers are sent to these districts, thus saving the risk to female teachers’.<sup>80</sup>

In a discourse that depended upon the commodification of white womanhood, the Governors’ crimes and the hysteria they provoked appeared to play directly into existing colonial anxieties. Jimmy Governor was the ideal product of a fledgling nation, beset by challenges to its capacity to manage itself. Threadgold wrote, ‘in a society where death, sexuality and property are so inextricably linked, and here one could add racial hatred and fear, the sex murderer, the black murderer of white women, are both hardly ‘exiles’’.<sup>81</sup> In a place with neither stable identity nor polity, the protracted pursuit, apprehension and execution of a rampaging black man was a perfect device for nation building.

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<sup>80</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1900.

<sup>81</sup> Terry Threadgold, *Feminist Poetics: Poiesis, Performance, Histories* (1997) Routledge 159-160.