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Translating into French *The White Girl* by Tony Birch, with its Indigenous Australian idiosyncrasies of style, context and contents

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As a preliminary, let it be stated that the adjective "Aboriginal" and the noun "Aborigine" will be used throughout this essay, since the more contemporary denominations "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander" or "Indigenous" or "First nation people" were not in use at the time of the fiction studied here (the 1960s), and as the author of the novel himself uses such adjective and noun throughout his narrative.

Also, I must claim that my take is that of a French professional translator (not an academic) embracing Henri Meschonnic's "pratique-théorique": "La pratique, c'est la théorie" (Meschonnic), hence the narrative nature of the account of my experience.

Tony Birch is a famous Indigenous Australian writer "who grew up in inner-city Melbourne with a rich Aboriginal, Barbadian (convict), Irish and Afghani [sic] heritage" (Daley). He is said to be "quintessentially Fitzroy" (ibid.), Fitzroy being historically a working-class area, now a hip neighbourhood of Melbourne. His Afghan great-grand-father settled in Fitzroy in the 1890s.

This brief outline of Birch's origins might suffice to characterize the peculiarities of his writing, regarding both contents and context, and style. Birch is recognized as one of Australia's finest writers of short-form fiction: "Tony Birch's *The Promise* stamped him as the outstanding Australian practitioner over shorter distances" (Whish-Wilson). "His short stories are semi-autobiographical, depicting *mostly children* [italics mine] coming to terms with domestic and social violence, a hand-to-mouth life on the fringes where money is visible but forever out of reach" (Walters). They convey with both poignancy and humour a sense of dread and urgency mixed with the ever-possible happening of magic and the miraculous; a combination of horror and fairy-tale penned in the most realist and raw fashion with mesmerizing flashes of utter human tenderness. And outright laughter.

Birch's main theme of interest, as identified above in Walters, is therefore childhood confronted with hardship and violence. This particular focalization can be seen as encapsulating and allegorizing the author's other important topic: the plight of Aboriginal peoples confronted with hardship and violence throughout the whole history of Australia-in-the-making – the corollary of which being resilience (on the part of both Aborigines and children) through fortitude and strength, cleverness and an indomitable sense of humour. This is the very topic of *The White Girl* (TWG).

My own take on Birch's style (as a literary translator with an ear trained on poetry and rhythm) is that his short stories carry the energy and speed of the short-distance runner, which I know Birch to be, echoing the afore-mentioned quote by Whish-Wilson. Birch has also been a boxer, trained by his father in childhood (cf. *Shadowboxing*) and his short stories definitely pack punches and leave you stunned, or "bruised" to borrow from the following quote about his first novel *Blood*: "The book explodes in its last third with equal parts exhilaration and dread, racing to a seemingly inevitable end that is awful, but not without hope, and leaves you bruised. A fantastic book." (Hopkirk) Here's another quote to confirm the physicality of his style in relation to his own training as a boxer: "He's a knockabout bloke who, despite

diminutive height, exudes a formidable physical presence and has something about him of the featherweight boxer—not surprising, perhaps, given his fighting antecedents." (Daley).

Prior to being offered the opportunity by Synchronique Editions to translate Birch's third novel, *The White Girl*, I had read all of Birch's collections of short stories, while overlooking his novels, thinking them less "punchy" on the grounds of the first few pages read online. I must confess that I would rather have been offered to translate one of his collections of short stories, though I said nothing, of course, to Louise, the kind editor who contacted me. I just mentioned that I had read and loved all of them, as a sort of guarantee of dedication and commitment; my way of asserting a kind of *Hieronymic Oath* (Chesterman) of my own, in keeping with the truthfulness item of Chesterman's proposition: "I will be honest about my own qualifications and limitations; I will not accept work that is outside my competence. [Truthfulness]". The corollary being in my view: "I will only accept to translate literary material that I truly love and appreciate."

As expected, TWG, on first reading, appeared to me to be a deeply moving and emotional story, replete with insight and information about Aboriginal history and life, a clear tribute to Aboriginal women and a virulent criticism of Australian historical policies around Aborigines. However, on that first reading, the novel style sounded somewhat humdrum, compared with Birch's blistering short stories. Something Walters also noted about *Blood*: "The writing here is unadorned, the language bordering on plain." I was nevertheless prepared to tackle the translation of TWG, feeling proud and honoured to be Tony Birch's new French translator (only *Blood* had been translated into French at that point). I was also proud and honoured to have been recommended to Louise Razsik at Synchronique Editions by Elaine Lewis, long-time member of AALITRA. I was in no way betraying my implicit *Hieronymic Oath*, since I truly love Birch's writing and respect him immensely as a talented writer. Also, my qualifications as a translator having specialized for nearly 30 years in Australian Literature legitimized my acceptance of the contract. My personal longstanding interest in Indigenous peoples' rights and literature (I have translated several novels by Native American writers) could also have been added to my declaration of expertise and acted as a guarantee that I would not overlook the issues of representing culture in translation.

Of course, as would be expected with Birch, something *magical* happened during the course of the translation, that changed altogether my perception of his style in TWG. Here's what I wrote to Louise:

> Revising the first 50 pages of my manuscript, I am surprisingly pleased with the result—especially since the translation process was a bit tedious in the beginning; I thought the style quite plain and not very engaging—unlike Birch's style in his short stories—though I could tell that this simplicity of style was in the service of an extreme sensitivity. I was, as is often the case in literary translation and without being aware of it, waiting for an *epiphany*... And it happened! My interest was rekindled by the reading of a beautiful French text by Marie Richeux [*Sages femmes*: *wise women*, also evocative of *sages-femmes*: *midwives*, definitely echoing with the subject matter of TWG]. I suddenly understood the specific style adopted by Tony Birch in TWG! Beneath a factual and unadorned appearance seemingly devoid of affect, it triggers in the reader the rising of these very affects, feelings, emotions, in the interstices of the narrative—in its silences—that the reader is led to fill by him/herself. It's a very interesting and subtle strategy indeed, and we must be careful, in the translation, not to add extra feeling or psychology, which seem to be absent but are implicitly left to the reader's sensitivity. This is the true

> elegance and power of this writing! When I understood this, it kind of liberated me and I took great pleasure in revising my text and translating the rest! Knowing that Tony Birch had been a boxer [...] I realized in fact that this seemingly factual and affectless style in this particular novel was *as powerful as boxing*: a series of little *jabs* which end up shaking and waking up the opponent/partner (us/the readers) so as to make them feel the feelings and feel the pain! It's fun, actually. Like a *lightweight boxing strategy*. And undoubtedly very Aboriginal too."

Indeed, I recognized this fighting/writing style as clearly Aboriginal, boxing having always been a sport embraced by popular classes and racial communities (see the Indigenous tent boxers in Australia) as an identity-affirming way out of poverty or discrimination and, in the best-case scenarios, to fortune and fame (Burlot). In that, I made him an heir of the great Muhammad Ali, who like him was both poetically and politically involved in black empowerment and emancipation. And *the jab*, I discovered, was Ali's most used offensive weapon! As this former heavyweight champion comments: "The right hand can take you around the block! But the jab will take you around the world" (*Le Cercle Boxing*). So I decided to go along with the jab tactic and trust Birch to lead me to victory! In the process I made Ali's famous motto: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" my own, because during the length of the match/novel, Birch could be expected to be making use of all the other classic punches in boxing such as *hooks* and *uppercuts* for maximizing effects.

Since my main theoretical grounding and key ethical guidance in professional literary translation have always been Antoine Berman's precepts of ethics and analytics in translation (Berman), I may not have needed to identify this stunning peculiarity of Birch's writing in order to respect his endeavour at simplicity. However, it made me all the more aware that amongst the twelve "deforming tendencies" Berman has identified, the two main ones that I needed to most consciously avoid here were: *Rationalisation* and *Expansion*. And indeed both were visible in my first draft where I had spontaneously added (as a French person is prone to do, but as I normally refrain from doing as a professional translator...), too many logico-temporal links (*thus*, *therefore*, *afterwards*, *indeed, after, before,* etc.) and markers enhancing perception or judgement (*very*, *much*, *more*, etc.), plus a tendency to reorganize sentences according to a very French normative preconception of logic or reason... (See 1st extract: *Incipit*, below).

Another ground on which I normally base my translation strategies (which need changing and adapting to each new project) is the author's own advice (whether specifically addressed to me or generally stated). In this case, I could rely on Birch's prescription to me in an email he sent in response to a question regarding the interpretation to be given to the expression "the river path": I needed to know whether this path was a *towpath*, since in French it would entail a specific translation (*chemin de halage*). Birch replied:

> You are right. There are no tow-paths in Australia. *So, translate as necessary* [italics mine]—'river track' or track along the river'—if you need to be more descriptive you could write 'dirt track ...'

So this became my additional roadmap: "*translate as necessary*", the corollary being to "*not* translate as *not* necessary, unnecessarily, or unnecessary things". Which is also in keeping with Berman's principles, and interestingly allows both an integration and a breaking away from the seemingly unsurpassable Derridian notion of a "relevant translation": no need here for "a seasoned dish"... *"un plat relevé"*... nor for "Sublimation, elevation, exaltation"... but *merely*

(if I may say so) sticking to a "translation relevant to the conjoined motif of justice […] and justness or appropriateness *[justesse]*" (Derrida) which is the primary definition of *relevant* in English and (in my view) maybe the only relevant *[pertinent]* one...

Prior to our exchange of emails, I had already taken some strategic decisions regarding Aboriginal-related terms or issues, based on another Birch's principle I'd read in an interview he gave in 2019 to *The Lifted Brow*, a quarterly literary magazine based in Melbourne, in the Nr.40 announced as *a First Nations issue with a twist*. As a member of the Blak Brow Editorial Collective, Birch was asked the following question:

> Did the collective feel any pressure to *contextualize certain ideas or concepts for a non-indigenous* (sic) *audience*? [italics mine]

It was a question I was also asking myself as the translator of an Indigenous Australian writer for non-Indigenous-Australian French readers. Here's Birch's reply:

> *Not at all—we neither thought we needed to do so, nor did we take that position out of disrespect*. I believe that you need to do two things as a writer: one, make the best work you can, and two, *assume a thoughtful and generous reader*. [italics mine] (*Lifted Brow*)

Another delightful precept for me, in keeping with this dogma in literary translation that I abide by: "the non-feeble-mindedness of the reader" theorized and taught at the ESIT (*École supérieure d'interprètes et de traducteurs*), Paris, by Danica Seleskovitch, founder with Marianne Lederer of the *Théorie du Sens* (Theory of Sense) or *Théorie Interprétative de la Traduction* (*TIT*; Interpretive Theory of Translation) for professional interpreters and translators (Lederer, 1990).

Some of these translation strategies I also shared with my editor, realizing afterwards that those were the *hooks* and *uppercuts* I had to use, in keeping with Birch's own writing/boxing strategies, in keeping also with Lawrence Venuti's "*Call to action*" in *The Translator's Invisibility* (2018, p. 311) which allows the translator to break away from the too simplistic (and in my view now outdated) dichotomy between foreignization and domestication and "to revise the individualistic concept of authorship […] not only by *developing innovative translation practices* [italics mine] in which their work becomes visible to readers, but also by presenting sophisticated rationales for these practices in prefaces, essays, lectures, interviews".

Translation strategies

Here are my/our (Birch and me) hooks and uppercuts:

1. A minimum of footnotes

Three so far, restricted to cultural points (*Nan, Akubra, Jacky*). This is because the unquestionably fictional (see below) nature of Birch's narrative, though based on true facts and stories, doesn't allow for too many societal, political, or historical interventions in the form of footnotes during the course of the reading.

2. ***The use of a foreword***

Suggest to the publisher a foreword providing historic details on the Australian legislations concerning Aboriginal people which differed according to each Australian state or territory. This is because Odette and Sissy's story in TWG is not situated in any specific Australian state:

> The plot begins in the 1960s in fictitious Deane, a country town whose physical, historic and bureaucratic character might place it in southern Queensland, north-western New South Wales or Victoria, where Aboriginal people were at the whim of "protectors", be they police or missions, and from whom they required permission for most freedoms, including travel. But Deane, a dying colonial town on a drying river whose waters have been stolen for whitefella agriculture, *has national resonance* [italics mine]– just like racist colonial legacies. *Deane is anywhere. Deane is everywhere*. [italics mine] (Daley)

3. ***Meaningful terms italicised***

Consistent with Birch's own strategy of italicizing terms marking segregation or linked to Australian and/or Aboriginal history (*settlers, superstitions, pioneers,* etc.)

4. ***Untranslated syntagms***

Quotations of syntagms in English from the original text, followed by their French translation, both in italics, these syntagms being in italics in the original text, hence the author's insistence on them. The doubled insistence in French is intended to have the French reader "hear" something of the Australian vernacular, either in "blackfella" or in "whitefella" style (which often appear to be very similar –see below), or of the racial or cultural assumptions that underlie them (*them wild young gins off the mission*, *a true white man*).

5. ***Italics in original as in translation***

All other mentions in italics in the original text are kept as italics in their French translation (all occurrences, not just the first one as the general convention goes) without mention of the original in English. This is because those do not have the above-mentioned linguistic or cultural revelatory quality.

6. ***The meaning of the words through context***

On the opposite end of this arc of translation strategies, specific Australian and/or Aboriginal English terms are kept exclusively in English, without translation nor footnote, since the context points towards their meaning (*boongs, blackfella, whitefella, sister*). This is to stimulate the reader's perceptiveness (keeping them on their toes, so to speak) and to fully embrace the non-feeble-mindedness-of-the-reader dogma. I was inspired in this audacious approach by a fellow French translator, David Fauquemberg, who recently published his bold French translation of *Too much lip* by Melissa Lucashenko (Lucashenko, 2023) where "whitefella" and "blackfella" (amongst other Australianisms) are not translated into French but kept, without italics, in Australian vernacular.

7. ***When to use full translation for cognitive impact***

The specific terms *Welfare* and *Welfare Board* have been treated differently according to context. First occurrence of *Welfare authorities*: full translation into French by *services sociaux*, for a better cognitive impact on the French reader, followed by a gradual introduction of the terms *Welfare* and *Welfare Board* untranslated and in italics so as to convey to the French reader the same sense of foreboding and dread attached to them in the Aboriginal consciousness.

8. ***The non-canonical translation of terms***

Use of non-canonical translation for terms specific to Australia, such as *half-caste*. Since it is an administrative category, with its loaded ideology, and not a social or subjective one, I opted for a "francization" into *demi-caste* (neologism), alongside *quarteron* (proper term) for *quarter-caste*, and *octavon* (proper term) for *octoroon*. I rejected too simplistic or outdated (or more evocative of Native American culture) solutions that would limit the meaning to *mixed-race* ("*métis*"), *mixed-blood* ("*sang-mêlé*") or *half-blood* ("*demi-sang*").

9. ***The very important word "country/Country" in its Aboriginal sense***

Regarding the very important topic of the use of the word "Country" in its Aboriginal sense and unique grammatical form (*Ø country/Country*) of which we are well aware since we've been translating Australian literature for 30 plus years and witnessed the transformation of the language over the years, we've opted, as in other translations of Australian literature (Stow, 2024), to alternate between "*le pays*", "*la terre*", "*la contrée*" ("country" being etymologically and literally the French word "*contrée*") with specifiers "*le/la*" (the) since it would sound like "broken French" (!) to use the forms *Ø pays/Ø contrée* in prose. Only in one instance could we dare to use *Ø contrée* in this narrative, with a kind of poetic twist at the end of the novel: "*it's wild country out there: c'est contrée sauvage par là-bas*" instead of "*c'est une contrée sauvage par là-bas"*. This remains to be discussed with the editor and publisher.

10. ***The oral style and speech of the characters in the novel***

As suggested earlier concerning the oral style of the characters in the novel, it is striking to notice no significant difference between Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people's speech, which is also a significant feature of contemporary Australian vernacular (except in areas marked by phenomena of creolization). Unlike novels or writings situated in areas or eras concerned with early colonization (like Alexis Wright's *The Plains of Promise*, for example), TWG is situated in the 1960s in an area where Aborigines were no longer "Mission Aborigines" and did not speak any kind of "pidgin" or "broken English". Hence, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian speakers are heard here to be already speaking the same Australian Language, which could be called an Aboriginalized Colloquial English: English as spoken by the British working-class migrants with all their regional idiosyncrasies, transformed by its adoption and fertilization by Aboriginal native speakers of "languages-other-than-English", who were also dwellers and custodians of their own country and culture, and whose own linguistic idiosyncrasies like clipped forms, elisions and truncations have flown/merged inevitably into Australian English (*bong, bush, mate, brother, sister, mob, country, you going, you better, better not, kiddies, Big smoke, etc*). As Sydney Baker observes in his famous (although dated) *The Australian Language* : "Australian Aboriginal dialects are sources from which we have drawn much of our idiom [...]" (Baker). This has also been noted in the case of the American language: "the perception of the Indians as the originators of the American style of speech" is

even central to Robert M. Pirsig's novel *Lila* (Pirsig, 1991). This unique style of speech (its poetics) is mainly what has to be rendered in translations from Australian literature (vs American literature), and it is mostly to do with orality, i.e. rhythm, colloquialisms and wry humour. Hence, words like "bong [dead]" ("gone bung" says Henry, a "whitefella"), and "yabber [jabber]" (says Odette, a "blackfella"), both originating from Aboriginal languages, will be translated into French colloquialisms *[foutu, blabla]* without linguistic or anthropological explanations by way of footnotes. On the other hand, words like "billabong" which are supposed to be universally known will be kept in their original form and not italicized.

11. *Finding the feeling of the language*

Last but not least, let's mention a strategy I have been using for quite a while so as to better get the feeling of the musicality of the language: listening to recordings in audiobooks read by native speakers has now become a must for me. In this case, TWG read by Shareena Clanton has been an invaluable help (Wavesound, 2019).

As a conclusion, let's say that the only notable difference in Aboriginal speech (vs "whitefella" speech) in TWG seems to be a paradoxical blend of both bluntness and tenderness, or severity and care, on the part of Aboriginal speakers when speaking amongst themselves. This can also be seen as a notable Indigenous strategy of survival through transmission of core values of both toughness and caring for others.

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Translation Extracts

Incipit:	*1st draft :*	*Final draft :*
Odette Brown rose with the sun, as she did each morning. She eased out of the single bed she shared with her twelve-year-old granddaughter, Cecily Anne, who went by the name of Sissy. Wrapping herself in a heavy dressing gown to guard against the cold, Odette closed the bedroom door behind her and went into the kitchen. She put a lit match to the wood chips and strips of old newspaper in the stove.	Odette Brown s'était levée aux aurores, comme chaque matin. Se glissant hors du lit d'une personne qu'elle partageait avec sa petite-fille de douze ans, Cecily Ann, dite Sissy, elle passa à la cuisine, emmitouflée dans une chaude robe de chambre, et referma la porte de la chambre derrière elle. Elle craqua une allumette pour enflammer les copeaux de bois et bandes de vieux journaux déjà prêts dans la cuisinière.	Odette Brown se leva aux aurores comme elle le faisait chaque matin. Elle se glissa hors du lit à une place qu'elle partageait avec sa petite-fille de douze ans, Cecily Ann, dite Sissy. Emmitouflée dans un lourd peignoir pour se garder du froid, elle passa à la cuisine et referma la porte de la chambre derrière elle. Elle craqua une allumette et la posa sur les copeaux de bois et les bandes de vieux journaux dans la cuisinière.
'Do they call you by another name,' the policeman asked, smiling, 'other than John?' 'My friends call me Jack.' 'Jack?' The policeman smiled. 'Or is it, Jacky?' He smirked. Jack winced. 'No. Jack.'	« Vous appelle-t-on par un autre prénom ? demanda le policier avec un sourire. Autre que John ? – Mes amis m'appellent Jack. – Jack ? sourit le policier. Ou bien Jacky[1] ? » Son sourire se fit narquois. Jack broncha. « Non. Jack. »	(Note de bas de page) : Surnom péjoratif donné aux hommes aborigènes par le passé, signifiant leur infériorité et leur domesticité.
The Line had been drawn a century earlier to separate the Aboriginal people incarcerated on the nearby mission from the good white *settlers* of Deane.		La Ligne avait été tracée un siècle plus tôt pour séparer les bons *pionniers* blancs de Deane des justiciables aborigènes internés dans la mission proche.
When the stone mine first opened the old people despaired, convinced that cutting into the ground and destroying country with explosives would do great harm, to themselves and the earth. Their *superstitions* were ignored		Quand la carrière avait commencé à être exploitée, les anciens avaient été au désespoir, convaincus qu'entailler le sol pour extraire de la pierre et détruire le pays à coups d'explosifs causerait de grands dommages, à eux-mêmes et à la terre. Leurs *superstitions* furent ignorées.
'My family, we've been in this area from the very *beginning*. We are pioneers.'		Ma famille, nous sommes dans la région depuis *les origines*. Nous sommes des *pionniers*.

He tolerated blackfellas who'd come off the mission and made a go of it for themselves. Many walked by his gate, some even doffing their caps as they passed by. It didn't mean he'd tolerate cheek from them. Jed Lamb might have been a junkman, but he was also *a true white man*.

Il tolérait les *blackfellas* qui renonçaient à la mission pour s'en sortir par eux-mêmes. Beaucoup passaient à pied devant son portail, certains soulevant même leur couvre-chef en le voyant. Mais cela ne signifiait pas qu'il était prêt à tolérer de l'insolence de leur part. Jed Lamb avait beau être un ferrailleur, il était aussi un *true white man, un vrai homme blanc*.

The white community of Deane, thriving on the gossip of a light-skinned Aboriginal baby, exchanged salacious tales about *them wild young gins off the mission* and the so-called respectful men in town who secretly chased after them.

La communauté blanche de Deane, avide de ragots sur un bébé aborigène clair de peau, échangea des fables salaces sur *them wild young gins off the mission*, *ces filles faciles abos de la mission* et les soi-disant hommes respectables du village qui leur couraient après en secret.

Fretting for the children, a group of women approached the head of the mission, Reverend Holman, and asked that they be permitted to take the girls to an important place along the river, *to fix them better*.

Inquiètes pour leurs enfants, un groupe de femmes vint demander au directeur de la mission, le révérend Holman, la permission de conduire les fillettes jusqu'à un lieu important au bord de la rivière, *to fix them better*, *pour les guérir mieux*.

I love the sea and earned my wage on the boats. Worked with an old boatman, the first decent whitefella I'd ever met. He taught me a lot about working the tides and where to lay the nets. He was a good man. I was free as a blackfella could be around that time. When I wasn't working on the boats, I would head off fishing for myself. Same as we used to do in the old days. Then the boating business went bust, so I tried my hand at shearing with a couple of other boys, a whitefella and a blackfella. We were a team of three. Ten years I was on the shearing. All over I went.'

J'aime la mer et j'ai gagné ma vie sur les bateaux. Je bossais avec un vieux marin, le premier *whitefella* correct que j'avais jamais rencontré. Il m'a appris beaucoup sur l'influence des marées et les meilleurs emplacements pour jeter les filets. C'était un type bien. J'étais aussi libre qu'un *blackfella* pouvait l'être en ce temps-là. Quand je travaillais pas sur les bateaux, j'allais pêcher pour mon compte. Tout comme on faisait dans l'temps. Puis l'entreprise de pêche a fait faillite, alors je me suis essayé à la tonte des moutons avec deux autres gars, un *whitefella* et un *blackfella*. On était une équipe de trois. Dix ans, j'ai fait, comme tondeur. J'ai été partout.

From that time on, Odette had no choice but to engage in a

À partir de cet instant-là, Odette n'eut d'autre choix que de jouer au jeu dangereux du chat et de la souris avec les services sociaux.

dangerous game of cat and mouse with the Welfare authorities.

With the permission of the Aborigines Welfare Board, the men moved into new quarters in Quarrytown, close to the mine site and within the boundaries of reserve land.

In the schoolyard at lunchtime they would sometimes argue over who the Welfare Board went after, the dark or fair children.

'The Welfare, they're in love with the fairer ones these days. My ex, he was an Irish fella, red hair, freckles. […] My girls look more like him than me.'

'You'd have been in some trouble,' Odette said. 'You'd need to be riding fast to keep them Welfare fellas off your back.' 'Don't worry about that, I'd have been riding fast enough.'

She glanced across to a blackboard on the wall behind Bill's desk. She was unnerved to see a column on the left side of the blackboard documenting the names of each *known Aboriginal child of any admixture of blood within the jurisdiction*. The second column listed the age and birth date of each child. The third column listed a parent. The final column, beneath the title *caste*, listed descriptions such as *half-caste, quarter-caste and octoroon*. Odette ran an eye down the board and counted sixteen names. Towards the bottom of the list was the name of her granddaughter, *Cecily Brown*. Alongside it were the

Avec la permission de l'*Aborigines Welfare Board*, l'agence d'État dédiée à la protection sociale des Aborigènes, ces hommes avaient pu emménager dans un nouveau quartier de Quarrytown, à proximité de la carrière et dans les limites des terres de la réserve.

Dans la cour, à l'heure du déjeuner, elles discutaient parfois pour savoir après qui le *Welfare Board* en avait : les enfants à la peau foncée ou ceux à la peau claire ?

Le *Welfare*, ils en pincent pour les plus clairs, désormais. Mon ex-mari, il était irlandais, cheveux roux, taches de rousseur. [...] Mes filles lui ressemblent plus qu'à moi.

– Tu te serais attiré des ennuis, observa Odette. Il aurait fallu que ton petit poulain galope drôlement vite pour distancer ces inspecteurs du *Welfare*.
– T'en fais pas pour ça, j'aurais galopé sans m'arrêter. »

Elle jeta un œil au tableau noir sur le mur derrière le bureau de Bill. Ce qu'elle y vit la rendit nerveuse. Il y avait une colonne à gauche listant les noms de tous les *enfants aborigènes connus de quelque pourcentage de sang que ce soit* au sein de la juridiction. La deuxième colonne listait les dates de naissance et âges des enfants. La troisième colonne était réservée au nom d'un parent. La dernière colonne, sous l'intitulé *caste*, renseignait des descriptions telles que *demi-caste*, *quarteron*, *octavon*. Odette parcourut la liste des yeux et compta seize noms. Vers le bas de la liste figurait le nom de sa petite-fille, *Cecily Brown*. Sur la même ligne, les mots *presque blanche – caste inconnue*. Elle ferma les yeux et s'intima de contenir sa colère grandissante.

words, *near white – caste unknown*. She closed her eyes and willed herself to contain her growing anger.

‘What’s happened here? The bike has gone bung.’

« Qu’est-ce qui y est arrivé là ? Le vélo est foutu. »

This might be nothing but drunk yabber or crazy talk, for all I know.’

Pour ce que j’en sais, c’est peut-être rien d’autre que du blabla d’ivrogne ou du délire paranoïaque.

‘But you’re heating the bath water. You’ve never done that on a Wednesday. Why are you putting water in the bath?’
‘Because I’m about to get in it and wash myself,’ Odette snapped. ‘I can take a bath any day I feel like it,’ she added, ‘after all, I’m a grown woman.’

« Mais tu es en train de préparer un bain. Tu n’as jamais fait ça un mercredi. Pourquoi est-ce que tu chauffes de l’eau dans la baignoire ?
-Parce que je vais me mettre dedans pour me laver, répondit sèchement Odette. Je peux prendre un bain tous les jours si j’en ai envie, ajouta-t-elle, est-ce que je suis pas une grande personne ? »

She offered Sissy the paper bag. ‘Would you like this second pastie? I can’t eat it.’
‘No. You keep it for later. You might be hungry then Nanna [...].’

Odette tendit le sac en papier à Sissy. « Est-ce que tu veux le deuxième chausson ? Je n’ai pas faim.
– Non, garde-le pour plus tard. Tu risques d’avoir faim plus tard, *Nanna*. [...]. »

‘What’s with you, woman?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you be looking at me that way. I know what you’re thinking. Well, you can get this over and done with and say what’s on your mind and I’ll be on my way. You reckon I’m some kind of traitor, don’t you?’

« Qu’est-ce qu’il y a, femme ? demanda-t-il. Ne commence pas à me regarder comme ça. Je sais ce que tu penses. Eh bien, vas-y, finissons-en, dis le fond de ta pensée, et je m’en irai. Tu penses que je suis une sorte de traître, c’est ça ? »

‘I best go,’ she nodded to Jack. ‘You look after yourself.’

« Il faut que j’y aille. » Elle gratifia Jack d’un signe de tête. « Prends bien soin de toi. »

You’re living under the Act, and she’s under the Act as well. That girl is not permitted to travel anywhere. It’s as simple as that.

Tu es soumise à la Loi sur les personnes aborigènes, et elle y est soumise aussi. Selon l’*Act*, cette gamine n’a le droit de voyager nulle part. Point final.

‘But what about the Act?’ She whispered the words – the Act – as Aboriginal people generally did. It was a curse, rarely spoken aloud. ‘It would hold you back from travelling, wouldn’t it?’

Jack scoffed dismissively at Odette. ‘The Act doesn’t mean nothing to Jack Haines,’ he boasted. ‘I was finished with the Act years back. It can’t touch me. I don’t need it. And I’m free of it.’

– Mais que faites-vous de *l’Act* ? » Elle chuchota ce mot – *l’Act* – comme les Aborigènes avaient coutume de le faire. Ce mot était une malédiction, rarement prononcée à voix haute. « La loi devrait vous empêcher de voyager, non ? »

Jack se moqua ouvertement d’Odette. « *L’Act*, ça veut rien dire du tout pour Jack Haines, se vanta-t-il. J’en ai fini avec *l’Act* depuis des années. Il peut plus me toucher. J’ai pas besoin de lui. J’en suis libéré. »