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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Carson, Susan Jane](#) (2009) Pathology and modernity : medical discourses and its fictions. In *North Eastern MLA Association Conference*, February 2009, Boston, USA. (Unpublished)

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ABSTRACT: Pathology and Modernity: Medical Discourses and its Fictions**TITLE: Finding Hy-Brazil: Eugenics and modernism in the Pacific.****Susan Carson**

In 1934 Australia presented an intriguing microcosm of the intersection of medical discourse and modernity: *one could say that the entire country was under the microscope*. In particular, the populating of Australia by those that were fit, virile, -and white - became an issue of national importance. The 1930s, it can be said, were remarkable for an often bizarre mix of ideas about race, nation and gender that cut across a diverse range of political and cultural positions. In this uneasy climate, international research into the relationships between race, culture and population found a receptive audience among the growing professional middle class. The complexity of this period in Australian history is clearly evident, I argue, in the literary production of several interwar Australian women writers, in particular in the work of Eleanor Dark. The publication of *Prelude to Christopher*, often called Australia's 'first modernist novel,' in 1934, provides a snapshot of the tensions between cultural and scientific elites--tensions that would significant effect ideas about national identity and public health policy. In the discussion that follows I address ways in which Australian medicine incorporated European medical discourse into the wider debate about race and nation, and the way in which Eleanor Dark, and her family and friends, became almost metonymic of a cultural moment that conjoined a literary and scientific subjectivity.

In 1934 Australia the nation was only 33 years old. The Depression had diminished the benefits of material progress in the 1920s, and the city slums became the focus of health concerns. Despite hegemonic representations of youth and strength, idealized in the bronzed Anzac soldier, Australia faced a major: it was virtually empty. By this I mean it was virtually empty of white people. Perceptions that this was a problem were fuelled by low immigration rates; the European arms race, fears about the militarization of Japan; and worries about a low white population in the tropical north. European ideas about race and population that had reached Australia early in the twentieth century coalesced in the 1930s into organizations that in turn influenced programs of settlement and public health policy for decades to come.

The quest for strength and virility was buoyed by the orthodoxies of British medical schools that saw humans as an organism that had to adapt to climatic conditions. These ideas resulted in what one writer calls the

aspiration to see Australia as the “heartland of an Anglo-Saxon empire in the Pacific” (Turnbull 154). The belief that Asian or indigenous populations would carry disease that endangered white settlement was widespread. As well, there were ingrained fears of the consequences of sexual transgression (Turnbull 157). As well, doctors who had returned from the battlefields of World War I brought home ideas about the regulation of public health, hygiene and fitness. One of these doctors was Eleanor Dark’s husband, Eric Dark.

So it is not surprising, as Warwick Anderson argues, that “science and medicine produced a civic subjectivity as surely as did literature, art, film, and other cultural enterprises” (1). Doctors, he says, were doing more than dealing with disease, they were taking part in a creative national imagining. For Anderson “the clinic and the laboratory should be added to those sites where the nation—any nation—may be imagined.” (1-2)

This imagined space of the laboratory can be extended to include Australia as a whole. The process of forming and settling a modern white nation in a non-European geography is an experiment itself on a massive scale. In the interwar period some of the most interesting accounts of this grand experiment were written by women who were generally feminist and left-wing. Their writing was important because it signaled to the world that there was a counter-narrative to the masculine-focused, bush traditions of prior canonical Australian writing. The novels of the thirties showed that a modernist aesthetic could be adopted and adapted by Australian writers, and that Australian intellectuals and artists were conversant with international debates on politics, philosophy and science. In Australian writing of this era we see what Susan Stanford calls the ‘bang clash’ of modernism: those competing and jostling beliefs and practices that make the study of modernism in the colonial context an especially interesting exercise.

Note: In the following discussion I refer to ‘eugenics’ broadly in the social and scientific context as a study of the factors that influence the hereditary qualities of future generations. For eugenicists, “quality of population is the key issue” (Garton 11).

Wider context:

Gisela Kaplan has argued that “[e]ugenics was probably one of the very first ideologies that generated global support. It was quintessentially European, entirely respectable and became truly ‘globalised’” (19). But at the same time, researchers argue that a distinctly ‘Australian’ version of eugenics became apparent, even if it was largely derivative (Wyndham, *Striving* ii). When *Prelude to Christopher*, Eleanor Dark’s modernist novel, was published Australia was not the ‘quarantined culture’ that many believe existed but it was certainly

European focussed. It was home to 6.6 million people in a land mass the size of the United States, of mostly British origin. The monarch was the English king, George V but the Prime Minister was Joe Lyons, a teacher, trade unionist and pacifist with a reformist and federalist agenda.

[can cut] *Anderson comments further on the nexus of medicine and civic vision, saying that:*

It is important to realize that medicine, until the early twentieth century, was as much a discourse of settlement as it was a means of knowing and mastering disease. In seeking to promote health, doctors drew on a fundamentally moral understanding of how to inhabit a place with propriety. They advised their communities on how to avoid sources of pathology; they offered guides to hygienic behaviour and civilized conduct. Race and environment jostled together in this civic vision. (4)

The civic vision to build a superior Australian race drew on earlier British concerns for building national efficiency through health reform that emphasized national hygiene (31-32). The connections between university and medical association fraternities in England and Australia and the growth of a home-grown 'body culture' movement, combined to produce a culture interested in, and accepting of, ideas about race selection.

[can cut] *Leading medical men such as J.S.C. Elkington and Sir Raphael Cilento were famous for their commitment to research proving that white men could survive in the tropics with Cilento frequently offering "apocalyptic warnings of the coming racial struggles for world power" (Gillespie 51). The work of German writer Wolfgang Graeser on the building of a new spirituality and physicality found a home in Australia, as well as in America and Japan. The interest in body culture was displayed in the gymnasium: George Dupain who established "The Dupain Institute of Physical Education and Medical Gymnastics" in Sydney in the late 1920s became a health science pioneer. In an interesting synchronicity, it was George Dupain's son, Max Dupain, who took some of Australia's most iconic, and modernist, photographs in the 1930s and 1940s, including a portrait of Eleanor Dark.*

Eleanor Dark's family and interests display many of the cross-currents of these ideas. She was an active bush-walker and mountain climber and her husband, Eric, was an expert rock-climber and founder of the Blue Mountaineers -- called the Katoomba Suicide Club by the locals because they climbed on Blue Mountains sandstone. Her aunt, Marion Piddington was "a great admirer of Marie Stopes in England,

and Margaret Sanger, who started a newspaper in America under the banner, 'No gods, no master'" (Brooks 116). Piddington was a founder of the New South Wales Racial Hygiene Association with links to the Eugenics Education Society in London. This group that proposed that health certificates be made a legal requirement for marriage and that individuals who suffered from syphilis or epilepsy, or who were intellectual handicapped, should be prevented from marrying and so passing on their lack of 'racial fitness' (Cumpson 145). Dark's biographer, Barbara Brooks, says that "when Eleanor was writing *Prelude to Christopher*, Marion Piddington set up the Institute for Family Relations in a room in her flat in Philip Street in the city. She called it the Sex Education Room and offered classes on the economic conditions of family life, sex habits, sterilisation and segregation, birth control" (Brooks 116).

[can cut] In the later 1930s social medicine became influential and ventured into public health (Gillespie 52). The emphasis shifted from disease control to the care and culture of the body of the infant and the school child, and his education and care of his body. (G 52) As war moved closer there was an increasing interest and involvement in a national fitness campaign. (G 55).

Diana Wyndham claims that although British models were foundational " Australian eugenics has several distinctly Australian qualities" (Wyndham, "Striving" ii) because it argued for the development of a distinctly Australian 'race' that was larger and fitter than the British. While many of these theories were debunked later by medical professionals and researchers the longevity of the White Australia Policy, designed to restrict Asian immigration, from 1901 to 1973, shows a wide public approval. As well, eugenics was men's business. Lisa Featherstone writes that many Australian eugenics texts "did not mention women at all" (182) and that the body of the woman was both absent and silent (182).

Isobel Crombie argues that "[e]ugenics was a topic that engaged with fundamental human issues such as sex, health, race and culture and so it is not surprising that it entered the creative imagination in literary publications in the interwar period" (41) but it was the representation of these issues in the form of the modernist novel that excited attention. Crombie acknowledges that Dark's *Prelude to Christopher* is "one of the few books of the period to engage with such contemporary issues in modernist style." (41).

So, why Dark? Dark was perfectly positioned to intervene in the eugenics discourse. She grew up in middle-class intellectual family in Sydney that was financially unstable but had important connections in government and local literary circles. Her uncle, A. B. Piddington, husband of Marion, noted above, was a member of Parliament who gave public support to health issues. At 21 she married Eric Dark, a doctor

who had served with the British forces in France in World War I. Eric was 34, and a widow with a young son. Eric foreswore early political conservatism to embrace socialism and read his way through socialist philosophy, including the work of the Fabian Socialists in Britain, H.G. Wells, and Bernard Shaw. In the 1930s he wrote articles for the *Medical Journal of Australia* with titles such as 'Property and Health' and he also wrote books in support of Communist Russia. In the 1930s he acquired one of the earliest long-range diathermy machines in Australia for the treatment of TB. It was to further this research that he and Eleanor visited the United States in 1938. Whereas Cilento was on the right wing of the social medicine debate, Eric Dark was firmly on the left as his studies linking "ill-health to unemployment and a capitalist social order" showed (Gillespie 51).

It is no wonder, then, that doctors became such a feature of Eleanor Dark's writing in the 1930s. Eleanor typed many of Eric's manuscripts and Eric was Eleanor reader of her first drafts. There has been much debate as to the extent of Eric's influence on Eleanor's writing and certainly the strains of being the 'local doctor's wife' who has to live in a small country town or suburban environment shows in her early short stories. But she shared with Eric a belief that a socialist-inspired social order could work in the public good, and she was united with him when they were under siege and socially ostracized as suspected communists during the 1940s. And at no time does she disavow the fundamental notion of progress through scientific inquiry, even if she disputes, as she does in *Prelude*, the most extreme manifestations of those idea.

Dark's first novel, "Slow Dawning," published in 1932, is unusual in that the doctor at the centre of the story is a woman. This character, called Valerie, dares to suggest that women should be able to visit brothels to have sex with men. After "Slow Dawning" Dark's doctors change gender: they are males who are of often self-centred (Dick Prescott in 'Pilgrimage'), Phillip in "The Urgent Call") or cold and bombastic (Gerald Hughes in *Slow Dawning*). By *Prelude to Christopher*, a few years later, doctors begin to metamorphose into humane progressive human beings, even if hopelessly idealistic. After *Prelude*, they become liberal pragmatists who help the socially disadvantaged in the city.

Prelude to Christopher however represents medicine at an ethical crossroad. The doctors (and there are at least three main figures who are medical doctors, and several others who are scientists) represent various points on the sanity spectrum. Pure science (in this case, biology) has become the province of the mad (Linda Hendon her mad uncle Dr Hamlin) and at the other end of the scale we meet the appropriately named country GP, Dr Bland. Another doctor, Marlowe, make a specific comment on

eugenics when he says that a patient should drink himself to death because it would be a better outcome for his wife who has just had her sixth child. He adds, “This breeding of the unfit must stop somewhere—someday. (274).

The laboratory is literally and symbolically at the centre of the novel. *Prelude* is the story of the doomed relationship of Nigel and Linda Hendon. Nigel is a brilliant doctor, and a war hero. He reads *The Psychology of Sex* and *The Science of Eugenics* and dreams of founding a community on an island whose “basis was to be the rearing of healthy children from untainted stock”(43). His career has been damaged by publication of a controversial eugenics treatise that has been suppressed by the Australian government, but he continues to dream about finding a world that is “unpeopled” (10). On the idyllic island of Hy-Brazil in the Pacific Nigel establishes a colony. The one flaw in his plan is his wife Linda, a beautiful young scientist, who comes from unsound genetic stock. In order to produce only healthy children Nigel and Linda cannot have a child -- but Linda becomes pregnant to a painter who lives on the island. Nigel’s experiments fail, mainly because the males want to enlist in a world war, and the colony collapses in a scene of fury and violence.

Linda takes over from Nigel as the most compelling character in the novel. She is highly intelligent and sexually liberated. She has slightly Asian features, drinks and smokes, styles her hair in the latest bob and wears loose wrap around clothing—all of which are sure signs of danger and decadence. Linda steps outside sexual and social convention: men find her ‘queerly attractive (166) and even her limp, a legacy of the trauma on Hy-Brazil, makes her interesting. But the blond, healthy Australian nurse thinks she is ‘revolting’ (166). Unlike the male doctors in the novel, however, Linda cannot be redeemed. Like her uncle’s laboratory organisms, she is unable to live. Before her suicide she ruminates on her strange upbringing and her marriage in the following terms:

So much, Uncle Hamlin, for your scientific training. So much, Nigel, for the austerities of your idealism. You were right, and all your rightness failed before a child’s mystical superstition and a biological need. No text-book statistics had touched the lovely serenity of her mood that night; the things she had learned in her uncle’s laboratory, the things which she knew with the bright-edged brain now so mercifully blunted, might really never have been.

So Linda suicides and Nigel, after a life threatening car accident, will marry his blond healthy Australian nurse who will give birth to a child called Christopher.

It is interesting to consider Dark's position on eugenics in light of this novel. From a personal perspective, being seen as 'anti-science' was a risk, especially given that Eric was supporting her financially and emotionally. Barbara Brooks, Dark's biographer, says that in this novel:

Eleanor presents the point of view of the outsider, as well as the scientist as reformer. Through judgments about sexuality and reproduction, medicine could, and did, become part of the technology of social control. She was critical of science and technology, suspicious of 'progress.' In her novels and essays, she argues for freedom for the individual, but also for the responsibility of the individual towards the community. (188)

But at the same time her creation of the character of Linda makes it clear that not all science, nor all progress, is suspect. Linda's transgressions are shocking and it is interesting to note that the reviews of the novel did not engage with Linda's honesty. Most reviews focused on her experimentation with modernist form (the use of flashback, interior monologue, the changing narrative perspective; the fragmented family history and the fluid movement between male and female point of view and inner and outer fantasy (TH 166). Dark was criticized for her 'stream of consciousness' technique by several critics but she used this technique because, according to Eric, "she found it the best medium of expressing what she wanted." (TH 167, qtd in Guiffre 106).

The book was seen as edgy, somewhat melodramatic, and its form and content caused a furore. As Brooks points out, when Dark wrote *Prelude* (between 1930 and 1933) "there were laws in the US providing for the sterilisation of people classed as mad, mentally unfit, social deviants. In Germany, the idea of racial superiority was used to justify the internment and murder of people on the basis of race and sexual preference as well as the so-called mad or mentally unfit. It was published in Germany in 1937 ---and, --as Brooks comments further---, "one wonders what readers there would have thought" (188).

However, as noted above, many of the more extreme ideas did not gain widespread acceptance although they continued to influence public health policy.

[can cut] *The story of the publication of the book in Australia and overseas offers another insight into the contradictory conditions of the times. Prelude was published by one of Australia's best known intellectuals, P.R. "Inky" Stephensen, who was trying to make a living as a publisher (he failed). Inky had joined the Communist Party when at Oxford in the 1920s but became a famous cultural nationalist after*

he returned to Australia in 1932. His political shift went from left to right (the opposite of Eric's) and he wrote a short but important book called *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1936), which was anti-semitic and anti-British, although at same time he supported Indigenous rights. His support of ultra-nationalist causes found him serving most of World War II in internment camps. Stephensen's publishing company ran into financial difficulties and only limited numbers of *Prelude* were published. However, the book was picked up by Collins in London and Dark tried to interest American film makers in the work, sending it to Bette Davis agent because she thought Bette Davis would be "exactly right as Linda" (186).

In this context Anderson's description of 'whiteness' is important:

"Until the middle of the twentieth century, medical scientists and public health officials in Australia regarded the white body as their principal research interest During much of the nineteenth century, being 'white' in the Australian colonies usually meant claiming British ancestry; in fin-de-siecle Australia, whiteness was re-created as a national type on the tropic frontier; later, it sometimes became diffused into the general, and more obscure, category of Caucasian, or else it was narrowed down to subtypes such as Nordic. Until the 1880s, then, being British implied a lineage; after that, whiteness became a type, mobile and standardized; Whiteness might suggest a typical bodily constitution or temperament; a cultural legacy and thought style; a virility or femininity; a head circumference and brain capacity; a predisposition or resistance to certain diseases; a blood group; a lamentable ability to sweat off tropical moisture. . . . Until the 1930s, few biomedical scientists in Australia, or elsewhere, doubted that they would eventually resolve manifold human difference into a few physical and mental types, called races, one of them white. But none of them ever managed to do so to anyone else's satisfaction—not for long, at least." (2)

Martin Crotty remarks that it was in the interwar years that eugenic solutions to white pathologies "seem to have had most appeal" (167). When this thinking was applied to research on Indigenous populations it led, Crotty argues, to "both a high tide and moral low point of modernism" (168). This is not to say that all Australian research leaders saw Indigenous populations in these terms. Indeed A.P. Elkin, who was later to congratulate Dark on her depiction of Aboriginal Australia in her historical fiction, "urged caution and restraint "lest, as a result of our scientific urge to systematize whatever we study, we abet the dehumanization of a living people." (Crotty 168).

Conclusion:

When Eleanor Dark began writing *Prelude to Christopher* in 1930 she was writing into a highly racialised atmosphere. The Depression was just starting to bite, her child was 18 months old, and her doctor husband saw daily the effects of privation on the poor but scientific progress was relatively new subject matter for an Australian novelist. Within four years scientific progress was an increasingly contentious subject. H.G. Wells, whom Dark read, visited Perth in 1938 with a “dedicated determination to set the world to rights through an application of science and commonsense and spoke to journalists of Hitler’s racial policies as “sentimentalized sadism” (qtd in Bartlett 67). It is interesting to note that Prime Minister Joe Lyons disputed Wells’ account of German racial policies for fear of giving offence to the Germans and Italians and precipitating war (Bartlett 68). Dark’s novel “picks up on a strand of utopian thought in Australian nationalism” (Brooks, Coda 188) because the “ideas around eugenics connected with the arguments of science, nationalism and feminism at the time. Ideas of progress, of improvement in social conditions, were part of eugenics, as they were part of both capitalism and socialism” (Coda, 188). The novel won the Australian Gold Medal for Literature in 1934 and made her central to the group of interwar Australian women writers who took up avant-garde positions on race, class and gender.
