

## **Auckland University of Technology**

**Zana Bell**

### **Biding with ghosts; listening to silences**

Abstract:

How does a writer capture the faint, marginalised voices from a colonial past? How then to use these fragments to create living characters that speak without authorial agenda, or post-colonial hindsight? As a postcolonial fiction author, I encounter women underwritten and overwritten by the historical canon and my PhD research aims to construct a 'biography' of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe through voices of its past women, including that of an 1890s female pioneer. But how do I locate her, ambiguously situated as she is across fiction, memoir, myth and official doxa? Combining Foucault's archaeological approach (1969), with Benjamin's 'scavenger' (1999), this paper investigates a method to excavate a range of 1890s women's marginalia: interviews, personal papers and novels. 'Listening' to these sources for both their historical detail and what lies beneath becomes a tactic for writing this pioneer woman. But to fully understand her, I need also to listen to the silences. Derrida encourages a 'being-with spectres' (1993) so I bide with these female ghosts to detect their elisions and omissions. The research locates a complex 'complicity' within which women have been represented by women and men alike. Women's writing also fed – unwittingly? – into the weaving of a heroic Rhodesian identity that contributed to the oppression of indigenous peoples. Silence becomes further complicated within my own ability to listen and discern how to construct a novel that traverses a course between collusion and betrayal.

Biographical note:

Zana Bell has had six novels published internationally across a range of genre. Her short stories and articles have also been published widely and her creative work has won awards and grants. She grew up in Zimbabwe and is currently undertaking a PhD at AUT University to address issues of identity, migration, colonisation and postcolonial fallout from a feminine perspective.

Keywords:

Writing back – spectres – silences – mythologizing – 'truth'

How does a writer capture the faint, marginalised voices from a colonial past? How then to use these fragments to create living characters that speak without authorial agenda, post-colonial hindsight or 21<sup>st</sup> century preoccupations? As a postcolonial fiction author, I encounter women underwritten and overwritten by the historical canon and my PhD research aims to construct a 'biography' of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe; that is, the history of the country told through voices of its past women, including that of an 1890s female pioneer. But how do I locate this pioneer, ambiguously situated as she is across official doxa, memoir, fiction, memoir and myth?

Combining Michel Foucault's archaeological approach (1969), with Walter Benjamin's 'scavenger' (1999), this paper investigates a method to excavate a range of 1890s women's marginalia: interviews, personal papers and novels. In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault challenges what he terms 'totalising histories' and he turns his attention away from the 'great men of history' whom he sees as much a product as an agent of their times, finding value instead in marginalized texts; spaces in which the voices of the 'other' can be heard and their subjugated knowledge revealed. Similarly, in *The Arcades Project* (1999), Walter Benjamin saw the role of the historian as a scavenger who:

selects from amongst all that is disregarded and from the residues of history. At the library he is unconcerned with what has been accredited as precious and valuable, but rather is drawn towards historical refuse. Waste materials are to enter into significant connections and fragments are used to gain a new perspective on history (252).

Most of the women's writings referred to in this paper have been long out of print and have been largely disregarded in academic and literary circles. 'Listening' to these discarded, fragmentary sources for both their historical detail and what lies beneath becomes a tactic for writing this pioneer woman. But to fully understand her, I need also to listen to the silences – and in order to detect these silences, I cross-reference the women's writings with official histories, academic writings, masculine memoirs and information gleaned from internet sources. Derrida's notion of hauntology underlies the research for it is concerned with the strange 'in-between' space that 'reclaims the unspoken and neglected' (Derrida 1993:79) and is a means to trespass into the margins where the instabilities and erasures of memory may be interrogated. It also allows 'the possibility of engaging the disjunctive force of the past as a resource that can allow us to post new questions regarding our time and collective identity' (Derrida 1993:83). Derrida encourages a 'being-with spectres', listening to, rather than speaking for them to avoid present-day interpretive meanings and standpoints which serve to reduce or banish the past and its complexities. In a 1983 interview, Derrida claimed, 'I believe that ghosts are part of the future and that the modern technology of images like cinematography and telecommunication enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us (*The Science of Ghosts*, 1983). Although the interview was conducted before the widespread advent of the internet, it appears his comment was prescient for the internet has played a significant role in this research, especially in accessing out-of-print texts and in facilitating a fragile spider web of cross referencing for obscure details.

Educationalist Michalinos Zembylas (2013) applies the notion of hauntology to societies disrupted by dictatorships and wars, equating the ‘disappeared’ to Derrida’s ‘spectres’. This application has resonance when investigating colonial histories for Zembylas is particularly wary of the move towards ‘totalising explanations’ (Zembylas 2013:84) – triumphalist or redemptive – which legitimate narrativizations driven by political, social or ideological agendas. Caution is thus required as I bide with these female ghosts to detect their elisions and omissions for my research locates a complex ‘complicity’ within which women have been represented by women and men alike. Women’s writing also fed – unwittingly? – into the weaving of a heroic Rhodesian identity that contributed to the oppression of indigenous peoples. There are also other underlying silences. The voices of indigenous women are mute, as are the voices of ethnic minorities and many of those women who passed through Rhodesia but did not stay. Silence becomes further complicated within my own ability to listen and discern how to construct a novel that traverses a course between collusion and betrayal of these women of whom I have grown inordinately fond.

This paper focuses on pioneer writings set mainly in Mashonaland from 1890 when the first pioneer column arrived until 1896 when the indigenous peoples, the Shona (and the Ndbele who are not part of this paper), rose up against the settlers invading their lands. Women’s texts of this time are scant and like all writing they have been shaped, either consciously or unconsciously, to fulfil functions which reach beyond the personal accounts they purport to be. There has been little academic interest in these writings, most of which have been out of print for many years, and can be censorial (Cairnie 2007) coming as it does from the vantage of a postcolonial framework. Colonial women, it has been suggested, suffer ‘double invisibility’ (Callaway & Helly 1992: 92) whereby historians tend to view the empire as a masculine space, while ‘academic feminists’ cannot feel affinity with them. As Chaudhuri and Strobel (1990) point out, ‘the study of Western women and imperialism is part of a process of studying not only the Other, but ourselves – and ourselves operating in less-than-politically-correct modes.’ (290). The ambiguous relationship of the academic feminist to the colonial woman is exacerbated by the complex relationship the colonial woman has with empire; wherein she is both complicit with and resistant to the imperial vision. (Callaway & Helly 1992:80). These complexities thread the works discussed in this paper: a memoir and two ‘collective biographies’ of different types. Three 1890s novels are also referred to for it appears women’s fiction could accommodate spaces in which prevailing beliefs could be interrogated and subverted.

Let us begin with the women. Who were they? In 1960, Jessie Lloyd compiled a register, *Rhodesia’s Pioneer Women 1859-1896*, adhering to a strict format: (Married) name, date of arrival, first name, maiden name and source of information. Sometimes there are a few biographical notes which provide ephemeral glimpses of people long vanished. For example:

MRS. ARCHIE CAMPBELL 1896

Nee Poppy Smith. Her husband was an 1890 Pioneer; he went back to the Union and returned with his wife in 1896 to be Native Commissioner at Fort Rixon. Mrs.

Campbell lived the rest of her life in Rhodesia; she died here in 1954 or 55. Information from her daughter-in-law (Lloyd 1960: 7).

The gaps in the personal narrative are immediately apparent but despite the apparent sketchiness of information this metadata yields a surprising wealth of information. Though many were British, there were women from many backgrounds such as Dutch, French and American. They were usually married, sometimes twice as a number were widowed. Deaths are often recorded: from malaria, black water and rheumatic fever. There were accidents. Mrs Nel (Lloyd 1960: 30), for example, was run over by a wagon wheel. A number died in the 1896 conflicts. Many accompanied husbands, fiancés or siblings though of course this register does not reveal the discussions, perhaps passionate arguments, underlying those decisions. Nuns, missionaries and nurses were drawn by vocation. Some women came as lady's maids or child nurses. A number of women were enterprising, setting up tearooms, lodgings, stores, laundries etc.

Stories lurk behind sentences. Mrs. Crombie 'having travelled the world, finally arrived in Rhodesia, met her husband and remained in the country' (Lloyd 1960: 10). Mrs. Bertelsen 'was murdered during the rebellion, together with her husband and four sons'(4). Phrases capture not only the idiom of the time but admired qualities. Mrs. Biller was 'a real good sort' (5). Mrs. Pascoe, 'the soul of goodness' (32), Mrs. Von Hirschburg had 'indomitable courage, humour, generosity and kindness' (42). Many women were described as 'plucky', a trait clearly venerated.

It is easy, at first, to miss silences. No Indian women are listed although there was a tiny Indian community (Keppel-Jones 1983: 421). There is no mention of prostitutes. Are terms like 'hotel owner' and 'barmaid' a whitewash? Are such 'unsavoury' details left out or are the women themselves excluded from the record? 'Spectres' are elusive, but as Derrida predicted, technology can encourage them. Diane Jeater referred in one article to French Marie, a successful brothel owner, who 'dressed and acted as a man, with a pistol ever ready' (Jeater 2000: 33) yet in Lloyd's text, she is recorded as owning only a mine and butchery and is circumspectly described, by her daughter, as 'a great character and much loved' (3). However, there are several references to French Marie online, including one account on the *Memories of Rhodesia* website written by a great granddaughter. It draws on familial anecdotes and details how French Marie not only ran brothels but also gambled, drank in bars, and fought with her fists – rambunctious details that do not surface in either contemporary accounts or official histories.

Fanny Pearson, too, is 'tidied up'. This 18 year old girl defied Cecil John Rhodes' ban on women entering Rhodesia in 1890 by disguising herself as a boy, naming herself Billy and travelling up with her lover, the Viscomte de la Panouse. They lived together for more than three years while mining out in the bush and it was only some months after moving to Salisbury that they finally married. Was this because she felt the force of Victorian disapproval in that tiny society? Lloyd records her adventures ambiguously: 'Known affectionately as 'Billy'. Came from England on the same boat as the Viscomte, then travelled with his party...disguised as a youth. They were married in Salisbury.' Billy is described as 'really a splendid little heroine and

deservedly popular' (Lloyd 1960: 32). Would she have been included on this register had she not entered into a prestigious marriage?

Bestselling African romance author, Cynthia Stockley, also has a much truncated biography. She wrote nearly 20 novels and collections of short stories and her sales, at one period, rivalled those of Rider Haggard. A number of novels were turned into Hollywood films. In 1936 she committed suicide in England (Barlow, n.d.). Yet she is listed, almost anonymously, by her second husband's name: Mrs. Pelham Browne. Lloyd briefly records Stockley's family connections before summing up her writing career as: 'She wrote several books about Rhodesia.' (7). Lloyd certainly knew of Stockley's successes for they are recorded in Boggie's book which Lloyd used as a reference text. There is no mention of Stockley's death either which, at the time, was classed a crime.

We meet the women themselves in two texts where they speak, for the most part, in their own voices. While *Adventures in Mashonaland* (1893) was ostensibly written by two nurses, it is clear Rose Blennerhassett is the primary author and it fits well within the then burgeoning field of travel writing (O'Connell 2012). The second text is the eclectic *Experiences of Rhodesia's Pioneer Women: being a true account of the adventures of the early white Women settlers in Southern Rhodesia from 1890 elicited and arranged by Jeannie M. Boggie*. This volume, compiled in 1938, is a curious patchwork of interviews with pioneers in their later years, as well as extracts from memoirs, letters, and diaries. There are also second-hand accounts, passed on by family members. Boggie stitched these together, at times overwriting the entries, presumably to provide greater cohesion, but this can complicate issues of authorship when Boggie's voice subsumes the original. In her preface, Boggie explains that she compiled this text after realising that while a considerable number of books had been written about and by the male pioneers, few had been written about the part played by the women pioneers. It was not meant to be biographical but rather a 'human story connected with the early days in Rhodesia – days of well-nigh unbelievable hardships, noble endeavour and dogged perseverance' (Boggie 1954: v). This enterprise provides an invaluable record of the adventurous exploits of the pioneer women ranging from the amusing to the tragic.

It is impossible not to be charmed by the nursing sisters or many of the women in Boggie's collections. They relate their tales with verve and were an intrepid group as they had to be for:

the way from Cape Town to Mashonaland was long and perilous. Swamps, which exhaled poisonous vapours had to be crossed. Boats and canoes were not to be procured; the men were forced to swim across. Oxen fell sick, and died by the score on the long trek. Fever ravaged the pioneers (Blennerhassett and Sleeman 1969: 26).

There were also wild animals, starvation and accidents. Many pioneers died.

One thing that comes to my mind to-day...was the number of graves one saw along the road. I think it was at the Lundi river we counted about forty; while at other places we saw a single grave, or several together. I don't suppose one could find a trace of one quarter of these graves today. Such is a pity; as they serve as milestones, and are

an indication of the difficulties that were encountered by the early pioneers of this country in opening it up (Boggie 1954: 56).

Illness and death visited their children. One baby passed away and ‘was then laid in another hut to await burial the next day; but oh! What a ghastly sight met our eyes in the morning. The rats had eaten almost half of the little face away’ (Boggie 1954: 169).

Hopes were high as people travelled north into Rhodesia but for the most part painfully dashed. Yet Mrs. Bent is representative of the spirit of these women. ‘Many of the trek were almost destitute, owing to losses in stock. We had now been six months in a wagon; with many hardships and privations. But we were still undaunted’ (Boggie 1954: 161). Their endurance was extraordinary. Mrs. Tulloch walked two hundred miles, the last fifty with wadded shoes which caused great agony. When they finally reached a hut she recalls the joy of having ‘a roof over my head, and level floor under me and felt as if I were in the lap of luxury’ (Boggie 1954: 96).

Anecdotes are often amusing for, as the nurses point out, ‘A person who takes life too seriously ... who can extract no fun from the odd contrivances one has recourse to, and the many inevitable difficulties, must obviously be very unhappy’ (Blennerhassett & Sleeman 1969: 206). There are entertaining accounts of the make-do, can-do approach of the early pioneers, Mrs. Nesbitt describing life as ‘simple and unconventional’ (Boggie 1954: 121). Dances were ‘delightfully jolly, free-and-easy affairs’ (146) and there were many happy memories, much ‘kindheartedness and goodfellowship’ (119).

Encounters with the ‘natives’ were, from the white women’s point of view, cordial and there are numerous records of amicable, intercultural dealings, especially during the early 1890s. The fascination with ‘other’ appears to have been mutual. Blennerhassett describes how when they were eating in their tent, ‘a troop of natives would glide silently up to it, squat in a semicircle close to the opening, and watch us intently. ....The natives could not understand our waists, or how we contrived to induce the food to pass our waist-bands’ (Blennerhassett & Sleeman 1969: 104). There is however, a distinct sense of racial superiority. Blennerhassett describes Chiconga, a chieftainess as ‘small, slight, very ugly and not unlike an ill-nourished monkey’ (244) though Blennerhassett also concedes ‘she was a gentle savage, not without mother wit’ (244). When Chiconga gives a clever response to a question, Blannerhassett declares, ‘Truly a woman, savage or civilized, is rarely at a loss for an answer!’ (245). Blannerhassett also acknowledges the skills of the Shona, recording, for example, an incident where a group of white hunters kept missing their shots when chasing game. ‘The natives, who are all very keen sportsmen, lost all patience, threw down their bundles, and proceeded to hunt a buffalo ... and succeeded in killing him with their assegais after some little time’ (130).

While the Shona worked for the pioneers in the early years, they maintained their autonomy. Workers ‘came and went at their own caprice. Sometimes we had a good staff, sometimes only one boy for everything’ (Blennerhassett & Sleeman 1969: 217). Yet Blannerhassett also noted that while the Bishop worked his natives hard and paid them little,

he was the only person in the country with whom the natives would stay. I think one reason of his success in managing natives lay in the fact that he treated them consistently. His boys were neither playthings nor slaves; were well fed, regularly paid, and cared for when sick (Blennerhassett & Sleeman 1969: 180).

In contrast, the Chartered Company paid only one pound a month and found it hard to obtain labour. 'Of course the Company's natives had many masters – some were good, others brutal and drunken; drinking was beginning to take very great proportions in Umtali. It was sad, terrible, yet men had very many excuses' (181).

Blennerhassett's candour is unusual in two regards. Firstly, ill-treatment of workers is not generally related in other memoirs, masculine or feminine. Instead, many provide numerous anecdotes of native foolishness told with exasperated good humour. The sentences also subvert by revealing widespread alcoholism, and though Blennerhassett immediately outlines the privations and hardships which drove men to these excesses, she also identifies alcohol as a contributing cause to ill-health and accidents (181). Tanser (1965) records how in the early 1890s the pioneers' reputation as heavy drinkers was established (56) yet while Boggie's book contains some humorous accounts of 'tipsiness', none voice criticism. Stockley, in contrast, depicts the corrosive effects of alcoholism in her 1923 novel, boldly titled *Ponjola* – a slang term for drink.

There are other silences. No mention is made of the passes blacks were required to carry to enter white settlements from as early as 1893 (Keppel-Jones 1983: 617). The women do not talk of the hut tax, instigated in 1894 to force the indigenous people into a cash economy and thus ensure cheap labour for European enterprises (Knight 1975: 4; Keppel-Jones 1983: 400). Nor do they mention how cattle were also seized and crops burnt to this end (Bonello 2010: 347). The nurses had left Rhodesia by this time but did the other women not know of these events or is there complicity in their silence? Miscegenation is not alluded to though it was not uncommon (Bonello 2010: 351). It is again fiction that dares to explore colonial shadowlands. Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) is an indictment of white men's behaviour towards black women but was dismissed as 'blasphemous and anti-British' (Cairnie 2007: 70).

Boggie never feigns objectivity and her exuberance leads to over-colouring. In describing Fanny Pearson, Boggie writes, 'She was forbidden to go up-country; but plucky little Billy resolved not to be beaten. By hook or by crook, she would get there' (Boggie 1954: 42). While this overblown style is in keeping with Boggie's intent to celebrate the courage of the women pioneers, it is necessary to attend closely to her accounts. Is it out of fondness for Billy that Boggie is careful to point out that on the ship to Africa, the count travelled first class, Fanny in second (42)? Boggie is vague when she writes that 'it was only later on' (44) that they married. In fact it was four years later. Boggie also corrects 'several mistaken stories' (44) to explain that 'Billy' met the count when he stayed at her mother's boarding house. Fanny's biographer however claims she ran away to London from her farming family when she was fifteen (Cary 1978: 108.), possibly turning to prostitution to support herself. Fanny was apparently evasive about her origins but on what authority did Boggie base

her assertions? Again, we must wonder if Fanny's marriage redeemed her in society's eyes for Boggie did not include French Marie in her book even though this feisty woman was still living in Rhodesia at the time of writing the book. Stockley's novel *The Claw* (1911) makes it clear that women who transgressed moral codes were as castigated in the pioneer society as they would have been in the drawing-rooms of Victorian London. Can we trust a somewhat vindictive fiction about vindictive women? Boggie devotes several pages to Stockley, based on conversations they had, and records Stockley as stating that most of the events and situations in her books were founded on fact. However, we need also to recognise that these conversations would have taken place many years earlier; a fact Boggie neglects to mention.

Indebted as I am to Boggie, I approach her book with caution. Many of the recorded incidents were only been retold many years later, edited by time and memory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none relate the poor behaviour of settlers. If there was any soul-searching, late at night, it is never mentioned. Boggie also collected the tales of the women who remained – what of the women who left? What would their memories have been? Boggie has been accused of aiming to 'produce a heroic, nationalist, sanitized, white and (although Boggie never uses the word) feminist narrative of the settlement' (Cairnie 2007: 68). This postcolonial summation, though hard to refute, also seems a little harsh. Perhaps Boggie did overreach herself in her exuberant praise which elevated the pioneer women to heroine status but maybe she would have described herself more as patriotic rather than nationalistic. Should her overblown style be interpreted as jingoism? It is admittedly hard to read without wincing: 'Saturday, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1893! A new country has been added to the British Empire. Hip-hip-hurrah!' (222). Her accounts are most definitely white – but 'sanitized'? How much was she consciously grooming her material? Is it possible she was merely operating within the late Victorian-Edwardian belief systems in which she would have been raised where certain topics were simply not discussed? She may well have been racist: is that her failing or her upbringing? And I cannot help but wonder at the inclusion of four photographs in her book, which do not relate to the content. They depict black women on her farm; by their huts, singing, sitting outside with their children. Is there affection in this inclusion or a nod to some ethnic balance, perhaps? Just as we cannot help but judge from our times, with our beliefs, perhaps she could not free herself of hers. I feel a need to tread lightly.

Cairnie (2007) describes Boggie and her contributors as rehearsing 'the masculine narratives of the empty land waiting to be conquered and occupied' (68). However, apart from reflecting the imperial creeds with which they'd grown up, it must also be remembered these women for the most part had come from a relatively small, densely populated island. Even in these days of easy international travel, parts of Zimbabwe still feel vast and underpopulated. Blennerhassett wrote:

It is impossible to travel through these immense fertile solitudes, without a feeling of intense wonder and regret that so many thousands of human beings should live their whole lives herded together in the pestilential slums of European cities (Blennerhassett & Sleeman 1969: 161).

She looked forward a time when there would be good food and housing, sufficient clothing and the eradication of disease and this vision no doubt was shared by many pioneers oblivious to - or disregarding of? - the fact this land was already occupied.

This last point brings us to the 1896 uprisings. Mrs. Marshall Hole wrote an account of the Shona settler conflict because, 'so far as I know, none have told what we Englishwomen went through in June, 1896, when without warning the natives rose in rebellion and in a few days murdered in cold blood so many white men, women and little children' (Boggie 1954: 71). It appears she was taken completely unawares as she describes being with her husband and daughter

and so unconscious of my oldest friends were lying stark and dead within a few miles of us, we were entertaining a few people at dinner, and laughing and chatting, and making plans for picnics without a suspicion of what the next day had in store for us (71).

For the whites, the following months were ones of terror with tales of family massacres which sent shock waves through the tiny society. Armed conflict drew the whites together and they began, unconsciously perhaps, creating a mythology wherein lives lost became viewed as sacrifices for peace and prosperity (Bonello 2010: 352). Hairbreadth escapes were celebrated and several 'were due to the splendid heroism of the womenfolk who, when their men were wounded, seized the rifles and kept the savages at bay' (Boggie 1954: 266). The actions of the Shona (now termed savages) were denigrated as murder and massacre, while the actions of the settlers framed in terms of righteous retribution. For example, after one attack 'the rebels fled into caves in the rocks. Later, our men attacked with dynamite and killed most of the rebels' (Boggie 1954: 266). Marshall Hole does not mention whether there were women, children, old or injured among the rebels.

The uprisings were crushed and the fate of the Shona and Ndbele tribes were sealed for the next eight decades. The pioneers appear to have been both outraged and taken aback that the 'cowardly' Shona had risen up against them. Marshall Hole wrote: 'It will be asked: 'what made the Mashonas rebel?' and it is difficult to find an explanation' (Boggie 1954: 73). She blamed the witchdoctors for inciting hatred; resentful not only of the law banning sorcery but also of the loss of their influence over their people to the missions and schools. There is no mention of hut taxes, of white farms, missions and mines pegged out on Shona land, of cattle confiscations etc. Fear polarises attitudes and Mrs. Marshall Hole is particularly vehement in her descriptions.

When their first timidity had been overcome by the murder of a few prospectors, the savages were like ravenous beasts thirsting for blood, and ruthlessly murdered and mutilated every white person within reach, not even sparing the unfortunate coolie traders nor the colonial natives who were working for the Europeans (73).

There is no record of what retaliation was taken but Mrs. Marshall Hole did point out that the witchdoctors had 'paid the penalty of their sins' (they were hanged) and that 'the irresistible force of civilisation is pursuing its course' (Boggie 1954: 73). Chillingly, she concluded, 'Whether or not there will be any recurrence of this fanatical outbreak, time alone can show; but at any rate we shall never again be

caught napping, for no one can possibly obliterate from memory the terrible events which ushered in the rebellion of June, 1896' (73).

Over the following decades the tiny white minority would pass many laws to increasingly restrict the indigenous peoples, all in the name of maintaining peace and appearing on the surface, to work. Some fifty years later, Boggie would write, 'All these events happened during the difficult period of Southern Rhodesia's babyhood and childhood. Today the country is free from native unrest' (1954: 279). Boggie, it would seem, shared the same myopia as the women in the 1890s, for within that same decade political unrest was to come again and would continue to erupt and escalate, culminating eventually in bloodied civil war in the 1970s. Did she not feel tremors? Was her farm as serene as the photographs of the woman workers suggest?

And so it goes with my ghosts. Reading their accounts, I learn of their daily lives and the rhythm of their speech but I am less confident I am learning how they truly thought. I admire their courage, their 'pluck', their laughter in the face of trials. I feel their pain in the loss of loved ones. I can understand their fear. I recognise they were trapped in the aspic of their times – just as I am, for I cannot share their Victorian mores nor endorse their imperial visions. How then shall I write my fictitious pioneer woman, remaining true to her while so many of my own creeds are at odds with hers? Will it be possible to play Janus and write with two faces; writing colonial but subverting too?

Ambiguities riddle my creative project and my own ambivalence is a further complication. The way is strewn with questions but that perhaps is one of the great functions of fiction. We begin not with answers but questions; writing that we might understand.

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