

Jim Crow Downunder? African American Encounters with White Australia, 1942–1945

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In June 1943 Pvt. Travis Dixon of the Twenty-ninth Quartermaster Regiment, United States Army, wrote from Australia to his father in Omaha, Nebraska. Dixon was one of the thousands of African Americans who saw service in Australia during World War II. Of the advice given en route to Australia, he recalled, “We were first reminded that this was a white man’s country and the natives still hunted heads. . . . We were told that rather than offend [*sic*] the Aussies,” it would be better “for us to act like the Abbo.” Arriving in Sydney, however, Dixon’s preconceptions, which had reflected the information provided by his white officers, were not realized:

When we landed in Sydney we found that it was entirely different. . . . We were allowed to go into any place that we thought we could afford. It wasn’t long before the Southern officers had put this place and that place off limits for colored troops. About the same time stories began to circulate about the American Negro soldier. Some were: they are cannibals and had tails like monkeys, that every American negro soldier carried a razor and will kill a person at a minutes [*sic*] notice. . . . One fellow was kind enough

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to drop his pants to let one of the Aussies see for himself that he did not have a tail.

After a brief stay in Sydney, Dixon's regiment was posted to Mount Isa in isolated northern Queensland. There he found a situation potentially very different from what he had initially encountered in Sydney. In Mount Isa, Dixon quickly ascertained, the "ambassadors of the Southern Aristocracy" had already introduced segregation and spread a number of negative rumors about "Negroes." The local Australian population, however, neither accepted the American segregative practices nor believed the rumors regarding African Americans that were spread by white Americans. "It was [not] long," wrote Dixon, "before the Aussies in Mount Isa" saw through "the groundwork of our white officers. This put them in the dog house with the civilian population." Dixon concluded by noting that the highlight of his visit to Australia was when his commanding officer informed a parade that the "Negro soldiers" were "here fighting for 14,000,000 negroes in America."¹

Private Dixon's letter never reached his father. It was passed on by the officer commanding his section to the base censor, who was part of the U.S. Army Intelligence Division (G-2). The white officer in the base censor's office who read Dixon's letter concluded that to allow it to be sent to Dixon's father "would probably tend to accentuate a feeling of racial discrimination at home." Censorship officers had instructions that letters containing "adverse criticism" of military segregation—and of the "race problem" in general—were to be "detained."² Deemed a potentially subversive document, Dixon's letter was never delivered. His words survive only because of the reportage procedures adopted by army intelligence. If censors removed sections of, or detained, a letter, they were required to note verbatim either the offending section that had been cut, or the offending segment that had compelled its detention. Full details of the author of the letter, including rank and unit, were filed, along with the name and location of the correspondent. Some of these re-

1. Censored Mail: Travis Dixon to Fred Dixon, June 5, 1943, Office of the Base Censor, South West Pacific Theatre, Box T-1419, Records of the United States Army Commands, Record Group 338 290/45/12/2-3, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as RG 338, NA).

2. *Ibid.* Army intelligence had a long-standing interest in racial issues. See, for example, Wray R. Johnson, "Black American Radicalism and the First World War: The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division," *Armed Forces and Society*, 26 (1999), 27–54.

ports were then used as anonymous evidence in situation and morale reports completed by G-2.

Following the lead of Beth Bailey and David Farber, who have exploited censors' reports in their study of race relations in wartime Hawai'i, this study uses censorship sources to examine African Americans' experiences in Australia during World War II. While collections of private papers and the thousands of published memoirs offer insights into the American experience of war in the Pacific, there are few such accounts by African Americans. The G-2 Theatre and Base Censor Reports, coupled with reports from the African American press, enable us to listen to rarely heard voices and to throw light on subjects that have been largely ignored in studies of the Pacific War. By providing insights into local contexts and offering specific life stories, these voices challenge the current understanding of the black American experience in racially stratified Australia; at the same time, they offer a point of intersection between the study of Australian wartime society and analyses of the African American experience. In the process, this article seeks to answer Brenda Gayle Plummer's recent call for "more investigations of the black war experience in particular locales" while also offering intriguing insights into Australian racial values and practices.³

This analysis, moreover, provides further evidence that the Pacific War was a racial war that not only exposed tensions *between* nation states but also revealed tensions and contradictions *within* nations. In the United States, the racially charged war against Japan and the struggle in Europe against "race pride" brought into graphic relief the continuing subjugation of black Americans.⁴ Sim-

3. Beth Bailey and David Farber, "The 'Double-V' Campaign in World War II Hawai'i: African Americans, Racial Ideology, and Federal Power," *Journal of Social History*, 26 (1993), 817–843; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996), 85.

4. The best work on the racial dimensions of the Pacific War remains John Dower's *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (London, 1986). Such subjugation could be found within the structure of the American military itself and its maintenance of systems of segregation that mostly confined African Americans to service and supply units. Three African American combat divisions (the Ninety-second, Ninety-third, and Second Cavalry) were formed, as well as a number of tank and artillery units, but (with some notable exceptions) they usually received indifferent training and poor equipment; their fighting qualities were usually doubted by their mostly white officers. Within the Army Air Force, the sky was segregated producing all African American squadrons such as the famous Tuskegee Airmen. The U.S. Navy did not segregate African Americans in separate units but confined their role to service and supply functions on its ships and bases. See Phillip McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World*

ilarly, while Japanese aggression was seen as a direct attack on Australia's racially exclusive immigration policy (popularly known as the "White Australia Policy"), Australia's allies and defenders included non-Europeans. Within this context, the minds of Australian officials were exercised over the "problem" of dealing with the African American servicemen who were part of the vast U.S. military presence that descended upon Australia in the wake of the Japanese assault at Pearl Harbor.

While the African American experience in wartime Australia has provoked little academic interest in the United States, the subject has received attention from Australian historians, usually within a wider examination of the American presence. Within these discussions, two distinct and competing images of the Australian reception to black GIs have emerged.

In 1942 notions of Australian nationalism and identity centered on conceptions of race. "White Australia" protected its racial exclusivity through the maintenance of racially restrictive immigration legislation—a national desire so strong that it was the first act of parliament after the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901. Following the outbreak of the Pacific War, the Australian government expressed anxiety at the possible deployment of African American troops, which threatened to contravene the White Australia Policy.⁵ But with the imminent danger of Japanese invasion, as well as assurances by Gen. Douglas MacArthur that black troops would be deployed to isolated areas, African Americans found themselves sent to Australia. However, partly because service and supply functions could not be sequestered from the rest of the army, MacArthur was unable to maintain the policy of isolated deployment for black troops. Soon after the first American troops landed in Australia, thousands of black servicemen were in Australian urban centers.

The prospect of African Americans in Australian cities and towns did generate what one historian labeled "public alarm," and Australian government and military authorities expressed concern at the prospect of fraternization between black Americans and Australians. But it is in the actual reception afforded these service-

War II (Lexington, Ky., 1993); Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of World War II* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

5. Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham, Md., 2000), 132.

men—and a relative handful of black women—that the historiography diverges. While acknowledging the governmental and public reservations about the presence of African American troops, proponents of one school of thought contend that, in practice, relations between black Americans and white Australians were “cordial.” “One of the biggest surprises for both Australian and American officials,” E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts have asserted, “was, in fact, the general warmth of the reception, not just to a few black nurses but to thousands of black servicemen.” Similarly, Rosemary Campbell has concluded that “American Negroes were generally accepted at the unofficial level with reasonable grace despite the strident racialism that had been at the center of concepts of [Australian] national identity.” When African Americans did suffer racial discrimination in Australia, it has been argued, it was chiefly at the hands of white Americans who sought to regulate African American access to public space with patterns of formal and informal segregation that would have been painfully familiar to most black Americans.⁶ These conclusions are congruent with other studies of African Americans’ wartime experiences outside the United States.⁷

A contrary and more recent viewpoint differs sharply from the

6. John Moore, *Over-sexed, Over-paid, and Over Here: Americans in Australia, 1941–1945* (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1981), 209; E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts, *Yanks Down Under, 1941–45: The American Impact on Australia* (Melbourne, 1985), 187, 48; Rosemary Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers: A Question of National Identity* (Sydney, 1989), 123, 130. In a later article on the subject, Potts and Potts noted: “Once the men [African Americans] disembarked, moreover, they were generally well-received. The problems that arose from their presence were created not so much by local people but by the resentment of some white Americans, unused to the sight of well paid and well dressed blacks rubbing shoulders with whites in hotel bars, restaurants, and at the cinema.” See Potts and Potts, “The Deployment of Black Servicemen Abroad during World War Two,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 35 (1989), 94.

7. Neil A. Wynn, for example, has noted that while the overseas service of black troops did cause difficulties for the U.S. military, as well as for foreign governments, “Afro-Americans were generally well received by the people of foreign countries.” Recent studies of African Americans’ experiences in Great Britain support this contention. David Reynolds’s 1995 study concluded that “British people transcended the stereotypes about ‘negroes’ and welcomed non-white GIs.” Graham Smith’s 1987 study was even more emphatic. Not only were many Britons “upset” by “the aggressiveness with which some white Americans expressed their views on their black compatriots,” but the evidence pointed “overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the black Americans were warmly welcomed in Britain and the action of white Americans in furthering a color bar was roundly condemned.” See Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1993), 32; David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942–45* (New York, 1995), 302; Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London, 1987), 218.

generally positive representations of the wartime relationship between Australians and black Americans. These historians have argued that Australian reception of black Americans was shaped largely by Australian racism—a racism that was clearly manifested in immigration policy and domestic treatment of immigrant and indigenous non-European minorities. Kay Saunders has claimed that African Americans suffered “dual and interlocking systems of segregation; one following US military procedures and the other imposed by internal Australian practices.” The African American presence in wartime Australia, she has contended, did nothing but demonstrate the “resilience” of White Australia. In another article, coauthored with Helen Taylor, Saunders has insisted that individual Australians’ responses to African Americans were negative and “irrational,” “overlaid as they were with images of rampant uncontrollable sexuality, criminal violence, and disorder.” While they concede that some black Americans perhaps did feel “less discriminated [against] in Australia than in their homeland,” Saunders and Taylor nevertheless assert that “this was a matter of degree, for none felt they were equally treated as white Americans in Australia.”⁸ Those

8. Kay Saunders, “Conflict between the American and Australian Governments over the Introduction of Black Servicemen into Australia during World War Two,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 33 (1987), 13. In another article on the subject, Saunders examined four racial elements in Australia’s war: “the fear of the potential collaborator (the Aborigines); the spy (Japanese, German and Italian agents of the Axis powers); the fifth columnist (enemy aliens, particularly those in strategically crucial regions); and the pollutant (the black American GI).” See Kay Saunders, “The Dark Shadow of White Australia: Racial Anxieties in Australia in World War II,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17 (1994), 326; Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, “The Reception of Black Servicemen in Australia During World War II: The Resilience of ‘White Australia,’” *Journal of Black Studies*, 25 (1995), 347, 338.

An interesting contribution to this debate, which reflects the degree to which the second school of thought became the orthodoxy in the 1990s, is Anthony J. Barker and Lisa Jackson’s study of the American presence in wartime Western Australia. Barker and Jackson accepted the arguments expressed by Philip Bell and Roger Bell, and by Saunders and Taylor. Yet they actually had at their disposal evidence that tended to support the notion of a favorable public response. They were surprised to find that “race relations remained a minor, mainly uncontroversial, part of the interaction between American servicemen and the West Australian public.” They concluded, therefore, that if race relations were not a negative feature of the West Australian wartime experience, it had to be because there were fewer African Americans stationed in the West than in other parts of the country. This had to be the case because white West Australians were as racist as any other white Australians. Approaching this issue from a rather different perspective, Robert A. Hall has suggested that the relatively liberal treatment of African Americans in the U.S. armed forces compelled Australian authorities to reevaluate their treatment of Aboriginal Australians. See Anthony J. Barker and Lisa Jackson, *Fleeting Attraction: A Social History of American Servicemen in Western Australia During the Second World War* (Nedlands, Western

historians who have claimed a more positive response by the Australian public are, according to Roger Bell and Philip Bell, engaging in little more than nostalgic attempts to stress “the egalitarian attitudes of local communities” and congratulate “white Australians on their domestic tolerance.” The “reality,” claim Bell and Bell, was that black Americans “encountered considerable hostility, both official and private.”⁹

Although these studies offer conflicting interpretations of black Americans’ experiences in wartime Australia, all are characterized by the absence of African American voices. Such an absence is only a minor concern in the discussion of Australian governmental responses to the presence of black servicemen, but it is a significant omission from any examination of interpersonal relations. On the one hand, evidence of “cordial” relations is provided almost exclusively from Australian sources and recollections. On the other, Australian authorities’ implicit collaboration with American-imposed segregative controls and practices, as well as the existence of the White Australia Policy, are seen as sufficient proof that African Americans endured both public and private racism.¹⁰

African Americans certainly anticipated that they would encounter considerable prejudice upon arriving in Australia—prejudice exacerbated by the fact that “most of the officers [commanding] colored soldiers who will be fighting overseas are Southern whites.” One black veteran of the U.S. military, noting that “Australia is a white country,” anticipated there would “be many a lynching under the guise of military legality.” There is, moreover, evidence not only that U.S. authorities made a half-hearted effort to limit the numbers of African Americans deployed to Australia, but also that Australian policymakers hoped—initially at least—to prevent black Americans from entering Australia at all. Reports of those efforts in

Australia, 1996), 177; Robert A. Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney, 1989), 75–76.

9. Philip Bell and Roger Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia* (Melbourne, 1993), 100.

10. Mention should be made in this regard of Rosemary Campbell’s efforts to include African American voices. While it appears the study was confined to sources available within Australia, she did include some second-hand African American voices and certainly appeared aware of the importance of these sources for her study. It should also be noted that Saunders and Taylor’s reference list for their 1995 article made no mention of Campbell’s work because the article had been submitted to the *Journal of Black Studies* two years prior to the publication of Campbell’s work. One can only surmise how Campbell’s work might have affected Saunders and Taylor’s study. See Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, 109–134.

the black press reinforced the general African American cynicism about white Australians' treatment of nonwhites. Indeed, although they were no better informed about Australia than their white brethren, many black Americans were generally aware of Australia's long record of racial intolerance. As early as March 1942, editorials and cartoons in the black press began addressing the issue of African American war service and Australian racism. Announcing the arrival of "Our Boys" in Australia, the *Baltimore Afro-American* noted that a nation that had excluded, "by law," "all colored people since 1901, now sees colored U.S. Troops come in to fight for its independence." In an editorial entitled "Undemocratic Australia," the editors of the *Chicago Defender* also remarked upon this "strange twist of fate" that saw "black men" participating in the defense of an "exclusive white man's country." Concluding with the hope that the "black man's blood might serve to nourish the tree of democracy which is so foreign to that distant outpost of white civilization," the editors emphasized the incongruity of black war service on behalf of racially stratified societies.¹¹

Cartoons in both papers reinforced prevailing African American notions of Australian racism. A March 1942 cartoon in the *Defender* portrayed a Japanese soldier landing on Australian soil, saying "So sorry please" as he passes a sign reading "No Colored Races Allowed." An *Afro-American* cartoon from the same month showed a large bomb labeled "Invasion Threat" bearing down on Australia and on Dutch and American colonial forces in the Netherlands Indies and the Philippines. While Dutch and American soldiers look on, the Australian soldier amends a sign reading "No colored people admitted" to read "All colored people admitted." Extending the principles of the Double V campaign, a cartoon published in the *Defender* in April 1942 depicted black soldiers disembarking in Australia, rifles shouldered, and marching proudly in front of a rapturous crowd of welcoming whites. In effect, the Double V had become a *Triple V* campaign: Alongside the struggles against fascism abroad and racism at home, African Americans were now also combatting racism among U.S. allies.¹²

Contrary to African American preconceptions, and to the ar-

11. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 18, 1942. A May 1942 article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that "civil service solicitation of clerks and stenographers for service in Australia is being confined to white girls." See *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 2, 1942; *ibid.*, March 21, 1942; *Chicago Defender*, March 28, 1942.

12. *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 28, 1942; *Chicago Defender*, April 18, 1942.

gument of historians such as Bell and Bell, and Saunders and Taylor, however, the African American voices located for this study suggest that some—perhaps many—black servicemen felt less discriminated against in Australia than in their homeland, thereby obviating the need for the third dimension of a Triple V campaign. Announcing the arrival of African American troops in Australia, the *Afro-American* declared that, although “white American officers” were “working overtime to poison” the minds of Australians “against colored people,” these “bronzed fighting men” had “shoved immigration regulations into the background.” The *Afro-American* reported as early as April 1942 that, although “many Australians had never seen a colored man before” and had “stared” at the newly arrived African Americans, their “curiosity soon wore off,” and they “accepted these men wholeheartedly as part of America’s vast army.”¹³ In March 1942 Staff Sgt. Bill Stevens, an African American serving in the 48th Quartermaster Regiment, was shipped to the Pacific. Three decades later, he recalled Australians’ responses to black Americans. “Our first stop was Sydney, Australia,” he noted, “where we blacks were received with some apprehension since the Aussies had never seen such a large number of Afro-Americans before. However, everything turned out all right.”¹⁴

If these reports and recollections imply that the warm welcome accorded African Americans could be attributed to Australia’s dire military situation in 1942, there is compelling evidence that the positive reception continued long after Australia’s military situation improved. One African American later wrote home from Milne Bay, New Guinea: “When I was in Australia I had the time of my life, the people were simply grand.” Lt. H. L. Ross, an African American officer and one of Travis Dixon’s superiors in the Twenty-ninth Quartermaster Regiment, advised a female friend in Washington, D.C., that he had had “plenty of fun” in Sydney. And, in direct contrast to the argument of Saunders and Taylor, Dixon thought the Sydney response to black troops not only matched the reception accorded to white Americans but exceeded it: “we were treated with as much respect, if not more respect,” than “the white soldiers.”¹⁵

13. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 25, March 21, April 4, 1942.

14. Bill Stevens, in Mary Patrick Motley, ed., *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit, 1975), 75.

15. Enlisted Man, 493 Port Battalion, APO 928, T-1428, RG 338, 290/45/12/4, NA; Morale Report, Jan. 1944, APO 501, T-1428, RG 338, NA. Censored Mail: Lt. H. L. Ross (29th Quartermaster Regiment) to Mrs. Goldie Chambers, June 25, 1945, and Travis

While these reactions to Australia were never read by the audiences for whom they were written, the hit or miss nature of military censorship inevitably ensured that some letters and telegrams that spoke favorably of the African American experience in Australia did reach home. One of the first of these messages was a telegram sent from Australia by Pvt. Louis Naylor Francis. In his brief note, Francis told his "Dear Mother" that he was "safe," "well," and "having a grand time" in Australia. His message was reprinted in the *Afro-American*, which, like the *Defender*, began to shift its position in the wake of such news. In April 1942 Sgt. Maurice J. Burke of Baltimore told his wife that the "Australian people treat us with the utmost courtesy and are the most hospitable people in the world."¹⁶

The diary of Pvt. James E. Nettles, which came into the possession of *Afro-American* correspondent Levi Jolley, provides further insight into relations between black Americans and white Australians. At the time, Nettles was serving a ten-year sentence in Englewood, California, for stabbing two white U.S. sailors in Brisbane. The stabbing occurred during a racially motivated fracas in which the two sailors had attacked Nettles. His diary records that during the fight he was assisted by a "white Australian soldier" named Joe Anderson. In addition to describing the white American racism endured by Nettles, Jolley remarked that a "high note in the document occurs when he [Nettles] relates the hospitable treatment of coloured soldiers by the white Australian natives."¹⁷

A few weeks after the arrival of the first African Americans in Australia in March 1942, blacks at home were receiving first-hand accounts of Australia from those recently returned. One of the earliest such reports came from merchant seaman Revels Cayton, whose ship had been redirected to Australia following the outbreak of war. Interviewed in Los Angeles, he reported that "we were greeted enthusiastically, lived in the best hotels and associated freely with the Australian citizens, with the American soldiers there as the only ones objecting." Another merchant seaman, Frederick Clark, told the *Afro-American* that "Australian citizens are the finest in the English speaking world, but white American Army officers are working against colored people."¹⁸

Dixon to Fred Dixon, June 5, 1943, both in Office of the Base Censor, South West Pacific Theatre, T-1420, in *ibid.*

16. *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 23, May 23, 1942.

17. *Ibid.*, Sept. 4, 1943.

18. *Ibid.*, April 18, 25, 1942.

By early 1943 the first black Army personnel were being rotated back to the United States for leave or redeployment and could offer personal testimony born of a longer exposure to Australia than that experienced by Cayton and Clark. These accounts were often published in the African American press. The *Chicago Defender*, for example, offered the first-hand impressions of a thirty-one-year-old Chicagoan, 1st Sgt. Lamont Estelle: "We thoroughly enjoyed our short stay in Australia. . . . [T]he Australians treated us better than we've been treated anywhere in the world. They were swell to us." Although black Americans whose only experience outside the United States was in Australia were arguably not well placed to make judgments regarding Australian racial values compared to those of the rest of the world, their reading did give them a basis for comparison. African Americans had access to press reports, and blacks serving in different regions were able to correspond with each other. But the more revealing point is that the reception accorded African Americans in "white" Australia made a telling contrast with the treatment they were accustomed to receiving in the United States. It was the realization of that fact that most troubled white Americans. Some not only feared "what it will be like when" African Americans "get back home," but openly predicted "a lot of trouble after the war, especially in the South" because the "boys have lots of privileges" in Australia that "they don't get down there" in the Southern states. Clinging tenaciously to their racial assumptions, many white Americans assumed it would be incumbent upon black Americans "to get readjusted" after the war: A successful challenge to American racism and segregation was presumably inconceivable.¹⁹

The treatment of African Americans stationed in Australia also interested Bishop Johnson A. Gregg of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Returning to California after a morale-boosting visit to Australia and the Pacific region, Gregg not only noted that "Australians are inclined to ignore race, creed and color in opening their doors to Americans," but he added that Australians consider "colored troops more than a match for the Japs as jungle fighters." Considering that black Americans hoped—again—that their military service would play a part in compelling white Americans to grant them the benefits of full citizenship, Gregg's determination to relay

19. *Chicago Defender*, May 1, 1943; Censored Mail: Capt. J. E. Schooley to Steve Corrigan, Feb. 20, 1943, and Capt. Paul Tornabe to Mr. Pat Celani, April 5, 1942, both in T-1419, RG 338, NA.

Australians' attitude toward blacks' martial prowess was significant. Given that the Australian soldier was being described, in the words of black journalist Vincent Tubbs, as "a great piece of fighting machinery," Australians' praise for the valor and skill of African American troops was doubly significant. Tubbs, who spent considerable time in what he described as "intriguing" Australia on behalf of the *Afro-American* during 1943 and 1944, referred frequently to "My Aussie friends" when discussing Australians in action or Australia more generally.²⁰

Within the black press, concerns about Australian racism had been largely forgotten by early 1943. One cartoon in the *Chicago Defender* displayed an American dock loaded with supplies for the war effort: While boxes labeled "Race Prejudice" were destined for England, and those stamped "Jim Crow" were destined for Ireland, those marked "Color Bar" were destined for Australia. Race relations in Australia, it was implied, could be poisoned by the importation of white American racism as practiced in the U.S. military. This issue, as noted, became a recurring theme in the African American press.²¹

Further evidence that some African Americans believed they were at least as well treated by white Australians as were their white compatriots is provided by the only fictionalized account of the American experience in wartime Australia written by a black veteran. Based on his own experiences and commenced during his service in Australia, John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* was eventually published in the early 1960s. The central character, Solomon Saunders, is a black soldier in a combat unit who is wounded and sent to Australia for convalescence. On board the hospital ship, he meets and befriends an Australian nurse. Upon arriving at "Bainbridge" (presumably Brisbane), the narrator notes, "This was Celia's home and he felt not exactly a stranger." Saunders stays with Celia's family and visits the popular Southern Cross Club, where Celia's brother assures him that white Americans (especially

20. *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug. 28, 1943. "There is probably nothing under the sun," it was noted in the *Afro-American*, "that could have done more to boost the morale of the men here than Bishop Gregg's visit." Reports in the black press suggested that Eleanor Roosevelt's encounters with African American troops during her visit to Australia, brief as they were, were probably no less significant than Gregg's visit. See *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 31, Sept. 18, 25, 1943. See, especially, *ibid.*, Aug. 7, Sept. 25, 1943.

21. *Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1942, Jan. 2, 1943; see also *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 28, Aug. 29, 1942.

those from southern states—the “peckerwoods”) are second-class citizens: “That’s right mate. We don’t encourage them, and if they come they know they bloody well better behave themselves. . . . If they come here looking for trouble we throw them out on their arses.” Saunders’s fictional incident resonates with an April 1942 report by Davis Lee, published in the *Afro-American*. Angered by the attempts by white U.S. military police to ban black U.S. troops from attending a dance, white Australian soldiers broke up the dance and “forced all the girls to leave the hall.”²²

In summing up the reception afforded them by white Australians, Solomon Saunders’s friend “Worm” concludes, “These Aussies are alright with me. . . . If it don’t be for these Yankee mother-hunchers round this place we would almost have it made.” Saunders also learns that the first black troops to arrive were treated like “heroes and color didn’t mean a goddam thing.” The Australians “treated them better than they were ever treated back home in Bam where they came from.” Predictably, white American servicemen resented such treatment and began seeking to enforce traditional American racial boundaries. Killens’s novel concludes with a fictionalized battle on the streets of Bainbridge between armed white and black American troops. Significantly, the only white Australians to appear in this action side with the African American troops.²³

Equally revealing is the evidence of many white American servicemen who sensed that African American soldiers received equitable treatment from white Australians. Forgetting the White Australia Policy and revealing the limitations of their encounters with Australian society, many white Americans (including those without experience of formal segregation) suggested that Australia was a nonracist society. Lt. Col. Ivy A. Pelzeman told a female friend in San Francisco that Australia was “nigger heaven” because “the Aussies don’t draw any color line insofar as associating with our colored troops.” Capt. J. E. Schooley advised a friend in Hope, Arkansas, that black servicemen were “having the time of their lives” because Australians “were not race conscious here at all.” Later, in another let-

22. John Oliver Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (London, 1964), 359, 374. No doubt the final version of Killens’s novel was shaped by the postwar African American civil rights struggle in the United States, but this does not detract from its value as a record of one black American’s experience in wartime Australia. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 15, 1942.

23. Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, 374, 436.

ter to his wife, he noted that “our negroes are well treated” because “there is no race discrimination here.”²⁴

Some Americans, offended by Australians’ relatively generous treatment of black Americans, responded by trying to “teach” Australians how to “handle” African Americans. In response to those efforts, black Americans found an ally in Australia’s historically strong trade union movement. Conceding that Australians were “powerless to interfere” in the racial problems confronting “another great democracy,” one trade union statement noted that “Dixie white soldiers” were doing their best to befoul relations between African Americans and Australians. While the claim that Australians were “comparatively free from racial prejudice” must be treated warily, the unions’ assessment of white Americans’ efforts to belittle and vilify African Americans touched on familiar themes. Declaring that Australians’ positive reception had prompted “the most cold-blooded, inhumanly calculated campaign” they had “ever witnessed,” the union statement asserted that “American army officers” had “visited schools, delivered lectures to the children, and instructed them not to go near the black men.” After detailing instances where white Americans put in place effective means of segregation—such as banishing African Americans from a number of social venues in Sydney, which led eventually to the establishment of the “Booker T. Washington” club for blacks—the unions pointed out that Australian soldiers had “been told not to have anything to do with ‘n_____s [sic].’”²⁵ If the incidents and attitudes described in the union report were accurate—and there is ample evidence that some white Americans did strive to make life difficult for their black compatriots serving in Australia—it nonetheless remains the case that African Americans reported many instances where white Australians treated them with respect and courtesy. Had that not been the case, white Americans presumably would not have found it necessary to try to modify Australians’ attitude toward and treatment of African Americans.

24. Censored Mail: Lt. Col. Ivy A. Pelzeman to Miss Margaret V. Walker, Feb. 12, 1943, and Schooley to Corrigan, Feb. 20, 1943, both in T-1419, RG 338, NA. Capt. Hyman Samuelson, a white officer serving with the Ninety-sixth Engineers, an African American unit, noted that “Australians are wonderfully tolerant, but the Americans, especially, the Southern boys, are a problem.” See Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, ed., *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored): The World War II New Guinea Diaries of Captain Hyman Samuelson* (Urbana, Ill., 1995), 47.

25. *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 28, 1943. See also Hall, *Black Diggers*, 77.

White American perceptions that Australians treated black GIs equally was seen as a causal factor behind a number of racial clashes within the U.S. forces. In April 1942 Col. C. H. Barnwell, Inspector General of American forces in Australia, was asked to complete a report on racial clashes in Brisbane. Barnwell ascertained that white American troops resented the treatment black troops were receiving from Australians. Barnwell had difficulty reconciling Australia's racist rhetoric with the "most" cordial welcome given to African Americans. "It appears paradoxical," he wrote, "that the American negro troops have been received by outspoken advocates of 'white supremacy' in a manner that has aggravated racial clashes between American whites and American negroes." Rather than attempting to deal with the underlying issue—white American racism—Barnwell's solution to the problem was either to transfer "colored" units to "other theaters of operations where members of their race normally reside" or to move them into outlying areas in Northern Australia "where some association may be had with the Australian negro, commonly known as an aborigine." Although Robert Hall has argued that "Black American soldiers and Aborigines tended to associate, drawn together by their common experience of racism," the more pressing issue of interactions between black Americans and white Australians was never resolved. A "Survey of Morale" in the Southwest Pacific Theater late in the war noted that "Persistent ill-feeling between white and colored troops indicates in this matter civilian hostilities frequently became more acute where military life brought contacts that challenged traditional patterns of inter-racial relationships."²⁶

There was some fraternization between African American men and Aboriginal women during the war, but it was the issue of relationships between black servicemen and white Australian women, which raised long-standing concerns regarding interracial sex, that most perturbed many white American servicemen.²⁷ Some white Americans sought to dissuade Australian women from consorting too closely with African Americans by claiming that the latter were

26. Col. C. H. Barnwell, "Investigation of Racial Clashes," April 12, 1942, reproduced in Walter A. Luszki, *A Rape of Justice: MacArthur and the New Guinea Hangings* (Lanham, Md., 1991); Hall, *Black Diggers*, 75; Censorship Survey of Morale, June 1943–Aug. 1945, T-1429, RG 338, NA.

27. Robert Hall has suggested that "social contact between black U.S. troops and Aboriginal women was common, but unlike white U.S. troops, few Negroes took war brides." See Hall, *Black Diggers*, 75.

infected with syphilis and by turning to well-worn but nonetheless powerful images of the black man as an "immoral, degenerate" creature, who was "undoubtedly a sex maniac." Not all Australians were persuaded by those depictions. Indeed, despite those attempts to dupe Australians, and notwithstanding the oft-repeated advice given to American servicemen to refrain from intimate liaisons with women in other countries, a number of black servicemen did enjoy the company of white Australian women. Writing from "somewhere in Australia," Vincent Tubbs presented a picture of lively social interaction between black Americans and Australian women. "The club was a regular madhouse," wrote Tubbs. "From one corner a radio blared out a hot tune by the Ink Spots. The intent gathering stamped its feet in an impromptu jam session." "Scattered around the room," Tubbs continued, some groups of African Americans enjoyed the company of "dates to whom they addressed soft nothingness."²⁸

Other, more private, sources affirm that at least some Australian women enjoyed the presence of black Americans. After visiting a "Colored Service Club," Lieutenant Colonel Pelzeman noted that "it was amazing at this club to see the white girls dancing and loving up the darkies." Captain Schooley informed his friend in Arkansas that Australian women "seem tickled" to "get a negro." Sgt. John F. Line, based with the U.S. Army Air Force in the southwestern Sydney suburb of Bankstown, told his wife in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, "At Luna Park[,] a place like Eastwood[,] you can see negars and white girls sitting around on the benches necking. Boy if that isn't disgusting as heck." In his report on this issue, Barnwell concluded that the major problem in the treatment of African American soldiers was "the extremely receptive attitude" and "intimate association between the negro troops and Australian white girls." Despite his own enjoyment of Sydney, Lieutenant Ross was "tickled to death" to be departing because he and the other officers of the unit were having "too much trouble with the men and the white girls." An enlisted man in the 493 Port Battalion boasted to his correspondent that he "had a couple of dames in no time." Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss have calculated that approximately fifty white Australian women traveled to the United States at the conclu-

28. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 25, Nov. 28, July 18, 1942, May 12, 1943.

sion of the war as the wives of African American soldiers.²⁹ If that appears to be a small number, many other relationships undoubtedly dissolved during the war, just as they did between Australian women and white American men.

Most white Americans who reported this interracial fraternization were at a loss to explain how it could occur: Why would white women wish to associate with black men? In many cases, they assumed the women they saw with black servicemen were either sex workers or lacked sufficient physical beauty to attract white company. The evidence, however, did not always support such a conclusion. Lieutenant Colonel Pelzeman, for example, was perplexed by his visit to the "Colored Service Club." The "strangest thing about it," he noted, "was the fact that some of the girls were attractive looking." Similarly, Pvt. George L. Isaaks reported to his sweetheart in Cleveland, Texas, that he was angered by the sight of a "beautiful white girl with a Negro."³⁰

In a letter to a friend in Palisades Park, New Jersey, Capt. Paul Tornabe offered an explanation why white Australians had been so generous in their welcome to black troops: "The Australians have not become conscious of the social status of the negro perhaps partly due to the fact that when the first batch of negroes got here, they told them they were American Indians, and thus were accepted by the best society." "Some of them," he lamented, "even married white Aussies." The rumor that white Australians had been tricked through their ignorance into showing tolerance toward African Americans was widely accepted among U.S. forces in wartime Australia. Significantly, similar claims were reported in Great Britain during the war years.³¹ There is, however, no primary evidence to support the claim either that African Americans were the perpetrators of this rumor or that Australians fell for it. Historians who have

29. Censored Mail: Pelzeman to Walker, Feb. 12, 1943, and Schooley to Corrigan, Feb. 20, 1943, Sgt. John F. Line to Mrs. J. F. Line, undated, all in T-1419, RG 338, NA; Barnwell, "Investigation of racial clashes"; Censored Mail: Ross to Chambers, June 25, 1945, T-1420, RG 338, NA; Morale Report, Jan. 1944, APO 501, T-1429, in *ibid.* See Annette Potts and Lucinda Strauss, *For the Love of a Soldier: Australian War Brides and Their GIs* (Crows Nest, New South Wales, 1987), 63.

30. Censored Mail: Pelzeman to Walker, Feb. 12, 1943, and George L. Isaaks to Miss Norma Fay Cohn, July 27, 1942, both in T-1419, RG 338, NA

31. Tornabe to Celani, April 5, 1942, in *ibid.*; see Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*; Reynolds, *Rich Relations*; and Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull*.

depicted blacks' experiences in Australia in generally positive terms, as well as those who have been more critical of the Australian reception to blacks, have accepted that African American soldiers did try to dupe white Australians. Yet no study provides first-hand evidence, from either an African American or Australian perspective, to support such a conclusion.

In the absence of any supporting evidence of African American authorship of the "Red Indian ruse," a more plausible explanation for the rumor is that it was the work of white Americans attempting to comprehend what for many was incomprehensible: that white Australian women would willingly consort with black Americans. The "Red Indian" rumor would conceivably have given far more comfort to white Americans than it would to white Australians who were supposedly ignorant enough to fall for it, or to African Americans who were allegedly willing to discard their racial identity in such a cavalier manner. Significantly, in all the accounts of the "Red Indian" ploy located in researching this study, the employment of the deceit was attributed to earlier African American units, the implication always being that the ruse, for whatever reason, was no longer sustainable.³²

Captain Tornabe's letter also alluded to another reason offered by white Americans to explain the Australian reception to African American servicemen. First Lt. Alban E. Rogers summed up this second argument in a letter to his wife in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. "One of the dumbest things that the politicians or someone have pulled in a long time (and that's going some)," he remarked, "was sending colored troops to Australia, where for years they have pursued a 'White Australia Policy,' and don't know how to treat them." The White Australia Policy had been so successful, it was contended, that white Australians did not know how to deal with non-Europeans.

32. Regarding the "Red Indian" ruse, it is worth noting that, putting to one side Hollywood's usually misleading representations of Native Americans, there were opportunities in the 1930s for Australians, especially those in large urban centers, to actually meet Native Americans. Residents of Sydney, for example, had the opportunity to meet the members of the "Red Indian Wild West Show" that toured Australia in the early 1930s and played at Bondi Beach for several weeks during the summer of 1930. Later in the decade shows with Native American members were regular features of the Sydney Royal Easter Agricultural Show. Sydneysiders flocked to the White City Tennis Center in January 1935 to see Chief High Eagle and his entourage; they likewise visited the Sydney Stadium to see Chief Little Wolf wrestle. Such public appearances provide further circumstantial evidence that Sydneysiders at least would not have been duped by such a scam.

Lt. C. E. Holloway concurred with this view. Writing to his wife at the University of Georgia in May 1942, he commented: "They've [black troops] caused trouble everywhere they have been stationed mainly because the Australians don't know how to handle them."³³ While it was assumed that white Americans, both northerners and southerners, knew how to "handle" African Americans, it was also assumed that Australia's restrictive immigration policy had created a racial quarantine that had far-reaching consequences regarding Australians' public and private dealings with non-Europeans.

The White Australia Policy did preserve British/Irish Australia. Yet, although the period preceding World War II saw an increase in the percentage of Australians who were of British/Irish descent, it is inconceivable that the White Australia Policy so completely shielded Australians from non-Europeans that they had forgotten how to be racially intolerant. Contrary to many Americans' opinion at the time, white Australians, like white Americans, remained among the most "race-conscious" people in the world. Although Rosemary Campbell has suggested that discrimination in Australia was perhaps "more theoretical" and therefore not concerned with issues associated with interracial contact, the treatment of nonwhite minorities within Australia—indigenous and immigrant alike—provided ample testimony that Australian racism did display a practical capability.³⁴ In this regard, many Australian country towns practiced systems of segregation against indigenous Australians that were little removed from the southern American model.

Historians of the wartime American experience in Britain have confronted a similar dilemma in analyzing the reception accorded to African Americans. Like white Australians, Britons were "race-conscious," but this did not appear to predetermine their personal relations with black servicemen. White U.S. servicemen in Britain attempted to offer the same explanations and perpetuate the same rumors regarding African Americans as did their white compatriots in Australia. Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, remarked on this issue in September 1942. The British "know nothing at all," General Eisenhower asserted, "about the conventions and habits of polite

33. Alban E. Rogers to Mrs. A. E. Rogers, July 26, 1942, Lt. C. E. Holloway to Mrs. C. E. Holloway, May 31, 1942, both in T-1419, RG 338, NA.

34. See Jens Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia: Influence on Population and Progress* (Melbourne, 1935); Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, 123.

society that have been developed in the US in order to preserve a segregation in social activity without making the matter one of official or public notice.”³⁵

In studies of African Americans’ experiences in wartime Britain, two explanations for British behavior have emerged. The first argument, articulated by David Reynolds, supports Eisenhower’s observation. White Britons were no less race conscious than white Americans, but they lived without a sizable nonwhite minority in their midst. Consequently, they did not have in place the forms of public racism and race-sensitive manners to which the future President referred. For Reynolds, this lack of public racism did not necessarily mean that Britons were not racist. Rather, their racial intolerance was more evident in the private sphere—an acknowledgment of the existence in Britain of distinctions between “public social equality” and “private social equality.”³⁶

In presenting his public/private sphere argument, Reynolds emphasized that few African Americans were permitted to enter the private sphere in Britain: Britons were happy to welcome African Americans into the public domain but not into their private lives. The evidence from the Australian experience, however, challenges this conclusion. In his report on the situation in Brisbane, Colonel Barnwell noted that “Negro soldiers have been entertained socially in private homes and elsewhere, by Australians.” *Afro-American* correspondent Levi Jolley noted that James Nettles’s diary included “minute details of visits to white homes.” Similarly, Davis Lee reported in the *Afro-American* that the two merchant seamen he interviewed in April 1942 had “expected a hostile reception” but “were greatly surprised when they found everything open to them, including private homes.” In Killens’s novel, Saunders and many of the African Americans who had preceded him are “wined and dined” and taken “home to Mama.”³⁷ Evidence provided by Potts and Potts, moreover, supports this general observation, with references to many examples of African Americans who were welcomed into Australians’ homes.³⁸ Further evidence is provided from black/white

35. Reynolds, *Rich Cousins*, 218.

36. *Ibid.*, 309.

37. Barnwell, “Investigation of racial clashes”; *Baltimore Afro-American*, Sept. 4, 1943; *ibid.*, April 25, 1942; Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, 374.

38. Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, 187–193.

sexual relations. As noted, some white Australian women invited black GIs into the most private of private spheres.

The second argument within the British historiography, supported in studies of African Americans' experiences in wartime Britain, relates to the "novelty" value of black Americans.³⁹ Unquestionably, in a predominantly white society such as Britain during the 1940s, African Americans were novelties for being outside the prevailing social order. Perhaps as important, the novelty was accentuated because African Americans were sojourners—an important distinction if one accepts that intolerance is partly fueled by the exigencies of competition and perceived threat.

The novelty argument resonates in the Australian context. Like Britons, most Australians saw African Americans in relatively small numbers, and, with the protection of White Australia, they realized that African Americans could only be sojourners—or, as the *Baltimore Afro-American* probably unwittingly put it in April 1942, "visitors." Killens's Solomon Saunders experiences the novelty of his position and race in Australia. Being "the only negro at a party," Saunders feels himself "the center of attraction. The oddity. The noble savage." The guests are polite and welcoming, but the warmth of the reception and the attention paid him unnerves Saunders, to the extent that, at the drunken conclusion of the night, he feels he is being kidnapped by the "whities."⁴⁰

African Americans were a part of the wider novelty that was the wartime American presence, encoded as it was in both Australia and Britain with so many positive images. In the Australian context, Bell and Bell have shown the degree to which America had become "implicated" in the patterns of Australian life by the 1930s and have explained the degree to which American dreams were finding an increasing resonance with Australian wants and desires.⁴¹ With their accents direct from the Hollywood-dominated movie screen, dress uniforms that even for enlisted men resembled tailored suits, and disposable incomes that saw privates' earnings rival those of an Aus-

39. See Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, 32.

40. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 4, 1942. In this regard, Campbell suggests that "prejudices" against African Americans broke down in light of the "knowledge that the Americans' occupancy would only last for the duration of the war." See Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, 130. Killen, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, 390.

41. See Bell and Bell, *Implicated*.

tralian captain, American soldiers, black as well as white, embodied these wants and desires.⁴² Conceivably, when Australians looked at a black serviceman, they saw his skin color, but they also registered him as an American. It is here, where issues of identity encounter forms of reception, that an explanation for African Americans' experiences in Australia may partly lie. While "race" divided black and white Americans, arguably for Australians those divisions were tempered by an apparently homogeneous culture that downplayed difference in favor of an underlying *Americanness*. Put bluntly, although Australians were certainly attuned to notions of racial difference, they were less concerned with the divisions between black and white Americans than were Americans. African Americans stationed in Europe remarked on this pattern, and in the Australian context, this process was encouraged by the black press.⁴³ In April 1942 the *Afro-American* reported that African Americans recently arrived in Australia had "behaved like typical American doughboys, strolling the streets, looking in the stores, drinking beer and attending movies." Equally revealing was a June 1943 article in the *Afro-American* that described how the indigenous peoples of the North and South Pacific considered African Americans to be "black white men."⁴⁴

This notion of American culture transcending race has been explored in an analysis of an earlier period in Australian history. In his study of African Americans and the Australian popular stage in the nineteenth century, Richard Waterhouse has characterized the Australian reception of black Americans as largely positive. During the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, large numbers of African

42. In his study of interpersonal relations between Australian women and American men in Queensland during the Pacific War, Michael Sturma found repeated references to the power of the American dress uniform and its association with American affluence. Sturma also implies that the dress uniform allowed American soldiers to transcend their class origins. In his examination of wartime Britain, Steve Chibnall found that many phenomena or patterns of behavior that were considered "natural" and "taken for granted" within the United States assumed an "exotic" connotation and even took on "a class connotation quite absent in the States." Coca-Cola was an example. See Michael Sturma, "Loving the Alien: The Underside of Relations between American Servicemen and Australian Women in Queensland, 1942–1945," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 24 (1989), 3–17; Steve Chibnall, "Whistle and Zoot: The Changing Meaning of a Suit of Clothes," *History Workshop Journal*, 20 (1985), 65.

43. Maggi Morehouse has noted that the men she interviewed for her study recalled that Europeans "recognized them as Americans or 'Yankees' first, rather than seeing them primarily by color." See Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 201.

44. *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 4, 1942, June 5, 1943.

American entertainers left the United States to escape the discrimination suffered “both on and off the stage.” Waterhouse has argued that most of those entertainers came to Australia and “stayed because the levels of discrimination that they experienced in Australia were far lower than those that they were subjected to in the United States.” African Americans occupied a “special place” in Australian colonial society, not only because of their relatively small numbers, but also because they were “more acculturated to white values and customs” than other nonwhite minorities.⁴⁵

Waterhouse’s analysis is of further significance because he asserts this “special place” African Americans held in nineteenth-century Australia broke down at the turn of the century under the weight of the Social Darwinist scientific racism that helped create the national edifice of “White Australia.” As a consequence, Australians discounted the cultural construction of black Americans that had hitherto granted them a “special place.” Waterhouse has used the racially charged public response to African American boxer Jack Johnson’s world title fight in Sydney in 1908 as evidence of this changed reception. Dianne Collins has also suggested that the “special place” African Americans had held in the Australian imagination in the nineteenth century waned in the early twentieth. Collins’s examination of Australia and its relationship to Hollywood in the period between the two world wars demonstrates that, if Australians had not completely rejected the “special place” African Americans had hitherto held, they were certainly more ambivalent toward black Americans.⁴⁶

45. Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage, 1788–1914* (Sydney, 1990), 148–149.

46. *Ibid.*, 106. Collins notes that 140,000 Sydneysiders saw D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in a seven-week period in 1916 and that sales of *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon, Jr. (the novel upon which *Birth of a Nation* was based) soared at the same time. Relations with indigenous Australians were seen to be partly responsible, with the *Sydney Sun* claiming that “our own association with the coloured races has rather weakened our reverence for Uncle Tom and his brethren.” Conversely, *The Jazz Singer*, which provided a very different image of African America than *Birth of a Nation*, broke all records during its forty-six week run in Sydney in 1928–1929. See Dianne Collins, *Hollywood Downunder: Australians at the Movies, 1896 to the Present Day* (North Ryde, New South Wales, 1987), 65. Further evidence from the 1930s suggests that African American entertainers and sportsmen who visited Australia in the interwar period enjoyed a warm public reception. Sydneysiders, for example, flocked to the Sydney Sports Ground to see black American ex-Olympian Eddie Tolan compete in a footrace. Members of the all-black “Hollywood Hotel” theatrical review, which played in Sydney’s Fuller Theatre in the late 1930s, be-

The positive Australian wartime welcome to African Americans, therefore, may also represent the beginnings of another transition in White Australia's racial sensibilities, a transition that would be realized in the period following World War II. In the early post-war years an increasing number of Australians came to regard both the White Australia Policy and the lack of civil rights for indigenous Australians as unacceptable. While the propaganda haze that engulfed wartime Australia was racially charged, many Australians rejected racial taunts when international opinion was condemning racism and Australia found itself allied with many non-European nations. It is no coincidence that the first major public debates about the efficacy of the White Australia Policy took place during the war years.⁴⁷ Following the lead of African American journalist and civil rights advocate Walter White, who argued in 1945 that "America's generosity, idealism, and heroism" were "being immeasurably diminished" by its "treatment of negro soldiers," Rosemary Campbell and others have suggested that the Australian experience of American racism, as evidenced by segregative and other discriminatory practices in the U.S. military, hastened this debate.⁴⁸ Writing in 1943, Vincent Tubbs anticipated that the experiences of wartime relations between Australians and Americans would help prompt a postwar debate on Australian racial values and practices. For instance, at a dinner meeting "the Most Rev. H. W. Mowell, Archbishop of the Sydney Church of England," had "asked bluntly: 'What can the Church of England do to assist in bringing about better relations between colored soldiers and Australian citizens?'" Tubbs thus "detected" that there was "an element of Australian thinkers now concerning themselves with post-war problems in this country."⁴⁹

Although those discussions regarding race relations had little

came instant local celebrities, and their social activities, such as a roller-coaster ride at Luna Park, were deemed of media interest. See *Labor Daily*, Dec. 4, 1934; "Hollywood Hotel" Frame No Home and Away—18044, Sept. 29, 1938, State Library of New South Wales.

47. See Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to North America and White Australia, 1919–1978* (Sydney, 1995), 192–193.

48. Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, N.Y., 1945), 146–147. Campbell has contended that "perhaps Hitler's war on the Jewish people was stirring some consciences." See Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, 123. See also Ken Coates and W. R. Morrison, "The American Rampant: Reflections on the Impact of United States Troops in Allied Countries during World War II," *Journal of World History*, 2 (1991), 211.

49. *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 17, 1943.

immediate impact, they indicated the beginnings of a changing political and cultural discourse on race in Australia. Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* reflects this changing Australian perception of matters racial. Suggesting that Australian racial values were still far from perfect, Solomon Saunders, in a flash of resentment, curses the seemingly enlightened treatment he receives from the Australian nurse and his white American officer:

What the hell is your excuse for living, pale faced wench? Sitting there as if you have the world in a jug and the stopper in your anemic hands. You and your lieutenant make a wonderful pair with your ALL-MEN-ARE-BROTHERS crap, as you wallow in your brotherhood while the world around you goes to pot.⁵⁰

While Saunders has his doubts that changing rhetoric constituted meaningful improvements in race relations, these changing sensibilities would, in the postwar years, eventually secure the end of the White Australia Policy and greater civil rights for indigenous Australians.

* * *

Contrary to the argument that white Australia received African Americans in a negative and racially charged manner, there is compelling evidence that African Americans' experiences in wartime Australia reflected more than just the racism long associated with the White Australia Policy. Indeed, those best placed to judge white Australia's response to black Americans—African Americans themselves—have left considerable evidence suggesting that many Australians reacted warmly and positively to their presence. This is not to suggest that white Australians did not express racist sentiments or that they always treated African Americans equally. Admittedly, too, Australians' positive responses to African Americans might have reflected the fact that black Americans were sojourners, who had no intention or opportunity to outlast their welcome. Nevertheless, the warm welcome they received serves to remind us that race relations are always conditioned by *specific* cultural and social circumstances.⁵¹

50. Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, 371

51. Beth Bailey and David Farber reached a similar conclusion in their study of the black American presence in wartime Hawai'i. Racism and racial practices were mediated by "local situations," "contingency," and "individual action." See Bailey and Farber, "The Double-V Campaign in World War II Hawai'i," 817.

No less significantly, white Australians' positive reactions to black Americans mirrored the generally positively light in which Australians tended to view the wartime presence of Americans. That reaction, based on more than the strategic imperatives of Australia's military alliance with the United States, reflected the long-term influence in Australia of American culture, a culture in which the black presence was always significant, albeit often contentious.