

A COMPELLING FORCE : INDIGENOUS WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

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In 2005, a new production of Jane Harrison's *Stolen* will be presented at the Sydney Theatre Company, seven years after its premiere in a co-production by Ilbjerri and Playbox Theatre companies in 1998 at the Melbourne International Festival for the Arts. The first draft of the play was presented by Ilbjerri at the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 1993, and already, it signalled a new mode of story-telling about an emergent issue in Australian culture. As well as the regional tours in Australia that followed the initial season, *Stolen* toured to London for Australia Week in 2000, and returned to the UK in 2002. It has been presented in Hong Kong and translated into Japanese with an Australian production featuring at the Tokyo International Festival in 2002. At Playbox, productions in 2002 and 2003 were seen by more than 15,000 people and it is extensively studied on school curricula. This work more than any other Indigenous play has spoken back to mainstream Australia, as well as, more controversially, presented stories about Australia's treatment of Indigenous citizens internationally.

Stolen tells the survival stories of five damaged Indigenous people who were members of the 'Stolen Generations', powerfully, directly and boldly. With a full cast of Indigenous actors and directed by Wesley Enoch, the production stood as a kind of witness about Indigenous life experience against an official Australian government position unprepared to accept the truth of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families during the past fifty years.¹ It provided a counter-narrative that many white Australians and the international community welcomed even if conservative figures in Australia were uncomfortable with its message. The play provided a force of resistance to the ongoing denial of Indigenous realities by white Australian culture, as well as a celebration of Indigenous survival and diversity after nearly two hundred and twenty years of white settlement.

To put this in context, one of the defining moments of intercultural relations in Australia at the end of the twentieth century for both positive and negative reasons was the *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of ATSI Children and their Families* in 1997. The Stolen Generations as the removed children are known became a pivotal focus for the process of reconciliation and for debates about Australian identity and history. Initially this issue and the report's publication appeared to be a decisive factor moving forward the process of reconciliation. The groundswell of support culminated in 2000 when 250,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge (the largest demonstration ever seen in Australia) in support of reconciliation. However, the vehemence of the growing reaction against the report combined with political opposition to land rights, indicated that Reconciliation was in danger of being 'set back decades' by the present government.²

Within this conflicted national space, Indigenous theatre, such as *Stolen*, engages with a collective necessity in Australia to address painful and controversial aspects of recent Aboriginal history and to consider the effects of ongoing exclusion of Indigenous subjects from national discourse. Indigenous cultural theorist Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that 'self representation by Indigenous women is a political act' because their actions are inevitably part of a process of political confrontation. In women's theatre texts this process of political engagement is the direct result of exploring and staging the 'practical, political or personal effects' of life in a society that constructs them as the 'other'.³

As a group, Indigenous women playwrights have challenged constructions of Indigenous people as homogenous by creating complex and varied representations of Indigenous women. Using humour and strong emotion, autobiography, biography and community stories, these women have fearlessly engaged

with contentious and fraught issues that exist under the surface both between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and within Indigenous communities. In the process of negotiating gender and race relations in contemporary Australia, they identify commonalities as well as differences. As Moreton-Robinson outlines:

All Indigenous women share the common experience of being Indigenous women in a society that deprecates them. Accordingly, there will be common characteristic themes dominant in an Indigenous woman's standpoint. Such themes include sharing the legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism; resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with self defined images; continuing our activism as mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, grandmothers and community leaders as well as negotiating sexual politics across and within cultures. Such a standpoint does not deny the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences. Indigenous women will have different concrete experiences that shape their relations to core themes. An Indigenous woman's standpoint also requires that we are aware and respectful of, and abide by Indigenous cultural protocols.⁴

However, as Marcia Langton emphasises in her discussion of Indigenous artists and their reception, Indigenous women playwrights are also a diverse grouping of women, diverse both as individual human beings and in terms of the ideas and creative work they present.⁵ They write as individuals, as women and as Indigenous Australians. At the same time, their work is received, like their life experiences, within a context that is complicated by race as much as gender.

Different colours: *True* (2004)

A play by Odette Best, an Indigenous woman playwright, called *True* (2004) illustrates some of the complexity of Indigenous subjectivity and some of the challenges facing Indigenous writers. Best has a background in Indigenous Health and in recent years, has focused on writing and experimenting with film. After reading a treatment for a short film that Best had based on a dream, Nadine McDonald, the artistic director of Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Theatre, the Queensland based Indigenous theatre company, approached her about reworking the piece for theatre.⁶ Best agreed and *True* was included in Kooemba Jdarra's three year development program.⁷ *True* was also selected to be workshopped at the 2002 Australian National Playwrights' Conference (ANPC). As film remained an integral part of the work for Best, the finished production combined theatre and projected film footage. Memory sequences incorporating archival footage of Indigenous children in institutions were projected on to the set through the last section of the production. The footage included family archival footage from Best's aunt.⁸

The play follows the struggle with identity of the three main characters: one woman, Toby, a social worker at a medical centre, and two men, Leon who is studying performing arts, and Noah, who is studying law. Toby is a feisty, independent young woman determined to keep her life emotionally and financially manageable. She shares a house and a half mother, half sister relationship with Leon. The play's narrative begins with Leon placing an advertisement for a new housemate. The result is a succession of weird and provocative characters answering the advertisement. In the exchanges with the initial applicants Toby is revealed as articulate and assertive, proud of her cultural heritage and her gender. She reacts strongly against attempts to reduce her to either a sexually submissive stereotype or a representation of a mystical force. Once Noah has appeared as the most acceptable applicant, the production, through the three main characters, explores the complex question of Indigenous identity in a contemporary urban environment.

The three individuals have all been directly affected in different ways by the policies of removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities. That is, those children who were removed from their families and communities under the various government policies and institutionalised and denied contact or dislocated from their Indigenous cultures and communities.⁹ Toby and Noah had both been removed from their families and adopted. Toby was adopted by an Indigenous family and Noah by a non-Indigenous family. Leon had recently discovered that he had a brother who had been removed. Each character is engaged in trying to deal with the act of removal and the personal consequences. Toby has applied to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for a copy of her file in order to discover where she really comes from. Throughout the play she avoids opening the large yellow envelope she has been sent containing

her file. Noah is negotiating a world that marks him as Aboriginal when he has no knowledge or experience of Aboriginal cultures or community. Leon is attempting to discover his brother's fate and deal with his feelings about his family and community in relation to his brother's removal. From their various positions each character questions their personal and cultural identities and tries to understand their place in the context of the accepted definition of Aboriginality.

Currently the most widely used definition of who is or can identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is primarily social. An Indigenous Australian is defined as a person who is a descendent of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and is recognised as Indigenous by members of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.¹⁰ Though accepted by Indigenous communities and a vast improvement on the 67 definitions previously developed by Europeans to control Indigenous Australians, this definition presents difficulties for the thousands of Indigenous Australians who were removed.¹¹ These difficulties are further complicated by the often traumatic experiences that result from adults attempting to reconnect with their families and communities.

In *True*, Best reveals some of the emotional challenges facing people who were removed as children. As the publicity material states the play explores the question: 'If our bonds with our culture have been severed, then how do we regain what has already been lost?'¹² Best has direct experience of this dilemma herself, she was removed from her family in the 1960s. Like the character Toby in the play, Best was adopted by an Indigenous Australian, a Koombumerri man, and his Anglo-Celtic wife.¹³

The production engaged with this fraught and contested situation in relation to the issue of identity on a range of levels both visually and verbally. The original advertisement for a housemate announced that Leon and Toby as a household were 'Out and Loud' and 'Black and Proud'. Best used the potential meanings of these words playfully in the text as different applicants interpreted the words in different ways and attributed them differently to Toby and Leon. Particularly in reference to who was 'Black'. The characters, including the minor characters, represented a widely divergent range of types of Indigenous Australians, all of whom had different connections to Indigenous culture and communities ranging from none, as in the case of one of the support characters, a young New Age woman who had just discovered she had Aboriginal ancestry to Leon who was born and raised within his Indigenous community. Indigeneity within the play, as within communities, is recognised in terms of cultural and community connection and self identification rather than appearance or physical markers of racial identity.

This complex situation was emphasized in the production. Both the text and the casting of the Indigenous actors countered categorisation of Indigenous Australians according to skin colour by visually demonstrating that skin colour is not of primary importance to identification, yet continually intrudes. Those characters who were most connected to their communities had the lightest skin colour and the character least able to identify or be identified as Indigenous had the darkest skin. So the characters, such as Leon and a young Murri man who responded to the ad, who had the strongest links to their communities and unquestionably fulfilled the definition of Aboriginality were noticeably lighter skinned than other characters. Noah who was the darkest had no connection to Indigenous communities and did not fit the definition.

Throughout the text, the fact that dark skin colour was continuously used and regarded as marker of Aboriginality, especially but not exclusively by the non-Indigenous communities, was engaged with from a range of perspectives. As McDonald, the director describes it: '*True* examines and questions the notion of identity based on different skin colour and government classification. It also explores how Indigenous people are categorised based on skin colour, among the Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous community'.¹⁴ Many non-Indigenous Australians find it difficult to accept that those Indigenous Australians who live in urban Australia, are 'real Indigenous Australians', and that they may have a sense of place and identity that is different from other Australians.¹⁵ This problem is further exacerbated when combined with assumptions about skin colour. In *7 Stages of Grieving* (1994) by Deborah Mailman and Wesley Enoch, the popular actor Mailman wryly illustrates how being 'black' marks people out for racist responses.

You get a lot of attention, special treatment from being black. I'm in this expensive shop and there's this guy next to me, nice hair, nice tie, nice suit, waving a big gun in the air and the shop assistant says, "Keep an eye on the nigger... eye on the nigger."

OK, so I went to try on a dress and the shop assistant escorts me to the 'special' dressing room, the one equipped with video cameras, warning to shop lifters, a security guard, fucken sniffer dog...(54).

The visible sign of skin colour has long been considered by Euro-Australians a major marker for Aboriginality since its classification within legislative definitions of race. Throughout the twentieth century skin, and a graded concept of colour, was used to regiment people's lives and limit choices. In particular, it provided one of the bases for justifications of the removal of children with lighter skin because it was assumed they could be assimilated. Skin colour has also been used as the identifier for 'real' Aboriginal people. The white Australian seeks a sanitised and homogenised version of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person and 'real' Indigenous people are always somewhere else not in a local or suburban community. The nomadic desert hunter, tracker, perhaps stockman, is the desirable image akin to the earlier fantasy of the 'noble savage'. The more visible urban dweller, politician, activist, artist is often dismissed as 'whiter than me' ... And, labels such as 'half caste' and '1/64th black' are all too easily used and suggest widespread ignorance of Aboriginal people's sense of identity. Vague references to Aboriginal people's spirituality, affinity with the land, the 'Dreamtime' legends and so on are clouded by an 'otherness' which does not relate to the visible, local Indigenous population.¹⁶

Best's play as well as exploring issues relevant to herself and her community engages directly with these attitudes within the broader community. Her creation of Toby as a strong, independent, financially secure and competent woman who is proudly Aboriginal confronts these cultural stereotypes. The social implications of the stereotype is further confronted by explorations in the text of prejudice within and between Indigenous communities and people. By exposing problems within Indigenous communities, Best also resists the representation of Indigenous people as undeserving victims of an oppressive white society. The play therefore speaks not just to a white audience positioned as 'other' to Indigenous experience but also to and for the differences within Aboriginal culture. An Indigenous theatre that makes Indigenous reality more complex, rather than a question of 'black or white', demands a more sophisticated response from its audience.

Festival director of the Indigenous program for the Sydney Olympics, Rhoda Roberts has raised concerns about the critical reception of Indigenous productions.¹⁷ She has identified two issues associated with how Indigenous cultural production is judged and how the Australian community understands Indigenous cultural expression.¹⁸ The first centres on critical standards and 'kindness' and according to Roberts, the 'kindness' approach results in a 'lack of engagement with the work'. As she argues: 'The last thing we want is for the best of Aboriginal art and theatre to be put in the charity basket'.¹⁹ The second issue concerns the dissemination of cultural knowledge and the demonstrated lack of cultural awareness in most reviews.²⁰ Both these concerns draw attention to the barriers that stand between non-Indigenous audience members and an Indigenous production in the reception and understanding of Indigenous theatre.²¹

For Kyas Sherriff, the Murri actor who played the female lead of Toby, *True* offers 'how we laugh, how we interact, where the pain is that we don't discuss'.²² Sherriff describes the play as consisting of strong characters and examining cultural issues that are 'part of everyday existence' for Indigenous Australians living through the situation. For her the play is about daily life and 'the issues that we don't talk about - the denials, and then of course the truths and lies'. For Sherriff one of the great 'gifts' of Indigenous controlled theatre companies like Kooemba Jdarra, is the capacity it provides for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to 'touch base'. This point of communication is important in order to support mutual understanding. However, this communication requires the non-Indigenous audience to be actively engaged with the material, seeking to gain some knowledge and understanding of experiences they do not have. The play, *True*, focuses on the dynamics of relationships but as Sherriff argues 'blackfellas have a different dynamic'. It is from a different place from Euro-Australian women writers in terms of social dynamics, cultural experience and history that Indigenous Australian women speak.

Once the silent victim

These women speak in a context where there are dominant pre-existing representations that must be confronted and countered. Though these representations have been contested, especially within postcolonial criticism, as Mudrooroo has argued generally in Australian writing Aboriginal characters are often used as a 'variant of fate' without agency, voice or hope.²³ There are no shortages of examples in work by Euro-Australian authors to justify Mudrooroo's analysis. In many works by non-Indigenous writers, the Indigenous characters are ciphers representing 'the tragic inevitability of encountering violence, unfairness and poverty, the squashing of aspirations, denial of beauty, ridicule and lack of freedom to determine one's own fate'.²⁴ This practice applies particularly to the representations of Indigenous women. The majority of representations of Indigenous Australian women in a range of Euro-Australian works for theatre across the last hundred years have consistently been silent and powerless in the face of Euro-Australian aggression. One of the most well known images of Indigenous women in the mid twentieth century was Jedda, the main female character in Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* (1955). Jedda is in many ways typical of standard representations of Aboriginal women. As a young girl she was taken from her family and raised by a Euro-Australian family then she is stolen by Marbuk, a myall Aboriginal man with tragic consequences. At each stage Jedda is a passive victim, vulnerable to primitive responses, overwhelmed by the moral or physical strength of others, whose only hope for a future lies in being assimilated into the Euro-Australian culture.

Though there have been variations within these representations, to a large extent Indigenous women characters occupy the position of silent victims. In the work of some Euro-Australian women playwrights this powerlessness has not been total, there has been some subversion of the image and the use of silence has provided the basis for limited resistance. In the first half of the twentieth century, plays with political agendas from different positions such as Henrietta Drake Brockman's *Men Without Wives* (1938) and Katherine Susannah Pritchard's *Brumby Innes* (1927) demonstrate the powerlessness of Indigenous women even when they indicate the individual's ability to negotiate within restrictions. These social documents have as major themes the position of women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in the outback stations. Both plays reflect a colonialist fear of the local Indigenous population and explore the sexual use and abuse of Indigenous women by Euro-Australian men.

In *Men Without Wives*, the character of Channa, a young Indigenous woman communicates both humorously and threateningly despite her silence. Silence is particularly powerful at the end of the first act when Channa is described: 'Lurking and beating out the time of the corroboree', within the house itself. (19) Like Drake-Brockman, Pritchard was drawing on personal experience of time spent in the outback. Her play *Brumby Innes* depicts three women, two Indigenous, Polly and Wylba and one Euro-Australian, May, all totally at the mercy of Brumby. They are, according to him: 'his mares'. (97) The Aboriginal women use silence and their own dialect to assert themselves within the parameters of Brumby's domination. For example, in the last scene, Wylba uses her language to abuse Brumby, while he is congratulating himself about her acquiescence. The thirteen year old Wylba, who has been abducted, and whose family has been punished for trying to rescue her, is described as: 'impishly, prancing cheekily in the doorway,' as she says to Brumby: 'Waly Marri, Booketerra, kundi-kundi spa'. (100) These words translate as: 'Bad one, prick, stinky, shame, shame'.

From the New Wave era, Dorothy Hewett's *The Man from Muckinupin* (1979), is often acclaimed by Euro-Australian audiences and critics as a radical departure from the usual types of Indigenous representation on the mainstream stage. The Indigenous woman, Touch of Tar, is a 'night' character mirroring and doubling the Euro-Australian 'day' character. Touch of Tar speaks but her life is literally locked into the dark and has usually been played by a Euro-Australian actor.

In most plays by non-Indigenous writers however the action and outcome is effectively predetermined. These representations define Indigenous women as sexual objects for Euro-Australian men, as bound by poverty, without education or resources, or a political or social voice. In many ways, the representations of Indigenous women have become narrower over time. For example, in *Too Young for Ghosts* (1991), Janis Balodis uses Indigenous women characters as exemplars of powerlessness. He uses the device of mirroring the European women characters' experiences of rape and powerlessness with an enactment of the kidnapping and rape of Aboriginal women.²⁵ Within this mirroring of Indigenous and European, the Aboriginal characters have no means to communicate. They speak a different language and they can neither understand the European aggressors, nor can they make themselves understood. Another example

is Andrew Bovell's use of Indigenous women characters in *Holy Day* (2001). One character, Obedience, is an exemplar of the stolen generations; silent throughout the play, she has her tongue cut out at the end. The other Indigenous woman character is a trapped and helpless captive who is beaten, chained, and then executed.²⁶ These women, as Mudrooroo suggests, are representative only of their powerlessness and silence. Overall, the message is that, however they may resist, Indigenous women have no option but to suffer or bear their suffering.

There have been some striking exceptions in plays written in the 1990s and 2000s. For example there is Louis Nowra's *Radiance* (1995) that was made into a feature film with Rachel Maza and Deborah Mailman and the work of Julie Janson such as *Black Mary* (1996) and *Gunjies* (1996). *Black Mary* is a dramatic account of Maryanne, a real bushranger who was Aboriginal and a woman. Maryanne is not unknown in the historical record but her story is usually overshadowed by that of her companion, Captain Thunderbolt. This play, based on Janson's research into both Aboriginal oral history and print archives, is Maryanne's story. *Gunjies* had its first performance in 1993 in the International Year of Indigenous People. The 'gunjies' in the title is a Koori word for police. The main narrative is Aranda's story. She is an urban Koori girl attending high school. The play follows her journey through tragic events that transform her from a naive schoolgirl to a powerful politically aware young woman.

These exceptions are usually the result of dialogue between Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous writer. Nowra for instance dedicated *Radiance* to his friendship with the leading Indigenous actor Justine Saunders. Janson, though she does not identify as Indigenous, has Aboriginal heritage and has worked extensively with Indigenous communities. However, these exceptions are few and far between.

Another side of the legacy of Australia's past also confronts Indigenous women writers. As Marcia Langton points out: 'The easiest and most "natural" form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible.'²⁷ This exclusion of Indigenous women from most plays set in Australia strengthens the fixed representations when they are present and adds to the challenges facing Indigenous women writers. In the work of many male Indigenous writers, women are often limited to a particular role as well. This role is however different from that of the types found in Euro-Australian writings. Women are often styled as the long suffering, strong, ever resourceful anchor for the family, such as in Jack Davis' work. For example in *The Dreamers* (1983), Dolly is the family matriarch. She is the anchor and motivator as well as carer for the family.²⁸ The role though strong is inevitably reactive as the women rescue others or try to maintain some sort of economic balance rather than initiate or control situations.

Indigenous alternatives: *Mechanics for the Spirit* (1993)

Indigenous women's writing confronts and contests these representations of Indigenous women as helpless and passive silent victims in the context of the broad framework of intercultural relations. Indigenous Australian women writers such as Oodgeroo in the 1960s and 1970s and Eva Johnson in the 1970s and 1980s created work for the stage giving voice to Indigenous women's stories and self-representations.

Oodgeroo was submitting her plays to competitions and radio throughout the 1960s. Her children's play *Old Pfeller* (1964) appears to be the first text by an Indigenous writer to be produced in urban Australia. Apart from her children's plays, however, her work was not produced. The only public performances were readings within Indigenous Playwrights' Conferences such as *Manhunt* at the Black Playwrights Conference in 1987. The only performance text not designed for children that saw production was *The Rainbow Serpent Legend*, produced in 1988. This was a multimedia production that was staged as part of the 1988 Expo in Brisbane and was seen by 3 million people. Oodgeroo's experiences were not entirely gender specific. Productions of Indigenous texts were extremely limited until there were Indigenous controlled theatre companies. Though women such as Bettie Fisher, played important roles in the early companies in the 1970s and 1980s, women writers' work was initially only produced through independent productions.

For example, Eva Johnson, a member of the Mulak Mulak people, had been producing work throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. In 1984 two of her texts were produced in Adelaide. *Tjindarella* was presented at the First National Aboriginal Women's Art Festival as part of the Fringe Festival in Adelaide as was her work *Onward to Glory*. In 1988 Johnson's play, *Murras*, was produced at the Fringe Festival Centre,

Adelaide Festival, and later for the Black Theatre Season at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney. In 1989 she performed her monodrama *What Do They Call Me?* (pub 1996) directed by Venetia Gillot at the National Lesbian Festival in Melbourne and again in 1991 at the Edge Theatre, Sydney. This is a one woman show exploring three stolen generation stories from one family's point of view, the mother, and her two daughters. One of the stolen generations herself, a recurring theme in Johnson's work is the impact of government policies on Indigenous women and children.

In the 1990s with the formation of state based Indigenous companies such as Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane, Ilbijerri in Melbourne and Yirra Yaakin in Perth, the situation began to change. Indigenous women have played pivotal administrative and artistic roles in these companies. Kylie Belling directed the first production of John Harding's *Up the Road* in 1991. Kooemba Jdarra supported the development of Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *7 Stages of Grieving* among other texts developed by or in collaboration with women writers. These companies have continued to produce work by Indigenous women writers. However, until the late 1990s practically no work by Indigenous women was produced by mainstream subsidised theatre companies.

There was at least one exception – Black Swan Theatre Company in Perth, produced Sally Morgan's *Sistergirl* in 1992. The production, directed by Andrew Ross premiered at the Dolphin Theatre, Perth and then toured to Adelaide, Darwin, Alice Springs and Sydney. The show was then remounted in 1994 and presented in Perth and Melbourne. The narrative follows the experiences and feelings of an Aboriginal woman as she prepares to die in hospital. Sally Morgan illustrates the diversity of Indigenous women writers. Raised as a Euro-Australian, she discovered her Aboriginality when she investigated her family background. Her family had been denying their Aboriginality and passing as Euro-Australian. This different position is in some ways reflected in Morgan's work in its focus on the discovery and importance of common humanity across cultures.

Though their attempts to gain access to stages initially had limited success, in the late 1990s and 2000s Indigenous women writers not only gained access but also claimed an important and central performance space.²⁹ As Anne Marshall argues, for Indigenous women 'survival demands expertise in translation, performance and self-representation in a racially discriminatory "white" world while strengthening our own.'³⁰ Demonstrating this expertise a number of Indigenous women used a broad range of theatrical forms some of which are now closely associated with them (such as the single story teller forms). Through their writings and performance, these writers and artists presented strong and provocative alternative voices and images of 'women's experience' outside, inside and through the mainstream. These writings push and resituate the limits of the representations. In doing so they present a range of active strong women as central characters in their own drama; women who are not passive victims of sexism or racism, but active agents using whatever resources they can call on to create possibilities and potential futures for themselves and others.

Issues of powerlessness and abuse are not and, given the experiences of many Indigenous Australian women, cannot be ignored within the work of Indigenous women writers. However, the issues are handled in different and individual ways. One of the aspects illustrated in the writings of a number of women is the importance of traditional spirituality as a source of strength. Men's Business has been observed and discussed within anthropological writings. In contrast with this framework of respect for men and their links with traditional practices, Women's Business has been treated as if it could not exist. At best it has been 'assumed to play an ancillary role to the more important ritual life of men'.³¹ Despite this determined framing of women as less, some women playwrights have staged explorations of the role of traditional practices within and for contemporary Indigenous women.

With due respect for community protocols, Merrill Bray, of the Eastern Arrente, has explored the brutal reality of the sexual abuse and victimisation of Indigenous women from the point of view of the strength and support women can draw from traditional spirituality and shared female knowledges.³² Bray is both a visual artist and a playwright. She held her first solo exhibition of paintings at Tandanya in Adelaide in 1999, during the Come Out Festival. She was awarded a Tandanya/Art SA Aboriginal Artists' Fellowship. Her first play, *Our Mob*, was workshopped in Alice Springs in 1991 by members of the local community under the direction of Richard Walley. The following year, Bray co-wrote a pilot situation comedy that centred on the

trials and tribulations of a regional Aboriginal radio station. *Our Mob* was workshopped at the 1993 ANPC/ Aboriginal Conference. Bray then wrote *Mechanics for the Spirit* in 1993, a play about the importance of nurturing the spirit. *Mechanics for the Spirit* was produced for the Adelaide Festival in 2000 as part of *Spirit, Time and Place*, a double bill with Ray Kelly's *Somewhere in the Darkness* (1996), directed by Noel Tovey.

Mechanics for the Spirit explores the relationship that develops between two Aboriginal women, one young urban woman, Pipi, and one elderly traditional woman, Aggie, who are literally thrown together in a cell in an outback gaol.³³ Through the two women's stories, the text deals with female loss and vulnerability as well as the physical, emotional and spiritual support of Women's Business. Pipi has been beaten and arrested for trying to intervene in a situation where the police were beating a young Aboriginal man. She is thrown into a cell where an older traditional woman bleeding badly from a head wound is talking to and playing children's games with an invisible sister. At first Pipi is frightened by the old woman, but as she notices the bleeding wound her compassion grows. She tries to give comfort to Aggie and to get medical assistance for her. Pipi's calls for help result in violence and aggression towards herself. It brings her to the attention of one of the more violent police officers. After the police sergeant attempts to rape Pipi, who was pregnant, miscarries. As Pipi loses the child, the death spirits come and Aggie fights them off, determined to protect Pipi. But they have come for the child. As Pipi tries to recover and deal with what is happening to her, Aggie, reveals her strong connection with Aboriginal spirituality and shares her knowledge with Pipi. As Aggie offers the younger woman comfort and gives her strength through traditional connections, it becomes apparent that Aggie is a spirit or ghost herself. Aggie's spirit is revisiting the place where she was beaten and left in a coma some years earlier. Her dying body is still in a hospital bed.

The text engages with a number of important issues. One is the issue of Indigenous women and their treatment by police and the judicial system. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-91) highlighted Aboriginal deaths in custody as a serious problem across the country. In general, though Indigenous Australians are less than 2% of the general population, as a group they were dying in prison at a rate of nearly thirteen times that of non-Aboriginal people. Another major finding of the Commission was the over representation of Indigenous people in gaols. These findings are usually discussed and considered in terms of male prisoners. Indigenous women are also over represented in prisons. They are in fact incarcerated at an even higher rate than men.³⁴ The basic narrative of *Mechanics* directly engages with this situation. This engagement, though it demonstrates that the women are victimised, it does not represent them as helpless victims. The women are actively involved in negotiating with the circumstances of their lives in a potentially empowering way.

A powerful moment in the play is when the two women claim the stage and perform a traditional women's dance from the Arrente people. The dance is introduced and led by the spirit figure of Aggie. With its gentle swishing of fronds and swaying movements the steps of the dance claim a peaceful and positive space, filling the stage with a different framework of possibility. Aggie's presence, and her ability to nurture and comfort the young woman struggling in the present, changes the representation of a long line of abused women to an image where a sense of survival is dominant, a survival that supports resistance and the future. As Peta Tait and Elizabeth Schafer have observed, within works by Indigenous writers for the stage, traditional cultural heritages and knowledges act on both symbolic and metaphorical levels.³⁵ Both these levels are important but there is another level as well, the literal and active connection between the past and present bound up through an individual's sense of identity and cultural identification.

Traditional cultures have been used in highly problematic ways in relation to external constructions of Aboriginality and the framing of Indigenous artists and their work. Connections or lack of connections to some form of museumised pre-contact traditional culture has been used as an often exclusionary form of authentication of Indigenous artists' work. The terms of validation require a tangible demonstration of the links between contemporary Indigenous art and 'the transmission of tradition over the generations'.³⁶ Helen Gilbert discusses this phenomenon in relation to early productions by Bangarra Dance Company, drawing on Gareth Griffiths' warnings about the 'myth of authenticity as another form of colonialist discourse through the construction of legitimacy in external cultural "desires" rather than Indigenous practice'. Gilbert argues that this process 'reduces Aboriginal culture to its reproducible artefacts while denying the validity of performance that reflects the lived experience' of contemporary urban Indigenous Australians.³⁷ This process

has at times created the basis for a hierarchy of 'authenticity' that reifies traditional cultural practices at the expense of contemporary developments. As McKenzie Wark has noted, 'the acceptable kind of Aboriginal art to white audiences has some trace of authentic tribal culture but mixes it with respectable forms of middle class taste.'³⁸ This taste is communicated particularly through artworks that incorporate images of the 'traditional' Indigenous subject. These desires and expectations have often resulted in the dismissal of urban based contemporary Indigenous artists, who have been stigmatised for not being 'real' or 'authentic' Aboriginal artists. Both national and international critics in the performing arts have used this distinction.³⁹

This problematic framing of traditional practices within the work of Indigenous artists tends to construct the incorporation of traditional references or practices as separate from the artists and the present. Bray's play engages with this problematic situation in a number of ways. She effectively claims a strong connection between the past and present for an Indigenous person. This reorientation towards a contemporary Indigenous person's perspective contests museumised constructions and the framing of these constructions as markers of Aboriginality and difference for the non-Indigenous audience. Bray does not incorporate traditional images and practices as 'markers' of Aboriginality but is in effect actively exploring the potential meaning and contribution of the past within the present for Indigenous women. In Bray's writing's contemporary Indigenous women are represented as having an active and dynamic connection with the legacy of traditional practices in the present.

The readings of images within an Indigenous production depend on the position, expectations and attitudes of the audience. Angela Chaplin, a Euro-Australian director, reports an incident after Jimmi Chi's Aboriginal musical *Corrugation Road* (1996). At one point in the production, a number of women in the cast performed a dance drawing on traditional practices. Chaplin's companion leant over to her and said: 'this is what I like to see them do.'⁴⁰ Whilst this tendency is apparently widespread, as demonstrated by a broad range of critical reception, her own experiences collaborating with an Indigenous artist demonstrate the potential for dialogue and interaction to lead to change.⁴¹

...when I went up north in Ningali's community where we went to write the piece [Ningali]. We were sitting round one night round the fire with her aunties and grandmothers and they were telling stories. They were telling them in language and Ningali was translating for us and I was getting completely carried away with the moment and thinking I'm the luckiest person in the world. They're telling me these amazing stories and a lot of them were dreaming stories and stories about historical events. Then Ningali started laughing and I said, what, and she said, Oh they are talking about Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley and whether they have sex or not. To me at that moment it was rammed home, I mean I was sitting with these women who didn't speak English, who lived on the same piece of land all their lives, but they are not museum pieces. I think that's so important that our work should reflect that.⁴²

One woman story telling; *Ningali* (1994); *7 Stages of Grieving* (1994), *White Baptist Abba Fan* (1997) and *Box the Pony* (1997)

Chaplin's trip to the Kimberly region was to undertake research for a creative collaboration between herself, Ningali Lawford and Robyn Archer based on Ningali's life. The result was a one woman show called *Ningali* (1994). Ningali was born at Wangkatjungaka, Christmas Creek station near Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley WA. Her father was a stockman and she grew up in the stock camps speaking Walmaajarri, the language of her maternal grandmother. She was raised within Western Desert Law and traditions. As Ningali has observed, her people were among 'the last folk the colonialists came to, so our language and our culture were largely intact.'⁴³ Ningali had little contact with non-Aboriginal Australia until her teenage years. Then at the age of 13, she was sent 2500 kilometres south to a boarding-school in Perth. At 16, she applied, 'mainly as a joke', for an American field scholarship to go to the USA as an exchange student. Asked to name her preferred destination, she named Hollywood. It was the only place she had heard of in the USA. She was offered and accepted an exchange scholarship not for Hollywood but for Alaska. As Ningali says in her show, going to Alaska 'was a real adventure for a girl whose language does not have a word for

snow'.⁴⁴ After finishing school it did not take long for Ningali to discover she wanted to be a performer. She went to Sydney to train at NAISDA. An actor and a dancer, she has worked extensively in theatre and film including Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* (1990), Eddie Bennell's *My Spiritual Dreaming* (1992) as well as her own shows, *Ningali* and *Solid* (2000). In 2000, Ningali toured Malaysia with a collection of songs and dances for Black Swan. Since then, as well as working in productions for most major companies, Ningali has created and performed in *Black 'n' Tran* (2001) with Hung Lee for the Melbourne Comedy Festival and *Solid* for the Perth Arts Festival 2000.

The show Ningali created with Archer and Chaplin deals with her home and childhood, stories from her family, her time in Alaska, her training in Sydney and visiting her family at Fitzroy Crossing. Interwoven within these events is the pain of loss, discrimination and repression. The show was very successful and well received and toured extensively. The show was also featured in the Festival of the Dreaming in 1997.

According to Ningali, it falls on the 'minorities to inform and enlighten the majorities'.⁴⁵ That is the challenge that Ningali sets out to confront in her creative work. Indigenous women's autobiography has been identified across a range of genres as a powerful challenge to pre-existing assumptions, by 'declaring its gender and race marginality, [it] likewise claims the truth-value of subjectivity'.⁴⁶ Helen Thomson has argued that the 'staged female Aboriginal autobiography embodies a powerful "talking back," a decolonising act'.⁴⁷ This interpretation is well demonstrated by *Ningali*. In the show Ningali addresses the audience directly, telling stories in a number of languages: Walmaajarri and Wangkatjungaka (her traditional language), English (which she learned when she was thirteen) and local Kriols. She shares laughter, anger and heartache in a monodrama that powerfully (re)presents an intelligent and sensitive woman who has negotiated successfully with an often hostile world.

The stage design was based on Ningali's face, with an area representing her eye, another her mouth. On one side of the stage, the mouth area, there was a 44 gallon drum where she sat singing. When she moved to the eye area, she lit a candle in the early performances and small campfire in later productions. Moving about the stage, energetic and articulate, Ningali confronts racialised assumptions and prejudices. At the same time she honestly acknowledges problems and social issues within her community. Ningali's presence on the stage confronts fixed representations and her use of her stories and language break the silence of racism.

Illustrating Roberts' concerns about the different types of cultural knowledge, as with all Indigenous productions, the show speaks differently to different cultural audiences. In the premiere production for deckchair Theatre in 1994 in Fremantle Western Australia, an audience of her 'mob' from Fitzroy Crossing came down from the north of the state to see the show. Seated up the back, behind the non-Indigenous audience their reactions made it apparent that there were multiple narratives being told in this multilingual, cross-cultural performance. On the one level, Ningali was entertaining the non-Indigenous audience with her moving and very funny tales of negotiating between the new and the different as she moves from the Kimberley to Alaska to Sydney and back again. Sharing underneath the laughter, the story of loss and displacement, even the camp in which Ningali grew up is located outside the border of her traditional country. On another level for the people from her community, she was sharing familiar experiences, and the comedy for them was in the recognition of situations and people. This multiple condition, or dialogic image, of the Aboriginal female subject demonstrates the partiality of inscription by the Euro-Australian audience. To the non-Indigenous it was new and revelatory, a story of a different world. Things that shocked and made them uncomfortable were familiar jokes to the Indigenous audience.

Ningali is one of a series of successful monodramas created in collaboration with and performed by Indigenous Australian women in the 1990s. Many of these monodramas are to a large extent autobiographical. As well as *Ningali*, these include *What Do They Call Me?* (1990) by Eva Johnson, *7 Stages of Grieving* (1994) by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman mentioned previously and *Oh My God I'm Black* (1995) devised by Maryanne Sam, Patricia Cornelius and Irine Vela, *White Baptist Abba Fan* (1997) by Deborah Cheetham, *Box the Pony* (1997) by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin, and more recently, *I Don't Wanna Play House* by Tammy Anderson (2001). Four of these monodramas were a successful feature of a series called *Wimmin's Business* for the Olympic Festival of the Dreaming in 1997. The program, billed as 'Seven women, Seven stories', consisted of seven monologues by Indigenous women artists from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA that included *Ningali*, *7 Stages of Grieving*, *White Baptist*

Abba Fan and *Box the Pony*. The performers were either the sole author or had written/devised the text in collaboration with others. The high level of success of the *Wimmin's Business* monodramas in the festival resulted in ongoing tours of the shows both in Australia and internationally. These monodramas share a basic motivation. As Mailman expresses it, the hope is that audiences will 'leave the theatre with more understanding of where [Aboriginal people] are coming from and to understand that the struggle is still strong for us'.⁴⁸

The number of monodramas in the Festival of the Dreaming was the result of an active decision by the artistic director Rhoda Roberts.⁴⁹ Roberts approached a number of female Indigenous performers about the possibility of collaborating with writers to produce work based on their personal biographies for inclusion in the festival.⁵⁰ The approaches resulted in the commissioning of *White Baptist Abba Fan* and *Box the Pony*. For both these women, Cheetham and Purcell these works represented their first attempts at writing for performance. Both were performers, Cheetham a professional opera singer and Purcell an actor and presenter. Both shows were successful and toured extensively after the festival.

Cheetham's *White Baptist Abba Fan* draws on her personal experiences and was put together with a team of collaborators that 'suited her' project. A member of the Stolen Generations, the adopted Cheetham had been falsely told by her white parents that she was an abandoned child, and that her 'mother didn't want' her. 'She put you in a cardboard box and left you in a field.'⁵¹ Cheetham's story explores the difficulties of becoming acquainted with her Indigenous mother so that when she met her for the first time they were 'strangers full of prejudices on both sides'. She records the struggle to accept her newly discovered black family and to understand their love of country and western music. The narrative follows her 'journey from white Baptist Abba fan to gay Koori opera singer' and interweaves operatic arias in several languages, with strong story telling.⁵² Like many of the plays discussed in this chapter, humour is a strong feature of the performance text.

Purcell's *Box the Pony* achieved a high profile and Currency Press published the text. Purcell discussed with Roberts an idea she had for a show fitting in with the festival themes of 'contemporary, intimate and true'. Once she had secured funding through the Olympic committee and the Aboriginal Arts Board, Purcell sought a writer with whom to collaborate.⁵³ *Box the Pony* is a Murri story from Queensland however Purcell chose a Euro-Australian man Scott Rankin to work with because, as she says, she 'wanted to see what the other side of the coin had to offer' the story of a Murri woman.⁵⁴ After its success at the Festival of the Dreaming, *Box the Pony* toured extensively. The published text of the play has been critically acclaimed winning both the 1999 NSW and 2000 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards for Best Play and was also awarded a 1999 Human Rights Arts Award. Purcell was nominated at the inaugural 2001 Helpmann Awards for Best Female Actor in a Play for her performance.

Box the Pony is a semi biographical work drawing on Purcell's life. Purcell's life has been described as a 'true rags-to-riches story'.⁵⁵ Growing up in rural Queensland, Purcell wore thrift-store clothes and spent evenings watching her mother stagger home from the pub. Her father, a Euro-Australian boxing teacher, had a Euro-Australian wife and children but fathered six children with Purcell's mother, an Aboriginal woman from the Goa Gungurri Wakka Wakka people. Purcell became a single mother herself at 18 and at 20, fleeing a violent boyfriend and her own developing alcohol habit, she moved with her daughter Amanda to Brisbane. From there she began to build her career in the performing arts. Her first major performance work was in 1993 in *Bran Nue Dae* (1990), which toured Australia. This was followed by more theatre work and then in 1995 she moved to Sydney to become a television presenter. In Sydney, she worked on a number of television dramas. In 1997, Purcell was nominated for an Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for Best Actress in a TV Drama for her performance in *Fallen Angels*. Her other theatre and film credits include the Olympic Arts Festival's production of *Marriage of Figaro* in 2000, and the film *Lantana*, 2001.

For Purcell, *Box the Pony* examines intercultural and inter-racial tensions in rural Australia through the lens of her own childhood. The narrative is in an active story telling style delivered as direct address to the audience. Within the monologue, Purcell plays seventeen characters or groups of characters. Song is integral to the narrative complementing the storytelling. The languages used in the text include traditional Murri languages, Murri English and standard English. The narrative is structured as two stories. One, told

in the first person, is the story of Leah, the central character and a version of Purcell, and her flight in her Datsun Sunny to fame in Sydney. Purcell shares her experiences of Woollahra with a very humorous look at prejudice in cafes and on the streets and her initiation into the world of cable television and stardom complete with personal stylists. The other story, narrated by Purcell, is of Steffie, her friend and alter ego back in Murgon, Queensland.

Leah: Up'ome'der, there was this girl called Steff, my little tidda der, myall black gin from up'ome'der, gunnar, gunnar, all she wore was a little hand-me-down frock and a couple of love bites. (43)⁵⁶

Purcell tells Steffie's story from abusive, yet loved, childhood to attempted suicide in the Datsun Sunny.⁵⁷

The story of the 'good times, hard times and sad times' is told with humour. The Miss Murgon sequence, where Steff successfully competes for the title of Miss Murgon, is an extraordinary piece of comic story telling that reveals layers about poverty and life in a country town for a young Murri girl. In the text, a central theme is the relationship between Purcell and her alcoholic mother, particularly her mother's drinking and death. This relationship is the backdrop for Steff's early pregnancy and violent boyfriend and the despair that drove her to attempt to kill herself and her child.

Leah: Steff guns the Datsun. Jess is in the front. She's giggling... It's a special treat. No seat belts.

Leah is dancing. Choreographed traditional dance movements. ...Brolga dance flying off and coming to a stop.

Steff: I'm slowing.. the car's slowing... Jess is clapping, giggling... it's fun.

Should've been wrapped around that tree.

Fucking pony saved me. (117)

The splitting of the narrative into two people allows Purcell 'to deliver the story once removed, comment on it from the outside and return to it'.⁵⁸ It also facilitates a shift in performance idiom from Australian 'car' vernacular to Indigenous animal mimesis and transformation. The pain and humour of the story is shared between the audience and the Leah/central character, thus allowing the audience the space to recognise Steff's sense of rescue from her fate. The text reveals a strong spirit never losing touch with humour and laughter as she struggles with the pain and joy of living.

Purcell's memories and emotional associations of her childhood and adolescence are given physical form on the stage. Cow hides were used to cover the stage and represent other characters, reproducing Purcell's memories of the meatworks and the hides thrown over barb wire fences along the roadway near where she grew up in Murgon. Boxing was a big part of her life growing up. All the young men hoped to turn their lives around through success in the ring and it was a disappointment for the young Purcell that this path was closed to her. Boxing had played an important role for Indigenous men in the first half of the twentieth century. With most occupations barred to them, side sho boxing troupes and professional boxing championships offered an avenue of escape from poverty. This dominance of the sport for both Indigenous people in general and Purcell's family in particular was reproduced in performance by the central placement of a large red punching bag. A large blue mat echoing the intense blue of Queensland skies completed the set.⁵⁹

As well as being partially autobiographical, *Box the Pony*, like *Ningali* and *White Baptist Abba Fan*, presents an individual's active and positive 'survival'. Purcell's performance of *Box the Pony* at Belvoir was promoted and discussed on the basis that Purcell as an individual was 'a force to be reckoned with' and 'fearless'.⁶⁰ The discussion of Purcell and her work included one journalist expressing her difficulty believing that Purcell could ever be anything but successful.⁶¹ These shows can be interpreted in a number of different ways. On one level these shows are (re)presenting successful individuals, on another they are representing successful Indigenous Australian women. They can be understood as role models or as exceptions. Even if

they were to be received as a collection of exceptions, these representations would still contest generalised representations that treat all Indigenous women as the same. As individual women these performers and their stories actively counter representations of Indigenous women as silent and powerless, collective and fixed.

These monodramas have been part of and contributed to a range of changes in the framing of Indigenous work in the performing arts. As stated earlier, theatre work by Indigenous artists has consistently contested externally imposed constructions of Aboriginality from a range of positions. Bray's *Mechanics of the Spirit* is an example of an artist claiming within their own framework links with traditional beliefs and practices. In a different way, these monologues have contested frameworks that museumise traditional practices and Aboriginality by commanding a contemporary space and framing. This has led to a variety of tangible results that indicate shifts in the expectations and assumptions about Indigenous women artists and their work. When *Ningali* was first produced, there was an attempt to frame her in relation to traditional performance associations by using photos showing her face painted with white ochre.⁶² *Ningali* resisted this type of framing and construction of her and her work. That was in 1994. In 1997 when Purcell was performing *Box the Pony*, there was no question of framing her within this sort of construction. The publicity photos display a laughing, strong and contemporary woman. This focus on the role of and presence of Indigenous people within contemporary arts and society was a feature of the Festival of the Dreaming as conceived by Roberts. It is equally a feature of the monodramas created by Indigenous women. Cumulatively the dynamic between representations and external preconceptions has been shifted. These monodramas have contributed to creating space for Indigenous women performers. Specifically an outcome was a broader range of roles available to the performers themselves. Purcell and Mailman in particular have broken new ground in theatre, film and television with roles in classic European texts such as *The Marriage of Figaro* (Purcell) and *Lear* (Mailman) and the ABC hit *The Secret Life of Us* (Mailman). *Ningali* has broken new ground creating stand-up comedy shows.

Collective stories: *Stolen* (1998) and *Black Chicks Talking* (2002)

Indigenous women in Australian theatre have continued to play an important part in provoking and facilitating shifts in expectations and opportunities for Indigenous voices to be heard. These cultural shifts are due in no small part to the willingness on the part of playwrights to engage with difficult emotional and political material on stage. This work of cultural reconstruction has been undertaken with a passion for collective and conscious reconciliation of divisive elements in personal and community lives. One of the most important and high profile theatrical texts, as discussed earlier, is *Stolen* (1998) by Jane Harrison.

Harrison, a descendent of the Muruwari people of New South Wales, was commissioned by Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Theatre Co-operative to research and write a play based on the experiences of members of the local Koori community. The script development process for *Stolen* began formally in 1992, when Harrison heard countless stories from stolen children about abuse, refusal of access to archives and information about their families. Many of them also spoke of the despair of parents who were told their children were dead or children who were told their families were dead or had abandoned them. The narrative focuses on the trauma of five Aboriginal children stolen from their families and the impact of institutional or foster care on their lives. The sparse dormitory set of the Ilbjerri-Playbox production was composed of iron beds and a massive filing cabinet. This *mise en scène* simultaneously connoted the prison-like isolation of each child and the anonymous system of government administration designed to disconnect them from an Indigenous cultural identity. On a series of different levels the production traces each adult 'child's' individual journey and the nightmare memories of grief and abuse as they struggle to play as children and live their lives. Each character has both a past and present story to tell about the process of reconciliation with their identity.

The female characters represent in condensed form the story of many Aboriginal women: Ruby is a naïve young girl whose sense of abandonment eventually sends her crazy; Anne is a young woman adopted by a white family without any connection to her Aboriginal past; and Shirley comes from two generations of mothers who have lost their children but is determined that she will be the grandmother of children she can care for.

Shirley: I'm ringing about one of my children, Lionel, who was taken from me in 1966 when he was just two years old. Why was he taken? Well you tell me.

... Put me on hold [she laughs] You people have been putting me on hold for twenty-seven years... Oh Lionel...(23)⁶³

Their responses to the policies of racial assimilation range from confused and abused, to suffering from an overwhelming sense of abandonment, to pragmatically adjusting to their circumstances. As adult women, they are locked in the intensely emotional aftermath of removal either as mothers or daughters, which provides no simple resolution:

Anne: S'pose you want a happy ending from me. You blackfellas want me to be reunited with my family, learn to love them, and move back home, all of us living happily ever after. You whitefellas want my adopted parents to become loving and tolerant of my black family and invite them around for Sunday roast. Don't you. Admit it. What about me? What do I want? (37)

At the end of the play, each member of the cast steps out of character and briefly tells their own story to the audience. Some cast members, like the characters in the play, have tragic stories to tell, others do not. This moment, in a sense, claims ownership of these stories for individuals in the present in a way that breaks the unified position of the dominant non-Indigenous audience. It also contests the tendency to generalise all Indigenous people as having the same experiences.

The success of *Stolen* and the collaboration between Ilbjerri and Playbox have opened the way for other collaborations between mainstream theatre companies and Indigenous artists, but the number of women writers included in repertoire is still very small. The Australian-focussed La Boite Theatre Company in Queensland provided the platform for Leah Purcell's second collaboration with Sean Mee, *Black Chicks Talking* in 2002. Unlike *Stolen*, whose documentary style was grounded in a political reality demanding a collective response, Purcell's work, more like the monodramas, is anchored by the collective articulation of contemporary indigeneity as difference in single individuals.

Purcell started thinking seriously about identity when she was working on *Box the Pony*. One outcome of her thinking was an interview based research project that culminated in a book called *Black Chicks Talking* (2002). In the book, Purcell interviews 9 young Indigenous women, successful in a variety of professions. The backgrounds vary, some have achieved high profile success in sport and the arts, and others are working to improve life within Indigenous communities or maintain Indigenous traditions. The interviewees included: Deborah Mailman, actor; Frances Rings, dancer; Rachel Perkins, film maker; Sharon Finnan, netballer; Tammy Williams, lawyer; Rosanna Angus, a traditional Bardi woman from Western Australia who works as the local community police warden; Cilla Malone, who grew up on a mission in Queensland and has overcome substance abuse; Liza Fraser-Gooda who began Jinnali Modelling, an agency that represents Indigenous models and who produced the first Indigenous swimsuit calendar; and Kathryn Hay who was crowned Miss Australia in 1999 and in doing so became the first Indigenous person to win the competition. Since 2002, Hay has been a parliamentarian representing Bass in Tasmania in the State Assembly.

The interviews documented in the book are an active exchange between interviewer and subject. Purcell contributes and reveals her experiences and responses to the women as she talks to them. The book proved highly successful and was the foundation for a number of other projects. From the interviews, Purcell produced a documentary and devised a play; both of these were also called *Black Chicks Talking*. The documentary was made as Purcell was finishing the book and is an abridged version of the project focusing on five of the women. Purcell then adapted the stories from her interviews into a stage play with five characters that premiered in Brisbane in 2002. After *Black Chicks Talking* written and directed by Leah Purcell, in collaboration with Sean Mee, produced in association with Bunjabura Productions (Purcell's own company), was presented at the Sydney and Perth Festivals in 2003. The production was combined with an exhibition of portraits by Robert Hannaford of the women originally interviewed and a multimedia travelling exhibition.

Black Chicks Talking is part of the same conversation as *Best's True*. The play explores issues of belonging, identity and family not only as they relate to an Indigenous context but also as they relate to a wider Australian one. Also, like *True*, *Black Chicks Talking*, deals with the pain felt by the Stolen Generations, and the generation/s that follow and have borne the legacy. In the play, five women meet in a spiritual space, each seeking to resolve issues of identity and belonging. They come from different places, different social positions and different mobs, from urban sophistication to Indigenous communities. In production, against a set that was simple, yet visually powerful, through hearing each other's stories, each woman comes to see her own world differently. The set, described in the promotional material as 'ancient ground', consisted of a giant branch of a ghost gum.⁶⁴ Gleaming white, it dominated the stage creating a space that was both strange and ancient and at the same time neutral and inclusive.

Like *True*, the exploration in *Black Chicks Talking* of identity and belonging deals with categorization by skin colour and the problems of separation from culture. The character Elizabeth (played by Purcell) views her history within the terms of the imperial/colonial language of race (full-blood, half-cast, quadroon). She has discovered she is 'part' Aboriginal. The dialogue wittily picks up on this description with the question – 'which part?'⁶⁵ The text then reveals that the character's fragmented sense of self is the result of her ignorance of, and separation from, Indigenous communities and cultures. Her mother repressed her cultural identity, leaving Elizabeth with no stories and no knowledge. She therefore feels inauthentic and vulnerable in the identity she both adopts and struggles to understand and own.

The character of Elizabeth draws on the interviews with Kathryn Hay in the book. Hay's search for her own identity is a moving real life example of an individual questioning their place in Australia, and in particular trying to come to terms with common types of Indigenous classification. For example, when Purcell questions Hay about her Aboriginality, the two women end up stating the diverse positions staged by *Black Chicks Talking* and *True*.

Kathryn: My Mum's Mother - and I think her mum - were Aboriginal or part... I'm a sixteenth, so my mum's half-caste... yeah, and then her...

Leah: Hang on a minute, I'm going to stop you right there! You've got to stop that talk, Kathryn!

*Kathryn: But that's how they categorise us or classify us.*⁶⁶

In the play *Black Chicks Talking*, Purcell uses sharply drawn stereotypes of a variety of different Indigenous women to explore these issues of identity and the difficulties faced by fair skinned Indigenous people or Indigenous people who have been raised outside of Indigenous cultures. Elizabeth looks 'white', yet as she says, she is 'part Aboriginal'. The other four women, who are darker skinned, berate her for using this terminology; but Elizabeth feels she cannot call herself Aboriginal because she knows nothing of Aboriginal ways and teachings. She likes her mobile phone and her well-paid 9 to 5 job and feels she has no connection to her Aboriginal ancestry. The other characters struggle in different ways with their identity and sense of belonging. There is Patricia, a spiky student radical. Michelle is a 'mission' girl, who makes jokes about being the government approved stereotype - seven kids from five fathers, complete with drink and drug problems. Then there is Sophie wondering if she can be authentically Indigenous with a house, a four-wheel drive and a washing machine, echoing the objections of the Euro-Australian student in relation to *True*. Only one of the characters, Michelle grew up with a strong connection to culture, 'hearing the stories of the old people'. The fifth character Janine watches the action from a distance. Physicalising the presence of loss and grief, she represents children who were removed or given up for adoption. Janine is Patricia's sister, who was removed and symbolically represents Michelle's daughter who was also removed. By extension, she represents all the children cut off from the oral tradition of their elders, from the stories that are a foundation of belonging and identity.

Like *True*, the conclusion is that Aboriginality comes from the individuals themselves regardless of classifications, categories or any other external constructions. In Purcell's words:

Hey, don't be boxed girl friend! You're a black woman and that's it. Australia must accept that Indigenous Australians come in all shapes, sizes and colours. Being a Blackfella in

*today's society has got nothing to do with skin colour, it about what you hold in your heart and soul.*⁶⁷

The Indigenous women playwrights discussed here are witty, articulate, well informed and courageous. They engage with the realities of their lives, discussing subjects and exploring material that is confronting and challenging for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The plays and performance texts offer personal insights into the experiences and personal, emotional and cultural stories of Indigenous Australians. Like most Indigenous women's writing the texts are marked by humour, courage and honesty. They present an Indigenous perspective of how Indigenous women see themselves and their communities and they offer their work to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. But they write first and foremost for an Indigenous audience and themselves presenting women not as passive objects but as active articulate subjects. In the process they examine and explore the lives and experiences of members of their communities. Their voices open up the possibility for the predominantly Euro-Australian audience of the mainstream stage to begin to know more about the boundaries around different bodies and the different dynamics that exist for Indigenous and Euro-Australian women in contemporary Australia. They also open up the possibility for Indigenous people to accept and deal with the legacies of colonialism that continue to mark and dominate their lives.

As Sherriff pointed out in relation to *True*, these writers engage with issues that are not usually discussed. They explore the legacy of lies and denial and the struggle for individuals to deal with important questions about identity and belonging. In the process these women writers create new stories that provide the potential for healing and change both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They provide an emergent force of representation for Indigenous Australian women and offer a basis for negotiating the racial differences that inform and shape Australia's narrative of nation.

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4. Aileen Moreton-Robinson 'Researching whiteness: some reflections from an Indigenous woman's standpoint', *Hecate* Vol 29 No 2, (Oct 2003): 75.
5. For example Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation', in Michele Grossman, (ed), *Blacklines*, MUP, 2003.
6. Kooemba Jdarra is an Indigenous controlled theatre company dedicated to producing work by Indigenous Australian theatre makers.
7. Development programs are an important part of Kooemba's mission and foundation philosophy to support the development of new Indigenous voices and scripts are supported through three stages over three years.
8. *True* was directed by Nadine McDonald and produced by Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane at Metro Arts in 2004.
9. In the 1990s a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry found that in the period from 1910 to 1970 between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children had been removed from their families, the majority by force or under duress. See *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of ATSI Children and their Families*. (Commissioner Ronald Wilson) Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997.
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19. Roberts, 'Sweet Dreams': 20-1.
20. Roberts, 'A Passion for Ideas': 11.
21. See Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames; Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1997*, University of Queensland Press, 2004 for further discussion of this positioning of Indigenous theatre within white culture.
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24. Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*: 167.
25. Janis Balodis, *Too Young for Ghosts*, Currency, 1991: 27.
26. Andrew Bovell, *Holy Day*, Currency/Playbox, 2001.
27. Langton, 'Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation': 113.
28. Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*, Currency, 1983.
29. For further discussion of the position of Indigenous women playwrights in the second half of the twentieth century see Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre*, UQP, 2004: 252-259.
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31. Ken Gelder & Jane M Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, MUP, 1998: 119.
32. The Eastern Arrente's traditional lands are in the Hartz Range, Northern Territory.
33. Merrill Bray, *Mechanics of the Spirit*. Directed by Noel Tovey, Theatre in the Raw, Ilbijerri and Playbox, Beckett Theatre, Malthouse, 3 March, 1997; Merrill Bray, *Mechanics of the Spirit*. Unpublished manuscript, 1994. Playbox archives.
34. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000, Corrective Services Australia cat. No. 4512.0, ABS Canberra.
35. Peta Tait & Elizabeth Schafer (eds), *Australian Women's Drama: Texts and Feminisms*, Currency Press, 1997: xiii.
36. Nigel Lendon & Wally Caruana, 'The Wagilag Sisters', *Art and Australia* Vol 35 No 1 (1997): 87. Helen Gilbert, *Sightlines: Race, Gender and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre*, Michigan UP, 1998: 74-5.
37. McKenzie Wark 'Messenger beyond the middle class', *Australian*, June 21 2000: 43.
38. See Rhoda Roberts, 'Sweet Dreams', Review, *Weekend Australian* 13-14 September, 1997: 20; Bill Gray, 'Bangarra Dance: A Talent for Tourism' : 30.

39. <http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/1997/08/20/21feat/feat.5html> access 29/8/1997.
40. Angela Chaplin in *Reconciliation and the Performing Arts: Proceedings of the Melbourne Forum*, Discussion Paper No 11/2000, Monash University Koorie Research Centre, (eds) Greg Gardiner and Peter Eckersall: 20.
41. For further discussion of the reception of Indigenous writers work see Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre*, UQP, 2004.
42. Chaplin in *Reconciliation and the Performing Arts*: 20.
43. Ningali Lawford, personal interview, Melbourne, 12 April, 2000.
44. Ningali Lawford, Robyn Archer & Angela Chaplin, *Ningali*, Directed by Angela Chaplin, performance at The National Performers Conference October 1994, Beckett Theatre at the Malthouse; *Ningali, Wimmin's Business*, Festival of the Dreaming, Opera House, Sydney, 23 September, 1997.
45. Lawford, personal interview.
46. Helen Thomson, 'Aboriginal Women's Staged Autobiography' in *Siting The Other: Re-visions of Marginality in Australian and Canadian Drama*, (ed) Marc Maufort & Franca Bellarsi, PIE- Peter Lang, 2001: 25; Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, Playlab Press, 1996: 73.
47. Thomson, 'Aboriginal Women's Staged Autobiography': 35.
48. Deborah Mailman quoted by Catherine Taylor, 'Mailman Delivers', *Weekend Australian*, 25-26 October, 1997: 18.
49. A member of the Bundjalung nation, Wiyebal clan of Northern NSW and South East QLD, Rhoda Roberts's involvement in the arts is extensive. She was a co-founding member of Australia's first national Aboriginal theatre company, the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust (ANTT) and as an actor/producer and director, continues to work in theatre, film, television and radio.
50. The Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney 1997 was the first of the arts festivals organised as part of the Sydney Olympic cultural program. The Festival was dedicated to the 'art of the world's Indigenous peoples', and with particular emphasis on the arts of Indigenous Australians. See Rhoda Roberts, 'Introduction.' *The Festival of The Dreaming: Festival Guide*, *Sydney Morning Herald* August 1997.
51. *Wimmin's Business* Brochure, Festival of the Dreaming Sydney 1997: np.
52. Wendy Blacklock, Director Performing Lines, personal interview, Sydney, 23 September, 1997.
53. Olivia Allen, 'Going Solo', *Dialogue* 33, (Dec 1997) np.
54. Leah Purcell, 'Introduction' in *Box the Pony*, Scott Rankin & Leah Purcell, Sceptre/Hodder Headline Australia, 1999: 1
55. Sarah Coleman, 'Leah Purcell – Telling Aboriginal Stories', *World Press Review*, Vol 50 No 8 (August 2003).
56. Rankin & Purcell, p. 43.
57. I discuss this play and other monologues in Maryrose Casey, 'Performing Indigenous Women', *Hecate's Australian Women's Book Review*, Vol 11 (1999): 41-43; Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-97*. UQ Press, 2004.
58. Purcell, 'Introduction' in *Box the Pony*: 3
59. Purcell, 'Introduction' in *Box the Pony*; Leah Purcell, & Scott Rankin. *Box the Pony. Wimmin's Business* Festival of the Dreaming Opera House, Sydney, 20 September, 1997.
60. Rachel Fensham, 'Farce or Failure', *Theatre Research International* Vol 26 No 1 (March 2001): 90.
61. Rebecca Lancashire, 'The Struggle of Life Takes Centre Stage', *Age* 20 October, 1998: 17.
62. Angela Chaplin, conversation, Perth, April 1999.
63. Jane Harrison, *Stolen*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1998.

64. Centrestage Diary of Events, QPAC November-December 2002; Leah Purcell in collaboration with Sean Mee, *Black Chicks Talking*, directed by Leah Purcell, produced by La Boite Theatre and QPAC in association with Bungabura productions, Optus Playhouse, Brisbane, 12 December 2002.
65. Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking*, Optus Playhouse.
66. Leah Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking*, Hodder, 2002: 213.
67. Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking*,: 213.

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Indigenous tribes speak of ancestors who fled there to escape the Spanish invaders, and they warn that anyone who enters this sacred city will fall ill and die.Â The Path Between the Seas tells the story of the men and women who fought against all odds to fulfill the 400-year-old dream of constructing an aquatic passageway between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.Â Nilo Cruz is a young Cuban-American playwright whose work has been produced widely around the United States including the Public Theater (New York, NY), South Coast Repertory (Costa Mesa, CA), Magic Theatre (San Francisco, CA), Oregon Shakespeare Festival, McCarter Theater (Princeton, NJ) and New Theatre (Coral Gables, FL).