

Today We're Alive



# Today We're Alive:

*Generating Performance  
in a Cross-Cultural Context,  
an Australian Experience*

By

Linden Wilkinson

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## PROLOGUE

Prior to the study presented in this book, I had no real interest in Australian history. I knew what I had been taught: 1770, Captain Cook claims Australia for Great Britain; 1788, the first convicts arrive, my ancestors among them; 1851, gold is discovered, bringing wealth, mass migration and more bushrangers; 1915, Gallipoli delivers defeat and the iconic ANZAC narrative with its code of courage, mateship and sacrifice. Moreover, I knew this history had shaped us.

I knew about the struggle for workers' rights; I knew about our egalitarian ethos; I knew about the heartache brought by isolation, by drought; and I knew colonisation had been a catastrophe for Australia's First Peoples. What I didn't know – with my uninterrogated smattering of history – was that I was, and continue to be, a product of this same colonisation process.

In early 2007, my focus was, as usual, on the future. Having just completed my master's thesis, which explored the creation of a verbatim theatre play (Wilkinson 2008), it was not my intention to hasten a return to the research world. Instead, I wanted to bring research skills into the world of arts practice. Inspired by the commercial interest in personal testimony plays like *Vagina Monologues* (Ensler 1998) or Nora and Della Ephron's (2008) *Love, Loss and What I Wore*, I had begun to think about exploring the nature of women's resilience, particularly in the performing arts, where image is so critical to employment.

I began collecting stories from actors who were still passionately engaged in their craft despite long periods without meaningful work. I returned to teaching drama and had the opportunity to travel to New Zealand. My job was to teach improvisation<sup>1</sup> for a week and, from that work, develop a film script from our class exercises.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hodgson and Richards (1987), improvisation, or the creation of scenarios through the imagination, serves to inform the practice of teaching character creation and through repetition of an experiential and emotional repertoire supports character integrity in text-based scene work. Spolin (1999) maintains that improvisation accesses intuitive knowledge through this same spontaneity of inter-active play and it is this knowledge that generates inspiring, creative performances.



Then a particular incident in a drama classroom changed everything; and, as the following account demonstrates, from a teacher I became an ethnographer; from a witness I became an inquirer. I watched a performance that changed my understanding of culture and inspired questions the event itself could never answer (O'Toole 2006).

In late 2007 I watched second-year drama students at Toi Whakaari – the National Drama School in Wellington – perform the school haka. It was a way of acknowledging the teaching and learning that had taken place over the previous week. It was a complete surprise; one minute the students were leaving the classroom, the next they had assumed formation, told me where to stand and the school haka began. I was unaware then of the school's history.

Toi Whakaari had moved to a more cross-cultural way of working in 1988 (Tweddle 2007). It was a way of developing a tradition different from the inherited English Drama School method, where teaching was compartmentalised into voice, movement, scene work and history of theatre. The inherited British model reflected exactly my own actor training in Australia at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, where I had been a student in the 1970s.

Instead Toi took on tikanga māori,<sup>2</sup> integrating Māori cultural practice of movement and voice. For actor training this meant a focus on wholeness, working the body and the voice in tandem, accepting that the discovery of movement is at the heart of everything. Through movement actors come to a deeper appreciation of feeling, marrying the inner life of the work with its outward expression. Over the three years of drama school at Toi, there is increasing emphasis on a student-led understanding of these movement-centred connecting principles operating between the otherwise isolated facets of an actor's craft (Tweddle 2007).

The twenty-five students I had spent the week working with were of different ethnicities (Pākehā,<sup>3</sup> Māori, Pacific Islander, even an Australian); there was an almost even gender split and most were in their early 20s. The improvisation course I was teaching was intended to familiarise the students with an area of training they had infrequently visited. Our aim was to develop possible scenarios and characters that might generate collaborative content for a third-year film exercise in six months' time. I was only involved with the students in my classes and had no

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<sup>2</sup> Tikanga māori: "the correct or customary way of doing things" (O'Donnell 2007, 271).

<sup>3</sup> Pākehā: "New Zealanders of non-Māori descent, usually—but not always—taken to refer to those descended from—or descended from settlers from—the British Isles and Western Europe" (Halba 2007, 207).

understanding of the kinds of work being done elsewhere in their course. I had often used improvisation in classes for both actors and writers and have always found it to be a liberating experience for students. Spolin (1999, 4) suggests that the improvisational process, blending games, structure and interpretive freedom, generates moments of pure imaginative response:

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves ... the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative freedom.

Improvisation demands trust, imagination and reflexivity; it is storytelling through the body and is, in my experience, a traditional teaching tool. Groups were imposed on the students later in the week; before that, students worked in pairs or trios they'd selected themselves.

We finished late on a Friday evening; from my point of view as teacher/facilitator, the students' work had been outstanding. The haka, a dance of exquisite precision and intense vocal resonance, seemed to emerge spontaneously from the student body. Just prior to it starting, I was led to a chair, told to stand on it, so I could see properly, and was playfully warned: "Most people usually cry."

It was a breathtaking experience to be so close to a dance of such ceremonial focus and potency. Once I had dealt with the shock of the event itself, I realised I was witnessing something even more amazing to me than a haka. I was watching students of diverse backgrounds step out of their Pākehā way of being, way of sounding, way of expression, and collectively step into inhabiting, for those three or four minutes, Polynesian culture.

At that moment I realised that all week I had watched Māori and Islander students move between cultures, their own and European. I had been conscious that in their improvisations, which generally involved performing stories that happened within their culture of origin, their characters, particularly in terms of body language, were different to how these same students presented in the classroom. In their performed scenes, the men adopted aggressive postures while the women adopted stances that were more passive. In both cases, the characters they captured expressed sentiments that reflected physical change. However, such generalised observations were fleeting impressions only; the focus in class was on the story being played out. My focus, as writer of the forthcoming film project, was on content not character.

Now, however, as the week ended, I was seeing Pākehā students, male and female, performing the school haka and slipping into another culture. In doing so, they exuded a confidence and authority they had not previously demonstrated. They were expressing themselves with a physicality I hadn't seen before, making sounds I hadn't heard. In those three or four minutes, I gained an insight into my own hegemonic mindset and in recognising that limitation I had grasped the potential for change. I was acutely conscious that I had found shifts in cultural ways of being, ways of behaving as normal for some students but not for others. Furthermore, if I had seen Pākehā students inhabit Māori or Islander characters in class work, I would have found it embarrassingly politically incorrect. However, in witnessing the same action through ceremony, I was given an insight into unity not division, possibility not discord.

I told myself this was the gift of cross-culturalism, to be watching a haka while simultaneously being given a transformative insight into my own limited perspectives. If I could register these disparate sites of experience at the same time, standing on a chair in a drama classroom, if I could be aware of the suddenly limitless, to my eyes, performance potential of cross-culturalism and the narrow interpretive funnel, again in my experience, of cultural hegemony, could I be part of creating a similar experience in my own country? If I could, what would it look like?

For the first time as a drama teacher I was consciously aware of the performative limitations embedded in the dominant inherited theatre culture on all students, Pākehā, Māori and Islander alike, and that encouraging flow between cultures through ritual and ceremony could create work with a distinct national and regional nuance. This is not a reflection on the limitations of the students, or on any suggestion there had been an implicit practice of self-censorship, but on the narrow range of exercises I had asked them to do.

If, as Denzin and Lincoln (2008, 14) maintain, “the performative is where the soul of a culture resides”, what I was witnessing was the potential for culture to celebrate difference, inclusion, respect and acknowledgement, and that realisation could inform my future work. A journey had begun.

I wanted to explore cross-culturalism in the Australian context. So I would go ... where? In the beginning, I had no idea.



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ROAD TO MYALL CREEK

and I always say that the path to Australia's future passes through its past  
—“Gerry”<sup>1</sup>

This book investigates the evolution of a verbatim theatre play in an Australian cross-cultural context. The play, *Today We're Alive*, concerns an 1838 Aboriginal massacre in north-west NSW and the Memorial<sup>2</sup> erected to commemorate it 162 years later. It is devised for six actors – three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal– and runs approximately seventy minutes. The play text is predominantly edited transcripts derived from the research participants' narratives; however, this draft also includes some documentary material sourced from the public domain. The choice of these additions reflects a desire to support the actors' transitions between passages of time and between stories rather than an attempt to augment the emotional potency of the stories themselves.

### **Investigating decolonisation through multiple perspectives**

Concerned with understanding decolonisation as a gradual process (L.T. Smith 1999), this study also examines the historical and cultural contexts in which these two events occurred: the massacre itself and the Memorial erected to commemorate it in the year 2000. To assist the investigation of decolonisation occurring over time, this study engages with multiple perspectives of the shifting interactions between colonised and coloniser, from the personal in chapter one to the theoretical in chapter two, to the

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview with “Gerry” (not his real name), who participated in this study and is a member of the Myall Creek Memorial Committee. All references to “Gerry” are drawn from an interview conducted by the author in Gladsville, NSW, 13 October, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The Memorial that now stands overlooking the massacre site at Myall Creek is not the first memorial to the massacre. It is distinguished from an earlier memorial by a capital “M”.

acts of individuals in chapter three and finally the practices and policies governing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in chapter four. As one of the aims of this study is to locate a reconciliation narrative, it is hoped that teasing out these contextual strands will deliver insights into the decolonising process. Through an examination of the factors that both enhance and inhibit the journey arc of decolonisation, it is possible that this study will deliver a greater understanding of the complexity of the reconciliation initiative within an Australian context, as revealed by the Myall Creek stories submitted here.

Finally, this study explores the experience of performing the play and the events and transactions that took place within the performance space, a tin shed 600 kilometres from Sydney and 500 metres away from the massacre's probable site. It was found that the performance and the feedback session after it deepened the insights into those factors mentioned above, which either enhanced or hindered a sense of affinity. The unexpected and revelatory dynamic of performance and the nature of the audience response both during and after the reading of *Today We're Alive* support the proposition that performance as a methodology has a profound contribution to make to decolonising research. Therefore, the play text, as it was first read, is included here as chapter six.

Eighteen months after this performance, the play was given the opportunity to tour. The NSW Department of Education and Communities funded a two-week rehearsal process and a four-venue tour for north-west NSW schools and communities situated within reasonable proximity to the Memorial. The play was edited into a new draft to meet budget, cast and time requirements. This draft is included as appendix C. A subsequent draft of the play has now been published (Wilkinson 2014).

The Myall Creek massacre story is told in chapter three as well as in the play. Its significance is not in the number of deaths or the number of perpetrators but springs from the massacre's disclosure and investigation at the time. Its unique legacy is its paper trail. It remains the only massacre in Australia's history where most of the perpetrators were arrested and tried, and, in an attempt to break their code of silence, some were hanged. The erection of the Memorial to the massacre is seen as an act of reconciliation, a "goodwill landmark in colonial and heritage history" (Harris 2009, 7). The committee formed in 1998 to design and build the Memorial had – and continues to have – equal Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal membership; the initiative to recognise the massacre, to have something that remained, came from Sue Blacklock, a Kamilaroi Elder and a descendant of a massacre survivor.

It would seem to be an appropriate research site to have within it a story about reconciliation.

### **Research question**

Applying the rigour of verbatim theatre within a performance ethnography framework, how could a site-specific cross-cultural reconciliation story in the Australian context be told, and what voices would emerge to tell it?

Within this overarching concern are other implicit research questions, including:

- What kinds of reconciliation narratives are illuminated by this research?
- How do the non-Aboriginal participants in this study reconcile themselves in the present to the brutality of the colonial past?
- How do the Aboriginal participants deal with the horror of the past and its intergenerational repercussions in the present?
- How do both parties unite in a common cause?
- How are these stories of shared history and ongoing dispossession received by an audience in a performance space?
- Finally, how are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors/co-researchers impacted in terms of their performance practice by both the emotive content of the drama and the experience of performing it?

### **Research expectation**

My expectation was that by interviewing the Myall Creek Memorial Committee members, I would be able to focus on the Memorial and contain the 1838 massacre as a background or trigger event. As I wanted to investigate a possible reconciliation narrative or narratives, I assumed that the massacre could be seen as occupying a space of past trauma and that being involved with the Memorial would bring with it a certain catharsis.

I was conscious that I was seeking a neat three-act structure for the play with the Memorial as the centrepiece. The play that would evolve from field interviews would emphasise the events that preceded it, the proposal to erect it, the relationships it inspired, and its legacy in the lives of those who made it happen.

I had anticipated that the play would illuminate multiple experiences of coming together, that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal committee members would have diverse motivations and histories. I expected that the decisions around the design of the Memorial would have been difficult, and I hoped that this difficulty would create informative content around the nature of intercultural tension and the challenges of consultative practice.

I had also expected that the annual anniversary services, held on the weekend closest to June 10, the day the massacre took place in 1838, would be regarded as significant celebrations. I assumed that a key event in the play's story would be the 2005<sup>3</sup> desecration of the Memorial, when the words "children", "murdered" and "women" were chiselled off one of the plaques by vandals in an attempt to make the words unreadable (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2005). I intended to focus on this event and the Memorial Committee's responses to it; I believed it would provide a structural turning point in the research play.

Following the National Heritage listing of the Memorial in 2008, and further listing on the NSW Heritage Register in 2010, I expected that the play would end on a triumphalist note.

### **Purpose of this study**

As an arts-informed/narrative inquiry, the aim of this study – through its choice of research site and its data collection and data analysis processes – is to contribute to a counter-hegemonic way of understanding a shared history event and its ongoing resonances for modern-day Australia. Because of its cross-cultural context, this study also aims to contribute to the evolving domain of decolonising methodologies through performance.

As I am a non-Aboriginal Australian of free settler and convict ancestry, the content of this study is strongly influenced by my investigation of previously unknown history. As I am a writer and performer, the content and structure of the play reflect prior as well as concurrent learning. As I am a researcher, I have consciously struggled to address the legitimate concerns that caution dominant culture participation in this contentious research field. I believe this struggle has sharpened my appreciation of the gap between the fractious political and social histories of Australian race relations and the rich potential for cross-cultural engagement offered through arts practice. I remain grateful to those

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<sup>3</sup> There are different dates given for this event: Schlunke (2006) suggests it occurred in 2003; the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2005, line 8) reports that this same act of vandalism occurred in 2005.



researchers whose methodological and philosophical guidelines make participation possible (Chilisa 2012; Grande 2007; McCaslin and Breton 2008).

## **The research challenge**

Having raised the issue of addressing the research challenge, not clarifying its location would seem to diminish it. The representational crisis (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) inherent in qualitative research is further heightened in this decolonising sphere by issues of epistemological perspectives and the pervasive dominance of the Western tradition's insistence on its superiority (Ladson-Billings 2000; L.T. Smith 1999; Spivak 1988). In decolonising research, focus has shifted from confronting how the researcher's ideas are shaped to how ideas, beliefs and values have shaped the researcher. Data therefore needs to be continuously interrogated by a process of self-reflexivity (Chilisa 2012; Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Freire 1996).

Although this dilemma is examined in greater depth in chapter two, which investigates the relationship between early colonial Australian history and theories of cultural change in the decolonising space, it is important to recognise that movement across cultures is problematic (L.T. Smith 1999). In the Australian context, long-term disruptions to cultural cohesion resulting from colonisation invite even less intercultural investigation, either through Aboriginal resistance to stereotyping or non-Aboriginal disengagement. Aboriginal playwright, Jane Harrison (2012, 34), argues:

Ever since white contact, Aboriginal people and culture have been systematically ignored, condescended to and negatively stereotyped. It follows therefore that non-Aboriginal people should approach Aboriginal topics with caution. It is proper that they manifest symptoms of anxiety and doubt around their ability and authority to speak for Aboriginal subjects.

Germaine Greer (2003) attempted to spark debate about the need for white Australians to embrace Aboriginality in order to locate true nationhood in her essay "Whitefella Jump Up". According to Harrison (2012), the debate was not sustained. Greer (2003, cited in Harrison 2012, 53) explains: "The whole Aboriginal question ends up consigned to the too-hard basket, and there we are content to let it stay". Underpinning both these examples of a cultural divide, I suggest, are indications of an absence of relationship across cultures. Awareness of this absence has a particular

relevance to the stories I tell later in this chapter in regard to generating play creation first as an artist then as a researcher.

Therefore, to continue this study with a belief in its potential for positive outcomes, I framed my research around sound advice:

A researcher must have a solid understanding of themselves, their own culture, beliefs, values and epistemologies. Only then can a proper understanding of another culture be attempted. (Parr 2002, cited in Chilisa 2012, 178)

This recommendation offers a research site to those, like myself, who come from dominant culture paradigms; where with attention and rigorous reflexivity new understandings may evolve through re-examination of inherited assumptions. My research focus is therefore not only the play my co-researchers and I created through performance but also the circumstances that impacted its development, the stories from the field that informed its content, and the blurred, incomplete history I hitherto unknowingly carried.

## **The research plan**

With an emphasis on performance ethnography as the primary methodology, this study interweaves Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal narratives about the Myall Creek massacre and the Memorial erected to commemorate it. The play that results from this process remains a piece of verbatim theatre, where the original voices from the field, although presented as edited transcript and distilled into composite characters, remain intact.

This research outcome is informed by a parallel process of self-reflexivity, which impacts the choice of data and influences the play's structure. This process is supported by reflections on the relationship between the play's content and the presence of or resistance to the five persistent narratives that I identify as emerging from the research. These narratives are investigated in chapters two and four. Finally, this study incorporates a third methodological tier of analysis through an exploration of my own play-building praxis through self-study.

The play text in chapter six includes some documentary material but otherwise adheres to verbatim theatre techniques as articulated by Paget (1987), where diverse narratives from the field are interwoven to present a complex picture of shared history, delivering in the Australian context insights into history's obfuscation and the consequences of recovering its 'lost' stories.

The original intention in the research plan was to investigate key moments of conflict in the verbatim draft through a process of negotiation, collaboration, story-telling and improvisation with my actor/co-researchers. This approach, I believed, would address some of the key epistemological and methodological concerns of leading researchers in the decolonising research field (Chilisa 2012; L.T. Smith 1999; Spivak 2003). The proposed outcome therefore would have been a play within a play; the data collection and analysis process would integrate the fieldwork experience and its exploration would occur through the laboratory-like intensity of a rehearsal room, a space that privileges memory, stories and the imagination; a space with which all of us involved in this study were familiar.

Regrettably ethical, financial and time constraints prevented this research endeavour from developing beyond its verbatim foundation. Though the actor/co-researchers' reflections give some insight into the experience of performing the play, investigating that experience through a further play-making process was not possible.

Had more resources been available, the play included in chapter six would not have been presented as verbatim theatre. Referencing Pink's (2009) notion of sensory ethnography, at the outset the vision had been to harness the collective memories and imaginations of my co-researchers, my six actors and myself and build a performed work on a verbatim base.

Nevertheless, to abandon the research project because it could not meet the initial vision was never an option. The event that inspired it, as illuminated in the prologue, was too powerful.

### ***(a) Locating the content***

I sought and gained permission from the Myall Creek Memorial Committee to begin the fieldwork in 2011. A film company<sup>4</sup> was seeking permission to film on the Memorial site so I was invited to attend that same meeting in February. Held at the memorial hall, a corrugated iron shed 500 metres away from the massacre site and 600 kilometres away from Sydney, not all committee members were present but those who were expressed enthusiasm for both projects. The memorial hall was built in 1923 to remember the fallen from the First World War and is not connected to the Myall Creek Memorial, despite its proximity to the massacre site. The hall however figures prominently in annual Myall

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<sup>4</sup> December Films made a series of three drama-documentaries for television on three trials of significance, the Myall Creek trial of 1838 being one of them. The series *Australia On Trial* screened on ABC in April 2012.

Creek services as it is a meeting place for those who wish to participate in the pilgrim walk to the Memorial. The memorial hall is also where the first draft of *Today We're Alive* was performed in November, 2011. Once I had permission, I contacted all committee members by mail, informing them of my project. I then met all those members present personally at the 2011 Memorial Service in June and requested an interview. The response continued to be positive.

The play's content is derived from interviews with twenty participants, nine of whom are Aboriginal. The interviews were approximately an hour long and were semi-structured; my questions acted as prompts, frequently seeking clarification in the participants' narratives, rather than demanding answers to pre-determined areas of inquiry. I always began interviews with a question about the Memorial and the responses deviated from there. I transcribed all the interviews in their entirety, with all pauses, repetitions and emotional responses to narrated content included in the transcript and I included this emotional punctuation in the performance draft. Most of the actors consistently observed this notation.

The interviews continued over a period of four months, beginning immediately after the 2011 memorial service and concluding a month before the scheduled date of the first performed reading. Although there was no time to develop characters, I had always wanted the first reading to be performed by six actors, three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal, and within those two groups to have two women and one man. This did not reflect the gender ratio in the field but the genders of the actors I knew and with whom I felt comfortable. As there would be little time to work on the script together before the performed reading, I knew, if I were to progress the draft, I would need to have feedback from actors whose aesthetic I understood and with whom I had a relationship that was candid and constructive.

### ***(b) Definitions of significant terms used***

As empire and capitalism are two ongoing drivers of current globalisation (Grande 2007; McLaren 1997), just as they were for colonialism, decolonisation is used in this dissertation as opposed to post-colonialism. As L.T. Smith (1999, 24) points out, "Post-colonial discussions have ... stirred some indigenous resistance ... to the idea that colonialism is over, finished business."

Because some participants in my fieldwork disliked the word "Indigenous" when applied to Australian Aboriginal people, I have used "Aboriginal" where possible. In recognition of Torres Strait Islanders as

also included in the word “Indigenous” but not in the word “Aboriginal”, I have used the word “peoples”, as in “Aboriginal peoples”, out of respect for others’ preferences and as a reminder to myself to be conscious of the potency of language.

Thirdly, as stated in a footnote earlier, I have used a capital “M” for the existing Myall Creek Memorial to distinguish it from other memorials, including the one that preceded it in 1988. That memorial’s story is told in chapter three.

Finally, I have used a range of metaphors to suggest exploration of unfamiliar territory. Words like “journey”, “discovery” and “frontier” reflect terminology used by scholars in the decolonising field (Grande 2007); however, such words also reflect prior learning whereas writing drama for theatre and television entails creating stories located in the realms of the imagination. In Vogler’s (1992) text, *The Writer’s Journey*, a tribute to Joseph Campbell’s<sup>5</sup> study of mythology, the mythic story begins with the introduction of the hero in what Vogler (1992, 19) terms “the Ordinary World”.

Following the example of placing a story in a context, a context from which the story then departs, this study also begins with a depiction of the ordinary world, not only mine but other non-Aboriginal participants in this research project. The narrative included in the following section also, I suggest, delivers an insight into the ordinary world of Aboriginal people as well.

### **The ordinary world**

At the end of 2007, when I returned from New Zealand, I had never engaged with anyone who identified as Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Nor did I consider this unusual. Occasionally, when an artefact was unearthed on a building site or an early sunset created an ominous gloom in the suburban bush of my childhood, there was, as researcher Peter Read (2000, 1) so sensitively suggests “the uninvited voice ever threatening to remind us that the land we loved was previously lost to others. We kept it at a distance.” This was not difficult to do.

Although government policies and their impact on Aboriginal peoples are discussed at length in chapter four, a brief reference is made to them

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) explored the universal relationship between myth, religion, symbolism and the creation of knowledge. Campbell’s analysis of the Hero’s Journey as a monomyth common to all cultures and explored in his seminal work *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1993) sought to generate a sense of human understanding across time and across cultures.

here. Policy is a backdrop to the following; even though the focus below is on personal experience, policy determined the ordinary world. These stories, mine and “Tom’s”,<sup>6</sup> inform the nature and intent of Aboriginal policy and its effectiveness over time in segregating not just people from each other but people from the truth of the past.

A policy of assimilation, begun in 1937, was still in place as Tom and I were growing up, he in the country and me in the suburbs. The aim of assimilation was to make the “Aboriginal problem” (Pearson 2010, 1) gradually disappear, so that mixed-blood Aboriginal peoples would lose their identity in the wider community. Laws segregated Aboriginal peoples into separate living areas, and under assimilation the forcible removal of their children in order for them to be placed in foster homes or non-Indigenous institutions increased (Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Their Communities 2013). Denial of the dispossession, Indigenous culture and the massacres created a narrative of avoidance, which for the colonists, Read (2000, 180) maintains, “was part of a genuine attempt to foster emotional possession of the land.” For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, it meant that only by a loss of identity, by surrendering “what it was that made them a distinctive people” (Manne 2009, 5), could they hope to enjoy the same rights and privileges as other Australians. It was assumed they would probably do this “inevitably and probably willingly” (ALRC 1986, 3).

Most of the non-Aboriginal research participants on the Memorial Committee emerged from a similar background to my own. The presence of Aboriginal people was peripheral to their lives, if present at all. They had only become aware of their lack of connection once they began their careers as teachers, as clergy, as volunteer health and education workers; in other words, once they had begun working in vocations that generated contact with “the Marginalised Other”.

Of these stories Tom’s is distinctive and worth sharing here because it embodies not just a piecemeal view of history but an appreciation of Aboriginal humour and resilience as well. Tom had been a high school teacher and is an active non-Aboriginal member of the Myall Creek Memorial Committee. In 1966, when Tom was around nineteen or twenty years old, Australian troops were fighting in Vietnam. Tom was therefore

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<sup>6</sup> “Tom” is a member of the Myall Creek Memorial Committee, whose name has been changed to protect his privacy. All references to him are from an interview conducted by the author at Warialda, NSW, June 9, 2011.

eligible for conscription. He actively supported the Country Party,<sup>7</sup> which was pro-Vietnam and pro-conscription:

I'd always had an interest in the past generally and including the Aboriginal past. There were no Aborigines in the area where I grew up. None at all at Dungog. There were none at the school. I don't think we ever saw an Aborigine. There were none at Hurlstone Agricultural High School, where I went for the last years of my secondary education; ah, the only references that were made really in the primary school social studies book were things about how Aborigines were hunters and gatherers and their houses were gunyahs and whatever and I think there was probably a mention of the Myall Creek massacre in those early studies but of a very general nature.

As a young teacher, I was sent to Moruya and ... I well remember an occasion when it was the 1966 Vietnam election ... and because I'd come from a struggling farm at that time, I was more interested in supporting the Country Party. And, ah, I was handing out how-to-vote for the Country Party at the election and I must have known something because I went to the lunch with the Labor blokes and ... one of the Labor fellas said, and I was a young man, I was nineteen, early twenties... and there was this man, and this had never occurred to me, he was a man double my age in his early forties or fifties, and I heard him say to one of the other people who were in the group ... we were having a drink over lunch ... he said: "That young man is old enough to go to Vietnam, if he believes we should be there." You know. And it rocked me. I hadn't thought about this other issue at all, Vietnam.

Anyway pertaining to our story of interest in Aboriginal things, there was a bloke in our group, Percy Davis, who was introduced to me as the last Aboriginal full-blood on the south coast. He was a smallish man, who'd been a jockey for many years and was shiny black with pink hands ... quite out of my experience altogether. And I ... and he said: "Whatcha doin', boy?" And I said: "I'm up there handing out how-to-vote for the Country Party". And he looked at me and said: "Vote Labor, boy, and keep Australia white".

The sense of irony in Percy's comment to young Tom, suggesting he vote 'to keep Australia white', refers to the White Australia Policy.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> The Country Party was a conservative, centre-right party supporting rural interests and is in coalition with the Liberal Party; it became known as the National Party in 1975. At this period, in the 1960s, the Country Party enjoyed a time of considerable influence. This declined in the 1970s as the rural population declined (National Party 2014).

<sup>8</sup> The White Australia Policy was a means of restricting immigration from particularly Asian countries and favoured migrants from Britain. It became law in

nature of a burgeoning social conscience at the time (Manne 2009) was stronger in the cities than in rural areas, where this conversation between Tom and Percy took place. The Davis family still live in this area today (Donaldson 2006, 15–34).

This story still caused amusement for Tom, when so many of his other stories didn't, and it serves as a fine introduction here to the potential richness of interaction that accompanies the challenge of confronting the many legacies of dispossession and histories half known from the personal to the national level. This is a story, too, about the unmaking of strangers; it disembeds the work of colonisation (Bauman, 1997). An interaction such as the one between Percy and Tom illuminates the performative potential of expressing racial difference, validating Lo's (2006) assertion that the body is an effective site of analysis in postcolonial study, an assertion this study develops in chapters five and seven.

It is also interesting to note that this exchange between Tom as a young man and Percy Davis occurred one year before the 1967 referendum,<sup>9</sup> which is explored later in this study. The success of this referendum officially allowed the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in the national census. Inclusion not only ensured their population statistics would become known but data on their health and standard of living were gathered for the first time. The referendum also implicitly acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples were not going to become “a melancholy footnote in Australian history”<sup>10</sup> (Stanner [1968] 1990, 176) or that their extinction was inevitable. Simultaneously, during the 1960s, the Aborigines' presumed date of occupation of Australia “was pushed back from 10,000 to 40,000 and 50,000 years” (Gammage 2011, xxii). From virtual invisibility, Aboriginal culture was now recognised as the oldest living culture in the world. Yet, Percy was introduced to Tom as the last full-blood on the south coast (of NSW).

But before ever meeting Tom, ever hearing this and many other stories, ever considering a research project that would begin at a massacre site, I

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1901. Race was finally removed as a factor in Australian immigration policies in 1973 (European Parliament 2015, 1–4).

<sup>9</sup> The 1967 referendum allowed the Commonwealth Government to make laws for Aboriginal people, ending State-only legislation, and also allowed the inclusion of Aboriginal people on the census, thereby finally recognising their presence (NAA 2011, 1).

<sup>10</sup> McKenna attributes this frequently-used expression to J. A. La Nauze, who observed that “Aboriginal Australians had appeared in Australian history as a ‘melancholy anthropological footnote’”(La Nauze 1959, cited in McKenna 1997, 3).



decided to explore cross-culturalism through professional practice. In Vogler's (1992) terms, I prepared to leave the ordinary world.

### **First steps**

Immediately after returning home from New Zealand in 2007, I wrote a script for a short film. Entitled *Stop, Revive, Survive*, a popular road safety slogan, it was about a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, mostly strangers to each other, whose lives intersect at a roadhouse one night in a storm.

I heard about a new theatre company based in Redfern, NSW. I took the script to them in 2008. I include this story here because it marks for me the beginning of a genuine relationship. Therefore, I adopt an ethnographic voice once more as I aim to share the following experience analytically as a researcher and emotionally as an arts practitioner (O'Toole 2006). The story demonstrates a willingness for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists to come together using performance as a mechanism to cross the cultural divide. Three years after the meeting and the workshop we shared, described below, Fred, Lily and Auntie Rhonda came with me to read the first draft of *Today We're Alive* in the memorial hall near the massacre site.

#### **(a) *Parallel learning***

When I approached Moogahlin Performing Arts in 2008 with *Stop, Revive, Survive*, I hoped for a reading. Key Moogahlin personnel – artistic director Frederick Copperwaite, Lily Shearer and Rhonda Dixon Grovenor – agreed to support the short film and advised me to seek funding for a one-day script development workshop through the City of Sydney's Quick Response Grants Program. What I didn't understand then was Moogahlin's heritage and its vision. As Behrendt (2007) argues, interconnectedness is a strong traditional belief in Aboriginal culture; and Moogahlin sees itself as standing on the shoulders of theatrical greats, those artists who began the Black Theatre in Redfern in the 1970s.

#### **(b) *Based in Redfern***

Redfern is the inner-Sydney centre of the national Aboriginal diaspora and a highly politicised area historically. For over 200 years it has struggled to cope with the legacy of colonial dispossession. Considered a ghetto for years, it is now being gentrified at a rapid rate (Gorman 2014, para.1).

Redfern is the birthplace of the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service and, as mentioned above, Australia's first Black Theatre. For its time it was a vocal and significant political forum for the exploration and celebration of contemporary Indigenous identity. The National Black Theatre opened in 1972 and closed after the withdrawal of government funding in 1977.

A transcript from a recent television program about the theatre (ABC 2012, 7) summarises its impact, using the voices of those still here to tell the story:

*Gerry Bostock:* Before Black Theatre, there were kids who tried to venture out from Redfern and go to the State library. They'd walk into the State library and they'd see all these white faces. And they would just turn around and go back to Redfern. So Black Theatre gave them the opportunity to mix with the rest of Australia.

*Bronwyn Penrith:* What really strikes me from those days, though, is the rawness and the passion of the people who were involved. I think that's something that still drives us as Aboriginal people today. I look forward to the day when Aboriginal history's embraced ... embraced by the wider community because in the end it is one history.

*Lillian Crombie:* Jack, Bryan, Uncle Bob and Carol— they had instilled something in me to stand up for yourself, to have a voice. And that's where I found my voice.

*Louise Aileen Corpus:* Thank God we had the Redfern blacks because, you know, they were defiant. They had guts. They had dreams.

*Rachel Maza:* There is a long way to go in this country. We have only ... we've only scratched the surface of the stories that need to be told ... What our challenge as artists is, is to stay strong in our vision, in our courage to tell those hard stories, to have the courage to stick to those visions and inspire everyone else to come to the party.

*Gerry Bostock:* The most important legacy of Black Theatre is confidence in being able to be Aboriginal.

*Louise Aileen Corpus:* Thanks, Redfern!

Moogahlin's founding members see the performing arts company as a continuation of the National Black Theatre, honouring the legacy and vision of those earlier theatre-makers, and are strongly committed to generating Indigenous performance work for Indigenous performers. The

interest in *Stop, Revive, Survive* was seen as a short-term exercise by all of us; developing work with a non-Aboriginal writer was not in their brief and I was grateful they had offered a day in what experience had taught me was the long haul of film script development.

### *(c) Fate and funding intervene*

Our funding application was successful and we held our September 2008 workshop at the Redfern Community Centre, which gave us support-in-kind. We began with a reading of the draft so, as Lily said: “The blackfellas in the script would sound like real blackfellas and not like some characters made up by a whitefella”. Facilitated by Fred, as director, the reading developed into a series of improvisations where the performers investigated the script in their own words.

It was one of these improvisations that, over time, took the script in an unexpected direction. As scripted in that film draft, into this roadhouse on that stormy night came three elderly women, two Aboriginal, one non-Aboriginal. They were taking a road trip because all of them were sooner rather than later facing death from unspecified causes. They were known in the script as The Aunties; they were “Toots”, “Dolly” and “Col”. Lily played Toots, Aunty Rhonda played Dolly and I was Col.

Late in the afternoon, Fred wanted to know why these three women were together, a point not clarified in the script. What were two Aboriginal women doing with a non-Aboriginal? It struck Fred as odd. I explained that they were marginalised women, impoverished, and had banded together because of shared occupancy in low socio-economic group housing. This explanation wasn't enough for Fred; the mix of races in an urban setting was too foreign. It had to be explored otherwise, for Fred, the relationship was too provocative, too dramatically inconvenient and not based in the real world. What remained unspoken between us was our shared history of distance from each other, the legacy of colonisation, dispossession, disadvantage and discrimination. History was an unseen but omnipresent character, the elephant in the room. What we were charged with investigating through improvisation was that same lack of relationship alluded to earlier in this chapter by both Germaine Greer and Jane Harrison.

We set up an improvisation where the two Aboriginal women, Toots and Dolly, were in a craft group in an aged-care facility. They wanted to go back to Dolly's country but had no means of transport. Col, the prickly non-Aboriginal woman, had a van. The object of the improvisation was to persuade Col to take them all on a trip to Dolly's country.

The improvisation succeeded, enriched not just with dialogue but also with potent and persuasive silences that generated affection and, most importantly, humour. Connecting emotionally and imaginatively, we, Lily as Toots, Aunt Rhonda as Dolly, and me as Col, found a bond, a creative freedom and a sense of shared purpose that surprised us all. It was this one scene that gave rise to a play over a five-year development period; *Stop Revive Survive* became *The Aunties' Epic* and then a mainstage production in 2013. Called *This Fella, My Memory*, this play and its development process are discussed further in chapter eight. However, in that room in 2008, we only knew we had found a truth, a foundation for relationship; we didn't know whether there was a future.

Problems with the script became obvious over the course of the day as the working environment became increasingly collaborative and participatory. We achieved a common understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the draft and agreed to continue developing the work should more funding become available.

The experience invited a greater investment of time, endeavour and commitment but it did not invite research. Yet the situation did. The scenarios we had been working with were too delicate, too nuanced for the detached analysis of inquiry. Nevertheless, as we shifted between scenes of harmony and scenes of discord, there was a sense that we were creating a new story, not something we had seen before. It was clear that whatever evolved from our shared story-telling would need time and space, safety and support to surface. I knew I could not be an actor, a writer and a researcher and expect to be able to commit myself fully to all roles; as a writer I might be too anxious to wait for an ending to emerge and so force one into existence; as a researcher I might miss creative or imaginative opportunities in favour of cognitive clarification. Besides, whatever happened with *Stop, Revive, Survive* would depend on further funding and that, in September 2008, was a remote possibility.

However my interest in investigating the cross-cultural space as a researcher had now fully emerged; I was gaining new understanding of Aboriginal perspectives and knew I wanted to document this learning, or perhaps "un-learning", curve. On that one workshop day, I had experienced an unfamiliar sense of simultaneous inclusion and responsibility and, because I was in this unexpected place emotionally, I had become more responsive to what was being offered creatively, more willing to remain open to possibilities.

A research project, on the other hand, I decided, had to be a story that already had an ending; I had to find an existing cross-cultural story and map the narratives within it. To progress my understanding of the cross-

cultural space, therefore, I had to investigate a site where there had been some kind of reconciliation event in the factual – as opposed to a fictional – world.

It was at this time I remembered hearing about Myall Creek. There had been a massacre there, I had read a play (Summons, 1994) about it years before, and now there was a Memorial to commemorate it. I had seen television coverage of the commemorative service in 2000. The committee that designed the Memorial, I remembered, was comprised of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members. This had to be a reconciliation story, and it had a beginning, middle and end: it had a Memorial.

### **The Memorial at Myall Creek**

Physically the Memorial sits on Crown land amid grassland in a remote but serene rural setting. It consists of a series of seven small stones set along a winding path, each bearing a plaque, and together the plaques tell the story of the events leading to the massacre, the massacre itself and its retribution. The story is told through art and language, both in English and in Kamilaroi; the twenty-eight massacre victims were Weraerai<sup>11</sup> people and a clan group of the Kamilaroi nation. The path leads to a large granite boulder, which also bears a plaque. This final plaque recognises a shared history and that the Memorial represents an act of reconciliation. The Memorial story is developed more fully in chapter six, in the play script *Today We're Alive*.

However, as Harris (2009) points out, memorials tell more than one story.

### **Not set in stone: Deconstructing memorials and their meanings**

All memorials are grounded, Harris (2009) maintains, in a minimum of two narratives: the narrative of the original event and the narrative of the time in which they were memorialised. In the Myall Creek case, there are at least four: the narrative of the event; the narrative of the coloniser; the narrative of the colonised; and the narrative of denial elsewhere in the country. Because the Memorial was erected 162 years after the event, the plaques' narratives reflect an evolving understanding of the truth of the past.

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<sup>11</sup> Spelt as Wirrayaraay on the Memorial, "Weraerai" is the spelling Milliss (1994) uses and to my mind is closer to the received pronunciation.

The word “massacre” appears twice on the seventh boulder’s commemorative plaque. Elsewhere in Australia, colonial conflicts between settlers and Aborigines are referred to as “battles”, if they are mentioned at all. As the word “massacre” is still so contentious elsewhere (Harris 2009), because of conflicting accounts between colonisers and those colonised, the Memorial at Myall Creek was always intended to represent a shared history for all Australians (Batten 2009) for it is the one and only site in the country where historical documentation and oral history concur.

As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) argue, memorials to historic conflicts between colonisers and colonised – so often concerned with societal notions of battles, victory and heroism – now represent sites of contested heritage. For the coloniser, the Memorial’s existence represents an acknowledgement of past wrongs, implying the present is a better place. For the colonised – because this Memorial is unique – its existence recognises that the brutality of the past remains profoundly present. This interpretive contradiction, according to Harris (2009), is inherent in all memorials as the so-called truths memorials tell are continually subject to reinterpretation. This might be over linear time by the victors or within the never-ending time of the vanquished, who re-experience the traumatising event in a way that is both parallel to but unrelated to linear time (Edkins 2003).

Nevertheless, the Myall Creek Memorial’s unique message of culpability and shame can be “swiftly subsumed” (Harris 2009, 7) by the introduction of yet another narrative: the super narrative of national progress. Heritage Minister Peter Garrett’s (2008) speech marking the 170th anniversary of the massacre concludes:

The fact that the descendants of some of the people massacred on that horrific day in 1838 and the descendants of those charged with the crime come together in their own peaceful and personal reconciliation gives me great hope for our country and makes me very proud to be an Australian.

Interpreting the Memorial’s meaning as a positive contribution to a comfortable historical narrative of cultural maturation, Harris (2009) believes, nullifies the continuing effects of violent colonial relationships and contributes to a disregard for Aboriginal versions of the past. The desire, however, to acknowledge the past – to contemplate the terror experienced by twenty-eight Indigenous men, women and children as, roped together and defenceless, they were hacked to death by twelve white men one June afternoon in 1838 – appears nevertheless to motivate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous travel to the Memorial site. Testaments by visitors to the Memorial, surveyed by Batten (2009, 94), suggest that the