

Performing Australia's black and white history: acts of danger in four Australian plays of the early 21st century.

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Alison Lyssa's former surname through marriage was Hughes. Her birth surname was Darby.

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Summary

In an Australia shaped by neo-conservative government and by searing contention, national and global, over what the past is, how it should be allowed to affect the present and who are authentic bearers of witness, this thesis compares testimony to Australia's black/white relations in two plays by white writers, Andrew Bovell's *Holy Day* (2001) and Katherine Thomson's *Wonderlands* (2003), and two by black writers, Tammy Anderson's *I Don't Wanna Play House* (2001) and Richard J. Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead* (2002). Drawing on post-colonial theories of theatre's language of resistance,¹ and Felman and Laub's psycho-analytic theory that bearing witness to trauma is a "performative act,"² I argue that Indigenous playwrights Anderson and Frankland each refuse empire's construction of itself as natural/ism and create multi-layered witness to trauma and its transcendence. The non-Indigenous writers, despite billed intentions to repudiate Aboriginal suffering, trap Indigenous witness within a white-directed utopia (Thomson) or dystopia (Bovell). In *Holy Day*, colonial raced and gendered stereotypes control the narrative, perpetuating myths that the displaced Aborigine is 'lost' and traditional culture is dream or nightmare. Highly visible Aboriginal defiance turns on itself, co-opted into a Bovellian myth of Aboriginality as an agent of racism. *Holy Day's* one break in the frame offers ineffective witness to silenced Indigenous pain. In *Wonderlands*, despite robust and well-researched articulation of Indigenous lands rights, the Aboriginal characters serve the imaginary "good Australia" identified by Jennifer Rutherford.³ *Wonderlands* wounds white aggression and sends it offstage lest it have to be confronted, while the saintly Indigenous characters salve white pain and wait for the

¹ See Michele Grossman, *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2003), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), Helen Gilbert, *Sightlines: Race, Gender, and Nation in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), Marc Maufort, *Transgressive Itineraries: Postcolonial Hybridizations of Dramatic Realism*, *Dramaturgies*, No. 9 (Brussels, Belg.: P.I.E.- Lang, 2003).

² Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 53.

³ See Jennifer Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2000).

white gift of their white-recorded history. Indigenous playwrights, Anderson and Frankland, subvert the silence that the coloniser mourns in passing.

Candidate's statement

The written material in this thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

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All sources have been acknowledged.

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Introduction

SEREBRYAKOV. Pain – is – invasion.

Howard Barker, *Uncle Vanya*.¹

Theatre is a tiny realm of the imagination that nonetheless maintains the power to influence our thoughts, our feelings and our actions in the greater realm of human society.

Rhoda Roberts.²

Selection of plays for analysis

Ubersfeld calls theatre “a dangerous art”. Its dangers and its privileges make it vulnerable to censorship, self-censorship, and “theatrical seduction (that) may transform it into nothing more than a means of entertainment for the pleasure of the dominant class.”³

This study investigates the “dangers” that four Australian plays, which premiered between 2001 and 2003, may represent to conservative views of Australia’s history as a result of their onstage depiction of perceived crises in the lives of Indigenous Australians. Two of the plays are by Indigenous writers. *I Don’t Wanna Play House* is Tammy Anderson’s polyvocal, storytelling, “country and western”-singing monodrama about her childhood, in which the domestic violence, sexual abuse, and racist denigration and dispossession that impacted on her and her family are exposed, deconstructed and transcended.⁴ Richard J. Frankland’s *Conversations with the Dead* combines multiple performance modes, such as intimate address to the

¹ Howard Barker, *Uncle Vanya, Collected Plays*, vol. 2 (London: J. Calder; Riverrun Press, 1990) 299.

² Rhoda Roberts, “A Passion for Ideas: Black Stage,” *Third Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture*, Company B Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 23 Nov. 1997, Currency, <<http://www.currency.com.au/>> accessed 15 Dec. 2003. Roberts was Artistic Director of the inaugural Festival of the Dreaming, 1997.

³ Anne Ubersfeld, Paul Perron, Frank Collins and Patrick Debbèche, *Reading Theatre*, Toronto Studies in Semiotics (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 4.

⁴ Tammy Anderson, *I Don’t Wanna Play House, Blak Inside: 6 Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, Current Theatre Series (Sydney: Currency in assn. with Playbox Theatre, 2002) 37-69. First produced by Playbox Theatre, dir. John Bolton, musician Don Hopkins, at The C.U.B. Malthouse, Melbourne, 25 Apr. 2001. The production has toured in Australia and internationally, including to Stables Theatre, Sydney, 17 July 2001; Space Cabaret, Adelaide, 28 May 2002; regional Victoria; Victoria University; Tasmania; NAIDOC Week, Royal Women’s Hospital, Carlton, Vic, courtesy of a grant by The Besen Family Foundation, 8 and 9 July 2005; ‘Hong Kong 2002’ festival; Minneapolis and Boston, 2004.

audience, drama, a singing chorus, ritual transformation and a protagonist who converses with those who died in custody, to tear open to view the destructive effect Australia's criminal justice system is having on Indigenous people – the incarcerated, their families and the community.⁵

The other two plays are by non-Indigenous writers. Within a narrative that borrows from thriller-suspense drama and (apart from one destabilising break in the frame) adopts a linear and realist form, Andrew Bovell's *Holy Day* depicts Australia's frontier past as a place of horrors, where white characters commit atrocities and depredations against Indigenous people and themselves, while fabricating historic records and creating myths to conceal what they are doing.⁶ Using two parallel time frames, a minimalist set evoking a Queensland pastoral district, and occasional monologues that alter the tempo of the drama and invite reflection, Katherine Thomson's *Wonderlands* presents a multi-generational struggle for a shared white and black belonging to the land. The drama exposes to scrutiny and repudiation an Australian history of racism, fear, denial and misinformation that drives modern white pastoralists' opposition to Indigenous human rights and land rights. A contemporary white character's significant support for Indigenous rights is enacted as a culmination of a counter-narrative in Australia's past where racism is abhorred. Precedents are revealed in acts of white gratitude to Indigenous people for help in establishing the pastoral industry, and in white voices of opposition to fellow whites who slaughtered

⁵ Richard J. Frankland, *Conversations with the Dead, Blak Inside*. 215-87. First co-produced by Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative, Playbox and La Mama, dir. Richard J. Frankland, at Carlton Courthouse, Melbourne, 13 Feb. 2002. Transferred to The Beckett Theatre, The C.U.B. Malthouse, Melbourne, 26 Feb. 2002. New production by Company B, Belvoir, dir. Wesley Enoch, at Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 30 July 2003.

⁶ Andrew Bovell, *Holy Day*, Current Theatre Series (Sydney: Currency in assn. with Playbox Theatre, 2001). First produced by State Theatre Company of South Australia, dir. Rosalba Clemente, at The Playhouse, Adelaide, 21 Aug. 2001. Toured to Playbox, The Merlyn Theatre, The C.U.B. Malthouse, Melbourne, 15 Sep. 2001. New production by Sydney Theatre Company, dir. Ariette Taylor, Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney, 26 Sept. 2003.

Aboriginal people on the frontier, and, a generation later, forced the removal of remaining Aboriginal people from pastoral properties flourishing on their land.⁷

The four selected plays are among a surging number, which since the 1970s, with a rare few prior to that time, have been bringing to the stage aspects of crises that have affected Australian Indigenous people from 1788 when Europeans invaded their land, claiming it for their own.⁸ The plays were chosen for their dramatic power and

⁷ Katherine Thomson, *Wonderlands* (Sydney: Currency, 2004). First produced by HotHouse Theatre, dir. Marion Potts, at The Butter Factory Theatre, Albury/Wodonga, 13 June 2003. Toured to Griffin Theatre Company, at Stables Theatre, Sydney, 16 July 2003.

⁸ Works by Indigenous playwrights include: Wesley Enoch after Euripides, *Black Medea* (2000 and 2005); Gulpilil (a.k.a. Gulpilil, David) and Reg Cribb, *Gulpilil* (2004); Louis Nowra and David Page from original concept by David Page, *Page 8* (2004); Noel Tovey, *Little Black Bastard* (2003); Andrea James, *Yanagai! Yanagai!* (2003); John Harding, *Enuff* (2002); Tracey Rigney, *Belonging* (2002); Maryanne Sam, *Casting Doubts* (2002); and Jadah Milroy, *Crow Fire* (2002); Leah Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking* (2002); Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell, *Box the Pony* (1999); Wesley Enoch, *The Sunshine Club* (1999); Jane Harrison, *Stolen* (1998); Deborah Cheetham, *White Baptist ABBA Fan* (1997); David Milroy and Geoffrey Narkle, *King Hit* (1997); Jimmy Chi, *Corrugation Road* (1996); Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, *The Seven Stages of Grieving* (1995); Jim Everett, *Changing Time* (1995); Ningali Lawford, *Ningali* (1994); Archie Weller, *Ngoonies* (1994); Eddie Bennell, *My Spiritual Dreaming*, Festival of Perth (1993); Sally Morgan, *Sistergirl* (1992); Richard Walley, *Balaan, Balaan Gwdha* (1992), and *Munjong* (1990); David Milroy, *Wild Cat Falling* (1992); Roger Bennett, *Funerals and Circuses* (1992) and *Up the Ladder* (1990); John Harding, *Up the Road* (1991); Jack Davis, *In Our Town* (1990); *Honey Spot* (1988); *Barungin [Smell the Wind]* (1988); *No Sugar* (1985); *Kullark* (1979); *The Dreamers* (1982); Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae* (1989); Bob Maza, *The Keepers* (1988); Eva Johnson, *Murras* (1988); *Tjinderella* (1984); Richard Walley, *Coordah [Brother]* (1987); Gerry Bostock, *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976); Robert Merritt, *The Cake Man* (1975), Kevin Gilbert, *The Cherry Pickers* (1971).

Non-Indigenous writers who have represented Aboriginal issues or protagonists in their plays include: Hannie Rayson, *Inheritance* (2003); John Romeril, *Miss Tanaka*, adapted from a story by Xavier Herbert (2001); Ned Manning, *Luck of the Draw* (1999), and *Close to the Bone* (1994); Rodney Hall, *A Return to the Brink* (1999); Julie Janson, *Black Mary* (1996); and *Gunjies* (1993); Nick Parsons, *Dead Heart* (1993); Beatrix Christian, *Inside Dry Water* (1993); Peta Murray, *One Woman's Song* (1993); David Buchanan, *Looking Off The Southern Edge* (1992); Suzanne Spunner, *The Ingkata's Wife* (1990); Louis Nowra, *Crow* (1994); *Radiance* (1993); *Byzantine Flowers* (1989), and *Capricornia*, Adapted from a novel by Xavier Herbert (1988); Ray Mooney, with Tribal Adviser, Gnarnayarrahe Waitairie, *Black Rabbit* (1988); Phil Motherwell, *Steal Away Home* (1988); Gordon Francis, *God's Best Country* (1987); Tony Strachan, *Between the Rock and A Hard Place* (1988), and *State of Shock* (1986); Thomas Keneally, *Bullie's House* (1980); Dorothy Hewett, *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979); Jill

because together they offer a range of dramaturgical strategies for bearing witness to crises affecting Indigenous people, whether transformed to the stage from trauma personally experienced by the writer, as in the case of the plays by Anderson and Frankland, or from mainly researched and intuited material, as in the works by Bovell and Thomson. Both genders are equally represented in this study. Each play has been performed in more than one city or town and has had significant critical attention. Each has been published, an honour not granted the majority of new Australian plays.⁹

Conversations with the Dead and *I Don't Wanna Play House* were chosen for study from a wide field of recent plays by Indigenous writers, amongst them Andrea James, *Yanagai! Yanagai!* (2003), which integrates traditional song in its structure, and interweaves landscape, mythic magic realism, Aboriginal religion and storytelling with the drama of "actual court transcripts" from the recent failed struggle of the Yorta Yorta people for land rights.¹⁰ *Black Chicks Talking* (2002) presents stories of contemporary Indigenous women, researched by Leah Purcell and adapted for the stage by Purcell and Sean Mee.¹¹ The *Blak Inside* season at Playbox (2002) of which *Conversations with the Dead* and *I Don't Wanna Play House* were a part, included four other plays: John Harding's *Enuff* imagines an ironic dystopia where blacks lose patience and plan an armed uprising against whites for Reconciliation Day.¹² Tracey

Shearer, *The Foreman* (1977); John Romeril, *Bastardy* (1972); Bill Reed, *Truganinni* (1971); Oriel Gray, *Burst of Summer* (1960); Betty Roland, *Granite Peak* (1957); Frederick Vickers, *Stained Pieces* (1949); Oriel Gray, *Western Limit* (1946); Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Brumby Innes* (1927).

⁹ For an indication of the large numbers of new Australian plays not published, see the work of The Australian Script Centre which "collects, catalogues, promotes and distributes unpublished Australian plays and now holds hundreds of scripts." <http://www.ozscript.org/html/about_us.html> (Accessed 13 Mar. 04).

¹⁰ Andrea James, *Writer's Statement, Yanagai! Yanagai!*, (Sydney: Currency in assn. with Playbox Theatre, 2003) vii. First co-produced by Playbox and Melbourne Workers Theatre, dir. James, Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, Melbourne, 10 Sept. 2003.

¹¹ Leah Purcell and Sean Mee, *Black Chicks Talking* was first produced by La Boite Theatre in assn. with Bungabura Productions, Optus Playhouse, QPAC, Brisbane, 11 Dec. 2002. Although the script has not been published, Purcell's interviews with nine young Aboriginal women, successful in a variety of professions, have been. Leah Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking* (Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2002).

¹² John Harding, *Enuff, Blak Inside*. 1-35.

Rigney's *Belonging* reveals through a linear narrative a schoolgirl's struggle to reconcile two imperfect worlds: her Indigenous community with its valued but in some aspects violently degraded Aboriginal culture; and, the suburbia of her white school friends that may appear on the surface comfortable and desirable, but is revealed as a site of betrayal and prejudice.¹³ Maryanne Sam's *Casting Doubts* bubbles subversive humour from its narrative and its metatheatrical interventions, casting doubts on the ethics of those who cast black performers for roles on stage and screen.¹⁴ Jadah Milroy's *Crow Fire* creates worldly and supernatural transformations to embody multiple realities: the perfumed white politician dresses up for the struggle to stop her marriage and good intentions going awry; the double-natured, hallucinatory "White Lady" who embodies the lure of heroin cradles to death the black man from the desert community; and, black Crow, in the author's words, "an omen of death, a cheeky mischief-maker, a messenger, a survivor, a bird—Corvus Orru!" dances the dream of Utopia and reconciliation.¹⁵

A smaller number of 21st century plays by non-Indigenous writers employing Indigenous characters have as yet been published. Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance* (2003) was considered, but not chosen for this study. Although its themes include race relationships in rural Australia, and conflict over ownership of the family farm results in great loss for Nugget, the sole Indigenous character, the vibrant life of the drama mostly shifts away from Nugget and focuses on the lives of the other ten characters, all of whom are white.¹⁶

There is an intriguing counterpoint to *Holy Day* and *Wonderlands* in a recent work by another non-Indigenous writer, John Romeril's *Miss Tanaka* (2001), adapted from a short story by Xavier Herbert.¹⁷ With its spectacle, puppetry, magical transformations, self-debunking mishaps and enigmatic characters, particularly the eponymous

¹³ Tracey Rigney, *Belonging*, *Blak Inside*. 71-106.

¹⁴ Maryanne Sam, *Casting Doubts*, *Blak Inside*. 107-67.

¹⁵ Jadah Milroy, *Crow Fire*, *Blak Inside*. 172. Milroy, *Crow Fire*, 169-213.

¹⁶ First produced by Melbourne Theatre Company at the Playhouse, Victorian Arts Centre, 5 Mar. 2003. Hannie Rayson, *Inheritance* (Sydney: Currency, 2003).

¹⁷ First produced by Handspan Visual Theatre and Playbox Theatre at The C.U.B. Malthouse, Melbourne, 21 Feb. 2001. John Romeril, *Miss Tanaka* (Sydney: Currency in assn. with Playbox Theatre, 2001).

protagonist, a young shape-shifting Aboriginal/Asian, Romeril's play, set in a mythic 1930s Broome, privileges the ludic. In their texts, Bovell and Thomson privilege not playfulness but the crafting of substantially naturalistic drama. Because a fictionalised interpretation of historic and/or present day crises between blacks and whites in Australia provides the dramatic spine for *Holy Day* and *Wonderlands*, but not for *Miss Tanaka*, where race is much less a determinant of the dramatic action and the behaviour of the characters, Romeril's play has not been included in this study.

A note on the *Conversations with the Dead* texts

For the four selected plays, the performance texts used are the published ones, except for Frankland's *Conversations with the Dead*. Analysis is based primarily on the unpublished script from the play's second production, which is the only one that I have seen. It was directed by Wesley Enoch for Company B, Belvoir (Sydney 2003), who kindly provided a copy of the performance script.¹⁸ Reference is also made to the text published by Currency that derives from the premier production, directed by Frankland for Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative, Playbox and La Mama (Melbourne 2002).¹⁹

The text used for the 2003 Company B, Belvoir production is considerably shorter than the published version. Changes include the dropping of an opening sequence in which Captain Cook's official orders to take possession of any "uninhabited" country for "the King of Great Britain" are set against an Indigenous perspective that uses interwoven action, song and projected images to challenge the British crown's act of possession. The chorus sings of the blood shed by those who came in the tall ships. A figure throws a spear that shatters an image of Cook's ship. Projected images evoke 200 years of tumultuous change affecting Indigenous people and culminating in the present-day trauma of deaths in custody.²⁰ The absence of this prologue from the 2003 production does not appear to detract from the impact of that history, because invasion and resistance are present subtextually throughout the play.

¹⁸ Richard J. Frankland, *Conversations with the Dead*, dir. Wesley Enoch, ts., Company B, Belvoir Street Theatre Performance Script, Sydney, 30 July 2003. Courtesy of Company B, Belvoir. Referred to henceforth as Frankland, *Conversations* (Belvoir Script).

¹⁹ Referred to henceforth as Frankland, *Conversations* (Currency/Playbox).

²⁰ Frankland, *Conversations* (Currency/Playbox) 219-220.

Empire's cruelties are represented metonymically in the gaol that is the locus of the action, while Indigenous experience and resistance to that paradigmatic institution is expressed by the chorus and the struggles of contemporary characters. Other changes to the script for the 2003 production, such as dialogue cuts and the re-shaping and re-ordering of parts of the action, have created, or so it seems from the page, a more tightly focused drama.²¹ The more recent text is therefore used as the primary basis for this study, even though it has not been published.

Political and cultural context

Each of the plays attests to harrowing aspects of Australian history that may be sourced in the troubled confluence since 1788 of blacks and whites, two peoples with disparate paradigms and disparate power to enforce or resist encroachment. As Robert Manne elucidates, in the quarter of a century following the demise of the McMahon government in 1972 and the election of the Howard government in 1996, there was "a new Australian consciousness" of the nation's past and of the devastation brought to Aboriginal people.²² According to Manne, a significant catalyst for this urgently needed change in sensibility was the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's 1968 ABC Boyer Lecture, entitled "The Great Australian Silence," where he posited that the nation had developed "a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale" and argued that "[w]e have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so."²³ The *Holy Day* programme reprints an extract from an essay by Tom Griffiths, who draws on Stanner to explore historic and contemporary constructions of the silence about Aborigines, and the implications for "the white Australian psyche."²⁴

²¹ A frequent theatre-goer who saw both productions and with whom I was speaking by chance after I had completed the chapter on *Conversations*, told me that the original production had possibly even greater dramatic and emotional power than the second, although both were intense and cathartic. Personal communication, 22 Oct. 2005.

²² Robert Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal history*, ed. Robert Manne, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003) 1-3.

²³ W.E.H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming: The Boyer Lectures 1968*, "The Great Australian Silence", Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969, 25, cited in Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 1.

²⁴ Tom Griffiths, "The Construction of Silence," Programme for *Holy Day*, by Andrew Bovell, Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney, 13 Aug 2003, n. pag. First published in Attwood, Bain and S.G. Foster,

Manne argues that Stanner's heralding of the changed consciousness in the nation's understanding of its history, led to landmark shifts in legal and political decision making. Both Manne's examples have a bearing on the plays being studied here. The High Court judgment in the Mabo case (1992) found native title in common law.²⁵ As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission elaborates, the High Court "rejected the idea that Australia was *terra nullius* ('land belonging to no one') at the time of European settlement," and "recognised the common law right of Indigenous peoples to land based on their continuing use and connection to land."²⁶ The import of the High Court's decision is dramatised in *Wonderlands* as a struggle by black, and sympathetic white, Australians against white racist denial of Aboriginal occupancy.²⁷

Manne's second example is the inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities, commissioned in 1995 under Paul Keating's Labor government, and resulting in the *Bringing Them Home* report.²⁸ Central to *Holy Day's* drama is a stolen black child and a white child who is missing.²⁹ In *Wonderlands*, although given very different treatment, the suffering caused Aboriginal people through the forced removal of their children and the suffering of a white woman because her child has gone "missing" create emotions whose conjunction plays a crucial role in bringing the drama to its climax.³⁰

ed., *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003). Also in *Eureka Street*, March 2003.

²⁵ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 2-3.

²⁶ "Social Justice and Human Rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples," 2003, Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/info_sheet.html> accessed 2 Nov. 2005.

²⁷ See Chapter Two.

²⁸ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 3-4. See Ronald Darling Wilson, *Bringing Them Home: A Guide to the Findings and Recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, 1997, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/stolen_children/> accessed 24 June 2005.

²⁹ See Chapter One. See Bovell's essay, Andrew Bovell, "A Sophisticated Nation," Programme for *Holy Day*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2003.

³⁰ Thomson, *Wonderlands* 61. See Chapter Two.

Two other significant events from the awakening of national consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s to the harm done to Aboriginal people are of relevance. The establishment of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (October 1987) under Prime Minister Hawke led to the employment of Richard Frankland as one of its officers, and subsequently to his writing *Conversations with the Dead* with its stark exposure of the appalling impact the Australian criminal justice system has on Aboriginal people.³¹ The other event, the High Court Wik case (1996) which found that Aboriginal Native Title was not extinguished on Pastoral Leases, is significant in Thomson's *Wonderlands* as the non-fictional legal framework within which the characters enact a fictional story of a struggle for land rights by black, and sympathetic white, Australians against white racist pastoralists.³²

All four plays in this study premiered under the Howard government, which at time of writing (2005) is in its fourth term. In the first year of his Prime Ministership (1996) Howard spoke of a "challenge" facing the nation:

And that is to ensure that our history as a nation is not written definitively by those who take the view that Australians should apologise for most of it.³³

In 2000 with the nation's centenary of federation scheduled for the following year, "hundreds of thousands of citizens," as Robert Manne describes, "walked across the bridges of Australia's capital cities, as a symbol of their desire for reconciliation."³⁴ While those who crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge applauded a dot of an

³¹ See Chapter Four.

³² See Chapter Two. See Henry Reynolds, Introduction, *Wonderlands*, by Katherine Thomson, (Sydney: Currency, 2004) ix-x.

³³ John Howard, "The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government," *Sir Robert Menzies Lecture: The Hon. John Howard, M.P., Prime Minister of Australia*, 18 Nov, 1996, Menzies Lecture Trust, <<http://www.menzieslecture.org/1996.html>> accessed 10 July 2005. For the Prime Minister's speech for reconciliation that contrasts with Howard's, see Paul Keating, "'Redfern Speech'," *Australian Launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People*, Redfern Park, Sydney, 10 Dec, 1992, <http://www.antar.org.au/keating_redfern.html> accessed 26 Feb. 2005.

³⁴ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 4.

aeroplane writing "Sorry" in white smoke upon the sky,³⁵ the Prime Minister Howard would only speak of "regret" for what had been done to Aboriginal Australians. He continued to refuse to apologise for the nation's past.³⁶ Manne describes "the Howard years" as a time when "a counter-revolution in sensibility concerning the dispossession of the Aborigines [. . .] was swiftly gathering momentum."³⁷ Citing a conservative campaign to discredit the findings of the *Bringing Them Home* report into the removal of children, Manne perceives "in the tone of public discourse" a hardening of "attitudes towards the question of historic injustices suffered by the Aboriginal people."³⁸ *Wonderlands* could be read as a symbolic enactment of non-violent bridge-crossing in which the citizenry, black and white together, overcome prime ministerial opposition with its false and racist interpretation of history, and fulfil the nation's destiny – a shared belonging to the land.³⁹

As Manne attests, controversy about interpretations of Australia's history intensified with publications of Keith Windschuttle's charges that historians such as Henry Reynolds exaggerated or even fabricated accounts of frontier massacres.⁴⁰ The *Holy Day* programme has extracts from an ABC TV debate (2001) where Windschuttle's accusations are refuted by Reynolds who defends the validity of his research and contends that there was "substantial killing [. . .] as settlers came into Aboriginal country without any respect to their ownership or traditions."⁴¹ *Holy Day* and *Wonderlands* are part of the maelstrom of Australia's 'history wars'. Both have characters who testify to white massacres of Indigenous people.

³⁵ Personal recollection of 'The People's Walk for Reconciliation,' Sydney, Sunday 28 May 2000. For Thomson's use of the bridge metaphor in *Wonderlands*, see Conclusion, 182.

³⁶ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 5.

³⁷ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 5.

³⁸ Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 5.

³⁹ See Conclusion, 182, and Chapter Two.

⁴⁰ See Manne, Introduction, *Whitewash*, 5-6. Manne brings together a substantial body of scholarly refutation of Windschuttle's argument. See Robert Manne, ed., *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003). See also Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2003).

⁴¹ Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle, interview with Tony Jones, "Debate Rages over 'Peaceful' White Settlement: Extract from ABC TV *Lateline*, 16 Apr. 2001," Programme for *Holy Day*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2003. See also Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*.

The crisis in Australia's historiography runs contemporaneously with scandalous everyday crises in the lives of Indigenous people in Australia: greatly disproportionate problems of poverty, ill-health, reduced life expectancy and high rates of imprisonment, deaths in custody, infant mortality, domestic violence, unemployment and substance abuse. Tammy Anderson's opening words in *I Don't Wanna Play House* evoke the disruption brought about by acute poverty lived on the margins of Australian society:

TAMMY. In the first fifteen years of me life I lived in sixteen houses, three caravans and I went to twelve schools.⁴²

Such problems, exacerbated by a history of death, dispossession, disruption of communities and culture through relocation, suppression of language and the enforced removal of children, form the background to the plays under discussion.⁴³ In *I Don't Wanna Play House* Tammy's Dad's description of his capture by "welfare" and his entry into "a life of crime" depict his tragedy as an almost inevitable destiny for an impoverished Aboriginal youth in a denigrated community:

DAD. When I was a kid I hated goin' to school, I was always pissin' off. . . I'd be out knockin' off the milk money and the paper round money, anything I could get me hands on really... And when I'd get home I'd have ta give the old man half ... If I didn't have anything...

Welfare came and put me in a boys' home. I was in and outta there for seven years...⁴⁴

Australia imprisons Indigenous people in greatly disproportionate numbers. In programme notes for *Conversations with the Dead*, Associate Professor Chris Cunneen, Director, Institute of Criminology, University of Sydney Law School, outlines the work of the 1987-1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and scarifies Australian governments [he uses the plural] for their failure to implement the far-reaching changes recommended to reduce the disproportionate representation of Indigenous people in prison and to turn around the "brutality, neglect and racism [which] continue to be hallmarks of the criminal justice system".

⁴² Anderson, *I Don't Wanna Play House*, 43.

⁴³ For example, for evidence of the cruelties and dislocation inflicted on Aboriginal people through the forced removal of children, see Wilson, *Bringing Them Home*.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *I Don't Wanna Play House*, 44.

Cunneen subsumes debates about the ownership of history and policies which adversely affect Indigenous people:

At a broader level, the last seven years [1996-2003] has seen a move away from the recognition of the impact of colonisation and racism on Indigenous people. The inability to respect an Indigenous right to self-determination, the inability to apologise for past historical injustices, the attempt to write history as a story of great imperial achievement means that the trauma of the past will continue to manifest itself behind the bars and bolted doors of Australian gaols.⁴⁵

In contrast Prime Minister Howard affirms a version of history that constructs Europe's occupancy of Australia as unashamedly moral: "I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement." The Prime Minister presents his advocacy of opposition to a "black arm band" view of our past" as entirely compatible with his policy of "a practical programme of action that will remove the enduring legacies of disadvantage."⁴⁶

In programme notes for *Conversations with the Dead* Frankland sources "attitude" as "the biggest killer", whose consequences have been the dispossession, killing and rape of Indigenous people, the taking of their children and the attempt to silence their voices and denigrate their culture:

Attitude, societal and individual, acquiescence of politicians and those that hold the wealth and power. That is what causes it [the killing] and is the prime reason it continues.⁴⁷

Reviewing Robert Manne (ed.), *Whitewash: On Keith Windshuttle's "Fabrication of Australian History"*, and Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Tony Birch argues that conservative political leaders are elevating a history construed through ideological spectacles into national myth that distorts public discourse, fortifies neo-colonial power and sanctifies punitive actions against despised groups of people:

⁴⁵ Chris Cunneen, "Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Background Notes, 7 July 2003," Programme for *Conversations with the Dead*, by Richard J. Frankland, dir. Wesley Enoch, Company B, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 30 July 2003.

⁴⁶ Howard, "Beliefs and Values."

⁴⁷ Richard J Frankland, "Writer's Note," Programme for *Conversations*, Company B, Belvoir, 2003.

Both *Whitewash* and *The History Wars* suggest that the discipline of history in Australia is a battlefield [note the martial metaphor] for the nation's hearts and minds. But, more explicitly, it is a plaything for particular ideological forces. At present, we have a group of populist conservatives waging not a history war but a propaganda one – and a cultural and political struggle. It is an issue for all of us, not just historians.⁴⁸

Don Watson analyses how Prime Minister John Howard denigrates language itself by painting “invented virtues” over a mythic version of Australian history:

Myths are tempting to those who are in a position to manipulate their fellow human beings, because a myth is sacred, and what is sacred cannot be questioned. That's where their power comes from. They simplify and provide meaning without the need of reason. [. . .]. They stifle doubt and provide relaxation and comfort.⁴⁹

In his marginalia Watson quotes the dramatist Eugene Ionesco, a wild debunker of trumpeting authority: “Men hide behind their clichés.”⁵⁰ In *Rhinoceros* Ionesco makes incarnate the thick hide of conservative-populist cliché. When Daisy and Berenger are the only humans left, Daisy longs to enter the rhinoceros world:

Those are the real people. They look happy. They're content to be what they are. They don't look insane. They look very natural. They were right to do what they did.⁵¹

Her reward for relinquishing doubt as she moves to take her place in the herd is to hear their roaring as singing: “They are like gods.”⁵²

The genesis of the plays

The plays from the four selected writers and their ancillary texts, such as interviews or programme notes, reveal a desire to challenge the hegemony of the myth of a god-like whiteness whose sacralised history has the right to impose silence on

⁴⁸ Tony Birch, “The Abacus of History,” Rev. of *The History Wars*, by Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, and *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, ed. Robert Manne, *Australian Book Review*, 255 (2003): 10.

⁴⁹ Don Watson, *The Decay of Public Language* (Sydney: Random House, 2003) 106.

⁵⁰ Watson, *The Decay of Public Language* 107.

⁵¹ Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, trans. Derek Prouse, *Penguin Plays: Rhinoceros; The Chairs; The Lesson* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1962) 119-21.

⁵² Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 119-21.

others. Each playwright gives a particular personal, contemporary and historical context for their work and a conscious choice to bear witness to their own experience and their own response to Australia's conflicted past.

Tammy Anderson describes the genesis of *I Don't Wanna Play House* which deals with domestic violence, alcoholism and sexual abuse of children: "[. . .] I was watching my children playing in the backyard one day, [. . .] and my daughter asked me to give her a 'whizzy'. It all came back to me. Secrets. Secrets. I put pen to paper [. . .]."⁵³

In *Conversations with the Dead* Richard Frankland draws on his own anguished experience working with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and on the trauma that incarceration and death bring to individuals, families and communities: "In some ways we searched for justice, searched for a fair go [. . .]. In reality we only stumbled from one hurting point to another."⁵⁴ The emotion Frankland describes is given vivid expression onstage, when the protagonist's first words to the audience as he stumbles into the morning are, "I'm looking for hanging points."⁵⁵ As the character's actions make clear, "hanging points" are any features in a cell, or elsewhere, that could be used to anchor a noose.

For Anderson and Frankland, the traumas to which they testify in *Conversations with the Dead* and *I Don't Wanna Play House* have particular resonance as a transformation into performance of lived experiences of crisis, traumas personally experienced by the writer and shared with others in their communities. *Wonderlands* and *Holy Day* are fiction. Thomson and Bovell each mark her/his play's genesis in a compelling idea to create a drama from conflict rooted in Australia's unresolved colonial history. As Bovell puts it:

Our past hangs over us like a shadow. *Holy Day* takes us into that shadow but it does so only to invite a consideration of its legacy.⁵⁶

⁵³ Tammy Anderson, Author's Notes. *I Don't Wanna Play House*, *Blak Inside*. 41.

⁵⁴ Frankland, "Writer's Note," Programme for *Conversations*, Company B, Belvoir, 2003.

⁵⁵ Frankland, *Conversations* (Belvoir Script) 2.

⁵⁶ Andrew Bovell, Playwright's Note, *Holy Day* iii. Also incorporated by Bovell in "A Sophisticated Nation," Programme for *Holy Day*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2003 n. pag.

Verghis, who interviewed Thomson prior to the 2003 Sydney season of *Wonderlands*, reported the play's genesis in Thomson's desire "to unearth the dramatic heart of the native title debate."⁵⁷ The play "rose slowly" from Thomson's archival research and her journeys, physical and emotional, to the outback, "meeting remote Aboriginal communities [and] building the trust of old tribal 'aunties.'" The graziers and pastoralists with whom Thomson spoke were "often suspicious and angry" and "totally perplexed" by a land rights claim. For Thomson, Verghis writes, the play "is simply a story of country" fought over by opposing sides, each with a deep sense of belonging to that land:

'I'm not a country person, so I find it hard to understand,' [Thomson] says, 'But what I do feel is that our history, in all its inspiration and shame, is something that non-Aboriginal Australians should make an effort to understand.'⁵⁸

On interviewing Bovell for the forthcoming Sydney Theatre Company production of *Holy Day*, Morgan wrote: "Andrew Bovell believes it is time for white writers to tackle Aboriginal issues." Bovell had begun the play in the 1980s, but had put it away, having felt "strong calls from Indigenous people for white writers and artists to back off. A decade on he feels there's a different cultural sensitivity. In the 1980s he wondered how a white writer could tell this tale. Now he wonders how a white writer cannot do so." Bovell grew up in south-west Western Australia, ten kilometres from the site of a massacre, about which he knew nothing until he was at university. "Yet," says Bovell, "the resonance of that history lived in that community in the tension between black and white. [. . .] But nobody had the language or stories to deal with it."⁵⁹

In creating *Holy Day* as a challenge to that absence of discourse about the trauma inflicted on Indigenous people, Bovell found a focus in the lost child in the Australian landscape:

When I started to look at the mythology of the lost child in Australia, all the representations of the lost child were white [. . .]. but what we as a

⁵⁷ Sharon Verghis, "Journey to the Red Earth," *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 July 2003, Metropolitan: 12.

⁵⁸ Verghis, "Journey to the Red Earth," 12.

⁵⁹ Andrew Bovell, interview with Joyce Morgan, "Child's Play Defines Shadow of Our Culture," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, 20 Sept. 2002, Metropolitan: 16.

culture don't seem to be able to own at the moment is that the most potent lost child or stolen child is actually black.⁶⁰

In creating their fictitious narratives, the non-Indigenous writers, Bovell and Thomson, do not draw merely on abstract research. Both affirm personal experience as part of their creation of their play. Verghis reports Thomson's revelation of her transformative emotional experience from the two years spent travelling through outback Queensland to research *Wonderlands*: "She came away changed, she says quietly."⁶¹

Although Bovell's comments on the genesis of his play appear less revelatory of personal transformation, he describes the effect that the unacknowledged local history of massacre had on the white community of his youth: "[. . .] we carried it in our soul."⁶² Bovell expresses an urgent conviction that non-Indigenous Australians must engage emotionally and cognitively with their experience of being part of the dispossessing culture:

There are these wonderful stories now emerging from Indigenous culture that are illuminating their experience for us, but at the same time, in understanding their experiences, we've got to do the hard work of understanding our own.

Why were these atrocities committed? Why did this kind of dispossession take place? We have to address it and we have to address it in many different ways. I want to be able to look Aboriginal people in the eye, but until white Australian culture addresses the past symbolically as well as practically, I don't think we can.⁶³

Bovell suggests in an interview with May-Brit Akerholt that prior to the recent rise of Indigenous writers in Australian theatres, a development he welcomes as "exhilarating", it was necessary for white artists with their greater access to resources to make an active choice to hold back and "clear a cultural space that Indigenous people could fill." While concerned at the danger of "subtle appropriation" by white writers' "using Aboriginal stories to adorn and enrich our own narrative," Bovell

⁶⁰ Bovell, "Child's Play Defines Shadow," 16.

⁶¹ Verghis, "Journey to the Red Earth," 12.

⁶² Andrew Bovell, interview with May-Brit Akerholt, "The Evolution of the Play," Programme for *Holy Day*, Sydney Theatre Company, 2003.

⁶³ Bovell, quoted in Bron Sibree, "One Man's Unsettling View of the Australian Frontier," *Canberra Times* 15 July 2003: 9.

believes that now there are white writers conscious of “the earlier mythology of Terra Nullius” and therefore “able to acknowledge the level of dispossession and describe it as genocide – or at least many of us are.” For Bovell interested white artists “must talk about it [the genocide], must account for it.”⁶⁴

Productions and venues

Because I was able to see each of the four selected plays in 2003, the first year of my Masters’ candidature, this study draws on those live performances as well as on the written playtexts. A comparative examination of the venues and promotional material indicates that the ambience and ‘culture’ of the theatre presenting the work has the power to affect the way each of the plays is produced, billed, performed and received.

Company B Belvoir Street, where *Conversations with the Dead* was performed in the ‘Upstairs’ Theatre, has a reputation for staging challenging new work, as did Nimrod Theatre Company who were the building’s previous occupants.⁶⁵ Belvoir Street Theatre with its padded bench seats and its location in the inner Sydney suburb of Surry Hills where it is hemmed in by unpretentious high-density housing contrasts with the chic armchair comfort and higher ticket prices of the Sydney Theatre Company’s Wharf where Andrew Bovell’s *Holy Day* was staged.⁶⁶ Above the timber walkway that takes Sydney Theatre Company patrons the length of the converted wharf to the glass walled foyer furnished with restaurant and balcony overlooking Sydney Harbour, great banners were hanging as if for a festival. The images in perfect colour were of the latest motor-car from Jaguar, Sydney Theatre Company’s principal sponsor for 2003. The captions proclaimed “The Art of Performance”, as if exhorting arriving and retreating tides of customers not to take what they might see in the theatre too seriously, because the ‘real’ stage is one’s personal creation,

⁶⁴ Bovell, "Evolution of the Play."

⁶⁵ The Belvoir Street Theatre building was formerly the home of Nimrod Theatre Company who converted it from a salt factory. See Julian Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* (Sydney: Currency, 2002) 92.

⁶⁶ Production by Sydney Theatre Company, dir. Ariette Taylor, Wharf 1 Theatre, opened 13 Aug. 2003.

attainable by purchasing the branded experience through which one chooses to perform oneself to oneself and to others.⁶⁷

As a member of the Australian Writers' Guild I was able to take advantage of a Sydney Theatre Company offer of tickets to *Holy Day* at a fraction of the regular price. The most likely explanation of this rare generosity is that the Company sought urgent promotion of the play to cover the embarrassment of too many empty seats. Some regular patrons may have chosen to stay away from a work that the Artistic Director, Robyn Nevin billed in the subscription brochure as:

[. . .] isolating a dark moment in our history from the 19th century Australian bush landscape, in a remarkable play which compels us to pause and look back before we move forward, a play I believe we had to do.⁶⁸

Although elsewhere in the brochure the content of the play is elaborated, Nevin in her introduction avoids direct mention of the clash between Aboriginal and white Australia that is at the core of *Holy Day*. In other promotional material Nevin is again adamant that she feels compelled to do the play.⁶⁹ Her tone seems almost to apologise to subscribers for her choice as she explains that Bovell's play "raises issues about our past and the kind of past we [white Australia] feel uncomfortable about."⁷⁰ It is as if she must tread warily when presenting her patrons with work that touches on difficult issues of Australia's black and white history.⁷¹ Her words seem designed to calm an anticipated subscriber anxiety about that history by shrinking its

⁶⁷ Jaguar's logo and caption, "The Art of Performance", appeared on the front cover of the company's annual brochure. *Sydney Theatre Company 2003*, (Sydney, Austral.: Sydney Theatre Company, 2002). For a study of the development of corporate branding as the marketing of "experience" and "lifestyle" see Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2000) 21.

⁶⁸ *Sydney Theatre Company 2003*, n. pag.

⁶⁹ "Sydney Theatre Company: Rich Pickings," *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 Sept. 2002, Special Promotion 2003 Sydney Theatre Company Season Guide: Special Supplement, n. pag.

⁷⁰ Sydney Theatre Company, "Rich Pickings."

⁷¹ For commentary by Nevin on the pressure on the STC "to produce productions that will earn significant amounts of money at the box office" and on her calculation in mounting the season that "big" earners for the Company such as David Williamson's *The Club* "make it possible for us to do *Holy Day* [. . .] and other plays that will not achieve high income at the box office", see Penny Brown, "Nevin Pledges Plays 'We Need to Confront'," *The Australian* 20 Sept. 2002: 15.

pain to an isolated “dark moment” that may be dealt with merely by pausing and looking back before resuming forward momentum.

In Company B Belvoir Street’s much more modestly presented brochure for its season that included *Conversations with the Dead*, Artistic Director Neil Armfield makes a virtue of the theatre’s focus on work that faces political issues. Deploring national and international war- and fear-mongering and the local climate of “rising aggression as the talk-back jocks encourage the worst and most shameful tendencies of the electorate” and Australian Government policies turn desperate refugees into a “faceless” enemy, Armfield offers theatre as an opportunity to contemplate and wonder at the complexities and gift of existence and “the clumsy power of the things that would threaten it”.⁷²

In the 2003 season we have a series of shows that deal with crises in society or community, and how the processes of history and human struggle work to cleanse and renew a damaged world.⁷³

Armfield bills *Conversations with the Dead* as “a deeply personal work about the legacy of Aboriginal deaths in custody,” and urges Belvoir Street’s patrons to experience theatre that intertwines entertainment, imaginative play, progressive political awareness and the optimistic quest for meaning and renewal through understanding of self and other:

So come to the theatre and leave for a time the defensive posturing of those who are guiding our future. Come and find some meaning, some calm, some release, a laugh, a place where your imagination can play and you can indulge in the complications of empathy: perhaps the most valuable of all human capacities.⁷⁴

A similar optimism about theatre’s role in promoting a questioning of contemporary government policies through the filter of a humanitarian and creative consciousness is evident in the Griffin Theatre Company’s promotion of the six plays in its 2003 season, one of which was the touring HotHouse Theatre Company’s production of *Wonderlands*. Describing the “distinctively different” works in the season as having “a

⁷² Neil Armfield, “Message from Neil,” *2003 Belvoir Street Theatre* (Sydney: Company B Belvoir, 2002) 7.

⁷³ Armfield, “Message,” 8.

⁷⁴ Armfield, “Message,” 8.

deep vein running through them to do with the clash of belief systems or cultures," Artistic Director Ros Horin, like Armfield, emphasises the positive role of artists in exploring hard questions about human connections and divisions that have far-reaching political and social impact:

[. . .] What with the shock jocks and some politicians whipping up fear and prejudice – and each new act of terrorism sending us ducking for cover behind the safe and familiar – it's up to our artists to probe the difficult questions. How do we bridge the gaps – 'translate' between different cultural groups – and break down the barriers – so that we can live in harmony. [sic]⁷⁵

Horin describes *Wonderlands* as "a deeply human, insightful drama about the cultural divide between pastoralists and Indigenous Australians over the simmering issue of Native Title."⁷⁶ A prolific, highly acclaimed writer, Katherine Thomson has had work produced in a wide range of venues, including prestigious halls like the Sydney Opera House and by producers such as the Sydney Theatre Company.⁷⁷ When *Wonderlands*, commissioned by HotHouse, came to Sydney it was not to glamorous waterfront, but to the Griffin Theatre Company's Stables in Darlinghurst, a few steps from the hub of Sydney's red-light district, Kings Cross. A maximum of 120 patrons are able to cram onto padded benches in two raked tiers facing one another across the intimate triangular stage. The Stables Theatre, named after the building's origins, was once home to the late Nimrod Theatre Company who established its reputation as a site for challenging new work.⁷⁸ Griffin pride themselves on being "[. . .] the only theatre company in Sydney entirely dedicated to the development and production of new Australian writing for the stage." Griffin describe themselves as "one of the great

⁷⁵ "6 Playwrights, 6 World Premieres, 6 Reasons to Subscribe to Griffin in 2003," *Media Release*, Nov. 2002, Griffin Theatre Company, <<http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/>> accessed 20 Oct. 2004.

⁷⁶ "6 Playwrights."

⁷⁷ The Sydney Theatre Company produced Thomson's *Navigating* (1998) and *Harbour* (2004). For production details of Thomson's and other Australian playwrights' work see "AusStage: Gateway to the Australian Performing Arts," AusStage, <<http://www.ausstage.edu.au/>> accessed 24 Sept. 2005.

⁷⁸ Nimrod used to pack 140 into the tiny theatre. For a description and images of the theatre at the time of Nimrod's opening there in 1970, see Meyrick, *See How It Runs* 22-27.

engine rooms of the Australian theatre, working in innovation and as a gateway for new ideas and talented new artists.”⁷⁹

When the Playbox production of Tammy Anderson’s *I Don’t Wanna Play House* (2001), a mono-drama with songs where the author plays all fourteen characters accompanied by a musician, toured to Sydney later that year, its venue was The Stables.⁸⁰ The Griffin Theatre Company’s “Media Release” for the season describes Anderson as “from the Palawa people of Tasmania” and extols her autobiographical play for its theatricality and for the optimism of “her song of overcoming horrendous obstacles”:

I Don’t Wanna Play House is a tale of an indomitable spirit wrought with love and tremendously coarse humour. [. . .].

With disarming and often shocking honesty Anderson tells of a childhood only a great spirit could survive.⁸¹

This conception of theatre as a site for affirmation of the human spirit and for exploring the need to strengthen connection with others is reiterated in Anderson’s own words, as quoted by Griffin Theatre Company:

Often the play is through the eyes of a child with all the happiness and possibilities that a child embodies. It’s about keeping going and striving for hope and above all, that the family stays together.⁸²

Although I missed seeing *I Don’t Wanna Play House* in its 2001 Sydney season, I was fortunate to be in the audience for the performance Anderson gave for the 6th Women Playwrights International Conference, Manila, 17 Nov. 2003.⁸³ The

⁷⁹ "Griffin Theatre Company," Griffin Theatre Company, <<http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/>> accessed 24 Sept. 2005.

⁸⁰ Playbox production, dir. John Bolton. Stables Theatre, Griffin Theatre Company, Sydney, 17 July 2001.

⁸¹ "Griffin Theatre Presents the Playbox Production of *I Don’t Wanna Play House*," *Media Release*, May 2001, Griffin Theatre Company, <<http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/>> accessed 20 Oct. 2004.

⁸² Anderson, quoted in "Griffin Theatre Presents the Playbox Production of *I Don’t Wanna Play House*."

⁸³ WPI Philippines’ 6th Women Playwrights International Conference, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila, Nov. 14-20, 2003. In the absence of the musician who would have been on stage with her had it been a full production, Anderson provided her own accompaniment, picking up her guitar to play as needed.

Conference programme describes *I Don't Wanna Play House* as “often heartbreaking as Anderson relives the abuse she and her family endured but the dominant note is love.”⁸⁴

Each of four plays, *Wonderlands*, *Holy Day*, *Conversations with the Dead* and *I Don't Wanna Play House*, are billed in tones that urge potential audiences to value theatre not only as art, but for its power – indeed, its obligation – to tackle painful subject matter that has contemporary political and social relevance. This traumatic material is variously expressed as work that makes (white) theatre goers “feel uncomfortable” about their nation’s history; raises “difficult” questions about divisive cultural attitudes and public policies; challenges aggressive governmental and other “clumsy power that would threaten [the gift of existence]”; or, enacts personal revelation of “horrendous” abuse suffered by an Indigenous child.

Each billing presents the theatrical performance of trauma as a preferred path to the overcoming of crises. By speaking of drama such as *Conversations with the Dead* as if its vital quality is transcendence, Armfield at Company B Belvoir Street grants theatre the status of teleological signifier able to “deal with [. . .] how the processes of history and human struggle work to cleanse and renew a damaged world.”⁸⁵

For Horin and Griffin Theatre Company the healing qualities of theatre are exemplified in the two plays performed there. *Wonderlands* offers “insight” into how humanity may bridge cultural divisions. In *I Don't Wanna Play House* “the great spirit” of the protagonist/performer Anderson overcomes abuse through hope, familial connection and love.

Nevin’s promotion of *Holy Day* at the Sydney Theatre Company as “the dark moment” from the past that “compels us to [. . .] look back before we move forward”⁸⁶ invites the potential audience to freeze the play in the past, and to view its

⁸⁴ Synopsis: *I Don't Wanna Play House*, from a Review of Aaron Jelbart, *The 6th Women Playwrights International Conference: Programme of Activities*, (Manila, Philippines: WPI Philippines, 14-20 Nov. 2003).

⁸⁵ Armfield. For an understanding of teleology as an imputation of a goal towards which an abstracted human experience is deemed to be progressing I have been assisted by Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996) 131-34.

⁸⁶ *Sydney Theatre Company 2003*, frontispiece.

depicted violent destruction of Aboriginal people from within the reassurance offered by a metatheatrical narrative of national progress. Yet that is the very narrative whose silencing of Indigenous voices Bovell's play seems intended to confront.

Performance as testimony

These acts of theatre bearing witness to suffering of Australian Indigenous people, are appearing at a time of searing contention, nationally and globally, over what the past is, how it affects the present and who are the authentic bearers of witness. Developing their theory of testimony in the late twentieth century, Felman, literary critic/teacher, and Laub, psychoanalyst, deem the contemporary cruelties to be of such measure and the need to bear witness so compelling, that Felman marks our time as “the era of the Holocaust, of Hiroshima, of Vietnam – [. . .] the age of testimony.” Such an age demands the bearing /bringing forth of witness.⁸⁷ Such an age demands illumination that has not previously been brought forth – illumination that reaches people, not merely cognitively, but through “the intelligence of the emotion.” The viewers or receivers of a work of art that bears witness become participants in that witness. The act of testimony creates “an effective and affective shock that resonates [. . .] in the whole body [. . .].”⁸⁸

Testimony, to be effective in breaking the silence / and thereby opening the possibility of healing, bears witness, as does teaching and psychoanalysis, not as a passive transfer of knowledge, but in a way that is “*performative*.” Something happens, Felman argues, emotionally as well as cognitively. Testifier and receiver “*live through a crisis*.” They experience the encounter as “surprising, cognitively dissonant,” and “not just congruent with everything that they have learned beforehand” (original emphasis).⁸⁹ The “existential crisis in all those involved” is crucial to the transformation that is testimony.⁹⁰

Felman analyses Carl Lanzmann's 1985 documentary film, *Shoah*, a syncretism of interviews with people bearing witness to their experience of the Holocaust. To avoid the overwhelming emotion of the work crushing him, or others, Lanzmann

⁸⁷ Felman and Laub 53.

⁸⁸ Felman and Laub 239.

⁸⁹ Felman and Laub 53.

⁹⁰ Felman and Laub xvi.

deliberately excluded from the film such overtly emotive elements as archival images of the camps and the victims. Yet, paradoxically, the film is resoundingly effective in its generation of affect even though Lanzmann set out "to reach people through their intelligence."⁹¹ Felman sees Lanzmann's work as transmitting "the intelligence of the emotion" which is equivalent to bringing "the darkness of the inside to the physical light of the outside." Intelligence for Felman is a "physical enlightenment", a literal shedding of light.⁹²

The experience of Lou Bennett, who played the women characters (Lily, Wife, Aunty, Spirit Woman, Glenda and Jane) in the original production of *Conversations with the Dead* (Melbourne 2002), is illustrative of theatre's power to tell stories that, in Felman's sense, shed light through an affective and cognitive crisis that resonates in the whole body. As Bennett attests, *Conversations* stirred an "exhausting and emotionally exhilarating" tumult of pain and outpouring grief that was transformative for herself and others in the cast and audience:

For a lot of my aunties and uncles – elderly women and men in our community – it was too much them coming to hear these stories [of self-harm and death in the gaol], and so they had to leave after the first act.

In many cases after we finished [performing] we'd go out to meet them and we'd be in tears, [. . .] consoling and crying and talking with them. It was exhausting... emotionally exhilarating and exhausting. I haven't cried so much even in my own personal life as when I performed all of the women characters.

It had thirty-three scenes. I was in eighteen, and was crying in about twelve – or being in a painful emotion. It was cathartic for a lot of us.⁹³

The play brings together playwright, cast and audience as owners of, and witnesses to, the truths of their experiences. As the playwright Frankland told interviewer Judy Adamson at the time of the Sydney production (2003), the cast of *Conversations* "has an 'ownership' of the work [that comes] from their own families' experiences of death,

⁹¹ Felman and Laub 204

⁹² Felman and Laub 239 footnote 19.

⁹³ Lou Bennett, personal communication (my transcription), at 6th Women Playwrights International Conference, Manila, 19 Nov. 2003. My meeting with Bennett was fortuitous. I did not conduct formal interviews as part of this study. With hindsight, I feel that it would have been valuable to do so.

jail and assimilation.”⁹⁴ Lou Bennett told journalist Sophie Best at a rehearsal on the eve of the play’s première, that she has had family members die in custody, and others from her extended family “taken away,” and that in exposing the “scars” *Conversations* brings “healing”:

These are real stories – they’re so raw, they touch a nerve, and I feel like we’ve honoured these people and these stories.⁹⁵

As Bennett makes clear, both the stories and the people who own them are honoured in the play’s bearing of witness that recognises and acknowledges, in public, those stories’ truths. Art, writes Felman, is a vital way of making known what has previously been hidden:

[. . .] art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) *what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times* [original emphasis].⁹⁶

The major task of this study is to examine how the four selected plays bear artistic witness to trauma resulting from empire’s occupation of Indigenous land and the consequent imposition on Indigenous people of abusive power by a (white) state or individuals. Each play constructs its own version of Australian history and landscape, whether through the fiction of Bovell’s *Holy Day* and Thomson’s *Wonderlands*, or the reframed autobiographical experience of Frankland’s *Conversations with the Dead* and Anderson’s *I Don’t Wanna Play House*. The plays bear witness to suffering from which a privileged non-Indigenous Australian, such as myself, is most likely protected.

Significant differences are found in how the staged trauma is depicted and how it affects characters of particular race, gender and age. In the plays by the non-Indigenous writers, *Holy Day* and *Wonderlands*, even though the Indigenous characters are passionate in their pursuit of their rights, the action is largely driven by the white characters, while the desire of the Indigenous characters remains

⁹⁴ Judy Adamson, "Lost Voices: Ninety-One Lives, One Play and a Nation's Shame," *Sydney Morning Herald* 26-27 July 2003, Metropolitan: 5.

⁹⁵ Lou Bennett, quoted in Sophie Best, "Singing out the Stories of the Dead," *Age* 13 Feb. 2002, The Culture: 6.

⁹⁶ Felman and Laub xx.

trammelled within a narrative arc that effects closure upon its own peculiar version of Australian history – a dystopia in *Holy Day* and a utopia in *Wonderlands*. In *Conversations with the Dead* and *I Don't Wanna Play House* the Indigenous characters are constructed from desire. The desire of the Indigenous characters rages and storms. It is not confined to good and wise behaviour. Its expression is not tidied and sanitised as it is in *Wonderlands*. It is not left without a tongue as it is in *Holy Day*. In the plays by the Indigenous writers, Indigenous desire is gifted the strength to drive the action.

'Desire' in the sense in which it is being used here may be thought of as synonymous with a character's power to feel, recognise and act upon a 'truth' of bodily experience. My use of the term 'desire' is not to be thought of as confined to what *OED* describes as a "specific" meaning of "desire": "Physical appetite; lust."⁹⁷ Rather, I am using the word 'desire' to express the longing or yearning of a character to express her/his self.

Bennett speaks of the performance of *Conversations* as an "honouring" of people and their stories of grievous suffering inflicted upon them. The power of artistic witness to 'honour' people and their experience of trauma lies, I suggest, in its power to represent the *fullness* of truth of felt experience. If desire is confined to fit an arbitrary code such as race or gender, even if that confined desire is benignly constructed and passionately expressed, its testimony will be confined. Its witness will not honour the story or the people to whom it belongs. A confined desire bearing witness will not be what Felman calls an "encounter with the real."⁹⁸

As well as the construction of race and gender, the extent to which the plays possess or dispossess Western theatrical conventions affects how the testimony is experienced and whether that witness is able to challenge preconceptions. As Felman puts it:

Testimony cannot be authentic without that crisis, which has to break and to transvaluate previous categories and previous frames of reference.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *OED*.

⁹⁸ Felman and Laub xx.

⁹⁹ Felman and Laub 54.

In conservative, naturalistic Western theatre, the audience are accustomed to the verisimilitude of an onstage world. Although they remain sophisticated observers of Coleridge's famous "willing suspension of disbelief [. . .] which constitutes poetic faith,"¹⁰⁰ they may nonetheless cease to re/mark that what they are observing is not, in fact, a copy of reality. As Ubersfeld's analysis of "theatrical illusion" posits, the spectators take back into their own world a "passivity" garnered from the perfect illusory one where they could change nothing.¹⁰¹ The "powerless voyeur" sees onstage a "picture" of social and economic relationships between people "constructed in conformity with the way a given social stratum sees itself." The spectators know that it is not a "true picture of the world," but have entered a denial of that truth:

[T]he illusion in its perfection offers them [the spectators] the model for a certain attitude towards the world. It is not objective relationships that are mimed, but rather a certain type of representation of those relationships and the attitude that flows from it.¹⁰²

Following Ubersfeld, I argue that rather than opening a way for Felman's "performative crisis" that breaks and re-evaluates "previous categories and previous frames of reference," naturalistic theatre makes it difficult for the spectator to see that relationships between characters, such as raced or gendered ones, are not 'real' but constructed. Examination of how the plays by the black and white writers disrupt – or fail to disrupt – the pretence that naturalistic theatre is a copy of reality, is a crucial part of my study. In the white playwrights' work, the acceptance – for the most part – of naturalistic conventions, appears to mimic a failure to overturn the raced, gendered and classed power relationships that support white control of the destiny of the Aboriginal characters and of the narrative.

It should be noted here that Bovell and Thomson are skilled dramatists who endow their characters with complex qualities that forestall their simplistic labelling as stereotypes. Both create their own cracks in theatre conventions through which to make direct address to the audience. Both writers, however, create in their plays,

¹⁰⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001) 677 (Ch.14).

¹⁰¹ Ubersfeld 25.

¹⁰² Ubersfeld 26.

variations of inherited colonial relationships of power. What is emphasised in those power relationships is very different: in *Holy Day* white women are malign, while in *Wonderlands* white women learn benevolence. Yet in both plays, the white women control the destiny of the black women. Drawing on Penelope Ingram's work, I suggest that whiteness in both plays is given 'invisibility' as the standard against which others are constructed as copies of the 'real' who lack the power of the 'real' and its desire.

Ingram writes:

Because they are ostensibly without race, not simply one race among many, whites have come to represent the standard against which all else is defined.¹⁰³

The plays by Bovell and Thomson invite belief in theatre-as-reality as an ostensible challenge to empire's version of itself. Yet their naturalistic drama may bolster "poetic faith" in versions of history remade as masquerade, whose concealed premise remains white desire enacted through white power. My study of the work of the black playwrights, Anderson and Frankland, reveals them to be ripping the curtain of invisibility from Western neo-conservative pretence that the white body, language, imagery and empire are the measure against which others are found lacking.

"Counter-hegemonic possibilities" abound in theatre, Tompkins argues.¹⁰⁴ With its multi-layered elements, from lighting, set and sound, to the living bodies of performers, their costuming, gestures and dialogue, the theatre offers multiple opportunities for a disjunction of theatrical elements, creating irony or revealing the restrictive, unrepresentative nature of stereotyping.¹⁰⁵ I argue that it is the Indigenous writers, Frankland and Anderson, who take advantage of these qualities of theatre to expose the lie of the invisibility of whiteness.

Through their own combination of Indigenous and Western performance traditions *Conversations with the Dead* and *I Don't Wanna Play House* each disrupt the frame

¹⁰³ Penelope Ingram, "Racializing Babylon: Settler Whiteness and the 'New Racism'," *New Literary History*, 32 (2001): 158.

¹⁰⁴ Joanne Tompkins, "Re-Orienting Australian Drama: Staging Theatrical Irony," *Ariel - A Review of International English Literature*, 25 4 (1994): 120.

¹⁰⁵ Tompkins, "Re-Orienting Australian Drama," 119-20.

of theatre as empire's mirror. Dramaturgies such as Frankland's magic realism and circular or ritual time, and Anderson's virtuoso polyvocal monologue and song, place these texts in a strong gathering of work by postcolonial writers who disrupt white-centric theatrical, cultural and political assumptions. Frankland and Anderson are, to use Coleridge's words, "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom."¹⁰⁶

In its search for any shocks against custom that the selected plays may deliver, this study has been informed by Howard Barker's argument that theatre is "not a moral place, as our ancestors knew well when they intermittently banned it."¹⁰⁷ Scathing of "a humanist theatre" where "writers are smitten with the idea of themselves as educators" and "have made a theatre of morals almost as rigid as the medieval stage and have contributed to a new style of social conformism,"¹⁰⁸ Barker extols theatre as an act "without a conscience" that takes writer, actor and audience to "wildness and barbarism" where "we glimpse the landscape of a pre-moral world and are allowed to run in it."¹⁰⁹

Barker's apparently irreconcilable poles of an affronting "conscience-free theatre" and a moralistic Brechtian "telling" would appear to be bridged by acclaimed Australian theatre director Neil Armfield. Quoting a line of dialogue from the film *Elizabeth* Armfield claims for theatre the potential "to touch the divine, here on earth." In so doing, Armfield argues, theatre "can reconcile, and teach, and bind and transport, and give us great pleasure."¹¹⁰

If Barker is right in its condemnation of the life-diminishing conformity taught by theatre whose aim is to 'teach',¹¹¹ theatre in Armfield's model may be condemned to repeat what Nietzsche describes as "the obligation to use the customary metaphors,

¹⁰⁶ Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," 677 (Ch.14).

¹⁰⁷ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester UP, 1997) 76.

¹⁰⁸ Barker, *Arguments* 76-77.

¹⁰⁹ Barker, *Arguments* 77.

¹¹⁰ Neil Armfield, "Australian Culture: Creating It and Losing It," *The Fourth Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture*, Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, 9 Nov. 1998, Currency, <<http://www.currency.com.au/>> accessed 6 May 2003.

¹¹¹ See Barker, 126-27.

or, to put it in moral terms, the obligation to lie in accordance with firmly established convention ... and in a style that is binding for all.”¹¹²

Kathleen Mary Fallon slammed Nick Enright’s *Cloudstreet*, adapted from Tim Winton’s novel and directed by Armfield, for its failure to disrupt the conventions of a colonialism that it refigured as an act of assumption of whiteness and blackness into a “spiritual” oneness:

[I]t slumps back into trite 'spiritual' insights 'there's no them only us', rejuvenated Christianity and a feel-good, heartfelt 'not a dry eye in the house' 90s version of colonialism. No Apology necessary. No Land Rights necessary. No Compensation necessary. ALL THE 'BLACKS' IN CLOUDSTREET ARE DEAD [original emphasis]!!¹¹³

Fallon’s critique has helped my understanding of how the two white-authored plays in this study portray the testimony of otherness. Although far from utopian, for whites or blacks, *Holy Day* ends with the white control over the land and over the sole surviving ‘black’ character, named Obedience, who is in a state of symbolic death – motionless, raped, with her tongue removed. *Wonderlands*, although far from trite in its rigorous critique of racism, and although it insists on Land Rights, nevertheless shifts significant problems offstage to facilitate “a feel-good” united Australia.

Armfield points to the need to connect the work of theatre with a time of crisis: “I fear we have rather tough times ahead. We must keep our faith and keep working.”¹¹⁴

Armfield’s Vanya-like conclusion suggests a turning inward, to the familiar, away from the fearful, in contrast to Barker’s cry for “a journey without maps whose destination might be an intemperate zone, a place of fear and little comfort.”¹¹⁵

Barker’s theatre without a map offers the imagination the freedom from restraint that Felman’s theory of testimony offers the body in its witness to its experience.

Commenting on Camus’ proposition that the artist “testifies not to the law, but to the

¹¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *The Norton Anthology* 878.

¹¹³ Kathleen Mary Fallon, "A Close Look at *Cloudstreet*," *Australian Book Review*, 215 (1999): 24.

¹¹⁴ Armfield, "Australian Culture."

¹¹⁵ Barker, *Arguments* 77-78.

body,”¹¹⁶ Felman describes the artist as bearing witness not to “truth (a theory)”, but to “*freedom*” (original emphasis):

Witnessing for the artist is to reveal the body’s otherness to theory, the body’s physical resistance to theory.¹¹⁷

Where the truths of felt experience are “honoured” in theatre, as Bennett describes their being in *Conversations with the Dead*, those truths operate very differently from “truth” as a theory of how one ought to behave. The truths of the body’s experience may wrest away the power that Baudrillard ascribes to Empire – the use of simulation to liquidate the real and generate “the map that engenders the territory,” hiding from us “the desert of the real”.¹¹⁸ The body is real when its story is heard as it is in *Conversations* and in *I Don’t Wanna Play House*.

As indicated by Robyn Nevin’s billing of *Holy Day* for the Sydney Theatre Company’s season as “a dark moment” to be viewed as a mere pause before “we” continue the narrative of national progress, “The Great Australian Silence” about Aborigines, to which Stanner drew the nation’s attention in 1968, has tenacity. This study investigates how the four selected plays of the 21st century challenge the ‘white’ Australian nation’s construction and maintenance of that “Silence”. Evoking the massacres of the colonial incursion, Rhoda Roberts calls that terror “the silence by violence.” Roberts reconstructs that silence from the perspective of the voice it attempts to crush: “Let me tell you, it’s deathly loud.”¹¹⁹

In examining Urvashi Butalia’s work on witness to the sectarian violence arising from “virulent” “othering” in India at the time of Partition, Rustom Bharucha writes:

¹¹⁶ Camus, “Le Témoin de la liberté” (1948) in *Actuelles* 1, 188 et 191; *Oeuvres complètes d’Albert Camus*, vol 5, Paris: Gallimard and Club de L’Honnête Homme, 1983. Trans. Felman. Cited in Felman and Laub, *Testimony* 108.

¹¹⁷ Felman, 109.

¹¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “*The Precession of Simulacra*,” trans. Paul Foss, and Patton, Paul, *The Norton Anthology* 1732-33.

¹¹⁹ Roberts, “A Passion for Ideas: Black Stage.”

How people remember is almost more important, and illuminating of a moment of violence, than *what* they remember.¹²⁰

This study will be alert to how the selected plays by Thomson, Bovell, Anderson and Frankland use the language of theatre to represent – or subvert – cultural and political conventions that sustain the silencing of the experience of Indigenous Australians.

¹²⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (London: Athlone, 2000) 114-15. Bharucha cites Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1998.