

Aesthetics of Truth-Telling: Intercultural Applied Theatre Praxis in an Australian Women's Prison

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ABSTRACT

Our Ancestors, Our History, Our Lost Culture was a devised theatre performance that I developed with women inside Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC) Australia in 2017. The performance was based on a memoir from the *Stolen Generations*: the thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from tribal homelands and separated from family in Australia throughout the early nineteenth century up until the 1970s. The intergenerational trauma of these forced removals continues, as do the wider structural inequalities brought about by the colonial project, including the crisis of Indigenous over-incarceration. Indigenous leaders refer to this as the "torment of powerlessness" (Referendum Council, 2017) and believe that there must first be a process of truth-telling before healing and reconciliation can occur. An example of Applied Theatre as Research (ATAR), the purpose of the project was to investigate how a group of incarcerated women would engage

aesthetically in representing a story from the Stolen Generations; and how applied theatre in this contemporary carceral context might be used as a mode of truth-telling. This paper describes how the project reflected an aesthetics of truth-telling, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous women came together to interpret and represent the complexities of this troubling history, and to gain a deeper understanding of its place in contemporary Australian culture.

BACKGROUND

At the time of the project, Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC) was a maximum-security prison on the outskirts of the city that holds a population of up to 300, offering inmates vocational education and training, criminogenic rehabilitation, and recreational programmes that included sport, and occasionally art and music. Over the past nine years, I have run six participatory programmes at the centre, encompassing devised theatre, radio drama and immersive audio. This paper focuses on *Our Ancestors, Our History, Our Lost Culture*, a devised performance that I developed with women inside BWCC in 2017. It was based on the memoir *Is That You, Ruthie?* (1999) by Aboriginal Elder and author Ruth Hegarty, which describes her time in Barambah Aboriginal Mission after being removed there as a baby from her tribal Gunggari lands in Mitchell, Queensland in 1930. Barambah was one of many reserves and missions that were established at the turn of the nineteenth century under the government's policy of "protection and segregation" (Baldry, Carlton, & Cunneen, 2015). People from over fifty tribes from all over the state of Queensland were forcibly removed to Barambah as part of the Stolen Generations. The term Stolen Generations came out of the landmark report *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Wilson, 1997), which detailed the extent and impacts of government policies of forced removal that were carried in Australia throughout the early nineteenth century up until the 1970s.

The idea for *Our Ancestors* evolved out of my previous work, specifically the *Daughters of the Floating Brothel* project, where I had worked with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women over 2014 and 2015 to create a radio docudrama which explored the history of

female incarceration in Australia since its establishment as a penal colony in the late eighteenth century. One of the episodes in this work had focused on Barambah Aboriginal Mission as a site of incarceration, and Auntie Ruth Hegarty had acted as a creative consultant on this part of the story. It had been clear that the Aboriginal women in the group engaged most strongly with creating the Barambah Mission episode, describing it as real and culturally relevant to them. The site of Barambah mission is now the Aboriginal community of Cherbourg, and many of the women who move through BWCC have history and ties there. In 2016, an activities officer at BWCC worked with a group of Aboriginal women to create a live theatre performance for NAIDOC Week¹ that addressed the loss of traditional culture. The project had generated some energy and enthusiasm for live performance among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who wanted to build on the themes they had started exploring in the NAIDOC piece. These previous experiences led me to propose *Is That You, Ruthie?* as the basis for our next project.

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are being incarcerated at alarming rates,² and this is seen as part of the continued legacy of the settler-colonial project (Baldry, Carlton, & Cunneen, 2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Judy Atkinson (2002), an Aboriginal scholar with Yiman/Bunjalung heritage, is among many who believe that intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation and the Stolen Generations has contributed to widespread disadvantage and despair. Indigenous leaders refer to this as the “torment of powerlessness” (Referendum Council, 2017) and believe that there must be a process of truth-telling in order for healing and reconciliation to occur. Australia has avoided the process of officially sanctioned truth-telling that has occurred in countries such as Canada and South

¹ NAIDOC stands for National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and achievements being observed annually throughout Australia for a week from the first Sunday in July.

² Citing data from the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016), the Australian Law Reform Commission (2017) reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constituted two percent of the Australian adult population, but comprised twenty-seven percent of the national adult prison population. The Commission went on to report that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *women* are the fastest growing prison population in Australia, currently being 21.2 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women.

Africa through their Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs). And yet Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian theatre makers, filmmakers, novelists, visual artists and storytellers continuously grapple with the traumas and tensions of our nation's founding, with many Indigenous theatre and literary works drawing on personal testimony and memoir to convey the shattering effects of the Stolen Generations (see Enoch & Mailman, 2008; Harrison & Enoch, 1998). Ruth's memoir is a compelling and beautifully crafted example of this; a personal account that draws attention to the harsh, punishments, painful separation from family, and glimmers of hope and laughter that underpinned daily life in the mission. Works like these engage audiences in ways beyond the sensationalised depictions and deficit discourses around Indigenous disadvantage and dysfunction that pervade the mainstream media and debate in this country. They have the potential to achieve aesthetic impact (Robinson & Martin, 2016) beyond the witness/truth-teller binary that exists in the official performance of TRCs. In this project, I therefore wished to investigate how making theatre based on difficult historical "truths", particularly inside a prison, might enable us as a group to experience the complexity and intimacy that exists in Australia between the past and the present, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, coloniser and colonised. In this paper I will focus on two aspects of this: first, how the shared sense of responsibility we felt for truth-telling enabled us to create a space for intercultural dialogue and creative collaboration; and second, how the process and final performance exemplified an aesthetics of truth-telling, where embodiment, affect and intimacy drew us into Ruth's story, and its situation in a contemporary prison deepened this engagement.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY: APPLIED THEATRE AS RESEARCH

In a project like this, applied theatre can be seen as operating at the "cultural interface" (Nakata, 2007) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. I conceive applied theatre as an art of living—an embodied, relational act of making of selves, worlds, and cultures in art, and in life: introduced as a Western aesthetic theory by John Dewey in the 1930s (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 2000), yet valued and pursued by Eastern philosophers and Indigenous peoples for millennia.

As such, aesthetics encompasses the embodied aesthetic engagement and meaning making that occurs within the process of ensemble building and creating works; the resulting works as they are experienced in a community-based event; and the radical potential of such affective encounters to embody ethical participation and social justice. This approach recognises that sometimes contradictory feelings such as care, love, hope, intimacy, tension, conflict and exclusion, might together form the affective palette that colours an applied theatre experience (see Thompson, 2015; Woodland, 2018). O'Connor and Anderson (2015) highlight the participatory, dialogic, aesthetic qualities of applied theatre as key to its potential as a research methodology. Claiming the term applied theatre as research, and its acronym ATAR, they make the case for applied theatre as a methodology that reflects the complexity of human experience and offers space for "critical hope" (p. 47). ATAR, the authors suggest, is a "politically and socially committed approach that requires research to be responsive to and driven by each unique setting" (p. 47). Over the past eight years, my work in BWCC has reflected this, with the consistent thread being to interrogate aesthetically the intersectionality between women's personal experiences of incarceration, and the wider "carceral cultures"³ in which they exist (see Woodland, 2019). The over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Australia, the Stolen Generations, and Ruth Hegarty's story are framed here as existing within Australia's culture of carcerality that began when it was established as a penal colony.

O'Connor and Anderson (2015) begin to discuss ATAR as a potentially decolonizing approach to research, which supports the earlier collection of work undertaken by Denzin, Lincoln and Smith (2008), locating critical Indigenous methodology as, "The site where theories of performance, pedagogy, and interpretive practice come together" (Denzin & Lincoln 2008, p. 6). Working interculturally at BWCC, with a predominantly Indigenous cast, this approach to methodology was at the forefront where, as I will describe below, the women themselves recognized the potential for performance as a

³ The conference Carceral Cultures was hosted in Vancouver by the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies in March 2018. This event brought together scholars, artists and activists to consider all the different ways human beings are becoming, now more than ever, subject to tyrannies and technologies of displacement, separation, surveillance and control.

critical and pedagogical tool. Also aligning with Indigenous methodologies, Nicholson (2016) describes the “relational ontology” of applied theatre, where “change happens not only through challenging institutional structures of power but also through the relationality of experience” (p. 254). Although *Our Ancestors* was situated within a critical exploration of the colonial legacy of Indigenous dispossession and incarceration, the discussion below will demonstrate that the real work was happening within and through our embodied interactions and relationships in the creative process and final performance, rather than achieving widespread structural change to the system.

Because this project dealt directly with a story from the Stolen Generations, there were ethical concerns for me as a non-Indigenous facilitator. I therefore continued to work with Aunty Ruth as a creative consultant and engaged Amber Romeril Sainsbury, a Brisbane-based Aboriginal actor, as co-facilitator. The devising process was democratic and collaborative, with the women engaged as equal partners in making the work. But although I tried to defer to Ruth and Amber’s authority, there remains a strong sense of tension for me as the leader and therefore mediator of Aboriginal history within the project; and as a researcher speaking about it now. I may never resolve this tension, but I remain mindful of Atkinson’s (2002) assertion that the traumas of colonisation are shared by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and that we must therefore all share in healing them.

STAGING IS THAT YOU, RUTHIE?

When the devising began in January 2017 the group consisted of two non-Indigenous women, eight Aboriginal women who had direct links to Barambah Mission, and three who did not have direct links but knew of ancestors who had been impacted by forced removal to other missions and communities around the country. We worked for two hours twice a week for six weeks, and then more intensively for the final two weeks developing the memoir into a live performance. The women named this project *Our Ancestors, Our History, Our Lost Culture*. Most of them had read Aunty Ruth’s book, and the devising process consisted of working through the book chapter by chapter, and selecting which scenes or moments we felt would be the most important, powerful, funny or hopeful for the audience.

The play followed Ruth’s own linear narrative, beginning with her

family's move to Barambah when she was an infant. Much of the story centres on Ruthie's separation from her mother at four years old, and subsequent life in the Mission's dormitory system, where girls and boys were segregated at age four or five, educated to fourth grade, and then sent out to work as domestic and farm labourers once they reached their early teens. The play depicted many of the day-to-day routines, punishments, joys and sorrows of the Mission, where Ruthie developed powerful and lasting bonds with the other girls, despite (or perhaps because of) their shared grief and loss. At age fourteen she was sent out to work, and the cruel work conditions led her to begin resisting and protesting in small ways against the injustices of the system. Her acts of rebellion included playing tricks on her employers, and a daring attempt to escape in the back of a mail truck. But being an avid reader and writer, Ruthie also used her talents to write letters to the Superintendent at Barambah Mission, and gain some semblance of justice in a system that is now known to have robbed tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers of their wages (Kidd, 2006). The play ended with Ruthie, decades later, beginning to research her history through official files and documents, and returning to the Mission for a reunion of the "dorm girls" (dormitory girls). The women performed in a large classroom to an invited audience of around twelve Aboriginal Elders from Cherbourg and Brisbane, eleven peers of the women performing, twelve centre staff members, and Aunty Ruth herself. Although Aunty Ruth, now eighty-six years old, had not physically been present through the devising process, the women knew that she was aware and involved in the background, and would be seeing the final work. As we were working so closely with her story, she took on an almost mythical status in the room, and was treated like a celebrity when she finally attended in person on the performance day.

TRUTH-TELLING AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN CULTURES

Throughout the devising process, there was a strong sense that the memoir represented Ruth's real life, and must be followed faithfully in performance. The Aboriginal women in the group were clear from the outset that they wished to honour Aunty Ruth's story, the other Elders who would be attending the performance, and their own ancestors who

had lived through similar experiences. The two non-Indigenous women wanted to, in their words, “Do justice to Aunty Ruth’s story,” and support the process of educating people about what had happened during the Stolen Generations. One of these young women would passionately defend her opinions about what parts of the book should be included in the play, sometimes with tears in her eyes. She told me that this was the first book she had ever read through to the end, and she wanted so much to be true to Aunty Ruth’s story that the inevitable process of editing and selecting that goes into adapting a novel for the stage became painful to her. She later recalled that the other women in the group had been impressed by her passion, and did not at all begrudge her investment in the story. Indeed, most of the women struggled with this editing process. The play therefore emulated the linear structure of the original memoir, with a scene for each chapter, linked together by narration that was delivered in direct address by a woman playing Ruth the storyteller.

Dewar and Goto (2012) suggest that art has had a critical role to play in the Canadian truth and reconciliation process, with Inuk artist and scholar Heather Igloliorte (2012) describing how works can speak across cultures in ways that are “undeniable” (p. 64). Barnes (1997) describes how a university-based intercultural theatre process during the time of the South African TRC, “Bridged the usual divide between plays that black students take part in and those that interest whites” (p. 6). Describing the decolonizing potential of ATAR, O’Connor and Anderson (2015) suggest, “The participatory, democratic processes inherent to applied theatre work can be understood as the bridge which allows for intimate conversations about things which matter to all participants” (p. 38). This approach was also reflected in Wilkinson’s (2016) verbatim theatre work, which explored intercultural perspectives of the stories surrounding an Australian Aboriginal massacre site. The process of devising *Our Ancestors* certainly created a bridge between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the room. Not only were we learning together about our shared history and working towards a shared outcome, but we were also navigating this intercultural terrain aesthetically, collectively putting ourselves at the service of the story. At the end of the first workshop session, one of the Aboriginal women related that when she had first walked in and seen the white women in the group, she had been surprised that they had been included. She went on to add:

But then I thought about that movie with David Gulpilil [*The Tracker*] and how much I hated that character Gary Sweet played.⁴ And when I thought about it, he did a good job because he was helping to educate people about what happened back in those days.

The two non-Indigenous women in the group were cast in a similar way to the Gary Sweet character, portraying the police officers, superintendents, matrons and government officials in Ruthie's young life, often as somewhat aggressive, one-dimensional antagonists. These depictions echoed concerns that were raised by Aboriginal cultural theorist Marcia Langton (1993) twenty-five years ago in her pivotal work on representations of Aboriginality in film, television and radio. Langton suggested that many Australian filmmakers [up to the point of writing], "Want to see 'Europeans' portrayed only as oppressors and all the complexities eliminated. They fail to admit the intersubjectivity of black/white relations" (pp. 37-38). But although Ruthie had experienced small moments of kindness from one or two white people during this time, the overwhelming majority of her experiences unfortunately were the opposite. Perhaps inevitably, in the face of all the usual logistical and time constraints of mounting theatre inside a prison, priority was given to Ruthie's side of the story in terms of trying to achieve detail and subtlety in the performance. I was concerned about this dynamic, wondering whether the non-Indigenous women might feel disempowered or marginalised in the group, or somehow internalise the conflict and negativity surrounding their roles. I checked in with them regularly about this, both during and after the process, and they assured me that they felt fine about it, because it was important to convey what they saw as the truth of the story.

Despite the one participant's initial unease around non-Indigenous involvement that I have described above, and the sometimes-fraught race relations that I have observed inside BWCC, the atmosphere throughout the project remained inclusive and accepting. Co-facilitator Amber spoke about this later:

⁴ In this 2002 film by Rolf de Heer, set in 1922 outback Australia, Gary Sweet plays the role of The Fanatic, a racist white police officer who relentlessly pursues the Aboriginal man who is accused of murdering a white woman.

Generally, there was no black and white stuff that was brought up. I expected there to maybe be a bit of...you know, a bit of white-hating stuff being chuckled out there, you know, or spoken about. But there was nothing. There wasn't anything.

One of the Aboriginal women spoke later about how important it had been to have the non-Indigenous women involved, not only to help tell the story, but also because she valued their support, and the opportunity to share her culture with them. Towards the end of the devising process, at one of the final sessions before the performance, there was a beautiful moment in which one of the Aboriginal actors asked the group to take off their shoes, join hands, and stand in a circle so that they could take a moment to focus and remember the ancestors—the reason why they were doing the performance. The two non-Indigenous women respectfully remained in their seats, assuming (as did I) that this was a moment for the Aboriginal women only. Soon the leader of the circle called the two women over to join them, “Come on, you’re honorary Murris⁵ today!” she said smiling, and the others all laughed and nodded in agreement.

OUR ANCESTORS AND AN AESTHETICS OF TRUTH-TELLING

The spontaneous performance described above generated a sense of care, inclusivity and warmth that formed part of the affective palette of aesthetic experience within our process, and mirrored the group’s care for the story itself. There were other elements that contributed to the aesthetics of truth-telling in the project, where we were drawn into the complexity of Ruth’s story, and its situation in a contemporary prison deepened this engagement. Living as she did within a punitive system of segregation and control, Ruth nevertheless felt strongly that the mission was her beloved home. This punishing, painful place was also a place of joy, sisterhood and love. In the performance, we were therefore focused on drawing out the moments of hope, humour and joy. We included a scene where the girls from the mission would go down to the local waterhole, nicknamed the “duck pond” and pretend to

⁵ Murri is the collective term for the diverse Aboriginal language groups of Queensland and North Western New South Wales, Australia.

be movie stars, striking poses and pretending to smoke, using twigs as cigarettes. This segued into a dance routine to the song “By a Waterfall” from the 1933 Hollywood film *Footlight Parade*, where the girls kicked their legs up in a chorus line. This scene got the biggest laughs of the performance, with Aunty Ruth shouting from the audience, “Kick higher!” Another scene showed the dormitory girls finding fun ways to do their chores, pulling each other on a blanket across the wooden floors in order to polish them. And yet we also represented some of the punishments experienced by the dorm girls—having their heads shaved or being locked in the tiny mission jail for minor transgressions against the mission’s many often-arbitrary rules. These contradictions are also present in the contemporary prison, where we know anecdotally that women often experience a level of ambivalence about their incarceration. Despite feeling the pain of separation from children, and the frustration of being denied their freedom, many women deliberately return to prison in order to retreat from violence, achieve stable housing, detox from drugs and alcohol, and re-connect to family and culture. *Our Ancestors* provided an aesthetic space to explore the parallels between the sense of home and sisterhood in Ruthie’s story, and the same feelings for the participants today.

Whitlock (2006) highlights the primacy of testimony and memoir in Australia and Canada’s truth and reconciliation processes, and suggests, “It is both the strength and weakness of reconciliation discourses that they appeal to emotion and, specifically, to that most unreliable site of remembrance, the heart” (p. 40). As such, testimonies presented as part of a legal process of truth-telling can be deemed questionable in terms of their factual reliability (Bharucha, 2001). Yet Bharucha suggests, “Seemingly ahistorical signs of subjectivity and emotion have a place in the writing of history. They do not necessarily replace facts; they complicate them” (p. 3770). Being based on a written memoir, with direct address narration, the performance itself certainly had a testimonial quality to it. But our embodied creative engagement with the story through the devising process, and certain decisions we made around staging the key scenes from her story, moved the work beyond the historical facts of Ruthie’s story and into an emotional, intimate realm. An example was the scene depicting Ruthie being separated from her mother Ruby at age four, forced to leave the mother and baby dormitory and go and stay with the older girls. From

this point forward, as was the rule, Ruthie and her mother were kept separate and forbidden to associate with each other, which marked the beginning of their lifelong estrangement. We had been using white sheets to signify various different forms of control inside the mission, for example, Ruby was wrapped tightly in a white sheet when she first arrived from the bush and was being inducted into dormitory life. We continued this motif with the heartbreaking moment when Ruthie tries to find her mother in the dormitory:

SFX: Mission Bell.

School finishes. Matron and Superintendent enter with white sheet and erect a “wall” down middle of stage.

Ruthie skips in a circle and back towards the sewing table where her mother RUBY is sitting with FRIEND, trying to go around the sheet.

RUTHIE: Mum, I’m home!

FRIEND jumps up from the sewing table and blocks her way before she can reach her mother.

FRIEND: You’re not allowed on this side of the dorm any more. You’re a schoolgirl now. You can’t see your Mum any more. You’d better go. If you’re caught here you’ll get into trouble. *EXIT.*

Enter four other dorm girls. They lie down to sleep with Ruthie among them.

SFX: Maranoa Lullaby.

Ruby moves from behind the sewing table and looks over the sheet that divides the stage, but quickly steps away when she sees Ruthie stir. Ruthie then creeps up to the sheet to try and catch a glimpse of her mother, then returns to bed. She cries quietly. (Excerpt from script)

The last sequence was performed slowly and silently, with the

Maranoa Lullaby providing a mournful soundtrack. Aunty Ruth had hummed this tune to me one day at her home. A favourite of hers, it was adapted in the early twentieth century from a traditional Gunggari Aboriginal song. At this moment, the audience members appeared to be deeply moved, with both the Elders and the women from the prison welling up with tears. The moment likely achieved deeper emotional resonance, given that these particular actors and audience members would have identified strongly with being removed from family, and/or having children taken away from them. Later, the woman who played the Superintendent remembered it as a particularly emotional moment on stage as she held one end of the white sheet: "That's why I had my back to everyone. Because I felt shy in showing my emotion. That's how I composed myself, was actually by not facing everyone."

One of the participants later said that the subject matter of the play had made her instantly committed to the process. Her grandparents had been part of the Stolen Generations and although she had never known them, she wished to honour their memory:

I don't really know much about my history because I was brought up in foster care, but what I did find out in that play was enough really to know really what my grandparents went through and how hard it was and how difficult it was for them back in them days. ... It just made me connect to them in ways that I never thought I'd be connected with them in any other way.

This last statement reflects the sense of spirituality that is integral to Indigenous Australian experience and knowledge systems, and it would not be ethical or appropriate for me to interpret such matters through a non-Indigenous lens. However, I would suggest that the aesthetic engagement in a creative process of embodied storytelling may have contributed to this unique sense of closeness to her unknown ancestors. Further, this woman's deeply subjective and emotional connection to the story, which was shared by many of the other Aboriginal women in the group, and witnessed by the non-Indigenous women (myself included), lent the process an intimacy and authenticity that might not have been achieved through reading the book alone.

At the end of the final performance, the actors returned to the

stage for a question and answer session. Someone in the audience asked if they could each stand up and introduce themselves. In this powerful moment, each of the Indigenous women shared what they knew of their “mob”—their Aboriginal background. Two of these women said they had been “grown up” by white people, and were unsure of their origins. The two non-indigenous women embraced this spontaneous post-performance introduction in their own way. “I am not an Aboriginal woman, but I really wanted to help tell this story,” one said. The other said, “I’m from New Zealand originally, but now I’m Australian.” She added, “I know what it’s like to have my children stolen, and that’s the connection I make with this performance.” This post-performance moment echoes Cohen et al.’s (2008) description of a performance of *Stolen* (Harrison & Enoch, 1998) at Belvoir Street Theatre in 2000, where the actors introduced themselves at the end and described their own stories of forced removal. Citing Director Wesley Enoch’s reflections on this performance convention, the authors suggest, “Technical or aesthetic questions about the relation of actor to character seem to no longer to matter at this point, only the acceptance that truths are being revealed on all levels between performers and audience” (p. 84). Sharing truths in this way brings about a strong sense of intimacy in performance; and this intimacy extended beyond the performance, as later, the performers and creative team celebrated with the Elders over tea and scones, sharing time together in an atmosphere of warmth and support. A couple of the Elders approached the two women who had been unsure of their Aboriginal ancestry, and were able to help them piece together parts of their family history, drawing connections to family members that they knew from around the region. Other women with ties to Cherbourg spent the time with their Elders, sharing memories and stories. At the close of the morning, after everyone had left, Auntie Ruth drew the women performers together for a prayer and a group hug.

CONCLUSION

For all the uncertainty that surrounds the concept of truth in memory, testimony and memoir, I would suggest that the group’s shared commitment to honouring the ancestors, with the emotional heart of Ruth’s story as a vehicle, created a unique kind of embodied truth-telling. I believe that being aesthetically engaged in making a

performance such as *Our Ancestors* inside a contemporary prison, and presenting it to an audience of Elders that included Ruth Hegarty herself, enabled us to arrive at a more intimate understanding of the objective facts surrounding the Stolen Generations. This was key to the process as an example of the relational ontology of applied theatre and Indigenous methodologies, where there was an emphasis on the affective, embodied connections between participants, facilitators and audience members; and temporal boundaries between the past and the present were collapsed. As one of only three non-Indigenous women in the group, I was conscious of our role in the process: as witnesses and allies, receiving intimate knowledge, and de-centering ourselves in order to represent a story of national shame and trauma. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2008), as an example of ATAR, the project represented an integration of the pedagogical, performative and the political; with a praxis-based ethic that was, “Grounded in performative practices that embody love, hope, care and compassion” (p. 9). The process also reflected several elements that Indigenous Scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes as essential to decolonial Indigenous research methodologies:

- Creating formal spaces for testimony or the revealing of truths; storytelling, and the experiences of women and Elders in particular;
- Celebrating survival through “an event in which artists and storytellers come together to celebrate collectively a sense of life and diversity and connectedness”; and,
- “The remembering of a painful past, and importantly, people’s responses to that pain” (pp. 144-147).

This project, like many examples of theatre in prison, involved a complex layering of personal experiences, aesthetic qualities and contemporary and historical resonances, all operating within the wider flows of politics and culture. The performance event brought about further complexities, with the Elder audience members in many cases experiencing a story that reflected the joys and sorrows of their own life experiences, being performed in a prison, by women who were themselves subject to the colonial legacy of Indigenous dispossession, child removal, and over-incarceration in Australia.

When it came to the day of the play I was so nervous, I was really stressed you know, but just thinking about my great grandma and my great grandpa; they went through the same thing, you know. I just kept that strong in my mind and in my heart and I just kept telling myself, I can do this, I can do this. I was worrying about messing up, you know, but I went through it with a blank mind and them in my mind and, you know, I did it, I did it. (Participant)

Author's Note: The research discussed in this chapter was completed with support from Queensland Corrective Services. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and in no way reflect the views or policies of Queensland Corrective Services.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Woodland, S. (2019). Aesthetics of truth-telling: Intercultural applied theatre praxis in an Australian women's prison. *ArtsPraxis*, 6 (1), 39-57.

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