

**'This Place is Full of Drama Queens': Reflecting on the Value of
Drama in a Women's Prison**

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Introduction

After 15 years of running drama workshops in women's prisons, I wish I had a dollar for every time a corrections officer has joked with me, "This place is full of drama queens!". These officers are likely referring to the tense, hyper-feminine environment of the prison, or alluding to the 'acting skills' that are brought to bear in the theatre of crime and punishment. I have also heard, for example, the sarcastic comment, 'We've got plenty of actors in here'. These kinds of comments reflect (among other things) a trivialization or de-valuing of prison drama programmes that can unfortunately come from some quarters within the institution. But for me, the prison drama workshop rarely elicits the kinds of dramas that these comments imply. It is a dynamic, celebratory, respectful and often-reflective space, where being a drama queen means embracing the art form and all it has to offer in rounding out our human experience. Contrary to the sarcastic gate comments above, my most recent project could not have gone ahead without the tireless dedication of a small number of activities officers who clearly saw the value in what we were doing.

There is an onus on practitioners to repeatedly convince the 'system' (i.e. corrections authorities, government bodies, even the general public) about the value of the work in ways that align with their professed vision for the reform and rehabilitation of prisoners. It is the notion of *value* that I hope to address here, inspired by recent studies that aim to bring more theoretical rigour to the question of how and why we should value the arts and culture, particularly in community and participatory contexts (see Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Matarasso 2017). In these studies, there is an acknowledgement of the difference between evaluation, which measures the impact of the work, and a scholarly interrogation of value, which requires nuanced analysis that focuses on understanding value in the arts in all its complexity, rather than simply proving its existence (Matarasso 2017). Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) acknowledge that there are many different ways to interrogate value in the arts, including a focus on monetary value through methods such as cultural economics and social return on investment on the one hand; and qualitative explorations of value in social, cultural and aesthetic terms on the other. I will focus on the latter, reflecting on three separate drama programmes that I have run in the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC) Australia since 2010. Through these case studies, I will hopefully support the notion that we need not conceive of a binary separation between the *intrinsic* value of drama in prison (often rather clumsily described

as ‘art for art’s sake’), and its *instrumental* value in developing skills and knowledge, and enhancing the experience of participants (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016). In doing this, I hope to speak from within the art form of drama about the social, cultural and aesthetic value and significance of the work, rather than framing it within prevailing discourses from areas such as rehabilitation, criminology or psychology. I believe that there is a need to explore and articulate the complexity of participatory drama in a prison context, and to frame its value in ways that are led by the participants’ interests, and by the aesthetic and cultural qualities of the practices themselves. This should move the conversation beyond what Belfiore and Bennett (2008: 192–93) describe as the ‘ritualistic’ use of a rhetoric of transformation in many contemporary debates on social impact in the arts.

Background

Drawing on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, recent reports in the media have focused on the increase in female incarceration in the past decade (Meyer 2016; Willingham 2015), and the staggering increase and over-representation of Indigenous women in prison (McEntyre 2015). It has been observed that the latter group are perhaps the most marginalized of all in the system, with a need for programmes that are culturally relevant and responsive to their specific needs (Biddle and Swee 2012; Dockery 2010; Jones et al. 2002). Prison arts invariably hold a precarious place in this mix, often depending on the commitment and drive of specific prison managers and staff, rather than broader government and public support. Falling within the Queensland state government’s jurisdiction, BWCC currently houses up to 300 women and is situated on the outskirts of Brisbane’s west. Since 2011, I have delivered four drama programmes there, with the fifth just completed at the time of writing. Up until now, these have been supported by BWCC in principle but funded with a combination of federal and state government arts funding, research grants and in-kind university access to resources. This year the management at BWCC has contributed significantly to the latest programme, perhaps a reflection of how the work is now recognized and valued by management at that institution.

In these projects, there is often a stronger emphasis on the creative process and the development of ensemble than the achievement of performances that have high production values and/or public audiences. This has not always been our choice, but has rather been borne out of the unique constraints and challenges of the context. The majority of women at BWCC are serving short-term sentences. They are a highly mobile group whose attendance in a drama programme can be regularly interrupted by medication calls, disciplinary actions, legal visits, court dates and work commitments, or cut short by sudden release or transfer to other facilities. At this point there is little to no possibility of inviting outside audience members into BWCC unless they are regular official visitors (for example Aboriginal Elders) who have already been cleared for entry, although I hope that this might change in the future. As BWCC is a maximum security facility, we have so far been unable to clear the

performers for release into the community or to other prisons to tour a performance. This means that although the performance outcomes are an important aspect of the work, I tend to focus on the meaning and value of the creative process for participants.

Within the significant body of documented practice and research in prison-based theatre that has emerged over the past twenty years, there are some key threads that are evident in describing the purpose of the work, and by extension, the ways in which its value might be investigated. I believe most of these can be framed using Matarasso’s (2016) three ‘fields of intention’ that he sees operating in participatory arts more broadly. The first is the notion of *cultural democratization* – that is, facilitating equal access to and participation in fixed elite forms of art and cultural expression, for example Australia’s Bell Shakespeare Company offering workshops in a youth detention centre (Peiper 2015). The second is the notion of *art for social change* at the level of both individuals and communities (Matarasso cites Geese Theatre Company UK as an exemplar in the prison theatre field here). And the third is the intention of facilitating *cultural democracy* – that is, the political act of sharing with people the means of cultural production, most often through collaborative practice between professional and non-professional artists. My own practice in prisons represents a movement between and across the second and third fields of intention described here. Having been introduced to prison theatre as a member of Geese Theatre Company in the early 2000s, I have since developed my own approaches and practices that lately seem to meld the ideas of social change and cultural democracy. Alongside this I have developed as a researcher, and therefore it is important to mention that the studies I refer to here are examples of practice-led enquiry, as opposed to being external interrogations of another’s drama practices.

Regardless of which fields of intention the practice may fall under, claims are often made that the work connects participants with their humanity, or that it is a humanizing endeavour that counteracts the dehumanizing machine of the institution. It seems that while we as arts practitioners instinctively know this to be true, there appears to be little fine-grained analysis of how or why this unfolds over the course of a prison theatre or drama programme, and how it manifests in the performances that are created. I believe that the humanizing potential of the arts in prisons is inherently connected to their significance and value in aesthetic, social and cultural terms; and are therefore impossible to measure or quantify in the ways that corrections authorities and policy makers most commonly demand. Matarasso (2017) and others advise that we should therefore work to change the conversation about cultural value itself, with Belfiore and Bennett (2008) suggesting that we must also recognize the complex and fiercely contested intellectual history of how western culture conceives the social impact of the arts. These have been preoccupations for me since I began the work in BWCC, when I was inspired by a study conducted by Jenny Hughes (2005) into the arts in prisons in the United Kingdom in which she suggested that practitioners and researchers must speak more compellingly from within their specific art forms about their effects in a prison context. For me, the most pressing questions in all of this are, ‘Value to whom?’ and ‘Value for whom?’. And the work described here will certainly reflect some of the ethical tensions surrounding

these questions. These case studies will also reflect my conception of social, cultural and aesthetic value as being led by the practice – responsive to each particular situation and each group of participants, but sitting within the wider context of art, culture and society.

2010: Devised drama and aesthetic experience

The first drama programme that I will discuss was delivered in BWCC as part of my doctoral study in 2010. In this programme, which I called *Living Stories*, I drew from a range of drama approaches and strategies including image theatre, drama therapy, text-based work, improvisation games, drama skills development and process drama. I worked alone, delivering two-hour workshops twice a week for 23 sessions, finally resulting in a short performance to an audience of around 30 other women and staff members. There were between five and ten women in the group, with numbers fluctuating depending on other commitments and interruptions as I have described in the introduction. The women were aged between 23 and 60, and were a mix of mostly Anglo-Australian, with two Indigenous Australian participants, one Afro-Caribbean and one Indian-Singaporean. In the study, I initially aimed to explore how drama might be a positive activity for women in this context, and to discover what drama approaches would engage them. Having previously been involved in Geese Theatre Company's explicitly rehabilitation-focused work, *Living Stories* represented my own move to explore new ways of working in an Australian prison context. The drama practice was experimental, moving through different structures and approaches until we decided on a theme for the final performance: *Inspiring Women from History*, after which we focused on devising scenes from the lives of women such as Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks and Mary McKillop. In researching the work, one of my key concerns was to find a way of integrating the aesthetic with the instrumental, rather than importing models from outside the art form of drama (for example, rehabilitation theory) to explore the value of the process to the women participants and its ameliorative effects.

I had some strong ideas about the potential value of drama in prison that I had carried with me from my work with Geese, and also from my recent testimonial performance work with 'Forgotten Australians' – survivors of institutional childhood abuse and neglect (Woodland 2009). These were rooted in the notion that the arts could facilitate wellbeing, personal development or positive change for the women on an individual level. Within this, I was keen to find out what the women's own versions of positive change might look like, and I soon learned that although many of the women were contemptuous of the institution's rehabilitation programmes, they invariably expressed a desire to transform themselves and their lives in some way. Rapidly honing my skills as a researcher, I soon found that it was not useful to ask the question, 'What do you get out of doing drama?' in our recorded one-to-one interviews, because this inevitably elicited one-word responses such as 'teamwork', 'communication', 'confidence'. While these are undoubtedly positive skills that are often attributed to drama by all kinds of participant groups, they felt somewhat shallow and

coloured by institutional expectations and rehabilitation-speak. This example is just one of a number of methodological considerations that are beyond the scope of this chapter to explore, but crucially it points towards the need for an approach that would move beyond blunt instrumentalism to delve more deeply into the complexity of the women's experiences of the drama, and their aesthetic engagement within the process.

As the programme unfolded, I became interested in the intersections between the fictional roles and narratives within the drama process for example, in improvised and scripted scenes; and the roles, identities and stories that the women shared of themselves outside the actual drama work for example, in conversations, reflections and casual moments. Although the women were reluctant to create performance based on their own lives and stories, many were nevertheless keen to share these stories in detail during casual conversations within the context of the drama group. This led me to develop a pragmatist aesthetic framework to analyse the process, influenced significantly by John Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* and the work of aesthetic theorists who have followed such as Richard Shusterman (2000). Belfiore and Bennett (2008) acknowledge Dewey's theory as sitting within the long tradition of linking art with personal wellbeing. Dewey attributes aesthetic experience to the making as well as viewing of an artwork, and also suggests that ordinary experiences can have aesthetic qualities. His aesthetic theory expands the idea of the aesthetic beyond Kantian elitism, to encompass everyday people and everyday practices. Proposing that art should 'serve life' rather than 'prescribing a defined and limited mode of living' (1934: 140), Dewey's pragmatism also collapses the boundary between art and life, and aesthetics and ethics, which reminds us of the 'art of living' that is also reflected in some eastern philosophical traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism.

I have written elsewhere in detail about this pragmatist aesthetic framing (Woodland 2016a), but essentially this enabled me to see that the women were engaged in a process of creating and re-creating their own identities through their engagement with role, narrative, spontaneity and emotion – all occurring both within and around the drama workshop process. I conceived this as an embodied poetics of renewal (Granger 2001), where the women were at times able to unbind their bodies through play, spontaneity and emotion; and unbind themselves from habitual roles and narratives that kept them tied up in stories of conflict and criminality. This idea of unbinding came from one participant who suggested that drama could bring out someone other than the 'bound-up prison person'. She explained to me that this bound-up prison person was someone who was careful and guarded almost to the point of paranoia. The term became useful for me in exploring other forms of binding that the women might demonstrate as habitual roles and narratives within the drama space, and how there appeared to be a rhythm between reinforcing these habits, and then reconfiguring them into new horizons through performance and play. In one woman's case, this was linked strongly to emotion, where she saw the value of the drama as enabling her to expand her emotional repertoire beyond what she described in binary terms as happy or angry. For another woman, there was value in seeing herself in roles other than that of a 'wicked criminal'.

The unique environment of the prison brought further aesthetic implications to this process, where the experience unfolded within an often-alienating institutional space marked by adversarial roles and conflict narratives. For some participants, the drama process did not always facilitate the creation of new narratives, allow the women to experiment with new roles, or enable them to show a new (better) side of themselves. There was a constant sense of necessary tension that underpinned the embodied poetics of self-creation in this context: 'Sometimes habitual roles and narratives would be reinforced within the drama process, and it did not always result in unbinding or renewal' (Woodland 2016a: 232). The aesthetic frame that I established for this study enabled me to conceive the value of the programme in poetic and aesthetic terms that sat at the intersection between drama and 'real' life. The philosophical terrain that informed the study (inspired by Dewey) reflects holistic and embodied notions of what it means to be human, and how the tensions, contradictions, sorrows and joys of this humanity – its complexity – is expressed and expanded through the creative process.

2012–15: Participatory radio drama and the legacy of female incarceration

Through the 2010 project described above, I observed how important it was for the women to find ways to experiment with new roles and ways of being themselves in the drama context. I also observed that there seemed to be a strong interest in history, and in exploring historical characters through the lens of their own lived experience. Inspired by Annie McKean's (2006) description of a project in HM Prison Winchester UK, I subsequently decided to experiment with Australia's penal history as a dramatic frame through which women might explore their contemporary experiences of imprisonment. Extending on the idea of *Inspiring Women from History* I wondered if we might find or create inspiring characters from Australia's convict past. I piloted this approach in 2012, where a group of six women engaged enthusiastically with the history of Old Boggo Road Gaol, a somewhat infamous historical prison in Brisbane that was built in the late 1800s and has since become a significant site for dark tourism. I observed that this process allowed the women to express their own emotions and experiences of imprisonment at a safe distance, through fictional characters that they created themselves collaboratively from historical records. Working in collaboration with two separate groups of women at BWCC, as well as participatory performance artist Daniele Constance, writer Shaun Charles, we developed these ideas further in 2014 and 2015 into *Daughters of the Floating Brothel*, a participatory radio drama project that explored moments in Australia's penal history from the convict arrival to the present. The decision to produce a radio drama came about when I began to consider the representation of voice, and how a wider audience might experience the women's performances. I also thought it might be a useful way to capture performances and create a more satisfying outcome in the face of the continuous interruptions, security and movement issues that I have mentioned earlier.

The *Floating Brothel* was the nickname given to the *Lady Juliana* (also *Lady Julian*), a ship that sailed from Portsmouth in 1789 to transport 226 female convicts from the overcrowded jails of England to the new penal colony in Australia. It was named the *Floating Brothel* because many of its passengers had been engaged in prostitution in London, but also because of the reputed sex trade that was conducted by the women in ports as the ship made its way to Australia.¹ In conceiving this project, I saw this ship arriving on Australian shores as a potentially rich starting point for creative work with the women. The posters that we used to advertise the project in 2014 showed images of the *Floating Brothel*, as well the Old Boggo Road Gaol, and invited women to come and explore this history through drama. We were somewhat surprised to find that for this project, ten out of the fifteen women who initially volunteered were Aboriginal. This led us to expand our understanding of incarceration beyond prison ships and prison buildings, and to recognize Aboriginal missions as equally significant carceral spaces in Australia's penal history (see Baldry et al. 2015; Casella and Fredericksen 2004). Over the two iterations of the project, we, therefore, worked towards creating a radio drama that represented five sites of incarceration: the *Lady Juliana*, the early convict settlement at Port Jackson, Barambah Aboriginal Mission 260 kilometres north west of Brisbane (established on Wakka Wakka land in 1904), Boggo Road Gaol in the early 1900s and the contemporary site of BWCC. We used a range of performance-making strategies to create fictional characters, scenes and content based on historical documentation, early paintings, images and stories, and the women's contemporary experiences. The final work incorporated documentary narration, dramatic scenes, soundscapes, personal stories, diary entries and poetic monologues created with the women, which were then edited and produced by the artistic team into an episodic radio docudrama. The work was presented at listening events in each of the three women's correctional centres in South East Queensland (BWCC, Numinbah Correctional Centre and Helana Jones), and a public event in Theatre 1.29 at Griffith University. Through partnerships with community radio 4zzz in Brisbane, and the Prison Radio Association in London, we also hoped to broadcast the work beyond the prison walls but this was unable to occur as I will explain later.

My investigations into this work are still ongoing, but I have begun to recognize its value beyond only the individual poetic/aesthetic engagement of participants that I describe in the previous section, and towards the social and cultural value of the participatory process and subsequent product, the radio drama. In the first instance, it seems that we as a team of practitioners developed an innovative approach to participatory drama practice in prison. The use of audio recording ensured that a range of participants could contribute to the project in different ways, and their voices could reach a wide audience while retaining a certain degree of privacy where necessary. With the radio docudrama form, there was potential for a diverse range of creative inputs such as dramatic scenes, soundscapes, music, poetry, song, storytelling and verbatim testimony; and some of the women reported that they were less intimidated by audio performance work than they were by doing live performance in front of an audience. The women appeared to be highly engaged in many aspects of the creative process, but most notably the creation of soundscapes to evoke different spaces within the

story. In these moments, the women enthusiastically rushed around the classroom looking for anything that could be used to create the different sounds required. They grabbed pieces of plastic out of waste paper bins and scrunched up paper to signify the sounds of wind in the gumtrees and crackling fires. They filled a waste paper bin with water to approximate the waves lapping on the beach. They turned tables over and walked on the wood to represent the officers marching on the deck of the *Lady Juliana*. They used the screech of a rotating metal magazine rack as an old rusty windmill. In these moments, the women were engaged in a spontaneous process of making, working together to create the world of the play. The use of audio recording and playback in the workshop room ensured that the women could hear the work as it progressed, and several of them said that they enjoyed this particular aspect of the process because it gave them a sense of satisfaction or instant gratification for the work they were putting in.

Prison radio has become an increasingly widespread global cultural practice that is now being recognized for its value as a tool to promote social justice and empowerment for incarcerated women in Australia (Anderson and Bedford 2017). Yet the programmes that the prison radio stations produce are most commonly focused on contemporary prison stories, social issues and music rather than traditional radio drama (which is perhaps a reflection of changing tastes and its disappearance from mainstream radio in Australia). The rising popularity of Internet podcasts, however, reflects a whole new audience for audio material of all kinds, including drama. In contrast to a theatre performance, an audio work has potentially lasting value as an artefact, not only for the women who create it, but also as a way of documenting the life of the prison community at that moment in time. Some audience members at both prison and public listening events for *Daughters* felt strongly affected by the authenticity of the contemporary women's voices representing historical stories of incarceration. The women's prison audiences particularly reported that they enjoyed the 'mental pictures' that they were able to create while listening to the work, and the emotions that were evoked through voice and soundscape. This shows that there may be potential in creating a work inside the contemporary women's prison and bringing it out into a historical prison site for the public, inspired by productions by performance makers such as Pan Pan, Dead Centre and Complicite that facilitate an immersive auditory experience for audience members. I would therefore suggest that extending radio drama into a prison context, where imprisoned women become the producers and actors in the drama, has value both as a participatory methodology and cultural practice.

In the pilot project, I initially felt that the combination of closeness and distance between the participants' experiences and those of their fictional historical forebears might facilitate unique forms of aesthetic engagement, and enable the women to process and reflect on their contemporary experiences of imprisonment and survival. However, as we developed the *Daughters* project, I also became interested in the personal, political and cultural significance of contemporary imprisoned women (particularly Aboriginal women) engaging with Australia's colonial legacy of female incarceration. The women were less inclined (or able?) to articulate their own personal connections to the stories we were telling,

only really observing, 'They had it much harder back then than we do now'. And yet the performances that the women produced in the historical context were inextricably linked to their contemporary experiences. For example, the historical soundscape that we created of the daily routine in Boggo Road, with bells ringing, doors slamming, keys jangling, floors being scrubbed and the officer calling for 'muster!' (head count) was replicated daily in the reality of BWCC, albeit with a contemporary twist (buzzers, electronic locks and intercoms). After creating a group scene about the 'black hole', Boggo Road's notorious subterranean punishment and isolation cell, one of our participants went back to her cell and wrote a monologue about her humiliating experience inside an isolation cell in the 'protection unit', where women are placed on watch for their own safety. She later said that the experience of writing her monologue had helped her deal with some of the difficult emotions around this traumatic event.

What emerged as perhaps the most significant aspect of the project was how the predominantly Aboriginal group engaged with the Barambah Mission story. 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 et al. 2015; Maddison 2011; Hogg 2001). People from over fifty tribes from all over the state of Queensland were forcibly removed there as part of the Stolen Generations.² Children were taken from their families to live in dormitories, strict curfews were imposed and the residents were referred to as 'inmates' (Williams and Belsey n.d.). Baldry et al. (2015: 177) observe that in these places, people were 'as imprisoned as if they had been locked in a proper jail.' I consulted on this aspect of the story with Aboriginal Elder and Memoirist Ruth Hegarty, who had grown up in Barambah from the 1930s to the 1950s. The site of the mission has since evolved into an Aboriginal community called Cherbourg where many of the women in our group had history and ties. It transpired that several of the women in our group had been part of an intergenerational legacy of incarceration going back to these early days of forced removal. They had great grandparents in Barambah Mission; parents, uncles and aunties in Boggo Road Gaol before its closure in 2000, and many had grown up together inside the system of state care and juvenile detention. One participant recalled seeing a photograph of a male ancestor who had been transported from Vanuatu to Australia as a slave; another told of her uncle who had been a victim of black death in custody.³ The problem of Indigenous over-representation is seen to be driven by high rates of poverty, homelessness, low educational attainment, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, sexual abuse, disability, trauma and mental ill health among Indigenous women (Baldry and Cunneen 2014; Bartels 2010; Stubbs 2011). But these conditions reflect systemic discrimination that can be traced back to Australia's establishment as a penal colony, and the subsequent displacement and genocide of the Indigenous population. Interrogating this legacy of institutional confinement through creative practice was both promising and risky. It was also fraught with ethical tensions around how the team of facilitators (who were all white) could act as mediators of this history for the group. In terms of the research and the practice, I am still investigating the value of this kind of engagement for the participants, as is reflected in the section that follows.

According to the group, the creative team and the audiences who listened to the finished radio drama, the Barambah Mission episode was the most accomplished aesthetically, narratively and in terms of the women's performances. Several women stated that this story was real and culturally relevant for them, and I believe this impacted significantly on their level of engagement during the creation of scenes for the episode, and the care and sensitivity with which the women approached the work. Through conversations with participants, it became clear that opportunity to engage with this aspect of their own history and culture was not only educational, but also a source of pride. Two participants, in particular, spoke of their passion for telling stories and educating the wider public about their people's history and culture. One of these women saw this as an opportunity to show her family, and in particular her young son, that she could do something other than engage in drugs and crime. This reflects a confluence of social impact and cultural democracy that is possible in this kind of work. Although the project may have reinforced the *fact* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment, criminality and victimhood, the project employed a self-conscious criticality in both performance and process. In *Daughters of the Floating Brothel*, the imprisoned women were re-cast as artists, actors, narrators and critical commentators; interpreting the postcolonial legacy of incarceration in Australia. Ironically, our aspirations for the project to reach a wider audience through radio were unmet, as the Department of Justice and Attorney General refused permission to broadcast the piece on community radio and Internet podcast at the last minute, even though BWCC management had been aware of and had approved the broadcast element of the project from the beginning. I sent a letter to appeal against this decision, but the Department maintained their stance, stating that the radio drama did not 'meet community expectations' for Queensland Corrective Services, and could potentially be 'confrontational for listeners'. This continued the marginalization of the group by denying them a wider public voice, and reflected a glaring chasm between how the work was valued by the women, the creative team and the audiences it did reach; and the larger authority of corrections in Queensland.

2017: *Our Ancestors, Our History, Our Lost Culture*

The above title was given to our most recent production in BWCC, a live theatre performance shown inside the centre in March 2017. For this project, I invited a local Aboriginal actor, Amber Romeril to join me as a co-facilitator. We worked with a group of 13 women to devise a performance based on Ruth Hegarty's memoir *Is That You Ruthie?* (1999), which describes her time in Barambah Mission after being removed there as a baby from her tribal Gunggari lands in Mitchell Queensland in 1930. Aunty Ruth again acted as a creative consultant. In developing this project, I was inspired by the power of the Barambah story in our previous project, combined with a clear and evident need for programmes that directly engage with Aboriginal culture and history that was reflected not only in criminology literature, but also in the responses of our previous participants. Also driving the shape of

the project was the broadcast embargo that we had experienced in 2015. Although they were regretful about the decision that had been made over their heads, BWCC management made it clear that we would not be able to do another radio project this time.

The trajectory of my work in the prison, from *Living Stories* and the *Inspiring Women from History* performance in 2010 up to this point, seemed to make adapting Aunty Ruth's memoir an obvious next step. A few months prior to the project commencing, the centre had purchased ten copies of the memoir and distributed these among women who were interested in developing the work. I met with these women a couple of times and invited them to underline passages from the book that they felt would need to be included in the play. Although the project was clearly advertised as dealing with a story from the *Stolen Generations*, we made sure that it was open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. When the devising began in January, we had two non-Indigenous participants, eight Aboriginal women who had direct links to Barambah Mission, and three who did not have direct links but knew of ancestors who were impacted by forced removal to other missions and communities around the country. Two of the women had worked with me in 2015 on the *Daughters* project, and a further two had worked with one of the prison's activities officers in 2016 to create a performance for NAIDOC week about the loss of traditional culture.⁴ Our group came together in January 2017, working for two hours twice a week for six weeks, and then more intensively for the final two weeks developing the memoir chapter by chapter into a live performance. The play was 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 Hegarty herself.

The commitment and investment of the group in this project was evident from the start. I had never experienced so much readiness to dive into the risky business of performance making, and of dealing with a highly emotive 'real-life' story that had powerful and direct contemporary resonances. The officer who facilitated 2016's NAIDOC performance was absolutely vital to the success of our project. He not only helped us navigate the bureaucratic challenges of getting equipment and people into the centre, he also worked to recruit participants and support them in staying with the project when issues and conflicts arose outside the drama space. This was because he had seen the value of the NAIDOC performance first-hand, having supported the women to develop the work with no prior experience of theatre himself, to create what was by all accounts a powerful performance for an audience of their peers. He was the antithesis of the staff members I allude to at the beginning of this chapter, and his comments to me suggested that he consciously acts in direct defiance to some of the prevailing disdain for arts and cultural work in the centre. A core group of enthusiastic and committed actors had formed around the NAIDOC performance, and although many of their number had dropped off by the time we arrived, it seemed that some residual energy was carried forward from that process into ours.

At the time of writing I am still conducting follow-up interviews with the women, Aunty Ruth, co-facilitators and prison staff, and I have not had much time to reflect on the overall significance and value of this project. But my instinct tells me that it represents the

most complex and fascinating layering of social, cultural and aesthetic value in my work at BWCC so far. To begin with, many of the women in the group were family, and had direct ancestral connections to Barambah Mission. Again, several of the women said that their commitment to the work came from the fact that it was 'real' to them, and that they felt they were honouring their ancestors, the Elders and Auntie Ruth, not only in the final performance but also throughout its development. For some, this also involved learning more about their grandparents' and great grandparents' experiences, which had not been discussed in their own families. There was a strong sense of occasion around the final performance, which brought the women into direct contact with Auntie Ruth, and allowed them to connect the inspiring story of struggle and survival that they had just enacted, to the very real 84-year-old woman standing before them. Not only that, but for Ruth, the performance had some of the same power as one would find in the field of Reminiscence Theatre (Schweitzer 2007), where her life story was validated and affirmed by a group of women whose contemporary experience paralleled her own. Many of the women reported that they felt a strong connection to Ruth's story because they had themselves been separated from their mothers, or had their children taken from them. Through the creative process, we explored the need to balance the despair and darkness in Ruth's story with the moments of humour and sense of hope that it contained. For two of the women I have interviewed so far, this seemed to lead to a deeper understanding of the complex dramaturgy that exists in a life story that is marked by trauma and suffering.

Some of the women reported that the physicality of a live performance enabled them to experience something similar to the sense unbinding I describe in the first case study, with one of them describing how she preferred this to radio drama, which only focused on vocal performance. The inclusion of white women in the performance was also a rich area for exploration. One of these women said she had never read a novel from beginning to end before Ruth's memoir, and that the power of the story kept her reading. She was so determined to do the book justice that she would passionately defend her opinions about what should be included in the play, sometimes with tears in her eyes. There were some problems in how the white women were represented through the play, giving rather one-dimensional 'bad guy' performances in roles such as police officers, superintendents, matrons and government officials. But these women were conscious of the importance of the story they were telling, and were embraced by the rest of the group as being 'honorary Murriss' due to their evident commitment to the play.⁵ In terms of cross-cultural practice, there remains a strong sense of tension for me as a white director and therefore mediator of Aboriginal culture and history. Although I tried to defer to Ruth's authority as the storyteller, and to Amber's authority as an Aboriginal actor, it still felt as if I was the one in charge of the process. This is something I am still grappling with in moral and ethical terms. Elsewhere, I have spoken of the complex layering of culture that can exist in the drama workshop space, and how it might be conceived as a site for reconciliation (2016). Cultural value in such spaces is therefore dependent, not only on the different cultures represented, but also on the unique culture that grows and exists through the course of any given project. In a

project that has such strong Indigenous cultural significance, there must be analysis of value through an Indigenous lens, an aspect of the research I hope to address in partnership with Indigenous scholars as the work goes forward.

Conclusion

This chapter therefore represents, not an in-depth interrogation of one particular aspect of value, but a reflection of how it may be conceived across the breadth of my practice in BWCC. The three examples above have demonstrated how my practice has evolved over the course of my time at BWCC, and how it has hopefully become responsive to the needs and interests of the women participants, and how notions of social, cultural and aesthetic value have formed and shifted around the practice. I am still finding my way as a researcher, still struggling to form the right questions that will deepen the conversation about how the women experience and value the work. But most notably, trying to find an ethical way through cross-cultural arts practice and research so that the work becomes as much a process of reconciliation as performance making. Although I have tried to privilege the voices of the women in this process, the problems of access to and stability in the participant groups that I have mentioned earlier mean that it is difficult to undertake genuinely participatory research, where the women might engage in extensive and ongoing conversations about how to describe and frame the value of their experiences in the drama. And nor would they necessarily want to, even if we did have the time and space to do so. Exploring the value of these programmes has therefore involved a conversation between the women's perceptions of their experience and my own ideas about value, which have evolved and been woven together with broader cultural and theoretical and philosophical threads.

In keeping with participatory drama and participatory research, ideas about the cultural, aesthetic or social value of a programme ideally must emerge from the drama process itself, and must privilege the voices of the people who live and work inside the prison. Interrogations of value should also reflect the complexity of drama or theatre as an art form, of participants' engagement in the creative process, and of the social interactions taking place between practitioners, participants, and audience members. Genuine conversations about value must include an engagement with failure, shortcomings and lack of value. Notions of value in prison drama are also rooted in the unique interplay between the performances that are created, the culture of the institution, the politics of criminality and state-sanctioned punishment, and the larger flows and movements of art and culture. Findings will therefore not necessarily be generic, or generalizable – a significant hurdle for those who want to prove its worth in monetary or statistical terms; or to establish whether the work has *lasting* value, or can genuinely be linked to reform or rehabilitation. This kind of approach will move prison theatre beyond surface-level narratives of redemption, humanization or transformation, and into more fine-grained analysis of the processes and products of prison drama as a cultural practice.

Author's note

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Notes

- 1 Our understanding of the *Floating Brothel* story came predominantly from a historical novel by Sian Rees (2002), a personal account by one of the crewmen John Nicol (Flannery 2013), and the brief description in Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore* (1987).
- 2 This 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 throughout the early nineteenth century up until the 1970s. For many in Australia, the term ‘Stolen Generations’ has become a kind of short-hand for the cruel acts of separation, institutionalization, physical and sexual abuse and neglect that have resulted in widespread intergenerational trauma among aboriginal peoples.
- 3 This shameful, well-documented phenomenon has continued to exist in the Australian criminal justice system since the Commission of Inquiry into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 25 years ago (Johnston 1991).
- 4 NAIDOC stands for National Aboriginal and Islander’s 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.
- 5 Murri is the collective term for the diverse Aboriginal language groups of Queensland and North Western New South Wales.