

15. Home Talk

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Beginnings

This is a story about how I came to write. In 2010, when I was in my late 40s, I completed a PhD and wrote a volume of poetry and a novel. This is a story. It is not an essay or an article or a treatise or anything else that ‘scholarly’ writing is called in western literature. This is a story because Aboriginal people live for and by stories. This is the story about how I came to write all that I did and how I came to find my place and my voice in a nation that until the early 1970s was dominated by an official White Australia Policy. It can be argued that, even in the twenty-first century, vestiges of the ‘white nation’ still prevail.

As Pierre Nora intended, I write this as a combination of personal history set against the broader socio-political contexts of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries in Australia. In this way, I hope to shed some light on how growing up Aboriginal has informed my historical practice and why the relationship between my personal life and professional research is inseparable. The value of Nora’s method for me is that it allows me to self-reflect on how my understandings of western culture were shaped and formed through my home culture *and* how Anglo-Australian understandings of Aboriginal people were shaped and formed in the classroom and how this continues to inform my research. As I write this, I have at the forefront of my mind ongoing issues of non-Aboriginal editing of Aboriginal works that continually ask Aboriginal scholars to justify their ‘facts’ against or in relation to a body of Anglo-western knowledge that is accepted and assumed as factual.

I am a Wiradjuri woman. In Australian English, Wiradjuri means ‘of the rivers’ or ‘river people’. My country where I was born and raised is situated between three rivers. I grew up on the Murrumbidgee River near a small country town called Gundagai, which is also a Wiradjuri word, meaning ‘bend in the back of the knee’, as the town is situated on a bend in the river. I was born in the early 1960s in a larger town called Wagga Wagga situated on the same river. In 1961 my mother was very young and had a difficult relationship with my father who was of Irish descent. Two unmarried Aunts raised my sister and me. In 1961, Australia fiercely, proudly and loudly called itself a ‘white nation’. Since 1901, when the colonies became the federated nation of Australia, the *Immigration Restriction Act* was officially introduced and enforced under the White Australia

Policy. The policy was not officially dismantled until the Whitlam Government came to power in 1972. The policy restricted the entry of all immigrants who were not British. The original inhabitants of the land, whom the British called 'Aborigines', were entrapped within the imposed white nation and everything about us was inferior, in deficit, and undesirable.

My Grandmother, like many Aboriginal girls, worked in the homes of wealthy white people. She attracted the attention of a Devonshire settler who came to Australia to farm. He was an austere protestant and a fierce and proud supporter of British colonial interests. He was staunchly patriotic and had intended, had the war not ended, before he was old enough to enlist, to join the British in South Africa during the Boer War (1999–1902). One of his many concerns, related to me time and time again through story, was that England and Europe were being 'ruined by liberalism'. He deplored universal suffrage for women and those with no property and condemned any movement related to economic independence for women. 'Politics', he said, 'should be left to the men with interests to protect'. He was well suited to nineteenth century colonial Australia and followed a well-worn but greatly understated pattern of settler farmers in Australia marrying Aboriginal women, because the expectations for the treatment and up-keep of such women were far less than that of white women. Marrying an Aboriginal woman provided many settlers with a slave, a concubine and a workforce of children who could be educated or not at their white fathers' discretion.

Many people have asked me as an adult why such a man would marry an Aboriginal woman and I say to them that she was a perfect choice in keeping with his socio-political and religious views because she had no rights and therefore no recourse for anything he did. He could keep her in complete isolation as a slave and no one would think anything of it. Also, as Kim Scott's novel *Benang* starkly illustrates, white colonists thought that Aboriginal blood could be 'bred out' in a few generations and Aboriginal women became part of individual eugenics schemes as well as those imposed by the states (Scott 1999).

My grandfather was bitterly disappointed that of his 12 children, only four were boys. But for my grandmother it was the beginning of the secrets that were the stories she had never been allowed to tell—our history through her memory. My grandfather ruled the women with an iron fist as he did not trust women left to their own devices or intellect. My grandmother's hair had to be braided and pulled tightly back at all times, she was only allowed to wear brown, and could have no bare skin showing apart from her face and hands. The first two children born were girls and my grandfather chose names from the Old Testament, which my grandmother secretly deplored. Fortunately, when two sons arrived in quick succession after that, named of course after English kings,

he lost interest in the girls, except for making them slaves on his farm, and my grandmother named the other six girls herself after her favourite flowers. I grew up with a garden of aunties.

Keepers and Tellers

Seven of my eight aunties were sent for a time to a small school in the area called 'the creek school'—a tiny one-room building on the outskirts of the main town. My grandfather decided that if they could read and write, they would be more useful to the husbands and 'masters' he would place them with. At school, my aunties were ostracised and made to feel ashamed of their dark skin, but they did learn to read and write. Because they were marginalised and isolated they spent a lot of time alone thinking about what they read—history in particular; the public, national history in the classroom and the personal secret history at home.

As I write this piece, it strikes me how much history within my family has repeated itself. Three of my aunties were sent to domestic service and three were made to stay and work the farm. Of those sent to domestic service, one suffered and survived sexual assault. She was one of the aunties who raised me almost 25 years later. My sister and I had similar experiences at school of being teased and shamed for our Aboriginality as my aunties had decades earlier. It is a common assumption of western history that the passing of linear time somehow equates to improvement, progress or advancement but, as this story shows, this was not the case for Aboriginal people.

After I was born my mother left me in the care of her two older sisters. One was in her early-40s and had never married. She said she was part of the 'war-generation', lots of women from that generation were left unmarried. But later on as an adult I pieced together the events of another colonial tragedy—a farming accident that left her unable to have children. She was almost broken-hearted, except my sister and I came along. My elder aunt was in her late-50s and was single by design. She had little patience for men in general, based on her observation of her own mother in particular, but also some of the settler women that she worked for. She always said: 'Marriage is not for better or for worse—it's for worse only.' She was fiercely independent and once her father passed away she was determined never to have to answer to any man again. And she didn't. She died when she was 93. When I was a teenager in the 1970s she developed a keen interest in the Women's Liberation Movement, as it was known at the time. Once my grandmother expressed some reservation at a scene we saw on our battered second-hand television of women burning their bras. Auntie Boo said: 'I don't care about their underwear as long as they stand up to the men!'

My two aunties were both a complement and a contrast in my life. They were the balance and symmetry that grounded me. My younger Auntie Bubby was shy and romantic. Her favourite books were *Wuthering Heights*, the story of another country where land, people and spirits are also intricately intertwined, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because it spoke to the power of children. She said if she ever got married it would have to be someone who looked like Heathcliff and acted liked Atticus Finch. When we were little she told us the reason she never got married was because there never was such a man. It was years later that I learnt the real reason why.

Auntie Bubby took my sister and me out walking and taught us how to love the land. She taught us about the flora and fauna. We knew the name of every single wildflower that quilted the hills where we lived, as well as the stories of the animals. Both my aunties loved animals, both native and introduced, and our home was always a menagerie of injured and unwanted animals. She loved other people's children and all through my childhood she was usually looking after white children as well as my sister and me, because she did it for free. There was one child in particular who used to spend weeks on end at our place while her parents worked to build up their business. The three of us used to keep my grandmother entertained for hours running around and playing boisterous games, pretending to be some of the white folk in town that the aunties talked about in the privacy of our home. The aunties used to call us 'the magpies' because we were 'always running round laughin' an' singin' an' makin' a lotta happy noise'.

My older Auntie Boo was feisty, practical and as a grown woman with no authorities to fear any more, very blunt. She was tiny and oozed energy. My earliest and most endearing memory of her was pushing a wheelbarrow around the paddocks. Nothing went to waste and no farm animal died in vain. Every time she came across a dead sheep she would take the wheelbarrow and a pair of hand-held shears and take off the fleece to sell and give the sheep a decent burial, which was a challenge, given how hard the country baked the earth. She walked the fence lines and picked off every tuft of wool snagged to the barbs. When she wasn't walking the paddocks, she gardened. I grew up in a ramshackle house built from bits and pieces, but the garden was magnificent. It still is, even though the old house is falling down around it.

Auntie Boo was a night owl. I asked her once why she stayed up for hours after everyone else. She said she liked to listen to the ghosts of the place that only came out when it was quiet. At school they told us there was no such thing as ghosts, except the Holy Ghost. But when I go back to the old place, I hear for ghosts too.

Aunty Boo was a great hoarder of all sorts of things that took her fancy. Her bedroom was an elephant's graveyard of old things discarded by the settlers she had worked for: feather boas, fox-fur stoles, pictures of crisp European winters with hounds and horses, a grandfather clock, washstands, pitchers, tea chests of Victorian underwear, crystal bowls full to the brim of costume jewellery, porcelain dolls, gollywogs, teddy-bears, bits and pieces of chipped floral china, brass candlesticks, and ornaments of all different shapes and sizes. Her favourite possession was a white elephant. It was a huge fine ceramic elephant, with garnet eyes and tusks of real ivory charging across a piece of deep green jungle, trunk held high as if trumpeting. My aunty always said that elephants with their trunks in the air meant good luck.

'Looks like a tough one, this one', she remarked more than once while fondling her treasure. 'That's how ya gotta be sometimes ... chargin' forward ... meet the trouble head on ... like ya mean business.' She got the white elephant from an elderly woman she once cared for. It was a gift from the old lady on her deathbed. 'This white elephant ain't useless!' Aunty was adamant about this. 'His ol' head be full 'o things that only an elephant 'ud remember. I got a memory like an' elephant an' r'member an elephant never forgets!' Her favorite saying, which my sister and I grew up with, was: 'There's no such thing as can't! Ya can do anything if ya put ya mind to it! Can't is jus' for lazy, weak people an' that ain't you an' me babe!'

The balance between my two aunts has been one of the most influential experiences of my life. I know how to dream, be romantic and have a soft touch, but I also know how to charge head-on, trunk up, when I need to confront something, or face my fears. And I know that there's no such thing as can't.

At home the women who raised me always told stories about people and places. They were like magpies too, gathering bits and pieces of lives known, things seen and heard, gems of wisdom carefully and lovingly hoarded in the archive of memory, to be shared as precious stories—lessons for life. 'Home-talk', we used to call it, because it was the talk that made us feel at home and the talk that had to stay at home. Most of these stories were shared at night, around a fire in winter or at the kitchen table in summer. Some of these family stories were told openly to us as children and some were told after we were meant to be sleeping, but I was a precocious child and I would pretend to be asleep on my makeshift bed, which was really an armchair, and listen for as long as I could. They weren't traditional Dreaming stories that many people associate with Aboriginal storytelling, they were the stories of how my grandmother and my many aunts had lived as black women and remembered who they were despite national and local efforts to 'breed out the blackness'. Some of the stories were funny, some confused me, and some were very sad, but one thing that emerged through all of these stories is that the women were talking about a different Australia to the

one we learnt and read about at school. The public Australia presented by my non-Aboriginal teachers and in my textbooks was a different place to the one the women talked about. The textbooks, teachers and my aunties were talking about many of the same events, such as the ‘discovery of’ and subsequent ‘peaceful settlement’ of Australia, the federation of the colonies to become one nation, the crossings of mountains and rivers by settlers who were ‘unlocking the lands for industry and wealth’, Australia as a ‘workers’ paradise’ and a land of opportunity freedom and hope. But my aunties’ experiences of and opinions on these and other historical events and narratives which formed the public discourse of the nation were very different from that of my white educators. As children we were always told to ‘keep these stories at home’, so people at school wouldn’t laugh at us and so we wouldn’t get into trouble for some of the cunning things the women did to get by. I picked up on a lot of common threads in these stories and I also heard whispered secrets—stories that were unfinished because the women sometimes stopped talking when they got to a certain point.

When they weren’t telling their own stories, my aunts used to read to us from books they loved, usually by well-known writers such as Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and J. R. R. Tolkien. One of our favourite stories was *The Wizard of Oz*, because the heroes, Dorothy, Toto and their friends, were the least likely people to be heroes. I noticed a lot of the stories they loved had unlikely heroes—usually someone who appears to be powerless or in a diminished position, like a servant, a child or a dog. At home I used to write stories too. Because very few other children from school were allowed to or wanted to play with us, my aunts used to give us scraps of paper from grocery deliveries and tell us to ‘go and write a book or a story’. I used to lose myself in the activity of writing stories and harboured secret ambitions of becoming a writer. But I didn’t tell anyone.

The Western Classroom

In the 1960s and 1970s, Australia was a very unforgiving place for all those who were not white. My first novel, *Purple Threads*, is an episodic narrative that focuses on events, places and people (Leane 2011). I recalled an incident that happened to me as an Aboriginal child in school in the late 1960s which illustrates an all too common experience for Aboriginal people. It goes like this. One day in a small country school in Gundagai, where I was never accepted by my peers because my sister and I were the only Aboriginal children at the school at the time, a group of girls my age called my Aunties ‘black witches’. I cried and thought it was all too hard. My aunties in their wisdom tried to console me. One of my aunts had worked as a maid in the homes of wealthy white Australians and had become the companion of an elderly Irish woman. One of

her many tasks was to read to this elderly woman. This gave her a tremendous insight into the colonial mind and a great appreciation of their stories. She told me Epictetus's story of the purple threads in the white Roman togas, which were rare but special, 'that small part which is bright and makes everything else graceful and beautiful' (Leane 2011, p. 109).

But I couldn't appreciate it at the time and I went to bed thinking:

I couldn't tell them I wanted to be white then. But if I was white I'd see myself everywhere. In the classroom, when I opened up a book or looked at a picture. In the crowded playground, laughing, skipping and jumping between elastics. Down the main street of town. Or on the movie screen. I'd not stand out from the rest. But purple? Black? Too hard. Too ugly. Too different. (Leane 2011, p. 109)

I'm ashamed to say that I wanted to be white then, because if I was white things would have been so much easier and if I was white I would have been considered normal. All I can say in my defence is that I was young and when I was young I wanted to be like everyone else. But I realised that this was never going to be and this is the story of how I came to accept who I was, who I am, and who I continue to be. I am and will always be indebted to those who helped me navigate this path.

Aboriginal presence has always made itself felt in the minds and imaginations of settlers. This has been evidenced through the representations of us in settler literature. Literature and stories are the window to national consciousness at any given time, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes in relation to Aboriginal representation in settler discourse: 'Representations are more than just symbols. They are a means by which we come to know, embody and perform reality' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, p. xxii). Since the early-nineteenth century we have been constructed and reconstructed in the Anglo-western literary canon as the exotic, the primitive, the noble savage, the innocent, the child-race, the barbaric, the depraved fringe dweller, the violent demonic aggressor, the tragic half-caste, the 'Venus Jezebel', and the militant trouble-maker. Continuing almost entirely uninterrupted until the second half of the twentieth century, explorers, sailors, soldiers, clergymen, farmers and even some convicts wrote of us. While some of these authors sort to be sympathetic, all of their depictions were embedded in difference and caste us always in deficit to Euro-British immigrants.

I sat in western-style classrooms and heard all this. What Aboriginal people were meant to look like and how we were meant to act were firmly entrenched in settler psyche. My experiences of being Aboriginal were made deficit or invisible to my teachers and peers, as were the experiences of the women who

raised me. In 1979, I was 17 years old, an age where questions of who I was and how others saw me were paramount in my mind. Sitting at my desk in a Senior Catholic High School in Wagga Wagga, however, there was suddenly no space to retreat. All eyes were on me. The class teacher had decided that we would read *Coonardoo*, Katharine Prichard's 1929 novel about relationships between Aboriginal women and white men on the north-western frontier where white settlement had more recently encroached on traditional Aboriginal lands (Pritchard 1990). I was the only Aboriginal student in the class. Thus my peers' gaze sought me out and scrutinised me, as they were encountering their first iconic literature dealing with Aboriginal Australians. The book's representation impacted on me, how I felt about myself and how others saw me and related to me. It was an alienating experience. My sense of myself, my knowledge of Aboriginal women, was savaged under the onslaught of the book's images.

The representation of Aboriginal women in the narrative stood in complete contrast to the way I saw myself and other Aboriginal women I knew. Although set 50 years earlier, I was raised by Aboriginal women who were the contemporaries of the woman *Coonardoo*, after whom the narrative was named. These women were strong, independent, outspoken and most of all ambitious for the next generation, my generation, to enjoy the same rights and privileges as white Australians and to be educated to the standard of our colonisers. Yet all this was undermined by the representations within Prichard's novel and the authority and status given to a body of white authors to represent Aboriginality. *Coonardoo* was promiscuous, helpless, totally lacking in intellect, dependent and defeatist. She was incapable of the abstract thoughts, reason and conceptualisations that the white characters displayed in the narrative.

Another thing that really perturbed me about my education was the western preoccupation with objectivity. I loved history and literature, even though it was always not kind to my people. I saw the gaps and spaces as sites that could be rich with alternative voices and experiences, if only I could find a way to open up these spaces and make different voices heard.

As a child and an adolescent I was fascinated by the story of Hannibal, told to me first by Auntie Boo who had read the story aloud many times to her elderly charge. Hannibal, whose homeland was Carthage, stormed the Roman Empire, wreaked havoc for 15 years and his siege and guerrilla warfare tactics have made it into every western-authored history text on the Roman Empire and every military manual ever since. He invented and mastered what is still referred to today in military circles as 'the art of turn'.

Years later, as a student of ancient history at senior high school our class studied the Roman Empire. My aunt's interest in this story was not so much Hannibal's military genius, although she did refer to it; her interest was in his courage and

genius in using elephants as the forerunners of heavy artillery, and his sense of memory and justice to his father, Hamilcar, who died in an earlier conflict against Roman encroachment, to his country under threat from Rome, and his ancestors who died defending this cause. She said it was a black history because Hannibal, his ancestors before him, and his descendants after were black.

And so I wrote once in an essay: 'I wonder why every time I read about Hannibal, he is depicted as "the threat", "the problem" and the "thorn in the side of Rome".' My teacher didn't answer these questions. Instead they proceeded to admonish me for using the pronoun 'I', and for writing a history essay in the 'first person'. The teacher told me that I should be more objective and to 'leave myself out of the picture and just focus on the facts!' But I wondered, despite the fact that the historian I was reading never mentioned 'I' or 'me' (themselves) as part of their take on the Punic Wars, how objective were they really? I remembered that Aunty Bubby said: 'This history is a funny business. You can get into a lot of trouble for touting the wrong heroes.' And I did.

Finding My Way

I managed to make it through high school and, at that time, I was the only one from a large extended family of many cousins who did so. I did so because I was encouraged and supported by my aunties, who said: 'One day you'll get to say something else.' But that day was a long way away then. I left school still wondering how I could 'fit into the grander scheme of the western order of things' (see Foucault 1970), and how we can shift the paradigm if we can't own the position from which we speak or write. Why is it that western historians and authors can just write without locating themselves within the bigger picture that they are writing about and without acknowledging the cultural platform from which they speak? Does this make their narratives objective? Maybe, truth is not universal. Maybe there are many truths that have their origins in where the one remembering stands and who and what they are remembering. How can I even begin to fill the gaps and give some voice to historical silences if I can't place myself and identify the position from which I speak?

So I left school perturbed and disturbed about western notions of objectivity, and the fact that Aboriginal people only make appearances in the meta-narratives, the 'big picture' of history and literature, when we were needed to make a point about how we were making our presence felt in settler consciousness at any given time. The novel I referred to earlier, *Coonardoo*, is a good example of this. Prichard constructs an Aboriginal woman in order to write a white man's tragedy. The greater concerns of the narrative are legitimacy and inheritance in the north-west

of Australia (see Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 54). *Coonardoo* is the story of a white man who loses his wealth, his property, and his mind because of his love for an Aboriginal woman who dies in tragic circumstances before her time.

Despite some not so happy memories of my school days, when I left school in the late-1970s the socio-political climate had changed due to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government. In the lead up to the election, the Australian Labor Party's election slogan was: 'It's time for a change!' And it was. Gough Whitlam and his cabinet were elected in November 1972. Within a short time, Whitlam implemented radical changes: the Anti-Discrimination Act, the abolition of tertiary education tuition fees, and the introduction of the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme, a means-tested allowance that would allow children from lower socio-economic backgrounds to attend universities en masse for the first time in Australia's history. Without the election of this government and the monumental changes it managed to implement before it was sacked by Governor General Sir John Kerr on November 11, 1975, I would never have gone to university and I would not be where I am today.

At my first lecture in English Literature at the University of New England, Armidale, in 1981, the Professor of the Department stood up and delivered his welcoming speech in his best Oxbridge accent. It wasn't too welcoming for some of us: 'For those of you who are the first generation in your family to attend university, you will struggle and be challenged, because it takes more than a generation to appreciate the language, the nuance of this fine body of literature.'

It reminded me of a poem I'd studied in High School by T. S. Eliot. Like J. Alfred Prufrock, I felt ill at ease and wondered how I presumed to come. But I did come and one of my Aunties said to me before I left: 'Good on ya babe. You'll be able to talk to the gov'ment and lotsa 'portant people. But doncha forget ya home talk when ya learnin' to be flash.'

So I came, however presumptuous, and I stayed.

30 years later I am still challenged by the English and Australian literary canons. But I do appreciate them, and I have engaged with them passionately on a number of fronts. I stopped writing poetry and short stories while I was attending university; I was so intimidated by the critiques many of my lecturers made of the writings of others and of what constituted 'good literature' in the first place. But I kept a journal where I jotted down ideas and memories. It also struck me how those among my lecturers who considered themselves as 'scholars of English literature' were very scathing of Australian literature. Despite being told it was second rate, I chose to study Australian literature and it was there that I encountered many more representations of Aboriginal people that reflected the mindset of settler society at any given time and our

containment within settler literature and thus settler imagination. In particular, I encountered Patrick White, whose 1961 representation of Aboriginality was a tragic and marginalised one. His 1976 representation of noble savages practicing ritual cannibalism never left me and drove me years later to write a PhD on this and other representations.

Through the 1980s and 1990s I taught high school in Canberra and introduced my students to my favourite literature. Classrooms are important sites for change. It was amidst the contestation for the telling of Australia's past, termed 'the history wars' during the Howard Government (1996–2007) that I entered the tertiary sector as a lecturer working with students who were studying to become teachers in 2000 at the University of Canberra. While I found most students were eager to understand and help Aboriginal people, it was mainly on their own terms, and these same students were reticent to teach against the narrative of Australian settler history that they were familiar with. Many grappled with the idea that I wasn't asking them to teach against, I was asking them to teach Aboriginal perspectives alongside the dominant settler histories. It was tough going, but once again this was an important site for change.

In 2002 I was encouraged to present a paper at an Indigenous Researchers' Forum at the University of Western Australia, Perth, and I wrote and presented a paper that was on something dear to my heart, 'Representations of Aboriginal Presence in the Australian Literary Canon'. An Indigenous scholar, Professor Martin Nakata, heard this paper and he suggested that I write a proposal to be admitted as doctoral candidate. I remember saying, 'I can't do it because I can't write about this according to western expectations of objectivity. I can't leave myself out of this discussion.' As soon as I said this, I felt my aunties' words coming back to me: 'There's no such thing as can't.'

I thought I couldn't be like my aunt's elephant then, charging head on to confront my foes and fears. The professor's response was that I didn't have to, and, in fact, that to identify my position and perspective within the research would make it a stronger thesis. This was a revelation and I thought seriously about writing a proposal. Then, in 2003, as I was developing this proposal, my eldest aunt passed away. I was devastated as I thought of all the memories and stories I had stored; these needed to be told because they are the important threads missing from the tapestry of recorded Australian history, like the purple threads in my aunt's story. They were the secrets that needed to be told.

I was accepted as a candidate for a doctorate at the end of 2004, at the University of Technology, Sydney, but I found I was paralysed and couldn't move forward with the research because the stories I grew up with were playing on my heart and mind. How could I write anything else until I found a way to tell these important stories? How could I write of the misrepresentations of Aboriginal

people in the nation's literature until I could testify to the agency, resilience and determination of my people, without whom I would not even be in a position to attempt this doctorate? By early 2005, when I had left my job, was on a scholarship to study full-time, and had still done nothing, my supervisor began to wrap me over the knuckles. I woke up one day, midway through 2005 and knew I had to just start writing the stories I was raised with, no matter how rough and how emotional I had to make a start. Now she was gone, I had to be like my Auntie Boo's elephant.

So I abandoned my academic research and started writing. When I sat down to write, I thought about other good stories I knew, particularly those with the unlikely heroes, such as Bilbo Baggins who single-handedly outwitted a dragon, but the real battle was fought in the tunnel, alone, before he even faced the dragon. And I thought of Toto, my Auntie Boo's favourite character, who worked out that the wizard was a hoax with the help of the cowardly lion, the brainless scarecrow and the heartless tin man, who were really brave, intelligent and compassionate, but had been told otherwise. All these characters felt powerless but they conquered what they feared most, even though they felt small and helpless at the time.

I thought about the most respectful way to tell some of the stories. I chose to use the literary devices of poetry and short story because I could focus on certain episodes that were significant and that were situated at the intersection of public history and personal memory, as this divergence was (and is) a fertile site for telling the stories and experiences that had been selectively left out of settler discourse. I thought that literature, works commonly described as fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth, because it gives a face and a voice to such truths. Also, it allows the use of pseudonyms, so that people's experiences of events and times can be spoken of respectfully. I also considered that much of the non-fiction I had read in history was not the truth either. An Aboriginal writer whom I greatly admire, Alexis Wright, said in relation to her decision to use fiction to tell the stories of her people: 'I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction which is not really true either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell' (Wright 2002, p. 13).

Another one of my favourite writers, Gunter Grass, said when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999, 'a writer is someone who writes against the currents of time'. The stories I grew up with were very much like this.

I thought about the stories I'd heard in terms of threads and secrets. I had to think very hard about some of the haunting memories that were whispered late at night, and some of the things that were never fully explained to me as a child because they were too hard to talk about. I wrote the poetry first

because, as I remembered, I became angry with some of the things I'd heard and the mysteries I'd pieced together as an adult. The main strengths of poetry for me are its brevity and evocative imagery, and I wanted to be really blunt and explicit about the things that had happened, that the family had carried as shameful secrets when the shame was really that of white Australia.

The name *Dark Secrets After Dreaming: A.D. 1887–1961* came to me very quickly once I started writing, as this slim volume of poetry deals with some of the very early experiences of the Wiradjuri as settlers encroached on traditional lands. It is also a play on western time. As an adult, through my friendships with other Aboriginal women of my generation I knew that many of the secrets of the women I grew up with had not just happened to them but to many Aboriginal women. Inferences to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, exploitation and lost children were all too common a theme. So I chose to make the voice within the poetry that of the 'Black Woman' who speaks of the 'White Woman' as the epitome of colonial presence. For example:

The White Women sigh and seethe.
We are a burden with our dark faces
unreadable eyes and lithe limbs.
(‘White Woman’s Burden’, Leane 2010 p. 18)

White women surround themselves with fruits
and flowers from their own land.
They call it a garden!
(‘Agony in the Garden’, Leane 2010, p. 26)

I wanted to be a medium for speaking out against the country’s past. I was deliberately generalising because as a people we have been generalised about, and I wanted settlers to read about themselves in this way because for too long our stories have been talked over. I use the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ to position whiteness as otherness. I wanted to offer a fresh insight into the brutality of domestic slavery in colonial Australia, and for people to consider the intergenerational effects of abuses perpetuated there. But I also wanted to show the resilience, intuition and determination of those I wrote about.

Although the poetry in *Dark Secrets* is based on events that happened before I was born, and ends with a reference to my birth, I deliberately used the first person singular ‘I’ to link the present to the past. Even though the incidents referred to were very much unfinished business. When people have survived abuse, the aftermath can and will continue to resurface. One reviewer wrote: ‘Non-Indigenous Australian readers must forgive Leane for lumping us all together’ (Whittle 2010, p. 20). But I don’t want forgiveness; I want non-Aboriginal readers to consider what it is like to be placed on the ‘other side’ of the cultural divide and how it feels to be described in such unflattering, general and brutal terms.

By the time I came to write *Purple Threads*, 12 months later, I felt that I had dealt with some of the intergenerational trauma that I was experiencing; not that it will ever go away, but to find a medium to express it that was respectful to those involved was cathartic. When I thought about writing *Purple Threads*, once again I thought about important incidents, but these things related more to memories and stories about the land and what connected people to land. My grandmother and all of my aunts were born post contact; my grandmother in the first 100 years of occupation, in 1887, and my aunts from 1907 onwards. Yet while none of the women lived a 'traditional' (if you take the conventional white definition of those who speak an Aboriginal language and live in a community) Aboriginal lifestyle, they had an innate capacity to 'read' the land and the seasons like a book or a map. The women I grew up with were always amazed that the settler farmers, in particular, couldn't read the land and were always surprised, stressed and dismayed by the weather and that they tried so hard to live against the land. The farmers were illiterate according to the Aboriginal order of things. The Wiradjuri landscape where I grew up is as much a character as any of the people, because it is living and resilient like the women in the stories. Flowers too, both native and domestic, are a strong motif, because they are as reliable and vibrant as the women who raised me. Flowers and stories can live forever. As my aunts always said: 'Country turns and turns again, resilient.'

I chose to narrate the stories through the eyes of a child. I did this because that was the way I heard many stories and I didn't fully understand some things at the time so I didn't try to interpret them from an adult perspective. I've re-told memories and allowed my adult readers to think about what I didn't say or think at the time. An undercurrent that an adult can read through the language of a child pervades many of the stories. The river is a continual motif of what appears on the surface, not always reflecting or fathoming the depths below. There is also the undercurrent of secrets that will never be told and things unresolved. Another reason I chose the voice of a child was because, like some of my favourite characters mentioned earlier, children are both powerless and powerful. At the time I could do nothing but listen, watch and remember. But as an adult I realised that to remember and to tell is powerful.

So I wrote a collection of inter-related poetry and an episodic novel as a testimony to the power of memory, the impact this can have on public history, which is never a closed book, and the importance of 'Home-talk' in connecting the secrets and threads for the telling of the nation's past. They are not autobiography or biography, they are collective memoir—history as stories, stories as history. Only then could I get on with my PhD.

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This text taken from *Ngapartji Ngapartji: In turn in turn:*

Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia

Edited by Vanessa Castejon, Anna Cole, Oliver Haag and Karen Hughes,
published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.