STAGING HISTORY AND RESISTANCE

Chapter V

Staging History and Resistance

My name is english
But I know my roots
my tribe my skin name
I am irrefutably
indisputably
proudly Aboriginal
(Davis, "I Am" 21)

Story telling

In traditional Aboriginal society, history of the community was preserved/maintained by the storyteller, who relayed it as an entertainment and an educational device. “Aware of the audience and of his/her own position as entertainer, the story-teller revises history in/through every performance by making the past ‘speak’ to the present” (Gilbert and Tompkins 127). He also makes improvisational references to highly current incidents or to the reactions of the audience. While story telling foregrounds the role of the interlocuter and the specific context of language utterance to create meanings that are changeable and unfixed, written history, avoids interpretative nuances, abstracts the narrative from any enunciative context, and attempts to suggest that meaning is fixed in language (Gilbert & Tompkins 126-27). Gilbert and Tompkins point out that while a knowledgeable local audience will understand the
cultural nuances, jokes, and specific allusions or references, outsiders will not necessarily comprehend them and that factors such as race, class, gender, age, and social affiliation affect the responses of individual viewers (128). These discrepancies, impact upon the performance and reception of the tale and refuse the closure common to western narrative discourses such as history (128).

Story telling relies on imagination, recitation, and improvisation. The narrative is augmented with “dramatic action, audience interaction, dance, song, and/or music [. . .]” (Gilbert & Tompkins 126) and this highly theatrical mode of communication transfers easily to the stage. Its presentational style and format challenge the naturalistic conventions by which western theatre usually stages its subject matter (127). Stories (both ‘traditional’ and post-contact) that constitute indigenous history, compete with and unsettle empirical histories and their associated theatrical discourses. Davis’s characters often tell stories. Positioned within a larger dramatic text, they mirror the ways in which the indigenous culture has been subsumed by European settlement. In Jack Davis’s plays, the old characters are the ones who usually narrate the stories. As repositories of Aboriginal culture they maintain and circulate tribal memory through their stories.

In The Dreamers, Worru, a born story-teller Worru regales Peter, Roy and Eli with the story of how Cornel and Milbart travelled on a train for the first time (1.4.19-20).
Well, they was gitten old fellas, them two, Cornell and Milbart, they was stayin’ in Wagin an’ they wanted to git to Katanning Show, see? And they was wayarning of the train, real wayarning. [Laughing] Anyways, they got in a railway carriage and that train was goin’ keert kooliny, keert kooliny round them bends and them corners. An’-an’-they was . . . they was . . .

He coughs and splutters.

sitting close together, like.

He laughs again and claps his hands.

Anyway, they went around one corner and Cornell got a real fright and he shouted ‘choo’ and he pushed Milbart like that.

He pushes Peter almost off his seat.

And he said, he said, ‘Wart arny yit, Milbart, git ober in de udder corner an’ help me balance this thing before it bloody tips over.’

They all laugh, Worru coughs. (The Dreamers 1.4.19)

A repository of tribal lore he recounts what happens to the kunya (soul) of dead people.

WORRU. [when Aboriginal people] “noych [die], their kunya soul] would go and stay in the moodgah tree, some time for a l-o-o-ng time, an’ when the moodgah flowers were gone,

251
summertime, their *kunya* would leave the *moodgah* an’ go to *Watjerup* [Rottnest]. That way, over the sea, *Watjerup*, thaty way, *boh-oh.* *(The Dreamers 1.4.20).*

He remembers that there are lots of *moodgah* trees at Mogumber old settlement because it has been *Nyoongah* country for a long time, that being very strong they killed other trees growing near them, and that “only *boolya* man can go there near the *moodgah* because he too is strong, an’ ‘e can drink water an’ take ‘oney from the *moodgah*. Any body else, that’s *warrah*, they could be finish . . . .” *(The Dreamers 1.4.21).* To him Mogumber is “*warrah* place . . .”

WORRU. [. . .] awright daytime, but *gnank weerdiny*,
couldn’t walk around stay near the fire. *[Shuddering.]* Too many *tjennaks, moorlies, an’, an’, widartjies.* *[Gesturing north.]* They come that way. They was real bad. Round face, an’ they was white, just like *Wetjalas*, an’ they ‘ad red eyes, an’ red ‘air, an’ them scream, an’ shout, sing out in the night time, in the pine plantation, jus’ like *koolongahs* [who had been murdered and buried there] *(The Dreamers 1.6.30).*

According to Jack Davis, Mogumber is an Anglicization of moodgumbar, which in the Nyoongah dialect means ‘place of the moodgar’ and it is coincidental that both Rottnest and Mogumber figure so strongly in the destruction of Aboriginal society *(Chesson 27).*
Worru also remembers Milbart who died long ago at Moore River, Billy Kimberly, who was moorditj [good] with a kylie [boomerang] and “could make it go three times ‘round that football ground and come back right near his tjenna [feet]”. When he rode his horse “you couldn’t see him at night ‘cause ‘e was black and the ‘orse was black”. Used to “allus carry a long gidtji, nor’-west one”, and how kids used to hide in the bushes and call out 'Wahrdung . . . Wahrdung . . . Black Crow . . . Black Crow . . .’ and then “doogeearkiny [flee] down the river” at his approach (The Dreamers 1.6.29). Winarn, the “ol’ fella with doot arm . . . pinched a bottle a whisky from his boss, . . . got cruel drunk . . . rolled in the fire and burnt his arm right off” (The Dreamers 1.6.30).

Through his stories Worru describes personal experiences, social events and mythical stories of the Dreaming. The story of the black trackers Billy Kimberley and Bluey, of shifting from grass Valley to Mogumber, of life in the Settlements of Moore River and Mogumber together make up fragments of communal history. He tells of his life as a young man and of his friend Milbart, with the Dancer performing much of the narrated action. These stories are his family’s history and Worru maintains and circulates tribal memory. He also has many truths to tell. Through the use of Nyoongah words and phrases, his tales also transmit fragments of a language no longer familiar to the younger generations.

In Barungin Granny Doll remembers how “the old fellas used to tell yarns” about “all sorts of things. About our lot, the massacres, the
burnings, the chains and the floggings. Pinjarra, Ballagin, Arthur River, Vasse, Kondinin” (2.3.45); she remembers how Old Grandfather used to tell about his father and his grandfather, who when on a hunt, used to “stand on the side of the hill and barungin, barungin. . . . smell the wind, ‘coz that wind used to talk to him and tell him where the kangaroo and the emus and the ducks were, and the rain” (2.3.45). But she complains that “now the wind’s got too many smells: motor car, grog, smokes, you want meat now, you go to the supermarket” (Barungin 2.3.45).

According to Granny Doll Koolbardi ‘The Magpie’ was their dad’s Nyoongah name, and she regrets the fact that she never really had a Nyoongah name, though “old Koolbardi -- that’s old Popeye Joe -- used to call [her] “Tjitti Tjitti” meaning wagtail”, and Marta Booin Booin because she had skinny legs (Barungin 1.7.35). According to her their family name ‘Wallitch’ came from ‘Walitj’ meaning the night-hawk. And “when some Nyoongah is gonna die, he always comes over and screams out”, like the night the old man [Shane’s Grandad] died. She remembers that “up at Moore River, old camp, plenty of Walitj up there” (Barungin 1.7.36).

Hodge and Mishra describes ‘myth’ as an abstract structure, a meaning potential . . . which is reproduced in a series of tellings, which will be different depending on occasion and purpose, narrator and audience (Hodge & Mishra 88). The story of wahrdahng the black crow and kurlbahrdi the magpie, is one of the few surviving legends of the
South West and is the favourite of Jack Davis (Chesson 57-60). The version used in the plays was passed on to the author by his stepfather, Bert (kurrahtj) Bennel, in the early 1930s. In Barungin Granny Doll remembers that Koolbaridi, ‘The Magpie’ was their dad’s Nyoongah name and that it was like his totem. She goes on to retell the story he used to tell about the magpie and the crow -- Koolbaridi and Wahrdun.

GRANNY DOLL: Well this Koolbaridi -- that’s the magpie -- and this Wahrdun -- that’s the crow -- they was brothers, see. This was the time of kundum, dreams, see, and they was bi-i-ig strong men, and they both had beautiful whi-i-ite feathers. They used to fly around the lakes and the water before the wetjala drained off the swamps, and they was moorditj hunters, but they was cruel jealous, jealous about who was the best lookin’. So all the old fellas got real sick an’ tireda listenin’ to these two arguin’ day after day, night after night. So they called a meetin’ and they said to Wahrdun and Koolbaridi, ‘Now look, you two, we’re dick and tired of you arguing all the time, so you go over there an’ fight it out an’ see who’s the best’. So that magpie and the crow they flew straight up in the air and they fought and fought, numbly, bulkily, numbly, bulkily.

[GRANNY DOLL laughs and throws her arms about.]
Numbly round and round they went, but they didn't know they was gittin' closer to the ground, getting, closer and closer when suddenly -- [Slamming her hands together] Tjoppuly, straight into this lake of bla-a-ack sticky mud.

LITTLE DOLL: Yuck.

GRANNY DOLL: Anyway, Koolbardi was the first to git out.

He crawled out of the mud and flopped down half covered in that bla-a-ack sticky mud and then after a long time Wahrdung come out the mud and flopped down beside him, and he was covered all over in that bla-a-ack mud, and that's how they are today, Unna [Isn't it] Meena? And whenever that old fella camped, them magpies would be there. At Government Well, in Northam where we used to camp, there was a family of magpies in a big old gum tree, and they have new babies every year. (Barungin 1.7.34-35)

The same story is retold by Alec in Kullark as one of the stories told by the old man whose funeral he had just attended. As Kateryna Arthur points out "[...] orally delivered stories change from telling to telling, not only in terms of the heteroglossia of the situation, to use Bakhtin's term, but also in terms of primary content (57).

ALEC: [animatedly] Oh yeah, yeah. Now the magpie and the crow was brothers, and they both 'ad beautiful white feathers, and they were always arguin' about which one
was the most beautiful. Anyway one day they decided to fly up into the sky and fight it out. So Wahrdung, that’s the crow, and Koolbahrdi, that’s the magpie, they flew into the air, and they fought and they fought, round and round, nunbuly bukuly, up and down. Anyway, they didn’t know they was getting’ closer an’ closer to the ground, then all of a sudden, tjoppul, they fell straight into this pool of black sticky mud. Well Koolbahrdi, ‘e was the first to get out, and he took off into the sky half covered in mud, and poor ol’ Wahrdung ‘e was the last to get out, and when ‘e flew up into the sky ‘e was black all over. (Kullark 1.1.10-11).

In her religious instruction class in No Sugar Sister Eileen, the missionary at Moore River Native Settlement tells from memory the story of Nativity, of the visit of the shepherds and the three wise men, and of King Herod’s anger at the birth of the baby to be King of the Jews. “He ordered his soldiers to kill every first-born baby boy under two years old. So Mary and Joseph didn’t want them to kill the baby Jesus, so they had to flee from Bethlehem. They wrapped the baby in a blanket and crept away in the middle of the night. They traveled all night and by sunrise they were far away and safe” (No Sugar 4.2.90). This story is juxtaposed against the flight of Joe and Mary with their child to escape the tyranny of Mr. Neal at the end of the play.
Story telling is a form of cultural historiography and a potential mode of empowerment. The hybridised theatrical discourse produced by incorporating/preserving pre-contact traditions in/through a contemporary form, is used to comment on and critique contemporary society (Gilbert and Tompkins 131). This structural intervention in an otherwise realist text strengthens the counter-discursivity of the oral histories recounted. In its specific emphasis on story telling as a form of cultural retrieval, Davis's plays make clear that the official narrative of Australia's 'settlement' must learn to accommodate both the forms and the versions of history it has hitherto suppressed.

Firmly grounded in the mythos of the local community indigenous lore may be seen as a form of 'guerilla resistance' against cultural hegemony (133). Through the incorporation of storytelling in his plays Davis foregrounds history, not as a pre-ordained and completed truth, but rather as a continually (re)constructed fiction which can only ever be partial (in both senses of the word), provisional, and subject to change. It [story-telling] gives to his plays a certain cultural specificity and a corresponding tenor of resistance and the story-teller becomes a potential political agitator (Gilbert and Tompkins 137).

**Time-span**

With European colonisation, concepts of linear time and segmented space were applied to regions which had always calculated time and space differently (Gilbert and Tompkins 107). “History, as a
white invention, depends upon a view of time as an unfolding ‘scroll’, and proceeds sequentially, following the same kind of course as written words on a page. Because Aborigines have a different understanding of time, they do not recognize history as a distinct category. According to the anthropologist W.E.H.Stanner, there is no Aboriginal equivalent for the word ‘time’ (Arthur 59). The Aboriginal concept of temporality, like in many other cultures, is “centred on an acknowledgement of mythical time which occupies a discursive and spatial field characterized by timelessness”. ‘The Dreaming’ for them connects the present with the past” (Arthur 58).

Quoting Frank Kermode’s view that ‘apocalyptic thought belongs to a rectilinear rather than cyclical view of the world’ and that history, ‘is purely intellectual discourse which abolishes Mythic time’ (qtd. in Arthur 59), Kateryna Arthur explains the white tendency to eradicate Aboriginal culture by eliding it from White writing. According to her, the impulse towards closure that is built into European historical narrative supports the colonialist impulse to break traditional cyclical continuities (Arthur 59). By “questioning the simple correlation between history and time and by reconstructing empirical time as multi directional, elliptical, fragmented and even unpredictable” Jack Davis’s plays “loosen imperialisms control over historical discourses” (Gilbert and Tompkins 142).
In *Kullark* a hundred and fifty years of historical time is presented in a few hours of stage time and this historical telescoping is accomplished by using the techniques of juxtaposition, elision, overlaying of different time frames; repetition of visual and aural images, staging of Dreaming events, incorporation of documents from the official historical records and other texts, and by characters stepping outside theatrical time to comment on the stage action (Gilbert and Tompkins 140). Various scenes set during different time periods are presented non-chronologically. Scenes depicting one day in the life of the contemporary *Nyoongah* family in the South West of Western Australia in 1979, the date of the first production of the play, are interspersed with scenes depicting and epic progression of events through different phases of Aboriginal history from 1827 to the 1940s. This includes dreaming events, the period of early contact, settlement, Aboriginal resistance, genocide, institutionalisation and regeneration. Extracts from diaries, journals and letters, transcripts of meetings and lectures, and oral stories encoding the different refractions and interpretations of events show that “each telling is incomplete in itself, [and hence] refers outward to an unstated totalising version” (Hodge and Mishra 105), a quality common to Aboriginal texts. Davis makes use of documentary material from the official historical record, amassed by whites, controlled by whites, and housed in predominantly white institutions. But, by presenting imperial versions of this monologic history in a wider context
of the Nyoongah past he conveys its historical, mythological and political meaning for Aborigines (Gilbert and Tompkins 140).

The story of *Kullark*, unfolds through the experiences of three Aboriginal families, Mitjitjiroo, his wife Moyrah and their son Yagan, who are members of the Swan River people of the 1830s; Thomas, Mary and Alec Yorlah of the 1930s and Alec, Rosie and Jamie Yorlah of 1979. Through these families, Davis traces a continuum of Aboriginal resistance, emphasises the survival of the *Nyoongah* people against all odds and stresses the role of the black Australian family as the focus of Aboriginality. In the original Perth production, the same actors played the corresponding members of the family group, reinforcing the continuities across time. Yagan's struggle is shown to continue in Thomas Yorlah's resistance to institutionalization and his attempts to get his family out of the concentration camp called Moore River Native Settlement in the 1930's. Their son young Alec Yorlah, on his return from service in World War II, struggles to live with dignity but is forced into passivity and compromise and Jamie's landrights activism and struggle against racism in 1979 is shown to be a continuation of Yagan's resistance.

*The Dreamers* opens at dawn, with the distant echoing voices of children singing a tribal song. A tribal family is shown walking slowly across the escarpment, the men leading carrying weapons and the women and children following with bags, kulumans and firesticks. This
is followed by a scene depicting the contemporary Nyoongah family. At the end of act one, Worru, the elder of the family is presented alone on the stage lamenting the loss of the tribes.

WORRU. [. . .]

You have turned our land into a desolate place.

We stumble along with a half white mind.

Where are we?

What are we?

Not a recognised race.

There is a desert ahead and a desert behind. (1.9.45-46).

His lamentation is intercepted by the "soft distant sound of children singing a tribal song" followed by the tribal family "walking slowly back across the escarpment" (46), this time against a night sky. They are in chains. Invasion of indigenous spaces by the colonisers led to the removal of Aborigines from their traditional homelands and to their confinement on Missions and Reserves [concentration camps?]. Dispossessed of their land and relegated to marginal spaces they often ended up in goal. Worru continues:

WORRU. [ . . . ] We are tired of the benches,  

Our beds in the park;  

We welcome the sundown  

That heralds the dark.  

White lady methylate
Keep us warm and from crying,

Hold back the hate

And hasten the dying. (1.9.46)

The tribal family once again appears on the escarpment in act two scene one. The kitchen/living room is shabby and untidy, with dirty dishes piled up on the sink and rubbish, bottles, and cigarette packets littered on the floor. With an eerie traditional chant they "trudge across the escarpment against a bleak wintry sky, . . . "inadequately dressed in blankets and shabby period clothes". It is the women who lead "carrying an assortment of boxes and bundles" (47) and Worru is shown lying on the bed in his squalid room moaning and mumbling a mournful litany, half English, half Nyoongah. A continuity is established between the Aborigines of the past and the contemporary Wallitch family through Worru and the tribal family and the framing of the lounge room setting with the backdrop of the escarpment on which the tribal family appear show the coexistence of the Dreamtime realm with with contemporary experience (H Gilbert 62). In the intermittent dream sequences Worru communicates with characters from other times and places.

The Dancer, not otherwise a character in the play, symbolically represents mythic figures and scenes from Worru's past. Unlike the tribal family he is not confined to the escarpment but inhabits all the acting spaces. He is an alter ego figure for Worru. In act one, scene four, Worru,
encouraged by Eli "begins a drunken stumbling version of a half-remembered tribal dance" (21), but when his feet tangle and he falls, an intricately painted dancer takes over. Accompanied by the sound of didgeridoo and clapsticks, he appears on the escarpment, "dances down and across in front" of the drunken group, "pounding his feet into the stage" (21), until finally dancing back up the ramp, he poses there for a moment, and the scene comes to an end. The Dancer, used here in a transformative role, signifies Aboriginal spiritual identity, which is linked both to the tribal past and the Dreamtime. According to Helen Gilbert, the two interrelated sets of movements, "produce an Aboriginal identity that reflects contemporary black reality, but which is, at the same time, also mythic, and therefore resistant to the dominant normalising impulses of that reality" (142). She also argues that the Dancer's pounding feet "remap, and reclaim stage space, recuperating, for Worru and the others, the tribal dance from a position of marginality within an urban culture" (70).

The imaginary form of Worru's dead friend Milbart is "given presence" (Gilbert 62) by the dancer. He appears when Worru in his dream urges Milbart to make a spear (1.6.35-36), and later a fire (2.1.58). In stylised rhythmic steps he "searches for a straight stick, finds it, straightens it, pares and tips it" and sprinting up the ramp onto the escarpment he strikes the mirrolgah stance [balancing the body in the act of throwing a spear] (1.6. 35-36). To make a fire he "searches for stone
flints, finds them, builds and ignites a fire. Carefully he lifts the fire in
cupped hands and carries it to the escarpment where he blows it gently,
igniting a careful fire, and sits warming himself. The latent spark of
Aboriginality is lit and blown into a warm fire through contact with the
Dreaming. And Shane learns through Worru and the Dreamer how to
maintain contact with his Aboriginal heritage.

The Dancer appears as featherfoot, the harbinger of his own death,
when Worru sings about it in Nyoongah. "Clapsticks followed by
didgeridoo take up the rhythm" and "heavily decorated with leaves and
carrying two short sticks he dances slowly across the stage and up on to
the escarpment" (The Dreamers 2.2.69). Later when Worru is sick and
falls off his bed he once again appears as featherfoot and moving slowly
across in front of the rest of the characters but unseen to them, removes
the decorating leaves, leaving them strewn on the front of the stage
(2.3.73).

In act one scene seven Eli settles down with Worru to an evening's
drinking listening to the radio. The sound of the radio fades to reveal the
dancer, sitting cross-legged on the escarpment against a deep night sky
singing, accompanying himself with the clapsticks (The Dreamers 1.7.43).
Once again, "sitting cross-legged on the escarpment against a night sky" he
sings sorrowfully at Worru's death in act two scene five (2.5.77).

In Barungin the Dancer appears thrice. When Peter gets arrested in
Koolbardon, the Dancer goes across the stage (*Barungin* 2.6.56). Peter, who had taken Little Doll to compete in the swimming carnival held at Geraldton, was driving Peegun's car when, in connection with a riot in a country town, all the black fellas' cars were searched and a number of arrests were made. A lot of stolen stuff Peegun had stashed away for Mickey was found in the car and Peter was arrested. When Robert announces to the Wallitch family that "Peter was found dead in his cell just after midnight", the Dancer goes across the stage and onto the hill (*Barungin* 2.7.58); And when the reading of the autopsy report comes to an end the Dancer is seen playing the didgeridoo on the hill (*Barungin* 2.8.57). As Helen Gilbert points out, here the Dancer contextualises Peter's death within the broader history of Aboriginal experience since colonization (62).

Through the Dancer's actions Davis shows an intimate connection in Aboriginal culture, between a Dreamtime realm, the present and the land. Though referred to as "he" in the stage directions the Dancer is assigned no gender in the casts lists. In the predominantly realistic text this distinction from other characters in the play allows him to function as "an alienating device" in the Brechtian sense. By disrupting the narrative sequence he draws attention to the constructedness of dramatic representation (Gilbert 135). He also functions as a "mode of historicization of Aboriginal identity" (Gilbert 142).
According to Gilbert and Tompkins, the mythical figure of the Dancer evokes temporal circularity, "collapse present, past, and mythic time and foreground points of overlap and contact between the spiritual world and the more mundane time/space of the 'ordinary' action" (142). Moreover, their appearance, signals a ritualised moment which represents timelessness, -- a state of being outside the dominant society's temporalities -- whereby a ceremonial catharsis of colonial oppression is made possible (142).

Davis used theatre's capacity for simultaneous representation of different time frames to interrogate history as it has been officially documented. As in the case of the three families in Kullark, in the original production of Barungin, the characters of Peter and that of the Dancer are played by the same actor. Dual roles such as these spanning different times destabilise the sense of an unbroken historical record in much the same manner as story-tellers or narrators break the time frame of a play (Gilbert and Tompkins 144).

Throughout the play Barungin, slides showing Aboriginal people in chains, images sliding back through decades of oppression, were projected behind the contemporary action reminding the audience that black anger and outrage have their roots in a history of white violence, and that the Aboriginal family at the center of the play has been shaped by an inheritance of grief (Gillam, Westerly 128).
Use of costumes and sets of different eras draw attention to the dismantling of a uniform chronology (Gilbert and Tompkins 144). Yagan’s body painting in Kullark “carries with it various unspoken authorities and can be read” (Gilbert and Tompkins 63). It is symbolic as well as functional and is specific to the context and culture. Spiritual and political in reference, reveals the site of culture and the significance and power outside the context of the play. It also asserts the continuation of traditional or indigenous ritualised religious practices despite the influence of Christian missionaries (Gilbert and Tompkins 63). Later in the play, Charles Fraser, appears as a well-dressed botanist carrying a shovel and butterfly net (Kullark 1.3.13), while Yagan, Mitjitjiroo and Moyarahn are clad in kangaroo skin capes. The men carry spears, the woman a wahna (digging stick (Kullark 1.3.13). It is Fraser’s colourful coat and trousers that is offered to the Aborigines as something to which they might attach some value. Later in the play at the Moore River Settlement, we find that Thomas Yorlah is made to wear settlement clothing (Kullark 2.3.49) and Jamie first appears in Kullark with an overnight bag and a guitar case, liberally plastered with land rights stickers (Kullark 1.6.22). In No Sugar, Joe wears a yellow shirt and black pants and the dress he presents to Mary is a red one (4.8.104). In Barungin every one of the graveside gathering carries a wreath of red and yellow flowers with black taffeta and ribbon (2.9.59). Here Davis makes a political statement through his choice of colours. The Aboriginal flag,
which consists of a tri-coloured rectangle, is divided in half horizontally, with the upper half, black and the lower red, and a yellow circle at the centre. The black represents the Aboriginal people, the red the earth and the people’s spiritual relationship to the land, the yellow, the sun, the giver of life. The flag, derived from the land rights campaign (Shoemaker, *Black Words* 121) and designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from Central Australia, was used as the symbol of the Tent Embassy in Canberra (*Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* 371).

**Spatial Histories**

The segmentation of space/land into political units with European determined borders does not take into account traditional Aboriginal boundaries (145). The linguistic economic and cultural domination of Aboriginal Australians by Europeans depended upon the conquest of Aboriginal land as it was the site from which they articulated their power over the indigenous people and hence the remapping of space becomes a central project for decolonisation (145). Indigenous peoples were written out of historical space by a map/history, which ignored their spatial epistemologies and wrote over their traditional place names (Gilbert and Tompkins 145).

Traditionally, pictographs, which symbolised whole stories “were used as a mnemonic device for bringing to the mind of the initiated various events in the stories of spirit beings whose actions were often re-
enacted, as well, in ritual dance” (qtd. in Elder 214). A painting in neo-traditional style of Warrgul, the Rainbow serpent, in the shape of a map of the Swan River, is used as a backdrop to represent the exterior in the play *Kullark*. It incorporates revolving screens in which changes in location could be indicated (*Kullark/The Dreamers* 6). They reveal a water colour of Swan River in 1827 when Fraser enters exploring (1.3.13), it shows the painting of a sailing ship on Swan River in 1829 in Act one scene three to represent the arrival of the settlers and later a painting of the Swan River colony in 1832. The second revolving screen through which Stirling enters periodically with proclamations, invariably reveals a Union Jack. The screen representing the interior reveals the contemporary kitchen-living room of the Yorlah family as well as a crude settlers hut of the 1830s in Act one Scene five. By foregrounding “the inevitable discrepancy between the “natural” and the “imitated” object the stylised serpent image holds the supposed mimeticism of the western map up to question (Gilbert and Tompkins 148).

Chesson describes the backdrop to the upstage setting in *The Dreamers*. Anchored in the present it depicted,

the creative spirit of Warrgul and traced the courses of the Swan and Avon rivers, bounded by the Darling Range, Rottnest Island, Garden Island and the Victoria Plains. The stages of Warrgul’s journey were recorded in a background that included the hollow basin of Perth Water, where he
rested to collect his strength before he etched his way into the sea at Fremantle. The islands were rock-markers to indicate his passing and welcome his return. Each yellows represented the sandplains north of Perth and a burning red the Darling Range and the Swan and Avon valleys. Abstract patterns were used to recall the beauty of the indigenous flora and fauna. Worked into the backdrop were circles to represent Northam and Grass Valley, and a lacework of footprints traced the Northam Nyoongahs’ journey to a larger circle representing Moore River (200).

In Barungin News paper headlines and images of Aboriginal people incarcerated, drawn from the archive and projected on to the screen is used as a backdrop and as a linking device.

In the plays of Jack Davis, space becomes a force that potentially determines relationships rather than simply affecting them (Gilbert and Tompkins 146). The positioning of settlers and/or indigenes within the landscape/stagescape illustrates this (146). By representing enclosures, boundaries and contested places in the stagespace, Davis illustrates how apartheid structures are built and maintained in the interests of imperialism and how they may be subverted or broken down (Gilbert 63).

In Kullark the settings are often overlaid so that there is no clear delineation between the spaces claimed by the Whites during the
invasion process and the spaces occupied by the Blacks in the contemporary narrative (61). In *No Sugar*, the Perth and Northam offices are literally and ideologically marginalized on the left, the Moore River Settlement and its offices on the right, with the black space -- the campfire -- central stage (Dibble 96). On Australia Day 1934, at the Moore River Native Settlement, all the whites are assembled on the dais facing the assembled black population of the settlement. Billy and Bluey “dressed in new but absurdly ill-fitting uniforms” (*No Sugar* 4.5.96) are placed between the two groups.

Helen Gilbert describes the setting of *In Our Town* for its premiere production in Perth in which “a diagonal line/path running from the back of the acting area to the limits of the thrust stage to mark a boundary between the predominantly white café-bar area and the black bush camp which occupied the rest of the set” (68). David through his presence in the café and Sue through her visit to the Aboriginal camp, transgress these barriers and sometimes the two also walk precariously along the boundary line (69).

The photograph in the published text of *In Our Town* shows Mrs. Moss (White) and Milly positioned on either side of the borderline as they discuss their children’s relationship (Gilbert, *Jack Davis* 71). While the Moss family in *In Our Town*, are gathered close to the rostrum at the Anzac Day ceremony (1.1.1), the Millimurra family gather around their
campsite (*In Our Town* 1.1.1). Larry and Davis stand close, but separated towards their own families (*In Our Town* 1.1.1). When Sue expresses her wish to visit the Millimurra family Sam advices her to wait till they get off the reserve since 'Wetjalas aren't allowed on the reserve ... [and] could get three months ...[unless one is] a missionary or a department bloke” (*In Our Town* 1.9.23). But Helen Gilbert points out that Davis portrays the segregation and marginalisation of blacks in ways that dismantles the physical and ideological structures, which disempower the Aborigines (68).

While depicting the historical confinement of Aborigines within institutions like missions and gaols segregating them from white society, Davis stresses the importance of subversion and resistance. In his plays, boundaries dissolve to become, ‘debatable places’ that ‘speak’ through their violation. In *No sugar* the Aborigines repeatedly break out of the mission compound and refuse to respect other restrictive enclosures created by representatives of white authority.

By dramatising the ‘dialectic of place and displacement’ spatial histories presented in Davis’s plays work against models of theatre which subordinate spatial signifiers to other thematic and generic concerns, and/or which present the landscape merely as a scenic device, designed at best to heighten narrative emplotment and, at worst, to recede as a naturalised backdrop for signal events. By revealing the land as an object of discursive and territorial contention, as well as an ‘accumulative text’
that records multiple inscriptions Davis dismantles the myth of *terra nullius* (Gilbert and Tompkins 156).

**Language**

As Gilbert and Tompkins point out the authority commanded by the English language was much the same as the authority of literate, official history over the unwritten, changeable Aboriginal histories (165). With colonization, the use of indigenous languages was prohibited, and the English language was imposed on the Aboriginal people (164). This turned out to be the first step towards the destruction of Aboriginal culture. The loss of language led to a loss of names, of oral history, of a connection to the land and the speaker's sense of autonomy and dignity (164). Granny Doll, a character in Jack Davis's play, *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* (1988), mourns: “*Wetjalas (whites) killed our language*” (*Barungin* 1.7.36).

Children who were taken away from their parents and brought up in missions and settlements were forbidden from speaking their own languages and were severely punished if they disobeyed and adults in settlements were also prevented from indulging in their own culture. Uncle Herbie complains in *In Our Town* “When I was a child, they say don’t you talk blackfella way, that’s bad, devil will get you and they wouldn’t let us corroboree wouldn’t let us sing and talk in our language” (*In Our Town* 1.5.12). Due to these early policies “most Aboriginal people regard English as their first language” (Davis, *Writers in Action* 191).
By renaming people and places in English, constructions of location and identity were replaced and greater control established over both. The Stolen Generation had been given English names and some had their names changed during the war. By renouncing her English name to protest the Bicentenial celebrations of 1988 Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) said “They could not spell the Aboriginal names so they gave us English ones” (qtd. in Shoemaker 225). Gran in *Barungin* describes how some of the Wallitch family became Wallets. “When old Grandfather Dave went to the War, then army fellas couldn’t say ‘Wallitch’, so they changed it to ‘Wallet’”. Similarly, in *In Our Town*, when David Millimurra went to war his name is changed to David Miller. As Larry says, though his name is Millimurra, “a nig name” (1.6.14) the records wrote him down as David Miller since it was easier to pronounce, says Larry (*In Our Town* 1.5.14). However, in spite of all attempts at suppression, the Aboriginal languages survived.

Forms of postcolonial language called ‘antilanguage’ by Hodge and Mishra, which arises as a strategy of abrogation, are according to Michael Halliday (1978) specially constructed to sustain difference and identity. Opaque to outsiders, it encodes the ideology of the group and foregrounds the world that sustains their identity. The intense attachment of Aboriginal communities to their traditional languages, according to Hodge and Mishra, is an antilanguage strategy, excluding outsiders (White Australians, and even other Aboriginal groups) and
bonding the community (206). Clothing codes, behavioural patterns etc. also reinforce the construction of group identity through forms of speech. The Aboriginal language used in Davis’s plays is the Nyoongah language, occasionally called the Bibbulmun. Davis explains that the term ‘Nyoongah’ literally means ‘man’ (an adult male; York or Yorga being the female equivalent) and that it has become a general term denoting Aboriginality in the South-West of Western Australia. According to him Bibbulmun is one of the fourteen South-West languages that have combined over the years to create the modern Nyoongah spoken in the play. It was at Moore River Native Settlement that Davis first began writing down Aboriginal words and learning the Bibbulmun language. He had also worked on a grammar of the language for a number of years. In The Dreamers Worru mentions some of the Nyoongah words:

Worru [. . .] [Pointing to his beard] Do you know what this is, Nyoongah way? This is my gnarnuk. [Pointing to his nose.] This my moorly. [Pointing to his eye.] And this my meow. [Indicating his forehead.] And this my yimmung. [Cackling with delight.] Plenty nyoondiak there, kia, plenty nyoondiak. (The Dreamers 1.6.32). leaf on a tree, as well as tea leaf is mahngk (1.7.40). The only Nyoongah word Shane knows in Wetjala. (1.6.33).

As Gilbert and Tompkins point out, the imperial theatre had assisted in the inculcation of the coloniser’s language both through the
training of actors and the conditioning of audiences (165). Now Davis uses the theatre to articulate linguistic resistance to imperialism. The presentation on stage, of the Nyoongah language, which had been forbidden by the colonisers, “represent[s] an act of defiance and an attempt to retrieve cultural autonomy” (Gilbert and Tompkins 169). By emphasizing not only the sound and rhythm of the language and its accompanying paralinguistic features, but also the site from which it is spoken (167) Davis’s plays help to reinvest Aboriginal systems of communication with a sense of power and an active place on the stage (168). The hegemonic ‘norm is thus modified, subverted, or decentred (Gilbert and Tompkins 170). The careful redeployment of linguistic signifiers – such as tone, rhythm, register, and lexicon – generate as much political resistance as the rewriting of history (Gilbert and Tompkins 168).

The performance of the plays emphasize spoken rather than written discourse and thus foregrounds orality while the use of unglossed Nyoongah language establishes a gap between (white) viewers and (native) performers which disproves notions of the infinite transmissability of language (170). Nyoongah words left untranslated, reverses the normal linguistic power structures, valorises the Nyoogah language and privileges the Aboriginal audience over the dominant English-speakers (171). It also demonstrates to the whites the enormous impact of being forced to learn and speak a vastly different language.
(Tompkins, Jack Davis 52). Even when the meaning of the words are provided in English (in the programme notes or in the published versions of the plays) in order to make them accessible to non-speakers, it still doesn't provide all levels of meaning (Gilbert and Tompkins 172).

According to Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker, Aboriginal writers "adopt various styles of writing so that what they really want to write about is there. It's hidden. It's contained within their writing, if one can see through the subterfuge, the camouflage that they use when they're writing" (Davis and Hodge 47). Aboriginality is displaced and concealed from the eyes of outsiders. Hodge and Mishra see this strategy as a continuation of the way in which traditional Aborigines guarded ritual secrets from the uninitiated (206).

In Kullark the Dancer, sitting cross-legged on the escarpment against a night sky, sings sorrowfully at Worru's death in act two scene five.

DANCER. Nitja Wetjula, warrah, warrah!

Gnullarah dumbart noychwa.

Noychwa, noychwa, hoychwa.

Wetjala kie-e-ny gnullarah dumbart.

Kie-e-ny, kie-e-ny, kie-e-ny,

Kie-e-ny.

[The White man is evil, evil!

My people are dead.
Dead, dead, dead.

The white man kill my people.

Kill, kill, kill,

Kill.] (2.5.77)

Hodge and Mishra points out that in the glossary at the back, the meaning of the word *gnullarah* is given as 'ours' not 'mine' as in the translation. By using the exclusive form of 'we' those with the required reading skill (a knowledge of the nuances of the language) are separated from the non-Nyoongah speakers in the audience and incorporated into a community with the Dancer. The Non-Nyoongah speaking audience is thus constructed as the 'Other' (208). Anti language is used to express their sense of otherness not only from the rest of the Australian community but from other Aboriginal communities as well (Hodge and Mishra 211).

Aboriginal culture possessed a set of qualities that are distinctively oral; namely absence of closure, generic fluidity, the dimension of performance, and a specific attitude to the potency of the spoken word (75). As Bruce Shaw has pointed out many of these are also features of 'Aboriginal English': "non-verbal and semi-verbal markers, repetition, reversals, standard substantives, a vocabulary of special terms, scatology, dialogue, interrogatives, verbal punctuation, mythological allusions, onomatopoeia, similes and the maintenance of suspense" (qtd. in Hodge and Mishra 75). Hodge and Mishra describes Aboriginal English
as "a sensitive medium of artistic expression, which Aborigines have
developed into a rich continuum of forms that they already use with
great facility and precision in the task of mediation (80). Aboriginal
English [. . .] is a complex language with its own grammatical patterns; it
has its own cultural codes, semantic levels and subversive strategies that
a non-Aboriginal listener or reader might fail to comprehend correctly
(Nelson, Connections 7)

In The Tempest, Caliban says: "You taught me language and my
profit on't / is, I know how to curse" (1.2.). Apart from using Nyoongah
word Davis also re-presents English. The use of variant Englishes offers
one effective means of refusing to uphold the privilege of the imperial
language (Gilbert and Tompkins 176). When a language is indigenised,
its lexicon changes to accommodate new words and/or new
combinations of words, which can be staged as part of a culturally
inflected dialogue (178).

In Davis's plays, the term 'wetjala' (singular and plural), used by
the Nyoongah characters to refer to whites, is not an Aboriginal word as
such but a new term created from the English. The terms 'white' and
'fellow' (usually pronounced 'fella' in Australia) had merged to give a
different pronunciation, a different spelling and a shift in the meaning of
the original words, since wetjala usually carries a mildly derogatory
connotation (Gilbert and Tompkins 178). Such changes in the lexicon
illustrate the colonised subjects' ability to appropriate the language of
the imperial centre and use it for their own expressive purposes. It also establishes a group identity (178).

By incorporating aspects of the oral tradition into the dramatic text and through parodying received discursive codes Davis destabilises 'English' and subvert its authority (181). The opening of Davis's *Barungin* depicts a fundamentalist preacher burying Eli. Through the incomprehension, discomfort, and annoyance displayed by the mourners, at the exaggerated and repetitive rhetoric of the preacher, Davis points to its inappropriateness to the occasion and thus destabilises the inflated English rhetoric and dominant society's discourse (182). Moreover Peegun through his imitation of the preacher, critiques the coloniser's religious discourse by offering an ironic version that deflates the assumptions of privilege encoded by such language (181).

While Davis uses the English language to express his dramatic art he also makes use of 'abrogation and appropriation, the cultural strategies of postcolonialism (205). Davis observes that, "because we [Aborigines] represent only one percent of the population [. . .] if we're going to survive, we have to learn to speak English as well as Aboriginal" (Davis, *Writers in Action* 188).

[. . .] if I wrote in an Aboriginal language none of you people would buy my book because you wouldn't be able to read it; therefore I wouldn't have any bread and butter. But also
English is my first language. My Aboriginal language is my second language. Throughout urban Australia we mostly speak English. Very few speak Aboriginal (Davis *Writers in Action* 191).

**Song and Music**

Songs by itself is an 'alternative' discourse and cultural signifier (184) and are effectively used by Davis. Apart from conveying an idea or emotion, song and music generate cultural meanings in its own right through a signification based on pitch, accent, tune, musical arrangement, the kinesics and proxemics of the singer and the historical layers of meaning of the lyrics (Gilbert and Tompkins 193-94).

Tindale had divided traditional Aboriginal songs into eight types: "Dream songs or *begere*, relating the adventures of ancestral beings; magical songs; songs associated with sickness and death; totemic songs; hunting songs; dramatic songs and epics; fighting songs; and those dealing with 'public opinion' " (qtd. in Berndt 369). According to him Aboriginal myths were mainly presented through song and not as prose narrative. These sacred songs were usually sung in a special setting: on the men's dancing ground, or in association with ritual sequences. The audience (members of the community) gathered around the space cleared for dancing and sat down on the ground. The songs usually sung to the accompaniment of clapsticks and didgeridoo were potentially associated
with action sequences of some kind; sacred songs often having their corresponding rites, or stipulated actions or movements. According to them, song and dance are ideally inseparable (Berndt 371).

The sacred songs provided only "key words or references, and not full descriptions" (Berndt 242). "There is a heavy use of symbolism; a single word may convey a whole range of images – most notably in short compressed songs where each word has a number of mythical and other implications apart from its literal meanings" (372). Berndt points out that, Strehlow, analysing the construction of the songs of Aranda has shown how different word forms convey subtle distinctions in meaning (372). For each creature or thing there is a series of names, with slightly different meanings. In addition there are 'outside' and 'inside' words, singing words, invocations, "big" names and "small" names, and so on.

The songs are sometimes organised in cycles, the sequences carefully arranged and apparent digressions interwoven into the central theme with specific allusions, local and mythical, amplifying their main points. The story, which unfolds in a leisurely way, with much attention to local detail rather than to plot, normally includes a number of place and other names, which also have meanings, not easily translatable (374). There are songs for all occasion and their subject matter is as varied as life itself.

With the policy of assimilation, religious practices centered on
exposed bora circles were forbidden. Though secular songmaking and singing continued in the camps, but with the arrival of the missionaries and their work of education, these were soon replaced by hymns and the song forms of England. With increased Aboriginal involvement in the cattle industry and the widespread use of the wireless, when new melodies in foreign languages began to be heard, English words replaced Indigenous words and traditional single song stanza came to be modified with a second stanza (Mudrooroo, *Indigenous Literature* 109). American country songs and the western musical became popular throughout rural Australia. The traveling singers introduced the guitar into Aboriginal communities (Mudrooroo, *Indigenous Literature* 110). Most indigenous secular song structures, were soon replaced by Country and western (hillbilly) songs since the subject matter reflected the new Indigenous lifestyles: "horses and cattle, drinking, gambling, the outrider as hero, a nomadic existence, country-orientation, wronged love, fighting and fucking" (Mudrooroo, *Indigenous Literature* 111). "My Brownskinned Baby" created in this genre by Bob Randall is written to protest the forced removal of children from their parents and has been incorporated into *Kullark* by Jack Davis. After the second world war, in the urban situation, American popular song structures, like rock' n' roll, were constantly played over the radio and television and influenced indigenous songs. In the late seventies, alternative music stations played reggae from the Caribbean. Its lyrics which stressed an ideology of
blackness and a sense of belonging to a land, appealed to the Indigenous people who had entered a phase of political activism (Mudrooroo *Indigenous Literature* 111-12).

In his discussion of Indigenous songs Mudrooroo uses the concept of ideotones: “audio-narrative units which appear to flow from and to suggest certain inevitable conjunctions occurring in the word/music nexus. These ideotones may be seen either to affirm or to challenge the apparent unity of the dominant ideological discourses playing at any one time. [. . .]. Those in the know, or in the culture, received a different meaning from those in the general population” (*Indigenous Literature* 113-114).

Song and music form an integral part of the plays of Jack Davis. It contributes to the *mise-en-scene* and affects the mood or atmosphere of the play. In *Kullark*, music serves the function of representing different cultures and shows switches in time periods. The life of the contemporary couple unfolds as a local commercial radio station plays country and western music. While the British explorers enter to a rollicking tune, the Irish settlers are represented by folk ballads, folk dance tunes and tin whistles, sometimes jaunty, sometimes gentle and on one occasion with a martial beat. Stirling’s official proclamations are always announced by a drumroll. Apart from this songs are also used.

Didgeridoo, an Aboriginal musical instrument half way between a
horn and a trumpet, and supposed to have been evolved from an 'emu decoy' (a short hollow branch blown to lure birds, such as emus and bush turkeys by imitating their calls (Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia 280) is used as a marker of Aboriginality. In Act One Scene two of Kullark, Yagan's chant and dance are accompanied by the drone of the digeridoo. It is used along with clapsticks whenever the Aboriginal family appears on the stage. Heavy rhythmic didgeridoo and clapsticks announces the entrance of the Dancer (The Dreamers 1.4.21). It sometimes crashes in (The Dreamers 1.6.35; 2.1.58), takes up the rhythm of singing (2.2.69), or drones threateningly (The Dreamers 2.3.73). In Barungin a didgeridoo sounds as a dancer goes across the stage (2.6.56) and on Peter's death the Dancer plays the didgeridoo on the hill (2.8.59). During the funeral service the preacher's voice is drowned out by a didgeridoo (Barungin 1.1.7) and it is often used for family entertainment (Barungin 2.3.44). In the busking scene in Barungin, while Peegun plays a didgeridoo Shane accompanies him on a guitar (Barungin 1.3.15). Clapsticks accompanies the didgeridoos for dancing (No Sugar 2.6.65). In No Sugar Jimmy plays 'Springtime in the Rockies' (No Sugar 1.3.27, 33) and 'Home Sweet Home' (No Sugar 1.4.31) on his mouth organ.

Sounds of the Magpies indicates the presence the Nyoongahs. Its warbling shows the presence of children in The Dreamers (1.2.8), and Mary's pregnancy in No Sugar (2.10.74; 4.10.109). Later it squawks to
warn Joe and Mary of the approach of Bluey, the black tracker (2.10.74). The sound of the occasional crow (The Dreamers 1.5.22, 1.6.26), cicadas droning at dusk (The Dreamers 1.6.36) and the sounds of dogs barking (No Sugar 2.3.59) can also be heard from a Nyoongah camp.

In The Dreamers Eli sings the hymns ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ (2.2.58) and ‘Yes Jesus loves me’ (2.2.59) as drunken songs. Peegun in Barungin sings the parody of a hymn as a drinking song (Barungin 2.3.47) and in jail Jimmy sings “Hail Queen of Heaven” (1.4.32).

With Sister Eileeen the children practice the hymn “There is a happy land” (No Sugar 4.2.91).

There is a happy land,

Far, far away,

Where saints in glory stand,

Bright, bright as day:

Oh, how they sweetly sing,

‘Worthy is our Saviour King!’

Loud, let His praises ring,

Praise, praise for aye! (No Sugar 4.2.91).

But on Australia day celebrations it is sung as a parody (No Sugar 4.5.98).

There is a happy land,

Far, far away.
No sugar is our tea,
Bread and butter we never see.
That's why we're gradually
Fading away. (*No Sugar* 4.5.98).

The Anzac Day ceremony in the play *In Our Town*, ends with the hymn “Lest We Forget” (1.1.2), and Uncle Herbie in a later scene remembers the hymn “Jesus he liked the diddle chillun” he was taught at the mission (*In Our Town* 1.5.12).

‘God Save the King’ is sung to close the Australia Day celebrations in *No Sugar* (4.5.99), ‘Rule Britannia’ plays softly as the English scientist enters with the box containing Yagan’s head (*Kullark* 1.7.33). ‘Advance Australia Fair’ plays loudly (*Kullark* 2.1.41) when the actors enter to take stock of the situation in 1901. The song ‘Brown Skin Baby’ with words and music by Bob Randall, is adapted by Jack Davis (*Kullark* 2.1.42-43) to speak of the Stolen Generation. In 1945 the victorious Australian Army returning home from World war two (*Kullark* 2.5.57) is greeted with Pack up your troubles and smile’ and Vera Lynn sings ‘Wish me luck’ as ex-corporal Alec number two four seven five four three steps out into the world as a civilian (*Kullark* 2.5.60). In *In our Town*, Drunk on champagne, the returned soldiers Larry and David sing ‘Lily Marlene’ (1.2.3).
The Dreamers opens with the distant echoing voices of children singing a tribal song (The Dreamers 1.1.7) as the tribal family slowly walks across the escarpment going hunting and gathering. The chanting is soft and distant as they walk back in chains (The Dreamers 1.9.46), and eerie (The Dreamers 2.1.47) as they later trudge along, inadequately dressed in blankets and shabby clothes, in winter. Apart from these tribal songs in The Dreamers (1.1.7, 1.9.46, 2.1.47), songs in Nyoongah are sung by the Dancer (The Dreamers 1.7.43, 2.5.77), Worru (The Dreamers 2.2.69), Gran (No Sugar 4.10.109) and Herbie (In Our Town 1.11.26).

Poem by Worru (The Dreamers 1.1.7-8), and in (1.9.45-46), blends with the sounds of a tribal song in The Dreamers (1.9.46) and the play ends with a poem by Dolly (The Dreamers 2.7.78-79). The poem ‘Nostalgia’ in the opening scene and ‘Worru’ in the last scene were written fifteen years before the play itself and was later woven into it. In his collection of poetry the First born Jack included the poem about Worru. In Our Town features the poems by David, “the poet laureate of the 32nd battlion” (1.6.15) about their mate Sam the gambling man (1.2.4), and about Norm and the two-up game (1.6.15).

In Barungin “The Magpie Song” (Barungin 1.3.16) which begins by telling the story of a bird ends with a pointed cry for landrights:

You believe in land rights too.
You believe in land rights too.

Do you believe in land rights too?

And at the end of the play Shane reads the poem ‘John Pat’ (Barungin 2.9.60)

The Radio is an integral part of the contemporary scene. In The Dreamers Peter turns the radio on (1.4.21) and dances a disco dance, Dolly turns it on to “the Earl Reeve 6WF Tuesday night Country Music Request Programme with Jimmy Little singing “Baby Blue’ (The Dreamers 1.7.40) As the family sits listening to Dolly’s request “Me and Bobby McGee’ (The Dreamers 1.7.42) the sound of the radio fades to the sound of the clapsticks to reveal the dancer sitting crosslegged, singing in Nyoongah accompanying himself with clapsticks (The Dreamers 1.7.43). Radio plays gentle country and western softly in Barungin (1.4.16, 19) as Meena and Granny Doll clear away the dishes at night and Little Doll plays Trivial Pursuit. The walkman and the TV are also part of the contemporary scene (Barungin 1.2.11).

The presence of song and music in an otherwise non-musical play, denaturalizes the action, increases the audiences’ attention, diverting it from one discourse to another (Gilbert and Tompkins 194). The numerous voices of a chorus multiplies the effect and provides an occasion for a vocal expression of solidarity, resistance, and indigenous presence (Gilbert and Tompkins 194). Indigenous song and music used
in the plays recall pre-contact methods of communication, affirm the continued validity of oral traditions, and help to break the bonds of conventional (western) representation (Gilbert and Tompkins 194), whereas hybrid song/music function to protest the domination of the coloniser's linguistic/musical tradition by liberally interspersing it with the words, forms, or musical structures of their less recognised and validated system of communication (Gilbert and Tompkins 194). Song and music can also live on after the performance's conclusion when the audience retells or re-sings parts of the theatrical presentation as an act of memory and thus act as a mnemonic device and as powerful 'linguistic' signifiers (Gilbert and Tompkins 194).

Whether they articulate their concerns through verbal or musical forms, or through silence, post-colonial plays reinforce language's heavy inflection with, and investment in, cultural specificity (Gilbert and Tompkins 200).

**Dancing**

In Aboriginal Australia, songs and the capacity to dance were venerated as sources of power and social prestige. They were incorporated in rituals and transcended everyday life concerns, since they were considered to have been transmitted from Creator Beings, who are tied to particular geographical sites and localities. Original forms of dances have been used as a means of substantiating claims to land
(Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia 220). Danced performances were not only representations of events with dancers assuming roles, but affirmations of their inner identity. As participatory acts, which brought dancers, spirits and various Dreamings into living juxtaposition with one another, dances closed space/time gaps between past and present for those who owned them (Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia 256). Knowledge of the directions of the ancestral tracks in relation to land and Dreamings are considered crucial to understanding the dances. Sets of painted body signs indicated social distinctions, and specific gestures designated kinship and/or totemic relations.

In The Dreamers Worru dances a “drunken stumbling version of a half -remembered traditional dance” and when he stumbles and falls an intricately painted Dancer takes over and “dances down and across in front of them, pounding his feet into the stage” (1.4.21). Later the dancer appears as Milbart to make a spear and “in stylized rhythmic steps [he] searches for a straight stick, finds it, straightens it, pares and tips it before sprinting up the ramp onto the escarpment and striking the mirrolagh stance” (The Dreamers 1.6.35-36). To make a fire “in stylized rhythmic steps [he] searches for stone flints, finds them, builds and ignites a fire. Carefully he lifts the fire in cupped hands and carries it to the escarpment where he blows it gently, igniting a careful fire, and sits warming himself” (The Dreamers 2.1.58). Carrying two short sticks and heavily decorated with leaves the dancer, appears as feather foot at the
front of stage and dances slowly across the stage and up on to the escarpment, (The Dreamers 2.2.69) but in the next scene when Worru falls off his bed, the dancer appears again as feather foot “and moves slowly across in front . . . removing the decorating leaves and leaving them strewn on the front of the stage” (The Dreamers 2.3.73). The dancer also appears thrice in Barungin, where he goes across the stage (2.6.56), on to the hill (Barungin 2.7.58) and appears on the hill playing the didgeridoo (Barungin 2.8.59).

Worru remembers the various Aboriginal dances like “the yongarah dance, the waitj dance, the karda, the yahllarah, the middar, the nyumby, . . .” and laments that “they all finish now, all gone”. (The Dreamers 1.6.34).

Uncle Herbie, in In our Town, insists that he is “a young fella” because he “can still do a middar and . . . can still play the didgeridoo” (In Our Town 1.7.17). After performing a rain dance (In Our Town 1.7.17) Herbie claims: “You see big Yungu rain come next week” (In Our Town 1.7.17). While Peter drunkenly dances his own disco to the music on the radio in The Dreamers (1.4.21), Micky dances to the music on a tape in Barungin (2.2.41) and Drunk, Peegun dances around singing the parody of a hymn (Barungin 2.2.47).

In Act two scene six of No Sugar a corroboree is held at night around a campfire made in a clearing in the pine plantation of the Moore River Native Settlement. Jimmy, Sam, and the black trackers Billy and
Bluey paint themselves with *wilgi*. Accompanied by clapsticks Jimmy sings his grandfather’s song in the *Nyoongah* language and miming with his hands, explains its meaning. It is “for the *karra*, . . . , crabs to come up the river and for the fish to jump up high so he can catch them in the fish traps” (*No Sugar* 2.6.66). Billy, who belonged to another territory, explains his body painting and performs a dance, which came from the *Wanmulla* country.

BILLY. This one *bungarra*, an’ he lookin’ for berry bush. But he know that fella eagle watchin’ him and he know that fella is cunnin’ fella. He watchin’ and lookin’ for that eagle, that way, this way, that way, this way.

*[He rolls over a log, disappearing almost magically. Bluey plays the didgeridoo and Billy appears some distance away by turning quickly so the firelight reveals his painted body. He dances around, then seems to disappear suddenly. He rolls back over the log and drops down, seated by the fire.]*

(*2.6.66*)

He later joins the Nyoongahs Sam, Jimmy, and Joe in a dance “with increasing speed and energy, stamping their feet, whirling in front of the fire, their bodies appearing and disappearing as the paint catches the firelight. The dance becomes faster and more frantic until finally Sam lets out a yell and they collapse, dropping back to their positions around the fire” (*No Sugar* 2.6.66). Billy acknowledges Jimmy as a “songman” and
the Nyoongahs as “dancemen” and affirms: “This still your country.
[Flinging his arms wide] . . . Gudeeah make ‘em fences, windmill, make
‘em road for motor car, big house, cut ‘em down trees. Still your country!
(No Sugar 2.6.67). He goes on to describe the Oombulgarri massacre,
which finished his mob in 1926.

The participation of the trackers in the corroboree indicates their
preference for maintaining their traditional lifestyles (Tompkins, Jack
Davis 59) and Davis remembers that in the last Nyoongah corroboree
held in Fremantle black trackers from the central police station were
involved, including Billy Kimberly, Old Nipper and Sammy Broome Hall
(Chesson 61).

Peggy Summers, a twelve year old White girl, who is working on a
new dance for her scholarship assessment thinks of using Aboriginal
music with didgeridoo and clapsticks for her piece. When invited to her
house Tim Winalli, an Aboriginal boy of thirteen, does a short emu dance
and William, his cousin, a bungarra (old man goanna) dance and Peggy
identifies the animals represented (40). Mother tells her the story of the
old man bungarra as William dances the bungarra.

This is the story of the old man bungarra.
And he’s walking along in the desert, looking for that special
berry bush that he can eat. And he’s walking along and
walking along. And up in the sky, way, way up, there’s this
eagle, just waiting to get the old man bungarra. And the
eagle's up there hovering, just waiting. And the bungarra's walking along and he's walking along, and he's looking at the eagle and he's looking for the berry bush, and he's looking at the eagle and he's looking for the berry bush. Then the eagle sees him, and he dives down fast! And the bungarra looks up, and he runs off quick!

[The dance ends] (41)

Later, the boys together do the kangaroo hunt while mother plays the clapsticks (42). “Tim, as the hunter, mimes spearing the kangaroo, played by William” (42). Peggy plans a dance with “two swans, a black swan and a white swan, ... swimming along a lake” (51). She demonstrates it using ballet steps calling out the French terms for each movement. In his efforts to repeat it Tim ends up parodying the ballet movements. He demonstrates the same dance corroboree style, in which “The swan isn't swimming, he's walking along the bank looking for worms. He's got a long neck, and a bushy tail and he waddles like a duck, only slow” (53). While it has to be done with a long neck, knees in, and her kwon (back) sticking out (53-54), Peggy's attempts to repeat it turns out to be too graceful and thus fails. The end result is a great success -- Peggy in a leotard and Tim with his body painted perform a modern dance incorporating elements of classical and traditional aboriginal dance, with music of didgeridoo and clapsticks (70).
As a form of spatial inscription, dance functions as a productive way of illustrating -- and countering -- the territorial aspects of Western imperialism. It's patterned movement offers the opportunity to establish cultural context and to challenge the norms of the colonizer. By centralising traditional, non-verbal forms of self-representation, dance recuperates post-colonial subjectivity. Situated within a dramatic text, it disrupts the narrative sequence and/or genre, denaturalises theatre's signifying practices and thus draws attention to the constructedness of all dramatic representation, and functions as an alienating devise in the Brechtian sense (Gilbert and Tompkins 239).

Since the imposition of an alien language had compromised the Aboriginal attempts to articulate themselves verbally, dance functions as a mode of empowerment by encoding identity through movement. Davis's plays make use of the communicative power and subversive potential of dance. But since the traditional styles of movement are often hybridised with western form and fashion, the dance presented to the audience is less a reified 'traditional' art than a staged artistic process and thus express a multifaceted identity which takes account of tradition while refusing to be locked under the sign of 'authenticity' (Gilbert and Tompkins 240).

Interpreting dance as a text in itself -- and as part of a play's overall semiotics -- provides an approach to drama that denaturalises notions of subjectivity as grounded primarily in dialogue. Dance thus
emerges as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity. As a site of competing ideologies, dance also offers potential liberation from imperialist representation through the construction of an active, moving body that 'speaks' its own forms of corporality. (Gilbert and Tompkins 242).
WORKS CITED


---. In Our Town. Sydney: Currency Press, 1992


