

Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey
and Claire McLisky



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Theatre or corroboree, what's in a name? Framing Indigenous Australian 19th-century commercial performance practices

Maryrose Casey, Monash University

The reception and framing within histories of practice of Indigenous Australian cultural production in the performing arts has been a problematic and contested field for decades. Though, overtime the terms have changed in line with political and social changes and developments, I argue that these shifts have been limited by continuing *a priori* assumptions about theatre in terms of what it is and the implicit assumptions of European cultural ownership of performances that are discussed under the term. These conjectures continue to have impact on what is included, excluded and defined within Australian theatre historiography.¹

Aileen Moreton Robinson argues that: ‘the white position functions by informing and circulating a coherent set of meanings ... that operate to establish and maintain perspectives and claims of ownership that are understood as ... common.’² I argue that this white possessiveness is implicit in Australian theatre historiography and affirmed through the resonances and understandings of the use of terms such as theatre. As I have discussed elsewhere:

¹ I would like to thank Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Liza-Mare Syron and the referee for their feedback on this paper.

²Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘The possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty: the High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision’ *Borderlines ejournal* 3.2, 2004
www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive.htm.

racialised narratives continue to dominate because the frames of cross cultural reception continue to be locked into a meta-narrative of white normativity; that is, a dominant and normalised vision of what is 'contemporary' in terms of cultural practice and the historical lineage of these practices and who claims cultural ownership of that lineage.³

This normalised vision sets the terms in which Indigenous Australians are incorporated into the white Australian imaginary ownership of contemporary practices. This normative vision has tended to operate on the basis that 'theatre' is assumed to be intrinsically and essentially owned by white (implicitly male, heterosexual) practitioners. To apply Moreton-Robinson's arguments about white possession in the context of theatre practice, there is effectively an *a priori* premise that theatre is a 'white' practice, owned from birth by white people. This possessive logic acts as the basic premise for the position/perspective used to judge and categorise work produced by people designated as the 'other'. Practices and performances are labelled from the position of this assumed ownership. 'We gave them theatre' proposed in relation to Indigenous theatre practitioners is still an often uninterrogated and common statement in many contexts from theatre foyers to academic theatre studies conferences. This implicit progress narrative is often most demonstrated through attempts to deal respectfully with non-European derived practices in the use of terms such as 'folk' theatre. Plays by Indigenous Australians such as Kevin Gilbert's *The cherry pickers* (1968) were initially designated as folk theatre.⁴ Terminology like 'folk theatre'

³ Maryrose Casey, 'Repositioning the interface for cross cultural reception of Indigenous Australian theatre', *Being there: before, during and after proceedings of the 2006 annual conference of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies* (2008), ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/2489/1/ADSA2006_Casey.pdf.

⁴ *The writers 3: Kevin Gilbert* (film). Researcher and interviewer James Murdoch, producer Peter Campbell, Australia Council 1992; Gillian Oxford, 'The purple everlasting: Aboriginal cultural heritage in Australia', *Theatre Quarterly* VII.26 (1977): 89. For further discussion of this see Maryrose Casey, *Creating frames: contemporary Indigenous theatre 1967–1997* (St Lucia, UQP, 2004), 3–41.

carries endless resonances that repeat colonising practices placing the cultural production in a secondary place within the traces of 19th-century notions of progress. If everything is folk theatre or theatre on some equal but different basis then the difference is recognised within hierarchies of value. This context makes the act of documenting performances under 'theatre' a fraught act. Yet words such as theatre also carry implicit associations with a type of valorised artistic endeavour that is all too often denied in the discussions of non-European derived practices.

As an expression of the *a priori* premises, what is known as Australian theatre practice is usually presented as beginning when a group of convicts performed *The recruiting officer* in the late-18th century. In this narrative, Indigenous Australian commercial theatre is consistently represented as beginning in the mid-20th century.⁵ Yet, within the cross-cultural context in the 19th century, Indigenous entrepreneurs publicly staged performances, advertised in advance in print, with spruikers walking through the towns with a bell prior to performances, booked venues and charged admission. Thus, Indigenous Australian commercial theatrical performance was already in place well before the mid-20th century. These earlier performances were labelled 'corroborees' and have only been discussed under that generic heading.

These corroborees as publicly presented spectacularised events for cross-cultural audiences served multiple functions for Indigenous Australians after colonisation of Australia by Europeans in the 18th century. Including songs, dances and battle displays resonant with culturally specific meanings, the events acted: to claim sovereignty; for political and diplomatic purposes; to provide a means of creating a basis for communication; to educate non-Indigenous settlers about Indigenous cultures; to entertain; and to enable Indigenous Australians to earn money and engage with the settler economy.

⁵ For example see Geoffrey Milne, *Theatre Australia unlimited* (Sydney: Currency, 2004).

These public performances for a financial consideration developed in part from the pre-contact traditions of welcoming visitors, trading, and from performances for entertainment. Barter and exchange of goods after performances (including the exchange of 'shows') had been a part of traditional inter-community practices. The European practice of giving money or goods to the performers was incorporated into this custom. As dispossession destroyed Indigenous economies and government regulations limited and restricted the ways in which Indigenous Australians could engage with the settler economy, their cultural capital became one of the few options available to Indigenous people as a resource to barter for money, political recognition and economic survival.

Across the 19th century, these performances were organised as towns were built in traditional seasonal and ceremonial camping grounds and Indigenous people were dispossessed of their lands and endeavoured to engage with the settler economy. By the 1850s Indigenous entrepreneurs were attempting to gain access to mainstream European theatres for their performances with limited success.⁶ In the late 19th century, many of the largest spectator events were Aboriginal corroborees. In 1885, an estimated crowd of 20,000 turned out to watch the first night of a 'Grand Corroboree', making it possibly the largest spectator event of the 19th century at the Adelaide Oval.⁷ Spectacles and theatre companies initiated and controlled by Indigenous Australians operated across the country. For example, a journalist in the *Bulletin* in 1896 noted that:

An Aboriginal theatrical co., has started operations in Queensland. Some 53 blacks of both sexes are running the show on approved 'white lines', commingling with the corroboree element. The 'co' pitched its tent at

⁶ *Age*, 2 January 1856; *Argus*, 3 January 1856.

⁷ *South Australian Register*, 1885; Bernard Whimpress, *Corroboree: Adelaide Oval 1885* (Kent Town, SA: Whimpress, 2000).

Cooperoo last week, and the whole district turned out to witness the first performance.⁸

Diaries and journals such as that of W.A. Cawthorne, suggest that Aboriginal-organised 'Sunday Corroborees' were a regular part of social life in the mid-19th century.⁹ Numerous accounts demonstrate the demand for these performances. Noah Shreeve, a Englishman resident in Adelaide, wrote in 1864 about local Aboriginal people explaining that they held corroborees 'for a pit of fun, the same when you got fiddle', and refusing to 'corrobbery' (sic) on demand, suggesting that he return two days later for the scheduled performance.¹⁰

Towards the end of the 19th century, corroboree-based public performances were so widespread and successful that there were strong moves by government and church authorities to bring the events under regulated white control.¹¹ These interventions attempted to restrict Indigenous-controlled corroborees to sanctioned Church or government approved events. Despite this regulation, corroborees continued as local forms of entertainment in rural areas open to all members of the surrounding Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities well into the 20th century. In the late 20th and early 21st century, these displays of dance and song have continued to be part of the repertoire of dance companies and cultural tourist events.

These performances represent an important part of cross-cultural history in 19th-century Australia. However, the terms used to define these performances affect the way in which they are recognised. Concerns about the terminology to describe different cultural practices

⁸ *Bulletin*, 14 March 1896.

⁹ W.A. Cawthorne, *Litterarium Diarium*, 23 March A104, Mitchell Library, Sydney; For further discussion see Michael Parsons, 'The tourist corroboree in South Australia', *Aboriginal History* 2 (1997): 146–69.

¹⁰ Noah Shreeve, *A short history of South Australia* (London: Printed by the Author, 1864): 36.

¹¹ Whimpress. See Michael Parsons, 'Ah that I could convey a proper idea of this interesting wild play of the natives', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2002): 14–26

are not new. One strategy that is used to counter these Eurocentric premises within theatre and performance studies has been to use the word 'performance' as a more neutral term to discuss practices. Though this reframing is useful, I would suggest that the neutrality of this term effectively limits its usefulness as an alternative word to use to discuss the types of performance that come under formal notions of theatre practices. Calling everything performance from the everyday action to formal theatrical events conceals the differences between types of events. At the same time other words such as theatre remain uninterrogated in terms of the meanings, resonances and hierarchies they imply.

The use of generic terms such as performance and theatre to describe practices carry with them resonances of specific European derived cultural practices and notions that do not necessarily serve the theatrical performances from other cultures being discussed. My particular concern at present is the effect of potential ways of framing these previously overlooked Indigenous commercial performances from the 19th century. These performances are generally acknowledged under the term 'corroboree' repeating the blurring between different types of performances that have been practised since European settlement of Australia. Corroboree is a word with common usage that is generally understood to refer to Indigenous performances involving dance, song and music. When discussed in relation to these performances 'corroboree' is often understood as referring to performances such as the re-enactments of dances from the Bomai-Malo ceremonies on Mer (Murray Island) captured on film in 1898 by Alfred Haddon in the Torres Strait Islands.¹² However, it has been and is used to denote a much wider group of types of performances without any differentiation beyond whether the performances are secret and sacred or public. Some early sources suggest that the word corroboree is probably derived from an Aboriginal 'dialect

¹² *Dreaming reels: Aboriginal images in Australian silent films 1898–1937*, vol. 1 (1997) Australian Film Archives.

in the early settled districts of New South Wales, and has been carried by the settlers all over Australia.¹³ It is generally accepted that the word corroboree is an adaptation of Aboriginal words such as *caribberie*. This word, popularised by the European settlers, has been reclaimed by Aboriginal people. But as anthropologists such as Ronald and Catherine Berndt argue, corroboree is too 'vague a term, lumping sacred and non-sacred together in an undifferentiated way, without adding anything distinctive to compensate for using it'.¹⁴ Equally to discuss these events under a general heading of 'performance' does not engage with the specific formal elements of the practice and effectively maintains past practices of locating non-European derived practices in a secondary position.

The historical practice

To further complicate the situation, performances within the cross-cultural context are not the only practices that are effectively erased by the assumptions within the resonances of words such as theatre. Highly developed performance traditions and practices were a central and important element within and across Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander cultures and life. Performance practices have been an important forum and expression for a vast range of activities from teaching to settling legal disputes. Historically, performance events of song, dance, mime and story can be divided into events associated with ceremonies that are sacred and private, and events associated with entertainment and social negotiations that are public. These performances can be based on the adventures of ancestral beings; magic and power; totemic songs; hunting; dramatic songs and epics; fighting songs; topical events and everyday life. Within Aboriginal cultures, there is no clear division between the sacred and ordinary stories. Rather, sacredness is a matter of

¹³ A.W. Howitt, *The native tribes of south-east Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

¹⁴ Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, *The world of the First Australians: an introduction to the traditional life of the Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964), 320.

degree. Within this continuum of connection to the sacred, Indigenous performance can be divided into three major types; ceremony, public performances based on Dreaming stories and performances based on topical issues for entertainment. These latter performances and the ways in which they are documented and discussed are the focus of this paper.

Like the 19th-century performances, these events are not examined within theatre history. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the traditional bias within the construction of 'Western theatre' that privileged written performance texts. There are extensive written accounts by witnesses and oral histories that enrich our knowledge of these practices but the performances were not written down as performance texts. This privileging of one type of practice, the written text, has continued despite the changes in contemporary practice that no longer privileges the traditional written 'play' form. The only events usually acknowledged within writings about Indigenous performance are either those related to ceremony or public performances based on Dreamtime stories from within studies of ritual and ethnographic studies of elements of the performance such as song. This focus overlooks a major segment of Indigenous Australian performance.

Corroboree performances based on topical or historical events that are created for entertainment were performed for intra- and inter-community gatherings and for cross-cultural performances.¹⁵ The performances include the alternating of a number of elements within the framework of the performance; these elements include storytelling through narrative, poetry, dance, mime, song, music and visual art. Operating within a paradigm of practice in many ways like European theatre practices, historically, there were performers, musicians, dancers and actors, writers, choreographers, people responsible for body design or costume, props and sets; and a manager responsible for organising the

¹⁵ Roger Hardley, 'The social life of Stradbroke Island Aborigines', in *Proceedings of the Royal Society Queensland, Stradbroke Island symposium*, eds. N.C. Stevens and R. Monroe (Brisbane: Brisbane Royal Society of Queensland, 1975), 141–46.

performance.¹⁶ There was a shared aesthetic scale. There were (and are) high expectations about the quality of the performances. Everyone can sing, dance, paint, and tell stories but the audience expects these arts to be performed well and historically an unsuccessful performance has a number of consequences including public criticism and a loss of social and political prestige.

Performances occur in defined and carefully chosen areas. Corroboree grounds were usually marked out and landscaped with a flattened performance space, off-stage areas that were hidden by trees or other physical features, and often built up areas for the audience. The physical environment, including the light and shadows created by the moon and the huge campfires, are used as part of and to enhance the performance. Trees and objects are used as props and sets. These practices all directly parallel western theatre practices both classical and contemporary. The performance space is equivalent to Classical Greek amphitheatres and 20th- and 21st-century practices of using found spaces and site specific venues. Yet implicitly the usual privileging of the European building-based tradition is an important part of excluding Indigenous practices from narratives of theatre. The Indigenous authorial and copyright practices are again both different and equivalent. Topical and historical performances are created and owned by individuals who teach and direct others in the required elements of the performance, song, dance and story.

Historically these performances were toured and were traded between communities. Examples documented since European settlement include many new corroborees created around the interactions between the communities and observations of the European settlers. For example, a European visitor to Australia in 1832 recorded a performance based

¹⁶ Catherine J. Ellis, *Aboriginal music, education for living* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985), 61.

around observations of the settlers' horses and riding in Tasmania.¹⁷ As well as creating corroborees for entertainment based on their observations of Europeans, Indigenous performers in the 19th century created corroborees around European entertainments that they witnessed. In 1854, a European settler:

took a party of Jervis Bay and Illawarra blacks to the Sydney theatre, to witness the opera of *Der Freischutz* chiefly with the idea of observing what effect the incantation-scene would have upon them. The scene in the Wolf's Glen riveted their attention. They exhibited great excitement at the circle of skulls in the glen; the mystic casting of the seven bullets; Zamiel, the red man with the long fingers; the toads, and frogs, and other reptiles on the ground; the firing of the gun, and fall of the bird.¹⁸

Six or seven years later the man returned to Jervis Bay, and witnessed the incorporation of several aspects of the Wolf's Glen scene into:

one of their moonlight entertainments ... They painted their bodies red and various other colours to represent the characters in the opera; with boughs of trees they constructed the glen; guanans [sic], frogs and other animals were supplied by their native forests. The firing of the gun and bringing down the bird, and, in short, all the principal scenic incidents of the opera, were imitated with amusing mimicry.¹⁹

Based on more informal European performances, in the 1880s, Billy Cassim from Stradbroke Island created a 'Monkey' corroboree after he observed an Italian organ grinder with a trained monkey in Brisbane.²⁰ Cassim, using a couple of wallaby skins for costume, entertained the communities on the island with his performances based on the monkey's behaviour. There are accounts of these types of corroborees being

¹⁷ James Backhouse, *A narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies* (London: Hamilton Adams and Co. 1863, reprinted New York: Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundation, 1967), 82

¹⁸ Roger Therry, *Reminiscences of thirty years' residence in New South Wales and Victoria* (London: 1863), 297.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Thomas Welsby, *The collected works of Thomas Welsby*, vol. II, ed. A.K. Thomson (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1968), 121.

performed for visitors to the island and touring to communities on the mainland.²¹

Performances were created based on events. Corroborees that have been documented over time and corroborees that continue in the repertoire of different communities vividly evoke the histories of Aboriginal communities offering a series of stories of the past both literal and allegorical. One of the Yolngu peoples in Arnhem Land, have a performance based in song, story and dance that tells of early encounters with Macassan traders, an Indonesian people from the island of Sulawesi. The Macassans had trading arrangements with the Yolngu peoples in Arnhem Land from about 100 years before European settlement in 1788 which continued until it was outlawed in the early 20th century. The performance called the *Jama Jama* (red flag dance) was created after some members of the Nambulwar went travelling with the Macassans in their boats. On their return they created performances based on their adventures.

European colonisation is examined in many stories. A number feature Captain James Cook even in areas where he had never been. These stories use Cook as an iconic representative of European invasion and the abuses of colonialism.²² Other corroborees focus on specific events. A corroboree performed in 1911 on Bathurst Island recorded in detail the early European settlement in 1824 at Fort Dundas on Melville Island with vivid mimicry of the actions of the crews on the sailing ships as they handled the sails and performed other tasks.²³ Many corroborees focused on finding the humour in the often dire situations Indigenous Australians found themselves in dealing with systemic racism from

²¹ Hardley, 141–46.

²² For examples see *Too many Captain Cooks* (video recording) (Canberra: Ronin Films, 1988); Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden histories: black stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill stations* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991).

²³ Herbert Basedow, *Notes on the Natives of Bathurst Island North Australia* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1913), 308–9.

government authorities and their representatives. The 'Soldier' corroboree, another corroboree created by Cassim around 1884, was a performance based on satirising the military training practices and the soldiers' brutal treatment of Aboriginal people.²⁴ From Wave Hill in the Northern Territory a corroboree documented in 1944, but with many decades in the repertoire, satirises the treatment of Aboriginal people by the legal system as well as the European attitudes to Indigenous women.

There were a number of corroborees created in northern Australia and the Torres Strait Islands during the Second World War about the impact of the war and in particular aeroplanes. There are corroborees that enact general themes and others that dramatise specific events. For example, hundreds of Allied planes crashed around the Gulf of Carpentaria. The 'Aeroplane corroboree' from Borroloola in the Northern Territory depicts the events around one such incident.²⁵ On December 1, 1942 a US bomber called Little Eva was returning to base after a bombing raid over New Guinea, hit a tropical storm and crashed at Moonlight Creek in the Southeast corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Yanyuwa people searched for Little Eva and her crew.

The Aeroplane corroboree enacts the story of the missing aircraft, and the events which followed the crash. Songs describe in detail the narrative of the pilot's journey, the storm damaging the airplane, the crash and the searches that followed.²⁶ Dancers, decorated as Tiger Moths, re-enact the aerial search for Little Eva. Other Yanyuwa

²⁴ Welsby, *The collected works*: 121–23; Thomas Welsby, *The discoverers of the Brisbane River* (Brisbane: Diddams, 1913), 116; George Watkins, *Notes on the Aboriginals of Stradbroke and Moreton islands* (Brisbane: Royal Society of Queensland, 1891), 141.

²⁵ See photos at www.abc.net.au/farnorth/stories/s842784.htm. Video at mcarthurriver.wordpress.com/2007/06/25/boys-from-borroloola-performing-the-aeroplane-dance.

²⁶ See *Ka-wayawayama – Aeroplane Dance* (1993). Producer/Director Trevor Graham. Film Australia; For other descriptions see for example: Rainer Kosok, 'Things as they were, ever changing: the co-existence of continuity and change in Indigenous Australian drama and theatre' (MA thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 2005).

performers tell of their ground search for survivors and eventual success. The Yanyuwa aeroplane dance corroboree performance originally extended over a week and was performed when people wished to perform it.

These are stories that are told through multiple art forms for entertainment, education and case—satisfying even the most stringent Australia Council protocols for professional theatre practice. Contemporary European derived theatre has come to take on many forms, often utilising elements such as speech, gesture, music, dance, and spectacle, combining multiple types of performing arts, often with visual arts, into a single artistic form. The Indigenous performances discussed above are formal performance practices with stylised conventions that predate the current rhetoric and practices of European and Euro-derived performance that now explore similar approaches yet they are not examined or acknowledged as clear precursors of current practice on this continent.

Reframing the performances

Writings within theatre and performance studies have been primarily focused on work defined as contemporary, usually text-based theatrical performance work.²⁷ Performance work labelled corroborees, have been primarily the domain of anthropology. However, even within anthropology, public corroborees, 'although often discussed in passing in the context of other concerns, have received surprisingly little attention.'²⁸ Over the last decade there has been growing recognition of the gaps in knowledge resulting from the almost exclusive focus on rituals especially

²⁷ For example see: Marc Maufort, 'Listen to them cry out from their Dreaming', *Antipodes* 20.1 (June 2006): 56–62; Brian Crow with Chris Banfield, *An introduction to post-colonial theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1996); Helen Gilbert, *Sightlines: race, gender and nation in contemporary Australian theatre* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1998); Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial drama* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁸ Susan Reed quoted in Rosita Henry, 'Dancing into being', *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11 (2000): 324.

those that are secret and sacred and associated with ceremony within writings on Indigenous performance traditions.²⁹ An outcome of this shift in focus is that researchers in anthropology and musicology examining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance and music 'have begun to explore an increasingly disparate range of performance genres put on display for the public gaze.'³⁰ However, the focus, as with theatre and performance studies, is generally on contemporary practices of song or dance rather than focused on the overall event of the performance or the history of such events.³¹ Some attention has been focused on Indigenous controlled performance events within tourist studies. In this field, Michael Parsons has divided corroborees into four main categories, the Peace Corroboree, the Command Performance Corroboree, the Gala Corroboree and what he styles the cultural Tourist Corroboree.³² His focus has been on the economic exchange within cultural tourism rather than an examination of the performances and their reception. Apart from this, the main contribution to an examination of these performances has been within Aboriginal history studies through examination of specific

²⁹ For examples see: Franca Tamisari, 'Writing close to dance: expression in Yolngu performance', in *Aesthetics and experience in music performance*, eds. Elizabeth MacKinlay, Denis Collins and Samantha Owens (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 165–90; Henry, 'Dancing into Being'; William O Beeman, 'The anthropology of theater and spectacle', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993): 369–93.

³⁰ Fiona McGowan and Karl Neuenfeldt, eds., *Landscapes of Indigenous performance* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005).

³¹ For examples see: Martin Nakata and Karl Neuenfeldt, 'From "Navajo" to "Taba Naba"', *Landscapes of Indigenous performance*, eds. Fiona Magowan and Karl Neuenfeldt (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), 12–28; Peter Toner, 'Home among the gum trees', in *Landscapes of Indigenous performance*, eds. Fiona Magowan and Karl Neuenfeldt (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), 29–45.

³² Michael Parsons, 'Ah that I could convey a proper idea of this interesting wild play of the natives', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2002):14–26; Parsons, 'The tourist corroboree'; Michael Parsons, 'Encounters in touriculture' (PhD thesis, Southern Cross University, 1997).

examples in isolation without interrogating the overall framing of these performances.³³

Other related research includes the growing body of work focused on non-Indigenous controlled exhibitions and tours that often brutally exploited the Indigenous performers. Examples include work such as Roslyn Poignant's *Professional savages: captive lives and western spectacle* (2004) examining the removal of Indigenous Australians by entrepreneurial white recruiters for circuses and exhibitions. In parallel with this research there have been critiques of Indigenous performances of corroborees promoted and managed by non-Indigenous organisations and individuals on the basis of the attribution by white impresarios and managements of 'a savage or exotic otherness to the performers who were packaged into neatly schematised and imperialised glosses for ready consumption by the spectator'.³⁴

These hidden histories and critiques are valuable and important. Indigenous people and performers were exploited by circus, theatre and exhibition managements. Indigenous performance has been manipulated to affirm imperial and colonial narratives. However, this is not the whole story. To tell one side of the story without the other is to reify the status of Indigenous performers as victims, and to allow a prescribed idea of Indigenous performance practices to stand unchallenged. In a sense, this erasure repeats the exploitation of Indigenous history that was practised so effectively by white entrepreneurs—this time to reaffirm the received version of theatre history as a gift of white culture to 'our' Indigenous peoples.

³³ For example Barry McDonald, 'Evidence of four New England corroboree songs indicating Aboriginal responses to European invasion', *Aboriginal History* 20 (1996): 176–94.

³⁴ Fiona Magowan, 'Dancing with a difference: reconfiguring the poetic politics of Aboriginal ritual as national spectacle', *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11 (2000): 308–21.

The point of this discussion though is not just that this work should be included, rather my question is how? What does it mean to look at these public performances as theatre? The Indigenous historical practices are secular performances aimed at entertainment but they maintain a connection through cultural practice to the sacred and the practices related to sacred performance. To just call it theatre risks erasing difference, at the very least erasing links to the sacred, community and place. The use of the term would, in effect, make these performances part of a norm that privileges European practice as originary.

Theatre as a word lays claim to European practices and constructed linear histories that create myths of progression from the classical Greeks to the present. In this normative vision there are metanarratives of theatre that are encapsulated in myths of origin of practice—especially narratives that weave a linear progression that presents a singular ‘Western’ theatre derived from and/or following the same developmental path as Classical Greek theatre, such as exemplified in the theories of the Cambridge Myth and Ritual School.³⁵ However contested, these theories continue to be embedded in thinking within theatre history and to express *a priori* assumptions.³⁶

The story of Thespis, as drawn from the tale told in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is a prime example.³⁷ Despite the facts that the earliest recorded theatrical events, as they are generally defined, date back to 2000 BC with the passion plays of ancient Egypt, and that many of the great Classical Greek texts were written under Egyptian influence, notions of what theatre is are all too often constructed within a linear narrative from the imaginary

³⁵ For example see: Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: a study of the social origins of Greek religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).

³⁶ For example Gerald Else contested the theories in his ‘The origin and early form of Greek tragedy’ (MA thesis, Cambridge, 1967. Yet the claims continue, for example see Julie Stone Peters, ‘Jane Harrison and the savage Dionysus: archaeological voyages, ritual origins, anthropology and the modern theatre’, *Modern Drama* 51.1 (Spring 2008): 3–4.

³⁷ Stephen Halliwell, ed., *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1998).

and highly contested Thespis stepping forward from the chorus to begin the path to Renaissance and contemporary theatre in a progression from collective enterprise to individual artist.³⁸ This story is then recreated in a parallel linear narratives about European theatre practices as developing from religious rituals.

The notion of Thespis has proven very attractive regardless of the lack of justification because it presents a very particular notion of theatrical performance that locks into the ideas of the individual and progression versus the collective. In effect, Aboriginal theatre, though it has historically been created and presented for tens of thousands of years in ways that contemporary artists within the European traditions have been working towards for the last 100 years, is not recognised or valorised as theatre because they did not make the same journey through text-based 'drama' to contemporary 'physical' theatre.

Perhaps an answer is to claim the terms of the framing of performances by utilising a different word for the general area of formal theatrical performing arts. Theatre, the word and concept, comes from Greek *theatron*, *θέατρον*, meaning 'place of seeing'; it was the place where people viewed performances. The Classical Greek *theatron* is usually understood as linked to the sacred and the community, as the theatre festivals and religious performances fulfilled a variety of social, cultural and spiritual functions. So perhaps rather than try to change the usage of loaded words, such as theatre and folk theatre, the answer might be to start using a word like *theatron* to denote the field of performances and then use culturally specific names to denote particular forms. In this context theatre in the European tradition would be one more subset within the field rather than the metanarrative that shapes and changes the framing and understanding of other complex performance practices.

³⁸ Scott Scullion offers a provocative and comprehensive critique of Aristotle's claims in "Nothing to do with Dionysus": tragedy misconceived as ritual', *Classical Quarterly New Series* 52.1 (2002): 102–37.