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**The White Australia Policy and the Issues of  
Aboriginal Population As Depicted in  
Contemporary Aboriginal Drama**

Master's Diploma Thesis

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I hereby declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the works cited section.

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# Introduction

21<sup>st</sup> century Australia is one of those countries in the world that can be proud of their multicultural society, comprising people of many different nationalities. But as James Jupp from Australian National University says,

Australia is only very multicultural compared with its former self ( before 1950) or because it contains a very wide variety of different origins, languages and religions—often represented by very small numbers of people and including, of course, the indigenous peoples as well as immigrants and their second generation children. It does not include very large numbers of very well established and regionally based ethnic minorities, even when compared with the United States, Canada, New Zealand or Britain, let alone India, Indonesia or the late Yugoslav federation. (Jupp 2)

Not always was the population of the Australian continent so varied. The original inhabitants of Australia—the Aboriginal people<sup>1</sup>—had lived there for about 40,000 years<sup>2</sup> before the arrival of the British colonists. After 1788, when the colonisation process started, there was an influx of people from Britain and Ireland who presented an almost

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<sup>1</sup> There are two groups of Indigenous peoples in Australia: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

However, some scholars use the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” interchangeably (see Chesterman) and so does this thesis. The division of Indigenous people to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is made only when the cited sources do so.

<sup>2</sup> This number has been confirmed by a group of palaeontologists who, in 2003, thoroughly analysed the oldest human remains found in the area of Lake Mungo in south eastern Australia in 1974. This analysis ended the debates over the actual length of the presence of the Aboriginal peoples on the Australian continent. Some former estimates claimed the Aboriginal people had been in Australia for more than 60,000 years. For more information, see Young, New Scientist.

homogeneous group of people of Anglo-Celtic origin. These colonisers became the majority in society and constituted what I call the white population<sup>3</sup>, as opposed to the Aboriginal people, i.e. the blacks<sup>4</sup>. This ‘white’ majority later did not want anyone who did not fall in this category of being ‘white’ to settle in Australia, thus preserving its single national culture for a long time.

The White Australia policy is a term used to describe series of complex acts, regulations and policies introduced to the Australian legal system after the Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901. Its initial goal was to prevent non-European immigration to Australia, thus helping maintain Australia’s “whiteness” in the sense of the origin of the population, as mainly of Anglo-Celtic descent. After the policy was introduced, Australia was a far cry from being the place of a mingling of many different cultures as it is now. Rather it was a racist state, treating both the people already living there and new immigrants as well on the basis of their origins<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the thesis I use the terms ‘white population’, ‘white people’ or ‘the whites’ to denote the people of the Anglo-Celtic origin, who were the biggest group of people to colonise Australia since 1788 and today form the majority of Australian society. I have taken my lead from Mike Donaldson who, while writing ‘The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia’ uses even the term ‘white invasion’ for labelling this colonisation. The term ‘white’ is also fundamental in constituting the White Australia policy, where it means people of European descent, as opposed to ‘non-European’ population (see Palfreeman). Many of the Aboriginal authors cited in this thesis use the term ‘white people’ in their works to denote ‘non-Aboriginal’ population in Australia.

<sup>4</sup> The thesis also uses the common term ‘black’ to describe the Indigenous people. I have taken my lead from Ernie Blackmore, who uses the term in his PhD thesis, or Adam Shoemaker who uses it to talk about Aboriginal drama as ‘Black drama’.

<sup>5</sup> For detailed study on the White Australia policy see Palfreeman; Macintyre; or Robertson, Hohmann and Stewart.

As mentioned above, the White Australia policy was a series of acts, laws and regulations enacted by the Australian parliament. These measures were not taken all at once but were gradually added to the legal system of the Commonwealth of Australia, thus altering it by a great number of changes affecting not only the prospective immigrants to Australia but the non-European population on Australian land as well. Despite being the original inhabitants of the continent, the Aboriginal people suffered a great deal in the aftermath of the laws and other policies introduced by the white colonisers. These had already been introduced before the Commonwealth was formed in 1901, even as early as 1881 through the naming of the first NSW Protector of Aborigines. Though the term White Australia policy is used to describe the state of affairs after 1901, it is necessary to include all policies towards the Aboriginal people even before that particular date and following on, the infamous assimilation policies that resulted with the Stolen Generations.

Though having been officially abolished in the 1970s, the impact of the White Australia policy is still present; the contemporary Aboriginal population is still dealing with the consequences of the Stolen Generations today. Many of those who were taken away from their homes are still alive, facing the problems of displacement and the loss of identity. No wonder these people have not been able to provide their children with something they were denied due to the laws of the White Australia policy. The current issues of domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction or child abuse among the Aboriginal population are the reminders of that era of Australian history in which the laws of the White Australia policy were in force.

The aim of this thesis is to present current issues and problems the Indigenous population in Australia have to deal with. These issues are studied with the help of theatre plays by contemporary Aboriginal authors, namely Jack Davis, Leah Purcell and Ernie Blackmore. The analyses of their plays will focus on the problems of contemporary

Indigenous society, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse, displacement, loss of identity, etc. This thesis aims at showing that these problems are a direct result of the Government's policies concerning the Aboriginal people that were in force in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the White Australia policy.

The first chapter studies the White Australia policy and the policies aimed at the Aboriginal population of Australia. Historical background to the implementation of the White Australia policy is given with its impact on limiting non-European (i.e. "non-white") immigration to Australia. This is necessary for understanding the emergence of racism as the fundamental principle for introducing the White Australia policy, and the policies aimed at the Aboriginal people, which attempted further "whitening"<sup>6</sup> of the country. The last part of the chapter deals with the current policy of self-determination, in which many Aboriginal people struggle in finding or keeping their cultural identities, thus being vulnerable to social problems.

The second chapter presents an overview of contemporary Aboriginal drama as a powerful media and a means of cultural self-representation. The term "Aboriginalism" is studied as a discourse of self-representation of the Aboriginal people together with historical context to determining what Aboriginality is. Defining characteristics of contemporary Aboriginal drama are given, focusing on the content, structure and style. Humour as a valuable part of most Aboriginal plays is also analysed here.

The last chapter is dedicated to the analysis of five plays by contemporary Aboriginal authors. These are *No Sugar*, *The Dreamers* and *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* by Jack Davis (1917-2000), *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell<sup>7</sup> (1970- ) and *Waiting for Ships* by Ernie

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<sup>6</sup> By the term "whitening", it is meant a systematic attempt at lowering the numbers of non-white population, i.e. people of non-European origin, either immigrants or the Aboriginal people.

<sup>7</sup> The play was written by Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell, the order of the names is according to the title on the cover of the book. Rankin is a non-Aboriginal playwright who put down on paper the story of Purcell's

Blackmore (1940- ). The plays depict lives of Aboriginal families and individuals from the 1930s to present time and show the social and personal problems Aboriginal people face, such as poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse, displacement, loss of identity, etc. These issues are analysed with the help of the plays and collated with other sources describing the problems in more general situations.

In the conclusion this thesis tries to summarise the connection between the historical events caused by the White Australia policy with the current situation of the Indigenous population of Australia.

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life as she told him. However, being the main protagonist, the only actor in the play and the person on whose life the play is based, I often refer only to Purcell as the author when discussing the interconnectedness of the story of the play with her life.

# **1. The White Australia Policy**

## ***1.1. Origins of Racism in 19th Century Australia***

To start analysing the White Australia policy it is necessary to mention the original reasons for its introduction to the legal system of the newly formed Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. The primary reason was to prevent non-European immigration to Australia. If the name ‘the White Australia policy’ is considered, it is apparent that the policy had to do a lot with ethnocentrism and racism. According to Broome, humans often feel superior to other humans. This is natural, since people coming from different cultural backgrounds often think of their culture and customs as the best. Such belief is commonly called ethnocentrism (Broome 87). During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Australia’s population was still mainly of British descent; which means that the people were ‘white’, here the denotation is based on the colour of their skin. However, the British descendants, who had successfully colonised the continent and proclaimed it to be the property of the United Kingdom, were not the only group of people in Australia. There were relatively large numbers of Indigenous people who had to face attitudes of disrespect towards them. These were considered ethnocentric, as the Europeans claimed cultural and not racial superiority (Broome 88). As Hartwig comments on later attempts of keeping Australia “white”, it seemed that the Aborigines were not considered a threat to maintaining the white Australian society. So before the Gold Rush started in 1851, there was still no racism towards the non-European people (Hartwig 9). Instead, a new fear emerged at this time, the fear of other groups of foreigners, mainly from Asia, who had started to move to Australia in increasing numbers. Russel Ward comments on foreigners and Aboriginal people in his article “An Australian Legend” (1961):

Before the Gold Rush there were, after all, few foreigners of any one race in Australia – except for the Aborigines, if we may, sheepishly I hope, call them foreigners after a manner of speaking. And no one who knows anything of Australian history needs to be reminded of how our ancestors regarded them and treated them. (Ward 335)

As Hartwig suggests, large numbers of foreigners started to come to Australia's goldfields after 1851(9). It was gold that attracted these adventurous people from all parts of the world to come and settle in Australia. The majority of these people were from Britain, however there were considerable numbers of American, French, Italian, German, Polish, Hungarian and Chinese emigrants. The Chinese, of whom about 40,000 came, were the largest foreign contingent and largely contributed to the fact that the number of non-Aboriginal population rose threefold from 430,000 in 1851 to 1,150,000 in 1861. It was predominantly them, who experienced ugly outbursts of racially motivated violence (Macintyre 87).

According to Broome, racism occurs where “two groups see themselves as being physically and *racially* (as opposed to just culturally) different and when one group claims the alleged inferiority of the other group is *caused* by the innate physical differences of its members” (Broome 87). This is what was happening between the “white” Australians (mainly of British descent who considered Australia to be “theirs”) and the Chinese, who differed greatly from the “British colonists in language, customs, and culture” (Hartwig 9). It was also the “science” of phrenology that influenced the Europeans' views on other races in the 1840s and 1850s. Those practicing this “science” believed that the shape of the head influences the size of the brain and thus the intelligence itself (Broome 90). The feeling of superiority of the Europeans was now based on racial differences. Another popular theory of that time was the theory of the Great Chain of Being, “ranking all living creatures from God downwards in a so-called order of merit. Since it was a European

theory, the Europeans were ranked highest among the races of mankind” (Broome 90) and Asians as well as the Aborigines were ranked as inferior races. So it seems, that “the development of racism depended on the presence of large numbers of foreigners leading a different way of life” (Hartwig 9). This also appears to have been the first time that Australia started to fear a massive influx of Asian people. The reason for Australia’s fear of Asian immigration, as Macintyre argues, was Australia’s involvement in overseas wars in China and the fact that Asia was overtaking Europe in being a military threat (140). Moreover, antagonist moves were revived “in 1888 with the arrival of a vessel from Hong Kong carrying Chinese immigrants who were turned away under a threat of mob action from both Melbourne and Sydney” (Macintyre 141). This and other incidents highly increased the feelings of nationalism and the slogan ‘Australia for the Australians’ became one of the symbols of the time (Macintyre 141). This happened during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also when the famous claim of Charles Pearson appeared. To support the nationalistic feelings and justify the antagonism towards the Asians, he claimed that the “white” Europeans in Australia were “guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live and increase freely for the higher civilization” (qtd. in Macintyre 141). Chinese people already settled in Australia were seen as “cheap labour and a threat to wage standards, ... sweaters and debauchers of white women” (Macintyre 141) so they “were paid less than white adult male employees and ... even, the [Trade] unions refused to allow the Chinese community to participate in the march [for equal wages]” (Willoughby). At this point, the Chinese were seen as enemies to the social orders in the European Australia, however, no official measures could have been taken against them. This changed after the Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901.

## **1.2. Implementation of the White Australia Policy**

After becoming a federated nation, certain legal acts were passed to make it impossible or much more difficult for Chinese and all non-European people to settle in Australia. The first act ever passed by the new Federal Government was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. With this act, the “concept of White Australia [was] an established part of Australian immigration policy from the beginning of the Commonwealth ...” (Albinski 161). The original purpose of the act, as stated in its opening statements, was “to place certain restrictions on Immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited Immigrants” (Government of the Commonwealth of Australia 1). The coinage *prohibited immigrant* was later used as the general denotation of anyone who did not meet the requirements of the act or anyone who did not abide by the regulations implied in the act.

One of the restrictions imposed by the Immigration Restriction Act was “when the dictation test was written into law as a means of excluding Asian migrants” (Albinski 161). As stated in the Immigration Restriction Act,

any person who is not a British subject either natural-born or naturalized under a law of the United Kingdom or of the Commonwealth or of a State, ... [is] required to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of an officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer, and if he fails to do so shall be deemed to be a prohibited immigrant and shall be deported from the Commonwealth pursuant to any order of the Minister. (Government of the Commonwealth of Australia 4)

This restriction made any person not of British descent a prohibited immigrant. Setting a dictation test “in an European language” was clearly a tool to restrict Asian migration and as such it showed all the signs of a racist act. The officers in charge of administering the

tests played an important role here. It was up to them to decide who to exclude and which “European language” to test. Those unwanted immigrants were given the test in a “European language” they surely were not familiar with, since a Transylvanian dialect of Romanian was also used, though only once (Palfreeman 345). This act was largely protested against by the governments of China, Japan and India. As Palfreeman suggests, the Japanese protested against the usage of a “European” language, being discriminatory against them. The Parliament amended the Immigration Restriction Act in 1904, exchanging the “European language” for “any prescribed language”, though no non-European languages were ever prescribed (Palfreeman 345). The inflow of new permanent Asian immigrants was thus ceased or severely limited. The dictation test as a limiting instrument on non-European immigration was very successful; it “was administered 805 times in 1902-1903 with 46 people passing and 554 times in 1904-09 with only six people successful. After 1909 no person passed the dictation test and people who failed were refused entry or deported” (National Archives of Australia, “Immigration Restriction Act 1901”). The dictation test thus fully met the expectations of it as a method of exclusion.

However, about 47,000 non-Europeans already lived in Australia in 1901. These could not all be made to leave the country and their families abroad could not be precluded from visiting them in Australia. Therefore a need for controlling the temporary entry of such non-Europeans emerged. This led to a policy of granting “certificates of exemption” from the dictation test. Immigrants granted this certificate were legally permitted to come to Australia for a period of up to seven years. Only specific purposes such as study, family or business were acceptable justification for granting these exemptions. However, if the immigrant later violated the conditions of their entry, the certificate could be immediately abrogated and the person submitted to a dictation test. In case of failing it, the individual would be pronounced a prohibited immigrant and deported from the country (Palfreeman

345-6). Such policy created a great number of prohibited immigrants and made it impossible for many people to settle permanently in Australia.

There were several more acts passed in the first years of the Commonwealth that aimed at the same target: to make the number of non-Europeans in Australia the lowest possible. The Pacific Island Labourers Act enacted in 1901 aimed at deporting most of the Pacific Islanders from Australia from the end of 1906. Under this Act, the Pacific Islanders were allowed to enter Australia only until the end of March 1904, and only as indentured servants (National Archives of Australia, “Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901”). Section 15 of the 1901 Post and Telegraph Act stated that ships subsidised by the Commonwealth, such as those carrying Australian mails, should only be staffed by “white labour” (National Archives of Australia, “Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901”). No less important was the Naturalisation Act passed in 1903 that made “non-Europeans ineligible for Australian citizenship” (Willoughby). All these acts were part of a legislation package passed by the new Federal Parliament and were the core of the White Australia policy.

### ***1.3. Changes Leading to the Abolition of the White Australia Policy***

For more than fifty years, there were no signs of any change that would lead to lifting the immigration limitations set by the White Australia policy, or completely abolishing them. The first change came in 1956, when the Department of Immigration “issued a statement on the conditions of non-European entry, which included the possibility of permanent residence and naturalization for Asians” (Palfreman 347). Later on the policy started to change, although very slowly. The Revised Migration Act of 1958 “introduced a simpler system of entry permits and abolished the controversial dictation

test” (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 6). The main change came in 1966 when the Government reviewed the non-European migration policy (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 6). It was only then that it could be said that “the pillars of the sixty-five year old White Australia policy began to be undermined. Now for the first time, non-Europeans were to be officially admitted as settlers” (Palfreeman 347). However, the official end of the White Australia policy was no earlier than 1973 when the Government introduced “new entry policy [grading the applicants on] a broad range of economic, social and personal factors (including occupational skills, knowledge of English, initiative, appearance, personal hygiene, speech and behaviour) and [making] no reference to race or religion” (Palfreeman 349). The White Australia policy is no longer in force and Australia is seen as a multicultural society today, but the aftermath is still seen and several issues with racist subtext refer to the past disapproval of non-European (i.e. non-white) immigration. Racism is legally prohibited, based on the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 that “makes racial discrimination unlawful in Australia. It aims to ensure that human rights and freedoms are enjoyed in full equality irrespective of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, being an immigrant or being a relative or associate of someone of a particular ethnicity or other status” (Lueckenhouse). This is in concordance with the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice of 27 November 1978 which states that all humans are born as part of a single species and therefore are equal in dignity and rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights).

Today, Australia is respected as a country that cherishes the rights of its citizens regardless of their origin. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, “almost one half of all Australians were either born overseas or had a parent born in another country” (Australian Human Rights Commission). This presents Australia as a multicultural society, however, the White Australia policy fostered the hostility to aliens that took more than half a century to be lawfully abolished, but not forgotten.

## **1.4. The White Australia Policy and the Aboriginal Population**

The White Australia policy accomplished what it was created for by limiting the number of non-European people coming to settle in Australia. But as it might not be clear from the above, the laws enacted during the time of the White Australia policy were not only aimed at the immigrants from Asia, Africa or Pacific Islands, but also affected the Aboriginal people in Australia. This group of people were already on Australian ground so other means of “whitening” the country, apart from restricting immigration, had to be found to disintegrate these people. For example, the Aborigines were “absent from the ceremonies that marked the advent of the Commonwealth. They were eliminated from the art and literature; ... [they] were even deprived of their indigeneity by the members of the Australian Natives Association, who appropriated that term for the locally born Europeans” (Macintyre 144). These are just some examples to show that the Aboriginal people were not counted with the Europeans when the Australian Federation was formed. What is more, the examples mentioned were not just signs of impoliteness but they were based on legal documents. The original Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia from 1901 made only two references to the Aboriginal people. Section 51 (Part xxvi) gave power over the Aboriginal people to the individual States and not the Federal Government:

The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to: [and the particular part xxvi:] the people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws. (Attorney-General’s Department 2003)

This shows the Federal Government was not considering dealing with the Aboriginal people as being equal to the white population, because it did not take the power over them from the States. And section 127 of the Constitution denied the Aboriginal inhabitants the

right to be included in the national census (Attorney-General's Department 2003). These two meagre references to the Aboriginal people in the first Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia clearly stated the stance the Federal Parliament took towards them.

### **1.4.1. Policies towards the Aboriginal Population**

The position of the Federal Parliament becomes clearer when a general overview of the history preceding the actual forming of the Commonwealth is examined. When George Thornton was appointed the first NSW Protector of Aborigines in 1881 (Sydney City Council), a new era of policies towards Aborigines began. This was characterised as the policy of protection but in fact it represented the segregation of Aborigines from the white people. The intentions of European Australians were to move the Aborigines out of their society and allow them to “live their age-old system of life” (Massola). As Massola claims, it was believed that “the only possible way to preserve the native race in its purity would have been to segregate the Aborigines in large reserves” that were created by the Protector of Aborigines’ orders and later by the NSW Aboriginal Protection Board (58). As stated above, “segregation [was] a key part of Aboriginal Protection Policy” (NSWALC), which implies that in fact it were the white people who were “protected” from having to encounter the Aborigines who were regarded as being an inferior race. The Aboriginal Protection Board “administered government policy, dictating where Aborigines could live and work, their freedom of movement, their personal finances and their child rearing practices” (Sydney City Council). These laws of segregation and “protection” encouraged “wanton disregard of Aboriginal culture, hopes and wishes” (Lippmann 15) from which the Aboriginal world has not yet fully recovered.

Even though the policy of segregation hindered the Aboriginal people from dignified lives and incorporation into the white society, it did not prevent the intermarriage of white and Aboriginal people. The consequent policy of assimilation is closely associated with the segregationist tendencies. On one hand, the “full-blood” Aboriginal people and children were not wanted in the white society; on the other hand, the “half-caste” children were believed to be able to be raised according to white manners. According to Chesterman, “the removal of Indigenous children was inherently racially motivated. In many ways hierarchies of race were the key factor behind the practice. Certainly this was the case for the more zealous advocates of child removal, whose aim was to breed out a race”<sup>8</sup> (5). Given the facts, the goal of this policy was to assimilate the Aboriginal population into the white citizenry, or let those not willing to assimilate become extinct. As Macintyre suggests, “all of this was premised on the elimination of Aboriginality, the abandonment of language, custom and ritual, and the severing of kinship ties so that absorption could be complete” (147). The official proclamation of the assimilation policy from 1951 stated that all Aborigines “shall attain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs, and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties” (Lippmann 25). That same year the Commonwealth minister for territories expressed this proclamation in other words, leaving no doubt as to what the Government’s stance towards the Aboriginal people was. He said that “assimilation means, in practical terms, that, in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed

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<sup>8</sup> The term “breed out” was officially used during the politics of assimilation in Australia, as evidenced in the works of the Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville in Western Australia or Dr. Cecil Bryan who addressed the Moseley Royal Commission in 1933 with a speech about the steps to be taken for “breeding the Aborigines out” (qtd. in Manne 233).

blood in Australia will live like White Australians do, [even though] that would require many years of slow, patient endeavour” (qtd. in Macintyre 226). Again it is apparent that the Government held the view that “white ways were best and that there was nothing in the Aboriginal culture worth preserving” (Lippmann 26). It seems sensible that the Aboriginal people enjoy “the same rights and privileges [and accept] the same responsibilities” (Lippmann 25) as other Australians. All were living in one country and all should have been the citizens of the country, which indeed was not true until 1967 (Burden 211). The only catch in “observing the same customs, and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties” (Lippmann 25) is that it could be read as that the Government would provide the Aborigines with citizenship and civil rights but only on the condition that the Aboriginal people give their beliefs away, forget their culture and assimilate and conform to white society and its cultural values.

These policies are now “acknowledged as having contributed to the destruction of Aboriginal families and society by separating children from their parents” (Sydney City Council) thus creating the Stolen Generations. This presents one of the greatest issues in regards to the Aboriginal people today. There were many stories of children stolen from their mothers, being sent to state institutions or being fostered by white people in Australia or even abroad. The exact numbers are not traceable but it is believed that “between 1910 and 1970 up to 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken forcibly or under duress from their families by police or welfare officers” (ENIAR). The consequences of the assimilation policy for the “half-caste” children were enormous, children were deprived of being loved, lost their identities and for their whole lives carried the burden of being removed. Sometimes they were physically or sexually abused in the places where they were allocated. The European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights (ENIAR) summarises the results and aftermath of this policy:

Most [children] grew up in a hostile environment without family ties or cultural identity. As adults, many suffered insecurity, lack of self esteem, feelings of worthlessness, depression, suicide, violence, delinquency, abuse of alcohol and drugs and inability to trust. Lacking a parental model, many had difficulty bringing up their own children. The scale of separation also had profound consequences for the whole Aboriginal community - anger, powerlessness and lack of purpose as well as an abiding distrust of Government, police and officials. (ENIAR)

All the issues summarised in this statement are apparent in the Indigenous communities today and will be studied in the plays from contemporary Aboriginal playwrights in the third chapter of this thesis.

The policies that fostered the Stolen Generations could be regarded as racist and influenced not only the children actually stolen but also the following generations and resulted in the erosion of Aboriginal communities. Penny van Toorn draws on Wayne King to analyse the possible causes of racism and hatred towards Aboriginals in Australia. Van Toorn mentions that “King’s analysis suggests that racism in Australia is born out of history and guilt, that it is perhaps an expression of displaced anxiety experienced by members of the group which perpetrated and/or benefited by the wrongs committed against Aboriginal people since 1788” (van Toorn). This goes back to the initial idea of racism being ingrained in the society of European settlers in Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All these policies are the explicit evidence of the fact that racism was undoubtedly one of the strongest motivations for keeping Australia “white”. This sounds rather unreasonable for Australia never was originally white. It only became “white”—in the terms of the colour of the skin of the majority of its inhabitants—with the colonisation or occupation by the British settlers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There are still great differences between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians in matters such as health issues, life expectancy or the number of people arrested. According to the statistics, “in the 1990s, infant mortality [among the Aboriginal population was] two to four times greater than that found in the total Australian population” and “the life expectancy at birth [was] lower than for most countries in the world with the exception of Central Africa and India” (Burden 199). The data from the Department of Health and Ageing says that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians born during 1996 to 2001 had life expectancies ... around 17 years lower than the average life expectancies for all male and female Australians born during 1998 to 2000” (Department of Health and Ageing). Crime and justice statistics for Western Australia carried out in 2000 by the Crime Research Centre of the University of Western Australia reads that

in 2000, Aboriginal people were five times more likely to be victims of violence than non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal arrest rates were ten times the comparable rate for non-Aborigines, adult imprisonment rates were 26 times the comparable rate, and juvenile detention rates were more than 30 times the rate for non-Aboriginals. (Crime Research Centre)

This theme of Aboriginal imprisonment is present in Jack Davis’s play *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* and is dealt with alongside the analysis of this play in chapter 3 of this thesis.

## 1.4.2. Policy of Self-determination

The following chapter summarizes the problems of Aboriginal people in the post-colonial era. Jean Fournier summarizes the situation of the Indigenous peoples all around the world:

The majority of Indigenous peoples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to exist in what can only be described as shameful conditions. Social and economic indicators all point to largely dysfunctional communities characterised by high rates of poverty, unemployment, school dropout, ill-health, family violence, substance abuse, suicide and incarceration. As well, the ability of Indigenous communities to run their own affairs, by comparison with the general population, remains severely restricted and constrained. (Fournier vii)

A question arises why this is so. Today, we are in the era of post-colonialism or as Bradley and Seton call it decolonisation. They claim that “decolonisation refers to moving away from policies of control of Indigenous peoples, developed in the so-called interests of the state, towards policies of self-determination for Indigenous people” (Bradley and Seton 32). The national referendum of 1967, together with the amendment of section 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution marked an era when the Federal Government began to be more involved in Indigenous affairs in Australia. When Gough Whitlam became the Prime Minister in 1972 he introduced the policy of self-determination for the Aboriginal people and also made Aboriginal Affairs a “national cause”. The policy of self-determination made it possible for the Indigenous people of Australia to distinguish their priorities and needs and also to identify the best ways of meeting them. This policy definitely marked the end of the assimilation era (Auguste; Whall 24).

The 1967 referendum was also regarded as an act of conferring citizenship to the Aboriginal people, which made them equal to all other citizens of Australia for the first time. However, the coalition Government failed to legislate for the Aborigines and was rather reluctant to meet their increasing demand for self-determination (Macintyre 234). As such, nothing much was done for the Aboriginal people to help them manage their own affairs. Little effort was made by the Government to help promote self-determination. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which was supposed to fulfil the special needs of the Indigenous people, was established together with some other leading organisations, dealing with the Indigenous affairs regarding health, legal services or housing (Whall 24). A breakthrough came with the Mabo decision in 1992, when the High Court rejected the principle of “terra nullius”, under which it was believed that there were no inhabitants in Australia when the British settlers arrived in 1788. The Native Title Act of 1993 followed and enabled the Indigenous people to make claims over their ancestral land (Whall 24).

These formal acts gave hope to the Indigenous people in Australia that they would be able to have homes again. By home I mean not only the ownership of the land itself but also maintaining the spiritual connection to it, which is what makes a home for the Aboriginal people in the first place. There were many displaced from these homes, not only physical dispossession of the children of the Stolen Generations but also the spiritual removal, removal from one’s own culture and traditions. According to Bradley and Seton, “the removal of children is now the best-known dimension of this attempt to turn Aboriginal people into non-Aboriginal people [and] ... to destroy Aboriginal identity through education of children in white institutions and foster homes” (38). And even though there are several institutions and enacted Acts that are intended to help the Aboriginal people; their own ability to “make decisions that affect their lives [is] constantly being challenged and subjected to scrutiny by outside forces. Indigenous people are continuously contesting constructions from outside agencies, however, there are on-going

tensions that challenge ... their ability to retain distinctive cultural identities, lifestyles, values and laws” (Bradley and Seton 42). O’Neill and Handley suggest that it is also the ability of the Aboriginal people to achieve “greater social and economic equality as against the majority of the Australian Community” what is being challenged (qtd. in Bradley and Seton 42). As such, the Indigenous people are still trying to succeed as self-determining peoples and communities and measure up to the majority of the Australian society.

## 2. Contemporary Aboriginal Drama

### 2.1. Aboriginality and Indigenous Self-Representation

Aboriginal people and their culture have not been self-represented for a long time. However, we might argue that only by being in Australia, by living there, walking on the land, speaking their languages, producing their culture in the form of art, music, and dances, they have represented themselves. What this chapter wants to outline is that the Aboriginal people were not self-represented according to the European point of view. The term ‘European point of view’, refers to the prevailing cultural thinking of the white population of European descent, or generally the descent of the Western culture. As Attwood claims in the “Introduction” to *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, the whole concept of being Aboriginal was defined by opposition to being white, and as such, the whites were to determine who is and who is not Aboriginal, therefore defining the whole concept of Aboriginality too (Attwood i). He draws a comparison to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism<sup>9</sup>, and discusses the term Aboriginalism as a discourse, i.e. a way of speaking and thinking about the Aboriginal people. He suggests three interdependent forms in which Aboriginalism exists. First the Aboriginal studies, i.e. the teaching by “European scholars who claim that the Indigenous people cannot represent themselves and must

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<sup>9</sup> Orientalism is a theory based on the assumption that colonisers can represent colonised peoples more accurately than indigenous people themselves can self-represent; it is based upon the inherent belief in cultural superiority—the profound certainty that colonisers bring to any colonial invasion—that their language, their literatures, modes of representation are more valid, more ‘true’ and more ‘representational’ of reality than those produced by colonised people themselves (Definition as given by Ernie Blackmore in a course “ABST202 Indigenous Self-Representation in Contemporary Texts” at the University of Wollongong, Autumn 2008).

therefore be represented by experts who know more about the Aborigines than they know about themselves” (i). Second, Aboriginalism is “a style of thought which is based upon an epistemological and ontological distinction between ‘Them’ and ‘Us’ – [under which] Europeans imagine ‘the Aborigines’ as their ‘Other’, as being radically different from themselves” (i). And finally as a “corporate institution for exercising authority over Aborigines by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, and ruling over them” (i). As stated above, the discourse of Aboriginalism defines the Aboriginality itself, i.e. what it is to be Aboriginal. It is important to try to understand the whole concept of Aboriginality, because it is essential in defining the identity of those who call themselves—or are called by others—Aboriginal and as such has a crucial importance for understanding the need for Aboriginal self-representation.

### **2.1.1. Historical Context of Defining Aboriginality**

If the legal point of view on Aboriginality is to be discussed, there have been many different ways of classifying people as Aboriginal. John Gardiner-Garden claims that “in the first decades of settlement Aboriginal people were grouped by reference to their place of habitation, [whereas] in subsequent years, as settlement resulted in more dispossession and intermixing, a raft of other definitions came into use” (3). John McCorquodale, a legal historian, analysed over 700 pieces of legislation, and found no less than 67 different definitions of Aboriginal people (9). One of the many definitions, which appeared to prevail

involved reference to ‘Blood-quotum’. ‘Blood-quotum’ classifications entered the legislation of New South Wales in 1839, South Australia in 1844, Victoria in 1864, Queensland in 1865, Western Australia in 1874 and Tasmania in 1912. Thereafter till the late 1950s States regularly legislated all

forms of inclusion and exclusion (to and from benefits, rights, places etc.)

by reference to degrees of Aboriginal blood. (Gardiner-Garden 3)

This legislation did not produce consistent results, because it was mainly based on the observation of the skin colour of the individual<sup>10</sup>. Federal Government used this “blood-quotum” criteria for example for deciding “if an individual was Aboriginal for the purposes of being counted under section 127” (Gardiner-Garden 3) of the Commonwealth Constitution<sup>11</sup>.

After the 1967 referendum, the policies of the Government turned into a progressive era and the “blood-quotum” definition was soon abandoned. Besides, this definition was never fully accepted by the Aboriginal people themselves. Later throughout the 1970s, the definition suggesting that an Aboriginal is someone who belongs to the Aboriginal race of Australia was used in legislation (Gardiner-Garden 4). However, this definition could be challenged as well, as it refers to the Aboriginal race, which, according to anthropologists, does not exist. Referring to Gardiner-Garden, modern anthropologists

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<sup>10</sup> Historian Peter Read presented a conflation to illustrate the inconsistencies in this legislation at the Aboriginal Citizenship Conference at the ANU in February 1996: In 1935 a fair-skinned Australian of part-indigenous descent was ejected from a hotel for being an Aboriginal. He returned to his home on the mission station to find himself refused entry because he was not an Aboriginal. He tried to remove his children but was told he could not because they were Aboriginal. He walked to the next town where he was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve. During the Second World War he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal. He went interstate and joined up as a non-Aboriginal. After the war he could not acquire a passport without permission because he was Aboriginal. He received exemption from the Aborigines Protection Act-and was told that he could no longer visit his relations on the reserve because he was not an Aboriginal. He was denied permission to enter the Returned Servicemen's Club because he was. (qtd. in Gardiner-Garden 3)

<sup>11</sup> Section 127 of the Constitution denied the Aboriginal inhabitants the right to be included in the national census.

use different criteria on division of mankind than races. These are region, culture, religion or kinship (4). The definition of Aboriginality that is used today emerged in the 1980s. This is the so called three-part definition which takes descent, self-identification and community recognition as the defining criteria. This definition was found, for example, in the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983, where “‘Aboriginal person’ means a person who: (a) is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, and (b) identifies as an Aboriginal person, and (c) is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal person” (New South Wales Consolidated Acts). This three-part definition was also “accepted by the High Court as giving meaning to the expression ‘Aboriginal race’ within [section] 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution”<sup>12</sup> (Gardiner-Garden 4). This three-part legislative definition of Aboriginality seems to be very complex, however, if it came to test, which of the three criteria was the most important? Gardiner-Garden suggests several cases where people who identified themselves as Aboriginal did not have any proof of their Aboriginal descent (6) and all the three criteria had to be fulfilled in order that one could be recognised as one. A notion on Aboriginality that is now commonly shared resulted from a court case that dealt with the validity of an election held under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 (Gardiner-Garden 7). According to the judgement, Aboriginal descent did not need any proof under any strict legal standard (Australian Indigenous Law Reporter). The justice also formulated that “the development of identity as an Aboriginal person cannot be attributed to any one determinative factor. It is the interplay of social responses and interactions, on different levels and from different sources, both positive and negative, which create self-perception and identity” (Australian Indigenous Law Reporter). The words of Justice Merkel who gave the judgement are in concordance with what most Aboriginal people think, that it is not any legal document that determines what it is to be

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<sup>12</sup> See page 18.

Aboriginal, however, being Aboriginal is mainly a social construct, it is the positive state of mind, the spirit, the soul, being proud of who you are and knowing where you are going and what you are doing (Shoemaker 231-2).

### **2.1.2. Aboriginality and Black Australian Drama**

As mentioned above, there is no single definition of Aboriginality that could work in all areas of any possible need for this classification. As Adam Shoemaker suggests,

Aboriginality is the legacy of traditional Black Australian culture. It implies movement towards the future while safeguarding the pride and dignity of the past. But Aboriginality is also counter-cultural in European terms: a reaction against the dictates of White Australian society. (Shoemaker 232)

Shoemaker, as opposed to the legislative definitions of Aboriginality, views Aboriginality as the spiritual heritage that Aboriginal people possess, the pride of being the original inhabitants of the Australian continent and also the attempts of distinguishing themselves from the white Australians (Shoemaker 232). He also mentions the words of Charles Perkins<sup>13</sup> who described the feeling of the Indigenous Australians for one another in the last decades when he claimed that the Aboriginal society “[began] to realise right throughout Australia that there’s a thing that’s binding them together: that’s the psychology of being an Aboriginal, that’s culture, that’s blood-line, everything” (qtd. in Shoemaker 232). Shoemaker also suggests that the oppression, still remaining in some parts of Australian society, helped promote the notion of Aboriginality and the emergence of spokespeople (politicians, artists, writers, etc.) for the “Black Australian movement”

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<sup>13</sup> In 1980s, Charles Perkins was Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He was “the first Aboriginal Australian to attain such a position in the bureaucracy” (“Charles Perkins”).

(Shoemaker 233). Of these, Aboriginal drama is one of the typical genres that speak for the Aboriginal public, because it is not only an expression of Aboriginality as defined by Shoemaker, but Aboriginal playwrights were (and are) effective political activists, expressing the reaction against the dictates of white Australian society.

The 1967 referendum marked the end of the era of the policies of assimilation and “protection”, as it “gave Aboriginals voting rights and “limited self-management”, and also marked the resurgence of Aboriginal culture” of which theatre became an important voice to express the Indigenous self-representation (Carroll 100). The assumed inability of the Aboriginal people to self-represent culturally has been mentioned in the beginning of Chapter 2. This was the prevailing attitude throughout the period when the white population dominated not only economically but culturally too. This dominance of the mainstream culture has not vanished and is present today as was before the referendum, however, there are many Indigenous artists and text producers whose creative contributions show the ability of Aboriginal people to represent themselves from their own point of view. Among them, the Aboriginal playwrights demonstrate the capability of re-telling their own histories and thus opposing the traditional myth of Aboriginalism.

## **2.2. Characteristics of Aboriginal Drama in Australia**

The play that is generally considered as the first Aboriginal play, thus marking the beginning of Australian Aboriginal drama is *The Cherry Pickers* by Kevin Gilbert, written in 1968 (Carroll 100). The first published Aboriginal play in Australia was *The Cake Man* by Robert J. Merritt, first staged at the Redfern Black Theatre in 1975 (Carroll 100). The Aboriginal playwrights whose plays are studied in this thesis are Jack Davis with his trilogy *The First-born*, comprising of plays *No Sugar* (1986), *The Dreamers* (1982), and *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* (1989), Leah Purcell and her play *Box the Pony* (1999) and Ernie Blackmore and his

*Waiting for Ships* (2004). In defining the characteristics of Aboriginal drama, references to the plays of these authors will be given, as well as references to another fundamental piece of Aboriginal drama, *The Cake Man*.

Scholars present many characteristics of Aboriginal drama. According to Carroll, content of the theatre plays is the most important characteristic, being complemented by characteristics of structure, form and style (Carroll). The following subchapters analyse these characteristics, together with the use of humour as employed in Aboriginal drama.

### **2.2.1. Content of Aboriginal Drama**

The content of Aboriginal drama is rather specific to the authors who consider themselves Aboriginal. As Shoemaker based his definition of Aboriginality on interviews with many Aboriginal writers, one part of the definition stands out here: “Aboriginality is also counter-cultural in European terms: a reaction against the dictates of White Australian society” (Shoemaker 232). And as a reaction against the White Australian society,

in drama, the concept of “Aboriginality” predicates the most important defining characteristic of content, namely political engagement; [as] most leading Aboriginal writers such as novelist and critic Mudrooroo Narogin, poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker), and playwrights Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis have in fact been Aboriginal rights activists. (Carroll 101)

When political engagement is studied as the most important defining characteristic of content, there is a need to supplement this by evidence from the plays themselves. The whole of Davis’s *No Sugar* is set in the 1930s and is a critique of the period of assimilation, which was in force till the referendum in 1967. Under this policy, many Aboriginal families were torn apart, “half-castes” segregated and Aboriginal people forced to live in missions

or on special reserves. According to Carroll, *No Sugar* “concentrates on the fragmentation of the Aboriginal family, forced dislocation, and the abuse of authority that Aboriginals were subjected to in the camps and reserves” (Carroll 102). It also shows the determination of the Aboriginal community at the Moore River Native Settlement who, at the end of the play, stage a protest against injustice when the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia O.A. Neville visits the camp. Unfortunately, it is of no effect but the act itself encourages standing against the oppressors. Carroll also mentions other plays that are set in the period of assimilation, for instance Merritt's *The Cake Man*. This play “[castigates] similar injustices, particularly focusing on the lack of mobility imposed on a people to whom the journey had always been a basic heritage and necessity” (Carroll 102). Shoemaker elaborates on that by adding that *The Cake Man* “portrays the contemporary search for Aboriginal identity, the loss of traditional authority structures, and the figurative emasculation of Aboriginal people which has resulted” (Shoemaker 242). As such it resembles the plays of Jack Davis.

The topic of the Stolen Generations, which is still a painful wound in the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Australian relationship, is present also in Purcell's *Box the Pony*. This play tells the life story of the author and the only protagonist and touches the problems of the “stolen” children just marginally, however, the visual interpretation in the play gives it a certain level of importance. It is through the song “Run Daisy Run” that “Leah tells the story of her grandmother being forcibly removed from her people and taken to a mission” (Sheahan-Bright 138). Unlike *Box the Pony*, Blackmore's *Waiting for Ships* addresses the issues of the Stolen Generations and the politics of child removal in great depth through the recounted experience of the main character. The play examines the ways in which the life of an Aboriginal boy “stolen” from his mother is affected by this involuntary removal. It highlights the crisis of identity induced by the loss of family ties and points out the anti-social behaviour to which many of the sufferers turn. Blackmore

reminds us of the work of Jane Harrison, who in her *Stolen and Rainbow's End* “tackles the power imbalance in Indigenous/non-indigenous relationships as seen in both ‘stolen generation’ children and as a result of Indigenous poverty” (Blackmore 61).

What is connected with the political engagement in the stories of stolen children and white oppression of the Aboriginal peoples in these plays is also the location of the plot. *The Cake Man* is “set in a location which is characteristically Black Australian: a government settlement or, in New South Wales, a ‘mission’. Merritt depicts this environment as it was for many New South Wales Aborigines in their childhood” (Shoemaker 242). The Millimurra family in *No Sugar* are also moved to such a government settlement, specifically the Moore River Native Settlement. Their family represents “Aborigines throughout Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, coerced to live in areas far removed from white Australians” (Shoemaker 256). Blackmore’s character Wally is, at the age of four, removed to a “farm” where together with his brother and many other Aboriginal children is forced to live according to the “white” ways, for example by taking care of the farm animals or going to church on Sundays.

Aboriginal Settlements are, however, not the only prominent locations for Aboriginal plays, because many of the Aboriginal plays are set in prison, which Shoemaker calls “an environment typically, if not exclusively, Aboriginal” (239). Such a play is, for example, an unpublished play *Ghosts in Cell Ten* by Kevin Gilbert, which deals with the different kinds of prejudices and exploitations (personal, psychological, sexual or racial) one is exposed in prison. Through this play, Gilbert addresses the questions of human rights and prison reform (Shoemaker 239-40). Prison also serves as the primary location for Jack Davis’s *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*. The play tries “to come to grips with the European dominance of Australia, a dominance which over the last few years has resulted in approximately a hundred Aboriginal men dying in police custody” (Narogin, “Black

Reality”, vii).<sup>14</sup> The play criticizes methods of police interrogation as being insensitive towards the Aboriginal people, including violence and racial humiliation. Shoemaker also sees *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* as Davis’s “most overtly political and accusatory play, [being] set in the context of the Bicentennial and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody” (Shoemaker 258). This play is the culmination of the trilogy *The First-born*, closing thus the stories of the Wallitch and Millimurra families and the recounts on the white oppression of the Indigenous people.

Of the other themes present in Aboriginal plays, the theme of family, kinship and the bond between the Aboriginal people is depicted in a large number of plays written by Aboriginal authors. Family and kin are very important parts of defining Aboriginality. If *The Dreamers* is taken as an example here, Shoemaker sees the play to be very personal, “because one sees the many sides of the Wallitch family: their happiness and sorrow, their quarrels and togetherness, their drunkenness and sobriety” (Shoemaker 253). All of these aspects make the play so successful, because the theatre-goer can identify with the people as a family. The same is depicted in the other two Davis’ plays, where the family serves as a place of togetherness and personal freedom, where one’s thoughts are respected. Purcell’s *Box the Pony* employs the theme of family and kinship as well. As Sheahan-Bright comments, “the Aboriginal concept of an extended network of family and kin is given a wider application [here] as the play continually invites the entire audience, black or white, to come into Leah’s great big ‘family’. Notions of Aboriginal kinship are also sometimes extended in a flippant way to include whitefellas” (130). Purcell often addresses the

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<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to add that this comment from Narogin is from 1989, a year after the first production of *Barungin*. However, according to Australian Institute of Criminology, the number of Indigenous deaths in police custody between 1990 and 2005 ranged between 10 and 20 deaths a year which adds 245 Indigenous people who died either in police custody or directly in prison between the years 1990 and 2005.

audience, mainly the pretend “black mob” at the back when she elaborates on some of the social or personal issues discussed in the play.

Not all the depictions portray Aboriginal family as an ideal community. Many times, the families are torn apart, either by external forces, such as in the cases of the Stolen Generations children, for example in Blackmore’s *Waiting for Ships*, when Wally and his brother are removed from their family to a farm, which in fact is a settlement for Aboriginal children and later on moved to an elderly white couple. Or as in *No Sugar* where the three generations of the Millimurra family are divided by the despotic lecher, Superintendent Neal in the Moore River Native Settlement. Other times the family presents almost hell due to its dysfunction as in *Box the Pony* or because of the presence of such a tyrant within its nucleus, as the father in *Waiting for Ships* is. The issue of a broken family causes other problems such as alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse or abuse of women. These are all themes present throughout the range of Aboriginal drama.

### **2.2.2. Structure, Form and Style of Aboriginal Drama**

It is not only content that is characteristic to plays by Aboriginal authors. There are also several characteristics of “structure, form, and style. All of these characteristics may be related to not only a history of dispossession but also to a culture which was largely eradicated from the consciousness of many Australians, Aboriginals included, during the assimilationist years” (Carroll 103). Aboriginal people today are still influenced by the complex cosmological concept known as The Dreaming, a term introduced by William Hanley Stanner (Edwards 79). The Dreaming “affects not only the Aboriginal sense of history and myth but also profoundly influences Aboriginal thinking and contributes to the centrality of ‘symbolism’ in Aboriginal thought” (Carroll 103). Max Charlesworth gives a

thoughtful definition of 'The Dreaming, according to him, The Dreaming refers to the epoch of

primordial shaping of the earth by the Ancestor Spirits and their giving to each Aboriginal people its moral and social law. It also refers to the persistence of the spiritual power of the Ancestor Spirits in the land, as well as to the personal life-plan of every individual, which originates in his or her spirit-assisted conception. The Dreaming is not merely something in the past (though it is that) but something that is also contemporaneously active. (qtd. in Carroll 103)

The idea of 'The Dreaming as something "contemporaneously active" is important, because it gives an insight in how the Aboriginal people understand the concept of time, which is then reflected in the Aboriginal drama. As Edwards suggests, The Dreaming cannot be "understood within a Western framework of linear time" (79). Western understanding of time as linear suggests that things happen in chronological order, what is past will forever remain past and never occur again. In Aboriginal thinking, the concept of time is seen as cyclic, rather than linear. The Aborigines see the activities that happened during 'The Dreaming (the time of the creation of the world) as past, however, in another sense they are still present (Edwards 79). Aboriginal playwrights use this cyclicity of time, influenced by their belief in The Dreaming, to frequently juxtapose the present and the past in their plays. The chronological narrative is thus often interrupted by flash-backs. This is one of the ways Aboriginal drama denies the three Aristotelian unities of traditional Western theatre—unities of time, place and action ("Western theatre"). Among many, a typical example is *Box the Pony* that plays with the conventions of theatre performance. By a non chronological order of events and with the help of flash-backs, the play denies the traditional unity of time. The unity of place is undermined by placing the plot of the play in many different environments and the unity of action is challenged by the engagement in

many subplots in the play. The use of dreams also interrupts the chronological narrative, for example, in Blackmore's *Waiting for Ships*: the one and only character Wally often dreams about his past, and by telling it then to the audience, he creates a cycle of past and present that are juxtaposed and often returned to.

Regarding the subversion of the unity of place, many Aboriginal plays are set in a great deal of locations, for example *No Sugar* takes place in prison cells of a police station in the town of Northam, an office in Perth, the Moore River Native Settlement and on a railway line. Two key scenic images appear in many Aboriginal plays: "the cluttered and usually impoverished domestic interior ... and the openness of the outdoors" (Carroll 106). The openness of the outdoors is a very important feature and is closely related to another stylistic characteristic of many Aboriginal plays which is the setting.

As Carroll proposes, many Aboriginal plays are not intended for a classical stage theatre but for the outdoor, open-air performances (106). If *No Sugar* is taken as an example, its original performance "was staged in a semi-promenade setting in which the audience followed the players on their journey through the action of the play" (Blacklock 7). The theme of journey through space, as mentioned in Blacklock, is also frequently incorporated in the structure and form of many Aboriginal plays. This is connected to the traditional nomadic life of the Indigenous peoples; their need to change location was determined by the seasonal changes and the availability of provisions, such as game (Carroll 107). Such a journey is also present in *Box the Pony* and *Waiting for Ships* where the theatre-goers follow the journeys of the main characters, i.e. Leah or Wally respectively.

Aboriginal drama does not use these resources to stand out in the first place. The use of open air stages, different locations, journeys through space all refer back to the time of The Dreaming. As mentioned above, Aboriginal theatre uses a great number of stylistic features that are distinct to this culture and help its self-representation.

### 2.2.3. Humour in Aboriginal Drama

The features specific to Aboriginal drama have been discussed and still there is one more fundamental aspect to talk about. This is the distinctive sense of humour, which the Aborigines have managed to retain during the years of torment and oppression they have experienced since the first years of the European settlement. The employment of mimicry and mockery of the whites together with the shared celebration of their own lifestyle have helped the Aboriginal people to withstand and oppose the encroachment of European society (Shoemaker 233). Anna Haebich has also commented, that the Aborigines “keep on laughing to stay afloat” (qtd. in Shoemaker 233). This image of Aboriginal people, relying on humour during the years of misery is very clear in Aboriginal drama. Shoemaker suggests that even though

Black Australian playwrights have all used humour extensively in their works, ... none of their plays could properly be termed a comedy. All the Aboriginal plays written so far describe scenes of hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, but none of them is unrelievedly sombre in tone. Humour tempers the seriousness of these plays and concurrently enhances their impact; it rescues them from any danger of being oppressive in tone<sup>15</sup>. (Shoemaker 234)

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<sup>15</sup> Here, Shoemaker is very specific and leaving no space for arguments claiming that ‘all playwrights have used humour’, ‘none of the plays could be termed a comedy’ and ‘all the plays written so far describe misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, but none of them is unrelievedly sombre in tone’. He might have known all the Aboriginal plays written by the publication of these thoughts but it must be considered that the world of Aboriginal drama has expanded during last decades and years and such limiting statements might be easily challenged. For the purpose of this thesis, however, the statements are considered true, as all the plays studied fit into the limits of the description

Before further observing the specific impact of Aboriginal humour on Aboriginal drama, it is helpful to look at the general characteristics of this humour. Stanner indicates that “there is some kind of affinity between humour and tragedy, an affinity which is almost too painful for many minds to wish to know too much about” (41). This supports the initial claim that the Aborigines laugh to keep alive and to be able to resist the tragic clash of their society with the colonising European one. Shoemaker also claims that “the humour seen in many Black Australian plays derives from the traditions and particular skills of Aborigines, especially those of mime and impersonation” (Shoemaker 235) and he quotes Jack Davis saying that “Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world . . . We’ve acted up before magistrates, we’ve acted up before the police, we’ve acted up before social workers; we’ve always done our own mime” (qtd. in Shoemaker 235). As such, the Aboriginal humour is often based on the specific Aboriginal experience. Several amusing incidents from the lives of the Aboriginal people are mentioned by Davis or by Stanner. One such case is when Stanner and an Aboriginal friend of his go fishing and shoot a “fine fat fish faintly swishing near the surface” (Stanner 43) which, however, had already been caught by someone else and tied up to the bank by a string. The story has spread and “to this day, half a lifetime later, [the Aborigines] still laugh. When I go fishing with them, someone is sure to say in an innocent tone: ‘You got plenty bullet?’” (Stanner 43). Another such amusing story is mentioned by Davis. It is about an Aboriginal man who is standing in the fire, his feet are burning and he does not even realise it before he smells something burning. Not having worn shoes for forty years, he has developed very thick callouses that protect his feet so he cannot feel the fire under. After this happened, he laughed and the story was told in the camp for a week (qtd. in Shoemaker 235). Davis sums up this story by saying that “little incidents like that [...] that carry on all the time – it’s not very hard to put ‘em down on paper. I’m sure the Aboriginal playwrights have seen that” (qtd. in Shoemaker 235).

As seen from these examples, these tales derived from real-life experience as presented by Stanner or Davis are imperishable and their longevity is given effective expression in Aboriginal Australian drama (Shoemaker 235). Aboriginal dramatists often take their inspiration mostly from the direct observation and recollection of personal experiences. The characters in their plays are then based either on their own stories or on individuals known to the playwright (Shoemaker 236). Humour is often seen as a tool that helps the Aboriginal people fight against the pitfalls or injustices of daily life. According to Davis, “one of the most visible ways Aborigines have survived the white onslaught is through reliance upon each other, upon ... traditions, and upon [the] distinctive mores; in short, through Aboriginality itself. Again, humour is an integral part of the equation” (qtd. in Shoemaker 252). Humour, as a vital component of the distinctive Aboriginal self-image, is present in Davis’s trilogy. Irony is fundamental in *No Sugar* and *Barungin*, where the “irrepressible sense of humour shines through, [underlining] the distinctive naturalism of Black Australian drama” and such humour is “often critical but never really offensive” (Shoemaker 258). In *Barungin*, when the Wallitch family come back from the funeral of one of the family members at the beginning of the play, they try to lighten the mood by humour, commenting on the length of the preacher’s sermon:

MEENA. Gawd, that preacher went on and on. He must’a’been vaccinated  
with a fuckin’ gramophone needle. I thought he was never gonna  
stop.

[*She laughs.*] (Davis 8)

This situation presents a personal misfortune rather than a social one in the sense of Indigenous oppression. As a tool for helping the characters overcome the harshness of their lives, humour is also widely used in Purcell’s *Box the Pony*. Throughout the play Leah “shows that she is capable of getting over difficult situations by laughing at them” (Sheahan-Bright 132). Humour is also used as the binding that helps the viewers identify

with the characters and keep the distance at the same time. It is a powerful instrument of softening the harsh criticism; it helps minimize the negative impact of this criticism on one hand and makes the audience think about it more on the other hand, thus creating a very strong emotional footprint. A contribution by Colleen McGloin regarding Aboriginal short film can be mentioned here. In Aboriginal short films, humour is used as a powerful tool for affecting the viewer, in the same way as it is used in the pieces of drama discussed above. In both these films and plays,

humour serves an important twofold purpose to undermine white authority and to reinforce agency: Blair [an Indigenous film director] uses humour to chide or subtly mock or ‘take the piss’ out of non-Aboriginal viewers, and contest their perceived ‘knowledge’ of Aboriginal people and their preoccupation with notions of cultural ‘authenticity’. Humour also asserts the agency of Aboriginal subjects through non-confrontational, yet effective, modes of resistance (McGloin)

Humour, then, is not only a means of making the audience laugh. Sometimes the non-Aboriginal viewers or theatre-goers are being laughed at by the writers without knowing it. Being funny, however, often means addressing some real issues people can relate to and subjecting them to irony or sarcasm, thus creates, according to McGloin, the non-confrontational and affective modes of resistance.

### 3. Issues in Aboriginal Society as Depicted in Contemporary Aboriginal Drama

The last chapter of this thesis deals with the analysis of the five plays mentioned: *No Sugar*, *The Dreamers*, and *Barungin* by Jack Davis, *Box the Pony* by Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell and *Waiting for Ships* by Ernie Blackmore. This chapter focuses on several issues of the Aboriginal population as they are depicted in these plays. These issues are seen as a fundamental part of Aboriginal life today and their delineation in the plays is an important tool for Indigenous self-representation and draws attention to the consequences of the White Australia policy and the policies of “protection” and the assimilation of Aboriginal people.

I have categorised the issues recurring in the analysed plays into three categories: Poverty and crime, Family relationships, and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships. The first category of Poverty and crime includes issues such as poverty, begging, crime (mainly petty thefts), the system of justice as applied to the Aboriginal people and the issues of deaths in custody which are tightly connected to it. The category of Family relationships examines the issues to do with family lives, including the problems of dysfunctional families, domestic violence, verbal and sexual abuse and the abuse of alcohol. The last category of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships deals with the issues concomitant of these relationships, such as racism, the consequences of the Stolen Generations and the loss of identity amongst Aboriginal people. However, many of these issues are interconnected, often crossing the boundaries set by the categorisation in these three groups, and not all of the plays address these issues evenly or altogether.

### **3.1. No Sugar**

The main theme of *No Sugar* is the oppression of Aborigines. The plot is set in the Depression years, in 1929 to be specific, and it takes place in many locations in Western Australia, where the fate of the Millimurra family is outlined—the town of Northam, the office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Perth or the Moore River Native Settlement. Davis draws on his own experience: although born in Perth, he was brought up in the Yarloop and Moore River Native Settlements. He descended from the Nyoongarah people from the south-west of Western Australia and his plays often tell the stories of this people (Tatang 2).

#### **3.1.1. Poverty and Crime**

Apart from the other problems of dispossession of the land and personal and social rights, the Millimurra family face problems of how to get enough food to eat and how to make a living. As mentioned above, the time of the play is during the Depression and despite the fact that those times were hard for everybody, a pageant to commemorate the settlement of the Europeans in Australia is taking place in the streets at the beginning of the play. The pageant presents Western Australia as a place of prosperous and optimistic society and national spirit shared among all people in Australia (Tatang 3). While people are marching in the street, the Millimurra family deal with the problem of having no food for dinner:

MILLY. And you fellas, we got no meat for dinner or supper; you'll have to go out and get a couple of rabbits. (Davis 16)

The celebration and joy in the streets contrast with the appalling living conditions of the poverty-stricken Millimurra family, who find it difficult to make ends meet under the economic restrictions placed upon them. As seen in scene two of the play, Auber Octavius Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, who is in charge of the weekly rations for the Aboriginal people, does not seem to be willing to help them much. Instead of trying to get more money for the Indigenous people in the times of the Depression, he suggests that to meet the budgetary constraints, Aborigines should be deprived of meat altogether.

NEVILLE. ... the proposed budget cut of three thousand one hundred and thirty-four pounds could be met by discontinuing the supply of meat in native rations. Soap was discontinued this financial year.  
(Davis 20)

It is evident that there is no supply of soap already, making it hard for Aborigines to maintain hygiene and wash their clothes. The comparison of the amount of money given to white and Aboriginal unemployed ones is given as well:

NEVILLE. ... Item one: the native weekly ration currently costs this Department two shillings and fourpence per week. Perhaps this bears comparison with the sustenance paid to white unemployed which I believe is seven shillings per week. (Davis 20)

The difference between seven shillings provided to the white unemployed and two shilling and fourpence to the Aboriginal unemployed is enormous, causing Aborigines suffer from poverty much more than non-Aboriginal population.

*No Sugar* is closed with a scene of sorrow, poverty and starvation. When Joe and Mary leave for Northam again, Gran's song represents their future situation:

GRAN. Woe, woe, woe.  
My boy and girl and baby

Going a long way walking,  
That way walking,  
That way walking.  
Pity, pity, pity,  
Hungry, hungry,  
Walking, walking, walking,  
Yay, yay, yay,  
Cooo-ooo-ooo-oooh.<sup>16</sup> (Davis 110)

The grandmother expresses her sorrow about the fact that her grandson and his prospective wife Mary have to leave the rest of the family and go towards uncertain future, which will definitely be marked by the presence of hunger. The problem of having no meat to eat often leads to stealing. Here, Joe and Jimmy (Gran's son and his nephew) think of stealing a sheep at a farm and killing it to provide food for the family. As seen from their plans to steal one of the sheep, it is clear that stealing is not voluntary. However, it is induced by the lack of food as one of the necessities needed for a person's wellbeing. In this scene, Davis points out the hardship of Aboriginal families and refers to stealing as their last resort in gaining food for mere survival.

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<sup>16</sup> The original song is in Aboriginal language (Davis 109). However, for the purposes of this analysis, the English translation is more important than the original. The translation of the song is provided in the section Translation of the Songs (110).

### 3.1.2. Family Relationships

The family issues are not addressed much in *No Sugar* since the main theme of the play is the oppression of Aborigines by white Australians. However, the term “family” might be broadened to include other members of the Aboriginal community, since Aboriginal people often address other Aborigines—not necessarily blood related—as brother, sister etc. As such, I would explore the relationship between the Millimurra family and the black tracker in the service of Mr. Neal in the Moore River Native Settlement.

The black trackers working for Mr. Neal do not share the fates of the other Aboriginal people in the settlement and hence they do not sympathise with them. They are often portrayed to be as cruel as their white master Mr. Neal. An Aboriginal girl, a friend of Mary, is raped by the sons of the master and becomes pregnant with one of them. When the baby is born, the trackers kill the baby:

MARY. ... And when she had that baby them trackers choked it dead and buried it in the pine plantation. (Davis 62)

The old tracker Billy is shown as a character that has assimilated into the white society. He shares the cruelty towards the other Aborigines, as shown when it comes to tracking and he tries to bring Joe and Mary back after they run away from the Moore River Native Settlement for the first time:

[BILLY KIMBERLEY *appears and rushes at him with a stockwhip in one hand and handcuffs in the other. JOE dodges him. MARY is sick again as BILLY advances slowly and menacingly on JOE.*]

BILLY. You two fella, silly fella. Everyone run away. Wait here for the choo choo. [*Swinging the whip at JOE*] Choo, choo, choo, choo.

[*JOE dodges the whip and threatens him with the doak.*]

JOE. Go back, old man. I don't want to hurt you. (Davis 74)

Billy is ironic and mocks Joe's and Mary's attempt to run away. When Joe overpowers him and Billy gets to talk to Mr. Neal, he even lies and fabricates a story about how Joe threatened to kill him:

BILLY. He bin chuck me off my 'orse and he bin knock me silly fella with a  
*waddi.*

...

BILLY. And that fella bin say that he gunna hang me from Christmas tree  
like that. [*He demonstrates.*]

...

BILLY. He bin knock me silly fella, with a big stone. [*Indicating his back  
and then ribs*] He bin kill 'em me here, here, and in the guts. Aw, he  
bad fella. (Davis 75)

Aboriginal people were those who were oppressed and should have stayed united, however, it is evident, that under the influence of white dominance, even the members of the same family of Aborigines go against each other. The difference is, according to Tatang, how each member of the Aboriginal community deals with the dominance of the whites. Some of them become submissive and some of them struggle to protect their dignity and identity as Aborigines (Tatang 4). By assimilating into the white society, Billy could be seen as the submissive one and a betrayer of his own people and culture.

### 3.1.3. Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Relationships

As stated before, I have categorised alcohol abuse in the Family relationships category. In *No Sugar*, however, alcohol plays a different role than in the rest of the plays and as such, it is more logical to analyse it as part of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationship issues. The abuse of alcohol is also one of the many problems Aboriginal population suffers from. Till 1960s (Brady), the purchase and consumption of alcohol by Indigenous people were strictly limited. The Aboriginal person caught drinking or in the possession of alcohol was automatically charged with an offence against the law. This is what happens to Jimmy and Sam, two middle-aged brothers-in-law:

SERGEANT. The two accused were apprehended in Bernard Park  
yesterday at approximately nine-twenty p.m. They were both under  
the influence of liquor. Munday was in possession of one bottle of  
wine, three parts empty.

...

JP [JUSTICE OF THE PEACE]. [*To the SERGEANT*] Are there any  
previous records?

SERGEANT. Munday has several previous convictions for the same  
offence and one of unlawful disposal of government rations.

...

JP. [*interrupting*] All right. I see this is your sixth offence related to alcohol.  
On the last occasion you were sentenced to fourteen days  
imprisonment. This time your sentence is three months  
imprisonment with hard labour. ... (Davis 35-6)

The policies prohibiting Aboriginal people to drink alcohol lasted throughout the 1950s till 1960s as part of the assimilation era. Some Aboriginal people (those who were seen as

capable of behaving in the “white” ways) were issued exemptions from the Aboriginal Act, being thus granted permissions to drink alcohol or enter hotels and pubs. Being allowed to drink alcohol was therefore seen as a step towards equality and citizenship (Brady).

Aboriginal people wanted to be able to drink alcohol so they would feel more equal to the non-Aboriginal majority. Here, Jimmy’s and Sam’s rights are dismissed as they are found guilty and charged.

The authorities wanted to have absolute control of the supply of alcohol to Aborigines so there was also a law forbidding to supply alcohol to Aboriginal people by any member of any other nationality (Indigenous Law Resources). Frank, an unemployed non-Aboriginal farmer, sees the Aborigines as friendly people and helps Jimmy and Sam get some alcohol. He is also charged and eventually found guilty and sentenced to six weeks imprisonment with hard labour. From today’s point of view, it is no crime providing alcohol to adult males but in the assimilation period the penalties for both supply and consumption of alcohol were high, however they varied in different areas and time (Douglas).

As already stated, *No Sugar* is a play dealing with the oppression of Aboriginal people. The issues of expropriating their land and their expulsion, segregation, together with racism and subsequent violence or sexual abuse are depicted in the play. As the pageant is marching in the street (to commemorate the European settlement in Australia) at the beginning of the play, Jimmy is aware of the land expropriation:

JIMMY. You fellas, you know why them *wetjalas* [white people] marchin’  
down the street, eh? I’ll tell youse why. ‘Cause them bastards took  
our country ... *Bastards!* (Davis16)

The land is an important part of the Aboriginal identity, it is the source of the Aboriginal spirituality, tradition, and the survival of Aboriginal people (Tatang 2). Thus being deprived of the connection with the land, expropriated and expelled from the places they call home,

constitutes a major problem for them. Jack Davis presents these issues in the play. After running away from the Moore River Native Settlement, Joe and Mary come to Northam, the previous home of their family. Joe talks about the rations for Aborigines with the Sergeant, coming across the topic of involuntary deporting:

SERGEANT. I can't help you there. Since all the natives have shifted out,  
Northam is no longer a ration depot.

JOE. We never shifted out, we was booted out. ...

...

SERGEANT. Where's the rest of your lot? Not here, I hope.

JOE. You oughta know where they are, you dragged 'em there. (Davis 80)

It is apparent what Joe thinks of this shift of his kin, when he uses the verb 'boot out'. His resentment at this matter is clearly stated.

The characters of the play also encounter some form of racism, either in form of legislative acts or in the form of simple human behaviour. By these, their personal and social rights are withheld. Jimmy, the middle-aged father of the Millimurra family, complains about this to Frank, his non-Aboriginal farmer friend:

JIMMY. [*drunker*] ... Fucks everybody up; everybody, eh? Eh? You allowed  
to walk down the street after sundown? Eh?

FRANK. Yeah, don't see why not.

JIMMY. Well, I'm not. None of us are; you know we're not allowed in  
town, not allowed to go down the soak, not allowed to march...?

[*He mimes handcuffs and gaol by first putting his wrists together and then placing a hand downwards over his forehead with the fingers spread over his eyes.*]

*Manatj* grab us like that. Bastards...

FRANK. Who?

GRAN. Politjmans.

JIMMY. They can shoot our dawgs, anytime they want to. Bastards ...

(Davis 28)

Not being able to go out after sunset, the equality of the Aboriginal people was again something only to dream about. It was another example of deprivation of human rights, as well as the prohibition of drinking alcohol was.

Not only were the Aboriginal people deprived from their social rights, as of being allowed to march in the streets, drink alcohol or go into bars; their rights of personal freedom were often challenged as well. The case of the rape of Mary's friend has been mentioned but Mary herself was subject to sexual abuse, although only verbal:

MARY. Mr Neal.

JOE. Yeah, what about him?

MARY. He's trying to make me go and work at the hospital.

...

MARY. When Mr Neal sends a girl to work at the hospital, it usually  
means ...

JOE. Means what?

MARY. That he wants that girl ... for himself. (Davis 69)

Mr Neal talks to Mary about this matter later. She defies him and her resentment is met with severe violence:

MARY. I don't want to work in the hospital.

NEAL. You'll work where I think fit, digging graves if I say so.

...

MARY. I don't care. You can belt me if you like, I'm not workin' in the  
hospital.

...

NEAL. Millimurra seems to have learnt her well. Well, I'm going to unlearn you.

[NEAL *grabs her*. BILLY *holds her outstretched over a pile of flour bags*.

NEAL *raises the cat-o'-nine-tails*. *Blackout. A scream.*]

Mary's character represents the pride and dignity of an Aborigine who does not want to be subdued even by the use of physical violence. As such, this scene represents the force and abuse against the Aboriginal people. When Mr. Neal is about to hit Mary with the cat-o'-nine-tails, the lights fade and only a scream is heard. This might suggest the violence was hidden from general public at that time.

## 3.2. *The Dreamers*

This play tells a story of an Aboriginal family living in a city in the present time<sup>17</sup>. The Wallitch family experience the ambiguity of being a family of a minority living in a place and time dominated by the majority's cultural beliefs. In this play Davis shows how the Aboriginal characters' lives are influenced by the combination of both cultures.

### 3.2.1. Poverty and Crime

Poverty and begging are one of the major issues this play focuses on. Even though the Wallitch family live in a city, their housing is of a very low standard, with no hot water or locks on the doors. Dolly, the only adult female in the family, comments on that:

DOLLY. ...Oh Gawd, I wish we 'ad a decent place to live in. No hot water,  
no locks on the doors, worse than livin' in a bloody camp.  
(Davis, *The Dreamers* 76)

When the family want to have hot water for washing themselves, they have to warm the water in a saucepan on the stove. This presents a case for arguing, mainly between the children of Dolly—Meena and Shane:

DOLLY. Come on, you kids. Hurry up, water's ready.  
MEENA. I'm having it first.

---

<sup>17</sup> The exact year when the events of the play take place is not given, only the implicit 'the time is the present' is stated at the beginning of the script. However, with the use of the information given in the introduction to the subsequent play *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, an approximate time can be guessed. Meena is fourteen years old in *The Dreamers*. In *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, set in 1988, she is a mother of a fourteen-year-old son and a twelve-year-old daughter. Considering the age of 18-22 the most probable for having the first child, this assumption would set *The Dreamers* somewhere around the years 1966-1970.

[MEENA and SHANE enter arguing.]

SHANE. No, you're not, I am.

MEENA. I am! You can have it after. (Davis 74)

This quarrel leads to a small fight. Eventually the kids spill the water and have to wash in cold water. Eli, Dolly's cousin, goes even further and compares their home to a prison:

ELI. [*shouting*] Freeo? What's wrong with Fremantle Gaol?

PETER. What's wrong with it?

ELI. You git three meals a day and a hot shower. Not like this place.

(Davis 83)

The situation seems really bad when a prison seems a better place to live than one's own home.

One of the ways the characters deal with poverty is begging. It is again Eli who is an experienced beggar. Having created an image of a disabled one-eyed man, it helps him "scrounge" money from passers-by in front of a shop:

ELI. [*pointing to his eyepatch*] Yeah, me and old patchy had a good day, Pop.

[*He takes it off and puts it in his pocket.*]

WORRU. Patchy?

ELI. Yeah, we were doin' all right outside the shopping centre today, yeah, getting' fifty cents a bite. One *wetjala* bloke, hippy, he gave me two dollars. (Davis 105)

This way, he actually deceives people to believe one of his eyes is bad. We actually get to hear the lines he uses to beg:

ELI. Ten dollars and eighty one cents! Not bad, old Hawkeye, not bad at all.

[*He pulls his eye patch down and addresses an imaginary passer-by.*]

Got bad eyes, boss, this one got catarac', this one goin' fast. Can you

spare forty cents, boss? God bless you, sir, God bless you, missus.

[*Gesturing skywards*] Hey! Big boss! You up there! You listenin'? Hope you been givin' out some of them blessin's I been promisin' them *wetjalas*.

[*He removes the eyepatch, puts it in his pocket and ...*] (Davis 120)

Begging is one of the biggest sources of income for Eli and the Wallitch family, however, the money is often spent on alcohol instead of food. The need for actual begging will be elaborated on in the second next subchapter on Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships.

### 3.2.2. Family Relationships

The Wallitch family are presented as almost an idyllic family with great relationships. The family serves an example of a group of people who stand by each other when needed. They are members of a marginalized group of people struggling to live their lives while surrounded by the dominant “white” culture. However, as the notion of the “Aboriginal family” not only in terms of consanguinity was mentioned when analysing *No Sugar*, there is another example of this idea present in *The Dreamers* as well. When Eli is begging outside the shopping centre pretending to be disabled, he is doing well. Some Aboriginal people notice him and try to get some money from him, referring to them as being part of one “family”:

ELI. Anyways, some of them *Nyoongabs* spotted me. There they was: ‘Give me fifty cents, brother’, ‘Give me a dollar, nephew’, ‘Give me fifty cents, uncle’; and you know none of them black bastards are related to me. That’s true. Pop, I never seen black fellas like ‘em, they real

bloody dinkum out and out bludgers. Can't stand the bastards.

(Davis 105)

Apparently, Eli is not happy with that and he clearly states his opinion of them, when he calls them “bludgers” and “bastards”. The irony is that he also begs for money when standing in front of the shop. But when the other people from the same “family” do that and ask him for money, he clearly distances from them saying they are not related and “I never seen black fellas like ‘em”. He sees himself in the position of someone being bothered by them.

The overuse of alcohol is also dealt with in this play. As already stated, the money Eli gets by begging—or the unemployment compensation—is often spent on alcohol rather than on food. Eli and Roy, Dolly’s husband, also buy alcohol with the money Dolly leaves at home for her children, Meena and Shane, to buy some lunch:

DOLLY. And how'd this get 'ere?

*[She picks up an empty bottle.]*

Now where did you git the money from?

ROY. What money?

DOLLY. For this bloody bottle?

ROY. Oh, Eli bought it this morning.

*[He starts to feel around for his thongs.]*

DOLLY. *[threatening him with the bottle]* Roy Wallitch, you're a rotten stinkin'

liar. You spent the kids' dinner money on this, didn't you?

...

ROY. Shit, I'm gettin' outa 'ere. (Davis 91)

Roy is aware of the fact that Dolly is not in favour of excessive drinking and her children are one of the most important things to her, which is why he briskly leaves the house when she becomes mad at him. Dolly, being the most responsible member of the family, cares

about the other family members and she is not happy to find Uncle Worru drunk a few hours after coming back from the hospital:

DOLLY. Ts, ts, ts! Just look at you, 'ome from the 'ospital two hours and you're drunk already. 'Ave you taken your pills? (Davis 92)

Even the children, Shane and Meena (aged twelve and fourteen) are aware of the drinking problem in their family. When Meena is getting ready to go out, they assume their family members will be drunk that evening, because of the unemployment compensation money:

SHANE. You better wait until they get home.

MEENA. They'll be drunk, anyway.

SHANE. Yeah, Social Service cheques today.

It is apparent that the day the money from the government comes, the adult male members of the family get drunk. It is important to mention that as this play is set in present time, there is no restriction on buying alcohol by Indigenous people. The excessive drinking is often caused by social insecurities and serves as a way of escape. However, this behaviour must not be stereotyped to all Aboriginal people.

### **3.2.3. Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Relationships**

The Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships in this play are portrayed as a struggle of the Aboriginal minority to live in the society dominated by the non-Aboriginal majority. The problem of getting a job for an Aboriginal person is discussed here:

DOLLY. Why don't you go down the Road Board? They'd put you on.

Cousin William got a job there. ... They've even got a *Nyoongah* bloke drivin' the garbage truck.

ELI. Yeah, an' they do all right sellin' bottles an' things, 'sides their wages.

(Davis 76)

Eli is not happy about the offer of driving a garbage truck and he suggests that the pay is very low. Meena introduces another piece of information to this debate:

MEENA. [*entering neat and tidy, school bag in hand*] Mum, that isn't a *Nyoongab* driving the garbage truck, 'es an Indian bloke.

DOLLY. What of it, still coloured, ain't he?

ROY. Lot of difference, he ain't a *Nyoongab* and that's good enough for me.

(Davis 77)

Roy could be seen as a lazy man, when he is happy with the fact that it is not an Aboriginal person working as a driver there. He sees it as an excuse not to work at all, claiming that he would not get the job anyway. This reading might support the popular beliefs that the Aboriginal people do not want to work, are uncompetitive, lack any motivation or true concern about their well-being in the future (Davidson 1). However, Davidson claims that research has proven that it is discrimination that contributes to Aboriginal unemployment the most. His paper on Australian Aboriginal unemployment was published in 1980, just a few years before the publication of *The Dreamers* (1982) and as such is definitely valid in the context of this play. Davidson also claims that the high unemployment rate of Aboriginal people<sup>18</sup> is caused by the reluctance of the employers to hire Aborigines. Given these facts, the unemployment must be viewed within the “broader context of unequal opportunity in recruitment, training, and work conditions, and not as something done to aborigines by themselves” (Davidson 1). Roy's reluctance to work must be therefore viewed from this point of view.

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<sup>18</sup> According to Davidson, the Aboriginal unemployment rate stood somewhere between 45 and 80 percent.

### 3.3. *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*

*Barungin (Smell the Wind)* closes the trilogy *The First-Born*. The plot is set in Perth, Western Australia and the action of the play takes place during 1988. *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* is Davis' most political play. Its main theme is the reality of Aboriginal deaths in police custody. The play also deals with other issues of Aboriginal communities, such as alcohol abuse, family relationships or racism and search for identity.

#### 3.3.1. Poverty and Crime

Crime plays an important role in *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*. It is Micky, Meena's fourteen-year-old son who does most of the stealing. As we gradually learn throughout the play, he regularly commits a great number of petty thefts, mainly of small things, such as electronics that he can't afford:

[... MICKY ... *pulls a packet of batteries from his pocket and unwraps them. He throws the packet on the floor, goes to the door, checks the others have left and goes outside. He stretches his arm under the house and produces a new Walkman. He unwraps it and conceals the package. He returns inside, puts the batteries in it and sits listening to music. GRANNY DOLL, MEENA and LITTLE DOLL enter, talking. MICKY hears them and stashes the Walkman under the cushions ...*]

(Davis, *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* 14)

The Walkman is obviously acquired illegally; otherwise Micky would not hide it. Later on in the play, he does not manage to hide his criminal activity from Peegun, a family friend who is staying with them at that moment:

MICKY. Anybody home? Anybody home?

*[He walks from room to room checking that the house is empty. He exits and re-enters with an array of stolen property including a camera, several cassette tapes, a 'ghettoblaster' tape recorder, another Walkman and a pair of binoculars. He looks at the audience through the binoculars. He selects a tape and places it in the tape recorder. He dances to it. He picks up the broom and climbs onto the table and dances. He fails to notice*

*PEEGUN enter and stand watching him. He spots PEEGUN, stops in his tracks and jumps off the table. He turns off the tape.]*

PEEGUN. Where did this stuff come from?

MICKY. It's not, um it's ... Oh, it's mine.

PEEGUN. *[examining the goods]* I know that. I bet you knocked it off.

*[MICKY is silent. He nods slightly.]* (Davis 41)

Micky mainly steals things for fun. He commits these thefts with a friend of his, Slugger.

Micky is fourteen but he tries to behave as an adult. Stealing might be just a part of looking for his identity and trying to prove himself capable of doing things like adults do. His sister Little Doll comments on his adult-like behaviour when he is with his friends:

LITTLE DOLL. Yuck! I'm not walkin' around with a big mob of boys, an Mummy, they was smokin' and walkin' around like this.

*[Demonstrating]* Makin' out they was big men. (Davis 9)

But still he is only a child afraid of his mother's reaction if she finds out what he does. And he is not a professional criminal, which is clear from what he and Slugger do when after what happens when they have a joyride in a Porsche they steal once:

PEEGUN. And what the hell did you do with it?

MICKY. Nothin'. It ran out of petrol, so we dumped it. (Davis 41)

Micky is not a dangerous criminal, however stealing electronics and cars at the age of fourteen is a sign of pathological behaviour. Moreover, it is Micky's loot that puts Peter, Micky's uncle, in prison eventually.

Peter's imprisonment is the key issue discussed at the end of the play. Several important factors lead to it and it is important to look at them. Peegun tells Shane, a cousin, that there is a much higher chance to end up in prison if a person is of Aboriginal descent:

PEEGUN. [*calling after him*] Look, in this country you got ten times the chance of ending up inside if you're black than if you're white. So you gotta keep a step ahead of the cops. (Davis 29)

This statement was made by Davis in 1988. A study from 2004 shows how accurate this claim was and that not much has changed over the years. According to the bulletin of NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, the rate of conviction in NSW courts in 2004 is nine times higher<sup>19</sup> for the Indigenous population than for the non-Indigenous (Snowball and Weatherburn 20). The bulletin also produces results of several rigorous studies that tried to find evidence of racial bias in sentencing. The studies have shown that the courts cannot be seen responsible for the high rates of Aboriginal imprisonment and that there were several instances when the courts proved to be more lenient to Aboriginal offenders (3). As such, direct racial bias has not been confirmed. What is called into question here is that "racial discrimination in sentencing is indirect rather than direct" (Snowball and Weatherburn 3). This includes everything before the actual trial in the court, i.e. the way police investigate or the likelihood of Aboriginal people being charged more

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<sup>19</sup> The absolute numbers cannot be compared, because there is a disproportion between the number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens. However, when the rate per 100,000 people is taken into account, there were 13,994 Indigenous offenders and only 1,490 non-Indigenous offenders. So the number of Indigenous offenders per 100,000 people is about nine times higher.

than non-Indigenous Australians. This might actually be why Peter gets imprisoned in *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*.

There is a riot in Koolbardon where Peter drives his car with his sister Meena and her daughter Little Doll. The other members of the family wonder how he got arrested:

SHANE. It's Peter. He was grabbed by the cops in Koolbardon.

ARNIE. I bet they got caught up in that bloody riot.

PEEGUN. What did they get picked up for?

ROBERT. They was goin' through all the blackfellas' cars.

PEEGUN. Aw ... gawd ... Fuckin' hell!

(Davis, *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* 57)

The fact the police “was goin’ through all the blackfellas’ cars” suggests the indirect racial discrimination, because the police were targeting only the cars driven by Aboriginal people and that is why there was higher chance of an Aboriginal to be charged with an offence. And actually, Peter does not commit any crime, he just happens to be driving the wrong car at the wrong place:

ROBERT. Apparently there was a lot of stolen stuff in Pee's car.

SHANE. *What?* ... What stolen stuff?

PEEGUN. Aw! Micky knocked it off and I stashed it away for him.

[*Pause.*]

ROBERT. Yeah, that's what he was picked up for. (Davis 58)

Due to a series of unfortunate events, Peter ends up in police custody where he meets his fate. He is found dead in his cell just after midnight. The coroner's comment on the autopsy reveals traces of beating on Peter's body:

CORONER. ... There were abrasions over the lateral aspect of the left cheekbone and above the left eye-brow. ... There was extensive bruising of the left epicranium and the scalp most marked on the

left. ... there were fractures of the sixth and ninth right ribs. A hairline fracture of the right temporal region. ... Both lungs showed intense congestion. ... The brain showed some flattening of the right cerebral hemisphere. ... Cause of death: closed head injury. ... (Davis 58)

Peter's death is depicted as a violent act of the police, it is shown as an unnecessary loss of a human life, an Aboriginal life. The topic of deaths in custody is a much discussed one and quite controversial as well. With no doubt the police are to blame, as Davis shows on the character of Peter, who is beaten to death. However, there are many deaths caused by suicide. Nonetheless, the numbers of Aboriginal people dying in custody are high and *Barungin* can be seen as a play to honour them.

### 3.3.2. Family Relationships

Family is again depicted as something essential for Aboriginality itself. It is the bond of the people, the feeling for each other. The depth of the roots of the family tree is touched upon at the beginning of the play when Eli is buried and the Wallitch family meet their relatives:

SHANE. Big mob there, anyway.

GRANNY DOLL. Yeah, there was 'lations I haven't seen for years.

MEENA. All them cousins, couldn't get away from 'em. Kept shakin' hands and tellin' me who they was. How many we got, Mum?

GRANNY DOLL. Gawd knows. (Davis 62)

It is apparent that having so many relatives, Granny Doll even does not know how many of them the Wallitch family have. Even though it is not only typically Aboriginal to have an

extended family whose members meet and express their sympathy at a funeral, but this sense of community is definitely present here.

Micky is the character that has most problems in this play. He steals and he also starts to drink in a very early age. The fact he is not ready to drink alcohol like the adults do is clear from what happens to him when he drinks too much:

MEENA. *Mickee!* Where have you been? You're drunk.

MICKY. So are you.

MEENA. Where did you get the grog from? Who gave you the grog?

MICKY. *Wetjala.* Who gave you yours?

...

MICKY. It's good enough for you and him and everybody else to drink, but  
not me.

MEENA. You're fourteen years old ...

...

MICKY. I don't care.

MEENA. I'll make you care. You'll care. (Davis 24)

Again, by drinking, Micky tries to be more adult. He sees the adult members of his family drink alcohol and he wants to be allowed to do so as well. Drinking is just a manifestation of the revolt typical for his age, for the transition from being a child to being an adult. The play also wants to show how difficult it can be for an Aboriginal person to grow up in a community, where drinking is common and not to start it as well.

### 3.3.3. Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Relationships

The issues of crime and deaths in custody among Aboriginal population, which have a lot to do with latent racism and as such represent the issues of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships are discussed in the previous section. This subchapter wants to focus on the search for Indigenous identity among the Wallitch family. The Wallitch family live in Perth, in an urban setting dominated by the majority non-Aboriginal culture. One Saturday evening, Peegun gets to play the didgeridoo, which makes Granny Doll think about the importance of the instrument for the Aboriginal people:

GRANNY DOLL. [*pointing at the didgeridoo*] That's all *Nyoongahs* got now, and that don't really belong to us. Dances are gone, laws are gone, lingos just about gone, everything finished. (Davis 44)

She regrets the nonexistence of Aboriginal culture in their lives, taken away by the white culture. She misses the music, dances or language that are typical for forming the Aboriginal identity. The Aboriginal people have been expressing their culture since the very beginning of their existence, however, this ability is somehow lost in the area surrounded by the majority culture. It is seen on Little Doll, who is being raised in the urban society, that she does not know much about these things, and she is curious what yarns Granny Doll was told when she was little:

GRANNY DOLL. ... The old fellas used to tell yarns.

LITTLE DOLL. What about, Gran?

GRANNY DOLL. All sorts of things. About our lot, the massacres, the burnings ... old Grandfather Walitj, and how they used to go hunting in the Avon valley and that old man, he would stand on the side of the hill and *barungin, barungin!* (Davis 45)

Here the explanation of the term *barungin* is offered. As Granny Doll tells the story, even Meena becomes interested in it and wants to know more:

MEENA. '*Barungin*': what's that mean, Mum?

GRANNY DOLL. It means 'to 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 and when people were around he learned about *barungin* from the old people from a long time back. But now the wind's got too many smells: motor car, grog, smokes, you want meat now, you go to the supermarket. (Davis 45)

This is quite critical of the conditions the Aboriginal people live in the city. There is no traditional hunting, people cannot *barungin* because the air is polluted by the smell of the city and the traditional culture is only present in the form of a didgeridoo.

The play also directly criticises the non-Aboriginal Australians, mainly the first settlers on the Australian soil and their descendants. When Robert, Meena and Peter's cousin, is going to give a speech at a rostrum about how the Aboriginal people have been treated in Australia, Arnie and Meena tell him what to tell the audience:

ARNIE. You stir 'em up, Robert. Make the *wetjalas* [white people] piss.

MEENA. You can't hurt *wetjalas*; they've got no conscience.

ROBERT. Yes they have. We just gotta help find it.

PETER. There hasn't been much sign of it in the last two hundred years.

MEENA. And there won't be in the next two hundred. (Davis 52)

This voice, claiming that *wetjalas* have no conscience presents a very strong argument by which Davis addresses the theatre-goers, who are predominantly non-Indigenous (Shoemaker, 'The Real Australian Story' 34-5), and by this statement he gives an impulse to a debate about the treatment of the Indigenous population in Australia.

His decision and determination to promote Indigenous equality made Davis a pioneer of Aboriginal literature using not only his plays, but also poems and his position as an elder statesman to educate non-Aboriginal Australians on the reality of the Aboriginal people's condition. As with most Aboriginal writers Aboriginal identity is a major issue which Davis portrays through the use of traditional language, dance, song and themes relating to colonisation and cultural oppression. Although his poems discuss issues relating to Aboriginality, they are more apparent in his plays as the medium allows for, particularly if performed, a greater understanding of the presented issues through the more personal setting. Davis himself felt that theatre was the "best means of influencing public opinion and bringing about an improvement in the Aboriginal situation" (Chesson 191). Although his poems are often viewed as secondary to his plays, they similarly focus on the "injustice towards Indigenous people and an awareness of nature" (Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka* 133) and both are renowned for his naturalistic depictions of Indigenous life.

### **3.4. *Box the Pony***

*Box the Pony* tells a story which is based on the life story of the main protagonist and co-author Leah Purcell. It is the story of the struggle of a young Aboriginal woman, whose father is English, to find her place in the world and to get free from the oppression she is exposed to. This is either the subjugation of Leah as a woman, in the male-dominated society or the oppression of Leah as an Aboriginal person, subjugated by Western imperialism (Maufort 109). This play presents issues that are present in contemporary Aboriginal society such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence, struggle for finding one's own identity of the children from mixed parentage or racism. Crime is not dealt with in this play, thus a subchapter on this is not present in the analysis. Poverty is touched upon marginally and is incorporated in the subchapter on Family Relationships.

The play follows two storylines. One is of Steff, who we meet during her childhood and adolescence when she is looking after her grandmother and mother and later working in the meat factory. She also falls pregnant, considers suicide and finally escapes the oppressive world to become Leah. Leah's storyline is set in the present, she is successful, she works in Sydney and she is the one who impersonates all the other characters in the play.

#### **3.4.1. Family Relationships**

Family relationships are not depicted as idyllic as in Jack Davis's trilogy here. It is because there are tensions amidst the family and some characters do not have the best relationship with the other. Alcohol and violence play an important role here. What is also very important is that Leah's father is "white" and has two families:

LEAH. Now my father, he's white. Two wives, two families, one white, one black and that was my mum. He and her had six kids together. I was the youngest. (Rankin and Purcell 25)

This actually puts Leah in the position of someone who partly belongs to both cultures but is not sure where her true identity lies. It is possible to examine the situation with the help of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Meredith draws on Bhabha and presents hybridity as "the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the *Other*) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something familiar but new" (Meredith 2). By interweaving the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised, something what Bhabha calls the "third space" emerges. As opposed to colonial binary thinking (black/white, etc.) the term "third space" is used for the inclusion rather than exclusion of the synthesis of cultures creating a new identity in between (Meredith 2). This third space in the play is shown through Leah's position in the society, where her identity is neither fully Aboriginal nor white. An example of this third space in between is taken from an interview with Purcell:

... when I was 13 and I started high school and the Indigenous students, the Aboriginal students from Cherbourg came and that was the first time I really felt the racial tension personally. We were all told to go and sit under the school, the black kids went to one side of this horseshoe, sort of, seating, the white kids went to the other. I was the last one to move because I said, "Where do I sit? I've got white friends. I know I'm related to some of the Aboriginal kids." I sat dead set centre. ... (qtd. in Denton)

The complexity of hybridity of Aboriginal and Western cultures (the colonised and the coloniser) is tightly connected to the search for one's own identity that the characters of Steff/Leah pursue throughout the play. When Steff takes part in the Miss Murgon beauty contest, she becomes "complicit in the Western materialism, thus being deprived of her

aboriginality” (Maufort 109). She does exactly what the other girls in the contest do and she voluntarily becomes part of something that demeans the girls, who are compared to the livestock:

LEAH. In 1987. Steff was fifteen. The biggest time of the year in Murgon was the Agriculture Show ... gave the farmers the opportunity to show off their livestock. You got the chooks...*brrk, bbrkk* ... the bulls...*mmmmmbb*, and then their daughters ...the Beauty Pageant.  
(Rankin and Purcell 73)

In this scene, Leah/Steff is not sure where she belongs.

Opposed to the Western materiality is the spirituality, which is provided by Nanna—the Grandmother. The character of Nanna serves as the link with the world of Aboriginal legends and spirituality. Young Steff is influenced by Western culture when she watches Neighbours on TV, however, she is still sensitive to the spirituality conveyed through dying Nanna. Nanna’s eventual death represents the loss of Aboriginal roots for Steff.

Young Steff experiences another level what it is to have a family than just having roots. She is abused by the three important men in her life—her father, her brother and her boyfriend:

*STEFF is holding her yellow dress. Her brother grabs her by the hair and is pulling her across stage.*

BROTHER. Myall little black bitch!

STEFF. Don’t touch me, what are you looking at? (Rankin and Purcell 85)

This male induced oppression is an oppression of power and patriarchal order (Maufort 109) which is expressed by the duties women have “up home there”:

LEAH. ... I wasn’t allowed to box, because I was a girl. Up’ome’der, all the girls got to do was cook, clean and look after the kids. (Rankin and Purcell 29)

This is not uniquely Aboriginal, since the oppression of women by men has been known in many cultures. Leah's boyfriend teaches her even more explicitly what it is to be a woman:

BOYFRIEND. You being a smart bitch [*punch*], big notin' your fucking self

[*punch*], little pretty bitch [*punch*], little pretty bitch [*punch*]

*The BOYFRIEND hits her, knocks her to the ground. As he yells he tries to get to her face. She hides it from him, protecting herself.*

BOYFRIEND. Give us your face...give us your face...I said give us your face...give us your face! (Rankin and Purcell 111)

What is important to know is that it is again another family member who Steff seeks comfort with. After being beaten up by her boyfriend, Steff tries to find comfort with her daughter Jess but it is clear she is not able to provide her all the affection her daughter asks for. At this moment, Steff behaves like her mother once did.

Steff's mother Flo is depicted as a woman with serious alcohol problem. When Steff is little, Flo does not provide her with the affection Steff requires because she spends a lot of her time in a pub. Steff thus needs to take care of her old and weak Nanna:

*We are back in the pub. Flo is very drunk.*

FLO. Hey! Where you been bub, eh? Come here and dance with your mother!

STEFF. Mum. I'm tired. Got school tomorrow. Don't be sittin' there bein' stubborn. Mum, I wanna go home!

FLO. You just wait there! Wait here! I can't talk about goggling my drink.

(Rankin and Purcell 59)

At this moment, Flo does not care for Steff and neither does for her mother, Nanna. On the contrary, she tells Steff to do so:

FLO. Hey! 'Ere bub, you forgot about Nanna. You better go and give her a feed, eh? Put Nanna on the pot. Gorn, gorn bub. What's the matter? You go home and fry up some eggs. ... (Rankin and Purcell 55)

Steff, on the other hand is very caring when her mother is drunk:

LEAH. Steff slept in the same bed as her mum until she was fourteen. But she didn't sleep much when her mother was drunk. Steff thought she might die.

STEFF. [*whispers*] Mum...mum...you breathin'? (Rankin and Purcell 63)

The constant emotional stress later becomes unbearable for Steff and she is looking for a way of escape. She imagines a pony—a present she received from her grandfather as a child—and its dream-like quality connects her with the Aboriginal ancestry (Meaufort 109). Her imaginary rides on the pony help her once get over the emotional distress and also save her life when she seeks a suicide as the only possible escape:

STEFF. Here bub, on Mum's lap...see that big old gum tree. I'm going to crush Jess between my body and the steering wheel, so she's dead first, my little one. But by the side of the car, galloping, is grandfather's pony. Steff's there, summer frock blowin', riding him bare back. ... Steff will be riding him forever...up'ome'der.

*Brolga dance, flying off and coming to a stop.*

I'm slowing...the car's slowing. ... Should've been wrapped around that tree. Fucking pony saved me. (Rankin and Purcell 117)

The scene with the pony shows that the world of dreams is interconnected with the real world. This is the actual climax of the play. It is the point when Steff becomes more assertive and decides to leave and go to Sydney. Here she changes to Leah, who finally settles the problem of her own identity by realizing she does not care if she is “white” or Aboriginal, she is who she is:

*LEAH stands up in front of the bench*

A bit of this? [*Does a traditional dance: Ngurrinyarmi*] Too Black?

*She thinks for a moment and then sings in a very white voice, with white choreography,  
one line from a patriotic Australian advertising jingle.*

Too White?

*Walking to centre stage, she has an idea.*

...

Ah whatever. (Rankin and Purcell 121)

The words “Ah whatever” express her reconciliation with who she is and that she really does not care.

### **3.4.2. Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Relationships**

*Box the Pony* touches on the problem of the Stolen Generations which is conveyed by Steff's Grandmother. She passes on the story of the Aboriginal oppression by the non-Aboriginal Australian population to Steff by drawing on her memories about the life in the mission camp:

NANNA. ... Put me on big train, went for long time, up and down, ...

New home land now. Tin yumba, dirt floor...ooh but he spotless clean, here sssshhh...bossman, bulliman comin'...top camp, middle camp, bottom camp. ... Corroboree every Friday night. Good times, sad time...hard times... (Rankin and Purcell 57)

The tragedy of the Stolen Generations children is also expressed by the song “Run Daisy Run” which introduces bit of lyricism to the otherwise bitterly satiric work (Meaufort 109).

The song presents the story of Daisy who is told to run away from the white men on

horseback who come to take the children away. It is again full of sorrow, depicting the forced removal of children as a heart breaking experience.

The other issue arising from the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal coexistence is racism.

Leah encounters racism when she first comes to Sydney:

LEAH. ... Had to live somewhere, right? So I go to a real estate agent.

‘G’day...and true’s god, the woman behind the counter looks at me and says, ‘We haven’t any money, we haven’t any money, take whatever you want.’

So I took a one-bedroom flat.

See, blackfella not greedy. (Rankin and Purcell 33)

She describes Sydney as racist but it is the discussed use of irony that she uses to mock the situation. She also dramatises another encounter with a white woman:

LEAH. ... Another time, I’m walking down the street and this lady comes out of her gate and, true’s god, it’s like a bloody cartoon. She grabs her bag and goes...

*As WHITE WOMAN frightened by seeing a blackfella up close, she catches her handbag to her chest and blinks, stopping in her tracks as if she fears LEAH might hit her.*

like I was going to hit her or something... (Rankin and Purcell 36)

Again, she mocks the whole concept of racism and laughs at the white people when she wants to do coffee in Sydney:

LEAH. These gubba fellas just don’t do coffee on the footpath, their dogs, which they treat like children, do gunung!

*Wiping her feet as if having trodden in gunung.*

That’s filthy. That’s stinkin’, that’s dirty that! And they got a cheek to say blackfella dirty!

One time, I see this woman ....she's the woman who [was afraid of LEAH before]. And I'm thinking, white woman can't be wandering around in my story! That's cultural imperialism! That's bloody racist!  
(Rankin and Purcell 67)

Purcell's transitions from a storytelling and musing about the story itself give an insight into how Leah perceives the black/white culture cohabitation. However, when coming to work in the slaughter house as Steff, she is being scrutinized by the staff. The scrutiny is with sexist and racial subtext:

LEAH. The men from the slaughter house would look down through a  
blood-spattered window to see who was working. They called:  
BLOKES. Eh come and look! New blood on the floor!  
*Steff is startled by all that is going on around her.*

WOMAN. Who's meat is this? Are you with us Jedda, this ain't no bloody  
dreamtime, you know. S'pose you'll go bloody walkabout on us  
soon, eh? (Rankin and Purcell 97)

Steff's is demeaned as a woman, being looked upon through a window and called as "new blood" by the men. Her Aboriginality is also attacked by the woman she works with. Steff is startled by the things around her and since being inactive for a moment, the woman inappropriately uses the term dreamtime to call her apparent daydreaming moment.

*Box the Pony* is an important play which challenges many aspects of contemporary Aboriginal society, being it family issues or racial ones. It is about an escape from the cycle binding generations of women in Aboriginal families. Leah manages to escape her future by leaving to Sydney where she achieves fame as a successful writer, singer and performer.

### 3.5. *Waiting for Ships*

Ernie Blackmore is an Aboriginal author who now works as a Lecturer at the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre at the University of Wollongong. He is a member of the Stolen Generations and he experienced the childhood full of violence and abuse (Blackmore 12)<sup>20</sup>. His life story is reflected in the play *Waiting for Ships*. This play tells the story of an Aboriginal boy from when he was four years old till early adulthood. Many of the recurring issues of Aboriginal people are dealt with in this play. Poverty and crime play their role here as well as alcohol abuse, domestic violence and the themes of the Stolen Generations. Last but not least the play deals with the question of identity as it regards the light-skinned Aboriginal people in Australia (Blackmore 12). The time frame of the actions of the play is the present and the location of the plot is set “anywhere a person can go in the pursuit of peace from the demons created in another lifetime” (Blackmore 191). The one and only actor in the play is a man in his sixties called Wally. The play is a monologue, Wally recounts the events of his life, impersonating four other characters—Young Wally, his Dad and his Mum and Mrs Daley. This aspect of the play, having only one actor, is similar to Purcell’s *Box the Pony*. It can be seen as an attempt to make an inexpensive production, or it might suggest that both the characters of Leah and Wally are on their own during their struggle for identity, and having no other actors in the plays just underlines the absence of a helping hand in the search for it.

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<sup>20</sup> All citations from Blackmore are from his PhD dissertation “Speakin’ out Blak, an Examination of the ‘Urban’ Indigenous ‘Voice’ Through Contemporary Theatre” (2007). The script of the play *Waiting for Ships* is included as Chapter 7 of this thesis. The play was first performed in 2004.

### 3.5.1. Poverty and Crime

Poverty has been discussed as something omnipresent within contemporary Aboriginal society. All the families in the analysed plays face it. Wally's family is not different in this aspect. The family is not rich, which he documents on what they eat:

WALLY. And although there wasn't too much to eat and sometimes all we got for tea was bread and dripping, it was home. (Blackmore 211)

Before he is taken away from his home in the beginning, it is only his mother providing for him and five of his brothers and sisters. This is also the official reason why Wally and his brother Gordie are taken from home:

WALLY. We'd been took from our Mum. Because she was looking after all of us kids on her own, and there were six of us at the time. Anyway, the Aboriginal Welfare mob reckoned we was at risk and charged us as being neglected children. The court said it the best thing for us. (Blackmore 193)

It has been shown by historical and sociological research that taking the children away was not the best thing for them. The theme of the Stolen Generations and the official justification for these removals will be elaborated on in the next subchapter.

Later on when Wally is a young adult, he and his friends are into stealing. As Wally comments, all of his friends have personal experience with imprisonment by the age of eighteen:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy.*] I think we'd all been in jail at least once. In my case I'd been locked up three times but just for petty shit, nothing serious. (Blackmore 221)

He gets into stealing after he is kicked out of his home by his despotic father. Later on Wally and his friends are supposed to rob a bank, but a lucky coincidence has it that Wally

is not involved. He oversleeps, his friends rob the bank without him and call him “too fuckin’ unreliable” to “do more jobs” with him. This destroys and saves his life at the same time. Being “unreliable” and thus not invited to other raids, Wally is disappointed. However, as he recollects his friends who later either commit suicide or are killed in police custody or in prison, he is grateful that this rejection saved his life (Blackmore 222). The theme of the deaths in custody is not elaborated on in this play, but a simple reference to it is given to remind the audience of this problem.

### **3.5.2. Family Relationships – Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Relationships**

The issues of family relationships and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships dealt with in this play are discussed in one chapter only, because they are too interconnected here and breaking up into two separate chapters would not be easy to follow.

Wally is taken from his home at the age of four, together with his brother Gordie. He is a light-skinned Aboriginal boy, his father is an Englishman who has gone to fight in the World War II. It is not poverty or the insinuated neglect that are the reasons for his removal. Actually the justification for these practices of removing “half-caste” or light-skinned Aboriginal children was to “breed them out”, believing that if all of these children are separated from their “full-blood” communities and integrated in non-Indigenous communities, the total number of Aboriginal people would decline leading to absolute

disappearance of these people from Australia (Blackmore 231). Colin Tatz in his AIATSIS<sup>21</sup> research paper goes as far as to call these practices genocide.

After being removed from their mother, Wally and Gordie are taken from Sydney on a train and bus and dropped somewhere in the bush, outside a shop, where they are left alone:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy*] ... it was rainin', like I said, and it started to get dark and as the darkness settled in I was shivering. ... Gordie managed to get me quieted down for a bit until the bloody lights in the store behind us snuffed out, and we were left in complete darkness. Now, I was really worried. I didn't like the dark much and we was out in the bush on our own. In our whole lives we'd never been alone before, let alone out in the bush. (Blackmore 193)

Being left alone, only with his brother, at the age of four in the dark somewhere in the bush is one of the examples of the acts of harsh treatment of the “stolen” children. After that, children were often introduced to an environment with no connection to their previous experience. And as removed from their homes, the children felt “the abasement of the self, because without a point of reference the children often accepted that they were to blame for the separation” (Blackmore 233). This dissociation and improper or cruel treatment of the “stolen” children is proven to be the basis for post-traumatic stress disorder, distorted thinking patterns and emotional disturbance (Briere 177). In his work *Dissociation in Children and Adolescents*, the psychologist Frank W. Putnam claims that if the dissociation and the physical, emotional or sexual acts of mistreatment happen early in a person’s life, the occurrence of avoidance strategies is likely to happen. Such individuals then often use alcohol or drugs to insulate themselves from the traumatic experiences of

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

the past (171). Wally survives this trauma of separation but as Blackmore argues and compares his own life story to the character of his play,

at a deeper level one is able to see the impact of this loss of identity—the denial of the boy’s identity by another, the denial of identity by the self and finally, the denial of overall identity as a social construct enabling the central character in the play to live life as neither a representative of Aboriginal people nor as a white man. (Blackmore 240)

The despotic father figure dramatically contributes to Wally’s self denial. Several years after being removed from his mother, Wally is brought back home. However, what he had remembered and expected from being home did not fully prove to be true. The major problem in his family is his violent father. As stated above, Wally’s father is an Englishman and Wally himself inherited his father’s skin colour. However, for his father, this seems to be a problem from the moment he comes to pick him up from Mr and Mrs Daley, a white couple who are fostering Wally:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy.*] He pulled back a bit, looking at me as if tryin’ to figure out if Mrs Daley was ‘avin’ a go at him or if she was tellin’ the truth. He looked at me closely again before he said, “That’s not my son”, he argued. ...

An argument sortta got started then with the man saying he’d know his kid anywhere. When Mrs Daley wanted to know why, he said, “The kids bloody mother’s an ‘Abo’. All the other kids are darkies”. An’ for the first time I realised that the colour of my skin was not what it should a been. (Blackmore 204)

In this scene, Blackmore draws on his own personal experience. This is a very disappointing moment for young Wally, seeing his own, long-anticipated father neglects him only for the colour of his skin. In the past, the skin colour was used to assign people to

particular ethnic communities, Wally's father anticipated Wally to be black so he could allocate him to the group of Aboriginal people. Finding Wally is white, he might have felt "obliged" to feel some affection for him, but he definitely dismissed this feeling by his behaviour later. Again, there is a parallel to Purcell, who also has a white father and an Aboriginal mother. Both of the characters (Wally and Leah) as same as the playwrights (Blackmore and Purcell) experience the in-between identity, finding themselves in the "third space", being neither fully Aboriginal nor white, which is rather difficult for them to accept. This was true for thousands of "half-caste" children who could not define their identity. Blackmore also suggests that his father's denial led to his anger and anti-social behaviour in the years to come (Blackmore 244).

Wally feels rejected twice, first by his family when he is taken away from his mother for—at least according to him—no obvious reasons, and secondly by his father. Moreover, there are more disappointments to come when Wally leaves Mr and Mrs Daley, i.e. that returning home would not be a return to a happy place:

WALLY. [*In normal voice*] ... eventually after packing my few belongings into a small bag I left the Daley's to go to a place that would cause me as much trauma as any I'd so far experienced in my brief life.  
(Blackmore 205)

The trauma to come is again connected with the despotic father figure who does not show any affection for the children. He is often angry without any obvious reasons and lets the others know that:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy*] ... He was angry. I didn't have a clue why, but he made it pretty clear he wanted to be left alone when the [sic] told me to "fuckin' piss off". It was an early trademark of the man.  
(Blackmore 207)

Wally's father is one of the many "white" men who form a relationship with an Aboriginal woman and have children with her, fathering them "with little or no care as to the fate of their offspring. ... It was these children then that suffered some of the worst kinds of experiences of separation and it was these children, who speak through the "voice" of that small boy Wally in *Waiting for Ships*" (Blackmore 236). Blackmore himself draws a direct comparison between himself and Wally and the other thousands of children with the same fate. His father's authority in the family is not natural but induced by the threat of violent response. When the family are sitting at the table having dinner, his despotism is apparent:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy*] No one was allowed to speak at the table ...  
And as quiet as it'd been while me Dad was there, as soon as he  
left everyone started talking at once. (Blackmore 208)

Alcohol is something that greatly contributes to the rising violence of the father. Wally calls his father angry when sober and a raver when drunk:

WALLY. [*In normal voice*] He smashed plates and slammed doors but up to  
that point he hadn't hit anyone except us kids who got beltings on  
regular occasions for "doing the wrong thing", whatever that was.  
(Blackmore 212)

At this stage Wally does not know what the problem is. When he gets unreasonable beating, he often thinks he has done something wrong, again he blames himself for his father's anger and, getting no explanation, such blame persists and gets more ingrained. At that moment, Wally does not know his mother is having a baby in the hospital:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy*] I went to ask him where Mum was and he hit  
me across the head and said. 'Go and wash your dirty fuckin' face  
then get some breakfast into you before I belt you one'. ... I didn't  
know what was goin' on or what "wrong thing" I'd done this  
time or why it was always my fault when anything went wrong. ...

“She’s gone to the hospital”, my sister said, looking at me as if I was a complete nong. I still didn't get it. “What for?” I wanted to know. “She’s having a bloody baby”. (Blackmore 212)

It seems that the fact the mother is having another baby fosters the anger of the father. For him, another child is just more noise in the house and more food eaten, as he does not care for his children at all.

As already mentioned, alcohol is one of the greatest problems as well. It is not only the father who drinks but the mother as well. Domestic violence becomes an everyday issue in Wally’s family. On one occasion, when the mother comes home drunk, the father beats her as well, only because she drinks with some women he does not like:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the boy*] Her crime was that she’d been drinking with some other women ... It appears as if Mum had no right to be with such people.

Unfortunately my Mum had had too much to drink to know to keep quiet and she started in on lipping him back and he didn’t like it. ... [Then he] lifted [her] from that chair and thrown across the room ... By the time all this had happened all of us kids were standing around the room watching in horror as he then began to beat up on her with his fists. (Blackmore 214-5)

Here, I would like to make a general comparison between the father/mother relationship and the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal (or the colonized/colonizer) relationship. The father here is an Englishman and as such he represents the colonizer who oppresses the Aboriginal mother. He shows his supremacy and dominance by violence and wants to decide what people the mother can and cannot see. The mother represents the oppressed Aboriginal, who is unable to resist the dominance of the father. And she is not only oppressed as an Aboriginal person, she is also oppressed as a woman. Another parallel to

Purcell's *Box the Pony* is found here. Purcell also mentions the Aboriginal women to be "doubly colonized", i.e. oppressed by both the white society and by the patriarchal order.

Wally's answer to years of experienced and witnessed violence is that he starts drinking at the age of 12:

WALLY. [*In normal voice*] Everybody else did by this time and I discovered that drinking made me feel better about myself although all too soon I was virtually out of control on the streets. ... I changed very quickly after I started drinking and like most of my brothers and my sister I didn't want to hang around home for long. Like them I was looking forward to being old enough to look after myself.

(Blackmore 216)

Actually it is his father, who "helps" Wally leave home early. At the age of fifteen, Wally starts to realize he is gay and tries to hide it. When he has sex with a boy he likes, his father finds out and almost kills Wally, who must be taken to hospital due to severe injuries caused by the beating. After his release, he ends up on a street, living in a squat, because the father does not allow him to come back home:

WALLY. [*In the voice of the 15 year old boy/man*] ... despite my fairly desperate attempts to defend myself he beat me until he was unable to hit me again. He dragged me out into the lane behind our house and left me there. ... I never went back home after that. I was nearly fifteen. ... I found a "squat" that night which became my "home" for a few weeks. (Blackmore 219)

This situation brings Wally to a career of a prostitute, which lasts two years.

However, in the plight of the violence he suffers from when still at home, there is his mother, a character he loves and tries to have a special relationship with.

WALLY. [*In normal voice*] But the “special” times spent with my mother, the times when she was sober, continued and became the core of our relationship. (Blackmore 216)

Their relationship is evidently stigmatized by the broken ties in the family induced by the father. Wally and his mother try to develop emotional and proper relationship but it is not possible:

WALLY. [*In normal voice*] ... I’m not sure of the implications but there was an elusive “something” I was looking for, for myself, and ... whatever that “special” thing was, or is, I believe she needed it too. It was as if it was always on the other side of the room. It was there to be had but could never be reached. It may have been that “something” missing that contributed to her drinking and later my own alcoholism and drug addiction. (Blackmore 216)

Still, the mother is a person thanks to whom Wally knows some family ties and she is his link to the spirituality of the Aboriginal peoples.

Having been removed from his family, neglected by his father, exposed to daily violence and alcohol problems of his parents, Wally develops anti-social behaviour. As Blackmore based the character of Wally on his own life story, he himself spent certain time of his young adult age living in the streets. What was most difficult for him was to deal with his bi-racial qualities. Being a red-haired man, he eventually developed avoidance to “Blackfellas”, although he could never deny being attracted to the spiritual side of his own people. He tried to live with his Aboriginality, later as a white person, but then he realized, with the “never-ending sounds of the clapsticks of [his] mother’s cultural spirituality and [his] own spiritual self” who he really was. But it was not until 1995 when the Family Court of Australia finally recognized the reality of the thousands of children from multi-racial families and acknowledged the iniquities done to them, that he came to terms with his

Aboriginal self (Blackmore 245-7). In this play, through the voice of Wally, he tries to echo “the cries of thousands or hundreds of thousands of children who, throughout history, and from across the worlds, have been stolen from their parents” (Blackmore 229). The play provides an insight into such child’s feelings and helps the readers or theatre-goers understand the pains and personal crises such child has to face.

## Conclusion

This thesis deals with the issues the Aboriginal population in Australia has to face and analyses them with the help of five contemporary plays by Aboriginal playwrights. The thesis argues that the current situation of the Aboriginal people is a direct consequence of the previous Governmental policies towards these people. Firstly, this conclusion wants to briefly summarise the principles of the White Australia policy, presented here as the historical background to the time when the policies were in force and part of the attempt of “whitening the country” in the sense of the words “Australia for the Australians”, whom the Indigenous people were not considered to be until 1967. The policies of assimilation and protection are summed up here and the current policy of self-determination which should give the Aboriginal people greater power to manage their own matters is discussed as well. Secondly, a general overview of Aboriginal drama is given, focusing on the typical characteristics of the plays written by Aboriginal authors, such as content, structure, form and style. The use of humour as a vital component of Aboriginal plays is also pinpointed. Next, a summary of the analyses of the five plays studied is given. These plays are *No Sugar* (1986), *The Dreamers* (1982), and *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* (1989) by Jack Davis (1917-2000), *Box the Pony* (1999) by Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell (1970- ) and *Waiting for Ships* (2004) by Ernie Blackmore (1940- ). The issues such as domestic violence, alcoholism, crime, anti-social behaviour or loss of identity are those depicted in these plays. I draw on the analyses of these plays and suggest that the issues of Indigenous population in Australia should be neither marginalized nor stereotyped. I have heard “white” Australians claiming that the Aborigines are just inadapted and their current problems are only their fault. However, the Aboriginal people are citizens of Australia, a part of the Australian society and as such I see their problems as the problems of society as a whole. On the other hand, not all

Aboriginal people are facing the aforementioned issues, there are many exceptions as there are in every other society. An up-to-date outline of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships and their possible development is given at the end of the concluding part.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the emergence of ethnocentrism and racism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia and sees it as the grounds for forming the White Australia policy after the Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901. The first law passed by the newly formed Federal Parliament was an act restricting non-European immigration. This was done in an attempt of forbidding all “non-white” immigrants to settle in Australia, preserving it thus for the ‘white’ Australians of British or Anglo-Celtic origins, hence the term White Australia policy is used. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 together with other laws and acts made it almost impossible for non-European (in this sense equivalent with “non-white”) people to migrate to Australia. The proponents of the “white Australia”, however, saw another group of people threatening their visions, the Indigenous peoples. These could not have been eliminated by restricting immigration so other measures had to be taken against them. The Aboriginal people were not considered citizens of Australia until 1967 and were treated as such (Burden 211). First they were segregated from the “white” Australians by being displaced from their natural habitats and moved onto large reserves. Later, the policy of assimilation was adopted, in an effort to eliminate Aboriginality. Children from mixed marriages were removed from their parents and put in Native settlements or foster white families, where they would be educated in “white” manners. These removals continued until the early 1970s and affected many generations of “half-caste” children, who are called the Stolen Generations today. The general perspective of society has changed since 1967 and the policy of self-determination is recognized today (Whall). The Indigenous people have greater powers to manage their own matters but, given the years of targeted oppression and violence against them, there are still on-going

tensions challenging their distinctive cultural identities and social and economic equality with the majority of the Australian society.

The second chapter is dedicated to contemporary Aboriginal drama. First the term Aboriginality itself is discussed here to present the idea of what it means to be Aboriginal. Throughout the history there were many different ways of classifying people as Aboriginal. The prevailing definition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered the degree of Aboriginal blood, so called Blood-quotum classification, which was nothing more than paying attention to the skin colour (Gardiner-Garden 3). The three-part definition concerning descent, self-identification and community recognition was adopted in the 1980s. This simply means that to be considered Aboriginal, a person needs to be of Aboriginal descent, identify as an Aboriginal and be accepted by the Aboriginal community as being part of it. This definition is not specific judicially and as such has been challenged many times, but it is the first time the spiritual side of being Aboriginal is mentioned. This means that a person can identify him or herself as an Aboriginal even if he/she does not have any apparent physical features, which is typical for Aboriginal people from mixed families (Australian Indigenous Law Reporter).

In regards to Aboriginal drama, Aboriginality is seen as a counter discourse to the European or Western discourse of representing the Aboriginal people. It tries to prove wrong the traditional European belief that the Aboriginal people were not able to represent themselves, and as such it succeeds by showing that there are substantial numbers of Indigenous authors, playwrights or film writers who represent their people from their point of view. Aboriginal drama in particular is presented as a powerful media in Aboriginal self-representation and most of the plays share certain characteristics. The content of the Aboriginal plays is one of them and is rather specific to the authors who regard themselves as Aboriginal. In their plays, the Aboriginal playwrights often draw on their personal experience and certain pattern can be followed in most of them. It is political engagement

that is the most important defining characteristic of content (Carroll 101). The plays address the issues of alcoholism, domestic violence, crime and anti-social behaviour in general, as well as the issues of displacement and loss of identity with direct reference to the Stolen Generations. The motif of prison is also quite common and the issues of Aboriginal deaths in custody is criticised, mainly in the plays by Jack Davis. Aboriginal drama is characteristic also in structure, form and style (Carroll 103). The cosmological concept known as the Dreaming influences the Aboriginal understanding of time, they see time as something cyclic, as opposed to the linear understanding of time by Western cultures (Edwards 79). The idea of past, present and future is there, but due to the understanding of time as something cyclic, these are blended together. This is often reflected in Aboriginal drama by a non-chronological order of events (expressed with the help of flash-backs or dreams) by which the drama denies the Aristotelian unity of time. The other of the three Aristotelian unities (introduced in the classical Western drama), often denied in the plays by Aboriginal authors is the unity of place and action. Many of the places are set in a number of locations between which the characters travel throughout the play, for example Davis's play *No Sugar* is set in almost ten different locations. The unity of action is denied by incorporating many subplots, such as the two storylines in Purcell's *Box the Pony*. Although none of the plays studied can be termed a comedy, the use of humour is fundamental in the majority of them (Shoemaker 234). Aboriginal plays describe scenes of hardship, misery, oppression, poverty or deaths and humour is used to temper the seriousness of the plays and also shows that Aborigines laugh simply to stay afloat. In the plays, humour is also used to undermine the white authority and assert the agency of Aboriginal subjects through non-confrontational modes of resistance (McGloin).

The third chapter presents the analyses of the five plays mentioned: *No Sugar* (1986), *The Dreamers* (1982), and *Barungin (Smell the Wind)* (1989) by Jack Davis (1917-2000), *Box the Pony* (1999) by Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell (1970- ) and *Waiting for Ships* (2004)

by Ernie Blackmore (1940- ). It studies the issues of the Aboriginal population as they are depicted in the plays and tries to find a connection between the particular examples from the plays and general consequences valid for society as a whole. The issues are divided into three categories: Poverty and crime, Family relationships, and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships. The first category of Poverty and crime includes issues such as poverty, begging, crime (mainly petty thefts), the system of justice as applied to the Aboriginal people and the issues of deaths in custody which are tightly connected to it. The category of Family relationships examines the issues to do with family lives, containing the problems of dysfunctional families, domestic violence, verbal and sexual abuse and the abuse of alcohol. The last category of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships studies the issues such as racism, the consequences of the Stolen Generations and the loss of identity among the Aboriginal people. However, many of these issues are interconnected, often crossing the boundaries set by the categorisation in these three groups, and not all of the plays deal with these issues evenly or altogether.

If Wally's story from *Waiting for Ships* is taken into account, the antisocial-behaviour of the main protagonist was created by the removal process. Often such behaviour is characterised as a condition of Aboriginality. This form of stereotyping is still to be found in contemporary society. In 2005, on a commercial radio, there was a debate about Aboriginal people and one of the listeners contributed with these words:

These hapless, useless, lazy people, if they don't like the system which supports them, which gives them medical health, which gives them education, which gives them housing, gives them all the facilities all we taxpayers take for granted, if they don't bloody like it, why don't they go back to the bloody bush! (Friends of the ABC)

This is one of the examples of the misunderstanding of the complex issues of contemporary Aboriginal society. These issues were inflicted by the laws and policies of

past Federal Governments and as it was the “white” people who fostered the implementation of them, it should be the same people who help the Aborigines with settling things again. In his apology speech from February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd acknowledged the responsibility and culpability of the non-Indigenous people for the mistreatment of the Indigenous people and the profound grief, suffering and loss this incurred (Rudd). Still today, there are great differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in health issues, life expectancy or the rate of criminal offenders. Rudd also acknowledged the awareness of this gap and proposed a determination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to close this gap between them (Rudd). These messages present a positive outlook for the future of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships and hopes in better understanding and symbiosis of these two cultures within Australia. However, the 220 years of European rule over Australia have left the Aboriginal communities disrupted and severely damaged. It will take many more decades to overcome the consequences of the past Governmental policies, the aftermath of the Stolen Generations or to raise the health and social standards of Aboriginal people by a substantial level. When and if this will ever happen still remains the unanswered question.

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