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## The Other Side of Me: Moving Words into Motion

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### Biographical Note

Laura Fish, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Northumbria University. Her publications include *Flight of Black Swans* (Duckworth, 1995); *Strange Music* (Jonathan Cape & Vintage, 2008) Orange Prize listed 2009; nominated for International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2009; selected for Pearson Edexcel's Black British Writing A level reading guide 2017/18.

Liz Pavey is Senior Lecturer in Dance at Northumbria University. Her recent site-specific and gallery-based projects *Take Your Seats* (Shingley Art Gallery and Hexham Abbey) and *Green Grass* (Great Exhibition of the North FRINGE) investigated human resilience, ontology and somatic memory.

### Abstract

This article reflects upon the practice-led research project *The Other Side of Me*. It asks how to translate the life story of a young Aboriginal man born in Australia's Northern Territory, adopted by an English family and raised in a remote hamlet in Cornwall, UK, into a narrative that engages with experiences of indigeneity in the contemporary world.

At the project's core is a collection of approximately 30 letters and poems that are crucially concerned with the trauma he suffered as a transracial adoptee – the conflicts of an individual coming to terms with two very different cultures. Telling his story raises issues of cultural appropriation. We propose here that adapting his story into dance offers one way to negotiate the challenges of cultural appropriation. Importantly, this process of adaptation is iterative, creating space for multiple voices and bodies to retell and reinterpret a story of personal trauma that sits at the limits of linguistic expression.

#### Keywords

Indigenous Australian, language, dance, trauma, adaptation

#### Introduction

The Other Side of Me tells the true and tragic story of a young Aboriginal man who was taken from his mother and Indigenous culture and brought up in South West England. It brings together an Indigenous Australian choreographer, a writer and a visual artist, with an Indigenous Australian dance artist and a Black British dancer (both selected to represent dual identities), to devise a dance duet that explores the young man's extraordinary journey and his process of rediscovery - a search for self.

This article asks how to communicate stories of personal trauma that sit at the limits of linguistic expression. Specifically, it explores reasons why written English might not be a suitable medium of narration and how adaptation through an affective medium such as

dance might be appropriate for expressing a story whose truest and most reliable element is its emotional content.

The article is informed by our reflections upon the on-going practice-led research project *The Other Side of Me* (longform project video: <https://youtu.be/x-iVdD2uTtQ>). The project, which is interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and arts-based, is led by two academics at Northumbria University, Dr Laura Fish, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and Liz Pavey, Senior Lecturer in Dance. Our project explores how to translate the life story of a young Aboriginal man who, for the purposes of the article, will be named John, born in Australia's Northern Territory, adopted by an English family and raised in a remote hamlet in Cornwall, into a narrative that engages with experiences of indigeneity in the contemporary world. The project engages with concepts of place, space and confinement, and poses questions about relationships between country of origin, identity, adoption, displacement, the criminal justice system and psychological health.

*The Other Side of Me* project has been impacted by the COVID-19 situation. Rather than tracing the project's delivery and outcomes, this article focuses on the underlying conceptual challenge: why might the English language be a problematic medium for telling John's story, and how can that story be told in a way which respects its fragmentary, affective and historically complex nature? It argues that dance offers an adaptive medium for exploring Indigenous experience and memory. The research has explored how adaptation across distinctive and complementary art forms might create a vocabulary of expression which captures unbearable emotions and communicates unspeakable experiences. We employed a range of research methodologies including 1)

historical research into the Australian government's policies to forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families and culture; 2) engaging with Indigenous Australian dance practitioners and knowledge centres; 3) the design and delivery of two smaller arts-based projects for vulnerable, disadvantaged young people and offenders at a secure children's home; 4) forming a creative team with a choreographer and dancer - both Indigenous Australians, a black British dancer, and a visual artist to devise and perform a dance duet that verses emotions through the language of the body. Experience gained through the first three stages of the research fed into this final stage of composing sequences that moved words into motion and our objective of developing methods for expressing the ineffable.

#### John's Story

At the project's core is a collection of approximately 30 letters and poems that span a period of four years from 1990–1994. The letters and poems, many of which were written from a cell in Preston prison, offer insights into the psyche of a man in his mid-to-late twenties as he re-evaluates his life and tries to come to terms with his Indigenous Australian origins. The project draws its title from his letters. He wrote: 'Memories exist on the other side of me. I have two sides. The side I know. And the side I don't.'

John's story is inseparable from the Australian federal and state government policies from 1910 until the 1970s to remove children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent from their families and culture. These children are known as the Stolen Generations. In order to appreciate the issues John's story raises, it is important to consider the trauma inflicted upon Aboriginal cultures since colonialism.

Australia possesses the longest surviving cultures on our planet dating back at least 65,000 years. Traditionally, its Indigenous peoples hold a deep respect and connection to their country and embody profound perspectives that contrast with western ‘contemporary’ beliefs and ideologies, especially those concerning interrelationships with nature, family, land, place, and the spiritual world.<sup>1</sup> Although Indigenous resistance against the (un)settlers was widespread, the Australian holocaust of the eighteenth century attempted to destroy traditional Indigenous life and culture.<sup>2</sup> After the British invasion in the late 1700s the systematic slaughter of the First Australians, including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, was considered necessary by the colonising invaders. The Indigenous population decline was catastrophic, with massacres and the state-sanctioned slaughters of men, women and children across the entire continent. The injustices and cultural and personal dispossession the First Australians suffered under white and colonial rule continues to the present day. These include unequal treatment and discrimination, appalling housing conditions, incredibly high incarceration rates and deaths in custody, deprivation, exclusion, malnutrition and poverty, while the struggle for land rights and the call for reparations remains on the agenda for Aboriginal people (Atkinson 2012).

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<sup>1</sup>The deconstruction and division into two words of ‘contemporary’ is to reflect that from some Indigenous perspectives Western cultures cannot be trusted ‘con’, and the temporariness of colonising culture and power.

<sup>2</sup>The prefix ‘un’ with a hyphen gives a negative connotation to the word ‘settler’ to illustrate the disorder and deeply unsettling experience for Indigenous people resulting from the invasion of white ‘settler’ colonies (Philip 2017).

John had been adopted in 1968, aged two-and-a-half, with his brother, aged one, in Tennant Creek in Australia's Northern Territory. Towards the end of the period when Aboriginal children were forcefully taken away (stolen) from their parents, the boys had been placed in St Mary's Adoption House, Alice Springs, an institute for children of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal descent or "half-caste children" that had played an important role in perpetrating the Stolen Generations in Central Australia.<sup>3</sup> Their adoptive parents, who were English, were teachers travelling from community to community. The family left Australia for England by ship in 1971, taking the children first to Devon then moving to a remote hamlet in the Tamar Valley, Cornwall.

Some of John's experiences and memories are recorded in his letters. Having to fit into white society created a deep sense of dislocation around his identity. Despite being young when he arrived in England, he retained some memories of Australia. His life in England did not progress smoothly. He was brought up in an environment he felt both connected to and alienated from. After attending state primary and secondary schools he started to 'run wild', drinking and drug taking and eventually moving to live in a caravan at a local farm. Aged 18 he worked as a storeman and later joined the merchant navy for a brief period. He was charged with violent behaviour, theft and illegal drug-taking and had numerous spells behind bars. Out of prison he drank heavily and he experienced long periods of unemployment. His letters are crucially concerned with the trauma he suffered as a transracial adoptee – the conflicts of an individual trying to come to terms with two very different cultures. In letter No. 1 he wrote, 'I feel cheated of my true origin and identity'. In letter No. 4 he said, 'I'm two people; one is ...

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<sup>3</sup> St Mary's Adoption House was 'appropriated' by the post-war Government to help its policy of wrongfully removing children from their families (Freire 2016).

English. Then there's ... an Aborigine from the outback of Australia, with totally different views and beliefs ... I'm fighting a constant battle with myself. Some day I hope very much to be rid of the torment and tug-of-war that goes on....' John felt adoption had effaced his identity; that he had been severed from his roots.

In August 1991 he was charged with rape and spent eight months on remand before the hearing where he was found not guilty. He was charged with rape again at a later date and found guilty. It was during this period that he began to re-evaluate his life. In 1992 he traced his birth parents in Australia to discover his father was a white stockman while his mother's side were from the Gurindji Nation. This marked a pivotal point and returning to Australia and meeting his own family became a priority:

It hurts because I'm not there with my real family, nor in my native setting....  
(Letter No 6); I look for people like me, there are none, not in this country anyway.... What am I doing here?... I've never really been settled or truly happy in England, it's not my home. And never will be (Letter No 7).

Laura came to hear about John in the mid-1990s in Cornwall. She remembers: 'His adoptive mother still lived in the hamlet where he had grown up. She said he was on remand for a rape charge in Preston prison and gave me his address. He and I began a course of correspondence lasting four years. The letters document his extraordinary journey, his bitter search for identity and some of the events leading up to his death while being detained by the police in 1997'.



Laura visited John in prison where he reflected upon his childhood in Devon and Cornwall. He had first asked questions about his adoption when in his early teens. The process had taken less than a week from his adoptive parents first contacting the Northern Territory authorities to the couple receiving the infants. The ease and haste of the process is typical of the history of Aboriginal adoption in Australia at that time.

John explained he had then grown apart from his younger brother. He felt a deep bitterness for his birth mother – his adoptive parents had been told she was a prostitute and that she had surrendered him ‘voluntarily’, and he felt unequipped to deal with his internal conflict. The issue of identity became pervasive. He described the adoption as the ‘[w]orst thing, as far as I’m concerned, [that] ever happened to me.... They did what they thought was best. But I know I would have been better off in my own environment, with people that are of my own kind’ (Letter No 5).

Laura felt the weight and importance of his story, contained in letters, which she carried for over a decade. She says: ‘As a black woman I had shared to some extent his experience of living as a member of an ethnic minority. We were both transracially adopted – him from Australia’s Northern Territory; me from parents in the Caribbean at a time when disproportionate numbers of black and minority ethnic children in Britain were placed in care – and we had lived in the same small village in England for about 20 years. I had also experienced the constructs, notions or assumptions of our inferiority, displacement, and of a history of slavery, as well as dispossession and subjugation resulting from colonisation by a dominating imperial power – the British Empire’.

After John's death, Laura began writing a radio play based around his life. In the early 1990s she had travelled across Australia to the Kimberley region and worked on an Aboriginal-run cattle station and at the Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation for David Banggal Mowaljarlai OAM, the senior traditional lawman of the Ngarinyin people in West Kimberley. Laura developed connections with Magabala Books and became acquainted with Oodgeroo Noonuccal. She also became closely acquainted with Ken Colbung, Nundjan Djiridjarkan, MBE and AM, a leader from the Noongar people who became prominent in the 1960s. At the same time and in the process she acquired some understanding of Indigenous Australian writing.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Limits of Language

Nonetheless, telling John's story raised issues of cultural appropriation. One central consideration was the matter of language. Laura asked herself which language and whose voice was appropriate when the author's culture and perception of the world is in a dominant relationship with the custodians of Aboriginal culture? Indigenous Australian and African cultures have rich traditions of story-telling expressed verbally and through art, ceremony, dance and in songs. Prior to colonisation Australia had 250

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1) <sup>4</sup> For example, Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, Australia: 1987), Kevin Gilbert ed. *Inside Black Australia: an Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (Penguin Books, Victoria, Australia; 1988), Bill Neidjie, *Story About Feeling* (Magabala Books, Broome, Western Australia: 1989), Davis, Jack; Muecke, Stephen; Nargogin, Mudrooroo; Shoemaker, Adam eds. *Paperbark; a Collection of Black Australian Writings* (University of Queensland Press; Queensland: 1990), and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People* (The Jacaranda Press, Queensland, Australia: 1970), Oodgeroo Noonuccal (known until 1988 as Kath Walker), was the first Aboriginal Australian to publish a book of verse in English. *My People*, which came out in 1970, may be considered one of the first major influences in Indigenous women's writing, thus forming the beginnings of a narrative inheritance for black Australian writers.

2)

distinct languages which can be subdivided into 600 dialects (Australian Human Rights Commission 2009). The Commonwealth governments first banned and then actively discouraged Indigenous languages in schools, replacing them with English and thus causing the erosion and eventual loss of Indigenous cultural knowledge and concepts that had been carried through language. In *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), the Caribbean Canadian author, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, outlines the effects of being forced to speak a strange language for those transported forcibly from Africa to the New World:

To speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own. While similar prohibitions extended to music at various times, language was one of the most important sites of struggle between the Old World and the New World. The outcome of this struggle was the almost absolute obliteration of African languages. (Philip 2015: 80-82)

Philip's words have clear resonance for the Indigenous Australian context as well.

For Laura the limitations of English and the ethics of unspeakability were both issues of concern to be addressed. Although writing letters might have been empowering for John – he was centering himself in his own story – and although his letters and poetry are a testament to what can be communicated through English, two important questions remained. Firstly, what remained unspeakable and/or unspoken in the letters that meant Laura felt she had to tell John's story? Secondly, why was writing John's story in English problematic? Certain complexities arise from the autobiographical depiction of John's life – his voice can only be heard through a language which limits the ability to convey what he wants to express – he remains in the trap of only knowing the language

of the colonisers. Laura grew to believe that writing John's biography or a play shaped by his life story risked reinscribing the dynamics of colonial power. To depict his story in English could create an act of ventriloquism undermining or erasing his voice and maintaining or preserving a dominant relationship with the language of the colonisers.

Laura was aware of the stereotypical portrayals of the First Australians perpetrated by the British and Australian media, which have swung between romantic and negative images, either depicting Indigenous Australians as noble tourist attractions or as a savage threat needing to be tamed, educated and civilised by white mainstream educators. Due to Laura's Western upbringing and perspectives, she felt ill-equipped to give voice to the side of John that he himself had been unable to connect with: 'I realised that by creating a radio play of John's life told through my words and images in my non-Indigenous authorial voice and directed at white privileged audiences, I risked drowning out the voices of Indigenous people myself. I could not imagine myself crossing into the country and culture that he so craved'. While John's letters and poetry have the potential to document his life and also to leave a record for future generations, Laura's account of his life is situated differently in relation to his Indigenous heritage, even though she shares a heritage of transracial and transnational adoption. Indeed, the English language works as a tool of colonial power and makes visible this difference and the limits of language as a medium to communicate his story. Laura considered that articulating John's story in English 'a language endemically and etymologically hostile to our experience' (Philip 2015: 20) not only felt wrong but also seemed impossible.

In 2010 Laura was offered an opportunity to collaborate with dancer Kathryn Pilkington and choreographer Paul Emerson (both of whom are currently Co-Artistic Directors of Company E, Washington, USA) to workshop the adaptation of passages from John's letters into dance. She was on the International Writers Fellowship at Iowa University. Laura: 'A leap of faith and imagination occurred in the dance studio. First seeing John's letters expressed through dance moved his written words into motion and into a place and space beyond, where pathos and emotions were portrayed through the poetics of movement and physical theatre'. What to Laura became striking and crucial to John's story was its affectiveness and tangible corporality, and how the transformative power of dance contains elements to express essential aspects of his narrative. He wrote of memories existing 'on the other side of me' and being cut off from himself. His history, and in a way his story, existed in a space which dance could access by moving beyond the limits of language in communicating his story. The capacity of dance to create meaning in the moment of encounter, free (relatively speaking) of the epistemological drive inherent in language, opened up an adaptive space for making visible and tangible the trauma of John's otherwise unspeakable and unspoken experiences. It became clear to Laura that when language reaches its narrative limits and all that is left is the affective, emotional consequences, *that* story in particular *can* be re-embodied through dance, precisely because dance is an affective and fluid mode of narration.

'That Body Should Speak' (Philips 2015: 72)

Through her fieldwork in Australia in 2017 Laura came to understand that expression through dance is vitally important to traditional and contemporary Indigenous Australian cultures. Lorraine Gibson (2016) reminds us that Aboriginal cultures are evolving but often perceived by non-Indigenous

Australians as fixed at the time of colonisation. Nonetheless, in their analysis of dance and quality of life for contemporary Indigenous communities in Australia, Kim Dunphy and Vicki-Ann Ware point out that, ‘as it did for the ancestors, ecological wellbeing is fostered through connection to country in the process of dancing on it.’ (Dunphy & Ware 2019: 508). In Indigenous Australian cultures, dancing might take place at corroborees and important gatherings including weddings, initiation ceremonies, women’s and men’s business, and funerals. Ceremonial forms of Aboriginal dance were forbidden by colonial authorities in much of Australia for almost a century. Banning dance, like the banning of Indigenous languages, had devastating effects on Indigenous Australian culture. Because dance is vital for ensuring traditional knowledge and beliefs are passed from elders to younger generations the ban eroded cultural expression and placed the significant symbolic, social, and ritualistic value dance holds for the First Australians in jeopardy. The possibility of adapting John’s story from words into dance thus pushed Laura up against similar challenges as those she had experienced in thinking about the colonial force of the English language.

When she began to collaborate with Liz Pavey on adapting John’s story, overcoming these challenges were a central concern. The resultant project, *The Other Side of Me*, thus incorporates aspects of contemporary dance techniques and approaches as well as Indigenous Australian dance forms to create a piece of dance theatre.<sup>5</sup> The project’s process of adaptation from colonially freighted text

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<sup>5</sup> Here we employ the term dance theatre in its common usage to refer to performance dance which explores narrative and may incorporate text (Burke 2017, Litson 2012), while acknowledging that the term can also signal ‘a dance theatre

to colonially complicated dance, was informed by recent debates about the cultural specificity or universality of dance. Bannerman, for example, asserts that, “[a]s an art form, dance combines a plethora of images, sounds and to some extent written or spoken words, and constitutes, therefore, what Roland Barthes refers to as a complex signifying system” (Bannerman 2010: 19). She refers to the cultural and intra-dance codes that may be operating in choreography, saying that in regard to certain movements “choreographers and audiences become accustomed to the correlation between movement and meaning and also to the codes that operate within choreographic practices” (Bannerman 2014: 68). Bannerman’s characterisation of dance as a culturally determined semiotic mode has clear implications for working across culturally specific dance forms, as we do in *The Other Side of Me*. However, dance scholarship drawing on somatic theory and phenomenology tends to argue for the affective, rather than encoded, nature of the kinesthetic. Dee Reynolds describes how ‘[s]pectators’ embodied, affective responses to the *dance*’s body are grounded in responses to the *dancer*’s body, which generates kinesthetic energies’ (Reynolds 2012: 124). Similarly, Sheets-Johnstone discusses ‘movement being seen and intuitively understood by the audience; that is, it is kinetically and affectively understood directly and immediately, without appeal to reason, language, or thought’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2012a: 54). If dance theatre is viewed as needing to be decoded semiotically then one requires familiarity with the cultural and/or intra-dance references in order to interpret the meaning, otherwise one’s understanding will be significantly limited. However, following Sheets-Johnstone’s argument, we can assert that dance,

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lineage from German *tanztheater* and *ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance)’ of the inter-world war period (Murray & Keefe 2007: 75).

through its qualitative dynamics and the dynamic congruency between movement and emotion, has potential to speak affectively in ways that can resonate across cultures.

Our approach to the process of adaptation was further nuanced by attending to the implications of cultural specificity to which Alison Ravenscroft draws our attention:

[This] is to say something other than that there is a ‘cultural corporeal schema’, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms, defined by Rosalyn Diprose as ‘a set of habits, gestures and conducts formed over time in relation to other bodies’. It is instead to say that the very substance of bodies is not universal but is made differently in different places, and that country too is made differently in relation to different bodies. Country and body might be consubstantialising, such that one does not ‘have’ the same body if one lives in one country rather than another.

(Ravenscroft 2007: 294-295)

To exemplify the erroneousness of a universalising perspective, Ravenscroft gives an example of a Warlpiri woman (specific Aboriginal group) for whom body and country may not hold any of the same distinctions from each other that they do in Western thinking: ‘her bodiliness is already countriness – but in my language not hers. Her body in-corporates what I would call country, ground say, and makes things that I see as body into country’ (Ravenscroft 2007: 295).

The National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA), Australia’s leading Indigenous dance training college, also alerts us to these differences between Western and Indigenous Australian cultures relating to bodies (and by association, therefore, country). In their publicity material, they identify ‘Carriage of Body’ alongside other colonial/Western constructs including ‘Property’ and ‘English Language’ etc., suggesting that the notion of carriage of



the body is alien to Indigenous Australian conceptualisations of personhood. In the process of adaptation, therefore, we were very alert to the fact that while we seek to appreciate the nature of Indigenous Australian dance forms, when we speak about these practices in the English language our understanding emerges from our prior Western perspectives.

### The Other Side of Me in Development

We have explained why written English might not be a suitable mode of narration for communicating a story of personal trauma that sits at the limits of linguistic expression and why we therefore chose to adapt John's letters and thereby his story into a different medium – dance. We have also examined some of the complexities involved in adapting John's story of displacement into physical movement. One of the strategies that adaptation into dance affords in telling John's story is collaboration. In developing *The Other Side of Me* as an adaptation, dance has enabled Laura to bring multiple perspectives and voices to John's story, thereby decentering her own voice as the determiner of his narrative.

The next stage in the project has been the formation of a creative team led by Gary Lang, a Larrakia man and Artistic Director of NT Dance Company, who travelled to the North East of England with Glen Thomas, an Indigenous Australian dancer, to develop a dance duet with Arran Green, a black British dancer (figure 1). As NT Dance Company holds a strong cultural and altruistic focus this provided a unique opportunity for cultural knowledge exchange.

Lang's choreography offers a space for the raw and visceral content of John's letters to resonate in a new medium (project trailer: <https://youtu.be/15UvAcPtf3A>). He wants to convey the universality of John's story – of atrocities happening to children, of racial intolerance and intergenerational trauma. By combining different narrative forms – writing, dance, and the oral tradition – the completed dance duet will allow reflection upon colonial and postcolonial legacies of disenfranchisement. Indigenous Australians are central to the creative team, bringing to the project their knowledge of their culture and elements of their dance forms. This unique intercultural collaboration has assisted in telling John's story of the Stolen Generations.

Importantly, though, the collaboration goes beyond a singular adaptation of a story given in one medium, writing, into another medium, dance. The project is structured around the delivery of two arts-based initiatives at Aycliffe Secure Centre, a secure children's home in County Durham. The participants, vulnerable young people and young offenders (aged 10 – 18), are characterised by high levels of vulnerability, including child poverty, sexual exploitation and abuse. Both initiatives aimed to enable the young people to use creative expression as a form of escape from institutionalisation and the cycle of punishment, shame, anger and defiance they frequently experienced (see figures 2–4). Working with the young people became a stimulus for sections of dance material and possible choreographic devices that could evolve into the public dance performance reflecting John's life and, in particular, his experience within the criminal justice system (see figure 5–6).

Gary Lang speaks of the ambiguity and equivocalness of dance. He says: ‘I would like it [The Other Side of Me] to be seen on stage. People will see the story from different angles. It’s like a multi-faceted gem – it sparkles in a different way, or it’s dull in a different way’ (Lang 2020). Aycliffe’s involvement has been one way of bringing to light the different angles and facets to which Gary refers. By using dance as a medium for the young people at Aycliffe to translate experiences that were often difficult to communicate verbally, other voices joined in the collaborative process of adapting John’s story for a public beyond the private authorship of his letters. John’s letters thus became a prompt to iterative adaptation. This process of iterative adaptation moved through John’s own personal writing, Laura’s professional writing, the performances of the non-trained dancers at Aycliffe, and the choreography and performance skills of Liz Pavey, Gary Lang, Glen Thomas and Arran Green.

## Conclusion

Delivery of the project and final performances has been impacted by the COVID-19 situation. A full documentary record and reflection on the research process is therefore not yet possible. This article has instead focused on the project’s conceptual underpinning: why English-language writing alone was considered inadequate to tell John’s story, and how adaptation into the non-verbal practices of dance, drawing on both Indigenous and Western performance forms, could begin to communicate the affective power of that story.

This project has explored the limitations of language when narrating a personal story of trauma that has a colonial dimension, and how (English) language can alienate and appropriate the very narrative to which we want to give an authentic and freeing voice. Negotiating these challenges made clear the need for a decentering approach that could give space to the non-verbal and to cultural experience other than the practitioner's own. By combining, in this instance specifically, Indigenous and contemporary Australia dance, we have learned that it is possible to move words into motion through body movement/dance and into a place where ineffable pathos and emotions can be expressed.

More importantly, in this project we have developed an innovative mode of iterative adaptation. This process of iterative adaptation, which echoes the iterative epistolary form of the original texts on which the project is based, enables the retelling of John's story through multiple voices and bodies, and gives rise to new stories through that multivocal/multibodied process. As practitioners we have found this mode of iterative adaptation hugely productive in navigating the challenges of narrating John's story and in giving space to its deep, affective power.

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Moving Words into Motion

Captions list

Figure 1 Creative Team group photo in rehearsals at Dance City, Newcastle, U.K, March 2020 (left to right: Gary Lang, Liz Pavey, Laura Fish, Glen Thomas, Arran Green)



Figure 2 Participants at Aycliffe Secure Centre engaging with art work (March 2020)



Figure 3 Masks painted for dance performance by participants at Aycliffe Secure Centre (May 2018)



Figure 4 Snake Dot Painting by participant at Aycliffe Secure Centre (March 2020)



Figure 5 Dance artists Arran Green and Glen Thomas in rehearsals with choreographer Gary Lang, responding to the creative work of the participants at Aycliffe Secure Centre. Dance City, Newcastle, UK (March 2020)



Figure 6 Dance artists Arran Green and Glen Thomas in rehearsals with choreographer Gary Lang. Dance City, Newcastle, UK (March 2020)

