

'You Were Born To Tell These Stories'
The Edu-ma-cations of Doctor Ruby

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This article originally appeared in the "Black Swan" issue of *Meridian* 17.1 (1998), published to commemorate Ruby Langford Ginibi's receipt of an honorary doctorate from La Trobe University. The editors wish to thank John Barnes for allowing the reprint.

I heard my totem bird call out, kitchee! kitchee! kitchee! kee, tellin me this meant to be, you were born to tell these stories. Whiteman didn't believe that bird talkem to me, he tellem me good news and bad, he warn when trouble tell of death, I always heed his call. For him messenger bird of my Banjulung people! That bird, kitchee, kitchee, kitchee, kee! Willy wagtail that bird be!

- Ruby Langford Ginibi, 'Banjulung Totem'¹

Less than fifteen years ago, on 23rd May 1984, a few months after her fiftieth birthday, a black woman who had always told her nine children she would write a book some day, sat down to do so. She had left school at the age of fifteen, unable to imagine a future for a black teacher of either white or black children. Instead, she trained as a clothing machinist in Sydney, and through hard necessity later acquired the bush skills of 'fencing, burning off, lopping and ring-barking, and pegging roo skins'.² Along the way she also learned the traditional knowledge, history and lore that give her the status of Doctor among her people.

The product of this wealth of experience is a voice unlike any other in Australian writing:

I was called after my great aunt Ruby. In the mission photo, she's sitting beside her identical twin, Pearl...The dresses are white. Ruby and Pearl are black.

When I was six, Mum left us...The person who took over our mothering was an Aboriginal clever man, Uncle Ernie Ord. He's telling us our totems. He says my totem is a willy wagtail, he says I'll always know if there's trouble because the wagtail will warn me. Many years later I'm living in Alexandria. There are sparrows and crows there, also a rain bird....There are no wagtails. One day I hear a wagtail outside my window. That afternoon I heard my brother had died.³

The succinct opening passages of *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, moving between the scenes of mission, home country and city, announce the driving concerns of Ruby Langford Ginibi's writing. The scene is powerfully visual: rubies for blood, pearls for whiteness; the inside and outside whitewash of assimilation against the stubborn blackness of Aboriginal bodies. The image of assimilation, two young black girls in white dresses, is immediately countered by reference to the forces that have sustained Aboriginal resistance to that process: the enduring network of kin and family, and the careful maintenance of a system of spiritual and cultural knowledge that defies the categories and limits of Anglo-Australia. In these two short paragraphs the non-Aboriginal reader is put on notice that s/he is entering a different order of knowledge and being: the narrator's 'mothering' by 'an Aboriginal clever man, Uncle Ernie Ord' affirms an understanding of family and nurture that cuts across the assumed norm of the nuclear family and gendered parenting roles, just as the introduction of her totem, the willy wagtail, challenges dominant views of what constitutes 'nature', the 'human', the 'rational' and the 'real'.

This is a notice that some critics have failed to register, thus missing the nature of the challenge that *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, together with Ruby Langford Ginibi's other writings, poses to the aesthetic, narrative and moral conventions of Anglo-Australia. In this short essay I hope to discuss some of those challenges, and to suggest the political and personal implications of attempting to respond to them seriously and with respect.

Desperately Seeking the Sovereign Subject

Don't Take Your Love to Town was published in 1988, the bicentennial anniversary of Australian colonisation, a fact that inevitably shaped both its production and reception. Later Ginibi was to deplore the attempt to 'gubbaise' her work by its Anglo-Australian editor.⁴ The desire to promote the book as a text of 'reconciliation', and to present its narrator as a simple, all-Australian type, can obscure *Don't Take Your Love to Town's* uncompromising politics and unsparing representation of the devastating consequences of poverty and racism. Equally 'gubbaising' are efforts by critics to fit the text into existing literary categories. Attempts to recruit *Don't Take Your Love to Town* into the battler genre associated with canonical Australian authors such as Banjo Patterson, Henry Lawson and Joseph Facey, ignore the fact that the literary construct of the battler, a product of the nationalist 1890s, is from its inception an ideologically loaded and racially marked figure; its consolidation as an icon of Australianness (quickly reinforced by advertising and popular culture) corresponds with the establishment of the federated white Australian state in 1901, an act that formally marked the dispossession of indigenous peoples.⁵ The recent recurrence of this figure one hundred years

later, in the rhetoric of Pauline Hanson's One Nation and John Howard's Liberal Party suggests the extent to which, far from being an inclusive image of the struggling people in our society, the battler remains a figure of the ethnocentric Anglo-Australian imagination.

Rather than the heroic, white, usually male, battler of 'the bush' (that other key construct of the Anglo-Australian imagination), the figure addressed by Ginibi's writing is the urban Aboriginal woman with her children. Rejecting the individualism of the battler genre, Ginibi's text is concerned with the collective, historically and socially produced, conditions of Aboriginal families in urban Australia. The hostile forces she contends with are not indiscriminating, apolitical 'nature' or 'the elements', but the systematically racist policies and practices of the state in housing, employment, education and, most urgently, in law and the criminal (in)justice system.

Quoting extensively from documentary sources, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* also breaks with the conventions of traditional autobiography, chronicling, not the development or success of an individual self, but a complex and intermeshing, inescapably political, *collective* story, a story that necessarily exceeds the confines of the narrowly personal. The text's inclusion of statistics and other non-literary materials on Aboriginal men in custody reinforces Ginibi's insistence on the representational nature of her story. Her son Nobby's time in prison, a sentence for his entire family, at the same time replicates the story of other young black men and their families.

The collective and relational subjectivity of the narrator in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* draws on a conceptual and historical understanding more adequately addressed by the genres of life-writing or testimonio,⁶ whereas critics attempting to read *Don't Take Your Love to Town* according to the canons of Anglo-American autobiography have, not surprisingly, found themselves out of their depth. A case in point is Tim Rowse's diagnosis that in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* Ginibi attempts, less than successfully in his eyes, to achieve 'self-realisation' and 'self-discovery' through an 'auto-therapeutic process':

If there is an obstruction to the emergence of Ruby Langford as the subject and assured interpreter of her own destiny, it is not non-Aboriginal hegemony, nor the weight of colonial history...it is...the contingencies of kinship fractured by rural-urban migration and by the fickle vulnerabilities of men.⁷

In response Philippa Sawyer has perceptively pointed out the limitations of Rowse's conceptual and theoretical framework:

Focusing on [what he identifies as] Ginibi's 'problems of female identity' and her 'problematic sense of self' Rowse mainly analyses Ginibi's subject position from the perspective of gender, while he undervalues the central role that her Aboriginal identity plays in her subject positioning. [He] assumes that ... discourses [of race and gender] function as separate and hierarchical entities and overlooks the notion of [what Theresa De Lauretis has described as] 'a simultaneity of oppressions' that are 'interlocking and mutually determining'...

Embracing the humanist notion of a teleological self-realisation...[r]ather than focusing on the political motivations behind Ginibi's writing, Rowse privileges the representation of the individual as unique and autonomous, and equates subjectivity with the disclosure of emotions. He finds Ginibi's text lacking to the extent that he states 'a "subject" seems to be absent from this circumstantial narrative'.⁸

It is not surprising that the singular, sovereign subject of traditional autobiography, 'the assured interpreter of her own destiny' sought by Rowse, is not to be found in *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, a text that is concerned with the multiple, discontinuous subjectivities and complex, interlocking experiences of a working class, urban, Aboriginal woman. The lack of 'interiority' and the inability to display emotion Rowse ascribes to the text's narrator may be, as Mudrooroo has pointed out, more accurately located as a gap in the critic's own reading practice, revealing a failure to recognise the cultural and aesthetic contexts of Ginibi's writing.⁹

Making Survival Culture

At a recent conference, 'Urban Life/Urban Culture', Ian Anderson hailed Ruby Langford Ginibi as an author who powerfully represents urban Aboriginal culture, a culture that resists the hybridised and assimilationist labels imposed on it by Anglo-Australia.¹⁰ Elsewhere Anderson has written about the impact of assimilationist practices and policies on contemporary Aboriginal identities from his own position as an Aboriginal Tasmanian:

The management of Aboriginal people by the Australian state during those decades prior to the 1967 referendum ... resonated around two core dictums: 'fuck 'em white' and/or 'train 'em right'. This colonial regime manoeuvred Aboriginal peoples along a trajectory which aimed to strip away the black bits from their bodies, historical consciousness and practices. Assimilation practices which aimed to transform the black into the white were allied to representations of Koori people in which our sociality was ambiguous or fragmented. *These representations conflated the fragmenting impulse of colonialism with a product, black bit, white bit people.... An Aboriginal body which maintains itself, despite this social context, is an anathema in terms of the desired outcome.*

During this era the most potent construction of Aboriginal people was that of the 'hybrid'...According to such notions any unfortunate 'hybrids' left belong nowhere and have no history.... we are doomed by this discourse to forever be black-bit white-bit people. It is against these stereotypes that Aboriginal people construct identities and symbols...I am no hybrid. I am a muttonbird Koori.¹¹

The urban Aboriginal communities and families in Ginibi's writings are not incomplete or imperfect 'black-bit, white-bit peoples'; they possess their own rich sociality and culture. Neither 'hybrid' nor 'kitsch',¹² the Aboriginal bodies and lives represented by Ginibi 'maintain

themselves', in Anderson's words, against a battery of (ongoing and historical) assimilationist pressures. This is the world lovingly detailed in Ginibi's second book *Real Deadly*, a series of life narratives, reflections and poems that takes up from where *Don't Take Your Love to Town* leaves off.

The publication of Mary Rose Liverani's shocking review of *Real Deadly* in *The Australian* in 1992 is the best evidence for Anderson's claim that 'An Aboriginal body which maintains itself... is an anathema' in the assimilationist social context. A Scottish migrant from Britain, Liverani confidently assumes the role of a knowledgeable commentator on Australian history and literature when she asserts:

Ginibi can't write. Lacking formal education, *and a literary or social context within which to appraise her experiences, she has difficulty making sense of her life or offering insight into it.* She seems to view herself and her family as characters in an American slapstick comedy or cheap romance.¹³

In spite of Liverani's claims to universalist authority, the review highlights all too clearly the class, ethnic and national biases of its author.¹⁴ The fact that such a staggeringly ignorant review could be published in Australia's only national newspaper suggests that Liverani's lack of historical understanding is not so exceptional. It is only in a context of assimilation, which seeks to obliterate the blackness of black lives and bodies, that people like Ginibi can be represented, in Anderson's words, as 'unfortunate "hybrids" belong[ing] nowhere and hav[ing] no history' or context. Here, again, the *desire* of colonialism to fragment and disarticulate Aboriginal cultures is 'conflated with a *product*, black bit, white bit people'.

As a means of pointing to some of the intermeshing cultural, political and historical contexts that invariably inform Ginibi's writing, and to demonstrate the ways in which she consistently both 'makes sense of' *and* offers insights into her identity as an urban Aboriginal woman in contemporary Australia, I will briefly discuss an episode titled 'Perfumes' from *Real Deadly*. The passage deals with a shopping expedition in which the narrator discovers a perfume called 'Black Velvet'. As Marcia Langton has described, 'black velvet', a term circulated in 'a song from the Australian pastoral frontier expressing the colonial lust of drovers...has passed into "redneckspeak" [and]...ricochets around most of the sexual images of Aboriginal women'.¹⁵ Contemporary Aboriginal women artists have attempted to appropriate or repossess the term 'black velvet' through different means; for example, Langton describes how the objectification of Aboriginal women as 'black velvet' is confronted in Destiny Deacon's photographic essay, *Black Like Mi*:

Deacon gazes through the mirror at that little black doll. Hers is also the feminine gaze. As she looks at the black dolls, boy and girl, in bed, she erases the possibility of white men seeing this sexual scene that she has created. She denies white male voyeurism. She denies the aural, sexual and colonialist conquest. At the same time in a sideways glance, she places the white male within her view, the white male who imagined the 'black velvet' and who as the subject/object of Deacon's representation, is denied a peep at the doll.

She makes impotent the white fantasy of 'black velvet' ¹⁶

It is in 'dialogues' such as these, between Aboriginal peoples and the stereotypes and symbols that confine them, Langton argues, that 'working models of "Aboriginality" are constructed'.¹⁷ Like Anderson's reworking of the doom-laden colonial symbol of 'Tru-ger-nan-ner' by a Tasmanian Aboriginal man who is very much alive, these 'working models' enable the construction of productive or oppositional identities in the face of disabling stereotypes.

This is the wider historical, political and cultural context that informs Ginibi's story about 'black velvets' in *Real Deadly*:

I needed a haircut and style and also a zip-up carry bag...to travel to Melbourne. I'd been asked to perform on a panel there too... it's called Spoleto...I had my hair done and went to a chemist to get some perfume. I noticed all the different varieties and I went along using the testers...until I saw...a new one...called Black Velvet; I was stunned. Here was our urban koori term for a black gin's vagina. With a chuckle, I grabbed it and tested it; mmmm, I thought...I hurried to my room and got into my old comfortable clothes...Margaret came into my room to say hello...and when she saw Black Velvet, she cracked up! Me and her started to laugh our heads off...when Mary from the dairy came to the door. We tried to tell her...by pointing between our legs to our private parts, because Mary is deaf! Margaret topped it off by saying, 'You better be careful with that black velvet because you might catch it'.

I nearly fell off the bed laughing, and at tea time we got the giggles too, talking about black velvets.¹⁸

This is a scene located, not as Liverani would have it, in 'American slapstick' or 'cheap romance', but in the multiple specificities of Ginibi's life as both a middle-aged woman living at the Allawah Aboriginal Hostel in Western Sydney, and also a Koori artist in high national demand. Like Deacon's photographs, Ginibi's writing addresses the images that continue to construct the female Aboriginal body, constructs that she, too, productively eroticises in the process of reappropriation. Through the chuckles and laughter of the women, the hurtful history of 'black velvet' is at once ruefully acknowledged, owned and repossessed. The women's' pleasure in their own sensuality ('mmm, I thought...') replaces the colonial violence represented by the drovers' song, and also subverts the voyeuristic marketing of 'Black Velvet'.

This passage also suggests that images and representations of Aboriginality are pervasive, if constantly misrecognised or invisible, in everyday Australian culture; they are images that are as often remade and repossessed in the daily transactions of urban Aboriginal living. Where Liverani sees the world of *Real Deadly* as one of unthinking and uncritical consumption (of everything from alcohol to take-away food to sitcoms), Ginibi's writings represent an active process of negotiating with and surviving in a dominant culture that persistently devalues, degrades and disappears her history. This is not a sodden, amoral world incurably mired in the dregs of white popular culture, as Liverani suggests. Rather, it is a resourceful, energetic and

vital culture that creates and copes, makes do, improvises and gets by, that incorporates the pain and injustice of living and responds with laughter, anger, art and play; that maintains itself, resists and does not let go: *survival culture*.

Edu-ma-cating Australia

My Bundjalung People, Ginibi's most recent book to date, includes a foreword by her adopted daughter, the artist Pam Johnston, who defines the book for the non-Aboriginal reader:

My Bundjalung People is not an academic book. It is not a remote observation of a people. This is Aboriginal history as experienced by many, many Aboriginal people...It has heart and soul, and tears of blood because it has been lived and tested by time itself. It is wholistic in the same way that Aboriginal culture is wholistic. One part cannot be separated from another. It tells what it is to be an indigenous person, what that means. Aboriginal history involves fact, spirituality, and culture.¹⁹

This wholistic history of the Bundjalung people combines a search for the author's own family stories with stories of the collective past and present, from the 1840s massacre termed the Richmond River Horror to the 'fourth world' conditions on the former missions of Box Ridge and Cabbage Tree Island in the 1990s. It is history that allows for a multiplicity of voices and experiences: the manuscript of a nineteenth-century land owner reflecting on his Aboriginal workers, and the unbearably complacent and myopic, yet undeniably affectionate, reminiscences of his grandson, a onetime employer of Ginibi's father, are included alongside the statements of two members of the stolen generations painfully remembering their incarceration at the now infamous Kinchella Boys' Home.

Taking its place as Aboriginal history, *My Bundjalung People* also marks the consolidation of its author's identity as a writer, scholar and spokeswoman for her people. Structured around a series of return journeys to Ginibi's home country after a forty-eight year absence, the text presents Ginibi as a public figure, making International Women's Day speeches in Sydney and Lismore, conducting research and giving interviews. A book that describes the process of its own making, *My Bundjalung People* foregrounds Ginibi's identity as scholar and educator, for example when, in the presence of all her family from Box Ridge, Ginibi and Johnston become the first women to address the Lismore club.

On this same night the Bundjalung name of Ginibi, meaning 'black swan', is bestowed on the author by her aunt, reaffirming her Aboriginality. In a historical conjunction that is more than merely fortuitous, Black Swan is also an evocative name in the history of black women artists in the United States, the title of the first record company 'whose stockholders, employees, and artists would all be black', and whose first recording was Mamie Smith's famous 'Crazy Blues'.²⁰ This night in Lismore, Ginibi and Johnston play the audience with a passion, power and laughter akin to that of the great Afro-American blues divas:

We looked at...[the audience's] faces and oh! They were a mournful lot!...Pam said to me: 'I can't handle their guilt. C'mon Ruby, start tellin' some of those sick jokes of yours'....

These jokes showed the audience how we are stereotyped even today. After we had finished there was much handclapping and laughing. We'd teased them out of their guilty feelings....

Pammy and me sure edu-ma-cated some of them that night in Lismore.²¹

The Aboriginal English word 'edu-ma-cate' appears repeatedly in *My Bundjalung People*, as when Johnston exclaims after Ginibi's interview with a newspaper reporter, 'Boy, did you edu-ma-cate him, aye!'.²² Throughout the text Ginibi is represented in the task of edu-ma-cating, not just on formal occasions such as Women's Day, but in an unscheduled lecture to schoolchildren in Baryulgil, in a discussion with white geologists in a pub in Bonalbo, with office staff at the ABC studio while waiting to do a radio interview in Lismore. A wealth of activity among the other Aboriginal characters in *My Bundjalung People* complements Ginibi's acts of edu-ma-cation: her friends and family members are also engaged in painting, writing and contributing to films, documentaries and research projects, while parallel to Ginibi's production of *My Bundjalung People* is the photographic exhibition of Bundjalung history that Johnston compiles.

The Aboriginal English term 'edu-ma-cate' underscores the distinctiveness of the knowledge imparted through these activities. For the recipient, to be edu-ma-cated calls both for learning a wholistic Aboriginal history *and* for un-learning the white history previously taken for granted; it also means asking who is able to occupy the privileged position of teacher. When a young Anglo-Australian woman announces to Ginibi 'I'm doing my Masters degree and then I want to teach Aboriginal studies', Ginibi responds: 'You have to talk to Aboriginal people to find out what you're going to teach...I wonder ...would white Australians let Aboriginals write about the white history. What do you think?'²³

Here, and throughout *My Bundjalung People* Ginibi exposes the power relations taken for granted in the authority to research, publish and teach, and urges the need for Aboriginal peoples to edu-ma-cate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians: 'The only solution I can see to promote a better understanding about us Aborigines is for our Aboriginal history -- the true history of this country -- to be taught in the schools as a compulsory subject. Our history has never been properly taught...We demand our rightful place in Australia's history! We Aboriginal people survive in this country because we are a nation within a nation and we will never lose our Aboriginal spirit.'²⁴

Even as *My Bundjalung People* affirms the collective identity of all Aboriginal peoples and asserts the essential failure of assimilation and hybridisation, in claiming 'our rightful place in Australia's history' it also acknowledges contemporary realities. As the recent discussion over the government's Wik legislation has shown, Aboriginal spokespeople endorse the necessity of coexistence, as opposed to the separatist agendas of the National Farmers' Federation and

other hardline Anglo-Australian interests.²⁵ Coexistence, in all its materiality, and for all its painful and unavoidable consequences, is recognised as part of the warp and woof of everyday living in all of Ginibi's writings, where non-Aboriginal Australians figure as neighbours, lovers, friends and co-workers as well as bureaucrats, employers, landlords, teachers and prison guards. In this complex tapestry of interaction, divisions of race are layered upon and crisscrossed -- though never overwritten -- by interconnections of class, gender, place and generation. The mesh of intimate relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is also from the beginning multi-ethnic and multi-cultural: it includes the dashing 'Indian cowboys', the Khan brothers, and Old Joe, the Chinese-Australian market gardener at Gunnedah Hill who befriends the narrator ('anything you want you take from garden for your kids OK'²⁶), as well as the nameless Italo-Australian farmer who fathers, but does not raise or acknowledge, her mother.

As opposed to these intermeshing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural interactions on the ground, throughout her writings Ginibi is deservedly scathing about the hypocrisy of Australia's official *policies* of multiculturalism which pay lip service to cultural diversity even as they perpetuate the dispossession of indigenous peoples. Multiculturalism's public celebrations of exotic cultures erase the state's record of coercion and intolerance towards other languages and cultures, and as such are often understandably painful to indigenous Australians who endure the brunt of assimilationist violence. As Ginibi has written:

They came with their godly marriages and paternalistic ways, and we were forced to assimilate...because our traditional practices were classified as 'heathen' and 'vermin' to be cleared off the face of the earth...and we were forced by governments to become like white people...

We have never been one nation -- ever! -- because Aboriginal people have always been excluded in white social enclaves in this country...Even the people who migrate here are on a higher social level than we are. We are classified as the lowest of the low, and we are the first people of this land!²⁷

Such passages demonstrate the inescapable contradictions of multiculturalism, and the tensions generated by the racialised hierarchies that permeate Australian society.²⁸ They also suggest how, although Aboriginals and other Australians of non-English-speaking-background (NESB) may share histories of colonisation and dispossession, and are subject to similar experiences of racism in contemporary Australia, NESB migrants are nonetheless complicit in the ongoing dispossession of indigenous Australians, just as the act of migration itself implies consent to, and shared responsibility for, the shameful events of Australian history.

For me, a migrant from Sri Lanka, edu-ma-cation starts with this acknowledgment, and a consciousness of the responsibilities and obligations, as well as the satisfactions, it entails. For NESB peoples, becoming edu-ma-cated is our application for an entry visa from the country's true custodians, and the first step to seeking our peace with the land; it involves learning from Aboriginal Australians their wholistic history of 'fact, spirituality, and culture', and an active

receptivity to its messages. It is in this spirit that the following story flits across the confines of this academic essay.

On the morning after Ruby Langford Ginibi invoked the spirits of her ancestors over our house, a bird flew in through the back door. It wasn't a willy wagtail, but what is called in Sinhala a 'ge kurulla', literally 'house bird', or, in Sri Lankan English, 'house sparrow'. There are plenty of them in our garden in Carlton, but not one has flown in through the back door before. In my childhood I remember these birds darting across the tall ceilings of my grandmother's house, coming and going at will through the high ventilation slats that are a distinctive architectural feature of the Tamil city of Jaffna. When I told Ruby Langford Ginibi, she responded, 'It's a sign'. I think it must be one too, accepting with both hands the gift that is generously given; I know that if new ancestors and other spirits are to be, if not at home, then on friendly ground in the Australian landscape, the process begins with our education by Ruby Langford Ginibi and other indigenous teachers.²⁹

The Doctoring of Ruby Langford Ginibi

On May 1 1998, Ruby Langford Ginibi was awarded the degree of honorary Doctor of Letters at La Trobe University. The occasion was particularly poignant in light of a passage in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* where Ginibi recalls how she was awarded a one guinea prize in a NADOQ writing competition: 'The subject was what you would like to become, and I wrote about doctoring'.³⁰

Commenting on this passage, Rowse concludes that since Ginibi would have been aware that it was 'virtually impossible' for her ever to become a doctor, the entire episode reveals the 'spirited opportunism' with which Aboriginal identities are fabricated or manufactured in order to gain institutional sponsorship, by professing aspirations state institutions are likely to favour.³¹ Apparently it does not cross Rowse's mind that in Aboriginal English 'doctoring' may carry very different meanings from those associated with medical degrees, white coats and a country practice. As Sawyer points out, in a usage such as Mudrooroo's title *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, for example, the term 'Doctor' suggests a person who has acquired a wealth of knowledge. In an open letter to Liverani in 1992 Ginibi had already pointed out that in her own Bandjalung culture she did possess the equivalent of a doctorate with her knowledge of Aboriginal history, culture and politics: her early aspiration in the NADOQ essay thus turns out to be not only perfectly possible, but one she has already achieved.³²

In one sense the conferring of an honorary degree by a licensed institute of higher education does no more than reconfirm this existing status. In light of Rowse's comments, however, it signifies the extent of Ginibi's achievement in white Australia. *Don't Take Your Love to Town* also relates how, at the age of fifteen, Ginibi's father refuses the possibility of her ever becoming part of the formal Australian educational system by rejecting the idea of a teacher's scholarship funded by the Aborigine's Protection Board (whose 'main function was to discriminate against Aborigines').³³ In this context Ginibi's recognition by this same white

educational system many decades later can be seen as an achievement, not solicited by institutional patronage, but rather accomplished in defiance of it.

On the day of Ginibi's award ceremony at La Trobe, her youngest son Jeffrey, who had accompanied his mother to Melbourne, told a story of his own. He said that as they were given their official tour of the campus that morning, they saw a black swan, ginibi, on the moat that runs around La Trobe University. She wheeled and glided for them on the water, in greeting and celebration, making this place more familiar, more their own. With her presence, I like to think, she signals that even the confines of academia are not impregnable, unable to be barricaded permanently against indigenous ways of being, seeing and knowing.

NOTES

My thanks to Jeffrey Langford for permission to retell his Ginibi story, and to Philippa Sawyer for many discussions of Ruby Langford Ginibi's writings.

This essay is dedicated, with respect and admiration, to its first and most important reader, Doctor Ruby Langford Ginibi.

¹ Ruby Langford Ginibi, 'Banjulung Totem' *Hecate* xvii. ii, 1991, p. 36. *NB*: The author varies the spelling of 'Banjulung' in different texts.

² From the biographical note to the first edition of *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1988.

³ *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, p. 1

⁴ 'Gubba' is an Aboriginal English term for 'white Australian' from 'gubbament' or 'government'.

⁵ For further discussion of the historical role of the battler, and the way in which this figure has re-emerged in the political rhetoric of the nineties, see Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, "'Racial Suicide': The Relicensing of Racism in Australia' *Race & Class* 39. 2, 1997, pp. 1-20.

⁶ On Life Writing see the introduction to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson ed. *De-colonizing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. On the South American genre of Testimonio, see John Beverley's 'The Margin at the Centre' in *De-colonizing the Subject*, pp. 169-195; and Kavita Panjabi's 'Probing "Morality" and State Violence: Feminist Values and Communicative Interaction in Prison Testimonios in India and Argentina' in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* ed. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 151-169.

⁷ Tim Rowse, 'The Aboriginal subject in Autobiography: Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*', *Australian Literary Studies* 16.1, 1993, p. 28.

⁸ Philippa Sawyer, 'Fictions of White Australia Identity: Land and Community in Contemporary Australian Women's Life Narratives' M.A Research Thesis, La Trobe University, 1996, pp. 89-91.

⁹ See Mudrooroo Nyoogah. "Couldn't ya cry, if ya couldn't laugh?" *Span* 34/35, 1993, pp. 376-383.

¹⁰ Ian Anderson, Keynote address at 'Urban Life/Urban Culture Aboriginal/Indigenous Experiences' Goolangullia, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, 27-29 November 1997.

¹¹ Ian Anderson, 'Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: Decolonising the Symbol', *Art Monthly* 66, December 1993-February 1994, p14; emphasis added.

¹² The term 'Kitsch' is from Rowse's description of Ginibi's response to Uluru in his *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Cultures*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1993, p. 88.

¹³ Mary Rose Liverani, 'From outside, without insight' *Weekend Australian* March 28-29, 1992, p. 6, emphasis added.

¹⁴ See Sawyer and Mudrooroo for discussions of how Liverani's fastidious, keep-yourself-nice strictures on Ginibi's family reproduce a discourse of coercive white intervention in the domestic lives of Aboriginal peoples.

¹⁵ Marcia Langton "Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television..." Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993, p 50.

¹⁶ Langton, p. 51.

¹⁷ Langton, p. 35.

¹⁸ Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Real Deadly* Pymble, Angus & Robertson, 1992, pp. 66-67.

¹⁹ Pam Johnston, 'Foreword' in Ruby Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People* St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1994, p. xii.

²⁰ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, New York: Pantheon, 1998, p. 152. It needs to be said, however, that in spite of its uncompromising slogan ('The Only Genuine Colored Record--Others are only Passing'), to Black Swan's eternal discredit, it rejected the sound of the incomparable Bessie Smith as too 'raw', and is seen by contemporary music critics as assimilationist in its selection of artists.

²¹ *My Bundjalung People*, pp. 52-53.

²² *My Bundjalung People*, p. 38

²³ *My Bundjalung People*, p. 108.

²⁴ *My Bundjalung People*, p. 46.

²⁵ See for example, Peter Yu, 'Co-Existence a Reality', *Australian* April 1, 1997, p. 15.

²⁶ *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, p. 79.

²⁷ Ruby Langford Ginibi, 'Aboriginal Traditional and Customary Law', *Law/Text/Culture* 1, 1994, pp 11-12.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the relations between Aboriginal and NESB Australians in the context of the racialised hierarchies operating in Australia see Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'De-toxifying Australia?' *Migration Action*, 1998.

²⁹ An anonymous referee of this essay has attacked me for telling this story, accusing me of equating myself with Ruby Langford Ginibi. In doing so I think he misunderstands the nature of her gift and underestimates the generosity of indigenous teachers who offer to share their knowledge with other Australians. To cite the profoundly moving words of one such teacher, Boori (Monty) Pryor, 'To feel happy about yourself, you must feel happy about the place you live in. To feel happy about the place you live in, you must get to know that place. To get to know that place, you must ask the people who have lived there the longest, the Aboriginal people. We have the key that can open the door to the treasures of this land'. [Boori (Monty) Pryor, *Maybe Tomorrow* Ringwood: Penguin, 1998, p. 7.] This utterly simple logic of listening to, learning from and accepting the insights of indigenous peoples is one that escapes many distinguished 'experts'.

³⁰ *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, p. 109.

³¹ Rowse, 'The Aboriginal subject in Autobiography', p.15.

³² Ruby Langford Ginibi, 'A Koori's lesson in Dispossession' *Weekend Australian* May 2-3, 1992, p. 6.

³³ *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, p. 48.

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