



Jan 26, 2018 15:52 GMT

EXPERT COMMENT: The Other Side of Australia Day

Dr Laura Fish, a writer and senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Northumbria University, discusses indigeneity in the modern world.

Australia Day on 26 January, the official National Day of Australia, is the day to reflect on what it means to be Australian, to celebrate contemporary Australia and to acknowledge Australian history. It marks the anniversary of the 1788 arrival of the First Fleet of British ships at Port Jackson. However, to many indigenous Australians, Australia Day is a commemoration of genocide and deep loss. Loss of their sovereign rights to their land, loss of family, loss

of the right to practice their culture.

The Other Side of Me, a multidisciplinary research project, honours the true and tragic story of Leith Bell, a young part-Aboriginal man born in Australia and adopted by an English family to be raised in the Cornish countryside. Leith was one of The Stolen Generation, much of his adult life was spent within the UK criminal justice system. Aboriginal people are currently overrepresented in Australia's prisons. Leith's life in England mirrored the trauma experienced by many indigenous Australians; his story is inseparable from Australian governmental policies to forcibly remove part-Aboriginal children from their families and culture.

This artistic collaboration engages with experiences of indigeneity in the contemporary world by fusing indigenous Australian dance practice with physical theatre and written words to create a vocabulary of expression that communicates unbearable emotions and unspeakable experiences. The project explores relationships between country of origin, adoption, displacement and psychological health, and issues related to identity, space, place, 'hidden histories', estrangement, and perceptions of 'the other'. A professional choreographer and director, a writer, and contemporary dancers will work together to create ways to express the concepts of separation, loss, displacement and trauma, to produce a new dance theatre work. The devising process will utilise creative writing as a catalyst for the invention of deeply poetic, emotive movement and accompanying music.



Group of Yugambeh Aboriginal warriors dance during Aboriginal culture show / [Shutterstock](#).

The project team have secured funds for the project's first stage - delivering an intensive arts course for young vulnerable people within the criminal justice system. Research shows that the arts can engage young people at risk, improve prisoner's health and wellbeing, help to rehabilitate former offenders, and stimulate an interest in learning. The arts course aims to ignite young peoples' imaginations and research ways to support them in versing emotions through the transformative power of creative writing, visual art, and dance. It will capture young people's perceptions of confinement within the criminal justice system and feed into the process of translating Leith's story into dance - of portraying a young man's struggle to cross a chasm within himself and his process of self-discovery.

Australia possesses the oldest and longest surviving culture on our planet, dating back around 60,000 years. Indigenous Australians are unique for many reasons, not least because they are thought to be the first humans to engage with body movement – dance - as a performing art form. Dance has been vital for ensuring indigenous knowledge and beliefs are passed from elders to younger generations. Dance also holds significant symbolic, social and ritualistic value to the first Australians. Ceremonial forms of indigenous dance were forbidden by colonial authorities in much of the country for almost a

century. Banning dance had devastating effects on indigenous culture because dance took place at corroborees, or important meetings such as weddings, initiation ceremonies, gatherings for women's and men's business, and funerals.

As the project's originator, I attended the bi-annual Laura Dance Festival, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, last July to research connections between literary narrative and indigenous and contemporary dance language and techniques. The role of dance remains integral to indigenous Australia. Dance is part of our lives. We need dance for strengthening communities and sharing our culture with dignity and pride.

I have been working closely with one of my colleagues at Northumbria, Liz Pavey, a dance artist and Senior Lecturer in Dance. Speaking about the project, Liz said: "The project is a unique opportunity to further examine the relationship between how we move, our environment, and our wellbeing. It will illuminate many cultural differences in attitudes to and practices of embodiment and will offer a space to explore questions concerning landscape, the built environment, freedom, and belonging and connection to place. This is an exciting chance to investigate the potential of expressive movement and creative practice to empower individuals, and foster community and personal narratives."

Australia Day is a time to reflect on what it means to be Australian, but also a reminder to honour the culture of indigenous Australians and acknowledge the genocide and loss they have suffered, while seeking new and innovative ways to tell the stories of their lives and ensure their culture and history is never forgotten.

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk
07708 509436



James Fox

Press Contact
Student Communications Manager
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact
PR and Media Coordinator
Arts Design and Social Sciences / Engineering and Environment
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact
PR and Media Coordinator
Health and Life Sciences / Sport
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk
07377422415



Ruth Lognonne

Press Contact
PR and Media Coordinator
Health and Life Sciences / Sport
ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk



Emily Morris

Press Contact

Corporate Communications Coordinator

emily.l.morris@northumbria.ac.uk