

# From Stage to Page to Screen: The traumatic returns of Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife*

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These are our stories. This is our history (Purcell cited in Keast 2022: 11).

*The process of adaptation is a complex project of reconfiguration: one that is not only governed by ethical issues and aesthetic tensions but by the social, cultural, and political issues that arise in the calibration of old stories for new times, new audiences, and new medias. Since the past itself can either be contested or conserved, rewritten or restated, the act of retelling always calls into question the relationship between story and history. This article investigates the ethics and politics of Leah Purcell's multiple contemporary adaptations of Henry Lawson's frontier narrative, 'The Drover's Wife' (1892). Purcell's contemporary reimaginings traverse stage (2016), page (2019), and screen (2021), and repurpose colonial tropes and stereotypes to rework Lawson's 'Outback hell'. By remediating Lawson's iconic tale, and infusing the story with her own personal history, Purcell moves beyond simply reimagining the story to foregrounding the corrective dimension of retelling, such that Australia's traumatic history must be claimed by us in the present. Purcell's multiple adaptations, then, not only shift the story to different mediums, but illuminate and interrogate the past in order to destabilise Australia's foundational narrative.*

KEY WORDS: Leah Purcell; trauma; adaptation; national identity, *The Drover's Wife*.

In an interview with Harcourt, the American short story writer and novelist George Singleton uses a spatial analogy to compare the process of writing long- and short-form fiction. Singleton (2006) says, 'Writing a novel is a walk across a bridge, while writing a short story is a walk across a tightrope.' Singleton's analogy captures the experiential differences of writing long and short prose and alludes to the characteristics that distinguish the short story as an enduring form: narrative economy, unity of effect or impression, and importantly, the compression of the story's temporal setting and characters. In fact, while both the novel and the short story share the same formal characteristics (plot, point of view, dialogue, setting), the novel depends on expansion, the short story on compression. The process of adaptation is a complex project of reconfiguration: one that is not only governed by ethical issues and aesthetic tensions but by the various social, cultural, and political issues that arise in the calibration of old stories for new times, new audiences, and new medias. As Demelza Hall (2019) explains, 'Works of adaptation are renowned for "talking back" to a text, while, at the same time, opening up new spaces and establishing new dialogues.' In this context, it is interesting to consider the process of adapting the short story to the longer form, or as Singleton suggests, transitioning from tightrope to bridge. Since the past can be either contested or conserved, rewritten or reinstated, the act of retelling always necessitates thinking about the relationship between the story and history itself.

One of Australia's most widely adapted (and readapted) short stories is Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*. First published in 1892 in the nationalist Sydney-based magazine *The Bulletin*, 'The Drover's Wife' is perhaps Lawson's best-known work. Frequently cited as a classic of Australian literature and relentlessly anthologised, the story is one of Lawson's most sentimental tributes to life in the bush, despite the fact that, as Christine Vandamme and others point out, the bush itself is surprisingly abstract and bare – more of a theatrical backdrop, perhaps, than a dimensional or even distinctively Australian place (2016: 73). In fact, one of Lawson's early mentors, J.F. Archibald, the co-founder of *The Bulletin* and Lawson's first editor, summed up his writing advice to Lawson in three words: 'boil it down' (cited in Barnes 1986: 7). Lawson, who is known for his laconic minimalism and unyielding realism, recounts Archibald's advice:

Every man has at least *one* story: some more. Never write until you have something to write about; then, write. Write and rewrite. Cut out every word from your copy that you can possibly do without. Never strain after effect, and above all, always avoid anti-climax. (cited in Barnes 1986: 7)

In *The Drover's Wife*, Lawson certainly heeds Archibald's advice, and through a series of flat, documentary observations related in successive episodes, carefully

walking Singleton's 'tightrope', Lawson reduces his plot to a drab and dusty bark kitchen: a cramped and uncomfortable space where the (unnamed) drover's wife and her children (and their yellow-eyed dog, Alligator) take refuge after a snake slips under the house and threatens to reappear through the cracks in the rough slab floor. As night approaches, the drover's wife huddles her children into a makeshift bed on the kitchen table, where she keeps vigil until dawn. In the long-awaited climax, 'the sickly daylight' breaks over the bush; the snake emerges; and in a moment of quiet, unspoken partnership, woman and dog work together to kill the reptile (Lawson 1986: 69). The story ends with the drover's wife tossing the mangled snake into the dwindling fire before her eldest son, Tommy, in an attempt to comfort his mother, makes his famous promise: 'Mother, I won't never go drovin'. Blast me if I do!' (Lawson 1995: 69). The story, as Brian Matthews argues, is 'one of Lawson's elusively apocalyptic visions of the bush' (1968: 54). As a frontier narrative for Australian national identity and its literatures, the tale has been reworked since its publication and retold on page, stage, canvas, and screen.

### **The Drover's Wives: Reimagining and Reclaiming Lawson's Short Story**

Since its first publication, *The Drover's Wife* has provoked a range of adaptations and creative responses by a number of well-known Australian writers and artists, including Murray Bail, Frank Moorhouse, Russell Drysdale, Barbara Jefferis, and Mandy Sayer. Interestingly, in tracing several of these adaptations, Sayer observes that reinterpretations by male authors tend to manifest as 'yarns that deliberately attempt to spin even wilder and more fantastic lies', while feminist reimaginings tend to 'remain within the realm of realism and attempt to critique how women have been portrayed in bush literature' (2008: 193). Under the terms of this opposition, both Bail and Moorhouse's versions of the story endeavour to 'kill off' Lawson, the literary precursor, while Jefferis and Sayer's reworkings focus instead on the wife herself. In other words, while Bail and Moorhouse are preoccupied with diluting Lawson's voice, Jefferis and Sayer are concerned with giving voice to Lawson's protagonist (Sayer 2008). Leah Purcell's multiple adaptations – in the form of play (2016), novel (2019), and film (2021) – clearly adhere to the latter tradition, for they pay respect to the original story even as they expand upon it. However, Purcell not only gives voice and name to the unknown wife; her task is to give voice to the provenance of truth and to the wrongs of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the question arises: what is it about the figure of the drover's wife that makes her so significant, so enduring, and so fertile for recasting across the century and across different artistic mediums? For Martina

Horáková, the 'continuing interest in Lawson's original story attests to its resilience as a foundational source of the national obsession with the bush mythology and colonial origins' (2022: 2). For Liesel Hermes, *The Drover's Wife* is 'still the Australian short story par excellence' (2007: 306) on account of its use of narratorial generalisation, which works to engender empathy for the drover's wife or at least 'an understanding of the wife's situation' (309). Narrowing in on the specific appeal of the wife's characterisation, Sayer suggests that in her appearance and reappearance, 'one can read ongoing dialogues about Australian national identity, gender relations, and particular literary genres' (2008: 193). However, beyond this, Purcell's (re)adaptations make clear how the drover's wife also constitutes a spectral figure of traumatic return. The character's recurring appearance and repeated enactment through various adaptations, modes, and genres reflects the way she haunts our collective imagination, ideologically manipulated to rationalise certain fears, cruelties, and erasures. Indeed, as a Go-Gungarri-Wakka Wakka woman, Purcell's moral obligation to 'tell the story over and over again' (2021a) forms part of her 'contemporary Dreaming': 'My corroboree or my giving is telling my stories through modern technology ... keeping the stories alive and preserved for the next generation' (Purcell 2019a).

### **Over and Over Again: The Spectral Returns of Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife***

In Purcell's revisioning of *The Drover's Wife*, the figure takes on further significance as a symptom of the deferred understanding associated with the Freudian concept of *nachträglichkeit*. *Nachträglichkeit*, as famously described in Freud's case study of the 'Wolf Man' (1918), holds that 'the traumatic memory goes through a process of elaboration or incubation after the [traumatic] event, a process that gives [the event] its subsequent force and fixity' (Leys 2000: 20). Put simply, an earlier experience is imbued with meaning retrospectively, after a later experience (Noel-Smith 2016). Applied to Purcell's rewritings, *nachträglichkeit* lays bare the way in which the story of the drover's wife – the trauma of colonial experience – could not be told at the time; it exceeded the capacity for Lawson to tell that story and for his readers to bear witness to it. Indeed, Denise Varney observes that the 'knowledge of colonial massacres of Indigenous peoples has long been quarantined in what has been called "the cult of forgetfulness practised at a national scale"' (2021: 38). Purcell's narratives foreground the overwhelm of colonial trauma, while simultaneously recognising it precisely as trauma, as a traumatic history, since there is no possibility for healing, for futurity, without this acknowledgement. In this way, suggests Varney, the drover's wife 'enacts a mode of restorative redress for theatre' – indeed for contemporary Australia more generally (2021: 38). In confronting and narrativising

the trauma of the colonial experience, particularly for Indigenous women, Purcell seeks to tell the story that haunts our nation and which has failed to be confronted through so many earlier restorings and retellings. 'These are *our* stories', Purcell insists, 'this is *our* history' [italics added] (cited in Keast 2022: 11).

Thus, while there have been numerous adaptations of *The Drover's Wife*, it is Purcell's multimodal and kaleidoscopic returning to the iconic short story, in what Sarah Ward (2021) calls a 'multi-format trilogy', that attests to the multitudinous openings and interpretations that the short story allows. At the same time, Purcell's reimaginings (and refusal) of the frontier narrative – her compulsion to return and recreate 'over and over again' – supports, in her own words, 'the format of how Blackfellas hand down stories' (2019a) and exposes the way that Lawson's story exhibits the shadow of what he, in his colonial context, cannot say. That is, although Varney, for instance, identifies the blind colonialism of Lawson's text in 'the whiteness of the drover's wife, the segregation of Aboriginal peoples from colonial settlers, and the latter's idea of the land as harsh but available for colonisation' (2021: 33), we propose that despite its social and cultural limitations, Lawson's story provides the shadows that incite wider, diverse voices to emerge and broader stories to be told. It is through this collision of historical discourse and literary tradition that contemporary First Nations storytellers and poets often locate themselves in 'middle place' – in what Evelyn Araluen (2019) calls 'the shadow between deaths ... between totem and cryptomythology, between native and notfor'. Indeed, Purcell (2021a) positions herself as a 'truth-teller' whose authorial responsibility is to 'shine a light on history' in an act of ethical restoration and re-education. Therefore, in her many returns to Lawson's short story, and through her expansion of the original story to longer form, Purcell gives body to the shadows that obscure the original narrative and critically dismantles the hegemonic understandings of home and nation that give cultural power to Lawson's narrative (Hall 2022).

To be sure, Purcell's returns to *The Drover's Wife* via different mediums – play, novel, film, and soon, a television series – angle in on different divisions and discussions for illumination, stretching the story across space and time. 'My challenge to myself', Purcell notes, 'was to make sure that if you saw the play, read the book, and saw the movie, you'd get a different experience ... it would have been boring for me just to regurgitate stuff' (cited in Keast 2022: 10). Beyond the multidimensional experience of seeing, hearing, and reading the story in three different modes, Purcell's adaptations also extend spatially as the different narratives unfold through time. The play's action, for example, moves beyond the confines and dangers bound in the domestic space of Lawson's short story to the 'liminal zone' just outside the two-room shanty, generating

larger metaphorical and 'allegorical implications about the impossibility of settlement' (Morrison 2018: 182). The novel and film expand this notion of uneven terrain as the setting develops to take in the wider community, mapping sociohistorical implications of colonial laws and jurisprudence upon the body. Certainly, the extraordinary vastness and changeability of the Australian landscape is emphasised in the film as, for instance, in its opening extreme wide shots of massive gum trees, harsh sunlight, sharp cliffs, howling wind, and rolling clouds.

In this way, each of Purcell's textual adaptations explore or expose elements of social, cultural, and generational adaptation – retellings that do not and cannot resolve the past but that posit instead alternative futures. Certainly, Linda Hutcheon suggests that adaptations are inherently 'palimpsestuous' works, 'haunted at all times by their adapted texts' (2012: 6) and oscillating in a constant dialogue between past, present, and future. The inevitable shadowing of the original text, or the prior text, gives the adaptation its haunting quality, which as Claire McCarthy (2018) explains, 'is not predicated on bringing the past to life but instead relies on acknowledging the process of adaptation in the production of meaning'. Arguably, since texts themselves are layered entities that are marked by repetition, renegotiation, and the reuse of material, textuality too is 'a supplement that has no origin' (Wolfe 2002: xiii); literature is 'a place of ghosts, of what's unfinished, unhealed, and even untellable' (Bennett and Royle 2004: 162). On screen, too, the process of adaptation often manifests as a spectral return, one that conjures the original work while simultaneously transforming it through creative reenactment, repurposing, and reinterpretation. For Purcell, whose work is inextricable from her *Dreaming*, and whose female protagonist is 'a bit of me, my mother, and my grandmother' (2021a), the feminist significance of Indigenous matrilocality, and the maternal reorientation from compliance to resistance, is part of a 'continuing songline' (Purcell 2021a) that resists the colonial project through reconnection with culture, kin, and Country. As Purcell (2019a), speaking of her 'contemporary *Dreaming*', explains:

If I can bring [my *Dreaming*] into a form that can touch and move and help bring about understanding, then I'm doing my bit for my mother and my grandmother who never had voices, and my grandfather and his mother that never had voices and were considered sub-human. I'd be doing an injustice if I stayed quiet.

### **Molly's Story: The Maternal Palimpsest and Spectralised Matriarchal History**

Purcell's returns, which are both haunting and haunted, articulate a spectralised matriarchal history that resonates with Hélène Cixous's project of *l'écriture féminine*,

whereby Purcell arrives 'vibrant, over and again' with 'farsighted' vision (Cixous 1976: 882). Cixous writes:

Because woman arrives, vibrant, over and again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with another. As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenises and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations. She must be farsighted, not limited to blow-by-blow interaction. (1976: 882)

Unquestionably, this maternal palimpsest is initiated at the beginning of Purcell's triadic project and maintained throughout her extended intertextual engagement with Lawson's work. Turning to her bookshelf for inspiration for a new writing project, Purcell recounts how her 'tatty old copy' of *The Drover's Wife* called to her, a summoning inextricably linked to embodied memories of her mother, and her earliest ventures in reading and 'writing back':

My mother used to recite *The Drover's Wife* to me when I was a little girl ... I've still got that book, with all my scribbles in it. Mum always used to say to me, 'Don't write on the words.' So all the drawings are on the blank pages and in the margins of this tattered little book ... I didn't even reread the story. I just decided to go with what I remembered. (Purcell cited in Blake 2016).

Unsurprisingly, in Purcell's trilogy, her representation of the commanding mother is embodied in the feisty protagonist of Mrs Joe (Molly) Johnson (the now-named drover's wife) as well as the spectral figure of Molly's mother as both visionary and guide. By recasting the drover's wife as the daughter of Black Mary, and as the mother of children accused of having 'a touch of the tar brush' (Purcell 2021b), Purcell indigenises Lawson's story but ultimately moves beyond a simple reimagining by undertaking important restorative work.

Specifically, Purcell's adaptations enact resistance to the phallogocentrism bound in colonial discourse, a refutation that 'ultimately celebrates that which in women has been denigrated for centuries' (Cixous 1997: 344). Cixous' project is a call for women to write themselves into the world – '[to] return from afar, from always: from "without," from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"...' (1976: 877). *L'écriture féminine*, as a theoretical position, enables women to

rewrite their (her)stories in order to write themselves into being, encouraging women to express their longings and desires without guilt or fear. In the film adaptation of *The Drover's Wife*, for example, Molly's children find refuge in a cave where her maternal family resides, pointing to the possibility of reunion with Country and kin. In the end, Molly is the one who, in Cixous' words, 'breaks out of the snare of silence' (1976: 881) – she is the one 'who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes' (882). 'I'm just a drover's wife', Molly says, 'but fight for my life, my children's, I will' (Purcell 2021b).

Purcell thus refocuses the locus of the protagonist's identity from nameless 'wife', who is known by 'status only' (Purcell 2019b: 8), to a deep exploration of 'mother', thereby refusing vulnerability and annihilation, and privileging instead resilience, hope, and continuance. In this way, the spectral mothers who inhabit Purcell's texts nourish the embodied mother who must fight for the survival of herself and her children. This reconfiguration of the drover's wife, who is now armed with a rifle rather than a green sapling club, is perhaps most evident in a scene from the novel when, at risk of drowning trying to save her son, Molly is buoyed by the vision of her mother, who died giving birth to her.

There before me ... floatin' before me ... is a woman. A fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, her native features strong in the contours of her face, her hair red; long and swirling in the current like the velvet-green weed stuck between the river rocks ... A calmness comes over me. I'm mesmerised by the woman's deep, dark eyes. I stare at her as if nothing else matters. The look in her eyes tells me something, I tilt my head to understand her thoughts. She speaks to me ... her eyes wide, knowing ... She is willing me on. To fight. To live. My children! (Purcell 2019b: 61).

Here, the fluidity of the mother's appearance evokes spatial and temporal reprieve where 'nothing else matters' (Purcell 2019b: 61). Purcell thus utilises haunting in order for Molly to come face to face with her history and to gather from this confrontation the recognition required to fight for her future. Motherhood, in this way, is reframed in Purcell's work to reconstitute 'feminine' weakness, passivity, and vulnerability into a positive, agentic sense of self that permeates beyond the body, time, and space. For Cixous, it is within and *through* the body – the maternal body – that women can write their way out of patriarchal constraint 'in milk' (1976: 881). Purcell's maternal returns, thereby, align with the liberation of *l'écriture féminine*, retelling stories, reframing history, and constructing a new future that is fluid and 'incalculable' (Cixous 2004: 350).

## 'Mother, I Won't Never Go Drovin': Revealing and Recasting Trauma

Just as Purcell audaciously revises Lawson's iconic tale, which is bound up in the national imaginary, the female figure in her trilogy audaciously forces viewer and reader to see what is hidden in the shadows, and worse, what is intentionally concealed. In its stage form, Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* was 'renowned for its visceral depictions of frontier violence that implicated audiences directly', confronting theatre-goers with the experience of traumatic realisation (Hall et al. 2021: 257). Of her play adaptation, Purcell declares: 'I'm making no apologies ... There's violence. I want people to leave the theatre in silence, like they've been hit with a good left hook' (cited in Blake 2016). Defying the historicising of women's positionality in phallogocentric discourse where '[e]ither woman is passive or she does not exist', the novel and the film equally do not shy away from the stark illumination of both racist and gendered violence (Cixous 2004: 349). In the novel, as we return to the same moment of trauma that opens the play – and again with the ferocity of *in medias res* – we see Molly under 'the moon's larger-than-normal halo of light; a powerful glow and energy, bringing unrest to the land' (Purcell 2019b: 2). Here, we learn that Molly is heavily pregnant with 'broken ribs' and 'gasping breath' (2019b: 7). While the film, in its symbolic evocation of the wild bull that threatens Molly's family, only alludes to the bestial violence that is later revealed to be at the hands of her husband, in the novel Purcell's use of asyndeton and alliteration emphasises the brutal beating of Molly's body while simultaneously building tension that propels the story forward.

Molly, feeling a fool, senses every aching part of her body: her swelling face, the red welt marks on her cheekbones, her throbbing jawline and her tender ribs. She tastes the salt of sweat and blood dribbling into her mouth as she sucks in air, exhausted, and leaning on the axe for support now ... She backs away and he grabs her by the arm, his dirty, hairy fist raised, punch after punch, her head snapping back. (Purcell 2019b: 6-7).

The detailed and difficult description of the violence that Molly endures exposes the way in which Purcell's construction of the mother is at once a symbol of pain and sacrifice as well as the figure who bears witness and epitomises resilience, braving it all for a future echoed in Molly's desperate, guttural cry which reverberates across all three adaptations: 'My children! My children!' The theme of maternal resilience is echoed in the metaphor of the snow gum: 'its stout trunk strong ... the sturdy tree's limbs outstretched, waiting to take the weight of winter ... the weight of you' (Purcell 2019b: 1). At the novel's end, Molly's granddaughter asks her father,

Danny, to recite a poem. As he speaks, 'a blanket of brilliant stars fills the sky and a new moon smiles down on the landscape below. By the old snow gum, a woman stands. They have a visitor ... It's the feminine shape of the tree trunk, exaggerated by the dark night and the firelight... Molly Johnson's legend and family live on. On country' (Purcell 2019b: 278). In such scenes, we see Molly 'arrive vibrant, over and again' as character and symbol, as nurturer, visionary, and survivor, '[in] a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with another' (Cixous 1976: 882). Importantly, in this softening shift from violent action is the deep connection to storying, retelling the past, and imagining possible futures, crucially made possible originally through theatre, which Varney describes as 'a crucial site for renewing oral culture, for artists to tell their own and others' stories, for linking contemporary issues with a long history of performance, for communities to work together' (2021: 33). In this way, Purcell's adaptations – and indeed Lawson's original – are stories of vulnerability as much as they are accounts of strength. By re-presenting history as always engaged in a process of becoming, Purcell's repeated visitations to the site of trauma move beyond intertextuality to the inevitability of haunting; in conjuring up the past, we must confront the ghosts that haunt us: 'the act of conjuring-up is as much about ways of seeing as it is about the thing seen' (Pietrzak-Franger 2012: 80).

As aforementioned, Purcell's revisions not only grant the drover's wife a name but reposition her identity from 'just a drover's wife' to mother, sister, and daughter. In this way, Molly is constructed through her simultaneous connection and concern with the past (the revelation of her Aboriginal heritage) and the future (the children to whom she is so devoted). The film makes this particularly clear, employing a disruption to the narrative's events, for instance, so that Molly's last moments of freedom and confrontation with the exploitations of colonialism constitute the opening scene, even though they do not occur until close to the narrative's end. In this way, the traumatic repetitions of Molly's life are immediately signalled and pointed up precisely as recurring and reverberating. That each confrontation with an aggressor, whether perceived or real, provokes in Molly a temporal collapse in which the faces of her abusers are blurred together further underscores the way in which she experiences each trauma as a repetition of the others. Indeed, Molly's story is echoed by Yadaka, the Indigenous man who helps her give birth to, and ultimately bury, her stillborn daughter, Mary, beside the tiny graves of several older siblings and the grandmother for whom she is named. Although Yadaka has the physical features of his father, he tells Molly that he never knew him: 'I don't think my mother even knew him' (Purcell 2021b). Yadaka's wife and children have been massacred, and he is essentially alone. Trauma is not isolated, then, but compounding.

At the same time, Purcell's texts present a reconsideration of the past as a site of comfort, protection, and belonging. The ghost of Molly's mother is not terrifying, but instead reassuring and welcomed, ensuring that we cannot read the ghosts of history presented in Purcell's adaptations as Gothic – a problematic concept in Australian Indigenous culture in any case (Gildersleeve 2020: 97). That is, it is not simply history that is Gothic – rather, it is *colonial history* that is the site of Gothic horror and trauma. Morrison terms this a 'shadow history', concerned with 'the lack of knowledge or understanding about the shattering experience of Indigenous peoples in this history, rather than a generalised misunderstanding by settler-invader peoples of their pioneer past' (2018: 175). Purcell, she argues, reimagines time as 'active and continuous ... both non-linear and profoundly intergenerational' (Morrison 2018: 176). We agree with Morrison, but further suggest that in Purcell's various reimaginings of *The Drover's Wife*, she adapts the way we see history as not only two cultures in conflict but as two historical discourses in collision. The drover himself, for instance, is an absent presence (Horáková 2022: 4), at once a symbol of advancement and colonisation, of violence and destruction. This reimagining of history also influences the way in which we understand the loss or theft of Molly's children, such that the narrative inverts the lost child trope so common in bush literature. Here, the children are not only comfortable in the bush; they move deeper within it in order to return to the safety of their Aboriginal community. They are instead in danger at the hands of the colonising authorities, determined to remove them from the power of that legacy. Thus, evil is understood not in the symbol of Lawson's black snake, nor the men of the law, or even in the drover as abuser, as Sayer observes (2008: 220), but in the agents of informal colonial authority symbolised by the merchant and the drovers as a collective. History must be held to account, must be confronted and claimed by the settler audience or reader, just as Molly must remember what 'she both knows and doesn't know' about her own identity (Horáková 2022: 6). In the same way that Molly's hesitation to acknowledge Yataka's identification of her Indigenous heritage 'also suggests hesitation on the part of the settler (the drover's wife) to imagine and accept this process' (Horáková 2022: 9), the safety and community that Molly will receive as a result of her acceptance is also extended to the settler reader. This ownership must take place, Purcell's work suggests, if anything like justice is to be considered, even as her narratives repeatedly rehearse a sense of righting or writing those historical wrongs.

Purcell's work thus moves beyond the conceptualisation of trauma as unrepresentable, instead figuring it as repeatedly, and necessarily, multiply, representable. The trauma cannot be resolved, to be sure, but what can be upheld is the inherent truth of surviving that trauma. 'It's the story I lived, it's the story I have told and will retell', the

adult Danny observes in the epilogue to Purcell's novel, in a self-conscious reference to the text's adaptations: 'the story of survival I'll pass down' (2019b: 274). 'I won't never go drovin', Danny's promise echoes across the century. But in the final analysis, it is Danny's rejection of self-imposed authority, of problematic civilisation, and of colonial history and heritage that Purcell's narratives reveal and recast. In this way, Purcell's project of maternal palimpsest moves back in order to move forward 'into the world' and 'into history' (Cixous 1997: 347). In the end, by 'emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down' (357), the multiplicity of Purcell's rebirthing of Lawson's short story invokes Cixous' Medusa who 'to life ... refuses nothing. Her language does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back, it makes possible' (347).

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