

Mirroring, Depth and Inversion: Holding Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* Against Contemporary Australia

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'There were many different darkneses;
even Victoria knew that.'¹

'How do I tell you this? How do I unconceal?'²

Introduction

Gail Jones's most recent novel, *Sorry*,³ has been readily embraced as the author's most probing consideration of the historical and contemporary treatment of Indigenous Australians by this country's federal Government. One critic noted that 'the word "sorry" has become so contentious in recent times that Gail Jones's decision to adopt it as the title of her fourth novel must be interpreted as a political statement',⁴ whilst another pronounced the novel 'Gail Jones's "sorry" to her aboriginal compatriots'.⁵ At the same time, however, the existing body of criticism regarding Jones's previous novel, *Black Mirror*, has almost entirely side-stepped a close examination of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within the text. Commentators have tended to regard such concerns as incidental to

¹ Gail Jones, *Black Mirror* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2002), p. 195.

² *Ibid.*, p. 224. All future references to this work will appear in the body of the essay.

³ Gail Jones, *Sorry* (Sydney: Vintage, 2007).

⁴ James Ley, 'Sorry', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 2007, available at:

<<http://www.smh.com.au/news/book-reviews/sorry/2007/05/04/117788377886.html>> accessed 1 October 2009.

⁵ Miranda France, 'Madness, Murder, Betrayal and Rain', *The Telegraph*, 20 June 2007, available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3665967/Madness-murder-betrayal-and-rain.html>> accessed 1 October 2009.

other issues such as the limitations of biography,⁶ the aesthetics of modernity⁷ and postmodernity,⁸ and the reception of female artists in the early twentieth century.⁹ This may be the result of a recently renewed historical interest in the largely unrecognised achievements of female Australian artists,¹⁰ or, quite simply, a consequence of *Black Mirror's* overarching stylistic interest in associative images and transformative spaces. Yet as Indigenous Australians come to occupy an ever more prominent place in Jones's fiction, and also continue to endure lower health standards, shorter life expectancies and higher unemployment rates than non-Indigenous Australians, the imperative to examine the significance of Indigenous stories and experiences in novels such as *Black Mirror* is arguably more pressing than ever before.

I argue that *Black Mirror* foregrounds the need to rectify past and present injustices and the importance of Indigenous Reconciliation through the filter of the surrealist art movement. I examine how Jones develops these themes, focusing first on the reality of war-torn Europe, second on the historical perspectives offered by non-Australian characters, and third on the political dimensions of the human body. It is through these visual and profoundly emotional foci that Jones sustains an enduring, haunting sense of incompleteness throughout the text, and fosters a broad, national imperative to 'unconceal' existing black holes in Australia's history. In doing so, *Black Mirror* calls for a politically active Australian populace and highlights the negative consequences of collective political detachment and complacency on Indigenous issues.

Before evaluating the Indigenous question in greater depth, it is worthwhile considering the ways in which the structure and style of *Black Mirror* facilitate Jones's exploration of story-telling and repressed voices. Presented as a non-linear narrative, *Black Mirror* charts Anna Griffin's

⁶ Tania Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', *JASAL* 4 (2005), pp. 49-61.

⁷ Lyn Jacobs, 'Gail Jones's "light writing": Memory and the Photo-graph', *JASAL* 5 (2006), pp. 192-208.

⁸ Fiona Roughley, 'Spatialising Experience: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* and the Contending of Postmodern Space', *Australian Literary Studies* 23 (2007), pp. 58-73.

⁹ Paul Genoni, "'Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', *JASAL* 3 (2004), pp. 159-172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

attempt to write the biography of the elderly though '[f]lamboyant and obstinate'¹¹ surrealist artist, Victoria Morrell. Whilst their relationship is initially premised on an effort to record the details of Victoria's life, both Victoria and Anna divulge various personal memories and encounters throughout these sessions. The stories offered by both women navigate 'unlikely intersections, particularly around childhood memories of a Western Australian gold-mining town'¹² as they grapple with their respective experiences of mourning, maternity and art. Jones utilises these conversations and Anna's biographical writing to confront the inherently limited nature of any 'official' history purporting to outline the complete life of an individual. Biography is deeply mistrusted as a form of record, referred to as a 'meanly simplifying genre' (16) with a marked and inadequate 'disrespect for the irreducibly copious life' (35). Indeed, Anna is compelled to abandon a reductive, rigidly chronological presentation of Victoria's life (see the chapter entitled 'The Swan' (153-209)) in favour of a structure propelled by images (see the following chapter, 'The Black Mirror Stories' (211-247)) in order to capture the fluid, sprawling complexity of Victoria's life. Importantly, Jones's willingness to acknowledge the incompleteness of biography thus enables her to 'interrogate the idea of *history* as "pure, intellectual discourse"¹³ (my emphasis) and ask 'the question *par excellence* that motors this genre: who are you?'¹⁴ in relation to Australia—*Black Mirror's* other biographical subject. In effect, the persistence of innately national concerns throughout the text broadens the fundamental question driving biography so that Jones also examines greater, collective concerns, such as 'Who are *we*?', 'Where have *we* come from?' and 'Where are *we* going?'.

The need to answer these questions is inherently connected to the unsettled, dynamic play surrounding Jones's title, *Black Mirror*, and its numerous possible gestures towards notions of opposition, inversion, mirroring and depth. One possible meaning derives from the literal object, a 'Claude glass' (otherwise known as a 'black mirror') which is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Art as:

¹¹ Bree Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', *The Courier Mail*, 26 October 2002, p. 5.

¹² Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 49.

¹³ Jacobs, citing Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) in 'Gail Jones's "light writing": Memory and the Photo-graph', p. 200.

¹⁴ Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 51.

a small tinted mirror, with a slightly convex surface, used for reflecting landscapes in miniature so as to show their broad tonal values, without distracting detail or colour.¹⁵

Once popular amongst artists and travellers, these 'black mirrors' effectively eliminated unnecessary particulars in order to produce a reductive and inaccurate (though highly picturesque and painterly) depiction of the landscape at hand. Just as Anna deems Victoria 'unresolved and imprecise, like a photograph not properly taken' (58), Jones argues against the equally 'unresolved and imprecise' image of Australia so willingly embraced by many Australians; that is, a simplistic and self-congratulatory image that fails to acknowledge urgent and underlying crises facing Indigenous people. As a whole, *Black Mirror* might be regarded as Jones's endeavour to proffer a more realistic photograph of Australia by incorporating stories of Indigenous mistreatment and hardship at the hands of governments and non-Indigenous communities (despite the fact that their potential 'unsightliness' has been traditionally concealed by a 'black mirror' worldview). Attempts to approach the text in this way are agreeably complemented by Jones's use of style and imagery, for as Sibree suggests, 'like a painting or photograph, it [*Black Mirror*] too, is fashioned from a luminous weave of light and dark, of presences and absences'.¹⁶

The idea of a 'black mirror' can also encompass other non-mutually exclusive possibilities linked to story-telling and national narratives, referring to the way in which various associative, analogous stories are mediated between Victoria and Anna (i.e., Anna's stories 'mirror' Victoria's stories, just as Victoria's stories often 'mirror' Anna's stories). Because Anna's 'whole world is like this: analogies, sadness, the hush evoked by a shape' (33), she is constantly attuned to 'the principle of correspondence' (27), forging multiple connections between their respective memories to revelatory effects. The illuminating effects of this 'mirroring' principle is perhaps most fluidly crafted when Victoria describes the light at her first surrealist art exhibition as '[j]ust like a vision' (71), prompting Anna to recall a time at a salt lake where she also 'squinted against the glare ... What a Vision! said Uncle Ernie' (73). Jones links these memories

¹⁵ Ian Chilvers (ed), *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art & Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 130.

¹⁶ Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

beyond the mere repetition of the word, 'vision' however, because Victoria is profoundly affected by her encounter with surrealist art, just as Anna's confrontation with nature is 'subordinated by awe, by loveliness, by who-knows-what' (74). Their emotional, affective 'mirroring' evokes a commonality charting the personal and indescribable. In light of their increasingly emotional discussions about absent mothers and lost lovers, the *black mirror* reflects their sense of grief and loneliness. Victoria recalls a period of intense torment and depression and the way in which 'I did not recognise myself at all; I stared into the mirror and saw darkness staring back' (246). In light of the 'visions' joining analogous, mutually illuminating stories, Anna's suggestion that '*They're everywhere, these Visions; you just have to wait; you just have to look*' (77), encapsulates the reader's task of identifying the many layers of 'visionary' mirroring and double narratives at work throughout the text. The first such example I consider is the way in which Jones's depiction of Paris under Occupation elucidates particularly confronting elements of Australia's (largely repressed) colonial history.

Mirroring: Reading Europe against the Australian experience

Whilst Victoria circulates amongst the surrealist *avant-garde*, mingling with the likes of 'Breton, Ernst, Desnos [and] Man Ray' (19), such sociability is drastically impeded by the Second World War and Victoria's struggle to cope with the disappearance of her lover, Jewels. The war allows Jones to explore the 'haunted, layered history of Paris'¹⁷ as a settlement subject to the intrusion of foreign forces, just as countless Indigenous communities throughout Australia were previously subject to colonial intervention. Similar to the way in which '[p]eople in France speak of the Occupation as though it existed in parenthesis, a pause in the continuum ... [even though] [p]arentheses *only appear* to possess containment' (239; my emphasis), Jones interrogates Australia's unsustainable attempt to contain its own 'Indigenous Holocaust' within a discrete period of time. Jones distinguishes contemporaneous responses to these two forms of invasion by way of the perceived differences in language, culture and civility between Parisians and Indigenous Australians. On the one hand, the recognisable French language and prosperous Parisian cultural traditions prompted many

¹⁷ Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

European nations to acknowledge the effects of Occupation as regrettable injustices against a highly civilised society. On the other hand, Britain's failure to even attempt to appreciate Indigenous customs *as a culture* or the Indigenous people *as cultured* essentially legitimised and necessitated paternalistic interference into Indigenous communities. Jones makes this distinction painfully clear, presenting the performative surrealist art scene in highly aesthetic, sensory terms grounded in vibrant colours and a dynamic play with surfaces. For example, at an elaborate party, even the air itself is innately connected with creativity and artistry, as 'light filtered through drawn scarlet curtains ... [giving] the impression of an organic pinkness ... [Victoria] imagined her lungs blooming with pigment' (19). In contrast, Indigenous cultural traditions are never referenced in similarly affective, generous terms, largely because most of the characters, Anna included, fail to identify (or even encounter) any forms of artistic Indigenous expression.

Despite these disparities, Jones undermines the perception that 'cultured' people are somehow empowered to control (and by extension, actively exploit) individuals and/or societies less 'cultured' than themselves. Jones depicts the experiences of women within the French art scene as a means of accessing the often untold, unrecorded and unacknowledged experiences of both male and female Indigenous Australians. Whilst a significant part of *Black Mirror* is set in Europe, Jones resists an uncritically romanticised presentation of Paris by interrogating the dominant (and overwhelmingly masculine) history of the Parisian *avant-garde*. Victoria was received as an outsider owing to both her gender and her status as an Australian, given the large part that modern primitivism played in the Parisian *avant garde*, and the simultaneous attraction and attractiveness of sophisticated expatriates from societies deemed primitive. Victoria is valued for her novelty as "*L'Australienne!*" (18), and her capacity to evoke momentarily entertaining and 'arresting Antipodean inversions' (18) to the delight of her contemporaries. André Breton, for example, who features in the novel, was indeed demonstrably curious and actively writing about Australian Aboriginal art during the 1920s. Yet at the same time, Victoria's gender contributed to her positioning as an 'Other' both interesting and vulnerable during a time in which Breton famously proclaimed, '[t]he problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in the world'.¹⁸ Even though Victoria's distinctly female voice became a 'rich

¹⁸ Hugh Honour & John Fleming, *A World History of Art*, 6th ed (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002) p. 823.

source from which to explore an alternative experience of modernity,¹⁹ she originally 'receive[d] scant recognition in the obdurately male circle in which she move[d]',²⁰ largely because for the surrealists, 'women were viewed solely as a projection of male desire and needs'.²¹ But this community more than simply marginalised women, for 'violence against women within the male surrealist movement [occurred and] is quite well documented.'²²

Jones's depiction of Victoria in Paris proves an illuminating 'mirror' against the presence and power of 'cultured', inevitably masculine figures in Australian society throughout the early to mid-1900s. In a small mining town, Herbert Morrell (Victoria's father) is presented as an anachronistic, self-deluding man of 'culture' whose financial and cultural resources tend to suppress the untold, 'unimportant' and fundamentally 'uncultured' experiences of Indigenous Australian women. Herbert's inflated sense of self-importance derives largely from his self-perception as a collector with an exceptional (and distinctly European) taste in art and architecture. He rejects Indigenous artifacts in favour of 'objects on a criterion of radical unAustralianness' (156) for he is wholeheartedly and unashamedly '[c]ontemptuous of the local' (156). Herbert's proud monoculturalism prompts him to purchase so many imported goods that Victoria can quickly and easily produce a list reflecting the full extent of their collection: 'We had Louis Seize cabinets full of curios: statuettes of Carrara marble, Bohemian bowls ... embroideries from various nunneries in Europe, and a series of ostentatious and rather ugly oil paintings' (47). Herbert himself willingly shares his attempts to 'systematically rank' (158) and order 'every race and nation on earth' (158), pushing Indigenous Australians to the very bottom of the list on the grounds that they are without 'markets, commodities and *evidence of artistry*' (158, my emphasis). In light of Herbert's determined efforts to further his highbrow tastes (and his equally 'refined' public persona) it is unsurprising that he views Lily-White as an Indigenous 'mission-girl ... well-trained for housework and general slavery' (178). He is '[c]ontemptuous of her race' (179) just as Miss Casey, a fellow

¹⁹ Genoni, "'Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', p. 170.

²⁰ Genoni, "'Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe', p. 163.

²¹ Honour & Fleming, *A World History of Art*, p. 823.

²² A comment by Gail Jones as cited in Sibree, 'The Window of Identity', p. 5.

resident in the Morrell home, 'thought Lily-White an animal' (182-183). Building on a former colonial paradigm where it was acceptable to 'set up dynamite traps at waterholes just to kill off Aborigines' (258), the perceived animalism of Indigenous people informs masculine attempts to colonise women's bodies. Lily-White was used by Herbert (her employer) for sexual gratification because she was 'almost not there, a symbol he banged against' (179). Even though we are never explicitly told that Lily-White does not consent to sex, Herbert's willingness to reduce her personality and entire cultural background to 'a body in whom he imagined every uncivilised simplicity' (179) strongly suggests that her improbable consent would have been quite immaterial anyway.

Black Mirror attempts to give voice to the experiences of women like Lily-White by recognising the exploitative power imbalances that characterised so many relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a reality that does not appear to have been spoken about at the time, nor, arguably, to meaningful effect in contemporary Australian society. Rather than directly ventriloquise the stories of Indigenous women like Lily-White, Jones uses Victoria's experience of the surrealist art movement and, to a larger extent, her subsequent experience of rape as an empathic, correlative means of accessing Lily-White's untold history. Victoria tells Anna that being sexually assaulted by three German soldiers left her with 'a kind of hollowness; I emptied out' (243), and describes the way in which the event called attention to her own crude utility, for 'my body was occupied ... [and] I knew my own concavity' (243). Just as Victoria 'wept for her own loneliness and her depatriation' (146) after being raped, having become little more than 'a body others pressed their intentions on' (146), the ill-treatment afforded to ostensibly primitive and 'uncultured' women like Lily-White emerges as a truly frightening and demeaning state of affairs. By the very act of telling these stories, *Black Mirror* suggests that the frequency of such occurrences in Australia's past need to be acknowledged rather than ignored. Rape is a particularly powerful and fitting metaphor for this task, as sexual penetration encapsulates the process of colonisation itself; that is, the implementation of forceful, non-consensual projects within Indigenous communities (such as *The Stolen Generation* and systematic killings) as a means of actively suppressing (and often destroying) Indigenous stories altogether.

Inversion: Reading new perspectives to gain empathy and understanding

Building on Jones's emphasis on historical Indigenous exploitation, *Black Mirror* urges an understanding of the ways in which these elements of Australia's past continue to impact upon the present (and, by implication, the future). In particular, Jones foregrounds the long-term effects of history on future generations through Anna's lover, Winston, a Jamaican expatriate and English Literature student currently living in London. Moving beyond the experiences of Lily-White and a young Victoria during the early twentieth century, Winston proffers a modern perspective on the ways in which momentous encounters and forms of grief are reproduced and re-navigated along family, ethnic and national lines. Despite the scope of Winston's personal talents and achievements, he remains haunted by the memory of Jamaica's colonial past. In response to Anna's question, 'Do you remember much of your childhood?' he answers, 'again formally' (103):

Black people—everywhere—always remember. Only the imperialist has the privilege of amnesia ... [Anna] knew then there were things he would never tell her (103).

Winston and Anna share a tendency to become self-conscious of their respective skin colours whilst in each other's company. This point of difference proves a recurring source of unease between them, as Winston frequently denies Anna the 'privilege' of forgetting the turbulent interplay between white and black people within her own nation, Australia. Whilst their affair facilitates a shared experience of becoming 'tropical and dark' (98), these 'jokey extrapolation[s]' (98) reveal Winston's lasting resentment of the way in which white people have not only abused their privileged positions at the expense of black people, but also have failed to remedy these negative consequences. On the other hand, Anna is continually surprised at Winston's professed connection with Jamaica's historical and cultural traditions, as realised through his musings on his mother and his childhood on a sugar plantation. When recounting these stories, he embodies his mother's manner of speaking (or singing, as the case may be): '*Nuh cry, nuh cry, nuh cry me poo chile, / you is mine an me is yours*' (105).

When Anna asks Winston 'Why is it ... that you mimic your mother's voice?' (106) he is surprised by her question and responds, 'It's my voice too ... [d]on't you understand?' (106).

But Anna *doesn't* understand, for she is completely removed from the reality of Indigenous Australia. Even as a child she perceived Indigenous people as an exotic 'other' rather than an integral part of her community. She rode her bike to 'Aboriginal camps and the desert' (55) in part because 'in this far-out region Anna felt transgressive' (55). In addition to her own detachment from Indigenous Australians, a now-adult Anna appears somewhat cynical about the ability of white Australians to ever know or appreciate Indigenous customs. This is suggested after Winston visits Victoria and mentions that:

[Victoria's] been telling me ... about the black people, the Aborigines.
 (Jesus, thought Anna. What could she possibly know?)
 About spirits, persists Winston. Why have you never told me? (131)

There are many reasons why Anna has failed to raise the subject of Indigenous Australians to a non-Australian citizen; largely because she knows next to nothing about their way of life and thus, like Australia at large, has preferred to disguise her ignorance by avoiding the topic altogether. In this respect, Winston rather aptly equates and implicates Anna with/in the colonial project itself, telling her, 'when he is angry ... to hurt her: *I will not be your dark fucking continent*' (98). This gap between them is again apparent when Anna somewhat awkwardly asks Winston to '[t]each [her] not to be afraid of the dark' (102). Troublingly, it isn't Anna who is perplexed by the Indigenous question to the point where she loses sleep—rather, it is Winston, who says to her in the middle of the night; in a voice evoking his own national history: 'Me can' sleep, he said softly, in his boyhood speech. Me keep thinkin bout them po thirsty Aborigines' (260). Winston's choice of vernacular is significant as it highlights the fact that even though he comes from the other side of the world, he evidences a greater concern and connection with Australia's Indigenous population than Anna does, even though she is an Australian.

Winston's attitude towards the Australian Indigenous population is shared by Victoria, who approaches Indigenous people with a great degree

of empathy and enthusiasm (largely due to her close family-connections with Lily-White and Ruby-White. Victoria lovingly mentions Ruby-White as '[m]y sister, my Ruby' (182), and her genuine personal connection with Indigenous Australia is further evidenced by her affective, compassionate response to the brutal murder of two black swans:

Two adult swans were pierced through the chest with makeshift spears, and they had been plucked of their wing-feathers so that they looked exposed and violated. Their long necks were limp and their black bellies already bloated with death. (202)

The parallels between the massacre of the swans and the colonial massacres of Indigenous people emerges through Jones's emphasis on the body parts of swans that are also common to humans, namely, their exposed ' chests', ' necks' and ' bellies'. This comparison is further enhanced through the construction of a principal binary whereby ' black' victims are subject to the fatal cruelty of ' white' oppressors. The plucked feathers re-enforce the awful reality of ' cruelty for cruelty's sake' inflicted upon the birds to grant the schoolboys a close inspection of their barbaric work. This event prompts Victoria to cry, ' not only for the swans but more mysteriously for Lily-White, as well. So Victoria sobbed for all the wounds that she did not understand' (203), bewildered as to how and why such brutality is imposed upon vulnerable others.

Victoria's response to this situation cannot be dismissed as the simple grief of an overwhelmed child, as evidenced when an older Victoria sees a woman throw a baby into the Seine. This similarly localised incident prompts Victoria to grieve once more for a variety of interconnected horrors, weeping ' for the baby ... for Occupied Paris, and its many barbarities ... for her lover, Jules' (11-12). Refusing to be ignored, the slaughter of the swans remains a momentous event for Victoria, for, in the absence of an explicit explanation behind her ' propensity for display' (129), it appears to inform her decision to adorn herself in feathers for much of her adult life. A connection between this momentous experience and Victoria's penchant for feathers can be drawn, not only because the event is said to enable her to mourn for multiple other Indigenous ' wounds', but because Victoria's feathers, just like those of the swans, were also ' so dark they had an oily sheen' (129). Importantly, as Victoria informs Anna at their first meeting, her black feathers actually come from swans: ' In your honour I am

wearing swans' (17). The identical colour and texture of both sets of feathers are unlikely to be mere coincidences. Rather, in the context of the unforgiving ways in which her father, brother and country have approached Indigenous people, Victoria's feathers come to stand much like Coleridge's albatross around her neck, representing her inability to rectify injustice whilst allowing her to say 'sorry'. When she is placed under hypnosis by figures from the surrealist art scene she betrays a series of unconscious associations between swans, Indigeneity and herself:

What creature are you?
Swan and not swan. Winged and wingless. Beady-eyed.
Do you have a name?
Lily-white. Midas. Ruby. Swan-Seine. (91)

The feathers become so thoroughly intertwined with Victoria's sense of self and self-fashioning that when recounting an elaborate party she attended in her youth she exclaims, 'And my feathers, of course. I wore my feathers' (110). Similarly, despite her deteriorating condition in the face of death, we are told that Victoria is 'sitting up in bed, wearing her feathers' (268). In fact, the feathers remain a part of Victoria in death itself, as she becomes 'ash as she wished, mingled with her swan's feather head-dress' (277).

Despite Victoria's personal efforts to engage with repressed stories and lost voices, the ending of the novel (rather inevitably) emphasises the need for substantive change in relation to Indigenous affairs. Led to the place where Lily-white 'buried the placenta she gave birth to with her daughter, Ruby' (301), this final, concluding image evokes a natural, unflinching connection between Indigenous beliefs and the Australian landscape. Here, even though 'Whitefellas would pass by and not notice anything at all' (301), we are explicitly told (though by whom it is not quite clear) that:

This place is holy. It contests all the mine-work and despoliation that is everywhere around. It is the unregarded and persisting monument of countless other stories. It is its own kind of marvellous. A secret marvellous. (301)

The existence of unsaid, 'countless' Indigenous stories foregrounds the fact that these 'contested histories will not be laid to rest'²³ whilst there are still many stories which must be expressed. Importantly, a failure to acknowledge the 'marvellous' stories literally and spiritually embedded in the Australian landscape means that Australians cannot gain a more comprehensive understanding of their own nation. Importantly, Jones locates 'holiness' (despite the horrific deaths, justices and oppressions marring the postmodern context) in the strength and sanctity of stories as a form of life-source. Much like the placenta, this passage acknowledges how narratives of association, belonging and identification are worthy of devotion because they continue to sustain Indigenous communities. Moreover, just as Victoria fails to volunteer all of her 'black mirror stories', proclaiming 'I have several black mirror stories and I will give you [Anna] three' (213), the open-ended conclusion of *Black Mirror* similarly and 'deliberately acknowledges the limits of its knowledge and reach'.²⁴ Despite the contribution of *Black Mirror*, Jones acknowledges that she cannot come close to representing the extent of all forms of grief experienced by Indigenous communities and inspired by arms of the Australian government (for example, *The Stolen Generation*, heavy restrictions on Native Title Claims or Indigenous deaths in custody). Subsequently, the open-endedness of the narrative works against a sense of complacency by re-iterating an urgent task for readers: re-creating an alternative sense of the 'community [that] might yet have been possible' (233).

*Depth: Reading the substance of human hands as a mandate
for change*

Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, *Black Mirror* appears to broaden traditional conceptions of the 'many different darknesses' (195) confronting contemporary Australia by moving beyond historical injustices committed against Indigenous people to include the non-responsiveness of Australian citizens to crises within Indigenous communities. Written before The Apology that was to be delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008, Jones gestures towards the federal Government's failure to 'say sorry' for 'The Dead Heart of Australia' (259) and, accordingly, locates the impetus for change within the collective power of the Australian

²³ Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 58.

²⁴ Dalziell, 'An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones's *Black Mirror*', p. 58.

populace. Drawing upon elusive, heavily imagistic conceptions of the human body (in particular, human hands), *Black Mirror* encourages readers to offer collective support for the movement towards Indigenous Reconciliation. In light of the 250 000 iconic cardboard hands offered by Australians in a proliferation of *Sea of Hands* installations on *National Sorry Day* in the year 2000,²⁵ *Black Mirror* can be read as a lament for the absence of a formal apology or substantive policy change at the conclusion of these high-profile national initiatives; a concern that the enormous *Sea of Hands* proved a regrettable and ever-declining case of 'form over substance'.

Again, the key story-teller who develops this theme is Victoria, who discusses hearts, heads and hands in fleetingly symbolic, associative terms whilst entering a state of gradual decline. Her recollections encapsulate her surrealist *oeuvre* rather nicely (given that the image of a detached hand also evokes the idea of the 'automatic hand' and automatic writing from Breton's 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*) whilst also affording Anna an insight into some of Victoria's most significant, traumatic experiences. One such example is the way in which she describes the haunting presence of her former lover, Jewels, for 'over the span of absence his phantom arm still lay warmly across her breast, cupping at her heart' (112). Similarly, after witnessing a woman throw her baby into the Seine, Victoria traumatically 'imagined herself translucent. Upraised veins marbled her glassy skin ... her two hands, blue stars' (13). Here, the unnatural, transient quality of Victoria's hands captures the extent of her unattainable suffering whilst pre-figuring Jones's complex, ambivalent and evolving use of human hands to chart the decline of the Indigenous Reconciliation movement.

Throughout the text, hands move from a hopeful symbol of possibility before becoming portentous and cursory and finally existing as empty, fading residue. An early depiction of hands provides a powerful sense of hope whilst representing the exciting possibilities of being able to make, create, design and act. Early in her art career whilst at a Salvador Dali lecture, Victoria notices that

a single plastic hand had detached in a flurry... it was white, child-size and appeared immaculate. ... I saw the asterix of

²⁵ *Sea of Hands* [Online], *Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation*, available at: <http://www.antar.org.au/sea_of_hands> accessed 1 October 2009.

every hand. And I saw my own hands, glimmering, white and open before me ... as though fabulously new. (86)

Victoria's inspired feelings of self-empowerment in response to this hand captures a particularly democratic (yet politically realist) approach to instigating action and awareness amongst the broader populace. As changes in Australian social justice policy in particular are indeed contingent on popular support, this passage offers a short-lived enthusiasm as to what the sentiment represented by the images of the *Sea of Hands* might have achieved. Following this incident, hands soon pre-figure a sense of failure, collapse and death, as Victoria thinks she sees 'a hand drift over the river and trace a line in the sky, a kind of script of her death, a prognostication' (142). The brief appearance and momentary impact of this hand suggests a sense of declining influence and energy, culminating in death itself.

Jones suggests we are perilously close to realising this outcome when we are left with the empty remains of hands as opposed to substantive hands themselves. The cartoon in Herbert Morrell's stereoscope features a deceptively simple, comical story in which a wealthy man is caught stealing kisses from the servant girl. In the story, 'the man's wife (one supposes) ... is pointing angrily ... and imprinted on his back are two floury handmarks' (219). Whilst these prints serve as an indicator of culpability and responsibility, importantly, it is not the hands themselves that are present, but rather, the inauthentic trace of human hands. As Jones's development of Indigenous themes become increasingly explicit, her proposal is fully realised when she uses the fragile absence of hands to suggest that their presence (and the strong, activist sentiment they embodied) is necessary if our sense of national identity is to be complete:

After the war I met a woman who had one arm blasted away, and who kept reaching, so she said, to brush hair from her face with the destroyed lost arm. It felt like that: impossible. It was like a phantom limb asserting lost presence. I felt spooked and disfigured by incompleteness. (230)

Like a 'phantom limb', Jones develops the notion that an ongoing failure to act together and encourage government change for Indigenous Australians will continue to 'haunt' Australia (domestically and internationally) until positive action is taken. The sign hanging outside the Midas mines re-

enforces this sense of urgency, placing the mandate for change 'in the hands', so to speak, of ordinary Australians:

It was a picture of two large white hands, hanging downwards.
They appeared severed and ghostly. The caption simply read:
T H E S E A R E P R E C I O U S. *The asterix of any hand.*
(298)

It is no coincidence that by the second last page of the novel the focus has moved from Victoria to Anna, a representative of the next generation, and tells us that 'Anna is alone again ... looking for a hand to clutch' (300). Jones leaves readers with an image re-enforcing her original portrayal of the inherent possibilities of an open hand searching for a meaningful union with multiple others. It is through the powerful formation of an Australian collective that Indigenous history can be fittingly acknowledged and appreciated, allowing our 'official' national history to avoid the incomplete simplicity of a reductive 'black mirror'.

Although *Sorry* can arguably be read as an exploration of the limitations of apology and understanding—that is, the possibility that an apology can be 'too little, too late'—*Black Mirror* attempts to alleviate the haunting presence of unacknowledged Indigenous history by bringing it to the fore and acknowledging how non-Indigenous Australians have contributed to that history. The ways in which Jones utilises the various dimensions of a 'black mirror', namely, mirroring, depth and inversion, proves a particularly illuminating means of exploring Indigenous narratives through association and analogy. *Black Mirror* is, in fact, a startlingly accurate reflection of one key dimension of contemporary Australia.

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