# TV Transformations & Transgressive Women

## From *Prisoner: Cell Block H* to *Wentworth*


Edited by Radha O'Meara, Tessa Dwyer, Stayci Taylor and Craig Batty

Peter Lang

'Just like *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*, this book is an instant cult classic. Written with love by a collective of expert aca-fans, *TV Transformations & Transgressive Women* takes us on a fascinating journey through the cultural legacies of Australia's favourite prison TV dramas. Contributors use a rich palette of methods, from genre analysis to production research, to unpack the significance of these shows. An exemplary textual study, this richly multi-perspectival collection is essential reading for anyone interested in television genres.'

– Ramon Lobato, Associate Professor, RMIT University

'This collection is a wonderful example of how certain TV shows can have tremendous impact, not only in the time of their making, but for several decades, when suddenly there's the opportunity to travel even further in an on-demand age and meet new audiences, academics and analytical approaches. The chapters offer a wide range of interesting interpretations and discussions, not the least on the way women have been represented on screen then and now. A good read for academics, fans and aca-fans.'

– Eva Novrup Redvall, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

A deep dive into iconic 1980s Australian women-in-prison TV drama *Prisoner* (aka *Cell Block H*), its contemporary reimagining as *Wentworth*, and its broader, global industry significance and influence, this book brings together a range of scholarly and industry perspectives, including an interview with actor Shareena Clanton (*Wentworth*'s Doreen Anderson). Its chapters draw on talks with producers, screenwriters and casting; fan voices from the *Wentworth* twitterverse; comparisons with Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*; queer and LGBTQ approaches; and international production histories and contexts. By charting a path from *Prisoner* to *Wentworth*, the book offers a new mapping of TV shifts and transformations through the lens of female transgression, ruminating on the history, currency, industry position and cultural value of women-in-prison series.

The editors of this volume are screen studies and screenwriting scholars with specialist skills in a range of areas and practices, including script development, gender studies and television studies. **Radha O'Meara** is Lecturer in Screenwriting at the University of Melbourne. Her critical research concentrates on serial storytelling and industrial authorship in contemporary film and television. **Tessa Dwyer** is Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies, Monash University. Her research focuses on screen media and language difference, and she has published the monograph *Speaking in Subtitles* (2017). **Stayci Taylor** is Senior Lecturer, Master of Media, RMIT University. Her research focuses on screenwriting practice, and she has co-edited two books on script development. **Craig Batty** is Professor and Dean of Research (Creative) at the University of South Australia. He has published fifteen books and many articles on screenwriting and creative practice research.

# TV Transformations & Transgressive Women

AUSTRALIAN STUDIES: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Series Editor
Anne Brewster
Associate Professor,
University of New South Wales

Volume 4

PETER LANG
Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • New York • Wien

# TV Transformations & Transgressive Women

From *Prisoner*: *Cell Block H* to *Wentworth*

Edited by Radha O'Meara, Tessa Dwyer, Stayci Taylor and Craig Batty

PETER LANG
Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • New York • Wien

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche National-bibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: O'Meara, Radha, 1975– editor. | Dwyer, Tessa, 1970– editor. | Taylor, Stayci, 1969– editor. | Batty, Craig, 1981– editor.
Title: TV transformations & transgressive women : from Prisoner: Cell Block H to Wentworth / Radha O'Meara, Tessa Dwyer, Stayci Taylor, Craig Batty [editors].
Description: Oxford, UK ; New York : Peter Lang, 2022. | Series: Australian studies: interdisciplinary perspectives, 22978194 ; vol no. 4 | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021055723 (print) | LCCN 2021055724 (ebook) | ISBN 9781789975062 (hardback) | ISBN 9781789975079 (ebook) | ISBN 9781789975086 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Prison television programs—Australia—History and criticism. | Women prisoners on television. | LCGFT: Essays.
Classification: LCC PN1992.8.P75 T83 2022 (print) | LCC PN1992.8.P75 (ebook) | DDC 791.45/75—dc23/eng/20220210
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021055723
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021055724

Cover image © Daryn Wolfsbauer.

Cover design by Peter Lang Ltd.

ISSN 2297-8194
ISBN 978-1-78997-506-2 (print)
ISBN 978-1-78997-507-9 (ePDF)
ISBN 978-1-78997-508-6 (ePub)



Published by Peter Lang Ltd, International Academic Publishers,
Oxford, United Kingdom
oxford@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com



This publication has been peer reviewed.

# Contents

# Figures

KIM AKASS AND SUE TURNBULL

# Foreword

When I received the invitation to be a keynote speaker at the *Wentworth is The New Prisoner* conference – the 2018 gathering in Melbourne, Australia, where this edited collection began its life – I was so flattered that I accepted without hesitation. Very occasionally is there a conference on a TV series so dear to your heart that it reminds you just why you became a TV scholar in the first place. *Prisoner*: *Cell Block H* (1979–86) – as it was called in the UK – was one such series. The fact that I hadn't actually watched it since it first aired, and then it was usually after a night out at the pub, didn't faze me. I loved the series. It was a cult classic. I would find it on YouTube and re-watch. No problem. As for *Wentworth* (2013–21) being the new *Prisoner*, I was sure that if it was anything like the original series, I would love that too.

So, invitation accepted, subject proposed, I settled down to my research.

The first problem I encountered was that, even though the show had started in February 1979 in Australia, it didn't make it to Britain until October 1984; and then it was only on Yorkshire TV, not actually making it to London until Thames TV screened it in 1987. Why does this matter? Because, the truth is that I didn't actually watch the show after the pub. It was screened around the time of my first child being born, which meant that the first few years of sleepless nights had erased the series from my memory. It was when I discovered that there were 692 episodes of the show, and that all 692 had slipped into a black hole in my brain known as 'new motherhood', that I really began to worry.

No matter. I would catch up with what I could and hope that everyone else at the conference was also struggling under the sheer weight of 692 hours of TV to re-watch.

I then turned to *Wentworth*, which was near impossible to find on British TV. Maybe it was due to the overwhelming popularity of *Orange is the New Black* (2013–19), but nobody I knew had seen *Wentworth*. It was a show that only the most dedicated fans could find as, much like its predecessor in the 1980s, Channel 5 tucked it away late at night and, to be honest, not many people that study TV in the UK watch Channel 5. To my relief, I eventually found it on Amazon Prime and began my great *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* viewing marathon.

I wish I could say that I did something other than watch *Wentworth* and *Prisoner* for the best part of four months. People often say that watching TV for a living isn't really a job, but they clearly have never watched a series twelve hours straight, seven days a week. When I discovered that *Prisoner* had been remade for American TV as *Dangerous Women* (1981–2), I nearly lost the plot. Luckily there were *only* fifty-two episodes – I could easily watch them in the space of two weeks, *Wentworth* and *Prisoner* not so.

I bare my soul to you in this Foreword because, over the course of those four summer months, curled up on the sofa, pen and notebook in hand (actually laptop but you know what I mean), from nine in the morning until nine at night (only toilet and lunch breaks allowed), I became totally absorbed in the world of Australian prison drama. I learned the lingo and lived the dream. I loved Franky Doyle (both iterations), was in awe of The Freak and cried when [SPOILER ALERT] Bea died at her hands at the end of season four of *Wentworth*. In truth, over the course of those four months I lost any sense of objectivity and became totally consumed by and obsessed with the women in Wentworth Detention Centre. When the time came for me to get on that plane to Melbourne and address the conference, I was really worried that all pretence of academic cool was lost and I would be exposed for the fangirl that I had become.

I need not have worried. The *Wentworth is the New Prisoner* conference was quite possibly the best conference I have been to since *The Sopranos: A Wake* (2008). Not dissimilar in its approach, and as committed to its 'fandom' as the *Sopranos* conference, there were whole sessions devoted to cast and crew, no pretence of objectivity, a photo shoot outside the walls of a former prison, and a conference dinner and quiz that were even more fun than the *Sopranos* location tour of New Jersey. I lived the Wentworth Detention Centre dream.

The essays in this collection reflect that passion. From the two Craigs recollecting their coming out to *Prisoner*, Alex Bevan's celebration of the stone-cold power dame and Alexa Scarlata's investigation into how Netflix and America changed *Wentworth* – to name but three – the essays contained within the following pages are excellent examples of the engagement of the aca-fan, or fan scholar, of *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*. Embracing the subjective within research, each of the essays demonstrates a love of the series and the medium that reminds me of why I began writing about TV. Every now and again, a series comes along that speaks directly to (and for) the dis-enfranchised – the queer, female, Black and trans members of the audience traditionally excluded from dominant TV narratives – and in response, powerful scholarship emerges.

As everyone in Australia will have, at the time of writing, seen the latest season of *Wentworth* (and the return of Joan Ferguson), spare a thought for those of us that are still waiting. Until then, watch some re-runs of *Prisoner*, refresh your memory of *Wentworth*, put the kettle on and settle down with this book. Reading these essays has not only re-ignited my love affair with *Wentworth* but also with TV in general. I hope it does the same for you.

*– Kim Akass*
Professor of Radio, Television and Film
Rowan University, USA

***

Like Kim, I was thrilled to be invited to speak at the *Wentworth is the New Prisoner* conference, not least because *Prisoner* was not only the first TV show I ever wrote about as a postgraduate student, but also because it introduced me to the pleasure – and pain – of doing audience research. Let me explain.

I first encountered *Prisoner* while teaching in an American high school just outside Philadelphia in 1980. At that time, I became aware that my students were racing off to the cafeteria to watch a series called *Cell Block H*, which they thought I would like. 'They talk funny, Miss', they told me, 'just like you'. A comment suggesting that my North of England 'Geordie' accent was just as foreign to their ears as the Australian. It's 'wild', they told me, 'all these women fighting and swearing'. To my shame, I didn't investigate

further, other than to note in passing that it certainly didn't look British to me. It would take a change of career and a change of continents before I encountered *Prisoner*, aka *Cell Block H*, again in Australia, in 1984, while studying for a PhD in Media and Education.

At that point, my then supervisor showed me a letter he had found in the Channel Ten archives from the headmaster of a girls' high school in outer Melbourne, complaining that a group of girls were copying the antisocial behaviours of the inmates, including aggression towards the authority that the school imposed. I specifically recall that the headmaster was most offended by the fact that the students had started referring to the teachers as 'the screws'. The possibility that, like a prison, the institution of a school imposes regulations on a student's time, occupation of space and on appropriate dress and behaviour, was clearly lost on the headmaster – though clearly not on the girls. *Prisoner*, I concluded after interviewing this group of students for myself, served as a metaphor in their resistance to the forces seeking to make them conform to feminine 'niceness' and being 'good girls'. But this wasn't the whole story. How could it be?

As Alan McKee has suggested, citing Thomas (1980), Palmer (1986), Fiske (1987), Hodge and Tripp (1986), Docker and Curthoys (1997) and my own unpublished research on the show, *Prisoner* might just be *the* Australian TV show to have inspired more audience research than any other (McKee 2001: 184). And McKee may well be right, since other successful Australian exports in the 1980s, such as *Neighbours* (1985–) and *Home and Away* (1998–), appear to have passed almost unnoticed (though there was a great deal of press speculation about their projected appeal to audiences in the UK).

Perhaps even more intriguing is the fact that while the original *Prisoner* attracted so much attention because of its presumed effects on a vulnerable young audience, when the re-imagined *Wentworth* arrived on Australian screens via the SoHo streaming service, concern was raised not about the portrayal of violence, the sex, the swearing or the unladylike behaviour, but whether or not it would live up to the expectations set by the original. In other words, *Prisoner* was now regarded as one of the great, trail-blazing Australian series that changed the way women were represented on screen. While it would take a much longer essay to properly account for how and why the reception of these two series has changed over the last fifty years,

I think this trajectory serves to illustrate some significant differences in the TV landscape more generally.

In the beginning, *Prisoner* was shown on network TV in Australia, in an early evening family viewing timeslot. Over the years I have encountered many students, now adults, who have told me that they were not allowed to watch *Prisoner* by their parents because of the 'violence' and presumed negative effects. *Wentworth*, on the other hand, was commissioned by Foxtel (the Australian branch of the Fox Network) in 2012 and launched on the streaming channel SoHo in 2013, before moving across to Fox Showcase in 2017. As executive director Brian Walsh suggested in a press release at the time: '*Wentworth* will be a dynamic and very confronting drama series, developed and stylized specifically for subscription TV audiences. We have told producers to push all boundaries and honestly depict life on the inside as it is in 2012' (cited by Dallas 2012).

The key phrase here is 'subscription TV audiences', which signals a perception that *Wentworth* will cater to a specific 'niche' audience, one that can possibly afford what were at the time high subscription fees for Foxtel. In commissioning *Wentworth*, Foxtel content producers would also be well aware of the global cult following for *Prisoner*, and how the re-imagined *Wentworth* might meet the needs of a global niche audience who would be inspired to subscribe to their streaming service in order to watch the show. I know I did.

From the moment in 1980 when fifty female motorbike riders converged on the offices of KTLA-5 on Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, to protest the death of Franky Doyle, the lesbian prisoner who had been shot by police during a riot in episode 20 of *Cell Block H*; to the enthusiastic online fan reception of *Wentworth* when it was shown in the United States; it is clear that both shows have inspired the kind of participatory engagement that begs the question 'why?'.

There are, as this collection reveals, so many reasons why *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* have continued to engage viewers all over the world and inspire the kinds of personal and critical responses represented here. Let us not forget what Sarah Cardwell has described as an aesthetic response to TV, which 'entails a heightened alertness to the formal, sensory and "design" qualities of the artwork', allowing the viewer to experience 'a specific kind of fulfilling emotional engagement with the work'. While it may have taken

some time for TV to be considered 'art', *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* can be appreciated as much for their 'artfulness' as for their portrayal of women struggling to survive in a system that is weighted against them.

As this collection clearly demonstrates, *Wentworth* matters as much today as *Prisoner* did some forty years ago. Now read on and find out why.

– Sue Turnbull
Senior Professor of Communication and Media
University of Wollongong, Australia

## Bibliography

Cardwell, S. (2013). 'Television Aesthetics: Stylistic Analysis and Beyond'. In J. Jacobs and S. Peacock (eds), *Television Aesthetics and Style*, pp. 23–44. London: Bloomsbury.

Dallas, S. (2012). 'Foxtel Commissions New *Prisoner* Series, Titled *Wentworth*', *If Magazine*, The Intermedia Group, 5 March.

Docker, J. and Curthoys, A. (1997). '*Prisoner*'. In H. Newcomb (ed.), *Museum of Broadcast Communications Encyclopedia of Television*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television Culture*. London: Methuen.

Hodge, R. and Tripp, D. (1986). *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Palmer, P. (1986). *Girls and Television*. Sydney, NSW: Social Policy Unit, Minister of Education.

Thomas, C. (1980). 'Girls and Counter-School Culture'. In D. McCallum and U. Ozolins (eds), *Melbourne Working Papers*, pp. 125–56. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Turnbull, S. (1984). '*Prisoner*: Patterns of Opposition and Identification', Unpublished Paper, Department of Media Studies, La Trobe University, Australia.

——(2017). 'Top Dogs and Other Freaks: *Wentworth* and the Re-imaging of *Prisoner Cell Block H*'. In M. Buonnano (ed.), *Television Antiheroines: Women Behaving Badly in Crime and Prison Drama*, pp. 181–98. Bristol/Chicago: Intellect Books.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all participants of 2018's *Wentworth is the New Prisoner* conference, which had the goal of uniting those who study and are fans of *Wentworth* and *Prisoner*, with those who are or who have been involved in making these shows, with the aim of generating a lively exchange of critical and creative ideas. The participants not only made the event the success it was in (and beyond) achieving those goals, but also set us on the path to producing this book. Participating organizations, keynote speakers, moderators, industry panellists and presenters (some of whom have authored chapters for the book) included the Australian Film Institute (AFI) Research Collection, Australia's National Film and Sound Archive, Kim Akass, Amanda K. Allen, Olympia Barron, Michael Beets, Alex Bevan, Michael Brindley, Philippa Burne, Kathy Chambers, Adrian Danks, Faye Davies, Jessica Ford, Catherine Gillam, Alexander Gionfriddo, Miguel Gonzalez, Craig Haslop, Kate Hood, Jessica Ive, Renee Middlemost, Helen Milte, Whitney Monaghan, Monash University, Jan Russ, Diana Sandars, Kate Saunders, Alexa Scalata, Kirsten Stevens, RMIT University, Ros Tatarka, the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, Sue Turnbull, Terrie Waddell and Kate Warner. Thank you for the dynamic presentations, passionate dialogues, lively collegiality and interpretive dance!

Regarding the book in particular, we first wish to thank Lucy Melville at Peter Lang, who – also being a *Prisoner* fan – invited us to work with her team when she heard about the conference. Thanks to Laurel Plapp, also at Peter Lang, who guided us through the process – and was understanding when we needed extensions.

Thanks also go to Steven Chong, for services to copyediting, Yaron Meron, for services to photography, and Adrian Danks, who gave us permission to quote the speech he gave to launch our conference in the editor's introduction to this book.

On behalf of our authors, we extend our gratitude to the many industry practitioners and expert informants who generously gave their time and shared their knowledge in interviews conducted by contributors to this volume. Thanks to Martha Ansara, Michael Brindley, Shareena Clanton, Andreas Fuhrman, Marcia Gardner, Pete McTighe, Robynne Murphy, Pollo de Pimentel, Jan Russ, Mark Stiles and Daniela Torsch. Thanks to Cath Moore for her work transcribing and editing the interview with Shareena Clanton.

Additionally, we would like to thank the many academics who acted as peer reviewers for the chapters in this collection. In generously sharing their time, expert knowledge and constructive criticism, they aided immensely in shaping and fine-tuning the research in the chapters that follow.

Thanks also for institutional support provided to the conference and book by Monash University, the School of Culture and Communication in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne, and the University of Technology Sydney. Monash University provided Special Project funds to enable inclusion of an Indigenous Australian perspective. Other university support went towards proofreading and associated costs.

Finally, and most importantly, we acknowledge that our daily work and the work of this book takes place on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and on Kaurna Country. We recognize that these are places of age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal, and that the local Indigenous Peoples have had – and continue to have – a unique role in the life of these lands. We pay respect to Wurundjeri, Kaurna and other Aboriginal Elders past, present and future for their custodianship of country and culture. We acknowledge that our work at universities around Melbourne and Adelaide benefits from an uncompensated and unreconciled dispossession that began over 230 years ago, but which continues to be resisted today. As we consider televisual fictions of Australian prisons in this book, we must reflect on the twin facts that Indigenous people are vastly overrepresented in Australian prison populations and vastly underrepresented in Australian screen production, facts that are consequences of ongoing colonization. We hope that readers will reflect on this as they read through the pages ahead.

RADHA O'MEARA, TESSA DWYER, STAYCI TAYLOR AND CRAIG BATTY

# Breakout Women: Introduction to TV Transformations, Gender and Transgression

The editors of this book are academics and self-confessed fans of the Australian women's prison TV dramas *Prisoner (Cell Block H)* (1979–86) and *Wentworth* (2013–21). This book is part of the 'aca-fan' tradition that blurs the boundaries between knowledges and practices of academia and fandom, eschewing a quasi-objective perspective for an up-close and personal critical analysis (Cristofari & Guitton 2017).

*TV Transformation and Transgressive Women* emerged after we, the 'aca-fan' editors, convened the 2018 international conference *Wentworth is the New Prisoner* in Melbourne, Australia, the home of these TV series. Fond of a pun (as will soon become very obvious), we were of course echoing the title of another women-in-prison drama, *Orange is the New Black* (2013–19). *Wentworth* is not the 'new' *Prisoner* so much as a re-imagining, as is discussed in many of the chapters throughout this book. But *Wentworth's* popularity, in part, opened the (cell) door for scholarship to turn its attention to both shows.

The intention of our conference was to bring scholars together from various fields – TV studies, screenwriting practice and fandom studies, to name a few – to share their work on these two particular Australian (and subsequently internationally adapted) TV shows. What soon became very clear was that not only did the assembled participants have exciting insights into the role and relevance of these shows but also that all of us in the room were very clearly aca-fans. Which is to say that none of us needed an excuse to travel internationally or interstate to chat about all things *Wentworth* and *Prisoner* with other equally passionate devotees. As noted by attendee (and author of chapter '*Orange is the New Black, Wentworth* and contemporary media feminisms') Jessica Ford in her review of the conference for *CST Online*, the blog of *Critical Studies in Television*:

> A common thread that emerged in discussions over tea and coffee was the general bewilderment (from those outside the conference) that an 'entire two days' could be dedicated to *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*. Yet what the *Wentworth is the New Prisoner* Conference proved is, not only are these series fertile spaces for a wide range of discussions pertinent to contemporary television studies, but also the value of an intimate highly-focused conference is unparalleled. (Ford 2018)

Our two keynote speakers Professors Kim Akass and Sue Turnbull (who we are delighted to have as the writers of the Foreword to this book) 'challenged each of us to see *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* as part of a larger discussion about women and television' (Ford 2018). This emerged as an important aspect of the conference, hence the title of this book not focusing solely on the two shows but instead framing them with the context of feminist TV and the concept of the transgressive female.

Running parallel to the traditional scholarly stream of such a conference was a series of panels with industry professionals from both shows. These comprised actors, producers, writers, art directors, cinematographers and casting directors, including those responsible for the *Wentworth VR* experience. This was possible partly because the conference was held in Melbourne, where *Prisoner* was shot in the 1970s and 1980s and where *Wentworth* was also produced. As Adrian Danks (then Associate Dean, Media with the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University) pointed out when he launched the conference, the host university was:

> [A] completely appropriate venue considering that the main building of our School overlooks Melbourne's and Victoria's oldest jail – opened in 1845 – as well as the law courts that 'served' it, and that the University itself incorporates aspects of the jail into its vast portfolio of buildings and spaces […] But this staging of the conference at RMIT also recognizes the centrality of Melbourne to the production of both *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* … the vast space of the city that takes in both the large sets built to house each show and the immediate environs of the suburbs that surround them. We also have to thank another successful show of the period, *The Young Doctors*, for tying up studio space in Sydney commonly used by [production company] Grundys, and necessitating that the production of *Prisoner* be carried out at Channel 10's Nunawading studios […] Both shows traverse the city, making use of its disparate, varied and often-abandoned spaces.

Associate Professor Danks was also able to share with us the story of a friend for whom *Prisoner* was such an obsession, he procured one of the cell doors from the set of the show after shooting wrapped finally in 1986. As Adrian reminisced:

> This was duly delivered, slightly resized and then screwed into place as his bedroom door – we (and, I imagine, he) got some pleasure in sliding back the peephole on the door & shouting: 'Get back in the cell, Barnes.' I have no idea what happened to the door, whether he took it with him from house to house or whether it still sits incongruously grafted into place in a suburban backstreet of East Ringwood. I hope it does.

This personal touch set the tone for a conference that made the most of its Melbourne setting and playful execution, which combined thought-provoking scholarly presentations with industry insights, a photo shoot outside the Old Melbourne Gaol (see Figure 1, page 16) and a themed trivia event during the conference dinner. As a taster: who served longer as governor: Erica Davidson (Patsy King) in *Prisoner* or Erica Davidson (Leeanna Walsman) in *Wentworth*?[1]

## A criminal history

*Prisoner* was an Australian TV drama about the inmates and staff in a women's prison. It was created by Reg Grundy and Reg Watson for local production house, the Grundy Organisation, and aired in Australia on the commercial Channel 0 (later Channel 10) from February 1979 to December 1986. Set and shot in Melbourne, the women of *Prisoner* lived and worked in the high-security wing or 'Cell Block H' of the fictional Wentworth Detention Centre. Broadcast twice weekly in prime time, the series quickly attracted a popular audience for its vivid women characters sharing close relationships and fierce rivalries. It was rare for an Australian TV drama to be so clearly focused on an ensemble of women. Embracing

1 *Answer*: Erica Davidson in *Prisoner* (1979–84).

the melodrama genre, the series combined a strong sense of morality with sensational topics and heavy emotions. More subtly, *Prisoner* also drew on the British screen tradition of social realism, addressing issues of incarceration, class, feminism, queer sexualities and social institutions. Over *Prisoner's* eight seasons and 692 episodes, it garnered a slew of awards, mostly for the lead actors. The powerful graphics of prison bars and sounds of locks clanking shut have become iconic, along with the theme song 'On the Inside' written by Allan Caswell and performed by Lynne Hamilton (1978). The show gained international interest, with notably large and ardent audiences in the United States and the United Kingdom, where it was known as *Prisoner*: *Cell Block H*. It has acquired cult status for its heroic women characters, dastardly villains, prominent queer stories and cheap sets. *Prisoner's* success has been prolonged by decades of global re-runs and translated into numerous adaptations, including Grundy's version set in a male prison *Punishment* (1981), *Dangerous Women* in the United States (1991–2) and Germany's *Hinter Gittern: Der Frauenknast* (1997–2007).

*Wentworth* re-imagined *Prisoner* for the twenty-first century, adding a prison leadership hyperconscious of news media perceptions, systems of digital surveillance throughout the prison and high-end production values. *Wentworth's* one-hour episodes were produced for Australian cable networks SoHo and Fox Showcase from 2013, with its final season concluding in 2021. Short seasons of only ten-to-twelve episodes have been a drawcard for Foxtel's Australian cable subscriptions and rapidly circulated the globe on prestige streaming video-on-demand services, including Netflix in the United States and Amazon Video in the UK. Where *Prisoner* was more risky, local, low-rent and broadly popular, *Wentworth* builds on known intellectual property to produce a prestige TV drama aimed at a global niche audience. *Wentworth* became part of a western tradition of 'quality TV' that has arisen since the 1990s (Feuer 2007; McCabe & Akass 2008; Schlütz 2016), and emphasizes social relevance and self-conscious art direction. While *Prisoner's* cult and global audiences seem to have been largely a happy accident, *Wentworth* capitalized on its predecessor's recognition and was designed for a global TV market. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Quality TV drama such as *Wentworth* has increasingly sought an

upper-middle-class audience and critical acclaim to support the branding and revenue of subscription TV providers. *Prisoner* has become regarded as 'ahead of its time' in addressing social changes of the 1970s and 1980s, and the comparison to *Wentworth* shows significant shifts in Australian attitudes and tastes in the decades between the two shows: *Wentworth* shows more explicit lesbian sex scenes, more graphic violence, and more prominent transgender and Indigenous characters. With a strong blue-colour palette, dynamic cinematography and high-impact editing, *Wentworth* leans into the expressionist visual style only hinted at in the shadows of *Prisoner*. Its storytelling moves more quickly and is more complex, in particular in the first season that emphasizes flashbacks showing how the key inmates landed in their cells. But *Wentworth* also embraces its melodramatic roots with heightened emotions, relationships layered with secrets and lies, and a character that returns from the grave.

*Prisoner* and *Wentworth* are long-running successful Australian dramas with many shared characters and characteristics, produced some four decades apart. They each provide a snapshot of Australian TV of their eras and our multidimensional analyses of both shows reveal some of the significant transformations and continuities across the history of Australian TV culture. *Prisoner* is perhaps emblematic of a broadcast era, when Australian TV was dominated by a few large free-to-air stations in capital cities and shows were shot on video tape for local audiences, who gathered around a set in the lounge room for appointment viewing. *Wentworth* seems to be exemplary of a post-broadcast or multiplatform era, as Australian TV is digitally produced and delivered to global audiences whose attention is fragmented across an increasing array of services and devices. So our studies in this book contribute to histories of Australian TV by delving into some of the conditions and implications of specific moments and transitions. This decentres histories of TV that tend to focus predominantly on global centres (Hilmes 2012), and draws attention to the particular roles and histories of small and 'semi-peripheral' nations (Flew 2007: 79; Landman 2009: 141; Redvall 2013: 36–9). Further, this book highlights the messiness of trying to trace media history as a progression of technologies, texts or practices. It foregrounds the idiosyncrasies of individual texts and the webs of people, material and place that bring them to life.

## Of Freaks and fans

Between our conference and the production of this book were various celebrations in 2019 recognizing *Prisoner*'s forty-year anniversary, including a sold-out public event for the St Kilda Film Festival, a Melbourne institution of Australian screen culture. On 25 June, a capacity crowd met at the St Kilda Town Hall to hear from cast members Jane Clifton (Margot Gaffney) and Val Lehman (Bea Smith). As we noted at the time (Taylor et al. 2019), highlights included Clifton speaking of her envy of Lehman's speedy line-learning that enabled her to do her scenes in one take after only a cursory read of her pages, and of her delight when Bea Smith had a long monologue she knew Lehman had yet to study with moments to go (this schadenfreude backfired when Lehman was able to pull it off once the cameras rolled). Both spoke of their love of the various directors: this one who would let you get away with anything, that one would insist that every shot was a Rembrandt, and Lee Spence who was mad for a mirror shot. Despite *Prisoner* breaking ground in creating roles for women in front of and behind the camera in Australia, as we have discussed elsewhere (Batty et al. 2019), stars Lehman and Clifton recalled that very few of the dozens of directors were women.

Lehman and Clifton also reported that female stars with production company Grundy's were paid less than their counterparts at rival production company Crawford's for their work on shows such as *The Sullivans* (1976–83). Lehman negotiated her own raises and was eventually moved to become a union representative, proud to report that she helped change a number of standard items in actors' contracts, thus contributing to the industry as a whole. She noted, too, that none of the cast was paid residuals when *Prisoner* became the first Australian drama to screen at prime time in the United States. They had to sue in order to get their extra $80 per week – eventually. This is despite the impact of the show, which according to Lehman is evidenced by the letters she and other cast members received from far-flung prisons, thanking the show for humanizing the plight of prisoners worldwide.

The tributes continued into 2020 with, just as one example, Australia's National Film and Sound Archive presenting 'On the Inside: A PRISONER Celebration' as part of their NFSA Live series. The online version of the previous year's live event in Sydney included rare clips from the NFSA collection, and a live performance by Allan Caswell, composer of *Prisoner*'s iconic theme song 'On the Inside'. It was introduced by NFSA Communications Manager and self-described '*Prisoner* Super Fan' Miguel Gonzalez. As social media fan pages and wikis attest, the forty-odd years (at the time of writing) that have passed since *Prisoner* debuted have not diminished the ardor of fan engagement and dialogue, and thus *Prisoner*, *Wentworth* and other women-in-prison (WIP) texts have significance worthy of scholarly attention.

*Prisoner*'s enduring appeal and unceasing life-force is evidenced not only by its multiple re-runs, remakes, spin-offs, homages, fandoms and its updated re-imagining as *Wentworth* but also, most recently, by its recognition in a special exhibit at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne. When we were brainstorming with ACMI curators about the look and feel of the *Prisoner*/*Wentworth* exhibit, we found that there were so many iconic images, objects and moments to highlight. Perhaps the most emblematic of all is Wentworth Detention Centre's infamous laundry press that stamped its significance, quite literally, in the series' very first episode, when 'top dog' Bea Smith brought it down on the innocent hand of alleged baby killer Lynn Warner (Kerry Armstrong). The steam press proved a highly effective way to subvert traditional notions of femininity and domesticity, twisting housework into a site of violence, horror and transgression, and delighting audiences in its gruesome detail and steam-filled sadism. The transgressive power of the steam press continued to be wielded in episodes of *Wentworth*, including when 'Top Dog' Kaz Proctor (Tammy MacIntosh) punished her previously ardent follower Allie Novak (Kate Jenkinson). Revelling in such imaginative instruments of torture – not least, the infamous leather gloves of Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson (Maggie Kirkpatrick) – *Prisoner* developed a strong early following well before cult TV fandom had become an industry norm.

As one of the first TV series to include openly lesbian characters in ongoing roles (most notably, Franky Doyle played by Carol Burns and Judy

Bryant played by Betty Bobbitt), *Prisoner* was a particular fan favourite amongst queer communities. The prevalence and strength of such *Prisoner* fandom during the 1980s saw a number of fan-based texts emerge, carefully tracking and documenting the original series (see Bourke 1990; Kingsley 1990) as well as remakes (see Dwyer & Burne, this volume), book spin-offs, official fan groups, stage shows and cabaret reiterations (see Haslop & Batty, this volume; Zalcock & Robinson 1989). Although only a few years behind the much-discussed cult fandoms of the original *Star Trek* (1966–9) and *Doctor Who* (1963–), *Prisoner* fans have received scarce acknowledgement in comparison, attesting to the heavily gendered way in which notions of 'cult TV' have developed. However, as Matt Hills notes, 'fans of cult TV are, in many ways, akin to fans of soaps' (2004: 517). Hills's useful analysis of differences between soap and cult TV fandom begins to break down in relation to a show like *Prisoner*, especially when one considers it alongside *Wentworth*. Globally, fans have actively re-organized *Prisoner* into the category of cult: both shows exhibit series memory within their texts and in their relationship to one another; both inspire voluminous ongoing fan fiction (as opposed to mere fan-talk or speculation). Hence, *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* invite reassessment of the gendered assumptions behind much TV fandom discourse, as is explored in numerous chapters within this collection. Alongside ACMI's *Prisoner/Wentworth* exhibit, this book offers a step towards acknowledging the significance of these shows and their audiences, and also redresses in part the undervaluation of light entertainment genres and TV fandom within national archives and Australian TV heritage.

## From the stony ground up

One thing that this book clearly signals is that Wentworth Detention Centre is not just a televisual setting – it provides a powerful world in which characters operate and themes are explored through multiple, often enduring, storylines. Indeed, this book reflects not only a love and

appreciation of this world from its contributors but also a strong sense that for many, *Wentworth* is also a world they inhabit: personally, emotionally and scholastically.

For Craig Haslop and Craig Batty, for example (in their chapter 'From Boys to Men via *Cell Block H*'), Wentworth was a safe space in which they could explore and understand their then-unarticulated queer identities. This is something we as editors wrote about in two publications: a book chapter in a collection on spaces of incarceration (Taylor et al. 2019), and a piece for *The Conversation* looking at the importance of storyworld in TV drama series (Batty et al. 2019).

As we acknowledged, the prison-as-world has seen many TV series creators explore the possibilities of detention, generating shows such as *Porridge* (1974–7), *Oz* (1997–2003) and *Prison Break* (2005–17). *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* are inspirational series in many ways: the worlds they created have been adapted into many international remakes, produced by Grundy/FremantleMedia or permitted by their sale of the format rights (see Dwyer & Burne, this volume). These shows provide plenty of opportunity to 'challenge the authority of the prison, especially where it is represented as a place that encourages rather than deters the corruption of its inmates, or as a place run by corrupt and incompetent governors' (Anher 2012: 36) – and in a very Australian way. As a re-imagining of *Prisoner*, *Wentworth* showcases a new view of a globalized Australia – a highly desirable country, even with its history of crime and ongoing discourse of control – one in which contemporary characters and themes are explored with as much larrikin humour as graphic violence.

The characters in *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* have much at stake in each encounter they make in the world. From eating breakfast to exercising in the yard, they may lose their freedom, social position, familial ties and even their lives. The prison corridor can readily become a site for compassion or conflict, solidarity or rioting. Queuing to use the public telephone, which is where we typically see teary connections with loved ones, can easily slip into hierarchical games among the inmates and, sometimes, violence. Because of their setting, the extreme stakes and emotional power of melodrama are never far from the surface for these characters.

Centrally to the premise of this book, the prison world also allows for a variety of female identities and experiences to be played out. As part of a global movement to better represent women on the screen (and behind the scenes), including Screen Australia's 'Gender Matters' initiative (2016–), *Wentworth* as a remake is very timely. Because the gendered segregation of correctional facilities has a long tradition and is widely accepted, Wentworth is a social space constructed primarily by and for women to inhabit. Not only does this world increase representation of women on screen but it also demands a greater range of female characters simply because all of the inmates – and the majority of the staff – identify as female. Women are the governors and the top dogs, the brutalized and the perpetrators. In this book, then, we want to recreate, celebrate and interrogate the world of both shows that means so much to so many, on and off screen. Far from a mere setting – and in this book, far from a mere case study – the world of *Wentworth* provides a rich playground for fans, scholars and industry practitioners. And so, to how this book explores this potential.

## Cell search

The chapters in this volume are grouped into four themed parts that cover a range of critical approaches.

'On the Inside' integrates and interrogates unique perspectives from those directly involved in the creation of *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*.

'She's Got Form' explores the aesthetics, textures and themes of the shows, contextualizing their influences and resonances with traditions of storytelling, genres and cultural connections.

'Tough Love' highlights how *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* represent and enact social structures, power dynamics and identity politics.

'On the Outside' delves into the real-world implications of these pivotal shows, contextualizing the threads between social activists, active audiences and industrial transformations.

## Part I. On the inside: Voices from industry

Using empirical research into industry practices and practitioners, this part includes interviews with key creators, actors, screenwriters, casting directors and producers, featuring voices from the field across both historical and contemporary contexts.

An in-depth interview with actor Shareena Clanton, who played main character Doreen Anderson for the first five seasons of *Wentworth*, gives a unique perspective on how contemporary Australian TV marginalizes Indigenous creators and characters. Helen Milte, who performed the guest 'walk-on' role of Margie Fleming in a few episodes of *Prisoner* in 1986, uses the critical concept of intertextuality to analyse the layered, shifting and disruptive meanings produced by guest characters and performances. Milte's firsthand experience on the set of *Prisoner* and behind-the-scenes memories offer access to under-theorized spaces and modes: entrances and exits; waiting 'in the wings'.

Clanton and Milte's industry insights are augmented by two production-focused chapters featuring interviews with screenwriters and producers. Radha O'Meara's chapter examines the industrial screenwriting practices that generated our favourite characters and stories on *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*. With a particular focus on spatial organization and staff communication, O'Meara suggests that the writers of *Prisoner* were quite isolated from each other and the rest of the production personnel, whereas the writers of *Wentworth* are more collaborative and relatively well integrated into the larger workforce of creative labour that brings the show to our screens.

Tessa Dwyer and Philippa Burne's chapter focuses on the adaptations and international formats that *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* have inspired. Informed by Burne's firsthand experience as a screenwriter at Fremantle as well as interviews with creatives from Australia, Germany and The Netherlands, this chapter traces the extraordinary longevity of *Prisoner* as an original drama concept and its significance for Australian TV broadly, especially in relation to Grundys, Fremantle and the development of international scripted format trade. Contributions to this part

showcase the importance of production-based research within media studies, particularly in TV contexts, where industry structures, processes and pressures are prominent and difficult to disentangle from content and creative practice.

## Part II. She's got form: Narrative, genre and motif

These texts centre on the texts of *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*, seeking to analyse and understand their aesthetic forms and situate them within artistic traditions and cultural frameworks. They explore the shows' intricate patterns of multi-character storytelling, connections with genres including prison dramas and melodrama, and influences of gloomy gothic styles and themes. Situating *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* within artistic lineages from European novels, Christian spaces and recent Quality TV, highlights the breadth of their resonances and innovations. Furthermore, such considerations reveal the unique ways that *Prisoner* and *Wentworth* express social anxieties around gender, class, morality, economics, justice and the unknown.

Kim Yen Howells-Ng analyses the complex narrative patterns used to negotiate shifting focus across multiple characters throughout the series *Wentworth* and *Orange is the New Black*. Howells-Ng argues that the shows' particular storytelling strategies reinforce their themes, with *Wentworth* emphasizing the characters' struggle for power within the prison, while *Orange is the New Black* points to the social issues of a wider system beyond the prison walls.

Niall Brennan's chapter places *Wentworth* in a history of long-running serial narratives on TV and compares it with many other prison shows (from *Oz* to *Buried*, 2003) to reveal its vast mosaic of characters' moral quandaries and reckonings. In particular, Brennan's comparison between the use of flashbacks and representations of character memories in *Wentworth* and *Orange is the New Black* highlights the complex treatment of characters' shifting moralities over many seasons.

Kate Warner understands the grotesque villains of *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*, such as Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson, as engaging gothic tropes

of the unnatural. Warner argues that the shows' use of gothic styles and themes to express social anxieties about shifting figurations of gender and the justice system, and that the heightened gothic imaginary of *Wentworth*, indexes an increase in these social tensions since the days of *Prisoner*.

Continuing with the gothic theme, Corrine E. Hinton and Cathrine Hoekstra examine *Wentworth's* mobilization of the trope of maternal separation to express fears about female bodies and motherhood. Interestingly, Hinton and Hoekstra concentrate on the social and economic market relationships within the prison to demonstrate how the motherhood of characters such as Bea Smith is routinely politicized and exploited within larger systems of power and exchange.

## Part III. Tough love: Punishment, power and identity

*Prisoner* and *Wentworth*'s representations and negotiations of social identities and power dynamics make them compelling viewing and inviting sites for academic analysis. These chapters explore the complex ways that prison dramas highlight, reinforce and challenge social categories, formations and systems. They remind the reader how popular culture reflects, mobilizes and enacts politics through complex textual and intertextual play.

Jessica Ford traces how multiple conceptions of contemporary feminism circulate in various TV fictions. Like Howells-Ng, Ford makes comparisons between how characters wield power in *Wentworth* and *Orange is the New Black*, and like Hinton and Hoekstra, Ford situates these power dynamics within a wider neoliberal system. Drawing these together in a new way, Ford argues that *Wentworth*'s articulation of feminism focuses more on the women's individual agency and *Orange is the New Black* uses personal stories to depict systemic failures.

Josie Rose Atkinson critiques the representation of Indigenous Australians in *Wentworth*, highlighting the show's particular responsibility to represent Indigenous characters when so many Indigenous people are criminalized and incarcerated by Australia's criminal justice systems.

Whitney Monaghan traces the connections between temporality, power and serial storytelling in *Wentworth* to explore how the series represents a queer experience of 'doing time'. Monaghan argues that *Wentworth*'s Bea Smith rejects a heteronormative biography, whereas Franky Doyle dreams of a radical new life beyond the confines of prison and models an affirmative queer temporality.

Sam McCracken discusses the trans characters Maxine Conway (Socratis Otto) in *Wentworth* and Sophia Burset (Laverne Cox) in *Orange is the New Black*, highlighting how the prison has become a focus of wider social arguments about gender non-conforming and trans people. McCracken examines the ways these trans characters are stereotyped, villainized, medicalized and ultimately marginalized within their shows' narratives, but reminds us how Maxine and Sophia nevertheless make trans identities visible to large TV audiences. This chapter was written before season 8 of *Wentworth*, so it does not directly address another transgender character, Reb Keane, but it offers useful ways of thinking about his role and representation.

Diana Sandars concentrates on the ingenue character of Susie Driscoll (Jacqui Gordon) in *Prisoner*, sparking an exploration of suburban Australian teenage girlhood and the possibility of prison as an ideal family, thus disrupting and reinventing stereotypes of femininity, girls and heteronormative rites of passage.

Alex Bevan argues that *Wentworth* is one of several contemporary western TV dramas that depict 'hard' cis female characters in positions of leadership, such as Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson, revealing contemporary political tensions around the security state, citizenship and late capitalism. Bevan suggests that contemporary dramas often associate the female body with the national body politic, but also complicate these characters and audience engagement with them in ways that problematize contemporary global politics.

## Part IV. On the outside: Fandom, activism and afterlives

From the outset, *Prisoner* was partly inspired and connected to real-world issues and prison activism, as detailed by Olympia Barron, Alexander

Gionfriddo and Catherine Gillam in their chapter exploring links to the prison reform movement, women's activist filmmaking in Australia and media portrayals of gendered incarceration experiences. Ex-prisoner Sandra Willson consulted on the series, and it received much praise for its gritty realism and extensive research (see Hohensee 1979: 16–17).

This grounding in authentic experience heightened *Prisoner*'s world-building effect and strengthened fan investment, with audiences often finding parallels in their own lives or society, as discussed in Craig Haslop and Craig Batty's conversational chapter recounting their experiences watching late-night re-runs in the UK during the 1990s, identifying *Prisoner*'s importance in their own developing queer identities. The series' natural focus on issues of marginalization, transgression and power politics immediately connected it to social realities for viewers across the globe. With Fremantle's *Wentworth*, this commitment to realism has prevailed, with ex-prisoner Kerry Tucker hired as 'authenticity consultant' (2013).

*Wentworth* fandom has proliferated on social media, developing decidedly queer dynamics, as explored in Amanda K. Allen's chapter focused on *Wentworth* Twitter fans and 'women loving women' relationships. Allen explores how homosexuality, particularly lesbianism, functions as the assumed norm within this particular fan community, hence challenging wider social heteronormativity and the erasure of lesbian identity.

Continuing analysis of *Wentworth* fandom, Renee Middlemost and Stayci Taylor assess its impact on creative practice, pointing to the limited role that industry tends to ascribe fans despite their strategic and economic importance. Unpacking *Wentworth*'s characterization of Karen 'Kaz' Proctor (Tammy McIntosh) as out-of-control female fan, Middlemost and Taylor consider this stereotype as indicative of industry efforts to police and limit fan agency while gesturing towards new scriptwriting possibilities.

The book concludes with Alexa Scarlata's chapter contextualizing *Wentworth* in relation to post-broadcast TV transformation and streaming platforms. Examining how *Wentworth* was picked up by Netflix for international circulation, Scarlata nuances understanding of the relationship between nation-bound legacy broadcasters, pay-TV and online disruptors, noting how they often rely on one another to succeed. Netflix has been crucial in supporting *Wentworth*'s continued production, also paving the way for its afterlife in streaming catalogues. At the same time, *Wentworth*

forms part of Foxtel's recent rebrand and efforts to compete with global distributors. This final chapter focused on distribution/production contexts and local/global publics encapsulates the collection's commitment to wide-ranging TV research that straddles multiple perspectives vital to industry, creative practice and scholarship.

For the past four years, these shows had been a major part of our lives – scholastically, personally and socially – as we have outlined, from the initial conference to follow-up events and publications, and incorporating the enduring fandom of *Prisoner* and *Wentworth*. To this end, we wanted this book to reflect this spirit, equally showcasing and celebrating the diversity of topics, approaches and people associated with the two hit shows and its fans – including us as editors. While a book like this can never replicate such real experiences, we hope its contents convey their spirit, passion and humour.

Figure 1. Editors (from left): Radha O'Meara, Tessa Dwyer, Stayci Taylor and Craig Batty outside the Old Melbourne Gaol (2018). © Yaron Meron 2021.

# Bibliography

Anher, R. (2012). 'The Prison in Early Modern Drama', *Literature Compass*, 9 (1), 34–47.

Batty, C., O'Meara, R., Taylor, S. and Dwyer, T. (2019). 'Inside the Story: Writing the Powerful Female World of Wentworth', *The Conversation*, 11 July, <https://theconversation.com/inside-the-story-writing-the-powerful-female-world-of-wentworth-119878?fbclid=IwAR3Rx9H2kn7vQmbRfh60GN1JLkAZZgGcpOyn49WTWuq1CtVBcKBVlL_Vi_U>, accessed 29 January 2020.

Bourke, T. (1990). *Prisoner: Cell Block H, Behind the Scenes*. London: Angus and Robertson.

*Buried*. (2003). [TV series]. UK: Channel 4.

Cristofari, C. and Guitton, M. J. (2017). 'Aca-fans and Fan Communities: An Operative Framework', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17 (3), 713–31.

*Dangerous Women*. (1991–2). [TV series]. US: Syndication.

Danks, A. (2018). 'On the Outside: Conference Launch', *Wentworth is the New Prisoner Conference*, RMIT University, Melbourne, 5 April.

*Doctor Who*. (1966–89; 2005–). [TV series]. UK: BBC.

Feuer, J. (2007). 'HBO and the Concept of Quality TV.' In K. Akass and J. McCabe (eds), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, pp. 145–58. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris.

Flew, T. (2007). *Understanding Global Media*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ford, J. (2018). 'Wentworth Is the New Prisoner Conference Report', *CST Online*, 4 May, <https://cstonline.net/wentworth-is-the-new-prisoner-conference-report-by-jessica-ford/>, accessed 14 January 2021.

Hills, M. (2004). 'Defining Cult TV: Texts, Intertexts and Fan Audiences'. In R. C. Allen and A. Hill (eds), *The Television Studies Reader*, pp. 509–24. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hilmes, M. (2012). *Network Nations: A transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*. New York, NY: Routledge.

*Hinter Gittern: Der Frauenknast*. ('Behind Bars – Women's Wing', 1997–2007). [TV series]. Germany: RTL.

Hohensee, M. (1979). 'Grundy's *Prisoner* – Television 1979: A Special Feature', *Theatre Australia*, 3 (7), 16–17.

Landman, J. (2009). 'Not in Kansas Anymore: Transnational Collaboration in Television Science Fiction Production'. In V. Mayer, M. J. Banks and J. T. Caldwell (eds), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, pp. 140–53. New York, NY: Routledge.

McCabe, J. and Akass, K. (2008). 'It's Not TV, It's HBO's Original Programming: Producing Quality TV'. In M. Leverette et al. (eds), *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, pp. 83–93. New York and London: Routledge.

*Orange is the New Black*. (2013–19). [TV series]. US: Netflix.

*Oz*. (1997–2003). [TV series]. US: HBO.

*Porridge*. (1974–7). [TV series]. UK: BBC1.

*Prison Break*. (2005–17). [TV series]. US: Fox.

*Prisoner*. (1979–86). [TV series]. Australia: Channel 0–10.

*Punishment*. (1981). [TV series]. Australia: Channel 10.

Redvall, E. N. (2013). *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schlütz, D. M. (2016). 'Contemporary Quality TV: The Entertainment Experience of Complex Serial Narratives', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 40 (1), 95–124.

*Star Trek*. (1966–9). [TV series]. US: NBC.

*Sullivans, The*. (1976–83). [TV series]. Australia: Channel Nine.

Taylor, S., Dwyer, T., O'Meara, R. and Batty, C. (2019). 'On the Inside: 40 Years of *Prisoner* at the 2019 St Kilda Film Festival', *CST Online*, 16 July, <https://cstonline.net/on-the-inside-40-years-of-prisoner-cell-block-h-at-the-2019-st-kilda-film-festival-melbourne-by-stayci-taylor-tessa-dwyer-radha-omeara-and-craig-batty/>, accessed 29 January 2021.

Tucker, K. (2013). '"Authenticating 'Wentworth'": The Prison Consultant from Cell to Screen', *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Conference, Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Brisbane, 24–26 June 2013, pp. 237–48.

*Wentworth*. (2013–2021). [TV series]. Australia: Foxtel.

*Young Doctors, The*. (1976–83). [TV series]. Australia: Channel Nine.

Zalcock, B. and Robinson, J. (2004). 'Inside Cell Block H: Hard Sell and Soft Soap', *Continuum* 9 (1), 88–97.

PART I

# On the Inside: Voices from Industry

INTERVIEW WITH SHAREENA CLANTON

# 1 Representation, Responsibility and Racism: A Courageous Conversation with Shareena Clanton

ABSTRACT
Shareena Clanton was interviewed by Radha O'Meara in 2019 about her experiences working as an actor on *Wentworth* (2013–21). Shareena is a proud Wongatha/Yamatji and Noongar/Gidja yorga (woman) from Boorloo in Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar. (Perth, Whadjuk Noongar Country, WA) While her father is Etowah Cherokee, African–American and Blackfoot from Mobile, Alabama, Shareena has spent all her life born and raised in Noongar Boodjar. As an actor for film, TV and theatre, Shareena currently holds various qualifications in performance and first-class Honours in her Bachelor of Applied Science for Indigenous Research Methodologies. Shareena played the role of Doreen Anderson in seasons one to five of *Wentworth* – one of the longest-running Indigenous central characters on an Australian TV series.[1]

RADHA: Tell me about your first experiences of being hired to act in *Wentworth*.

SHAREENA: My concern immediately was how incredibly whitewashed it was, dangerously so, given the political landscape and privatization of prisons, and how overrepresented Indigenous people are in Australia's prison systems. I was concerned what the terms of engagement were going to look like on the subjects of justice and racial injustice. This is a really important story to tell because a lot of the truth behind the Indigenous reality often goes unsaid and remains silent and invisible. It was an honour and responsibility that I took upon myself to make sure I did these stories justice.

1 Cath Moore transcribed this interview and edited it for length and clarity.

Figure 2. Shareena Clanton played Doreen Anderson in seasons one to five of *Wentworth*. © Shareena Clanton 2021.

When we were in rehearsals, someone asked me, 'Did you do your research? Did you go up to women's prisons?' Yes, I've done the research, but I don't need to expose myself to further torment for a role because I live it, I breathe it, I see it all the time. It's been a tragic part of what is happening in this country. The consequences for breaking various laws are often harsher sentencing to Indigenous communities. The various legislative systems deliberately control, marginalize, overly criminalize and punish Indigenous Australians in unprecedented ways, and continue to see us making up disproportionately high percentages within the prison populations. It's a penal system of subjugation that viciously targets and strategically vilifies our people and communities.

I think the first season of *Wentworth* was probably the best in terms of its points of difference. I thought it had phenomenal potential to tap into something that was really interesting about making visible what has so often been put to the periphery as women, and in particular for Aboriginal women. They had custom-built these prison cells, where they could shift and move the walls to get camera angles and we understood that we were on the cusp of something that created a different architecture in the TV world. It was just amazing to be part of and yet I was not ignorant about my

own ambivalence. I often found myself sitting alone in my cell and thinking of those brothers and sisters who cannot get out of these tracksuits but are confined to just four walls for years on end, some for justifiable sentencing and others, for simply not paying a parking fine. I certainly was grateful to go home each night to my own bed and the comforts that such freedom affords, but it was a stark contrast to the cold, dark and often isolating jail cells we were filming in every day.

As the show progressed, I grew more confident in my own voice. In the first season I didn't know if I should speak up and the fear of not working again paralysed my thought and restricted my voice to those in positions of power. I was keenly aware of the hierarchical systems that were evident in a show with international following. It was frustrating to endure people who operated behind the scenes to strategically position themselves and their own interests, their egotism and self-serving politics. The saying that the '*squeaky wheel gets the oil*' was undoubtedly true. I was often told to be grateful for the work, despite my own accomplishments, but the writers' rooms themselves underestimated me and, being overwhelmingly white, probably assumed I wouldn't become as political and unreserved as I did. I wanted to go beyond the paradigm and mantra of gratitude often stated to me that rendered many immobile. I wanted to activate progress and change, as well as accountability, to ensure more Indigenous women were standing alongside me in that show.

As an artist and creative, you step into a show like *Wentworth* and realize that you are very much part of a well-oiled machine. You are part of the machine that knows where it wants to go and be. You have restrictions and limitations in how progressive and interesting you can be. There's enormous pressure to work within an established framework. The machine was fuelled by racism, whitewashing, complacency and the indifference that is afforded to those in positions of power, which are so far removed from the realities we endure as people of colour. Often, they told me to not be '*too disruptive*', which I originally found as an industry newcomer was unnerving and intimidating. In retrospect, I can see that was about the imprisonment and confines of fear, about needing to enforce colonial powers of control. They projected the idea that if I was '*too disruptive*' then I would be written out and could be easily replaced. I think that's when

the naïve glasses came off and the fogginess dissipated. I stopped playing by their rules by the end of the first season.

It was about a third of the way through the first season that I stopped looking for approval and validation within these all-white spaces and I began to focus on my own power and purpose. I simply asked, '*Why are there not more Indigenous people as part of your main cast? Why are the Indigenous people on the periphery, on the sidelines and not really part of your core storylines? Why aren't you including more people of colour here in this prison, which in reality is so racially diverse?*' Because we all know about the criminalization of Blackness. I know this is a complex issue and there's multiple factors at play within the justice system itself, as well as individual accountability. But there's a huge, disproportionate representation of Indigenous people and people of colour incarcerated in Australia.

As soon as that happened, I began to see how they avoided some crucial truth-telling in the executive, network and creative rooms. They didn't know how to broach subjects that needed consultation, inter-subjectivity, intercultural interface, critical lens approaches and discursive racial dialogues. People who were pushing for much more progressive and in-depth conversation were often excluded and their ideas did not make the final edit or executive sign off. They didn't know how to challenge the very colonial constructs underpinning these issues, like why there is a high imprisonment rate of Indigenous Australians, or the undeniable racism that the whole system operates on, both within the prison walls and outside of them. I understand that it wasn't a documentary; I understand that it was a TV drama. I saw eye-rolls when I started to speak up about the Indigenous perspective, particularly about the responsibility we have to represent a more truthful and inclusive narrative that doesn't shy away from the facts and history itself.

I also understand it was a remake of an old framework and that meant paying homage to an iconic, familiar show. But it was also reinventing those stories, which was really important, because the original story denied a central First Nations character and completely whitewashed the prison system. So, it was progressive in some respects, yet conservative and limited in others.

RADHA: How did your experience of working on *Wentworth* change over the following years?

SHAREENA: I found it exhausting to navigate a lot of racism, ignorance and bullying from those who were neutral in the face of injustices. There were so many superiority complexes, so much discrimination and white feminist rhetoric, and the endless behaviour of colonial control. I often ridiculed the pomposity of so-called 'progressive' white feminist ideologies that denied Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty. I realized that the potential for a redemptive collaboration was often sidelined in the creative process. When I stepped back and focused on my own commitment to these conversations as a woman of colour, then I was able to take the emotional reaction out of the situations. I began the necessary critical examinations that asked questions like, '*What is the impact of this show? How is your positioning providing a platform and framework for other young mob to see themselves on screen?*'

By the time it came to season five, I felt the show had become a beacon of white feminist storytelling. It was self-congratulatory in its own accomplishments, but denied racism was ever evident. It never recognized the political and economic hierarchies that keep women of colour out of sight – it just continued to serve the white female protagonist or white female antagonist. The women of colour were a by-product of colonial manipulations, so the women of colour were needing to be rescued against their own ineptitude, incapacity or intellectual lack of discernment. I saw that narrative play out in multiple ways and through various colonial lenses. I'm not reducing the hard work that it's done for other women and I'm not reducing what it's been able to achieve on a global and national scale, but I also question *for whose benefit*? I'm always wary of centralizing white women and positioning an elevated colonial idea of whiteness.

RADHA: It sounds like you were very aware of the structural inequalities at play.

SHAREENA: One of the comments from the executive producers was, '*We have diverse extras*' as if that was a justifiable excuse. I said, '*That's not good*

*enough,*' and she responded, '*We don't want to overrepresent a negative stereotype*.' The white supremacy in her statement was crystal clear. I said, *'You can't overrepresent facts. There's statistical evidence. You can't whitewash it; that's history. It's the present-day colonial context, it's the mode in which you're operating. It's the world that you're representing. What do you mean, overrepresenting a negative stereotype?'*

Then I unpacked the negative stereotype and racist positioning even further. I said, *'I don't believe that. What's the real reason behind that?'* She said, '*We worked with Aboriginal people before and some of them just don't rock up on time*.' I will never forget that moment. That's how they unveiled some of the repressive layers of the settler colonial narrative and revealed their racism for all to see. So, you can see it was both cringeworthy and frustrating. It showed me exactly where they were at in terms of their ignorance and discrimination of First Nations peoples. They were not at a level where they wanted to challenge and dismantle their own biases, or any preconceived notions surrounding Indigenous identity, representation and community engagement.

Their fear was palpable. People would often say to me, '*You're the one with the problem. It's you that's offended and we don't have any responsibility. I don't see colour*.' These kinds of excuses were used in uncomfortable conversations about race politics. They require brutal honesty and transparency and courageous truth-telling, instead of a blatant deniability and disregard for the truth with white fragility as a mountable defence and the inexcusable banner of innocence.

People in powerful positions are complicit in maintaining a particular worldview. They maintain the grand narrative, which continues to perpetuate a lie that Australia needs a white saviour. Whatever that looks like, it's still about upholding the status quo and centrality of whiteness. Australia still has embedded deeply into its colonial consciousness a version of history they've told themselves. This does not include Indigenous authority, resistance, triumph and autonomy. Instead our stories seem to be told consistently in terms of trauma and deficit. When you unpack and test the power base of colonial hierarchies and laws, you begin to unravel the threads of fear, fragility and rage that bind the blankets of oppression so tightly around our people. These blankets we resist daily with our survival,

determination, anti-colonial critiques and actions. It is enough just to survive, let alone thrive in these spaces.

I don't have the luxury of time. Time is not just neutral; it is consistently ticking against me. I understand that we must enforce change and be dedicated to challenging oppressive systems. Perhaps the tides will turn in my lifetime. But right now, it is unsafe, lonely and incredibly toxic for people of colour to sit within these prisms of power and architectures of colonial culture. I'm often navigating my identity, my tone, my language and decolonial rhetoric in order to tap into the colonial ear and eurocentric understandings. I am asked to constantly accommodate myself to their fragility at the cost of my own emotional labour. This is exhausting work.

The people in power often say, *'The responsibility is not on us, it's on you. You're the person of colour, so you have to educate us'*, rather than, '*What is it that we're learning? Why is it we have this behaviour? Why are we so often reverting to the same easy narratives or solutions?*' It becomes 'too difficult' to go there, to have those conversations about racial politics and racial stories. But these conversations are especially important when we're talking about the judicial system, which is a key institution for governments to criminalize, oppress and marginalize Indigenous people and people of colour. They make money from our pain in prisons and they make money from our pain on the screen. I have learned your colonial language, yet you cannot shift your language or learning in return.

So, for the most part, people in the screen industry understand this is a marathon; this aim to be truly representative of the world we live in. I would often say, '*What about a Muslim storyline? What about trans women who are people of colour? They don't have to be Indigenous, but they need to be non-European in their identity and visibly representing those who are often on the margins in mainstream media or pushed to the sidelines because they are not valued in the same way. What about a character who is disabled and needing to navigate this world with a visible and invisible disability? What about LGBTQIA+ women who are not all white middle class representatives of society?*' Often the response was, *'Well, we can't represent everybody, that's just not possible.*' My response to that is, '*Yes, to some degree that may be true. But aren't we meant to be representing a multidimensional, multifaceted society and a variety of women who aren't just tokenistic or one-dimensional?*

*What exactly are we doing saying that this is a show about women? Whom exactly are you representing and giving voice to here?'* The answer to that is a disconcerting silence. They all embody colonial constructs; the ideology of settler narratives that seem to be progressive and liberal in their presentation but were incredibly conservative in their ways of speaking and ways of doing that align to the values of white supremacy. They don't have to think every day about their own relationality to racial politics, nor did they want to.

We, as First Nations peoples, have more than 80,000 years of history and are the oldest living culture in the world. Somehow, despite various efforts of erasure, criminalization, subjugation and oppressive policies, we've survived and adapted. We're still here. That shows insurmountable resilience. I don't live in a pain-based narrative, a victim-based narrative. I understand the various elements of human connectivity and bringing to light the important concerns of specific traumas and experiences that we don't often get to see on a day-to-day basis in our media representations. But the fact that the only narrative of Indigenous people on screen is framed around a model of victimhood and regression, or the identity of being inept and incapable, is what I find problematic.

RADHA: Was the character of Doreen ever identified as being from a particular Indigenous People or a particular Nation, or was she just 'Aboriginal'?

SHAREENA: No, she was just generalized in her Aboriginality.

Again, that just shows a lack of diversity in the writers, programmers, executives, funding bodies and those who are approving the script. It didn't say particularly Koori, it was just an 'Aboriginal woman' from Melbourne, Victoria, but no one knew her clan or language groups. It was never mentioned. And then in season three, we developed cultural nuance about Doreen, when she was pregnant and started singing to her baby. Suddenly, Doreen sung a song called *Ngarra Burra Ferra*, which is a traditional Yorta Yorta song that gave the character more cultural specificity.

When I got the script, I asked, '*What are the cultural sensitivities around this? Because I'm not from this Country. Who do I need to seek permission from to speak this language on this Country, to be able to sing this*

*song?*' Often they wanted me to provide solutions and resolutions to these concerns, because production did not have a cultural framework around Indigenous protocols and terms of engagement. They lacked the cultural awareness and education about song use and permissions. The education that was required of me was never-ending and that reality was not the same for my non-Indigenous counterparts.

I wanted to put more language in *Wentworth*, but that in and of itself was a struggle. The producers said, '*We want to, but we don't know how*.' I said, '*I'm offering you solutions. I'll write it for you, but I'm not even getting the writing credit*.' Or even, *'I can help guide you about the use of my language in here, or if she is Yorta Yorta, to get language consultants and use words properly. Research the use of language in this space with her other sistergirls, in their dialogue with each other. And if you want to talk about race politics, but don't know how to, then you need to be unapologetic in not knowing the answer rather than assuming a knowledge base*.' I would encourage them to go deeper and with more layered characteristics and in-depth identity. I said, '*Don't just teeter on the sidelines about important subject matter like racism or racial tensions. I can help guide and inform this process with you but you must be wanting to push it with the executive decision-makers so I am not alone in this*.'

By the time they had written season five, I was well and truly ready to hang up my teal tracksuit for good. Asking me back for a potential storyline for later seasons was not a good enough reason for me to return. I felt exhausted, frustrated, overwhelmed and burnt out. I stopped enjoying the work and I needed time to step back and away from the industry. Not just to reevaluate my intention, but to unpack who I was again, as a human being and as an artist. I felt that I had spent too long pushing my intentions, however good or well meaning they were, uphill and I was not respected or appreciated with the contributions I gave. Half the time it felt like I was talking to brick walls. I needed to reenergize my spirit, mind and body again.

RADHA: What kinds of responses did you get to your performance in *Wentworth*?

SHAREENA: After the first season, I was very aware of the reception *Wentworth* had received from my own community. Talking with my

mob, they were asking, '*Why are you the only Black prisoner?*' I know that the white actors involved don't have those conversations with their mob, they're not accountable to their whole communities, they don't have to speak on behalf of their race. They don't have community coming up to them and asking, '*Why have they made all the other characters white? Why are you the only Blackfella in there? Do you understand the statistics? Why isn't the casting more diverse in a prison show?*' So, when it came to casting season two, particularly my love interest, I was very clear and aware of the racial landscape.

Creating the character of Doreen's partner, Nash (Luke McKenzie), I asked, '*Why are you married to the idea that he has to be a white man?*' And the producers wouldn't really answer me in the way I found satisfactory or justifiable. Their insistence on Doreen's partner being a white man adhered to the grand narrative of whiteness. It's an extension of the White Australia Policy and assimilationist ideals. It just perpetuates media narratives that if you marry white, dress white, think white, act white, talk white, then you're accepted into the dominant society and will no longer be cast as '*the other*'. They said to me, '*We handled that when Doreen and Nash looked after the magpies, with that theme of Black and white coming together*.' I said, '*You really think that we're that harmonious? That's a good enough reason to connect to the theme of racial intersubjectivity?*' Again, more unsettling silence.

I'm not saying that that there isn't a place for interracial love to abide or to allow the characters' choices to work on a spiritual level. But it's often perpetuated in the mainstream narrative and media bias that in order to be accepted into wider society, you marry, or love whiteness. This speaks directly into the system of eugenics and the notion that '*white is right*'. That dangerously feeds into stereotypes and multiple archetypes that if a Black woman is with a white man, then I am somehow elevated in society. I didn't want to perpetuate that colonial rhetoric and I was keenly aware of how such imagery could be perceived in the dominant discourse, and within my own community.

One of the things I hated was that originally my character was this alcoholic with no intellectual capacity or capability. Doreen had an inferiority complex with little-to-no value system. Her ineptitude wasn't about