

*A Life for the Truth:
A Tribute to Ruby Langford Ginibi*

Oliver Haag and Linda Westphalen

To speak is not a casual affair, but a holy action. Words not only describe the world, but actively create and shape that world

(Hertha Dawn Wong, referring to 'Native American forms of personal narrative,' 1992: 18-19).

One of the most significant Indigenous Australian authors, Ruby Langford Ginibi, a member of the Bundjalung Nation and the Sydney Koori community, took the courageous step in 1988, the year of the Bicentenary of British colonisation of Australia, of telling a largely ignorant non-Aboriginal audience about what it was like to live her life. She recorded this life in a pivotal text: *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. This book, as the pages which follow indicate, had a lasting impact on many readers, both in Australia and worldwide. Thus began an extraordinary writing career, a career seemingly out of step with an equally extraordinary life lived in bush camps and subsidised housing, raising nine of her own children and many of other people's, working in backbreaking menial jobs not considered suitable for 'white' women. This edition of the *Journal of the European Association for Studies on Australia* is to honour the life of Dr Aunty Ruby Langford Ginibi, her works and her contributions, large and public, larger and private, to literature and history, in Australia and worldwide, to institutions and individuals.

Ruby Langford Ginibi was born Ruby Maude Anderson in Coraki, New South Wales (NSW) in 1934 on Australia Day, January 26th—a day that she called 'Shame Day'. She died in Sydney on October 1st 2011 and is still mourned by those of us privileged enough to know her. At her funeral, she was counted as a 'larrikin'; a particularly Australian term meaning a person who challenges the rules, who has a bold, slightly criminal attitude to the establishment, and who holds up a mirror to the stuffy and pretentious, and shows them their warts and double standards. Ginibi was a woman of great intellect and integrity, with a legendary sense of humour. She challenged others on several fronts—on their ignorance and racism, mostly. She loved life, loved to laugh, loved her children and her people, loved to write. She loathed arrogance and ignorance, loathed the privilege that went with colonisation, and sought to tell the truth of the impacts of the invasion on Aboriginal families. In an interview in 1992, Ginibi responded to a question about her motivation to write:

I thought I should write these stories down, because nothing's been taught in the school curriculum much about Aboriginal history or culture, politics or anything, so there's a whole heap of people out there that don't know a

thing about us. If I wrote these stories and told them how it really is from our side of the fence, and like we really are today, in the twentieth century, approaching the twenty-first, it might promote a better understanding of Aboriginal people...It's a good hope to educate people. (Langford Ginibi 1992)

Ginibi's 'good hope to educate people' was realised in numerous books, interviews, poems, speeches and articles. She received an inaugural History Fellowship from the NSW Ministry for the Arts in 1994, an inaugural honorary fellowship from the National Museum of Australia in 1995, and an inaugural doctorate of letters (*Honoris Causa*) from La Trobe University, Victoria in 1998. In 2005 she won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards Special Award, followed by the Australia Council for the Arts Writers' Emeritus Award in 2006.

As she would say: not bad for a woman who left school at fourteen!

Awards and accolades from the establishment leave aside Ginibi's status in Aboriginal communities. She was an Elder—and this is a complex and demanding role in Aboriginal Australia. One of the many responsibilities of an Elder is to take on the teaching of others—to 'learn them' in, among other things, history. Ginibi called this learning 'edu-ma-cation'. For many people, in Australia and overseas, she was a teacher first and foremost, and she gave unstintingly to this role, even when she was in poor health. Ginibi's totem was the Wagtail, a small black and white bird counted in Indigenous Australia as the bringer of messages, both good and bad. Gifted with the art of communication, it is as if Ginibi's whole being was geared to bring messages to others, an edu-ma-cation grounded in no nonsense straight speech. Ginibi fought ignorance and racism with words as if they were sculptor's chisels, digging through rock of embedded lies to the truth.

Hertha Dawn Wong tells us that the act of speaking is not a casual affair, and that we create the world via language. Ruby Langford Ginibi helped to shape a new reflective path in Australia. She knew back in 1984 when she began to write *Don't Take Your Love to Town* that the entrenched racism of colonised Australia had to be challenged, and that words were to be her tools. We are still a racist country—some wars are never really won—but perhaps like many places on earth, we have come to understand a little of what it means to be conquered, and that history is forgotten as well as remembered. Ginibi, the Wagtail, the larrikin edu-ma-cator, the generous soul, the Elder, the mother, the Aunty, the friend, is fondly remembered in this Special Edition. And each contributor speaks with reverence, respect and love.

This edition is in many respects unconventional—as unconventional as the author it commemorates. It consists of scholarly articles as well as self-reflective and creative approaches. In addition to Australia, there are contributions from Austria/Germany, India and Spain to pay tribute to a great historian, writer and friend. This is, perhaps, what Ginibi was first and foremost to us: a friend and inspiration. The making of this volume testifies to Ginibi's wonderfully rebellious and disarmingly warm character. When the first news about her death spread through the world, many people gathered together. They joined the funeral

in Australia, lit candles in Scotland and wept in Spain. They took up Ginibi's books, sent emails and looked at the book covers with her face smiling—laughing, her unmistakably loud voice still in our minds, laughing and crying. They came together to commemorate one of Australia's most distinctive authors.

We planned, almost spontaneously, a special memorial issue, which received unanimous support of David Callahan, *JEASA's* chief editor, and Sue Ballyn. The wish from so many people to contribute has been a strong sign for Ginibi's impact on her readers: we enjoyed her books, we laughed, cried, got angry. And eventually we had to give something back to 'our' author, some sign of gratitude, some answer. This volume is such an answer—sad, funny and passionate.

Readers may be asking why this is a European journal and not an Australian one. The reality is that Ginibi's death went virtually unreported in the Australian media and so little recognised that her funeral had to be supported financially by her friend and student, Suvendrini Perera, who then sought donated contributions from the public to cover expenses. The list at the end of this introductory section contains the names of the donors to this fund, and is followed by some of the email records Suvendrini received. They make for extremely moving reading. It perhaps shows that Ginibi's death was deeply felt by many Australians, who were unprepared for her passing, and didn't know that Ginibi's later life was rich only in spirit and love.

The outpouring of emotional and financial support following the funeral is in marked contrast to the official silence on Ginibi's death. Emails and letters sent to various Australian government bodies by her family and friends did not succeed in raising a contribution from the state. In her letter to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Perera pointed out the disparity between this and the state funeral recently held for another female artist, Margaret Olley. In these circumstances, it is no coincidence that this issue is a transnational effort, initiated outside Australia.

We could not have created this volume without the continuous support of many people: Suvendrini Perera, Anita Heiss, Sue Ballyn and David Callahan. Thank you all.

Ginibi's body is gone—her smile, her voice, her gesture, all gone. But Ginibi's spirit is still here. It inspired donors to pay funeral costs, authors to pay tribute and strangers to come close. People have been mourning yet also finding new friendships. Ginibi is still alive. She lives on in this volume, in our hearts and humanity.

Farewell and take care. Be demanding yet still gentle to us—us, your students.

References

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CONTRIBUTORS TO AUNTIE RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI FUND

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Some of the emails received by Perera from donors to the funeral fund

I read Auntie's book 'Don't take your love to town' when I was at Uni, and it opened my eyes to the story of this country. I cannot think of another book that has had such an impact on me, it was truly life changing.

I'm glad I could assist. I agree, she was a national treasure, and the beauty of her legacy is that her works as well as her memory live on.

Thank you for taking this initiative on behalf of so many who admire and treasure Auntie's inspiration to our lives.

I'm glad I had an opportunity to help. This country does a bad job of recognising a certain type of greatness – thank you for helping address that to some degree.

*Just to let you know I'll be making a donation to your paypal account soon towards funeral and memorial costs for Ruby Langford Ginibi. Many years ago, I wrote a chapter of my MA in Women's Studies thesis on **Don't Take Your Love to Town**. Recently, I received a CAL photocopy cheque for an article I later wrote based on that chapter, and I'll be donating that money.*

Thank you very much for all you have done to draw us together in memory of Ruby Langford Ginibi.

*Am very moved that you have shown show much respect for Ruby, I would be happy to make a small donation. I have read only one of Ruby's books - **Don't Take Your Love to Town** and will always remember it, for her determination and love for all her children.*

Thank you again for your very brave and selfless action in putting up the money needed for Ruby Langford's funeral - it is truly an extraordinary act. I wish you all the best.

*I remember being so moved by **Don't Take Your Love to Town** that I wrote her a letter. She wrote back to me and it is something I will always treasure. She was surely a treasure!*

It must have been in the early nineties or even late 1980s that I read "Don't take your love to town" and was very moved by it. I'm not Indigenous. At the time I was living in Germany, and on holidays in Australia. Every two years or so I would go to Blackbooks and buy autobiographies/biographies, which opened up a new world to me – it wasn't all pretty but I

knew I had to find out about it. In other words, Auntie Ruby helped me start on a journey that is still continuing – now I'm back in Australia.

My husband and I (he's German) would like to contribute to the funeral costs.

What a loss to all of Australia!

A friend of mine wishes to donate. He is based in Wiesbaden, Germany. He is just a passionate reader of Ginibi's books--not an Australian Studies scholar at all.

*The news about the loss of Ruby Langford Ginibi has been extremely sad for me. Although I didn't know her in person, her work inspired me and guided me across the years in the hope for justice and hardship. Her book **Haunted by the Past** changed my life.*

I read your email and wonder how I can make a contribution to this funeral fund. It will be a modest amount, but I'm sure every bit helps. We should all be very grateful that you have taken the initiative in paying the funeral costs in the first instance. Auntie Ruby belongs to us all, so we are all responsible for ensuring her departure is paid for – not by just one person, but by many.

I look forward to hearing about any form of memorial that commemorates Auntie Ruby's life. Quite frankly I feel extremely privileged and lucky to be able to have assisted with Auntie Ruby's funeral costs!