

Apron-Sorrow / Sovereign-Tea

the award-winning book by scholar and activist Dr Natalie Harkin about domestic servitude, stolen wages and archival justice in South Australia



Apron-Sorrow / Sovereign-Tea
by Natalie Harkin is available
to purchase from Wakefield
Press

she lingers in archives her trace is
my memory we labour dig sweat
blister imagine know them more
intimately so much work to be done
so much work to clean up this
colonial mess

poetry from the book

“Apron-Sorrow / Sovereign-Tea
explores how First Nations women
were used as indentured domestic
servants in South Australia across
the 20th century.

Drawing upon archival material and the
lived experiences of women who
survived the system, and their relatives,
it is a confronting depiction of a racist
and paternalistic system that separated
these women from their families and
exploited their labour.

The accounts it contains are closely
researched and written with passion,
courage, sadness and heart. Story after
story, it shows how closely controlled
these women’s lives were and exposes
a brutal chapter in our history.

*How can we not honour these
women and the suffering they have
endured? And what of the
unfinished business of the unpaid
wages they are owed?*

Future generations will understand
the sacrifices our Aunties have made
and the pain they have been
subjected to, and this understanding
will create change.”

Judges’ comments
NSW Literary Awards 2026
Winner - Indigenous Writer’s Prize

Stolen wages is unfinished business.

Support truth-telling and justice for First Nations workers.



Up until the 1970s, governments, churches and employers could withhold, reduce and steal payments from Aboriginal workers, including women and girls indentured to domestic service under Assimilation policies in Australia.

Forced and unpaid labour was intertwined with systemic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

Aboriginal girls were indentured as domestic servants for private white homes, pastoral stations, hospitals, and other employers, under a variety of race and gender-based labour schemes. Many women and girls were subjected brutal racist violence, including physical and sexual abuse.

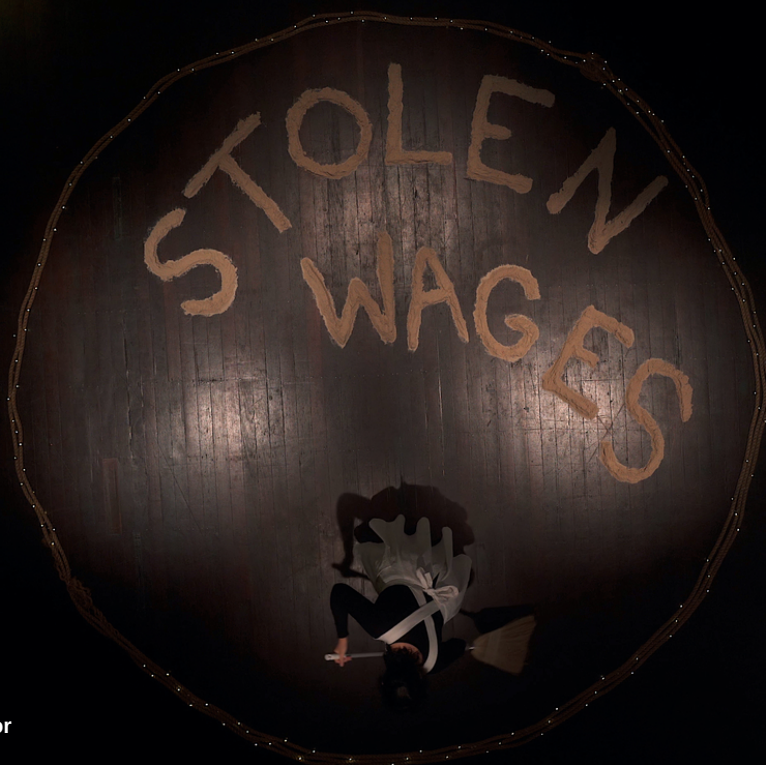
The practice of stolen wages, including the wages denied to Aboriginal women who were domestic servants, has greatly contributed to the significant wealth gap between First Nations people and other Australians that remains today.

Archives are held in cultural institutions across Australia which hold records that were made by governments, churches and others, that detail this history.

Aboriginal people lived under surveillance policies, being monitored and recorded extensively by agencies including governments and churches. In South Australia accessing some of these archives is very difficult.

Aboriginal people deserve archival justice – their right to access their own records, that document their stories, with care and safety. Twenty years ago, in 2006, a Federal Senate Inquiry was held on the matter of Indigenous Stolen Wages. The final report 'Unfinished Business' recommended governments take a proactive approach to archives and other policy to avoid compounding past injustices through inaction.

Truth-telling is long overdue in South Australia. This matter of stolen wages, and how the state profited from the indentured and slave labour of Aboriginal workers, remains unfinished business.



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