

Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women

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Introduction

The bitter smell of coffee lingered in the air like smoke and the echo of laughter and music whispered in my ears. I was at the Judith Wright Centre waiting for Indigenous Australian female singer/songwriter Toni Janke to perform. I watched the audience file in and take their seats in the theatre. I smiled at my friend Mark and his sister Louise who had both come along to watch the concert with me. There was a hush over the audience as the lights dimmed and Toni came on stage. The backing CD started and the sounds of guitar, drums and ethereal sounding flute reverberated through the theatre. Toni began to sway to the music and then her strong, smooth voice began performing her song 'Jewel of the North'. I also moved to the slow beat and listened carefully as Toni sang, 'we sang all the old songs back then, and we laughed and we danced once again'. Then the applause wrapped around me and embraced me in its warmth. I looked over at Louise and noticed she had a puzzled look on her face. She caught my eye and said in a hushed tone, 'It's certainly not what I was expecting.' I wondered, what did she mean by this statement? Did the performance not 'sound' how she was expecting? Did Toni not 'look' how she assumed Indigenous Australian performers should look? Was she surprised that the concert was performed by Indigenous Australian women? I wondered how many other people in the audience were also thinking that it was not what they expected. Were the Indigenous Australian women performers aware of these audience expectations?

Each time I recall this experience it tells me about how Aboriginalist discourse works to fix, confine and sustain non-Indigenous audiences' expectations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music are intensely aware that Aboriginalist discourse hinders them and they perform a diverse range of styles, languages, places and identities in order to resist, negotiate and challenge Aboriginalism.

Drawn from Edward Said's theory of Orientalism,¹ the term 'Aboriginalism' has been used by scholars in the Australian context to refer to specific ways of representing Indigenous Australian people. Broadly defined, it refers to the tendency of (largely white) scholars to use 'culture' as the key analytical tool for knowing social difference and for explaining issues in colonial contexts.² Music performance is one arena where Aboriginalism is visibly and sonically at play. One of the most common Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian people is, as Indigenous female performer Lou Bennett points out, 'basically a man, out in the desert, black skin, flat nose with a lap-lap on, standing on one leg, resting against a spear.'³ In performance contexts Indigenous singer-songwriter Deb Morrow notes that another typical Aboriginalist construction is a man playing 'didjeridu, clap sticking, full black, with paint all over them. And that, that's all they are. Anything less than that is not Aboriginal.'⁴ Lou's and Deb's comments raise questions: in what ways are discourses of Aboriginalism gendered? Does Aboriginalism have consequences that are different for men and women?⁵ How does Aboriginalism affect performance and specifically Aboriginal women performers? As a non-Indigenous researcher, how does my own research and writing work within and against Aboriginalism?

What is Aboriginalism?

The earliest references to the term 'Aboriginalism' can be found in the work of Vijay Mishra. In 1987, Mishra drew on Said's *Orientalism* to develop the term Aboriginalism in order to describe the attempt at the 'reduction of a culture to a dominant discourse' which overpowers 'the plurality of Aboriginal voices'.⁶ A number of authors have subsequently examined

historical and contemporary expressions of Aboriginalism in various contexts including education, film and literature, anthropology, archaeology, media and theatre.

Aboriginalism has the effect of silencing Indigenous Australians and views Aboriginal people as ‘fearsome and dangerous, childlike and passive or primitively attractive but not as capable of self government or equal civil or moral subjects. Essentially they will be spoken about or for but cannot speak themselves.’⁷ Hodge describes Aboriginalism as being ‘ideally constituted to act as an ambiguous instrument for ideological control’.⁸ Similarly, Attwood shows that Aboriginalism is characterised by an overarching relationship of power between coloniser and colonised and suggests that Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, ‘produces authoritative and essentialist “truths” about indigenes, and which is characterised by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge’.⁹ Bradford also argues that Aboriginalism works within the dynamics of knowledge and power, suggesting that Aboriginalist discourse ‘locates authentic Aboriginal cultures in a remote past where they can be safely quarantined from notions of progress and development and denied the possibility of change or adaptation’.¹⁰

A number of scholars emphasise that anthropologists, historians and others have been, and continue to be, responsible for the construction and dissemination of Aboriginalism. Certainly, Aboriginalism exists not only in academic discourse, filtering through into the general culture as stereotypes such as those identified by Bennett and Morrow. But before addressing Indigenous Australian women performers’ perceptions of how they are imagined and constructed by audiences, I would now like to examine some examples of Aboriginalism from anthropological texts. As Muecke notes, rather than viewing texts as locations where the desire to speak is liberated, we need to critique them as sites of multiple exclusions.¹¹

Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian women
 Critiques of Aboriginalism rarely feature in anthropological or ethnomusicological discourse and with the exception of Moreton-Robertson there has been very little discussion of the specific ways that Aboriginalist discourse constructs,

works against and affects Aboriginal women.¹² As McConaghy, among others, points out, Said's *Orientalism* presents us with a notion of colonialism as non-gendered.¹³ Said states that 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.¹⁴ Lewis emphasises that the 'him' of this quotation is significant — for Said, in *Orientalism* at least, Orientalism is a homogenous discourse articulated by a colonial subject that is 'unified, intentional and irredeemably male'.¹⁵ Lewis acknowledges that although Said discusses the impact of discourses of gender in his later work, in *Orientalism* he 'does not question women's apparent absence as producers of Orientalist discourse or as agents with colonial power' and gender only occurs in the text 'as a metaphor for the negative characterisation of the Orientalised Other as "feminine"'.¹⁶ Lewis argues that women did produce representations that constituted Orientalism, and while there is a wealth of literature on gender and Orientalism, scholars working in the Australian context have not yet drawn on this work to critique Aboriginalism in relation to gender.¹⁷ How, then, is Aboriginalism gendered? What does this discourse mean in relation to Aboriginalism and its relationship to gender?

White male anthropological representations of Indigenous Australian women

Anthropology has played an influential role in constructing Aboriginalist notions of both 'Aborigines' and Indigenous Australian women. My analysis here does not attempt to give an exhaustive account of Aboriginalist representations, nor does it try to condemn these images and texts. As Muecke reveals, anthropological accounts 'traditionally excluded the possibility of dialogue with the Others' and regarded traditional forms of Indigenous Australian cultures and music alone as 'authentic', valuable and therefore worthy of scholarly consideration.¹⁸ Historically, male anthropologists dominated Australian anthropology and their primary objects of study were Indigenous Australian people and cultures.¹⁹ In their early anthropological texts, Aboriginal women were 'invisible,

or represented as inferior, or possessions or victims, or both. White male anthropologists viewed the native scene through their own phallogocentric lenses, and were dependent on male Aboriginal informants.²⁰

Women representing 'other'

Henrietta Moore writes that in the early 1970s the new 'anthropology of women' began by confronting 'the problem of how women were being represented in anthropological writings' by men and the initial problem was quickly identified as one of male bias which was seen as having three 'tiers'.²¹ According to Moore, the first bias is that of the anthropologist who brings to research various expectations and assumptions about the relationships between men and women; the second bias is one inherent in society; and the third bias is one imbedded in Western culture.²² Feminist anthropologists saw the primary task as one of deconstructing this three-tiered male bias by focusing research on women and anthropological writings about Indigenous Australian women proliferated during this period.

Phyllis Kaberry was the first non-Indigenous female anthropologist to represent the lives and culture of Indigenous Australian women.²³ Her 1939 book, *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane*, was based on her research in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia; it highlights the significance of Indigenous women and focused on the cultural and religious heritage of Aboriginal women at a time when 'few outsiders paid any attention to the lives of Indigenous people, let alone women'.²⁴ Since the work of Kaberry, many women anthropologists attempted to challenge the three-tiered bias and claimed a deep concern for Aboriginal women and their traditions.²⁵

Kaberry's text at least emphasised the roles of Aboriginal women at a time when Aboriginal women were represented only in stereotypical ways or not at all. Her views of 'the Aboriginal woman' as sharing with men an equal ownership of land, a common religious heritage and having sacred and secret ceremonies restricted to women challenged some of Aboriginalism's key myths. Kaberry's focus on 'traditional' Indigenous women was part of her campaign to contest the

view, argued by male anthropologists in the early part of the twentieth century, that 'traditional' Aboriginal women 'were no more than "domesticated cows"'.²⁶

Kaberry's failure to acknowledge the impact of colonialism on Kimberley Aboriginal life has been criticised by Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who states that Kaberry's 'methodology allows for an illusory absence of colonisation which is preserved and felt in the presence of its absence'.²⁷ Similarly, Toussaint notes that Kaberry 'appears from her ethnography to have worked *unquestioningly* in a colonial era and she aligned herself with pastoral families, some of whom held more power and authority than 1930s Aboriginal women and men'.²⁸ Certainly Kaberry was working in a period in Australian anthropology that was strongly aligned with and influenced by Aboriginalist and colonialist agendas.

Non-Indigenous female anthropologist Diane Bell's book *Daughters of the Dreaming* was first published in 1983 and was received at the time as a 'challenge to certain cherished assumptions concerning the role of women, particularly in the sphere of religion'.²⁹ Bell asserts that Aboriginal women have a parallel culture to men, are social actors who have status, power and authority to enact social agency, and 'are autonomous, independent ritual actors who actively participate in the creation, transmission and maintenance of the values of their society'.³⁰ Yet *Daughters of the Dreaming* could be viewed as an Aboriginalist text in its positioning of Bell as a knowledgeable expert on Aboriginal women with the authority to represent and document Indigenous women's secret and restricted knowledges in a public text. Bell has been highly criticised by Indigenous Australian women academics such as Jackie Huggins, Moreton-Robinson and others who have challenged Bell's right to speak for Indigenous women.³¹ Similarly, Moore suggests that white women anthropologists, like Bell, want to challenge men's right to speak for women, but in the process find themselves 'unintentionally speaking for other women'.³²

Hamilton, however, emphasises that Bell's text must be commended because it 'opens up a certain perspective, one which has received little credence or even attention before'.³³

Bell herself states that her aim is to articulate an ethnography that was ‘feminist, engaged, ethically grounded, collaborative, relational and enmeshed in ever-expanding political contexts’.³⁴ However, her intentions must be questioned because — like Kaberry, Berndt, and others — Bell documents information about women-only ceremonies, information that today is considered restricted information.³⁵ Bell argues that ‘my economic and emotional independence of the world of men meant that I was “safe” with women’s secrets’.³⁶ While she acknowledged that information about women-only ceremonies was secret, she still documented it in a public text.

Certainly, the work of women anthropologists attempted to challenge assumptions concerning Aboriginal women. However, representations of Indigenous women by these anthropologists reveal that they, too, have contributed to the production of Aboriginalist discourse about Aboriginal women. Moreton-Robinson argues that ‘when white women anthropologists write about Indigenous women, they do so in the conventions of representation bounded by their discipline, university and politics and white Australian culture.’³⁷ There have been many other representations of Indigenous women by non-Indigenous women scholars,³⁸ and a number attempt to challenge and actively resist Aboriginalism in their work by moving beyond the traditional frame of reference to deal with social change, include and acknowledge the voices of Indigenous women, and situate Indigenous women not as objects within texts, but highlight the fullness of the lived experiences and multiple subjectivities of Indigenous women in the present. Certainly, part of the challenge for any non-Indigenous scholar researching Indigenous Australian people and their cultures, myself included, is to resist speaking for Indigenous Australians and emphasise Indigenous perspectives in order to actively challenge, shift away from and move beyond Aboriginalism.

Aboriginalism in performance

Despite the growing body of academic literature about Indigenous Australian music, critiques of Aboriginalism and colonialism are yet to take centre stage in this area of study.³⁹ There has been a noted scarcity in scholarly examinations

of Aboriginalism in relation to contemporary music performance.⁴⁰ With the exception of Lawe Davies, there has been little academic examination of the ways in which Aboriginalist discourse fixes expectations of Indigenous Australian people performing contemporary music and further, how Indigenous Australian performers respond to these expectations.⁴¹ There has also been a lack of examination of the specific ways Aboriginalism works to hinder Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music.

Aboriginalist discourse creates expectations and assumptions on two levels: how Indigenous performers should look and also how they should sound. Aboriginalist images of painted up black (mostly male) bodies wearing red headbands and dressed in loincloths are a dominant Aboriginalist representation in tourism, books and television. Aboriginalism also creates the expectation that the music of Indigenous performers will 'sound' Aboriginal, and therefore be linked with 'culture'. For example, when Indigenous female duo Shakaya were interviewed on ABC Radio, the first question they were asked was 'So, do you think there's anything particularly Aboriginal about your music?' Naomi Wenitong and Simone Stacey from Shakaya responded: 'We're trying to, we want to create a bit more sound where we can use a didjeridu and have actually used didjeridu in our songs. We'd like to do a lot more stuff with traditional instruments you know.'⁴² Their response suggested the pressure to conform to the image constructed by Aboriginalist views of Indigenous performers by including sonic markers of Aboriginality such as didjeridu in order to legitimise their music and their identities.⁴³

Neuenfeldt points out that the didjeridu is an integral element of an Aboriginal 'sound' in contemporary music and further suggests that 'having an identifiable "sound" ... is a major requisite for candidature for entry into the "universal pop aesthetic"'.⁴⁴ Aboriginalist expectations of the didjeridu are linked 'with the implicit inference that Aboriginal instruments, music (or musicians for that matter) are primitive, unsophisticated and low tech'.⁴⁵ Other recognisable ingredients of an Aboriginal 'sound' are clapsticks and lyrics sung in Indigenous Australian languages. Under the Aboriginalist gaze, the inclusion of Aboriginal 'sounds' into contemporary

songs by Indigenous performers ‘serves to “legitimise” them in the sense of creating overt linkages to past and present forms of artistic expression’.⁴⁶

Indigenous Australian women performers play around, within and against such musical constructions by actively negotiating, challenging and using them while blurring and merging the borders between contemporary and traditional Indigenous musical expression through the use of a wide range of musical styles and instrumentation. They make deliberate musical choices about how they, as performers, will look and also how their music will sound. Certainly, the Indigenous Australian women I interviewed are acutely aware of Aboriginalist stereotypes surrounding Indigenous Australian performance, understand how culture is used to legitimate performance and use a range of strategies to work within, against and around these Aboriginalist constructions.

Indigenous women performing within/against Aboriginalism

Sarah Patrick

Brisbane-based Torres Strait hip hop performer Sarah Patrick notes:

White Australians think they know our culture but they know nothing. They just know what the media feeds them. They see a didgeridu, they see a corroboree, they see a group of black people painted up, they go ‘oh, that’s their strange little rituals, that’s culture’.⁴⁷

Sarah’s statement highlights her awareness of Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous performance. Certainly the Indigenous Australian women performers I interviewed are aware of these stereotypes and myths surrounding Indigenous Australian performance and understand how culture is used to legitimise performance. One of the premises of Aboriginalism is the perpetuation of stereotypical notions of a primitive Indigenous people engaging in strange and exotic rituals that sharply distinguish ‘them’ from ‘us’. Like many Indigenous Australian people, Sarah rejects this representation of Indigenous identity and performance and argues that:

What makes you black is actually your spirituality and your ties to family more than anything. Particularly knowing your family and knowing where they come from and knowing your tribe. That to me is more of a marker of Indigenous culture identity, um, as opposed to the markers of oh paint, costumes, didj. To me that's a stereotypical view that, that's a white view that's been forced upon us, um, and it's not the reality.

For Sarah, her Indigeneity is based on her family connections and her inner guiding beliefs rather than any visual or sonic markers of Indigenous performance. She also emphasises that non-Indigenous expectations of Indigenous performers being 'painted up' with ochre and playing didjeridu represent a clichéd view, which has been forced on Indigenous people. However, she does allow herself creative freedom to incorporate elements of Torres Strait Creole at times in her music, for example in her song 'Where Itzat':

With a smile like the sun you's a whole lotta fun
 The kinda wantocs sistagels chase at NAIDOCs
 You's are black-tastic, black-tabolous
 Black-wonderful, black-marvellous
 Native as platypus yea I like that
 Black is where it's at — I love black boys yo and they love me!

Sarah points out that 'White Australians have a perception which is stereotypical but not necessarily the truth and that's not helped by portrayals in the media'.⁴⁸ She further notes:

What you'll find with most Indigenous rap is that instead of using Afro-American terms I do it in Island language terms, so instead of saying 'brother' we say *bala*, like *gumma* is well, in the city it means just a good looking person you see a nice looking guy it's like 'Oh *gumma*!' However when you go back up North into the islands it still just means like a beautiful woman, like a girl, but that's changing [laughs].

Although Sarah does incorporate elements of her Torres Strait Island background in her music, she also emphasises that:

It's not done in a methodical way—like you obviously don't sit down with a song and go 'Oh! I'll put in this here because I have to have the markers', for me necessarily like in terms of Indigenous culture, the one big marker that people don't understand is that it is the inner, rather than the external. Just like, yeah cool, I can paint up as much as the next person but that doesn't make me any more black than anyone else.

Sarah sets out openly to resist Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous sounds in her music and, although she does not necessarily plan to incorporate elements of Indigenous musical expression, sometimes 'it just happens'.⁴⁹

Briscoe Sisters

The Indigenous duo from Cairns, North Queensland, the Briscoe Sisters (Deline and Naurita Briscoe) have also successfully been grabbing audiences' expectations by using hand clapping and singing a number of contemporary songs in the Aboriginal language from their region in Mossman in North Queensland—Kuku Yalanji.⁵⁰ They point out that they do not often come across questions about the legitimacy of their performances. Their song 'Wanju' on their live album is sung in Kuku Yalanji and English in two-part harmony and accompanied by acoustic and electric guitar, drums and bass.⁵¹

One of the sisters, Deline, states that 'Back when I was about seventeen I just thought "Hey we should do a song in language" just because it's how we talk so I thought why don't we just do a song in language so we did that.'⁵² Deline emphasises that:

A lot of people think that the Aboriginal culture and languages are lost and when we get up and sing it just opens their eyes to see no there is a culture, there is a language for you know every section of Australia. But, yeah and I guess because ... every time we sing, we sing a language

song so it's hard. If we didn't sing language yeah we maybe would be asked that.

Further, Deline notes, 'There's a lot of people out there that don't know that Aboriginal people still have their culture because they think that's all lost and they've got no culture 'cause I've heard those statements before too'. The view that all Indigenous cultures and languages are all lost is a marker of Aboriginalist discourse, implies that Aborigines and their music making are dying out and also situates authentic Aboriginal cultures in the past. By singing in their language the Briscoe Sisters are resisting this perception and challenging the Aboriginalist myth that Aboriginal people cannot adapt to modern times.

Like some other Indigenous women performers, the Briscoe Sisters incorporate their language into their music as a way of preserving their Aboriginal language through song. Deline states:

Actually a lot of times when we sing in language, people from our area, Kuku Yalanji especially, when they've moved to the cities or they've moved to Townsville or whatever, we finish [and] they're crying 'cause they've never heard our language sung like that before, and so it's a new thing for us and our tribe, clan, all of that, to have our language sung like that.

However, many of their songs do not incorporate elements which audiences might identify as 'Aboriginal' (for example, 'Check it Out', 'Lonely Souls' and 'Broad Road'). They sing about a diverse range of issues including workplace prejudice, relationships, child sexual abuse, friendship, and other topics and accompany themselves on guitar and hand percussion or sing *a capella*. The Briscoe Sisters then, are resisting non-Indigenous people's expectations on dual levels. Most of their songs resist Aboriginalist constructions and expectations of what styles of music Indigenous Australian people perform, and also how they should sound, by not including musical markers of their Indigeneity. Yet at other times they incorporate some lyrics in language which challenges the

Aboriginalist assumption that Aboriginal languages and cultures have died out and the colonial myth that Aboriginal people are incapable of adjusting or adapting to the present.

Monica Weightman

The beginning and ending of the title track on Monica Weightman's CD *Lost Generation* incorporates the song 'Darnley Island Too Far Away', a song that Monica's father sang during his childhood on Thursday Island.⁵³ The opening is sung by Monica and two male vocalists in unison and accompanied by clapsticks:

Teb teb ka nalai e
Kara nas barki
Bakiamudari tumem ka
Erub ka deraimeli e
Nole ka erdari
O diya mi diya
Darnley Island too far away

Monica states:

It's a wonderful story. We've retraced the writer's steps and I spoke to his descendants up there on Darnley Island, they're still there. But ... his name's Leui Thaiday, the guy who wrote that and he was a songwriter. He was a pearl diver and a songwriter. Apparently he was forever making up songs so we spoke to his relatives on Darnley Island, they gave us permission to use it, and ah the mask on the CD.⁵⁴

The inside of the CD case also features a painting of a wedding mask by artist John Dow, which signifies the 'cycle of generations'. Most of the songs on Monica's album (including 'Here We Go', 'Miss You', 'Middle of Nowhere) do not draw on features that audiences could identify as musical markers of her Indigeneity and Monica notes:

I got asked a question from a South African woman. She said to me, about the instrumentation, like 'do you use

the didgeridu and stuff?’ and I said, ‘Well, no I don’t.’ And I probably would be reticent about putting it on my, or within my music because that’s not ... where I come from, you know. We’re talking more about drums and Islander drums, that’s sort of more where I come from. So there is this general conception that, you know, all Aboriginals play didgeridu.

Monica’s statement points to the localised nature of Indigenous musical sounds and emphasises that she is aware that the sound and image of the didgeridu has become fixed in the minds of many non-Indigenous people as a symbol of Aboriginality through out Australia and overseas. Neuenfeldt notes the didgeridu has become the ‘primary aural and visual musical icon of Australian indigeneity’.⁵⁵ Monica resists Aboriginalist expectations by only incorporating sounds which she feels are culturally appropriate while at the same time contemporary music has provided Monica with the tools to connect with her Indigenous heritage.

Deb Morrow

Other Indigenous women performers, like Deb Morrow, attempt to openly resist Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous performance by not drawing on any typical musical elements—such as didgeridu, clapsticks or the use of Aboriginal languages—that could be identified by audiences as forms of traditional Indigenous Australian musical expression. The title of Deb’s CD *Flight of the Emu* (2001) is meaningful to Deb because, as she states, ‘Emu’s my main totem, that’s the one that drives me most’. The CD cover includes a sketch of an emu in red facing a black and white photograph of Deb. The emu’s head is close to Deb’s profile and signifies Deb’s closeness to and affiliation with her totem. The significance of an emu taking flight is explained by Deb in the following way:

As you know, emus can’t fly, but there’s a traditional story about how she used to fly once and she lost her flight through she came to the earth because she wanted to dance with brolga, and brolga tricked her into coming to the earth so once she stepped foot on the earth she lost her

flight and that's when the world started getting created and things started going wrong, and we've ended up here.

Here there is a certain tension between images and sounds because the songs on Deb's album do not draw on any musical elements which audiences might identify as 'Aboriginal'. Like Lou, Deb deliberately resists Aboriginalist stereotypes of Indigenous performance by trying to 'steer away from it as much as possible, because they're [clapsticks and didjeridu] not something I was brought up with. I wasn't brought up traditionally, I don't think my tribe actually ever blew a didjeridu.' Deb explains that she uses instruments that are available to her, and she challenges the Aboriginalist beliefs that Aborigines are frozen in the past, unable to adjust or adapt to the modern world, asserting 'we're a progressive culture and we've progressed and we've been forced to be, to move into a modern world, so I use what's been given to me and that is my guitar, electrified instruments, drum kits'.⁵⁶

A big question which arises is how can these Indigenous women be resisting Aboriginalist constructions when, on the surface, incorporating elements of traditional musical expression and visual images could be read as meeting Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous performance? There is a tension apparent here — these women are trying to resist one-dimensional Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous Australian performance yet at the same time they want to be free to explore, experiment and draw on their cultural backgrounds in their music and self representation. It is not surprising that this contradiction exists because just as the myths projected by Orientalism and Aboriginalism have no rationality and are grounded in 'prejudices based on doctrines of evolutionary difference and intellectual inferiority' the responses by Indigenous women performers to Aboriginalism in performance are equally varied and diverse.⁵⁷

My relationship to Aboriginalism

I now want to step back and pose the question, as McConaghy does, is it possible to speak about Indigenous Australian people from outside Aboriginalism?⁵⁸ Writing about Indigenous Australian issues, peoples and cultures is inherently political.

As a non-Indigenous woman I am mindful of Sharpe's warning that 'none of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice'.⁵⁹ An important question for me is: how is my gaze different? In some ways I feel that I am resisting tendencies to view women as secondary. First, by engaging with Aboriginalism in relation to performance and focusing on Indigenous Australian women, I am taking a crucial step towards 'moving beyond the exoticised projections of the imaginations of Western anthropologists'.⁶⁰ Second, by asking questions about Aboriginalism I am drawing attention to the ways this discourse works to create and sustain expectations of what Indigenous Australian women performing contemporary music should sound and look like, and how Indigenous Australian women respond to these expectations. Third, and perhaps most importantly, at every turn I am putting in place strategies that aim to privilege the voices of Indigenous Australian women performers, emphasising their diverse voices, performances and styles in order to resist how Aboriginalism excludes Indigenous people as authorised speakers.⁶¹

After undertaking interviews with twenty Indigenous Australian women performers for my doctoral research, I was overwhelmed with the many challenging ethical questions posed by feminist researchers about representation and writing. How can I represent the performers best? Given that one of the central tenets of feminist research is to empower women's voices and experiences I also question whose voices should I include, when and how often? How can I include a 'chorus of voices'?⁶²

Concerned with the issues of representation, authority and authorship raised in my own writing, I am continually attempting to incorporate quotations of Indigenous women performers from my interviews with them. The words of Kathy Charmaz resonate with my own thoughts:

I prefer to present many detailed interview quotes and examples in the body of my work. I do so to keep the human story in the forefront of the reader's mind and to make the conceptual analysis more accessible to a wider audience.⁶³

At the same time, I am constantly reminded of Holman Jones's fear that the text might contain 'too many of the author's voices and too few of the voices of those she studies'.⁶⁴ Lincoln and Denzin note that one way to respond to these issues of representation is to move to 'including the Other in the larger research processes that we have developed'.⁶⁵ I attempted to do this by sending drafts that included Indigenous women performers' statements to the performers themselves for their comments, additions and approval of the representation of their voices. This involved a process of negotiation and consultation with performers.

The best that I can hope for is to incorporate the voices of performers and allow them to speak in their own voices rather than interpreting them through my voice. Yet despite my intentions, ultimately the work remains my interpretation of their words. I am still left wondering if my representations of performers is what they had hoped for? 'How do I "unlearn" my privilege as a white woman scholar?' throughout the research process? Is it possible for a non-Indigenous researcher and Indigenous performers to have an equal voice in a research project like this? Like Holman Jones, I feel that 'I am not wise with answers, but alive with questions'.⁶⁶ I cannot escape the fact that I am a non-Indigenous female scholar engaging in a representation of Indigenous Australian women, and that I am constructing or producing knowledge about Indigenous women performing contemporary music. As Attwood asks, is it 'possible to have any worthwhile non-Aboriginal knowledge about Aborigines or is it inherently flawed because of the political—that is colonial—circumstances in which it was created?'⁶⁷

Conclusion

A month after the performances by Toni and Sarah at the Judith Wright Centre, I ran into my friend Mark's sister Louise by coincidence at Indooroopilly Shopping Centre. 'Hey, Kate!' Louise exclaimed, 'I meant to tell you, thanks heaps for inviting me to that Indigenous music gig.' 'That's OK,' I said slightly bemused at the memory of her comment that the performance wasn't what she had expected. 'I ended up buying Toni Janke's CD from her website and I've really

been enjoying listening to it,' Louise said excitedly. 'Really? That's great,' I responded trying to hide the surprise from my voice. 'Yeah, I was playing the CD the other day and then Mum said to me "you wouldn't know that she's Indigenous just by listening to her music, would you?"' Louise rolled her eyes and continued her story, 'And I said, "Well Mum, just because she's Indigenous doesn't mean she has to be blowing a didgeridu or wearing a head band!"'

This narrative illustrates that contemporary music provides Indigenous women with a powerful podium to change audiences' expectations, educate non-Indigenous people about the diversity of Indigenous people and break down Aboriginalist perceptions of Indigenous Australian performance. The comment that 'You wouldn't know she's Indigenous just by listening to her music' suggests that Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous performance continue to pervade the minds of many non-Indigenous audiences and certainly the performers remain acutely aware of these expectations. But when Indigenous Australian women performers take the stage, their voices and performances are attempting to educate non-Indigenous people through performance about the diverse identities, songs and musical styles performed by Indigenous women musicians.

Today, Aboriginalism continues to take many varied and at times contradictory guises in relation to Indigenous women performing contemporary music. Indigenous women performers emphasised to me that some audiences expect 'traditional' musical instruments, languages, costumes and 'paint', while others have perceptions of 'real' Aborigines as being an 'other-worldly' and much desired 'other' to the non-Indigenous imagination.⁶⁸ Aboriginalist discourse is constructed, controlled and maintained by a dominant non-Indigenous culture and appears to continue to have a strong hold in the minds of many non-Indigenous Australians. As a result, Indigenous Australian people, as Muecke acknowledges, are faced with a 'totalising concept of Aboriginal culture' and often expected to 'display this essence, or this or that skill, as if culture were an endowment of a totality'.⁶⁹

Rey Chow reminds us that we live in an era in which

the critique of the West has become not only possible but necessary and describes this task of critiquing colonial power and representations as ‘dismantling the claims of cultural authority that are housed in specific representations’.⁷⁰ The contemporary music performances and recordings by Indigenous Australian women are exciting and exhilarating not only because they are talented musicians but because they provide potent examples of the ways these women are able to sing, perform, speak, and play their way through Aboriginalist assumptions to self-define more diverse and dynamic identities as Indigenous Australian women.

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Reflection

A number of performers have emerged since the publication of the article—including Jessica Mauboy and Thelma Plum—and performers continue to perform within and against Aboriginalist expectations in diverse ways. A recent example of an Aboriginalist image was the DVD cover of the 2012 film *Sapphires*. While the Australian DVD cover showed the four Aboriginal female singers who play the Sapphires at the front, with their manager in the background, the United States DVD cover depicted their manager at the centre with the four women faded into the background. Some critics argued this was clever marketing for the US audience, yet it could also be read as a parallel to early anthropological texts where Aboriginal women were relegated to the background and silenced.

Since the publication of this article, my research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women performers has continued and I continue to consider my own relationship to Aboriginalism. What is my role as a non-Indigenous woman scholar in this context? My response has been to shift to a more collaborative research framework. One of the performers who I interviewed for my thesis, Lexine Solomon, invited me to work

collaboratively on a project exploring the contemporary music of her fellow Torres Strait Islander women performers. Together we travelled across Australia interviewing Torres Strait Islander women performers and have since published and presented at conferences together. I have also undertaken a collaborative research project with Aboriginal researcher Monique Proud about music making in her own community of Cherbourg in Queensland. In this way, I hope my research can resist Aboriginalism and continue to work towards building ongoing dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Notes

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