

# 'Performances of Power': A New Project on Aboriginal Performance in Australia

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*Abstract: Settler states are built on 'unsettled ground' with Aboriginal peoples, settlers and migrants locked in a continual struggle, contesting their rights to culture, land and belonging. In this struggle Aboriginal performance has played a vital role in protesting the settler-nation order and maintaining Indigenous cultural forms and interpretations of the past. This paper explores the tensions with reference to the Aboriginal peoples of Western Australia in a new project examining the history of performance, issues of cultural sustainability and rights, and the contribution of performance to sustaining culture and wellbeing. The project will produce a comprehensive living history of public performances incorporating Aboriginal dance, music, art, story-telling and theatrical devices directed by Aboriginal people or in collaboration with others and incorporating agendas of political protest and cultural survival. Also to be addressed are international perspectives on the sustainability of Indigenous cultures in settler societies with reference to the role of rights-based frameworks in supporting Aboriginal cultural diversity in Australia and cosmopolitanism. Finally, the project will assess particular performances in terms of their contribution to cultural sustainability, wellbeing and empowerment with the aim of enhancing planning and production to ensure community cultural, social and financial outcomes are met.*

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## Introduction

**S**ETTLE STATES STAND on shifting ground with settler and Aboriginal citizens locked in a continual struggle over contested rights to culture, land and belonging. Foundational conflicts reverberate down the years as Wolfe (1999, p.3) explains, 'invasion is a structure not an event.' Rather than final resolution there is continuing renegotiation. In the unequal playing fields of the settler state Indigenous voices and spaces are continually appropriated by dominant settler discourses. Yet Peter Phipps (nd, p. 29) writes of Aboriginal 'performances of power' that can break through this silencing to assert the 'vibrancy of cultural life' and 'existence and sovereignty' and to introduce audiences to a 'proper ethics of living on country.' Such performances are the focus of the new research project at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia, to be discussed in this paper.

Established in July 2011, the five-year project led by Senior Research Fellow, Professor Anna Haebich, will enrich appreciation and understanding of historical and contemporary Indigenous performance. While the project builds on existing scholarship framed by theories of post-colonialism, cosmopolitanism, cultural sustainability, Indigenous rights and culture and wellbeing, the research team will seek to generate more direct and innovative responses to Aboriginal performance. Phipps (nd, p. 37), reflecting on his years working for the international Yolngu Garma Festival in Arnhem Land in Northern Australia, marvelled at the Yolngu people's gifting of 'rich treasuries of cultural wealth' to festival participants and the

webs of reciprocity this created. He also observed how this gifting served as a strategy for 'cultural survival and renewal' and as a profound 'gesture towards a deeper intercultural dialogue about being: at the level of ontological relations of space, time, epistemology and embodiment.' The Curtin project seeks to honour this invitation to engage in the 'deeper intercultural dialogue about being.' This means adopting reflexive and inclusive methodological and interpretative frameworks as developed by, for example, Linda Smith (1999) in her book *Decolonising Methodologies* and also exploring with Indigenous performers culturally appropriate modes of communicating research findings. The project approach also draws power from the principal researcher's many years of deep friendship with Aboriginal people, family bonds through marriage and time spent staying in country with Aboriginal friends and family in Western Australia. The commitment is to bring together knowledge, analyses and resources that meet the interests of Aboriginal communities while also furthering frontiers of intellectual research.

While global in context, the Curtin project is in fact a regional study that draws on the rich cultures and creativity of Aboriginal communities in the state of Western Australia. Performance is a contested term with varied definitions. In this context the term refers to historical and contemporary *public* Aboriginal performances (as distinct from those that are closed, being sacred or otherwise private) that are directed by Aboriginal people, sometimes in collaboration with non-Aboriginal others, and where Aboriginal agency and agendas of cultural representation, survival, protest and resistance predominate. The project explores three interconnected themes: the history of Aboriginal performance; cultural sustainability, rights and cosmopolitanism; and the contribution of Aboriginal cultural events to community wellbeing. The project will record how Aboriginal people in Western Australia deploy creative performance to dialogue, challenge, subvert and protest the settler state by strategically adapting Aboriginal cultural forms for purposes of cultural survival and political resistance. Also how living cultures are celebrated and interpretations of the past are represented through performance. Of particular significance are processes of cosmopolitanism and synthesis and reinvention in performance that challenge conventional perspectives on Indigeneity and cultural authenticity. There are also questions of how performance contributes to Aboriginal family and community economies and to cultural and tourism industries of the settler state. In short, the research will expand the field and in doing so will integrate understanding of Aboriginal performance across a range of disciplines and research methodologies.

### **Aboriginal Performance in Western Australia**

Scholarship on public Indigenous performance is a rapidly expanding field of study internationally. Australian scholarship is strongly interdisciplinary and highly theorised in terms of post-colonialism, cosmopolitanism and performativity while also grounded in analyses of particular performance events and texts. To date Western Australia has received limited attention in the literature apart from historical overviews in national contexts such as Casey (2004) and Gilbert and Lo. (2009) The in-depth local and regional studies conducted by the Curtin University project will redress this absence while also adding new layers to theoretical analysis of Indigenous performance.

The project will creatively document Western Australia's rich history of Aboriginal performance and performers' contributions nationally and internationally. This history ranges widely across early cross-cultural contacts, corroborees, travelling troupes, festivals, theatre,

dance, music, tourism, official ceremonies and political protests today. Little of this material has been documented despite the wealth of archival and oral sources. Documents record how at various sites of first contact Aboriginal people danced for the newcomers and how these performances became the principal form of entertainment for settlers and Aboriginal people in many colonial towns. These records are augmented by Aboriginal accounts handed down the generations. Research from other Australian colonies records the entrepreneurial and political intent of late nineteenth century public performances and groups them into four framings: the peace corroboree; the command performance; the gala corroboree; and the commercial or tourist corroboree. (Parsons 1997, p. 46) During the twentieth century Aboriginal performers also took part, often unwillingly, in ceremonies of the settler state celebrating colonial myths of conquest and pacification. Residents of missions and government institutions were frequently called on to perform for visiting Royalty and other dignitaries. There were also non-Aboriginal theatrical appropriations of Aboriginal lives and performance, some employing blackface that served to reinforce settler colonists' conviction of their ownership of the land and supremacy over Aboriginal people. (see Haebich 2008; Haebich and Taylor 2008; and Healy 2008)

During the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal theatre emerged as a powerful force in Western Australia and across Australia. Casey (2004) and Gilbert and Lo (2009) trace the contours of this movement in the context of broader national developments and frameworks of reconciliation and nation. They attribute its beginnings to the demands of the Aboriginal protest movement and new federal government initiatives to promote the Aboriginal arts. They describe a radical (for the times) insistence on Aboriginal writers, narratives, actors and management and control of theatre groups. In Western Australia the movement emerged from the innovative theatre of resistance and survival in the plays of Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis performed by the Black Swan Theatre. These plays were performed locally, nationally and internationally with growing support for Aboriginal theatre in the lead up to the Australian Bicentenary in 1988, the reconciliation movement of the 1990s and Olympic Games cultural festivals in 2000. In the 1990s the Aboriginal musical *Bran nue dae* by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles brought contemporary Aboriginal music styles and humour and dance to a national audience.

The valuable national narrative of theatre high-points provided by Casey (2004) and Gilbert and Lo (2009) understandably overlooks a wealth of local West Australian performances and performers some well-known to settler audiences and others simply treasured by Aboriginal communities. Being regionally based the Curtin project can document this history through archival and oral history research and the collection of memorabilia relating to performances. Further analysis will identify framing mechanisms driving Aboriginal performance more relevant than nation and reconciliation.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

The Curtin University project will generate new insights into sustainability of Aboriginal cultures in settler states and the significance of rights-based instruments and concepts of cosmopolitanism in endorsing Indigenous cultural diversity and innovation. In the Australian context Gilbert and Lo (2009) are leaders of debate in the field of performance and cosmopolitanism. Australian government conservatism in policy and practice has dominated the field of Indigenous cultural rights until recent years in opposition to a vibrant politically

active Aboriginal arts sector. (see Haebich, 2008; Sissons, 2005) This official stance persisted despite the international rights conventions and instruments adopted by the United Nations and UNESCO and the leadership role of Australian Indigenous people in developing the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Adopted by the Australian government in a significant move in 2009 the Declaration has a cultural rights framework that promises sustainability of Indigenous cultures in settler states. However its agendas seem dated in a postcolonial globalising environment where new transnational Indigenous cultural forms are rapidly evolving regardless of nation or human rights. The project will promote discussion of these issues in Western Australia through real and virtual debates between local and international performers and activists organised under the auspices of Curtin University's Centre for Human Rights Education, Centre for Aboriginal Studies and Centre for Advanced Studies in Australia, Asia and the Pacific.

Theories of Indigenous cosmopolitanism provide fresh perspectives on the issue. They eschew binaries of authenticity and traditionalism and claims of the homogenising influences of globalisation and instead vindicate Indigenous performers pushing the boundaries of creative expression into innovative transnational forms. Forte (2010, pp. 2-3) describes a long history from colonial times to the present where Indigeneity has engaged with 'wider fields, finding newer ways of being established and projected, and accruing new representational facets.' Rather than cultural loss and destruction Forte sees cosmopolitanisms based on 'mobility, recognition of interconnectedness, openness toward cultural difference, and engagement with Others.' This argument is reinforced by international historical scholarship. Balme (2007) documents a sweeping history of cross-cultural encounters and productions in the Pacific region framed by theories of post-colonialism, transnationalism and globalisation. Deloria's (2004) study of Native American performers' 'encounters with modernity' challenges simplistic claims of the levelling effect of modernity and its erosion of Indigenous identities and cultures also criticised by Muecke. (2004) These various approaches point the Curtin project towards new understandings of the mutually redefining nature of cosmopolitanism and identity.

The project considers the incorporation of performance and related arts practices into celebratory and ritual aspects of living as well as a means of political advocacy, and in this way is drawn to address the totality of the impact of the arts in society. Aboriginal communities in Western Australia today have a vibrant calendar of festival events hosted by the many Aboriginal cultural and community organisations. These histories and achievements are yet to be documented but Aboriginal academic L. Slater (2009, forthcoming) argues that festivals provide public spaces where Aboriginal people can express sovereignty and ethical intercultural engagement and where 'Indigeneity cannot be assimilated or appropriated but rather where 'we' work towards new forms of relationality.' (Slater 2009, p. 171) There is also a burgeoning of government agencies developing performance events with Aboriginal community groups to promote wellbeing and empowerment through the arts. Again there has been little independent research on these projects. The project will provide new insights by combining critical analysis and participatory research to produce comparative case studies of community and government initiated events that will be of practical relevance to Aboriginal organisers and government agencies.

## Research Challenges

The challenges of a project of this nature are many. Of central concern are the complexities of cross-cultural research and issues of voice and positionality that are magnified in Indigenous critiques of all phases of academic research. There are also problems internal to performance studies research, which Scheer (2010, p. 111) claims is 'white and European' and urgently needs 'conversations that, however inflected with the views of empire, can attempt to speak in other ways to other cultures.' Casey (2004, 2009) has adopted theoretical frames from whiteness theory to redress this imbalance. Muecke (2004, pp. 33, 36) criticises documentation that ignores the power of Indigenous performances 'where orality, song and other impressive skills [are] much more significant than the written word' and calls for creatively documented research rather than 'distanced representation.' Other concerns relate to the difficulties of interpreting historical records riddled with the biases and prejudices of their non-Aboriginal creators. Phipps (nd, p.36) argues that what is required is an 'acute colonial sensitivity to these performances as a theatre of power integral to the earliest phases of colonization.' A further matter is the ephemeral nature of Aboriginal performance and its limited documentation, especially in Aboriginal cultures grounded in oral practices.

Smith (1999, pp. 124-5) identifies the challenges of pursuing Indigenous research within the academy's 'highly institutionalised' fields of research and knowledge led by researchers trained in ways that do not articulate with Indigenous agendas. Yet she also acknowledges that university researchers working with community action researchers can create 'legitimate innovative, cutting-edge approaches [that] intersect and inform each other at a number of different levels.' The Curtin project has forged a determination to develop a research culture that engages 'in solidarity, with passion, with dignity' (Denzell 1999, p.511) with Aboriginal protocols and ethics of relationship, reciprocity, responsibility and respect. This intention reflects Phipps' model of 'ethical community engagement' based on 'long-term relationships' and 'reciprocity in the exchange between researchers and communities that are highly complex [and] difficult to quantify.' (Phipps 2005/2006, p. 32) The Curtin project is embedded within such a landscape of relationships. Since the early 1970s the leader, Anna Haebich, has worked as a researcher with Aboriginal communities, organisations and research centres and on related projects from within universities and major cultural institutions in Western Australia and nationally. Her publications and exhibitions on Aboriginal history and culture are used widely by Aboriginal and other students and researchers. Her partner, Nyungar man Darryl Kickett, is well known nationally and respected for his commitment and integrity as a leader, activist and elder. Local Aboriginal organisations advise the project and funding will provide for Aboriginal researchers. Developing relationships with performers expands out exponentially from this base.

Minimum requirements for the project are frameworks of Aboriginal knowledge and research methodologies with participation built into all stages of research and documentation. Aboriginal models advise adoption of Aboriginal ethics and protocols for research with strong Aboriginal partnerships and senior research appointments. Consultation to assess and reassess directions and methodologies is vital. Methodologies incorporate critical qualitative research, participatory collaboration and narrative and performative approaches. Goals are built on community aspirations for healing and personal and collective transformation and the ongoing political struggle for social and institutional change. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2008) Further essential requirements include culturally responsive processes to ensure

that community concerns remain central to research and that findings and issues are communicated to all participants

Also vital to the project is a broad interdisciplinary approach bringing together Aboriginal history, anthropology, sociology, transnational and postcolonial studies, the performing and visual arts and human rights in combination with strategies of archival research, oral history and documentary and performative recording framed by perspectives of Aboriginal knowledge. This will create a multilayered and textured account of performance history and practice and generate synthesising and decentred approaches that avoid privileging of mainstream perspectives. These different fields also provide varied techniques for analysis of written, oral and visual representations of past and present performances and for processes of production and documentation. Denning has demonstrated how new interpretative frameworks can emerge from interdisciplinary approaches as well as innovative writing and visual styles to communicate the particular power and magic of performance. (see Carter, 2009; Muecke, 2004) In terms of communicating research an exciting potential exists in e archiving material collected, following the example of sites in the European Commission funded performing arts e archive, ECLAP, which the Curtin project leader viewed at a recent workshop in Brussels.

## **Conclusion**

This exciting project promises to add much to the understanding of Indigenous performance generally and to Aboriginal performance in Western Australia in particular. The challenges are to document and analyse the ephemeral cultures of Aboriginal performance and in ways that appropriately draw power from collaborating Aboriginal artists and elders. Clearly this requires a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives, an innovative technology tool kit and appropriate research methodologies with continuing commitment to transparency of process and self-reflection on the part of researchers. Most importantly, the project's success rests on the power of the ties of reciprocity and personal relationship in which it is embedded and the commitment of participants to share in the 'deeper intercultural dialogue about being' that performance offers to us all.

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