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Hop, Skip and Jump: Indigenous Australian Women Performing Within and Against Aboriginalism

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Introduction

I was in The University of Queensland library talking to one of the librarians, James, about my PhD research. He asked, 'So, what are you researching again?' and I replied, 'Well, I'm working with Indigenous Australian¹ women who perform contemporary music, you know, popular music singers'. James looked confused, 'Oh, so are you going to interview that guy from the band Yothu Yindi²?' This was not the first time I had been asked this and inwardly I sighed and replied, 'No, I'm just focusing my research on Indigenous Australian *women*'. Streit-Warburton's words immediately reverberated in my mind: 'Ask an Australian to name an Aboriginal singer and there is a fair chance that the answer will be Yothu Yindi's Mandawuy Yunupingu. Ask again for the name of an Aboriginal *woman* singer and there is an overwhelming chance that the answer will be Deafening Silence. Deafening Silence is not the name of a singer; it is the pervasive response to most questions about Aboriginal women.' (1993: 86). As I looked at James, I wondered if anything had really changed in more than 10 years.

The account above highlights how Indigenous Australian women performers continue to be silenced in discussions and discourses about Indigenous Australian performance. It also illustrates how Aboriginalist³ discourse works to sustain non-Indigenous audiences' expectations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Yet, Aboriginalism is not just a discourse that is 'done to' Indigenous people; Indigenous Australian women performers have their own ways of responding, reacting to and resisting Aboriginalism. This essay explores how Indigenous Australian women have been marginalised in academic and media discourses surrounding Indigenous Australian performance and some of the musical strategies that performers use to play within, against and around Aboriginalist constructions. Drawing on examples from academic texts and media representations of Indigenous Australian performance, the focus is on critiquing representations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Using song texts and first-hand interviews with performers, I discuss how a number of Indigenous Australian women performers resist Aboriginalist representations of themselves in that they attempt to bring Indigenous Australian women's experiences, voices, and topics to the fore through contemporary song. I also examine how they play within and against Aboriginalist musical constructions through actively negotiating, challenging, and using these constructions while blurring or merging the borders



between contemporary and traditional Indigenous Australian musical expression through the use of a wide range of musical styles and instrumentation.

A Brief History of Indigenous Australian Women's Contemporary Music Making

Although Indigenous Australian women and men performers have been adapting imposed Western musical genres since colonisation, the success of Indigenous Australian musicians performing contemporary music and their recognition by the music industry is a relatively recent development. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women performing and recording various styles of contemporary music has been steadily increasing since the 1950s (see [Barney 2006b](#)). The earliest available commercial recordings of popular music by Indigenous Australian women performers were made by Georgia Lee (Dulcie Rama Pitt), and Olive and Eva in the 1940s and 1950s ([Dunbar-Hall 1995](#); [Walker 2000](#)). In the 1960s, Wilma Reading and Georgia Lee released recordings. Heather Pitt, Cherie Watkins, and Auriel Andrew recorded their music in the 1970s, while Lucy Cox, the Mills Sisters (Darwin), Robyn Green, Sharon Mann and Ruby Hunter, released recordings of their music in the 1980s ([Dunbar-Hall 1995](#)). Since the 1990s many Indigenous Australian women musicians have emerged to record their music. Christine Anu had considerable mainstream success in the 1990s, as did the Mills Sisters (from the Torres Strait Islands) (see [Neuenfeldt 2008](#)). Numerous Indigenous Australian women performers have now emerged from a diverse range of regions and with many differing musical styles. This includes: Melbourne-based performers Lou Bennett, Amy Saunders, Illana Atkinson, Little G, the Maza Sisters, Liz Cavanagh, and Monica Weightman; Gold Coast-based Toni Janke; Kerriane Cox from Beagle Bay in Western Australia; Lexine Solomon, Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, Briscoe Sisters, and now disbanded Shakaya from North Queensland; Ruby Hunter from South Australia; Shelly Atkins from Tamworth; Brisbane-based performers Maroochy Barambah, Georgia Corowa, Sarah Patrick, and Ruth Ghee; Shellie Morris, Leah Flanagan and the Mills Sisters from Darwin; and Sydney-based performers Christine Anu, Emma Donovan, Luana Pitt, Cindy Drummond, Ebony Williams, Ursula Yovich and Stiff Gins. The continuing growth in the number of recordings by Indigenous Australian women performers highlights a dynamic musical scene in which Indigenous Australian women are confidently asserting social power and agency to have their voices heard.

My Position in Relation to Indigenous Australian Women Performers

It is important to comment on my position as a non-Indigenous woman researching and working with Indigenous Australian women performers. Acknowledging my identity is not meant as an apology nor as 'another expression of white guilt' ([Maddison 2009](#)), but as an acknowledgement of my positioning. Non-Indigenous people are increasingly asked by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify themselves in relation to Indigenous Australian peoples, to position and understand their white⁴ race power and privilege, and thereby work towards taking a part in the colonial story ([Smith 1999: 3](#)).

I have been working with Indigenous Australian women performers since 2002 when I began my doctorate. I interviewed twenty Indigenous women across Australia, which was a rewarding, challenging and exciting experience from which I learned much about the experiences of Indigenous Australian women and their contemporary music making. Since completing my PhD, my research with Indigenous Australian women performers has continued and research relationships have grown into long-lasting friendships and further research collaborations ([Barney and Solomon 2009a](#); [Barney and Solomon 2009b](#)). In my own writing, I attempt to keep Indigenous Australian women's voices at the forefront by interweaving different speaking voices from first-hand interviews with performers with my own voice into a dialogue. I emphasise the diverse voices, performances, identities and styles performed by Indigenous Australian women and I continue to be guided by the performers I work with in how they wish to be represented.

Using examples that I read as Aboriginalist texts from academic sources, I will examine the impact of Aboriginalism on colonial constructions and non-Indigenous expectations of Indigenous Australian women performing in contemporary music contexts. As Lincoln and Denzin ([2000: 1050](#)) point out, there is a need to revisit texts from earlier historical moments in order to understand the present. In doing so, I am not suggesting that Aboriginalist discourse continues in exactly the same way today, rather I aim to illustrate the longevity of Aboriginalism



and how some Aboriginalist notions in academic writing and visual media representations have contributed to unrealistic expectations of Indigenous Australian women performers.

Marginalisation of Indigenous Australian Women in the Academy

An increasing body of literature focusing on the contemporary music performance practices of Indigenous Australian people has emerged. Nevertheless, the musical output of Indigenous Australian women performers has often been overlooked in academic discourse, which is largely about Indigenous Australian male performers. Most of the early published work on Indigenous Australian performance was by non-Indigenous male scholars and focused on the music of specific groups of Indigenous people from places such as Arnhem Land and Central Australia, who were identified as 'traditional'. Early texts defined Aboriginal performance as essentially 'traditional', fixed, and static and focused on Aboriginal men and their music making while relegating women's performances to the margins.

The cover of A. P. Elkin's text *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (1938) features an Aboriginal man standing on one leg resting against a spear, thus highlighting an Aboriginalist assertion that Aboriginality⁵ is constituted by a remote, primitive, traditional, male Aboriginal culture⁶. The third edition of Elkin's text includes a chapter entitled 'Music and Dancing', where he states that 'Aboriginal music and dancing must be recorded and studied while it is still a functioning element in a living culture' (1954: 245). Elkin reveals an Aboriginalist agenda by implying that Aborigines and their music making will die out, and by situating authentic Aboriginal cultures in the past, thereby denying them the possibility of change or adaptation. Elkin's short section on musical instruments states that 'the most interesting Aboriginal musical instrument is the didjeridu' (1954: 247). Certainly in some circles the didjeridu has endured as a metaphor for the perceived primitiveness of Aboriginality and its timeless traditions. Elkin also describes the role of the 'Songman', who 'is not simply a man with a good voice, but one who has been taught by, and inherited his position from, his father or uncle' (1954: 254). Elkin asserts that 'A Songman is a great acquisition to a camp' but makes no mention of any song woman or senior Aboriginal women with knowledge of song (1954: 255). This exemplifies the Aboriginalist perceptions which assumed that the position of women was secondary and less important to that of men in matters of knowledge and culture.

The Aboriginalist perception that Aboriginal women had nothing important to say about Indigenous Australian music cultures is also evident in T. G. H. Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* (1971), which analyses the rhythmic and musical structure, language and verse structure, subject matter and themes of Central Australia songs. While Strehlow goes into considerable detail on the subject of men's performance in the text, women's performance is relegated to the background; he includes only a very brief chapter entitled 'Women's Song' towards the end of the text. It appears as an afterthought at the end of the last chapter, before the conclusion. Strehlow begins this short chapter by stating that 'the special women's songs form ... a closed book for us; and it seems likely that we shall never know anything of much value about them' (1971: 647). Strehlow writes that the only 'genuine feminine verses' in his 'possession' were given to him by a man who had been a medicine man (1971: 650). Strehlow gives a detail of the text, referring to a 'healing charm', and then concludes by comparing the song to a male equivalent (1971: 653). Like that of Elkin, Strehlow's focus on the secret sacred songs of Central Australian men affirms his Aboriginalist insistence that 'authentic' Aboriginal performance is constituted by traditional, remote, male performance.

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 [the] anthropological writings' of male anthropologists and the initial problem was quickly identified as one of male bias, which was seen as having three 'tiers' (1988: 1). 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 embedded in Western culture (1988: 1–2). The three-tiered bias outlined by Moore (1988) is evident in the work of Elkin and Strehlow as they bring to their research assumptions about the secondary position of women, their biased reading of Aboriginal women inherent in their society, and the male bias inbuilt in Western culture. Their focus on 'traditional' songs affirms the Aboriginalist claim that traditional forms of Indigenous Australian music alone are 'authentic', valuable and worthy of scholarly consideration and that



the dynamics of Aboriginalism further operate by positioning Elkin and Strehlow as white male experts who displace any possibility for Aboriginal men's or women's voices, ownership or control.

Similarly the cover of the edited collection *Australian Aboriginal Music* (Isaacs 1979) highlights the centrality of traditional Aboriginal male performers and their music making. The photograph features two Aboriginal men sitting on the sand, wearing only loincloths and ornate headbands—signifiers of primitivism. It appears as if one Aboriginal man is singing and beating clapsticks while the other Aboriginal man accompanies him on a didjeridu. The cover of the text reveals the Aboriginalist assertion that Aboriginal performance is always linked to 'culture', as constituted by traditional, primitive, male Aboriginal musicians playing didjeridu and clapsticks. The absence of women from this image further reinforces the invisibility of Indigenous Australian women and their music making.

John Castles noted in 1992 that Indigenous Australian women singers were 'prominent, though all but inaudible in the music that reaches whites' (1992: 27). Since then, a small number of scholars have focused their research on Indigenous Australian women performing contemporary music (Mackinlay 1992; Streit-Warburton 1993, 1995; Streit [Warburton] 1994; Reed 2002; Barney 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008). In addition to this research, several articles briefly discuss Indigenous Australian women who perform in contemporary music contexts (e.g., Pearce 1979; Breen 1989; Castles 1992; Langman 1993; Hayward 1993, 1998; Ryan 1994; Ellis and Ellis 1994; Beniuk 1995; Mitchell 1996; Gibson 1998; Neuenfeldt 2001, 2008; Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004; Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2004; Stubington 2004; Dunbar-Hall 2005; Nakata and Neuenfeldt 2005). Pearce's (1979) mentioning of Aboriginal female singer-songwriters Essie Coffey, Wilga Williams and Auriel Andrew marks an important point in the discourse because it is the first reference to Indigenous Australian women performers in the history and development of Indigenous Australian contemporary music making. Marcus Breen's edited collection of essays, *Our Place, Our Music: Aboriginal Music; Australian Popular Music in Perspective* Volume 2 (1989) highlights the experiences of Aboriginal women vocalists in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, citing Silvana Doolan, Betty Fisher, and Leslie Graham. Tony Mitchell notes that a number of Indigenous Australian women performing artists in the 1990s 'extended the range of hybrid musical forms played and sung by Indigenous musicians from country, rock and reggae to folk, a cappella, pop and dance music' (1996: 179).

Clinton Walker's *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music*, which is rich in biographic data although written for a mainstream audience outside academic critical discourse, devotes a section to Indigenous Australian women jazz and blues performers, discussing the music careers of Georgia Lee and Wilma Reading and mentioning Heather Pitt, Candy Devine, Betty Fisher, Heathermae Reading, Marlene Cummins and Savannah Doolan (2000: 51–67). In their exploration of the migration and Indigenisation of a well-known song of Torres Strait Islanders called 'Taba Naba', Nakata and Neuenfeldt (2005) mention the contemporary recordings of the Torres Strait Islander Mills Sisters and Christine Anu as examples of how the song has changed over time. Neuenfeldt (2008) discusses the output of the Mills Sisters and Christine Anu in his exploration of Torres Strait Islander music. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson (2004) and Gibson and Dunbar-Hall (2004) discuss a number of Aboriginal women performers and issues relating to gender and identity. They emphasise the 'fluidity of interpretation ... and reception of music performed by Aboriginal women' (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004: 86) and point to the complexities of identity construction for some Aboriginal women musicians. They also note that for numerous Aboriginal women musicians, their identities as both female and Indigenous Australians are equally significant (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004: 87).

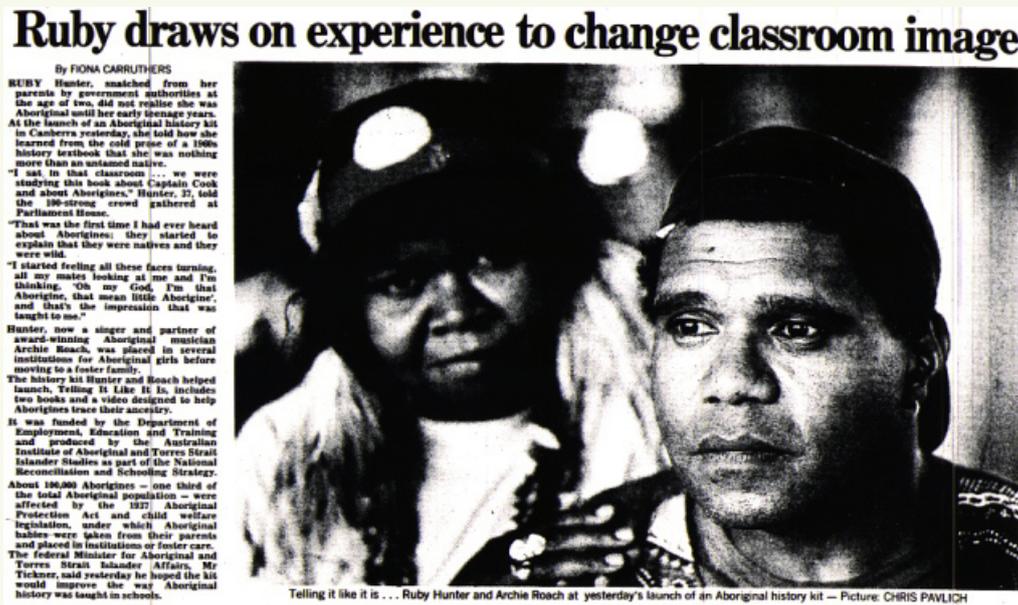
While this body of work about Indigenous Australian women performers provides some understanding of how Indigenous Australian women performers express their identities through music, issues of colonisation, Aboriginalism and gender remain strongly absent. My research aims to extend this literature and analyse the ways in which Aboriginalism affects music performance⁷ and furthermore how Aboriginalism is gendered.

Marginalisation of Indigenous Australian Women Performers in the Media

The media has often positioned Indigenous Australian women as secondary, invisible, silent and/or less important than Indigenous Australian men performers.⁸ One of the ways in which Aboriginalism silences and conceals Indigenous Australian women performers is evident in an image that accompanies a 1993 article on Indigenous Australian performer Ruby Hunter in *The Australian* newspaper



Figure 1: Article on Ruby Hunter in *The Australian* (Carruthers 1993)



(Figure 1). The article is titled 'Ruby Draws on Experience to Change Classroom Image' and focuses on Ruby's memories of being forcibly removed from her family as a child. Although the article centers on Ruby's experiences, the accompanying photograph features Ruby's partner, Indigenous Australian performer Archie Roach, in the foreground of the image, staring off into the distance. In contrast, Ruby is reduced to an out-of-focus figure in the background. This image is reminiscent of early Aboriginalist texts by non-Indigenous male scholars which placed men in the forefront, and in so doing, dismissed the performance practices of Indigenous Australian women or assumed that the position of women was secondary and less important to that of men.

A more recent example of Aboriginalism can be seen in an article that appeared in 2004 in *The Australian* (Rothwell 2004a: 4–6). Rothwell⁹ claims to discuss Indigenous rock music in Australia, but the thirteen photographs prominently featured throughout the article are all of Indigenous Australian male performers (Figure 2). Indigenous Australian women musicians are completely absent from the photos and only one female musician, Shellie Morris, is mentioned in the entire article.¹⁰ Rothwell acknowledges that 'audiences were tempted to feel that indigenous music could only be authentically Aboriginal if it seemed tribal, if its singers were surrounded by dancers and body painted didg players' (Rothwell 2004a: 4). Yet the article still perpetuates and reinforces this expectation by focusing on Indigenous men performing in 'remote Australia' and maintains the Aboriginalist claim that Aboriginal male performers from remote locations alone constitute 'real' Aboriginal performances.

Rothwell also poses the question• 'Where is Aboriginal music bound—towards the mainstream, or back to the purer, tribal past?' (Rothwell 2004a: 4). Here Indigenous Australian music is positioned between past and present and his use of the term 'tribal' is outdated. The article ignores the reality that 'Aboriginal culture has adapted and changed under drastic circumstances over the past 206 years' (Huggins 1998: 85). It is also an example of 'the way in which Aboriginal people are placed within a straight-jacket of tradition' (Cowlshaw 1999: 23) and silences the voices of Indigenous Australian women, making them invisible.

Yet it would be naïve to suggest that Aboriginalism occurs only from within academia and the media. Indigenous Australian women are aware of how Aboriginalism filters out into the general public as stereotypes and they enact their own forms of resistance. The title of this paper, 'Hop, Skip and Jump' is derived from a comment made by Indigenous Australian performer Ali Mills, who noted that Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music 'just play hopscotch everyday of our lives ... [and] we just don't know which foot, which circle to be in' (Alison Mills, pers. com. 2004). Ali Mills' comment provides a metaphor for the way Indigenous Australian



Figure 2: Article on Indigenous Australian Rock Music in *The Australian* ([Rothwell 2004a](#))



women performers play within, against and around Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous performance, making their own kind of game in order to create a new discourse of what it means to be Indigenous Australian women performers.

Performing Against Gendered Aboriginalism: Indigenous Australian Women's Responses Through Song

Aboriginalist representations in academic texts and the media have had the effect of silencing Indigenous Australian women performers. However, Indigenous Australian female performers are acutely aware of the ways in which Indigenous Australian women have been sidelined. Here I explore some of the ways in which four Indigenous Australian women performers whom I have interviewed have responded. Lou Bennett, Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, Emma Donovan and Lexine Solomon, challenge how Indigenous Australian women have been, and in some cases continue to be, viewed. I include the performers' comments and my own readings of their songs to illustrate how they are able to contest the Aboriginalist representation of Indigenous Australian women as silent, passive and invisible. By singing about gender-specific themes that celebrate Indigenous Australian women, they are attempting to empower, celebrate and make connections between generations of Indigenous Australian women.

Empowering Indigenous Australian Women: Lexine Solomon and Jodie Cockatoo-Creed

Raised in North Queensland, Torres Strait Islander performer Lexine Solomon has released two albums ([Solomon 2002](#), [2006](#)) and has performed nationally and internationally as a soloist, backing vocalist and choir director for over twenty years. She was the first female Torres Strait Islander Music Manager at Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) from 2002-2005 and has completed a Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education and Community Management at the University of Technology, Sydney. A theme that runs through the songs on her album *This is Woman* ([2002](#)) ([Figure 3](#)) is the importance of women to family and cultural life. Several songs are about the women in her life, particularly her mother and grandmother (e.g., 'Then it Happens', 'Run the Race'). The title song on the album was written for an International Women's Day dinner in Brisbane in 2000 and exemplifies Solomon's focus on the importance of women:



What is woman made of?
A question of all time
A woman found with virtue
This is not a rhyme
She has purpose
She gives love
She has all she needs

This is woman, and she loves
This is woman, and she lives
This is woman, and she believes

On one level, the song could be heard as aiming to empower all women, and as asserting women's strength and purpose, yet Solomon explains that the song is about the power of Torres Strait Islander women. She states that 'my most important message about Torres Strait Islander women is that we have purpose and in that song I say it, that we know how it love, we give love' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2008b](#)). The song emphasises the dynamic lives and experiences of Indigenous Australian women who 'love', 'live' and 'believe' in their strength and purpose. Through this song Solomon celebrates the women in her family and also highlights her own strength and determination: 'It's about "this is what I can become", the chorus talks about "I'm a woman of purpose, I give life, I am loved" and I've tried to remain true to that' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2008a](#)). The chorus is about acknowledging the important links between generations of Indigenous Australian women and 'why they [previous generations] make us who we are' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2005](#)).

The importance of women is also a dominant theme in Jodie Cockatoo-Creed's ([Figure 4](#)) music. Like Solomon, Cockatoo-Creed was raised in North Queensland and notes that singing about Indigenous Australian women:

just comes naturally to me, it just subconsciously wants to be out there because, well, I do come from a very matriarchal family and my grandmother is such a powerfully strong woman and my mum, who's been helping me for so long. My father passed away when I was very young and he is also a father of five. I am the eldest of five girls ... and my mum had to play both roles and did such a good job to keep us all together as a family, and it all comes out in my song writing ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2005](#)).

Cockatoo-Creed says that she 'always wanted to do a women's song' because 'sometimes it's forgotten' that 'women are always the backbone of any race' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2005](#)). During her ten years as one of the only female members of Yothu Yindi she had the opportunity to co-write 'Good Medicine' (with INXS band member Andrew Farris), a song that celebrates Indigenous Australian women and centres on the power of women. Cockatoo-Creed states that:

Andrew Farris and I met first while doing the *Garma* album. Before we started working on this, he hadn't heard me sing before and then he started stuffing around and he asked 'What do you want to do Jodie?' and I said 'Oh, I'd like to do something different'. Andrew then went on to ask me 'What sort of role do you want to have in this band and tell me about your journey'. I slowly talked to him and he understood about me and how I was and how I came this far and a part of how I'd grown with the band and even put my own little bit into it, you know, my own little personality into the performance and the song writing. And then he heard me sing and he was impressed and blown away. I said 'Well, actually Andrew I've always wanted to do a women's song' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2005](#)).



Figure 3: Lexine Solomon (Photo by author, 4 November 2004, Alice Springs)



'Good Medicine' was featured on Yothu Yindi's album *Garma* ([Yothu Yindi 2000](#)), with Cockatoo-Creed singing lead vocals:

Can you dig it?
In a woman's world
Can you dig it?
Right on

Part of the attraction
Is to test my own reaction
Need good medicine
Got no time for any games
Minor superficial aims
Need good medicine (oh yeah)

I have been told
I am a lucky child
And respectfully
I can say
It's 'cause I'm a woman

Can you dig it?
In a woman's world
Can you dig it?
In a woman's world
Can you dig it?
Good medicine

Cockatoo-Creed asks 'can you dig it, in a woman's world?', playing on the saying 'it's a man's world' and suggesting she is asking listeners if they can accept and embrace a world with women at the foreground. Women are at the centre of the 'world' Cockatoo-Creed sings about, rather than on the periphery, not marginal and silent, but powerful and strong. Cockatoo-Creed also sings of being a 'lucky child' because 'I'm a woman', which could be read as asserting the importance and significance of women to family life.



Figure 4: Jodie Cockatoo-Creed (Photo by author, 13 December 2004, Cairns, Queensland)



Mandawuy Yunupingu states in the CD notes that Yothu Yindi has ‘been a male-dominated band so it’s right that Jodie should spread her wings with a celebration of womanhood’ ([Yothu Yindi 2000](#)). Reed ([2002: 29](#)) suggests that Yothu Yindi was perhaps attempting to remedy any perception that it is an exclusively male band by promoting Cockatoo-Creed. However, Cockatoo-Creed states that she thinks male members of Yothu Yindi ‘just respected me as another songwriter and they believed that I could, I was capable of achieving it with them. I just thought they wanted to give me that opportunity and yeah I’m glad, I’m so glad for it’ ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)). Through the song ‘Good Medicine’, Cockatoo-Creed is able to assert her view that ‘women always need to be recognised’ ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)) and resists the Aboriginalist perception that Indigenous Australian women are secondary to men.

Connecting Generations of Indigenous Australian Women: Emma Donovan and Lou Bennett

Indigenous Australian women performers are also able to resist Aboriginalist constructions by singing about the importance of the connections between generations of Indigenous Australian women within specific communities. Originally from Northern New South Wales, Emma Donovan performs solo and as part of The Black Arm Band.¹¹ She has released two recordings ([2004](#), [2009](#)) and was also an original member of the group Stiff Gins. Some of Donovan’s songs are about the Indigenous Australian women in her life too and this is evident in ‘Gumbaynggirr Lady’ ([Donovan 2004](#)):

I hear your voice it’s calling me
Through the valley and beside the sea
I know you’ll always walk beside me
Through every step I make
There’s no give or take
Bring me home Gumbaynggirr Lady
Bring me home this is where I’m from
This is where I belong

Donovan identifies herself as a ‘Gumbaynggirr Naminjee woman’ ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)) and her song asserts her connectedness to her mother’s and grandmother’s people. She also acknowledges the strength and support she gains from the women in her family and uses music to pay homage to the Indigenous Australian women in her life. The line ‘I hear your voice, it’s calling me’ could be heard as emphasising the importance of women’s voices and the connections between generations of Indigenous Australian women. The references to ‘the valley’ and ‘the sea’ also point to the deep connections between women, land and place. Donovan sings of sharing a sense of belonging and ‘home’ with the women in her family and highlights their significance as they ‘walk beside’ her.

Gender-specific themes informed the songs of the group Tiddas (e.g., ‘Ann’s Song’, ‘My Sister’, ‘Tiddas’, ‘She’s Dreaming’, ‘Body Shape’, ‘Waka Nini Yana’).¹² Lou Bennett ([Figure 5](#)) from Tiddas mentions that she sings about ‘a lot of women’s issues’ ([Lou Bennett, pers.](#)



Figure 5: Lou Bennett (Photo by author, 21 July 2003, Melbourne, Victoria)



[com. 2003](#)) and has written songs which link generations of women in her family. She wrote the song ‘Waka Nini Yana’ after hearing a tape recording of her great-grandmother Priscilla McCrae speaking in the Yorta Yorta language ([Rocca 1998: 4](#)). Introducing the song on Tiddas’ CD *Lethal by the Kilo* ([Tiddas 1998](#)), Bennett states that:

This one’s called ‘Waka Nini Yana’, which in my language means ‘Where are you going?’ and there’s a statement which mentions ‘Domini Yalka’ which means ‘my precious baby’, ‘Domini Yana’, which is ‘my precious one’. And it’s a statement my mum used to say to us kids and all my cousins and aunties also used to use it as well.

In the English verse of ‘Waka Nini Yana’, Tiddas sing:

Where are you going?
My precious baby
Come back here
Where are you going?
Just a short way or a long way
Is it this one or that one?

Like Donovan’s and Solomon’s songs, this song points to the significant roles women play as mothers, grandmothers, aunties and sisters in Indigenous Australian communities in caring for, and looking after family. Bennett uses the song to connect with her own great-grandmother and uses her language to assert her cultural identity. All four performers are aware of how Indigenous Australian women have been silenced in media representations and academic texts and how Aboriginalist images and discourses have assisted in shaping mainstream perceptions of Indigenous Australian performance. As Solomon comments, ‘I want to be heard, not silent. Historically we haven’t been heard ... Indigenous Australian women performers are actively seeking ways in which to have their distinct voices heard’ ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2008a](#)). Similarly Bennett notes, that ‘being able to voice my own opinion and voice it through my music ... is a really important concept for me about my Aboriginality. I write about it, I sing about it, I talk about it, but the main thing to be able to get across is to do it in my music’ ([Lou Bennett, pers. com. 2003](#)).

Other songs that focus on Indigenous Australian women include Toni Janke’s ‘Black Woman’, Kerriane Cox’s ‘Woman Got No History’, Christine Anu’s ‘Mother’s Child’, Luana Pitt’s ‘Big Black Beautiful Lady’, Mereki’s ‘Dolly’, Ruby Hunter’s ‘Proud, Proud Woman’ and ‘Ngarrindjeri Woman’, and Brenda Webb’s ‘Little Black Girl’. As Larissa Behrendt notes, the ‘voices of Indigenous women ... are often stifled or spoken for in dominant discourses’ ([Behrendt 2002: 98](#)) and all of these songs by Indigenous Australian women performers highlight their attempts to give women a voice through the medium of contemporary song. Their songs resist the ways Indigenous Australian women have been ignored in media representations and historical academic texts and point to the important roles women play in Indigenous communities across Australia.



Using and Challenging Aboriginalism Through Musical Performance

Indigenous Australian women performers make deliberate choices about the presentation of their music, including how they, as performers, will look and how their music will sound and they respond in a diverse range of ways. For example, some Indigenous Australian women performers incorporate instrumentation and features that could be identified as traditional Indigenous musical expression as well as aspects of traditional dress such as feathers into their visual presentations on stage. Others leave open the opportunity to include musical markers of their Indigeneity but emphasise that they are incorporating these elements on their own terms. They are aware of non-Indigenous audience expectations and, at times, deliberately resist Aboriginalist constructions and expectations of what styles of music Indigenous Australian people perform, what these types of music should sound like and how they, as performers, should look.

The images of Aboriginal men with painted bodies, didjeridu and clapsticks in some media representations and historical academic texts reinforces the Aboriginalist expectation that the music of Indigenous Australian performers will 'sound' Aboriginal and therefore be linked with 'culture'. Karl 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" ... of sound, sight and sentiment' ([Neuenfeldt 1997: 112](#)). 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' ([Neuenfeldt 1994: 94](#)). Other recognisable ingredients of an Aboriginal 'sound' are clapsticks and lyrics sung in Indigenous Australian languages. These musical sounds fulfill Aboriginalist myths that traditional forms of Indigenous Australian culture and musical sounds are alone 'authentic' ([Cowlshaw 1992: 20](#)). Under the Aboriginalist gaze, the inclusion of Aboriginal 'sounds' into contemporary songs by Indigenous Australian performers 'serves to "legitimise" them in the sense of creating overt linkages to past and present forms of artistic expression' ([Neuenfeldt and Costigan 2004: 118](#)).

Cultural Appropriateness: Emma Donovan and Jodie Cockatoo-Creed

Donovan and Cockatoo-Creed both assert that they only include elements of what audiences might identify as Indigenous Australian performance into their music if they think these are culturally appropriate. Donovan's recording of 'Koori Time' on the album *Sending a Message* ([Various Artists 2003](#)) includes didjeridu alongside guitar and bass, and she states that she included didjeridu because:

I was working with that other Indigenous brother, he's from Maori [culture], and he's right into his culture ... so when I was working with him I felt like I had to push my culture more too because there was two cultures that were behind the whole thing and so I incorporated the didjeridu ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)).

However, when Donovan recorded the same song for her solo album *Changes* ([Donovan 2004](#)) she resisted incorporating elements that audiences might identify and label as 'Indigenous'. She states:

Now that I've been working solo and working by myself, I don't feel like I have the didj. Like me as an artist and what I sing about and my feelings towards songs and what I want to say in song, I don't feel like I have to, you know, come out with the clapsticks and didjeridu like, you know, they're traditional instruments and they should be used traditionally and not, I'm not saying that they should be used only traditionally, [or] you can't use them in contemporary form, I think it's beautiful to be used in contemporary form, but I think to myself as a songwriter, you know I just [think] it doesn't have to be [included] either ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)).

Donovan says that at times 'I do dress up and I do paint up and I do sing in language' ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)). For example, the album *Changes* ([Donovan 2004](#)) also includes the song 'Feathers', which is sung in both the Eora language and English with electronic beats and backings. The song was initially composed as part of the Welcome Ceremony in Sydney Dreaming in 2004, in which Donovan performed. Donovan states that the song is about:



Wallum Mulli, which is a rainmaker of this area and, the story told about how women had a lot to do with making the rain. How they used to call upon Wallum Mulli, like that was the story of 'Feathers'. Because they used feathers to show Wallum Mulli where the rain was and where to place the rain so that song was written specifically for that ceremony. Because I do a lot for the Sydney area as far as music and festivals and other community events—I was really honoured to have that song on my album and perform it, be a part of that ceremony ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)).

Donovan also performed the song at the 2004 Deadly Awards, wearing feathers in her hair and around her wrists, with ten female Indigenous Australian contemporary dancers, but she notes that:

When I say to people that I've got a CD on sale ... they're thinking that it's just like a whole album of all language ... but it's not. It's my original work and it's my original ideas on you know, contemporary music and stuff like that so I'm pretty sure that a lot of people would be in for a, in for a shock but um (laughs) it's true ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)).

Donovan hopes that non-Indigenous people will 'appreciate me without the feathers I reckon! (laughs)' ([Emma Donovan, pers. com. 2005](#)). Similarly, Cockatoo-Creed points out that as a member of Yothu Yindi, she was very aware of what was culturally appropriate for her to perform and states that:

Because I am not from Nhulunbuy from Northeast Arnhem Land, I couldn't go the traditional way, it's not my place to do that. I'm a descendant from the Yupangathi clan from Old Mapoon in the West Cape York Peninsula and so I couldn't be full on and contemporary and wear lots of sexy outfits or anything as I still have respect that Yothu Yindi is a cultural, musical band ... being part of Yothu Yindi was different because it had a cultural aspect rather than just music ... and myself being part of that, I just felt really strong as an Aboriginal woman ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)).

Since leaving Yothu Yindi, Cockatoo-Creed has been working on her solo material and resists drawing on any stylistic features or instrumentation that audiences might identify as being Aboriginal. She says, 'I'm not into it. I like to write what makes me feel good, what annoys me, not necessarily my culture, not about Aboriginal people/Aboriginality ('cause there's so much to write about!)' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)). She also says 'I don't sort of go out and write a song just to have clapsticks and didjeridu playing through it' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)). Although Cockatoo-Creed believes that incorporating aspects of Indigenous Australian musical expression 'was very important with Yothu Yindi because that's what Yothu Yindi is, but personally for my own music I don't really [incorporate it]' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)). She says 'I've had that experience, with my own mob. I've danced traditionally and painted up before, anyway so I'm not really a stranger to doing that (laughs) ... I would sometimes paint up (only for special performances) because it's just not respectful unless you're shown properly' ([Jodie Cockatoo-Creed, pers. com. 2004](#)).

Resisting/Leaving Open: Lou Bennett and Lexine Solomon

Other Indigenous Australian women performers like Lou Bennett deliberately avoid typical components that could be identified by audiences as forms of traditional Indigenous Australian musical expression. They attempt to challenge audience perceptions of Indigenous Australian performance through their music by drawing on a diverse range of musical styles. In doing so they are asserting agency and maintaining control over how their music sounds in an openly political way. Bennett sings about a diverse range of themes including love, friendship, 'Indigenous issues, a lot of women's issues, lesbian issues, it's about respecting our earth, it's humanitarian issues, yeah so there's a bigger picture than just Indigenous music' ([Lou Bennett, pers. com. 2003](#)). For example, in her song 'When Your Eyes Meet' Bennett, accompanied by electric bass, drums, guitar and keyboard, sings of love at first sight:

When your eyes meet, you'll talk sweet
When your eyes meet
You laugh loud, to get her attention
Across the crowd, your eyes meet



Don't move too close, you might lose a connection
Who knows, what might happen
Your hands touch, it's accidental, you start to blush
And there's no hiding it

Through her music, Bennett deliberately resists Aboriginalist expectations of how Indigenous Australian performers should sound and in so doing she has effectively created a new and transgressive musical subjectivity.

Similarly, the majority of songs on Solomon's album *This is Woman* do not draw on stylistic features or instrumentation that could be identified as Indigenous Australian musical expression (e.g., 'Cut to the Chase', 'Abundantly Clear', 'Change My Destiny') but Solomon says 'I'd like to keep the opportunity out there, you know, keep my options open of course—someday I might have the opportunity [to include aspects of my background]' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2004](#)). The final track on Solomon's album is a hymn from the Torres Strait Islands, 'Baba Waiyar', which is sung in an eastern Torres Strait Islander language ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2006](#)) with vocal harmonies that are common in Torres Strait Islander music and using Island-style guitar and drum:

Baba waiyar ninu maigi mari
Baba waiyar ninu maigi angelal
Ngalnumia kaimel inub kubil nu
Inub jubil nu
Kurusika goiga

Father, send me your Holy spirit
Father, send your Holy angels
Together with us this night
This night
Until the break of day

Solomon explains that 'Baba Waiyar' was:

written by an uncle up in the Islands [the late Miseron Levi] and I was in Canberra when I was recording that album, and I had met up with one of my aunties, and she actually came and played guitar for me, and she taught it to me the Island way but I still sing it the way that I learned it, so that was pretty special, and I asked if I could put it on the album ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2004](#)).

Solomon leaves that possibility open, as well as the creative freedom to draw on her Torres Strait Islander heritage in her music. She has faced the question of 'what's Indigenous' about her music. She points out that she has had to resist expectations by emphasising that her music is 'not really the traditional stuff. If you want traditional you need to get the traditional people and they'll come out with costume and paint—if need be' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2004](#)). Solomon emphasises that she included 'Baba Waiyar' on her album 'with the Island style of guitar and the drum because it's still a part of my heritage. And I still should be able to have access to it even though I live in the today world' ([Lexine Solomon, pers. com. 2004](#)).

The songs of Bennett, Solomon, Donovan and Cockatoo-Creed demonstrate diverse responses to Aboriginalist expectations and assumptions about Indigenous Australian performance. Their songs and comments also highlight the complexities and tensions that exist between commercial and cultural agendas, and between musical sounds and visual images, resisting Aboriginalism yet experimenting with sound.

Conclusion

The songs of Indigenous Australian women performers demonstrate that contemporary music is a platform that enables those performers to challenge Aboriginalist views. By celebrating and focusing on women in their songs, Indigenous Australian women performers confront Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous Australian performance. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson note, 'as Aboriginal Australia is diverse in its makeup, so too popular music by Aboriginal artists and the uses to which it is put are diverse' (2000: 48) and the individual and collective narratives of Indigenous Australian women performing contemporary music illustrate the diversity of experiences, multiple subjectivities



and variety of the styles of music Indigenous Australian women employ. These women make deliberate choices about how their music will sound and through their music they are able to negotiate, challenge and play with Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous Australian performance.

Indigenous Australian women performers are also very aware of how women have historically been sidelined and they actively seek to have their voices heard. As Gillian Cowlshaw asserts, Indigenous Australian women and men 'must be accorded the right to speak authoritatively to the same domain they inhabit' (1998: 166). Through contemporary song, Indigenous Australian women performers express their connections to other Indigenous Australian women and the important roles Indigenous Australian women play in communities. Their songs provide some powerful examples of the ways Indigenous Australian women are able to resist Aboriginalism by performing their way through, within and against Aboriginalism to create a new discourse about what it means to be strong, proud, talented Indigenous Australian women.

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ENDNOTES

¹In this paper the term 'Indigenous Australian' is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

²Formed in 1986 in the Yolŋu community at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, the group has 'achieved remarkable commercial success for their culture-bridging, politically-conscious songs and performances' (Knopoff 1997: 49). The band's members include Yolŋu from Yirrkala and Galiwinku (another Yolŋu settlement) as well as Balanda (non-Indigenous) musicians. See Corn's (2008: 1) work which demonstrates how Yothu Yindi uses traditional symbolism in their self-representations to 'express ideals of sharing and common humanity among different peoples around the world'.

³Said's theory of Orientalism (1978) has been influential for scholars interested in critiquing the traditional cultural gaze on Aboriginal people in Australia (Anderson 2003). Broadly defined, the term 'Aboriginalism' refers to the tendency of (largely non-Indigenous) scholars to use 'culture' as the key analytical tool for knowing social difference and for explaining issues in colonial contexts (McConaghy 2000: 43). Like Orientalism (Said 1994: 6), Aboriginalism exists not only in academic discourse but has filtered through into Western consciousness where statements permeate into the general culture as stereotypes. A number of authors have examined historical and contemporary expressions of Aboriginalism in various contexts, including literature, film, and theatre (Hodge 1990; Hodge and Mishra 1991; Burvill 1998), anthropology (Attwood 1992; Cowlshaw 1992), archeology (McGhee 2008), Indigenous education (McConaghy 1997, 1998, 2000), media (Angel 2008) and children's books (Bradford 1999, 2001). Yet there is a sparsity of research examining the ways in which Aboriginalism affects music performance and, further, how Aboriginalism is gendered. Aboriginalism takes many contradictory guises and this paper is not attempting to undertake an exhaustive analysis of Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Elsewhere I have examined other academic texts as examples of gendered Aboriginalism (Barney, in press) and the various ways Indigenous Australian women performers negotiate their way through the problems of the Aboriginalist constructions of race (Barney 2006a).

⁴The concept of 'whiteness' has been critiqued extensively by critical race and whiteness studies scholars, including Moreton-Robinson (2004) and Nicoll (2000, 2004).

⁵There has been considerable debate surrounding the terms 'Aboriginality' and 'Indigeneity'. In this paper the term 'Aboriginality' is used when quoting a specific work and it is not my intention to attempt to define these terms. Indigenous representatives continually emphasise that self-representation is an important right for Indigenous peoples. As Huggins notes, 'I detest the imposition that anyone who is non-Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race' (2003: 60). See Merlan (2009) for analysis of the internationalisation of the term 'Indigeneity' and Paradies (2006: 362) for discussion of 'the extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities ... that comprise Indigenous Australia'.

⁶See Sullivan (2005), who analyses the dominant view of culture.

⁷While there is a sparsity of literature relating to Aboriginalism in music performance, Magowan (2001) draws on Said's (1978) notions of 'strategic formation' and 'strategic location' in an analysis of women's crying songs in Northeast Arnhem Land. There are also some recent works addressing musical Orientalism (e.g., Lock 1991; Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996; Pasler 2000) and audience responses and expectations of Indigenous Australian art abroad (e.g., Mundine 1990, 1998a, 1998b; Sykes 1990).

⁸See Barney (2008) for analysis of other media representations of Indigenous Australian women performers.

⁹I am aware that Rothwell has also written articles on Indigenous Australian women performers (Rothwell 2004b), yet the focus here is on this particular article and the stereotypes it reinforces.



¹⁰My comments are not meant to discount the achievements of these performers, but to illustrate that Indigenous Australian women performers are noticeably absent from this media representation.

¹¹The Black Arm Band includes David Arden, Mark Atkins, Lou Bennett, Sally Dastey, Emma Donovan, Kutcha Edwards, Leah Flanagan, Joe Geia, Shane Howard, Ruby Hunter, Bunna Lawrie, Jimmy Little, Shellie Morris, Rachael Maza Long, Stephen Pigram, Archie Roach, Peter Rotumah, Amy Saunders, Dan Sultan, Ursula Yovich, (Bevan) Gabanbulu Yunupingu, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, and Bart Willoughby. Its website states that 'these artists, black and white, share a cultural space through music, reconciling difference and exploring what connects us, rather than divides us, across cultural and historical boundaries' ([The Black Arm Band, 2009](#)).

¹²Tiddas had been disbanded for several years when I interviewed Lou Bennett. At the time of writing, however, the trio is performing together again as part of The Black Arm Band.

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music are acutely aware that Aboriginalist discourse has created unrealistic expectations and misconceptions of Indigenous Australian performance. One of the immediate effects of Aboriginalism is that it silences Indigenous Australians. In academic discourse and popular media, the voices of Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music are rarely heard and often overlooked. This essay explores how Indigenous Australian women have been marginalised in academic and media discourses concerning Indigenous Australian performance and some of the ways that performers play within, around and against Aboriginalist constructions. Drawing on examples from academic texts and media representations of Indigenous Australian performance, the initial focus is on critiquing representations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Using song texts and first-hand interviews with performers, I then discuss how four Indigenous Australian women performers resist Aboriginalist representations of themselves by using a diverse range of musical styles and by attempting to bring Indigenous Australian women's experiences and voices to the fore through contemporary song.

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