

ABORIGINAL MUSIC NARRATIVES FROM AUSTRALIA: DISENTANGLING PATTERNS OF HISTORICAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Australian collective memory is moored in the "Secret History" of myths and landscape in context of historical past of the nation. The canons of arts evolve out of the cultural context of the country which is closely tied to the very idea of Australia as a nation. The shared perfection of the two arts- music and poetry provides a new horizon to the study of the national music which looks at language and literature thus produced within the paradigm of 'text'. However, these paradigms deserve closer attention: as they provide a link which reflects structurally-oriented identification of distinctive cultural features of the orient. Nationalist literary history of the nation Australia is grounded in the popular oral tradition of the past. Oral performances can, thus, be viewed as an expression of deep-rooted values of Aboriginal community. The song lyrics then become texts that are sung and make readers aware of cluster of stories in forms of popular culture called song-lines.

Decades following regime of settler colony in Australia provided an art song genre that connected Australia's past with melodic inflections. The creation of national music through the setting of historical texts thus provided a field of study for researchers to look at what Stuart Hall calls 'message form' and certain 'codes' of meaning ('Encoding/Decoding', 1973). This paper explores selected songs of aboriginal musicians that are also a medium of self-representation. These songs become texts that reclaim aboriginal identities and ideologies through songs that underlie identity-projections. The narratives of the songs mark clear distinction of social from individual background and foreground which is distinctly manifested in their themes. The pedagogical implications of theories studied within the overlapping frame of literature, popular culture studies, and composition/rhetoric studies would further help us speculate the process of meaning construction.

We can shed more light by adopting textual analysis of songs that reveal distinctive features of aboriginal community. The aboriginal musicians attempt to write down not only their culture but also their collective history of trauma. This act of restating, representing and tracing back the operation of colonial power renders them visible amidst the popular culture produced with an imperial eye. The mechanisms of colonial power put surveillance on mediums of social investigations. The investigatory practices of shifting identities of the 'other' and 'self' have long history of politics of representation. However, the representation for the aboriginal musicians is self-referential where the very process of representation calls attention towards the community represented. The far-reaching analysis of representation helps scholars examine aboriginal concept of culture that Raymond Williams (1981) called 'lived cultures'. Representation, therefore, requires explanation as it is useful to think of it through in relation to the process of meaning-generation.

Analysis of a musical text can be considered as a fragment of data that provides perspective of aboriginal community within their social and cultural setting. Aboriginal culture is an oral culture wherein storytelling

is one of the prominent spiritual features of their existence. Prof Malati Mathur states in her essay entitled “Writing Self, Writing community: Storytellers and Activism” that during the Dream time, certain song lines were sung by their ancestors which ‘acted as travel and navigating aids...any deviation from the precision of the song would most certainly bring death to the traveller’ (76). Looking at the dangers of claiming such a tradition where the language and culture of a community represented certain structures deeply rooted in their ideology, one questions the intervention of colonizers and raises questions dealing with much harm done to their community. The cultural bases of the ideology as dealt by Antonio Gramsci emphasizes on the hegemonic structure that oscillates between ruling ideas of self and other. It is likely to see a pattern in a colonial set that is made to accept their subjugation. However, in a similar case like Australia where settler colony prevails, various agents help the ruled become subject that construct identity through a system of representation. This system includes not only myths, images, ideas and concepts but also includes songs that incorporate and continue the fetish of song lines.

Archie Roach’s song “Took the Children Away” reflects on the national history of Australia in its grand narrative. The song thwarts all efforts of erasing historical memory of the trauma of nation’s colonial past. It rather brings together the whole aboriginal community to access, know or report instinctive consciousness of their community by presenting the song as a story:

*This story’s right, this story’s true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep.
Said to us come take our hand
Sent us off to mission land.
Taught us to read and write and pray
Then they took the children away...*

As aboriginals perform, the song provides voice to the musician who intricately links two distinct disciplines that of ethnomusicologist and educator. Lyrics of the song document story of removal, painful moment of separation from the families and experiences of *Stolen Generations*. The song foregrounds strong voices against the colonial violence. The practice of forcible removal of aboriginal children from their families was first officially recorded in *Bringing Them Home* — report of National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families in 1997. The report traces complex history of grief and loss that gave trauma trails to Aboriginal musicians to be sung to the world at large.

I was at the post office with my Mum and Auntie [and cousin]. They put us in the policeute and said they were taking us to Broome. They put the mums in there as well. But when we’d gone [about ten miles] they stopped, and threw the mothers out of the car. We jumped on our mothers’ backs, crying, trying not to be left behind. But the policemen pulled us off and threw us back in the car. They pushed the mothers away and drove off, while our mothers were chasing the car, running and crying after us.
(Bringing Them Home, 6)

It is hitherto being discussed how the language of the song examines and deliberates essential policies of protection and assimilation. It clearly outlines defense of many other aboriginal people who were marginalized and still continue to remain invisible from Australian history as there are only 2% of aboriginals left in the country and who are yet struggling to claim their national identity. Anita Heiss inquires in her essay “On Being Invisible” that even after having Greek Australians, Italian Australians, Chinese Australians, Lebanese

Australians and “real Australians” what is missing from Australian story is first Australians. At the closer inspection of the very term, Aboriginal, we realize that the word is derived from ‘Abo’ and ‘original’. In the same vein Bain Attwood writes about the shift from lower case to upper case aborigines. The very word connotes and claims the identity of Aboriginals which is what was taken away from them since 1770 when Captain Cook first lodged ‘Possession Point’.

Theories of language illustrate the link between the object represented on the basis of shared social and cultural conventions that establish ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ as codes. Thus, the songs sung by aboriginal musicians signify truth that is a product of evolution evading the hegemony imposed by colonial or elite cultural forms. The arbitrariness of language suggests that there is no way to have a text giving away complete truth. Saussure and Derrida majorly contributed to theories of language as they stated there is no absolute truth; what a text presents is part of truth. Consequently, the aboriginal experience can be retrieved as the very act of resistance in grand narratives of the songs. The songs give voice to the version of knowledge that becomes universal reality presenting the perspective of marginalized community or the subaltern.

The sad reality of genocide, dispossession of land, miscegenation is what further marks the songs sung by aboriginal musicians. The rhetoric of protection and absorption can further be sited in the song “Only A Few” by Peter Rotumah. The song was co-written with his friend Ian Johnson and late Henry Thorpe. He was a lyricist and a musician who was much inspired by prominent Indigenous musicians like Bobby McLeod. The song provides a discourse between specifics of identity that had been addressed in various other songs and other literary works. The problem of miscegenation is also highly significant since it positions aborigines in relation with the nation and its citizenship that would continue to leave its impact on their attitude towards their notion of ‘belonging’. Nevertheless, identity politics presents forms of colonial culture which require one to cross all boundaries and to overlook at legitimate forms that initiate dialogue:

*Long before the white man came
Our people never lived in shame
We took what we needed from the land
Worshipped Mother Earth, her clouds and her sands
But when the Endeavour arrived
We had to struggle to survive
They chained us and cast us aside
And waited for a nation to die*

*So my Brothers
We give this song to you
Murdered our people
Now we are only few
Only a few*

The song conceptualizes strategies that help aborigines to come together on a common platform, to utilize a strategy of empowerment through various codes extending the meaning of self-assertion, self-reference, and self-determination. Using a wide variety of symbols like land, clouds and sands the narrative highlights relationship that aboriginals have with nature through musical landscapes. The use of the term ‘Endeavour’ brings in the colonial project that established the hierarchy of the whites. The song encapsulates attempts of the composers to repair the damage done in the past. The song becomes a primary cite for creating an identity and also that of identifying with one’s community. In a multicultural nation Australia, keeping intact

the aboriginal identity is to bolt it with ideologies deeply rooted in Dream time. Different manifestations that one might draw through discursive analysis of symbolic vehicles constituting language of the song help us decode signifying system. The music narratives combining art and story-telling communicate stories to the large audiences. The conception of nature, theme of mate-ship, provides a glance of the infinite space of aborigines that are often contained within the larger frame of metanarratives thus produced. Enduring interest in spiritual healing ascertains gentle disputation of a system of belief and aboriginal culture.

The songs are indeed reconciling the tradition of song-lines, corroborees that are either dissembled by the musicians to explain the harmony between human thought and culture. The tendency to unravel objects giving away or producing meaning by using symbols and images as codes of classical story can be regarded as a datum to be received. By analyzing the world of signs that are incessant part of subculture thus produced, we constitute the identity through lived experience. The questions of identity still demarcate discourse of representation:

I've got everything that could be reasonably expected: a good home environment, education, stuff like that, but that's all material stuff. It's all the non-material stuff that I didn't have – the lineage. It's like you're the first human being at times. You know, you've just come out of nowhere; there you are. In terms of having a direction in life, how do you know where you're going if you don't know where you've come from?

Confidential evidence 136, Victoria: man adopted into a non-Indigenous family at 3 months; still grieving that he was unable to meet his birth mother before she died. (Bringing Them Home 11)

As a social product, identity is often determined on the basis of power relation. The questions of the ruling agency are often ruling out the one ruled. The crucial point, as we have seen, is then when the elite who controls this structure of power incorporates images, representation and meaning to suit his motive. Noel Garner's song 'Stolen Generation' explores and uncovers these motives of colonial ideology. It is based on the story line providing us a new set of questions pertaining aboriginal issues. In 2005, the song won the Best Lyrics Category at Australian National Songwriters Association contest from the album *Walking This Land*.

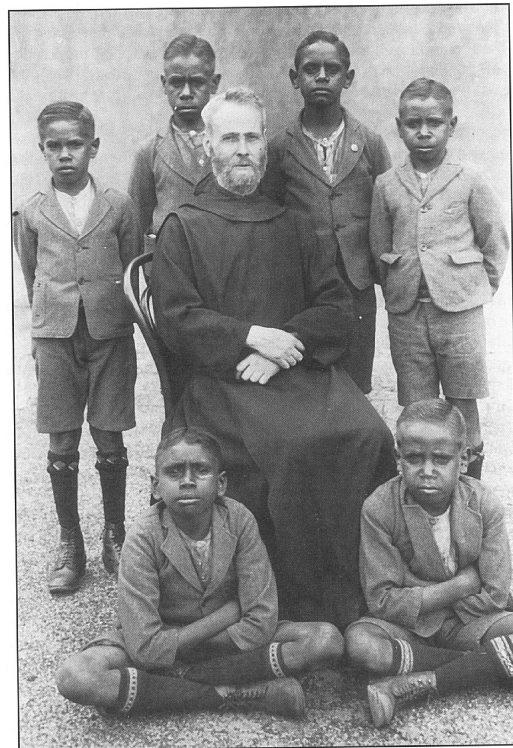
At the outset of studying the narrative, one looks at how this song becomes a testimony of an aboriginal. Alexis Wright comments upon how 'aboriginal writing causes unease' for it differs from dynamics of 'standard English, or white concepts, values and ways of describing events, places, and people' (97). These narratives are not only seeing recognition of the difference but also equip one with language that is used as a weapon to articulate Aboriginal characteristics. Since most aspects of aboriginal community were transferred through oral tradition, the concern for future generation has reached out to masses through the medium of song that raise questions that are yet unanswered:

*Stolen children, taken away
Stolen children, where are you today?
Stolen children, do dreams really come true?
Is there pain in your heart, was there love enough for you?*

There has not been enough work done by scholars who could look at various songs providing new dimensions for the study of individual texts as codes that open trajectories of new views towards aboriginal culture and literature thus produced as an act of resistance. It was Alleen Moreton-Robinson who got theory of whiteness in the academic study of Aboriginal Australian literature. Similarly, one could also inspect the course of reception of the songs within the larger frame of popular culture and audience studies. Decoding and the process of meaning making further provides scope for significant study in an era regulated by interdisciplinary and

multidisciplinary approach towards a text. Besides, recent work that has been done, particularly on aboriginal music, has actually juxtaposed theory of whiteness, resistance, narrative and nation as against an understanding of multicultural idea of nation. The songs that could further be explored include Warumpi Band's 'Blackfella Whitefella', Paul Kelly's 'We Have Survived', Elvis Presley's 'Jailhouse Rock', 'Our Home, Our Land', "This Land Owns Me", Bob Randall's "Brown skin Baby" (They Took Me Away, 1983).

The narratives of songs discussed in the paper embark upon 'Aboriginal problems'. These narratives reflect upon the various forms of resistance that can be studied under the lens of narrative theory. These narratives are often characterized with horror, cultural defiance, authenticity, and myths; breaking conventional structure of sentences, these songs suit aboriginal style of communication. They illustrate how emotional and cultural experience of music also provides a cognitive experience of music through music landscapes. The hard-hitting narratives of the songs can often be compared with poetry which were primarily produced by bards. Music theory also incorporates music philosophy and musicology which makes use of songs as texts that are written apparently in a pattern which is in proximity with lyric poetry. Many of these songs display patriotic yearning of aboriginals who are living in exile within their own country as they are yet to reclaim their rights. The layered aboriginal music narratives portray people with their stories. These stories, consequently, take care of them and of generations in times to come. The structure of the narrative shows how aboriginals believe in the power of story-telling as many a times a person survives on a story. The act of weaving colonial past into the narrative puts these stories in the memory of the other and helps being taken care of and healed through the corpus of persuasive art of telling tales.



*Brother Luis Arrufat and students, St. Mary's Orphanage
New Norcia, WA, c1930.*

Courtesy: Baithe Library 7658/P

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