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## Section A: Teaching and Learning

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### Disturbances and Dislocations: Understanding Teaching and Learning Experiences in Australian Aboriginal Music

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Indigenous knowledge from and between both non-Indigenous and Indigenous voices.

#### Engaging with theories of dialogue and voice

#### Introduction

One of the biggest debates in Australian Indigenous education today revolves around the many contested and competing ways of knowing by and about Indigenous cultures and the representation of Indigenous knowledges. Using Bakhtin's theories of dialogue and voice, my concern in this paper is to explore the polyphonic nature of power relations, performance roles and pedagogical texts in the context of teaching and learning Indigenous Australian women's music and dance. In this discussion, I will focus on my experiences as a lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland and my involvement in this educational setting with contemporary Indigenous performer Samantha Chalmers. Like a field experience, the performance classroom will be examined as a potential site for disturbing and dislocating dominant modes of representation of Indigenous women's performance through the construction, mediation and negotiation of

The work of Bakhtin on voice and dialogue serves as a useful standpoint for understanding these multiple speaking positions and multiple texts. Described by Clark and Holquist (1984) variously as a 'thinker' and 'singer of polyphony', Bakhtin was fundamentally opposed to the notion of a single truth. Throughout his life work he attempted to rethink ways heterogeneity had traditionally been assigned the appearance of unity. Bakhtin's quest to find a single name for variety resulted in his usage of the terms 'heteroglossia' and 'polyphony' (Clark and Holquist, 1984:7). Both terms emphasise multiplicity of sound and meaning. Inherent within them is the assumption of dialogue that Bakhtin conceived of as communication between simultaneous differences (Clark and Holquist, 1984:9). Bakhtin places much emphasis on the centrality of dialogue to human existence, insisting that '[t]o be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialogue ends, everything ends' (Clark and Holquist 1984:86). Clark and Holquist explain

further the Bakhtinian connection between voice, meaning and dialogue as '[m]y voice can mean but only with others, at times in chorus, but at the best of times in dialogue' (1984:12). Thus, a Bakhtinian approach acknowledges that 'many voices clamor for expression' and '[d]ialogical processes proliferate in any complexly represented discursive space' (Clifford, 1986:15). Bakhtin emphasizes performance, history, actuality and the openness of dialogue and provides an important framework for analysing multiple speaking positions and ways of making meaning through dialogue between shifting and differing subjectivities.

My approach to the analysis of voice in this paper agrees with recent trends in anthropology which increasingly acknowledges the relevancy of multi-subjective, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic ethnographic texts (Clifford, 1988:52-53). Marcus (1998:65) suggests that this change has as much to do with 'changing ethics of the ethnographic enterprise as with a dissatisfaction concerning the structural analysis of cultural phenomena'. He contends (1998:65) that anthropological research today exhibits a marked sensitivity to the dialogic, oral roots of all anthropological knowledge, transformed and obscured by the complex processes of writing which dominate ethnographic projects from field to text, and of the differential power relationships that shape the ultimate media and modes of representing knowledge.

Thus anthropological texts have become or are in the process of becoming polyphonic in the sense that different points of view are registered in multiple voices. Marcus and Fischer (1999:71) describe these new texts as much more 'interesting' in that they 'retain the different perspectives on cultural reality' and 'turn the ethnographic text into a kind of display and interaction among perspectives'. Clifford (1988:53, 1986:15) also supports this view and contends that with the recent questioning of colonial styles of representation, anthropology must strive to break-up the authority, control and power inherent within monologic ethnographies. With these thoughts in mind, this paper privileges dialogue over monologue and 'there is instead the mutual dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts' (Tyler, 1986:126).

## **The educational setting**

The research site is a subject called ANTH2120 Indigenous Women's Music and Dance. It was first taught at the University of Queensland in 1995 as a subject offered through the Department of Anthropology and I have been teaching this subject in my role as a lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit since 1997. The subject aims to extend the understanding students have of Indigenous Australian women's music and dance by examining performance as education for living, as a reflection of cultural continuity and social change, and as expression, nurturance and maintenance of identity. Issues covered in the curriculum include:

- deconstructing categories of Indigenous performance such as traditional and contemporary
- situating Indigenous women in terms of their social and musical roles and connections to status, authority, ownership, power and knowledge
- understanding the complex relationship between women's performance and country
- re/presentations of Indigenous women's performance.

The objectives of the subject are to relate Indigenous Australian performance practices to broader social, historical and political contexts; to understand the complex relationship between gender and music in Indigenous Australia within the context of anthropological, ethnomusicological and Indigenous frameworks of inquiry; and, to interpret and critically analyse the performance practices of Indigenous Australian women.

One of the ways in which the ANTH2120 classroom challenges the authority of Western knowledge production is by employing theories of embodied knowledge through experiential teaching and learning practice. Under the tutelage of those Indigenous women who have the status, authority and knowledge to teach certain aspects of music and dance, students are provided with the opportunity to become as Rice (1994) advocates 'dancing scholars' who through observation and participation in performance

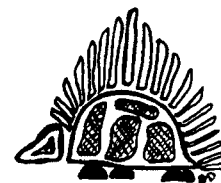
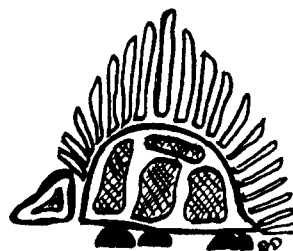
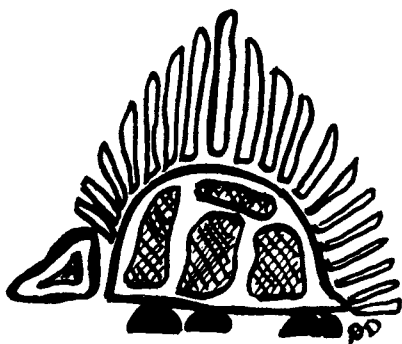
events and through socio-musical interactions with female performers, come to an understanding of music-culture through a shared performance experience. Students are required to move beyond the boundaries of what they know and are familiar with to take an active part in a learning process which engages multiple 'texts' (such as audio and written information, talk and interaction, singing, movement) as a path to understanding. Recent ethnomusicological research emphasises the fluid and interconnected nature of discourse within performance. Performance is increasingly viewed 'not as the product but as the process of realizing other social goals, for example, as part of the negotiation of identity, the symbolic mapping of space and relationship, or the transformation of consciousness' (Moisala and Diamond, 2000:1). In the ANTH2120 classroom music and dance are viewed then as a performative activity whose boundaries as Moisala and Diamond (2000:1) contend are 'fluid and contingent, created in the moment as an interactive event involving all participants, including researcher'. Using participatory experience in the classroom to make meaning is encouraged by Hooks (1994:148) who suggests that '[f]ocusing on experience allows students a knowledge base from which they can speak' and to bodily engage at the educational level as Wong (1998:90) describes by having the music 'resonate through their vocal chords'. In this way, the field becomes the classroom and the classroom the field. Collaboration between the two necessitates thoughtful interaction as teachers and students are joined in new ways. However, Wong (1998:85) is vocal in suggesting that the interface between ethnomusicology and music education remains uneasy because of a refusal to acknowledge that many musics represent agendas for social change and hence are inherently political. She (1998:85) remarks that:

Locating authority in the field or in the pedagogical moment becomes a gesture from older ethnographic practices: authority is diffuse, fleeting, fluid, no longer determined by older norms of power.

Indeed, part of the challenge of the ANTH2120 classroom is to address the complex set of power relations and interactions which underscore each musical moment and the way teaching and learning takes place between, from and through non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants in social space which historically has been dominated and controlled by Western mainstream systems of knowledge. One of the most pressing concerns is whether giving space to and acknowledging Indigenous female performers as cultural producers and their products, does as Moreton-Robinson alludes, present a 'benign concept of cultural difference that reinforces the 'exotic' and the 'primitive' and express a naivety about the power of white Western paradigms, platforms and people to be inclusive of that difference.

### The first voice: Samantha Chalmers

It is within this educational setting that Samantha Chalmers is invited to the University of Queensland by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit as guest lecturer. Identifying as a Yanyuwa/Wadaman woman, Samantha is a contemporary Indigenous performer who specialises in dance choreography. At 27 years, Samantha has a host of achievements behind her. She completed a degree in Indigenous dance through NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association) in Sydney in 1997. Since then she has performed with Dance North in Townsville, Bangarra Dance Theatre in Sydney and Chunky Moves in Melbourne;



participates regularly in cultural festivals across Australia and overseas; and involves herself in local performance events and dance workshops. Samantha is currently based in Darwin where she recently worked under the community development employment program (CDEP) at Danila Dilba Aboriginal and Islander Health Service as a youth project officer. Samantha's Yanyuwa connections place her in a direct familial relationship with me – she is my husband's sister and we relate to each other as *manjickarra* (sister-in-law), a classroom dynamic I will return to later in this paper.

Samantha's understandings of Indigenous dance stem from her experiences as an urban based performer combined with on-going relationships with family from remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. She sees contemporary Indigenous dance as a derivative of its original traditional source and writes

Dance is an expressionistic tool utilised to capture, express, embody and formulate any given representation in Traditional Indigenous culture. It is used in its form, 'accompanied' by song and music, to entertain as well as a tool for use in ceremony etc. It is not separate from other aspects of culture and has its place, story, law, song, music etc of which it is representing ie totem or story . . . Where influenced by 'new' experiences etc the evolution of Traditional culture, therefore dance, will be influenced: positively or negatively; stylistically the distinctions of the culture remain if the culture has not been upset considerably (1999:1-2).

For Samantha, contemporary dance acts as a medium to express changes brought about by colonisation and how she as an individual is negotiating her identity as an Aboriginal woman through that sorry history into a positive present and future. She comments that performance reflects her own journey. Each dance tells a story, enabling her to empower herself in spirit by demonstrating her relationships to country and family (pers. com 2000).

## The workshop

On Wednesday 12 April 2000, the students participated in one two hour performance

workshop with Samantha. Prior to entering the classroom, Samantha and I spoke at great length about the way in which her knowledge of contemporary Indigenous dance would be presented to the students. Samantha, like many other Indigenous performers, treats the presentation of Indigenous knowledge in this setting and in her performances very carefully and she strongly adheres to her own cultural rules surrounding who has the right to knowledge of performance and the appropriate ways to transmit this knowledge. She writes (1999:4) that while contemporary Indigenous dance represents a 'fusion' of traditional elements with contemporary western inspired movements, it is imperative that permission is granted for the use as distinct from ownership of traditional movements.



The workshop was divided into two distinct sections. The first involved Samantha performing a recently choreographed dance followed by an informal conversation with myself and the students about Indigenous contemporary dance where she described her performance as a:

Variation between a woman's song and a man's song, the contemporary way. It was a dance I choreographed for my grandmother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. It's about our journey from traditional lifestyle ... – so it's basically a travelling story ... my grandmother's name's Hilda Muir. She was cruising around Borroloola there in the Northern Territory with her Mum and the story goes, that she told me, an incident happened, someone got murdered so the police fellas were called in, and they came in and took everybody dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah [horse sound] on horseback but then they left everyone here at Borroloola except for Nana and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah they

took her to Darwin on horseback ... and she didn't really know where she was going but because she was of mixed race they took her away from her mother at 8, 7 years of age and consequently she grew up in a place called Kahlin compound and grew up with other mixed race indigenous people, children mainly and babies . . . and she was pretty much passed around in servitude to the government and welfare.

A dance workshop with the students comprised the second section and it was during this part of the class that both students and myself were able to learn Samantha's grandmother's dance. Step by step Samantha guided us through a series of warm-ups before providing us with the opportunity to experience via verbal instruction and imitation the dance moves for ourselves. Samantha recognises the value of experiential learning and embodied knowledge as a path to understanding and comments that:

Some times it's just not enough to talk about how wonderful a sunset can be, feeling the sunset is like so beyond words, you know. So when they dance and I say 'feel the water' or 'feel the sand', lift your arms up like wings, be a brolga and bring it down. You know they identify with those images and therefore connect even if it's not consciously. Making that first conscious identification with these images which is fluid throughout the dance and then ultimately you just . . . give yourself up to it and then there's the ultimate spirit of the dance, lives like a river and can feel yourself as an individual moving as well as a team (pers. com 2000).

After one hour filled with much trial and error, repetition, patience, humour and encouragement, Samantha was able to sit back and watch the class perform the beginnings of her grandmother's dance for her.

### **The second voice: Elizabeth**

I would now like to discuss briefly my responses to this process. Without doubt, my experience in the ANTH2120 classroom is at once rewarding and challenging. In this setting, my sister-in-law relationship with Samantha as partial insider (family member by marriage) and partial outsider (researcher) is brought together with my role in the University as the non-Indigenous lecturer on

Indigenous women's music and dance. The result is a complex set of power relations between myself, Samantha and the students themselves and a constantly changing dynamic as all three groups attempt to negotiate our way through these relationships. As a partial insider I stand in a particular familial relationship with Samantha and in turn this places me with particular responsibilities and obligations to her. Alongside the sister-in-law dynamic that exists, there is a teacher and student relationship at play between us by way of my role as partial outsider (researcher). My role as student in relation to Samantha is then juxtaposed in this educational setting with the role I play as teacher in relation to the students enrolled in ANTH2120. The relationship between the students and myself thus shifts the power dynamic where upon, like it or not, I find myself in a position of status and authority. Based upon an already established student-as-novice and teacher-as-expert relationship, the students have certain expectations of my actions in the classroom. What they see and experience however is an educational borderland created by the combination of the concepts of culture, voice and difference where '[m]ultiple subjectivities and identities exist as part of pedagogical practice' (Giroux, 1992:206). The lecturer and the guest have a close personal relationship that determines and drives their professional association. Moreover, they see and experience their lecturer taking on the role of a student in relation to Samantha which I suspect disturbs and challenges their perceptions of teacher-student and cross-cultural relations in many different ways.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, the classroom ethnography I have provided here has been necessarily messy. Questions about the types of dialogue that occur between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, performers and lecturers and how the teaching and learning processes in this educational setting disturbs and dislocates Western paradigms for knowing about Indigenous performance remain largely unanswered. Without doubt, the issues of representation and speaking position are of

extreme importance in this context. My subject position as middle class white woman is constantly shifting and changing in the ANTH2120 classroom as I negotiate and maintain multiple identities and relationships with both students and Indigenous performers. McConaghy (1994:25) writes that :

The decision of whether an educator positions him or herself as an interlocutor for Indigenous people, has too often been the subject of representation fashions and prescriptions, rather than a critical analysis of particular conditions.

The history of research by non-Indigenous people on Indigenous peoples and the resulting representations of those communities is, as Tuhiwai Smith (1999:1) writes:

inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.

Hooks' (1992:346) contends that representation is a matter of problematising positionality and deconstructing subject positions of power. I am reminded of Robertson's (1993) analogy of midwifery used to describe the complexities of representing the knowledge of the other in ethnomusicological research. In Robertson's framework, midwifery becomes a metaphor for the translation of information from one set of cultural realities to another. The task undertaken by the midwife is to ensure that safe arrival of a newborn child and the task of the ethnomusicologist is to 'give safe passage to musical perceptions that might easily be dismissed, simply because they do not fit our habits of thought and interpretation' (1993:107). She further explains:

The ethnomusicologist is often engaged in a dance of midwifery. She can coach or nurse the tradition she studies into public perception, but she may not excise its limbs when they do not move to the rhythms of the scholarly world. She is not the parent of the tradition; she is merely the facilitator. Yet how she brings the tradition into the light may determine its survival and its

acceptance. This is an awesome responsibility. Here, the birthing technique of the midwife is negotiated through her own cultural politics and her own willingness to address central cultural issues that have been rendered invisible by the theocratic codes of our disciplines (1993:123).

The multiple speaking positions I assume as teacher, student and family member alongside and in relation to students and Indigenous performers in this discursive space; the maintenance or challenge to power relations the dialogue between us exhibits; and, the politics of representation and knowledge production in general are central to an incredibly complex teaching and learning environment of which I am only just beginning to understand.

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