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BOOK REVIEWS

LANDSCAPES OF INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE: MUSIC, SONG AND DANCE OF THE TORRES STRAIT AND ARNHEM LAND

Fiona Magowan & Karl Neuenfeldt (Eds.)

Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2005, vii+171pp, ISBN 0-85575-4931

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Landscapes of Indigenous Performance fills a significant gap in the academic literature on Indigenous Australian music and dance. There are very few recent full-scale publications on Indigenous performance in these regions and aside from the work of a few notable exceptions (e.g., Beckett, 1981; Connell, 1999; Davis, 2004; Neuenfeldt, 2002), Torres Strait Islander music and dance in particular has historically been marginalised and neglected in academic literature. The text also provides an important contribution to the fight against Aboriginalism by examining issues of colonisation, control, and power and provides a useful educational resource for teaching courses on ethnomusicology, anthropology, Indigenous Australian studies, contemporary Indigenous performance and Australian studies.

The book is based on a number of papers originally delivered at the 1999 Inaugural Arnhem Land Performance Conference and explores how local music and dance genres in the Torres Strait and the Northern Territory have been influenced by "missionary, institutional, popular and global influences" (p. 4). Indigenous scholars feature within the text with contributions by Eddie Koiki Mabo and Martin Nakata. This is particularly significant since most of the discourse relating to Indigenous Australian music and dance has been written by non-Indigenous scholars and illustrates an important resistance to the ways Aboriginalist discourse has attempted to silence Indigenous voices and deny that Indigenous people can speak for themselves. Many of the other chapters by non-Indigenous contributors also incorporate the voices of Indigenous Australian performers in order to

allow Indigenous perspectives on Indigenous music-making to be heard and emphasised. This approach provides further depth to the book and lends deeper insight into the lived experiences, performances, songs and dances of Indigenous Australian performers.

At first glance, the collection seems a disparate range of topics and the connections between the chapters do not seem clear. The title itself is confusing as "landscapes" per se do not really feature as a theme in the book. Yet Magowan and Neuenfeldt's introduction to the text successfully draws the links between the papers and provides an introduction to the aims and themes of the book. They emphasise that the text has three main themes: the relationships between musical pasts and presents, contemporary cultural performance as cultural domain, and cross-cultural issues of teaching and recording Indigenous music and dance. Discussing the book as a whole, Magowan and Neuenfeldt argue that the text "invites reflection upon how Indigenous performance genres are a dialogue between community and state or government powers, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous performers and between educators, traditional leaders and institutions" (p. 9).

The nine chapters which follow provide insight into the diverse range of musical performances in the Top End and Torres Strait. For example, Nakata and Neuenfeldt trace the origins of "Taba Naba," a popular Torres Strait Island song, and suggest reasons for its migration to the Torres Strait and its transformation into an icon of Torres Strait music and culture. Both Toner and Magowan examine performances on video from Northeast Arnhem Land, while Slotte discusses the Christian movement at Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) by examining how Christian music and dance in Arnhem Land incorporates traditional ritual. Mackinlay explores the ways Aboriginal performance traditions are incorporated into tertiary classrooms and the complexities of being a non-Indigenous educator teaching Indigenous music and dance. Mabo provides a personal and historical account of Torres Strait music while Loos presents a biographical study of Mabo with a focus on the importance of song to Torres Strait identity and culture. Drawing on historical photographs, newspapers, magazines, and travel accounts from the early 1900s, Mullins and Neuenfeldt discuss the changes that occurred in the public music culture of Thursday Island from 1900 to 1945. Mullins and Neuenfeldt illustrate how many different people shaped the unique musical culture

still found on Thursday Island. Certainly, the book illustrates that music and dance “provides means by which [Indigenous Australian] people recognise identities and place” (Stokes, 1994, p. 5).

One disappointing aspect of the book is the number of typographical errors and inconsistencies in the presentation of words and author names. While this is not a major flaw of the book it is a shame that such avoidable errors are evident in the text. Another slight shortcoming of the book is the lack of closure at the end of text. The final chapter is a detailed musical analysis by Anderson of a Central Arnhem Land song series. While the chapter is no doubt useful to some scholars and students undertaking musical analysis of Aboriginal songs, the reader is left suspended and with a feeling of a lack of cohesiveness. Perhaps if Magowan and Neuenfeldt had included a final chapter which summed up the book, or perhaps a different chapter to conclude, it would have made a more satisfying and unified ending to the text.

Overall, the book is a useful tool for researching and teaching some aspects of Indigenous Australian performance. Magowan and Neuenfeldt acknowledge that “there is a need for greater public understanding of these cultural forms and for comparative analyses of alternative and competing histories and historicities of Indigenous music and dance in these regions” (p. 2). The collection successfully takes up this call by exploring some of the wide-ranging forms of Indigenous performance. *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance* could be used to help tertiary students think critically about the complexities and issues surrounding performance traditions of Indigenous Australian people. As a whole, the collection importantly draws attention to the diversity of songs and dances performed by Indigenous Australian people from the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait and successfully places the performance practices of Indigenous Australians in their musical, social, cultural and political contexts.

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A BEND IN THE YARRA: A HISTORY OF THE MERRI CREEK PROTECTORATE STATION AND MERRI CREEK ABORIGINAL SCHOOL 1841–1851

Ian D. Clark & Toby Heydon

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In 1843 an area of land at the junction of Merri Creek and the Yarra River, several kilometres to the northeast of Melbourne, became a Station of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate. A school for Aboriginal children operated in various forms at the site until 1851. *A Bend in the Yarra* provides a detailed narrative of the school from its early successes through its gradual decline as attendance by Aboriginal students declined. To a great extent, though, the value of this book lies in the larger picture it paints of early culture contact between white migrant settlers and Aboriginal people in the surrounding region of Victoria. This larger picture helps explain the motivation for establishing schools like the one at Merri Creek and clarifies the problems such schools encountered. The book is particularly useful and fascinating in the tension it depicts between white attempts to settle Aboriginal people in a limited number of locations, of which Merri Creek was one, and Aboriginal intentions to remain free and mobile agents in their own country.

Part of this tension has to do with the desire of Aboriginal people – mostly members of the Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung clans – to be close to the novel centre of activity that the town of Melbourne represented and the counter desire of the white townfolk and authorities to move them away. The initial intention of the authorities was to “civilise” these Aboriginal people, people who the white townfolk seem to have regarded as visitors to the town, despite the fact that the town was situated in Aboriginal country. In 1837 an Aboriginal “village mission” was established on the outskirts of Melbourne and between 60 and 80 Aboriginal residents were engaged in building a schoolroom-dormitory there. As we know, schools occupied a central role in the “civilising” project and while Aboriginal people