Bodies, Myth and Music: How Contemporary Indigenous Musicians are Contesting a Mythologized Australian Nationalism

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Abstract

This article focuses on two Australian myths: terra nullius and the 'noble savage'. These myths have their nexus with the absence and presence (respectively) of Indigenous beings. This article argues that these myths formed the foundation of colonial nationhood, and that their repercussions are reverberating within post-colonial imaginings of Indigenous Australians today. The myth of terra nullius, empty land, enabled the construction of a nation at the expense of the Indigenous 'other'. Furthermore, the ways in which colonisers repressed Indigenous subjectivities was to essentialise them as 'noble savages'; a figure who is relegated into mysticism and obscurity, consolidated into a "melancholic anthropological footnote" (La Nauze 1959) of Australia's colonial triumph. Grounded in this understanding, this article will consider the ways in which these myths are being broken down by dynamic, engaging and distinctly visible Aboriginalities through the case study of contemporary Indigenous musicians. Contemporary Indigenous musicians occupy mainstream stages and screens with diverse, meaningful, accessible and modern Aboriginal identities. These didactic and exigent bodies are revoking the myth that Australia was vacant prior to 1770, and that its First Peoples are incapable of being modern. As such, this essay explores the deconstruction of terra nullius and the 'noble savage', as a result of Indigenous presence within contemporary public realms.

Keywords: Aboriginalities, terra nullius, 'noble savage', Australian nationhood

Australian nationalism is palpably linked to the Indigenous body: in its presence and in its absence. The colonizer's preference towards European values and imageries led to the construction of Australian national ideals. Considering Australia's geographical position and its prior inhabitance, the attaining and sustaining of these values have

been, since European arrival, greatly contested. Yet these ideals still maintain a legacy and a potency. They were pursued through the mythologizing of the 'other', of the Australian Indigenous peoples, manifested in the pathologizing of the Indigenous body. The absence of the Indigenous body was developed through the fiction of *terra nullius* (empty land), and the only acceptable presence of Indigenous bodies was by an imagined archetypal 'noble savage'. Both these forms of presence and absence (Wade 2010) are being contested in twenty-first century Australia by individuals of an assertive modernity containing varying, and visible Aboriginalities; key among them the contemporary Indigenous musician. These musicians are occupying mainstream stages and screens with diverse, meaningful, accessible and distinctly modern Aboriginal identities, far divorced from the myths of *terra nullius* and the noble savage.

The composition of an Australian nationalism was built out of the traumas of identity flowing from its status as a settler nation (Moran 2002a, p.1035). Myths were created to legitimize colonisation and the egregious practices that followed. Mythologizing notions of the body of the 'other', referring to that of the Indigenous 'other', have played a substantial part in the creation of Australia's nationalism and continue to have impact. As such, this article shall argue, with a strong focus on theory, that Australia's nationalism was created through the 'principles of exclusion' (Nacci 2002, p.153) of the colonial regime to justify colonisation as legal and moral. This created the juxtaposition of 'us and them' (Durak 1959, p.314) that has manifested in the limitations placed upon the social and political position of Indigenous Australians. Turner (1986) noted the Australian narrative is an ideological construction strategically assembled around the optimism of the settler to the exclusion of Indigenous Australians in such a nationalist frame. This constructed nationalist rhetoric often denies Indigenous experiences and temporal extension. The founding principles of *terra nullius* and the noble savage have had repercussions in current applications of nationalism, such as the often disturbing presence of Indigenous people as corporeal beings and their physical transgression and exigency.

Recently, Indigenous music has received 'unprecedented attention from audiences in Australia and overseas, buoyed by a general upsurge of interest in Aboriginal artists' (Galvin 2012). Contemporary Indigenous music is not simply a pastiche of Western music, but combines histories, experiences, knowledges and

music from multiple influences.[1] Its syncretic nature is inherently a product of Australian modernity that is bound together by a polyphonic society, with multiple voices expressing diverse experiences. Yet contemporary Indigenous music is not esoteric; it does not alienate a Western audience by utilizing unfamiliar sounds. By creating a shared space contemporary Indigenous music finds its power as a provider of cross-cultural communication eradicating essentializing myths of Indigenous beings. Its familiar sound to non-Indigenous audiences reduces its abstruse nature as racialised art, and creates a responsive platform for social and moral interaction. In an overt sense, 'popular music itself has come to serve as a catalyst for raising issues and organizing masses of people' (Garofalo 1992, p.16-17), but it also frames subtle 'debates and tensions concerning Australian sovereignty and indigeneity' (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2000, p.67).

This article will examine the nexus between nationalism and the body to foreground explanations of the strategic colonial mythologizing of Indigenous bodies, through the absence and presence dynamic. The discussion will move to highlight the nature of Australia's modernity as it is born from a monological narrative that confirms its legitimacy by creating binaries to situate itself as superior to the 'other'; this is the social and cultural stage upon which contemporary Indigenous musicians create and perform their art. Subsequently, a brief look at the experiences of contemporary Indigenous musicians – Jessica Mauboy, Dan Sultan, Thelma Plum and The Medics – will be used to highlight how public and mainstream representations of Aboriginality are breaking these myths, and are a subtle display of the fracturing of a constructed Australian nationalism.

Music and Aboriginality

Dunbar-Hall & Gibson (2004, p.28) provide useful definitions of contemporary Indigenous music. For them, contemporary music describes 'musical practices that involve aspects of commercial production, performance and distribution, and which are influenced to some degree by Western sounds and instrumentations'. This definition avoids the implication that the music is not 'traditional', but privileges the stance that 'contemporary' music is an evolution of culture. There are limitations in

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[1] 'Western' is used here as a conceptual rather than a geographical term to describe the increasing 'Euro-American' worldview of cultural, political, economic and social industries.

attempting to define Indigenous expressions through the Western binaries of 'traditional' and 'contemporary', the main being that it implies a temporality to the subject, that one exists in a pre-colonial past, and the other in an isolated present. The traditional and the contemporary can exist simultaneously and symbiotically, and to imply that they exist in different timeframes ignores the intricacies of cultural production and expression. All the complexities of defining music reinforce the social and cultural context, in which music is produced, gathered, arranged, framed and consumed.

The term 'Aboriginal' refers to those who are of the heritage and culture of the first peoples from the mainland of Australia, and the term 'Indigenous' includes those of Torres Strait Island heritage and culture in addition to Aboriginal peoples. 'Aboriginality' however defies such succinct definition. It is used as a de-essentializing term to suggest that Aboriginality is intersubjectively produced via histories and personal experiences, constructed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and therefore varies between Indigenous individuals (Langton 1993, p.31). While it is acknowledged that Australia's population is an assemblage of many cultures, ethnicities, 'races' and subjectivities, this article is concerned with 'whiteness' as a signifier of the cultural, economic, political and social hegemony of colonial Australia. Furthermore, 'whiteness' comes to denote 'mainstream' not in terms of its racial makeup but as part of a particular history whereby Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are dichotomous; Indigenous Australians are politically 'black' and by opposition, non-Indigenous Australians are 'white' (Perkins 2004, p.177). Similarly 'mainstream' is a loaded term: it suggests a normalcy to white, youthful and middle-class Australia. This is not intended to suggest that Aboriginality is somehow abnormal but rather that the 'mainstream' almost ironically designates what is considered a 'normal identity', which is invariably the white, youthful and middle-class ideal born out of the colonial desire for a venerated European model.

Australian Nationalism and the Indigenous Body

Nationalism is a powerful resource for the individual and for the collective. For an ideology it has distinctly phenomenological effects, as it lays the foundation for social and cultural conditioning to produce a community by which shared experiences are enacted via norms (Anderson 1983). Nationalism is understood as

> […] a heterogeneous set of 'nation'-oriented idioms, practices, and possibilities that are continuously available or 'endemic' in modern cultural and political life (Brubaker 1996, p.10).

National groups are self-ascribed emic identities that are not necessarily derived from a common ancestry (Barth 1969; Anderson 1983). As such, nationalisms have become the most successful and potent political force in modern world history as it orientates one culturally towards a national identity and has actions that flow from this identity (Moran 2002b, 676). Nationalist identities, especially western ideologies as Kapferer (1989, p.16, p.28) has noted, can 'assert their argument as a truth of nature' but in no way 'are 'true' or 'valid' interpretations of lived realities'.

Australian nationalism, whilst difficult to define, was founded on origin myths to give settler Australians a cultural orientation to situate their existence as a colonising nation. Australia's national myths are relational and instrumental: colonial interests constructed the binary of the settler/native in contrast to one another to justify their opposition (Lester 2006; Scates 1997); and also subjective: nationalism was achieved through the 'winner-take-all' project of colonisation (Wolfe 1999, p.163). What is interesting about this nationalism is that it propagated beliefs that frontier conflict was trivial, violence was accidental and government policies were not destructive or genocidal (Reynolds 1999). Although colonial atrocities are proven to be true, they still remain an uncomfortable and unpalatable reality for non-Indigenous Australians to grasp. Taking her cue from Lévi-Strauss (1978), Casey (2004, p.xvi-xvii) explores a theory of social memory, which can be applied to the construction of nationalism, as a reflection and reinforcement of particular beliefs and understandings. It is the power of one group who weaves the myths into the foundations of nationalism which places the world within the context of that view: 'the dominance of a particular group of narratives overtime affects what is recalled about particular time periods and practices'.

Australia's complex history of nationalism and its colonial agenda positioned the Indigenous body in opposition to the (settler) self. Foucault's (1984) concept of the *genealogy of the subject* demonstrated how subjectification is *internalized*. It reflects a concern of the subject's own body and corporeality, and how that affects productions of truth. Foucault elaborated upon the human body being the *raw material* for social and cultural processes; the techniques of domination and

subjugation of another's body are founded upon the principle that the body and the self can be reduced to simple properties. Douglas affirms this in her work in relation to what she terms the body physical and the body politic. She argues, 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived' (1973, p.93) and that

> […] there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not
> involve at the same time a social dimension (1973, p.58).

Thus a colonising history reduced the Indigenous body to binary oppositions of reality/myth, truth/falsehood and centre/periphery.

The presence and the absence of Indigenous bodies have aided in the construction of settler Australian nationalism. Myths were strategically used to undermine and to proliferate the belief that the eradication or subjugation of Aboriginal people was necessary and could be achieved in a reasonable, humane, lawful and accommodating manner. These images reverberated upon the collective symbolic to an extent that newly arrived early settlers soon acquired a view of Indigenous society as 'compounded of godless anarchy, violence, cannibalism and sexual depravity' (Reynolds 1974, p.51). These constructed images of Indigenous Australians have been entrenched in nationalism to the extent that 'the primitive, the 'other', has come to symbolize white Australian identity' (Scates 1997, p.45). The Australian nation has done little to rectify these imaginings of the continent's First Peoples. As discussed subsequently, a full rejection of *terra nullius* and the noble savage would erode the foundations on which it built its nationalism.

Absence: *Terra Nullius*

The productions of settler historical experiences have force 'by virtue of the realities they describe quite as much as by virtue of the realities they may hide' (Kapferer 1989, p.2). This is most evident in the fiction of *terra nullius*. At the time of settlement, Australia was pronounced *terra nullius*: empty land. This blatant falsification was used to deny entrance to treaty agreements and immediately implied rights of land to the coloniser. On Capitan James Cook's expedition to discover a southern continent on the HM Bark Endeavour, King George III of England gave instructions that Cook was '*with the consent* of the natives to take possession of convenient situations in the country' (cited by Museum of Australian Democracy

[1768] (emphasis added)). As no treaty has been entered into, Commonwealth possession of Australia occurred without the land ever being ceded by the Indigenous inhabitants. *Terra nullius* then, and now, 'rendered invisible and dematerialized… flesh-and-blood Aborigines [*sic.*]' (Morrissey 2007, p.69) from history, public life and Australian nationhood.

The traction and popularity of *terra nullius* went unchallenged due to the convenience of scientific racism. The supposedly 'objective, impartial, and scientific' pursuits of phrenology and eugenics were popular British and European schools of thought used to 'legitimate racial, gender, and colonial hierarchy' (Synnott & Howes 1992, p.147). The sciences attempted to explain that with their 'present brains' that were 'greatly inferior in size' (Combe 1835, p.164) it was impossible for Indigenous Australians to be civilized or even considered on the same plane of humanity as the European and were thus, 'relegated into obscurity' (Ward 1966, p.50). Furthermore, viewing Indigenous Australians as a 'wild race' created the popular position that settlers were the first to see and deduce meaning from the land (Moran 2002a, p.1022). The uses of phrenology and eugenics (among other physically oriented studies) created an attitude of 'studied indifference' in which, 'predictably… [Indigenous Australians] were placed on the lowest human link of the chain… relegated to the second division of humanity' (Reynolds 1974, p.47). The declaration of *terra nullius* was, through settler eyes, accurate, as the original inhabitants were not considered wholly human.

This imagining served to compound the creation of Australian settler identity as a superior, legitimate and lawful presence on the continent. These practices exerted profound political influence, justifying conquest and imperialism and the resulting racial inequalities. As such, the physical became political. As the coloniser placed itself and the colonized body in hierarchical opposition, nationalism was being constructed around the definition of the other as inferior and the self as superior (Falk 1985, p.117). The annihilation of Indigenous historical experiences is compounded in the foundation myth, which expressed an absence of the Indigenous body for the legitimacy of colonial claims. The sense of ownership that was born out of the *terra nullius* fiction required the filling out of 'empty' space as well as the building of settler national meaning (Moran 2002a, p.1022).

The effects of *terra nullius* are far reaching. The *Mabo and Others v Queensland (No. 2)* 1992 case, commonly referred to as *Mabo*, significantly

contributed to eroding the strength of *terra nullius*, although this was only as recent as the end of the twentieth century. The High Court of Australia recognized Eddie Koiki Mabo's claim to Native Title on the islands of Mer, Dauar and Waier in the Torres Strait. In order to do so, the High Court rejected the doctrine of *terra nullius*, and ruled in favour of the common law doctrine of Aboriginal title. This marked the initial and most significant point of departure away from *terra nullius*, resulting in the creation of the Native Title Act 1993, which aimed to protect native title and legislate for its co-existence within the colonial land management system. However, despite the Native Title Act achieving much in the realm of Indigenous recognition in Australia, the myth is so entrenched in Australia as, according to Indigenous academic Irene Watson (1997, p.48), the full death of *terra nullius* would collapse the entire Australian legal system. This is typified by the Native Title Amendment Act 1998 instated by the conservative Liberal party Prime Minister John Howard. In response to a successful Native Title claim made by the Wik Peoples in 1996, Howard proposed, and successfully implemented, a 'ten-point plan' aimed at restricting the claims one could make towards Native Title; giving greater power to states to extinguish Native Title, providing greater rights to mining and pastoral leases, and dictating which lands could and could not be claimed. This watering down of Native Title indicates that Australia's willingness to fully relinquish *terra nullius* is not imminent. Expelling the myth of *terra nullius* would have resounding effects on the construction of Australian nationhood, and is therefore, for the foreseeable future, likely to be entrenched in the legal system. That *terra nullius* is an intrinsic part of Australian legal and social life reinforces the centre/periphery dichotomy of Australian nationhood.

Presence: Noble Savage

Opposed to the absence of Indigenous peoples through the myth of *terra nullius*, is the similarly perplexing myth of the noble savage. This character is a popular literary icon and social figure throughout the world (Ellingson 2001). Most commonly the figure is an essentialized and romanticized male (which also reveals the gendered dynamics at play), offering a counterpoint to the modern follies of mankind. He typifies the uncivilized character, untouched by the corruption of European expansion and is authentically humanist by his exemption from the original sin. Mostly the noble

savage has become an avenue for curiosity and an icon for the playing out of guilt. Although authorship of the term remains contested – attributions fluctuate between Dryden (1672) and Rousseau (1754) – the uses of the term seem to indicate the same thing: the figure of the noble savage repulses, yet is simultaneously desired by the civilized man. His honour is admired but his wildness is admonished.

The Indigenous Australian that is welcomed into settler spaces is usually that of the memory of the noble savage archetype. Essentializing prejudices against Indigenous Australians has implied that the 'only Aborigine [*sic.*] worth counting is some romanticized tribal person' (Breen 1989, p.4). He is an easy form of Aboriginality to grasp because, for the large part, he does not exist. This mythologized individual's memory and image, however, still remains as the accepted form of Aboriginality. He stands, one legged, spear in hand, on the cliff of the Australian consciousness, as a 'melancholic anthropological footnote' (La Nauze 1959, p.11) to all that was lost of a primitive and romantic race. Australia is retrospectively mourning for that race, represented by this male individual. Guilt is played out in the consumption of 'cultural artifacts' such as dot paintings, didgeridoo recordings and other essentialized relics, largely ignoring the highly political, didactic and dynamic Aboriginalities that exist alongside them. While this image is still a form of Aboriginality, depicting it as the only form is damaging, as it is reinforcing 'selective and rather static notions of distinct subjects and dissimilar cultural domains' (Ottosson 2010, p.277) and not acknowledging the complex, progressive and pluralist subjects that a policy of liberal multiculturalism ignores. Despite the rhetoric of egalitarianism, Australians are conditioned to construct boundaries and delineate things into categories (such as 'other') to aid in its conceptualization of a subject. This illustrates that as a nation we have been taught, over 200 years, that Aboriginal is synonymous with marginal.

Based on these myths, Australia's narrative of nationalism affirmed to itself that egregious colonial practices were justified, and in turn, offered a cultural orientation and a social memory. Thus the persistent institution of nationalism has become habitual and turned 'into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale… [which] cannot possibly be explained by absent mindedness' (Stanner 1969, p.25). This 'historical amnesia' (Rimmer 2000, p.283) is predicated on the necessity to distance Indigenous people from the nation-building process where

there would need to be a meaningful recognition of the illegality of colonisation and its processes.

While this is a deplorable creation of Australian national identity, it is not a temporally bounded thing. Issues of colonisation and the creation of the national imaginary, is consolidated in modern social, economical, political and cultural norms. Australian modernity has emerged from an Australian nationalism. Both concepts were formed under the banner of egalitarianism and progress, while depreciating the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. The construction of modernity and nationalism has been utilitarian in the way that it projects benevolence in order to conceal the physical, territorial, emotional and cultural violence in its path to existence. Foundational to both Australian nationalism and modernity is the continuing supposition that Indigenous Australia lacks 'that philosophical, political, economic and industrial complex that was European modernity' thus positing Indigenous people as 'a primitive counterpoint to that modernity, defining it by contrast and confirming the Europeans' advantage' (Muecke 2002, p.5). In this way, Australia's nationalism was developed as a monologue, finding 'continual verification of itself and its worldview' (Bird Rose 2004, p.20). In disabling dialogue with the 'other', monologues' 'violent erasures are universalizing its own singular and powerful isolation' (Bird Rose 2004, p.20).

While modernity expresses a certain egalitarianism, its essential crisis lies in its imperative that the centre/margin dichotomy is intrinsic to its existence. The 'modern' and 'progressive' pins itself against the 'ancient' and 'stable'. Modernity is exerting itself as a victor over the past, in a competition between the archaic and the progressive (Latour 1993, p.10). Its spoils are enjoyed in the arenas of politics, economics and culture where the victor becomes the dominant, the norm and the accepted. Now modernity is no longer a conqueror merely of the 'past', but of anything that lies outside of his realm; difference becomes an adversary. A state of cultural dominance is formed and consolidated by the centre/margin opposition, which is an essential 'inheritance of modernism' (Muecke 1992, p.189). The monolithic histories, sovereignties and policies of the liberal nation-state have been entrenched in formal and social institutions such as popular culture, where minority interests (of which Indigenous peoples are but one example) are overshadowed. However, it is a fractured state in which lies an epistemological impasse when it comes to conceptualizing the centre/margin; while modernity has its victors and

conquered, the boundaries between centre and margin are not clearly delineated. While the centre/margin imaginary undoubtedly exist, the distinction is being blurred by the highly syncretic, fluid and hybrid cultural productions that react to this form of modernity, while simultaneously being a product of it, such as the contemporary Indigenous musician.

Contesting Myths: Contemporary Indigenous Musicians

Australia's constructed nationalism, while growing and becoming more flexible, did not factor the Indigene into its frame. As such, whatever cultural manifestations are produced in this environment are immediately mediated by this frame. This is where contemporary Indigenous musicians become facilitators for contestation. They cannot exist as an autonomous entity, but are linked to a history, a modernity and a nation that produced the centre/margin binary to legitimize its existence through the avenues of myth making. For a country that is coming to terms with its colonial history, the 'unsticking' of the centre/margin binary is of paramount importance, as this appears as a viable path that will lead to an actualization of modernity. The reality is that the binary framing of centre/margin, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, and so on, is too limiting for the complexity of lived experience. Not only does it cast the binary in opposition to each other, but it also disallows a reality where people can self-identify and experience life in partial and multilayered ways. The contemporary Indigenous musician has the ability to negotiate and cross the borders of cultural order, moving in and out of the everyday social world, which is then shattered by this act. The non-norm breaks down the social dynamics of the dominant worldview, and then constitutes a culture in its own right, weaving meanings and products from the social ingredients available to both entities. Thus, this fluid culture is determined by those who use it. Contemporary Indigenous musicians are emblematic of, and finding power through this fluidity, creating a framework where notions of Aboriginality are diffused subtly throughout a non-Indigenous listenership.

In any contemporary cultural industry, the usefulness of the dichotomy of centre/margin becomes unstuck. The margins are not so rigidly bound and are open to fluid, syncretic productions which honestly mimic the social intimacy of a multicultural and globalized society. New cultural products are being invented in 'the jaws of modern experience' (Gilroy 1993, p.101) that account for the reality of lived

experience. The unique ability of contemporary Indigenous music lies in its capacity to communicate notions of Aboriginality, to act as an Indigenous presence for a mainstream audience, and to present a truer reflection of Aboriginalities within society. The music acts as 'a cross-cultural tool for a marginalized and disadvantaged minority to 'talk back' to a dominant non-Aboriginal mainstream, as well as a means for 'sharing culture' with, and creating greater understanding in, a non-Aboriginal public' (Ottosson 2010, p.287-88).

These musicians construct a space which is neither central nor marginal, but comes from a place born out of the intersection of the two, a unique medium in which is equally as accessible from both sides, if a listener chooses to access it. Located at this pivot, music provides a 'form of presence' (Ottosson 2010, p.294), to stand ground in a society where cultural productions cannot exist autonomously, but within a wider social, political and national context, such as via myths of nationhood. Contemporary, mainstream or popular music is an invitation to engage through a system of communication accessible to both parties on a common, although unequal, ground. It is not a process of acculturation but of an intercultural engagement that links two or more disparate practices and ideas in a symbiotic entity that reflects the polyphonic nature of the human experience.

The public recognition of contemporary Indigenous musicians contributes to the eradication of mythological fallacies of Australian nationalism. The artists referred to – Jessica Mauboy, Dan Sultan, Thelma Plum and The Medics – represent a corpus of music that has gained 'crossover popularity' (Galvin 2012). This exposure is a 'means of mediating Aboriginal viewpoints and agendas into the Australian national consciousness' (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2000, p.47), heightening the cross-cultural communication occurring across Australia. Mauboy and Sultan grace the covers of lifestyle and music magazines, and images of The Medics and Plum are plastered on subways and poster-boards promoting upcoming music festivals. Contemporary Indigenous musicians are filling the stage, screen and playbill, appearing well dressed, engaging and affable. These representations are opening soft diplomatic pathways to cross-cultural exchange that can alter non-Indigenous reliance on the noble savage as the essential symbol of Aboriginality.

The deconstruction of myths of nationhood becomes enacted in the musicians' body by the production of publically promoted Aboriginalities; in this instance, the contemporary Indigenous musician. This in itself is problematic because, beyond any

stylistic or aesthetic choices they make, Indigenous musicians are marred by their 'blackness as an open signifier' (Gilroy 1993, p.32), and in this way, skin becomes a marker of difference. The fact that 'the more radical expressions of Aboriginality are often located in extralinguistic signifiers' (Gilbert 1998, p.52) ties the body to the centre of Indigenous political exigency. Every Indigenous body (and being) in public space has become '*interpellated*, in advance of any personal distinctions they might attempt to make as individuals' (Morrissey 2003, 191). This is not the object of overt racism but a historical hangover as the 'weight of prejudice (the legacy of European invasion and colonisation)' has given Indigenous bodies a '*density*' (Morrissey 2007, 73). Put simply, the physical energy of just being there is enough of a stylistic consideration to assert that the settler is in fact foreign. Moran expands on this as the physical presence of the 'other' indicates 'the settler is in fact foreign' (2002a, p.1025). The visibility of the Indigenous body has, to borrow from Bataille (1962), *transgressed*: crossed the border of cultural order to the secular and everyday world, which is then shattered. The non-normal breaks down the social dynamics of the dominant worldview.

In its most potent form, the corporeal presence of an Indigenous musician in public spaces can unsettle beliefs and opinions about Australia's socio-historical context. The physical display of Indigenous people on promotional posters, stages and television, and in other mainstream spaces, inverts the dominant/dominated power axis of Australian colonial history. Indigenous Australians are being actively *promoted* and are visually inhabiting a space accessed by a majority non-Indigenous audience. To typify this, Sultan asserted a political and highly visible Aboriginality at a Rock for Recognition concert, which aimed to increase awareness about a campaign to include Indigenous Australian prior occupation in a preamble in the Australian constitution. As Sultan took to the stage at the Corner Hotel in Melbourne he solicited the audience with:

"Do you recognise me?"

The response was a resounding cheer of appreciation and approval, to which he retorted:

"Well, the constitution doesn't." (Personal observation, 8 November 2012)

This manifest display of didacticism spread unease through the majority settler audience. Sultan became the face of the unrecognised and unknowable Indigenous collectivity to the audience. This was a particularly salient occasion to do so as the simplicity of the physical ascension of Sultan on the stage reverted the dominant/dominated power axis inherent in Australia. This physical arrangement overturned the position of who is most commonly speaker and who is listener. Through the didacticism of Sultan, normalised ideas of history, power and nationalism were thrown into disarray, as even the physically dominant placement of an Indigenous being is not a common occurrence.

In public displays of modern Aboriginalities, as in the case of Sultan, the preconception of *terra nullius* is shattered as 'sovereignty [is] manifested as a corporeal fact' (Morrissey 2007, p.73) and the noble savage is denied by contemporary subjectivities. Indigenous Australians have inherited the weight of these misconceptions and have become the loci bearing 'witness to an earlier sovereignty' (Morrissey 2007, p.66). The fact that Aboriginal people are the sovereign owners of Australia and that this sovereignty was never ceded is supported by the 'silent yet screeching excitement of physical vibrancy' (Daly 1989, p.25) of the Indigenous body. Contemporary Indigenous musicians are subtly asserting colonial experiences and combating the falsifications and myths of history, which built settler Australian nationalism, through the strategic agency of a body in opposition.

Additionally, the ways the bodies of contemporary Indigenous musicians are used often requires polarized forms of Aboriginality: those that fit the 'world music' icon and those that fit the Western ideals of music marketability. Langton (1993, p.41) calls this polarization a 'banality' where Australia has an 'obsession with 'positive' and 'negative' images' of Indigenous people. This idea is reflected in many colonised or racialised societies globally, where 'negative' images reflect a 'common sense' perception of minorities. 'Positive' images do not defy racism because they neutralize racial difference by placing the minority unchallenged within the majority culture. The desire for 'positive' images is premised on a power relationship that favours the Western over the 'other', essentially delivering cultural dominance by cultural assimilation (Thomas 2009, p.118). The awkward place in between these poles is left untouched as it offers complexities and realities that are not palatable to Western tastes and preferences. So what effect does the banality of the Indigenous body serve?

While in the settler eye the musicians can be reducibly banal and racially neutral, in actuality they are *multifaceted* due to the socio-historical context in which views of their corporality was constructed. By being so *normal* they are so *complex*. Mauboy has become a 'vamped-up R&B sexpot' (Gibbs 2012); Sultan is a 'classic rock star, that semi-mythical figure born of bedroom fantasies' (Zuel 2010); Plum's position as a 'sweet-toned folk singer-songwriter' (Galvin 2012) expresses a girl-next-door image; and the four-piece band The Medics started playing their own brand of 'atmospheric rock' (Galvin 2012) at high-school in Cairns. These are depictions of Indigenous bodies so far removed from the myth of *terra nullius* and the noble savage. Enacted through their bodies, affirmed through their public presence, Mauboy, Sultan, Plum and The Medics are presenting Aboriginalities far from the essentialized imaginings of a temporally distant desert tribesman.

These musicians may not look, act or think like their mythologized forefathers, but their authority as liberated Indigenous subjectivities is reliant on deconstructing the accepted essentialism of romantic, tribalized Aboriginalities. Their music is not 'traditional' in an essentialist or reductive sense, and any attempt to use the term 'traditional' is ultimately damaging as it is 'conceived in opposition to modernity or progress' (Makang 1997, p.324-5). Music produced by these artists defies classification, as it is a compendium of the gamut of cultural flows that constitute an actual Australian identity, while pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in Australian modernity. This socially liberating space provides access for 'transgressive politics and aesthetics [to become an] escape route for the marginal subject' (Muecke 1992, p.196) by developing complexities and multiple identities away from that of the noble savage simultaneously claiming a presence in public spaces. The music is syncopated, pulsating with the beats of multiple experiences, voices and sounds, to create a web in which existing concepts of Australian nationalism become unstuck and pulled apart by an enlightened cultural poetics devoid of any predetermined categories that posit one as better than another. An essential feature of this music is that Aboriginality is produced as a 'thread of expression that has always, and is continually changing' (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004, p.16); a feature of cultural continuity that has often been denied of Indigenous people, accounting to a concern for 'authenticity'. The medium of contemporary music allows for fluid transitions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people,

sounds and concepts, which enforces its function as a site for dialogues about nationalism and history.

If 'music must be a direct reflection of the society from which it emanates' (Crisp 1979, p.54) then contemporary Indigenous musicians are reflecting the syncopated, fractured and imperfect realities of an Australian modernity. By representing complex individual Aboriginalities, contemporary Indigenous musicians are rejecting the importance placed on 'authenticity' via outdated modes of what constitutes 'tradition', imaginings that have their conception from the noble savage. Similarly their growing public presence is enough of a refutation to the concept of *terra nullius*. The ability a contemporary Indigenous musician has to negotiate the fluid space of contemporary music demonstrates the multiple Aboriginalities and diverse identities that constitute a modern Indigenous existence. Thus the restrictive bonds of Indigenous mythological imaginings are being erased by the dynamic, didactic and complex Aboriginalities produced by contemporary Indigenous musicians.

Conclusion

Australian myth and nationalism has controlled, and to a large extent is still controlling, the identities of Indigenous people. Justified by the myths of *terra nullius* and the noble savage, Australian nationalism was built on principles and practices which legalized the colonisation and settlement of the continent, its contents and inhabitants. These principles and practices were often legitimized through the opposition of the settler body to the Indigenous body. Nationalism constructed – enabled by the discourses of phrenology and eugenics – the fiction of *terra nullius* and a romanticized view of an Indigenous noble savage. The imperialisms of these preconceptions distanced and eradicated Indigenous beings in the formation of nationalism, denying individuals their own experiences or temporal extension, for settler nationalist's own strategic ends. The continued presence of Aboriginal bodies remains a troubling and disturbing fact for settler Australians as it is a direct testimony against the principles and practices that founded Australian nationalism. The presence and absence of Indigenous Australian bodies have greatly contributed to the creation of Australia's settler nationalism and their bodies continue to be restricted and controlled by the preconceptions this nationalism ensues.

However, dynamic and distinctly modern Indigenous musicians are contributing to the reversal of these myths. Through them, the past is living in the present, rejecting essentialized constructions of Aboriginality. Racial history and the resulting social dynamics, as influenced by nationalism and modernity, still act as a mediator to individual creativity and cultural productions. Yet contemporary Indigenous musicians' ability to enter Western modes and spaces enables them to produce works that speak from an individualist standpoint, as well as a collective Indigenous and non-Indigenous one. It is here where the musical and stylistic choices of contemporary Indigenous musicians are bridging the crevasse between Australian nationhood and Indigenous Australia. The opportunities for cross-cultural engagement in this cultural arena contest the mythologized colonial constructions of their ancestors. The lingering notions of *terra nullius* and the noble savage are being broken-down by non-Indigenous audiences being receptive to highly dynamic, fluid and syncretic cultural creations. In this way, the non-essentialist musician can slowly chip away at the reductive notions of their identity, and provide engaging pathways to continually prove, sometimes by presence of body alone, that Australia's mythological beginnings are damaging to the powerful Indigenous subjectivities that undoubtedly live among the nation.

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