Inside Out: An Indigenous Community Radio Response to Incarceration in Western Australia

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ABSTRACT | An Indigenous prison requests show in Perth, Western Australia, Inside Out has emerged as a response to the disproportionately high incarceration rates of Indigenous people in the state and is the most popular show on the community broadcaster Noongar Radio, airing across twelve prisons with more than 270 requests per week. Incorporating interviews and analysis of language and music, this article will discuss how Aboriginal people in Western Australia use Inside Out as a shared communicative resource to assist in upholding their connections to family, community, and Country, connections that can be central to Aboriginal Australian social and emotional well-being but are most often impeded by incarceration. Using language and music—mostly country music—to enact Aboriginal cultural and social connectedness, Inside Out serves vital community concerns not addressed by commercial broadcasting, while also creating representations of Aboriginal culture for non-Aboriginal listeners.

KEYWORDS | community radio, incarceration, Noongar, Aboriginal English, Indigenous broadcasting

The prison requests program Inside Out on Noongar Radio in Western Australia is an example of how Indigenous people actively employ communicative resources such as radio broadcasts, language, and music to address pertinent community concerns while also creating representations of their own communities. Like many radio programs devised and produced by Indigenous people, Inside Out serves as a “cultural bridge between the parallel universes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous society” (Meadows 2009, 523). Indigenous peoples in many nations have used radio broadcasting to reinforce specific regional languages and cultures, while actively combating negative stereotypes and providing information or perspectives absent from mainstream sources (Smith and Brigham 1992; Stuart 2003; Rodriguez and El Gazi 2007; Meadows 2009). Like much Indigenous broadcasting,
Inside Out is an act of resistance against the dominant cultural influence of mainstream media.

Background

Almost fifty years after the first Australian public radio broadcast, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples won access to radio broadcasting with the introduction of community radio licenses in Australia in 1972 (Australian Government 2010). Originally designed to serve interest groups inadequately represented by commercial and government media, the not-for-profit Australian community radio sector continues to provide a platform for Aboriginal self-representation and the articulation of specific Aboriginal community concerns. One among twenty dedicated metro and regional Indigenous community radio stations operating across the continent (CBOOnline 2009, 9), Noongar Radio 100.9 FM is the only Indigenous radio station in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. “Noongar” (also spelled “Nyungar”) is a term used today to refer to the Aboriginal people, language, and culture of southwestern Western Australia. More than 30,000 people—including the authors of this article—identify as Noongar, constituting one of the largest Aboriginal cultural blocs in Australia (SWALSC 2009).

Although, as Perth’s only dedicated Indigenous radio station, Noongar Radio aims to “support and promote the achievements and aspirations of the Noongar community it serves” (http://digital.radius.org.au/service/noongar-radio), much of its content is also relevant to Aboriginal people living in Perth but originally from other areas, and many of its programs are simulcast on regional radio stations in Western Australia. A requests show that aims to keep “loved ones connected on the inside and out” (http://www.noongarradio.com/nr_programs/inside-out/), Inside Out is the most popular program on Noongar Radio. The very practical need for the program is underscored by the disproportionately high incarceration of Indigenous people in Western Australia and the significant impact of this phenomenon on Aboriginal families. Inside Out exists as a communicative space involving the families and friends of prisoners, the prisoners themselves, and the broader Noongar Radio audience, which includes a large number of non-Aboriginal listeners.

Methodology

This article will discuss how Inside Out on Noongar Radio 100.9 FM assists in the maintenance of bonds between families, communities, and Country otherwise impeded by incarceration. Furthermore, it will identify how
Aboriginal cultural identity and the importance of kin relationships are conveyed through the language and music featured in the program’s broadcasts. Margaret Kovach (2012, 13) proposes that, in Indigenous research contexts, “methodology itself necessarily influences outcomes,” leading researchers such as Juanita Sherwood and Sacha Kendall (2013) to stress the privileging of local Indigenous voices as a key methodological consideration. Additionally, Indigenous researchers can often share a heightened “sense of responsibility to be useful” to their communities (Bracknell 2015a, 1). Indeed, we the Noongar authors of this article approached the research with preexisting contacts within—and accountability to—the Noongar community.

As casual listeners of Inside Out already aware of the generally positive effect the program has in the community, we determined the general scope of this preliminary study of the cultural, linguistic, and musical dynamics of Inside Out. Through talking with key Noongar Radio staff, we gathered information and advice to determine the direction of a subsequent review of the pertinent literature. We then analyzed three episodes of Inside Out, gathering data on language and music, while seeking to verify the claims made by the Noongar Radio staff we interviewed. Although our own lived experiences as Noongar people—especially with regard to the symbolic relevance of language and music—contributed to this study—we relied on a range of Aboriginal voices to reflect the diversity of the community concerned, rather than on our own preexisting knowledge.

Noongar Radio

Launched in July 2009 after the West Australian Aboriginal Media Association (WAAMA), better known for its station name, 6AR, was de-licensed for failing to recognize and meet the needs of the Western Australian Indigenous community, Noongar Radio was licensed with the primary objective of supporting Noongar culture and people in Perth (Johnston 2011). At present, the station has four employees, forty volunteers, and twenty-five programs broadcast directly to the Perth metropolitan area. All its programs are available anywhere in the world through live streaming on the Noongar Radio website (http://www.noongarradio.com; Wilson 2016), and some are also broadcast to other areas in Australia through the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS), a national satellite program delivery service distributing news and programs to Indigenous community radio stations.

Noongar Radio employee and volunteer coordinator Mechelle Wilson—affectionately known in the Noongar community and prisons as
“Big Girl”—produces and presents the prison requests show *Inside Out* every Sunday night from 5 to 9 p.m. Wilson (2016) recalls that, soon after its launch in 2009, Noongar Radio was receiving hundreds of requests for prisoners from their loved ones, as well as from prisoners through prison officers. Once then Station Manager Michelle White decided that Noongar Radio needed to provide a show specifically for prison requests, it took a year for the station working with Corrective Services to establish a procedure that would allow for the broadcasting of requests to and from prisoners and their loved ones, while also making sure that restraining orders would be upheld and vulnerable people would be protected (Wilson 2016).

As Perth’s only prison requests show, *Inside Out* first aired in May 2010 and has recently grown to include all prisons and juvenile detention centers in Perth, Greenough, Carnavon, Roebourne, Mullewa, Derby, and Meekatharra (Wilson 2016).

Wilson receives just shy of three hundred requests, “shout outs” and messages, for the show each week, with a large portion from Bandyup Women’s Prison, just outside Perth (Wilson 2016). Request forms are usually made available to inmates in prisons. Family or friends on the “outside” can select songs and make dedications by SMS messaging, by contacting the *Inside Out* Facebook page, or by dropping in to the Noongar Radio station headquarters on Beaufort Street in Perth. Although most of the requests on the program are from and dedicated to Aboriginal people, there are also a smaller number from and for non-Aboriginal people, signaling both the wide audience listening to *Inside Out* and the fact that Noongar Radio is providing a service to the broader community not provided by mainstream media (Wilson 2016). In recognition of this success, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) honored *Inside Out* with the 2011 National Award for Best New Program or Content Initiative.

**Indigenous Incarceration and Radio**

that the “extraordinary differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous media in form and content” support the idea that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples may inhabit altogether separate universes even though they share the same geographic location.

As of June 2016, Indigenous Australians made up only 3.7 percent of Western Australia’s overall population, yet represented 38 percent of Western Australian prisoners, with an incarceration rate sixteen times higher than non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). And disproportionate Indigenous imprisonment in Western Australia was far worse among the young: as of 2015, 78 percent of juvenile prisoners—aged between 10 and 17—were Indigenous (Amnesty International Australia 2015, 12). Disproportionately high Indigenous incarceration is a global phenomenon, exemplified by incarceration rates in North America, where First Nations peoples constitute 18 percent of the prison population but only 2 percent of the general population, and in New Zealand, where Maori people make up 50 percent of the prison populations but only 15 percent of the national population (Willis and Moore 2008, 11). Although it is not within the scope of this article to discuss the various factors associated with high Indigenous incarceration rates, institutional racism, intergenerational poverty and trauma, mandatory sentencing, minimum jail terms, reduced parole, homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health are all frequently linked to this phenomenon (Amnesty International Australia 2015). In 2014, one in eight Indigenous people in Western Australia reported having a loved one sent to prison or having themselves been incarcerated in the previous 12 months (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet 2014). And, to this day, incarceration continues to be a significant and highly relevant issue for Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

Connection to Country and Family

In an Australian Aboriginal context, the term “Country,” written with a capital letter, signifies land as “nourishing terrain” (Rose 1996, 1), alive, multidimensional, and intertwined with local Aboriginal people and culture. Although Western Australia has instituted a regional prison policy to address the “anguish in Aboriginal prisoners’ concerns at being held ‘out of their country’” (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services 2008, 4), with sixteen prisons operating and more than triple that number of Aboriginal cultural groups across the state, many Indigenous prisoners still serve time in prisons far from their own Country and can be transferred with little notice (Kwaymullina 2011). Below is a “shout out” and request received
by Inside Out exemplifying the importance of Country to an Indigenous prisoner:

Request: Echo voices—Lajamanu Teenage Band.

Shout out: my family and mob in Wyndham and Derby, love and miss you mob, please all take care of our community—it’s very special. I miss my Country so please keep it strong for my return.

Hearing messages and songs from the home Country may help to strengthen the spiritual ties and connection to it.

Listeners from the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia serving time at Acacia Prison in Perth often get in touch with their loved ones via Inside Out:

Request: Fitzroy Express—Home Sweet Home.

To all my family—to all my country—Kimberly brothers at Acacia—do it easy—take it easy—Kimberly and the country mob—keep our culture strong and stay deadly . . . not long now till we’re reunited all the Country and all the Kimberly mob hey. Can’t keep us in here forever—stay strong black and proud.

Inside Out also receives similar messages and requests from prisoners just south of the Gibson Desert:

Request: Any song from Warunyinna Band.

For the Countrymen at Acacia Prison who from Warburton Community. We all must stay strong and focused until we return to our lands to practice true culture and be part of our piece of mother earth.

The examples above make powerful use of the terms “Country” and “Countrymen.” They also select music from their own homeland regions: Fitzroy Express from the Kimberley, Warunyinna Band from Warburton, and Lajamanu Teenage Band from just a few hundred kilometers over the border from Wyndham into the Northern Territory.

Across Australia, prisons have implemented a range of strategies to specifically support the well-being of Indigenous prisoners, such as establishing areas, shelters, and fire pits for cultural gatherings, along with often regularly
delivered programs that include “visiting Elders and cultural enrichment packages” (Grant 2016, 347). In her review of initiatives for Indigenous prisoners in Australia, Elizabeth Grant (2016, 349) concludes that although “being connected to country and family is paramount to all Aboriginal prisoners regardless of whether people originate from urban, rural, or remote settings,” Australian correctional agencies are presently more attuned to the needs of Indigenous people from remote regions. With the highest rate of imprisonment in any Australian state, Western Australia operates four regional work camps, providing prisoners with the opportunity to work “on country,” although the many Indigenous prisoners who might benefit from such alternate prisoner housing programs often have difficulty in obtaining the low security rating necessary to qualify (Grant 2016, 348).

Even though families and friends can stay in touch in various ways—including via requests shows like *Inside Out*—by displacing prisoners from their Country, incarceration can disconnect prisoners from the identity, spirit, culture, knowledge, and potential for healing that exists within it (Anderson 2013), creating a vicious cycle of trauma and incarceration (Poroch et al. 2009). As the incarceration rates for Indigenous peoples have steadily risen over the past ten years, Indigenous suicides have also increased. Indeed, Western Australia has the highest Indigenous suicide rate in the nation, with Indigenous people more than twice as likely to commit suicide as non-Indigenous people (Georgatos 2015). And disconnection from culture is identified as a key factor behind the disproportionate Indigenous suicide rate (Laughland 2014).

An Indigenous person’s social and emotional well-being—inclusive of that person’s overall social, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and cultural well-being (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet 2014)—is put at risk when entering prison due to the ensuing damage to—and disconnection from—relationships to kin and Country. Blaze Kwaymullina (2011, 88–89) offers a description of this kind of disconnection, explained by his Noongar colleague, Mia:

I saw firsthand prisoners who had been made to move away from Country and family and were incarcerated in someone else’s Country, miles from their homelands, within a tight, heavily, guarded institution. The “soul sickness” that developed was hard to shake, resulting in mental health issues whilst in prison, which continued once outside of it. I asked this prisoner, did he know why he was feeling this way, and his reply was “I’m heartsick for Country, I can’t see the stars in the night sky. I know they’re not from my part of Country, but maybe I will get better if I could see them.”
An Indigenous worldview sees health from a holistic perspective, where spirit, mind, and body are interlinked with an emphasis on Country. David Mowaljarlai explains the health dangers associated with removing Aboriginal people from Country (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, 165):

We grow up with that spirit of caring and warmth of the sun, fire and love from our family. Those are the growth elements, the elements of Wadjina [ancestral being]. Wadjina can't walk in jails. When Aborigines are cut off from that, they want to kill themselves.

Inside Out reaches the Kimberley prisons in the far north of Western Australia, where Mowaljarlai was from. Although unable to bring people physically back to Country, the program creates a platform over the airwaves for prisoners to maintain and express relationships, love, and concerns for their Country.

Inside Out can also provide Indigenous prisoners with a forum to uphold their cultural obligations and help them maintain their social and emotional well-being while they are away from Country. Mechelle Wilson (2016) described an Indigenous prisoner from Acacia Prison being transported under security guard to a funeral where he was to read the eulogy for the deceased. The shame of being brought to the funeral by guards left the prisoner unable to speak and therefore unable to fulfill his family obligations to read the eulogy. Distraught at disrespecting his family, the prisoner grew mentally and emotionally unstable, to the point where he was placed on suicide watch. But then he reached out to Inside Out, asking Wilson to read and broadcast the eulogy on his behalf and to invite his family to listen in. Once his eulogy and apology to his family had aired, the prisoner felt as though his obligations to his family had been met, and he no longer wanted to harm himself.

Even though it is the very nature of incarceration to inhibit relationships with family and Country, Inside Out allows prisoners in Western Australia to stay connected. Mechelle Wilson provided a letter she received from a grateful Inside Out listener highlighting the struggle to maintain relationships with incarcerated family members:

My first "shout out" call—there she [Mechelle] was talking and settle me down—taking all the butterflies out of me. It was so great and when I sat back and listen to the call—I cried—it was natural and made me feel so good and happy. It felt like I was actually talking to my grandson and family. Later through the week they rang me, thanking me for their call and told me it was so good to hear my voice.
You see, two years ago I had a freak car accident that left me with a left amputated leg. I'm in a wheelchair and don't get out and about much. I use to visit my grandson every week in three prisons. My whole day was doing visits every weekend. Now I don't get to do them anymore because in my situation and currently being diagnosed with bowel cancer and having chemo for liver cancer I find it very hard to go and visit. So this is where lovely Mechelle has helped me so much to overcome all my stress of not seeing my grandson in prison—she brought that closeness back and I do feel so close, when I'm on your show.

Even though family is integral to Indigenous well-being (Pupazzoni 2011; Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet 2014; Department of Corrective Services 2014), fewer than three out of five Indigenous prisoners will ever receive a visit from a family member or even a friend (Anderson 2013, 125).

A range of factors associated with poverty, restrictive visiting hours, poor health, transport issues, and the long distances between prisoners and their families can contribute to this situation. Families may also feel intimidated or embarrassed to visit, wary of the institutional setting, prison staff, and the likelihood of strip searches (Wilson 2016). *Inside Out* provides an alternate means for families and friends to maintain links with prisoners, going some way to overcome the economic, geographic, and cultural obstacles to prison visits. That said, one could readily argue that contemporary issues such as institutional racism, race-based violence, poverty, and extreme stress place increased emphasis on Aboriginal families as key mechanisms of support (Bourke 1993).

**Language and Kinship**

Across the world, in areas such as New Zealand, Colombia, Canada, and the United States, Indigenous broadcasting is often employed to strengthen local Indigenous languages (Smith and Brigham 1992; Stuart 2003; Rodriguez and El Gazi 2007). Although all 30,000 Noongar people share one common ancestral Aboriginal language, Australian census statistics listed Noongar as a home language for just 163 people in 1996; 213 people in 2006; and 369 people in 2011 (Bracknell 2015b, 68). That this number of speakers has more than doubled in fifteen years is the likely result of committed community language revitalization efforts undertaken since the 1980s and is consistent with the outcomes of similar efforts elsewhere in metropolitan and rural areas of Australia (Walsh 2001).

Noongar Radio has supported language revitalization by broadcasting short Noongar-language education segments, but, in light of the still small
number of Noongar speakers, *Inside Out* is broadcast predominantly in Aboriginal English, with a smattering of Noongar words and occasionally words from other Aboriginal languages as well. Deborah Hartman and John Henderson (1994, 5) explain how "using words that are distinctive to your social group is a powerful way of expressing your membership of the group both with other members of the group and with outsiders." Writing with reference to the Australian context, Hartman and Henderson also suggest that it may be possible for collective and individual Aboriginal identities to be articulated without using an ancestral Aboriginal language such as Noongar, for example—through the use of Aboriginal English.

Quickly identified by words such as “deadly” (wonderful), *unna* (an affirmation), *lubbly-sing* (attractive person), and “yarn” (conversation involving storytelling), Aboriginal English “is a distinctive dialect of English which reflects, maintains, and continually creates Aboriginal culture and identity” (Eades 1991, 57). Its sophistication as a dialect and its wide adoption by Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia makes it a useful substitute or replacement for endangered or dormant Aboriginal languages (Malcolm 2001, 217). Because, however, Aboriginal English is much the same across Australia (Eades 1991; Sharifian 2002), it is more useful in articulating notions of pan-Aboriginal identity than in affirming local Aboriginal distinctiveness. Commonly understood Noongar words such as “Wadjak” (Noongar people from Perth), *yoka* (female) and *baal* (he/she/it) heard on *Inside Out* mark the program as distinctively Noongar. But the surnames of the inmates and their families and friends featured on the program offer an even clearer indication that one is listening to Noongar radio, at least among Aboriginal people in Western Australia—most of whom are able to identify kin relationships through these common surnames.

Fisher (2013, 380) explains that, since the advent of Indigenous community broadcasting, radio has “linked up” Aboriginal families and community “seeking to bring extended families separated by geographic distance, by incarceration, hospital stays, or even boarding school back together.” As a result, many Aboriginal communities have come to understand Indigenous radio primarily as a means for people to connect or reconnect with one another; its programs also provide an “immediacy of community” and “intimate address” for those who are part of the cultural group. That said, Aboriginal broadcasts are produced both for a local Aboriginal audience and, at the same time, for a “listening, non-Indigenous other” (Fisher 2013, 398). For, even though, on one obvious level, the prisoners are “inside” and everyone else is “outside,” in terms of the various levels of meaning that listeners are able to draw from the language and names featured on the program, other kinds of “insiders” and “outsiders” can also be demarcated.
Indeed, according to Noongar Radio Station Manager Paul Whitton, Noongar Radio has a larger non-Aboriginal than Aboriginal audience. Even though the language used in Inside Out functions to mark the program as a distinctly Aboriginal space, a letter Wilson received from a non-Aboriginal listener in Perth illustrates how broadcasting positive messages on behalf of the Aboriginal community can shift existing negative perceptions in mainstream Australia:

I am a White Australian and I was switching stations on my new digital radio when I came across Inside Out, your prison program. It was a real eye opener. It made me realise how racist I was! I had always thought the Aborigines in jail were no-hopers, wasting their lives away but your program showed me they were all individuals with families that loved and cherished them and who ached to hold them once again. It also revealed how much they are respected and needed by their broader community who want them to stay strong and come home as survivors, not victims. If more white people listened I think your station would have the potential to be a great healer between cultures. It can change attitudes and be a strong force for reconciliation. I would like to congratulate you on your work and thank you for the opportunity to see the Noongar people in a new light.

Clearly, this non-Indigenous listener received a key message from Inside Out—the high value of family and community among Aboriginal people. Fisher (2013, 380) suggests that “linking up through request programs, and the various ‘shout outs’ and music requests that dedicate themselves to distant kin such programs entail, has itself become a key public icon of Aboriginal distinction.” In creating a representation of a local Aboriginal community for itself, radio presenters on requests shows such as Inside Out “publicly and performatively” identify individuals as belonging to Aboriginal families—frequently in long lists of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews—by using surnames. In doing so, they link to local Aboriginal cultural schemas associated with kin relationships. Based on his research on Aboriginal English, Farzad Sharifian (2001, 76) has modeled this phenomenon, highlighting shared cultural “schemas” or “conceptualisations” that members of cultural groups may instantiate “through various cultural artefacts,” such as painting, music, and language.

As Sharifian (2005, 76) explains, a cultural “worldview” based on shared experiences and understandings provides a “framework for human conceptualisation.” In an Aboriginal Australian context, for example, a few of the many cultural schemas Aboriginal people share result in terms such
as “spirit,” “family,” and “home” taking on special significance through the specific metaphysical experiences, regional protocols and techniques, and the roles and responsibilities of large extended families and kin networks (Sharifian 2005). Cultural schemas are continually renegotiated, and members of a cultural group sharing some, but not all, the elements of a schema may still belong to the same culture (Sharifian 2003). Individuals can be inscribed with new cultural schemas through lived experience, without compromising their existing schemas or membership in particular cultural groups. Thus Sharifian’s model offers an empowering framework for biculturalism.

Aside from surnames, geographic terms broadcast on *Inside Out* also invoke particular schemas. Prisons are always referred to simply by their shorthand names, such as Bandyup, Acacia, Casuarina, Boronia, Greenough, Albany, implying an unfortunate familiarity with the incarceration that most non-Indigenous Western Australians never experience. Similarly, groups of people referred to on the show as the “KGB mob” (Koondoola, Girrawheen, and Balga), “Carlisle mob,” and “Banksia Grove mob” are all from suburbs of Perth with comparatively large Aboriginal resident populations. But the most frequent expressions on the program, “kisses and hugs” and “love you always,” are disarmingly direct and require no “insider” cultural knowledge. *Inside Out* listeners consistently express these two heartfelt phrases toward family members, spouses, and other loved ones. Loving “shout outs” are often received from and to females in same-sex relationships, although *Inside Out* is yet to pass on a romantic message between two males. Wilson (2016) suggests that homosexual Aboriginal men are still wary of being open about their sexuality in such a public community forum.

**Music and Identity: George and Dolly**

Messages relayed between loved ones on *Inside Out* feature forthright declarations of love and support but also use language linked to concepts familiar to Aboriginal listeners. Many of the musical choices listeners make when requesting tracks to be played on the air can also be understood as part of the communicative process. The lyrics, genre, and origin of the music selected are loaded with meaning. As previously discussed, tracks by local Aboriginal performers help to link prisoners to distant homelands. However, country and western (or simply “country”) music—mostly by American performers—is the most frequently requested genre on *Inside Out* (Wilson 2016).

Since it first arrived in Aboriginal communities with the touring shows of the 1930s, country music has been popular in Aboriginal communities across Australia (Smith and Brett 1998). Whereas mainstream Australians
tend to dismiss country music, associating it with “rednecks” and “hicks” (Gibson and Davidson 2004), Aboriginal people have embraced the signature guitar-heavy sound of country music, which has become one of the most common stylistic elements in Aboriginal popular music (Breen 1989; Castles 1992; Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2006). In his book Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music, Clinton Walker (2000, 14) suggests that Aboriginal people relate to country music’s lyrical emphasis on storytelling and its “tales of horses and love gone wrong, of dead dogs and drinking”; noting that country music is “music of the land,” portable by virtue of its instrumentation, Walker proposes that the somewhat intangible sense of loss permeating much country music—perhaps arising from its steady rhythms and its crying vocal and instrumental timbres—is something “Aboriginal people identified with absolutely.”

The long-standing relationship between Aboriginal people and country music coincides with the equally long-standing reliance on Aboriginal labor by the Australian pastoral industry (Moore and Curthoys 1995). Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson (2004, 44) describe the influence of radio and cinema on Australian audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, who saw country music as “a music of the frontier in early ‘singing cowboy’ and western films.” For Aboriginal Australians, the imported North American screen icon of the “singing cowboy” was often intertwined with the enduring figure of the Aboriginal stockman; indeed, many Aboriginal men working in the cattle industry saw themselves as “cowboys” (Rose and Davis 2005). Intergenerational identification with country music—be it American or Australian, Aboriginal or not—could also be viewed as intergenerational identification with working on the land, reflecting a sentiment once expressed by Aboriginal performers Richard Walley, Ernie Dingo, and Joe Geia that Aboriginal people “feel closer to cowboys than they do to city people” (Kartomi 1988, 21).

The Inside Out audience uses country music as a kind of shared communicative resource, as does the radio show itself. The three most popular songs requested by Inside Out listeners are all by American country artists. George Jones’s 1999 version of “Choices” (Curtis, Yates, and Lyons 1997) and Dolly Parton’s original version (1974) of “I Will Always Love You” top the list. Produced with Jones’s long-standing intent to keep “pure” country music in mind, “Choices” took on additional resonance in light of his 1999 drunk-driving conviction (Mellen 1999). Read in the context of Aboriginal incarceration, the lyrics of “Choices” take on even greater significance:

I’ve had choices since the day that I was born
There were voices that told me right from wrong
If I had listened, no, I wouldn’t be here today
Living and dying with the choices I’ve made

I guess I’m payin’ for the things that I have done
If I could go back, oh, Lord knows I’d run
But I’m still losin’ this game of life I play
Losing and dying with the choices I’ve made

Parton’s two-time hit “I Will Always Love You”—brought to even more lasting mainstream attention by Whitney Houston’s epic 1992 R&B cover version—rearranges one of the most commonly heard phrases on Inside Out, “love always.” Parton’s earnest delivery adds an extra layer of sentimentality to the lyrics:

If I should stay
I would only be in your way
So I’ll go, but I know
I’ll think of you each step of the way

The song’s instrumentation, typical of the country music genre—including a crying slide guitar—is augmented by an almost gospel-sounding group vocal pad in the final choruses, perhaps suggesting a larger, family sense of love, rather than just a romantic one.

Conclusion

Although Noongar Radio aims to “support and promote the achievements and aspirations of the Noongar community it serves,” much of its content is also relevant to Aboriginal people originally from areas other than Perth and many of its programs are simulcast on regional stations in Western Australia. As the most popular program on Noongar Radio, Inside Out garners almost three hundred requests and “shout outs” every week (Wilson 2016). The program provides an invaluable service to the Aboriginal community of Western Australia, helping to bypass, if not overcome, geographic and economic obstacles by providing an alternative platform for families to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones.

Incarceration breaks or at least interrupts connections that are vital to the health and well-being of Aboriginal people, and it dramatically impedes the maintenance of cultural obligations. This adversely impacts the successful reintegration of inmates after their release. Disconnecting Aboriginal
prisoners from Country—which in turn disconnects them from culture—has been linked to the increasing suicide rates in the Western Australian Aboriginal population (Georgatos 2015). Inside Out provides a means for Aboriginal prisoners to maintain family relationships and to express love and concern for their Country. It also acts as a forum for upholding cultural obligations while these prisoners are away from Country, bolstering the maintenance of their social and emotional well-being.

The “shout outs” and requests forming the basis of Inside Out are filled with Aboriginal English and Noongar words and expression that communicate kin relationships—including the surnames of prominent Noongar families and the names of suburbs with large Noongar populations. Indeed, these are key markers of Inside Out’s discourse. In its use of language, the program constructs a space immediately familiar to Aboriginal listeners, yet nonetheless welcoming to non-Aboriginal ones as well. Listeners’ requests on Inside Out reflect an intergenerational identification with country music among Aboriginal people in Western Australia; their requests for music by regional Western Australian Aboriginal groups reflect the prisoners’ need to connect with their homelands.

Inside Out exists as a communicative space for the families and friends of prisoners, the prisoners themselves, and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Noongar Radio listeners. Serving as a “cultural bridge” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, it has the ability to alter perceptions of non-Aboriginal listeners through providing positive and self-determined understandings of Aboriginal situations negatively portrayed within the mainstream media. It exists as both a community strategy to cope with incarceration and a site for the expression of Aboriginal identity and counternarratives through language and music. And it serves as an example of how radio broadcasting can be a powerful cultural resource for Indigenous communities.

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CASEY KICKErr is a Noongar from the southwest of Western Australia and an associate lecturer in Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. She volunteers at Noongar Radio as a board member and has previously served as a producer and broadcaster for the station for a number of years. Casey is passionate about self-determined approaches toward issues facing Aboriginal peoples and hopes to promote the positive impacts Aboriginal people are having on their communities.
WORKS CITED


