

REPOSITIONING THE INTERFACE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL RECEPTION OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

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SHAUN EDWARDS, AN INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN VISUAL ARTIST, understands his work, and in fact all art, as an act of “engaging an audience in the substance of an unfamiliar culture” (2005). The focus of this paper is on the challenge of finding ways of seeing what is unfamiliar within the superficially familiar. The discussion emerges from a work in progress, aiming to document contemporary Indigenous Australian theatre practices in terms of how practitioners and communities identify their work as culturally specific. In this context, ‘culturally specific’ refers to social practices and epistemologies that constitute part of intangible cultural heritages that inform and shape work processes and the finished cultural product. On a number of levels, my aim is to discover potential frameworks that will facilitate cross cultural audience engagement with, and openness to, the unfamiliar.

One of the primary challenges of this task is to not merely create yet another set of markers that will be used to define hierarchies of ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ or ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginal cultural production (see Casey 2004; Griffiths 1995; and McGregor 1997). Towards this end, I am looking at the reception of Indigenous Australian cultural production within the performing arts as an example of the particular positioning of the cultural interface that determines much of the popular and academic reception of non-white artists and their work within industrialised countries. The positioning of the interface for cross-cultural reception has implications for the framing of cultures and individual artists by either broadening the channels of communication or restricting them. This paper is an initial exploration of a different frame of reference for non-Indigenous reception of Indigenous performance that could potentially shift the point of cross cultural engagement or the interface of reception. The suggested new frame of reference is an exploration of the value of using the definition of intangible cultural heritage, within the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (U.N.E.S.C.O.) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (n.d.a), as a possible starting point for repositioning the interface of cross-cultural exchange and reception.

Over the last 30 years there has been a great deal of debate about ‘definitions’ of Indigenous Australian visual and performing arts, and the resulting implicit definitions of the artists’ Indigeneity. Many Indigenous artists have asked

that we [artists and critics, Indigenous and non-Indigenous] collectively look at the definitions, stereotypes and limitations placed on Indigenous arts because if we don’t we will continue to [. . .] omit an important expression of living Indigenous Culture (Cook 2005, n.p.).

These requests result from the impact of proscriptive definitions on the reception of Indigenous artists and their cultural production. Adverse effects range from frames of reception that reduce all genres from comedy and musicals to drama and tragedy into one genre—'Aboriginal'—to the labelling of Indigenous artists' work as 'white', not Aboriginal enough or not 'authentic' Aboriginal art.

In an effort to contest the proscriptive definitions of Indigenous art beyond the accepted stereotypes, and at the same time identifying contemporary problematic frames of reference in a humorous way, Cook has created a movement she calls 'Club Savage'. Summarising the context and provocation for its formation, Cook introduces the club with the story:

once upon a time, there was a movement of Indigenous artists tired of being told their work was not black enough, subject matter not cultural enough and sick of constantly having to justify their Indig-identity. So with their campfire burning strong, they decided to legitimise their styles and loudly proclaim themselves as Club Savage artists. Where your membership is your indig-identity, artistic creation always cultural-enough and your art always blak-enough (Cook 2005).¹

Within the 'Doctrine of Club Savage', Cook outlines the criteria for membership:

- You must be Indigenous Australian [Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander] to be a Club Savage creator.
- Club Savage is Indigenous art because it is produced by Indigenous artistic creators.
- Club Savage is representative of living culture.
- Club Savage challenges the idea of what Aboriginal art is through contemporary expressions.
- Club Savage is cross all art forms and can include experimental collaborations with other art forms or non-arts industry.
- Contemporary dreaming to create ideas and concepts is valid.
- The central idea or concept of the art work is not necessarily social historical retelling.
- The central idea or concept does not have to educate or reconcile.
- Any Indigenous artist can be a Club Savage artist (Cook 2005, n.p.).

Theatre has historically played an important role in the fight for cultural recognition, social and political rights for Indigenous Australians, whether in the form of corroborees in the nineteenth century or building-based theatre collaborations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The terms of reception of Indigenous Australian theatre work have been highly contested and this has led to many positive and nuanced frames of reception as demonstrated in the work of critics such as Helen Gilbert. However, despite the articulated motivations and intentions of Indigenous artists and the shifts in critical reception, Cook's criteria for membership in Club Savage emphasises the degree to which the general frames of reception and traces of earlier frames continue to set the context of reception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural production.

On the political and social levels, the ways in which Indigenous cultures are framed continues to be the basis of race-based policies and practices under Australian State and Federal governments (see Casey 2004 *passim*). Respect for specific cultural identities continues to be an important factor for Aboriginal and Islander communities in relation to the settler/ migrant based Australian institutions and communities. Currently, a whole new series of battles have emerged that seek to deny recognition or negate Indigenous Australian cultural specificity in terms of sovereignty and social rights. Australian cultural politics have, in effect, returned to an earlier era with a renovated and far more vicious version of assimilation policies and attitudes now labelled 'mainstreaming' policies. Parallel with these chang

es in the social and political context has been a shift in the frames of reception for Indigenous cultural production. Within the scope of this paper there is not space for a detailed examination or critique of the current shifts in reception. However, at the risk of a broad generalisation, I would suggest that reception and production of Indigenous performance in the current political climate has become even more political than it was in the twentieth century. There is a tension between the developments aimed at opening up the terms of reception and the overshadowing of performance practice/reception by the broader political frames. These tensions have had an impact on access to production as well as on the discussion of Indigenous work.

In the twentieth century, as I have argued elsewhere, political policies such as assimilation, multiculturalism and the different narratives of reconciliation provided the language for discussion of Indigenous cultural production (Casey 2004 *passim*). Examples include the framing of the work of Jack Davis in terms of the ‘markers’ of Aboriginality, and the production history of Jane Harrison’s *Stolen*. Currently there is not an equivalent dominant clearly defined narrative supporting reception. This is a positive step in itself since any development of so called mainstreaming, i.e. erasing difference and assuming full assimilation, could not be said to be a positive step. In practice traces of different paradigms of reception are expressed within reviews and critical commentary sometimes competing paradigms within the same reviews and articles. Cook’s doctrine engages with many of the frames of reception that have been and continue to be used in relation to Indigenous cultural production. For example the reviews of Richard Frankland’s *Response to Walkabout* (2005) reproduce a number of different themes that dominated the mid twentieth century reception.² Overall the reception of Frankland’s *Response* reproduces the same themes in the criticism that have operated since the 1970s. In summary, the reviews repeat earlier terms of reception such as:

- The desire that the show must be educative but not didactic;
- There is limited engagement by the critics with the ideas presented—what is different or creative. Regardless of the material in the show no critic observes or hears anything they have never heard before. It is all labelled as familiar;
- Supported by the inability to see or hear different epistemologies and histories, the white ownership of the story remains unquestioned; and
- The Indigenous actors are described as inferior to the white actors and must not be too masculine.³

As Johannes Fabian argues, “there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical [and] a political act” (1983, 1). Any basis for receiving or defining the cultural specificity of theatre work is embedded with a priori assumptions about contemporary practice, the specific cultural production under review and the cultural position of the person creating definitions. Racialised narratives continue to dominate because the frames of cross cultural reception continue to be locked into a meta-narrative of white normativity; that is, a dominant and normalised vision of what is ‘contemporary’ in terms of cultural practice and the historical lineage of these practices and who claims cultural ownership of that lineage. This normalised vision sets the terms in which Indigenous Australians are incorporated into the white Australian imaginary ownership of contemporary practices in both a cultural and spatial sense. Aileen Moreton Robinson argues that the white position functions

by informing and circulating a coherent set of meanings [. . .] that operate to establish and maintain perspectives and claims of ownership that are understood as [. . .] common sense knowledge and socially produced conventions (2004, n.p.).

This normative vision has tended to operate within contemporary urban theatre practice on the basis

that theatre is assumed to be intrinsically and essentially owned by white (male, heterosexual) practitioners. To apply Moreton-Robinson's arguments about white possession, in the context of theatre practice, there is effectively an a priori premise that theatre is a 'white' practice, owned from birth by white people. This possessive logic acts as the basic premise for the position/perspective used to judge and categorise work produced by people designated as the 'other'. Practices and performances are labelled from the position of these a priori assumptions. 'We gave them theatre' proposed in relation to Indigenous theatre practitioners is still an often uninterrogated and common statement in many contexts from theatre foyers to academic theatre studies conferences.⁴ From within this premise, Indigenous theatre has been recognised and validated on the basis of how it differs in terms of perceived exotic elements or parallels Euro-Australian theatre practice. In the latter case, Indigenous theatre is usually described as derivative, or even as white, and certainly as not Aboriginal enough. One of the results of this paradigm of reception is that primarily those elements and those shows that comfortably fit within the templates of validation at any time are acknowledged in critical writings and commentaries (see Casey 2000 for a close study of this process).

A prime example of this latter phenomenon is discussed in my book, *Creating Frames* (Casey 2004). John Harding's play *Up the Road* and Ray Kelly's *Somewhere in the Darkness* demonstrate the impact of this paradigm on the production history and reception of these different plays. Harding's play, naturalistic and conventional in form and content, was valorised within the narrative of reconciliation that was predominant in the mid to late 1990s under John Howard's government, touring nationally and receiving publication by Currency Press. *Somewhere in the Darkness*, on the other hand, which challenged the reconciliation narrative and was adventurous in both form and language, was publicly read in Sydney and Melbourne and had a small alternative theatre production, and remains unpublished (Casey 2004, 260-5). When you are dealing with an ephemeral art form this effectively means only those productions that are deemed 'acceptable' within the hegemonic white definition exist and remain on the historical record. Unless there is an acknowledged framework of indigenous theatre praxis, the cultural products of indigenous practitioners will continue to be defined by exotic elements or 'difference' rather than by a framework of their own shared understanding. This has impact on the artist and their work and also on the processes of cross-cultural exchange.

When the norm of theatre practice is defined as 'white', Cook's definition of indigenous practice is too diffuse to contest this hegemony not the least because without a more defined definition it can be misunderstood as essentialist. It could be said that Cook, in the face of an essentialist society is deploying strategic essentialism as a political position. In order to have effective cross cultural exchange there must be a level of active listening, seeing and understanding. This kind of exchange is unlikely if there is no identified reason for this active engagement.

In order to open up this situation and allow for different possibilities there needs to be a frame of reception that places the point of view of the Indigenous artists as primary, supporting, and supported by, a broader 'definition' of Indigenous cultural practice and production. This extension of the frames of reception would require the incorporation and recognition of practices that are derived from the specificity of Indigenous practitioner's speaking position, accumulated life experiences and choices, and recognition of the resulting epistemological frameworks that generate and form the creative product.

One of the problematic aspects of definitions of Indigenous cultural production is the fact that definitions are, in effect, necessarily generalised and proscriptive. As such, they have the potential to be useful tools, but also to provide categories of inclusion and exclusion. Approaches to indigenous Australian cultures and cultural production all too often express a 'one size fits all' premise. Indigenous

Australian cultures are many and varied just as there are many and varied non-Indigenous Australian cultures. Further, as Marcia Langton points out, though sharing commonalities in terms of cultural heritages, each Indigenous artist is an individual in their own right with their own life trajectory and cultural reading of history and the present (Langton n.d., 1). The challenge is to find a definition that is more inclusive than exclusive and therefore has the potential to be open to actual practice rather than mark out 'exotic' territory. If Indigenous theatre, or art, is Indigenous because the creators are Indigenous, as Cook argues, there is a need to identify a frame of reference that engages with Indigenous culture and practice in its own right and in terms of its specificity rather than in relation to the dominant Euro-Australian culture.

An Alternative Frame of Reference

Culture as life experience has been accepted as a common understanding for at least 50 years yet when a culture framed as the 'other' is the focus of reception this position disappears. Culture is lived experience and is therefore the expression of a myriad of intangible cultural experiences that Arjun Appadurai describes as "a map, through which humanity interprets, selects, reproduces and disseminates cultural heritage" (in Munjeri 2004, 118). If different life experiences create different cartographies, how do we read the maps created thereby? I suggest the possibility that the definition of intangible cultural heritage within the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage offers a potential way to refocus cross-cultural reception.

The U.N.E.S.C.O. convention is a manifestation of growing concern about the fate of the intangible elements of cultural heritage that is those aspects of culture not directly embodied in material things (Brown n.d.). The convention defines intangible cultural heritage 'as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage'. Included in the convention's outline of the main areas where this living cultural heritage is manifested are practices such as oral traditions and expressions, including language and the performing arts. Also included in the list are social practices, such as rituals and festive events and knowledge and practices concerning the physical world. Within the outline of the convention it is recognised that:

. . . intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, and is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their historical conditions of existence. It provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, and its safeguarding promotes, sustains, and develops cultural diversity and human creativity (U.N.E.S.C.O. n.d.b, n.p.).

Described as "a key concept in understanding the cultural identity of peoples", intangible cultural heritage is recognised within the convention as an invaluable part of "insuring exchange and understanding . . ." (ibid).

Some Reservations

On one level it can be problematic to use this definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage without qualification to act as a framework for reception. U.N.E.S.C.O.'s conventions are focused on protection and preservation. Like other frames of reference, such as the markers of difference, the U.N.E.S.C.O. definition evolved within a specific framework and is applied within that framework. The Convention's goal is to provide a template for promoting the survival of traditional folklore, knowledge, and artistic expressions throughout the world (Brown n.d., 1). It is part of active campaigns to conserve cultural traditions in the face of globalisation, and the need to buttress political and social standing for

communities by “garnering international recognition, prestige and even legitimization for ones [sic] own cultural heritage” (Kurin n.d., 1).

Further, the intangible cultural heritage convention was developed as an extension and in relation to the 1972 tangible cultural heritage convention (U.N.E.S.C.O. n.d.a, 2). Within the tangible heritage convention ‘what qualified as cultural heritage was deemed to be stable, and static and having “intrinsic values” as well as qualities of “authenticity” (Munjeri 2004, 13). The notions of authenticity within the tangible cultural heritage convention were defined ‘as restricted to four components . . . authenticity in materials based on physical values or fidelity to the object; authenticity in workmanship . . .; authenticity in design . . . and authenticity in context or fidelity to context’ (ibid).

As Dawson Munjeri points out, a problem with the conventions is that though there is recognition that “physical heritage needs to be understood in terms of its underlying values so too intangible heritage in practice must be made incarnate in tangible manifestations” (2004, 18). In practice therefore, since both conventions are designed for protection of cultural expressions, it is logical that the major application of the intangible cultural heritage convention is through U.N.E.S.C.O.’s ‘Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Program’ (see U.N.E.S.C.O. n.d.c). This practice is problematic for a number of reasons. One is that when the definitions and recognition of intangible cultural heritage focus emphasis on the tangible outcome (an artefact, a poem, an effectively tangible object) the processes of development, including the epistemological framework that supports and shapes the finished product, are effectively treated as negligible. Another result of this practice is that when manifestations of the intangible are still effectively judged in terms of the old criteria of tangible cultural heritage, identifying commonalities risks establishing a set of markers rather than opening up debate.

If the intangible heritage definition is not to become a negative or retrogressive move in the context of framing cultural practices it needs to be refocused onto dynamic cultural practices, that is respect for cultural practices based on continuity and change rather than tangible heritage protection and therefore the tenets of ‘authenticity’ as narrowly defined in the four elements. Intangible cultural heritage processes cannot be commodified or defined within a series of markers because they are potentially constantly changing. Therefore the source of recognition needs to be based in social practice rather than on an external codified list. This also requires a substantial shift in positioning. It requires receiving art and engaging with art initially within the specific cultural context as an expression of that context rather than operating from a position marked by a priori norms that ‘others’ different cultural experiences in a way that requires the terms of that difference to be identified and codified in order to be respected.

The intangible cultural heritages that often constitute contemporary practices shaping the finished performance, informing it and giving it layers of meaning are not necessarily apparent to people outside the culture and are therefore difficult to recognise as tangible expressions. The interpretation or analysis of works within a frame of intangible cultural heritage requires a deeper engagement with the artists’ contexts and the performances. If culture as artistic expression can be analysed as an outcome of culture as lived experience, the concept and definition of intangible cultural heritage opens up a broad range of possibilities for extending and enhancing cross cultural respect. However, it needs to be carefully negotiated in order to maximise the potential for understanding and cultural space rather than act as another way of limiting cultures to the exotic and different.

Claiming a different a priori history

The classification of specific productions as white or Indigenous depend on the individual viewer's understanding of what defines a given practice as culturally specific. From a culturally external position, a story can be defined as either Aboriginal, or not Aboriginal enough, by identifying elements that are formally recognised as culturally specific or 'different'. If the terms of reference are the 'markers' of Aboriginality', then it is the identification of elements such as family, land and spirituality. From a more culturally internal position there are some basic agreed elements that contribute to a production being formally recognised as Indigenous, by Indigenous communities. These elements relate to the dynamic between the artists and their respective communities. In the process of developing work, the relevant Indigenous community is actively involved, observing, contributing to the event through formal consultation protocols and informal participation. Another requirement of Indigenous theatre is a clear acknowledgement of Indigenous protocols and a fair and equitable Intellectual Property and Copyright understanding.

As Nicholas Mirzoeff has cogently argued:

Both the anthropological and artistic models of culture rest on being able to make a distinction between the culture of one ethnicity, nation, or people and another. While it has been important to deploy what Gayatri Spivak called a "strategic essentialism" in order to validate the study of non-white and non-Western visual culture in its own right, it is now important to do the hard work of moving beyond such essentialism towards an understanding of the plural realities that coexist and are in conflict with each other both in the present and in the past (1999, n.p.).

As part of a move towards recognising pluralities, John Bradley, following Fabian, argues for the creation of a 'transcultural space' that recognises different cultural practices operating separately and simultaneously that moves beyond defining Indigenous knowledge and practices from the viewpoint of Euro-Australian government and social frameworks and agendas (Bradley n.d.). The definition of intangible cultural heritage within the U.N.E.S.C.O. convention offers the potential to open up a transcultural space where similarities are respected as part of difference rather than framed as derivations based on Eurocentric a priori premises. This space would necessarily always be contested as a living cultural system constantly moves, changes, absorbs and rejects elements of practice. The complexities of this type of constantly negotiated frame of reference offers more meaningful terms of transcultural communication than markers of difference that represent abstracted information that is, at best, a reduction that is further reduced within reception. The question here is, if there is a dialogue across cultures where is the power located in terms of who can speak and who can be heard? Whose vision of Indigenous practice and knowledge should be foregrounded or primary within the terms of reception? This is not to argue that non-Indigenous critics should not contribute to the debate but rather that the debate must include the Indigenous perspective in detail rather than exclude it or treat Indigenous knowledge as an object or resource for non-Indigenous people.

Notes

1. Cook tells the story, for example, of an art historian declaring that Yamatji artists' work was not 'Aboriginal art'. See Cook 2005.
2. For example see John Slavin "Walkabout" in *The Age* August 22, 2005; Martin Ball, "Black and white message goes missing" in *The Australian* August 22, 2005; and Luke Benedictus "Are we there yet?" in *The Age* August 21, 2005.
3. For further discussion of the framing of Indigenous actors see Casey and Syron 2005.
4. The most recent example I witnessed was a statement made by a member of a panel at the A.D.S.A. conference in Wagga in 2005.

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—n.d.a “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” Paris, 17 October 2003 <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00006>>

—n.d.b “UNESCO adopts international convention to safeguard intangible cultural heritage”

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—n.d.c “Brief History UNESCO Culture Sector”

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