



DR GEORGIA CURRAN
Sydney Conservatorium of Music,
University of Sydney
georgia.curran@sydney.edu.au

Cross-cultural negotiations in a film production of Warlpiri women's song and dance

In July 2016, a group of Warlpiri women gathered at a bush site near to the Central Australian Aboriginal settlement of Yuendumu to sing and dance *yawulyu*, a genre of women's song which has been orally passed on through many generations. A filmmaker also attended to capture these songs and dances on camera and ultimately produce a DVD for inclusion as an insert into a book of Warlpiri women's songs (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017). The motivations of the performers were clear – all acutely aware of the fragility of this musical tradition so intimately connected to their identity and ways of passing on knowledge of Dreamings, country and kin. Documentation and preservation were high on the agenda as the key women sung, danced and painted their bodies with red and white ochre designs and carefully told the associated stories. These noble aims were, however, bound by cross-cultural negotiations surrounding the documentation of Indigenous traditions, aspirations for cultural reproduction and available publishing contexts. Although, Warlpiri people have themselves been media producers since the 1980s (Michael 1994, Ginsburg 2006) and have been involved in media-based research projects for even longer, there continue to be many complex cross-cultural negotiations which surround these kinds of intercultural projects.

INCORPORATING AN AUDIENCE

- *Yawulyu* do not typically incorporate an audience as all participants have a performance role
- Only since the 1970s land rights era of performing songs as evidence has a Warlpiri understanding of the role of an audience began to form
- For the *yawulyu* films, the notion of audience was imagined – importantly future generations of Warlpiri women, and a broader non-Aboriginal Australian audience who presumably would learn and gain appreciation for Warlpiri culture.
- For film productions, this audience impacts on the performance and shapes the ways in which songs and dances are presented

PRESENTATION OF ORAL KNOWLEDGE IN A FIXED FORM

- Warlpiri songs have been orally transmitted for many generations and subject to in-the-moment negotiations amongst large groups of people
- Does filming fix a 'reified' representation of these traditions?
- Filming can make redundant emergent ceremonial practices, an idea labelled as 'Culturecide' in its most dramatic form (Michaels 1994).
- Films of Warlpiri song and dance are a point of interaction in themselves from which debate arises

INDIGENOUS AUTHORITY AND FILM PRODUCTION ROLES

- Warlpiri ownership of songs is determined by inherited rights (*kirda* = owners, *kurdungurlu* = managers)
- How can these traditional roles be transferred in to creative roles of film production?
- Large groups of women who relate in particular ways must be part of a film production team to assure that the proper negotiations can occur around performance.
- Notions of western authorship were replaced by a Warlpiri emphasis on authority and rights.
- Indigenous moral and cultural property rights must be acknowledged (Curran et al. forthcoming).

“...local desires are entangled with changing ontologies...”

(Peterson 2017: 237)



CONCLUSIONS

- Filmed representations of Indigenous song and dance may significantly change some aspects of performance and the reproduction of associated knowledge.
- Rather than being a source of tension, Warlpiri women themselves develop unique performative responses to managing the cross-cultural requirements of film production.
- For Warlpiri women in Central Australia, the concern with future preservation of their endangered singing traditions overrides fears of the impact that documentation and filming may have on ceremonial practice.
- Film and book projects often become contemporary contexts for holding *yawulyu* in a world where this musical tradition is endangered due to few performance opportunities.

REFERENCES

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For more information on the book and DVD production see:



Scan this code for more information on the book and DVD production



Scan this code to view the films on Indigenous Community TV

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