

# 'We're Women We Fight for Freedom': Intersections of Race and Gender in Contemporary Songs by Indigenous Australian Women Performers

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KATELYN BARNEY

## Abstract

Contemporary music has provided a platform for Indigenous Australian women performers to challenge sexism and racism and bring Indigenous Australian women's experiences, history and topics to the fore. With reference to Indigenous Australian feminist theories surrounding the dual operation of racism and sexism, this paper explores the intersections of race and gender in the contemporary songs of Indigenous Australian women. Drawing on song texts by Indigenous Australian women performers and first-hand interviews I conducted with performers, I provide readings of how a number of women sing about a diverse range of themes including the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, grief and loss, and celebrate the strength, histories and identities of Indigenous Australian women. Conclusions will be drawn regarding the ways contemporary music provides Indigenous Australian women with the vehicle to have their viewpoints and agendas heard.

## Introduction

We're women we fight for freedom  
 We're strong, we fight for peace  
 We struggle every day to prove our worth  
 We're women and we're proud to say  
 Who we are in ourselves  
 We've been hiding in the background for too long.  
 With my sister beside me  
 I am strong, I am free  
 When she's with me  
 With my sister beside me  
 I am strong, I am free  
 She believes in me<sup>1</sup>

This song was sung by the (now-disbanded) trio Tiddas on their 1993 album *Sing About Life*. Comprising two Indigenous Australian<sup>2</sup> women and one non-Indigenous woman, Tiddas (which means sisters in Aboriginal English) sing about their fight for freedom and peace, alongside their pride in being women, no longer hiding in the background but standing strong and free. On one level, the song could be heard as an expression of solidarity with all women and conveying a reconciliatory and feminist stance. Yet another reading suggests that it is specific to Indigenous Australian women with its references to struggles, silences and sisterhood.

As Aboriginal activist and historian Jackie Huggins points out:

Women's position in Aboriginal culture, both traditional and contemporary, situates them within a powerful network of female support. This means that Aboriginal women put into practice the ideal which white feminists refer to as 'sisterhood'... Aboriginal women's unity remains strong at community, state and national levels, reinforced by the need to stand united against any form of racism.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary song is used by Indigenous Australian women performers as a vehicle to respond to current and historical events, just as song and dance has been used by Indigenous communities over long periods of time.<sup>4</sup> Yet how do Indigenous Australian women use contemporary music as a platform to have their voices heard and fight against racism and sexism? Some sing of the strength and survival of Indigenous women despite a history of racial and sexual oppression while others draw the links between the rape of Indigenous women and the exploitation of the land. Some depict the universal silencing and oppression of Indigenous women while others sing of their strength and knowledge despite often being ignored and of women's important roles in family, cultural, and community life. Indigenous Australian women sing about a diverse range of themes, places, identities, styles and languages yet an overarching theme in many songs is the duality of their identities as both Indigenous Australian and as women.

This paper explores the intersections of race<sup>5</sup> and gender in the contemporary songs of Indigenous Australian women. Drawing on examples of songs by Indigenous Australian women performers, first-hand interviews I conducted with performers and Indigenous Australian feminist theories surrounding the dual operation of racism and sexism, I will discuss how a number of women sing about a diverse range of themes including the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, grief and loss, and celebrate the strength, histories and identities of Indigenous Australian women.

### **Indigenous Australian women (and men) performers and the politics of race and gender**

Australia's colonial history which entailed the forced removal of Indigenous people from their land and culture, their subsequent experiences of alienation and the loss of power and control over their lives has been well documented.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous women and men have engaged in political struggles in Australia since colonisation. In particular, Aboriginal women played an active part in several land-rights issues of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Bonita Mabo, wife of Torres Strait Islander leader Eddie Mabo was involved in the 1992 case before the High Court that brought about the overturning of the doctrine of *terra nullius* and recognition of native title in Australia, Yvonne Margarula and Jacqui Katona opposed the Howard government's plans for uranium mining at Jabiluka in the Kakadu National Park, and Gladys Tybingoompa from the *Wik* people assisted in setting important legal precedents in land rights in 1996 so that lease hold interests do not extinguish native title and co-existence is possible.<sup>8</sup>

Music has also played a role in this struggle and as Hutnyk argues 'music is politically engaged not solely because of its ability to make a space or because of its lyrical content, but both because it affirms community and because it tells histories'.<sup>9</sup> Dunbar-Hall and Gibson point out that 'contemporary popular music by Australian Aboriginal artists has become increasingly evident as a means of mediating Aboriginal viewpoints and agendas into the Australian national consciousness'.<sup>10</sup> They emphasise that contemporary music as a form of communication with non-Indigenous Australians continues to be vital in promoting acceptance and recognition of Indigenous rights in relation to land in Australia and stress that 'music is embroiled in the very debates and tensions concerning Australian sovereignty and indigeneity'.<sup>11</sup>

Dunbar-Hall and Gibson's work fills an important gap in the literature by providing a refreshing historical, social, and political critique of a broad range of musical styles, Aboriginal

performers, and contemporary issues. The historical developments in Indigenous Australian contemporary performance reveal the growth and dominance of male performing artists and groups from the 1970s to early 1990s. However, this discourse attempts neither to determine why the history appears to be male-dominated nor examine the issues relating to the lack of access by women performers to the same economic resources, social power, and agency as men.<sup>12</sup>

Castles noted in 1992 that Indigenous Australian women singers were 'prominent, though all but inaudible in the music that reaches whites'.<sup>13</sup> Since then a small number of scholars have focused their research on contemporary musical expression amongst Indigenous Australian women musicians.<sup>14</sup> Streit-Warburton has made a significant contribution to the discourse relating to Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music. Her honours dissertation draws on visual images and song texts of Aboriginal women performers, to argue that they are seeking to negotiate their identity through music.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Streit-Warburton examines the difficulties faced by Aboriginal women performers in the music industry.<sup>16</sup> Discussing the song texts of Indigenous women performers Leah Purcell, Tiddas, Toni Janke and Ruby Hunter, she notes the significance of music as a tool for Aboriginal women to express their identities and emphasises that, 'for Aboriginal women, music is like a raft that ferries them through the hazards of the mainstream. For many, it has also been a lifesaver, keeping alive important knowledge and raising spirits.'<sup>17</sup>

In a similar vein, Reed examines what she describes as 'Aboriginal rock songs as texts which are indicative of Indigenous identities and attitudes towards race and gender'.<sup>18</sup> She emphasises that contemporary music has provided an opportunity for Indigenous women performers to reflect on their racial and gender identities. Reed concludes that 'it is race that continues to have primacy as it has done within Indigenous women's responses to feminism, but gender is also a significant site of struggle against colonisation and control'.<sup>19</sup>

Moreton-Robinson writes that 'the British government did not colonise Australia overnight, nor was it a consistent project; nevertheless the dispossession, domination and denial of Indigenous people's sovereignty provided the foundation for the modern Australian state'.<sup>20</sup> She also points out that Indigenous Australian women experienced the colonisation process differently to men – their sexuality was policed and contained, their bodies were used by white men as sexual objects and many were forced to become domestic servants.<sup>21</sup> Other Indigenous women have spoken out about their histories through autobiography<sup>22</sup> and poetry.<sup>23</sup> A number of Indigenous women I have interviewed speak of how Indigenous Australian women and men have participated in forms of resistance against racial, sexual, political and cultural oppression and how music can play a role in this process.

Yet only a limited number of scholars discuss how Indigenous Australian (mostly male) performers use contemporary music as a tool for Indigenous political concerns.<sup>24</sup> The lack of attention to this topic is perhaps surprising since 'Aboriginal' in itself is a political term and Indigenous people have been represented and at times have represented themselves as political. Huggins insists that 'Aboriginal people are born political. Political awareness and action are a part of life'.<sup>25</sup> It also shows a hesitation by non-Indigenous scholars to engage on a political level with Indigenous contemporary music.

Within this discourse there is little mention of how Indigenous Australian women speak back against racial and gender oppression using contemporary music. Gibson uses the lyrics of Lou Bennett for his article title—'we sing our home, we dance our land'.<sup>26</sup> He also mentions that a number of contemporary songs by Indigenous Australian women reflect on the personal experiences that Indigenous Australian women have had of colonialism, 'articulating solidarity for women in Australia, and the strength of this unity in the face of cultural change'.<sup>27</sup> Dun-

bar-Hall mentions Aboriginal performer Kerrianne Cox in his discussion of how Indigenous Australians use music to educate, celebrate and remind non-Indigenous audiences of their survival.<sup>28</sup>

In her analysis of contemporary Indigenous music in Melbourne, Ryan discusses the female trio Tiddas and notes how Ruby Hunter's experiences of being homeless have directly influenced her music, and have been translated into her songs about Indigenous people, women and domestic violence.<sup>29</sup> Reed also mentions the songs of Tiddas and Ruby Hunter in her exploration of how Aboriginal rock music can teach non-Indigenous listeners, such as herself, important lessons about Aboriginal peoples' connectedness and deep sense of belonging to their country.<sup>30</sup>

This body of work about Indigenous women performers provides us with some preliminary understanding of how Indigenous Australian women performers express their concerns through music. Although there is now a growing literature on contemporary Indigenous performance, issues of racism, colonisation and gender remain strongly absent. Apart from the in-depth research of Mackinlay, Streit-Warburton, Reed, and myself<sup>31</sup>, Indigenous women performers continue to be an ignored group in the literature.

## **Intersections of race and gender: Indigenous Australian women speak**

While there has been a sparsity of analysis of the ways Indigenous Australian women use music to express gender and racial politics, Indigenous women have spoken out about the intersections of race and gender in order to challenge white Australian feminism. My reading of Indigenous Australian women's feminist writing suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women view race and racial oppression, over and beyond gender, as primary to their experiences of discrimination.<sup>32</sup> Yet at the same time, their writings imply that for Indigenous Australian women their experiences of racism and sexism are inextricably linked and cannot be separated. For example, Behrendt writes of the 'potent combination of racism and sexism'<sup>33</sup> in relation to the sexual abuse and rape of Aboriginal women by white males and argues that 'it is as much an issue of race as it is of gender.'<sup>34</sup> Colonisation meant that Aboriginal women experienced 'invasion, dispossession, destruction of culture, abduction, rape, exploitation of labour and murder.'<sup>35</sup> Aboriginal women were not only oppressed within this white patriarchal framework because of their gender, they were further devalued because of their race.<sup>36</sup>

Huggins also explores the complex factors of race and gender in relation to the colonisation and oppression of Aboriginal women and writes that 'Aboriginal women experienced the added burden of sexual exploitation based on a white male assumption of superiority over both women and Aboriginal people.'<sup>37</sup> Huggins emphasises that Aboriginal women are still 'simultaneously being oppressed through racism and sexism'<sup>38</sup> and for many Aboriginal women their mothers, sisters, aunties and cousins are their 'buffer zones against, and ... sanctuaries from, the hostile world.'<sup>39</sup>

Like other Indigenous Australian women who have engaged in feminism, Moreton-Robinson views race as a primary concern yet not removed from issues of gender arguing that Indigenous women's perspectives are shaped variously by racism and sexism, a legacy of dispossession, a deep connection to land and continuing their 'activism as mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, grandmothers and community leaders, as well as negotiating sexual politics across and within cultures.'<sup>40</sup> Like Huggins, Moreton-Robinson emphasises the solidarity between Indigenous Australian women because they are doubly oppressed by racism and sexism.

Many Indigenous women performers are also acutely conscious of the masculinised frame-

work which exists in the music industry and as a result highlight the struggles they have faced on the dual levels of sexism and racism. Shellie Morris points out that 'I fought all my life [against sexism and racism] ... sometimes it's hard to ignore but if it's directly in your face well of course you stand up for what you believe in, I don't have a problem with that'.<sup>41</sup> Ali Mills agrees and states that 'we've definitely been discriminated against as women for sure, no doubt in my mind'.<sup>42</sup> Their songs also depict how they have been discriminated against in terms of both race and gender.

## **My positioning**

It is important to reflect on my own position in relation to Indigenous Australian women's engagement with white feminism. Writing about Indigenous Australian issues, peoples, and cultures is inherently political. The life stories of Indigenous Australian women have documented how non-Indigenous women historically exercised white race privilege and the oppression of Indigenous people<sup>43</sup> and as a non-Indigenous woman I am conscious that I am implicated and complicit in the history of racial, sexual, economic, political and cultural oppression of Indigenous Australian women.

In 2002 when I began to think about the Indigenous women performers I might interview for my doctoral research I was nervous and unsure about making contact with performers. I was aware that they are all busy women and was worried about trespassing and imposing on their lives. How would the performers perceive me? Would they be interested in participating in my research project? Or would they see me as another non-Indigenous researcher wanting to research, write about, and benefit from Indigenous people? I was reminded of Huggins' warning:

Don't expect Aboriginal people to easily welcome you into their world. Some of us will be more open and tolerant than others. There is a long history of violence, mistrust, guilt and fear that cannot be erased overnight. Know when you are becoming an intruder rather than an accomplice.<sup>44</sup>

I also thought of Smith's comment that the history of research by non-Indigenous people on Indigenous people is:

inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research", is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.<sup>45</sup>

Yet interviewing Indigenous Australian women performers was an exciting, challenging, engaging, and lived process in which I learnt much about their diversity of experiences, their identities, and their fights to resist expectations and assumptions as I did about my own. Concerned with issues of representation, authority, and authorship these questions raise in my own writing, I continually attempt to incorporate quotations of Indigenous women performers from my interviews with them in order to keep their voices at the forefront. I have also attempted to allow the performers who I interviewed to retain ultimate control over how their words are interpreted by sending these quotations to the performers to obtain their approval and give them the opportunity to change, alter, and edit their comments. Yet despite my intentions ultimately this article remains my interpretation and analysis of their words. I am still left wondering if I got it 'right'? It is important to acknowledge that in the section which follows the analyses of the songs provided are my own readings of the song texts rather than implying that the meanings reside in the extracts.

Certainly questions about being non-Indigenous woman and representing Indigenous women still arise in this context. My research relationships with Indigenous women performers have continued since my doctorate and in some cases these relationships have grown into long lasting friendships. One of the performers I interviewed, Lexine Solomon asked me to work

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on a project with her and we are now collaborating on a new research project funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies which focuses on the experiences and contemporary songs of Torres Strait Islander women performers. I continue to be guided by the performers in how they wish to be represented in my writings and attempt to provide them with the space to have their say, voice their experiences and be recognised as a unique part of Australia's diverse Indigenous heritage.

### **Singing Indigenous Australia women into visibility and audibility**

In response to a history of racism and sexism in Australia, many Indigenous women performers have used their music to illustrate Indigenous Australian women's history and experiences of colonisation. Here I discuss three themes in Indigenous women's songs which illustrate how they sing their experiences into visibility and audibility: reclaiming history and celebrating strength, forcible removal, grief and loss, and re-representing Indigenous Australian women.

#### **Reclaiming history and celebrating strength**

In early anthropological texts Aboriginal women were 'invisible, or represented as inferior, or possessions or victims, or both. White male anthropologists viewed the native scene through their own phallocentric lenses, and were dependent on male Aboriginal informants'.<sup>46</sup> The written record of Indigenous claims to land made during the 1970s has since been characterised as a product of an era of deep erasure of women<sup>47</sup> in which Aboriginal women's lives were viewed as 'impoverished and male-dominated'.<sup>48</sup> For example, Maddock argued that Aboriginal women's ceremonies were small and personal<sup>49</sup> while Munn suggested that their interests were circumscribed by the life of the camp.<sup>50</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s women anthropologists began to 'confront the problem of how women were being represented in anthropological writing' by male anthropologists<sup>51</sup> and a number of texts were published by way of redress.<sup>52</sup> These texts rebuked the neglect of women and their significance in existing studies of Aboriginal culture and pointed out the important roles women maintained in cultural knowledge and decision-making in their groups.

Kerrianne Cox's song 'Woman Got No History' on her first album *Just Wanna Move*<sup>53</sup> also confronts how Indigenous women have historically been ignored and highlights how 'the history of a woman is never seen':

Woman got no history  
You reckon it's a mystery  
Just ask my girl  
What colour her world  
Is it red, not blue, nor green  
The history of a woman is never seen  
I say no, I say I say no  
Old woman tells the tale of yilli-brew  
If only woman's story you knew  
I've seen girls playing in the dirt  
Learning everything, skills out of the earth  
I seen woman stand up for their rights  
A life without freedom  
A life without fight I say yeah, I say I say yeah

Moreton-Robinson notes that 'White Australia has come to 'know' the 'Indigenous woman' from the gaze of many ... [yet] in this textual landscape Indigenous women are objects who lack agency'.<sup>54</sup> Kerrianne Cox disrupts this by telling 'her' history through song, in her words and through her voice.

One reading of the song text could be that the image of 'girls playing in the dirt' evokes, in

non-Indigenous discourse, images of poverty and poor hygiene not ‘learning everything, skills out of the earth’. Yet another reading could be that the song illustrates the deep connections between Indigenous women and land and ‘the relations between Indigenous land, spirit, place, ancestors and bodies’.<sup>55</sup> This highlights how song texts might be understood differently by different discourses and how relationships between reading/reading position may be complicit in oppression. Kerrianne sings of the strength and knowledge of Indigenous Australian women despite the ways they have been ignored and of women’s important roles in family, cultural, and community life. Other songs by Kerrianne also focus on the importance of expressing Indigenous women’s history through song (e.g., ‘She’s Got a Story Too,’ ‘Kututu’).

Ruby Hunter identifies as a Ngarrindjeri/Kukatha/Pitjantjatjara woman and also sings of the strength and survival of Indigenous Australian women despite a history oppression Aboriginal women have experienced in her song ‘Proud Proud Woman’:

Women of this land  
You’ve cried tears of silence  
For those who died  
In our hearts it is kept  
Their sacrifice we all respect  
Proud proud proud woman  
Hold your head up high  
For we are still living  
Struggling to survive

Similarly to Kerrianne, Ruby sings of women’s connections to land which highlights the significance of landscape in contemporary songs by Indigenous women. Ruby’s depiction of ‘tears of silence’ could be read as representing Aboriginal women as passive and silent. However, Bird-Rose writes of the multiple meanings of silence and describes a double bind inherent ‘in the encounter between Indigenous knowledge systems which include boundaries of exclusion and silence, and the colonising demand for information’<sup>56</sup> She suggests that, in relation to land claims Aboriginal women’s ‘silence can be heard as an absence of knowledge, while their words can be used to support a view that their knowledge and interests are encompassed by what appears to be a more sacred domain controlled by men’.<sup>57</sup> Morgan and Coombes also articulate sensitivity differences and diversities in the meanings of silence and write that ‘silence may be understood as a speech act, open to multiple meanings, performing various functions and positioning participants’.<sup>58</sup>

Discussing the dual nature of racial and sexual oppression, Behrendt writes that for over a century Indigenous Australian women were at the mercy of white male managers who sexually abused and exploited Indigenous women.<sup>59</sup> Torres Strait Islander hip-hop performer Sarah Patrick has written a song titled ‘Home’ which depicts this history:

Two hundred years ago ships sailed in from the sea  
With disease ‘n’ colonial adversaries—thieves  
With mother England’s decrees  
And good intentioned but corruptible, misguided missionaries  
Dispossession was the next stage and  
Most graziers refused to pay a wage  
Beaten by police baton forced dependence on ration  
Genocide was in fashion they deny that it happened  
Nowadays there’s suffering abroad, refugees fleeing from war  
Government slams the door, truth’s been misconstrued  
Don’t mean to be rude but didn’t some of youse arrive in a boat too  
Now it’s all ipods and mobile phones  
And some of the tribes are now long gone  
You live in a glass house don’t throw stones  
Urban jungles are what we roam and...

*Chorus*

This is what I call home (Home)  
This is what we call home (Home)  
Yes they raped the land and raped the women  
Raped our way of life with their pilgrammin'  
We call this home (Home)  
We call this home (Home)

Sarah draws the links between the rape of Indigenous women's bodies and the exploitation of the land. Similarly, Mohanram also highlights the connections between Aboriginal women's bodies and the doctrine of terra nullius which declared that Australia was a land without people.<sup>60</sup> She argues that 'naming Australia terra nullius demands the disavowal of the black body and the disavowal of black as human because the very legality of the term is contingent upon the bestowal of non-human status to black and indigenous Aborigines.'<sup>61</sup> Sarah resists this perception by singing about the colonisation process and particularly how racism and sexism are responsible for the historical exploitation of Indigenous Australian women.

Other Indigenous women sing against universal silencing and oppression of Indigenous women. Toni Janke points out that she included her song 'Black Woman' on her second album *The Brink*<sup>62</sup> because 'I really wanted to do a song on there that black women could relate to, not just Indigenous women ... it applies to black women from all different nationalities'.<sup>63</sup> In 'Black Woman' Toni sings:

Black woman  
Better guard your soul  
Keep it safe and tight  
Black woman  
You'd have lost control long ago  
If you couldn't fight  
'Ruined your life, you didn't get very far' some say (yeah)  
You knew the distance was gonna be long  
To keep your head above water  
And to make you strong  
Day after day, day after day, day after day

Like Ruby, Toni sings of the strength and resilience of black women and suggests that black women need to protect themselves emotionally and mentally against stereotypes, sexism and racism in every-day life.

**Forcible removal, grief and sorrow**

In 1997 the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families found that Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities throughout the history of colonisation in Australia.<sup>64</sup> Known as the 'Stolen Generations', without doubt, not one Indigenous Australian family has escaped the effects of the trauma of removal and it is estimated that a third of the Indigenous population were affected.<sup>65</sup> Kerrianne's song 'Stolen Children' refers to this issue:

Stolen children whose mothers cried  
For her long lost children  
'Til the day she died  
She longed to know her children were alright  
She longed to hold her children so very tight  
And to tell them all of their dreaming  
The way it is right to live on the land  
To give a guiding light  
To dance and sing  
And to do all those things that mothers and children do

To learn the ways of the tribe, the bush, the land and sea  
 And so to survive  
 My baby she cries, my baby remembers me

Kerrianne states that 'my aunt, Veronica Francis, had a poem on the stolen generation that she wanted to connect with me on. It wasn't saying, hey you took our kids away and you should be ashamed and sorry. It was about a mother's love, a mother always knowing that the child would find its Dreaming.'<sup>66</sup>

Race and gender coincide in this song as Kerrianne emphasises the mother's perspective and sings of the grief and sorrow of the mother who cried, hoping her child would remember her. The song also emphasises the loss of language, culture, and identity of children who were removed from their families. The impact of the Stolen Generation policies has left its mark on Kerrianne's family and community.<sup>67</sup> Her grandmother was taken from her family when she was five years old<sup>68</sup> and Kerrianne states that 'I cried when I found out my grandmother was taken.'<sup>69</sup> Music also has the power to resonate with memory and emotion and as Henderson suggests 'music is affective because songs contain sensate memories of other songs, other selves, other moments.'<sup>70</sup> Certainly contemporary music allows Kerrianne to communicate her grandmother's history and the memories and the emotions attached to this history. While the song could connect with any woman who can relate to the emotional aspect of losing a child, it clearly can be read on a cultural level as raising awareness of the many of the Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their families and the wide reaching effects on their families and communities.

Like Kerrianne's aunt, Ruby was forcibly removed from her family as a child and states that:

I was born at a billabong in the riverlands at the Coorong in South Australia—but I was fostered out. The welfare people just come out one day and took us. If they come across any campers or travellers, blackfellas who had children, they took the children into town with them straight away. They said they were taking the children to the circus. All the clowns looked after me, that's all I can say (she laughs). So then we were on a mission. My sister was there. My brother was there. Well, they had to train us to go toilet and wash our hands and clean our face and wear clothes, didn't they? How to put pants and shoes and those bra-things on (she laughs). See, when they take you away, your own family doesn't exist any more because the welfare people don't want the family to find out where you are. They kept our own family away from us because they thought they'd be a bad influence.<sup>71</sup>

On her second album *Feeling Good*<sup>72</sup> Ruby's song 'Ngarrindjeri Woman' proclaims her own survival as one of the Stolen Generation:

I am Ngarrindjeri woman  
 And I stand so proud and tall  
 I remember stories when I was a little girl  
 In our mother's land  
 Our mother's land  
 Our mother's land  
 I am Ngarrindjeri woman  
 And I'm still here today  
 To carry on our culture  
 In Ngarrindjeri women's business ways  
 In our mother's land  
 Our mother's land  
 Our mother's land

The line 'I'm still here today to carry on our culture' could be read as pointing to her resistance against the colonisation process by declaring her pride in being a Ngarrindjeri woman and telling the listener that she stands 'proud and tall' aware of her own history. By singing of her survival, Ruby challenges both racialised and gendered stereotypes. She asserts her pride in being an Indigenous woman and at the same time resists the perception that women are sidelined

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to men in matters of knowledge and culture. Ruby also rejects the racist and colonialist myth that Indigenous cultures are dying out and the idea that authentic Aboriginal cultures are situated in the distant past. The links between women and land are again strong as Ruby sings of ‘our mother’s land’ illustrating how the theme of place in contemporary songs by Indigenous women can be directly linked to Aboriginal perceptions of land.<sup>73</sup>

Deb Morrow, who was also forcibly removed from her family as a child, uses her music to express her re-connections with the Aboriginal women in her family. She acknowledges that her album *Flight of the Emu*<sup>74</sup> was recorded at a time when:

I was just dealing with all my anger ... It was also at a time I'd met my biological mother and found four sisters that I never even knew I had, and just watching them over a period of two years and seeing what they'd been through and it was like just all this anger welled up inside of me so it felt like I needed to tell the government a little bit about, and there's people in power, not just governments but the people that stuff us down all the time, you know.<sup>75</sup>

Her song ‘Destiny’ resonates with her reconnections with the women in her family:

I see a lost forgotten soul  
Who is this girl I see?  
Is she a part of me?  
Her skin is darker and her looks much older  
She's so gentle so kind  
She knew my name though I never told her  
She's like my spirit through my eyes  
Who is this girl I see?  
The very image of me

Her music allows her to bring her experiences and the women in her family into visibility and makes it possible for Deb to retrieve her own history as an Indigenous Australian woman. Many other songs by Indigenous women musicians raise gender-specific questions, express solidarity between women, celebrate Indigenous women and attempt to bring Indigenous Australian women into visibility including Lexine Solomon’s ‘This is Woman,’ Emma Donovan’s ‘Gumbaynggirr Lady,’ Christine Anu’s ‘Mother’s Child,’ Mereki’s ‘Dolly’ and Brenda Webb’s ‘Little Black Girl.’ All of these songs by Indigenous women performers highlight their attempts to give women a voice through the medium of song and remedy how women have been sexually and racially oppressed.

### Re-representing Indigenous women: Stiff Gins

Indigenous Australian women are able to resist and subvert racism and sexism through other avenues such as name choice. Sydney based duo Stiff Gins<sup>76</sup> are resisting the historical and stereotypical construction of Indigenous women as animalistic and dehumanised through their provocative use of the term ‘gin.’ Through their name, the duo (Kaleena Briggs and Nardi Simpson) are attempting to reclaim the term ‘gin’ and turn it around to mean ‘proud, strong exceptional, black woman.’ Stiff Gins<sup>77</sup> write on their website that:

From almost the very instant of first contact Dharug (& other) language words were beginning to be chronicled by officers of the First Fleet...initially as word lists & then later by a growing number of colonists as common Sydney vernacular. As whites became familiar with the term gin (din, diyin, dyin, ding, gin, jin) so then did they begin to interpret & use it in their own contexts. From this early time the English use of gin meant anything from woman to vestal virgin. In the face of incredible change Aboriginal people were also forced to incorporate the colonists into their own existing cultural contexts. The exchange of women between groups, a complex & highly regulated system practiced by the Sydney clans, was one method Aboriginal people used to incorporate settlers into their society. It was interpreted by colonists however as the offering of sexual favours. The first written use of the word then was in this context when in 1791 it appeared in a passage of a letter written back to England describing an Aboriginal person’s ‘gift of his thin Ding (wife)’ to the Governor. Perhaps such cultural misinterpretations (misinterpretations of cultural practice) mark the beginnings of the use of gin by Australians as a sexually derogatory term.<sup>78</sup>

In the late 1800s and early 1900s representations of Indigenous women as 'gins' were prevalent in newspaper cartoons. For example, an image (figure 1) was featured depicting an Aboriginal man carrying an Aboriginal woman in a sling around his head with the caption reading 'gin sling.' Their faces are depicted as grotesque and animalistic confirming the Aboriginalist<sup>79</sup> construction of Aboriginal men and women as primitive and savage.<sup>80</sup> As Stiff Gins note:

Men too did not escape the smear of the insult, some becoming defined by it themselves usually to their detriment. A gin shepherd a white man who lived with Aboriginal women and a gin jockey and gin burglar a man who sleeps with Aboriginal women.<sup>81</sup>

Another image (figure 2) featured in a newspaper visually portrayed an Aboriginal woman drinking out of a large tin. She is represented as unfeminine, uncivilised and rough and her body and facial features are represented as grotesque with oversized lips and disproportionate feet and hands. The caption reads 'dry gin' which is a play on words which refers both to the alcoholic drink and to the stereotype of Aboriginal women as alcoholics. A similar image was titled 'gin and water' (figure 3) and refers both to the sexual consumption of Aboriginal women and the beverage. Here Aboriginal women are represented in these images as unfeminine, animalistic and less than human.

Figure 1



Figure 2



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Stiff Gins point out that:

All Aboriginal women were tainted with this new discourse and in the space of a mere 100 years all Aboriginal people were disenfranchised from any connection with the word, its use and meaning lost to those to whom it had once belonged. Gin had become a white Australian word, and an insult.<sup>85</sup>

Yet Nardi and Kaleena question, ‘Why should this continue? Why for so long should the true origins of a word—born of country they now gathered—be accepted and repeated as a slur? A burden to be carried by generations past and present?’<sup>86</sup> Stiff Gins highlight that their decision to call themselves Stiff Gins is a conscious attempt to break down stereotypes and challenge the way Aboriginal women have historically been viewed.

Certainly, the term ‘gin’ was used only in relation to Indigenous women and had no history for non-Indigenous women. As Moreton-Robinson notes ‘Indigenous women’s experiences are grounded in a different history from that which is celebrated and known in white domains’<sup>87</sup> and the specific and exclusive usage of the term ‘gin’ for Indigenous women illustrates just one of many departures in historical relationships between women in respect to colonisation. Yet hooks contends ‘stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation’<sup>88</sup> while Langton points out that ‘all representations are derived from, and react against, historical representations and historical symbols of “Aboriginality”’.<sup>89</sup> By reframing the word and choosing to represent themselves as proud, talented, black women, Stiff Gins actively resist colonial and historical representations of Indigenous Australian women ‘as being sexually available and easily accessed’.<sup>90</sup> For Stiff Gins, contemporary music has ‘provided a site for subversion of non-Indigenous gendered and racial denigration of Indigenous women’<sup>91</sup> and through their name Nardi and Kaleena are attempting to break down negative representations of Indigenous Australian women.

Stiff Gins also point out that they are able to ‘redress cultural, historic and linguistic injustice through a powerful medium. Song’.<sup>92</sup> For example ‘All Began’ from their first album *Origins*<sup>93</sup> uses the term ‘gin’ in its lyrics to reinforce their message:

Every day we’re getting closer  
And we all agree (yeah)  
This is what we live for, what we want to be (want to be)  
Gins are out and up there  
Standing proud and tall  
Carried by the strength of those  
Who went before  
One voice, one voice

As in the gender-specific songs of other Indigenous Australian women, Stiff Gins emphasise the strength and pride of Indigenous women and thereby resist the Aboriginalist and colonialist representation of Aboriginal women as available, animalistic and sexually deviant.

Another aspect of ‘All Began’ is the important role the song plays in live performance contexts. I observed Stiff Gins perform this song at the Woodford Folk Festival 2003. It was their last song in their final performance at the festival and many Indigenous women who were in the audience rose, danced, and joined in singing the lyrics in front of the stage. As Stokes writes ‘the musical event … evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity.’<sup>94</sup> In this context, contemporary music forms a site of empowerment for Indigenous women. Stiff Gins’ choice of name and their music provides a potent example of Indigenous women’s voices speaking back against sexist and racist representations of Indigenous Australian women.

## Conclusion

Indigenous women performers are able to challenge sexism and racism by singing about gender-specific themes in order to bring Indigenous Australian women's experiences, history and topics to the fore. Their songs express their identities as mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, and lovers, convey pride in being women, and highlight the important roles of Indigenous Australian women in their communities throughout Australian history. As Reed states, 'gender is something around which solidarity with other Indigenous women is expressed.'<sup>95</sup> Like the perspectives of their Indigenous Australian sisters who have engaged with feminism, the contemporary songs of Indigenous women illustrate how racial and gender identities collide, intersect and interweave. Indigenous Australian women performers, like Stiff Gins, are also challenging gendered and racial oppression not only through contemporary song but also through other avenues such as name choice.

These readings of Indigenous women's song texts are my own and as Jacob's notes 'all researchers, then, be they white or black, female or male, carry their own identity into the field with them and this acts to shape the picture created'.<sup>96</sup> Yet I have attempted to listen carefully to the experiences of performers or as Levesque-Lopman articulates to 'listen in stereo'<sup>97</sup> to what Indigenous women have told me about how they use contemporary song to bring their experiences and struggles into visibility and audibility through song. I have drawn on songs texts, the words of performers from interviews with them and media articles to attempt to create a picture of their creative strategies for resistance to colonisation. Certainly Indigenous women musicians in Australia are multi-faceted and multi-talented performers who use contemporary music to express themselves, resist racial and gender stereotypes of Indigenous women and raise awareness about issues which they feel strongly about. They are actively resisting Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous women, shifting Indigenous women's experiences of colonialism into visibility and audibility, and encouraging Indigenous Australian women to reclaim their power as Indigenous women.

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*Katelyn Barney completed her PhD at the University of Queensland researching Indigenous Australian women performing in contemporary music contexts. Kate is currently lecturing at the University of Queensland and the Australian Catholic University and teaches piano privately. Kate is also the Secretary of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (Australia/New Zealand branch), the Treasurer of the Musicological Society of Australia's Queensland Chapter, and Acting Managing Editor of The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education.*

## Notes

- 1 Tiddas, *Sing About Life* (Compact Disc, 1993).
- 2 In this paper the terms 'Indigenous Australian' and 'Indigenous' are used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The term 'Aboriginal' refers to Indigenous Australians whose culture is tied to country on mainland Australia, while 'Torres Strait' describes those Indigenous Australians whose country are the islands in the Torres Strait. However, about two thirds of Torres Strait Islanders live on the mainland and statistically many identify as both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal.
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- 16 Streit-Warburton, Craft, Raft and Lifesaver, p. 307.
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- 18 Reed, Songs of Australian Indigenous Women, p.22.
- 19 ibid., p.37.
- 20 Aileen Moreton-Robinson *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2000), p. 4.
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