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# MAYBE *we can find* SOME COMMON GROUND: INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES, *a* MUSIC TEACHERS' STORY

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## ■ Abstract

This paper examines the idea of embedding Indigenous perspectives drawing upon a metaphor for designing an environment that nurtures Indigenous cultural identity and relationships. This paper constitutes a teacher's personal story of emerging understandings of Indigenous Standpoint Theory and pedagogy, which began with embedding Indigenous perspectives within a tertiary music and sound curriculum. These understandings were developed into "rules of thumb" that have had transferable implications for research that examines community music-making projects in urban Indigenous and cross-cultural communities. These ideas are explored through case studies that examine them in context. Furthermore, the idea of embedding Indigenous perspectives in my own value systems is explored and a growing awareness of the embodied understanding that stems from an open, continuous and critical discourse with Indigenous people. This reveals a relationship of belonging and welcoming interfaced with obligation and a growing knowledge of people, community and country and its effect on my "white understanding" of relationships. This proposal stems from several successful projects where participants have experienced both nurturing of Indigenous knowledge and a productive tension. This does not advocate an argument for positive discrimination but rather seeks to build the idea that interfaces which simultaneously develop embodied understanding alongside Indigenous pride can lead to compelling and unique learning experiences for students, teachers and communities.

## ■ Introduction

In Dillon and Chapman (2005, p. 192) we suggested that "the way forward in embedding Indigenous perspectives in music curriculum [was] to engage with the process of personalising our experiences of Indigenous knowledge through experience and embodied understanding". Martin Nakata and his discussion of "interfaces" between cultures suggests that "What is certain is that the intersections of different knowledges, systems concerns and priorities will converge to inform and develop new practices in this area" (Nakata, 2002, p. 15). It is the understanding of the sites and tensions inherent within this emerging understanding of "interfaces" and "between knowledge systems, concerns and priorities" that I wish to discuss here from my own position as a white philosopher, teacher and songwriter.

As a musician I am familiar with making sense of my world through the act of writing songs and so I have included a creative practice strategy for understanding the ideas and embodied experiences I have of Indigenous standpoint theory. Secondly, I am aware that the many poignant insights have come to me through my association with people, places and practice as a teacher and musician. I have adopted an approach to referencing often used in participant observation case study and ethnomusicological research (Jorgensen, 1989; Stake, 1975; Stake, et al., 1991; Yin, 1981) where the researcher references conversations, observations and journal entries as if they were an academic source. I consider that this approach is itself at the interface of research processes as kinship, relationship and country (location and place) is central to Indigenous knowledge systems as too is the use of songs, which contain and communicate knowledge. It is with this in mind and with a sincere respect for these concepts and the owners of this knowledge that I present this paper in the hope that it might demonstrate my personal struggle with the tensions at the interface between cultures, embodied understanding and academic rigour.

## ■ Locating myself in the discourse

I am a white, middle class man, who has come to academic research about the meaning of music to

individuals and community after a career as a singer and songwriter. Over the past three years, I have engaged with embedding Indigenous perspectives in a tertiary music curriculum. As a result of this engagement, I have found myself questioning who I am and what I am doing in relation to my understanding of Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous knowledge. As my colleague Liz Mackinlay suggests, “I have come to try to untangle my whiteness, the colouring of my pedagogical practice, and more broadly make visible the ways in which ethnomusicology too is a discipline marked by the power and privilege of race” (Mackinlay, 2005, p. 114).

With this in mind I use the term “whitefella” in the song outlined in this paper to describe a responsibility and obligation to engage in questioning what I do and how I do it in research and teaching that involves Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. I also seek to discern “ethical, moral and socially just research and educational praxis” (Mackinlay, 2005, p. 114). This is a conscious and political process to seek personal transformation and acknowledgement of the racism that is inherent in my whiteness and colonial framing. Indigenous authors Ngarritjan-Kessarais & Malin (2001, p. 5), refer to Howard a white American who describes “social transformation as the process by which dominance is acknowledged, decoded, challenged and dismantled. The process and amount of effort required is different for White Australians than that for Indigenous Australians”. Furthermore they suggest that “We can be participants in racism or work against it. We benefit from privilege by default, which makes us part of the problem but we can also work towards becoming part of the solution” (Ngarritjan-Kessarais & Malin, 2001, p. 16). The term “whitefella” is to me a reminder of my whiteness and the obligation to work against racism in my words and actions and to be consistently seeking constructive criticism that leads to further understanding and more ethical actions.

### ■ The approach

This paper examines a personal experience of tensions at the interfaces of culture as expressed by Martin Nakata (2002). Methodologically, the approach I have taken involves, firstly, a story that serves as a metaphor for the embedding of Indigenous perspectives. Secondly, I examine the inherent tensions at the interface of music experiences drawing upon case study experiences and then placing each of those experiences within a song. The song seeks to reconcile and make sense of the idea of “common ground” (Driese, personal communication, May, 2006) as a physical and metaphorical realisation of an interface. Thirdly, I revisit the “rules of thumb” for embedding Indigenous perspectives as outlined in “Without a song you are nothing” (Dillon & Chapman, 2005) and expose these tenets to the analysis drawn from the abovementioned methodology of story, song

writing and practice-led experiences. To demonstrate the interaction between theory and practice, I will reference a wide variety of sources and in particular I will draw upon practice-led and participant observer sources that seek to understand embodied and experiential knowledge. Furthermore, I will present data and analysis in an open and transparent way by showing the process to the reader (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ■ Verse 1: Recontesting Indigenous flora as a metaphor

In 1993 I lived near the Yarra River in Victoria in a place called North Warrandyte. The name is a word from the Woiworing language of the Wurundjeri, who are the Indigenous people of the Yarra Valley to the northeast of Melbourne (Annois, 2006). Despite its appearance of being “virgin bush land”, the Wurundjeri had lived with this land for thousands of years and following invasion Warrandyte had been the place where gold was first discovered in Victoria. This had a devastating effect on the people, culture and the land in the area: the people were moved to a reserve in Healesville and the land was stripped of all old growth forest to be used as supports for mine shafts. It should be acknowledged here that this physical and cultural genocide should not be rendered invisible by my discussion but important to note that the decimation that occurred to the land and its flora and fauna also occurred to the Indigenous people and their language and culture.

I am pursuing a cross-species, flora-to-human, metaphor and even though I am acutely aware of its limitations I find it a very useful device for illustrating the benefits of nurturing environments that temporarily eliminate competition. I want to here acknowledge the editors’ advice in this process about the limitations of the metaphor. One hundred years later the bush in Warrandyte has returned but the small house where I lived was overrun with vines, bamboo, blackberries, pampas and a plethora of European and native weeds. My zoologist wife was determined that we would reclaim this land at least for the native plant and animal species that occupied the land. Swamp wallabies, echidnas, platypuses, possums and a vast array of birds lived in our yard or near by. My wife and I attended classes and read about what to do to reclaim the bush land. We found that there were several simple principles we needed to follow:

- Propagate species known to be Indigenous to the area from seed so that a genetic diversity could be maintained.
- Propagate seedlings separately until they are strong enough to be reintroduced to the bush.
- Clear the land of invading species and native weeds; sometimes even burning the land is necessary so that it can start again cleansed of the invaders.

- Plant species in relationship groupings. Some plants are called pioneers; they prepare the soil for the larger gum trees that follow when these pioneers die, nourishing the terrain (Rose, 1996) for the next generation and for their related plants. Some occupy the understory, others need more light and space; some attract birds to pollinate them others need the heat of bushfire to seed.
- Monitor and remove invading species from the land until such time as the Indigenous species are established. Be careful of virulent weeds that could choke the Indigenous plants such as blackberries, pampas and ivy (see Australian Plants Society Yarra Yarra Group, 2007).

It was only in retrospect that I understood what it was that I had learnt while on Wurundjeri country. The catalyst for this retrospective insight came from a conversation with Athol Young (Brisbane City Council, Manager of Community Events) about the “Stylin’ Up” Festival in Inala in Brisbane’s southern suburbs. Athol and I discussed why another programme that we had recently run at a local high school involving contemporary music had so few Indigenous participants and so many South Sea Islanders (Tongan and Samoan) students and Maori.

We got to talking about “Stylin’ Up”, recognising that the Indigenous perspectives were strongly grounded in relationships with elders, the country and the festival propagated the music in a community setting separated from “invading species”. In this situation, Indigenous “gardeners” tended to nurture self-esteem and expression within a community setting. At the case study school, the South Sea Islander student affinity with singing in harmony appeared to be a case of these students adapting their church choral skills to the very different realm of R’n’B and Hip Hop. Tropical species of all kinds flourish well in Queensland and so it was with the two programmes. When the “Stylin’ Up” programme was in its third year, elders and members of the council invited other communities to share in the success of their festival. This success was measured by the decrease in street crime, the increase in youth school attendance and self-esteem (Baker, 2004; Spirovski, 2005); the sense of pride the community felt about who they were. They had not only created a great festival but also generously made it into common ground where cultures could express their own pride and sense of self and culture.

What my understanding of “Stylin’ Up” and my experience of Wurundjeri country suggest is that we may need to follow the lead of the “Stylin’ Up” case where Indigenous perspectives are nurtured in an environment that allows the culture and identity of the individuals and community to grow. We need to acknowledge and nourish this terrain by facilitating a relational environment that is informed by and driven by Indigenous community leaders for it to thrive. We

need to further audit and monitor the tension between the Indigenous culture and ethnic other. My attraction to this metaphor is perhaps simplistic but I do feel that it does acknowledge the “inter-relationships between all living things” in its discussion of planting in relational groups that are native and specifically connected to the land. The alternative to this approach nurturing is demonstrated in the comparison.

It is also ironic that for some species to be able to produce seed fire is necessary. The seed of some acacia is one species that requires this kind of heat to enable it to shoot. I think this suggests that in recontesting Indigenous knowledge within the notions of tension at the interfaces we need to confront political and often unpopular and uncomfortable issues. Without the fire the acacia is unable to grow. Without engagement and without the potential tensions inherent in politics that Indigenous standpoint theory and pedagogy generates, it may not be possible to Indigenise curriculum beyond the appearance of a neat “native garden” within a European garden. While I am wary of the limitations of metaphor to describe the culture, the human condition and relationships, as an artist I am also drawn to the irony and complexity that occurs at the interface of stories about country. Maybe this too is common ground. It is this idea that I wanted to explore further but what came to mind was not a traditional academic research process but the words and melody of a song.

#### ■ Verse 2: Without a song you are nothing

Liz Mackinlay (Mackinlay, 2004) reiterated to me the idea that the owner of a song in Indigenous culture was a person who owned great knowledge. Liz is a white woman who has studied Indigenous culture from an ethnomusicological standpoint. She is married to Gordon Chalmers (Chalmers, 2005) and together they delivered two lectures outlining an understanding of the role of music in Indigenous culture in a lecture series on music and spirituality. The idea Liz presented was that without a song there was no knowledge. She suggested too that song comprises multiple levels of meaning and transmits oral knowledge to those who have the right to interpret it. It is also a site where the singer can make sense of the world they live in – “it is a way of working stuff out”. Furthermore, Gordon introduced me to the idea that songs and stories feature Silence-Conflict-Home and the Indigenous knowledge concept that: “Words are insufficient to convey a true understanding of Aboriginal spirituality as expressed through song. To know it, is to live it” (Chalmers, 2005).

In some ways this validated what I have spent a large amount of my life doing – trying to make sense of my life through writing songs or trying to communicate aspects of the human condition to others. I am not suggesting that the songs I have written are equivalent

<p><b>Intro/Chorus</b> Maybe we can find some common ground</p>	<p><b>Chorus</b> But if we learn to sing the place and dance the sound</p>
<p><b>Verse 1</b> White fellas like me, we see things differently.</p>	<p>Maybe we can find some common ground (x2)</p>
<p>We talk of owning country, not of country owning me</p>	<p><b>Verse 3</b> White fellas like me, when we seek the truth; we find it in numbers, and in words</p>
<p>Every star has a name that tells us where we are, we can name the Southern Cross and Jupiter and Mars</p>	<p>But we can show humanity in stories, dance and song,</p>
<p>But you can name the gaps between the stars</p>	<p>Our paintings give us history and tales of right and wrong,</p>
<p><b>Chorus:</b> The meaning of my song is in the silence and the sound</p>	<p>Its been an us and them for far too long</p>
<p>So maybe we can find some common ground (x2)</p>	<p><b>Chorus</b> When country lives in us and it seems much more profound.</p>
<p><b>Verse 2</b> When white fellas dream, we do not get to hear.</p>	<p>Then maybe we can find some common ground</p>
<p>The spirit of our country, Singing wisdom to our ear</p>	<p>Maybe we can find some common ground.</p>
<p>My dreaming and my songs only ever seem to be 'bout politics and tragedy and what love means to me, our countries song says: we are "young and free"</p>	

Figure 1. "Common ground" (Lyrics inspired by Mayrah Driese & Victor Hart).

to the level of knowledge and significance of cultural meaning that an Indigenous songline holds, nor to reduce the sacred nature of Indigenous song and knowledge, but it does help me experience and privilege an embodied relational understanding between songs and knowledge, and the potential for songs to store and communicate knowledge. Furthermore it suggests to me that songwriting as a process is a way of making sense of experiences and seeing whether these experiences resonate with others who share the cultural values, understanding of the symbolic discourse (popular song) and the songwriter's fundamental role as a medieval Bard or critic of the human condition.

Indigenous people understand "where songs come to us from". Songs come to me from my association with significant people and places and only through singing them do I come to understand what they say to me. In this case I nervously sang the song at the conference and got to the line "our country's song says: we are young and free" gazing out at the listeners who were a majority of Indigenous peoples and realised that Indigenous culture was neither "young" or for the last two hundred years "free". The irony of the lines from "Advance Australia Fair" struck me like a thunderbolt leaving me speechless for a moment until I managed to say "40,000 years is young?" and continue the song. The insights I have gained from "song" – those that

come to me personally and those I choose to sing that come from other people – have been a source of knowledge for me for as long as I remember, yet it took this event to alert me to the power of insights contained in song or to awaken what my body and soul perhaps has always understood. Why had I never used this as a way of knowing before in academic research? It is this kind of insight and understanding that my experiences with Indigenous people have awakened in me and I am grateful for the generosity of spirit of those that have led me to these understandings and alerted me to the importance of embodiment. This knowledge too comes to me through my relationships. The lines of the song outline two perspectives – one from my own white perspective and the other which is an interpretation of the new understanding I have gained of Indigenous perspectives. The lyrics appear in Figure 1 to illustrate this narrative process of juxtapositioning of lyrics.

#### ■ Verse 3: Maybe we can find some Common Ground

The song is called "Common ground" (Driese, personal communication, May, 2006). The "hook" comes from a concept explained to me at Caboolture's Urban Country Music Festival by Mayrah Driese. Maryah is an Indigenous woman who, when she was with QUT's Oodgeroo Unit, had led the "Embedding

Indigenous perspectives” initiative. Mayrah and I had been discussing how I had recently been involved with a group of refugee Somali women who used the local primary school as a place to dance and sing so that they could recall their connections to their country and help give their daughters a sense of connection with their culture. Mayrah explained to me how she too felt about being away from her country and how when she had the opportunity to dance in a place where she was permitted to do so she could open up the songlines from where she was to where she was from and “recharge” her connection with country and all that meant to her. She spoke animatedly to me about the idea that city councils all across Australia could confer with elders and create “Common ground” where people from other countries both Australian and beyond could reinvigorate their connection with country through song and dance. I was particularly impressed by the generosity of this idea that Indigenous people understood the need to connect with country and might be prepared to define common ground where this kind of activity could take place. This generosity had also been apparent in the actions of elders at Inala to share their pride in their community. Then it struck me that it was not only the commonality of the place that was the insight here, the common ground was also contained within the idea that people of many cultures awaken and enliven connections to country and culture through song and dance and songs and dance that speaks “for” country. The song and dance opened up the communication with the sense of self in relation to others and the country of origin.

#### ■ Middle 8: Country and Hip Hop as an interface

Caboolture’s Urban Country Music Festival also introduced me to Craig Ackland who was then working for the Oodgeroo Unit at the Caboolture campus of QUT. He suggested to me that the two forms of popular music he felt still engaged with the political issues that represented Indigenous knowledge were Country and Hip Hop (Ackland, personal communication, 2006). Country simply because it provides a connection with country and Hip Hop because in a world of so much disposable pop Hip Hop is still being used as a political voice for marginalised communities. Once more I encountered the idea that music can be a metaphorical site for common ground. At the country music festival it was Troy Cassar-Daley who was “speaking for country” and the group Local Knowledge speaking about urban Indigenous experience. These ideas were not like the white myth of “ebony and ivory” but a valid expressive medium. Whilst these musical styles represent expressive mediums they are diametrically opposed in terms of generation and values: Country music expression a relationship with country and Hip

Hop expressing the personal and situational feelings of urban Indigenous youth to their experiences of contemporary life.

#### ■ Tension at the interface

Martin Nakata (2002) described the interface of cultural knowledge as a site where activity occurs and suggested that that activity was necessarily a point of tension. Essentially if there is no tension then one party is in a position of dominance and quiets the activity. In musical knowledge we understand this idea and we can distinguish between productive (Swanwick, 1994) and non-productive tension. Indeed Swanwick’s theory in relation to musical knowledge refers to a productive tension between analytical and intuitive knowledge in music-making.

These tensions are apparent in Hip Hop and Country music in that Country music is perceived to be a less genuine expression of Indigenous worldviews than an authentic connection with traditional songs which connect the participant with a genuine understanding and connection to country. Elders in communities seldom want young people to present the kinds of negative themes and offensive language common to Hip Hop which is strongly political and often contains sexual and drug references and negative lifestyle themes, to the world (e.g., Indigenous Intrudaz see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2007). Initially at “Stylin’ Up” Indigenous City Council employees charged with the responsibility of facilitating these music programmes reported this tension. What transpired however was recognition that Hip Hop itself was a vehicle for expression; it provided common ground. What is apparent here is a tension between worldviews and perceptions, which occurs at the interface of music and culture. This tension can occur both in songs and about them. In the process of using popular song as a medium for cultural expression we need to be mindful of these tensions and create strategies to allow them to be productive. It was with this kind of idea in mind that we have begun to apply some “rules of thumb” as analytical tools to examine the ethical and educational potential of strategies for embedding Indigenous perspectives.

#### ■ New lines to my song: Revisiting “rules of thumb” (Dillon & Chapman, 2005)

In Dillon and Chapman (2005), my colleague and I proposed some “rules of thumb” for embedding Indigenous perspectives in tertiary curriculum. I exposed these insights to my experiences both empirical/analytical and embodied/intuitive that have formed part of this philosophical journey. What I found was that when I re-examined these ideas, presented originally as practical suggestions for

teachers embedding Indigenous perspectives within curriculum, was that they referred to the transmission, storage, communication and agency of Indigenous knowledge. The resulting refinement to these “rules of thumb” suggests that “Whitefellas like me” need to consider:

- Ways of knowing: Examining underlying structures and assumptions of knowledge.
- Knowledge from country: Distributed and situational knowledge.
- Ways of representing knowledge: Drawing on multiple modes/systems of representation to store, communicate and amplify thought.
- Relational knowledge: Understanding who you are in and when you are on common ground.

I will utilise these ideas as an evolving conceptual framework and analytical tools for examining my practice as a teacher and my developing understanding of Indigenous standpoint theory. Specifically the process here has involved examining the idea of “common ground” as a metaphorical/metaphysical interface between cultures. I have tried to do that through exploring my own interaction with each of these areas of Indigenous knowledge through both empirical means and what I hope are culturally appropriate strategies for understanding phenomenon and analysing them. Many cultures are expressed through story, song, visual art and dance and these are also areas where researchers can experience the meaning of culture through participation. These are potential sites for meaningful and syncretic interaction between cultures. These are sites of tension but the lesson I have learned here is that if there is no tension at these interfaces then there is no genuine engagement with reconciliation, “Words are insufficient to convey a true understanding of Aboriginal spirituality as expressed through song. To know it, is to live it. Silence-Conflict-Home” (Chalmers, 2005).

#### ■ Conclusion: Choruses to fade out

I am conscious that this paper is a little experimental. I am conscious it is not traditionally academic and more anecdotal in its presentation. It contains elements of grounded theory (Strauss, 1990) and participant observation case study (Jorgensen, 1989) that I am extremely familiar with but it is something more than that. While the elements of self as an instrument of research and as a participant observer are part of this enquiry they do not provide a satisfactory explanation for my experiences with receiving a song and oral knowledge that has come to me through this experience. I am conscious that in drawing together these ideas I may have also trivialised them. Nor do I wish to present the “ebony and ivory” style fantasy that is often presented in cross-cultural music

experiences. I hope that I have not offended the generous givers of this knowledge but I hope too that what I have presented here is at tension with all these communities of mind so that it provokes some criticism and discussion about what is appropriate and compelling research.

The simple concept that I have discussed here involves drawing upon Dreise’s (personal communication, May, 2006) explanation of “common ground” and Nakata’s (2002) concept of interfaces as a way of presenting music-making as a metaphorical location where cultures can interface. In musicology and in theology this is called syncretism. Syncretic music is described as different from traditional music in that for traditional music to change the culture itself would have to change (Vella, 2000). Syncretic music involves a blending together of musical ideas that maintains the integrity of the original cultures and brings about something even more expressive or expressive of the relationship between cultural frameworks. It is this kind of interface, this kind of common ground where Indigenous knowledge can be imparted as part of pedagogical experience for those who seek the meaning of expression in sound. There is potential here for a non-verbal, non-textual interface and for embodied understanding to take place. Maybe we can find some common ground.

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