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‘Black is Beautiful’, and Indigenous: Aboriginality and Authorship in Australian Popular Music

Introduction

[I]t seemed to me as though a battle had been won, when the blacks all over the world began calling themselves ‘blacks’. And, so what! You know, black is black; and it’s beautiful! (Bandler cited in Lake, 2002)

Though historically Indigenous and African-American populations have been racially classified as ‘black’ within white societies – a term first adopted for its association with uncleanliness (Dyer, 1997) – their histories of representation are widely divergent. Since the nineteen-sixties, the term ‘black’ was radically reclaimed by African American people, witnessed through the emergence of the ‘black is beautiful’ movement. ‘Black is beautiful’ was a movement that changed public aesthetics and fashion forever and, as it did so, sought to establish a more dignified sense of public representation for African American people. It was a movement that re-claimed black identity by asserting new forms of public authorship within the public sphere based upon looking and feeling good, as a black person. As an identity-based social movement, ‘black is beautiful’ helped establish ‘black’ as a term for mobilising new political action, in the United States and globally. It is with the establishment of Indigenous civil rights movements based on these principles that the opening quotation, a conversation between the Aboriginal civil rights campaigner Faith Bandler and novelist Len Fox, becomes meaningful. By creating a framework for engaging white politics and representation, ‘black is beautiful’ resonated strongly with Australian Indigenous political movements. However, as this paper will argue, it is not until the past ten years that the Indigenous sense of ‘black is beautiful’ has finally started to gain mainstream visibility through the entertainment industry, enabling new forms of Indigenous public participation and authorship.

This article, then, explores the ‘black is beautiful’ initiative in relation to mainstream Australian Indigenous performers and producers. In terms of large scale commercial artists such as Shakaya, through to independent publishing, modelling and dance companies, sexiness has provided Indigenous identities a means of commanding unprecedented public attention in the early twentieth-first century mediasphere. Until recently sexualised images of
Indigenous people have been largely absent from the mainstream, a history which contrasts strongly with representations of African American sexuality, both in the United States and globally. Given the terse history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia, academics have responded to the few contemporary sexualised representations of Indigenous bodies in the mainstream as ‘exploitative’ (for example, Hayward, 1993; Jennings and Hollinsworth, 1988). Over the past decade, however, as the black is beautiful message has reverberated around the globe in various musical forms, Indigenous Australians have started to draw upon the idea as a means of attaining agency and publicity in the mainstream. This article suggests that the ‘black is beautiful’ message, whilst originating in the North American context, has been appropriated by Indigenous performers and producers to affirm a more long term and meaningful sense of public visibility and political voice. As creative practitioners have become more established, so to the Indigenous authorship of sexualised imagery has gained greater public recognition.

Sexiness and Authorship

The question of authorship has been a key consideration in previous academic discussions of Indigeneity and mainstream representation (Langton, 1993; Mickler, 1998b; Moore & Muecke, 1984). Writing on this subject has focused predominantly upon film and journalistic texts, rather than television, music or other mainstream productions. Sexualised images of non-white women in music videos has received extensive coverage in the American context, where writers focus upon the sexualised presentation of non-white women by white male authors (for a discussion of David Bowie's 'China Girl', for instance, see Hisama, 2000; and an analysis of Tina Turner's 'What's Love Got to do with it?' see hooks, 1992). These postcolonial approaches draw attention to the ‘convergence of sexuality and power’ (hooks, pg 68) within the medium yet tend to read representations as inescapably stereotypical. Such writing on sexuality has exerted an influence upon readings of Indigenous sexuality in Australian music (see below), and share applicable limitations in their analyses of single texts, accentuation of pernicious characteristics, and selective focus on female, seldom male, bodies and sexualities. But if we consider their reception within a broader mediasphere, where the question of authorship can be acknowledged, such writing reminds us of the power dynamics often associated with the articulation of marginal voices within the mainstream.
An instructive debate took place between 1992 and 1993 in the music journal *Perfect Beat*, and centred on such issues of Indigenous authorship and/or exploitation in the mainstream. The articles were written in relation to the commercial success of Yothu Yindi, a part white part Yolngu (Aboriginal) band, and in particular the re-release of their single ‘Treaty’ (henceforth called ‘Treaty II’) (1991). Tony Mitchell (1992) attributes the success of ‘Treaty II’ to the editing-out of the ‘political’ meanings in the original video by powerful record executives. According to Mitchell, the decision to cut the footage of Bob Hawke signing a treaty was due to purely commercial reasons, to appease the disinclined interests of an anti-Aboriginal ‘Anglocentric hegemony’ (13). Hayward (1993) contributes to this debate, and suggests that Aboriginal sexuality, encapsulated by the ‘Treaty II’ video, epitomises the exploitation of Aboriginality in popular culture. At the centre of Hayward’s textual discussion is the re-edited video which, no longer featuring images of Bob Hawke and Yolngu elders, was re-made in order to foreground a sexualised Aboriginal female dancer:

Clad in a short, tight, black, glossy dress, the camera shoots her from a low angle, centring on her crotch. This female presence is typical *MTV* fare, decorative and sexual, ‘eye candy’ aimed at the notional adolescent male *MTV* viewer, the very audience that voted *Treaty II* as best Australian video of 1991 (38).

The association between Aboriginality and sexiness in this reading leaves little room to acknowledge a sense of Indigenous authorship, as ‘such a representation is clearly exploitative but no great surprise’ (ibid). An Aboriginal woman in this context is overlooked as a significant political figure, seen as nothing more than a ‘standard model of sexist stereotyping in music videos’ (38). In this reading Aboriginal women cannot escape the anthropological gaze as ‘the fetishistic “covered but exposed” nature of the images surprises’ (39). The female dancer is read in terms of the bare-breasted, anthropological image of the tribal woman, and this association leaves little room for Indigenous sexiness to ‘strut its stuff’. Yet the question remains: how is she to break-out of this mould? If the topless tribal woman is seen as a bad image of the Western scientific gaze (whether it is sexual or sexualised is another important question to bear in mind) then how, and in what form, can Aboriginal women appear sexy without confirming such popular stereotypes?

If sexy images are known to be authored by Indigenous actors, producers, musicians, celebrities and sports people, a new sense of public voice must be acknowledged. Before these assertions can be explored, I would argue that a central question has been overlooked in these postcolonial academic debates about sexual representation – are the song and video for ‘Treaty’ public pronouncements by Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australians? In other
words, is the video for ‘Treaty’ authored by Indigenous Australians? By this I do not mean that we should follow the traditional ‘English literature’ model of reading ‘art’, whereby the author, in interviews and commentaries, gets to decide what their art means. However, I do follow Foucault (as his work has been developed by Andy Medhurst and Alan McKee) in saying that audiences use their knowledge of who is speaking in order to decide how to interpret a text. The example that McKee (1996) gives is ‘The Messenger’ – the video that was made by Indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt for the band INXS. The video features a parody of ‘blaxploitation’ films, with Indigenous Australian women in tiny shorts and skirts, being blatantly sexualised. For those audiences who only know ‘The Messenger’ as ‘an INXS video’ – a video made by straight, rich, white men – this image becomes exploitative. But if the video is interpreted as part of Tracey Moffatt’s oeuvre, with all of the intertextual knowledge that brings, then it will rather be seen as a challenge to precisely that kind of exploitation. The public acknowledgement of authorship, then, is central to the judgement and reception of sexualised imagery. Such knowledge was pivotal to the success of the ‘black is beautiful’ movement in the United States.

**Authoring the ‘Black is Beautiful’ Message**

The history of black American performers within the development of global (and therefore Australian) popular music is an important one for illustrating the significant place authorship has in changing mainstream perceptions of race, and indeed sexuality. Particular studies of black representation in U.S., European and British popular culture, film and advertising (see Bogle, 1973; Gilroy, 1994; Leab, 1975; Nederveen Pieterse, 1992; Negra, 2001) illustrate that histories of blackness are very specific, and ultimately reveal that blackness in U.S. and European popular culture – as opposed to Australian – is not only more publicly visible, but more sexualised too (specifically see Bogle, 1973; Nederveen Pieterse, 1992; Negra, 2001). Slavery in the U.S., for instance, has greatly influenced the representation of black people in popular culture and the dominance of sexualised stereotypes of black men, in particular, in film and advertising history. Until the nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties, these public images were not authored – even seen to be authored – by black Americans themselves, but were instead produced by whites and intended for mass consumption. In the nineteen-seventies the film maker Melvin Van Peebles gained attention with the inaugural ‘blaxploitation’ film *Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971), which impressively drew upon the male black buck stereotype so dominant in earlier Hollywood
films. Blaxploitation filmmakers of that era railed against the white industry’s portrayal of black Americans as hyper-sexual, particularly the black buck character which represented the strongest threat against white civility through his muscular sexuality.

But it was through music that black artists were first seen to author their own profiles as ‘black and beautiful’. The black-owned music label Motown became the biggest independent record company in the mid sixties, with early international successes like The Supremes and The Four Tops, and later Stevie Wonder and Gladys Knight. With the emergence of soul music in the late nineteen-sixties, a new consciousness of black pride was also emerging. Singers like James Brown and Aretha Franklin helped popularise the ‘natural’ or ‘afro’ cut, instead of the older ironed and straightened styles which were seen to mimic Caucasian hair. The ‘afro’ became a statement of racial pride, the ‘black aesthetic’ also registered changes in popular fashion, body language such as hand-shakes, new vernacular expressions of ‘brotha’ and ‘sista’, modelled around a collective understanding of the term ‘Soul’ (Van Deburg, 1992, pp. 194-198). James Brown’s lyrics – ‘Say it loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud’ – became an anthem of change, articulating a new voice of American racial identity to black and white audiences. Music was at the centre of this new consciousness, which was undeniably authored by popular black musicians and producers.

Though black music was popular amongst white audiences for decades before the sixties, self-authored popular images of black sexiness initially gained prominence through black magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*. Describing the emergence of the black is beautiful movement, Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) suggests that a black American popular consciousness centred on notions of beauty and physical attractiveness first emerged through the conventionally heterosexual institution of beauty contests. Contests organised by and for black communities had been documented in the black press since as early as the eighteen-nineties (46), black contestants started to gain recognition in traditionally all-white contests during the early nineteen-sixties. Clintona Jackson won the International Freedom Festival Pageant in 1962 – she became the first black American to gain recognition in an event in which all previous winners were white. With the backing of advocacy groups like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), mainstream magazines *Jet* and *Ebony*, as well as *Our World*, *Tan* and *Sepia*, publicised the beauty pageant as a significant civil rights issue. The integrationist agenda sought to challenge white assumptions of feminine attractiveness in the media, which favoured ‘light skin and long straight hair’ (43). But related to this goal was the task of securing equal rights and recognition across a range of areas within American society. African American women
fought documented legal cases for employment opportunities as models, air stewardesses and within other areas of the hospitality and service industries (66-68).

Throughout the nineteen-seventies, the ‘black is beautiful’ movement became significantly more commercialised – initially to black consumers, then much later to mixed audiences. In the early seventies Ebony and Jet attracted advertisers like Duke ‘Afro’ hair-wax, Pepsi and Chevrolet all featuring sexy black models. The emergence of a new black consumer culture can be traced through these aesthetics, which sought to affirm blackness as a desirable commodity – a Chevy, for instance, offered its black driver a ‘dignity you can dig’. Soft-core pin-up calendar images of black models were increasingly common in Jet magazine, whilst Ebony deployed more marketable notions of sexiness through the promotion of make-up and hair-care products specifically for black women. In the mainstream white media, Jane Hoffman appeared as the first African-American model on the cover of Cosmopolitan in June 1969, and the cosmetics company Revlon started employing black models for their perfume television campaigns of the late nineteen-seventies (Summers, 2001, pp. 74-75). In 1984 Vanessa Williams claimed the Miss America title, and slowly black American women began appearing in other areas of mainstream representation – from film and television acting, advertising, through to fashion and later news presenting.

The public recognition of self-authorship entails that those bodies which were previously only sexualised (and thus authored by others), now become seen as sexy – publicly acknowledged as attractive. It is the public acknowledgement of authorship of sexuality that is most important to the presentation of these sexualised black bodies – separating sexiness from more prurient forms of sexual interest. Such acknowledgement provides a basis for the recognition of subjective control and agency, differentiating images from those which may otherwise be described as exploitative.

Commercial Indigenous Histories

Despite the success of a number of Indigenous musicians in Australia, there are very few examples of sexualised black performers comparable to the United States. In part this is due to the population differences, and the existence of a much larger African-American market, initially through which ‘black’-authored products and images gained public visibility. Secondly, the history of Indigenous representation in Australia is remarkably divergent from that of black America, where an enormous range of black characters in film and advertising were created with the aim of performing particular white-authored sexual narratives. As
outlined above, such a history provided a range of images from which black artists have appropriated for various commercial, political and individual purposes. An obvious example is the perverse ‘socio-scientific’ interest in African female sexuality in the nineteenth-century, in particular the hips and buttocks (the Hottentot Venus), which has been appropriated black musicians. The sexualised form of dancing that focuses on the ‘booty’, made popular by groups such as Destiny’s Child, can be seen as reclaiming these kinds of embodiments. Prior modes of racist production, which were owned and authored by white scientists, now inform a range of black self-styled meanings, culturally affirmed in the forms of dance and musical expression.

Although very different from American black forms of public representation, a brief history of successful, mainstream Indigenous performers can be identified. Jimmy Little, for instance, is regarded as Australia’s ‘first Indigenous pop star’ (Kennedy, 2003), who regularly performed his style of harmonious ballads on the Johnny O’Keefe Show and Bandstand. Little’s image is suave – he is presented in smart designer suits, and is always impeccably groomed for live appearances, concerts and album shoots. In 1960 his handsome looks helped secure a role in a Hollywood film, Shadow of the Boomerang. Despite his image as a lady’s man (confirmed by the duet ‘Bury Me Deep in Love’ with Kylie Minogue), Little’s style of music and image (including his publicised Christianity) does not lend itself well to sexualised dancing or a more commercial promotion of his body. Likewise, a number of Indigenous bands have gained commercial success in the mainstream over the past 20 years, such as No Fixed Address, Warumpi Band, Us Mob and Scrap Metal, though none have been promoted – in music videos or broader media advertising – through sexualised lead singers. Such can also be said of Yothu Yindi, and the more recent wave of Indigenous Hip Hop artists, such as Downsyde, Local Knowledge and Wilcannia Mob. In fact it was not until the late nineteen-nineties that Indigenous popular music started to incorporate a more sexualised content, with the female artists Shakaya and Christine Anu. In these instances elements of the ‘black is beautiful’ enterprise can be identified, particular through the R & B band Shakaya.

**Sexy Indigenous Music**

It is not until the mid nineteen-nineties that the first sexualised Indigenous singer emerges in the Australian mainstream media, and that is Christine Anu. Though she had been performing nationally with Paul Kelly since 1993, the debut album ‘Stylin’ Up’ (1995)
established Christine Anu as a successful mainstream Indigenous artist. The most famous song from this album, which Anu sang at the 2000 Sydney Olympics Games, is the Warumpi Band’s ‘My Island Home’. In these early days Anu does not speak of her musical authorship in any great detail, but through interviews it is clear that she is seen to author her own sexy image. In Juice (1995) magazine Anu is listed amongst the top ‘20 sexiest Australians’ and in her profile declares that upon first arriving in Sydney ‘I slutted around a bit’ (qtd in Hartley & McKee, 2000, p. 250). In more recent years, the R & B duo Shakaya have also achieved enormous commercial success in the Australian music charts as Indigenous performers. After releasing their first (self-titled) album in 2002 with Sony, the band toured Australia with Destiny’s Child and Kylie Minogue. Much like Christine Anu, Naomi Wenitong and Simone Stacey of Shakaya both speak about their music and their sexy profiles – in interviews and guest appearances, on television, radio and in print. These two artists are markedly different from previous mainstream Indigenous artists, in that they are recognised and promoted – to white and Indigenous audiences – as sexy.

Shakaya’s sexy image draws upon a number of African-American cultural signifiers. The most immediate influence is traceable in the R & B music itself, though visual and fashion cues can be seen in music videos. The single ‘Sublime’, for instance, features two muscular, shirtless black men playing basketball, who provide the reference material for the two girls who are seen singing in the background. On the cable music station Channel [V] (Matheson, 2002), Shakaya are interviewed about the inspiration for the single, and comment that ‘the song’s really just based on checking out a guy’. This public demonstration of Shakaya’s authorship, of their music and sexuality, forms an important basis for establishing who Shakaya are, and what their music represents to their audiences. Shakaya often speak about relationships as a source of inspiration for their songs, a theme which resonates with their female teen fan-base. ‘Stop Calling Me’, for instance is about having ‘ex-guys and ex-boyfriends and that ringing up afterwards’ (Debbs, 2002). The single ‘Sublime’ is described as a ‘love song’, written about the experience of ‘getting to know a guy, and how nice it could be’ (Matheson, 2002).

The treatment of relationships in Shakaya’s music shares similarities with American black female band Destiny’s Child, who sing about dating and the importance of showing respect for fellow girlfriends – or, in black parlance, ‘sistahood’. Shakaya’s ‘Cinderella’ video most strongly demonstrates this sense of cultural borrowing. The video is cut together with footage of the girls shopping for clothes, with clips of Naomi walking hand-in-hand with an uninterested-looking boyfriend, whose attention is continually diverted to a conversation
on his mobile phone. Simone walks past and tears her friend away, and together they sing the
chorus, ‘I’m not your Cinderella, You’re not my Rockafella’. Later, Naomi angrily revisits
her date – she strides into the restaurant to start rapping, ‘Yeah, what yo let me introduce
myself, I’m the girl you keep trying to play’.

In comparison to earlier ‘girl power’ groups such as the Spice Girls, Shakaya and Destiny’s Child draw upon a particular notion of ‘sistahood’ as an expression of solidarity with other young black women. Central to this
construction of heterosexual femininity is a shared sense of style and community, which
acknowledges the supportive bonds between young women when negotiating relationships
with boys.

A shared sense of black female identity is celebrated elsewhere through Shakaya’s
image. Music videos employ black models, break-dancers and basketball players; in terms of
fashion, the duo appropriate American black aesthetics, sometimes wearing bandanas and
excessive gold jewellery (or ‘bling’), for instance. Such cross-cultural influences can also be
seen in the public image of Anthony Mundine, who has recently released a number of rap
singles. As a boxer, Mundine’s most obvious borrowing from the American tradition – for
better or worse – is his political commentary through poetic slang, a style of public
engagement directly traceable to the former boxer and black civil rights campaigner
Mohamed Ali. These identities illustrate an emerging sexualised mainstream Indigenous
visibility, one which clearly draws upon different musical and stylistic elements of the Afro-
American tradition.

**Indigenous Authorship**

Besides music, it is interesting to note that there are a number of Indigenous
performers and producers increasingly choosing the ‘black is beautiful’ concept as a primary
mode of public engagement. Not only are these producers seen as authoring their own
sexualised imagery, but rather actively draw attention to their authorship in order to build
strategic political speaking positions. Several Indigenous producers have chosen to market
sexy Indigenous sports men through ‘Indigenous’ themed calendars, for instance. The Koori
Kids foundation recently produced its ‘League of Their Own Calendar 2006’, which features
’t2 of [rugby] league’s hottest players’ – footballers are photographed frontally naked,
looking desirably sweaty after workout sessions. According to the calendar’s producer, Larra
Busse, the project aims to raise awareness of Indigenous ‘sports role-models’ through rugby
league players. Produced by Vibe Australia, the ‘Deadly Dozen 2003 Calendar’ is another
which features shirtless, sexy sportsmen – Anthony Mundine, Carl Webb and Che Cokatoo-Collins. The calendar was used ‘as a way of raising funds to provide sporting equipment to rural and remote communities’. In these instances authorship is used to publicise particular needs of Indigenous communities. Through sport, and particularly working class sports like rugby league, Indigenous men are becoming recognised as sexy within the mainstream.²

Indigenous women have also produced calendars of sexualised Indigenous models as a means of engaging public interest and debate. Jinnali Productions was established as a ‘publishing and promotions’ business in 2000, by two Murri women – Dina Paulson and Liza Fraser-Gooda. In 2003 they released the ‘Jinnali – Women on Fire’ calendar, which became an effective promotional platform for the company’s modelling agency. The first Jinnali calendar was produced in 2001, and was prompted by statements made by visiting super model Naomi Campbell that there were no Indigenous models on Australian catwalks. The Jinnali calendars feature Indigenous models wearing bikinis, each posing in different locations significant to that particular model. In each profile, totemic symbols and tribal backgrounds are acknowledged. Since launching their first calendar, models have appeared at the ‘Tropicana’ Gold Coast Festival, posed for FHM (For Him Magazine), modelled at Melbourne’s Fashion Week, as well as the Melbourne Grand Prix. The stated aim of the company is to change the ways in which Indigenous people have traditionally been seen in the mainstream media:

For too long, Aborigines have been portrayed in society as stereo-typically uneducated, ugly and poverty stricken. Our calendar breaks down that image, and portrays Aboriginal women as beautiful, intelligent and confident with their own Aboriginality (Paulson & Fraser-Gooda, 2002).

The producers of recent Indigenous calendars, much like Anu and Shakaya, are increasingly recognised as authors of Indigenous forms of mainstream sexiness. Moreover, producers like Vibe Australia, Jinnali and Koori Kids actively publicise their authorship – as a means of soliciting public interest and, in the process, seeking recognition in the mainstream in ways which have previously excluded Indigenous voices.

Gavin Jones, the editor-in-chief of Vibe Australia, an Indigenous publicity, events and communication management organisation, evokes this sense of Indigenous potential when speaking of the ‘black is beautiful’ concept in relation to the promotion of new Indigenous talent:

We try to emphasise that side of things through Vibe – with Indigenous men and women in the media, it’s often easier to gain positive and lasting publicity by being
seen as sexy. To maintain that interest you often have to be right up front with how you look, and the ‘black is beautiful’ comes through in events like the Deadlies (Jones, 2006).

Jones’ comments allude to some of the practical limitations of sustaining a career as a popular media personality generally, not just an Indigenous one. This may be more applicable in popular music, which often foregrounds the youthful attractiveness of singers through visual display – album covers, posters and music videos. In recent years the Deadlies has attracted a great deal of television publicity, where artists like Shakaya and Anu perform live, but then feature in photographs and press-released magazine articles about the event. Indigenous sports stars, politicians and business leaders have also appeared in these contexts, often alongside prominent dancers and models, publicising Indigenous-made clothing and bikinis, for instance. In these cases, the ‘black is beautiful’ concept affirms an independent Indigenous identity in the public sphere, one which is desirable, and separate from a white sense of history. Through celebrations such as the Deadlies, and festivals like NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) and ‘The Dreaming’, ‘black is beautiful’ thus confers identification with a distinct sense of Indigenous history and culture. For contemporary white audiences, the public knowledge of these forms of authorship must ensure that current academic debates move beyond previous polarising claims of white exploitation and expropriation.

Authoring the future

In examining the contemporary careers of Shakaya and Anu, the public presentation of Indigenous sexualities is integral to a more rounded sense of mainstream Aboriginality in the twenty-first century. Though comparable in-roads are still being made in other areas of mainstream representation, such as soap and drama productions (King, 2009b), reality TV (King, 2009a) and news journalism (Hartley & McKee, 2000; Mickler, 1998a), it is becoming clear that contemporary Australian popular music provides an important forum for emerging modes of Indigenous authorship. Speaking of the media’s interest in their Aboriginality, for instance, Naomi and Simone comment how “receiving support from our mob (Aborigines) [...] is confidence building” (Shakaya qtd in Gregg, 2005). Publicly, they claim: “[w]e are proud of our [Aboriginal] culture” (ibid). The Indigenisation of the ‘black is beautiful’ philosophy, as a popular mode of Aboriginal promotion and engagement, has been successful in creating these new commercial forms of Indigenous authorship.
Long before these home-grown creative productions appeared, Australian audiences consumed black American music and popular culture, from early stars like James Brown and Aretha Franklin, to contemporary successors like Will Smith and Beyonce Knowles. The global appeal of these artists have consolidated the ‘black is beautiful’ aesthetic outside of the United States, not only as a means of celebrating physical looks and appearances but, more importantly, as a means of promoting a racially and politically significant identity. As the American tradition has developed, so too the selling of music, fashion and bodily styles has started to change the Australian mainstream. Recognition within white Australia of the ‘black is beautiful’ aesthetic has enabled Indigenous artists like Anu and Shakaya to appropriate, and further adopt particular cultural signifiers more appealing to Indigenous producers. ‘Black is beautiful’ appropriation has enabled mainstream Indigenous identities to emerge and, as a consequence, has promoted the reception of black forms of Indigeneity among white audiences.

The ‘black is beautiful’ creed has also drawn attention to the diversity of Indigenous people seeking employment in the Australian mainstream Creative Industries. For such creative producers, the public acknowledgement of Indigenous authorship, and thus agency, is a powerful form of recognition that offers to change the ways in which Indigenous artists and performers are engaged in creative productions. This does not mean that all forms of indigenous mainstream participation will forever cease to become unproblematic. Rather, acknowledgement must be given where it is due, for those artists seeking public visibility in areas which white audiences and critics have otherwise taken for granted. Sexual representations are often hard to ignore, but when they appear as proudly Indigenous, a new form of public participation and authorship must be critically acclaimed. Australian audiences and critics cannot ignore the changes that are beginning to introduce us to an emerging beautiful, black and Indigenous public sphere.

Notes

1 For comparison, Destiny’s Child’s more recent ‘Girl’ shows the trio defiantly walking down the street, arm-in-arm, after one of them breaks up with her boyfriend. To further illustrate the intertextual reach of ‘girl power’, it is worth mentioning that the video is captioned by a Sex in the City title sequence.

2 As the Koori Kids calendar sales suggests, this recognition might also be skewed towards a more rural fan base.
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