

ON THE MARGINS

Torres Strait Islander Women Performing Contemporary Music

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Abstract

Despite the increasing number of Torres Strait Islander musicians who are now recording their contemporary music, and aside from the work of a few notable exceptions (eg Beckett 1981; Neuenfeldt, 2002; Magowan and Neuenfeldt, 2005), Torres Strait Islander performers continue to remain marginalised in academic discourse. Further, what has been written about contemporary Indigenous Australian performance is largely about male performers—the voices of Torres Strait Islander women are noticeably absent. With reference to feminist theories of marginalisation and difference and drawing on first-hand interviews, this paper examines how Torres Strait Islander women negotiate issues of marginalisation, differentiation and identity through their music. It also considers what it means to Torres Strait Islander women to perform on the margins and the ways that contemporary music performance functions in this context as a site for resistance and affirmation of their Torres Strait Islander identities.

Keywords

Torres Strait Islanders, women, contemporary music, marginalisation

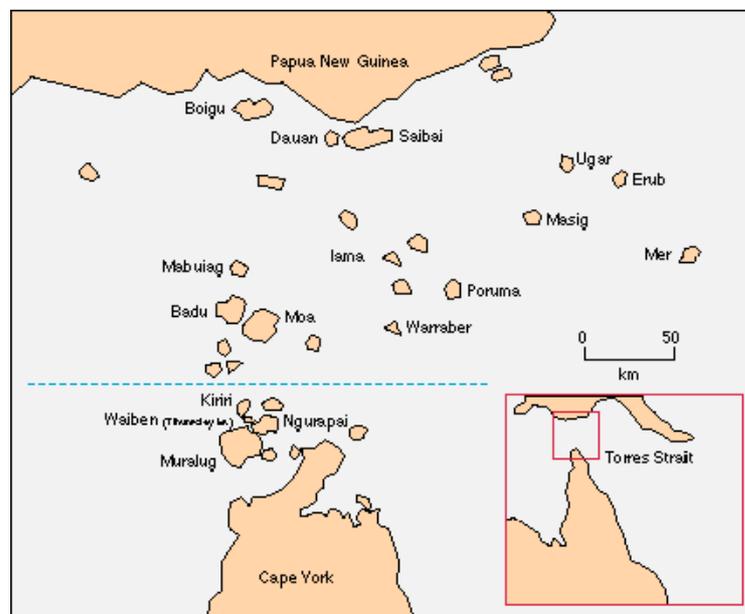


Figure 1: Map of the Torres Strait Islands
(<http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/sep2/hanna/hanbox1.html>)

Introduction

Drawing on theories of marginalisation, in this article I first provide an overview of the existing literature on Torres Strait music and the limited scholarship that focuses on Torres Strait Islander women and discuss how this is played out in mainstream popular culture. Drawing on first-hand interviews with Torres Strait Islander women performers and examples of their contemporary songs, I then examine how Torres Strait Islander women performers living in mainland Australia communicate their Torres Strait Islander identities and how they attempt to raise awareness in the wider community about the Torres Strait region. I also explore how they make connections to the Torres Strait Islands through contemporary song and in doing so feel less marginalised and separated from their families’ home islands. Conclusions will be drawn regarding what it means to Torres Strait Islander women to perform on the margins and the ways that contemporary music performance functions in this context as a site of resistance and for affirmation of their Torres Strait Islander identities. While there are a number of talented Torres Strait Islander women who perform contemporary music - including the (now disbanded) group the Mills Sisters, Leonora Adidi, Christine Anu, Helen Anu, Norah Bagiri, Ruth Ghee, Rachael Maza, Lisa Maza, Doreen Penseio, and Vickie Wedrat - this paper focuses on the songs and experiences of three mainland Torres Strait Islander contemporary performers: Toni Janke, Sarah Patrick and Lexine Solomon.

Torres Strait and Mainland Migration

The Torres Strait Islands are a cluster of islands bridging the sea between Cape York and Papua New Guinea (Figure 1). Beckett notes that:

It is always interesting to be among Torres Strait Islanders; their position facing Janus-like the two mainlands of Australia and Papua New Guinea, their rich and varied environment, their dynamic culture, the complexities of their position in the Strait and recently on the mainland as Australia’s other Indigenous minority. (2004: 2)

As Beckett suggests, Torres Strait Islanders have a complex position as Australia’s *other* minority and although Australia officially recognises Torres Strait Islanders as a distinct Indigenous people, they are often overshadowed by the more numerous Aboriginal people (2004: 2). The term ‘Aboriginal’ refers to Indigenous Australians whose culture is tied to country on mainland Australia (numbering 366,665), while ‘Torres Strait’ describes those Indigenous Australians whose country is the islands in the Torres Strait (26,240) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Statistically many identify as both Torres Strait Islander *and* Aboriginal (17,630), and in total Indigenous Australian people comprise approximately 2.4 per cent of the national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Torres Strait Islander academic Nakata points out that Torres Strait Islanders have historically been a “minority within the Indigenous minority in Australia... not only were they spoken about as ‘Aborigines’ but always by people other than themselves” (1993: 334; also see Shnukal, 2004; Sharpe, 1993).

Although Islanders are recognised as having strong ties to the Torres Strait Islands, many moved to mainland Australia to further their education and employment opportunities after World War Two (Barnes, 1998: 28). Approximately two thirds of Torres Strait Islanders now live on mainland Australia, yet many maintain connections with the Torres Strait Islands¹. As Lawe Davies and Neuenfeldt note, “herein lies the essential paradox of the diasporic imagination: although the geographic space known as the Torres Strait is a group of islands between Australia and Papua New Guinea, the majority of its population are mainland based, not island-based, Australians” (2004: 138)

I will discuss further what it means to Toni Janke, Lexine Solomon and Sarah Patrick to have a Torres Strait Islander identity on the mainland later in this paper.

My Research Approach

The research data used in this paper is drawn from several sources, including first-hand interviews with Torres Strait Islander women performers, recordings of their music, books and journals, and media articles. The examples of songs by Torres Strait Islander women discussed in this paper are drawn from recordings. The focus here is on the lyrics rather than the music and these texts are used to illustrate the performers’ statements and to demonstrate the links between the performers’ spoken words and their songs. Interviews involved in-depth discussions with three Torres Strait Islander women who perform contemporary music, Janke, Patrick and Solomon, and extracts from these are included here in an attempt to privilege the voices of the performers and as a means of dialogic interaction to develop an understanding of how Torres Strait Islander women performers express and reflect on their identities through contemporary music. I had previously interviewed the performers during my doctoral research, which focused on Indigenous women and their contemporary music and illustrated how Indigenous Australian women performers are enacting new types of agency to negotiate their way through, around and over one-dimensional Aboriginalist² constructions of Indigenous performance.

I became interested in pursuing research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who perform contemporary music in 2000 when I undertook a course on ethnomusicology during my fourth year of a dual Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Queensland. Much of my initial interest in ethnomusicology was due to my teacher on this course, Liz Mackinlay, a senior lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland who has worked extensively with Indigenous Australian women performers. Mackinlay, who would later become my PhD principle supervisor, opened my mind, eyes and ears to the study of music as a component of culture, and to the complexities of studying music in cross-cultural contexts. The following year I undertook another course with Mackinlay titled ‘Indigenous Australian Women’s Music and Dance’. This was the first time I had participated in Indigenous women’s performances of any kind and it required me to move beyond the boundaries of what I knew and was familiar with. As I danced, listened and talked to Indigenous Australian women performers I was struck by how little I really knew about their performances in general. Through observation and participation in the course, I began to gain an understanding of the historical, social, and political contexts relating to Indigenous Australian women’s music. The course also led me to begin to think critically about the ethics of representing Indigenous Australian women’s performance and my place in this discourse as a young non-Indigenous female.

I decided that if I was going to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between gender, music, and politics in the Indigenous Australian context, I needed to continue studying and working with Indigenous Australian women performers. My PhD research then began and over three years I interviewed twenty Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music across Australia. Inevitably I formed closer research relationships with some performers than others, particularly the performers who either live in or near Brisbane, or who have family in Brisbane, because of the opportunity to meet with them more regularly, and to invite them to The University of Queensland to perform and take workshops. Janke, Patrick and Solomon are three of the performers with whom I have maintained close contact, and during our discussions they have often highlighted how Torres Strait Islander women have been marginalised in representations of Indigenous Australian performance and have struggled to have their voices heard. This article reflects my continuing research relationships with them, which have grown into long lasting friendships and new research collaborations.

Literature on Torres Strait Islander Music

While there has been a long history of research on Aboriginal music more broadly (eg, Wild, 1984; Ellis, 1985; Barwick, 1989; Knopoff, 1997; Dunbar-Hall, 1997; Ryan, 1998; Magowan, 2001; Corn, 2002; Mackinlay, 2003, Marett, 2005), Torres Strait Islander performers continue to

be overlooked in the academic and musicological landscape. Early research on Torres Strait Islander performance is found in the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* (Haddon 1901–1935) in relation to funeral and initiation ceremonies. Other discussions of music are found in missionary reports (eg, Macfarlane, 1917–1959), encyclopaedia entries (Koch, 1998; Wild, 1998) and journalistic accounts (see Hayward, 2001a). Laade (1977), Beckett (eg 1981, 1987, 2001), Hata (1981, 1983), York (eg 1990, 1997, 1998, 2000; York and Lui 2003) and Genova (1991) have recorded and documented Torres Strait Islanders’ musical culture, while Lawrence (eg 1998, 2004) has examined musical change and contemporary Christian songs in the eastern Torres Strait.

Beckett (1981) was one of the first scholars to discuss contemporary music performed by Torres Strait Islanders. He writes that there are few Torres Strait Islanders “who do not sing and the great majority dance... music and dancing pervade their lives and are the objects of consuming interest and pleasure” (1981: 1). Further he discusses the creativity of Torres Strait Islanders and mentions songs about the movement of luggers, military service, weddings and the state of the sea (ibid: 8-9). Since then a number of scholars have written about Torres Strait Islander contemporary music and Neuenfeldt is the main contributor to this discourse. Neuenfeldt (2002) discusses how the musical expression of Torres Strait Islanders is related to the notion of place, “country”, longing and belonging. Elsewhere Neuenfeldt (2001) focuses on the cultural production of a CD disc recording of Torres Strait Islander music, *Strike Em! Contemporary Voices from the Torres Strait*, and the role of music producers as cultural brokers who use music to mediate between different cultures. Neuenfeldt and Costigan (2004) discuss how Torres Strait Islander songwriters incorporate traditional dance chants within contemporary songs while Lawe Davies and Neuenfeldt (2004) examine the thematic motifs of diasporic Torres Strait Islander songwriters.

Hayward (2001b: 29-46) also explores diasporic themes in his study of the repertoire of Torres Strait Islander songs performed in Queensland’s Whitsunday islands between the 1920–1950s and importantly mentions the music of a number of Torres Strait Islander women performers such as The Mills Sisters, Rita Mills and Dulcie, Sophie and Heather Pitt. Magowan and Neuenfeldt’s edited collection *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, Song and Dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land* (2005) interweaves “disciplinary, thematic and geographical perspectives” to explore how local music and dance genres in the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land have been influenced by “missionary, institutional, popular and global influences” (ibid: 4). Within the collection, Nakata and Neuenfeldt (2005) trace the origins of *Taba Naba*, a popular Torres Strait Island song, to a United States source and suggest reasons for its migration to the Torres Strait and its transformation into an icon of Torres Strait music and culture. Elsewhere in the same text, Mullins and Neuenfeldt (2005) - and also see Neuenfeldt and Mullins, (2001) - explore the changes that occurred in the public music culture of Thursday Island from 1900 to 1945. Drawing on historical photographs, newspapers, magazines and travel accounts from the early 1900s, Mullins and Neuenfeldt illustrate how many different people shaped the unique musical culture still found on Thursday Island. While this might seem like a significant body of literature, comparative to the discourse focusing on Aboriginal performers it is very limited and very little of this research mentions Torres Strait Islander women.

Literature about and by Torres Strait Islander Women

Shnukal writes that Torres Strait Islanders are “a minority within a minority and the women a minority again—triplely invisible” (1999: 180) and certainly there is very little literature that focuses on the experiences of Torres Strait Islander women. Drawing on interviews with almost 200 Torres Strait Islander women, Osborne (1997) documents women’s experiences during the Pacific War from 1942–1945 and illustrates the isolation, alienation and poverty that Torres Strait Islander women endured. She also shows the importance of women’s skills and knowledge of fishing, food gathering, house building, medicine preparing as well as in being domestic and store workers outside of the home. In privileging women’s voices, Osborne notes that Torres Strait Islander women’s knowledge has been historically “devalued and suppressed” and that “it

is only by the ‘speaking out’ of marginalised women that members of the dominant western societies will be better informed about the histories of their own nations” (ibid: 2). Barnes (1998) explores how Torres Strait Islander women living on the mainland maintain their identity. Using a survey carried out with fifteen Torres Strait Islander women, Barnes concludes that, “living far from the Torres Strait makes it harder to maintain cultural continuity but many of those surveyed probably shifted to the mainland to further their education and employment opportunities” (1998: 28).

In the first full length publication focusing on Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives: Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History* (2004), McRose Elu provides a Torres Strait Islander woman’s perspective on religion. She writes that while those who have the most social and political power in the Torres Strait are men:

women are the keepers of the household, the nurturers and managers of the family. We have a very important position... as homemakers, gardeners, food-gatherers, child-bearers and comforters and we play a major role in maintaining social harmony.
(2004: 140)

Reviewing *Woven History, Dancing Lives*, Torres Strait Islander journalist Rhianna Patrick notes that this inclusion of an Islander woman’s perspective is “something that isn’t seen very often at all in academic writings such as these” (2004: online). While a number of Aboriginal women have written their life stories (eg Tucker, 1983; Simon, 1987; Morgan, 1987; Ward, 1988; Huggins and Huggins, 1994; Pilkington, 1996) there are comparatively few Torres Strait Islander women’s autobiographies. Ellie Gaffney’s (1989) autobiography *Somebody Now* tells of her experiences as the first Torres Strait Islander to become a qualified nursing sister. Terri Janke’s (2005) semi-autobiographical novel *Butterfly Song* explores the experiences of an Indigenous female lawyer who is drawn to Thursday Island, the home of her grandparents, and persuaded by her family to take on her first case. *Butterfly Song* points to the disjunction between island and city life and moves from the pearling days of the Torres Strait to the ebb and flow of big-city life. Woven throughout the discourse about and by Torres Strait Islander women is a theme of marginalisation and the struggles for recognition and identity that Torres Strait Islander women experience.

In/visibility of Torres Strait Islander Women Musicians

A number of the Indigenous women performers I interviewed mentioned that Torres Strait Islander Christine Anu is one of the few Indigenous women performers who is continually visible in the mainstream media. Toni Janke notes, “there’s no other Aboriginal/Islander women that has the calling card that she [Christine] now has” (p.c. October 2004). Similarly, Melbourne based performer Monica Weightman questions, “who have we got besides Christine Anu that’s actually up there on that level?” (pc July 2004). Christine Anu’s performance of the song *My Island Home*³ at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games’ closing ceremony was a significant celebration of Torres Strait identity on an international stage and attempted to celebrate localised Torres Strait Islander culture and identity as part of the Australian national imaginary.

Anu’s own discourse surrounding the performance illustrated that she viewed her performance as an opportunity to illustrate the richness of Torres Strait culture and express her pride in her Indigeneity (*Australia: Warts and all* documentary, 2000) and she proclaimed it her “best gig to date” (Barclay, 2000: 112). Certainly her performance at the closing ceremony was also an opportunity for Anu to promote her own image and increase her international profile. On the surface Anu’s performance of *My Island Home* created a space where a diverse range of people could celebrate a sense of national unity. However, as Godwell asserts, in large international events like the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games “every conceivable distinguishing feature is seized upon, repackaged, and subsequently launched as a unique quality peculiar to these particular games” (2000: 246). This was evident in Anu’s performance where the white turtles, which were painted on the backs of the dancers, were presented simultaneously as a unique, distinguishing

feature of the Torres Strait Islands and as a national symbol in conjunction with this globalised Olympic event.

Yet how many people in the audience viewed her performance as an illustration of Torres Strait Islander identity? Certainly other performances that followed Anu’s at the Games generated much more media attention and interest, such as when non-Indigenous performers Midnight Oil wore black t-shirts with the word ‘Sorry’ emblazoned on them and Savage Garden’s lead singer, Darren Hayes wore a t-shirt with an Aboriginal flag printed on it. Reed notes that there was a “general silence regarding Christine Anu” in media responses to the closing ceremony while Midnight Oil “received sustained and at times contested attention” (2002: 17). In this way, Anu’s performance could be viewed as being sidelined by the media through the focus on other, more politicised performances by non-Indigenous male performers at the Olympics.

Torres Strait Islander Women and Contemporary Music

A small number of scholars have focused their research on the usage of forms of contemporary musical expression amongst Indigenous Australian women musicians (Mackinlay, 1992; Streit [Warburton], 1994; Streit-Warburton, 1993, 1995; Reed, 2002; Barney, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). While there has been no published research that concentrates specifically on Torres Strait Islander women contemporary performers, some articles briefly discuss Torres Strait Islander women who perform in contemporary music contexts. Perhaps unsurprisingly most of these articles mention Christine Anu. Mitchell suggests in passing that Christine Anu was subject to sexist and racist treatment by the music industry at the 1995 Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA) awards when her award for Best Aboriginal/Islander album was excluded from the televised section of the event (1996: 188). Also considering the representation of Christine Anu, Beniuk (1995) includes a short examination of media descriptions of her. Hayward (1998) discusses Anu in relation to her collaboration with non-Indigenous producer and songwriter David Bridie on her 1995 album *Stylin’ Up*. He suggests that Christine Anu’s album illustrates that Torres Strait Island folk songs can successfully be included on recordings “if buttressed by the presence of more mainstream and, above all, commercially successful, pop material” (1998: 193). In their exploration of the migration and Indigenisation of *Taba Naba*, Nakata and Neuenfeldt (2005) mention the contemporary recordings of the Torres Strait Islander Mills Sisters and Christine Anu as examples of how the song has changed and varied over time. Developing this discussion, I examined how Christine Anu’s performance of *My Island Home* at the closing ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games celebrated an increasingly reconciled national identity, yet at the same time worked to conceal the history of race relations and contemporary political debates about social justice and human rights for Indigenous Australians (Barney, 2005). This limited literature on contemporary music by Torres Strait Islander women parallels the sparse literature on Torres Strait Islander women generally.

Marginalisation

The concept of marginalisation is prominent in the work of some contemporary feminist scholars who are concerned with the relationships of the margin to the centre in the production of knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1987; Brown, 1989; hooks, 1984, 1990). Along with feminist standpoint theorists (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987), these scholars make the claim that studying those who have been denied access to power will inform our knowledge of the centre in new and important ways. Tucker defines marginalisation as “that complex and disputatious process by means of which certain people and ideas are privileged over others at any given time” (1990: 7). However, hooks writes that “marginality is much more than a site of deprivation... it is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (1990: 342). Further, hooks suggests that “understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people” (1990: 343). Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) calls for marginality to be used as a starting point rather than an ending point in order to explore the tools of resistance. Minh-ha also points out that “the story of marginality has taken a long time to be

untold. It is neither easy nor difficult, but it can’t be stopped in its collective singularities and kaleidoscopic changes” (1990: 332). Spivak points to the “irreducibility of the margin” and suggests that, “the relationship between margin and centre is intricate and interanimating” (1990: 383).

Indigenous Australian women writers also speak of the marginalisation they experience in their everyday lives. Huggins (1998) notes that Indigenous Australian women “will always be on the margins” and are often positioned as:

more sensual but less cerebral, more interesting perhaps but less intellectual, more passive but less critical, more emotional but less analytical, more exotic but less articulate, more withdrawn but less direct, more cultured but less stimulating, more oppressed but less political. (1998: 36)

Similarly, Moreton-Robinson suggests the colonial and historical Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian women “as being sexually available and easily accessed” (2000: 170) have had very real consequences for Indigenous women, leaving them even more marginalised than Indigenous men.

hooks suggests that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (1990: 149) yet in the context of Torres Strait Islander performers there are further layers of complexity to this marginalisation. They are not “part of the whole” but could be viewed as a margin *within* a margin. Positioned between Australia and Papua New Guinea, the Torres Strait Islands are at times disassociated and marginalised from Australia and from Aboriginal people. For example, Beckett notes, “how often have we gone to a display or exhibition of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture’, and found the Islanders unrepresented?” (2004: 2). At other times the Torres Strait Islands are aligned with Papua New Guinea rather than mainland Australia. As Janke states, “there’s a tendency for people, still, not to see the Torres Strait as part of the broader Indigenous identity... you have to remind people that it’s not part of Papua New Guinea” (p.c. September 2006). This has the effect of disallowing Torres Strait Islander identities to connect or align with mainland Australia. Another layer of this marginalisation is that mainland-born Torres Strait Islander performers can feel disconnected from the Torres Strait Islands themselves because of their physical distance from them. As Patrick notes, “You actually don’t have a homeland that you can go back to” (p.c. October 2004).

Torres Strait Islander women performers are even further marginalised, particularly in academic literature and popular culture. Janke explains this in the following way:

Indigenous music itself is such a tiny little niche, and then to talk about Indigenous women’s music is even a tiniest tiniest niche. Then you talk about Torres Strait Islander women, you’re not even on the map! (p.c. September 2006)

It is thus appropriate to adapt the concept of marginality from feminist theory to music performance in order to make the absent present. Drawing on feminist ideas of marginality as a site for resistance I shall use these to examine how three Torres Strait Islander women performers express their sense of belonging through music, and use music as a site for resistance and affirmation of their Torres Strait Islander identities.

Toni Janke: Jewel of the North

Gold Coast based performer Toni Janke explores a diverse range of styles and instrumentation on her two albums *The Brink* (2001) and *Jewel of the North* (2004). Like numerous Indigenous Australian people (Fuary, 1993), Toni identifies as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and describes her identity in the following way:

I am Wuthathi and Meriam, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. On my mother’s side Aboriginal Wuthathi people from the eastern side of Cape York Peninsula and also Torres Strait on her side. My father’s side is from Murray Island in the Torres Strait but I grew up, three or four generations, in Cairns. My family moved to Canberra, I lived in Sydney for years and now live on the Gold Coast. I haven’t lived in the communities from which I come but that’s my ancestry and heritage. (p.c. September 2006)



Figure 2: Toni Janke Performing at Woodford Folk Festival 2003
(Photo by the author, 30 December 2003, Woodford, Queensland, Australia)

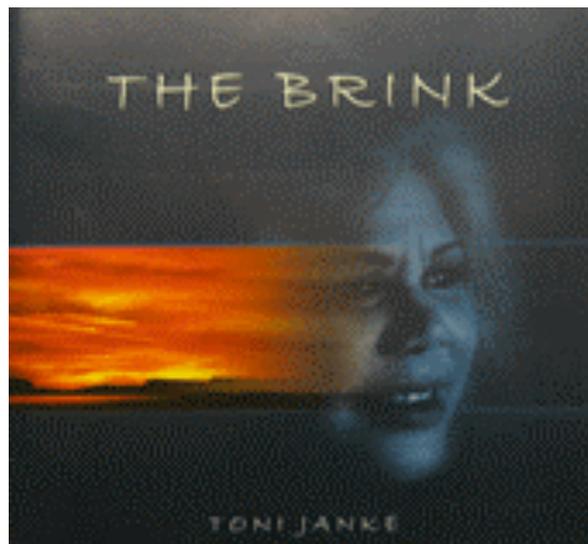


Figure 3: Toni Janke -*The Brink* CD front cover (2001)

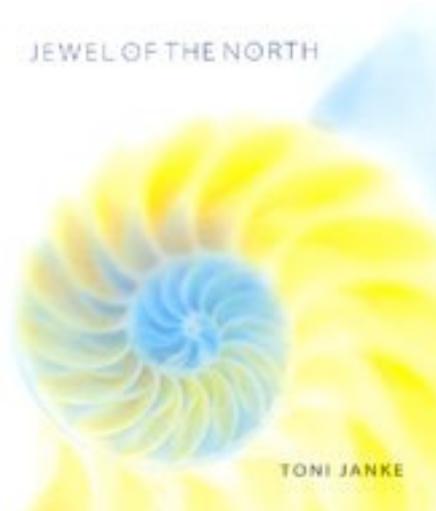


Figure 4: Toni Janke – *Jewel of the North* CD front cover (2004)

Further discussing her identity, she notes that:

I think I'm lucky, because I have connections to both sides. It's quite typical and common in North Queensland, where a lot of people are what they call ATS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander... I think it's an advantage actually having the different cultural background... My upbringing is probably more Islander than Aboriginal because I grew up with relations who were Islander and cousins and yet I don't see it as one or the other or different. I just obviously see it as an integration of both cultures. (p.c. September 2006)

Her second album *Jewel of the North* was written as a dedication to her upbringing in North Queensland and reflects her respect for her heritage:

Jewel of the North, the album, it's a dedication to growing up, not in the Torres Strait, but growing up in North Queensland. But it's also a tribute to my ancestry and my grandparents and parents. It's sung in English obviously but reflecting a respect for that heritage and that past. (ibid)

In the title track from the album Janke sings of her childhood in North Queensland, running through the canefields and sitting at campfires at night:

*Jewel of the North, shimmering Pearl
Mother of God, sweet baby girl
We ran through the canefields on fire
The mountains around us seemed higher
And then we heard the sound of a rare, rare bird
When you called my name*

Through her song *Jewel of the North* Janke is able to express her identity and her experiences growing up in Cairns. Further discussing her identity as an Aboriginal/Islander woman living on mainland Australia she states:

*I didn't grow up learning [well-known Torres Strait song] *Taba Naba* and things like that, even though I had family all around. I write as an individual coming from that heritage and that background...but I don't specifically say 'I'm going to write an Islander song today'. (ibid)*

Janke is able to resist audience expectations by only incorporating sounds that she feels are culturally appropriate while at the same time contemporary music has provided her with the tools to connect with her Indigenous heritage. She is aware of how the Torres Strait has been historically marginalised and notes that:

In the early 1990s when I was working for [then Federal Labor Minister] Robert Tickner... we wrote a letter to the Governor General asking to change the portfolio name from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs which it was labelled in the mid 1970s to the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs... that went through and the people in the Torres Strait, the governing bodies, it was something they'd long wanted... to be recognised formally. (ibid)

Janke believes that knowledge in the wider community about the Torres Strait is growing yet she notes that:

Even up until probably ten years ago people would say 'where's the Torres Strait?' - even now. People don't realise it's actually a group of Islands, where it is, and Indigenous people come from there. (ibid)

Janke resists this perception by singing and speaking about her experiences as an Indigenous woman through her work as Indigenous Education Officer for twelve schools on the Gold Coast. She states when working with children in schools “I take the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait flags with me everywhere I go” (ibid). Through her music she is able to educate audiences and express her identity as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman.

Sarah Patrick: Where Itzat!

Sarah Patrick (Figure 5) is the chief songwriter of hip-hop and R&B duo MIZ (with Marsha Chang-Tave) and specialises in “stirring sounds, lyrics and rap” (Brisbane Writers Festival 2004 programme note). Patrick describes herself in the following way:

I've got two distinct sides of my family. My mum's white Australian, so I've got that side of the family, and then there's my dad's side which is Torres Strait. So I can see both sides of the argument, and it's like people go 'oh, but you're only half blah, blah, blah'. Which I'm like, well the differentiating fact of that is that: (1) I know my family, (2) I know my community, (3) I've grown up in my community, so thus I've learnt the language, the culture, the way we see things, our perspective, um, and that's probably how I describe my cultural identity. (p.c. October 2004)

According to Patrick, MIZ’s music mixes “politics and fun” and some of their songs, such as *Where Itzat*, incorporates Torres Strait Creole⁴ as lyrics:

*Though you best known for your sookin⁵
Em numba wan good-lookin
Em kala of the earth hot like a kaup-mauri cookin⁶
How em make me run kala-wan
With a smile like the sun you's a whole lotta fun
The kinda wantocs⁷ sistagels chase at NAIDOCs⁸
You's are black-tastic, black-tabolous
Black-wonderful, black-marvellous
Native as platypus yea I like that
Black is where it's at – I love black boys yo and they love me!*



Figure 5: MIZ - Marsha Chang-Tave and Sarah Patrick
(from www.abc.net.au/.../blackarts/music/s1418317.htm)

Patrick points out that:

What you’ll find with most Indigenous rap is that instead of using Afro-American terms I do it in Island language terms, so instead of saying ‘brother’ we say ‘bala’, like gumma is, well, in the city it means just a good looking person - you see a nice looking guy it’s like “Oh gumma!” However when you go back up North into the islands it still just means like a beautiful woman, like a girl, but that’s changing [laughs]. (p.c. October 2004)

Patrick reflects that she finds it difficult to communicate her Torres Strait Islander identity through song because of the lack of general knowledge about the Torres Strait:

It’s hard to express a Torres Strait identity [in music] because not many people know where it is so most people think I’m Aboriginal and then I say I’m Torres Strait and they say ‘Where’s that? All the Islander people know who you are, ‘you’re such and such’s daughter’. You’re known in your community... Culturally the Torres Strait is very strong... you feel marginalised in the sense that no one knows where the hell the Torres Strait is... but strong within your community, youse all know who you are, youse all know the songs, you still get acknowledged. (p.c. September 2006)

Beckett notes that, “to be an Islander you must have an island, but for the mainland-born this ‘island’ has to be discovered all over again, and imagined” (2004: 13). Like Janke, Patrick grew up on mainland Australia and points out the complexities for some mainland Islanders who do not have formal ties to the Islands, which further creates a sense of marginalisation:

Now if you live in the suburb of Redhill [an inner city suburb of Brisbane] that’s different from living on an island that looks a particular way - that has a particular dialect. (ibid)

For her forthcoming album, Patrick plans to collaborate with well-known Torres Strait Islander performer Seaman Dan and hopes to encourage other mainland-living Torres Strait Islanders to connect with the Islands:

I would like to include traditional songs from Seaman Dan in between each of the songs, to introduce each of the songs... pointing back to Torres Strait as part of your influence... also for all those urban people who are living in the city and who aren't necessarily living on the Islands a lot of the time it's a good thing for them to throw on and feel like they have some connection to that and secondly I'd like to do that so then I'll know more about the Torres Strait writing process. (ibid)

Patrick is using her music to make a strong connection with her Torres Strait Islander identity and in doing so resists singular essentialist notions of Indigeneity. As Dodson argues, essentialised definitions of Indigeneity continue to be imposed on Indigenous people today and “there would be few urban Aboriginal people who have not been labelled as culturally bereft, fake or ‘part Aboriginal’ and then expected to authenticate their Aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd ‘traditional’ experiences” (2003: 28). Yet Patrick, like other Indigenous Australian women performers, is aware of and knows about these Aboriginalist constructions of what constitutes a “real” Torres Strait Islander and contemporary music provides her with a space where she can resist and challenge such constructs and enter into a process of reflection on her identity. Music performance also allows Patrick to bring Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture in from the margins in order to educate non-Indigenous people about the diversity of Indigenous Australian people and identities.

Lexine Solomon: I Belong

Lexine Solomon’s album *This Is Woman* (2002) is a reflective, personal collection of songs that deals with her family history, relationships, Gospel influences, and her identity as a Torres Strait Islander woman. Like Janke and Patrick, Solomon (Figure 7) was raised on mainland Australia but sustains ties to the Torres Strait Islands. She describes herself in the following way:

I’m Indigenous and raised by a Torres Strait Islander father – on the mainland – it’s important that you can relate to me – as I am not raised in the Islands so I only have a kindergarten understanding of language but my understanding of culture and custom, and some of the traditions make up who I am because of my father. There’s lots of cultural ties back to the Islands that I have and without ‘living’ parents, my connection is only as strong as I make it. (p.c. September 2004)

Discussing the importance of her identity as a Torres Strait Islander woman, Solomon states:

To me it’s my tie to why I am! I belong! You know, there’s that whole link back to my father – there are people who know me because of him – they relate to me even after he’s been gone twenty-plus years now. It’s a link to people who are still living, the old people and their families. (p.c. November 2004)

Solomon’s identity is most prominently expressed through music in her song *I Belong*:

*Generations may come and go
Still the memories linger on
But the stories tell me who I am
There is truth in the words they spoke
It’s not a tale and it’s not a joke
These words tell me why I am
I am the land, I am the trees
I am the sand, and the seas
My people they walked this land and I belong*

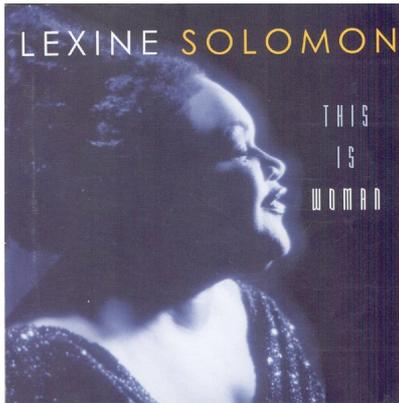


Figure 6: Lexine Solomon - *This is Woman* CD front cover (2002)



Figure 7: Lexine Solomon
(Photo by the author, 4 November 2004, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia)

The notes to her CD state that *I Belong* is about “heritage and a yearning to identify with people and culture and how generations carry memories and stories handed down through me.” In October 2001, *I Belong* was the theme song for the inaugural National Gospel Happening in Canberra and Solomon points out that:

I’ve taken that around the world actually, and a lot of races have said that it’s like it was written for them. I took it to New Zealand, to New York and Chicago and sang it for different races of people... I took it to the Islands, and they were like, ‘this is about us!’ You know, so that’s been pretty amazing, yeah. (p.c. November 2004)

Using song as a medium, Solomon has been able to express her identity as a Torres Strait Islander woman and show her respect for her family and ancestors. Solomon notes that, although she was raised and lives on the mainland, being Torres Strait Islander is “still a part of my heritage. And I still should be able to have access to it even though I live in the today world” (p.c. November 2004). Solomon uses her music to connect with her Torres Strait Islander heritage and to feel less marginalised herself from the Torres Strait.

Janke, Patrick and Solomon are all aware of the lack of knowledge in the general community about the Torres Strait and emphasise how Torres Strait Islander women have been marginalised and their struggles for acknowledgement. They highlight that there are many exceptionally talented Torres Strait Islander women who have not yet received recognition in the media and academia and they all work to educate audiences about the achievements of Torres Strait Islander women. Janke, Patrick and Solomon illustrate the complexities for Torres Strait Islanders who have been born and have grown up on the mainland and they use music to explore their connections to the Torres Strait and their identities as Torres Strait Islander women living on mainland Australia.

Conclusion

hooks states that:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back”, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice. (1989: 9)

For hooks, the act of speaking from the margins is a gesture of resistance that challenges, threatens and silences those who exercise oppressive power. She maintains that “speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless — our beings defined and interpreted by others” (hooks, 1989: 12). Torres Strait Islander women performers like Janke, Patrick and Solomon are using music to “talk back” against the ways Torres Strait Islander women have been marginalised historically by taking the stage to perform their music and attempting to raise awareness about the Torres Strait region.

All three of the performers were born and raised on mainland Australia and are part of the diasporic population of approximately two thirds of all Islanders “separated by time, place and situation from their origins” (Davies and Neuenfeldt, 2004: 137). Yet like other mainland-born Torres Strait Islanders, it remains essential to Janke, Patrick and Solomon to maintain connections with the Torres Strait Islands. They use their songs to celebrate and make ties with the Torres Strait and affirm for other mainland Torres Strait Islanders that constructing an Islander identity is possible and can be lived out through music. The writings of Torres Strait Islander women highlight the struggles for recognition and identity that mainland-born Torres Strait Islander women face and Janke, Patrick and Solomon are attempting to bring the experiences of mainland Torres Strait Islander women into the foreground through song. As Patrick notes, Torres Strait Islander women:

should be acknowledged because in Australian history they are the forgotten people. Their invisibility and misrepresentation in relation to Australia’s nationhood is particularly important to Indigenous people as we are still fighting those things to this day. (p.c. January 2006).

Janke notes that it is:

surprising there haven’t been more Torres Strait women come out professionally as recorded artists because there’s so many talented women singing. Guitar and performing or dancing is so Torres Strait Islander. It’s just built into culture and most people are really, really good at it... it’s a sense of belonging. (p.c. September 2006)

Neuenfeldt (2001: 135) notes that there is an increasing number of Torres Strait Islander musicians who are now recording their contemporary music and the future looks positive for Torres Strait Islander performers, and women in particular, to continue to receive more recognition in future publications on Indigenous Australian music⁹.

Contemporary music provides Torres Strait Islander women with a powerful podium from which to educate non-Indigenous people about the diversity of Indigenous people and performance. When Indigenous Australian women perform, their voices and performances are attempting to educate non-Indigenous people about the diverse identities, songs, and musical styles performed by Indigenous women musicians. Their performances and recordings are exciting and exhilarating not only because they are talented musicians but because they provide potent examples of the ways Indigenous Australian women are able to resist Aboriginalist constructions of Indigeneity to self-define more diverse and dynamic identities as Indigenous Australian women.

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Endnotes:

1. On the Australian mainland, there are large Torres Strait Islander communities in capital cities including Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne as well as regional centres like Townsville, Cairns and Mackay.
2. Drawn from Said’s (1978) theory of Orientalism, the term “Aboriginalism” has been used by scholars in the Australian context to refer to specific ways of representing Indigenous Australian people. Broadly defined, it refers to the tendency of (largely white) scholars to use “culture” as the key analytical tool for knowing social difference and for explaining issues in colonial contexts (McConaghy, 2000:43). Music performance is one arena where Aboriginalism is visibly and sonically at play.
3. While mainstream audiences mostly associate the song *My Island Home* with Torres Strait Islander performer Christine Anu, the song was originally composed by non-Indigenous musician, Neil Murray - a member of the Central Australian Warumpi Band (see Barney 2005 for further discussion)
4. Lawrence and Lawrence note that Torres Strait Kriol (Creole) developed from pidgin languages brought to the Torres Strait by Pacific Islanders from the 1850s on and has become a significant language in the Torres Strait Islands (Lawrence and Lawrence 2004, 19). They also highlight that Kriol is a common language used by Islanders in daily life and is assuming a position of cultural marker among Islanders who are “proud of their heritage and speak Kriol to indicate to others their cultural, social and linguistic associations” (2004: 20).
5. *Sookin’* – timidity.
6. *Kaup-mauri* – a cooking pit in the ground.
7. *Wantoc* - a person of a shared community background (literally, someone who speaks the same language – ‘one talk’).
8. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day of Celebration.

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Discography of contemporary recordings by Torres Strait Islander women performers

This table attempts to list Torres Strait Islander women performers and their commercially released recordings of contemporary music. This list is only preliminary and will be developed further as research on this topic progresses.

Name	Year	Type	Title	Label (if known)
Anu, Christine	1993	CD/Cass	Last Train (with Paul Kelly)	White Records
	1993	CD	Sing your Destiny	White Records
	1994	CD Single	Monkey and the Turtle/ Tama Oma	White Records/ Mushroom
	1994	CD Single	Island Home/Kulba Yaday	White Records/ Mushroom
	1994	CD	Heartland (Music from the television series)	ABC Music
	1995	CD Single	Come On/Keep Up/Last Train	White Records/ Mushroom
	1995	CD	Stylin’ Up	Mushroom
	1995	CD Single	Come On	Mushroom
	1995	CD Single	Party	Mushroom
	1995	CD Single	Party (Remix)	Mushroom
	1995	CD Single	Sunshine on a Rainy Day	Mushroom
	2000	CD	Come My Way	Mushroom
	2000	CD Single	Jump to Love	Mushroom
	2000	CD Single	Coz I’m Free	Mushroom
	2003	CD	45 Degrees	Mushroom
	2003	CD Single	Talk about Love	Mushroom
	2005	CD	Christine Anu: Live and Deadly	Showtune Productions
	2005	CD	Acoustically	Liberation Blue
	2007	CD	Rainforest Family	ABC Music
Bagiri, Norah	2006	CD	Featured on RAN: Original Soundtrack recording for the TV series RAN Remote Area Nurse by David Bridie	ABC Music
Janke, Toni	1993	CD	Hearts Speak Out	Toni Janke Productions
	1996	CD Comp.	Songlines: Acoustic Sounds From Black Australia	ABC Music
	2001	CD	The Brink	Toni Janke Productions
	2004	CD	Jewel of the North	Toni Janke Productions
Lee, Georgia	1949	78 rpm	Mean to Me (with Graeme Bell)	EMI
	1951	78 rpm	St Louis Blues/Blue Moon (with the Quintones)	Jazzart
	1962	LP	Georgia Lee Sings the Blues Downunder	Crest
Maza Sisters	2002	CD Comp.	Sending a Message Vol 2	ABC Music

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Mills, Rita	1998	CD	Blue Mountain	Independent
	2001	CD	Mata Nice	Zuna
The Mills Sisters	1993	CD	Frangipani Land	ABC Music
	1995	CD Compilati on	Our Home, Our Land	CAAMA
Pitt, Heather	1976	LP Comp.	Dr Jazz (Highlights from the TV Series)	EMI
Redding, Wilma	1960	45 rpm	In My Little Corner of the World/If I Were a Bell	Rex
	1960	45 rpm	Nature Boy/Fool Fool Fool	Rex
	1961	45 rpm	I Only Came to Say Goodbye	Festival
Solomon, Lexine	2000	CD	This is Woman	Independent
	2006	CD	Strike a Pose	Independent