

Conditions of Recognition: Social Aesthetics and Aboriginal Australian Performance

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Abstract

In the context of colonisation, social aesthetics often reveal the boundaries between cultures, demonstrating differences in understandings, experience, and expectations. Humorous performances in particular expose different social aesthetics. This article examines Aboriginal Australian comedies performed for cross-cultural audiences. The examples date from the 1880s through to the 1990s. There are accounts of numerous performance texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created by Aboriginal people that engage with their experiences of colonialism. The documented accounts are from the position of European settlers or early amateur and professional European and Euro-Australian ethnographers in relation to the early performances. Newspaper critics are the main source of responses for the later shows. The performances were satirical and represented many traumatic sides of race relations in Australia with humour and laughter. These performers expressed the social aesthetics that they shared with their communities, but these expressions were (and are) not always understood by outsiders or interpreted in the same way. The Aboriginal audiences are documented as laughing uproariously at these performances. In contrast, the reaction of non-Aboriginal audiences has ranged from patronage through to confusion or anger. This article will engage with the competing social aesthetics revealed by these performances.

Introduction

Social aesthetics as a term is useful in foregrounding the social and cultural nature of aesthetic judgement. Further it facilitates the recognition that any notion of aesthetics is integrated and co-informed by the social rather than aesthetics being in any way a neutral or separate appreciation of beauty or art.

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As Donald Brenneis argues, aesthetics “fuses intellectual, sense making activities with socially learned criteria for coherence and beauty.”¹ This locates notions of aesthetics within specific cultural and experiential limits.

In the context of colonisation, social aesthetics reveal the boundaries between different cultures and the resulting differences in social and cultural understandings and experiences of performances. I would further argue that these integrated elements reflect and contribute to the specificity of any particular ontology. This is demonstrated by the ways in which what makes us laugh or smile is embedded in our experiences and understanding of the world. Humour in particular can act as a marker of different social aesthetics. Differing culturally specific responses have been observed and documented in a range of contexts.² These include the different response of cultural groupings within the audiences of the early African American musicals and satires in the early twentieth century as well as most of the early productions by Australian Indigenous writers and companies. The audience splits its humorous responses according to cultural familiarity. As Marcia Langton succinctly describes it, “the home team gets the jokes.”³

My questions here concern the different ways performance texts can be seen and understood from different positions of social aesthetics, particularly in terms of who is laughing at whom, and on what basis, and the ways in which this plays a role in the colonial enterprise. I am exploring the ways in which social aesthetics have been used to control these embodied performances through the process of reception and documentation by white observers. The focus is on Aboriginal Australian performance practices for entertainment mainly from the nineteenth century and the European or Euro-Australian reception. There has been minimal examination of these performances perhaps because, as Johannes Fabian suggests, in the context of systemic power relations, performances for entertainment by marginalised groups are usually dismissed because they threaten social control.⁴

Aboriginal performance practices that predate and continue after colonisation are complex and include dance, song, dialogue, musical accompaniment, mime, as well as forms of puppetry. These performance practices can largely fit into three main groupings: ceremony, often secret and

¹ Donald Brenneis, “Performing Passions: Aesthetics and Politics in an Occasionally Egalitarian Community,” *American Ethnologist* 14:2 (1987): 237.

² Maryrose Casey, *Creating Frames* (Brisbane: UQP, 2004), 114-115.

³ Marcia Langton, personal interview, Melbourne, August 4, 1998.

⁴ Johannes Fabian, “Theatre and Anthropology, Theatricality and Culture,” *Research in African Literatures* 30:4 (1999): 29.

sacred; public versions of dreaming stories intended primarily for educative purposes; and topical performances for entertainment.⁵ The latter—Aboriginal Australian historical public performances for entertainment—are the focus of this discussion. These performance practices incorporate elements such as sets, scripts, actors, directors, properties (objects that add to the *mise en scene*) costumes, and defined performance spaces among others. These performances for entertainment ranged from one-off events to performance texts that were part of repertoire over decades. The genres included improvised performances such as “riddles ... acted in pantomime” where “the watchers had to guess the meaning or the answer” and complex rehearsed performances that enacted creative responses to topical events and conditions.⁶

Performance has played a central role in European and Aboriginal contact since colonisation began in the late eighteenth century.⁷ It would have been extraordinary in many ways if this were not so given that Australian Aboriginal cultures are probably the most performance based in the world, in the sense that explicit choreographed performances were used for a vast range of social and cultural purposes including education, religion, the arrangement of marriage alliances, and judicial and diplomatic functions. In response to this, the equation of Aboriginal people and their performances by colonists and settlers was so strong across the nineteenth century that it was used a source of humour well into the twentieth century. One example published in 1924 presents a (probably apocryphal) British journalist assuming that Aboriginal people were actually called corroborees. He is described as stating:

in all seriousness ... that ... the thought had occurred to him what a great development had taken place [in Australian cities] since ... [it] had been the home of the corroborees who had lived undisturbed in their native freedom.⁸

Despite numerous statements that deny Europeans’ understanding of the meaning of Aboriginal performance, the European settlers’ and colonists’ comprehension of the political and social role of these is clear in accounts

⁵ Maryrose Casey, “Theatre or Corroboree, What’s in a Name? Framing Indigenous Australian Nineteenth Century Commercial Performance Practices,” in *Creating White Australia*, eds Jane Carey and Claire McLisky (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2009), 117-119.

⁶ “Aboriginal Group Games,” *Cairns Post*, November 10, 1930, 7.

⁷ Maryrose Casey, *Telling Stories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance* (Melbourne: ASP 2012), 49-50.

⁸ “Beware the Corroboree,” *Brisbane Courier*, April 19, 1924, 6.

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ranging from David Collins' tales of exchanging dances during the first encounters⁹ and Matthew Flinders' stories of Bungaree saving the expedition that was circumnavigating Australia by exchanging songs with Aboriginal groupings they encountered¹⁰ to more humorous accounts. There are records of a wide variety of political and diplomatic performances ranging from welcome ceremonies to extended performances such as one in the early 1840s in southern Queensland, when a leader of the Mandandanji people, Bussamarai, invited the leading settlers to watch a performance that illustrated the war between Aboriginal people and settlers.¹¹

An example of an event that demonstrates the colonist's awareness of various roles fulfilled by performance relates to Escape Cliffs in the Northern Territory in 1839. The Escape Cliffs were named because two of the crew of the HMS Beagle surveying Australia in the 1830s—Lieutenant Lewis Roper Fitzmaurice and Charles Keys—used performance to escape a potentially life-threatening situation. The men were on land surveying and found themselves confronted by potentially hostile Aboriginal warriors. As the story goes:

Messrs. Fitzmaurice and Keys, of H-SLS. Beagle, had a narrow escape there from death under the spears of the natives. The two officers were taking observations at the foot of the cliffs, when a party of warlike aboriginals suddenly appeared on the top. Fitzmaurice and Keys saved themselves by beginning a fantastic dance, which apparently paralysed the blacks; and while they watched in astonishment the antics of the white men, a boat from the warship came ashore and rescued them. 'Escape Cliffs' found a place in history.¹²

The illustration by Fitzmaurice published in 1846 shows the two men "dancing for their lives."¹³

⁹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. 2 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1802), 245.

¹⁰ See: Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis: Undertaken For the Purpose of Completing the Discovery of That Vast Country*, Vol. 2 (London: G. & W. Nicol, 1814), *passim*.

¹¹ Gideon Lang, *The Aborigines of Australia* (Melbourne: Wilson and McKinnon, 1865), 28-29.

¹² "Perils of a Geologist," *The Advertiser* (SA), June 4, 1908, 8.

¹³ John Lort Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia: With an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of HMS Beagle, in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, Vol. 2 (London: n.p., 1846), 413.



Roper Fitzmaurice, “Messers Fitzmaurice and Keys dancing for their lives,” engraving in John Lort Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia: With an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of HMS Beagle, in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, vol. 2 (London; T & W Boone, 1846), frontispiece.

The two men had guns at their feet, which the account written by another officer who served on the ship, Commander John Lort Stokes, makes clear they would have used first if they had had the chance rather than attempt other conciliation or communication. When they tried to reach for their guns, however, the Aboriginal men threatened them with spears. In its retelling, the situation became a source of humour for the ship’s crew.¹⁴ The humour was not just in the image of the two men frantically dancing. As Candice Bruce and Anita Callaway observe, Stokes, and presumably Fitzmaurice and Keys themselves, assumed they were outwitting the Aboriginal people by parodying their practices.¹⁵ Though they thought the laughter was at the expense of the Aboriginal warriors, whether they respected the aspect or not, the two Europeans were by necessity forced to abide by Aboriginal diplomatic practices of exchanging performances. One could speculate about the Aboriginal reception of the performance but it is reasonable to assume that if they were as hostile as Fitzmaurice and Keys imagined, then the warriors chose to respect the offer represented by a performance in such circumstances.

A wide range of Aboriginal performances for entertainment were also noted in diaries, journals, and newspapers. The type of detail offered, however, is often markedly limited in the nineteenth century. The main focus is on what were labelled ‘war corroborees’. These include judicial battles and mock

¹⁴ Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, 414-415.

¹⁵ Candice Bruce and Anita Callaway, “Dancing in the Dark: Black Corroboree or White Spectacle,” *Australian Journal of Art* 9 (1991): 96.

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battles. With the exception of these judicial practices, diarists and journalists regularly limit descriptions of the actual performance to “there was a corroboree.”¹⁶ When there is more detail, it usually consists of a reference to a piece of mimicry, or an observation that the white audience did not understand the meaning of the performance. The aesthetic response to performances for entertainment is illustrated by the general terms used. Occasionally these performances are likened to European opera or ballet¹⁷ but more often as “fiends broke loose” from hell with repetitions of words such as ‘violence’ and ‘savage’.¹⁸ A key feature of the interpretation of performances for entertainment by Europeans in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century was a hierarchy of aesthetics that presumed that particular notions of beauty and activity were superior and that Europeans were more capable than others of creating higher level art work.¹⁹ European notions of aesthetics, and therefore the capacity to create and appreciate beauty, were then taken as signifiers of sophistication and civilisation, and therefore intelligence and development in the racial hierarchy. In turn, the strong hierarchical element within assumptions about aesthetics blended easily with Social Darwinism and its evolutionary notions. The terms in which the performances were generally recounted are illustrated by comparisons such as one published in 1857 equating “growls and yells of wild beasts” with the “savage ignorant Aborigines in corroboree.”²⁰ In keeping with the conceptions of European social aesthetics, the performances are used to prove that Aboriginal people displayed a “state of barbarism.”²¹ To this end some writers waxed lyrical about the performances describing the:

Wild men of the forest, their contortions, their leaping, and withal their terrible shouting, which fills the neighbouring rocks and gullies with an unearthly echo ... wrought up to such a pitch of madness ...

¹⁶ See, for example, “Silverton,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, January 1, 1887, 17.

¹⁷ See, for example, Olive Harvard, “Lady Franklin’s Visit to NSW, 1839,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 29:5 (1943): 295.

¹⁸ A Correspondent of the *Town and Country Journal*, “Corroboree at Stroud,” *Queenslander*, October 1, 1870, 6; see also *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser* (NSW), February 3, 1872, 3.

¹⁹ For further discussion of this see Casey, *Creating Frames*, chapters 1-4.

²⁰ ‘A Progressionist’, “Mr O’Shannassy’s Disorderly Party,” *Argus*, May 11, 1857, 5.

²¹ “Aboriginal Mission,” *Colonist* (Sydney), September 7, 1837, 3.

that they have foamed at the mouth, emitting a sound like hissing snakes.²²

The European responses to Aboriginal performances express and illustrate the clash in different social aesthetics. In both the terms used and in the lack of understanding of what was being presented, there is a strong suggestion that the different social aesthetics contribute to a failure of perception as an inability to recognise what is being presented in performances despite a high level of familiarity with the forms. The article from which the description of the “wild men” above is drawn also included some details about the costume and the set such as the fact that one performer was painted up in a clear representation of a Scottish highlander in kilt and socks.²³ These details, though recorded, are not seen as contradicting the dominant description of “wild men” who foamed at the mouth.

In the records of amateur ethnographers and academic writing since, performances for entertainment rarely receive the same attention as sacred ceremonies. This was formalised by the turn of the twentieth century, when Baldwin Spencer—a seminal anthropologist and ethnographer—dismissed these types of performance texts as “ordinary corroborees.”²⁴ In his framework of social aesthetics, value was only placed on performances that were part of a spiritual/religious ceremony. Performances for entertainment were by implication, and by his choices, unworthy of study. Ronald and Catherine Berndt worked decades later in the 1940s, and demonstrated a desire to respect Aboriginal cultures. Their approach was closer to a contemporary sensibility, yet still operated within the same framework as Spencer. They renamed the “ordinary” corroborees as a type of ceremony, probably to give them some level of recognition. In their words, performances created for entertainment under the heading of types of ceremonies were:

Imaginative and inventive dancing and songs composed to translate for public enjoyment ... contemporary events of everyday living.

²² ‘A Bushman’, “Corroberra,” *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, February 20, 1841, 2

²³ ‘A Bushman’, “Corroberra.”

²⁴ Baldwin Spencer, “The Spencer-Gillen Expedition: The Blacks of the Interior,” *The Register* (SA), August 5, 1901, 6.

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Many of the dramatic performances with songs and musical accompaniment are of this sort.²⁵

Among the performances that are documented in detail are a number of events that invite laughter at colonial violence. These performance texts for entertainment from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were created by Aboriginal people for their communities. Fabian observes that tragedy, which he defines as “drama that ends badly,” is the key trope within accounts of the encounter between Europeans and those they define as the other based on the premise that other cultures are “destined to disappear.”²⁶ In the Australian context, the dominant myth of the ‘doomed race’ sets the foundation for the reproduction of this implicit theme. It is not surprising therefore that traditional Aboriginal humour has until recently been left out of anthropological studies.²⁷ The focus on a ‘salvage’ of disappearing cultures and peoples is always a serious and tragic business. If they are dying out, they can hardly be laughing about it; and if they are, that is not the focus of salvage. In this framework of thinking, detailed accounts that focus on performances for fun stand out as anomalies.

These accounts of performance texts are from the perspective of European settlers or early amateur and professional European and Euro-Australian ethnographers. Though, like the account of the event at Escape Cliffs, the narrowness of the perspective from which the story is told reduces the cultural encounter to a simple form of clowning, these performances clearly mock colonial violence rather than solemnising the tragedy. These performances texts effectively challenge the tragedy of quietly ‘dying out’. Instead, they offer a different potential cultural exchange. The performance texts are satirical and aimed to provoke laughter at many traumatic sides of race relations. In all instances, the embodied performers expressed the social aesthetics shared with their communities for comic entertainment, but these expressions were not necessarily always understood in the same ways by outsiders.

²⁵ Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians: An Introduction to the Traditional Life of the Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964), 326.

²⁶ Fabian, “Theatre and Anthropology,” 30.

²⁷ See, for example, M. Garde, “The Pragmatics of Rude Jokes with Granddad: Joking Relationships in Aboriginal Australia,” *Anthropological Forum* 18:3 (2008): 235-253.

Laughing at Soldiers and Sailors

In the East of Australia, Nuahju—known as Billy Cassim—a Geonpul man from Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) in Queensland was well known for the comic performance texts he created. His performances were toured and traded between Aboriginal communities throughout the islands and across to the mainland where they were performed for white audiences.²⁸ These performances satirised race relations.

One example is the “Soldier” corroboree, created by Cassim around 1884. This was a performance based on satirising the military training of what one observer describes as the “Territorial Army” and their subsequent use of their weapons and training to deal with the Aboriginal ‘problem’ by killing them without provocation.²⁹ The performance text included a long mocking speech about the “wonderful Sandgate soldier man.”³⁰ Sandgate is a nearby town on the mainland Queensland coast. The first half of the performance focussed on a series of clowning sequences where the trainee soldiers would take fright at the sound of their guns firing. The “Soldier” involved a large cast including soldiers and officers as well as volunteers in training, Indigenous victims both male and female, grieving wives, plus musicians and singers. The finale was a series of danced mock battles between the Aboriginal people and the European volunteers.³¹

Accounts mention the amusement of the white audience at the performance.³² There is no mention, however, of their response to seeing the reversal of the usual ‘black face’ performances. By the late nineteenth century, white representations of Aboriginal characters and corroborees featured in every performance context from charades to additional numbers created by black face minstrels. Corroborees, performed by white actors who were painted or dressed in black woollen suits dancing round fires yelling fiercely, were part of dozens of plays and dramatic spectacles. Adding to these, Black and White Minstrel shows had crossed the Atlantic to Australia by the late 1830s. Within these theatrical genres, Aboriginal people were represented as foolish figures

²⁸ Robert Hardley, “The Social Life of Stradbroke Island Aborigines,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, 86:16 (1975), 145.

²⁹ Thomas Welsby, *The Discoverers of the Brisbane River*, (Brisbane: Diddams, 1913), 116; George Watkins, *Notes on the Aborigines of Stradbroke and Moreton Islands* (Brisbane: Royal Society of Queensland, 1891), 141.

³⁰ Thomas Welsby, “Memories of Amity: Snapper Days. A Corroboree,” *Brisbane Courier*, July 23, 1921, 17.

³¹ Thomas Welsby, *The Collected Works of Thomas Welsby* Vol. 2, ed. A.K. Thomson (Melbourne: Jacaranda Press, 1967), 122-123.

³² Welsby, *The Collected Works*, 122.

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of fun or faithful pets that served their masters; examples include burlesques such as *Princess Springtime* (1866) and comedies such as *The Nobleman at Home* (1886). Dressing up as ‘natives’, either with black makeup of some description or black wool costumes, for balls and parties was also common. This continued well into the twentieth century. One show created for and performed by school children in 1933, entitled “Bush Babies Ball”, included “arranging an Australian corroboree with realistic atmosphere” that was performed by the white children in costume.³³ Cassim’s work reversed the dominant form of cross-racial comedy at the white man’s expense.

What is present in the accounts is a claim of authority for the white spectator on a number of bases. Firstly through the way in which, despite the content, the white observers state they find the performances amusing, demonstrating that they get the joke and that therefore they are knowing subjects who understand Aboriginal people. This is further strengthened by the patronising framing of the performers. This is an element that is consistently underscored by the descriptions of white audiences refusing to pay in advance and insisting that they will give the payment they are inclined to give after the performance. Cumulatively these aspects claim power for the white audience. As an example of the element of patronage, in one account of a performance organised for visiting white dignitaries, Thomas Welsby recounts that the end of the performance came “with the customary raging temper of the dance.”³⁴ In another account he gives more detailed description:

Toompani [an elder] danced beyond the rest of his tribal warriors, no doubt his mind going back to younger days when his tribe was large and strong. The perspiration and all was forgotten save that he, Toompani, was king of his clan, and he was their mighty warrior ... Still continued the dancing and crooning, and the white men gave signs to discontinue. Unwillingly, the men gave up and prostrated themselves on the ground near the [women]. Still Toompani danced on. ... [Finally] the stately leader being compelled by pure fatigue to end his jumping and shouting, and down amongst the group he settled.³⁵

Despite the fact that the performance had been actively requested, the language of the description dismisses the performance within the similar terms

³³ Lady Kitty, “Round the Bridge Table,” *The Advertiser*, April 26, 1933, 15,

³⁴ Thomas Welsby, “Recollections of the Natives of Moreton Bay,” speech delivered to the University Historical Society, September 27, 1916, 115.

³⁵ Welsby, *The Collected Works*, 123.

to earlier condemnations of Aboriginal performance. Welsby (1858-1941) was a politician and dedicated historian of Queensland in the late nineteenth century. He wrote seven books about the region of Moreton Bay, and was personally acquainted with Cassim and witnessed many of his performance texts. In only one account, in the midst of a description of Cassim's comic skills and the statement that if he had been a white man he would have been as successful as the famous British comic actor John Lawrence Toole, Welsby explicitly states that he thought the "Soldier" was "not amusing" in the way it represented soldiers, the "running away of the soldiers and their jumping and climbing fences."³⁶

While it is interesting that he does not have a problem with the killing of Aboriginal people within the scenario, there is a further complication that is being ignored in his descriptions. Implicit in Welsby's descriptions and reservation is the assumption that the soldiers must be white. The reference to "the wonderful Sandgate soldier man" identifies the group being parodied. Sandgate was the location of a major Native Police encampment. The Native Police were made up of Aboriginal men brought in from other areas who served under white officers. They were used to 'disperse' Aboriginal people; 'disperse' being a code for 'kill'. A number of the white officers were notorious for their violence. One of the longest serving officers was Inspector Frederick Wheeler who was located at Sandgate in the 1860s and 1870s. The Sandgate area originally had a large Aboriginal population and Wheeler was credited with "clearing out the aborigines who never again troubled Sandgate."³⁷ Within a record of extreme violence, Wheeler stood out as going too far for his contemporaries. After a number of massacres he was reprimanded and told that he had "acted upon one or two occasions with indiscretion."³⁸ According to Wheeler in 1876, "he could shoot as many [Aboriginal people] as he liked without interference."³⁹ He was eventually charged with murder and absconded.

The "Sandgate man" may well have been a parody of Wheeler or someone like him. It is quite possible that, given the physical proximity to Sandgate, refugees escaping from the acts of 'dispersal' were actually living on Stradbroke. This would provide the basis for the creation of the performance.

³⁶ Thomas Welsby, *Early Moreton Bay* [1907] (Melbourne: Seal Books, 1977), 34.

³⁷ E.V. Stevens, "Early Brighton and Sandgate," speech delivered to the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, August 23, 1956, Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

³⁸ Executive Council quoted in Jonathan Richards, *The Secret War: True History of Queensland's Native Police* (Brisbane: UQP, 2008), 14.

³⁹ "A Lover of Justice," *Rockhampton Bulletin*, January 17, 1871.

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These dispersal practices, which continued through to the late 1890s, add a sharp edge to the “Soldier Corroborree.” Welsby was a local and should have been well aware of the possible original figure being parodied as well as the dispersal practices. Cassim created a performance that enabled Aboriginal people to laugh at horrific incidents in their lives and the lives of communities that they knew. I argue that these comedies serve a number of purposes for Aboriginal people. The traumas of colonial violence had to be understood in an everyday way and on a human scale in order to enable people to live within their cultures with dignity and a sense of future.⁴⁰ By making sense of the violence through humour, the performances reduce the perpetrators to a human level, thus challenging narratives that presented superior arms and numbers as a sign of intellectual and cultural superiority. Making violence ordinary and laughable would have been an important part of enabling community members to cope emotionally and psychologically. This is not to diminish the trauma but rather to engage with it in multiple ways. As Drew Haydon Taylor argues in relation to Native American comic performances, while the humorous approach helps keep people sane it does not mean that they are using humour to “whitewash the problems ... You can have humour and explore serious issues.”⁴¹ The white audience on the other hand, as represented in the written accounts, do not acknowledge the serious aspects. Given the shared geographic context, the white observers would have needed to separate the source of the performance from the comedy they were witnessing in order to see it as amusing play by lesser people. That Welsby does not link ongoing violence with the performance is only possible because of his different social position and the expectation that this is a performance for his entertainment.

“The South Passage Corroborree” is another performance text by Cassim, which was performed in the 1880s. This narrative plays with the shipwrecks that occurred on Stradbroke’s coast. In the story, a group of Aboriginal people go to the telegraph office on Stradbroke Island to report that a large ship has run aground on the other side of the island. In response, the operator sends an SOS to Brisbane and a steamer comes out to aid the stranded ship. When the steamer arrives and the crew find they have been tricked, they abuse the Aboriginal people who have come to laugh. In their rage, the crew shoot at the Aboriginals. The performance ends with the Aboriginal people escaping

⁴⁰ For further discussion see Maryrose Casey, “Making Fun of Trauma: Laughing at Racialised Violence,” *Performing Ethos: International Journal of Ethics in Theatre and Performance*, 3:1 (2013), [in press].

⁴¹ Drew Haydon Taylor, *Me Funny* (Vancouver: Douglas and Macintyre, 2005), 105.

unharmful into the bush, laughing over their success. One white audience member took exception to the performance of the “white sailors,” which he described as exaggerating their words and behaviour until they appeared “ludicrous.”⁴² Interestingly within the same article, the writer (possibly George Watkins) considers the Aboriginal performers ability to accurately mimic Chinese people in another performance text as proof that they have learned to see things from a “white man’s standpoint.”⁴³

In a general discussion about performance on Stradbroke, Cassim was denied authenticity on the basis that the performances were “influenced by white men’s actions.”⁴⁴ Given that what Cassim was doing was making fun of the white men, especially those with power, this is an interesting rationale for dismissal. Presumably, to be authentic, he should not observe and parody the white men who controlled his life. The performances were all created and performed with the intention of laughing at serious and emotionally painful violent situations that were part of the Aboriginal communities’ lives. As well as offering laughter at their own pain, the performances create a space to counter narratives and discourses of white superiority. Baldwin Spencer as an Aboriginal Protector declared that Aboriginal people have “little control over [their] feelings and [are] liable to give way to violent fits of temper, during which [they] may very likely behave with great cruelty.”⁴⁵ “The South Passage Corroboree” shows the white men as easily manipulated people who, when tricked, resort to mindless violence.

There are other examples of comic performances from across the country that engage with abuse of authority, including the chaining of Aboriginal people. These date from the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. In Western Australia, the subjugation of men in chains is the subject of a performance in the northern Kimberley created around 1942. The comic performance text was created by Alec Wirrijangu. Anthony Redmond, an anthropologist, documented this performance that he witnessed on different occasions in the 1990s.⁴⁶ The performance is a Ngarinyin performance for

⁴² ‘Sketcher’, “Dunwich Celebrities Who Have Passed Away,” *The Queenslander*, October 25, 1890, 787.

⁴³ ‘Sketcher’, “Dunwich Celebrities.”

⁴⁴ F.S. Colliver and F.P. Woolston, “The Aborigines of Stradbroke Island,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, 86:16 (1975), 98.

⁴⁵ Baldwin Spencer, “Preliminary Report on Aborigines of the Northern Territory,” in *Report of the Administrator for the Year 1912*, cxx, no. 45, 1913.

⁴⁶ Anthony Redmond, “Captain Cook Meets General Macarthur in the Northern Kimberley: Humour and Ritual in an Indigenous Australian Life-World,” *Anthropological Forum* 18:3 (2008): 255-270.

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entertainment from the genre known as *jurnba*. The performance text centres on Captain Cook and the US General Macarthur. The costumes include layers of padding to produce grotesquely fat bellies, and the characterisation includes a limping gait. There is also a line of men with ropes round their necks representing neck-chains. The chained prisoners ranging in age from young boys to grown men have to follow any orders thrown out by Cook or Macarthur. They have to stand, walk, sit, and jump as the great white ‘bosses’ order. The two limp and stagger around the dance ground with mock rifles giving orders and making sporadic attacks on the audience. According to Redmond, “the comic grandiosity and unpredictable threatening forays launched at the audience by the performers playing the ‘whitefella bosses’ had the audience laughing and screaming uncontrollably.”⁴⁷ The Captain Cook/Macarthur *jurnba* was performed for US and Australian soldiers in the 1940s and for local audiences, including white people, subsequently.⁴⁸ The accounts include descriptions of both the black and white audiences laughing.

As the *jurnba* is more recent and the documentation has been done by a contemporary anthropologist, there is a greater level of specific information that contributes to a richer picture of the performance and the culturally specific aesthetics. Redmond draws attention to aspects that require cultural knowledge to understand, and in a sense see, what is being performed. The figures of Cook and Macarthur are mirrors to each other. This implies a certain kinship relationship, which they contravene in performance through hostility to each other. This is further exacerbated in the characterisation through the limping. Most Aboriginal groupings have complex sign languages. Within these signs parts of the body have specific meaning. For the Ngarinyin, the legs relate to sibling relationships and therefore the lameness exhibited by the characters suggests that their familial relationship to each other is deformed or damaged in some way. On a more general level the performance is about abuse of authority. The laughter shared by the Aboriginal community and the US and Australian soldiers in the 1940s was probably based on the common powerlessness within a military operation. There are, however, levels in the performance that only those with in depth knowledge of the Ngarinyin culture recognise.

These are three performances that laugh at colonial violence and systemic racism. A common feature in these performance texts is the parody and mockery of figures representing white cultural superiority. These figures

⁴⁷ Redmond, “Captain Cook Meets General Macarthur,” 257.

⁴⁸ Welsby, *Collected Works*, 121; Redmond, “Captain Cook Meets General Macarthur.”

are exposed as ludicrous in their violence, lack of control, and lack of moral and ethical conduct in a context where social narratives espouse white Europeans as the pinnacle of intellectual and moral, as well as aesthetic, development. Yet in the accounts from the nineteenth century the tone towards the creators and performers is patronising. There are few occasions when any discomfort is expressed. In the documentation of these events, superiority is reclaimed within the European notions of social aesthetics. This is a recurring pattern in the documentation of performances. An interesting and in some ways extreme example I have discussed in detail elsewhere is the transposition of a performance in the 1830s for a large gathering of Aboriginal clans from across NSW into a performance by a single Aboriginal man for an all-white audience. In this performance, elders from the Sydney area performed the colonial authority figures and military manoeuvres of the British in order to inform those clans not immediately affected (or as drastically overwhelmed) by colonisation about the nature, habits, and identifying practices of European settlers.⁴⁹ The white observer recounted this event as a passing amusement.⁵⁰ In a humorous biography published in England in 1859, this performance was transformed into a lone Aboriginal man performing for the amusement of a British ship's crew in Sydney Harbour.⁵¹ This transposition relocates the performance into the environment claimed by the white observers. The performers are there to amuse the white audience. They are not acknowledged as people expressing their own perspective, for their own people or their own purposes. The power over the length of the performance, the remuneration for the performance, and sole right to judge quality are claimed on behalf of the white audience as an important part of the social aesthetic validated in the documentation.

Aesthetics Shifting with Social Narratives

This social aesthetic underwent shifts and changes in the mid and late twentieth century. These shifts are revealed in the reception of shows that were created and presented within urban theatres that mocked racist violence. In 1972, *Basically Black* was a multi-authored sketch based, revue style production at Nimrod Street Theatre in Sydney in collaboration with the National Black Theatre.⁵² The text included sketches written by Aboriginal writers, and the full

⁴⁹ See Maryrose Casey, "Bungaree and the Grand Corroboree: 'White Fellow Sit Down all About; Black Fellow Murry Miserable,'" *About Performance* 11/12 (2011).

⁵⁰ "Grand Corrobory," *The Colonist*, April 9, 1835, 4.

⁵¹ "Bungaree, King of the Blacks," *All the Year Round* 1 (1859), 77-84.

⁵² I discuss this show in detail in Casey, *Creating Frames*.

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cast was Aboriginal. The cast wore white half masks when they were playing white characters. One sketch by Gary Foley involved an altercation between an aggressive Euro-Australian labourer and an Indigenous Australian industrial designer in a bar. The white labourer objects to the Aboriginal man's presence and occupation. The exchange rapidly becomes physically violent. At the end of the sketch the Aboriginal designer, after being seriously beaten, is arrested for assault. This sketch was described by Foley as bitterly comic.⁵³ Audiences found it very funny.

This was a successful show in terms of audience attendance and was filmed and shown on television. Nevertheless, despite the laughter from both black and white audiences, it was almost uniformly and quite aggressively condemned in newspaper reviews. In the social/critical memory it is generally accepted that the reservations about *Basically Black* were because the production on the stage as an aesthetic event was inferior.⁵⁴ Despite the Aboriginal participants' perspective that it was comedy and audiences' laughter, the reviewers focused on anger with statements such as "the writing is clearly angry" to such an extent that there is little doubt they were angry themselves.⁵⁵

The reviews indicate that, rather than the judgement being shaped by some sort of neutral aesthetic response, the critical commentary is shaped by social and political narratives. Implicit in the reviews are narratives of assimilation current in the previous decades. In the case of *Basically Black*, the claim made in three reviews that English or white Australian artists with no direct knowledge or experience of life for Indigenous Australians would handle the work more aesthetically draws attention to the link between the social and aesthetic. It is also clear that many of the critics did not like seeing white people made into figures of fun. The shift in cultural relations from the 1880s to the 1970s shifted the response to mockery of white Australians by Aboriginal people on the stage. The white critics were no longer able to treat the Aboriginal performers with the same type of indulgence or patronage as they had in the nineteenth century and earlier in the twentieth century. There is therefore more engagement and reaction to the content. Nevertheless, they reclaimed control through similar means by labelling the aesthetics as lacking. Implicit in the reviews and anecdotal evidence is the assumption from the

⁵³ Gary Foley, personal interview, Melbourne, July 30, 1997.

⁵⁴ For further discussion of the reception of *Basically Black* see Casey, *Creating Frames*, chapter 5.

⁵⁵ Katherine Brisbane, "Meeting Our Blacks," review of *Basically Black*, *The Australian*, November 4, 1972, 18.

white audience that their presence at the performance marked them as ‘good guys’. With this assumption comes the expectation that the Aboriginal performers will affirm their status and they will share the jokes together. The level of discomfort and anger expressed by critics suggests this part of their social aesthetic was not fulfilled.

A more recent example is *Cruel Wild Woman* (1999). This play satirised Pauline Hanson and the rise of the One Nation Party with its associated racialised attacks on Aboriginal people. The writers Sally Morgan and David Milroy argued that:

they were writing a comedy for the communities that lived with racism, they didn’t need it explained to them or its ramifications outlined. They were gathering together to laugh at the completely laughable.⁵⁶

The critics panned the show on the basis that it did not deal seriously with serious issues such as racism and therefore did not offer “new insights ... the script gives us nothing of substance to mull over.”⁵⁷ The Indigenous audiences responded so positively that many individuals came to the show a number of times. According to Milroy, “if the [Noongar] community likes it, the critics are guaranteed not to.”⁵⁸ Effectively, the critics were complaining because they were offered comedy instead of tragedy. The expectation from the perspective of the white audience was that they would be educated and their knowledge enriched in some way. The power relationship between white audiences and Aboriginal theatre makers is a striking feature of the social aesthetics.

Conclusion

Since European settlement, social aesthetics have played an important role in asserting and reinforcing hierarchical race-based narratives. Social aesthetics function as more than different responses to performances. Who has the right to laugh and decide what is humorous has been a part of a competitive or hierarchical aspect of European social aesthetics that has played a role in justifications of racialised repression. In the episode at Escape Cliffs, recounted earlier, the ship’s crew presumed the right to laugh is solely theirs. They tricked the Aboriginal warriors. They mimicked and performed a parody of

⁵⁶Ron Banks, “Laughter as a Lifeline,” *West Australian*, February 4, 1999, 5.

⁵⁷Jacqueline Molloy, “Wild Woman Soft at Heart,” *West Australian*, February 12, 1999, 5.

⁵⁸David Milroy, phone interview, April 14, 1999.

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Aboriginal practices. Yet as George Vowles wrote to the *Brisbane Courier* in 1921:

wherever in my young days there was an assembly of blacks, there was a buffoon, and whenever a white man was present, he was the subject of their merriment.⁵⁹

Social aesthetics, in terms of cultural and experiential positions, marks the different responses to these performances. In all these shows, there are layers of comedy that require insider knowledge either in terms of traditional or contemporary Aboriginal cultures and life experiences. All these shows demonstrate a humour that mocks horrendous events. This humour and comedy cannot be understood in the same way by people who have no direct experience of the level of threat and vulnerability that powerlessness imposes. This disjunction between difference social positions is further complicated by the social attitudes and resulting expectations of white audiences. They view the performers and the performance through the lens of assumptions about Aboriginal people. There is a constant tension between the all-knowing subject position that is being claimed by the white men, and the Aboriginal position. Further, the documentation of Aboriginal performances (or lack of it) reveals the multiple levels on which social aesthetics/narratives create blindness to what is before the white audience. When the social and political narratives are disturbed by the performances, the white observers reclaim control of the event, or at least release the discomfort, through the written accounts. The power of social aesthetics is not only in the moment of reception but also in the moment when the performance is documented. The frames of reference for these aesthetics causes both blindness and discomfort to the point of anger for those who hold fast to, or fail to recognise, the narrative framework that limits their thinking.

⁵⁹ George Vowles, "Memories of Amity," *Brisbane Courier*, February 1, 1921, 8.