

## **Diplomatic Interventions:**

### **Aboriginal Performance on the International Stage in the Twenty-First Century**

Helen Gilbert

My essay focuses on the ways in which Aboriginal Australian performance makers are currently seizing international platforms to solicit public understanding of the challenges facing indigenous societies today, particularly as they stem from European colonialism. Since the late 1990s, music, dance, film, storytelling and stage dramas by Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders have become staples among Australian offerings at international festivals and special exhibitions, often enjoying a proportionally greater presence than other works (Australia Council Report, 2015). Likewise, indigenous performers regularly feature in diplomatic initiatives designed to promote a distinctly Australian brand of innovation abroad, not only in artistic circles, but also more widely. The *Australia Now* programme, which ran in Japan from April to November 2018, is a highly successful local example in this vein. Alongside scientific, academic and trade-oriented fare in various parts of the country, its highlights included a solo drama by legendary activist Jack Charles, staged at Shizuoka; two short works by Bangarra Dance Theatre, and an exhibition built around the rhythm and song of the yidaki or didgeridu, with performances by Yolgnu musicians. The programme's launch at the Australian High Commission in April also signalled its special investment in indigenous arts as Yorta Yorta opera singer Deborah Cheetham stepped up to perform a beautiful aria suggesting the riches on offer from this quarter.

*Australia Now* and ventures like it with key trading-partner countries make up one prominent strand of cultural activity contributing to the internationalisation of Aboriginal performing arts. Multi-country touring of selected works constitutes another strand, though in practice the two are often

linked, not least through government or corporate sponsorship systems. What interests me here are political interventions that Aboriginal people are staging in the diverse international arenas opening up for their work, even as it is harnessed – some would say co-opted – to celebrate the creativity of Australia at large. I want to think about these dynamics in relation to *indigenous* forms of cultural diplomacy, which, I will argue, involve embodied acts and aesthetic exchanges that sustain minority communities within, against and beyond the fragmenting forces of globalisation. My indicative case examples, among many possibilities, are two works developed in regional Australia and brought to London in 2013. The first, *Namatjira*, a multilayered bio-drama honouring Albert Namatjira's life and legacy, was featured in association with the Royal Academy of Art's gala event of the year: the *Australia* exhibition (21 September–8 December 2013). The second, Marrugeku's *Gudirr Gudirr*, an intimate dance solo exploring mixed-race Aboriginal identities in Broome, came to London with much less fanfare to play at a small-scale biennial event: The Origins Festival of First Nations.

In brief, the critical touchstones for my thinking about these works are George Yúdice's warning that the 'culture-as-resource' model made prevalent by globalisation only serves to deepen existing social schisms (2003); and, conversely, Arjun Appadurai's insistence on the power of the human imagination to harness globalisation for an emancipatory social politics (2000, 6). The stark contrast between these views raises the question of how indigenous performance is invested with, or divested of, particular cultural values when it circulates as a product within global commodity circuits – whether for educational, entertainment or diplomatic purposes.

According to the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, cultural diplomacy can be defined as 'the exchange of ideas, information, values, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture with the intention of fostering mutual understanding' (cited in Agostinelli 2012, 1). In Western practice, such diplomacy has historically involved putting cultural relations at the service of foreign policy in

a proactive process whereby a nation's institutions, value systems and unique cultural personality are promoted. This process helps to renegotiate international relationships in changing times and is also a form of nation-building. We only have to look at the Cold War era to see the success of cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power. With globalisation, however, the role of governments in brokering cultural exchanges has diminished in most countries as the Internet and other digital technologies, along with mass tourism and free trade, have opened new channels for commerce and communication. As the corporate and private sectors, particularly in the realm of media and entertainment, increasingly influence cultural flows between nations, the workings – and indeed the concept – of cultural diplomacy is changing.

When we think about Aboriginal cultural products in this mix, it is worth recalling that colonialism generally denied or scaled down indigenous people's diplomatic identity or 'right of embassy' – that is, the right to officially represent their cultures. As colonial commissioners, ambassadors and missionaries appropriated the right of interference in indigenous affairs, they systematically erased 'non-state, non-Christian and non-governmental modes of encountering otherness' (Constantinou and Der Derian 2010, 10). This was 'diplomacy in the service of empire-building', not a means to understand and mediate relations with Indigenous peoples across cultural borders. Denying the Right of Embassy (the right to be an ambassador) as developed in the modern Law of Nations thus became part of a wider strategy that legitimated colonial control over indigenous people, their territories and their cultural riches (Constantinou and Der Derian 2010, 10–11). The massive ethnographic collections held by European museums are but one enduring legacy of this historical process. Contemporary indigenous performance makers are thoroughly aware of these contexts and of the promises and limits of cultural diplomacy today, as the following brief examples will illustrate.

*Namatjira* (the play) was created through a grass-roots initiative by community arts company Big hArt to develop visual and dramatic arts in the Western Aranda territory in Central Australia. The project began in 2009, in collaboration with Namatjira's extended family, and continues today on various fronts. In a mix of Aboriginal and standard English, embellished with song, dance, parody and anecdote, the play dramatises Namatjira's rise as the renowned pioneer of Aboriginal art in the Western style, along with his fall into prison and poverty as he tried to balance the pressures of fame with his responsibilities to his family and community. As well as inspiring the Hermannsburg School of painting, Albert Namatjira was the First Aboriginal Australian to be granted citizenship – in 1957 – in his own country. At the height of his fame, his work sold in minutes and had many notable admirers, including Britain's Queen Elizabeth. Not surprisingly, then, several of his paintings were featured at the Royal Academy's *Australia* exhibition, which boasted about thirty percent indigenous content, in a mix of styles and media. As a live performance that could add a 'good story' to the exhibition, Big hArt's play – which included several of the painter's relatives as cast members – provided a ready fit for the Academy's engagement programme. The show was brought to London for a brief run in the city's Southbank arts precinct with the support of the Australian High Commission, which was closely involved in brokering the *Australia* exhibition.

*Namatjira* played to full houses and was roundly praised in the small number of reviews it garnered, but the spotlight, in both London and Australian newspapers, was on a special diplomatic moment: Namatjira's grandchildren, along with the show's two main actors, Trevor Jamieson and Derik Lynch, had a private audience with the Queen. This was initially reported in local and international media as a reprise of the moment when Namatjira himself met the Queen in 1954, but Lenie Namatjira insisted there was more to be said on that front. So she wrote to *The Guardian* with her version of the encounter:

So like my grandfather, I met with the Queen. ... Back then, she gave him a medal and he

quickly walked away. I gave her a painting ... as well as a postcard from the kids in Hermannsburg, which they made for the occasion. And I told her the children have got to learn to paint like I once did, and that we need her help for this, to make our local art centre a good one. The government is working for her. ... She can make this right'. (2013)

With this statement, Namatjira's granddaughter asserts her diplomatic identity as an ambassador for the Aranda nation in their dealings with a foreign leader. Instead of accepting a gift from the Queen, Lenie *gives* gifts from her family and community, making it clear that these cultural offerings come with the expectation of reciprocity, here couched in terms that suggest Britain's historical obligation to make things 'right' in the nations it colonised. Lenie's public intervention positions her so-called private audience with the Queen as a canny performance of both cultural sovereignty and cultural diplomacy. A year later, Hermannsburg artist Vincent Namatjira, another of Albert's grandsons, painted his own version of the royal meeting that also stresses its diplomatic nature. In the painting, three interracial handshakes are foregrounded as the Queen, Prince Philip and the Australian Deputy High Commissioner reach out to Jamieson, Lynch and Lenie Namatjira, while Kevin gives a thumbs up sign. The artwork's playful suggestion that the Aboriginal figures are somehow stage-managing the meeting is consistent with the style of Big hArt's drama. Although play itself has a great deal to say about the history of Aboriginal struggles against colonialism, for me at least, its winning trait in performance was the power of its humour to dissolve rigid hierarchies between black and white nations, sometimes in a very visceral sense.

My second example, *Gudirr Gudirr*, is a solo dance theatre piece performed and co-choreographed by Dalisa Pigram of Marrugeku, an innovative multi-arts company that has worked for two decades in a process of culture-making and culture-mapping in indigenous communities in northern Australia. Jointly led by Pigram (Yarwuru/Bardi) and Rachel Swain, a non-indigenous director and choreographer, Marrugeku has forged a unique brand of Aboriginal interculturalism that is both

inclusive and determinedly indigenous in principle, practice and ethos. Although based in the remote coastal town of Broome and emphatically concerned with the local, the company reaches internationally in vision and practice, working, in this production, with collaborators from Belgium and Burkina Faso. Marrugeku's shows have played in various cities in Europe, generally in small art-house venues, as well as widely across Australia. *Gudirr Gudirr*, which premiered at Dance Massive in Melbourne in 2013, is the company's most successful touring work to date.

This dance drama explores the lived consequences of the pearling era for Aboriginal peoples, but not through any direct focus on its history. Pigram (who is the granddaughter of Aboriginal law man, leader and state senator Patrick Dodson) uses the diverse physical vocabularies of western circus, Aboriginal dance, animal movements and the Malay martial art form of silat to tell what is both a quintessentially Broome story and a much broader parable. The show is marketed as a performance that 'lights a path from a broken past through a fragile present and on to a future still in the making' (Marrugeku website). The fragile present is marked by high rates of violence and youth suicide in Aboriginal communities as well as ecological threats from mining interests and gas pipeline developments. The title, we are told, is taken from the Yawuru word for the warning call of the Guwayi, a wader bird that can be heard when the tide is turning. In this story, 'to miss the call is to drown' (Marrugeku website). Pigram's dance is an extended embodiment of that call.

Four spoken monologues, folded into the dance, extend the warning call more explicitly for those less adept at reading the dance itself. These monologues are lessons for the audience but in different pedagogical modes. In one, for example, Pigram tells a story in Aboriginal English about hunting crabs as a child, filling a bag only to have to empty it when she cannot cross the water back to

safety. ‘The tide teaches us not to be so greedy’, she adds at the monologue’s end.<sup>1</sup> Later her focus turns directly to the sustainability of indigenous cultures in a verbal polemic that simultaneously chronicles the wrongs of colonial history and demands their redress through a series of repeated assertions that various times or eras are over: the time when Aboriginals were classed as flora and fauna, the time when their children were removed from their families, ‘the time when suicide didn’t exist in Aboriginal communities’, and so forth. At other points, Pigram’s movements dissolve into or emerge from images and projected footage that show a darker side of Broome life. There is footage, for example, of Aboriginal youths fighting in the dirt, taking photos of themselves and plastering them on Facebook. Elsewhere a lizard is shown stumbling with its head stuck in a beer can. The image expands to become a diptych, then a triptych – we can hear humans in the background, laughing, photographing, not helping.

<Insert image 1 about here> Fig. 2. Dalisa Pigram in *Gudirr Gudirr* by Marrugeku. Photo: Terry Murphy and Helen Fletcher Kennedy, 2013.

*Gudirr Gudirr*’s various vignettes are bookended by dance sequences enacted in the presence of projected film footage of portraits featuring different generations from the Broome community: parents, friends, elders, children, ancestors and teachers. Pigram situates herself within this social tissue, aware of her location – her lineage – and presents herself to audiences as part of a broader ecology of her country. Performance in her world, is a mode of embodied belonging, a genealogy, an ecological practice that connects the dancer with the land and its peoples. In short, the rights of representation and the right of embassy or diplomacy are shown in this performance as coming

---

<sup>1</sup> My analysis of *Gudirr Gudirr* is based on two live viewings of the performance, respectively at The Place in London in 2013 and at Teatro Central in Seville (Spain) in 2014.

from family, ancestors and the land, albeit a damaged land that demands care and planning for the future.

The Australian High Commission in London endorsed the presentation of *Gudirr Gudirr* – mostly by lending its brand to the festival’s publicity – but the show was not in a position to make the same kind of immediate splash as *Namatjira* did. If we look at the bigger picture, however, it is evident that Marrugeku has been able to position its touring work in Europe (and beyond) to attract the interest of a growing circle of international festival and venue directors whose committed audiences nourish and innovate small-scale fringe and community forms. As part of their London visit, Pigram and Swain were quick to offer costumes to an exhibition I curated in tandem with the Origins festival, and they spent many hours with fellow performance makers from other First Nations from around the world, watching their shows and sharing their insights. I see these interactions not just as networking in the conventional sense but also as helping to fashion a trans-indigenous public sphere that potentially circumvents mainstream cultural hierarchies.

<Insert image 2 about here>. Fig. 2. Marrugeku exhibit at *EcoCentrix: Indigenous Arts, Sustainable Acts*, curated by Helen Gilbert at Bargehouse, London, 2013. Photo: Rita Leistner.

Social media posts also suggest ways in which Marrugeku’s work speaks to new audiences abroad, as suggested by a holiday blog from Spain, where the show appeared shortly after its London run. Titled ‘Life in Granada is Grate’ (sic), the blog read: ‘We saw a fantastic dance performance last night called *Gudirr, Gudirr* as part of my theater class. It was a one-woman show incorporating dance, video, monologues, and a fishing net to explore her experiences with racism as an Australian Aboriginal. ... Here’s the 5 star Guardian review and here’s a video’.<sup>2</sup> The review in question lauds

---

<sup>2</sup> This blog was accessed in June 2018 but is no longer available online.



Pigram's original work as being 'as politically astute and powerful as any heard in Australian public discourse for decades' (Badham 2014). In 2017, *Gudirr Gudirr* played in Toronto where critics immediately saw the show as inviting reflection on Canadian colonialism. Martha Schabas, critic for *The Globe and Mail*, drew the comparison as follows:

I can't overstate the impact and importance of this piece. In one sense, it's an urgent invective on how systemic oppression has left Australian aboriginal communities grappling with social and economic injustice. ... [It's] relevance to Canadian audiences is obvious – it's impossible to watch and not consider how slowly and ineffectively change and justice are being granted to our First Nations communities at home'. (2015)

A similar response met *Jack Charles Vs the Crown* during its 2016 tour to Ottawa, Calgary and Vancouver: 'Much of Charles' story rings uncomfortably true for us in Canada' (Langston 2016). Reaching beyond Australia with quintessentially Australian stories to prompt audiences in other nations to engage with their own colonial histories, as these performances do, constitutes another kind of indigenous cultural diplomacy.

The works discussed here, and others like them, support Constantinou and Der Derian's view that 'diplomacy should not only be concerned with advocacy, policy implementation and public relations but also – and more crucially – with innovation and creativity' (2010, 2). Possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue emerge from the myriad aesthetic and dramaturgical choices available to artists as they strive to shape their own artistic encounters with international audiences. In this sense, the task of diplomacy is to excite the public imagination. Indigenous theatre in the twenty-first century tends to do this in ways that are less deconstructive than reconstructive. By this, I mean that the dismantling of colonial stereotypes now seems to be less prevalent as a decolonising tactic in indigenous arts than the forging – or at least imagining – of new connections across communities and places. These connections are part of a critical project of cultural rebuilding and empowerment,

a *performance* of survival, as Jack Charles work reminds us. No doubt this is ‘soft’ power at work – but perhaps its accumulation across many projects, across time and across place will eventually make a difference.

### **Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank the ASAJ conference organisers, particularly Professor Keiji Sawada, for inviting me to speak at the event. It was an honour and a pleasure to attend and to meet a wonderful cohort of colleagues working in Japan to further Australian studies from an international perspective.

### **Works Cited**

- Australia Council for the Arts. (2015) *International Arts Activity – Australian Arts Sector*. Sydney: Summary Report. Available at [www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/aca\\_222292\\_international-summary-560a1bf8c9ab1.pdf](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/aca_222292_international-summary-560a1bf8c9ab1.pdf), last accessed 4 January 2019.
- Agostinelli, Margarita. (2012) ‘Cultural Diplomacy and the Concept of the Other’, paper given at the International Conference on Cultural Diplomacy and the UN, New York and Washington, 21–24 February. Available at [www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2012-02-unccd/Cultural\\_diplomacy\\_and\\_the\\_concept\\_of\\_the\\_Other\\_-\\_Margarita\\_Alexandra\\_Coppi\\_Agostinelli.pdf](http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2012-02-unccd/Cultural_diplomacy_and_the_concept_of_the_Other_-_Margarita_Alexandra_Coppi_Agostinelli.pdf), last accessed 4 January 2019.
- Appadurai, Arjun. (2000) ‘Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination’, *Public Culture* 12.1: 1–19.
- Badham, Van. (2014) Review of *Gudirr Gudirr*. *Guardian Australia*. Available at [www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/jan/19/gudirr-gudirr-marrugeku-review](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/jan/19/gudirr-gudirr-marrugeku-review), last accessed 4 January 2019.
- Constantinou, Costas, and James Der Derian. (2010) ‘Introduction: Sustaining Global Hope:

Sovereignty, Power and the Transformation of Diplomacy’. In Costas Constantinou and James Der Derian (eds) *Sustainable Diplomacies. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–22.

Langston, Patrick. (2016) Review of *Jack Charles Vs the Crown*. *The Ottawa Citizen*, 15 January. Available at [ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-review-jack-charles-australian-story-uncomfortably-true-for-canadians](http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-review-jack-charles-australian-story-uncomfortably-true-for-canadians), last accessed 4 January 2019.

Marrugeku (2019) Description of *Gudirr Gudirr*. Available at [www.marrugeku.com.au/productions/gudirr-gudirr/](http://www.marrugeku.com.au/productions/gudirr-gudirr/), last accessed 4 January 2019.

Namatjira, Lenie. (2013) ‘My Message to Queen Elizabeth II: Aboriginal Art Needs Support’. *The Guardian*, 28 November. Available at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/28/my-message-to-queen-elizabeth-ii-aboriginal-art-needs-support](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/28/my-message-to-queen-elizabeth-ii-aboriginal-art-needs-support), last accessed 4 January 2019.

Schabas, Martha. (2015) Review of *Gudirr Gudirr*. *The Globe and Mail*, 8 May. Available at [www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/gudirr-gudirr-is-a-one-woman-dance-show-with-a-vital-message/article24337111/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/gudirr-gudirr-is-a-one-woman-dance-show-with-a-vital-message/article24337111/), last accessed 4 January 2019.

Yúdice, George. (2003) *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

### **Biographical Note**

Helen Gilbert was the Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at the University of Tokyo from September 2017– July 2018. She works at Royal Holloway, University of London and is author/editor of several influential books, including *In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization* (2017), *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas* (2014) and *Performance and Cosmopolitics* (with Jacqueline Lo, 2007). In 2015, her outstanding work in international theatre and performance studies was recognized with a Humboldt Prize in Germany.