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Abstract
In 2008, I was an observer at a two-day workshop concerned with the future of the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival. The delegates were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Cape York Peninsula, representing communities (Indigenous townships) that dance at this long-running event. There was an openfloor discussion; following cultural protocols, one by one elders got to their feet to speak for country. A highly respected elder told of how he and his family cared for country - walked, talked, sung, hunted, burned - to keep their ancestral lands healthy, as the land looked after them. He then passionately implored his audience to understand that dancing at the Laura festival is the same. My memory is of the old man becoming animated and agile, made young as his feet stomped the floor, his traditional country manifest in the room. As someone who has been to many Indigenous festivals, I saw dust rising, that old man dancing. After him, elders stressed their support for the festival and its role in gathering people from across the region to strengthen and affirm the Cape as a multicultural Aboriginal domain, and as a means to maintain and develop strong culture for the Cape and surrounding communities. All the participants then undertook an exercise to arrive at the festival purpose or mission statement. Despite the range of people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge. The countrymen were unanimous that the Laura Festival is a significant event for maintaining cultural integrity and passing on tradition to young people. That old man does not dance alone.

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Chapter 7

Sovereign Bodies: Australian Indigenous Cultural Festivals and Flourishing Lifeworlds

Lisa Slater

In 2008, I was an observer at a two-day workshop concerned with the future of the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival. The delegates were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across Cape York Peninsula, representing communities (Indigenous townships) that dance at this long-running event. There was an open-floor discussion; following cultural protocols, one by one elders got to their feet to speak for country. A highly respected elder told of how he and his family cared for country – walked, talked, sung, hunted, burned – to keep their ancestral lands healthy, as the land looked after them. He then passionately implored his audience to understand that dancing at Laura festival is the same. My memory is of the old man becoming animated and agile, made young as his feet stomped the floor, his traditional country manifest in the room. As someone who has been to many Indigenous festivals, I saw dust rising, that old man dancing. After him, elders stressed their support for the festival and its role in gathering people from across the region to strengthen and affirm the Cape as a multicultural Aboriginal domain, and as a means to maintain and develop strong culture for the Cape and surrounding communities. All the participants then undertook an exercise to arrive at the festival purpose or mission statement. Despite the range of people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge. The countrymen were unanimous that Laura Festival is a significant event for people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge.
maintaining cultural integrity and passing on tradition to young people.\textsuperscript{4} That old man does not dance alone.

There are hundreds of Indigenous festivals across Australia, from small community gatherings to large-scale productions complete with rock star stages, and the corresponding talent. Since colonization, there has been a history of Indigenous public performances for non-Indigenous audiences. My focus here is on what are readily called Indigenous cultural festivals, and more so those events that are innovations of the ‘traditional’ ceremonial life that now unfolds in settler, liberal Australia. They are public performances, manifestations of a sacred, ritual world. In particular, I am drawing my observations and analysis from festivals I have attended and researched (but absolutely not limited to these examples, or excluding events in urban Australia), such as Garma (Northern Territory), Laura Aboriginal Dance (Far North Queensland) and KALACC festivals (Kimberley, Western Australia). These festivals are held on lands that are recognized under forms of land rights and native title, and ‘traditional’ culture is practised and is acknowledged by, and affects, state and corporate activities. Like many Indigenous festivals, they have a similar purpose: to maintain and strengthen culture. Yet it is Indigenous culture that worries so many people in the mainstream. In this chapter, I examine Indigenous cultural festivals as creative commitments to the ontological primacy of land and non-Western sociality and ritual life, which emerges in a deeply intercultural world dominated by settler liberalism. A hope and aim of these events is to compose anti-colonial relations, arguably whereby ‘culture’ is not a commodity to be scrutinized and judged but rather recognized as emanating from complex lifeworlds.

In the same month as the 2011 Laura Festival was staged, academic John Morton (2011) wrote an opinion piece for The Australian newspaper, entitled ‘Threadbare paradigms hamper Indigenous progress’. He wrote that since the new millennium, there has been a ‘dramatic’ shift in Australian public intellectual debates addressing Indigenous issues. Previously, Indigenous difference – here identified as ‘culture’ – was the vehicle for achieving Indigenous rights and political recognition; currently, the reigning public discourse – promulgated and popularized by Aboriginal public intellectual Noel Pearson – is the need for Indigenous people to engage with the ‘real economy’. Put simply, political responses to Indigenous socio-economic issues have been directed largely towards mainstreaming. Morton (2011: 2) goes on to argue that Pearson and his supporters are not opposed to difference, but rather to ‘those who wish to sustain a culture of victimhood’. By drawing on Marcia Langton’s attack on the ‘old Left’, he associates ‘victimhood’ with keeping ‘Aborigines in a non-modern place’. Putting aside whether he is correct to suggest that there has ever been such an easy division between left and right, and previous steadfast support for ‘culture’ (and his un-nuanced use of the term ‘difference’), if Morton is discussing an intellectual debate, it is one that has been had in the disciplines of anthropology and Indigenous studies, Countrymen is a gender neutral term for Indigenous traditional owners, readily used in northern Australia.
surrounding Peter Sutton’s (2009) book *The Politics of Suffering*. He worries over the politicization of the academy, and wants to defend Sutton’s work (and person) from what Morton sees as an ideological attack by some on the academic left. But he is most troubled by Aboriginal ‘culture’. Morton took the opportunity to reiterate Sutton’s thesis:

[C]ertain forms of Aboriginal tradition, when corrupted in the context of modernisation, led to distress and dysfunction. Aboriginal child-rearing practices, strategic recourse to legitimate violence and the articulation of extended kin obligations were placed under the microscope and found to be inconsistent with the encroachment of imposed regimes of schooling, policing and welfare, which relied on other rationalities for potential good effect. (2011: 2, emphasis added)

The problem identified by Sutton is one of differing rationalities: realities or ontology. Broadly speaking, Indigenous and settler colonials have ontological differences. Yet Morton advocates for a neat middle ground. Relinquishing ontology is a very different proposition from setting aside ideological differences. However, for the moment I will put aside these criticisms to return to culture. If somewhat tentatively, Morton weighed into the ‘culture wars’ or the politics of engagement with Indigenous policy and its role in the imagined futures of and for Indigenous peoples (Hinkson 2010: 1). While Morton suggested an ideological slanging match, Altman and Hinkson’s edited collection, *Culture Crisis*, which contains diverse scholarship, notes that ‘culture’ has become an object of critical attention – a ‘site of intense, future focused contestation’ (Hinkson 2010: xiv).

What is this thing called Aboriginal culture, which is simultaneously revered and deplored? Indigenous visual arts – that is, paintings from remote Australia, not urban art – are close to universally admired. Even the most conservative politicians are photographed in their offices with a desert dot painting – or an Arnhem Land bark or the subtle red earth tones of the Kimberly – as backdrop, roundly praised as good culture. At the same time, kinship systems and obligations to extended family are readily, with bipartisan support, condemned as ‘an impediment to progress’. Maybe this is to confuse the question, or even to ask the wrong question. A specific practice only becomes ‘Indigenous Culture’, as Eric Michaels (1994) points out, once it is taken out of local networks of production, circulation and exchange. My above example works, as Morton does, with mainstream formulations of ‘culture’ or cultural difference as an object or processes abstracted from its material and discursive relations. It is an arrangement that, on one hand, commodifies Indigenous culture as an aspect of the mainstream economy and, on the other, essentializes it as unchanging traditional practices that are a bad fit with modernity. To produce good culture, it must be disarticulated from bad culture. But why does that old man dance? What are the forces or assemblages to which he binds himself when he – like his countrymen – speaks of the vital role of cultural maintenance, and the place of festivals in this process? In drawing
readers’ attention to Morton’s article, I am not only taking the temperature of an ongoing debate, but more importantly I think he publicly discloses presumptions that are foundational to the popular construction of ‘Indigenous culture’ and the ‘Indigenous problem’. Before continuing, I know I risk making Morton into a straw man (or worse, a whipping boy), and this is not my intention. Rather, I am arguing that public discourse – or what passes as political debate – is hampered by ‘threadbare paradigms’, but the same cannot be said of much scholarship in the broad fields concerned with Indigenous issues. It is a rich resource – as is to be found elsewhere, such as in local programs and initiatives such as festivals – for understanding our present, and realizing just and desired futures. I want to propose that there are vastly different articulations of culture being expressed by that old man and Morton. Or, to be more accurate, what is at play is ontological politics. Indigenous cultural festivals, I argue, are an innovative responses to keeping culture alive – meaningful lifeworlds comprised of local networks of production, circulation, exchange, sociality and law, embedded in settler, liberal modernity. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians live in entangled and interdependent lifeworlds. All Australians are influenced by government policies and bureaucratic decisions, yet Indigenous people and communities are marked by cultural, historical, socio-economic (more often perceived, but sometimes geographical) differences and, despite processes of colonization and assimilation, they continue to assert sovereignty. These apparent differences between lifeworlds play out in political and social fields. The questions of how to theorize such difference-yet-relatedness within an increasingly expanding and complex social field, Hinkson and Smith (2005: 157) argue, is a crucial challenge for accounts of ‘Indigenous Australia’ and anthropology in general.

Wrestling with this very material dilemma, they propose the ‘intercultural’ as a productive concept. There are not, they argue, separate Indigenous/non-Indigenous spheres that meet at an ‘interface’; rather, their approach is one that considers ‘Indigenous and non-Indigenous social forms to be necessarily relational, and to occupy a single socio-cultural field’ (Hinkson and Smith 2005: 158). Sympathizing with their intellectual project, Patrick Sullivan (2005) is wary of the term ‘intercultural’, arguing that the concept emerges from and is limited by the modernist project of ‘caught between two worlds’. He calls for the development of relational anthropology, which accounts for the fluidity and contestation privileged by many Indigenous peoples, and which reveals complex fields of interrelations and co-location. In this sense, he proposes that cultures should primarily be understood as effects of strategic and political relationships (Sullivan 2005: 184).

There are cultural differences, but they emerge in a relational field: the reproduction of cultural differences is in a field of interdependencies, imbrications and relatedness (Preaud 2009: 119). Importantly, there is no site of neat convergence, for example, where state policies and bureaucracy and local difference and divergence unite; rather, it is in the thickness of everyday life that people navigate the effects of power-laden relational processes – be they familial, local, regional, national or global. In this shared social domain, socio-economic disadvantage – or...
what is too commonly thought of as the ‘problem’ (and sometimes the promise) of Indigenous culture – emerges. It is in our present that so-called traditional culture is harnessed as a resource for ameliorating social issues. Why? Because strong, healthy life is made from, among other things, a world that is meaningful, shared and valued by self and others. The festivals that are the focus of this chapter represent a public space within contemporary Australia where ‘traditional’ or customary culture takes precedence and structures exchanges and events – with, I would argue, the express purpose of enlivening and enriching life.

The association of non-Indigenous people (particularly settler colonials) with ‘modernity’ and Indigenous people with ‘tradition’ or ‘not modern’ (yet) is commonplace. Arguably, it is particular practices or performances of Indigeneity that are categorized as the pre-modern, to which liberal settler societies then attribute aesthetic-moral value. As Weiner and Glaskin (2006, quoted in Preaud 2009: 42) write:

The emergence of a domain called (variously) the ‘customary’, the ‘traditional’ and/or ‘the Indigenous’ is made visible chiefly in the bi-cultural context of the modern nation-state. The ‘invention’ of tradition is not, as the phrase might suggest, an essentially autogenously generated transformation from within a community perceived to be spatially and culturally distinct. It is a gloss for a particular moment in inter-cultural relations, especially of an asymmetric nature.

We are in a particular inter-cultural moment – albeit a long one – whereby commentators, public intellectuals and politicians alike worry that traditional culture is limiting and delaying Indigenous people’s entry into modernity. To return to Morton (2011: 5) as one such example, he finishes his article with ‘as we move beyond the era of what Pearson calls “the campaign blackfella”, we will be more ready to accept that the most important problem shaping research is the desirability of Aborigines entering more fully into modernity’. For many, I think this would be perceived as a reasonable expectation of research and, more generally, public policy. However, the underlying assumptions are that there are two separate social domains – the Indigenous and non-Indigenous – with the former either outside or standing at the threshold of modernity. I would contend that the more pressing scholarly concern should be the study and conceptual unravelling of this damaging false binary.

The intellectual project of Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2006) monograph *The Empire of Love* is to critique the accompanying discourses of individual freedom and social constraint that circulate in settler-colonial societies. The idea of freedom, the fantasy of individual choice, in Povinelli’s theoretical arrangement, is produced within a liberal assemblage of conflicting cultural modes of modernity and tradition – or what she refers to as autological and genealogical imaginaries (also see Probyn 2008):
By the *autological subject*, I am referring to discourse, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism. By *genealogical society*, I am referring to discourses, practices, and fantasies about social constraints placed on the autological subject by various kinds of inheritances. (Povinelli 2006: 4)

She sets herself the assignment of understanding how these discourses animate and enflesh ethical and normative claims about the governance of love, sociality and bodies, and in so doing operate as strategies of power that contribute to the material conditions that over-invest in some to live prosperous and optimistic lives, while others are diminished – ‘the power to cripple and rot certain worlds’ (Povinelli 2006: 9). Despite the fact that socialities can be radically different, I would argue that there are not two competing cultural modes. The genealogical web of kinship relations to human and non-human worlds, ancestral traditions and attendant obligations give life deep meaning to many Indigenous peoples, while settler liberal subjects are largely formed within social systems that privilege self-fashioning discourses. The reality, as Elspeth Probyn (2008: 235) writes, is that ‘we live viscerally between interpellation and freedom’. Settler liberal governance promulgates freedom and choice, while responsibility is not only to the self but bears the traces of genealogical constraint: self-fashioning within the limits of family and community values makes a good and proper citizen. However, the state recognizes autological – modern – subjects if they conform to the Western imaginary of agency, citizenship and responsibility (Preaud 2009: 57). Concurrently, the state perceives others – in this case, many Indigenous peoples, whose agency, responsibilities and humanness derive from alternative sociality and order, human and more-than-human world – as beholden to tradition, so thus not being autonomous, fully modern agents. The discourses of autological subject and genealogical society are a claim on what makes us human, and they contribute to securing settler liberal power and reproducing it as normative (Povinelli 2006).

The discourses of modernity and tradition obscure the distribution of power and value within the Australian state, and the complex navigations and inventiveness that compose the quotient for minorities in intercultural domains. My concern here is the dilemma for Indigenous people of negotiating the discourses of autological and genealogical society, and how this impacts upon their everyday lives. These very lifeworlds are routinely not taken into account when ‘culture’ is abstracted from its material and discursive relations – be it to praise or problematize. These discourses cannot be understood outside of people’s familiar lives. They are not a set of rules that one applies to life; rather, Indigeneity enfold in dense social worlds (Povinelli 2006: 85). Lifeworlds – or thick life, to borrow from Povinelli – generate sociality, which has its own local obligations, responsibilities, social identities, agency and hierarchies. Povinelli’s goal is to understand how the discourses of modernity and tradition shape social life, so we can begin to ‘formulate a positive political program’ – a politics of thick life – ‘in which the density of social
I wish to follow her. Arguably, what are commonly referred to as customary or traditional cultural practices are Indigenous relational ontologies, being privileged and performed in shared social domains. Where else are the spaces of enunciation or performance of contemporary Indigeneity if not here and now? What are the experiments in living that emerge from Indigenous peoples contesting modernity? To quarrel with and expose the inequitable power of Western visions of modernity, post-colonial scholars are attentive to alternative or hybrid modernities. If modernity is best understood as an attitude of questioning the present, as Gaonkar (1999: 13) assumes, then modernity is everywhere. All modernities are contextual. Western modernity, with its distinctive moral and scientific vision, distinguished from its own ancient past and non-Western societies, is associated with the development of industrial capitalism, which ushered in social and economic transformations, and with them the production of new forms of subjectivity (Gaonkar 1999: 15; Knauft 2002). As others have argued, this is not modernity but the history of the West, which is also a history of exploitation and domination of Indigenous peoples justified by racial logics of primitivism and tribalism (Chakrabarty 2000; Povinelli 2006). The intellectual, political terrain from which I draw is that of postcolonial, African, Indigenous and subaltern studies organizations, artists, writers and thinkers, who have interrogated the Western construction of modernity as power-laden, secular, disembodied and separate from the non-human world (e.g. see Ahluwalia 2010; Arabena 2006; Fanon 1963; Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre 2007; Marika 1999; Mbembe 2001; Moreton-Robinson 2007; Povinelli 2002). Critiquing the commitment of European political thought to the human as ontologically singular, Chakrabarty writes: I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits. Being human means … Discovering ‘the possibility of calling upon God [or gods] without being under an obligation to first establish his [or their] reality’. (2000: 16)

The agency, love, wiliness and creativity of spirits, ancestors, country – the more-than-human world – are called upon, or rather made manifest in the

5 According to Preaud, relational ontology refers to ‘each person or agency is uniquely articulating constellations of relationships that define his/her/its being: here singularities do not derive from individual internal characteristics but from the ordering of a particular network (or rather sets of networks if we add to kinships networks of places, histories, and myth) and ways of navigating through it: each agent thus appears as a moving node of a network and, indeed, it is the very condition of their being’ (2009: 123–4). He goes on to argue that relational ontology is a ‘general property of living systems and not specifically attached to particular segments of the human population and it is from a relational nexus of heterogeneous elements that singular positions are articulated’ (2009: 134).
world, because they are vital to many Indigenous people’s relational ontology. If a meaningful relationship with a particular ‘country’ is constitutive of being and self, then it cannot be left out or put aside for the so-called prize of secular modernity (Preaud 2009: 29). Articulating maligned or largely unrecognized (or unrecognizable) alternative ontologies into spaces dominated and mediated by the liberal settler state produces contestation and creativity. In this sense, Indigenous cultural festivals are expressions and generation of, as well as experiments in, Indigenous modernity.

Across Australia, and globally, Indigenous cultural festivals are growing in number and influence, ranging from small community events to those of national and international reach and significance (Phipps and Slater 2010). There are literally hundreds of Indigenous festivals and celebrations in Australia, most of which are local events driven by community organizations and individuals, with very little funding or outside support, with a focus on contemporary cultural practices: sport, music, art or ‘traditional’ culture. The driving force of these events is often, in mainstream speak, community well-being: the gathering together of people to celebrate, share and remember, and clear a public space that is dedicated to the values and aspirations of the people and place. Notably, as Michelle Duffy (2005) suggests, because festivals are structured events, they bring groups and communities together to mark out particular socio-political, historical and cultural affiliations. Like mainstream festivals, Indigenous festivals are deployed as a means to enhance community creativity, belonging and well-being, and thus nourish community resilience. Scholars have recognized festivals and community celebrations as important events that provide both material and symbolic means of responding to and coping with change (Gibson and Connell 2011; Gibson and Stewart 2009; Mulligan et al. 2006). And many Indigenous Australians face relentless change.

Historically, Indigenous people have participated in festivals commemorating nationhood, and staged counter-festivals to protest colonization and to celebrate survival. They are a means of entering into dialogue with mainstream Australia and testimony to ongoing political struggles (Kleinert 1999: 345). The annual Survival Day concerts staged across Australia unsettle and challenge official Australia Day celebrations, and have grown out of a long history of utilizing public performance to remind broader Australia of the continuing Indigenous presence. For contemporary audiences, performance has become an increasingly familiar aspect of cultural practice among Indigenous peoples. Such events are a testament to ongoing political struggles, and for both Indigenous performers and their audience they provide an important context for the contemporary negotiation and transmission of Indigenous people’s, and more broadly Australian, identities (Myers, quoted in Kleinert 1999).

In recent years, several major Indigenous festivals have emerged, including Garma Festival (North-East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory), The Dreaming (South-East Queensland), Barunga Festival (Northern Territory), Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival (Cape York, Queensland), Coming of the Light (Thursday Island, Torres Strait Islands) and KALACC Festival (Kimberley, Western Australia).
In 2003, in recognition of the vibrancy and significance of Indigenous festivals, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded a touring photographic exhibition, *Kickin’ up Dust: Contemporary Festivals of Indigenous Australia*, featuring images of the Torres Strait Cultural Festival (Thursday Island), Stompem Ground (Broome, Western Australia), Larapuna (Tasmania) and Garma festivals (Payne 2003). The lineage of all of these festivals is extremely intercultural: from ceremony practised on country to rodeos, sports days and country shows, to the glamour of international arts festivals and a long history of arts and culture being deployed to ameliorate social issues.

In recent years, there has been an increasing academic, government and philanthropic interest in community celebrations, and particularly in the relationship between community art and well-being (see Mulligan et al. 2006; Phipps and Slater 2010). In turn, philanthropic and government agencies increasingly are receiving applications for funding for Indigenous festivals. Notably, the Australia Council’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (ATSIAB) (2008), as a part of its industry development strategy, Celebrations, is supporting festival events in recognition of their artistic, cultural and economic benefits for Indigenous peoples.

Telstra Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Australian telco, Telstra, initiated the three-year research project for which I was primary researcher, after identifying a need for evidence-based research. The foundation was receiving numerous funding applications that relied upon anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the connection between Indigenous celebrations and strengthening social well-being (Phipps and Slater 2010). What became clear during the research was the number of government and non-government bodies that were initiating, or responding to, the thirst for Indigenous community celebrations and events. However, differing pressures, ambitions and agendas often drive funding agencies and Indigenous communities. Add to this the fact that that festivals are run by diverse and divergent bodies – be they community agencies, such as sport and recreational or arts workers, Indigenous organisations or councils, professional events managers, or energized and passionate individuals – all with varied capacities and resources. All events, no matter how big or small, rely on volunteers – be they local or from elsewhere – and the goodwill of community – individuals and organizations – elders’ and traditional owners’ approval and support, compliance with council regulations and some form of sponsorship, even if it is the local shop. This is quite apart from, as any arts/community sector worker knows, the relentless demands of applying for funds, reporting and acquittal. This is all to say that Indigenous festivals are complex contemporary events, which makes them captivating to study – and no doubt challenging and rewarding work.

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6 This project started in 2007 and won the support of the Australian Research Council under the Linkage grants scheme, ‘Globalising Indigeneity: Indigenous cultural festivals and wellbeing in Australia and the Asia-Pacific’ (LP0882877, 2008–10), partner organization, Telstra Foundation (see Phipps and Slater 2010).
Indigenous festivals, as Rosita Henry (2008) writes, have grown in tandem with state policies that foster the celebration of culture as a further means to govern people. For all the positive aspects of Indigenous festivals – like all arenas of Indigenous lives – they operate within a web of government and non-governmental agencies and corporate agendas, values and power relations. Indeed, funding and supporting such events could be regarded, in some instances, as cunning forms of governmentality. Henry (2008: 53) points out that ‘the state deceptively asserts its presence within the festivals. Indeed, agents and agencies of the state colonize the festivals, so that the festivals become prime sites for recognition of the “effects” of the state’.

This can most readily be observed in what events and programs are funded. For example, at the Barunga Festival, the Department of Lands and Planning’s Road Safety Branch sponsors the ‘Road Safety Song Competition’. Local bands become the medium to deliver government directives ‘about safe and appropriate behaviour for drivers, passengers and pedestrians’ (Barunga Festival 2010). Most of the bands perform their usual repertoire with the addition of lyrics such as ‘don’t drink and drive’, ‘wear your seatbelt’ and so on. For all the import of road safety awareness, the means of delivery are paternalistic, and it is assumed that the problem is one of ‘education and promotion’, and that people only need to learn ‘proper’ conduct and they will adjust their behaviour. (Notably, the competition is popular but that might have little to do with the ‘awareness’ campaign and much more to do with the opportunity it affords to perform in front of countrymen.) However, partaking in such events should not simply be interpreted as submitting to the process of assimilation or naivety. Indigenous festivals and public performances have long been creative means to negotiate and intervene in forms of state power, to mark out a continuing presence and legitimacy, and to assert some agency in a rapidly changing world dominated by mainstream values and bureaucratic power (Henry 2008: 54).

Since colonization, there has been a history of Aboriginal public performance for non-Indigenous people. However, they have been received primarily as modes of ‘cultural’ tourism or entertainment, representative of a ‘primitive’ age or dying culture. Kleinert (1999: 347) writes that:

Colonial history is replete with a rich history of such performances. However, the importance of these cultural representations has been largely overlooked, either bracketed off from history as anthropology … appropriated as theatre, viewed primarily as a form of entertainment and a spectacle of an exotic primitive Other.

Françoise Dussart (2000: 76) argues that the forced sedentarization of Central Desert Aborigines, which imposed inter-group residency on various Aboriginal societies, resulted in public ritual becoming an important tool for inter-Aboriginal engagement. At this time, non-Indigenous viewers other than anthropologists were rare. During the Protectionist era, mainstream community festivals and events, such as rodeos and rural shows, provided an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to embrace the performative potential of such events for political engagement with settler society (Henry 2000: 587). However, with the introduction of various
Aboriginal Land Rights Acts, public performance became a ‘kind of legal tool’, due to the legislation requiring proof of genealogical and religious connections to the land (Dussart 2000: 76). Government officials thus became a new audience for public ceremonies. The socio-political role and effectiveness of these cultural performances for Indigenous people went largely unacknowledged by non-Indigenous audiences until the last two decades, when the Australian public more broadly began to appreciate aspects of ‘traditional culture’. More importantly, however, the state’s recognition of the continuance of Indigenous land ownership and governance saw the emergence of Indigenous organizations – such as land councils and various cultural-political bodies – in which customary law became further entangled with bureaucracy and state-based process. As discussed earlier, this produces fields of interrelation and co-location, or the intercultural, in which Indigenous people must navigate asymmetrical political power and competing social identities and boundaries. Settler liberal governments’ intrusion into, and bureaucratization of, Indigenous lifeworlds, alongside mainstream embracing of Indigenous cultural performance, produces new contexts for the articulation (and transfiguration) of ‘Indigeneity’ into the Australian political space (Preaud 2009: 32). Festivals might also be thought of as experiments in and expressions of the agency of ‘country’.

The Indigenous cultural festivals to which I wish to draw attention are those that I understand to be an innovative extension of what is known as ritual or ceremonial life, within the transmutations and constraints of settler liberal colonialism (Preaud 2009: 49). As noted, festivals I have attended and researched, such as Garma, Laura Aboriginal Dance and KALACC festivals, inform my analysis. These three festivals are held in regions where there are discrete Aboriginal lands recognized by the state, and where ceremonial life and ‘traditional’ culture and languages remain strong and exert significant influence on state and corporate activities. Broadly speaking, they have a similar purpose: to keep culture strong. KALACC festival is held every few years in different locations across the Kimberley, Western Australia. It takes place over five days, and attracts up to 3,000 people. The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC), whose objective is to strengthen Kimberley Aboriginal social, cultural and legal values, organizes the event. The event gathers Indigenous people from across the Kimberley to learn and maintain songs and dances, to sustain culture and to demonstrate sovereignty. The event is closed to tourists and visitors, and only a few select influential people from outside the region are invited (KALACC 2011). The annual Garma Festival of Traditional Culture is one of Australia’s premier Indigenous cultural festivals. It is an initiative of the Yolŋu Indigenous people of North-East Arnhem Land, and is held on traditional lands, Gulkula, near the mining town of Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory. At Garma, Yolŋu culture is practised and shared through visual arts, Bunggul (traditional dance), Manikay (traditional song), contemporary music, workshops and forums, and men and women’s cultural tourism programs. Garma is open to tourists and visitors, but only through an application and invitation process (Slater 2006). Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival began over 30 years ago, and is held...
The Festivalization of Culture

biannually 15 kilometres from the township of Laura, Cape York, Queensland, on Kuku Yalanji land. The three-day program is a celebration of the region’s Indigenous cultures, primarily featuring dance groups from across Cape York and into the Torres Strait, and has become one of the largest gatherings of Indigenous people in Australia. It is open to tourists (Slater 2010).

There are, as mentioned, hundreds of events scattered across the country, many of them small, local festivals with the express purpose of cultural maintenance and transmission. Notably, as much as they are highly intercultural events, festivals are not only showcases for or spectacles of the remnants of Indigenous traditions or contemporary artistic expression, but in many cases are temporal, material and socio-cultural spaces in which Indigenous people affirm and maintain the ontological primacy and agency of ancestral lands and beings. There are different categories or levels of Indigenous knowledge – public, sacred or secret-sacred – often referred to as inside/outside, which designates the appropriate level of access and openness of the knowledge to ‘outsiders’ or those who are not holders of the law. The manifestations of ancestral beings or country at festivals – be it through song, dance, designs, objects or stories – is at the level of public knowledge (Preaud 2009: 44; Magowan 2000). The KALACC festival, Preaud (2009: 45) writes, ‘can be seen as an extension of the movement of secularization of ritual power or, to put it differently, the projection of ritual practices into novel situations and sets of relationships’.

Festivals are another means by which Australia, on the local, regional and national levels, is affirmed, contested and reproduced as Indigenous country. An alternative modernity is actualized, and the more-than-human world of country, spirits and ancestors materializes in shared social domains, where it can test the secular modern commitment to and desire for a world of the ontologically singular.

Cultural festivals reterritorialize the state and non-Indigenous peoples into an alternative sociality. One of the express purposes of festivals is as agents for transforming relationships with settler Australia – be it government or citizens. In these spaces, Indigenous and mainstream Australians are positioned as equivalent, and ‘our’ lifeworlds are co-located and entangled. What distinguishes and gathers ‘us’ is Indigenous law and governance, largely made prominent in these spaces through ceremony, but it is also asserted in a variety of other ways, such as meetings, talks and workshops. For a few days, the imaginary notion of ‘we’ is re-composed. Countrymen are the hosts, all others are guests and ‘we’ are interpolated into an assemblage in which ‘country’ is a, if not the, primary actor; power relations shape-shift. I am not suggesting that the significance, or affect, of this is recognized or responded to in the same way by all: if one has little experience in particular forms of sociality then attentiveness and humility might just be one of the best options. What does it feel like? What are the possibilities? How are notions such as respect, reconciliation and equality tested in these places? I am proposing that the festivals to which I draw attention here are an experiment in anti-colonial relationality.

Cultural festivals are creative, and I would especially argue very generous, ways in which Indigenous people have made themselves present in the world and continue to challenge a history that had rendered them absent (Henry 2000: 586).
To be ‘rendered absent’ from history is to be made marginal to the civic body, which reinforces the values of the settler, colonial culture. In turn, Indigenous people’s incorporation into the national body too often comes at the cost of their being subject to and limited by mainstream discourses and representations of modernity and tradition. In so doing, the socio-cultural differences that are life-sustaining and generative do not inform the very government policies that are being created to improve Indigenous lives. Indigenous peoples and cultures have long been denigrated, misunderstood, discounted and appropriated, made meaningful or meaningless through a colonial lens, but rarely recognized as material expressions of world-views and sociality that anchor and tend life. I am in no way suggesting that festivals are the only or remaining space where ‘culture’ is performed – of course, this is in no way true: culture is lived in the everyday. Furthermore there are an abundance of ‘cultural’ programs and initiatives that are developed and supported by government and non-government agencies in conjunction with Indigenous communities as a means of addressing social issues. However, what is well documented – and most especially etched into the lives of Indigenous people – is the assimilative pressures upon peoples who are embedded within a dominant culture. A vital component of sustaining and supporting socio-cultural well-being is the creation of public spaces in which Indigenous values, hopes, ambitions and imagined futures can be asserted over and against the social construction of reality by state practices and the mainstream (Morrissey et al. 2007: 245).

Scholars have noted the importance of performance for Indigenous cultural politics, most especially knowledge transfer and the renewal and assertion of Indigenous identity (Henry 2008; Myers 1994; Phipps and Slater 2010; Slater 2007). In public discourse, it has become distressingly familiar to hear of inter-generational breakdown in Indigenous communities, and the associated social and cultural distress. It is well understood that a sense of identity is a prerequisite for mental health and, as Morrissey (2007: 249) and others argue, cultural identity depends not only on access to culture and heritage, but also on opportunities for cultural expression and cultural endorsement within society’s institutions. Groundbreaking reports such as the national report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and Bringing Them Home (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families 1997) have highlighted the devastating role that fractured or lost cultural identity has played in the lives of Indigenous people. When I refer to cultural transmission, I am not only discussing the teaching of particular practices, such as traditional dance or painting, but much more importantly the inter-generational transfer of social relations and worlds of meaning. Here I follow Tim Ingold (2000) and Martin Preaud, who conceptualize the transmission of cultural knowledge ‘not in terms of a set of contents passed on from one generation to the next but as a nexus of relations generated in the immanent field of country, or the environment’ (Ingold, quoted in Preaud 2009: 101). To return to an earlier discussion, if one’s social identity – one’s ‘beingness’ – is constitutive of meaningful relationship with ‘country’, and networks of kinship with the human and non-human – that is, a...
particular cosmological order – then it is vital to life itself. In the context about which I write, the import of cultural transmission is to maintain, bind and actualize social relations to ‘country’ in ever-transforming social fields, not to return to a mythical, pristine, pre-colonial past (Preaud 2009: 109). Cultural festivals are one such route for reinvigorating significant relationships and social identities, with the express purpose of strengthening young people’s capacity to navigate the demands of a deeply intercultural world, and to be innovators and agents of the new roles and possibilities generated in our shared present.

If I were to attempt an answer to my own question, ‘Why does that old man dance?’, I could simply answer, ‘So his children’s children can also dance, or be known by, their country’. But this is to say little if one separates particular practices from local networks, relations and conditions of production. Public formulations of Indigenous culture often have it as practices somehow exercised in discreet social domains, subject to corruption by modernity but not of modernity. The discourse of the conflicting cultural modes of modernity and tradition operates to obscure complex fields of interrelation, co-location and power relations in which people’s lives are embedded. It produces the ‘Indigenous problem’, and the solution as a movement more fully into secular, liberal modernity. In so doing, we fail to attend to the complex navigations and experiments in living that constitute marginalized peoples every day, and more so to care for their hopes, values, pain, love and desired futures. Cultural festivals are creative assemblages composed of and from the pressures and promise of a globalizing, intercultural world. That old man, I would contend, was affirming festivals as contemporary practices for nurturing the ontological primacy of land and alternative forms of sociality. Why? Because it constitutes their social reality, and people will fight (however tactically) for their worlds of meaning. In this sense, I am arguing that cultural festivals are peaceful weapons in a continuing ontological political contest.

References


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