

## On Indigenous Post-nostalgia: Transmedia Storytelling in the Work of Romaine Moreton\*

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It is a calling an octave higher  
The rainbow cries  
The first time was water  
The next shall be fire  
(Romaine Moreton, “The River’s Course”)

<sup>1</sup> T.G.H. Strehlow’s *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971) acquired notoriety after Bruce Chatwin’s citation of Strehlow’s work in *Songlines* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 2002), 166, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Hill, “Talking Broken Song”, *Overland* 171 (Winter 2003), 31-37.

<sup>4</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

During the period between 1932 and 1935, the anthropologist, T.G.H. Strehlow, and the Arrernte guide, Tom Lyonga, gathered and translated a collection of more than three-hundred Arrernte songs.<sup>1</sup> Barry Hill’s recent biography and collection of Strehlow’s diaries reveals some interesting details on the collaborative praxis employed while collecting these songs. As Strehlow recounts, during the transcription of the songs, the traditional custodians laid down a series of bundles, each containing a verse inscribed on a sacred object called *tyuringa*. Strehlow’s role was to write down the verses while the custodians wailed and sang as they unravelled the long strings in which the *tyuringa* were wrapped. Yet, although it is scarcely acknowledged, Strehlow’s diaries reveal the difficulties encountered by the anthropologist in understanding and translating the multidimensional textuality of Arrernte songs. Strehlow voiced his difficulties in transcribing the complex performance of the *tyuringa* and confessed that he “had to use inversion and certain poetical turns in an attempt to capture some of the dramatic effects of the original”.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the performative intertextuality of the *tyuringa*, indicated by the multiple meanings of the term which defines the songs, the inscriptions on the sacred objects and the related ground-painting which often took place during the performances, was later reified through the wide-spread nostalgic mode of the anthropological studies of Strehlow’s time into a commodified orality. Strehlow later justified his selling of the secret/sacred images of the Arrernte elders to the German magazine *Stern* by declaring that he owned them for he was the “last of the Aranda” or *ingkata* (ceremonial elder) and was recording “the remnants of a finally doomed culture”.<sup>3</sup> According to the present study, this episode may be regarded as an example of the “white possessive investment” in orality, a story that remains largely invisible in the persistent severing discourses of developmental modernization of histories of media and technology.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of never-ending, counterfactual announcements of the death of orality, Indigenous songs, music and spoken word performances have not disappeared either with the colonial imposition of the English language,

or with the advent of the press, broadcasting media, and digital recording technology. On the contrary, they have participated in the growth of Australian literature, in the recording output of the twentieth century and in radio and television broadcasting. The Indigenous media sector is extensive, with more than a hundred permanently licensed community radio stations, one commercial television station (Imparja, Alice Springs) and one commercial radio station (Yamitji Media, Carnarvon); more than fifty film, video and multimedia producers; one national newspaper and a large number of regional and local newspapers; several presses (IAD, Magabala Books, Aboriginal Studies Press).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the number of Indigenous music and spoken word performances at music festivals has significantly increased since the 1960s, and, more recently, digital recordings and video performances have started to circulate on the web.

Already during the 1990s, the prominent Australian scholars of media studies, Marcia Langton and Eric Michaels, demonstrated that Indigenous Australian writers have a long experience in broadcast media and sound recording technologies.<sup>6</sup> If the digital revolution rhetoric of the 1990s assumed that new media were going to push aside and absorb old media, convergence may emerge as an important reference point for media studies which try to imagine the future of the entertainment industry and claim that old and new media already have interacted and will interact in the future in ever more complex ways.<sup>7</sup> According to this study, “media convergence” or “transmedia storytelling”, has always characterised Australian Indigenous creative practices.<sup>8</sup> Thus, media convergence and transmedia storytelling may be more helpful frameworks to analyse the steady growth of transmedia practices of Australian Indigenous authors, such as the Goenpul poet, spoken word performer, singer and film-director, Romaine Moreton, whose work inhabits and continually crosses the liminal space of creative media.

## The Time of The Voice: The Commodification of Indigenous Orality

As Arjun Appadurai notes, the effort to inculcate nostalgia is a central feature of modern merchandising and commodification, yet such nostalgia does not principally involve the evocation of a sentiment to which consumers who really have lost something can respond. Rather, mass advertising teaches consumers to miss things they have never lost. In creating experiences of loss that never took place, these types of advertising create what might be called ‘imagined nostalgia’, nostalgia for things that never were. Nostalgia, he continues, creates the simulacra of periods that constitute the flow of time, conceived as lost, absent, or distant. Thus, they sell a progressive conceptualisation and representation of time and history to contemporary consumers.<sup>9</sup> This implosive, retrospective reification

<sup>5</sup> Michael Meadows, “‘Tell Me what You Want and I’ll Give You what you Need’: Perspectives on Indigenous Media Audience Research”, in Mark Balnaves, Tom O’Regan and Jason Sternberg, eds., *Mobilising the Audience* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press), 256; Anita Heiss, *Dhuuulu-yala: To Talk Straight; Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 51-57.

<sup>6</sup> Marcia Langton, *Well I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television...* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993); Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> This re-definition of the complex relation between technology and modernity may be traced in several essays by Marcia Langton and Eric Michaels, but also in Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Modernity* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling”, *Technology Review* (15 January 2003), <<http://www.technologyreview.com>>, 23 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 77.

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of time has arguably characterised the commodification of Aboriginal voice and music.

Indigenous cultures and spirituality have been reduced to commodities and deprived of their original use, context and symbolic value through the extensive use of the term Dreaming, a translation of the Central Desert Arrerndic *alcheringa* coined by the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer in 1899. The Dreaming, or Dream-time as it is often called, refers to the Arrerndic time of ancestral creation. Aboriginal Englishes tend to favour the term Dreamings, which denotes the ancestral beings, the story and songs which recount the beings' actions, or the sacred objects, designs, and sites in the landscape which those actions brought about, or, more often, the term Law, stressing the fact that the ancestors created a universe of rules and regulations. Yet, the development of Dreaming as an English gloss for specific Arrernte concepts and practices has taken the normative English meaning as its starting point and has been naturalised through the marketing of festivals and events, through the plastering of Indigenous art across aeroplanes, walls, umbrella stands, paper napkins, T-shirts, key racks, wine bottle labels and all manner of domestic and commercial objects.<sup>10</sup> In the Australian society of spectacle, the constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologizing of Indigenous cultures has created a set of imagined representations through which non-Indigenous peoples experience an Aboriginality that is divorced from experience. Yet, verbal art and music have rarely been considered as colonial commodities, although the international exhibitions of the nineteenth century which mark the beginning of the mass consumption of the colonial commodity spectacle regularly featured spoken word and live music performances.<sup>11</sup>

Mainstream broadcasting, jingles and advertising have taken the invention of racial difference into every corner of Australian homes. Indigenous Australian verbal art, the songlines and the sound of the didjeridu and clapsticks have been the referents of ever-changing discursive practices.<sup>12</sup> Many recordings marketed as authentic and traditional music have recently been composed and recorded as new age relaxation music by non-Indigenous and even non-Australian performers to create Australia's past for the tourist industry.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Indigenous music genres, such as rock and rap, are often regarded as unauthentic and pressure is put on musicians to use the didjeridu regardless of whether it "is culturally or aesthetically appropriate to the music", and to "produce Indigenous, expressive culture in particular, prescribed ways".<sup>14</sup> Along these lines, the nostalgic demand for the Indigenous voice and sound feeds into the production of Australia's white modernity.

Correspondingly, academic criticism often reiterates the trope of media convergence as loss or as the replacement of a vanishing oral tradition. Verbal art is separated from other visual and musical elements by means

<sup>10</sup> Marcia Langton, "Culture Wars", in Michele Grossman, ed., *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the Making of European Identities* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Murray Garde, "Maningrida, the Didjeridu and the Internet", in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press), 344-346.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Barwick, "Song as an Indigenous Art", in Kleinert and Neale, eds., *The Oxford Companion*, 328-335.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Oien, "Aboriginal Contemporary Music: Rockin' into the Mainstream?", in Kleinert and Neale, eds., *The Oxford Companion*, 335.

of literary criticism. Yet, following Mikhail Bakhtin, this search for orality may be identified as the methodological misunderstanding and confusion of the fundamental unit of communication: “the utterance”.<sup>15</sup> According to Bakhtin, orality and recorded speech do not represent or determine something that exists outside them. Recorded and oral language do not exist outside of performance, they are not a “function of thought emerging independent of communication”.<sup>16</sup> In Bakhtin’s words, “language enters life through concrete utterances .... Our repertoire of oral (and recorded) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skilfully in practice, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence in theory”.<sup>17</sup> Theoretically, Marie Louise Pratt further explains, there is no reason to expect that the body of utterances called orality should be systematically distinguishable from other utterances on the basis of intrinsic textual properties.<sup>18</sup>

Several critical works have further complicated the history of the orality/literacy relation. In *Orality and Literacy, The Technologising of the Word*, Walter J. Ong suggests that the relationship to orality of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, considered by Jacques Derrida one of the first voices of phonocentrism and logocentrism, was ambiguous.<sup>19</sup> In the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, Plato seems to be downgrading writing in favour of oral speech, and thus subscribes to a phonocentric point of view. However, in the *Republic*, he bans poets from the ideal republic because they stand for the oral, mnemonic world of imitation, aggregation, redundancy, copiousness, tradition, participation. This was a world antagonistic to the ‘ideal’ analytic, sparse, exact, abstract, visual, immobile world of the ideas. Ong claims that Plato felt this antipathy because he lived at a time when the alphabet had first become sufficiently interiorised. Paradoxically, Plato could formulate his phonocentrism, his preference for orality over writing, clearly and effectively only because he could write. Plato’s phonocentrism is textually contrived and textually defended. Hence, according to this study, orality and writing are identified through their other. They have always existed in a symbiosis, that is, not as a binary opposition but as a constitutive intertextual relation. In Ong’s words, “without textualism, orality cannot be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation”.<sup>20</sup> Written texts may well have been constructed following an oral concept (as in political rhetoric) and, vice versa, oral performance may follow conceptually written rules, as in religious services with a requirement of verbatim repetition.

Yet, the interrelation between verbal and written performances has often been constructed as a temporal succession, which has been the basis of their discrimination. As Stephen Muecke emphasises in his analysis of the different relation between epistemology and conditions of production

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, in Michael Holquist, ed., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, [1952-1953] 1986), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), xi.

<sup>19</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 169-170.



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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Muecke, "Body, Inscription, Epistemology: Knowing Aboriginal Texts", in Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed., *Connections: Essays on Black Literatures* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Kateryna Arthur, "Fiction and the Rewriting of History: A Reading of Colin Johnson", *Westerly* 1 (March 1985), 55-56.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press), 123.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: University of Chicago Press, [1972] 1981), 99.

in Indigenous verbal art and in writing, this chronological bias may run the risk of implying that "traditional performances .... [are] preliterate, as in some way preceding literary productions, as if they lie at the end of a progression. They could then be seen as unelaborated or unsophisticated, in a comparison which always treats writing as more powerful a medium than speech".<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the misleading construction of the hierarchical opposition of writing/orality has had very concrete consequences, as for example the temporary amnesia of the first British settlers of Australia who declared 'possession' of an unnamed and unoccupied space. As Kateryna Arthur argues, the obliteration of Indigenous cultures in Australia has been as much the work of the pen as of physical violence and might be defined as "a kind of cultural write-out or white-out".<sup>22</sup> However, the erasure of Indigenous Australian pre-colonial history was not the work of writing but the failure to understand that writing need not always be defined by the Gutenberg tradition. As Derrida notes, the Western interpretation of writing is rather limited: "To say that a people do not know how to write because one can translate the word which they use to designate the act of inscribing as 'drawing lines', is that not as if one should refuse them 'speech' by translating the equivalent word by 'to cry', 'to sing', 'to sigh'?"<sup>23</sup> Hence, the blind spot of many scholars of Indigenous verbal art and writing might be that they seek to explain or modify the power relations that link technology and performance in a way that doesn't take into consideration that performance might exceed their power of classification and might already be operating through a technology that they prefer to perceive as their own property.

As Derrida further argues, the translation of the composition of the mutually related orality/writing into one logic is "an effect of analysis that violently destroys it, reduces it to one of its simple elements by interpreting it, paradoxically enough, in the light of the ulterior developments it itself has made possible. Such an interpretative translation is thus as violent as it is impotent".<sup>24</sup> Instead, this study seeks to redefine spoken word performances, song, music, and writing as intertextually related performances. Thinking of writing, orality and sound in terms of multimedia convergence and transmedia storytelling, rather than in terms of competitive historical progress, means that their analysis has to consider how they co-exist, opening up the Western progressive history of media and technology to the performative, disjunctive elements that are normally left out.

### The Post-nostalgic Stage: Romaine Moreton's Transmedia Storytelling

The nostalgic view of Indigenous cultures, which denies the capacity of Australian Indigenous artists to establish new media networks and employ different technologies, may be attributed to the white possessive investment

in Aboriginal orality as a benchmark of pre-modernity. As a recent study on talking and listening in the age of Australian modernity argues, during the 1920s sound and voice started to be influenced by media and communication technologies such as the telephone, the gramophone, the radio and the cinema, and modern sound and voice were defined as something to be measured, managed and abated through new regulatory measures and new techniques of mechanical reproduction.<sup>25</sup> As Bruce Johnson notes, the arrival of modern sound recording technology, which in Australia coincided with the implementation of the White Australia Policy, proliferated and amplified the geographical and semiotic range through which auditory phenomena could exercise authority.<sup>26</sup> Arguably, sound recording technologies granted music, language and accent the unique potential to become a biopolitical device on a large scale.

Music and songs functioned as a pervasive regulatory measure and strong conveyor of the White Australia Policies, which since 1901 have largely regulated the access to the imaginary white Australian nation. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, songs and music have regulated and disciplined the white self of the modern Australian nation, as in the case of Australian children singing the national anthem and reciting in one nation-wide accent in schools and missions; the overtly nationalist discourses of band cultures in schools; ideas of what is a legitimate or pure Australian accent and powerful speech. Whiteness is, of course, a figment of the imagination, yet, as George Lipsitz argues, the possessive investment in whiteness is a social fact that provides those who introvert and pass on the spoils of discrimination to the succeeding generation with resources, power, and opportunities, such as insider networks that channel employment opportunities, housing secured through discriminatory markets, unequal education opportunities.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it should not be surprising that those who enjoy the various kinds of privilege which derive from the possessive investment in sound are frequently suspicious of new information circuits and attempt to regulate ownership of the information stored in sound recording media by drawing them into discourses of authenticity and disciplinary borders. The scarcity of Australian Indigenous contemporary music recordings up until the 1970s – with the exception of Jimmy Little – reflects the Australian white policing strategies and social climate of the twentieth century.

Until the 1970s, Indigenous artists had limited access to recording studios and when they were recorded it was exclusively on non-indigenous terms. Significantly, the 1960s and 1970s, the years marked by the acquisition of the right to vote (1967) and the pan-Indigenous Land Right movements, saw a growth of recordings by male Indigenous artists such as Jimmy Little, Vic Simmons, Johnny Nicol, Col Hardy, and Ernie Bridge; music recording continued to grow in the 1980s, when at least thirty indigenous

<sup>25</sup> Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon, eds., *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity: Essays on the History of Sound* (Canberra: Australian National University E-press, 2007), 1-4.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Johnson, "Voice, Power and Modernity", in Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon, eds., *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity*, 113-122.

<sup>27</sup> Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, vii.

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<sup>28</sup> ScreenSound Australia, *Recordings by Australian Indigenous Artists 1899-1998: A Guide to Commercially Issued Sound Recordings by Australian Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders* (Canberra: ScreenSound Australia, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", *Black Film/ British Cinema*, ICA Document 7 (1988) reprinted in *Anglistica* 1.1-2 (1997); Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", *Third Text*, 10 (Spring 1990), 61-79; Reprinted in Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 234-235.

<sup>30</sup> Katelyn Barney, "Women Singing Up Big", *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2006), 45.

male performing artists released recordings. Yet, if Indigenous musicians of the 1960s and 1970s resisted dominant hegemonic cultural processes and representations, hegemonic forces in the recording industries re-appropriated the tactics of minority cultures into the mainstream. Through the aforementioned process of commodifying the Indigenous voice, the cultural hegemonies attempted to re-assimilate the disruptive elements of the movement, creating a market context wherein conventional, even stereotypical, modes of articulating Indigenous Australian music and sound received the greatest award. The marketing of a homogeneous Aboriginal identity had produced a cultural context in which images that would subvert the status quo were harder to produce because there was no market for them.

The study of Australian Indigenous sound culture clarifies how the non-Indigenous representation of Aboriginal cultural identity has often functioned as an oppressive discursive formation which reveals little about those individuals who are supposed to identify with the fictionalized Aboriginal cultural identity of Australian commodity culture.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous Australian musicians and writers had to carry an impossible "burden of representation" in the sense that every single publication had to stand for the totality of everything that could conceivably fall within the category of Indigenous music and literature. Building on Stuart Hall's seminal essay, "New Ethnicities" (1988), Kobena Mercer explains that during the 1970s-1980s, the role of representative fell on the shoulders of black artists not so much out of individual choice, but as a consequence of structures of racism that historically marginalized their access to the means of cultural production. The visibility of a few token black public figures served to legitimate, and reproduce, the invisibility and lack of access to public discourse of the community as a whole.<sup>29</sup>

This seems to be confirmed by recent studies and discographies, such as "Women Singing Up Big", which emphasise that an increase in recording output by Indigenous women performers happened only in the 1990s,<sup>30</sup> when they started voicing a critical corrective to the absence and romanticization of Indigenous women by certain Koori reggae rock bands, such as No Fixed Address. Several important events occurred in the 1990s that may have had an impact on the recording output of Indigenous women musicians, as also on the participation of women in the Land Rights Campaign and the incipient formation of a strongly committed Indigenous feminist and queer movement that distanced itself from the white feminist movement. An event which provided women greater access to the music industry was the 1992 national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary women's music festival, *With Open Eyes*, held in Sydney. Two years later, the Tiddas group received the Australian Recording Industry Award.

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As part of the evermore differentiated Indigenous movement, which has clearly entered a post-nostalgic phase characterised by multiple identifications and possibilities, Romaine Moreton's multimedia work reveals "the compelling importance of the auditory in the cultural, clinical, technological constitution of the modern self" both in inter-Indigenous and intra-Indigenous relations.<sup>31</sup> Yet, she also reveals the strategic potential of media convergence, defined by Henry Jenkins as the "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation of multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of audiences", for new strategic performative purposes.<sup>32</sup>

Moreton's creative work may be defined as transmedia storytelling; that is, "storytelling across multiple forms of media", for it is often conveyed and may be accessed through different media such as live spoken word performances, print, radio broadcasting, cd recordings, the internet.<sup>33</sup> Yet, while transmedia storytelling is used by most franchising companies to enhance the creative process and capture the audience, Moreton's knowledge of the diffused discourses of modern technology and whiteness and their investment in mediatic privilege sets her apart for her metanarrative reflections and creative exploitation of the power of media, accent and sound. The governmental functions of media, sound and accent are evident in several works by Moreton, yet they acquire a central importance in her spoken word performances where the structural arrangement of the poems is often determined by the ubiquitous citation of white sounds and accent. Moreton often reflects on the colonial imposition of the English language and accent in her poems.<sup>34</sup> Yet rather than using Goenpul English, she diffuses the violence of colonial sound and accent, articulating it in "ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviours" in which sound is crucial, such as the recitation of the national hymn, the oral memorization of historical events, the gospel and the abusive imposition of accent.<sup>35</sup> This aural strategy is particularly evident in "Like White", hence it is worth quoting the poem at length:

Back straight and head held high  
As you mouth the pride of Australiana  
Yes You!  
Black bitch and dirty black bastard  
You!

As you take your place at your desk ready for your schooling  
Absorbing the miracles of the great white captain  
Cook?  
Or Hook?  
Whatever you may  
Whatever you say  
you for now  
believe,

<sup>31</sup> Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon, *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2; see also Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling".

<sup>34</sup> I have discussed Romaine Moreton's use of English in my "Post Me to the Prime Minister: Property, Language and Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Relations in the Australian Nation", *Anglistica*, 9.2 (2005), 103-125.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofski Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).



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Like White  
Like normal

Like for now there is no prejudice  
no black no white,  
Until you do bad or do too good,  
Like excel (for which you will be patronised)

Or don't listen (for which you will be chastised)

as you start worrying about how your mother will pay her bills  
or how she always affords to feed you  
on next to nothing,  
and not listening to God himself!

The teacher  
The preacher

As he, in his eyes

Tries to rescue you from savage ignorance  
By delivering unto you the gospel ....

and ways for you to speak them like they're truth ....

and that I should take great care in my pronunciation of words and my arithmetic,  
so that I shall set myself apart.

I am not like the other savages,  
I am now an educated savage  
I am now ready to try to be normal

Like White.  
Like what I say will make any difference  
As to how you perceive me,  
Like God preacher man  
Teacher man ....  
What if I am wrong  
And am still just a stupid black  
Stupid Black!<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Romaine Moreton, "Like White", *The Callused Stick of Wanting* (published privately, 1995). Reprinted in *Rimfire* (Broome, WA: Magabala Books, 2000), 34-36.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 168-170.

<sup>38</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative", in David T. Goldberg, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1990.

In this poem, sound penetrates the body, yet it also has the power to constitute it racially. Moreton discovers blackness as a racial category in her encounter with white sound and accent. Following a post-colonial interpretation of Louis Althusser's theorisation of the process of interpellation, Moreton becomes a racially defined subject through the recitation and introversion of white sound.<sup>37</sup> In Homi Bhabha's words, "we are no longer confronted with an ontological problem of being but with the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics".<sup>38</sup> Yet, in

the conclusion, Moreton renders the speech act of interpellation “unhappy” for she does not introvert it, remaining silent instead.<sup>39</sup>

So I stay silent,  
And the preacher man  
Teacher man  
No longer knows whether I have absorbed his lies

Or whether

A blankness of mind replicates  
The blankness of eyes.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Moreton, “Like White”, 36.

Most importantly, while Moreton cites and recites white discourses in the first part of the poem, she creates an audience/readership that is challenged to listen to her interrogating voice either through self-recognition or as witness, for the poem’s theatricality effectively depends on the tacit requisition of a third person plural, a “they” of witness.<sup>41</sup> The poem ostensibly moves from the introverted recitation of the white address, to the author’s address of a singular second person (the teacher, the preacher), to the inclusion of the audience as “compulsory witness”.<sup>42</sup> Although it is impossible to presume consensus between Moreton’s views and those of her audience or readership, once they are placed within the enunciative space of her spoken and written performances, readers and listeners witness Moreton’s silence with or without their consent.

Elsewhere, Moreton explicitly apostrophizes interlocutors who are as diverse as her mother, colonial rapists, and the Goenpul people. In the poem, “Crimes of Existence”, she returns to the pain caused by the national anthem “Advance Australia Fair” embraced by her mother in order to reflect on the potential or actual displacement of queer identities.<sup>43</sup> Even here the constitution of a community of witness enables the making of an exclusionary imaginary nation (“the silence of witness that permits it, the bare, negative, potent but undiscretionary speech act of our physical presence”):<sup>44</sup>

My mother thinks  
That when they sing

Advance  
Australia  
Fair  
That they mean to advance  
All of us

What she doesn’t realise  
Is that us  
Does not necessarily

<sup>41</sup> Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Romaine Moreton, “Crimes of Existence”, in *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books, IAD Press, 2004), 24-25.

<sup>44</sup> Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance*, 10.

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Include us  
& that fair really means  
Light  
As in  
Right  
As in  
White  
....  
My mother  
Also doesn't stop  
To consider  
That when the Christian leaders  
& other vilifiers of homosexuality  
Call society to attention  
& ask them to jail

The queer, the lesos & the gays  
What they really mean  
Is to incarcerate  
Her very own daughter  
& make sexuality her crime.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Moreton, "Crimes of Existence", 24-25.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 226.

<sup>47</sup> Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", 204.

As in this monologue, Moreton's creative practice moves within the liminal space of media, only to emerge as a practice that is "theatrical to the extent that it mimes and renders hyperbolic the discursive convention that it also reverses".<sup>46</sup> Arguably, Moreton's live, filmed, digitally recorded and printed performances carry out a re-citation of subjectivity, putting on stage other ways of being by re-presenting and re-citing stereotypes in order to flout masculinity and racism. Fragmented and fractured, identity is disavowed, troubled and unsettled by multidimensional flows across multilateral media dialogues and sounds which "can subvert the perverse satisfaction of the racist, masculinist gaze ... by presenting it with an anxious absence, a [performative effectivity] that turns the discriminatory look, which denies ... cultural and sexual difference, back on itself".<sup>47</sup> This kind of practice works through citations which, as Judith Butler explains, are crucial to the exposure of the sounds that can no longer control the terms of their own abjecting strategies. For instance, in the digitally recorded, printed and web versions of "Blood of Dinosaur", the liquidity of blood signifies the recidivism of racism:

Water is a never ending cycle  
Which passes from one generation  
Into the next

Like recidivism  
Has a greater context

Racism too an estuary  
Ebbs and flows between descendants ....

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My tears upon the floor  
Are nothing but the blood of dinosaur

The soaking, all-embracing abjecting strategies of racism are articulated by Moreton in a cyclic pattern of “bare life” experiences:

I knew a man  
Who took his final stand  
Armed with courage at his door

This man, with gun in hand  
Said you ain't gonna take my children  
Any more  
This man defended his land  
And the children he bore  
This man physically yielded  
To the fossil hand of the law

Poised upon his lip  
He tasted the blood of dinosaur ....

I knew a child  
Hunger was his best friend  
Consumed by the consumer  
he was eaten again

his little black body  
withered by neglect  
this little boy  
humanity forgets

his body is wrapped  
invisible offshore  
the blanket soaked  
by the blood of dinosaur

a history of nameless black faces  
the present a fiction of races  
I will cry I will cry until I no longer deplore....

Yet, the bare life experiences described by Moreton unavoidably fold in and out of each other. The flow of blood is unpredictable and uncontrollable: it is transformed into tears, rain, rivers of justice. Thus, the abjecting strategy of racism creates, as its ‘constitutive outside’, a space of material and political effectivity:

Only when the reign falls no more  
Shall there be no blood  
Upon the valley floor

The beauty not misery  
Will be lifted by the sun

---

Then finally collapse  
Renewed as one

So when it falls  
Let it wash me over  
Let it wash me free  
...

I shall let my eyes be filled by beauty  
Not misery  
Then rise with the sun

May love bring greed undone  
Then may the rivers of justice  
Eventually flow into one

May tears upon the valley floor  
Be nothing more  
Than the blood of dinosaur.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Printed and digitally recorded in Romaine Moreton, "Blood of Dinosaur", in *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books, IAD Press, 2004), 115-119, to be found in the [Multimedia](#) section.

<sup>49</sup> Austin's category of perlocutionary speech acts is particularly useful in this context. See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

Arguably, Moreton's exhortative use of "perlocutionary" speech acts such as "I shall let my eyes be filled by beauty", "May tears upon the valley floor be nothing more than the blood dinosaur" has the strategic intention of creating an audience which will listen and act according to a new vision.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, this is made evident as the audience and readers are insistently interrogated. For instance, in "Are You Beautiful Today?", Moreton explicitly addresses white women,

Are you beautiful today?  
Are your children safe and well?  
Brother, mother, sister too?  
I merely ask so you can tell.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Romaine Moreton, "Are You Beautiful Today?", in *Post Me to the Prime Minister*, 29.

This insistent pattern of interrogation, far from signifying univocal patterns of deafness or participation, might indicate that Moreton's movement across media such as writing, digital recording, radio broadcasting and film, is strategic in creating a direct communication with her readership and audience. Moreton creates a specifically located readership and audience by employing verbal narrative devices such as visible speaking positions, deixis, chiasmus, snatches of dialogue, repetition, rhythm and vocatives. These may be identified through the methodological application of Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality" as a transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of "enunciative" and "denotative" positions.<sup>51</sup> However, more than a transposition, Moreton's creative work displays the potential of not being restrained by pre-conceived notions of writing and sound recording as performances of detached communication. Ong's argument that while the address of an oral speaker forms an 'audience' that is a close-knit

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora and Alice Jardine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 15.



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group or unit, writing and recording have no equivalent concept, is contradicted by the insurgence of a new way of using writing and sound recording technologies.<sup>52</sup> Moreton's transmedia storytelling doesn't abide by the Ongian definition of writing and recording as detached universality. Writing and recording are used to address the audience and readership, thus calling for a clearly located reading and listening process, which enables mutual agency, possible alliances and exchange through a strategic alliance between the performative and the political.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, critics who approach Moreton's creative work in search of a pre-modern voice find it quite different from their standards of authenticity, which require the Indigenous poet to carry the 'burden of representation' of remoteness and nostalgia beyond contemporary politics. In Moreton's transmedia storytelling, the auditory becomes a site for the communication event which unfolds in the time of the present continuous and interrupts the 'remote temporality' of tradition. While the sounds, rhythms and song patterns of her performances often draw their inspiration from Goenpul traditions and lore, they are also a space of deconstruction grounded in the artist's involvement in Indigenous, feminist and queer movements. In poems such as "Shake", this is particularly powerful:

Depression did not swell  
Like erupting oceans  
Round the point where my  
Aunty grew

While disenchanted men  
Plunged to their misfortune  
The wind did not whip  
My mob into a frenzy  
They shook the dirt  
From their soles  
As per usual

Now an Elder  
My aunt smirks at the impending doom  
Of tax reform

Bring it on  
No gst<sup>54</sup>  
Will frighten  
Me

The privileged panic  
the less privileged fear  
the world quakes  
whilst the poor remain motionless  
at the notion  
of a national tax hike

<sup>52</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Brewster, "Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton", *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Special Issue "The Colonial Present", Gillian Whitlock and Victoria Kuttainen, eds., 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Goods and Services Tax (GST) is a broad-based tax of 10% on most goods, services and other items sold or consumed in Australia.

<sup>55</sup> Digitally recorded as  
 “Shake” on the music  
 compilation *Fresh Salt*  
 (Secret Street); reprinted  
 and digitally recorded in  
 Romaine Moreton, “Shake”,  
 in *Post Me to the Prime*  
*Minister*, 99-103, to be  
 found in the [Multimedia](#)  
 section.

we shall climb  
 then shake the dirt  
 from the soles of our feet

we shall pull weeds pick crops  
 chop wood  
 paint skyscrapers

then shake the dirt  
 from the soles  
 of our feet.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Romaine Moreton,  
 “Interview”, *Red Room*  
*Company*, <[http://www.redroomcompany.org/poets\\_romaine-moreton.php](http://www.redroomcompany.org/poets_romaine-moreton.php)>, 20 January  
 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Morrissey,  
 “Aboriginal Writing”, in  
 Kleinert and Neale, eds.,  
*The Oxford Companion*,  
 320; Dick Hebdige,  
 “Foreword”, in Michaels,  
*Bad Aboriginal Art*, xxi.

Thus, as this study hopes to have demonstrated, Moreton’s multimedia storytelling displaces the expectations of those Aboriginalists who search for a distant and remote practice of connection or identification with past oral forms or narratives. Significantly, in a recent interview, Moreton links her use of performance poetry to the Indigenous spiritual belief in timelessness, the belief in the simultaneous existence of past, present and future, through which she actively counteracts the Western “technologically driven” representation of time. Moreton notes that in Indigenous culture, Eastern philosophy and quantum mechanics “time doesn’t exist” and that her refusal to “give away power to time” is liberating.<sup>56</sup> Arguably, the belief in timelessness lies at the centre of Moreton’s performative practices, which counteract the nostalgic rhetoric of the white possessive investment in orality through the multidimensional flow of content across multiple media platforms and the active appropriation of multiple media industries, which enable her to reach and create specifically located audiences. Through a topological reframing of time, Moreton’s works may be regarded as “situative” in that they deal with the diverse situations of Indigenous peoples in Australia and, by unsettling dominant modes of empathy and identification, they invite the audience and readers to reflect on what happens when the utopian public space imagined in modernity – neutral, transparent, open to all – is replaced by a “social space that is always already inhabited hence always divided, circumscribed, owned”.<sup>57</sup>