

Embedded Aesthetics: Creating a Discursive Space for Indigenous Media

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The closing years of the twentieth century are witnessing a radical re-orientation of thought in the human sciences which defies conventional disciplinary boundaries and demands a new 'turning': away from the rationalising modes of modernity and towards a different grasp of the nature of knowing itself. . . . The power of visual media as a means of knowledge-creation is only hesitantly grasped by many in public life. . . . But, from the viewpoint of the emergent visual-aural culture of the twenty-first century, "what's on" creates the context for what is known and hence finally for what "is."

—Annette Hamilton

Since the late 1970s, Aboriginal Australians (and other indigenous people) have been engaged in developing new visual media forms by adapting the technologies of video, film, and television to a range of expressive and political purposes. Their efforts to develop new forms of indigenous media are motivated by a desire to envision and strengthen a "cultural future" (Michaels 1987a) for themselves in their own communities and in the dominant society. Aboriginal cultures, of course, are extremely diverse, as Aboriginal cultural critic and anthropologist Marcia Langton has pointed out in her recent book on indigenous media production. "There is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community," she writes:

There are [two] regions which can be characterised, however, with reference to history, politics, culture and demography. . . .

The first region is "settled" Australia . . . where most provincial towns and all the major cities and institutions are located, and where a myriad of small Aboriginal communities and populations reside with a range of histories and cultures. . . .

The second region is "remote" Australia where most of the tradition-oriented Aboriginal cultures are located. They likewise have responded to particular frontiers and now contend with various types of Australian settlement. [Langton 1993:12–13]

Aboriginal media productions are as various as Aboriginal life itself, ranging from low-budget videos made by community-based media associations for both traditional people in remote settlements and groups in urban centers; to regional television and radio programming for Aboriginal groups throughout Central Australia made by organizations such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA); to legal or instructional videos (often quite creative) made by land councils as well as health and other service groups; to documentaries and current affairs for national broadcasting; to independent features directed by cosmopolitan Aboriginal artists such as Tracey Moffatt whose first feature film, *Bedevil*, premiered at Cannes in 1993. Such works are inherently complex cultural objects, as they cross multiple cultural boundaries in their production, distribution, and consumption. For example, Aboriginal producers often collaborate with non-Aboriginal media workers, be they media advisers to remote settlements or staff at Australia's national television stations. Works themselves are often hybrid, combining traditional ritual knowledge and/or performance with MTV-style special effects. In terms of circulation and reception, these productions are seen by multiple audiences, including other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewers in Australia, via circulation of video letters as well as local, regional, or national broadcasts, or by diverse overseas audiences through film festivals and conferences.

With an interest in enlarging analyses of film texts to account for broader contexts of social relations,¹ I have found it helpful to think of Aboriginal media as part of a *mediascape*, a term created by Arjun Appadurai to account for the different kinds of global cultural flows created by new media technologies and the images created with them in the late 20th century. Appadurai argues for situated analyses that take account of the interdependence of media practices with the local, national, and transnational circumstances that surround them (Appadurai 1990:7). Using such a model for indigenous media helps to establish a more generative discursive space for this work which breaks what one might call the fetishizing of the local, without losing a sense of the specific situatedness of any production. The complex mediascape of Aboriginal media, for example, must account for a range of circumstances, beginning with the perspectives of Aboriginal producers, for whom new media forms are seen as a powerful means of (collective) self-expression that can have a culturally revitalizing effect. Their vision coexists uneasily, however, with the fact that their work is also a product of relations with governing bodies that are responsible for the dire political circumstances that often motivated the Aboriginal mastery of new communication forms as a means of cultural intervention.² Such contradictions are inherent to the ongoing social construction of *Aboriginality*. Cultural critic Fiona Nicoll offers a helpful explication of the term that has been the subject of considerable debate.³ As she writes:

"Aboriginality" . . . [is] a colonial field of power relations within which Aborigines struggle with the dominant settler culture over the representation of things such as "identity," "history," "land," and "culture." In contrast to the category "Aboriginal culture," which is always defined in opposition to a dominant "non-

Aboriginal culture,” the concept of “Aboriginality” must be thought in *relation* to “non-Aboriginality.” For it was the white settlers who lumped the various indigenous peoples under the homogenizing name of “Aborigines,” then brought into being the categories of “Aboriginal history,” “Aboriginal culture,” “Aboriginal experience” and “Aboriginal conditions.” [1993:709]

Thus, not only are Aboriginal film and video important to Aboriginal Australians, but they cannot be understood apart from the contemporary construction of Aboriginality. As nation-states like Australia increasingly constitute their “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) through the circulation of televisual and cinematic images of the people they govern, Aboriginal media have become part of the mediascape of the Australian *national imaginary*.⁴ Put in concrete terms:

“Aboriginality” arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book. [Langton 1993:31]

Discursive Spaces/Social Action

This essay is an extension of a larger effort initiated by Aboriginal cultural activists to develop a “discursive practice”—both for Aboriginal makers and for others who make and study media—that respects and understands this work in terms relevant to contemporary indigenous people living in a variety of settings (Langton 1993). Specifically, it examines how Aboriginal media makers understand their own work. How, one might ask, do people understand indigenous media works as they move through the complex circuits sketched above? What are the aesthetic standards—the discourses and practices of evaluation—that are applied to indigenous productions as they are positioned differently in various exhibition contexts? Are Aboriginal ideas about their “beauty/value” able to cross over cultural borders? I am concerned in particular with how notions of the value of indigenous media are being negotiated at different levels of Aboriginal media production.⁵ While there are multiple arenas of Aboriginal production (local, regional, urban, etc.), in this essay I will focus on three sites of Aboriginal media work: remote communities; national television; and transnational networks of indigenous media producers that form around events such as film festivals or coproductions.

In these different arenas, Aboriginal producers from very different backgrounds use a language of evaluation that stresses the *activities* of the production and circulation of such work in specific communities as the basis for judging its value. In communities where traditional Aboriginal cultural practices are still relatively intact, such evaluation is culturally very specific, corresponding to notions of appropriate social and formal organization of performance in ceremonial or ritual domains. In her analysis of Aboriginal media production, Marcia Langton argues that such media from remote areas are “community-

authored" (1993:13). Summarizing studies in the 1980s of the organization of video production at the remote Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu (Michaels and Kelly 1984), Langton writes that "the camera and camera person are attributed with the ritual role of *kurdungurlu* (ritual managers) . . . because they are witnesses to events and affirm their truth," while those in front of the camera are *kirda* (ritual owners) with acknowledged rights and obligations to tell and perform certain stories and ceremonies (1993:65). Based on my own contact with Yuendumu in 1992, it is unclear whether these specific arrangements still endure in the 1990s. However, the general principle of kin-based rights to tell certain kinds of stories and ceremonial knowledge continue to shape production practices. More generally, then, "[t]here are rules, which are somewhat flexible, for the production, distribution and ownership of any image, just as there are under traditional law for sacred designs which . . . refer to ancestors and ancestral mythology" (Langton 1993:65).

In ways that are both similar and different, urban Aboriginal mediamakers are also concerned with their media productions as a form of social action. While their works are more typically understood as authored by individuals (Langton 1993:13), many urban Aboriginal producers nonetheless see themselves as responsible to a community of origin (for example kin and friends in the urban neighborhood of Redfern in Sydney), although it is a sense of community less bound by specific cultural rules than that of people in remote settlements. This is especially true of those working for Australian state television who shoulder the specific burden of creating an "authentic" Aboriginal presence in the mass media and, more broadly, in Australia's national imaginary.⁶ This tendency to evaluate work in terms of social action is striking to an observer schooled in Western aesthetics. With few exceptions, questions of narrative or visual form are not primary issues for discussion per se, despite the obvious concern for it in individual works. Rather, for many Aboriginal producers, the quality of work is judged by its capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations, although the social bases for coming to this position may be very different for remote and urban people.⁷ For the sake of discussion, I will call this orientation *embedded aesthetics*, to draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations.⁸ For example, Eric Michaels, an American researcher who helped develop Aboriginal media production with Warlpiri people at Yuendumu in Central Australia, noted that for the people he worked with:

[Aboriginal] art or video objects become difficult to isolate for analysis because the producer's intention is the opposite. Warlpiri artists demonstrate their own invisibility in order to assert the work's authority and continuity with tradition. They do not draw attention to themselves or to their creativity. [Michaels 1987a:34]

My argument, then, is that this new and complex object—Aboriginal media—is understood by its producers to be operating in multiple domains as an extension of their collective (vs. individual) self-production. However, it is im-

portant to recognize that Aboriginal producers from various locales and backgrounds—remote, urban, rural—come to their positions through quite different cultural and social processes. In the case of urban Aboriginal mediamakers, their embrace of *embedded aesthetics* may be an extremely self-conscious choice, produced out of contact with a variety of discourses. In the cases below, I will sketch the multiple ways that this kind of positioning of indigenous media emerges from very different social bases for the understanding of Aboriginality and its representation, especially as it passes across cultural and national borders.

Remote Control: Media in Traditional Communities

My first examples are drawn from two successful community-based Aboriginal media associations developed at relatively traditional remote settlements in the Central Desert area of Australia. The first is Ernabella on Pitjantjatjarra lands in South Australia, just south of Uluru (Ayers Rock). The second settlement is Yuendumu on Warlpiri lands in Central Australia, northwest of Alice Springs, home to the Warlpiri Media Association since 1982. Both are Aboriginal settlements with highly mobile populations that can vary from 500 to 1500 over the course of a year. Founded by missionaries in the 1940s, they became self-governing by the 1970s and retain infrastructures consisting of a community store, a town office, a police station, a primary school, a health clinic, a church, an art association, and local broadcast facilities (Langton 1993).

In 1983, people at Ernabella began producing video programs with the encouragement of white schoolteachers and advisers, in particular Neil Turner, who settled in the community, learned the language, and facilitated the development of Ernabella Video Television (EVTV) from its inception to the present. Established in 1985, EVTV operates from a small video production, editing, and playback facility and an inexpensive satellite dish that provides local broadcasts of work produced by EVTV as well as items selected from national television feeds. Determined to be as independent as possible from government subsidies, EVTV has supported itself successfully through a self-imposed tax on cold drinks in the community store, the sales of EVTV videos, and occasional public and private grants (Batty 1993; Molnar 1989; N. Turner 1990).

Over the first decade of its existence, EVTV has produced over eighty edited pieces as well as thousands of hours of community television under the direction of a respected couple, Simon and Pantiji Tjijangu, and a local media committee made up of male and female elders. Their concerns range from monitoring the content of work shown—so that images are not circulated that violate cultural rules regulating what can be seen (e.g. tapes of women's sacred ceremonies are not edited and are only accessible to appropriate senior women)—and the timing of viewing so that television transmission, whether locally produced or the national satellite feed, does not interfere with other cultural activities.

Perhaps because the supervision of EVTV is largely in the hands of elders, the video work of Ernabella is distinguished by its emphasis on ceremonies, in particular the stories, dances, and sand designs that are associated with the

Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters Dreaming) (which explains the origins of the Pleiades constellation). In adapting such forms to video, EVTV producers include in their tapes the production process itself, which can involve the whole community, including children, dancers, storytellers, and video crew. For example, in tapes such as *Seven Sisters Dreaming: Tjukurpa Kungkarangkalpa Tjara* (made in 1985) one sees not just a performance as we understand it in the West. Dances and enactments of the story of the Seven Sisters are preceded by extensive preparation and participation by those members of the Pitjantjatjara community who are responsible for ritual knowledge and ceremony. This aspect of Pitjantjatjara ritual performance has been reconfigured to accommodate video production: the tape includes not only ritual preparation but also other participants offering their comments on the ritual as they sit at night by the campfire to view the day's rushes (Leigh 1992:3). Such reflexivity is not a Brechtian innovation; rather, it authorizes the reconfiguring of traditional practices for video as "true" and properly done.

In addition to such framing of the production process, the value or beauty of such videos for the Pitjantjatjara videomakers is extratextual, created by the cultural and social processes they mediate, embody, create, and extend. The tapes underscore the cosmological power of ceremonies to invigorate sacred aspects of the landscape; they reinforce the social relations that are fundamental to ritual production; and they enhance the place of Pitjantjatjara among Aboriginal groups in the area, as well as for the dominant Australian regional culture. Over the last decade, people from Ernabella frequently have been invited to "perform" in nearby cultural centers such as Adelaide. Knowledge of these issues is important to understanding the value of EVTV tapes as texts that cross over cultural borders, reaching other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. As media activist Philip Batty commented:

the work of EVTV had the effect of engendering a kind of local renaissance in traditional dance, performance and singing. The various video programmes depicting the actual land where the dreaming lines were located gave renewed strength to traditional beliefs and values within the communities. [Batty 1993:113]

As another example of indigenous media work emerging from remote Aboriginal settlements, the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA) began producing tapes in 1982 and established their own unlicensed local television station similar to that of EVTV, in April 1985. Frances Juppurrurla Kelly, a young Warlpiri man, became a key videomaker and central figure in developing WMA. Much of what has been written about that group for outsiders came out of the work of Eric Michaels, for the (then) Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which commissioned him to research the impact of Western media on traditional Aboriginal people in Central Australia. When he arrived at Yuendumu, he discovered that:

[t]here was, in the early 1980s, a considerable creative interest among Aborigines in the new entertainment technology becoming available to remote communities. There was equally a motivated, articulate, and general concern about the possible unwanted consequences of television, especially among senior Aborigines and local indigenous educators. In particular, the absence of local Aboriginal languages from any proposed service was a major issue. [Michaels 1987a:11]

As a result, Michaels also brought an interventionist approach to his research, encouraging people to produce their own videos without imposing Western conventions of shooting and editing. The broader concern that Michaels shared with Yuendumu videomakers was that, if people could make videos based on Aboriginal concerns, they might escape the more deleterious effects of broadcast television by substituting their own work for mainstream satellite television signals. While they had not tried video production before, Yuendumu residents were familiar with mainstream cinema, as well as the active production of Aboriginal popular music, as well as radio programs in Central Australia.⁹ Since 1982, Warlpiri videomakers have produced hundreds of hours of tapes, on a range of subjects including sports events, health issues, traditional rituals, and their own history, as in *Coniston Story*, a tape in which the Aboriginal descendants of a revenge massacre of Warlpiri people by whites go to the site of the tragedy and tell their version of this “killing time.” In an analysis of *Coniston Story*, Michaels notes that “one is struck by the recurrent camera movement, [and] the subtle shifts in focus and attention during the otherwise even, long pans across the landscape,” shifts that Western interpreters might see as “naive” camerawork (1987a:51). Rather, Frances Jupurrurla Kelly (the Warlpiri producer/director and camera operator) explains that the camera is following

the movement . . . of unseen characters—both Dreamtime [ancestral] and historical—which converge on this landscape. . . . Shifts in focus and interruptions in panning pick out important things in the landscape, like a tree where spirits live or a flower with symbolic value. [Cited in Michaels 1987a:52]

Jupurrurla’s explanation suggests that in developing a new mode of telling Warlpiri history through video, his concerns were consistent with traditional Aboriginal cosmology in which the particular geographic features of the areas they inhabit (and the kin-based rights and responsibilities attached to them) are central to authorizing myths and ceremonies. Michaels argued that this emphasis on the meaning of landscape is apparent in many Warlpiri tapes and accounts for the value and beauty of such sequences for Warlpiri viewers (Michaels 1987b).

What is not immediately visible in the tapes themselves is that people organize themselves around media production in terms of the responsibilities of specific groups for knowledge and practices associated with certain geographic areas, similar to the case of Ernabella discussed above. In other words, the ways in which tapes are made and used reflect Warlpiri understandings of kin-based obligations for ceremonial production and control of traditional knowledge, as these index cosmological relationships to particular features in regional geogra-

phy (Michaels and Kelly 1984). "The credibility of the resulting tape for the Warlpiri audience is dependent upon knowing that these people were all participating in the event, even though the taped record provides no direct evidence of their presence" (Michaels 1987a:46). Thus, for Warlpiri videomakers, cultural production—if it is of any value—is understood as part of a broader effort of collective self-production always associated with the *jukurrpa*, the ontological system of kin- and land-based ritual knowledge, translated into English originally as "the dreaming" (Stanner 1956) and now also as "the law." Notions of value embedded in *jukurrpa* run contrary to Western notions of the social relations of aesthetic production that emphasize the creative "self-expression" of individuals who are assigned responsibility as authors. Rather:

stories are always true, and invention even when it requires an individual agent to "dream" or "receive" a text, remains social in a complex and important sense that assures truth. Rights to receive, know, perform, or teach a story (through dance, song, narrative, and graphic design) are determined by any identified individual's structural position and social/ritual history within an elaborately reckoned system of kin. Novelty can only enter this system as a social, not an individual invention. Not only is one's right to invent ultimately constrained, it is particularly constrained with respect to the kinship role for it is the genealogy of an item—not its individual creation—which authorises it. [Michaels 1987b:65]

These principles through which some Aboriginal videos from remote settlements are mediated within and across cultural borders are consistent with the evaluative processes used for other "hybrid" Aboriginal media such as acrylic painting. As Fred Myers writes regarding the evaluations Pintupi painters from the Central Desert area make of their work, "the painters themselves have been unforthcoming about such aesthetic considerations." (Myers 1994:15). Indeed

The[ir] principal discourse . . . emphasizes their works as vehicles of self-production and collective empowerment . . . these are not necessarily interpretations that are outside the processes of representation themselves. [Myers 1994:35]

In addition to providing a means for enhancing forms such as ritual performance, Aboriginal film and video offer innovative possibilities for collective self-production. As novel forms, these media provide sites for the re-visioning of social relations with the encompassing society, an exploration that more traditional indigenous forms cannot so easily accommodate. In media production, Aboriginal skills at constituting both individual and group identities through narrative and ritual are engaged in innovative ways that are often simultaneously indigenous and intercultural, from production to reception. For example, Yuendumu residents have produced a series of children's programs designed to teach literacy in Warlpiri. The series was invented by elders and schoolteachers, both white and Aboriginal. With grants written with the help of a media adviser, they received funding from the Australian government and hired a local Anglo-Australian filmmaker, David Batty (with whom they had worked before), to create the series *Manyu Wana* ("Just for Fun"). The result has been an ongoing se-

ries of collaborative community-based productions where kids, teachers, and filmmaker work together to improvise and then enact humorous short sketches to illustrate both written and spoken Warlpiri words in ways that seem to engage multiple audiences. Immensely popular in Yuendumu and neighboring Aboriginal communities, *Manyu Wana*, despite its very local origin and monolingual use of local language, has also been seen and appreciated all over the world.

National Imaginaries

Since the early 1980s, the demand for more Aboriginal participation and visibility in the Australian mediascape has been increasing, not only for local access to video in remote areas, but also for more Aboriginal representation on mainstream national television. This concern is not simply about equal access but a recognition that distortion and/or invisibility of Aboriginal realities for the wider Australian public can have a direct effect on political culture. Continuing exclusion of work by Aboriginal people from Australia's media institutions has sharpened Aboriginal awareness of the connections between political enfranchisement and the need to control their own images in the public sphere.

Aboriginal people—in terms of content and staffing—are still virtually absent from Australia's three commercial television networks (Langton 1993:21).¹⁰ However, two important efforts to increase an Aboriginal presence on public television were initiated in 1989. These were (1) the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the state-owned national television station that reaches all of Australia; and (2) the Aboriginal Television Unit of the Special Broadcast Service (SBS),¹¹ Australia's state-funded station set up to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate programming, both imported as well as locally produced, for Australia's many ethnic communities.

In April 1989, the Special Broadcast Service initiated a 13-part television series devoted to Aboriginal issues, called *First in Line*, the first prime-time current affairs show in Australia to be hosted by two Aboriginal people. This was a border crossing of considerable significance to Aboriginal cultural activists.¹² The producers and crew were primarily Aboriginal, and they consulted with communities throughout Australia for items stressing the positive achievements of Aborigines (Molnar 1989:38–39). Eventually, *First in Line* was discontinued, and an Aboriginal unit was established with Rachel Perkins at the head, a young Aboriginal woman who had trained at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA). She has been creating programming through the use of work such as *Manyu Wana* from regional and local Aboriginal media associations. In 1992, she commissioned and produced a series, *Blood Brothers*, comprised of four documentaries on different aspects of Aboriginal history and culture (Rachel Perkins, interview, May 2, 1992). While these efforts are important, the SBS has a relatively small audience and budget.

By contrast, the state-controlled and -funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has a much greater resource base and reaches a national audi-

ence. In 1987, the ABC set up the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU),¹³ but it was not until 1989 that their first Aboriginally produced and presented program, *Blackout*, began broadcasting on a Friday-evening time slot. This series, a weekly magazine show on Aboriginal issues, is still being produced. (In 1992, it was awarded the United Nations Human Rights Media Award.) Additionally, APU programs occasional series such as *The First Australians*, an eight-part series of independent documentaries on Aboriginal topics broadcast on Thursday nights in 1992.¹⁴

Unlike the producers from remote settlements, Aboriginal producers at APU grew up in urban or "settled" areas, are bicultural, often hold university degrees, and are sophisticated about the ins and outs of national television vis-à-vis their interests as indigenous makers. People like Frances Peters and Rachel Perkins are new kinds of cultural activists who are regular *border crossers*, a position they occupy as part of their own background (from Aboriginal families educated in the dominant culture's pedagogical system) and out of a recognition that they must speak effectively to (at least) two kinds of Australians. Like the more remote-living Aboriginal media makers discussed above, they are concerned with their work as part of a range of activities engaged in cultural revival, identity formation, and political assertion. Through their work in televisual media production, they have been able to assert the multiple realities of contemporary urban Aboriginal life, not just for their own communities but also in the national public culture where Aboriginal activism and political claims are generally effaced from the official histories.

For example, in 1991, Peters worked with fellow APU producer David Sandy to produce the first documentary special of APU for broadcast in 1992. The title, *Tent Embassy*, refers to the event that galvanized the beginning of what some have called the "Aboriginal civil rights movement." On Australia Day (January 26) 1972, four young Aboriginal men erected a small tent on the lawns of the Parliament House in Canberra and declared themselves a sovereign nation. The action succinctly dramatized the issue of Aboriginal land rights in the Australian imagination and helped catalyze a broader social movement. The return, in 1992, of some of the original activists, now in their forties, to the site of the original protest to reassert their claims and to occupy Parliament House as well becomes the occasion for the film to explore the last 20 years of Aboriginal politics. The history moves from the confrontational activism of the Aboriginal Black Power and the Black Panther movements in the 1970s, to the establishment in the 1980s of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders Commission (ATSIC), a five-billion-dollar bureaucracy that has been criticized by some activists as co-opting Aboriginal political power. *Tent Embassy* is built out of the stories of key activists—lawyer Paul Coe, scholar and activist Roberta Sykes, public figure Charles Perkins—as we see them in archival footage, in extended contemporary interviews. It opens with a wonderfully humorous dramatic recreation that suggests the spontaneous origins of the first protest and holds fast to the principle of making people primary over issues. Other events are tracked through archival footage, not only of the embassy protest, but also

of crucial events leading up to it, such as the discovery of bauxite on Aboriginal lands in the 1960s, which helped put land claims on the national political agenda.

For productions like *Tent Embassy* to be effective in reaching large, mixed audiences, they require aesthetic considerations that negotiate multiple cultural perspectives. The challenge for producers is to create visions of Aboriginal culture and history that simultaneously address the realities of Aboriginal communities and intervene in representations of Australian national histories in ways that will attract both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. Frances Peters (and a number of other Aboriginal producers) are exploring how to reposition cultural authority in their works by using satire, humor, and drama. These provide complex commentaries on their own identities and on their relationships with the dominant society, without simplifying or reducing the Aboriginal experience for what are still predominantly white audiences. In Peters's words:

Aboriginal people in Australia are not one nation; the differences are there, but we're all Aboriginal. . . . I [am] trying to break a lot of image stereotypes. I think those stereotypes may have something to do with why many indigenous artists are moving away from documentary and into fiction or drama films. We are sick of the documentary format; we've seen so many of them about us . . . so unfortunately what we've done is associate documentary with just another form of stereotyping. We've got the opportunity as aboriginal filmmakers to change that. [Peters 1993:102]

Producers at APU are engaged in more than the creation of media images of themselves that alter their place in the world of representations. In considering this kind of work in relation to questions of indigenous aesthetics, one must recognize the value they place on media production as a form of social action. Frances Peters articulated this position clearly to me in discussing her position as an Aboriginal producer:

Unlike you, we can't remove ourselves from the programs we're making because they're about us as well. And because they are about us, we always have that responsibility to our Aboriginal culture and country . . . we can't walk away and just make a program on a different theme next time. . . . Ultimately you're not really answerable to a hell of a lot of people. . . . But with us, with every program that we make, we are ultimately responsible to a larger Aboriginal community. And we can't remove ourselves from that responsibility. [Frances Peters, interview, April 30, 1992]

Peters's comments speak to the complex and embedded sense that indigenous producers bring to their work, never seeing it as existing apart from the mediation of social relationships, especially with communities of origin, whether urban or remote. However, *community* is not, for her, some romantic notion of a unified social position. It is, rather, a complex and unstable social construct, implicated in the changing understandings of Aboriginality in Australia today, as bureaucratic structures for the administration of Aboriginal funding and poli-

cies have proliferated. As much as she feels accountable to a broader Aboriginal world, she queries the concept:

Which community? Our communities have become bureaucratized and class-stratified. Accountability is riddled with fear of being made to feel guilty, or that you aren't Aboriginal enough. [Peters 1993:105]

Her positioning (along with that of other producers) intersects and is influenced by emerging Western theoretical discourses in the arts, built on frameworks of multiculturalism, which emphasize "cultural diversity as a basis for challenging, revising, and relativizing basic notions and principles common to dominant and minority cultures alike, so as to construct a more vital, open, and democratic common culture" (T. Turner 1993:413). In the world of Aboriginal media making, an approach built out of contemporary identity politics (which has influenced many urban-based Aboriginal producers) intersects with concerns that shape the work of more traditional Aboriginal producers from remote communities, thereby creating a sense (or even illusion) of coherence in the ways that a broad range of Aboriginal makers evaluate their work. Regardless of this outcome, it is important to recognize that urban Aboriginal producers working in bicultural settings have embraced an *embedded aesthetic* as a strategic choice. Their efforts to develop an alternative approach to their work, while emerging from their experiences as Aboriginal Australians, are nonetheless self-conscious; the Western aesthetic conventions of the dominant society are culturally available to them as well. This sense of self-conscious positioning is evident in Frances Peters's description of coming to consciousness in her days as a student and Aboriginal radio producer:

So, I was going to university, getting a formal education, and then spending my Saturday afternoons having great fun at an Aboriginal radio station [Radio Redfern], breaking all the rules. We were creating our own sounds, basically, we were promoting our music, and we were telling our own news in ways and forms that we chose. All that raised a lot of questions for me about the media and how I was going to see myself working in it. It was hard; it was a battle, and I used to fight in every one of those classes at University. [Peters 1993:99]

Transnational Mediations

For most producers, their sense of community is very local. However, new and more expanded communities of identity are emerging through collaborative activities that transcend the boundaries of the nation-states that encompass them. Over the last five years, indigenous media productions have increasingly become part of *global cultural flows*. Connections are being built by indigenous producers who have been organizing a transnational indigenous network via film festivals and conferences, as well as joint productions such as the Pac Rim initiative, a documentary series being made jointly by indigenous filmmakers from Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. These events are becoming the basis for constituting an emergent organization of indigenous me-

dia producers. For example, the First Nations Film and Video Makers World Alliance (FNFVWA) was formed at the September 1992 Dreamspeakers Festival in Edmonton, Canada, itself the first indigenously organized international Aboriginal film and video festival. In such exhibition venues organized by and for indigenous people, media workers frame their work with a discourse of self-determination, clearly placing collective and political interests over those of individual expression. Such positioning is evident, for example, in the following statement of aims of the FNFVWA drawn up in 1992:

- a. to raise awareness of First Nations issues
- b. to establish a film and video communication network
- c. to ensure that traditional lands, language, and culture are protected
- d. to implement work and training exchanges
- e. to establish a world conference
- f. to ensure environmental protection and management
- g. to promote our teachings of history and culture
- h. to distribute and market our own films.

A major concern of all those indigenous filmmakers who attended Dreamspeakers was the need for our works to be distributed amongst other indigenous groups in other countries, that we are our own international market. The problem we felt was that our works are almost always received [more positively] by overseas audiences than by those in our own countries.

This statement of principles developed by a group of indigenous attendees (and the weeklong Dreamspeakers Festival itself) was striking in the lack of discussion of themselves as artists concerned primarily with formal issues or even freedom of expression. The indigenous media makers in the alliance, who came from all over the world, were all engaged in asserting the relationship of their work to broader arenas of social action. Such positions complicate structures of distribution and public culture in which the (media) artist's position is valued as being outside or critical of society, as in Adorno's view of art as an "intrinsic movement against society," a social realm set apart from the means-end rationality of daily bourgeois existence (Adorno 1970:336, quoted in Bürger 1984:10).

Recent shows of indigenous film/video that have been organized by dominant cultural institutions situate them as new forms of aesthetic/political production yet continue to look for aesthetic innovation in the text itself, rather than in the relations of production and reception that shape the evaluation and mediation of the text in unexpected ways. Mainstream showcases, for example, continue to focus on "individual makers" in places associated with "auteurship" in the arts, such as programs of The Museum of Modern Art (1990, 1993), The New Museum (1990), or the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center (1992), all sites of exhibition of indigenous media in New York City. In such venues, indigenous work is in tension with Western discourses that valorize the individual as a political or artistic agent in opposition to a broader polity. Although this has been changing as the broader zeitgeist in the West embraces multicultural and identity-based politics as frames for the exhibition of various expressive media,

the structures for showing work in most cases still put forward "the artist," repressing the embeddedness of individual artistic production in broader social and political processes. For the most part, indigenous producers reject this dominant model of the media text as the expression of an individuated self and continue to stress their work as on a continuum of social action authorizing Aboriginal cultural empowerment.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the social relations built out of indigenous media practices are helping to develop support and sensibilities for indigenous actions for self-determination. Self-representation in media is seen as a crucial part of this process. Indigenous media productions and the activities around them are rendering visible indigenous cultural and historical realities to themselves and the broader societies that have stereotyped or denied them. The transnational social relations built out of these media practices are creating new arenas of cooperation, locally, nationally, and internationally. Like the indigenous producers themselves, I suggest a model that stresses not only the text but also the *activities* and social organization of media work as arenas of cultural production. Only by understanding indigenous media work as part of a broader mediascape of social relations can we appreciate them fully as complex cultural objects. In the imaginative, narrative, social, and political spaces opened up by film, video, and television lie possibilities for Aboriginal mediamakers and their communities to reenvision their current realities and possible futures, from the revival of local cultural practices, to the insertion of their histories into national imaginaries, to the creation of new transnational arenas that link indigenous makers around the globe in a common effort to make their concerns visible to the world.

Notes

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1. For a fuller development of this position, see Ginsburg 1994a.

2. These contradictions, some have argued, are typical of liberal welfare states and their indigenous populations, a system that Jeremy Beckett calls welfare colonialism (1988).

3. For examples of debates on Aboriginality, see Beckett 1988, Thiele 1991, Lattas 1991, and others in a special issue of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* entitled *Reconsidering Aboriginality*.

4. I follow Annette Hamilton's use of the term *national imaginary*. Drawing on ideas from Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Jacques Lacan, Hamilton uses the term to describe how contemporary nation-states use visual mass media to constitute *imagined communities*. She uses Lacan's idea of the imaginary as the mirror-phase in human development when the child sees its own reflection as an "other": "Imaginary relations at the social, collective level can thus be seen as ourselves looking at ourselves while we think we are seeing others" (Hamilton 1990:17). As examples, she cites the current popularity of Aboriginal art and popular music, as well as films such as *Crocodile Dundee*, in which the outback and Aboriginal knowledge play a critical role, as if Australian appropriation of Aboriginal culture can justify "the settler presence in the country, and indeed . . . the presence of Australia as part of a world cultural scene" (Hamilton 1990:18). Given current world conditions, representations of the Australian nation must take account of what Hamilton calls an increasingly "internationalised image-environment," in which images of indigenous peoples now carry a heavy semiotic load (1990). Aboriginal media have become implicated in the circulation of commodified images of Aboriginality, including "hi-tech primitives" engaged in their own televisual production. For a fuller discussion of this position, see Ginsburg 1993a.

5. For a discussion of the origins and use of the term *indigenous media*, see Ginsburg 1993a.

6. While the opportunities of such positions are obvious, there is some concern on the part of Aboriginal filmmakers that they are expected to confine their work to conventional or romanticized representations of Aboriginality, what Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "the savage slot" (Trouillot 1991).

7. Urban-based filmmakers such as Tracey Moffatt may be more oriented toward formal issues, although they, too, often couch their interests in terms of their social possibilities as *interventions* into dominant conventions of representation regarding Aboriginal men and women in popular culture, as was the case with both *Night Cries* (1990) and *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987). In the case of makers such as Moffatt, this language may be less a product of Aboriginal categories and more a reworking of available discourses in the independent cinema movement, of which she is a part.

8. For an interesting discussion of similar issues in relation to Aboriginal writing, see Muecke 1992.

9. For a fuller discussion of the development of Australian Aboriginal media in different locales, see Batty 1993, Ginsburg 1991 and 1993a, Michaels 1987a, Molnar 1989, and O'Regan 1993.

10. Langton notes:

One network was even broadcasting a drama series featuring a European acting in place of the original Aboriginal Character, Bony, from the novels of Arthur Upfield. . . . A new and welcome twist . . . was the appointment of Stan Grant, an Aboriginal journalist, to the position of anchor on *Real Life* [a nightly current affairs program]. [1993:21]

11. In 1978, the government established a separate Special Broadcast Service (SBS) initially to serve immigrant minorities. By the mid-1980s, the SBS altered its policy to include the presentation of Aboriginal radio and television programs and to take as its mandate the correction of popular misconceptions about Aboriginal history and culture.

12. Michael Johnson and Rhoda Roberts were the hosts for 38 programs that aired Tuesday nights at 7:30.

13. While the state-controlled and -funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) had been training Aborigines since 1980, by 1987 only seven Aborigines were employed there. That same year, the prime minister established the Aboriginal Employment and Development Policy (AEDP), which requires all industries to have 2 percent Aboriginal employment by 1991 (Molnar 1989:36–38).

14. As of 1993, APU had six Aboriginal staff who produce *Blackout*, a weekly late-night program on Aboriginal affairs, as well as occasional documentaries and dramatic works. As such, it is a precedent-setting model for including indigenous people and their concerns in the imaginary of the nation-state and beyond.

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