

STATION IDENTIFICATION: THE ABORIGINAL PROGRAMS UNIT OF THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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Over the last decade, the production of media by and about Aboriginal Australians has undergone geometric expansion, from a few experimental efforts at developing local video production in the early 1980s in remote communities, to the current situation in which video equipment and television broadcasting are available to practically every Aboriginal settlement that wants it. It is not only the work of remote-living Aboriginal people that has taken off. Urban Aboriginal independent filmmakers such as Tracey Moffatt are well-known in independent film circles; Moffatt has just completed her first feature, "Bedevil," that was shown at Cannes and is circulating in an international market. While the costs and benefits of such developments are still being debated (Ginsburg 1991; Langton 1993), Aboriginal media has triggered interest worldwide for indigenous groups that have formed alliances around the production of their own media. It has also engaged the interest of westerners who seem to be fascinated by the seeming disjunction of Aboriginal people — stereotypically identified by their relatively simple material culture and distinctly non-western cosmology — working comfortably and on their own terms with the latest in satellite and video technologies.¹

To most people interested in media and/or things Aboriginal, the mention of indigenous media in Australia evokes one of those two developments. Less well-known is the remarkable growth since 1987 of an Aboriginal Program Unit (APU) as part of the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC), Australia's national state-supported

television channel. Because of the broadcast range of the ABC (a national network that regularly commands 20% of the television audience) and the resources it has as a state institution (approximately \$450 million/year) (Meadows 1992) which allow it freedom from commercial sponsorship, the APU is playing an important part in increasing the televisual representation of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. However, perhaps due to television's distinctly national profile, ephemeral character, and middle-brow status among intellectuals and artists, the APU has had virtually no recognition outside of Australia, despite the quality of the work it produces. This article (and the accompanying interview by Jacqueline Urla with Frances Peters, a producer for the APU) are first efforts to introduce some of the work of the APU to people outside of Australia. Its programs bear consideration in terms of form, substance and reception; and the Unit itself is of interest as a precedent-setting model for including indigenous people and their concerns in the televisual imaginary of the nation state and beyond.²

BACKGROUND

Aboriginal media is barely a decade old.³ It emerged out of transformations in consciousness of both Aboriginal and Euro-Australians, historically changing government policies, as well as the presence of new media technologies. Many Aboriginal producers see their work as continuous

with the 1970s social movements for Aboriginal rights which were aided by the Australian Labor government's liberal left policy in support of Aboriginal "self-determination" (Leigh 1988). Aboriginal awareness of these connections between political enfranchisement and the need to control their own images in the public sphere has been growing over the years and continues today as is still evident, for example, in recent debates over media representation of Aboriginal concerns that emerged in the Mabo decision and in recent position papers written by Aboriginal cultural activists for the Australian Film Commission (Langton 1993; MacPherson 1993).⁴

These concerns first crystallized with the government's 1985 launching of AUSSAT, Australia's first communications satellite. Its presence meant that anyone in the country—including traditional Aboriginal people living in remote parts of Australia's Central Desert that had been out of range of television signals—could receive at least one ABC television channel and two ABC radio stations (Meadows 1992). It was out of a concern that they have some say in what the satellite might bring into their lives that Aboriginal activists were catalyzed around access to and control over media, as summed up in phrases such as "Land rights and air rights." The ideological climates surrounding the resulting public debates organized by Australia's Broadcast Tribunal in the 1980s favored the notion that multicultural expression was an acceptable version of the Australian nation; this influenced national support of Aboriginal media associations and the Aboriginally-owned satellite downlink in Alice Springs, Imparja Television (Batty 1993).

Pressure on the part of Aboriginal people for increased representation in mainstream Australian media grew with the approach of Australia's Bicentenary in 1988.⁵ Aboriginal trainees at the ABC protested the lack of attention to Aboriginal concerns in national television programming (Sandy 1992). In response, the ABC formed the Aboriginal Programs Unit in 1987, recognizing that

a special need exists for the Aboriginal people to

develop their own cultural identity in order to redress the special disadvantages they have suffered. Accordingly, the ABC will encourage community awareness of the Aboriginal people's aspirations in its programs, and it affirms its commitment to providing television and radio programs made by Aboriginal people themselves. (ABC n.d.)

Specifically, the ABC made a commitment to having at least 2% of its workforce be of Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islander descent, in line with the percentage of Aboriginal people in the country. As of 1992, this accounted for 116 members of ABC staff throughout Australia, including the members of the APU.⁶ This is not a particularly startling statistic, until one compares it to the situation in the U.S., where the possibility of a regular state-supported presence of indigenous people in broadcasting is almost inconceivable to a nation that has become accustomed to the virtual invisibility of Native Americans in our media.

The Aboriginal Programs Unit began by producing or purchasing occasional works on Aboriginal topics. For example, the biting dramatic parody of the 200 year legacy of racism in Australia, "BabaKiueria," was broadcast during 1988 as a counter to the celebrations of the bicentenary year that took no account of the Aboriginal view of this event. While this work has become a kind of a cult classic, Aboriginal staff at the ABC were increasingly frustrated that they were working for non-Aboriginal directors and producers (although with Aboriginal actors and production crew) and that their work was not part of any ongoing schedule.

In response to these demands for regular Aboriginal programming, with Aboriginal directors and crew, the APU has been producing a 30-minute weekly series since 1989. "Blackout" is made by Aboriginal producers and aired at prime-time (8 pm) for 8—10 weeks during the television "season." The show was originally conceived as a studio talk show, but the staff felt it was too narrow and formal, and it has now developed an eclectic format to reach diverse audiences throughout Australia. Since 1991, "Blackout" has been organized around weekly themes, with a format that varies from live audience

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THE ABORIGINAL PROGRAM UNIT OF THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCAST CORPORATION. FRANCES PETERS IS THE FOURTH FROM THE LEFT.

discussions with prominent Aboriginal figures in arts and politics, Aboriginal music and dance, interviews, and documentary segments made throughout Aboriginal Australia. In 1992, the APU also produced a documentary series, "The First Australians" with work acquired from independent filmmakers on topics concerning Aboriginal cultures, history and politics.

By 1993, the Aboriginal Programs Unit was operating with a budget of approximately \$2,000,000 (Australian) annually for the production of its own programming and the purchase of work "of a distinctive Aboriginal nature" by independent producers. The unit has a core staff of six Aboriginal producer-directors and two researchers, employing additional people as required for particular projects. (As of late 1992, there were still no Aboriginal camera or sound people to work with the APU, which has been a source of some concern.) Additionally,

original documentary specials produced by the unit have been integrated into general ABC documentary series.

Frances Peters, a Kamilaroi Aboriginal woman who grew up and went to university in Sydney (where she also performs frequently as a vocalist) joined the Unit in 1989 as a researcher for "Blackout." The following year, she produced and directed her own first half-hour documentary for "Blackout," "Oceans Apart," for which she also wrote and performed the music. The piece is based on the lives of three Aboriginal women who were raised in white families; as adults, they reconnect with their Aboriginal heritage either directly, by seeking contact with their families of origin, or through cultural activities in the arts, communications, and education. Peters chose as her subjects women who "don't look Aboriginal," who are sophisticated and middle-class, and who are anything but victims. This was a deliberate strategy to

subvert conventional stereotypes of Aboriginal people in the dominant media which tend to focus on men: traditional bush-living people engaged in ceremony or painting, or urban dwellers represented as social problems. The women's unusual narratives offer extraordinary examples of the possibilities of recapturing a contemporary indigenous identity in the face of tremendous forces of assimilation. The piece is also powerful for the striking differences in the women's lives despite their common struggles: Peters takes care to draw attention to the diversity of Aboriginal experiences. Additionally, while the history of Aboriginal children being taken away and placed with white families is one of the more tragic legacies of the government's stance toward Aboriginal children of mixed descent, "Oceans Apart" avoids becoming a simple attack. By allowing the women's stories to guide the piece it makes viewers aware of the costs of institutional racism as we are drawn into their lives, enabling us to see both the consequences of policy and the ways that they have managed to overcome them. Frances Peters explained her choice as an effort to avoid treating Aboriginal people as issues:

They are speaking on behalf of themselves, from a personal point of view and therefore the political comes from the individual, the issue comes out of what is happening, and the person's experience rather than putting the experience up, and having the people speak on behalf of the experience. So by dealing with it on a personal level, we find that it is stronger politically as well. (1992)

In 1991, Peters worked with Aboriginal producer David Sandy, to produce the first documentary special of the 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 40s, to the site of the original protest to re-assert their claims and to occupy Parliament House as well becomes the occasion for the film to

explore the last twenty 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 \$5 billion bureaucracy which 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, politician Charlie 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 in the 1960s which helped put land claims on the national political agenda.

While "Tent Embassy" was received extremely well in the general press (e.g. Stewart 1992), the piece is controversial in the Aboriginal community for its revelations of considerable division among political leaders as to whether one can change the system while acting within it. This is, to my knowledge, one of the first media works made by an Aboriginal producer (or about Aboriginal issues) that looks at political debate within the community, rather than framing issues as Aboriginal vs. European Australian, or representing Aboriginal society as a seamless whole. Peters and Sandy see themselves as a new generation committed to exploring that complexity which they encountered when they came of age in the early 1980s. As Peters framed it,

It is not just a film about black versus white; it is a film that questions our own political strategies and where they take us all. It is perhaps the luxury of being in the generation that followed these early activists to question and re-examine the history they created.

Bearing the legacy of those who helped alter the political landscape for Aboriginal people in this century, Peters and Sandy are new kinds of cultural activists. For them, the Aboriginal Programs Unit enables them to enter into media production in order to assert the multiple realities of contemporary Aboriginal life, not just for their own

communities but in the national arena, where Aboriginal activism and political claims are generally effaced from the official histories. While the ideology of television assumes the lowest common denominator in its viewers, these Aboriginal producers are finding ways to draw people in — using music, humor, and drama — without simplifying or reducing the Aboriginal experience for what are still predominantly white audiences.

In considering this kind of work in relation to visual anthropology, one must recognize their media production as a form of social action. It is crucial to understand the difference it makes when members of disadvantaged minorities become the authors of representations about themselves, as opposed to the dominant model in ethnographic filmmaking where the maker is generally from outside the community. Frances Peters articulated this difference clearly to me in discussing the position of being 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. A lot of program makers don't. It becomes a 9 to 5 job. You come to work, you make a program as an observation, and basically, in many ways, you can walk away from that.

So we can't walk away and just make a program on a different theme next time, you know. Non-Aboriginal filmmakers — when they're making programs about different topics have the luxury of saying, "We'll I've dealt with the disabled, and next week it's going to be about women, and next week it's going to be about X... And ultimately you're not really answerable to a hell of a lot of people. You're either answerable to your executive producer, to a certain section of the community or society, or whatever. But we, with every program that we make, are ultimately responsible to a larger Aboriginal community. And we can't remove ourselves from that responsibility.

Peters' 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. While for most producers, these relationships have been primarily with their communities of origin, new more expanded communities of identity are emerging. For example, the most recent project that

Peters is engaged in as an APU producer is the Pac Rim initiative, a documentary series being made jointly by indigenous filmmakers from Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and Canada. Thus, indigenous producers such as those at the APU are engaged in more than the creation of media images of themselves that alter their place in the world of representations. Additionally, through collaborative activities, they are building transnational alliances of indigenous people that transcend the boundaries of the nation states that encompass them.

NOTES

1. For a full discussion of this idea of Western fascination with indigenous media makers, see Ginsburg 1993.
2. This article is based on interviews I conducted at the ABC in Sydney in the spring of 1992 with Unit producers Frances Peters and David Sandy; and with Frances Peters at the Dreamspeakers World Aboriginal Film Festival in Edmonton, Alberta in September 1992, and again in the winter of 1993 in New York City, following her appearance at the "Shock of Recognition" conference and film festival in Amherst, Massachusetts organized by Jacqueline Urla and others. The work of the unit includes the magazine format current events series "Blackout"; the dramatic piece "Babakieuria" (1988); and the documentaries "Oceans Apart" (1990), produced and directed by Frances Peters; and "Tent Embassy" (1992) produced by Frances Peters and directed by David Sandy, the first documentary special produced by the Aboriginal Programs Unit, broadcast as part of ABC's "True Stories" series.
3. Different aspects of this involvement are summarized in essays by film historian Michael Leigh (1988), filmmaker David MacDougall (1987), the late Eric Michaels (1986), Aboriginal anthropologist and activist Marcia Langton (1993), myself (Ginsburg 1991, 1993) and communications scholar Helen Molnar who reminds us that many remote-living Aborigines have been producing their own radio programming since the 1970s, "leaping over the print generation to begin recording their languages, stories, music and culture" (Molnar 1990: 148).
4. Most have a negative view of the media's coverage (or lack of it) of Aboriginal issues, and regularly complain of racial discrimination and stereotyped representations as "angry young militants" or the "drunken no-hopers" (Watson 1978; Meadows 1992: 83).

5. If one examines the history of its involvement with radio, the ABC has been active with Aboriginal broadcasting since the 1970s when it gave support to the fledgling Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in the Northern Territory. According to media scholar Michael Meadows,

In the 1980s, the ABC established a consultation process with communities to ensure a continuing recognition of the complementary but different roles sought by itself and Aboriginal communications (John Newson, November 14, 1989; personal communication)... The aim is to help local media associations in remote areas set up their own broadcast stations using ABC transmitters...

By 1990, the ABC broadcast over 100 hours of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander radio programs in Aboriginal languages throughout Australia. The ABC is aware of the very local nature of broadcasting desired by Aboriginal communities, as opposed to former trends to accommodate all Aboriginal interests in national programming (Meadows 1992: 90). However, this in no way suggests that there is no need to have an Aboriginal presence in the prestigious national center of television production.

6. In addition, the government established a separate Special Broadcast Service (SBS) in 1978, 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. The SBS, however, as a UHF channel has a much smaller audience and less than a quarter of the budget of the ABC (SBS 1980).

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