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Sound tracks of the Black Pacific: Music, identity and resilience in Australian South Sea Islander communities

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Abstract

Australian South Sea Islanders, the descendants of the Melanesians from (primarily) Vanuatu and Solomon Islands who were 'blackbirded' to Queensland and New South Wales (1847-1904) for their labour, have, through music and dance practices, come to identify as part of a global black 'transnation'. Studies of the 'Black Atlantic' point both to the transnational character of slavery and the importance of music as a medium of resistance. This article proposes that Australian South Sea Islanders' musical cultures might usefully be understood in terms of a parallel concept, the 'Black Pacific', in relation to which the Pacific's colonised and decolonised peoples have developed their own expressions of black pride and performed resistance. It argues that a more nuanced appreciation of Australian South Sea Islander performance culture as part of the Black Pacific will allow all Australians to better understand some of the vitally important yet obfuscated consequences of Australia's blackbirding past.

Keywords

identity, sound, resilience, tracks, australian, south, sea, islander, communities, black, pacific:, music

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**Sound tracks of the Black Pacific:
Music, identity and resilience in Australian
South Sea Islander communities**

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Abstract

Australian South Sea Islanders, the descendants of the Melanesians from (primarily) Vanuatu and Solomon Islands who were ‘blackbirded’ to Queensland and New South Wales (1847-1904) for their labour, have, through music and dance practices, come to identify as part of a global black ‘transnation’. Studies of the ‘Black Atlantic’ point both to the transnational character of slavery and the importance of music as a medium of resistance. This article proposes that Australian South Sea Islanders’ musical cultures might usefully be understood in terms of a parallel concept, the ‘Black Pacific’, in relation to which the Pacific’s colonised and decolonised peoples have developed their own expressions of black pride and performed resistance. It argues that a more nuanced appreciation of Australian South Sea Islander performance culture as part of the Black Pacific will allow all Australians to better understand some of the vitally important yet obfuscated consequences of Australia’s blackbirding past.

Keywords: Australian South Sea Islanders, Melanesia, Black Pacific, decolonisation, music, dance

Introduction

Kidnapping and enslavement are key themes in the narratives of the Melanesians ‘blackbirded’ to Queensland and New South Wales between 1847 and 1904. These trauma stories have been passed down to their descendants, Australian South Sea Islanders. Over the past sixty years, Australian South Sea Islanders have come to identify as part of a global black ‘transnation’, with descendants of African slaves in the Americas in particular, through perceived and actual performance culture affinities. Studies of the ‘Black Atlantic’ point both to the transnational character of slavery and the importance of music as a medium of resistance (Gilroy 1993; Genovese 1974).

This article proposes that Australian South Sea Islanders’ musical cultures might usefully be understood in terms of a parallel concept, the ‘Black Pacific’, in relation to which the Pacific’s colonised and decolonised peoples have developed their own expressions of black pride and performed resistance (Webb and Webb-Gannon 2016; Shilliam 2015; Solis 2015). At the same

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time, it sets out a conceptual path that would enable the music made by Australians of South Sea Islander descent to be included among the musical traditions of Australia. It also points to areas in which further investigation might be fruitful in uncovering the complex pathways created by Australian South Sea Islander performers and performances that connect Melanesia with Indigenous Australia, settler-colonial Australia, and black politics globally. This could in turn cast further light on the ways music connects the culturally diverse populations that are characteristic of many modern societies.

Displacement

A complex relationship exists between Australian South Sea Islander expressive culture, coerced labour, and colonialism. The omission of Australian South Sea Islander musical practices and accomplishments from formal histories of Australian musical culture is as conspicuous as it is unfortunate. A Wikipedia entry conveys some idea of the problem, even if unintentionally, stating:

Indigenous people in Australia are both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. People of South Sea Islander descent may be included by popular culture, although they are the descendants of Pacific Islanders brought to Australia during the 19th century as indentured labour on the Queensland sugar canefields.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Indigenous_Australian_musicians

Here, by sleight of hand, Australian South Sea Islanders are excluded from the category of 'Indigenous Australian musician', even as their recorded output "may be" classified as Indigenous. Although there is a considerable literature relating to Australian South Sea Islander experience, to date, only one study of Australian South Sea Islanders' performing arts has been undertaken, and this focuses on first-hand observers' accounts of Australian South Sea Islander maritime and plantation music (Webb and Webb-Gannon, 2017). That this is a serious omission is clear; almost all scholars of the Australian South Sea Islander labour trade have noted how crucial music and dance were to the development of these Islanders' sense of ethnic identity (see Banivanua-Mar 2007; Corris 1973; Gistitin 1995; Mercer 1995).

Between 1848 and 1904, 62,000 Islanders were brought to Queensland and New South Wales from Melanesia (primarily from what are now the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) as indentured labourers in the pastoral, agricultural, and maritime industries. Working conditions were often "slave-like" (Moore 2015a). Wages in excess of 30 million Australian dollars in current terms were withheld from the workers (Moore 2015b). Approximately one third of recruited labourers died during indenture. Under the White Australia policy, from 1906-1908, most South Sea Islander labourers were deported, not necessarily to their home islands. However, nearly 2000 remained in Australia, and today the number of their descendants could be as high as 45,000. Over the past century, these people have faced conditions of entrenched discrimination and poverty paralleling those encountered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Like the descendants of African slaves in the Americas, the Caribbean and the United Kingdom (the Atlantic), Australian South Sea Islanders remain a disenfranchised population suffering from intergenerational trauma (Atkinson 2010).

Ongoing hardship has not prevented Australian South Sea Islanders from politically mobilising at key moments and ultimately achieving the hard-won victory of official recognition as a distinct cultural group by the Australian Federal Government in 1994. While oppressive conditions may have limited the extent to which Australian South Sea Islanders have thrived as a

community, their creativity has contributed significantly to their cultural resilience and capacity to be recognised politically.

Music and the ‘Black Pacific’

A shift is underway, notes Paul Lyons (2016), towards regarding the Pacific “as an understudied counterpart” to “Atlantic Ocean-focused discourse” (see Gilroy 1993; O’Neill and Lloyd 2009; and Weaver 2014). This is evident in recent research on music in what a handful of scholars, picking up on the increasing frequency over time of trans-hemispheric black alliances in Pacific cultural and political movements, have termed the Black Pacific (Shilliam, 2015; Solis 2015; and Webb and Webb-Gannon, forthcoming). We contend that the concept of the Black Pacific in relation to Australian South Sea Islanders is particularly apposite since, unlike Maori and other cultures to which the term has been applied, Australian South Sea Islanders, like Black Atlantic populations, were transplanted overseas, away from their home islands, hence alienated from their land and its cosmological values, beliefs and associated practices. Displaced, the original South Sea Islander labourers and their descendants relied upon that other major cosmological foundation of Melanesian identity—music and dance performance—for their survival as a distinct diasporic people in Australia.

Clearly, there are significant differences between Black Pacific Australian South Sea Islander populations and Black Atlantic populations affected by the historical trauma of the Middle Passage, including the number of people involved in transplantation, the distance of removal from homelands, the extent of volition each population had with regard to their own future, and the capacity (in some cases) to return to homelands at the end of indenture. Another key rhetorical and ideological distinguishing factor, which we will have to address elsewhere, is the former’s explicit shaping, in recent decades especially, of a complex narrative of Indigeneity.

Yet, there are also remarkable similarities in the ways in which expressive culture has served Black Pacific Australian South Sea Islander and Black Atlantic populations over the course of their traumatic histories in order to facilitate continuity in black cultural identification and to achieve self-determination. Black Caribbean writer Edouard Glissant observes, “for us music, gesture and dance are ... how we first managed to emerge from the plantation: aesthetic form in our cultures must be shaped from these oral structures” (quoted in Gilroy 1993, 75). Similarly, for Australian South Sea Islanders, music and dance sustained labourers not only on ships and plantations but also beyond the labour era down to the present (Webb-Gannon and Webb 2017).

Based on anecdotal fragments preserved in newspaper reports, and various writings and sketches by recruiters, settlers, journalists, missionaries and other observers (examined in detail in Webb and Webb-Gannon, 2017), as well as Australian South Sea Islanders’ own published accounts, we propose that an Australian South Sea Islander musical identity emerged from disparate Melanesian musical practices, in three broad, overlapping phases, through which Australian South Sea Islanders came to connect with black transnationalism. The ‘origination’ phase begins with labour recruitment in the late 1840s and ends at the time of mass deportation in the years leading up to 1910. Accounts of maritime musical culture by recruiters and government agents tell of South Sea Islanders singing and dancing while en route to Australia, possibly a gesture of solidarity in the face of an unknown future, and on plantations as early as 1863 (Webb and Webb-Gannon 2017). Integral to the music of this phase were lyrical texts that employed variant forms of English-based Melanesian pidgin; these were fused to melodies that were themselves part of nascent musical pidgins (Keesing 1988; Webb 1993). Emotional and affective dimensions of plantation life were explored through Islander expressive forms such as

minstrelsy, folk-type campfire entertainment, the singsing dance festival, and traditional male initiation rites for example, which were taken up in sites in Australia during the indentured labour trade era.

A second, ‘formulation’ phase, involved the Anglican and Presbyterian churches and the independent Queensland Kanaka Mission from the 1880s, and from the 1920s the Seventh Day Adventist and Assemblies of God denominations, introducing South Sea Islanders to variant forms of Christian hymnody. Gospel hymns drew Islanders to the new religious teachings, and hymnody bound them to each other. Some, such as the Loyalty Island recruits were already familiar with European hymnody, as they received instruction in it from Polynesian missionaries beginning around 1840.

Post-deportation, from 1908, the formulation phase pertained to those Islanders who remained and fended for themselves as disadvantaged fringe populations in Queensland and New South Wales, and extended until the increased demand for Australian South Sea Islander recognition in the 1970s. Data concerning Australian South Seas Islander music making during this period largely remains to be collected, but it can be stated with confidence that it overlapped with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island repertoires and was eclectic, drawing on hymnody, ‘Island’ songs, blues and jazz, and narrative genres such as folk and country music (see Walker 2014, 69-82). In this phase, music served in evoking and remembering origins, building communities, social mobility (uplift), and religious worship.

As an example of the eclecticism of this phase and the ways it overlapped with the phase that followed it, consider the reflections of Jardine Kiwat, a second generation (Australian-born) Australian South Sea Islander, whose “mother’s people were blackbirded to Mackay” (Queensland) and whose father is of Torres Strait Islander descent (Kiwat 1999, 74). Kiwat (1999, 74) notes that his mother identified with Tahitian music “every time she wanted to feel happy”, and especially during the Christmas season.

This wasn’t because we were Tahitian: it was a music my mother felt close to, a music my mother identified with, even though she was of South Sea Island descent—a mix of Aoba Island [Vanuatu] and Levuka Fiji. This music was from a community that sang and danced together, happy and content with many of their traditions alive and intact despite French colonization. (Kiwat 1999, 74)

Kiwat then writes:

I was influenced by a mixture of jazz and country from Mum, traditional Torres Strait Islander music/dance and original songs from Dad and by an assortment of David Bowie, The Beatles, Janis Joplin, Brook Benton, Jim Reeves, The Doors, Isley Brothers, Deep Purple, Neil Diamond, Skyhooks, Wild Cherry, Little River band, Chain and, of course, lashings of Tahitian music at Christmas time. (Kiwat 1999, 74).

For Kiwat’s mother, as a first generation Australian South Sea Islander of mixed descent herself, Tahitian songs may have served as a kind of surrogate Pacific Island music. Both Benton and the Isley Brothers, the black artists among those he lists as influences, had a background in gospel music but also made a transition to R&B.

A third phase of ‘celebration’ coincided with the upsurge in the 1970s of Australian Indigenous politics, which was energised by the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the global reach of black transnationalism. It incorporated into Australian South Sea Islander musical culture African American spirituals and gospel genres, the music of black singers including Charlie Pride and Bob Marley, and more recently, socially conscious rap and neo soul.

The compulsion to sing formed a connecting thread. Australian South Sea Islanders have made use of such music to celebrate their ‘black Pasifikan-ness’, to raise awareness of the tragic aspects of their history, to contribute to the building of global black and Indigenous networks (Gilroy 1993; Clifford 2013; Hau‘ofa 2008; Banivanua Mar 2016), and to comment on current Australian Indigenous and South Sea Islander politics. The track ‘Freedom Riders’ by Fred Leone’s group Yarwah is but one example (Leone is of mixed Samoan, Aboriginal and Australian South Sea Island descent). Loosely evoking Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 ‘The Revolution Will Not Be Televised’, the song marks the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Freedom Rides across New South Wales that were led by the Aboriginal activist, Charles Perkins. The Black identity politics expressed in this third phase are premised on the first two phases, which were concerned more with cultural survival (phase one) and cultural fusion (phase two).

The complexity involved in delineating the conceptual parameters of Australian South Sea Islander musical culture, and Australian South Sea Islander cultural identity itself, is related to the group’s fractured historical experience. Australian South Sea Islander identity draws on cultural traditions from Melanesia (primarily Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands) as well as kinship practices and cultural links with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Australian South Sea Islanders continue to identify strongly as Melanesian, connecting with their Melanesian cultures of origin, for example, through reconciliation ceremonies with ‘home’ villages, island tours, and the tracing of kinship.

Music and dance are formational practices in Melanesia (see Wolffram 2012; Webb forthcoming). Across Melanesia, Van Heekeren contends, songs “bring people together in more than a social way. They promote the modes of being that are most highly valued” (Van Heekeren 2011, 55). Knauft concurs; in Melanesia, he explains, the performing body celebrates “social and cultural vitality”. In those Islands, the singing voice is “an index of relationships between the internal self and the social collective” (Knauft 1999, 84). Drawing on its Melanesian roots, Australian South Sea Islander culture values the socially constitutive role of song and dance (Webb and Webb-Gannon 2017). At the same time, Australian South Sea Islanders have long identified with African-American historical experience and cultural expressions from spirituals, gospel hymns, the music of Paul Robeson and songs of the Civil Rights era, to blues, jazz, reggae, hip-hop and break dancing, Motown, soul, and recent R&B music (see Neuenfeldt 2015, for example). Such cultural identification further indexes Australian South Sea Islanders as a Black Pacific people—a mirrored microcosm of the Black Atlantic with an identity formulated around narratives of kidnapping and slavery, focused on the search for roots, and performed through creolised and, in prominent instances, Black Power-oriented music and dance. This is not to argue that all Australian South Sea Islander music is an expression of the trauma of their dispersion, but rather that it is related in some way to their experience of being black or Other (for example, traditional music brought from the Black Islands [Melanesia], hymnody acquired from mission encounters, and reggae appropriated through processes of globalisation).

Australian South Sea Islander black lives matter

The Black Lives Matters campaign of recent years represents a significant meeting of Black Atlantic and Black Pacific politics in contemporary Australian South Sea Islander expressive culture. Originating in the African American community in the United States as a response to police brutality towards African Americans, the campaign achieved exponential growth and influence via social media and has energised black and solidarity movements around the world. In Australian South Sea Islander communities, musicians and political-cultural leaders seized its

message as a powerful expression of Australian South Sea Islander marginality and resistance. Most recently, following the debate connected to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States about the appropriateness of statues memorialising Confederate Army Civil War figures in public places, Australian South Sea Islanders have requested that statues and plaques commemorating kidnapped South Sea Islanders who laboured in Queensland's sugarcane fields be placed alongside those of colonial era plantation owners already standing, such as that of Robert Towns in Townsville who "made his name blackbirding" (Haxton 2017). Similarly, in his 2016 track 'Black Thoughts', Australian South Sea Islander descended rapper Ziggy Ramo refers to the Black Lives Matter movement in Australia. He speaks variously to black pride: "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" and black power: "Throw my Blackness in your face without a warnin' message". The first of these references is an allusion to the 2015 song 'The Blacker the Berry' by rapper Kendrick Lamar, which in turn alluded to the 1929 novel, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* by Harlem Renaissance writer, Wallace Thurman.

In New South Wales in 2016, President of the Australian South Sea Islander Port Jackson (ASSIPJ) organisation, Emelda Davis, facilitated a set of B.L.A.C.K. (Bold Leadership Awareness Culture Knowledge) workshops seeking to raise awareness of Australian South Sea Islander history and identity. In addition to incorporating the colours of the reggae flag into the workshop logo, the events featured other Black Atlantic influences including a keynote presentation by Deng Adut, the Sudanese-Australian lawyer (and former child soldier), and performances by hip hop and spoken word artists (We Are A Star 2016). Utilising the symbolic valency of the Black Lives Matter campaign, ASSIPJ has also worked the slogan 'black lives matter' into a black and white colored logo (appropriated from N.W.A.'s Straight Outta Compton album cover, which itself punned on the 'parental advisory' label applied to audio recordings). The words 'black' and 'matter' in bold black letters sit above and below the word 'lives' in white lettering that is filled in with old black and white photographs of Melanesian labourers brought to Australia (Australian South Sea Islanders—Port Jackson 2016).

Blackness, performativity and healing in Australian South Sea Islander communities

Ziggy Ramo is of Australian Aboriginal as well as Australian South Sea Islander descent. For various reasons, the Australian South Sea Islander identity component of many Indigenous musicians in Australia is downplayed in both scholarly and popular accounts of Australian Indigenous performance culture. Ziggy is not alone in his combined Australian Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander heritage. Besides Fred Leone mentioned above, Australian jazz singer Shireen Malamoo, Malcolm Cole and Richard Talonga, who were founding members of the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, Naomi and Joel Wenitong of the awarded Indigenous hip-hop group Last Kinection, and emerging Australian soul-pop singer Marcus Corowa all acknowledge both their Australian South Sea Islander heritage and their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. The output of these musicians and dancers is valued in the public and commercial spheres for its contribution to Australian cultural life as Indigenous performance. While the artistic skills and accomplishments of these women and men are celebrated in Australia, their ancestral connection to the Melanesian islands, often including those of the Torres Strait, is rarely acknowledged.

To date, most scholarly work on the Black Pacific has concentrated on Polynesian and Australian Aboriginal conceptions of blackness, sidestepping the experiences of the so-called black Islanders (Melanesians) and their diaspora, including Australian South Sea Islanders

(Banivanua Mar [2016] is an exception). As Ponipate Rokolekutu (2015) has explained, for a range of historical reasons it is not possible to speak of a unitary Black Pacific experience. Nor has there been a single expression of black solidarity that extends right across the Pacific Islands. Such affinities and expressions have ebbed and flowed over time in various parts of the Pacific Islands, in relation to such particularities as decolonisation (historical and contemporary), nuclear testing, and climate change and environmental despoliation.

In a recent study of Melanesian music and notions of blackness, Webb and Webb-Gannon (2016) argue that expressions of black identity in that region need to be considered in light of the historical and cultural diversity of the islands that were pejoratively labeled black from the 1830s onwards. A more nuanced understanding of black transnationalism is urgently needed, one that takes into account the Pacific and its differentiated articulations of which Australian South Sea Islander cultural identity comprises a powerful case study. Such an understanding would highlight Australian South Sea Islanders' Melanesian heritage but would also invite new attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expressive practices, many of which, as noted above, share a rich culture with those of Australian South Sea Islanders. Just as there are different ways of conceiving 'blackness', there are different ways of thinking about 'Pasifikan-ness'; indeed, ethnomusicologist Gabriel Solis is investigating the instances in which various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians classify their own music as part of a Black Pacific tradition (2015). Just how far west Australia's Pacific littoral extends and why is worthy of further investigation. While the salience of a shared Black Pacific identity might in instances such as this transcend the subtending identities of Australian South Sea Islander and Aboriginal, for example, we are interested in the ways in which it might also enhance these by bringing into relief the complexities of different Black Pacific cultures.

Australian South Sea Islander history contains many stories of loss, and a narrative of 'healing' has become part of the discourse by which intellectuals and Australian South Sea Islander musicians promoting the idea of Black Pacific identity explain its significance. This includes the loss of lands, of families, of political autonomy, and the related loss of traditional songs, stories and dances. As Australian South Sea Islander musician Namarca Corowa asserts, it is "by capturing their memories through music, song, poetry and storytelling" that Australian South Sea Islanders are able to "cradle the smouldering ember of [their] culture" (2013). In notable Australian South Sea Islander musician Georgia Corowa's words, her people "sing the spirit, and it's part of healing, coming from a real place" (IZIT Entertainment 2015). As anthropologist Laura Peers writes of the significance of cultural heritage in community recovery, "access to heritage objects [or, in this case, intangible heritage] ... can play an important role in healing from colonial trauma for indigenous groups by facilitating strengthened connections ... to ancestors, to kin and community members in the present, and to identity" (2013, 136).

Conclusion

Prior to an official visit to Melanesia in late 2016, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop tweeted that the Pacific is "our neighbourhood, our priority" (Armbruster 2016). A deeper understanding of Australian South Sea Islander performance culture has the potential to enhance Australia's links with the islands of Melanesia while substantially increasing existing knowledge of Australia's cultural history, by utilising the power of music as a constructive cultural mediator. Melanesia is often negatively perceived as Australia's 'arc of instability'. Yet, the critical political assistance that Melanesian countries have provided to Australia, during the Pacific War for

example, and more controversially, in providing Australia's asylum seekers with a home, is often overlooked.

Similarly, in Australia, the accomplishments of Australian South Sea Islanders who are Australian citizens of Melanesian heritage, are rarely mentioned despite the fact that some of Australia's most prominent sportspeople (Mal Meninga), political spokespeople (for example, Faith Bandler and Bonita Mabou) and performers past and present (Richard Talonga and Ziggy Ramo) are of Australian South Sea Islander descent. The largely pejorative Australian view of Melanesia must be reoriented toward a focus on the substantial positive contributions Australian South Sea Islanders have made to Australian culture and society. A more nuanced appreciation of Australian South Sea Islander performance culture as part of the Black Pacific will allow all Australians to better understand some of the vitally important yet obfuscated consequences of Australia's blackbirding past. An exploration of the boundaries of the Black Pacific (bearing in mind that no categorisation of human culture is without its limitations, exclusions and ambiguous edges), particularly in Australia, would be useful for better understanding Australia's place in the Pacific and the connections and overlaps between Australian Indigenous and Pacific cultures. An understanding of Australian South Sea Islanders (and other black Indigenous populations) as forming part of a Black Pacific would be as illuminating in the straightforward connections it reveals between the Pacific and the Black Atlantic, as in the boundary problems and questions that it generates. The accomplishments of Australian South Sea Islanders, a displaced diasporic people, are remarkable, given their historical and ongoing marginalisation.

At present, Australian South Sea Islanders are actively raising awareness of their history and culture using black musical genres such as rap, for example, and through linking to black transnationalism through the Black Lives Matter campaign. Their rich cultural traditions of music and dance await systematic exploration, as does the role they have played in ongoing processes of reconciliation and restitution. Further research on Australian South Sea Islander musical heritage and identity is therefore critical, in order to further uncover the aspects of this hidden history and to restore dignity to a people who have, disproportionate to their numbers and relative advantage, made strong contributions to Australian society and culture. This essay, which has attempted to contextualise Australian South Sea Islander musical identity within the framework of black transnationalism, is an initial step in that direction.

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