

# DECOLONISING AUSTRALIAN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY THROUGH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: A RETELLING OF PANDORA'S STORY

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## INTRODUCING A STORY

If I use the word “story”, what does it mean to you? Perhaps like me, the word story takes you back to a place in your childhood where everything was lived through your imagination. For some of you, the word story might easily be replaced with others such as fairytale, fable, fiction or it might even take on a more cynical twist to mean a fanciful retelling of facts. Riessman (2008, p. 4) reminds us that stories, in an Aristotelian sense, are indeed always interpretive because “they mirror the world” rather than copy it exactly. Story is a kind of remembering and Franz Fanon might mischievously suggest that stories are revolutionary which should “properly be called a literature of combat” (1967, p. 193) for they evoke dangerous truths about a nation’s history and identity. If Hannah Arendt were here she might say that “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (1968, p. 105) and Virginia Woolf would insist stories are essential for us to begin moving from the “cotton wool of daily life” to “moments of being” (1976, p. 72).

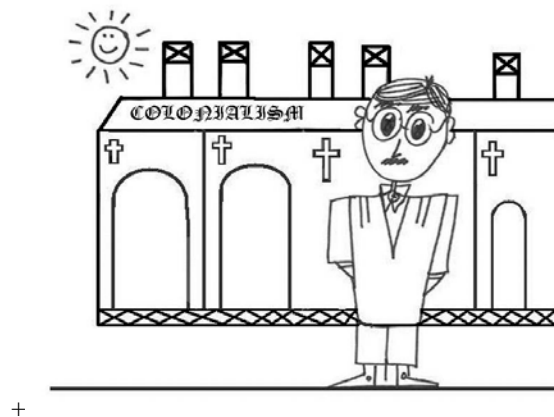
I grew up as an ethnomusicologist listening to Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara and Kudanji women from the Aboriginal community at Burrulula in the Northern Territory of Australia tell stories through and about song. Jemima a-Wuwarlu Miller, Dinah a-Marrngawi, Mudinji a-Karrakayn Isaac, Rosie a-Makurndurna Noble, Nancy a-Yukuwal McDinny, and Linda a-Wambardurna McDinny gifted to me how powerful song as story and story as song can be as memory, witness, and a hope for something different. In this paper, I am going to take some creative license to retell the story of one of my favourite goddesses and the first woman in Greek mythology, Pandora (c.f. Parker, 2007, pp. 266-269), by positioning her within the context of applied ethnomusicological work, decolonisation theory, and my wish for a research practice of the heart and hope. The playful autoethnographic approach I am taking is in many ways an act of Pandoric proportions in and of itself – who can say what will come flying out? (Behar, 1996, p. 19). In autoethnographic writing such as this, a scene is set, a story told, intricate connections are woven, experience and theory are evoked and then ruthlessly let go (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). All of the balls that have been juggled fly into the air and both performer and audience stand waiting with baited breath to see how they might fall.

This is a story that I have wanted to share for some time but so that you can adopt some risk management strategies to avoid free-falling juggling balls, it comes with a warning. The way in which this story is told may come across as rather mocking and perhaps even offensive. This narrative is both troubling and troubled by the relationships it invokes (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4) between who we are as non-Indigenous researchers in Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the knowledges we work with, and the tangled up past and present in which we find ourselves. It travels, as does Conrad’s (1899/1999) novella, into the “heart of

darkness” where words like ethics, social justice, relationship, compassion, vulnerability and love make space for the difficult and unsettling issues of race, politics, power and representation to take centre stage in our theoretical and methodological narratives.

#### IN THE BEGINNING

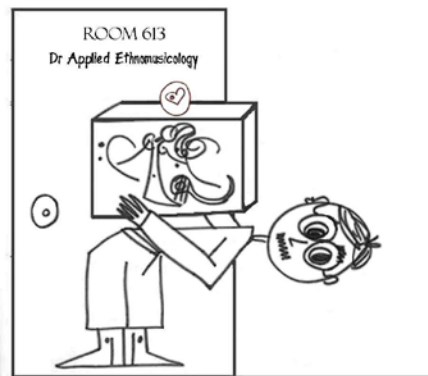
When the world of ethnomusicology was first created, it was a happy place of discovery and adventure. Joining the crusade of Colonialism and scientific exploration (see Figure 1), ethnomusicologists armed themselves first with notebooks, then the gramophone and all manner of visual and audio recording equipment to collect, capture and catalogue the world’s musical cultures (c.f., Cooley, 1997, pp. 5-11). They worked alongside and often times in collaboration with Colonialism’s soldiers, administrators and missionaries, driven by a desire for the exotic sounds of the Other. The sun shone every day but the ethnomusicologists paid no heed to the shadows they cast in the lives and worlds of the Others. Their eyes were fixed firmly on the prize of detailed documentation, description and explanation of the musics they found rather than on the white power and privilege which enabled them to be there in the field with the Others in the first place. At the end of each day, the ethnomusicologists would return home to their world, suitcases heavily laden with melodies, rhythms and musical symbols not their own to be rewarded by the god Colonialism with praise and promises of potential expeditions, promotions and professorships.



*Figure 1. The world of colonialism*

One afternoon, a woman called Applied Ethnomusicology was inside her office at the University carefully cataloguing the recent recordings she had made of Yanyuwa Aboriginal music from Burrulula in the Northern Territory, when Colonialism knocked on the door. Applied Ethnomusicology sighed heavily. She had already been interrupted many times today by her colleague Aboriginalism, who had become excited by the “traditional” and “authentic” Aboriginal melodies as he

described them, coming from her room. She pasted the brightest smile she could muster on her face and opened the door. Colonialism stood there, bowed down to the ground holding a dark wooden chest that he was carrying on his shoulders. He looked as though he might collapse under its sheer imperialistic weight. Applied Ethnomusicology rushed to get the worn-out Colonialism a seat and called out to her colleagues to assist. Aboriginalism, Colonialism's right hand man, arrived quickly and dutifully to help the old man lower the chest onto the floor (see Figure 2). It was tied shut with golden cords and carved with unusual musical markings variously resembling long-necked lutes, reversed treble clefs, and dancing women.



*Figure 2. Colonialism arrives with his box*

“Oh thank you my dear girl!” Colonialism sighed as he sat down heavily on Applied Ethnomusicology's only chair. She bit her tongue in frustration at once again being patted on the head as the young female scholar – the dutiful daughter - doing her time. Looking directly at Aboriginalism and ignoring Applied Ethnomusicology, Colonialism asked, “My friend, I have come to ask of you a great favour”. Aboriginalism nodded eagerly, already agreeing to the something that Colonialism required of him.

“This academic environment is so heated right now and I am finding this box, burdened as it is with artefacts of history and so on, too heavy for me to carry on the next leg of my neo-colonial journey. Would you mind terribly if I left it here in your office while I take this backwards step forward into a-colonial amnesia and a convenient forgetting of the trauma and aftermath of my actions?”

Applied Ethnomusicology cleared her throat noisily and when she spoke her voice was saccharine sweet. “With all due respect Colonialism, this is actually my office and I'm not sure I have that much space for your ... what did you call them? ... trophies of the past? Are you sure that's what they are anyway?” Colonialism looked at Applied Ethnomusicology with a sneer that was filled with both incredulity and contempt. “My dear girl, how could you think they might be anything else? There is nothing else except for my legacy!” Worried that the two were headed for a showdown, Aboriginalism hastily interjected, “Applied Ethnomusicology was only joking, weren't you Apps? Of course you can leave your box here!” After hauling

the large box into Applied Ethnomusicology's office, Colonialism furtively poked his head out to look up and down the hallway. "Are you sure no one will steal it?" he asked anxiously. "This is my box and NO ONE under ANY circumstances must challenge it, damage it, open it or take it without my authority!" Aboriginalism laughed a little too confidently, "Don't worry Colonialism, I will always protect what is yours – in fact, I'll fight to the death to make sure that what you own becomes dogmatically and directly enshrined in the theory and practice of ethnomusicology, that race is placed firmly in the back of the cupboard along with all of our other skeletons, and that our view of what constitutes Indigenous Australian peoples identities, performance practices, histories, and contemporary realities stays firmly in place". Colonialism looked Aboriginalism squarely in the face and stared at him sternly. "Alright, I'm leaving my legacy in your hands. This box contains powerful and dangerous things that must not be released. It's up to you to continue the grand narrative of whiteness and rightness – don't let me down Aboriginalism – the very premise on which this grand nation of ours was peacefully settled depends upon it!" The two men shook hands as Colonialism left.

#### THE WHISPERING BEGINS

Aboriginalism exhaled noisily. "Well, what are you going to do for the rest of the day Apps? Fancy a little bit of transcription and analysis?" Applied Ethnomusicology looked at him in disgust. Guys like him just didn't get it. The postmodern move to self-reflection had brought Applied Ethnomusicology a crisis of representation – "jargon to some, provocative insight to others" (Barz, 1997, p. 206) – whereby ethnomusicological texts in all of their guises were now deservedly subject to interrogation. She constantly questioned her right to be white, the power and privilege she carried because she was white, and the heavy mark that her whiteness brought to bear on her work and relationships with Indigenous Australian people. Applied Ethnomusicology knew in her heart that it was up to her to do something different but she was torn. She was struggling. She felt uncomfortable. But she knew it was a discomfort that she had to own and live with – the comfortable alternative would only breed complacency and complicity with Colonialism, and Applied Ethnomusicology would rather die than jump into bed with him and his band of merry men.

Turning back to the here and now of Aboriginalism standing in front of her, Applied Ethnomusicology replied, "Oh why don't you just f ..." but stopped and frowned. "Can you hear that?" Aboriginalism listened hard, but heard nothing. "What are you talking about Apps? I can't hear anything except Patriarchy clinking cups around in the tea room". "No, listen Aboriginalism! I'm sure I can hear voices whispering!" (see Figure 3).



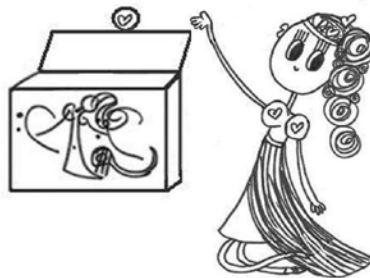
*Figure 3. Applied Ethnomusicology hears whispering coming from the box*

Aboriginalism stood very still this time, tilting his head slightly to one side as if that would help his auditory perception. Applied Ethnomusicology sat down cross-legged next to the strange box and waited. “What the hell are you doing Apps? Colonialism forbade us to do anything to the box! Move away from it!” Aboriginalism was angry with Applied Ethnomusicology and roughly tried to pull her to one side. But she would not be moved. She was sure the whispering had come from inside it. After only a few seconds, she heard the voices again. “Applied Ethnomusicology, listen to us! Decolonise ...” the voices were so low and whispery, she wasn’t sure whether she was really hearing them or imagining them. She bent down even closer and put her ear to the lid. No, this time she was sure – the box was calling to her. “De-col-on-i-ssss . . . this whispering . . . can you hear us? de-col-on-i-s-a-tion . . . de-col-on-i-sshhh . . .” Applied Ethnomusicology looked up at Aboriginalism who just stood there staring at her in disbelief. Why can’t he hear it? She thought to herself. Applied Ethnomusicology sat in the silence between them and realised that the murmuring she heard was stirring inside her alone. The voices were getting louder and louder. “Applied Ethnomusicology! Please let us out ... we are stuck in this dark box of colonialism! Please help us to escape!” Again Applied Ethnomusicology glanced at Aboriginalism. Surely, he could hear them now? Her breath caught in her throat. Why? Why can’t he hear it, this whispering so persistent? How can he stand there so indifferent to “[the] dispossession, death and despair” (Rose, 2004, p. 5) she could hear in the voices?

There were so many voices. Applied Ethnomusicology imagined she could hear those of her Mara, Kudanji, Garrwa and Yanyuwa teachers, friends, sisters, family and kundiyarra – her most necessary companions – as they sat around the campfire and lifted the songs of the Dreaming mermaids right up into the night sky. She heard the voices of many senior song men and song women who were no longer alive as they walked her through the country of their ancestors on foot and their feet kicking up sand on the ceremony ground. Applied Ethnomusicology heard her granddaughters as they put their own Yanyuwa words to silly made up whitefella songs and laughed until they cried. She heard the wailing of women as they cried for

the stolen country, stolen innocence, stolen children, stolen identities, stolen knowledges and stolen freedom.

“Applied Ethnomusicology! Don’t turn away from us! Listen to this whispering in your heart. Henry Reynolds (1998) did it, Ruth Behar (1996) has opened up to her vulnerability, Deborah Bird Rose (2004) has even taken us on a journey into the wild country and back again! You are not alone. Listen Applied Ethnomusicology! We beg you!” The voices inside the box were now reaching a fevered pitch. “Let us out so that we can work together to expose Aboriginalism and Colonialism’s research for what they are - vehicles of sustained oppression, a tool of colonisation (Mutua & Swadener, 2004, p. 14), machines which continue to dominate our worlds as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people today”. Applied Ethnomusicology felt as if she were going mad and hastily covered her ears with her hands to block out the voices. “Applied Ethnomusicology, don’t you realise? Everything is in danger of colonising – everything is suspicious – just think about the Colonialism has protected this box which has now invaded your office! Listen to us, let us lead you to let go of your power and privilege so that you can really ‘look at us’ – your-self at us, the Other!” Applied Ethnomusicology could no longer stand it. Suddenly all fingers and thumbs, she fumbled to untie the knots in the golden cords that held the box tightly shut and all the while pleading voices filled her ears. At last Applied Ethnomusicology undid the thick threads and the gleaming cords fell away. She took a deep breath and opened the lid (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Applied Ethnomusicology opens the lid of the box*

#### REIMAGINING PANDORA’S BOX: A VASE OF GIFTS TO GUIDE DECOLONISATION

Now we all know what happens next in the most well-known version of this Greek story - Applied Ethnomusicology opens the box and unleashes all kinds of unspeakable evils onto her disciplinary male dominated world. She would be forever demonised as the woman who brought about the downfall of ethnomusicology just as another woman in a garden in another world was blamed for war, death, disease and all of mankind’s other ills. But if it is true, as bell hooks (2010) tells us, that what we cannot imagine, cannot come into being, then, it is my wish to take this ending of the Pandora’s box story on a very different turn.

As soon as Applied Ethnomusicology opened the lid, she realised what she had done. The box had been crammed with all of the secrets of Colonialism's past. The hush-hush hide it under the carpet actions and attitudes about Indigenous Australian people that he had never wanted anyone to know about because of the threat they posed to his position of as the civilising presence and power in this country. All of these secrets came flying out. They flew out of the chest in a great swarm and fluttered all over Applied Ethnomusicology's skin. For the very first time, Applied Ethnomusicology felt pain, regret and guilt. A guilt so heavy she began to struggle to breathe. Her baba Jemima telling the story of being a slave for the mijiji's at the big house, the white boss smelling around the young gins to make or take yellafella kids and the white trash selling grog to 7 year old girls today. The Binbingga people who were led to a cliff and forced to jump or they would be shot, white men shooting Aboriginal people like wild animals, white men using and abusing her mother-in-law and her children in exactly the same way. The missionary's car shining in the sun as it came to take ceremony, culture and children away and the doctor's plane taking on the same sinister gleam as it similarly came and went with too much frequency. Young men and women dying from alcohol, gunja, violence and jail, suicide. She saw her white ancestors standing around, laughing and pointing at her Aboriginal family, screaming at the top of their lungs, "See, we told you! They'll never be any bloody good!" Applied Ethnomusicology staggered and stared at them in disbelief. "My people, these whites who knew and think they still know best". She began to wail with anger, confusion, shame and despair, and all too late, she slammed the lid down onto the box.

Applied Ethnomusicology cradled her head in her hands and curled up into a tight ball on the floor of her office, oblivious to the coffee stains and ingrained dirt. She tried to calm herself, slowly breathing in and out, and again, and again until ... she almost choked. "Shit! There it is again!" Applied Ethnomusicology once more heard voices coming from inside the box. She had foolishly thought that all of Colonialism's secrets had flown away but she was sadly mistaken. "Let us out Applied Ethnomusicology!" Applied Ethnomusicology waited. Not daring to move. "Don't be afraid of us! We can help you!" came the voices yet again. Applied ethnomusicology whispered, "What am I going to do?" Ultimately, she knew that there was only one thing she could do. Uncurling herself from the floor, she opened her eyes and turned to open Colonialism's chest for a second time.

Applied Ethnomusicology gasped. She saw with her own two eyes that Colonialism's box was not actually a box, but a beautiful large vase half buried in the ground (see Figure 5). Before her demotion by Heisod and later Erasmus in Greek mythology, Pandora was known as "she who sends up gifts" and the vase was representative of her status as the earth goddess who bestowed all things necessary for life (Marquardt, 1982, p. P. 286). Applied Ethnomusicology gently lifted the lid and one by one the whispers she had heard began to appear out of the vase. First to appear was Decolonisation, holding hands with Postcolonialism, Critical Race Theory stood side by side with Whiteness studies, and lastly came Feminism in an embrace with the Ethical Necessity of Being in Relation with the Other. Decolonisation, spoke first.



*Figure 5. Applied Ethnomusicology opens the box which is now a vase*

“Applied Ethnomusicology, we promised that we would offer you something and so I bring to you openness. Somewhat risky I know because you ‘do not know the outcome ... one’s own ground can become destabilised ... one’s self [is] available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed’ (Rose, 2004, p. 22). However, openness comes hand in hand with situatedness and dialogue. What matters is that you take me on board as a way of thinking which requires us to be critically vigilant (hooks, 2010, p. 26) about the colonial past in the present – to not be afraid to look into the dark corners of our fieldwork notes, recordings and research papers to uncover what may be lurking there”. Applied Ethnomusicology looked at Decolonisation, “So what you’re saying is that you want me to uncover and remember the history of ethnomusicology in Australia with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a racialised landscape, because after all, race is everywhere? (c.f., Radano & Bohlman, 2000)” Decolonisation smiled and made space for the Ethical Necessity of Being in Relation with the Other to speak.

Clearing her throat, Ethical Necessity spoke quietly. “Applied Ethnomusicology my message to you comes from Levinas and his good friend Rosalyn Diprose. The face of the other – all of the Indigenous people we work with - calls the subject (that’s you Applied Ethnomusicology) to responsibility ... it does so in a way which that demands our attention to [her] call. [She] shows [her]self to us, and we cannot help but respond, because we cannot turn away” (Levinas, in Fryer, 2004, p. 42). Applied Ethnomusicology immediately understood the truth of what Ethical Necessity said and a single tear fell down her cheek. “Through such literal, discursive and intercorporeal looking”, Ethical Necessity continued, “You and them enter into a relationship with and a responsibility to one another – lives, histories, memories, stories, conversations, emotions and desires become entangled. You have to be brave enough to listen to the whispering in your heart and once you have heard, wear it proudly on your sleeve”. Applied Ethnomusicology is unsure, “Is that all I have to do?” “Well no – there is one more thing”, Decolonisation interjected. “Don’t waste the words we have given you – there are too many wasted words in academia. We ask that now you have released us from Colonialism’s box, embrace the gifts from



this vase and begin the dialogue we have started with you with others – your colleagues, the ones that matter, those who have the power and privilege to start telling the stories behind Colonialism so that together we can deconstruct his discipline and reconstruct a future in the present”. Applied Ethnomusicology was still not convinced. “But really, what good is that going to do? Colonialism is everywhere – he is too powerful. He is inside our heads, our institutions, our disciplinary practice, our classrooms – I bet he’s even here in this office if we look closely enough!” Ethical Necessity moved herself closer so that she could look directly into Applied Ethnomusicology’s face. “All we ask is that ‘on the day that we [you] can conceive of a different state of affairs [and] a new light falls on [your] troubles and [you] decide that these are unbearable’ (Sartre, 1956, pp. 434-435)” (in Greene, 2000, p. 5), then you at least begin to imagine what a decolonised Ethnomusicology might look like. ‘There are always vacancies: there are always roads not taken, vistas not acknowledged. The search must be ongoing; the end can never be quite known’ (Greene, 2000, p. 15). I can’t promise you that you will find what you are looking for, but is it not our responsibility to at least try?”

Seeing that Applied Ethnomusicology understood, Decolonisation and Ethical Necessity kissed her gently on the forehead and waved goodbye. Applied Ethnomusicology felt terribly alone and did not know what to do. She turned towards the vase, remembering that Colonialism would soon be back and would want an explanation for why the box was now a vase, and why the once box was now open and empty. As she turned to replace the lid, out of the vase came another whisper - it was Hope. Applied Ethnomusicology heard clearly in that moment the message Hope held – it was a belief in the capacity of humanity to recognise wrong doings, to be transformed, to engage with one another’s differences with honesty and openness, and thereby enter into a relationship with a wise and loving politic necessary to achieve any measure of justice. Applied Ethnomusicology sobbed with relief as Hope fluttered gently against her skin, soothing her sadness and singing a song for a new tomorrow. And luckily, Hope has stayed with her ever since (see Figure 6).

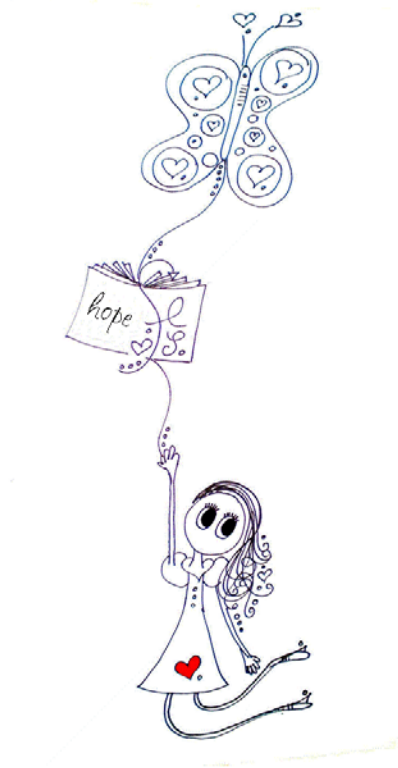


Figure 6. Hope arrives and lands on Applied Ethnomusicology's skin

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