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# An aboriginal Moomba: Remaking history

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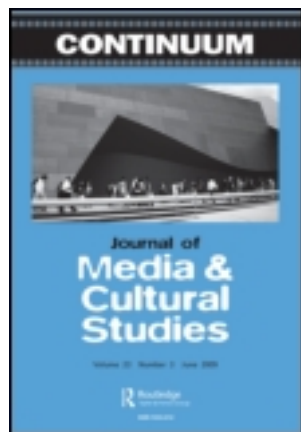
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### An aboriginal Moomba: Remaking history

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# An Aboriginal Moomba: *remaking history*<sup>1</sup>

SYLVIA KLEINERT, *Australian National University*

For the better part of this century it has been possible to erase the evidence of a dynamic Aboriginal presence in southeast Australia. Decimated by a long and intense history of colonization, Aborigines were subsequently erased from narratives of national identity, rendered invisible through policies of integration and assimilation. Yet despite their liminal position on the margins of white Australia, Aboriginal people in the southeast never ceased to act as historical agents and to engage in cultural representations that were at once an affirmation of *cultural identity and difference* and a means of entering into dialogue with mainstream Australians.

My paper focuses on one such representation, *An Aboriginal Moomba: 'Out of the Dark'* staged at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne, 23–27 June 1951 by an all-Aboriginal professional cast drawn from local and interstate Aboriginal communities<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1). *An Aboriginal Moomba* is highly significant as a site of contest and conflict in the theatre of Aboriginal history—testimony to the rich and distinctive cultural history of the southeast and the ongoing political struggles of Aboriginal people against colonial authority. In the first section of this paper I explore the significance of this unique performance, its interconnectedness with earlier cultural practices, and the array of meanings it generated for Aboriginal performers and participating audiences alike. I then examine the subsequent transformation of *Moomba* in 1955 as the name given to the Melbourne City Council's new Autumn Festival. In tracing the genealogy of *Moomba*, I am interested not only in exploring the genre of performance as a form of social action, but also the tensions and contradictions which surround these historical events which are seen to be integral to the process of defining indigenous identity in settler colonial contexts.

## Performing Culture

In recent years the idea of performance has been explored in productive new ways: first, with reference to the material analysis of performance as text; and second, more generally referring to wider issues of reception and the audience impact of performances (Clifford, 1985; Turner, 1986; Kratz, 1994; Myers, 1994). Simultaneously, anthropology has moved away from its earlier, narrower focus on the structural analysis of ceremonial life in small-scale tribal societies to consider the dialectical exchange and wider social processes enacted in more complex urbanized settings. For contemporary audiences, performance has indeed become an increasingly familiar aspect of cultural practice among indigenous peoples taking place across a wide range of venues: in conjunction with cultural tourism, exhibitions in galleries and museums and the staging of spectacular international events such as Atlanta or Sydney 2000. 'For both indigenous performers

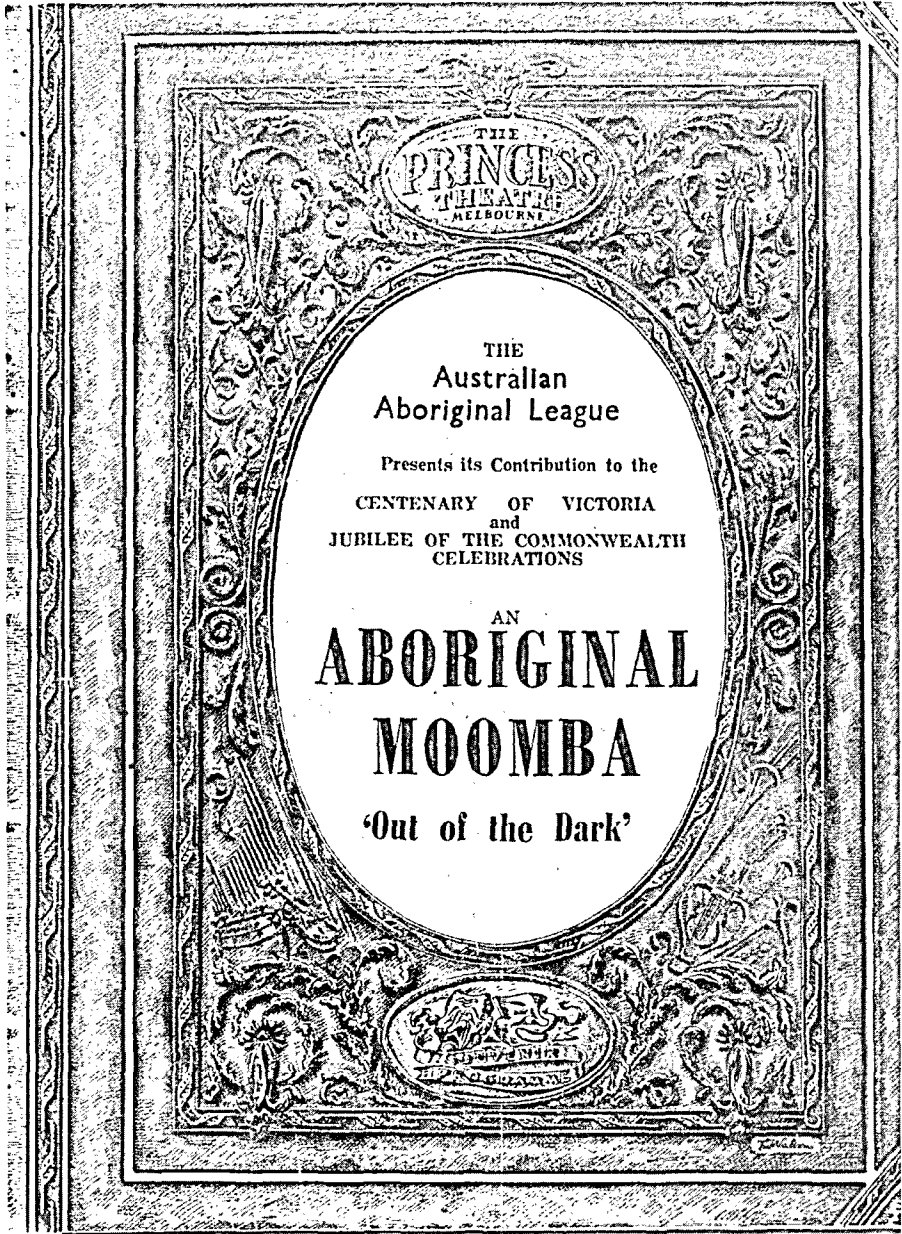


FIG. 1. Programme from *An Aboriginal Moomba: 'Out of the Dark*, The Princess Theatre, Melbourne, 1951. Reproduced with permission of the Onus family.

and their audience-participants', it is argued, these various settings provide an important context 'for the contemporary negotiation and circulation of indigenous peoples' identities' (Myers, 1994, p. 679).

In his analysis Victor Turner suggests that such staged performances of cultural identity and difference necessarily occur in a liminal zone outside the discrete frame

allotted to ritual life, yet separate from the quotidian world of the everyday. Viewed as a form of social and symbolic action, performances are not simply reflective or expressive of social systems. Rather, they are seen to be 'reciprocal and reflexive—in the sense that the performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history' (Turner, 1986, p. 22). Turner's ethnographic perspective allows us to see performances in temporal terms as part of a cultural continuum linking the lived reality of individual lives with the wider stream of history.

As Fred Myers observes, this form of "'culture-making'—in which neither the rules of production nor reception are established" will be fraught with problems (Myers, 1994, p. 679). We can expect that such staged spectacles of cultural identity and difference will be critically scrutinized by those commentators concerned with the threat posed by the 'specter of inauthenticity' (Jolly, 1992) and the inequalities evident in this interactive process. In the past, many observers have tended to dismiss such cultural representations, seeing in their many ironies and improvisations evidence of the destructive impact of colonization (Fry and Willis, 1989; Price, 1989). In so doing, Myers suggests, they effect a 'double erasure' (Myers, 1994, p. 680). Projecting Aboriginal people as the 'hapless victims' of colonial stereotypes denies their active engagement in a contemporary historical reality and the significance of these intercultural performances for performers and audiences alike. By contrast, Morphy (1991), Myers (1991) and Clifford (1988) would argue that the issues raised by performance as a form of cultural representation are not dissimilar to the problems posed in the marketing of other forms of indigenous art. All necessarily involve interpretation and translation of the ethnographic object in relation to the broader issues raised by the politics of cultural identity in contemporary settings.

Colonial history is replete with a rich history of such performances. However, the importance of these cultural representations has largely been overlooked, either bracketed off from history as anthropology, or 'literally as well as figuratively' (Bruce and Callaway, 1991, p. 87) appropriated as theatre, viewed primarily as a form of entertainment and a spectacle of an exotic primitive Other. However, to view such performances within theatrical metaphors is not only to suppress their political meaning, but also, more generally, we risk losing sight of their importance as tokens of exchange within the 'theatre of history' (Carter, 1992). Intervening in these colonial narratives, Paul Carter reinterprets this dynamic and distinctive history of cross-cultural exchange as 'a form of spatial mimicry, a device for making contact' (Carter, 1994, p. 4), a dialogue that occupies the disputed space between black and white. By drawing attention to the conjuncture of interests involved in such events—and their incommensurable differences—I highlight the importance of these events in the complex and contested history of settler societies.

### Staging Aboriginality

In October 1950, the official programme of cultural events to celebrate the forthcoming centenary of the State of Victoria and the jubilee of the Commonwealth was announced. In addition to more popular events such as the restaging of Sturt's expedition down the Murray River, Melbourne's Festival Committee announced an eight-week programme of plays, ballet, opera, concerts and exhibitions based on the model of the Edinburgh Festival and commencing on 31 January 1951 at various venues (Marks, 1950). With a nod to both imperial and nativist sentiments, the programme ranged from a Shake-

spearean production and the first complete Australian performance of the ballet *Swan Lake* to the Melbourne premier of the Australian ballet *Corroboree*. The former asserted the young nation's emerging status in relation to its European cultural heritage; the latter reflected the growing interest in a unique Australian identity founded on the imagined relationship between Australia's indigenous minority and a settler society.<sup>3</sup>

Incensed to find that an Aboriginal presence had been excluded from the festivities, Melbourne Aborigines, lead by the then President of the Australian Aborigines' League, Pastor Doug Nicholls, threatened to organize another Day of Mourning like that previously mounted in Sydney on 26 January 1938.<sup>4</sup> In place of William Cooper's original, brilliantly conceived protest which had unleashed a successful campaign of public speeches, meetings and interviews, Aboriginal leaders adopted a deliberately cultural strategy aimed at mobilizing culture for political intent. Their reprise of the Day of Mourning proposed an extraordinary array of performances and events: a rally in Melbourne Town Hall showcasing the achievements of indigenous artists, sportsmen and ex-servicemen; a re-enactment of the 'treaty' signed in 1834 between Kulin elders and John Batman on the banks of the Yarra River that established the settlement of Melbourne; to be preceded by floats representing Aboriginal culture in its past and present forms; a display of boomerang throwing; and, to conclude, a grand corroboree (*Argus*, 1951a). As the *Argus* editorial of 19 January 1951 astutely observed, the proposal to restage the Day of Mourning revealed 'an extraordinary sense of ritual', transforming the centenary celebrations so close to the heart of colonial settler narratives of identity, into a series of powerful and provocative counter-colonial struggles for equality and recognition (*Argus*, 1951b). In the historical consciousness of Aborigines, the site of Melbourne, like Sydney, was over-determined, marked by 'a conflict long dead [and] a present conflict' in a process of displacement that fused the past with the present.<sup>5</sup>

With mounting support from the media and the wider community, coupled with the very real threat that the proposed Day of Mourning might destabilize official celebrations, the Melbourne City Council belatedly capitulated, agreeing to provide the Australian Aborigines' League with £2000, the services of a director, Irene Mitchell of the Little Theatre (now St Martins), script writer Jean Campbell, and set designer Dres Hardingham, to mount a performance at the Princess Theatre in June. Perhaps the Melbourne City Council hoped that the mere three-day season allocated to the performance, its judicious location outside the frame of the official arts festival and long after the centenary and jubilee celebrations had faded in the public memory, would ensure the performance's marginalization.

This was not to be. Driven by political, cultural and economic imperatives, *An Aboriginal Moomba* became a turning point in the self-perception of the Melbourne community. As the contemporary urban Aboriginal artist, Lin Onus, recalled:

I remember as a kid listening to people talk about it and it was the most amazing shot in the arm ... There were all these other things happening as well like Aboriginal servicemen had come home from war but found whilst they were equal elsewhere they weren't back home ... People's political involvement was much stronger then than it is now and I think there was much tighter community bond so that the whole Moomba thing was so extraordinarily positive and it really gave people something to be proud of and when I listen to the older people who were there ... it keeps coming through time and time again. We did this ourselves and it was great (Onus, 1992).

To mark the symbolic importance of this historic occasion, the Australian Aborigines' League called the performance *An Aboriginal Moomba*, meaning 'happy get-together' (Knox, 1951).<sup>6</sup> Words like 'moomba' and 'Koori', in common use as a private, 'inside' language amongst Aboriginal people of the south-east, represented an assertion of autonomy and independence against the hegemonic authority of assimilation policies aimed at erasing the evidence of a dynamic Aboriginal presence.<sup>7</sup> By choosing to make public that which was normally restricted knowledge, a nascent urban Aboriginal community challenged colonial authority with a more public and politicized affirmation of political identity.

As one of the first Aboriginal theatres to be paid award wages, *An Aboriginal Moomba* represented a watershed for all Aborigines—a direct outcome of the highly organized protests mounted by Aboriginal political organizations in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Ian McLean notes the 'conscious strategic shift' (McLean, 1998, p. 104) which occurred during these decades as Aboriginal leaders in urban, rural and remote communities mobilized culture in political struggles for justice and restitution. Within the Melbourne community, for example, activist, entrepreneur and then President of the Australian Aborigines' League, Bill Onus, had long argued that the only way to overcome institutionalized racism against Aborigines was to present to the public those individuals who had achieved success in their chosen field: for example, Harold Blair, Albert Namatjira and Doug Nicholls (*Corroboree Season 1949*; 'Seeking Abo. "stars" in Qld', *Moomba 1951*).

In name and form *An Aboriginal Moomba* represented a unique response to a particular set of historical, political, and economic circumstances—but it also drew upon a rich and distinctive history of performance in the southeast. Through a conscious process of adaptation and incorporation, Aboriginal people in the southeast had syncretized classical traditions of mime, dance, burlesque and storytelling with elements from a contested colonial reality to create novel hybrid displays of culture. First evident in the public corroborees of the nineteenth century, Aboriginal performances were transformed under the oppressive regime of assimilation. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the concert parties and vaudeville routines which toured Aboriginal reserves in the southeast and performed for tourists fulfilled multiple roles; they were a means of reinforcing cultural solidarity, an important source of income, and a way of engaging in cross-cultural exchange with mainstream Australians.

From the 1930s onwards as Aborigines chose, or were forced to leave, isolated reserves and fringe camps on the outskirts of country towns to move into the southern capitals, a wealth of performance traditions travelled with them. Viewed by participants and observers alike as a form of 'contemporary corroboree', these performances typically comprised an extraordinary medley of events from traditional storytelling, songs and dance, displays of boomerang throwing, roping and whip cracking skills learnt in the pastoral industry to protest songs, hymns, and elements from Australian folk traditions and American musical comedy accompanied by piano, accordion or a gum leaf band. The post-war period found many Aborigines extensively involved in various forms of performance from circuses to commercial theatre.

In the highly charged atmosphere created by this symbolic protest, these well-established traditions now underwent a further transformation. Reflecting a heightened sense of historical consciousness, *An Aboriginal Moomba* was structured into two parts representing Aboriginal culture in 'The Past' and 'The Present'<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 2). Played before a splendid backdrop which reproduced a watercolour by the popular Arrernte artist, Albert Namatjira, and framed by panels bearing the geometric designs traditionally associated with carved trees unique to the southeast, the first half of the programme,



FIG. 2. The cast of *An Aboriginal Moomba: 'Out of the Dark'*, The Princess Theatre, Melbourne, 1951. Reproduced with permission of the Blair, Nicholls and Onus families.

representing 'The Past',<sup>10</sup> dramatized the myth of Toolaba, played by Jacob Chirside of Cherbourg, who awaited the return of his son Birwain (Harold Blair), his bride Nerida (Dulcie Pitt) and tribal warriors who included Wurrawilberoo (Bill Onus). The ensuing scene depicted wedding celebrations with feasting, songs, dances and stories as the chief Toolaba relayed Aboriginal legends of the water-lily, the koala and the alligator.

In contrast, the second half of the programme, representing 'The Present', aimed to show how Aboriginal people 'whilst maintaining their inherent characteristics of courage, endurance and imagination had adapted themselves to the new customs and culture of the white people' (*An Aboriginal Moomba*, 1951). It commenced with 'Tableaus of Progress' and included a contemporary cabaret starring Aboriginal tenor Harold Blair, and Torres Strait Islander, Dulcie Pitt, performing under her stage name, Georgia Lee.

### Criticism and Commentary

Not surprisingly, *An Aboriginal Moomba* generated a multi-layered response. In the southeast, where few white Australians had any direct experience of Aborigines, it was possible for *Moomba* to be read as an exotic spectacle of the Other. As one enraptured commentator enthused, during the finale '[w]hen the fire was kindled with fire sticks ... and Mr. Onus sent boomerangs hurtling around the auditorium and finally, swallowed flares in the eerie atmosphere of a forest fire, the excitement was intense' (see Fig. 3). As many commentators have since argued, such staged representations of identity render indigenous culture available for exploitation by appealing to primitivist stereotypes which allow Aborigines to be distanced in time and space from a contemporary colonial reality. More recently, we have come to understand how constructions of Aboriginality emerge from 'particular political and economic circumstances, within a particular cultural tradition and in terms of particular historical experiences' (Beckett, 1988, p. 2). For Aborigines in the southeast experiencing ongoing oppression and racial



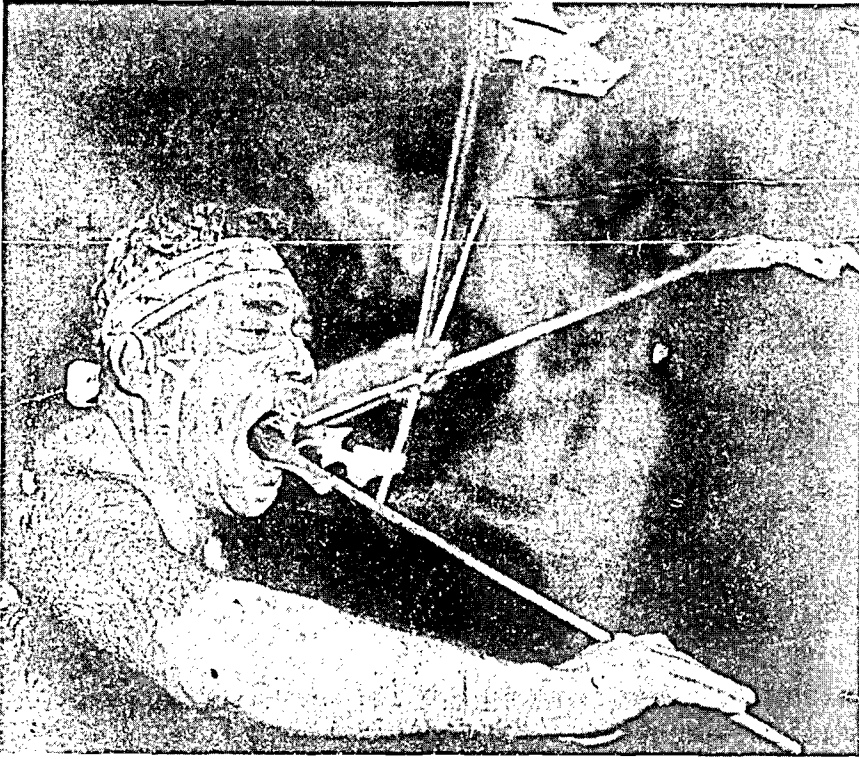


FIG. 3. William (Bill) Onus in *An Aboriginal Moomba: 'Out of the Dark'*, Princess Theatre Melbourne, 1951. Reproduced with permission of the Onus family, photo *Sun/Herald*.

discrimination, such idealized representations of a past hunter—gatherer lifestyle fulfilled a positive role, at once a reaffirmation of a regional Aboriginal heritage and an assertion of cultural difference within a settler society.

An affirmative response to *An Aboriginal Moomba* spawned a new-found admiration and recognition for Aboriginal culture. Theatre critics suddenly discovered 'something that had been in existence for thousands of years' (Doherty, 1951). Indeed the *Bulletin* critic drew favourable contrasts between *An Aboriginal Moomba* and *Corroboree*, the Australian ballet's contribution to the official arts festival. In his opinion, *An Aboriginal Moomba* 'was all done with the utmost simplicity, with a rhythm and a naturalness of acting and miming which put it in an entirely different class from the Australian ballet on the same subject done recently on the same stage' (*Bulletin*, 1951). In turn, recognition for *An Aboriginal Moomba* as an authentic expression of regional and national identity, called into question the derivative character of Australian culture. In the euphoria which followed, country, interstate and international tours were planned, culminating in a Royal performance in London. Displaying great foresight, Bill Onus seized the opportunity to promote the formation of an indigenous theatre company—but to no avail. *An Aboriginal Moomba*, however successful as an expression of vital and vigorous regional Aboriginal presence, was unable to displace a monolithic colonial culture and another version of *Corroboree*, staged by Beth Dean, was featured for the Royal Visit in February 1954.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst critics were fulsome in their praise for 'The Past', they were generally more ambivalent about the second half of the programme; it was condemned by one commentator as 'an incongruous and pathetic intrusion' which left the audience impatiently awaiting the finale (*Moomba 1951*). When critics so categorically dismissed the second half of the programme from consideration, they refused recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal presence in the southeast. It was not that critics sought visual authenticity; indeed, hybridity characterized the entire performance, given that the cast performed in an array of costumes: kangaroo skins, grass skirts and evening dress! Rather, it was that 'The Present' undercut an existing settler colonial primitivism. Whilst the idealized representations of the first half accorded with the interests of both Aborigines and non-Aborigines, the evident hybridity of 'The Present' threatened authoritative definitions of an authentic Aboriginality. Emerging from this debate there is a sense in which primitivism enshrined traditional Aboriginal culture as an elitist high art form transmitted intact as a canonical set of values from one generation to another. In contrast, the extraordinary hybridity of contemporary urban Aboriginality was evaluated against the radical changes of the modern world where established values seemed to be threatened by popular culture.

In one critic at least, *An Aboriginal Moomba* elicited a further response, awakening a moral concern for the plight of Aborigines. Writing in the *Australasian Post*, Gordon Williams suggested that:

Moomba will bring to the thoughtful more than a pang of regret [because it is not enough to] wear Moomba as a badge of encouragement of national culture. It would be finer still if we wore it as a pledge of our ability, and our will to give the thousands of under privileged and still scorned Australian Aborigines, a more human deal (Williams, 1951).

It might appear then that the vital and vigorous cultural traditions displayed in *An Aboriginal Moomba* served to not only temporarily unsettle existing narratives of settler colonial identity but in some cases may have stirred the conscience of whites, making them more self-critical of their attitudes to Aborigines.

Until now I have focused primarily on the events which provided a catalyst for *An Aboriginal Moomba*, and an analysis of the performance as an interactive process in which performers and audiences were mutually engaged. I further argue for the profound impact of such events on the lifestyles of the individuals involved, enduring well past the actual performance and transmitted as part of living history and cultural memory of a community. In his biography published in 1965, Doug Nicholls recalled Moomba's momentous impact on the process of cultural revival:

We began to realise ... that we should be proud of our Aboriginal culture—that we should remember we were a great people. I told them, "We've been missing out because we've lost the interests of our own hearts—we've disgraced ourselves by not holding onto it. Instead of teaching ourselves about ourselves, we've been studying whites". (Clark, 1965, p. 157).

In Nicholl's response, *An Aboriginal Moomba* emerges as a pivotal turning point in the historical consciousness of a new generation of urban Aboriginal people. Involvement in the performance allowed a direct transaction to occur between individual experiences and collective identities. It also aided the emergence of more complex relationships that embodied both a renewed sense of cultural pride and solidarity with a wider critique of settler society.

## Contested Identities

Such was the impact of *An Aboriginal Moomba* that, in 1955, the Melbourne City Council accepted Bill Onus' proposal of Moomba as the name for their new Autumn Festival.<sup>12</sup> Whilst such cultural appropriations might be seen as further evidence of the relentless plunder of indigenous cultures by colonial regimes, such a narrowly pessimistic perspective loses sight of the importance of such cross-cultural exchange to all parties concerned. In colonial settings European names erase a prior indigenous presence but it is equally the case that the widespread use of Aboriginal names is an important means of achieving a unique regional and national identity. And within well-established Aboriginal networks of exchange, the presentation of gifts had long served to negotiate relations of power, authority and good will. In presenting the name Moomba to the people of Melbourne, Bill Onus sought to incorporate members of the dominant society within Aboriginal relations of reciprocity and indebtedness.<sup>13</sup> That Moomba was widely understood as a gesture of reconciliation, an attempt to persuade white Australians of their moral obligations toward Aboriginal people, is evidenced by the media response. In one outstanding image the *Sun's* cartoonist, Armstrong, depicted black and white living in equality in the remote outback and in the city under the byline, 'Great happy get-together'.

Mainstream Australians could choose to remain aloof from these political processes, however, refusing to acknowledge the debt incurred. Maintaining white dominance, Moomba's official historian, Keith Dunstan, recorded 'sceptics a-plenty' when Moomba was announced as the name for Melbourne's new Autumn Festival: 'Learned scholars went through tomes in public libraries, to discover the real meaning [but] could find nothing about "Getting together and having fun"' (Dunstan, 1969, p. 5). The question of Moomba's authenticity remained unchallenged, however, until 1969, a year after Bill Onus' death, when Lorna Lippman, research scholar at the Centre for Aboriginal Affairs at Victoria's Monash University, wrote to the Editor of the *Age*:

It may interest your readers to know that the word 'moom' in the southern Aboriginal languages means 'bottom' (in the anatomical sense) and 'ba' means 'and'. How the words came to be placed together is a mystery. I can only surmise that the original part-Aboriginal informant offered the only two words he still knew and which sounded sufficiently authentic to enable him to hoax the white populace (Lippman, 1969).

Stung into retaliation at the racial slur on his father's reputation—and the charge of inauthenticity levelled at the cultural heritage of the southeast—Lin Onus sought to reclaim indigenous control over Moomba. Driven by a more radical and militant sense of black consciousness, Onus, then only twenty-one, adopted a form of colonial mimicry, in effect, turning around Lippman's accusation, by asserting that Moomba was indeed a hoax perpetrated against whites.<sup>14</sup> Engaging in an act of counter-appropriation, Lin Onus regained indigenous control over the word Moomba and, in the process, restored dignity and respect to his father's reputation (he was, after all, one of the most influential Aboriginal leaders of his day) by positioning him as a trickster figure, one who had turned the tables on whites, making them look foolish by parodying their ignorance and their fetishistic concern for authenticity.

In public discourse Moomba is now widely understood as a hoax. Writing in *Australian Aboriginal Language*, Barry Blake has wryly observed:

undoubtedly the most unfortunate choice of a proper name from Aboriginal sources was made in Melbourne when the city fathers chose to name the city's annual festival 'Moomba'. The name is supposed to mean 'Let's get together and have fun' though one wonders how any one could be naïve enough to believe that all this can be expressed in two syllables. In fact 'moom' (*mum*) means 'buttocks' or 'anus' in various Victorian languages and 'ba' is a suffix that can mean 'at' or 'in' or 'on'. Presumably some one has tried to render the phrase 'up your bum' in the vernacular (Blake, 1991, p. 84).

By calling into question Moomba's legitimacy, Lippman and others imposed a 'double erasure' on Melbourne Aborigines; refusing authenticity to Moomba denied the significance of cultural practices in the southeast and overlooked the reciprocal relationships implied in the original gift. In so doing, white institutions sought to maintain authoritative control over definitions of Aboriginality. Through his act of reappropriation, Lin Onus regained some control over Moomba as part of the rich and distinctive cultural heritage of the southeast. Recontextualized as a hoax perpetrated against whites, Moomba was transformed into a counter-colonial tactic of resistance. In the process, however, its original meaning was changed; the historical significance of the original performance and its meaningful purpose in the political struggles of Aboriginal people became relegated to almost complete obscurity. Later, it seems, Lin Onus came to regret his youthful actions, realizing they were ultimately destructive, but found he was unable to undo Moomba's place in public discourse as an ironic hoax.<sup>15</sup>

Of course the contemporary appearance of the Moomba Festival—still framed around the popular slogan, 'Let's get together and have fun'—belies its tense and conflictual history within a history of cross-cultural exchange. In all probability performers and audience alike who participate in the popular public festival are largely unaware of its indigenous origins—even as Melbourne continues to gain cultural capital from the use of such a regionally distinctive name. In drawing attention to the anomalies and contradictions which circulate around Moomba, it has not been my intention to see them as part of a wider history of colonial domination, nor as evidence of a postcolonial hybridity to be celebrated. Rather, the ambiguous response generated by Moomba over the course of history, both appropriated by settler colonial narratives of identity and denied legitimacy as an authentic expression of Aboriginality, only serve to highlight the significance of the performance genre in contemporary politics of cultural identity in settler societies.

Given the degree to which the performance genre now takes its place alongside more familiar forms of cultural practice as an objectification of Aboriginal identity, it seems timely to reconsider the, as yet, largely overlooked history of these ephemeral and collaborative events. My article highlights the significance of performance genre as an interactive process between performers and audience participants. We see how such staged performances of cultural difference and identity carry the potential for social change, giving rise to individual and communal experiences that allow idealized representations of the past to be synthesized with the tensions and complexities sustained by a contemporary social reality. The possibility for social change emerges in the liminal zone occupied by performance as protest becomes persuasion and performers cross a threshold to interact with everyday life.

Performances therefore represent an important form of cultural production and constitute one of the primary means by which First Nation peoples negotiate and circulate their contemporary cultural constructions of identity. Functioning as meta-narratives in the history of cultural representations, such performances take place within

particular historical, cultural, economic and political circumstances. Thus it is important to distinguish between the particular historical experiences of Lin Onus, engaged in a counter-colonial act of reappropriation only possible within an emerging era of black consciousness. *An Aboriginal Moomba*, by contrast, represented the creative response of Aborigines operating within the opportunities and limitations imposed by an assimilationist regime. Albeit substantially transformed in the process of cross-cultural exchange, Moomba has remained throughout a site of political struggle and cultural contestation.

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## Notes

- [1] This paper was prepared during an ARC Post Doctoral Fellowship at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU. It draws upon a wider research project concerned with the 'hidden history' of Aboriginal art in southeastern Australia. In undertaking this research I owe an immense debt to Lin and Joanne Onus, among others, for their generous advice and encouragement. Whilst every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of my findings and to contact all those involved, the author is willing to provide a free copy of the publication to those concerned with copyright clearance. Inevitably this research remains incomplete, and I would be interested in hearing from individuals who participated in these events and who may be in a position to contribute further information.
- [2] The cast of about fifty included Dulcie Pitt (Georgia Lee) from the Torres Strait Islands, Jacob Chirside, Jack Cumbo, Harry Emerson and Johnny Watters from Cherbourg Mission, Queensland. Melbourne Aborigines included: Harold Blair, Ivy Bucks, Dick Cobbo, Jack Cobbo Snr, Oscar Collins, Melvina Cooper, George Daisy, Merle and Peter Davis, Winifred Douglas, Con Edwards, Jack Gray, Eddie Jackson, Reg Lawrence, Larry Leady, Stanley Nerang, Doug and Gladys Nicholls, Lillian Nicholls, Norman Macdonald, Joyce McKinnon, Bill Onus, Eric Onus, Wynne Onus, Margaret Tucker, Mervyn Williams, Charlie William and Eileen Young. Fred Foster, Foster Moffatt, James Scott and Tom Walters came from Lake Tyers, Tommy Lovett came from Lake Condah, and Geraldine Briggs and Evelyn came from Shepparton. Alan and Joan Saunders and Elley Bennett travelled from Sydney. The cast included the boxers Jack Hassel and Alfie Clay. This list may be incomplete.
- [3] *Corroboree* was originally presented at the Empire Theatre, Sydney in 1950, choreographed and directed by Rex Reid, with music by John Antill, costumes by Robin Lovejoy and sets by William Constable.
- [4] Now recognized as a turning point in the long history of Aboriginal resistance, the Day of Mourning was staged by William Ferguson and Jack Patten with Doug Nicholls, whose great uncle was William Cooper. For a detailed analysis of these events see, Heather Goodall (1996) and Jack Horner (1974).
- [5] Ranajit Guha quoting Jacques Lacan (Guha, 1989, p. 271).
- [6] Translations vary. In Mavis Thorpe Clark's biography of Doug Nicholls, Moomba is glossed as a 'camp concert' (Clark, 1965, p. 155). To this day, the origins of the word 'moomba' are still unclear. Lin Onus told me that the word was in common use among the Melbourne Aboriginal community, but more recent information suggests that 'moomba' was a Queensland word and the result of research by Bill Onus and his wife Mary, who was of Scottish descent. However, whether Moomba was still in use prior to the performance of *An Aboriginal Moomba* or gained wider circulation afterwards is still unclear.
- [7] For some time now Koori is the preferred name by which Victorian Aborigines wish to be known (Broome, 1989). In this paper, however, I have chosen to retain the term 'Aborigines' because Koori was not in public use in the historical era with which I am concerned, and even today, not all members of the Aboriginal community agree with the use of this term. Whilst some prefer to be known as Aborigines or even blackfellows, others wish to use the name of their cultural language group, e.g. Yorta Yorta.
- [8] This ideal was never realized, however. Cherbourg Aborigines received only part of their salary, the remainder being paid into a trust fund by Queensland Native Affairs.
- [9] Similarly it was intended that the floats for the Day of Mourning represented Aboriginal culture in its past and present forms. The unfortunate subtitle, '*Out of the Dark*', possibly contributed by director Irene Mitchell, was not intended to imply that Melbourne Aborigines were emerging from prehistoric darkness but from the obscurity to which they had been relegated by assimilation policies.
- [10] Not surprisingly, Irene Mitchell's initial plan that Namatjira would travel to Melbourne to paint the set

proved impossible to implement. Instead the backdrop, by designer Dres Hardingham, reinterpreted Albert Namatjira's *Monoliths of the Legendary Euro, Palm Paddock* (Mountford, 1949) with permission from the artist. In the circumstances it is unlikely that any copyright fees were paid. According to Irene Mitchell, Doug Nicholls and Bill Onus agreed to the reproduction of a watercolour by Namatjira and the backdrop doubtless contributed to *An Aboriginal Moomba's* popular success. Nevertheless, this decision overlooked the possibility that the members of the Melbourne community might have had the expertise to produce a set design.

- [11] At the invitation of the Australia Council, Beth Dean staged a revival of *Corroboree* on 6 February 1954 at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney.
- [12] Evidence suggests that the proposal for the name Moomba came from Bill Onus, not Eleanor Knox of the *Argus* as suggested in Dunstan (1969, p. 5).
- [13] Through his actions, Bill Onus also negotiated a continuing Aboriginal presence in the public festival offering displays of boomerang throwing in 1954 and again in 1955 (Dunstan, 1969, p. 5; Minutes Book, 1955).
- [14] In a letter to the editor of the *Age*, 13 December 1969, Lin Onus replied that: 'A member of the first Moomba Committee approached my father, Bill Onus, to give them a suitable name for the festival. He gave them "Moomba", and added, with his tongue in his cheek, it was the only Aboriginal word which had the same meaning all over Australia. Had the committee stopped to think they would have known this was impossible as at the coming of the whiteman [*sic*] there were over 600 different Aboriginal languages in this country. The "Moomba" thing was a private joke among the Koories, and one of our whiteman friends for many years, and a well kept secret in the old Aboriginal tradition.' In another version of these events, Keith Dunstan (1969, p. 5) relays that Lin Onus told the *Sun News Pictorial* that: 'Dad and his brother Uncle Eric [Onus], came up with the word as a bit of a joke. The first syllable "moom" is Aboriginal for "bottom" or backside'. Lin said his father and uncle liked that word because they thought 'the guys were sitting on their backsides as far as Aboriginal affairs were concerned. They added the "ba" just to make it sound a bit more pleasant. Dad told them that it meant "Let's get together and have fun". Every time we heard it we had a good laugh.'
- [15] Joanne Onus, personal communication, 15 June 1999.

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