

SHIFTING GROUND: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DJUKI MALA DANCERS IN PERFORMANCE AND DANCE DISCOURSE

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It is late evening and ten Indigenous Australian males, arranged in a regimental formation, linger on a basketball court sheltered by a tin roof. Fluorescent lighting defines a performance space inside the pavilion. The men are poised to perform, dressed in ceremonial loin cloths and/or shorts, and their bare skin is smeared with a white substance, presumably ash or body paint. Owing to the dancers' costumes the viewer awaits an Indigenous Australian ceremonial dance performance. The setting is informal and familiar on account of the basketball hoop hovering above their heads in the background and the chatter and cheers of adults and children traversing and surrounding the performance space. As a British music act's Europop remix of the musical accompaniment for the *sirtaki* begins to play - a song originally composed by Mikos Theodorakis to accompany a Greek social dance made famous by the 1964 film, *Zorba the Greek* - the audience cheers appreciatively.

Simultaneously, the choreographic element of the performance commences and the men perform a movement vocabulary neither exclusively associated with the popular invented Greek tradition nor Indigenous Australian dances. Instead, on this sport pitch intended for a US-American college sport, the dancers perform a choreography that references social and club dances and North American popular culture; for instance, gestures and movement phrases that resemble well-known

dance scenes from the film *Saturday Day Night Fever* and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video. The borrowed movement vocabulary is further interspersed with what could be perceived as choreographic references to an Indigenous Australian dance vernacular, including angular positions of the arms, and shunting and stamping in unison with the regular beat of the music. Outwardly rotated, bent legs also feature prominently. A recording of the event was captured inconspicuously on a mobile phone and uploaded to YouTube by a community elder, leading to the performance "going viral."¹

The choreography described above, known as *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style*, was performed by a group known as the Djuki Mala. It can be understood as channelling various notions of tradition and traditional dance, as well as references to diasporic and globalised culture. Such a combination of elements renders attempts to decipher the performance's cultural location(s) difficult. Compounding this confusion is the broad audience viral YouTube videos attract. For example, viewers unfamiliar with the dance practices of Indigenous Australians would have difficulty differentiating between a citation of local dances in northern regions of Australia, and a parody of enduring monolithic images of dancing natives popularised by colonial literature and art.²

¹ Cotajoka. (2007, October 20). *Zorba the Greek Yolngu style* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw&list=UUuRatUXAzbbe7DwKFzntLA>

² See: Samuel Thomas Gill's (1818-1880) *The Newly Arrived* and John Glover's (1767-1849) *Natives at a corrobory* are two of many such depictions of dancing Indigenous Australians in colonial Australian art. A range of recent film and television depictions of Indigenous cultures and colonised subjects can be found in Tracey Moffatt's video art work, *Other*. See also: Momentum Worldwide. (2012, March 31). *OTHER* by Tracey Moffatt [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/39552060>

In response to the Djuki Mala's choreographies the National Library of Australia (NLA) made the "decision to expand its Indigenous dance collection."³ This was part of an attempt to accommodate documentation of dance practices that transgress the boundaries of common notions of Indigenous dance practices, and more specifically the concert dance genre "contemporary Indigenous dance."⁴ Presumably in response to the well-known Bangarra Dance Theatre's prominence in the field of contemporary Indigenous dance, the NLA notes that Indigenous Australian contemporary dance artists' "principal approach [...] has been to fuse traditional Indigenous dance onto a hybrid form of ballet and twentieth century modern dance techniques".⁵ It is from this established framework of contemporary Indigenous dance that the Djuki Mala have diverged. However, upon viewing the video recording of *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* for the first time, one wonders if the performers are solely "making traditional dance their starting point, then quarrying material from diverse music styles, such as Bollywood spectacles or Hollywood movies, for inspiration and stylistic embellishment," as the NLA suggests.⁶ Or have performance and user-generated media provided a forum for

³ Christofis, Lee. "Building the Indigenous contemporary dance collection." In *The National Library Magazine*, March 2012. 13-15. Accessed November 20, 2014. <http://ausdance.org.au/uploads/content/articles/NLA-Building-the-Indigenous-contemporary-dance-collection.pdf>. 13.

⁴ Here I acknowledge that a classification of dance possibly linked to the culture and ethnicity of the practitioners, as opposed to the artistic methods or content presented, ought to be problematised. However, the ideas being presented in this paper stem from discourse analysis of texts and further analysis of limited available film recordings, and in this respect cannot contribute to an in depth discussion of the corporality of extremely diverse Indigenous Australian dance artists.

⁵ Christofis, "Building the Indigenous contemporary dance collection." 13.

⁶ Ibid.

the Djuki Mala to express a critique of contemporary Australia and the world, for example, by turning expectations back on non-Indigenous spectators in mockery?⁷

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Published academic considerations of the Djuki Mala's breakthrough performance often praise it for being an example of resistance from a marginalised group, confronted by asymmetrical power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Jessica de Lary Healy investigated the impact access to digital media and the internet has had on remote Australian communities, with a special regard for Indigenous Australian self-authored, mediated visibility that electronic media offers.⁸ This is described as a positive example of self-determination and self-mediation online. She then goes on to consider the format of Djuki Mala's *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* in relation to the remix and sampling culture central to YouTube's success.

Another article, *Dancing for strangers: Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* by Franca Tamisari, incorporates postcolonial and literary theory to illuminate the creative and political potential of parody and laughter in negotiating cross-cultural confrontations.⁹ Tamisari does so by citing Bakhtin's definition of grotesque realism as a literary mode with the capacity to undermine the power of the ruling class.

⁷ Murphy, Jacqueline Shea. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*. Minneapolis 2007. 64.

⁸ See: De Lary Healy, Jessica. "Yolngu Zorba Meets Superman." *Anthrovision* 1.1 (2013): 1-18. Web. <http://anthrovision.revues.org/362>.

⁹ See: Tamisari, Franca. "Dancing for Strangers: Zorba the Greek Yolngu style." *La Ricera Folklorica* 61 (2010): 61-72.

However, Tamisari and de Laryg Healy's examinations focus exclusively on Djuki Mala's initial burst of fame. Since their papers were penned, exposure facilitated by the Internet and associated news media attention has subsequently led to the Djuki Mala being invited to restage the seminal dance in urban areas and at festivals Australia-wide. Invitations were sometimes linked with artistic and professional collaborations with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, resulting, for example, in tours and televised performance opportunities. Further, dances based on *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style's* formula were produced for these performance opportunities. These developments complicate the authors' arguments and it follows that the socio-political positioning of the Djuki Mala in dance discourse ought to be reconsidered.

In this vein theatre scholar Denise Varney has criticised the "commodification and subordination of the Chooky Zorba" when "decontextualised" following their emergence online, in an article that proposes the notion of "Yolngu modernity".¹⁰ Yolngu modernity is said to be expressed through the "integration of modern digital technology into performance" that simultaneously involves "a reaffirmation of tradition".¹¹ The Djuki Mala's appearance in Rachel Perkins's film *Bran Nue Dae* is perceived by Varney as an example of Yolngu modernity that "went some way towards restoring the sense of dignity and mischief that had been lost" in restagings of the Djuki Mala's dances that failed to align with Yolngu

¹⁰ Varney, Denise. "New and Liquid Modernities in the Regions of Australia: Reading Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu [Wrong Skin]," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 58 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2898437711/new-and-liquid-modernities-in-the-regions-of-australia>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

modernity.¹² Despite the article's critique of some Djuki Mala performances, it is limited to a discussion of the role of digital media and does not explore the ways in which 'dignity and mischief', in Varney's terms, were potentially undermined in *performance*. It is against this background that the paper sets off.¹³

In response, this paper explores the ways in which the dances were altered and/or re-framed for restagings in non-Indigenous contexts. It also problematises the implications these changes have for narratives of empowerment expounded in most academic discussions of the Djuki Mala.

The textual and visual sources supporting the ideas in this paper span a considerable timeframe since the Djuki Mala's emergence in 2007 to the recent past, consisting primarily of documents accessible online such as news articles, radio interviews and television news reports. Unlike the academic reception of the Djuki Mala, news media coverage of the group typically provides a discussion of the region the dancers come from, legitimate the dances on the basis of a continuity of Indigenous Australian traditions, and/or emphasise the significance of the dancers' successes in the face of harsh conditions facing Indigenous Australians in remote communities. As a result, the Djuki Mala's dance practice and the artistic merits of their performance are disregarded, much like the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Maryrose Casey has also contributed to discussions of Djuki Mala and Indigenous dance performance in a comparative study of the *Aboriginal Theatre* production of 1963 and the Djuki Mala's *Wrong Skin* production from 2010. Both productions are understood to expose a restrictive canon of Indigenous dance works, which Casey sees in relation to the historical Indigenous practice of making dances for fun that falls outside of the non-Indigenous conception of Indigenous dance, for example as sacred and ancient. Although Casey's article does not relate directly to this paper it does shed light on the limits of conceptualisations of Indigenous Australian dance performance. See: Casey, Maryrose. "Performing for Aboriginal Life and Culture: Aboriginal Theatre and Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 59 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2897443421/performing-for-aboriginal-life-and-culture-aboriginal>.

possibility that the Djuki Mala's performances might express social or political critique.¹⁴

Recordings of performances, usually published online by the Djuki Mala or theatres and festivals that hosted them, and accessible via online video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, complement discourse analysis with semiotic dance analysis. These sources are considered in order to more clearly discern to what extent representations of the Djuki Mala's performances in news media reflect and address choreographic and scenic elements.

Therefore, the continuation of this paper firstly considers the relationship between news media representations and self-representations of the Djuki Mala, informed by cultural studies. It will become apparent that discussions of the Djuki Mala and presentations of their work are influenced by obsolete and dissonant concepts perpetuated by cultural commentators.¹⁵ Then, by retracing a series of restagings of the choreography *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* from a basketball court in remote northern Australia in 2008, via the televised talent show *Australia's Got Talent*, also in 2008, to the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2009, the paper demonstrates how the Djuki Mala's performed politics are thwarted by essentialising discourse as well as examples of institutional and theatrical framing of their dances.

¹⁴ These articles and reports differ drastically from dance critiques of non-Indigenous concert dance, those that typically describe and evaluate, and in doing so invariably reference individual performers, the performance context, and assert a given dance's place in relation to a canon of works. Some even argue that reviews of contemporary dance performance do an injustice to the form if they do not acknowledge the values and commentary underlying the movement. See: Daly, Ann. *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture*. Middletown 2002. xxviii.

¹⁵ For an extended theoretical discussion of cultural concepts in relation to contemporary cultural production by Indigenous North Americans, see: Siebert, Monika. *Indians Playing Indian*. Alabama 2015.

The second half of the paper focuses on the choreographic element of the Djuki Mala's dances, which has been revised and sometimes expanded upon in varying performance contexts. Through dance analysis I propose that it is possible to identify how discourse on the Djuki Mala has directly affected their dance practice; namely how shifts in modes of corporality and representation in the Djuki Mala's choreography reflects the ideologies underlying non-Indigenous discourse on the dancers, and Indigenous Australians more generally.

ANALYSIS

The proceeding analysis follows the example of theorist Homi Bhabha, who would have us focus on the "in-between" spaces, or the "Third Space of enunciations" exhibited in expressions of cultural difference and culture's hybridity.¹⁶ Although Bhabha acknowledges the authority bestowed upon traditions and restagings of the past in reasserting cultural and ethnic identities, he emphasises that this act simultaneously reconstructs traditions.¹⁷ Bhabha's Third Space allows one to see past generic markers of difference as fixed signifiers; instead, describing them as performative acts that must be repeated in order to be perpetuated. In this regard Bhabha distances himself from Edward Saïd's notion of the Other, arguing instead that discourse is incapable of defining the Other. It is the "excess" of the marginalised Other's performance of culture that compels the dominant discourse to continue in its attempt to contain it. In this respect the paper seeks to identify aspects of the Djuki Mala's performances extending beyond

¹⁶ See: Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London 1994. 56.

¹⁷ See: *Ibid.*, 3.

prescriptive markers of indigeneity, and corresponding processes limiting the dancers' critical potential.

The theoretical dimension of the central observations made in this paper also draws attention to antiquated and dissonant notions of culture that circulate in discussions of the Djuki Mala. In news media coverage of the group, the term "culture" carries with it ambivalent associations linked to "social Darwinism and the Boasian culture concept."¹⁸ In many news media sources, the Djuki Mala's choreography is framed and/or understood according to a refuted anthropological "contextual synchronic" model of culture, which involves perceiving the Djuki Mala as the product of an ancient, static, cultural continuity.¹⁹ In instances when a static culture concept is employed, the Djuki Mala are described as performing traditionally, in spite of elements such as music choice or citations of popular dances suggesting otherwise.

When the dancers are perceived as transcending the characteristics of so-called traditional dance evolutionary discourse and ideologies are employed. In these instances the Djuki Mala are portrayed as an anomaly by journalists, or discussed even as time travellers, as a result of the enduring discursive association of Indigenous cultures and the distant past. The impasse this culture concept presents precludes the Djuki Mala's claim to contemporary Yolngu cultural production, at least in news media discussions. To overcome this exclusion from contemporary dance discourse, I suggest the performers must "account for

¹⁸ Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian*. 15.

¹⁹ See: *Ibid.*, 13.

historical and cultural change” in Indigenous cultural practices by conceding subjectivity and instead “rely[ing] on the earlier civilizational progress narrative.”²⁰

Framing the Djuki Mala in Televised Performances and Advertisements

Prior to a tour throughout Australia in 2014, the group was renamed from the Chooky Dancers to Djuki Mala, an approximate Yolngu translation of the dancers’ name of choice since 2007. The Djuki Mala’s website²¹ provides an explanation for the change of name, suggesting that it better reflects the fact “the members of the group do not speak English.”²² This is an easily refuted claim if one watches the 2015 promotional video (featured on the website’s homepage) that consists of a series of clips of the Djuki Mala on stage, spliced with off stage footage of them describing, for example, their biographies and dance practice in English.²³

The website’s content further emphasises that Djuki Mala are embedded in “traditional culture, their identity as Yolngu people in the foreground.”²⁴ It follows that their performances offer a “rare and insightful view into Aboriginal Australia.”²⁵ The dancers’ ethnic identity and birthplace is denoted under the “About Us” rubric of the company’s website. One page dedicated to the narrative of the dancers’ rise to fame combined with explanations of their cultural and ethnic heritage, and another page devoted to describing Elcho Island’s geography and island life. This

²¹ NB: the Djuki Mala’s website has been extensively redesigned and its content revised since this article was written. For this reason, some of the citations in the body of this paper may differ from more recent versions of the website’s text, whilst other citations may no longer appear on the website at all.

²² “About Us.” Djuki Mala. Accessed November 12, 2014. <http://www.djukimala.com/#!/news/cyuu>

²³ Djuki Mala. (2015). *Djuki Mala Promo 2015* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/119307371>

²⁴ “About Us.” *Djuki Mala*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

detailed information is provided as an ersatz for dancers' portraits and biographies common to other dance company websites.²⁶

In a similar manner, the "Djuki Mala Story"²⁷ narrativises the group's creative processes as stemming from tradition rather than the dancers' own innovation:

Clowning within Yolngu Culture has been around longer than many of the traditional dances themselves. It is from this that The Chooky Dancers natural flare for comedy has emerged.²⁸

The choreographer of *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style*, Lionel Garawirtja, explains how "A lot of our dances are inspired by our initiation ceremonies for young men."²⁹ He continues, "At those ceremonies, we just make up funny dances for the whole community to laugh at and enjoy."³⁰ Although these citations would tend to contradict an interpretation of the Djuki Mala's dances as political, such as those offered by academics, de Largy Healy has made a connection between the choreography and a ceremony that developed in post-settlement Australia:

Djatpangarri is a fun style of songs and dances, which is often characterised by mimicry and pantomime and performed by young men for public entertainment.

Also called 'wakal manikay' or play songs, this recreational genre was created at

²⁶ NB: as of 2016 the dancers' biographies have been made available on the Djuki Mala's website.

²⁷ "About Us." *Djuki Mala*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lallo, Michael "'Chooky Dancers': Spirits rise amid sorrow." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. April 19 2014. Accessed February 1 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/dance/chooky-dancers-spirits-rise-amid-sorrow-20140416-36r54.html#ixzz3VG5TwHPK>

³⁰ Ibid.

the Yirrkala mission in the 1930s and performed until the 1970s as a localised form of popular entertainment.³¹

With everyday encounters at the core of these dances, de Largy Healy points to examples of comic dances referencing Disney cartoons and non-native fauna. This practice is also said to be closely tied with comic dances used to “diffuse tension” in initiation ceremonies that are “characterised by a form of permissiveness rarely seen in other contexts, which relies on gender reversals and switching of codes.”³² The *Djatpangarri* and related comic dance practices performed in other contexts can, therefore, be seen as a reaction to a settler-migrant presence. Further distancing an interpretation of the Djuki Mala’s choreographic methods from a contextual synchronic culture-based explanation is the possibility that their sampling of an eclectic mix of choreographic references is linked to common techniques in the production of online, user-generated media, such as remix and call and response on YouTube.

On one of the rare occasions that news media acknowledge the Djuki Mala’s divergence from traditional culture, it is commented that “You probably haven’t seen anything quite like this. Djuki Mala, also known as the Chooky Dancers, certainly dance outside the square.”³³ This is not without its own set of issues, as historian and cultural theorist Philip Deloria has addressed in his semiotic analyses of photographs of Native Americans engaging in activities that defy stereotypes:

³¹ De Largy Healy, "Yolngu Zorba Meets Superman." 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ Today Tonight Adelaide. (2014, August 28). *Chooky Dancers* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.todaytonightadelaide.com.au/stories/chooky-dancers>

Even as it defines the unnatural and odd, the naming of an anomaly simultaneously re-creates and empowers the very same categories that it escapes. [...] It is so much the exception that we sense the category with more certainty than we did before we confronted the anomalous.³⁴

Here we are reminded of an enduring binary pairing, the discursive impossibility of a coexistence of the “old” indigene and the non-Indigenous “new.”³⁵ Again, this enforces the claim of how Indigenous peoples are imagined “in a precontact ‘ethnographic present’ always temporally outside of modernity.”³⁶

Although it is likely the journalist sought to shed a positive light on Djuki Mala’s work, Deloria’s notion of an ethnographic present is expressed by one reporter in the following statement: “The sight of Indigenous dancers performing *Zorba the Greek* was nothing short of cultural time travel.”³⁷ A recurring theme, the Djuki Mala are frequently described in terms of having “a tale to tell about a journey that began way back before time,”³⁸ or quite simply that “they float through space and time.”³⁹ Looking beyond examples of the Djuki Mala, Australia’s most prominent contemporary Indigenous dance company, Bangarra Dance Theatre, is said to have solved this temporal divide by “Finding a way to bridge past and

³⁴ Deloria, Philip. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. Lawrence 2004. 5.

³⁵ Literary theorist Terry Goldie’s image of the indigene refers to a homogenised, fictional, generic Indigenous Other. See: Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation: Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literature*. Montreal 1993. 4.

³⁶ Deloria, Philip. *Playing Indian*. New Haven 1998. 105.

³⁷ Today Tonight Adelaide, *Chooky Dancers* [Video file].

³⁸ Clarke, Sonny. “Djuki Mala: Chooky Dancers.” *Aussie Theatre*. March 27, 2014. Accessed Feb. 2, 2015. <http://aussietheatre.com.au/reviews/djuki-mala-judith-wright-centre>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

present [which] has been at the heart of indigenous peoples' struggle."⁴⁰

Indigenous Australian ballerina Ella Havelka excels at cultural time travel, having succeeded in making an "historic leap to Australian ballet."⁴¹

In the first televised restaging of *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* for an audition in the contest *Australia's Got Talent*, a narrator informs audiences at home that the dancers travelled "all the way from Elcho Island" and due to the fact that "most of its members [are] unable to speak English, the judges aren't sure what to expect."⁴² Footage of the dancers preparing backstage, shown applying body paint in grass skirts, is in sepia tones. They are seen meditating in a circle, and sitting cross-legged on the floor. Colour returns when each of the judges' confused faces are captured, returning to a sepia image of the similarly confused facial expression of a dancer. The close up of the dancer is saturated with colour moments before the dance commences.

Sepia is employed in film to instil the viewer with the impression that the events captured on film occurred long ago, or are perhaps merely a dream or distant memory. Having bridged the gap between then and now, the Djuki Mala's dancing is televised in colour. As the performance progresses the judges' grimaces fade and they celebrate joyfully the Djuki Mala's arrival in modernity. Similarly, at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the performance of *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* was supplemented with a prelude. As the curtain is

⁴⁰ Coslovich, Gabriela. "Art as medicine." *The Age*. Sept. 13, 2013. Accessed Feb 16, 2015.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts/art-as-medicine/2007/09/13/1189276893304.html?page=fullpage>

⁴¹ Nauman, Zoe. "Ella makes historic leap to Australian Ballet." *News.com.au*. October 7, 2012. Accessed March 21, 2015. <http://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/ella-makes-historic-leap-to-australian-ballet/story-fndo4bst-1226489819633>

⁴² See: nana443. (2008, May 13). *Australia's Got Talent - Arnhem land Islander chooky dancers* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzhZr-uKtlc>

raised a lone Indigenous male playing didgeridoo is revealed on a dimly lit stage, and artificial smoke billows out into the audience.⁴³ A second musician steps out of the wings playing rhythm sticks, followed by the Djuki Mala armed with spears, who skip in unison from upstage to the centre of the performance space. They reenact a battle scene and, although the lighting state has become brighter, flooding the stage in deep red and orange hues of the Australian landscape, the performers are still hidden by the haze of dry ice. Abruptly, the musicians pause and the dancers drop their weapons, and *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* commences to the amusement of the audience. During the course of the high-energy dance routine the fog disperses and the lighting state gradually becomes brighter. The performance is then transformed into a pyrotechnics spectacle, dazzling the audience with bursts of flames upstage, and exploding confetti canons downstage. As the dance reaches its conclusion, blinding light generated by a “waterfall” of sparks cascades from above. The symbolism of light and dark is omnipresent in Christian thought since the Enlightenment and the inferences to be made from representations of indigeneity in darkness and contemporary dance vocabulary in bright lights reiterate the binary opposition of tradition and modernity.⁴⁴

Indigeneity and mimesis

Journalist Michael Lallo refers to the dancers’ “fluid movements, and the speed at which they learn new styles” and how this “show[s] that rhythm and

⁴³ See: Abremaline. (2009, March 30). *Chooky dancers comedy gala 2009* [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdOeS_bJzEO

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the use of exhibition lighting and meaning making in Indigenous visual arts contexts see: McLean, Ian. “Contemporaneous Traditions: The World in Indigenous Art/Indigenous Art in the World,” *University of Wollongong Research Online* (2013): 1-18. Web. <<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1905&context=lhapapers>>.

dance are second nature.”⁴⁵ The Djuki Mala’s manager, Joshua Bond, informs readers that “they [the dancers] have an innate sense of their own physicality,” despite lacking a formal dance education. He continues, “We’ve worked with some of Australia’s best dance companies and [...] no-one picks up movement as quick as Djuki Mala – they’re naturals.”⁴⁶ Presented in such a way, the Djuki Mala’s dance ability to memorise a sequence of choreography is an indication that “dance is in [their] blood” and a display of “the rhythm of [their] ancestors,”⁴⁷ as the Djuki Mala’s 2014 promotional video points out. It is also a reminder, as Walther Benjamin argued, that man’s “gift of seeing resemblances is nothing more than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else.”⁴⁸

In colonial era discussions of the faculties of Indigenous “races,” references to Indigenous peoples on all continents as talented mimes was common. This discourse has not lost its discursive currency, as descriptions of Djuki Mala reveal. Sonny Clarke invokes this enduring image by stating that “In bare feet, loin cloth and ceremonial white paint, their language is movement.”⁴⁹ In the context of collaborations with the Djuki Mala, the difficulties posed by an alleged lack of a common language – the Djuki Mala “speak English as their third or fourth language” according to journalist Liza Power – were solved by Bond and the dancers who found other ways for

⁴⁵ Lallo, ““Chooky Dancers’: Spirits rise amid sorrow.”

⁴⁶ “Djuki Mala – The Chooky Dancers.” *Otwaylifemagazine*. May 1 2014. Accessed February 15 2015. <https://otwaylifemagazine.wordpress.com/2014/05/01/djuki-mala-the-chooky-dancers-weds-7-may-copacc/>

⁴⁷ Artback NT (Jan 27, 2014). *Djuki Mala 2014 Promo* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMAJnORACmg>

⁴⁸ Benjamin, Walther. “On the Mimetic Faculty.” In: *Walter Benjamin: selected writings 1931-1934. Vol. 2. Pt. 2.*, eds. Jennings, Michael et al. Cambridge 1999. 720-723. 720.

⁴⁹ Clarke, “Djuki Mala: Chooky Dancers.”

director Nigel Jamieson to communicate with the dancers.⁵⁰ During the creative process of *Wrong Skin*, a mixed media dance and theatre production directed by Jamieson and featuring the Djuki Mala, Power continues to explain how “the physicality of the performance lent itself to other forms of dialogue, and [...] a physical language of gestures soon evolved, as did a foundation of respect.”⁵¹

Charles Darwin, the very inspiration for racial hierarchies, has similarly documented his experience of first encounters with the (Indigenous) Other, albeit here his account of a meeting with the “Fuegians” of South America is cited. He remarks that “Their very attitudes were abject and the expression distrustful”, although following a series of gestures “we became good friends.”⁵² Darwin denotes the natives’ own language little importance as it sounded unintelligible. This was remedied by the fact the natives were “excellent mimics: as often as we coughed or yawned or made an odd motion, they immediately imitated us.”⁵³ He also recalls stories of “the Australians, [who] likewise, have long been notorious for being able to imitate and describe the gait of any man, so that he may be recognized.”⁵⁴

The conviction that Indigenous Australians transgress cultural barriers through an innate ability to assume the gestures of the colonist/dominant culture persists to this day. Approximately 180 years after Darwin, academics continue to contextualise images of Indigenous Australian figures in colonialist era art in a

⁵⁰ Power, Liza. "Stepping Stones." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. March 15, 2010. Accessed December 8, 2014. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/stepping-stones-20100311-q1t7.html>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Darwin, Charles. *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle round the World, under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R.N.* New York: D. Appleton, 1871. 205.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

similar way. Art historian David Hansen describes the meaning of mimesis in colonial artworks, in which Indigenous Australians are often depicted wearing British military jackets without trousers or other colonist cast offs, as documents demonstrating “the adoption of new gestures to permit the maintenance of Aboriginal protocols of meeting under the new regime.”⁵⁵ His analysis of colonial representations of Indigenous men and women elevates imitation to a cultural protocol, as opposed to a pragmatic necessity, when navigating culturally specific codes and etiquette. Hence, mimesis is misconstrued as a “ritual physical performance [...] to neutralise the charged, uncertain and dangerous space of the meeting.”⁵⁶

In contrast to the examples above that reassert a discursive link between the Djuki Mala, Indigenous Australian tradition, and mimesis, the mode of representation at work in many Djuki Mala choreographies is one of remix. In the terms of dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, this would be an example of “reflection.” For example, in *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* the dancers do not aspire to resemble Greek folk dance, in fact, they “show none of the characteristics” of the Greek *sirtaki*.⁵⁷ Instead, the mode of representation is “related to the trope of irony” and in “the task of executing movement might occasionally approximate qualities or behave in ways that remind the viewer” of a particular image.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hansen, David. “Death Dance.” *Australian Book Review* (April 2007): 27-32. 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁷ Foster, Susan Leigh. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley 1986. 246.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

Djuki Mala's *Singin' in the Rain* dance can also be categorised in such a way, as it is not a copy of the original choreography, but rather an interpretation of the fantasy of dancer Gene Kelly presented from an Indigenous perspective.⁵⁹ One particular recording of the dance, performed in the dry surrounds of an outdoor festival, emphasises the superfluousness of an umbrella as dry earth hovers in the air. The dancers alternately hold the umbrella above their head, or sharply jab the umbrella's spike towards the ground as one would a spear. Whilst Gene Kelly deviated from normative behaviour by dancing in the rain without an umbrella, the Djuki Mala dancers dance with an umbrella in the driest of conditions.

One can also infer from early video recordings that the Djuki Mala's *Bollywood* dance was not created with the intention of resembling a Bollywood production. Promotional material from *Wrong Skin* shows the dancers perform dressed in shorts and various kinds of hats, for example, baseball caps, and bucket and panama hats.⁶⁰ Some of the performers also wear sunglasses, and rather than invoke the elaborate design elements of Bollywood films, one would describe the costume choices as practical beach fashions. A recording from 2011 at an outdoor festival shows the dancers in shorts and ceremonial body paint performing a version of the choreography to *filmi* music that, like *Zorba the Greek* *Yolngu Style*, also defies attempts to pinpoint its cultural location.⁶¹ Although the

⁵⁹ CAAMA. (2011, June 11). *Chooky Dances Singing in the Rain* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/24979112>

⁶⁰ Gav Robins. (2011, February 17). *Wrong Skin Promo edit.mov* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSV498vAuVc>

⁶¹ CAAMA. (2011, June 11). *Chooky Dancers do a Bollywood Number* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/24961305>

dancers do collectively recreate images of Hindu deities' many arms, further references to Indian dancers' hand gestures fluidly morph into other gestures that emulate, for instance, a kangaroo's ears and posture, or phrases common to "vogue dancing." In doing so, the Djuki Mala draw a comparison between the use of hands and gestures in contrasting dance styles.

Despite a mode of representation that diverges from the image of the indigene, responses to the *Bollywood* dance mark a return to a tendency to categorise the Djuki Mala as social outcasts. Some have gone as far as interpreting Djuki Mala's performance of *Bollywood* as symbolising self-identification and solidarity with India's precariat. This notion is based on a rendition in *Wrong Skin* in which the dancers are featured in shorts and improvised towel turbans:

But the spirit of celebration is modified in a Bollywood sequence that includes documentary film footage of the Elcho community, its derelict overcrowded housing and poor facilities. As the men dance, Bollywood style, their bare feet and shorts now show they are clearly identifying with India's village poor rather than its urban middle class. We see that the promise of transformative celebrity is held in tension with the material conditions of disadvantage.⁶²

In this interpretation the barefoot dancing of an Indigenous Australian elicits a drastically different response from cultural critics than, for instance, a barefoot, non-Indigenous contemporary dancer. The interpretation also rests upon a generic notion of "us" and the Other.

⁶² Varney, Denise, Peter Eckersall, Chris Hudson, and Barbara Hatley. *Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific: Regional Modernities in the Global Era*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 84.

In the Djuki Mala's national tour, the casual costumes used in *Wrong Skin* were replaced with shimmering golden loin cloths and matching golden turbans.⁶³ Additionally, the dancers all wear dark sunglasses. The combination of Bollywood music, turbans – a stereotypical marker of South Asian males — together with dark sunglasses significantly affects meaning making when appreciating this performance. No longer are the sunglasses associated with glare at beaches, but rather a contemporary stereotype of Indian celebrity, and more specifically, Bollywood actors' penchant for sunglasses indoors and outdoors. Although the new costumes are possibly an effort to avoid the Djuki Mala's conflation with impoverished Indian communities through references to the glamour of the Indian film industry, the change is an example of a more general shift toward modes of representation, such as imitation and resemblance in Foster's terms, in more recent stagings of the Djuki Mala's dances.

Several further dances produced for the Djuki Mala's national tour in 2014 adopt mimesis as a dominant choreographic mode. For example, the tour featured choreographies that consist of a re-enactment of Michael Jackson's solo to the song, *Billie Jean*, also a popping and locking demonstration complete with Don Campbell inspired outfits, and a Motown impersonation in which the dancers are dressed in matching formal suits and lip-sync in the style of Motown back-up singers.⁶⁴ Most obviously with regard to costuming, in the examples cited, the Djuki Mala adopt the image of the source material, rather than draw attention to

⁶³ TheMelbComedyFest. (2015, May 7). *Deadly Funny National Final & Showcase – Djuki Mala* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbKyMemdZ_8

⁶⁴ See: Djuki Mala. (2015). *Djuki Mala Promo 2015* [Video file].

the perceived (in)congruency of the elements combined in their choreographies; for instance, the difficulty of 'moonwalking' barefoot.

It can therefore be concluded that the differing versions of Djuki Mala's choreographies each expose "the limitations of conceptions of indigeneity."⁶⁵ *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style* can be located in modernity, an unexpected anomaly, yet framed in a way that dialectically constitutes and strengthens the sense of stereotypical indigeneity. Similarly, the Bollywood dance, which originally responded innovatively to *filmi* accompaniment and employed modes of representation comparable to *Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style*, was perceived as identifying with the Indian Other's impoverishment due to an absence of shoes. Yet, when the dancers adopt an image of Indian glamour and celebrity or produce choreographic material that resembles more accurately the sources cited in their performances, they revert to a (choreographic) mimetic mode that reaffirms the image of the indigene. This catch-22 of meaning would appear ineluctable and indicates how Indigenous performance is appreciated as an extension of Indigenous Australian performers' cultural and ethnic identity, and/or a fictitious image of indigeneity.

Whether the Djuki Mala actively engage with representations of and discourses on indigeneity critically cannot be determined on the basis of the sources at the centre of this study. However, it is possible to discern that cultural commentators' treatment of fluid images of indigeneity and Indigenous identities revert in many instances to images of the indigene and the primitive Other. This is

⁶⁵ Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian*, 5.

in spite of the Djuki Mala's potential to inspire discussions that "clear space for the much-needed public recognition of the political, historical and contemporary realities of indigenous lives."⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ Ibid.

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