

**Conversations, collaborations and contestations: Building a dialogue between  
Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in ethnomusicological research**

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This paper explores the ways collaborative research offers ethnomusicologists a “dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than for” Indigenous people (Fielding 305). Drawing on my research experiences collaborating with Indigenous Australian women, I consider the difficulties, dilemmas, ethics and the benefits of cross-cultural collaborative research. I focus on two collaborative projects and incorporate interviews with my co-researchers and theoretical perspectives on collaborative research, to examine the complexities of including Indigenous people as “co-researchers”, the implications of knowledge production with and for Indigenous people, and the importance of a dialogic approach to collaborative research. I discuss my perspective as a non-Indigenous ethnomusicologist and my shared lived experiences with Indigenous researchers. Ultimately, I consider how collaborative research can allow Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethnomusicologists to engage in dialogue, have equal voices in projects, and facilitate relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

**Keywords:** Australia, Indigenous, Torres Strait, Ethnomusicology, Australia, Conversation

## Introduction

[1] There are many examples of collaborative ethnomusicological research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and there is a growing body of literature about cross-cultural collaborative research. However, as Somerville and Perkins (255) note, many examples of collaborative research “gloss over the negotiations of collaboration” and few discuss how the collaborative research process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in ethnomusicological research works in practice. This paper explores the ways collaborative research offers ethnomusicologists a “dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than for” Indigenous people (Fielding 305).

[2] I draw on my experiences undertaking two collaborative projects: one with Lexine Solomon, a Torres Strait Islander performer and researcher about how Torres Strait Islander women express their identities through contemporary music, and another project with Monique Proud, an Aboriginal researcher exploring the contemporary music making in her own community of Cherbourg in Queensland, Australia. Using interviews with both Lexine and Monique, I discuss my own perspectives and theirs about the collaborative process. Certainly “there is no one way or formula to ensure successful collaboration” (Kerber xxi) and this paper does not intend to provide a guide to collaborative research. It instead explores how my own collaborative research practices allow Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to engage in dialogue, have equal voices in projects, and contribute to facilitating relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

[3] Somerville and Perkins propose the idea of the “contact zone” as a useful way to theorise collaborative Indigenous/non-Indigenous research sites and “border work” as a way to understand the emotional and intellectual work of intercultural collaboration (253). The contact zone has been used by Pratt (1992) and Carter (1992) to describe aspects of cultural

contact in historical contexts. Pratt describes the contact zone as “the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (33). Carter similarly bases his analysis of the contact zone on historical texts, explorers’ accounts of first contact with Aboriginal peoples (255). Other anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have also applied the concept of the contact zone (e.g. Clifford; Stratton and Devadas). Similarly, I am applying the concepts of border work and the contact zone to explore the ways my research collaborators and I negotiate and mediate numerous borders between Self and Other, between community and researcher, and move between and across borders in the contact zone.

### **Collaborative research in ethnomusicology**

[4] Collaborative research can have many names including “action research” and “participatory community research”. Action research is defined by Punch as where participants are viewed as research partners rather than subjects (Punch 89) while participatory community research is discussed as a method that “values the processes of genuine collaboration” through dialogue, action and empowerment of—often oppressed—people (Reason 328). Despite the many labels for collaborative research, “the underlying spirit is that of working, learning, and moving towards positive social change together” (Wali 6) and has important implications for how researchers proceed with research, conceptualise aims and methods, and implement research outcomes. There is much literature on cross-cultural collaborative research (Hooker) and also more specifically between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in many settings, including Canada (Haig-Brown; Haig-Brown and Archibald), Bali (Dunbar-Hall and Adnyana), New Zealand (Nunns and Thomas) and Australia. Collaboration in ethnomusicological research is not new either (e.g. Kaufman Shelemay; Van Buren). Yet, Beaudry warns, “because of our university-orientated goals and the grant

policies we work under, collaboration in the true sense of the word is sometimes difficult to set in motion” (83).

[5] In the Australian context, there are many examples of Indigenous/non-Indigenous Australian music research and recording collaborations (e.g. Corn and Gumbala; Hayward; Maralung; Neuenfeldt and Kepa; Yawulyu Mungamunga), However, with the exception of a few scholars (e.g. Mackinlay; Neuenfeldt and Kepa) there is little discussion of how collaborative research processes between Indigenous/non-Indigenous people in ethnomusicological research work in practice.

#### **Introducing Lexine, Monique and myself**

[6] My interest in undertaking collaborative research with Indigenous people began in 2001 while undertaking an undergraduate course “Indigenous Australian Women’s Music and Dance”. During the course, workshops by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women performers from remote Indigenous communities and local performers took place in the classroom. This was the first time I had participated in Indigenous performances of any kind and it required me to move beyond the boundaries of what I knew and was familiar with. As I danced, listened and talked to Indigenous Australian performers I was struck by how little I really knew about their performances in general. The course also led me to begin to think critically about the ethics of representing and working with Indigenous Australian performers and my place in this discourse as a non-Indigenous female. I decided that if I was going to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between gender, music, and politics in the Indigenous Australian context then I needed to undertake further study.

[7] I began my PhD research with Indigenous Australian women performers in 2002 and interviewed 20 Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music across Australia. Since then my music research has shifted to a collaborative framework and I have also collaborated with Indigenous colleagues on a number of teaching and learning projects as part of my role in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland. Being a non-Indigenous researcher working closely with Indigenous people is a complex issue and there are multiple perspectives and opinions in relation to the issue of whether non-Indigenous people should engage in acts of representation about, with and for Indigenous Australian peoples, knowledges and cultures. However, I suggest that collaborative research offers a space in the contact zone between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for non-Indigenous researchers to engage in dialogue with Indigenous people in meaningful ways and allows for sharing between two cultures. There are no easy answers, but I continue to search for ways forward that are useful and beneficial to the Indigenous people I work with.

[8] Torres Strait Islander performer Lexine Solomon was one of the women who I interviewed for my PhD. After completing the project, Lexine asked me if I'd like to work with her on a project together. Lexine describes the process of collaborating in the following way:

The collaboration initially was about, first I thought I had an interest in it. I thought I want to be part of this, find out what the processes are. You (Katelyn) had actually said to me maybe there is more information required for Torres Strait Islander female performers and there's not a lot written. And then that made me think, how do I say, how do I get involved when I'm not at uni. I'm not enrolled at that point. I'd never been to university. In an email one day I just decided I'm going to ask you a question...



**Figure 1. The author with Lexine Solomon (May, 2009, Brisbane)**

[9] We secured funding from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to explore the experiences, identities, and contemporary music of Torres Strait Islander women performers. We also hoped to provide the performers with a platform to have their say and be recognised as a unique part of Australia's diverse Indigenous population. We devised the interview questions together and I undertook the ethical clearance processes required by the University. We then travelled across Australia to Cairns, Thursday Island, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, between September 2007 and December 2008, to undertake interviews with Torres Strait Islander women who perform contemporary music. Our agendas for the project were slightly different yet complementary. Lexine hoped to gather data about other Torres Strait Islander female artists and hear about their challenges in performance while I was particularly interested in foregrounding women's voices and theories of marginalisation in relation to Torres Strait Islander women performers. We remained open about our agendas for the

project and discussed them at length. Our collaboration resulted in co-authoring articles together and producing a report and DVD for the performers (Barney and Solomon).

[10] I worked with Monique Proud at The University of Queensland from 2008-2010. Her family is from Cherbourg, an Aboriginal community 250 kilometres north-west of Brisbane. While Monique is not a performer like Lexine, she has an interest in the music making of her own community and she states that the collaboration came about because:

One day Kate and I were just talking and I was talking about music from Cherbourg and how it has a really distinct sound and that there had been quite a few famous musicians or local musicians from Cherbourg and Kate started asking me questions about what I thought the sound was, why was it distinct, and what was it about music from Cherbourg that was different from other regions. I was saying when you hear music from Cherbourg on the radio you know it's from Cherbourg, doesn't matter if you're in Sydney or Melbourne, you know it's from Cherbourg. So we started looking into it further.



**Figure 2. The author with Monique Proud (October, 2010, Cherbourg).**

[11] Monique felt that it was important to undertake a focus group interview with her family to discuss the possible benefits of the research project. Then after receiving positive feedback, we decided to undertake the project. Monique and I also had slightly different agendas for the project. As Monique mentions in the quote above, her interest was particularly in finding out what makes contemporary music from Cherbourg distinct while I was keen to explore the ways performers connected to Cherbourg through their songs. Yet it was possible to explore both of these topics and therefore the project aimed to explore both the “Cherbourg sound” as well as how place and landscape is expressed and celebrated by a number of Aboriginal songwriters from the community. We devised the interview questions together and again I undertook the ethical clearance processes. Monique contacted the performers she knew from Cherbourg and together we interviewed them both in Cherbourg and in Brisbane. In both instances there were no tensions or dilemmas in setting up the projects, perhaps due to our existing friendships, but as I explore further below there was a need to negotiate and balance other issues.

### **Roles and responsibilities in the contact zone**

[12] Blume writes that “working together implies a partnership – each partner bringing something of value to the process of collaboration and each partner receiving something of value from it” (210). In both projects my roles were to facilitate and write grant applications, undertake the ethical clearance processes, data analysis alongside Monique and Lexine, and co-present and co-write articles with them. Monique discusses the complementary roles we played on the project together:

For me, being Indigenous myself, having that degree in sociology and having that link with Cherbourg, I find society and culture really interesting and that’s my community so I was coming from that perspective, from that Indigenous perspective.

I haven’t studied music, you (Katelyn) have that grounding in music and theory and I

think basically we brought brought different knowledge systems and different elements, different aspects to the table. So the things you hadn't done before I had that knowledge in and vice versa. I think when we collaborated on the research we really worked well together because we balanced each other out in certain ways.

Lexine also emphasises our different roles and responsibilities in the project:

But you (Katelyn) as the researcher and also you're collaborating and then you're reviewing, always looking for the themes. You're, Katelyn's the one that's looked at it and seen well how do we keep this relevant to what we set out to do. That's the hard yakka. That was the hard job. Making sure all collaborations were receiving what we set out to get. That's difficult. You're playing three and four roles while I'm trying to stay true to my culture, keep protocols, if they say you're going to eat you eat, or if they say you stand then you stand or don't come in yet I'm not ready. You had to go with the flow.

[13] As Lexine and Monique both emphasise the projects occurred as a result of many conversations and also previous research – with Lexine I had interviewed her for my PhD, while Monique and I had worked together at The University of Queensland. They both were conceptualising/viewing the projects from their own unique perspectives and relationships with their communities while I too come with my own ethnomusicological research background and music experiences. As Lexine touches on above, we brought different skills to the project. Mine in interviewing Indigenous Australian women performers, transcription and analysis, and writing reports and articles while Lexine brought her experiences as a Torres Strait Islander woman performer, her understandings of cultural protocols and her many connections to possible interviewees. Monique's comment also points to the importance of our different backgrounds to balance the project – hers in sociology and links with Cherbourg and my background in undertaking music research.

[14] In both contexts it was important to know when to lead and when to follow. One example when I had to lead was in writing ethical clearance documents and writing of reports for the University and funding bodies as I had experience doing this while Lexine and Monique did not. However, the following edited excerpts from my journal demonstrate when Monique and Lexine led the research projects:

I've just had my first day in Cherbourg with Monique. It was an eye opening experience filled with both joy and sadness. Monique said it's always an intense experience coming back and that you see the good and the bad and its hard to reconcile. The streets of the small town were desolate and a group of small children stared warily at our car as we drove along. Our first stop was the cemetery and Monique told me that they always go there first to pay respect to family who have passed away. Tiny white wooden crosses filled the field, so many were unmarked. Next we drove to Mon's cousin's place - a small blue house with a freshly planted garden. We go up the stairs and three children run to the door to greet us, following by a woman holding a small baby. Mon introduced me to her cousin's wife as "my friend Kate, she's the music person I was telling you about". She smiled, kissed my cheek and then asked me to hold her baby while she made us a cup of tea. Much later when we left the house after dark, Mon smiled and said, "Don't worry, we'll get to the research tomorrow".

Today Lexine and I interviewed Selena in Cairns. As we entered into her kitchen, Selena said "I've made a stir fry, shall we eat first?" as she got plates out of the cupboard, not waiting for an answer. Lexine looked at me, winked and then says to Selena, "Okay, that would be great." Selena and Lexine talked about different families and people they knew. I listened, nodded, but didn't know the people they were talking about. Lexine slowly steered her towards the project "So Selena you know I'm researching our fellow Torres Strait Islander women performers and we're wanting to

find out about your experiences”...While Lexine briefed Selena, I began setting up the video camera and audio recorder. Selena nodded as Lexine discussed the information sheet and consent form. Suddenly Selena looked at me, “Hey camera girl, shall we start soon?”

[15] The excerpt from my trip to Cherbourg with Monique illustrates the way Monique led and set the schedule and the importance of visiting relatives before any research could be done. The second excerpt demonstrates how Lexine led the interview process with Torres Strait Islander women performers as she already had relationship with them. My role in this context was initially more technical, to provide and set up the recording equipment, and to allow space for Lexine to brief our participants. While “in the field” with them at times I was the “music person” or the “camera girl” but once the interviews were underway we shared the asking of questions. Yet at other times during the research projects I took the lead to fulfil University processes, analyse data and meet writing deadlines. Certainly, equality in collaboration is important and as Dyck, Lynham and Anderson demonstrate, “power differentials between researcher and researched” can be minimised through collaborations among women (622). However, they note that continually negotiated interactions and appropriate methods are essential if we are to “give voice” to women who are usually silenced by academic discourse.

**Border work: Does collaborative research divide Indigenous people from their communities?**

[16] Haig-Brown poses the question of “Does the process of doing research separate a researcher from the community?” (21) and certainly this is an important issue in collaborative research with Indigenous people. Both Lexine and Monique had to cross

borders between being a researcher and being a community member. For Lexine as also a fellow performer there are many obligations – to fellow Torres Strait Islander women performers, to family, to community, to the University, and to the funding body, and she emphasises that she must cross many borders to continually negotiate these roles:

The portrayal of me saying ‘I feel like I’ve betrayed my culture and my fellow performers’, that was self discovery, I could not believe that we stumbled onto that. We didn’t stumble but [Katelyn: you didn’t think that would happen before we did it] no way. I didn’t believe that. All of a sudden I had two hats that were jumbled and mixed. I’m a performer, now I’m a researcher which voice am I using. And on behalf of the fellow performers, what voice are they looking for.

This resonates with Canadian Indigenous scholar Kovach who points out “we can only go so far before we see a face...and hear a voice whispering, ‘*Are you helping us*’” (31).

Monique’s perspective is somewhat different to Lexine’s:

For me I haven’t felt divided because I think I’m always aware that I’m just a piece in the puzzle, I’m just one person in the community. Whether that be researcher or just a community member – we don’t all have answers as individuals. I’m very aware when I go back to Cherbourg, or I’m doing a research project I’m not the expert. And that’s culturally as well. I’m a young Indigenous woman, it’s not necessarily my place sometimes to speak up in meetings, I’ll let Uncles or Aunties that are older than me, that have lived on community longer to actually say it. But I’ll back them up if they ask me. I’ve been lucky that the community have really supported me and my education.

[17] Lexine's and Monique's experiences demonstrate different responses - not all Indigenous people will feel divided from their community through undertaking research. Possibly because, as Monique notes, she is a younger Aboriginal person she has not yet experienced that. Or perhaps because they come from two very different Indigenous communities - one originally set up by the colonial administration as an Aboriginal reserve, the other a diasporic Torres Strait Islander community across Australia. This demonstrates the diversity of Indigenous people's experiences and also that the meaning of "community" differs in different settings. Both Monique and Lexine live away from their "home" communities but have had different experiences of the research process with their communities. Lexine speaks of feeling like she's "betrayed" family and friends by undertaking research on them and the importance of having the correct "voice" in the research. Yet Monique feels supported by her community in undertaking research. This also highlights the individuality of each collaborative research relationship and was an important lesson for me: if non-Indigenous researcher's want Indigenous people to collaborate more strongly as co-researchers, co-presenters, co-writers and undertake their own research on their own communities it is important to be aware that they may need to negotiate the complex and difficult borders between community member and researcher and maintain both their community obligations as well as their research agendas.

### **Conclusion: Relationship as research**

[18] Pratt characterises the contact zone as being filled with "possibilities and perils" and while I've touched on some of the perils for Indigenous researchers, the possibilities of collaborative research are also equally important. My research relationships with both Lexine and Monique have developed and become strong friendships. As Monique emphasises:

Having that friendship, I think for us it just unfolded really naturally. It wasn't a power struggle like some academics have. I think you and I have a friendship where we can just pick up where the other left off and I think it worked really well together.

Lexine highlights that for her there have been unexpected outcomes of our collaboration:

I chose you (laughs) if I can say that. Because there basically was an opportunity to say 'let me put this silly question on email and if she doesn't answer then I'll understand it doesn't deserve an answer'. But here we are, seven years down the track. And you know it's steered a lot of things in me to decide yep this is important to me.

This resonates with Haig-Brown's (257) assertion that "the rewards of this engagement are that both participants are transformed in the process". I too have learnt much from them about music making, about their communities and their cultures. I've gained insight into the importance of being flexible during the research process, at times waiting for an invitation to begin discussing research and the role of sharing meals as a way of establishing connections. I have also learnt about the importance of listening carefully, always taking others perspectives seriously and nurturing relationships through all stages of a research project and beyond. These have been exciting and unexpected benefits of collaborative research experiences for me.

[19] Collaborations like mine with Lexine and Monique are not new to ethnomusicology and I hope this discussion adds value to the research experiences and relationships of others. Van Buren emphasises "collaborative research within diverse communities is an essential aspect of the future of applied ethnomusicological work" (61) and certainly dialogue plays an important role in successful collaboration. Monique talks about the importance of collaboration as a "dialogic alternative" (Fielding 305):

I think dialogue is so important because I think when you're taking two different people from two different backgrounds and settings and knowledge systems then you can't just expect it to all come together and be perfect. I think you and I were lucky that it did just come together naturally. But I think you need to keep that dialogue going and talking, briefing and debriefing and keep looking at where you are with research, making changes if you have to, just keep tweaking it and adjusting it a bit because otherwise you can just have some common misunderstandings.

[20] Both Lexine and Monique were involved very closely in the design of the projects, devising questions, and we have co-written articles and co-presented at conferences and forums. They have also joined me in the classroom to allow students to enter into a dialogue about their experiences and their communities and learn about the borders they negotiate between community member/researcher/collaborator. In my experiences, collaborative research projects have unfolded naturally through circumstance – Lexine through previous research, Monique through work. The tensions in both collaborative projects were not so much between me and my collaborators but were discomforts that we experienced individually, yet we faced these issues together. For example, Lexine and I were able to talk about her role as researcher/community member and my positioning as a non-Indigenous researcher working in Indigenous spaces.

[21] Recently, Maddison has argued that “the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia [is] profoundly stuck” (4-5). Collaborative research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people holds the potential to help bridge the gulf, to allow non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to work equally together, to learn from each other and resist oppression of Indigenous people through inclusion as co-researchers. This journey is not simple for either Indigenous or non-Indigenous and there are many discomfort zones to negotiate as we travel together. However, I will continue to strive with Lexine and Monique

to make visible “the often invisible work of the contact zone” (Somerville and Perkins 257) in order to build better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

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### **Biography**

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