

Rattling Those Cages: Reflections on Indigenous Voices in the Black Lives Matter Movement in Australia

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With a presidential proclamation on October 8th 2021, Joe Biden followed numerous cities, states, and districts in recognizing Indigenous Peoples’ Day on October 11th, the day previously known in the United States as Columbus Day. Columbus Day marks the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas, and while it is celebrated as a national public holiday in various parts of the Americas and Europe, for Indigenous peoples Columbus’ arrival meant genocide, physical displacement, cultural deprivation, and high mortality rates driven by smallpox. When President Biden made his announcement, my social media pages were flooded with related content, posted and created by Indigenous-led organizations and individuals mainly based in North and South America, but also in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

In Australia, Indigenous Yorta Yorta hip hop artist DRMNGNOW and Filipino and Indigenous Muruwari musician Dobby are both active voices in the Black Lives Matter movement, and both used Indigenous Peoples’ Day as an occasion to promote appreciation of Indigenous Peoples globally through their social media pages. By referring to the United States as Turtle Island—the name for “earth” in Indigenous creation stories in North America (McCall et al. 2017)—on Instagram and Facebook, both artists strongly urged readers to rethink the usage of colonial nation-state names. DRMNGNOW’s informative post provided an explanation of how the proclamation of Indigenous Peoples’ Day aids the appreciation of First Nations peoples, and sent love-wishes to Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island. The resistance to the use of colonial nation-state names is similarly apparent in DRMNGNOW’s song “Australia Does Not Exist” (DRMNGNOW 2018), with the lyrics:

*And remind them how we conquered them, every single day
And what better way to do this than to give this land a name
Australia, yeah! The great land that was claimed.*

(...)

*This always was, and always will be a land of, countless Indigenous nations.
None of which are called Australia.*

Dobby responded to Indigenous Peoples’ Day by sharing a TikTok video by hip hop artist Bobby Sanchez, who is based in New York City and is a descendent of the Wari people in Ayacucho,

Peru. In the TikTok video, Sanchez lip-syncs to their own song “Quechua 101 Land Back Please” (Brunson 2021). With lyrics such as: “*Land back please. Stolen land under siege,*” Bobby Sanchez emphasizes a similar message to that expressed by DRMNGNOW: Indigenous lands belong to Indigenous peoples. The attention paid to Indigenous Peoples’ Day by Indigenous musicians globally made me wonder: How do Indigenous hip hop musicians in Australia position themselves in relation to BIPOC matters globally? How are issues affecting Indigenous peoples intertwined with global movements such as Black Lives Matter? And how do Indigenous musicians in Australia make sure their voices are heard by non-Indigenous audiences?

As sociologist Tricia Rose describes, hip hop has been an important medium for Black people to resist dominant forces depriving them of their freedom (Rose 2008, 263–64). Moreover, Rose states it provides a “stage,” facilitating a challenge to the “dominant transcript” (Rose 1994, 101). Seen as a medium of resistance, it is not surprising that hip hop is also celebrated by many Indigenous musicians around the globe. Ethnomusicologist Liz Przybylski suggests that hip hop is a genre “that fluidly passes political borders. Many artists have gravitated to hip hop’s story of possibility as a kind of creative expression that has come from places that have been marginalized” (Przybylski 2017, 493). She argues that while “indigeneity” and “blackness” may sound like two separate concepts in academic settings, lived realities show that these categories often overlap. This dialogue between blackness and indigeneity enhanced by hip hop is what she calls “crossings” (Przybylski 2021). This aligns with what Black Popular Culture scholar Halifu Osumare (2001) refers to as “connective marginalities,” in which hip hop may be an expression of similar social challenges among black people globally.

While the relevance of skin tone has a fraught history in the Australian context of indigeneity, black or brown skin color often has been the most obvious resonance for Aboriginal people to blackness on a global level. Regardless of skin tone, many Aboriginal people refer to themselves as proudly Blak (with the omission of the c to differentiate from other Black communities worldwide). Quoted in the Koori Mail in 2003, Aboriginal hip hop artist Lez “Bex” Beckett states: “before Australian and Aboriginal hip-hop really took off, we [Aboriginal youth] all followed what the Americans did. It really influenced me because it was a Black face on the television, and when you are a young fulla growing up in Cunnamulla in central Queensland, it is a pride thing to see another Blackfella in a position of power”¹ (in Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004, 123). Similarly, Indigenous Malyangapa Barkindji rapper Barkaa uses references to skin color in relation to overseas hip hop in her song “For my Tittas.”² With lyrics such as “*Like pac said, The sweeter the juice*” and “*The darker the roots,*” Barkaa makes reference to the late American rapper Tupac’s song “Keep Ya Head Up”, which begins: “*Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice. I say the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots*” (BARKAA 2020; TheLoverboy 2008).

¹ The words “fulla” and “blackfella” are words used in Indigenous contexts in Australia. “Fulla” (which may be spelled in a variety of ways such as “fella” or “fullah”) here is another word for “boy” or “man.” “Blackfella” often means “Aboriginal man,” as opposed to “white man.” However, here it is used as “black man,” who may not necessarily be Indigenous.

² Aboriginal word for “sister” and/or “female friend.”

Likewise, hip hop musician Dobby looks beyond the idea of a particular musical form adopted by marginalized peoples. In his published research as a music scholar, Dobby (a.k.a. Rhyan Clapham) emphasizes hip hop's ability not only to carry marginalized voices in general, but Indigenous voices in Australia specifically (Clapham and Kelly 2019). The similarities between pre-colonial cultural expressions (corroborees, body paint and rock art, oral storytelling, and instruments like clap sticks) and hip hop (breakdancing, graffiti, MCing, and DJing) are evidence for hip hop's adaptability among Indigenous musicians in Australia (Dobby, in Schuitenmaker 2022). Describing the exceptional connection Indigenous people in Australia have with the music genre, Chiara Minestrelli has argued that Indigenous hip hop can be seen as a pan-Aboriginal movement (Minestrelli 2017, 2).

Dobby and Barkaa speak directly to white settler-Australians as they address Indigenous deaths in custody in their song "I Can't Breathe," with lyrics such as "*If I were you I would educate myself*" and "*If you're white, come and fight with your Blackfella friends*" (DOBBYau 2020). In a podcast conversation Dobby and I recorded together, Dobby explained the context of this song:

When George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis in the States, in June last year 2020, we, in Australia, looked back in our own backyard and said, "well how come we are quick to stand up and fight for someone like George Floyd but we don't even know the name David Dungay Jr. who was killed in the same, exact way. By not just one cop, but five police officers, in a prison."...The cops stood on the back of his neck and he was suffocated. (Dobby, in Schuitenmaker 2022)

Before the tragic killing of Indigenous Dunghutti man David Dungay Jr. on December 29, 2015 by police officers, his last words were the same as those of George Floyd: "I can't breathe." Unfortunately, despite years of intensifying protest and a royal commission between 1987–1991 investigating the high level of Indigenous deaths in custody, it took a pandemic and the murder of another Black man in the United States for Black deaths in custody to become a prominent issue for many settler-Australians. "I Can't Breathe" has thus generated a large amount of media attention, resulting in Dobby and Barkaa's song now being included in new anti-racism learning resources for schools Australia (Racism No Way, n.d.). In this way, school curriculums offer spaces both for marginalized voices to be heard and for Indigenous students to learn how to use their voices. This has not come without resistance, as Dobby explains:

Barkaa and I are both very aware that this is going to rattle a few cages. And this is, you know, the truth-telling that we need. We said to ourselves, "if it's not getting that reaction then we've not reached the right people." And this is the whole thing, like in June last year we were talking to ourselves and we were like "how do we get outside our bubble?" Because preaching to the choir doesn't do anything. (...) real change comes from finding the parameter, right? (...) So, we need it to be able to reach those people that are going to call us, you know, racists ourselves, or, justify that David Dungay was a criminal (...). So it meant that it was working. (Dobby, in Schuitenmaker 2022)

As argued by Georgia Curran and Mahesh Radhakrishnan (2021, 111–12), George Floyd's murder initiated another surge in the Black Lives Matter movement on a global level. This

momentum has been key as part of the strategic planning in the production and release of “I Can’t Breathe.”

Artists such as Barkaa, DRMNGNOW, and Dobby are actively rattling cages by confronting, challenging, and resisting Australia’s colonial foundations. Through hip hop, these musicians highlight parallels between racial issues in Australia and those in the United States, seeking to generate attention on a national and international scale. As these Indigenous hip hop artists urge us to listen to Indigenous voices in Australia, they give credence to Tricia Rose’s (2008) argument that hip hop is a significant medium for protest for Black people, from all around the globe.

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