

Finding a Voice on Indigenous Issues: Midnight Oil's Inappropriate Appropriations

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Midnight Oil is undoubtedly Australia's best-known political rock band. For twenty-five years, the group has voiced demands for social justice and publicly criticised aspects of Australian society. It seems inevitable that the band came to be concerned with Indigenous issues and found ways to debate these issues within mainstream discourse. However, while seeking to promote greater understanding of the deleterious effects of 'white' Australia on the Indigenous population, the band made choices that some of the people they attempted to represent found offensive and viewed as perpetuating myths and prejudice. At times, Midnight Oil contributed to the silencing of Indigenous voices, particularly by suppressing or refusing to engage with the objections of Aboriginal groups. While the band may not have considered itself to be an independent instance of power, an 'epistemological a priori'¹ dominating knowledge, Midnight Oil's prominence in spheres of public debate meant that their message often drowned out that of those to whom they attempted to lend their voice. This paper will focus particularly on a controversy over the song 'Truganini' in 1993, when Indigenous groups exposed Midnight Oil's errors of fact, as well as their more generically 'white' misconceptions. The controversy forced the band into a dialogue with the community it claimed to represent — a controversy heightened by the fact that Indigenous issues were not yet prominent in mainstream, 'white' debate. The band's struggles can be seen to reflect Australia's attempts to negotiate its way out of a racial deadlock. 'Truganini' appears to be a turning point after which Midnight Oil learns to speak to, instead of speaking for, its audience.

In March 1993, the seemingly innocent liner notes accompanying the Midnight Oil single 'Truganini' sparked a controversy. These notes meant to shed light on the song by explaining that Truganini was 'the sole surviving Tasmanian Aborigine',² the last of her race, when she died in 1876. The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre immediately called for a boycott of the single, highlighting the fact that 7,000 contemporary Tasmanians considered themselves to be Aboriginal. Perhaps more serious were the claims from the Centre that 'Truganini [had] become a convenient symbol for the terrible things white people have done, but also for the view there are no longer any Tasmanian Aborigines, that we are extinct'.³ Not only did the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre attack Midnight Oil, it also challenged the traditional textbook representation of Truganini 'in chains', held by her European captors and, beyond this, the dominant perception of Australia's history. From the viewpoint of the Centre, the band's statement denied a current Indigenous presence in Tasmania, metaphorically producing the extinction it described by excluding an entire category of the population. Midnight Oil's statement propagated the myth of an extinct race.

Some Indigenous activists saw benefit in Midnight Oil's error and devised a 'campaign that would attract maximum media attention'.⁴ The Tasmanian

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Aboriginal Centre saw Midnight Oil's mistake as an opportunity to redress frequent white misconceptions — any attack on the Midnight Oil institution would benefit from considerable media exposure. The band became a deliberately wielded instrument in a political struggle. Midnight Oil was not a primary target in the Centre's formal public statements against 'Truganini' but a loudspeaker allowing Indigenous groups to be heard. Midnight Oil's manager, Gary Morris, encouraged the band's critics to overlook the error and be silent: 'My suggestion to these people is to stop shooting themselves in the foot and let a band like Midnight Oil voice its appeal to white Australia on behalf of black Australia'.⁵ On behalf of Midnight Oil, Morris disparaged the ability of Indigenous Australians to self-represent. He diminished the significance of Midnight Oil's erroneous representation while over-estimating the band's ambassadorial powers. Certainly, the 'white Australia' Midnight Oil's message would reach would be a left nationalist, republican sector of the population, not the entire nation. Hijacking the Midnight Oil edifice was an empowerment tactic on the part of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, especially since the 'Truganini' controversy had legal roots.

In 1992, after the *Mabo* judgement, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre took the lead in Native Title claims in Tasmania.⁶ The legal cornerstone to the recognition of Indigenous rights to land was the acceptance that Aboriginal people were not extinct in Tasmania.⁷ Contending that Truganini was the last Indigenous Tasmanian could therefore seriously undermine Tasmanian Aboriginal people's Native Title claims. Midnight Oil's comments suffered from poor timing but offered the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre an excellent opportunity to disseminate their argument to the largest possible audience. Greg Lehman, who first brought the issue to the attention of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, laments the fact that Midnight Oil did not consult the Indigenous community to check the validity of their statement.⁸ Although the band claimed to champion the Indigenous cause, Midnight Oil spoke for Indigenous Tasmanians and instead perpetuated a white bias.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre's attack concerned comments made about Truganini, not the song itself. The lyrics show that Midnight Oil was probably not aiming for historical accuracy but was concerned with what Truganini might symbolise. The band seemed to see her as embodying the violence inflicted upon Indigenous people. Actually, Truganini encapsulates not only apparent racial misunderstandings in Australia but deep-rooted and conflicting politics of history.

'Truganini' does not deal primarily with Indigenous issues but links a range of vignettes themed on 'injustice': workers' strikes, farmers' miserable conditions, and Australia's convict past launch the chorus. A republican theme dominates:

I hear much support for the monarchy
 I hear the Union Jack's to remain
 I see Namatjira in custody
 I see Truganini's in chains
 ...
 I hear much support for the monarchy
 I see the Union Jack in flames, let it burn
 I see Namatjira with dignity
 I see Truganini's in chains

In this context, the republican agenda is linked to the crimes of the colonial past and, in Namatjira, its effects on contemporary Australian society. Midnight Oil seems to have chosen two iconic Indigenous figures for their evocative power, and employed them in a loose, possibly ‘gratuitous’⁹ — as opposed to strictly historical — manner. The band’s manager insisted that ‘the reference to Truganini is a metaphor for injustice in land rights, not a comment on authentic Aboriginality’.¹⁰

The ‘Truganini’ controversy, although the most publicised, was not the first instance in which Midnight Oil perpetuated a white bias. Going on an outback tour in 1986 was an unprecedented move for a ‘white’ rock band already quite well known on the coast. Although they humbly admitted their lack of knowledge about black Australia, they made the occasional slip: ‘we realised with a jolt that we, like most typical Australians, knew practically nothing about the Aborigines with *which* we share this country’ (emphasis added).¹¹ Strikingly, the journalist did not identify the error, which would readily be identified as offensive today. The band was invited by a friend of theirs to play for small Indigenous crowds in the Northern Territory, and then asked by Film Australia to record a song for a documentary on the return of Uluru to its traditional owners in October 1985.¹² Invitations from several Aboriginal communities followed, and Midnight Oil held free concerts in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. They performed with two Indigenous bands, the Warumpi Band and Gondwanaland.

Midnight Oil’s ambition was to ‘build bridges’ between the centre and the periphery, allowing a new dialogue to happen.¹³ However, Aboriginal audiences first seemed far from impressed and journalists did not fail to notice that about two thirds of the audience left, while the Aboriginal bands touring alongside Midnight Oil had been immensely popular the same night.¹⁴ Midnight Oil had to change its performance, as city and country audiences had different expectations. Until then, the ‘white’ artists who were popular with Aboriginal people in the centre of Australia were country music singers such as Slim Dusty, whose preferred topics — love of family, of homeland — were more familiar to this audience than Peter Garrett’s loud, live-wire performance and comments on ‘slick city politics’.¹⁵ Midnight Oil managed to connect with its country audience by slowing down the pace and yarning between songs. The metamorphosis did not prevent critics from arguing that this newfound dialogue was short-lived: Midnight Oil’s outback tour as a one-off event, and contrasted with the long-term relationship the likes of Slim Dusty have established with Indigenous communities. In this light, Midnight Oil appear as ‘dilettantes rather than committed radicals’.¹⁶

While Midnight Oil’s tour has been harshly criticised,¹⁷ song lyrics in a subsequent album, *Diesel and Dust*, have attracted surprisingly little attention, yet they raise far-reaching ideological concerns. *Diesel and Dust* attempts to present Indigenous concerns to Midnight Oil’s ‘white’, urban audience. The criticism the band faced raises the question ‘who holds the power to tell whose history?’¹⁸ Is there a way Midnight Oil could satisfy their urge to make Aboriginal voices heard without attracting criticism? Former Prime Minister Paul Keating advocated adopting the point of view of Indigenous Australians.¹⁹ However, such a process would tend to express a white perspective in more or less subtle disguise. Midnight Oil’s song ‘The Dead Heart’ tells a story of colonisation from an

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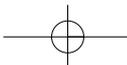
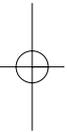
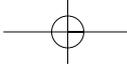
Indigenous speaker's perspective, and interpellates its audience as Indigenous. The line 'we don't serve your country, don't serve your king, know your custom, don't speak your tongue' illustrates and advocates resistance to cultural oppression. Midnight Oil's effort is laudable but its artificiality poses many problems and solves few. This technique recalls the way colonisers hijack Indigenous narratives and systematically appropriate history. The lyrics to 'The Dead Heart' consist of monosyllabic words (with the exception of some three-syllable words at the end of a verse for emphasis). Although Aboriginal people did oversimplify their narratives when confronted with colonisers' disbelief,²⁰ the song's simplex style reproduces the 'primitive' stereotype. Trying to act as a translator, in this instance the band tends to be a ventriloquist instead.

One way to pursue the goal of voicing Indigenous concerns would be for Midnight Oil to invite Indigenous musicians to perform on their recordings. Similar ventures, however, have attracted accusations of exploitation, of using Indigenous artists for folkloric purposes, and depriving them of copyright and control over their performances.²¹ While Midnight Oil has never included an Indigenous singer in their recordings, the band has often featured a didgeridoo player since the album *Red Sails in the Sunset* in 1984. Charlie McMahon is a former university lecturer who accompanied the band on its outback tour, yet — perhaps through over-theorisation — his didgeridoo playing is problematic. The didgeridoo is so widely recognised as a symbol of Aboriginal music that it has become metonymic and its use tends to elide the fact that Indigenous people may play other instruments, depending on the region of their birth and on the social occasion of their performance.²² In a way, the didgeridoo has been 'Orientalised', to use Edward Said's terminology, since it corresponds to a western construction of Aboriginality and cannot encompass the variety of Indigenous Australian musical production.²³ However, when Midnight Oil tried representing Aboriginal sounds in a more researched manner, some Indigenous groups objected to the sound of a bullroarer recorded for the introduction of a song on *Diesel and Dust*, as they considered it belonged in sacred rituals, not in rock songs.²⁴

Paradoxically, the objections to Midnight Oil's appropriations of Indigenous history, voices and instruments have created a measure of communication and provided a public forum for debate, replacing what was, in the mid-1980s, an oppressive status quo.²⁵ Their blunders, however, are not important; rather, what counts is the effort²⁶ they make to elaborate a strategy that may move toward healing the racial tensions in Australia. The controversies the band sparks can provide space for discussion and the renegotiation of liminal zones between cultures. At 'the margins of language or discourse, speech is more fluid, more flexible'.²⁷ Moving into the periphery creates space for the dominant narrative to be disrupted and 'contaminated' by foreign elements. In this way, Midnight Oil plays the part of a mediator — and scapegoat. However imperfectly traces of Indigenous traditions may be recorded in 'white' culture, their presence is a sign that those cultures are recognised as extant and as belonging to the entire Australian society. Such projects call into question white Australians' acceptance of their ancestors' deeds, but the adoption of an Aboriginal viewpoint, however fake it proves to be, still re-centres Indigenous issues within white society. Placing

an Aboriginal point of view in the 'white' public sphere seems to be a first step towards recognition of past events.

While Midnight Oil's song lyrics have become increasingly cryptic, the band uses their public appearances to reaffirm their strong political commitment. Midnight Oil's dialogue with the Indigenous community was especially visible in the way the band approached the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. The band had learned the lesson of the 'Truganini' controversy and consulted members of Yothu Yindi before deciding upon the now famous 'Sorry' outfits. These shirts, given the impact they had on viewers, went further than the official organisation of the Olympics in re-centring Indigenous issues: until Midnight Oil appeared on stage, Indigenous imagery had been used mostly at the artistic level.²⁸ Cathy Freeman's presence produced tensions as well as pride — as an Aboriginal athlete, she seems to bear a weight that 'white' athletes do not and she 'runs for reconciliation [while] Ian Thorpe does not swim for it'.²⁹ Midnight Oil hailed Indigenous Australia directly, recognising that the original inappropriate appropriation of the continent is the critical issue that needs to be addressed. On this occasion, Midnight Oil brought popular protest to one of the country's (and the world's) most iconic arenas, a place where symbols of nation are displayed. The band demonstrated their acceptance of their role as a mere instrument, a loudspeaker for Indigenous voices. Retrospectively, it seems easy to castigate Midnight Oil for its many mistakes. However, the band has made constant efforts to revise its representations of Indigenous Australia and, sometimes at its own expense, has stimulated a reflection among 'white' Australians: 'If this manner of dialogue or representation was inappropriate, what else could be tried?' Aden Ridgeway's view is that 'acts of reconciliation are not extraordinary events', they should allow us to 'better understand the perspective of the other side'.³⁰ Midnight Oil's persistence in the face of criticism and their constant effort to accommodate Indigenous agendas shows that Australian history cannot be told as a 'comfortable' narrative — but that striving toward reconciliation is a worthy project in itself.



Notes to pp 121–131

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- 1 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Representation, knowledge and whiteness: knowing the indigenous Other', paper delivered at La Trobe University, 16 August 2002.
- 2 Andrew Darby, 'Songs get Midnight Oil into hot water', *Age*, 11 March 1993, p 1.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Lyndall Ryan, 'Aboriginal politics in Tasmania 1975–1995', *Island*, no 64, Spring 1995, pp 26–36.
- 5 Quoted in Darby, *op. cit.*
- 6 Ryan, *op. cit.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 Interview with the author, 23 July 2002.
- 9 Marj Kibby, 'Truganini, Midnight Oil, and the appropriation of signs', <http://www.newcastle.edu/departement/so/truganini.html>, site visited on 21 September 2000.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Janet Hawley, 'The midnight rockers tune in', *Age*, 2 August 1986, p 6. (My italics.)
- 12 Andrew McMillan, *Strict Rules*, Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney, 1988, p 12.
- 13 This resurrects the role of the medieval musician, as detailed in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985.
- 14 Janet Hawley, *op. cit.*
- 15 *ibid.*

Notes to pp 132–136

- 16 Bruce Elder, 'Ballad of unfinished business', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1990, p 80.
- 17 For instance, see *ibid.*
- 18 Julie Gough, 'History, representation, globalisation and indigenous cultures: a Tasmanian perspective', in Claire Smith and Graeme Ward (eds), *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2000, p 89.
- 19 Paul Keating, 'The Redfern Park speech', in Michelle Grattan (ed), *Reconciliation: Essays on Australian Reconciliation*, Bookman Press, Melbourne, 2000, p 63.
- 20 Heather Goodall, 'Aboriginal history and the politics of information control', in Richard White and Penny Russell (eds), *Memories and Dreams: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Australia, Pastiche II*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, p 92.
- 21 This is what happened to Paul Simon when he recorded *Graceland* in 1986, as recalled by George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: popular music, postmodernism and the poetics of place*, Verso, London, 1994.
- 22 Chris Lawe-Davis, 'Aboriginal rock music: space and place', in Tony Bennet et. al. (eds) *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, Routledge, London, 1993, p 250.
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 As reported on <http://www.deadheart.co.uk>, site visited on 21 July 2002.
- 25 Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1975.
- 26 Rosemary Van Den Berg, 'Nyoongar; Perceptions of Reconciliation', *Meanjin*, 1, 2000, pp 155–61.
- 27 Mary Klages, 'The blackness of blackness: the critique of the sign and the signifying monkey', <http://www.colorado.edu/English/engl2010mk/2gates.html>, site visited on 3 May 2002.
- 28 Lisa Meekison, 'Indigenous presence in the Sydney games', in Smith and Ward, *op. cit.*, pp 109–26.
- 29 Moreton-Robinson, *op.cit.*
- 30 Aden Ridgeway, 'An impasse or a relationship in the making?', in Grattan, *op. cit.*, p 14.