Performing Bodies: Negotiating Race And Gender: In An Indigenous Australian Performance Studies Classroom

Elizabeth MacKinlay

© Elizabeth MacKinlay 2015
Copyright Notice: The policy of GEMS is that authors will retain copyright to their materials.

Abstract: In this paper, I explore what happens when Indigenous Australian women sing, dance and perform for and with students in a tertiary classroom setting at the University of Queensland. With reference to ethnomusicological, feminist and Indigenous studies frameworks of inquiry, I discuss the possibilities which open up for understanding and negotiating gender, race and other subjectivities through an embodied and experiential style of pedagogy. Through a creative dialogue between myself, the students who participate in this performance classroom, the performers themselves, video clips from the class and a variety of academic voices, issues of performativity are voiced and problematized.
**Introduction**

In the history of Western thought, the body has been regarded as a "source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason" (Grosz, 1994, p. 5). Cartesian dualism is considered by contemporary philosophers to be responsible for the splitting of mind from body, the prioritising of reading mind over body (McWilliam, 1996, p. 16) and consciousness above corporeality (Grosz, 1994, p. 7). Speaking about the appearance of black women’s bodies in mainstream classrooms, bell hooks writes that one of the unspoken discomforts surrounding the way a discourse of race and gender, class and sexual practice has disrupted the academy is precisely the challenge to that mind/body split. Once we start talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we’re automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalised space. The person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body (hooks, 1994, p. 137).

She draws attention to the "legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders, who have been usually white and male" (1994, p. 191) which sees us teach as though only the mind not the body were present.

In this paper I explore what we can know when Indigenous Australian female performers make the journey into mainstream classrooms, when we as non-Indigenous teachers and students sing and dance alongside them, and the processes and methodologies we engage to construct a discourse of race, gender and performance in, of and through the body. The pedagogical context is an Indigenous Australian women’s music and dance course offered at the University of Queensland where students engage with Indigenous understandings of gender and performance by becoming singing and dancing scholars alongside the Indigenous custodians of these performance traditions. In this paper I argue that this embodied type of pedagogy is effective in bringing an experiential understanding of race, gender and performance.

**Locating Myself And The Classroom**

I have been working with Australian Aboriginal women in a research capacity since beginning my doctorate in ethnomusicology in 1993. Most of my involvement has been with Aboriginal people who identify as Yanyuwa in the remote Aboriginal community of Borroloola in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory of Australia. My relationship with this community – my ‘field’ - is at once professional and personal. My subjectivity as wife to a Yanyuwa man and mother to a Yanyuwa son places me in personal and familial relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female singers and dancers with whom I am speaking to and about. We have shared our selves and our worlds in many different places in many different ways. I have sat with them by the banks of the McArthur River, around campfires at night, in the town camps and in Toyotas talking stories and telling lives. We have grieved together for the loss of our children, the loss of our loved ones and we have shared the wonder of new birth and new beginnings. They have sat with me in staff meetings, amongst strangers and friends, in front of many students, with government officials and alongside their Murri (Aboriginal) brothers and sisters in Queensland speaking and singing their experiences as Yanyuwa women. I have danced with them on country at Borroloola and they have danced with me here in Brisbane in the classroom. My understanding of Yanyuwa performance traditions represents my lived, shared and embodied experiences in this context.

In 1997 I began working as a lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland and in this capacity I have been afforded the valuable opportunity to invite Yanyuwa women to participate alongside me in the classroom. The course is called ABTS2120 Indigenous Australian Women’s Music and Dance (hereafter ABTS2120) and extends the understanding students have of Indigenous Australian women's music and dance by examining performance as education for living, as a reflection of cultural continuity and social change, and as expression, nurturance and maintenance of identity. With gender as an overarching theme, issues covered in the curriculum include:
§ deconstructing categories of Indigenous Australian performance such as traditional and contemporary;
§ situating Indigenous Australian women in terms of their social and musical roles and connections to status, authority, ownership, power and knowledge;
§ understanding the complex relationship between women’s performance and country; and,
§ re/presentations of Indigenous Australian women’s performance.

The pedagogical agenda of this course is achieved by combining traditional "chalk 'n 'talk" lecture material and the concretised Western texts about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s music and dance with a shared and participatory performance learning experience which engages students in an active reading of Indigenous Australian women’s music and dance via the body as text.

Speaking About Performance And The Body

One of the most distinguishing features of the ABTS2120 classroom then as personal, political and educational locale is the experiential component and engagement of the performing body as an epistemological site. This is what makes it non-standard, this is what makes it at once exciting and confronting, and this embodied learning provides the setting for transformative meaning making and action via a bodily "engagement with difference, not retreat or isolation from it" (Wong, 2000, p. 69). Increasingly anthropologists and ethnomusicologists view performance as dialectical and bodies discursive. Henry et al. turn their anthropological gaze to examination of dance as lived experience and view the performed moment as a "generative site in which cultural and social identities are being performed, contested, constructed and/or reformulated" (Henry et al., 2000, p. 257). Dance and performance is viewed as dialogic then in the sense that the performance moment engages each individual body in a relational experience with other historically located, socially situated and culturally constituted bodies. Engagement with the "other" through lived performance experience provides a space for making meaning between shifting and differing subjectivities and further for interpreting, legitimating, reproducing and/or resisting identity categories and power relations.

Similarly, Hastrup’s work seeks to re-instate people as active in the reproduction as well as the transformation of culture and relocate the body as a locus of agency. Her re-centring of the body as "motivated" adds a dynamic dimension to the notion of the "mindful" body and emphasises the corporeal, situated and lived nature of social experience and the emergent quality of meaning. She writes, "One does not have a body, one is a body. There is no manifestation of the self outside the body, even if our senses and words help us project ourselves outward" (Hastrup, 1995, p. 90). Marshall agrees and suggests:

When we do research about bodies in the context of how to theorise the body, it tends to be either from a psychoanalytic perspective, or from the external approach that takes bodies as texts . . . We do not, on the whole, talk about how the body is experienced as a way of getting a better hold of a theoretical concept (1999, p. 64).

In Hastrup’s framework the self and the body constitute a unified space or stage with no boundaries where history, social experience and culture are performed, negotiated and transformed. The body as stage enables individuals to engage in meaning making through lived experience or as Marshall (1999) contends, the body becomes a vehicle to "theorise" everyday experiences.

Ethnomusicologists too have long realised the value of participant/observation, or as Hood (1971, p. 242) describes "making music together". Cooley suggests that musical experience via "fieldwork is the observational and experiential portion of the ethnographic process during which the ethnomusicologist engages living individuals in order to learn about music-culture" (1997, p. 4). Kisluik (1997, p. 23) elaborates and asserts that renewed emphasis on experience in ethnomusicology is gradually shifting the discipline towards reflexive, non-objectivist scholarship and further away from historically colonialist approaches. For Rice (1994, p. 6) musical experience is defined as the "history of the individual’s encounter with the world of musical symbols in which he finds himself" and "the dialectical
movements between distanciation, which invites explanation, and appropriation, which suggests a new understanding” (Rice, 1994, p. 6) enable the researcher and/or student to expand their own music symbolic system to include symbols referenced from the new musics studied.

Dunbar-Hall agrees and further suggests that in both music education and ethnomusicology, combining "an ethnographic approach and a focus on personal experience have become the means for leading students to a position from which to theorise". Participation in music-culture as a path to learning then has the potential to encourage students not only to theorise about their experiences, but also to actively engage with the political and ethical. Similarly, hooks (1996, p. 218) suggests that “The point of performance is to engage an audience in such a way that they not only participate but, potentially, are transformed in some way” by means of a reciprocal dialogue between audience and performer. Together these scholars highlight that by participating in a musical experience, engaging in a musical dialogue with performers as lived and moving bodies, the door is opened for students/researchers to reconsider and re-theorise understandings about that music-culture.

**Becoming Dancing Scholars: The Performance Workshops**

The ABTS2120 classroom is a site which opens up the location of possibility for change and transformation about what we can know when Indigenous women sing and dance, when we sing and dance with them, and the processes and methodologies we engage to construct discourse about those performances. To demonstrate the way that race and gender are mediated through performance in the ABTS2120 classroom, I will focus on the dance workshops performed by two groups of Yanyuwa performers. The first workshop can be broadly described as "traditional" and was performed by senior Yanyuwa women from Borroloola Dinah a-Marrangawi Norman, Jemima a-Wuwarlu Miller, Rosie a-Makurndurna Noble and Linda a-Wambadurnmara McDinny in October 2000 and 2001 (see Figures one, two and three). Yanyuwa dancer Samantha Chalmers performed the second in April 2000 and August 2001, defined loosely here as "contemporary" (see Figure four).
unrestricted” performance. These are referred to as fun dances by the Yanyuwa, more specifically, walaba when composed by men and a-kuriya when composed by women. A-nguyulnguyul, a sub-set of the song type a-kuriya, are a popular form of Yanyuwa performance and figure prominently in the Yanyuwa women’s song repertoire in the context of ABTS2120.

In the first week the Yanyuwa women and I introduce and explain various Yanyuwa song and dance styles through demonstration of unrestricted public fun performance. Next, the students are engaged in preparation for the performance of an unrestricted ceremony called Ngardirdji (Mermaid Dance) the following week by painting darladarlas (dancing boards). In the second week students are invited by the Yanyuwa women to paint up and dance Ngardirdji with them. This invitation marks the moment in the traditional workshops where students are not just subject to the performance of Ngardirdji but subject in it.

The contemporary dance workshop is a one-week class where students are able to watch Samantha perform solo and then perform alongside her as she teaches them a modern dance piece. The workshops are linked by a common expression of Yanyuwa identity through performance by women who have familial and cultural ties.

Staging The Dance: A Dialogue About Race And Gender

Here I bring the ideas I have presented thus far on performance as a dialectical space and the transformative qualities of the performing body in pedagogy together by examining student and lecturer/performer reflections to the traditional and contemporary dance workshops. I have created an ethno-drama or playlet around issues of performance and the body by weaving together student free-write responses to all performance workshops held in 2000 and 2001, the statements of lecturer/performers gained from one-on-one interviews I conducted with them, academic voices and my own in an interactional dialogue. For the most part, student responses focus on those workshops that included a large component of participation in dance; in particular the workshops conducted by Samantha Chalmers and the Yanyuwa women. Fictitious names represent the student voice and appear in bold, the academic voice is capitalised.

Figure 3: Rosie a-Makurndurnamara Noble and Linda a-Wambadurnamara McDiinny teach ABTS2120 students to paint darladarlas (dancing boards), October 2001. Source: Elizabeth Mackinlay

Figure 4: Yanyuwa/Wardaman contemporary Aboriginal dancer Samantha Chalmers. Source: Samantha Chalmers

The traditional workshops are held over a period of two weeks. Prior to going to class, Dinah, Jemima, Rosie, Linda and I talk at length about how the two workshops will be run. The Yanyuwa women treat the presentation of Indigenous Australian knowledge in this setting very carefully. They strongly adhere to their own cultural rules surrounding who has the right to knowledge of ceremony and song and regard all of the students in the class as young children who possess very little knowledge. As such, the type of songs performed in the ABTS2120 classroom fall within the repertoire of Yanyuwa lhamarnda or “public
and placed in a box, and italics mark the guest lecturer/performer and my voice.

SMITH: As a teacher, I consider it very important to "set the stage" for a student to "discover" relationships among data and ideas. Rather than to be told what they are – the student will remember the ideas better, apply them more precisely, and gain experience in a process intrinsic to ethnomusicological endeavor. And the student may discover something "really new" – or at least different from the teacher's understanding of it (1987, p. 204).

Jane: The workshops were the defining moments where you actually got up and danced . . . the defining moments of the course (2001).

Jenny: Participating is undoubtedly the best way to learn everything and anything in life (2001).

Liz: The moment when the performers come into the ABTS2120 classroom is a moment when students are placed in a position to take responsibility for their own learning. The participation process means that students must also physically engage with this learning, that is, to enact agency to become a motivated and moving body.

HASTRUP: Motivated agents create theatres of self. They stage themselves and meaning is made in the process (1995, p. 90).

Liz: Most students respond in a positive manner to this bodily engagement with knowledge through performance. Some students are excited with the pleasure to be gained from moving - motion encourages emotion.

HOOKS: Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress (1994, p. 7).

Sandra: Beautiful! I had a wonderful experience. That dance made me feel grounded & centred, that I was in tune with the motions & elements. Dance is something I love very much and I can say some of the happiest free-ist moments of my life were spent dancing (2000).

Andrea: Dancing is very therapeutic & this particular class time was extremely engaging. Just by looking at the enthusiasm in everyone's face, you could tell this was a success (2000).

Anne: I had so much fun! I really enjoyed getting inside my body and feeling movement. I loved the energy I felt as an individual as well as what I contributed to the group energy as a whole (2001).

Samantha: Making that first conscious identification with these images which is fluid throughout the dance and then ultimately you just allow your, you give yourself up to it and then there's the ultimate spirit of the dance, lives like a river and can feel yourself as an individual moving as well as team (2000).

Alexandra: It's so good to get involved in a subject in a physical way. I loved being able to participate in the dancing. It took a little while for me to loosen up my body, must have been stiff from doing my assignment last night. You don't realise how tight and tense your muscles can get (2000).

Jenny: I have participated in a lot of theatre and a few dance performances in the past, so I am acquainted with the feelings of creating and physically moving as a group and I have always found it extremely powerful. This evening was no exception (2001).

Samantha: Sometimes it's not just enough to talk about how wonderful a sunset can be, feeling the sunset is like so beyond words you know. So when they dance and I say "feel the water" or "feel the sand, lift your arms up like the wings, be a brolga and bring it down. You know they identify with those images and therefore connect even if it's not consciously (2000).

Clip 1. Samantha watches the students perform and encourages the class to identify with the images they are imitating in the dance, 12 April 2000

Melissa: Because I know how much song, and performance are imbedded in Aboriginal culture, and particularly Yanyuwa culture, I felt so overcome with emotions. Although I do not remember what I felt like when I first saw the ocean, I reckon to it being like seeing and sharing their performance with me (2001).

Sandra: So it was wonderful to me to see someone use dance as a form of self-expression. I felt as if I could know Samantha, just by watching her movements & dance (2000).

Alexandra: Sam was so good. She really made me feel comfortable and welcome. She's really encouraging to be around (2000).
Anne: Although somewhat hesitant about participating, I was largely put at ease by the enthusiasm of Samantha Chalmers and the group participation (2001).

Clip 2. Samantha encourages the class, is enthusiastic and demonstrates her general enjoyment, 12 April 2000

Grace: Samantha was amazingly enthusiastic and knowledgeable and gave of herself without question (2001).

Andrea: I also felt like Samantha made the setting very relaxed & more of a conversation with her mind than perceived learning. She had so much energy & that was eventually transferred onto the rest of the class & we needed it. I loved watching her movements & recognising subtleties from other performances I’d witnessed & I enjoyed further engaging in these movements with her (2000).

Jeff: In this class, it is always a bit nerve racking as you get singled out a lot being one of only a couple of guys if I am lucky (2001).

Gary: I initially felt I would be uncomfortable with attempting to perform an indigenous dance, especially with the class demographic, but Sam managed an excellent balance between informing, supporting & directing (2000).

Liz: Gary is the only male student in a class of 25. Samantha was very careful to ensure that Gary’s positioning as a man was catered for according to Yanyuwa rules about women and men dancing together, as well as ensuring that Gary would be comfortable in this role.

Samantha: By yourself? You want to do it? Are you sure?

Liz: Gary nods.

Samantha: Go . . . 5, 6, 7, go!

Liz: Gary goes through his movements from start to finish, forgets the end so Samantha shows him from the sidelines.

Samantha: Start again? I’ll do it with you, 5, 6, 5, 6, lift your leg!

Liz: Samantha and Greg dance together.

Samantha: Stamp your leg, want to hear your leg man! . . . Woo hoo! That was excellent bro! Very brave, very brave, no shame job there (2000).

Clip 3. Samantha dances with Gary to show him the moves, 12 April 2000

Gary: It was a real opportunity for us to get to know, you know, together push all of our inhibitions to the side (2000).

Angela: I really loved how she layered it and mixed in language. I fell right into it, one woman next to me bumped into me and "Oh sorry Sis", so I think it was working. I really enjoyed the feeling of the dance and Samantha’s honesty and expression (2001).

Jane: I was responsive to her upfront and very real teaching style (2001).

Grace: I think what I enjoyed most was that I started to feel the movements with the music and from watching the people moving around me (2001).

Anne: There was a great feeling of togetherness and, well, power even (2001).

Jane: Felt like a group triumph when it all came together (2001).

TRINH T. MIN-HA: When armors and defence mechanisms are removed, when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women [Liz: And men in the context of ABTS2120] begin to experience writing/the world differently. This is exciting and also very scary (1999, p. 258).

Andrea: I admit that I felt very awkward & clumsy while participating in the dancing, and even more so trying to sing the words. I felt very foreign and unnatural (2000).

Michelle: I was impressed with many of my counterpart’s efforts and determination to put themselves out of their comfort zones and dance (2001).

Rachel: We often looked awkward wearing only a bra, struggling to imitate unfamiliar dance steps and being painted with white ochre that did not look nearly as striking on our white skins as it did on the Yanyuwa women (2001).

Clip 4. Students demonstrate a common awkwardness wearing only a bra, struggling to imitate unfamiliar dance steps and being painted with white ochre, 22 October 2001

MORETON-ROBINSON: Whiteness is so pervasive as an invisible norm that race, as difference, still belongs only to women who are not white (2000, p. 110).

Liz: The act of painting white ochre on white bodies serves to mark whiteness in this setting. The white ochre feels pasty, cold and rough; your body feels open, expansive and exposed as the painting up
process takes place. The whiteness of your body cannot be ignored. Corporeality shifts to intercorporeality as the physical sensations of painting up are brought together with intersubjective interpretations of the experience.

Clip 5. ABTS2120 students "paint up", 22 October 2001.

MORETON-ROBINSON: Whiteness is not interrogated or named as a "difference", even though it is the standard by which certain "differences" are measured, centred and normalised (2000, p. xviii).

HOOKS: Race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white; it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even (1990, p. 54).

MOORE: Black scholars continually emphasize this point, but it is usually ignored or simply repeated as a form of rhetoric. The dominant experience of gender for white people is one that is deeply racialized, precisely because their race is both an unmarked category and constructed in contra-distinction to other race identities (1994, p. 61).

Liz: White bodies, white skins, white paint. Black bodies, black skin, white paint. The differences between white self and black Other are brought together in this awkward moment – the differences must be named.

MOORE: To leave certain spaces and pass into others is to know in your body what the differences of race involve; it is to know oppression and discrimination intimately in a way which does not allow for separation of the physical from the mental (1994, p. 81).

Liz: The act of performance, of dancing together, means that a communication across differences is possible. In this "moving about" between self and Other, students can work through the implications of their whiteness in this setting, they can question what it means to be a non-Aboriginal person in relation to Aboriginal people and their own role in perpetuating racism and oppression. It may be gauche, it may be uncomfortable, it may be confronting, but it represents a powerful pedagogical moment for the possibility of change and transformation

GUSTAFSON: To be critical of a knowledge system can mean to stand temporarily outside of it, or to stand in another location to view it. In a standard classroom the student would learn about other knowledge systems by reading about them, questioning, and critically reflecting upon these abstract concepts. But in doing so, she would be able to keep that knowledge at arm’s length as Other. Embodied learning enables students to also experience another system of knowledge by becoming subject to it and subject in it" (1999, p. 266).

Rachel: This awkwardness combined with the ceremonial process itself, allowed for bonding to occur between all of the people involved. I found the entire experience highly significant because I often recognise an absence of celebration of life and womanhood in my own life and in the wider Western community (2001).

Jane: I think a few people were surprised that Liz was participating in some of the things . . . a blurring of those boundaries, especially with the Yanyuwa when they came in and she danced which I mean obviously she’s going to dance with the Yanyuwa women but especially dancing in her bra (2001).

Liz: My physical participation in the performance workshops, whether that be being instructed by my sister-in-law Samantha to move or by the Yanyuwa women to paint up, sing and dance, is an essential part of who I am in this setting. Dancing in a bra in the ABTS2120 classroom in front of students who otherwise never see this physical side of you is quite different than dancing in a bra back in Borroloola. We are trained, shaped, "disciplined" to disassociate ourselves as teachers from our bodies in the classroom – there are hidden dangers lurking there.

MCWILLIAM: Whether scholars come to blame Descartes or Rousseau for the prevalence of a mind/body dualisms in Western scholarship, the fact remains that, in the history of Western thought, a mind/body dichotomy defines ‘human being’, while the body has been interrogated as the excess baggage of human agency (1996, p. 16).

HOOKS: Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach only as though only the mind is present, and not the body. To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders, who have been usually white and male (1994, p. 191).

Liz: I too experience initial feelings of awkwardness in crossing the boundaries of what is expected by a teacher to become once again embodied. By painting up and dancing in a bra with Yanyuwa women my female body is revealed and cannot be
ignored. This display is not meant to be voyeuristic. It is about performing my multiple subjectivities in that setting as white, female, family member, researcher and teacher. It is about living up to family expectations and responsibilities and it is about acknowledging those relationships through the actions and interactions of my body with other bodies. It is about recognising the knowledge and authority each of the woman have about specific forms of Aboriginal women’s performance. It is about knowing from my experiences "in", "out" and "in-and-out" or between the field that bodily engagement with this knowledge is one of the best ways to come to an understanding of it. It is also about being a good

"ethnographic/participant/observer" body as role model for my students, to show them my understanding of appropriate ways to act and interact in that setting with "insiders".

Gary: It has been an enjoyable privilege to be able to participate with "insiders" of Indigenous Australian music. The opportunity to be included in the learning experience that encourages a far stronger connection than would otherwise be the case (2000).

HIGGINS: Intercultural performance clearly engages students in doing rather than simply watching or listening. It encourages them to use many of their senses and to become emotionally involved. It is pleasurable for most. It fosters collaboration and mutual support in the teaching/learning process. It promotes personal and social as well as intellectual development. (2001, p. 254).

HOOKS: Critical reflection on my experience as a student in unexciting classrooms enabled me not only to imagine that the classroom could be exciting but that this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement (1994, p. 7).

Andrea: To be on both sides – the learner & observer was a very good experience. I am so thankful that Annie and Jemima & Dinah came all this way to share their culture with us (2000).

Deborah: I felt that learning the social and musical roles of women in Indigenous dance and song was valuable, before being an observer and a participant. Participating in the dance today was an effective learning process as it put all this theory into context . . . as real and existing in our face (2001).

Gary: I feel this [course] engaged and challenged me in a way I was not expecting (2000).

Andrea: It challenged my knowledge of things and that’s what I enjoyed about it . . . I think courses like these should be required, or at least highly encouraged as they are the window of seeing through the walls society puts up which inhibit open minds (2000).

MOORE: Behaviour, sets of activities conducted in structured space, can be used to ‘read against the grain’ of dominant discourses, to expose the arbitrary nature of their construction. If one cannot resist by placing oneself outside dominant structures and discourses, one can none the less displace oneself within them (1994, p. 82).

Gary: In regards to participating on the more musical sphere, as a male, white Australian I feel a lot of guilt & shame about the treatment of Indigenous peoples, & I feel much of the cultural appropriation that is carried out is almost the final insult, I’m unsure about my personal participation in that process. I try to keep at the forefront of my mind that it is a privilege to participate in a workshop with the guests, but I feel my/the reciprocity of the experience is somewhat lacking (2000).

MOORE: It seems then clear, then, that body knowledge can both refuse us and traduce us. It can insist on things that we would like to leave behind and it can continue to guide us when we have lost all sense of strategy and purpose (1994, pp. 81-82).

Paula: It also made you feel you were like becoming part of her [Samantha’s] culture sort of and you got that sort of feeling like she was letting us in on her (2000).

Gary: Yeah she [Samantha] was encouraging us to experience an element of the culture in some way, shape of form, so yeah we could take it away with us at the end of it. It was definitely a gift that she gave us (2000).

KISLUIK: When we begin to participate in music and dance our very being emerges with the "field" through our bodies and voices, and another Self-Other boundary is dissolved (1997, p. 23).

Rachel: Being a participant in Ngardirdji allowed me to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities involved with Indigenous
performance. There is great advantage in experiencing cultures rather than simply about them. The main reason for this is that by learning through experience, the learner is confronted with the living nature of the culture – with all its complexities (2001).

Melissa: What they gave to me was part of their identity, and that effected my identity because I realized that who I am as a person is more than my race and gender (2001).


Stephanie: Being a participant of contemporary Indigenous dance allows a small insight into a dancer’s view. Even if the only thing one learns is the view of the stage as a performer (as opposed to a view of the stage as an audience) then one is enriched in a small but significant way (2001).

Conclusion

The ABTS2120 classroom is a site where the issues of gender, race, identity and performance intersect and interact in fluid and complex ways. In the ABTS2120 classroom, bodies become active agents in the reproduction of discourse about Indigenous Australian women through dialogue and interaction, that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women performing to and with non-Indigenous Australian students. Race is completely visible in this context - black bodies are juxtaposed against white and white bodies collide with black. As Wong (2000, p. 58) contends, performance in this context is "another encounter between bodies where performance is a constitutive moment for an activist response to racialized inequities". This dialectic provides moments for myself and other non-Indigenous students to confront and negotiate the way that race and gender is inscribed and performed on and through our white bodies. Bodies of knowledge, physical bodies, gendered and racialised bodies are challenged and the performance moment acts as a site for engagement and transformation.

References


