# The Black Pacific: Music and Racialization in Papua New Guinea and Australia

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I was black at school when it was not cool.

They said the color of my skin made me a fool.

I was into rap when you thought it was crap.

All good now, so you want to be black?

--Joel Wenitong, “Blackfellas”

I’d like to begin with two music videos: First, the song “Treaty,” an Australian Indigenous Roots classic by the Yolngu band Yothu Yindi. When they recorded the song in 1991 they gave it an arrangement with prominent funk bass and drums [**Play**]. Second, let me play the song “West Papua,” by Tolai singer from PNG’s New Britain, George Telek.. The song calls for an end to the Indonesian rule of the Western half of the Island of New Guinea—disputed territory that the Indonesian government considers integral to the historical nation and which the Indigenous there people see as a colony, and a somewhat brutally repressive one, at that. When Telek recorded this version in 2010 for a documentary on the struggle for Indigenous freedom, he drew heavily on a Reggae sound modeled on the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers[**Play**].

These two songs amount to high points in a proliferating field of black musical references in the work of Indigenous artists in the Southwestern Pacific. For the past few years I’ve been looking at the connection between music, blackness, and the anticolonial struggle for Indigenous rights in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Australia, and I’ve come to see this connection as neither incidental nor insignificant. In fact, it is a crucial linkage in what Howard Winant calls the “*trajectory* of racial politics.” I combine ethnographic and historical research about music in the region showing local identifications with blackness as a racialized identity category is politically effective and serves as a way of recognizing and engaging the modern world system from an explicitly subaltern position. This is not, of course, the only example of black music—especially hip hop, but before that reggae and other forms—serving such a role; but it is one in which the racial logics and logistics are particularly interesting and which may shed light on the broader issue of musical racialization. Crucially, I want to draw attention in this study to the ongoing musical interactions in the Pacific between Indigenous peoples—Aborigines and Melanesians—and people of African descent. This is important, if only because both the general legacy of racialism and the more specific instance of disciplinary area specialization in ethnomusicology has served not only to highlight and elaborate a system of difference separating white Selves from a world of non-white Others, but also to establish categorical difference between those racially Othered peoples (Radano and Bohlman 2000, 4-5).

My argument here marks an otherwise largely unexplored element of the development of blackness and Indigeneity as part of modernity, and so before moving on to a closer examination of the music and its role in the process of racialization, it may be useful to suggest how I see this work in relation to two major areas of inquiry: African American and Diasporic studies, and Indigenous studies. Although I am moving beyond a strictly Diasporic model of transnational blackness, I recognize and build on the framework established by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Gilroy’s contribution was not just to focus black cultural studies on the African Diaspora (instead of narrowly on national or continental traditions); George Shepperson had done this as early as the 1970s, and in any case, as Dwayne E. Williams notes in “Rethinking the African Diaspora,” “Elements of the African Diaspora experience have been evident in the writings and efforts of most Black intellectuals since at least the eighteenth century” (1999: 118). Nor was Gilroy’s innovation to build a theory of black racial formation on music and literature; Sterling Stuckey had done something like this in *Slave Culture* (1987), as had Amiri Baraka, writing as LeRoi Jones, in a very different register in *Blues People* (1963), to name but two. His contributions, rather, were to combine a cultural study of the Diaspora that drew on a wide archive, especially reflecting the importance of music and other arts, with a focus on mechanisms of mobility and transport—key tropes in the narrative of modernity, and thereby to argue that racialization—and racism—itself is a key factor to understanding modernity at large. Gilroy may not be a maritime historian as such, but the figure of ships and the black people on them—as crew, as passengers, and most horribly as cargo—in his work offered a useful guiding figure in the conceptualization of blackness in a post-nationalist context.

This paper expands from the Atlantic—the ocean across which the African Diaspora most clearly came to be—to the Pacific, retaining an interest in peripatetic sailors (and soldiers) while also gauging the impact of the circulation of sound recordings within the ambit of a black Pacific. My key intervention is to understand better the ways racialized discourse and interactions between racialized peoples have played a critical role in the course of Indigenous Australian and Melanesian engagements with modernity, primarily in the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, but perhaps not always recognized, the racialization of Indigenous people in the region is coterminous with modernity, dating in some sense to the earliest colonial voyages, marked by the coinage of the terms “Melanesia” (from the Greek, “black islands,” named for the appearance of its peoples), and New *Guinea*, named for its geographical and ethnologic resemblance to West Africa. It is also inscribed in the local pidgin language terms of self-identification, “Blekbala,” “Blakpela,” and “Blak Fella,” terms that emerged early in the lexicon through interactions between Indigenous peoples, missionaries, and the sailors who made up the primary social contact points between Westerners and Indigenous people in the Pacific.

Anthropological theories of Indigenous modernity in the Pacific have often seen the two halves of that phrase—“Indigenous” and “modernity”—as structural opposites, either looking at incursions of elements of the modern (commodity capitalism, for instance) into an otherwise autochthonous Indigenous context, or have looked at local transformations of modern cultural forms as producing “Other” modernities (Akin and Robbins 1999; Foster 1992; Muecke 2004; Stewart and Strathern 1998; 2005). Marshall Sahlins’s “Develop-man” figure is a key version of this latter kind of theory. He describes a situation in which one of the principle faces of modernity in the Pacific, NGO and governmental development, is transformed by local actors. The “Develop-man” is, then, a traditional Pacific bigman (a community leader who cements his place in the social hierarchy through redistributive largesse, rather than through heredity) who uses access to capital and transnational NGO resources to recapitulate an essentially Indigenous cultural system (2000 [1993]: 418-20).

In contrast, I draw on Indigenous articulations of racialized discourse to show the ways Indigenous peoples in the Southwestern Pacific have actively participated in the creation of modernity itself. Drawing on the work of Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd (2009) and Philip Deloria (2004), and on Anthony Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), I propose that there are not multiple modernities, but rather multiple positions within the modern social formation. This work is in part an answer to Byrd’s call for reconceptualizing cultural studies of modernity to consider “Indigenous peoples on a world stage,” and focus on “the discrete moments and occasional discursive bumps…in which the Indigenous disrupts or otherwise radically transforms the stakes” (2009: 16). And it is in part a response to Deloria’s assertion that far from marginal to modernity, in fact, “the entire world of the modern belonged—and belongs—to Indian people, as much as it does to anyone else” (2004: 232). This is true not only for Indigenous North Americans, but for Indigenous peoples world-wide. My argument ultimately suggests that through creatively deploying racialized discourse, Indigenous peoples have recognized and enacted agency in relation to modernity as such. Not only does modernity belong to Indigenous peoples, but equally significantly, the histories of Indigenous peoples are, to be sure, part of modernity. There is no modernity without Indigenous peoples, and no accounting for two crucial elements of the modern—racialization and nationalism—without the inclusion of Indigeneity.

In order to explore these issues, I would like to turn to a more detailed elaboration of the place of black musics in the Southwestern Pacific. I will then contextualize these musico-racial identifications with some more general history of blackness in the region. To situate my argument about Indigenous musical blackness and socio-political agency in relation to ongoing debates about similar questions world-wide, I want to briefly address theories about music, political agency, and modernity from our own discipline, raising the issue of commodification and interrogating the role of corporate mass media and commodification in the circulation of racialized musics in the region. Finally, in conclusion I will return to the central questions that motivate this study: what are the implications for the analysis of modernity when identifications with blackness in the Southwestern Pacific are brought to the fore; and what are the implications for the study of racialization when extra-Diasporic black identities are added to the analytical framework?

## Diasporic Music in Pacific Contexts

I was first alerted to the significant presence of African Diasporic blackness as a model for racialization in Australia in 2005, when I was doing research on contemporary performance of traditional dance in hybrid forms by the members of an Indigenous dance college in Sydney, the National Aboriginal and Islanders Skills Development Association (or NAISDA). When one of the faculty members, Percy Jackonia (a Torres Strait Islander who had grown up in Cairns, North Queensland), learned that I had an appointment in a department of African American studies, he was keen to talk with me about Marcus Garvey, whose ideas he felt had been quite influential, particularly in the Torres Strait. At one point we were watching a video of NAISDA’s performance along with a huge cadre of Indigenous dancers from a number of remote communities at the opening ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic games. The choreography was massive, but focused on a scene in which one little white girl (Nikki Webster, conspicuously adorned with strawberry-blonde ringlets) who is meant to represent the Australian nation, climbs a staircase holding the hand of Yolngu songman Djakapurra Munyarryan. The students, who were otherwise quite delighted with the performance were obviously disgusted with this part, prompting one to remark, “She’s like Shirley Temple in those movies, ewww” (Personal Communication, October 2005).

I believe these kinds of associations—between blackness in Australia and in PNG, and blackness in the African Diaspora—are fairly widespread. My ethnographic experience suggests that today, at least within the cohort of people engaged with mass media and involved in developing and listening to local popular music styles, they are quite commonplace and deeply felt. In Australia this amounts to a fairly substantial portion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population; in PNG it is probably smaller, but in my experience it includes at least that segment of the population who are under thirty and live in or near one of the country’s major towns—the capital, Port Moresby and the provincial seats.

To look at this, let me return to the music I started with. As I suggested, black musical signs are a key background language in Yothu Yindi’s work, including the song “Treaty.” Yothu Yindi were, throughout the 1990s, and to some extent still are the most widely influential Aboriginal band in Australia. The brainchild of Yolngu community leaders Mandawuy Yunupingu and Witiyana Marika, and white Australian bassist Stuart Kelloway and guitarist Cal Williams, Yothu Yindi began as an experimental project combining rock with Yolngu instruments *yidaki* (didjeridu) and *bilma* (clapsticks) for a single concert tour. They kept playing together, and in time they came to define the sound of “Aboriginal Roots Music,” codifying a style that placed Yolngu *manikay* (traditional songs) in a fusion of rock, funk, and reggae (Corn 2007; 2010).

The song “Treaty,” from the 1991 album *Tribal Voice*, was a breakthrough for the band. Written in the aftermath of the Barunga Statement, which called for acknowledgement of colonial injustice and recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty in Australia, its combination of explicitly political lyrics in English, traditional song lyrics in the Gumatj dialect, high production values, and a danceable funk beat made it a national and international hit. Debate at the time raged over the political implications of changes to both the song and its video in an extended remix (the “Filthy Lucre” mix) indicating that the song’s tough message was widely understood among Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, and accounted significantly for its popularity (Hayward 1998; Nichol 1998). The literature on this song and on Yothu Yindi’s success more generally has tended to focus on Indigenous signifiers in the music and their relationship to Indigenous lifeways (Corn 2010; Hayward and Neuenfeldt 1998; Knopoff 1997; Magowan 1994; Stubington and Dunbar-Hall 1994); but it is also important to recognize the extent to which African Diasporic musical signs—funk and reggae beats, blues and reggae melodies, a heterogeneous sound complex drawn from the blues-soul-R&B-Funk continuum—provide the ground against which the figure of Indigenous musical signifiers—*manikay*, *didjeridu*, and *bilma*—stand in relief. Studies such as those by Aaron Corn or Jill Stubington and Peter Dunbar-Hall have been enormously important in exploring the agency of Indigenous Australians in demands for recognition; but without other ways of looking at this music there is the danger of becoming stuck in a debate over what Jessica Bissett Perea calls a “sound quantum ideology” (2012, 9). Like the pseudo-scientific racializing logic of “blood quantum” as a measure of Native American indigeneity, the fixation on sounding Other ultimately serves as a limit on Indigenous musical self-definition.

The aesthetic and political antecedents for Yothu Yindi’s blending of Indigenous issues with black music can be seen most spectacularly in the work of Bart Willoughby’s first group, No Fixed Address. This Aboriginal reggae band’s first exposure to white Australian and international audiences came as the opening act for Peter Tosh in a 1982 tour. The film *Wrong Side of the Road* (1981) captures the connection between black music, black power symbolism, and the politics of race most clearly. The eponymous opening song is a reggae classic, and announces its racialization in the lyrics’ opening stanza [**PLAY**].[[1]](#footnote-1) Unlike “Treaty,” which relates more exclusively to a politics of dispossession, Willoughby’s lyrics here draw land concerns into a more urban context—and a context that echoes concerns of the black liberation movement in the U.S. from the 1960s and 70s. The lines of the second stanza, “There’s a lot of things that are trying to stop you / and that’s racism and the cops and the government which is bogus” sing of structural racism and police violence. The film’s presentation of this song ends with police harassment and beatings. In the film No Fixed Address are shown on stage in front of a flag that is a classic of the era: it combines the Aboriginal flag (black and red with a yellow sun in the middle) with a black figure with upstretched hands, its afro and raised fists a clear adoption from black American political imagery (Lothian 2005: 184; Stokes 1997: 166) [**Fig. 1**]. The combination of these lyrics and imagery with the iconic sound of reggae—which is not only identifiably a Diasporic music, but connected with protest and the politics of race through Bob Marley’s and Peter Tosh’s work—came to be a touchstone as Indigenous Roots music came into its own in the following decades. Here is as good an example as any of the limits of “sound quantum” arguments: No Fixed Address’s work bears no relationship to pre-contact acoustemologies; and yet it was a critical step in the development of an Indigenous musical scene.

More recently the connection between politicized music and sounds from the African Diaspora in Indigenous Australia can be seen in the work of Aboriginal hip hop groups like Local Knowledge. This Newcastle, New South Wales-based group’s 2005 song “Blackfellas” enumerates Aboriginal and Melanesian language names on top of a production with a strong West Coast aesthetic. The opening lyrics set an explicitly oppositional interpretive frame for the piece: “Local Knowledge, rise up! Down under!” they rap, the words “Rise up” emphasized by a digital delay that in effect multiplies a single voice into the sound of a multitude. Let me play an excerpt [**Play**]. Each rapper takes a solo in which they represent their individual identities within a larger Indigenous context, most of which explicitly tie into the term “black.” **[Play**] The third rapper in the song, Joel Wenitong, draws the most explicitly on blackness as a trope and connects it metadiscursively to hip hop:

I’m the blackfella from the cubbie cub-east

Say family roots from the island South Seas

You can track me down from my family trees

French and German you can add to these.

I was black at school when it was not cool

They said the color of my skin made me a fool.

I was into rap when you thought it was crap.

All good now, so you want to be black?

Taking a cue from Yothu Yindi and other Aborignal roots musicians, Local Knowledge break genre in the middle of the piece, between the second and third solo sections, to insert a traditional song with an unusual accompaniment built up of chanting and body percussion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In Papua New Guinea and the Indonesian province of West Papua, a range of bands, including the Black Brothers, Sanguma, and George Telek were active in the same time span as No Fixed Address and Yothu Yindi, and like them, drew on African Diasporic musical materials. Their work often drew heavily on reggae in particular, but also African American sounds. They combined these with local instruments such as *susap* (mouth harp), *kundu* (hourglass-shaped drum), *mambu* (bamboo flutes), and *garamut* (log drum) and local variants of the regionally popular Pacific string band style, to make music that was often, though by no means always, political.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Given the very real differences in the politics of Indigenous people and Australians, and Melanesians in PNG, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the lyrical content of these songs was quite different from Yothu Yindi or No Fixed Address. Without military struggle or bloodshed, Papua New Guinea became independent from Australia through an act of parliament in 1975. In the years since independence, oppositional politics in the country have generally revolved around internecine conflict, including an armed separatist movement in Bougainville, and around objections to government corruption and poor stewardship of national resources. Racial politics tend to be part of the nationalist rhetoric—blackness is connected to Melanesian identity, which sets PNG apart from its neighbors to the North, West, and South, that is, Australia and Indonesia, and connects it with its neighbors to the East, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Australian musician David Bridie, whose band Not Drowning, Waving was pioneering in collaborating with PNG-based artists in the 1980s attested the importance of reggae, and particularly Bob Marley’s work, in the region. In his words, “Marley connects. He’s black, comes from a tropical climate and speaks of the liberation of black people. From the first time I landed in PNG in 1986, you would hear Bob Marley everywhere. *He is no doubt the most influential overseas artist in PNG*” (personal communication 2012; my emphasis).

The clearest example of the use of Diasporic black music by an artist of this generation is in Telek’s “West Papua,” as noted before. Telek has actually recorded the song a number of times, and this, the most recent recording, draws the most explicitly on not just reggae, but specifically on Bob Marley’s classic recordings with the Wailers. I would point particularly to the way the piece opens with a trio of women singing the lyrics “Listen up, listen up, yeah” in harmony. The sound is strongly reminiscent of the I-threes, the Wailers’ female singing trio.[[4]](#footnote-4) I was unable to ask Telek or the female singers, who record under the name Tabara about the connection to the I-threes, but Bridie, who produced this version offered: “Marley has always been huge in Melanesia, and I’m sure the connection to the Wailers’ I-threes is a valid one” (personal communication 2012).

Telek, Sanguma, and the Black Brothers’ descendants in PNG, including Tribe of Jubal and Richard Mogu, have continued to work in this vein. While their music is not generally oppositional within a national framework, it instead has taken on the project of developing a national “voice” that can be heard as projecting a kind of black pride in a post-colonial context, and thus oppositional vis-à-vis the larger colonial structures of modernity. In each case, Reggae and Funk are musical background languages that blend seamlessly with Pan-Pacific string band styles and against which signs of Indigeneity stand out.

In a less politicized context, signs of blackness drawn especially from Reggae have become commonplace in the prodcutions of CHM Supasounds, the monopoly commercial music company in PNG. Consider, for example, the band Twinhox of Kavieng, a duo of brothers from the Island province of New Ireland. The two recorded a hit album in Cyclone Digital Studio in the capital in 2000, which includes a range of material, but in which synthesized reggae-disco-rock fusion arrangements were keys to popular success. The cassette’s cover carried through the associations, depicting the brothers in dreadlocks, and red, gold, and green knit beanies. [**Play**] The group was poised to be the breakout stars of the time, but they were tragically lost at sea somewhere off the coast of New Ireland, yet still, their recording circulates extensively in the network of general stores that provide the main legal outlet for commercial recordings in PNG.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## A Short History Of The Politics Of Blackness In The Southwestern Pacific

I turn now to the larger context for understanding music’s role in racialization in the Southewestern Pacific. While the use of Funk, Reggae (and more recently Hip Hop) in PNG and Australia is a post-1970s phenomenon, the racialized identities it encapsulates are older. In focusing on concrete histories of racialized social engagement I have been inspired by Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman’s caution regarding the deracinating power of musicological (and as I see it, cultural studies) approaches. “Race, as the generating force of difference, is actually neutralized—or “eraced”—because difference is shifted from human differences to musical differences, to the object of music itself. By locating race ‘on music,’ both race and music become fetishized and denied” (2000, 10).

At least two key movements of people, the pearl fishing industry beginning in the late 19th century and the American presence in World War II, brought Melanesians and Aborigines in the region into contact with West Indian and African American sailors and soldiers (Brawley and Dixon 2002; Loos 1980). The importance of the World War II presence is visible in the historical record, largely through the Australian government’s opposition to the stationing of black servicemen in Australia, and the significance of both servicemen and pearlfishers is attested to in local memory as well. Larry Woosup, a community leader in the Angamuthi/Athumpayia language groups in Cape York, for instance, relayed to me stories about his brothers’ experiences pearlfishing in the 1960s, and his parents’ experiences in the 1940s, pointing to the importance of black people in both cases. He particularly singled out the musico-racial sense of identification between northern Cape York communities and black servicemen, saying that it was exciting to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the region to listen to records with American marines who, as he said, “looked like them,” and in exchange they showed the soldiers their songs and dances (personal communication, June 2006).

These North American contacts were key vectors in the spread of black consciousness, and black culture—including philosophy, music, and dance—throughout the area. While I am still in the process of contacting relevant archives in Australia and PNG in hopes of finding documentary evidence to support the oral histories, it stands to reason. It is compelling that both Percy Jackonia and Larry Woosup both pointed to West Indians in the pearl fishing fleets as a source for Garveyism as well as music in the region. Marcus Garvey himself saw sailors as a key component of his Pan-African movement because of their mobility. As Robert A. Hill, editor of the multi-volume edition of Garvey’s political papers says, “West Indians played a key role in spreading Garveyism in Africa, not only through their involvement in organizing UNIA branches, but also through the clandestine circulation of the banned *Negro World* and other Garveyite propaganda at various African ports by West Indian merchant seamen” (2006: lxxvi). Similarly, as E. Taylor Atkins has shown in Japan, and Heejin Kim has shown in South Korea, African American soldiers were a vital link in the transmission of black music in mid-century—jazz, rhythm and blues, and so forth—around the world (Atkins 2001; Kim 2012). While the trans-national music industries were already capable of moving recordings around the globe, certainly by the end of World War II, and in fact earlier, it was crucial that soldiers—many of whom were musicians themselves—put an explicitly black face on African American musical styles as they interacted with local communities in Asia, the Pacific, and beyond.

One final connection between Pacific peoples, black music, and people of the African Diaspora that I have only recently begun to investigate, but which looks promising, is to be found in the circulation of Negro Spirituals in the late 19th century, and the visit of the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Australiasia from 1884 to 1890. I can say relatively little about this at this point, except to note the length of the Singers’ stay, and the fact that F.J. Loudin recorded in his supplement to J.B.T. Marsh’s *Story of the Jubilee Singers*(1892) that they sang at least on one occasion for Aborigines at a mission station. He reports, perhaps somewhat self-servingly, that their singing drew “tears of joy” from the audience, and caused them to exclaim, “Oh, God bless you! We have never heard anything like that before!” (1892, Supp. Ch. 3)

I should stress that the geopolitical conditions facing Indigenous Australians—whether mainland Aborigines or Melanesian Torres Strait Islanders—are considerably different from those facing Papua New Guineans to say nothing of other Melanesians, and their futures may well be radically divergent. As subjects of a settler colonial nation, Indigenous Australians’ racialization takes place within an ongoing fight for land, basic human rights, recognition of sovereignty, and a discourse of multiculturalism; as a postcolonial society, the racialization of people in PNG is part of developing nationalist discourse. Their colonial pasts, however, and the circumstances in which they developed discourses of blackness—and perhaps most importantly the contexts in which playing diasporic black music as a way of representing racialized identities and politicized subjectivities arose—share some important elements. The most important of these have to do with the fact that the largest Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Papua New Guinean communities spent much of the twentieth century with territorial status (rather than statehood). Their lands governed by Australian administrators, indigenous territorial residents were subject to the violence of white rule, but excluded from citizenship.

The image of white people that emerged for the region’s indigenous people, as Ira Bashkow has suggested, grew as much through an abstract “antinomy of self versus other,” as through “direct experience and encounters with the peoples that the discourses purport to represent” (2006: 8). Bashkow describes “black” as a relational concept in the Orokaiva community in which he worked (in Oro Province, PNG), which is to say that it came into being and continues to exist not monologically, but in a dialectical opposition with “white.” I suggest that while black is, indeed, relational throughout the region it is more complicated for many people than the dialectic “blackpela/waitpela.” Bashkow notes this complication in the many gradations of whiteness that Orokaiva people conceptualize (6-7); but I also see it in the circulation of ideas about blackness in the region not only related to whiteness, but also related to African American and Afro-Caribbean people and arts. Not incidentally, these are ideas that have circulated specifically in music among indigenous people in the region.

Kathy Lothian has written about one such nexus for the circulation of these ideas. Her research focuses on the importance of the Australian Panther organization and the Black Power movement in 1960s urban enclaves, such as Sydney’s Redfern neighborhood, to the later establishment of better-known (and more successful) Aboriginal activist organizations in the 1980s and beyond (2005). Although her argument is not strictly about blackness as an identity category, she traces out a closely linked debate in Australian history over whether or not the African American political philosophy underlying black power had a significant impact on Indigenous movements. Lothian concludes that far from having “[rung] hollow in the Australian context,” as historian Ted Robert Gurr suggests (1983: 359-60), writers such as Eldrich Cleaver, Bobby Seale, Angela Davis, Malcom X, and Franz Fanon offered ideas that resonated with Indigenous Australians: “While Redfern activists did see themselves as a dispossessed and colonized indigenous people, and whereas issues of land were central to this, they also saw themselves as part of a more general worldwide liberation movement and as part of a racially oppressed minority” (2005: 196).

Much recent discussion of race in the Southwestern Pacific revolves largely around the racializing discourses of those in power. This is particularly true in historical work dealing with race and 19th century policies of white expansion in territorial Australia and the United States. What is most clear is that while a triadic racial typology of Anglo-Saxon, African, and Indian (or white, black, and red) emerges in the U.S., and a binary typology of Anglo-Saxon and Aboriginal (or white and black) emerges in Australia, European ideas about the meaning of black (or “negro,” or “negroid”) were anything but settled, uniform, or rational. Certainly race was understood in some sense to be a biological category, as manifested among other things in the fixation on interracial sex and the painstakingly fine-tuned elaboration of taxonomy for the children of such unions. However, many early writers on the subject simply focused on phenotype, viewing Aborigines and Melanesians as similar-looking to Africans. For instance, the leading ethnologist Charles Pickering described Aborigines as “fully as dark as…the Negro,” though he eventually concluded that they were racially distinct (Smithers 2008: 316; 2009: 254).

Noting the considerable difference between programs of genocide through absorption as applied to Native American and Aboriginal Australians on the one hand and policies of racial exclusion exemplified in the “one drop” ideology on the other, Patrick Wolfe makes the distinctive claim that in terms of their relationship to capitalism and the colonial system Aborigines may have been called “black,” but were not racialized as such (2001: 866). Rather, he argues, they were racialized as analogous to Indigenous North Americans. The idea, as he presents it, is that rather than focus on terminology, we should understand racialization as a part of capital’s expansion. As he says, the colonizers’ interest in claiming territory in both Australia and North America produced one set of ideas about racial absorption regarding Indigenous peoples, while their interest in maintaining a system of slave labor in the U.S. led to a different set of ideas about African Americans. (I note that his argument does not make claims about Melanesians, whose land and societies were only marginally incorporated into capitalism and the colonial system until as late as the mid-twentieth century).

There is much to consider in all of this, but because so much discussion has focused on the relationship between white colonists and black subjects, without looking at explicit relations between black people in the Pacific and black people in the Diaspora, the question of how blackness has been deployed actively, particularly by Indigenous Australians and Melanesians remains open to some degree. To see blackness as a useful category for Indigenous people in the region, one must see how it facilitated identification with other black people, not just how it played out in a racial opposition with white people and subjugation by the white power structure. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I believe that understanding the investment in identifications with black people beyond the diaspora is also necessary if we wish to account more fully for the political implications of the movement for black liberation in North America.

## Music, Modernity, and the Politics of Identity

Let me move back, now, to some discussion of music, because I believe it is not incidental that the medium of music has been a key location for Aboriginal and Melanesian people to not only represent, but in fact develop racial identities and identifications in the 20th century and beyond. In general the ethnomuiscological literature of the past two decades has shown fairly conclusively that music is consistently and deeply tied to social identities both as they are experienced by individuals and as they are performed, commemorated, and used to motivate larger social groups (Buchanan 2006; Charles-Dominique 1996; Jackson 2012; Radano and Bohlman 2000; Rice 2007; Sardo 1997; Sugarman 1997; Turino 1993; 2000; Turino and Lea 2004). Moreover, as Radano and Bohlman say, “…one might argue that the racial as it has been variously constituted within the contested spaces of difference is the Western ground on which the musical experience and its study has been erected” (2000, 2). As such, we might not be surprised to find music connected to the development of racialized identities in the Southwestern Pacific. More specifically, though of course there is also a precedent for tying music specifically to the representation of African Diasporic idenitity. As I mentioned already, Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* recognizes this, devoting an entire chapter to the role of music in expressions of black identity, and Ronald Radano’s *Lying up a Nation* (2003) is dedicated substantially to this point; but the idea is much older. Nearly a century before *The Black Atlantic*, for instance, W. E. B. Du Bois organized *The Souls of Black Folk* around a reading of spirituals, or “sorrow songs” (2008 [1903]). In his concluding chapter, he famously describes these songs as “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation, and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (163).

I note that in making the case that this music has been an effective tool for Indigenous artists in the Pacific, I am fully aware of the problem of assigning political efficacy to a social domain that is deeply enmeshed in, and perhaps dominated by, the modern transnational capitalist formation. The grass roots are constantly being coopted by corporate entities who are as happy to sell protest songs as love songs, and in so doing tend to limit those songs’ revolutionary potential. In a review article on “Music and the Global Order,” Martin Stokes cautions against easy celebrations of the potential for music to transform, upend, or otherwise provide a mode of resistance in the power relations that characterize the contemporary geopolitical order (2004). Citing a range of localized studies, he notes that for all that recent media, mobility, and ideological transformation have changed the face of culture around the globe, they can also be seen to have underwritten reinscriptions of old colonial apparatuses of domination, and the reproduction of “hegemonic relationships between center and periphery” (48). He argues that in the 1990s and early 2000s, we, following two major figures, Veit Erlmann and Mark Slobin, tended to write about the impact of late modern globalization, via the emergence of so-called “world beat” music by embracing one or the other of a set of binary oppositions: “global and local, system and agency, pessimism and optimism, top-down and bottom-up” (50). Again I point to Radano and Bohlman’s introductory essay from *Music and the Racial Imagination*, in which they offer a cautionary realism in response to celebrations of World Beat’s lionizers: “And so are revealed in the many version of popular music tracing across the metropoles new rhetorics of the folk vernacular which repeat as they reinscribe modernity’s never-ending quest for the authentic. That these rhetorics of authenticity have been occupied with discernably American racial figures betrays the colonizing effects of a United States empire without colonies” (32).

My work here, like that of many of us interested in moving beyond these dichotomies, is in line with Anna Tsing’s call for analyses that examine and clarify in concrete, human terms, “different modes of regional-to-global interconnection” (2002: 471). Surely the fact that Indigenous musicians in the Pacific draw on African American and West Indian musics to engage in a politics of liberation is considerably conditioned by American geopolitical dominance. Had the 20th century run differently Germany might have retained the northern half of New Guinea, for instance, and who knows what consequences that might have had. I do not wish to get bogged down in counter-factuals, though such thought experiments can be interesting. The more salient point as I see it, is to look at how music has been a tool and a token in an important, but otherwise overlooked social and political history. This is not the place to engage in a full-fledged debate about musical commodification, but my main intention is simply to say that the music I am looking at here did not only arise because of disembodied circulations of recorded sound artifacts. I want to argue that musical sound clearly matters, but in line with my ethnomusicological orientation I want to say that it does so as part of larger social networks of significance.

Allow me one more example: while I was working on a draft of this last Fall, as though right on cue, I happened to note that the biggest film of the season in Australia was a *Dreamgirls-*esque biopic titled *The Sapphires*. As its imdb page describes it: “It's 1968, and four young, talented Australian Aboriginal girls learn about love, friendship and war when their all girl group The Sapphires entertain the US troops in Vietnam.” The story is loosely based on the experiences of four actual Aboriginal women, three of whom had a girl group in Melbourne in the 1960s and two of whom toured American bases in Vietnam in 1968 (more radical than the film suggests, the other two were protesting the war and refused to participate). The film, which was written by Tony Briggs, the son of one of the actual Sapphires, and directed by Wayne Blair, an Aboriginal filmmaker, is a complex bit of work. If it were not for the Aboriginal angle, it would read like a fairly conventional romantic film with a bit of drama and a happy ending. Chris O’Dowd’s role as a hapless, tortured, but ultimately lovable Irish ne’er-do-well and manager certainly supports this reading. And yet with its gestures toward addressing the government sponsored kidnapping of mixed-race children, deracination, and the shooting of MLK, the film aspires to be more.

It is, I know, unfair and largely unproductive to charge a movie like this with being “historically inaccurate,” but it does not follow the actual life histories of the women it portrays, and it is interesting to see how changes to their stories in the interest of filmic narrative touch directly on the issues I am interested in in this paper. The most dramatic intervention is the invention of Chris O’Dowd’s character, Dave. In the clip I want to show you, which gets nearly all the film’s major plot points moving, three of the singers—Gail (played by Deborah Mailman), Julie (played by Jessica Mauboy), and Cynthia (played by Miranda Tapsell)—face the brunt of small-town racism when they leave their mission station, Cummeragunja, to compete in a talent show. They are not given the prize, in spite of a rousing interpretation of Merle Haggard’s “Today I Started Loving You.” Dave takes their side and is fired by the hotel owner who sponsored the contest. In the ensuing scene, Dave and the singers hatch a plan to entertain troops in Vietnam, the act begins its transformation from country to soul, and the eventual love interest is established. [**Play**]. In many ways this scene captures realities of Aboriginal music-making in the 20th century: racism, the importance of interracial working relationships, and perhaps especially the common white surprise at the importance of country music to black Australians; but it dramatically revises the women’s actual agency and identifications in order to serve the narrative imperatives of romantic comedy. I think musical agency was the last thing on the writer’s and director’s minds when they created Dave (and as yet I’ve not had a chance to ask), but the effect is to create a Pygmalion-esque situation in which Dave, the hipster Henry Higgins, winds up teaching the Sapphires to be (or at least to sound) authentically black. This is dramatized somewhat later when Dave uses the Staples Singers’ hit, “I’ll Take You There,” to teach the women the intricacies of call-and-response, expressive micro-timing and intonation, and timbral density: in a word, sonic markers of musical blackness.

In real life, the Sapphires were already in Melbourne when they discovered the opportunity to work in Vietnam, and were already a successful soul girl group. I won’t belabor the point too much (and the film does at other moments do a nice job of connecting black Australian life to African American life), but it is worth pointing out that in an interview the actual Sapphires told stories that made their brief careers as singers more clearly connected to a world of Indigenous and African American agency and connections. For instanceBeverly Briggs said:

I was 19 when we sang professionally as a group. It all started one night when we were coming home from a late shift at the Postmaster General. We got off the train at 11pm at St Kilda. We were going past a nightclub when these young Maori gentlemen out the front said: "Hello girls, come in, come in, come in to see the show!" They said they were looking for a girl to do the hula in their show, which had a South Pacific flavour. So the next day we ended up performing with these guys because their dancer didn't show up. They said "Can you sing?" and we said we can harmonise. That's how it all started (Nunn 2012).

Briggs went on, **“**There weren't pop stars as there are now in those days. There was Elvis Presley. But who were the women? We liked the black American groups. We loved The Shirelles. We harmonize real good. The Maori guys in the band were impressed with our harmonies and that's why they kept us. We'd sing “Hit the Road Jack” (Nunn 2012). Laurel Robinson specifically addressed their relationship to country music, saying, “So in the film, that's why they show us doing all the black songs. There wasn't anything like that here in Australia. It was mainly country and western. When you're young you hate country and western. But when you get older, you're sort of drawn to it. Most Aboriginal people hate it when they're young and love it when they're old” (Ibid).

I have a fair bit of work still to do to fully think through the issues raised by this film and it’s success (it was the highest grossing Aussie film of 2012, and widely recommended by critics as well). As in any production of this sort, the issues at stake are complex. My objection to the representation of the Sapphires’ agency is only one layer. There is certainly also the agency and visibility of the Aboriginal cast and crew to consider, the importance of work showing the larger history of racism into which any one group’s musical life fits, and so forth.

## CONCLUSION

There can be no question, the record—pun intended—clearly shows that Aboriginal and Melanesian artists have used music to build a racial politics over the past forty years or more. But what kind of social formation is represented when black people in the Southwest Pacific—Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, and Papua New Guineans—engage in racial politics in the register of African Diasporic performance? Are they making claims that link them racially to African Americans and others in the diaspora, or are they doing something else? I suggest that the linkages they intend are metaphorical, grow most directly out of the black power movement of the 1960s and 70s in the Pacific and the U.S., and in a sense take advantage of the cracks and confusion in racial logic that go back to the initial era of colonization of Australia and Melanesia. Perhaps most importantly they represent an affirmative politics of affinity between black people, not just a response to whiteness. The history of trans-Pacific black connections is only beginning to be written, but I suggest that it is crucial to understanding the larger picture of the international dimensions of race in modernity. Indigenous people in the region did not just conceptualize connections with black people (and especially black musicians) in the diaspora through engagement with mass media representations of blackness. As in Winant’s analysis of the political trajectory of race, this story has both a *longue durée* (in which indigenous people in the Pacific have come to have a racialized politics through colonialism and European racism), and shorter cycles (in which that racialization has been manipulated to various ends). Throughout the twentieth century there was a steady, if not enormous, stream of black people from the U.S. and the West Indies in the region. The Fisk Jubilee singers travelled there in the 1880s, sailors spent time there in the pearlfishing fleets, black American soldiers were active throughout the region in World War II, black political activists visited in the 1960s, Peter Tosh and other reggae musicians toured in the 1970s, and so forth. Moreover, connections from north to south, between Australia and Melanesia were common at least in the later twentieth century, spreading ideas about blackness within politically engaged communities.

I would close by noting that the term “black” does not always signify a connection to the diaspora for Indigenous people in the Southwest Pacific. Race, furthermore, is by no means the only important social category through which indigenous people in the area craft identifications, nor even the only politically salient social identity at stake in musical articulations in the region. Race is rather one among many vectors in a complex social field; we must also consider youth and adulthood, national and ethnic divisions, differences between rural and urban spaces, and of course, gender. For the sake of argument I have been painting with a relatively broad bush. Doing so, however, is an important step in a larger process of thinking through the cultural politics of Indigenous people in the Southwest Pacific and their connections to the larger context of global modernity. At least in my discipline, ethnomusicologists too often write about the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Melanesia as cultural isolates and as exemplars of radical difference. Instead, I see those peoples—clearly part of a much broader circulation of selves, of ideas, of things—as bound up in the power relations that make up the contemporary world

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1. I note, the song’s opening lyric: “I am a black, black man / And I need to be recognized in this wretched world” suggests at least a passing familiarity with Frantz Fanon, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). The stress on “recognition” is particularly consonant with Fanon, and the use of the term “wretched” is indicative. That said, “wretchedness” is also deeply integrated into the discourse of missionary Christianity in the region, and without further evidence such a connection remains but speculation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While the video, which features dancers from NAISDA in traditional Aboriginal body paint and Torres Strait Islander feather headdresses, shows one dancer playing two boomerangs as clapsticks, no clapstick sound appears to be present in the production. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Black Brothers were originally from Jayapura, in West Papua. They went into exile in Vanuatu in 1979, and later relocated to PNG, where they were enormously popular (Lockard 1998: 105). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The I-threes were composed of Bob Marley’s wife Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, and Marcia Griffiths, and performed with the Wailers from 1974-1981. The three singers on this recording are the daughters of the West Papuan singer and Black Brothers band member, August Ramwaropen. They perform independently as the group Tabura. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In PNG as in most of the world, much of the traffic in music happens outside official distribution channels, largely through internet downloads to cell phones. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)