

# Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Indigeneity and Performance

Professor Helen Gilbert (Royal Holloway) and Dr Ian Henderson (Kings College)

Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London and Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London

## Introduction

By focusing on performance by indigenous peoples in different parts of the world, this project examined how oral and embodied practices are passed on within societies and across different cultural groups. Indigenous performance was chosen for its highly developed systems of non-verbal communication, including oral, kinetic and spatial modes of artistic expression, and its potential to probe Western ideas about text-based knowledge. The project was comprised of a series of three interdisciplinary workshops that brought together world-leading researchers from Britain and abroad to debate specific but connected concepts in relation to indigeneity. The second of these events coincided with the Origins Festival of Indigenous Performance, produced by Border Crossings Theatre and involving Aboriginal and First Nations artists from Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. Participants across the workshops series were drawn from disciplines as diverse as geography, anthropology, performance studies, musicology, politics, heritage management, dance, media arts, history, and postcolonial theory. The term 'performance' was interpreted broadly to encompass a range of events, that included site-specific and mixed media work, political protests, 'cultural' performances incorporated into heritage tourism, and sports-based pageantry such as the opening ceremonies of Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Research inspired by discussions will be published in a forthcoming special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, to be edited by Helen Gilbert.



Photo: Henry Kitui



www.fullcircleperformance.ca

A workshop series convened by Helen Gilbert and Ian Henderson, funded by the AHRC under its 'Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects' programme.

## WORKSHOP ONE: MOBILITY AND BELONGING

13 February 2009, *Institute of Commonwealth Studies*. Chair: Helen Gilbert

This workshop focused on relationships between mobility and belonging as expressed in, and mediated by, indigenous performance practices. Participants discussed indigenous performance as an *embodied* material practice that rehearses, reproduces and/or revitalises forms of mobility, as well as creating new modes and patterns. Overall, the day highlighted ways in which mobility reflects and negotiates cultural power and how modes of social movement are transmitted, including the transnational circulation of indigenous arts and their reception by non-indigenous audiences.



www.fullcircleperformance.ca



www.fullcircleperformance.ca

## WORKSHOP TWO: ORALITY AND TRANSMISSION

15 May 2009, *Goodenough College*. Chair: Rachel Fensham

This workshop examined cultural transmission by focusing closely on oral practices as aspects of intangible heritage. It sought to explore the ways in which orality, literacy and mediality dynamically interact, particularly in the reception and preservation of oral practices. Drawing from readings by Diana Taylor on the distinction between the archive and the repertoire, the participants discussed how the concept of orality shapes and informs an understanding of transmission of cultural knowledge in and for indigenous communities. The day concluded with a powerful lecture from Alanis Obomsawin at the Origins Festival.

## WORKSHOP THREE: HERITAGE AND MATERIAL CULTURE

19 September 2009, *Royal Holloway, U. of London*. Chair: Ian Henderson

This workshop explored how the study of indigenous performance practices might illuminate key characteristics of heritage and how these practices relate to social cohesion. Invited speakers and participants discussed the functions of heritage within its specific social/cultural groups as well as in cross-cultural situations. Heritage practices and industries were understood to be dynamic expressions as much concerned with modes and impulses for transmission as with the creation of tangible archives.



Photo: Amy Sanceletta, courtesy EMPICS



Photo: Astrid Wind

## Origins Festival London 2009

The Origins festival, curated by Michael Walling of Bordercrossings, was held in various venues throughout London to celebrate the creative arts of First Nations peoples from around the world. The wide-ranging programme included four theatre productions, numerous film screenings and a number of workshops and panel discussions to encourage greater awareness and debate on indigenous arts practices among the wider public. The programme primarily focused on the indigenous cultures of Australia, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand and the USA, with a few examples of productions from other regions, such as Fiji.



BEYOND TEXT



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council