

Transnational Perspectives on Contemporary Indigenous Performance

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This project examines contemporary indigenous performance as a vital mode of cultural representation and a dynamic social practice. The research focuses on the theatre, dance, film, and performance-based activism of indigenous peoples in Australia, the Pacific Islands, the Americas, and South Africa. Three key questions animate this work: How is indigeneity expressed and understood in our complex, globalizing world? What kind of cultural, political, environmental, and aesthetic issues are negotiated within its canvas? Why has indigeneity accumulated immense symbolic and ideological capital in Western societies when indigenous cultures are among the most disenfranchised in modern times, often still struggling for social justice and access to their ancestral lands after centuries of colonization?

The current phase of the project involves the completion of a monograph on indigenous performance over the last two decades, drawing from my recent archival searches, fieldwork, intercultural dialogues, and practice-led research, which were funded by an ERC Advanced Grant. The book examines the recent, rapid development of indigenous performance globally, its enthusiastic reception in national and international contexts, and its local significance and value, especially in relation to environmental movements. I also explore how evolving concepts of indigeneity contribute to broader understandings of heritage, belonging, ecology, and conservation in multicultural societies and how cultural values, knowledges, and practices are transmitted, through performance, across place and time. The research is thoroughly interdisciplinary, engaging with current scholarship in history, postcolonial studies, cultural geography, anthropology, environmental studies, and performance theory. A DVD will complement this book; its theme of “contact” (among humans, animals, objects, and environments) is expressed through clips of contemporary indigenous dance, film, and poetry, interspersed with interviews and textual provocations.

A new strand of this project will be explored during the coming year, in dialogue with Professor Christopher Balme at Ludwig Maximilian University and scholars at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. It focuses on indigenous performances about the effects of climate change considered in the context of global debates on the Anthropocene.