

The eyes of the beholder essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Through various means of arts media, Langton asserts that “ how the audience responds that creates the debate” (1993). In other words, audience perception or interpretation of a particular medium shapes how society understands the topic at hand, whether via history or imagination. The depiction of Indigenous people and cultures influences audience perception in a mixture of extremes; Aboriginal people were either portrayed as victims of the white society, unable to pull themselves up, or as minorities who have made it successful, receiving status on a pedestal.

With these media ranging from painting to film to music, numerous perspectives of Indigenous people are pooled together, impacting notions of Aboriginality and its surrounding issues: identity, authenticity, and representation. Since the beginning of colonisation, Indigenous people experienced inequality and justice as well as suffered a loss of identity – victims of racism. Still today, Aboriginal individuals fight for equity, especially through land rights and native title. In Julie Dowling’s *Yalgoo* (2002) painting, she focuses on the issue of native title for Indigenous people.

With a claim to the native title, Indigenous people are able to practice freely on their lands, participate in decisions regarding their lands, and negotiate benefits for their communities (Yunupingu, 1997). As seen in *Yalgoo*, Dowling emphasizes the connections back to land and country (Snell, 2004).

Specifically, she illuminates the theme of injustice and sorrowfulness felt by Aboriginal people without the acknowledgement of native title claims, which features her Great Uncle George and Nana Molly.

Both lost most of their family, language, and culture due to oppression from the white society. Thus, Julie Dowling depicts Uncle George and Nana Molly holding hands across Yalgoo, a place of endearment whilst suffering injustice, as a gesture of hope that one day they both will come back to where they belong. In order to do so, though, native title must be claimed. In this sense, Julie Dowling highlights the issue of identity and allows her audience to interpret and extract the emotional hardships Indigenous people underwent through colonisation in Yalgoo.

Moreover, Aboriginal people were not only depicted as victims of domination but also as “primitive” creatures of the wild, especially men. Much of history has it that upon colonisation, Aboriginal people seemed different and “primitive.” As in Chauvel’s *Jedda* (1995), the plot surrounds the idea of corruption existing within Aboriginal society, in which Indigenous people were viewed as uncivilised, “primitive” people (Langton, 1993). The story has it that *Jedda*, a young, civilised Aboriginal woman, gave into her “instinctive, native weakness” via the lust of Marbuk, a “wild” Aboriginal man of witchcraft.

In the end, Marbuk was condemned to death by his own community when *Jedda* fell for her “genuinely wild,” “mysterious,” and “unknowable” King Kong (Langton, 1993). In essence, Marbuk represents the conventional Aboriginal male – unwilling to assimilate and seemingly wild, beastly, and uncontrollable: “His is the lust of a “real primitive.” He is an outlaw. He refuses to submit to civilisation” (Langton, 1993). Thus, this led to his destruction, which symbolises the notion that if Aboriginal people refuse to concede, they will not survive – a paternalistic view from the white society.

More so, most of the diction used in *Jedda* represented Aboriginal people, namely men, in a very negative light, as if they were aliens. However, Aboriginal men were not the only victims in arts media. In Destiny Deacon's photographic essay *Black Like Mi* series (1992), representations of black women were perceived to attract colonial lust, demeaning the value of Indigenous females and their identity: "lascivious white male gaze on Aboriginal woman is a mediated sexual experience" (Langton, 1993).

To further demonstrate the hostility that Aboriginal women suffered, the song "Lyrebird" by Alesa Lajana cries for justice. It tells of a frontier man's desire to have sexual intercourse with an Aboriginal woman by force. If she rebels or hides, he hunts her down and tortures her for pleasure: "Run and hide try she might... I would always hunt her down... Lyrebird sang all day long, and turned her screams into a song" (Hidden Blog, 2011). In this sense, Aboriginal women were stripped of their identity and appeared powerless and fragile, unable to save themselves even if they tried to escape.

In other words, racism is inevitable. Even when Indigenous people live normal lives like those of their white neighbours, e. g. having a well respected job and living an adequate life, the white community still shuns them. In *One Night the Moon* (Lucas et al. , 2001), the search for a missing child led to the realization that racism remains a constant problem. By all means, the Indigenous tracker Albert only wanted to help Jim find his daughter, but he was denied consent for being black. Devastated and hopeless, Albert quit his job and gave up on his dream of being a tracker.

In the end, Jim's wife, Rose, asked Albert to help her. Together, they found Emily dead by the hills, and Jim committed suicide out of guilt and shame. The moral of the story portrays Indigenous people as powerless but intelligent beings. Though he lived a life comparable to that of White Australians, having been rejected from what he did best made Albert weak. This depiction of Aboriginal people emphasizes the idea that Indigenous people lack a strong identity. Rather than challenging the law and white authorities, Indigenous people fear rejection.

As a result, Aboriginal people are constantly perceived as incapable of standing up for themselves, giving up on their ambitions. On the other hand, Indigenous trackers are viewed as intelligent beings. Alongside Rose, he was able to "follow the moon" and found Emily when Jim and his crew failed. This representation of Indigenous people and the course of nature highlight the connection between Aboriginal people and land, which they rely on their surroundings for knowledge and survival – an important part of Aboriginal culture (Hill, 1995).

Despite all the negative portrayals of Indigenous people in the sources mentioned above, Pringle and Featherstone (1986) managed to create a unique way of looking into Aboriginal history, providing their audience a new perspective of understanding the issues surrounding Aboriginality. In the satirical film *BabaKiueria*, the stereotypes of Aboriginal people were reversed. Indigenous people played the high and mighty role while White Australians casted as minorities. When Indigenous people came to conquer the barbeque area that White Australians inhabited, they misinterpreted the land as "babakiueria."

This stresses the underlying problem of miscommunication and diversity among Indigenous people and White Australians. Furthermore into the film, contemporary Aboriginal issues and stereotypes were discussed in a documentary style: white people as a minority, the unequal treatment of whites by the police, white children are taken from their families, and white people being allocated because the government needs their home.

In defending for the actions of the government, Wagwan, the Minister for White Affairs, reasons that it is morally wrong for the government to leave the white minorities in whatever situations they are, even if they are content. He believes the government has the duty to make decisions for them because they are incapable of managing their own affairs. Moreover, the white minorities were perceived to be lazy – refusing to do work, as primitive – enjoying violence and bloodshed as a form of entertainment, resistant – avoiding assimilation and refusing to change, and as gambling and alcohol addicts – keeping a “ simple faith” in success via gambling and drinking.

Additionally, the white people agreed to everything that the government wanted to do, even when the government decided to interrupt and intervene their ambitions and lifestyles by transforming their robust industry to grassy lands. The film is controversial in the sense that even though Aboriginal people were treated unequally, they never consented to government force. Therefore, *BabaKiueria* provides insights to the problems of Aboriginal history, but it also presents a falsified resignation by Indigenous people.

In keeping the trend of representing Aboriginal people as dominant figures, Moffatt challenges the typical view of Indigenous women as fragile, nai?? ve

victims and often sex symbols for white men in *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987): “nice girls/nasty girls; white culture/black culture; the past/the present; predator/prey; exploiter/exploited” (Langton, 1993). Through a mixture of art and documentary overlapping Australia’s colonial past and present, Moffatt represents Aboriginal females as clever, cunning women (Summerhayes, 2004).

Instead of giving in to white men like during the early years of colonisation by British men, these three women seduced the men for their money. In other words, Moffatt reversed the potentially powerless victims to women who knowingly exploited men who wanted their company. In this sense, Moffatt generates a whole new perspective on Indigenous women. After all, Aboriginal people do have the potential to override the social norms and stereotypes of being defenceless and victimised.

To overcome inequality, Local Knowledge, a hip hop band, calls out for unity in their popular track *Blackfellas* (2005). This form of media is not only catchy, but it also educates its audience about the struggles that Aboriginal people experienced. The song helps to authenticate all the different races that exist under Aboriginality per naming them at the beginning of the song: “ Rise up, rise up, all the murries, all the kooris, all the goories... Moreover, the song allows Indigenous people to voice their opinions and express them in a way that would attract a higher calibre of younger generations as a means of informing them of their lineage. Overall, film and arts media provide efficient means of unraveling the stereotypes, history, and truths of Aboriginal people. Although some media are more effective and accurate

than others, the ending message of the day lies within the eyes of beholder:
the audience.