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BOOK REVIEW

Indigenous Radio and the Cultural Politics of Voice

Daniel Fisher. 2016

The Voice and Its Doubles: Media and Music in Northern Australia,
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Research of sound as culturally and socially productive in human life is becoming increasingly sophisticated with contributions from scholars in media and communication studies, cultural studies, anthropology and ethnomusicology. In *The Voice and Its Doubles*, anthropologist Daniel Fisher draws on work with Aboriginal radio stations in Brisbane (4AAA) and Darwin (TEABBA) to build several arguments around three key imperatives that he finds underwrite Indigenous audio media production: 'giving voice, sounding black, and linking people up'. (4) One main argument Fisher presents is that the emergence of Aboriginal Australian media production since the 1980s has produced 'a particular sedimentation in sound of a rich politics' (2) in which voice, race and agency are simultaneously intimately entangled and fragmented by audio technologies, the institutions of the settler state and Indigenous activism. A related argument is that the 'ideology of voice' reproduced in Aboriginal media organisations 'must be drawn through audio media's power to both amplify and unsettle the voice and the character of its bearer'. (16) Fisher sets out to disentangle the expressive, technological and institutional dimensions of these arguments about Aboriginal voice, sound and expressivity via the concept of mediatisation. Using a range of literature familiar to scholars in culture and media theory (such as Bakhtin, Briggs, Derrida, Goffman, Althusser, Bourdieu), Fisher approaches voice as sound that is always already mediated, always to some extent removed from the speaking body, and always somehow staged in and through audio technology, politics, activism and sociality.

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From this mediated state, he suggests, the embodied voice is extended ‘into other forms and agencies’ (12) to comprise a series of ‘sonic avatars’ (xix), which are the voice and its doubles referred to in the book’s title. Throughout, Fisher investigates how Indigenous audio media producers actively figure, refigure and stage Aboriginal voice in ‘the politicised dynamics of representation and social relatedness that suffuse Aboriginal cultural production’. (41)

The first chapter outlines the development and networking of Aboriginal broadcast media to argue that the mediatisation of kinship is central to the social imaginary through which Aboriginal people reproduce their distinction from other Australians. Fisher focuses on the widely popular request shows broadcast by most Indigenous radio stations in Australia to demonstrate how modes of address and the genre of country music requested by listeners reproduce a technologically mediated Indigenous public that is underpinned by distinct Indigenous kinship ideologies. Chapter two explores in more detail the role of country music in shaping this Indigenous public. Fisher’s analysis here tends to rely mostly on secondary sources and film instead of primary ethnographic data from his radio broadcaster informants. The third chapter explores training activities at the 4AAA radio station in Brisbane to analyse how Indigenous self-fashioning is generated by vocal technology, such as speaking into microphones and editing sound digitally, as well as arguments about what kind of sound and program the station should broadcast. True to his theme of mediatisation and sonic avatars, Fisher discusses how through such audio practices and arguments, the radio workers are to some extent alienated from their own voice as they ‘become other to it’. (120) Further, the radio voice acquires a mediated agency of its own in so far as it is ‘standing for’ and ‘speaking for’ Indigenous agency and political power but also shaped by the desires of government and other external agencies that fund the radio stations in order to foster a certain form of Indigenous expressive competency.

Chapter 4 fleshes out in more historical and social detail the relational, bureaucratic and financial forces that shape the aspirations, directions and politics of the work at the 4AAA studios. The ethnographic character of the chapter comes as a relief from the very long and conceptually dense formulations Fisher frequently uses that at times cloud the point he is trying to make. Here Fisher seems to trust, as good ethnographers do, that thick description will lead to an understanding of the complex technological, social, administrative and political matters the Indigenous broadcasters wrangle with as they craft particular kinds of voice. The section on the importance of ‘live’ sounds for expressing a distinctive ‘blackfella’ sonic sociality is especially interesting. Fisher could perhaps have developed more of an ethnographically based analysis of how and why the Aboriginal media workers and listeners value such a live quality in the everyday sound world they share, driven as it is by highly idiosyncratic personalities. His abstract style of commentary seems disengaged from this rich social dynamic. For instance, after several pages of engaging description of the colourful goings-ons of Tiga Bayles and others in the 4AAA team as they produce radio at the Tamworth country music festival, Fisher states: ‘Live performances matter greatly to making radio here, grounding CD and cassette recordings in experiential, ritualized audition and often taking particular recordings and reanimating them as performance for a live audience.’ However, instead of analysing how this socially and culturally dynamic ‘live’ effect is invested with meaning by the media workers’ actions we are merely told that it ‘often meant the elicitation, or at least accommodation, of audience vocalization’ (170), which makes it appear as something abstract instead of lived.

The next chapter shifts location to Darwin and the Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA). While based in the Northern Territory capital, TEABBA’s main

audiences live in some thirty smaller Aboriginal communities in the remote north. The chapter explores the how TEABBA has to negotiate servicing their remote-living listeners and pressure from their government funder to move toward a commercial model that requires them to market this Indigenous audience to urban-based advertisers. Fisher approaches this tension as a form of cultural brokerage in which knowledge of remote Indigenous communities becomes a valued commodity. After outlining the social and cultural context in which TEABBA operates, the focus zooms in on interpersonal dynamics and individual aspirations and interests among TEABBA staff, broadcasters and remote community members. As in the previous chapter, the ethnographic material provides the greatest insights into the qualitative contrasts between the sets of values and practices the Aboriginal media workers are committed to, such as ritual and ceremony, and those underpinning corporate demands. We also see how individuals at TEABBA have managed to bring remotely practiced ritual and ceremony into their city-based organisational practices, in the process producing new kinds of intra-Indigenous interpersonal relations. As Fisher rightly points out, as remote practices are translocated from their ancestral places to TEABBA's city headquarters, these new relations are also invested with a corporate and bureaucratic aspect. Although Fisher foregoes an ethnographically based analysis of some of the intercultural complexities raised here, this is rich material for understanding more about the lived reality of interpersonal practice that is at the heart of some of the most bitter and destructive conflicts within Indigenous Australia. The next chapter looks closer at the intra-Indigenous dynamics of cultural production by following a conflict between the Darwin-based, politically driven TEABBA and the Aboriginal Resource and Development Service (ARDS), a small, Christian-based, Yolngu-language radio network operating in remote Arnhem Land. Competing for the same audience, these two media organisations also partially compete for the same funding sources. They do so by forging two very different kinds of Aboriginal voices: ARDS seeks to advance and advocate for Yolngu people's welfare and cultural practices via news and information broadcast in Yolngu language, while TEABBA seeks to represent a range of language groups across the region in a pan-Aboriginal political project of self-representation. Although Fisher's ideological commitment to TEABBA's aims are a bit too obvious at times, the chapter provides good insights into the personal, financial, political and practical factors put into play in this regional struggle over representation, voice and audiences and for associated social and symbolic capital. Fisher's conclusion that these kinds of struggle are not external to the field of Indigenous cultural production but rather constitute the field itself is not highly original, nor does it need to be since the regional details he provides are a valuable contribution to more diversified understandings of emerging forms of inequalities and power relations within and between Indigenous groups today.

In his conclusion Fisher suggests that the sound world of Indigenous audio media not only echoes Indigenous agency but also attracts powerful and at times radically different agencies and interests. He outlines two changes that he sees conditioning cultural production in Indigenous audio media today: 'the shifting rationale of Aboriginal government' (252) away from goals of self-determination toward principles of industry and enterprise, and the changes brought about by new privatised and corporate digital, mobile and social media. Discussing the impact of these changes on Indigenous media, Fisher tends to simplify recent policy changes and somewhat overstates Indigenous distinctiveness in Australia. His description of the field of Indigenous cultural production as 'a board game in which, at indeterminate intervals, someone smacks the table, sending chips, dice, cards, and drinks into the air, rearranging the game and its rules, demanding that one start anew' (252) seems surprising since throughout

the book Fisher has demonstrated the opposite: that the mediatisation of Aboriginal voice is reproducing enduring, albeit always unfinished, forms of relatedness and distinct sets of values and practices.

This book is ambitious in its theoretical aims and its arguments will appeal to scholars specialising in the cultural analysis of sound, listening and audio media production. The more ethnographic chapters will also inspire students and researchers interested in the everyday practices and politics of Aboriginal Australian media even if, as discussed above, the ethnographic analysis perhaps could have been more developed at times.

About the author

Åse Ottooson lectures in anthropology at the University of Sydney and has conducted fieldwork in Central Australia since 2000. Her research interests are in Indigenous–settler relations, popular music, masculinity and intercultural theory. She has recently published *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia* (2016).