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Please note that this article is an excerpt from my recent unpublished PhD thesis (Re)Claim the Frame: a rethinking of opera and operatic practice in Australia completed at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney [Gadigal Country], and which can be found in The University of Sydney library as an open access digital document. Please follow the link here: <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/27876>

This qualitative research project analyses the sustainability, viability and evolution of opera in Australia — through the business and power structures, staging practices and educational models — with a view to systemic change and possible futures for opera in Australia.

ARTICLE ABSTRACT

This timely research presents an excerpt of my analysis of opera and operatic practice in Australia in today. The aim of the broader research is to interrogate the sustainability, viability and evolution of the Australian operatic field. Situated during the globally recognised Coronavirus pandemic era, this qualitative research project was conducted over the period 2018–2021. The fieldwork component of the research is an investigation conducted through long-form interviews with a selection of the central figures in the operatic field in Australia today. Bourdieusian Field Theory is employed as the primary framing device. The study also engages Grounded Theory in the data analysis and codification. This excerpt is from Chapter 8, Part III Stories We Tell: Making and Staging Opera in Australia. I examine how and why repertoire opera is being reframed, and who is taking the lead in this reframing, juxtaposed with the personal and societal cost of performing unexamined extant opera works and perpetuating the 'opera gaze'. The vision and division of the operatic field is deconstructed in an exploration of contemporary Australian opera and contemporary creative practices, fictional ritual spaces, and explorations of diversity, Aboriginal opera and decolonising the postcolonial operatic lens.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY 1

This work was originally written on Gamilaraay Country [North West NSW, Australia] and I acknowledge the Gamilaraay/Gomeri people for their care of Country — land which has never been ceded. This article was updated in 2023 on Gadigal Country [Sydney, Australia]. Interviews referenced took place across various First Nations Countries which are the fabric of present day Australia. First Nations Countries have been acknowledged throughout this article and are written before or after the Western colonial placename.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal, Australia, decolonisation, diversity, First Nations, Indigenous, opera, power

Alternative Forms and Approaches to Operatic Practice in Australia

'Opera' quite simply means 'work'. It is the plural of the Latin 'opus' and refers to both the action and the outcome of multiple works — the coming together of artforms or works as the result of collaborative work (or labour).

By Sally Blackwood



Jessica Aszodi in Liza Lim's *Atlas of the Sky* photo Photo: Bryony Jackson.

[M]ost of the big opera companies have a model that is in its essence calcified in the late nineteenth early twentieth century and is working on the production and reproduction of works from that era [...] we do not live in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and our audiences do not come from that period, our spaces do not come from that period, our marketing models, our box office revenues, our resonance in popular culture — none of these things are even vaguely similar [...] so there's an obvious mismatch. (Aszodi, interview with author, 11 September 2018)

'Opera' quite simply means 'work'. It is the plural of the Latin 'opus' and refers to both the action and the outcome of multiple works — the coming together of artforms or works as the result of collaborative work (or labour). According to musicologist Tim Carter, the elliptical usage of the term — 'one goes to the opera to see the opera perform an opera' — however absurd, goes some way to revealing the 'complex intermingling of space, agency, and outcome embedded within the term' (Carter, 2014, p. 4). The term 'opera', as a broad, generic, all-encompassing classification, has been used consistently since the nineteenth century. As it has travelled, it has operated as a standardised term to refer to operatic works across historical periods, and it has mapped the course of opera's evolution and movement to the present (Goehr, 2014). Opera's journey is one of continual adaptation, resulting in a plurality of styles interwoven with time and place.

Australian-born vocalist Jessica Aszodi has chosen to dedicate her opera career to the creation of new operatic work that resonates personally and professionally. She has deliberately chosen a path away from the standard repertoire opera to be in a space that values her vocal experimentation, to work with living composers who write for her voice, and to actively participate in the operatic subfield, which is testing the boundaries of what opera can be. Aszodi is part of a vast interconnected network of artists — creators and performers — who dedicate their

talents to the collaborative practice and ethical creation of new and reimagined extant operatic works that challenge the form of repertoire opera and connect to contemporary sociopolitical conversations on community, sustainability, wellbeing and diversity. These alternative approaches to opera reveal themselves in every step of the conceptual framing, creative practice, values and modes of delivery. This alternative view openly challenges the Spaces, Places and Forms² of opera. It changes what the rehearsal room looks and feels like, who is in the room, how they are invited in, their presence, and the level of support given to creative practice, development and performance. It has the potential to change the power relations within and beyond the creative space, reclaim artistic agency and give voice to all those in the room.

The three parts of this article address the structures and colonising forces of opera and alternative work practices and decolonising means of reclaiming the operatic field and form. In the first section I deconstruct the operatic frame in reference to Lydia Goehr's 'work-concept'. I challenge the 'work-concept' with discussion on the embedded nature of labour of the contemporary opera creative; explore interviewee examples of their contemporary work practices; and provide a brief examination of Liza Lim's (2018) *Atlas of the Sky*. In the second section I examine the argument of Deborah Cheetham Frailon AO, Artistic Director of Short Black Opera — that '[o]pera is an Aboriginal construct' (interview with author, 30 October 2018) — to reveal the driving passion behind Cheetham's championing of opera in its ability to express contemporary Indigenous narratives through ancient connections to song, dance and storytelling. In the third section I explore the complex task of decolonising the dominant colonial voices in the artform and the Australian postcolonial gaze by re-examining the narratives, casting and representations of race, and questioning the preservation of the postcolonial position of alterity that is often arguably buried beneath the music.

Opera By Any Other Name: Deconstructing Opera

'Opera' [...] [is a performance practice which] might loosely be called some other kind of performance art or some other form of multimedia or multimodal practice, that might not wear the opera label. (Ricketson, interview with author, 6 June 2018)

I want to work with and to be responsive to the stimulus of my own time and that means that I need to apply the word 'opera' differently in my practice and in my outlook more generally. (Aszodi, interview with author, 11 September 2018)

Interviewees whose work is deeply entrenched in the 'small to medium'³ operatic strand of the 'restricted' subfield⁴ of subsidised opera described that the Places, Spaces and Forms of innovation, risk-taking and reinvention of the operatic artform are to be found in the 'small to medium' environment. Interestingly, those working in or with the 'major'⁵ opera companies made no attempt to voice the same argument for the production of repertoire opera; in general, they tended to agree that innovation and risk-taking were not their domain. In fact, the 'majors' all stated that experimentation and the possibility of failure was too great a financial — and to some extent reputational — risk to pursue.

Reflecting on the large operatic machine, composer Damien Ricketson notes that '[p]roducing new work, and especially more experimental new work, is something that the model cannot bear' (interview with author, 6 June 2018). Instead, the focus of the 'small to medium' opera sector and subfield of independent opera artists is a deconstructed operatic model (re)constructed by collaboratives of specific artform practitioners to best suit their style and approach. In this way, opera can become either an abstracted meeting of forms — a vast canvas for experimentation and innovation in the nexus of form and content — or a platform for telling diverse contemporary narratives. The malleable operatic frame expands and contracts to engage with content as its diverse artists manipulate Form,

Place and Space in their collaborative negotiation of what a specific work will be and what 'opera' could become. These operatic experiments take place in spaces outside the opera house and vary in form and scale from intimate chamber pieces to large epic-scale works incorporating cross-artform practitioners breaking the operatic moulds and expectations.

Examples of three vastly different Australian practitioners from diverse backgrounds working in the 'small to medium' operatic space are directors Kip Williams and Adena Jacobs, and composer Cat Hope. Williams, director of extant opera works, shares that '[o]pera affords me an opportunity to sit in a meditative abstract space, [a] non-literal space. A representative space. A space where an idea can unfurl and unravel and occupy the poetic' (interview with author, 30 August 2018). Williams' reimagined operatic works seek to enable a connection with, and discourse around, contemporary cultural and societal values, including gender politics and social justice. He expresses the personal artistic opportunity that presents itself in the occupation of the operatic space. For radical queer feminist director Adena Jacobs, whose work straddles both reimagining extant opera and the construction of new operatic work, it is a question not only of whether certain stories are being told in the operatic space, but also whether it is possible to 'rewire ourselves to experience things that are different to each one of us' (interview with author, 27 June 2018). Jacobs explores the idea of audience and creator together experiencing what she calls 'a total shift' in binary aesthetics — a questioning of the values of good versus bad art or a 'de-centring of what we perceive to be good opera, good art' (interview with author, 27 June 2018). This complete deconstruction of narrative content and form, staging aesthetics, and deep-rooted binary value judgements is arguably considered central to the work of the avant-garde contemporary multi-artform practitioner. Jacobs goes one step further, stating that in the mainstream space 'we struggle to tell stories that are truly ambig-

ous [...] to be in an unknown space or be truly uncertain or uncomfortable or disturbed [...] we're very afraid to really challenge ourselves [...] we seek out the same experiences again and again' (interview with author, 27 June 2018). This complex and nuanced argument goes to the heart of Jacobs' experimental creative practice and avant-garde performance work, which breaks the mould of storytelling and performance expectations.

Cat Hope, composer of new operatic work, comes to the artform with a background in experimental and exploratory sound, matched with technical innovation in animated graphic score notation developed with her collaborators, Decibel New Music Ensemble. Hope describes opera as a vast field of possibilities:

Opera in the contemporary era can be whatever we decide it is. Electronics, interactivity and community participation are all part of contemporary practice' (Blackwood, 2019).

Hope discusses the opportunities that opera presents:

[I]t is important that opera pick up on what the music of our day is and can be. It doesn't need to be bound by traditional stories, singing or composition styles. New operas should reflect the stories and styles of our time ... women and non-binary people are an important part of these stories and styles, which is why the inclusion of our ideas, stories, opinions and creative vision is so important to the operatic canon at this point of time. Our casting needs to reflect this too — who we are and want to be in a better world. (Blackwood, 2019, quoting Hope)

Each of these three contemporary opera creatives approaches the deconstruction of opera from different access points into the artform: music, text and dramatic storytelling. In each case, a deep respect and

understanding of the operatic form grants the artists a solid platform for (re)creation and consideration of opera's contemporary associations and relevance. As each artist (de)constructs a single work, the resonance of their shifting of the operatic power structures within the work has the effect of progressively shifting the parameters of production and consumption of the whole of the operatic field in Australia.

In our interview, composer Liza Lim AM stated that '[o]pera is fictional ritual space where there can be some kind of transformation of being', and that it 'is an immersive experience operating on multiple sensory levels [...] which can take you into other states of being, other worlds of knowing' (interview with author, 4 September 2018). In Bourdieusian terms, opera has the powerful ability to penetrate each element of habitus (ways of being, knowing and doing); thus, it has the potential to cause hysteresis or momentary transformation in all agents within the greater societal field. Lim adds that opera is 'culturally coded', which enables resonance and depth of complexity, or a state of 'super saturation' (interview with author, 4 September 2018). Lim's (2018) *Atlas of the Sky* examines formations of shared transformation through community participation. Lim's work explores ritual gathering and employs opera as a framework for the collective experience. She states that '[r]ituals are technologies of self-knowledge [...] not just the individual but also communities [...] They have really strong social functions that go back [several] millennia' (Lim, interview with author, 4 September 2018). In our interview, we discussed the importance of liveness and sharing physical space between **the performer and audience. Lim believes that the 'co-presence of all bodies' is 'crucial to the experience' — performer and witness in a 'momentary flash of transformation'** (interview with author, 4 September 2018).

The differences in the nature of contemporary operatic practices and experimental operatic works are revealed in the language of the creators in both the description of



Deborah Cheetham's Pecan Summer photo Photo: Jorge de Araujo & Richard Jefferson

form and the examination of creative practice.

Concerning her own compositional practice, Lim discusses emergent components and notes that 'Atlas of the Sky works with qualities of energy to express visceral elements of social spaces' in a study of mobility (interview with author, 4 September 2018). Lim's work examines how group energies shift from 'stagnant to highly activated states', evidenced in the sound and movement of the work, engaging bodies and vocal vibration. Lim describes the multilayered approach to her personal compositional process: 'It's not just sonic materials or rhythms and melodies. It's trying to think of these larger phrasings of energet-

ic forces' (interview with author, 4 September 2018). She explains that an important part of her process is the time shared with fellow musicians; on the surface engaging in technique, and with even deeper importance placed on 'interpersonal exchange' or what Lim refers to as a coming together and an understanding of the 'energies embodied in that person's performance and their approach' (interview with author, 4 September 2018). Lim embeds personal intangible material into her compositional work. She explains the process as very specific and grounded in 'an embodied relation' far beyond a mere 'sonic profile'. In this way, Lim works simultaneously at the macro and micro levels during the compositional pro-

cess, allowing the malleable operatic frame to ingest the minute details or 'secret knowledge' of the performer and concurrently absorb macro-energetic forces. Lim describes her process as a 'collaborative subtle set of exchanges' between the composer and the performer, and notes that this collaboration continues within the performer through rehearsal and performance as they respond to the propositions in the score (interview with author, 4 September 2018).

Contemporary creative work practices challenge Lydia Goehr's late-eighteenth-century 'work-concept', which separates performance from the creation of the work, views the 'work' as a separate entity or unified whole, and sets up power relations

between the composer, performers and audiences (Goehr, 1992, p. 232).⁷ This challenge is brought about through the visual aesthetics of staged performance written into the score and interpreted by specific individual performers, and which I argue are embedded in the identity of the work. Therefore, artists who collaboratively contribute to the creation and the performance of the work cannot be removed from the work — not if the work is to remain the same work. In this way, not only are the performing artist, the director and often the designer intrinsic in the creation of the work, but their collaborative participation in the creation and performance of the work remains part of the 'work'. In a work such as *The Howling Girls* (Ricketson & Jacobs, 2018), director Adena Jacobs is a co-author of the work, and the vocalists are equally inseparable from it. I argue that a restaging without the key role co-created and performed by soprano Jane Sheldon or the six teenage girls would not be possible; rather, it would produce another version of the work, but not the 'work-concept' entity that Goehr describes.⁸ This is a critical difference in the contemporary creation of new opera. In a work such as *Fly Away Peter* (Cyger & Wilcox, 2015), the collaborative contributions of director Imara Savage and designer Elizabeth Gadsby are intrinsic elements of the 'work' itself — in equal measure to the music and libretto. In my 2018 interview with the work's composer, Elliott Cyger, he described the collaborative creation and the initial discussions with the director that shaped the libretto and, in turn, the music. Cyger notes that 'I can't just take the opera vehicle and put my content in, I actually have to reconsider the vehicle itself' (interview with author, 17 August 2018). As much as Cyger is the single music composer, this collaboration between music, words, visual staging and drama informed all elements of the work as it was taking shape. Cyger explained:

[T]he collaborative process, even though that's existed within theatre performance for a long time, for that to be becoming the new norm for opera is really interesting and exciting. You don't have to [...] submit [a

completed work] and hope that everyone likes it. There's this dialogue all the way through which is really interesting and fruitful for all parties coming together; and interestingly more likely what would have been done in the nineteenth century. (Cyger, interview with author, 17 August 2018)

I argue that this collaboration and co-creation is becoming more profound in the twenty-first century, and that the work of the director and designer in this instance is embedded in the 'work'. Further, although the work lives on as a musical score, the restaging by a new artistic team could be problematic because the work is recognisable as a performed entity and retains elements that were collaboratively produced by Savage and Gadsby. In both examples, the opera object is a performed artefact that is intrinsically tied to all artists who contributed to the 'work' performance creation, and that operates with a different set of power relations than those proposed by Goehr. New contemporary methods of creating opera challenge the very nature of opera creation and the 'sacred object' (Abbate & Parker, 2015) of the opera artefact embodied solely in the score. Evolving practice-led research challenges the ways in which spaces for creative practice are constructed, as well as the essential roles of all artists — performers, directors, designers, composers and librettists — in the making and performing of operatic works. The research challenges the ways in which the artefact is conserved and reproduced in the post-premiere performance season. This evolving practice confronts previously unquestioned work systems and hierarchies that dictate how new operatic works are made, performed and conserved, especially in mainstage 'repertory opera'⁹ companies whose work practices remain, for the most part, dominated by traditional approaches to new opera performance creation.

Interviewees working in this evolving contemporary area are well aware of these challenging and clashing work practices, as well as the difficulties of the two operatic strands operating in parallel. In our 2018 interview, mezzo

soprano Eve Klein acknowledged:

I've had criticisms of my own work with people who consider themselves as conservators of the operatic tradition, particularly the canonic repertoire¹⁰ [...] [who] see experimental contemporary work of the kind that I do, as a direct challenge to opera and will say that the work that I make is not opera, that opera is something else [other] than what I'm doing. (Klein, interview with author, 10 August 2018)

Vocalist Jessica Aszodi believes that the rate of change is occurring rapidly in her area of contemporary practice and that 'sometimes it's jarring to encounter people who live in that house because I remember that that house is still there and there are people who still live in it and the view has not changed; but the world has changed' (interview with author, 11 September 2018). Tamara Saulwick, Artistic Director of Chamber Made,¹¹ asserts that the company's view of opera is that 'it's opera inasmuch as it's interdisciplinary work and we're bringing these languages together, we're bringing text and composition and performance and staging [...] if the word opera means interdisciplinary work that's what we're making [...] [and we're] redefining the spaces that it could occupy' (interview with author, 9 July 2018). Several female interviewees also voiced their passion for redefining the operatic frame and were clear that their interest and place in the operatic field was in the creation of new contemporary operatic work. This is a space where their voice is valued and their work respected, and the creative practice systems are based on their inclusion as artists contributing to the creative collaboration of a work.

'Opera is an Aboriginal Construct'

'A song is not merely a song. It can be a map to our identity, it can help us find the way home. A song is not merely song.' (Dhungala Childrens Choir, Cheetham, 2019).

Deborah Cheetham Frailon AO is the founding Artistic Director of Short Black Opera, an Indigenous¹² opera company based in Melbourne [Naarm] and touring (pre-COVID-19) nationally. Cheetham, a soprano and composer, set up Short Black Opera in 2009 as a proactive response to the lack of Indigenous opera singers and Indigenous opera stories being told. Cheetham is from Australia's 'stolen generations'¹³ and grew up in a white aspirational working-class family; only later in life did Cheetham reconnect with her Aboriginal mother and identify as a proud Yorta Yorta¹⁴ woman. Throughout her early life, Cheetham's connection to music was supported by her first music teacher who, on discovering her passion and talent, exposed her to the Western music canon and finally opera, which Cheetham fell in love with. During her schooling and tertiary education — a Bachelor of Music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music [Gadigal Country] — Cheetham was an Aboriginal anomaly and lacked Indigenous role models or leaders to follow. However, opera offered Cheetham an alternative form of connection, expression and a stable place, and she recalls being inspired from an early age by performances by Dame Joan Sutherland. Since learning her Yorta Yorta ancestry, Cheetham has been able to align her love of repertoire opera and the connection to ancient Aboriginal storytelling — song, dance, performance and Country — and has become a strong force in the advocacy of Indigenous opera in Australia. Cheetham has an Aboriginal lens — a deeply embedded living perspective of Australia's past and present — that stems from her personal family history and experience being in the position of the colonised. This resilient Aboriginal lens, which is most often diametrically opposed to the white colonial gaze, provides critical insights into Australia's conscious and unconscious mythmaking of its colonial past, its continuing impact on national agendas and local communities through language employed and views perpetuated, and its influence on the present unreflective 'opera gaze'.¹⁵ Cheetham is driven by a strong passion to change opera into a more inclusive Aboriginal space; she views the meeting of

artforms in opera as a powerful place for change, and opera as an important vehicle for sharing Aboriginal narratives of resistance, survival and truth-telling.

I have given this particularly personal introduction to Cheetham's life because it has deep resonance with her operatic work and her passion for the artform, and it informs what drives her on a daily basis. As a reaction to her upbringing and her need to hear other Aboriginal voices and see other Aboriginal faces on the operatic stage, Cheetham created an opera company that offers training and career pathways for Indigenous artists, and that places Aboriginal storytelling at its core. In her 2019 Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address, Cheetham advocated passionately for the 'the power and necessity of music and the role it plays in shaping and sustaining communities. Music is my earliest memory. For me, it's my way of knowing the world and making sense of everything in it' (Cheetham, 2019). In our interview in 2018, Cheetham spoke directly about her life and work, taught me a great deal about my unconscious white gaze, and opened me up to the possibility of viewing the operatic world from a different perspective. Cheetham is frustrated by the lack of opportunities in opera for Aboriginal people, and advocates for Indigenous engagement at all levels of the operatic process, including training and development of artists; professional employment opportunities for singers and other musicians; engagement as producers and production staff; programmers and administration; and executive decision-making positions. Cheetham (2019) states, 'I realised that things would not change for the next generation of Indigenous singers unless I created a space in which they could safely develop their skills and express themselves onstage. A decade ago this led to the creation of Short Black Opera'. Short Black Opera is set up especially as a training and nurturing environment from which artists can learn and grow in order to work across all areas, roles and companies in the operatic field.

Cheetham is not the first Aboriginal opera singer, but she is by far in the

minority. There is a resilient legacy remaining from a small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opera singers who came before Cheetham, including stalwarts such as tenor Harold Blair AM (1923–1976), whose international performance and local Aboriginal activism led him to receive a Member of the Order of Australia in 1976 (Wyld, 2019), and whose alma mater, the Melba Opera Trust founded the Harold Blair Scholarship for Indigenous singers in 2012 (Melba Opera Trust, 2012);¹⁶ Georgia Lee (née Dulcie Rama Pitt, 1921–2010) an international crossover jazz–blues and opera performer (Henningham, 2012); and mezzo soprano Maroochy Barambah (born 1954), Songwoman, Law-woman and elder of the Turrbal people [Brisbane, Queensland], who has starred in opera, musical theatre and film (Kovocic & Lemon, 2006; Turrbal Association, 2020).¹⁷ The incredible journeys and careers of these three singers, and others, forged pathways that Cheetham is now building on in the present. Cheetham received several accolades in 2019, including the coveted Melbourne Prize for Music (Melbourne Prize Trust, 2019), and her visibility is important in achieving lasting changes for Indigenous opera artists and the artform. She is explicit in pointing out that 'the vital task of ensuring diversity and growth is often left to the small to medium sector' (Cheetham, 2019). This is a frustration that echoes across the operatic field beyond Aboriginal opera, as artists and company managers in one strand of the field feel the burden of responsibility for the whole sector. In 2023, Cheetham was appointed by The Sydney Conservatorium of Music [Gadigal Country] as the inaugural Elizabeth Todd Chair of Vocal Studies and Professor of Practice (Vocal Studies) further enabling her to be a role model of success for Indigenous artists and hopefully make further significant advances and provide further opportunities for Aboriginal musicians.

In 2010, Short Black Opera premiered its first mainstage opera, Pecan Summer (Cheetham, 2010), which was composed by Cheetham and sung and played by a cast of Aboriginal musicians. This was

Australia's first Aboriginal opera; created and performed by Aboriginal artists, it was sung partially in Yorta Yorta language.¹⁸ The opera was not the first or last created on Aboriginal themes or featuring Aboriginal characters, but the others have been created by non-Aboriginal artists. Some earlier operas include: *Kaditcha or A Bush Legend* (Douglas, 1938), a ballet section of which was later entitled *Corroboree* (1939); *The Young Kabbarli* (Sutherland & Macey, 1964), on the life of Daisy Bates (née Margaret Dwyer 1859–1951), a fieldwork researcher on Aboriginal culture and society; *Voss* (Meale & Malouf, 1986) a tale of a white man's struggle against himself and the harsh Australian environment, in which Aboriginal people were mute; Andrew and Julianne Schultz's *Black River* (Schultz & Schultz, 1988), co-production with Bangarra Dance Theatre¹⁹ featuring Aboriginal mezzo soprano Maroochy Barambah, which examined the personal impact of Aboriginal deaths in custody; and *Beach Dreaming* (Isaacs, 1993), a work written for and about the life of Maroochy Barambah.²⁰ After *Pecan Summer* (Cheetham, 2010) came *Daisy Bates at Ooldea* (Boyd & Reece, 2012), *The Rabbits* (Miller-Heidke & Katz, 2015), *Parrawang Lifts the Sky* (Cheetham, 2021) and *Koolbardi wer Wardong* (Williams & Ghouse, 2021).²¹ However, *Pecan Summer* marked the starting point for the company and the beginning of a shift in Australia's relationship between opera and Aboriginal storytelling through an Aboriginal lens. In an interview at the time of the opera's creation, Cheetham (2009) stated that '[o]pera — if you think about it — is just storytelling through music, drama and dance and singing, and we've been doing that for thousands of years'. In its first 10 years, *Pecan Summer* toured to Melbourne [Naarm], Adelaide [Kaurna], Perth [Boorloo] and the Sydney Opera House [Gadigal], taking with it the entire 80+ entourage of musicians, creatives and technicians. Cheetham talks about her drive to create opera:

Pecan Summer was to help people access Indigenous culture in a really powerful way, in the most powerful way, through music [...] We gave an

'on-Country'²² premiere for *Pecan Summer* and a lot of the local people from the Goulburn Valley, Shepparton, Mooroopna, Echuca and surrounding areas came to see Australia's first opera composed by an Aboriginal composer, and even though they'd lived in that area their whole life and those events had taken place around them they had no idea of the events of that opera — the walk-off from Cummeragunja Mission. Sometimes it doesn't matter how close you are to something if you've been taught to believe something else it's really hard to set aside those beliefs even when the truth is all around you. (Cheetham, interview with author, 30 October 2018)

At the time of our interview in 2018, Cheetham had just premiered her second large-scale work, *Eumeralla*, a *War Requiem for Peace* (Cheetham, 2018) in language on Gunditjmarra Country at the Port Fairy Festival in Victoria. Cheetham's point of departure and way into telling this story of the Gunditjmarra Aboriginal 'Resistance Wars' took inspiration from Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (Britten & Owen, 1962).²³

According to Patrick Nolan, Artistic Director of Opera Queensland, Cheetham is 'a really important voice in terms of telling Indigenous stories in Australia through opera. We're not seeing much on the mainstage in that realm' (interview with author, 30 July 2018). This statement, coming from the leader of a state opera company, raises the question: Who is to program Aboriginal operatic work if those in power do not? It shines a light on the white lens and asks: If Aboriginal opera is not on the mainstage, then perhaps a shift in the gaze is needed — that is, a deeper connection to the contemporary conversation that is presently embracing Aboriginal performing artists in dance, theatre, film and television; a profound examination of the cultural responsibility of those in power, and a view to serious investment in Australia's Aboriginal and diverse stories and storytelling. Cheetham laments the lack of cultural understanding and support, saying of the state opera companies, and Opera Australia in particular, that 'they simply don't

get what the authentic Aboriginal voice is. It's the point of view from an Aboriginal person. It's not the point of view of someone who is interested in Aboriginal culture. It's the Aboriginal voice that's missing from our flagship company' (interview with author, 30 October 2018).²⁴ However, perhaps Cheetham's (2010) *Pecan Summer* and the development of *Short Black Opera* have already started to (re)claim the operatic frame and forge further pathways for future Aboriginal opera creatives and the telling of Aboriginal stories through opera. Perhaps it went some way to inspire *Opera Australia* to work with the Yarrabah community [Queensland; Gunggandji and Yidinji Country] on *Yarrabah: The Musical* (Roberts & Yarrabah Community, 2012). The next step could be to shift projects such as *Yarrabah: The Musical* from being considered 'outreach' onto the mainstream and for 'major' institutions to make space for the Aboriginal lens to guide and shape their annual programming, creative development, community engagement and artist investment. This would be a step towards genuine shared leadership with Indigenous opera creatives.

Aboriginal society possesses a deep synergy between embodied culture — knowledges, beliefs and values — and cultural artefacts. Transposing that concept onto opera and the opera artefact offers interesting results. It connects individual operatic works within the whole sphere of opera, within the space and time in which the artefact was created and first performed, as well as drawing the works into today to find lines of synergy in the present and into the future. The Aboriginal lens offers a new or different viewing of opera and places its 'sacred objects', or archives, into a contextualised place where stories are able to resonate through circular time, finding contemporary connection. Cheetham's unique position in the field gives her the ability to work across multiple cultural frames — Indigenous, Anglo-Australian and Western European opera — offering her many points of access and connection in the making and staging of the operatic form through music, narrative, language and performance.

[Decolonisation] starts with the idea of knowing that there are other ways to exist in the world that are outside of your own [...]



Sydney Chamber Opera's *The Howling Girls*. Photo: Zan Wimberely

Perhaps Cheetham's claim that '[o]pera is an Aboriginal construct' has a deeper meaning — namely, that in the meeting of song, dance and storytelling is the performance of culture and the ability to connect and share deeper stories and lessons of humanity.²⁵ Cheetham (2019) explains: 'Music, dance, art, the spoken narrative, this is how humankind has traditionally made sense of its existence. It is our way of knowing. For Indigenous Australians this is how all knowledge was acquired and passed on'.²⁶ For Cheetham (2019), opera is the ultimate conduit for performative educational sharing and the united experience of artist and audience in order to take people on a shared 'journey from not knowing to knowing and from knowing to understanding' — a way of making sense and giving meaning to the world. Cheetham (2019) describes her personal understanding of the world and her place within it, saying, '[t]he longest practice of knowing is through the arts'. In Bourdieusian terms, this Aboriginal habitus (ways of being, knowing and doing) is transcribed on the body of the performer to be shared with the audience. It is in this sharing, or connection, that a 'journey to knowing' through singing, performing, listening and experiencing can unfold and affect audiences' personal habitus, allowing a deeper questioning of the doxa (rules and assumptions) and nomos (values) of the field and possibly leading to new or multiple understandings of the world.

Here, the Bourdieusian concept of 'symbolic domination'²⁷ can be flipped on its head using Cheetham's Aboriginal lens to shift the cultural reproduction of opera by manipulating or hijacking the white colonial social hierarchies of producing and consuming opera — otherwise maintained through symbolic violence²⁸ — and repurposing the form to transmit Australian Indigenous narratives using the imported opera vehicle. The consumption may look the same, the faces of audiences may resemble those of the opera consumer, but the faces on the stages are new and ancient, and the Aboriginal bodies and voices of the performers carrying the stories are embedded with different

habitus and slowly shift or contest the nomos and doxa of the field. By reclaiming the operatic frame with an Aboriginal lens, stories of the stolen generations, the Resistance Wars, the joys and the deep connection to Country can be experienced through familiarity with the operatic form and openness to experiencing new content. I hope Bourdieu would agree that this is a clear articulation of the 'political in action' — that is, habitus on stage affecting the nomos and doxa of those experiencing the performance within the operatic field. In the making of the work the hysteresis would be even clearer due to the sharp contrast of culturally safe spaces holding the operatic form, with all of its economic, social and cultural capital, and with the operatic frame ingesting new and ancient 'foreign matter' from Aboriginal artists as they share their habitus and bend Western opera into a new form.

Decolonising Opera

[S]ong is embedded in this land [...] sometimes our opera companies are just singing a microtone out of tune. (Cheetham, interview with author, 30 October 2018)

The ambivalent relationship with the indigenous peoples is in the forefront of national debate, while the uneasy confrontation with the land itself pervades virtually all Australian artistic output. (Halliwell, 2004, p. 12)

Opera's enduring and wide-ranging popularity, rich traditions of artistic collaboration and exchange, diversity of styles, and ability to blur the lines between cultivated and vernacular forms of art make questions about the intersections between race, ethnicity, and identity within that genre both trenchant and valuable. (André et al., 2013, p. 1)²⁹

Colonisation is arguably embedded in the historical 'whiteness' of the operatic artform and its presentation in Australia because opera's arrival in Australia at the time of colonisation remains inextricably linked with Australia's political and societal power structures and value systems concerning race, class and gender. Decolonisation is the potential undo-

ing of colonisation or the separation of the operatic artform from the entrenched colonial power structures.³⁰ The arguments for decolonisation call for a new vision of opera through possible structural reforms of operatic business and creative practices, a deconstruction of power relations, and a shift in the opera gaze. It is an important and sizeable concern — arguably the key concern — and it cannot be done justice in a portion of this one article. Instead, my hope is that the core of this argument, as it was presented and revealed to me through the interconnecting threads of my interviews, will embed itself as a companion to the postcolonial understanding of the Australian cultural landscape and the operatic field itself. The narratives of race and belonging, like the vibrations of song, are deeply embedded in the Australian cultural makeup and the contested spaces of the created concept of national identity. It is a discordant strain, and the arts and culture suffer for this perpetual dissonance. As a postcolonial nation, Australia is not alone in looking to confront its past, heal the present and decolonise its narratives, systems of creation, and performance and cultural representation for the future.

[Decolonisation] starts with the idea of knowing that there are other ways to exist in the world that are outside of your own [...] It asks that organisations examine their policies, practices and values and the basis on which these are designed. (ArtsHub Australia, 2021, quoting Nahlous)

Who's being represented? What stories are we telling? Who have I got onstage? And if it's a bunch of white people, you've got a problem. (Smith, interview with author, 7 July 2018)

Decolonisation of opera is a complex task requiring deep self-reflection of the operatic field as well as close examination of individual 'problematic' repertoire and canonic operas. The work of confronting racism and cultural appropriation in operatic works involves interrogating the colonial white lens, the history and context of the creation of the work juxtaposed with the contemporary lens, and the present-day retelling or restaging

of the work. During my interview with writer Alison Croggon, we discussed the 'opera gaze' — that is, the postcolonial and white privileged lens, which is the current norm in Australia — and how it dictates what is created and presented across the mainstage performing arts. Croggon remarked: '[T]hose circles of marginalisation [...] that's absolutely reflected in what reality is represented [...] it's something I've been thinking about a lot as a white person, and it is something we all have to address' (interview with author, 17 August 2018).³¹ The fear of a loss of cultural domination plays out in the operatic field through the cultural reproduction of repertoire opera, and 'each such repetition is a re-inscription to a longstanding process of cultural imperialism' (Dunn, Gandhi, Burnley, & Forrest, 2003, p. 175). Multicultural race representation is of critical importance on the mainstage, and as theatre director Lee Lewis says, experiencing cross-racial casting as 'experimental' only intensifies its marginalisation (Lewis, 2007); that is, it highlights the 'otherness' of the experiment rather than normalising race within the narrative context. Referencing the Eclipse Report (Brown, 2001), Lewis (2007) notes that 'any real impulse towards diversity on mainstream stages has to be made from the top downwards, from boards to artistic directors and into company culture' (p. 52).³² I would argue that in 2023, although mainstage theatre may have made significant progress over the past 10 years, repertory opera continues to lag behind.³³ It is isolating itself and becoming more and more detached from the multicultural contemporary Australian audiences it simply does not represent.³⁴

In our 2018 interview, composer Paul Smith and I debated the 'problematic' nature of opera's portrayal and the representation of racial minorities, exoticism and cultural appropriation. Smith asked: 'Do I think that a white singer should play Madame Butterfly? No. I think that that's horrendous'. I challenged Smith, asking, 'Does a French singer have to play Mimi?' (the title role in *La Bohème*; Puccini et al., 1896). Smith responded, 'no, but those politics are different. The politics of Europe

are different to the politics of racial minorities. Anybody can play Mimi because white French is the default. That's not a category. Whereas Asian young girl is a category that not everybody can play, so it's highly problematic' (interview with author, 7 July 2018). Here, Smith reveals the larger complex arguments concerning the representation of minority groups or marginalised communities by those in the majority.³⁵ Music scholar Naomi André believes that:

[T]his question needs more conversations, because we need to think very carefully about opera and the politics and sensitivity of who's representing whom [...] opera needs to have some sort of discussion and contextualisation. Because when there's a voice that can sing *Otello*, I want to hear it, regardless of the colour. I think we need to open up the pipeline for people of colour to sing these roles. (André, Toppin, Dailey, Madlala, & Zuma, 2020)³⁶

Smith articulates the need for a shift from exclusion to inclusion of multiracial voices, bodies and faces on opera stages in the retelling of extant opera, believing that '[t]here's no way to get around the racist cultural appropriation in opera. And there's no way to talk about what the problems are that isn't "this is highly offensive"' (interview with author, 7 July 2018). Director Lindy Hume AM also believes that 'Madama Butterfly is almost impossible to program now because it's so politically disgusting. So racist. You can't. The days of being an opera programmer are limited unless you take a very particular perspective' (interview with author, 7 June 2018). Yet in the twenty-first century, *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini et al., 1904) is still one of the most performed operas in the world. Puccini's music possibly smooths over the underlying perpetuation of the destruction and infantilisation of the feminine, and the racist exotic nature of the Asian Other, allowing, and arguably unconsciously supporting and 'perpetuating the notion that operatic theatre is a place for nostalgic spectacle' (Pham, 2021), and reaffirming the postcolonial tropes of white male domination.³⁷

Across the operatic field there is general recognition of the deep-rooted issues of racism and cultural appropriation. Interestingly, the discourse from the leaders of the major opera companies acknowledges these issues but simultaneously exhibits a reticence or powerlessness to act. Nolan acknowledges that:

The *Magic Flute* is a deeply problematic narrative [...] you've got this black character who is evil, and he's figured as such and all he wants to do is effectively rape the woman. You've got this female, the Queen of the Night, who is also figured as [a] deeply problematic almost bad character, and the good guy is the old white man and the young hero [...] How do you begin [to] unravel this? (Nolan, interview with author, 30 July 2018)

Stuart Maunder, Artistic Director of State Opera of South Australia (2018–2023),³⁸ also concedes that 'the cultural appropriation card is a big issue and I wish that we could be truly colour-blind in our casting, but we can't' (interview with author, 5 September 2018). Maunder and Nolan's statements highlight the entrenched complications in the present-day presentation of works of the opera repertoire and the perception of insurmountable barriers for moving forward. They reflect a broader disquiet about the connection of opera in the contemporary context and conflicting personal emotions in tackling these 'problematic' issues. Some of the difficulty may stem from the fact that these operas are still extremely admired. Maunder stresses the importance of broadening the repertoire beyond the narrow vision of constant recycling, but admits that '[p]eople are going to come to [Madama] Butterfly to [La] Traviata [...] At OA [Opera Australia] if you had *La Bohème* one year, you knew that next year it was either going to be *Butterfly* or *Tosca*' (interview with author, 5 September 2018).³⁹

There is no denying that eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera remains popular, and that the 'top ten' operas of the repertoire, including *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini

“I don't think opera will ever go away



Cat Hope's *Speechless*. Photo: Frances Andrijich

et al., 1904) and *The Magic Flute* (Mozart & Schikaneder, 1791), continue to sell and remain the staple offerings of opera repertoire programming. This point was brought up by various interviewees and generated much debate as to why this is still the case in contemporary Australia. This arguably reveals much about Australian postcolonial society and the entrenched value systems concerning race, class and gender that are upheld as the cultural 'norm' and reproduced through the unreflective presentation of repertoire opera. There are many competing factors as to why repertoire opera maintains its appeal, including the primacy and potency of the music and the psychological pull of the human voice.

Opera soprano and vocal teacher Lisa Gasteen AO states:

I don't think opera will ever go away because people love the human voice. It's the original instrument and it's a beautiful one, and possibly the most complicated of all instruments [...] It's a sensual thing; it speaks to our hearts not our brains [...] It can trigger an immediate physical response. It can give you goosebumps, it can make you shiver, it can make you cry [...] That's why we love the human voice because it speaks to us on a much deeper level. (Gasteen, interview with author, 13 August 2018)

Further, there are questions of ex-

posure and access; that is, perhaps these operas sell because that is all that is on offer. While this may sound overly simplistic, underlying this is a complex system of *nomos* and *doxa* that resides in and emanates from the operatic field and dictates what is valued and how the operatic field operates in order to uphold this value. In business terms, the marketplace tendencies of supply and demand, matched with the cultural capital of knowledge, or at least recognition of the opera artefact, goes a long way to maintaining the status quo. However, the argument is far more sophisticated and does not follow a binary oppositional line because opera's continuing appeal is recognised as personal and multifac-

eted. Therefore, the larger view here concerns the machinations of the operatic field and is a comment on the relational intersections of power and the power structures rather than the many and varied reasons, personal passions and connections for individuals to the opera artform. My pluralistic definition of opera as gleaned from the research — as an artefact, a frame and an evaluative term — offers multiple pathways for the decolonisation of opera. In this way, in reference to Opera Dynamic modelling (explored in Part II of the full thesis), the power structures of the operatic field may be shifted towards decolonisation through various points of access.

In shifting the power dynamics, access to a diversity of voices and opera agents with a multiplicity of lenses, practices and opinions is vital.⁴⁰ In Australia, Aboriginal voices and investment in Aboriginal leadership is key to the process of decolonisation and to encourage new understandings through the Aboriginal lens. One individual can have a huge impact, as Sydney [Gadigal] experienced with Sydney Festival Artistic Director Wesley Enoch AM (2017–2021), a proud Noonuccal Nuugi man whose tenure enabled Sydney to experience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work as the core components of his 'Blak Out' programming.⁴¹ In 2020, Brisbane [Meanjin] Festival's incoming Artistic Director Louise Bezzina asked local Indigenous arts communities how they would like to work with the festival, and subsequently moved

from an Indigenous Advisory Board to create the 'Blak Curatorium', a First Nations programming team in charge of the vision and engagement of First Nations artists for the 2020 Festival. Applauded for its inclusivity and innovative collaboration with First Nations communities, the Blak Curatorium will remain an integral part of the structure and leadership of the festival into the future, demonstrating another way in which to challenge the status quo and strategically decolonise a performing arts space. A role such as Head of First Nations programming at Sydney Opera House, held by Rhoda Roberts AO (2012–2021), has changed the face of the iconic Sydney Opera House. The First Nations program is now embedded across all programming streams and tourism activities, adding to the richness and diversity of performance offerings and a fundamental historical and contemporary cultural understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, and offering specific insights into Bennelong Point [Tubowgule] on which the Sydney Opera House is situated.

CONCLUSION

Alternative forms and approaches to operatic practice in Australia takes in the areas of deconstruction of content, form, culture and business practices; Australian Aboriginal opera and the Aboriginal lens; and the decolonisation of the operatic field. Each of these areas provides a picture of the current field of

diverse opera and operatic practices in Australia, as well as their agents, approaches and values. Colonisation is a perpetual 'problematic' issue that is embedded in the cultural framework of repertoire opera and the conventional operatic practices of production and consumption. The dominant opera gaze controls access to the operatic field, blocks entry to the 'club' and refuses support to those who are deemed not to belong.⁴² In mainstage repertoire opera, this opera gaze is currently reflected on- and offstage. It is an entrenched unconscious bias of marginalisation, discrimination and cultural appropriation requiring decolonisation as a collaborative process of revealing and unravelling the exclusionary practices of the operatic field. Alongside the dominant colonising spaces of mainstage repertory opera is a network of opera practitioners who are reshaping and redefining the operatic frame with a diversity of practices to challenge what opera is and what it could become. They are creating spaces of collaboration, experimentation and ritual, and these spaces indirectly challenge the opera gaze and offer a multiplicity of ways and means of deconstruction and decolonisation.⁴³

[I]f we forget that we are part of a living tradition and that we need to be in dialogue with contemporary culture, then we're in big trouble. Now is an interesting time because there is a lot of change taking place not just in Australia but on the world stage. (Aszodi, interview with author, 11 September 2018)

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