

Commentary

Story sovereignty - Safe spaces for performers of colour

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Abstract

Performers of colour have had to endure racism, both on and off stage. Sadly, many performers of colour have had personal (in)direct experiences of racism. Sadder yet, there are those who have been discouraged to pursue careers in the performing arts because of the racism they have experienced. This article analyses a production by women of colour called Hot Brown Honey. Through this show, notions of racism are called to question and safe spaces for performers of colour are created. As two Pacific Island authors, one being the Director/Co-writer/Performer and the other an activist academic, we provide insider access into the Hot Brown Honey family. Through our insider voices, we are able to share our experiences of how this show disrupts racist perceptions, and privileges people of colour and our narratives. It is our humble prayer that both this show and article empowers people of colour in the performing arts, and builds a better industry for the next generation.

Keywords: People of Colour, Performers of colour, Hot Brown Honey, Pacific Island, Racism

Where it all started

As Pacific Islanders we started dancing, singing and chanting in our Mothers wombs. For us, performing has always been more than entertainment. You see, our traditional dances are not merely for crowd amusement, but a sacred transmission of historical events and royal familial lineages. Unfortunately, due to colonial arrogance and lack of knowledge in our cultures, many Western scholars and industry members did not understand the importance and prestige of our performing arts (Efi, 2005). Instead, they relegated us and our arts to meaningless performances for their touristic fantasies and sexual gratification (Lemusuifeauaali'i & Enari, 2021; Trask, 1990). Nevertheless, despite these sick fantasies placed on us by colonial perceptions, we have always understood why we perform, and the importance of our performances. We knew that our performances were keeping our legacies, historical records and 'lived experiences' alive (Efi, 2005). Being Pacific people, performances are our natural

way of being, and how we communicate with each other (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020; Enari & Faleolo, 2020). It is only

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through our holistic communication through movement, chanting and singing that we can fully convey the richness of our stories. From the graceful movement of our hands when we chant about the smooth movement of the waves; to the sharp fist movements when we speak of past wars. We have always been storytellers, not just through written form, but through the tattoo's etched in our skin, the carving patterns scraped in the forest, and the movement of our bodies, awakening all modes of sensory engagement. As Pacific People, we continue these ways of storytelling, even upon migration to foreign countries far away. Growing up in a colonial system, our performing arts empowered us and were our connection to our (Mother)land.

Racism is alive

As people of colour, being raised in Australia meant we were confronted by both its racist history and present (Alvarez et al., 2016; Hage, 2014; Hollinsworth, 2006; Jayasuriya, 2002). Going to school we would always question why native aboriginal languages and cultures were not prioritised, whilst ANZAC day was regularly taught. As we got older however, we realised that the invisibility of Indigenous knowledge, languages and cultures was not a coincidence, but a deliberate political ploy to continue the erasure of Indigenous people, People of Colour and further extend colonial order (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Enari & Matapo, 2021; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Even as Pacific Islanders, we also inherited a historical and contemporary legacy of racism from Australia. Our violent history can be traced as far back as 1869, where Pacific people were kidnapped to work as slaves in the sugar plantations in Queensland (Mortensen, 2000). The White Australia Policy was also another racist law, which discouraged migration from the Pacific Islands between 1901-1973 (Lee, 2009). In 1971 the Australian Cabinet even publicly called us too "unsophisticated and unsuited" to live in society (Hamer, 2014). Although the White Australia Policy has been abolished, many of us Pacific Islanders in Australia have been plagued by ill informed stereotypes of being unqualified and unskilled labour (Vasta, 2004). The latest public comments degrading us were made by the Deputy Prime Minister in 2019, when he suggested that our families in the Islands would survive climate change when they "come here and pick our fruit" (Pacific islands will survive climate crisis because they 'pick our fruit', Australia's deputy PM says, 2021).

Whilst navigating our space in the Australian performing arts industry, it was clear that this profession was Eurocentric and cloaked in colonial values. Many of the production crew, performers and content were white. Annoyingly enough, the only roles we would see for people of colour were roles that continued the stereotypes Australia had of us (Aronson, 2004; Madambi, 2020; Spencer et al., 2016). They had roles for the aboriginal with mental health issues, the native Pacific Islander who couldn't speak English and the Asian storekeeper. We had seen the lack of and negative (re)presentation of People of Colour, as a barrier to entering the performing arts. As performers of colour, we were tired of being invisible, or on stage to fit whatever racist narrative Western theatre companies want to impose on us. We knew we had to disrupt this space and (re)gain sovereignty of our stories within this industry.

With the increase of performers of colour in colonial unsafe spaces, many began to share their stories of racism among each other. Several of these performers saw the importance of People of Colour having the sovereignty to forthrightly create our own works. As these conversations

continued, Hot Brown Honey was born.

Hot Brown Honey - Our own space

Hot Brown honey was birthed as a form of resistance to the racism we experienced both on and off the stage. It was also birthed out of the need to create our own performance stories and to (re)gain our narrative sovereignty. With an all people of colour, all-female identifying and non-binary crew, from script writers to performers, this show truly is done by people of colour about people of colour. Many of the cast have received both formal and informal training. With the racist history and colonial legacies that still pervade the industry and our lives, Hot Brown Honey has created an essential space for People of Colour to breathe, heal and gain control of our craft. As co-author of this article and Writer, Director and Producer Lisa Fa'alafi explains

I wanted to tell our stories, with the full mana, power and prestige that they deserve. As a group, we also wanted to create a space for other performers of colour, so they may know there is a safe space to tell our stories, our way and on our terms.

Hot Brown Honey strongly believes in the importance of nurturing our colourful and vibrant brothers and sisters in the performance industry. Our intention for creating this space is not only to disrupt and destroy the negative stereotypes that have always followed us, but to also celebrate our resilience, our truth, our courage and all our complexities. As we are a collective, ranging from First Nations, Warramiri, Gamilaraay, Birra Gubba, Wakka Wakka, Yindinji, South Sea Islander, Torres Strait Islander (Australia), Xhosa (South Africa), Tongan, Maori, Samoan, Thai, Indonesian and Chinese, we harness our cultural pride and ancestors throughout the show. We draw upon our own cultures and modes of artistic practices, as well as those of other People of Colour including African American Hip Hop.

Through this safe space created by Hot Brown Honey, we have also been able to address our 'lived experiences' on the stage. We tackle issues of racism, privilege and microaggressions; bringing them to the forefront. In this show, we perform and deconstruct these issues live on stage, and provoke critical reflection from the audience. Our show is an avenue to address the historical racist issues, as well as the current ones we face. Irrespective of the crowds' feelings toward racism, we rejoice in the freedom and sovereignty we have to protest our own issues on stage, on our own terms. The power associated with being in control of our performances, is aligned with the power our ancestors had when they performed.

Moving forward

Hot brown honey is a form of performance sovereignty and colonial resistance which disrupts the arts space. This show sits along with other productions by people of colour such as Fafswag in New Zealand, Virago Nation in Canada, The Cocoa Butter Club in the United Kingdom and the Noir Pageant in America, which challenge issues of racism against People of Colour. The decolonising of the arts is part of a wider international decolonisation movement, which is present in other industries such as Sport (Keung, 2018), health services (Affun-Adegbulu & Adegbulu, 2020; Harrell, 2000) and academia (Smith, 2013). People of Colour are now (re)writing and dismantling colonial values and systems from their chosen fields.

Performing arts is an extension of how Pacific islanders and other People of Colour have always told our stories, they are not confined to books and spoken speeches. Instead, our narratives are forthrightly performed and celebrated through song, chant and dance. As Pacific Islanders and People of colour, we are proud that our people are not only surviving, but also

thriving (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). It is important to maintain our performance sovereignty, as it allows us to tell our narratives in its entirety. Through doing our part to ensure this space is nurtured, and other safe spaces for performers of colour are created, we can solidify our existence in this industry. Our position within these spaces brings a duty of responsibility, for not only our fellow brothers and sisters, but also our children, and our children's children, who are yet to come. May we ensure that we leave a better industry for future generations than the one we inherited. Ia manuia.

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Biographical Notes

Dion Enari is a lecturer at the School of Sport and Recreation, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences at Auckland University of Technology. He has a PhD from the Faculty of Society and Design, Bond University, Gold Coast with a Master

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Lisa Fa'alafi is a theatre maker, director, choreographer and designer. She is the Director and co-writer of multi award winning show Hot Brown Honey and also is the co-director of feminist theatre company Polytoxic. Lisa's practise centres collaboration, intersectionality and diversity with work that addresses the global conversation of representation, inclusion, self sovereignty and decolonisation on stage.

THE HONEYS

Lisa Fa'alafi aka the Game Changer / Kalala Sione aka The Love Liberator^[1]
Hope Haami aka Hope One The Beatboxer / Juanita Duncan aka The Truthsayer
Ofa Fotu aka The Mythslayer / Elena Wangurra aka The Soul Soother
Crystal Stacey aka The Peace Maker / Yami Löfvenberg aka The Trailblazer
Ghenoa Gela aka The Ground Breaker / Busty Beatz aka The Queen Bee

HOT BROWN HONEY - FIGHTING THE POWER NEVER TASTED SO SWEET

Created & Written by Lisa Fa'alafi & Busty Beatz

Directed by Lisa Fa'alafi / Music Direction by Busty Beatz / Technical Direction by Paul Lim

Produced by QUIET RIOT Executive Linda Catalano Associate Lucy Day in partnership with Kim Bowers & Lisa Fa'alafi

Production Design Lisa Fa'alafi / Lighting Design Paul Lim

Original Composition Busty Beatz, Ofa Fotu, Hope Haami & Lisa Fa'alafi

Costume Design Lisa Fa'alafi & Colleen Sutherland

Choreography Lisa Fa'alafi / Additional Choreography Samantha Williams

Sound Design Busty Beatz / Set Design Tristan Shelly

Based on the original concept & script 'Hot Brown Honey Burlesque' by Kim 'Busty Beatz' Bowers, Lisa Fa'alafi & Candy Bowers