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Nytunga and Dianna

*An Australian aboriginal lesbian and her English lover talk
about cultural appropriation and invisibility*

by Marilyn Davis

In the 16 years since the Michigan Women's Music Festival began, women from all over the world have come to Michigan to join in the annual celebration of lesbian culture. This summer Nytunga Phillips made her story by becoming the first Australian aboriginal woman to attend. A visual artist and a political activist, she travelled to Michigan with the support of her lesbian and aboriginal communities. "It was a great effort," she said. "I didn't get here out of my own pocket. It was a great effort from the community of aboriginal people and the lesbian community, where I sell my art." Nytunga and her English lover, Dianna Scifleet, had just arrived in Portland from Michigan when I talked with them last September.

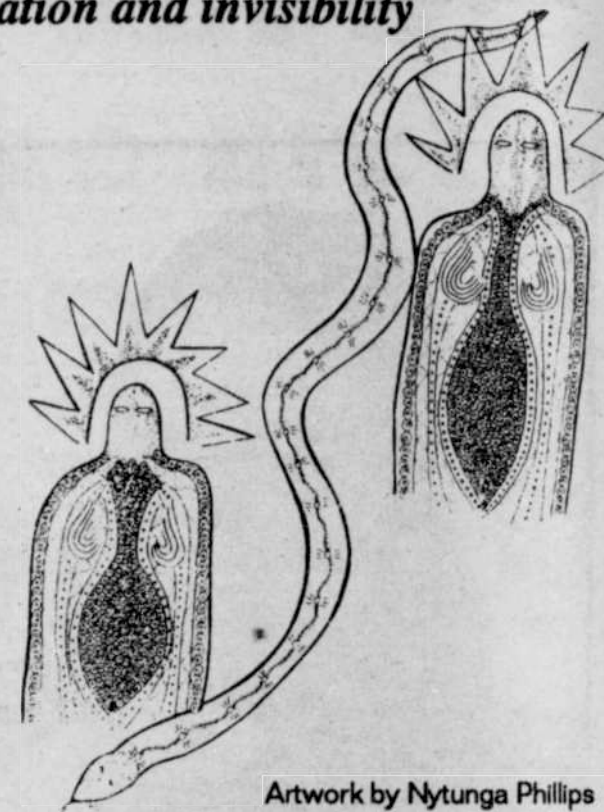
Nytunga and Dianna are a mixed race couple from an institutionally racist culture. According to Nytunga, the colonial government of South Africa learned apartheid from Australia, where there are still laws separating white and aboriginal cultures. While Nytunga was growing up there was no guarantee of public education for aboriginal children; on the basis of a complaint from a white parent, an aboriginal child could be removed from school. It has only been since 1967 that the aboriginal peoples of Australia have been considered citizens. Before that, Nytunga says, they were enumerated in government records along with the "flora and fauna" of the country.

Nytunga's presence at the Michigan festival raised difficult issues for white women. She protested the widespread appropriation of aboriginal cultures by white people. She spoke out when an Australian woman displayed art based on aboriginal sacred symbols and she objected when a festival performer played the didgeridoo, a sacred aboriginal instrument. And she pointed out that cultural appropriation is not just an Australian problem. The United States has its own indigenous cultures. Nytunga remembers being told as a child, "The Indian people of America are our sister tribe."

In Portland, we continued to discuss the issue of cultural appropriation.

Nytunga described her experience at the festival. "We're talking about the first time an aboriginal lesbian woman has set foot at that festival, 16 years it's taken, and already my art is there, and my instrument as well. If you can't hear from an aboriginal woman that this is wrong, who can you hear it from? The woman playing the didgeridoo didn't see that by playing that instrument she was to me committing cultural genocide. People might think that's pretty radical, after all she doesn't have a knife at my throat, but it's a great drain on the culture when white people take over indigenous people's business. It lessens our culture. It's like taking away our last bit of self-respect and the dignity that we have left, our music and our art. Those are the last two things we have, other than our spirituality.

"I know it's conditioning in a lot of ways to be like a colonist, and an imperialist. To me, embracing a world culture means respecting our differences and accepting that we are all equal, and that's all it can ever mean to me. Can't we respect the fact that something comes from another culture and say that's wonderful and just



Artwork by Nytunga Phillips

admire it for what it is? We can all be different, because the day that lesbians are clones of each other, I don't want to be around. We would have lost so much on this planet.

"I believe that what women have to do is break down the patterns of imperialism, along with the patterns of racism. If I question something that's racist, I'm not doing that to hurt somebody. I'm saying that because it's hurting me. And that's what I want to tell white women. If someone of color says to you, 'That's racist,' that's not an attack. That's saying, 'You really hurt me. You hurt my heart and my spirit.' The white woman who's been called a racist needs to hear that, more than get on a trip about being called a racist. She needs to know that she's hurt another woman, another lesbian.

"A white woman came to me at the festival. She said to me, 'Nytunga, where do I start? What do I do?'

"You have to find out where you come from. This is not your land. You have to go back to your own roots. That's what it should be about. If your people don't talk to you about these things, that's too bad, but there are ways to find out. These (European) cultures have wonderful myths and stories and legends. I can't understand why that isn't enough."

Dianna says that when she met Nytunga's family eight years ago, she realized her own ignorance about her past. "They'd say, 'Where are your people from?' and I'd say, 'They're from New South Wales,' but that's not what they meant. I didn't know what to say. I thought, 'I don't know where my people are from.'"

Now Dianna leads racism workshops in which she encourages other white women to explore their own cultural roots, to overcome the "convenient amnesia" that keeps them ignorant of the past. "There's lots of nastiness and horrible things that have happened in Australia because of its colonization by white people. In school we're taught that Captain Cook discovered Australia, like Columbus here. When I was about eight, I questioned that. I said 'What about aboriginal people?' And I got thrown out of class. That conditioning comes from all your life as a white person. And the guilt causes amnesia."

Nytunga believes that the world can change, and that change can begin with the lesbian community. "Yes, it's going to fucking hurt. It's going to hurt white women to change their lives. But it's hurting us every day, every breath we take, every time we see our culture taken from us. What we do is we tear our guts inside out, and this is part of it. We have to tear our guts inside out to change racism and cultural appropriation. Because with great healing comes great pain."