Cultural Difference in Australia:

issues of identity in contemporary Aboriginal musical experience[1]

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'If we compose music, we are also composed
by history'.   Luciano Berio[2]

Recently an American political scientist proposed that, in the future, major sources of conflict will be due not to politics or to economics, but to cultural difference.[3] The author argued that culture is fundamental to ideas of who we are and how we interact with others, and conflict occurs when there are fundamental differences between groups. If this is true, Australia provides a case of cultural interaction and conflict. The Australian population is composed of diverse groups of people, and is geographically situated near very different cultural groups, distinct from the Western culture on which non-indigenous Australia has been based.

Music, as part of our cultural selves, both reflects and helps to create our social milieu. Yet this interaction is often overlooked. As Michael Chanan points out, music has long been viewed as pure knowledge, as an abstract art that is difficult to translate into an everyday language. Music seems to be autonomous; its practice and reception are isolated from the very processes that make it possible. Chanan claims that

> [a]s long as music is regarded as a purely autonomous activity, then the apparatus, including the technologies and the institutions which determine what is performed, published, recorded and broadcast remain in crucial ways invisible (or inaudible).[4]

Techniques that point out these hidden activities facilitate the understanding of the musical process within its cultural and social context.

Postmodern and postcolonial critiques of literature and fine art have assisted recognition of sources of the dominant modes of representation in Western art. Such critiques can question and subvert these dominant forms and ideologies. Postcolonial strategies, in particular, have challenged the values assigned to Western art; they attempt to create a space for non-Western art forms. Recently, similar strategies have

been applied to studies in music, particularly in the study of popular and world music.[5] However, because of the nature of music, so-called subversive strategies on the part of the composer or performer can be difficult to locate.

The emergence of 'world music'[6] and its popularity within Western culture raise issues relating to the concept of the exotic Other and its resonance in Western art. Because of its very difference, world music provides new and exciting resources for Western consumption and composition. Its exotic nature is fetishised, and this process results in such music remaining defined within, and marginalised by, eurocentric ideas. This is further emphasised by strategies of marketing both recorded and live performances. Such marketing influences both the perception and the reception of such music, shifting it from its cultural context, and its potential for subversion, into a framework of consumption.

In a discussion on contemporary indigenous music in Australia, Lisa Nicol points out the difficulties faced by non-Western artists:

> the agenda is set firmly within a paradigm which sees non-Western musicians struggling to make it in a white mainstream-dominated market. The assumption is that the cost of such crossover success is often personal, artistic, musical and..._political_ compromise [emphasis in the original].[7]

Nicol argues further that the non-Western artist is considered to be representative of a particular group or culture, and marketed under an all-embracing umbrella of 'non-Western music'. Individual expression and beliefs are subsumed within both these categories. The message is overwhelmed by the packaging.

These sorts of issues are important in the Australian context where ideas of what it means to be 'Australian' are again attracting public attention, especially within the Republican debate and plans for the celebration in 2001 of the centenary of Federation. An

inherent part of what was promoted as Australian culture from the 1970s until recently has been tied to a concept of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism. This creates a certain tension with the latest concepts of Australian culture which are being promoted.[8]

Australian society has identified itself predominantly with an Anglo-Australian culture, in which indigenous and migrant groups create, or more cynically are permitted to create, a space. The Keating government's recent *Creative Nation* policy, although attempting to recognise and support the diversity of Australian culture, seems more preoccupied with how the notion of an Australian identity can be incorporated into economic growth: '[t]his cultural policy is also an economic policy. Culture creates wealth...[and] is essential to our economic success'.[9] The promotion of 'Australian' culture presents an intimate association between indigenous groups and other Australians: their culture is promoted as ours. This relationship is aimed blatantly at the tourism dollar: 'The culture and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has become an essential element of *Australian* identity, a vital expression of who we *all* are' [emphasis in the original].[10]

This very strong linking of the idea of what is 'Australian' with indigenous culture is problematic. There is no pan-Aboriginal culture in Australia.[11] There are various culturally distinct indigenous groups; aspects of their cultures have been perceived and marketed as 'Aboriginal'. It is this perception that is to be promoted overseas as the 'Australian' identity, thus devaluing the contributions of other ethnic and cultural groups. Their contributions and interactions within Australia are not seen as 'Australian', but are tolerated or marginalised. The *Creative Nation* policy emphasises the importance of culture and the arts in supporting a national identity. The nature of this identity remains vague however, apart from the reference to indigenous culture. What is this identity and how is music to be part of it?

Throughout Australia's white history, many composers have sought to produce a distinctly 'Australian' sound. A recent edition of *Sounds Australian* explores this issue, particularly the appropriation of indigenous and Asian musics, and their compositional techniques, acknowledging that it is a complex issue.[12] Reference to other musical works has traditionally been one of the techniques of composition. This reference is not aimed at critical commentary, as it is in the

visual arts; rather it is a recognition of the regard in which that work is held. However, appropriation of non-Western music does lead to a questioning of the ethical stance of the composer. Non-Western music may add 'local colour', but how it is incorporated into a European framework may raise issues of exploitation and insensitivity. The *Creative Nation* policy pushes forward those aspects of indigenous culture that it wants to promote as 'Australian', yet it apparently ignores how an indigenous or migrant artist operates within this framework.

In an article examining the process of collaboration between distinct cultures of unequal political and social standing, Louise Meintjes looked at the identification white South Africans made with the music of indigenous South Africans on Paul Simon's *Graceland* album (1986). Meintjes believes this identification both legitimates the white South Africans' presence and weakens the subversive elements of the indigenous culture:

> By expressing a claim on these traditions, [white South Africans] are able to legitimate their own identity as local and to construct a history for this local identity. The cementing of a local identity is a politically important move for Whites...[since] they not only establish a place for themselves...but they also diffuse the potency of those traditions and signs for the subordinated group. As these signs become emblems representing the nation as a whole, their value in making distinct identities within the nation weakens. In this way the dominant faction reduces the potential of using these signs in the process of resistance.[13]

Similarly, in the Australian context, the *Creative Nation* policy's definition of national identity as 'Aboriginal' could serve as a means of minimising political disruption, although this may not have been the government's prime objective.

Studies in ethnomusicology which examine the responses of migrant and indigenous cultures to Western culture can elucidate the experiences of these different cultures. As postcolonial literary theory has argued, in order to subvert the attempts of the dominant culture to confine or displace the Other, indigenous and migrant cultures are often forced to adopt the dominant language and discourse so as to establish dialogue with that dominant culture. This is problematic because of the threat to autonomy, and the danger of being subsumed within categories of the Other.

Such issues surrounded the mixes and videos of Yothu Yindi's song 'Treaty'. Even though it was argued that changes to the song enabled the band to 'spread the rhetoric further',[14] there are those who saw it as a bowing down to commercial pressure.

Bran Nue Dae (1990), a 'spiritual/rock/reggae opera'[15] by Jimmy Chi and Broome-based band Kuckles, addresses some of these issues, particularly ideas about identity which aim to re-establish indigenous cultural values. Since it also places the narrative within recognisably Western constructs–writing in the tradition of musical theatre and premiering at the Perth Festival in 1990–*Bran Nue Dae* makes claims to both an indigenous and a European heritage, but subverts the dominant historical narrative. It portrays the effects of the coming of European culture and the resultant disruption to indigenous life, a disruption with greater repercussions for the community than previous cross-cultural contacts. Topics such as deaths in custody, assimilation and the removal of indigenous children from their families are touched on in the storyline. As Chris Lawe Davies points out, *Bran Nue Dae* comes out of a region that has encountered many varied cultures: '[f]rom the earliest days, people from Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, China, Greece, Afghanistan, England...consorted in transgressive erotic profusion with the local people'.[16] The musical depicts a number of indigenous responses to the impact of Western presence, in particular to the 'modern' culture of the 1960s, and the understanding and incorporation of elements of this foreign culture.

In a television interview, Jimmy Chi described *Bran Nue Dae* as semi-fictional, depicting scenes from his own and others' lives.[17] Musically, the songs draw on the varied traditions of Broome, an 'old pearling port [which] has a musical tradition as potent as the brews and the brawls of its past...It is the music of a four-generation subculture that had a language and fun all its own'.[18]

The audience is presented with the different values held by different cultures, and the negotiations needed within such a framework. For example, the subject matter and visual imagery show a non-mainstream attitude towards sexuality.[19] In particular, language is used to indicate the complexity of interaction, not only between indigenous and other Australians, but between different indigenous communities, and even within a community itself. In a dialogue between the characters Tadpole and Slippery, various indigenous dialects are used to describe an animal, terms that the German Slippery cannot understand. When Slippery cannot even seem to understand English, Tadpole in exasperation calls it a 'beeeg lizard',[20] bringing the language down to a very simple child-like image. A humorous scene, it indicates the problem of inter-cultural communication in an understandable way, using language that can be grasped by those outside the culture. A further example is the song 'Everybody Looking for Kuckle', which shows linguistic changes made to standard English that reflect a different language construction and a different view of linguistic activity.

Cultural identity is more complex than simple adherence to constructed ideas and symbols of nationality, and art can be an important means of describing this complexity. The culture of Australia should be allowed to be enriched by its varied population, without the concerns of what it means in terms of a construct of 'national identity'. The promotion of a tourist-driven 'Aboriginality' as national identity devalues the potential richness of this culture.

It can be argued that the governmental *Creative Nation* policy maintains aspects of the colonial project without illustrating the complexity and diversity of culture within Australia. On the other hand, works such as *Bran Nue Dae* present an alternative view of cultural interaction and narratives about Australia's past, while using the conventions of Western musical theatre to ensure a wide dissemination of the issues. It questions European notions of what constitutes culture, and the value assigned to different, non-Western cultures.

Notes

1   This paper is based on work in progress for a dissertation.
2   Unsourced quotation in Michael Chanan, *Musica Practica* (London: Verso, 1994), p.xi.
3   Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilisations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (Summer 1993), pp. 22-49.
4   Chanan, *Musica Practica*, p.7.
5   For example, see V. Erlmann's article 'The Politics of Transnational Music', *World of Music* 35.2 (1993), pp.3-15, and the editions of *Perfect Beat* 'Sounds Alliance' 1.2 (Jan. 1993) and 'Co-Locations' 1.3 (July 1993).
6   T. Mitchell, in 'World Music, Indigenous Music and Music Television in Australia', *Perfect Beat* 1.1 (July 1992), p.6, offers the following definition: 'The term World Music came into currency in the popular music industry in 1987 as a marketing tag referring to popular music originating in countries outside the normal Anglo-American (and Australian and Canadian) sources of popular music'. Steve Feld also notes the link between non-Western music and its commercial availability in 'Voices of the Forest', *Arena* 99/100 (1992), p.167.

[7] Lisa Nicol, 'Culture, Custom and Collaboration', *Perfect Beat* 1.2 (Jan. 1993), p.23.

[8] A recent report on the centenary of Federation celebrations looks at this from the point of Australian unity: 'The motto of 1901 was 'one people, one destiny'. For 2001, it must be 'Many cultures, one Australia'. And this must be achieved at a time when many forces will be attacking the very notion of nationhood around the world. We will be celebrating Australian nationhood at a time when the global winds are eroding and blurring national identity'. Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee, *2001: A Report from Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), p.1.

[9] *Creative Nation: Commonwealth Cultural Policy, October 1994* (Canberra: Department of Communications and the Arts, 1994), p.7.

[10] *Creative Nation*, p.6. The policy contains information on the growth of cultural tourism and the world-wide interest in Aboriginal culture and the money generated by this interest (pp.99-100). The issues and problems surrounding indigenous cultures–what forms are marketed, the involvement of artists and communities and the more problematic issues surrounding the cultural product itself–are not discussed, nor do they appear to be an issue at all in this policy. Financial support is dependent upon a project's representation of national identity. For example, funding for major performing art organisations is to be handled by the Major Organisations Board, the policy stating '[o]rganisations will be included on the Board by the (Australia) Council on the basis of an assessment of their national significance and their financial viability' (p.16). What this national significance is, or how it is to be determined, is not explained.

[11] Catherine and Richard Berndt, Catherine Ellis and Alice Moyle have illustrated the variety and complexities of the different regions of indigenous culture in Australia, while Eric Michaels discusses the myth of a pan-Aboriginal culture in *The Aboriginal Invention of Television* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986). Therefore, the term 'indigenous' is used in this paper to indicate the various Aboriginal groups in Australia, while 'Aboriginal' indicates the assumed culture of Aborigines, that is, the myth of a pan-Aboriginal culture.

[12] 30 (Winter 1993).

[13] Louise Meintjes, 'Paul Simon's *Graceland*, South Africa and the Mediation of Musical Meaning', *Ethnomusicology* 34.1 (1990), p.51.

[14] Chris Lawe Davies, 'Black Rock and Broome', *Perfect Beat* 1.2 (Jan. 1993), p.51.

[15] Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae* (Paddington, Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), p.vi.

[16] Davies, 'Black Rock and Broome', p.52.

[17] *Bran Nue Dae: a film about the musical by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles* (Broome, WA: Bran Nue Dae Productions, 1991), broadcast on ABC TV, 8.30 pm, 15 April 1992.

[18] Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, p.vi.

[19] See *Bran Nue Dae*, ABC TV, 15 April 1992. The open and playful attitude towards sexuality is disussed by both Chi and Kuckles band member Mick Manolis.

[20] Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae*, p.41.