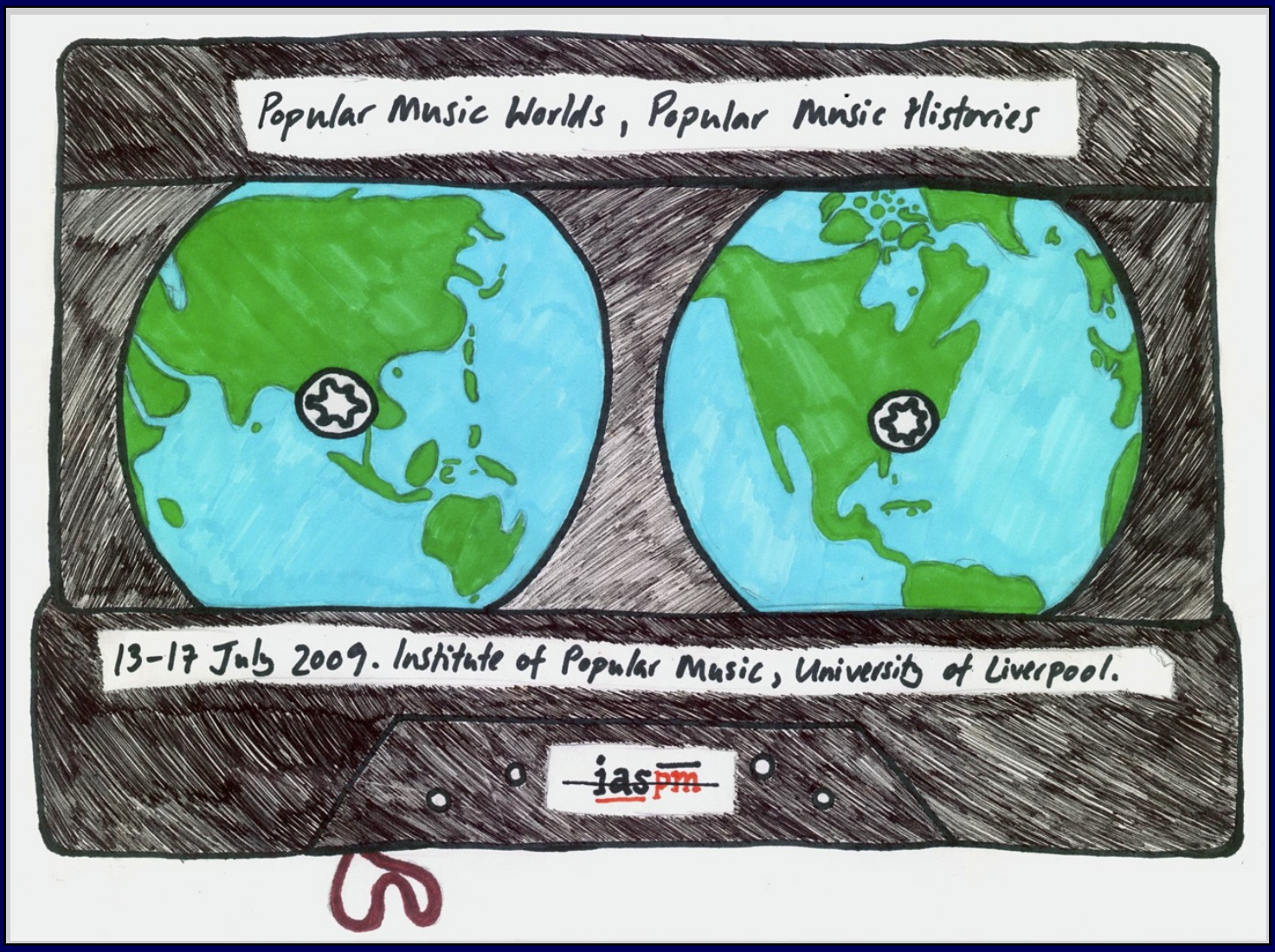

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Performing Aboriginal Places in White towns

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Introduction

Among Aboriginal music makers from remote desert communities in the Northern Territory of Australia, performances in regional towns dominated by white people are often portrayed as desirable occasions for cross-cultural engagements in a musical 'mainstream' space. Australian Aboriginal popular music making in general is also often analysed and understood as a cross-cultural tool for a marginalised minority for 'sharing culture' with a non-Aboriginal public, or to 'talk back' to a dominant non-Aboriginal mainstream (cf. Breen, 1989; Broughton et al., 1994, 655ff; Castles, 1998; Dunbar-Hall, 1998; Ellis, Brunton and Barwick, 1988). This perceived capacity of music to address and speak across racial and cultural divides is usually described as a good thing. It is assumed to create increased understanding and tolerance among non-Aboriginal people for Aboriginal life worlds, and thus help in reducing racial, socio-cultural and political divisions.

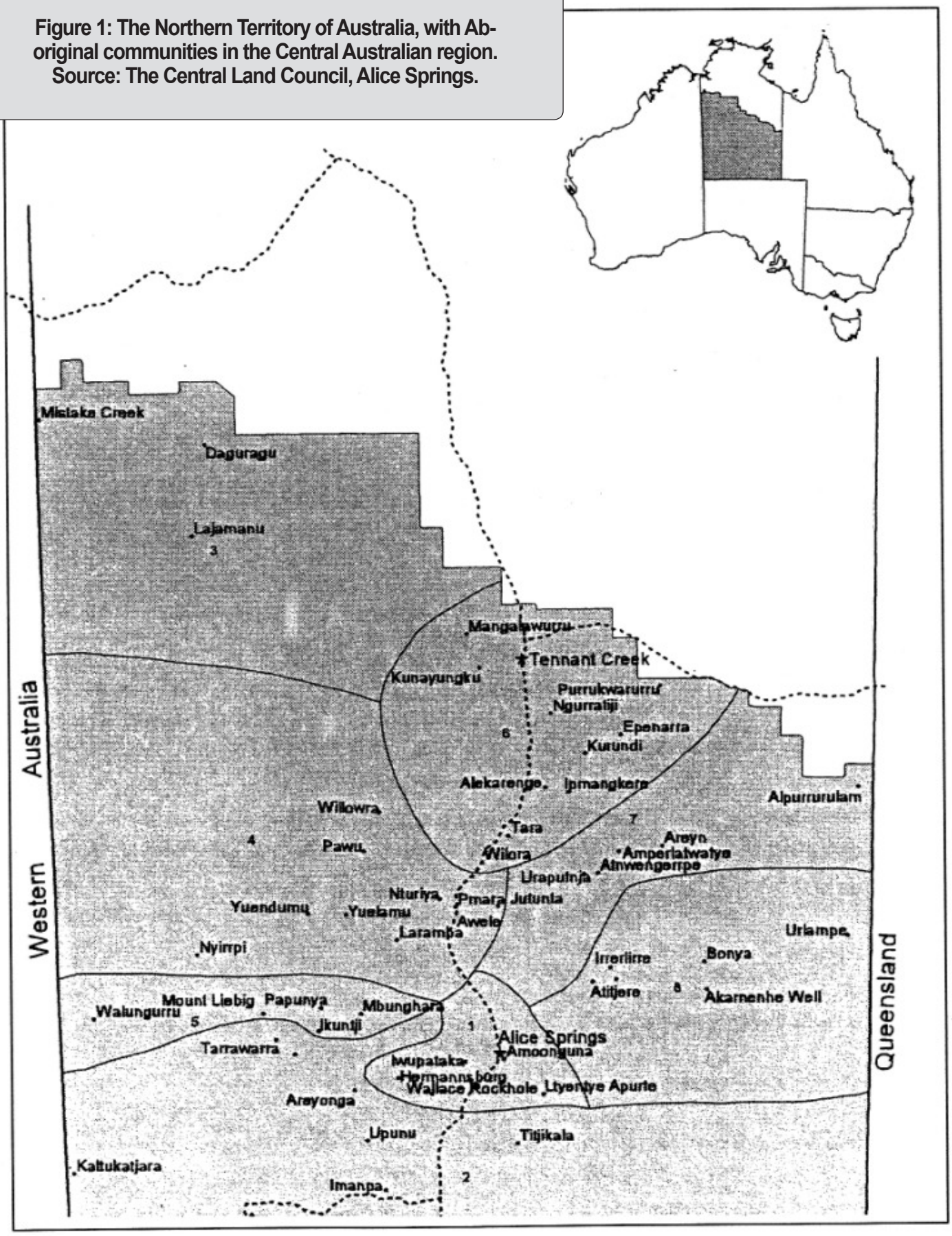
Using ethnographic examples from Central Australia, this paper explores what actual takes place when Aboriginal desert musicians perform in white dominated regional towns, such as Alice Springs. (1) Paying attention to how notions of place and socio-cultural space are mediated in the organisation and performance of Aboriginal town gigs, assumptions about cross-cultural benefits of such events are shown to be problematic for the researcher. I argue that this problem partly emerges from dominant cross-cultural approaches to Indigenous/non-Indigenous engagements. I suggest that a more productive conceptual direction may be to explore musical and socio-cultural expressions as processes of ongoing, inter-cultural mediations.

The Place and the People

Central Australia is a vast, sparsely populated region occupied by large cattle stations, a few mining operations and tourist operations (most famously, Ayers Rock, or Uluru). There is one major town, Alice Springs, with a population of 27,000. It is 1500 kilometres north or south to the next town of any size.

About a quarter of the population in Central Australia are Aboriginal people, compared to Australia as a whole, where the figure is just over two percent (ABS, 2006).

Figure 1: The Northern Territory of Australia, with Aboriginal communities in the Central Australian region. Source: The Central Land Council, Alice Springs.



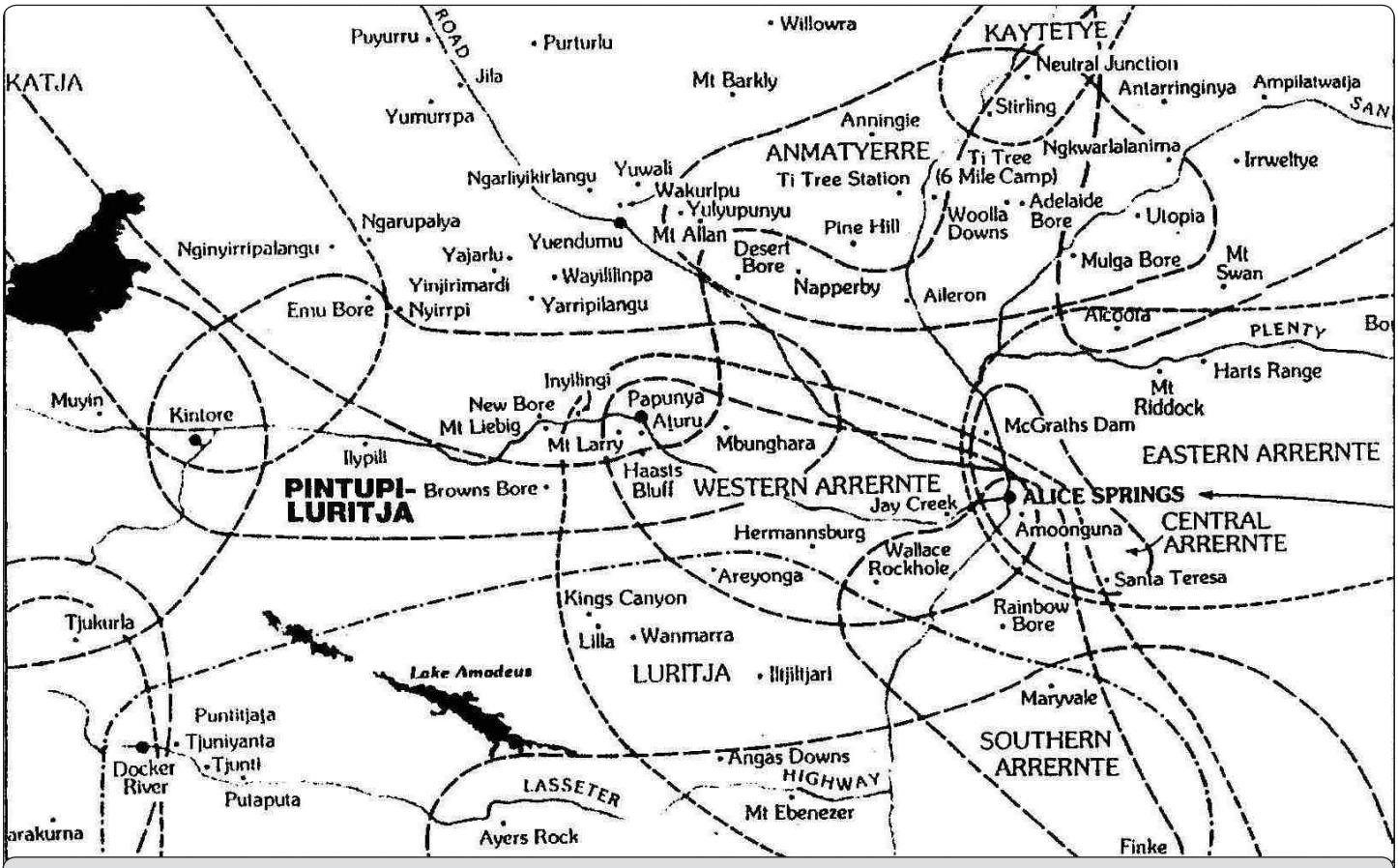


Figure 2: Current distribution of languages in the Alice Springs region.
Source: The Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

Over the past three decades, half of the land in the Central region has been handed back to its traditional Aboriginal owners. These homelands are dotted with remote Aboriginal settlements, usually referred to as 'Aboriginal communities' or 'bush communities'. The musicians appearing in this paper come from such communities. Most desert communities have less than 200 residents (except the largest, Yuendumu, pop. 800-1000), including non-Aboriginal people who usually work in the schools, shops, health clinics, mechanical workshops, and in administrative positions.

Many Aboriginal people in bush communities continue to organise their life based on customary principles associated with particular ancestral areas and languages. That is, Aboriginal people in Central Australia, like elsewhere in the country, have never belonged to the one society or language group. Twenty-five different Aboriginal languages and dialects are still spoken the across the Central Australian region (IAD, 2002). These language groupings, and local groups within them, continue to identify and organise themselves according to distinct localised orders, affiliated with identifiable ancestral areas. Many of the musicians I have worked

with from remote communities speak several Aboriginal languages and most are ritually initiated men who take part in ceremonial life.

British colonisation has had a dramatic and destructive impact on Aboriginal life worlds in this as in other Australia regions. By WWII most Aboriginal people had been forced off their ancestral lands and lived in Christian missions, rural workers' camps or on the outskirts of white settlements (Rowse 1998). Christianity and the rural industry have had a still powerful influence on Aboriginal values and practices, but people are also shaped by a rich multi-cultural history of interactions with people from a range of different ethnic, national and religious backgrounds in Europe and Asia.

Music has always been part of this regional, intercultural history as Aboriginal people have picked up and reworked various styles and sounds in Aboriginal dominated settings. Missionaries brought European hymn traditions that have been recreated in local Aboriginal languages and singing styles since the late 19th century. Cowboy song and hillbilly music arrived in the late 1920s with travelling white show men and touring country shows (Whiteoak, 2003). Hollywood Western movie music and honky tonk style country was widely adopted by the locals from the 1950s, and surf and guitar rock music styles have been reworked into many distinct local Aboriginal styles since the early 1960s (Walker, 2000). Local variation of so called 'desert reggae' have also become part of everyday Aboriginal life across the region since the late 1980s (cf. Dunbar-Hall, 1998).

Aboriginal regional musicians thus continue to put aspects of various cultural influences into practice in their day to day lives and musical expressions. The way they articulate such mediated forms of being in the world, or rather 'becoming-in-the-world', as musicians and Aboriginal men from particular places and people will differ from one social and musical setting to the next. This paper explores the setting of performances in regional white towns.

Desired White Spaces

Among Aboriginal musicians in bush communities, gigs in white towns are often 'talked-up' as desirable and rewarding experiences. This kind of talk usually revolves around their encounters with people who are not 'bush mob', and especially 'whitefellas' (2). They talk about how this or that white musician was at a town gig, and maybe they mingled backstage. They may talk about white sound engineers and other music workers who were there. If these people are from 'big town' places such as Melbourne or Sydney, this will also be emphasised.

This talk basically creates 'town gigs' as a desired space, where the bush musicians can connect with and tap into a white, professional mainstream music industry. 'Town' and whitefella domains in general are often thought of as places of plenty among Aboriginal people in the region and the talk of town gigs make them out as places of plenty of professionalism, plenty of recognition, plenty of technological resources and sometimes plenty of drugs and sex. It basically stands for what their 'blackfella' everyday situation is not. By placing themselves in this talking-up of town gigs, the musicians also position themselves on a more advanced level of music making compared with the everyday 'mucking around' with music in their Aboriginal settings. And it is in the main the cross-cultural quality of town gigs, that is, the whitefella association, that boosts this image of being situated somewhat beyond and above their everyday blackfella place.

A closer look at how blackfella gigs in a white town such as Alice Springs are organised and carried out can demonstrate how such ideas of blackfella and whitefella spaces are mediated in actual practice.

Organising Blackfella Town Gigs

The first observation to be made about the organisation of performances by Aboriginal community bands in Alice Springs is that unless you're an Aboriginal person or work closely with Aboriginal people you're not likely to even hear about them. The exception is performances that are part of larger whitefella festivals and events. Other community band performances are predominantly organised by local Aboriginal organisations and in the main promoted in Aboriginal domains. They are announced on the Aboriginal community radio station, for example, and if flyers are made up, these are mainly distributed to Aboriginal organisations and bush communities. The information rarely makes it to the public places around town or the local newspapers where non-Aboriginal gigs are always advertised.

One obvious reason for this selective promotional strategy is about unequal structural positions in a commercial domain. Aboriginal organisers usually depend on meagre public funding, and promotion costs money. However, Aboriginal organisers and musicians do not seem too keen on changing existing practices, either. As one musician put it to me when I suggested that wider promotion would attract larger audiences and opportunities; 'Whitefellas wouldn't be interested! They couldn't take it. We're just too much for whitefellas!' He, like many Aboriginal people, clearly values this 'too much' blackfella feature, which includes a range of practices and attitudes associated with local blackfella sociality, such as moving around in larger groupings, socialising in rather public and sometimes loud manners, and

gathering to eat, sleep, drink and fight on public lawns and around shopping centres. These Aboriginal ways of being present are precisely what white town residents, police and business operators in general do not value, and that white powers historically have tried to control and discipline.

Still, without the wider promotion most Aboriginal town gigs attract several hundred people, and not surprisingly, the crowds are almost exclusively made up by Aboriginal people. A double CD launch with the Ltyentye Apurte band from the Eastern Arrernte community of Santa Teresa, and the Titjikala Band from the Luritja/Southern Arrernte community of Titjikala, is a typical example.(3)

The Performance of Town Gigs

The concert by the Ltyentye Apurte and Titjikala Bands was held at the Todd Tavern, a popular Alice Springs pub. Close to 300 Aboriginal people turn up for this gig. I can only see a handful of white people in the crowds, all of them working for Aboriginal organisations. As people start to fill the gig room it is soon divided up, with Eastern and Central Arrernte people on the one side of the room and Southern Arrernte and Luritja people related to Titjikala on the other. The men move around and talk to other men, while most women stay with the group of women they arrived with and stand at the back of the room for most of the night.

The Titjikala Band is on first and as soon as they start up their first country-rock tune people immediately take to the dance floor. The singer dedicates each song to various relatives and the band plays their rocky number 'Titjikala is my home' three times, each time drawing a loud, enthusiastic response from the Titjikala side of the room. After a break, the Ltyentye Apurte Band starts up with a couple of thumping rock guitar tunes. From the upsurge of dancers and noise it becomes obvious that the majority of the crowd are Central and Eastern Arrernte, and this is their band tonight. The crowd responds with whistles and appreciative shouting when the singers dedicate songs to particular relatives. When the band plays the song 'It's my home Santa Teresa' twice during their set, the Arrernte dancers go wild.

Moving Bush to Town

Looking at the social dynamics of this and other blackfella gigs in Alice Springs, it is as if one has simply moved a concert in a blackfella bush community to town. Just like in the desert communities we have blackfella musicians performing for a blackfella audience largely made up by people from the musicians' language groups and home communities. And it is mainly those people the musicians address with their music and performance, like when they dedicate songs to particular kin. Just like at bush community concerts men and women largely move in separate groups, with women, if they are

sober, behaving less extrovert and men being the public 'movers and shakers'.

A few features of course differ in town settings. In a pub venue people do not sit on the floor, for example, as they would in a blackfella-dominated setting. Kids and teenagers, and the ever-present community dogs, are not allowed in to a town pub, either. People also tend to play the extra-marital field more in town, where social control is somewhat less strict. Combined with the accessibility to alcohol in town this usually results in more jealous dramas and fight around town gigs. Alcohol is prohibited in desert communities and town gigs therefore often become occasions for drinking. The night just described was rather orderly. Two weeks later, however, two other bush bands played at the same venue. That night turned into a rowdy, drunken happening with a few people ending up in hospital and several in the police lock-up, including one of the performing musicians. This was a more obvious demonstration of the valued 'too much' quality mentioned earlier.

In sum, while allowing somewhat more permissive conditions for drunken and sexual behaviours, town gigs with bush bands largely recreate the social dynamic of music events in the Aboriginal musicians' home communities. In this articulation of Aboriginal relatedness and difference, songs like 'It's my home Santa Teresa' and 'Titjikala is my home' take on particular powerful meanings in mediating a sense of place and space in town gigs.

The Power of Community Songs

Most Aboriginal community bands or musicians of any standing in Central Australia have a 'community song' about their particular bush community. (4) These songs may describe the history, people and the landscape around this specific place. They can be sung in a local Aboriginal language, in English, or a mix of both. The musical styles of these songs vary. They can be set to a country music tunes, or they can be long, sentimental rock ballads, or they can be fast, catchy reggae or rock tunes, like Ltyentye Apurte Band's 'It's our home - Santa Teresa'.

Musicians tell me that they write these songs to make their own mob 'happy and proud'. People from the community in question also always respond to these songs with strong emotions and request them again and again. Hence, these are highly dense occasions for expressing and experiencing shared sentiments, history and place, for people from a particular place.

When performed outside the home community, these songs also become public statements of a community's people and country, as distinct from other Aboriginal

communities. Especially when sung in a local Aboriginal language, these songs are also performed to prove to other Aboriginal groups that 'culture' is still strong in this community. That is, by using and displaying the local language of particular ancestral traditions (which is always associated with a particular ancestral place in the landscape), they demonstrate how active they are in maintaining such knowledge and practice. All songs in local languages can have this function but the community songs are especially important for reinforcing differentiation and relative strength between different regional Aboriginal groups. Anyone can certainly enjoy other people's community song as a great piece of music, but they can never share its sentiments in the same emotional and socially meaningful ways as people from that particular community and Aboriginal grouping.

When performed in regional towns, community songs have a third, important purpose and power for many musicians. I describe this as the 'gathering power of place' that these songs are perceived to perform (Ottosson 2006). Casey describes this power as working to conjoin our experiences of time and space with a specific place (1996). This place provides a scene for the experience of our past and present feelings, thoughts, expressions and actions, regardless of where we happen to be at the moment.

The perceived 'gathering power of place' of community songs is particularly important because most Aboriginal desert communities keep 'loosing' men and women to white towns, which usually means they get lost to a life on the grog. This loss is a major problem because social cohesion in desert communities still fundamentally relies on certain men and women of particular kin categories practicing their responsibilities and rights in relation to specific individuals and tracts of country. Many country and rock songs address this problem but usually by urging people already in the communities not to leave.(5) When it comes to convincing people who have left to return, community songs are perceived by the musicians to be the most powerful. These songs are performed to act on people, to move them emotionally, to transform them morally and physically to return to their people and ancestral country. And it works, I'm repeatedly told by the musicians, who can name several people who have returned after being lost to town life for years, the trigger being that they heard their community song, or saw it performed. This made them so homesick that they managed to give up the grog and town, and returned to their home country. Because of the perceived power of these songs to act on others, the musicians also become mediators of such performative forces, which further their status as men and as musicians in their Aboriginal settings.

Summary

When investigating how gigs by Aboriginal bush bands in Central Australian white towns are actually organised and carried, it becomes clear that these events mobilise distinct Aboriginal relatedness, identifications and interactions. This seems to contradict the musicians' talking-up of these events as cross-culturally desirable and rewarding experiences in a white-dominated social and musical space. The dynamics of town gigs in fact seem to work to restrict opportunities for cross-cultural engagements or white recognition. Interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people around these events are more or less limited to the white ordering and policing of 'too much' blackfella demeanour, which tends to reinforce historically established orders of separation, division and inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activities and people.

A remaining question for the researcher is how to deal analytically with these contradictions? In my research I have found the analytical concept of intercultural mediation be useful in addressing this question (cf. Hinkson and Smith 2005; Merlan 1998). If we approach musical and social expressions of space and place in terms of ongoing intercultural mediation, that is, as emerging from constant interactions of ideas, people, practices, materiality, in which experiences become embedded and embodied in layers on layers as we go about our daily lives (cf. Meintjes 2003, 8), those contradictions become less of a problem. They instead appear as socially productive. If, as I suggested earlier, the way we articulate such mediated forms of 'becoming-in-the-world' will differ from one social setting to the next, we may also allow for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of both real and imagined places for the always ambivalent formation of still coherent and meaningful ways of becoming-in-the world.

With this approach, it becomes clearer that the talking-up of town gigs into imagined rewarding 'whitefella places of plenty' is mainly socially productive when this talk takes place in blackfella social places. It is in blackfella places the imagery of participating in a whitefella musical world can increase real blackfella male and musician status, even when such participation is not realised as imagined. The main intercultural dynamics of mediation played out here are in relationships between Aboriginal ways of being in places and spaces.

The power of community songs demonstrates the point even clearer. Partly, the perceived power of these songs depends on these tunes being performed in white towns; the place where the 'lost' people are. But the power of these songs is also fundamentally sourced from particular Aboriginal social, physical and ancestral

places and social dynamics, the performance of which reinforces distinctions between Aboriginal places and spaces.

In the setting of regional towns, places where white-dominated orders are shaped in ongoing histories of discrimination and disciplining of Aboriginal people, those Aboriginal people have also always insisted on being present on their own terms. As suggested previously, Aboriginal town gigs can be particularly powerful occasions for a certain 'too much' blackfella presence by attracting a large number of Aboriginal people who come to support 'their' bands, dance, socialise, drink, chase sex, have fun and fight in ways that tend to unsettle the white town order. Approaching this in terms of intercultural mediations is to foreground how these forms of presence have in themselves emerged from a history of complex intercultural interactions and mutual influences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and orders, real and imagined.

The notion of 'too much' itself indicates such mediated intercultural qualities. One can only be 'too much' in relation to, and interactions with, an 'other'. As described, to be present in 'too much' blackfella ways in whitefella dominated towns are often desirable and gratifying experiences for Aboriginal people. Cowlishaw suggests that part of this satisfaction is entangled with racial conflict (2004, 4) and these ways of being present may indeed be a form of resisting unequal white orders. But we also need to take seriously that not all aspects of Aboriginal everyday practices and life worlds are primarily shaped by racial conflict. The reproduction of real and imagined divisions of black and white spaces may have just as much to do with people identifying with, and cultivating, distinct forms of Aboriginal sociability, in relation to whitefellas but also to other blackfellas.

Hence, real and imagined radical difference as well as cross-cultural desires and rewards may be better investigated and understood as always emerging from, mediated and transformed in, intercultural engagements and mutual influences among a range of people, ideas and practices. The point is that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people depend on each other, both between and within those groupings, for creating and recreating meaningful places in their musical and everyday life.

Endnotes

1. The ethnographic examples in this paper are based on 15 months fieldwork for a doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology (Ottosson, 2006). The author continues to work and conduct research with Indigenous peoples in Central Australia, where she has resided for the past 9 years.

2. In the local Aboriginal vernacular, 'whitefella' and 'blackfella' are the most commonly used term for non-Indigenous and Indigenous people and domains.

3. The albums launched were Ltyentye Apurte Band's 'It's our home – Santa Teresa' (CAAMA Music, 2001) and the Titjikala Band's 'Tapatjatjaka' (CAAMA Music, 2001).

4. To mention just a few; 'Lajamanu' by The Lajamanu Teenage Band (CAAMA Music, 1999), 'Yuendumu' by Blackstorm (CAAMA Music, 1998), 'Yurrampi' by the Rising Wind Band (CAAMA Music, 2000) and 'Daguragu/ Wattie Creek' by the Lazy Late Boys (CAAMA Music, 1999).

5. Examples of such songs are the North Tanami Band's 'Ngamarlangu' (Mother and child) (CAAMA Music, 1990), 'Wama kuru wanti' (Leave the grog alone) with Titjikala Desert Oaks Band (CAAMA Music, 1989), 'Who's gonna wipe their tears' with Danny Plain (CAAMA Music, 1988), or 'She's coming back' with the Areyonga Desert Tigers (CAAMA Music, 1988).

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