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Imagining Togetherness Amid Dislocation

Three scenes from Australian music making

SAMUEL CURKPATRICK WITH LAURA CASE AND ANTHEA SKINNER

INTRODUCTION

For Charles Taylor, the term *social imaginaries* refers to the ways that people 'imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (2004: 23). However, realities of human dislocation – of separation, disability, injustice and exclusion – present significant challenges to an understanding of social imaginaries as collectively formed. This is especially so when certain histories, cultures or philosophical trajectories that make up a society seem at odds with one another. A lack of understanding from individuals and communities with different experiences only exacerbates their sense of dislocation from broadly held projects or aspirations. Accordingly, concepts of social togetherness in some contexts may seem naïve or even hypocritical.

A defining feature of Taylor's social imaginaries is 'common understanding which makes possible common practices' (2007: 172). On one level, this is self-evident: knowing the rules of a game or the conventions of a musical style allows different players or musicians to participate. Activities that involve a degree of coordination or efficiency require a degree of common understanding. But what about common understandings of things like meaning or purpose? In our day-to-day lives we encounter all sorts of people with very different concepts about life and how we should get along together. Yet, despite a profound lack of common understanding on this level, we manage to participate in common practices remarkably well.

Given the pervasiveness of human dislocation and difference within contemporary societies, in this article we propose an expansion of Taylor's definition of social imaginaries to also incorporate the obverse formulation: it is our common practices that make human relationality possible in the first place. Is it not our shared forms of life, as human beings who sense, think, create, hope and trust, who live together, work together and eat together, which precedes social imagining? This expanded definition holds implications for interpretations of music performance and the ways it brings together those of differing cultures and abilities. Just as American clarinettist and swing band leader Benny Goodman challenged segregation in 1930s America by performing with prominent African-American musicians (Wells 2020), music is a powerful means for effectively reshaping social imaginations through common practice.

This basic methodological approach also holds implications for the ways we interpret or engage with histories of colonization, racism and exclusion through performance. For contemporary societies with a liberal heritage, an appraisal of these forms of dislocation is often at the front and centre of public discourse and desire for a new, more inclusive future. Yet, a focus on dislocation can also seem at odds with any enthusiasm for what might be held in common, in solidarity or as an expression of universal humanity. A fixation on social, political and environmental crises within the media and public discourse might be seen as symptomatic of a social imaginary that emphasizes dislocation as a defining feature of human experience.

This focus can risk cultivating a mood of determinism, a preoccupation with inherited inequalities of gender, race and ability, rather than the possibility of human creativity to transcend these coordinates. The question therefore arises whether concerns over dislocation have become too dominant a focus within genuine liberal imagination and to what degree these concerns limit critical thought to the continual revision of 'constellations of

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power' (Editorial Collective 2022: 7) and their various configurations – a vying of discrete identity blocs for space within societal discourse. This is in contrast to a transformative sense of relationality in which greater understanding emerges within shared space of conversation, interaction and performance.[1]

In the following scenes of music-making from Australia, we seek to reframe experiences of dislocation from dominant forms of social togetherness. Presentations given at symposia held by the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, in conjunction with the Musicological Society of Australia in late 2022, generated discussion between authors on the overlapping themes of our work. Although representative of distinct and varied contexts, we discerned a need to articulate a more expansive vision for the ways performance generates new social imaginings across differences of culture, ability and history, even as those differences are affirmed.

Having developed this theoretical framing through our discussions, the following sections are separately authored by Samuel Curkpatrick, Laura Case and Anthea Skinner respectively. Each scene introduces the author's perspectives on the topic of social imaginaries, as gained through their research and work in performance settings. While these scenes are drawn together more explicitly by analysis in the conclusion, they introduce perspectives based in varied contexts of intercultural collaboration (Curkpatrick), colonial history (Case) and disability culture (Skinner).

SCENE ONE: CONNECTED THROUGH SONG

Across Indigenous Australia, traditions of ceremonial performance have played a vital role in sustaining healthy, interdependent communities. Bodies of song and narrative comprise educative processes in ethical behaviour and kinship obligations, and convey rights to land and responsibilities of resource management. Yet these important aspects of social formation were largely overlooked by missionaries who founded many of the small communities and towns now dotted across Australia.

Like many other settlements, the Roper River Mission in southeast Arnhem Land, founded in 1908, offered local Aboriginal groups relative safety from violent pastoralists who were pushing ever further into their lands. While motivated by humanitarian concerns, many missionaries were also shaped by European social values, which they sought to inculcate through regimented work and timetabled religious instruction in English. Within a generation, dislocation from traditional languages and culture – which were often forbidden – was profound (Dewar 1982).

Of the seven different language groups that settled at Roper River in the early to mid-twentieth century, only speakers of Wägilak and Ritharrŋu – two closely related languages – maintain their traditional ceremonies today. Benjamin Wilfred, a leading Wägilak songman, explains, 'At Ngukurr, those young people, they lost their language and culture – everything. They're just lost; only the Wägilak are helping them now' (Curkpatrick 2020: 45).

For Wägilak singers, the responsibility to perform these ceremonies on behalf of other groups in Ngukurr extends from a sense of connection to the past and the old ways, which hold the power to bind communities together through ancestral *rom* (law). With few resources and little support, this is a heavy burden, compounded by the seemingly endless funerals that come with complex health problems, community violence, poor roads and vehicle maintenance, and a lack of meaningful employment.

This responsibility to sing for others in the community does, however, provide purpose and identity within a context of cultural dislocation and loss. Indeed, the traditional role of singing within formal, educative processes continues in new ways. Singing traditional songs is not merely an activity of representing the past to the present, but a way to build healthy communities who live, to varying degrees, according to the social responsibilities of ancestral law.

This process is represented metaphorically by the *biḻma* (clapsticks) that structure *manikay* (public ceremonial song) performances. The rhythmic patterns played by the *biḻma* have been passed unchanged through the generations. These rhythms carry the narrative action of song

[1] For a detailed consideration of these issues and their relevance to the humanities, see Gadamer (2013).

and dance, and represent the core of a clan's identity. Importantly, the *bi̱lma groove* generates momentum that draws the wider community together in performances held outdoors and that are open for all to participate (fig. 1). In this way, children are educated, old people edified and generations connected. In the face of present social difficulties, community conflicts or the death of a loved one, song and dance continue to bring people together, to 'feel good', to 'make together' and be restored in their connections with one another.

In the face of immense cultural loss, new forms of collaboration provide impetus to rediscover old songs. During a recent studio recording session for the album *Hand to Earth*, Wilfred was listening intently to the improvisations of other musicians. In the sounds of the trumpet and synthesizer, he was brought to tears as he recalled a song forgotten since childhood. For Wilfred, even if they have not been sung for decades, ancestral songs are 'always there, always behind your back, coming behind you'.

Figure 1. Dancers led by Daniel Wilfred at a funeral ceremony in Ngukurr, southern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, 6 June 2023.
Photo Lee Wynyard

Significantly, the *manikay* tradition also enables new connections to be formed with non-Indigenous Australians. Since 2005, Wägilak singers have collaborated with some of Australia's leading improvising musicians and composers, under the auspices of the Australian Art Orchestra (Curkpatrick 2020). For Wägilak singer Daniel Wilfred, these collaborations are readily incorporated into the ancestral *raki'* (string) of *manikay*, which connects the generations and strengthens community by weaving together different families and generations (Curkpatrick 2023).

> The old story carries the new story. That old story is strong because you know where it comes from and where the dreaming goes through. And you have to stick with that old voice and story, to pass it on. But you are making a new one too, putting the old story in the new story. You put the old voices in the new voices. New styles but the old style is there, connecting. *Raki'* [the ancestral string] is pulling us together, holding us. When you travel or share your music with others, on tour, that *raki'* is still there, connecting you to your home. (Curkpatrick and Wilfred forthcoming)

For Wilfred, cultural dislocation is never absolute and the old can always be discerned in

the new as the very source of creativity. In the process of making new connections, the old is a groove that draws together and carries along, thickening relations of people and place that are woven into the ancestral *raki'* (string). In this way, Wilfred recalled the strutting movements of the ancestral *wäkwäk* (black crow) in a dream, accompanied not by the *bi̲lma* but by a steady 'reggae' groove played by the Australian Art Orchestra:

> I saw five crows coming towards me, from the sea. And I was asleep. And I started singing. Behind me I heard a bass, lead [guitar], drums, keyboard. They were playing. And when it stopped, I woke up and I looked around. And I saw a bird under the tree, talking: 'Wäk wäk wäk' [crow cawing]. And I went up to tell David [Wilfred], 'Hey, I dreamt last night. I saw five crows come towards me. And I heard it all start up from those instruments.' (Curkpatrick 2020: 114)

The Wägilak social imaginary, exemplified by traditional ceremony and song, is one in which new experiences and relationships, such as those with musicians of the Australian Art Orchestra, do not represent separation from the past but an opportunity to reinvigorate ancestral traditions in new contexts. Realities of cultural loss, which can seem overwhelming, engender responsibility within a younger generation, to sustain the core purposes of ancestral traditions through their continued performance. By focusing on song as an activity that brings about interdependent and mutually responsive communities, Wägilak singers imagine a more reconciled Australia, by way of the old that continually gives impetus to the new.

SCENE TWO: EUROPEAN MUSIC AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF A COLLECTIVE SOCIAL IMAGINARY WITHIN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Music is not only an inherent part of Indigenous social imaginaries[2] but also a vital part of Aboriginal culture, connection, tradition and expression. While it is true that European music was often imposed on Aboriginal people as a means of conversion to civility, this engagement cannot be exclusively seen as evidence of cultural loss (Case 2022). Determining how Aboriginal people adapted European musical traditions on their own terms to fit within ongoing cultural practices, is to illustrate how they influenced, rejected and survived the forces of empire. As an Aboriginal musician myself who grew up learning classical violin, I believe in the importance of reframing this narrative of cultural erasure to one of cultural resilience, survival and resistance as part of reclaiming a new social imaginary – one created by Indigenous people, as distinct from that imposed by non-Indigenous settlers.

As colonial governments began to make a more concerted effort to 'civilize' Aboriginal people in twentieth-century Australia, many were segregated from society onto missions around the country. Missionaries taught European activities and often forbade Aboriginal people from practising their own traditional customs. While many were driven by a desire to 'protect' Aboriginal people from the violence of colonialism, their efforts were misguided and resulted in widespread cultural erasure. Reports from the missions focused on visual symbols of 'civilization', and Western music was often taught to Aboriginal people as preparation for assimilation into white Australian society (Martin 2020). Both the beliefs and actions of European missionaries influenced the settler social imaginary of Indigenous people as needing to be 'civilized', which has continued to justify the outcome of contemporary governmental policy and the ongoing racism towards Australian Indigenous people.

In 1901, the Aboriginal mission at Purfleet just outside Taree on the mid-north coast of New South Wales opened. The missionaries who worked there sought to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity. When the Purfleet mission hall opened in 1903, Aboriginal children were still not allowed to attend school in New South Wales, so the hall acted as a segregated school during the week and a space of worship on the weekends (Ramsland 2006).

The hall was also used to hold regular meetings regarding the Mission and the proceedings were often published in the local papers. A report from 1906 in the *Manning River Times* commends the missionaries for 'carrying the gospel to the dark people' (*The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* 1906a: 6). In

[2] As distinct from a settler social imaginary, where Indigenous people are thought of in a way that is determined by outsiders and their perception of Indigenous communities and culture. Being Indigenous and inherently a part of that community facilitates a distinct social imaginary, separate to that constructed by settlers and their representation of Indigenous people.

between speeches by those who worked on the mission were several musical events. This same report comments: 'a number of the men also gave novel and pleasing items on gum leaves inserted in sticks, accompanied by the violin' (ibid.). A similar event consisting of lectures was held just a few months later in May 1906, and the report comments that 'a very pleasing item by three of the aborigines with leaves and violin and organ accompaniment was well rendered' (*The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* 1906b: 4).

Music has always played an essential role in both the creation and preservation of individual, cultural and collective identities for Aboriginal people (Bracknell 2014). As such, while European musical traditions were regularly featured in these public displays as evidence of civility alongside Christian messages, it seems likely that Aboriginal people may not have necessarily seen this as a 'European' form of music-making. Rather, musical events such as the one held at Purfleet provided Aboriginal people a means of engaging with their own cultural and collective identity in a way that aligned with their traditional experience of making music. Through its ability to facilitate cultural continuation and Indigenous expression, music can be interpreted to act as a means of resistance. Indeed, the fluid nature of music defies colonial efforts to persecute and control.

Rather than taking this engagement as evidence of successful assimilation, as many Europeans and missionaries did, European musical traditions allowed Indigenous people to engage with their own social imaginary and identity in a way that was not forbidden on sites such as the missions where harsh restrictions were often imposed. Indeed, music-making was regularly cited as a favourite pastime for Aboriginal people on the missions, regardless of the form it took, as it provided an escape that felt relatively familiar (Haebich 2018; Ryan 1999).

An explicit example of this occurred in 1934 when Aboriginal people from the Purfleet mission staged a corroboree[3] and concert for the wider community (*The Northern Champion* 1934: 5). For the first half of the programme, traditional songs and dances were performed, followed by a corroboree illustrating elements of 'native lore'. The dancers who performed in the corroboree were dressed in traditional war paint and carried spears, boomerangs and shields. Each instrument that featured in the corroboree was home-made and the ensemble included 'single string fiddles, violins and ukuleles made of 3-plywood from tea chests' (ibid.). This was followed by a gum-leaf band and orchestra that concluded the programme.

Figure 2. Band from Purfleet, New South Wales, c.1909. Bert Marr, violin; Fred Dumas, accordion; Bob Bungie, banjo; Minnie and Hazel Dungie, vocals; Harry Dumas, auto-harp (see Sullivan 1988).

This is a clear example of how Aboriginal people combined their own familiar traditions with European instruments as a means of keeping their culture alive and carrying traditional knowledge forward. These communal expressions promoted a sense of social and cultural cohesion among disparate tribal groups, crossing barriers of age, gender, ability and clan affiliation. Incorporating European musical traditions into their own cultural worlds allowed Aboriginal people to produce a new and unique artistic expression within their own performance context, on their own terms, facilitating a collective social imagination and resilience, regardless of such pronounced cultural loss.

[3] An Australian Aboriginal dance ceremony that may occur as a sacred ritual, or informal gathering.

SCENE THREE: ONE OF US: ON SEEING REFLECTIONS OF OURSELVES ON STAGE

> 'I became a performer because, growing up, the only times I saw people who looked like me in the media were in stories about abortion or euthanasia.' Jess Kapuscinski-Evans (2019)

This comment, made by my bandmate Kapuscinski-Evans during question time at a disability panel of the Musicological Society of Australia's national conference, sums up the importance of visibility in the disability community more succinctly than I ever could. We are both members of the all-disabled crip-folk trio Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra (fig. 3) and much of our work revolves around normalizing the sight of people with disability, not just by performing on stage but by embracing the stereotypical rock 'n' roll lifestyle (Skinner and Kapuscinski-Evans 2021).

Figure 3. Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra. Left to right: Anthea Skinner, Jess Kapuscinski-Evans, Zoë Kalenderidis.
Photo Nic Tsourlenes

Kapuscinski-Evans is the lead singer of the band and, as her comment above suggests, she has had a very obvious disability since early childhood. Even now she is an adult, as a small woman in a very large wheelchair, she is often treated as a child by strangers. As a result, our performances in Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra are designed to subvert audiences' expectations of people who look very disabled. Kapuscinski-Evans takes on a traditional rock persona, swearing and singing about sex, drugs and various forms of debauchery. We perform covers like *Too Drunk to Fuck* by the Dead Kennedys and *I Wanna be Sedated* by the Ramones, and our original songs like *You're Weird (I Think I Love You)* and *Mean Mistreater* often celebrate queer, kinky, disabled sex.

Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra's performance is designed to be confronting to non-disabled audiences, but we are not the first to do so. We are simply the latest in a long line of disabled performers who have refused to embrace society's expectations of disability and have instead unashamedly focused on our differences, on our outsider status, on the transgressions our unique bodies and brains allow us to get away with and who deliberately illicit a feeling of discomfort around those who are not used to our ways. We build on the work of Macy Gray, Bob Flanagan, the Sex Pistols and Ian Dury, going all the way back to the freak show performances of the nineteenth century (Garland-Thompson 1997: 68).

Indeed, it was at a modern-day freak show that I first learned to embrace disability pride. My disability was barely visible in my teens and I had always attended mainstream schools. Disabilities were something 'others' had. I was just sick – a lot. In my early 20s, my disability suddenly became visible to the outside world as I, very self-consciously, began walking with a stick. At about this time, my partner landed a job performing in the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow during their Australian tour (Sandahl 2016). As we walked in on the first day, it quickly became clear that this was no ordinary theatre show. A large proportion of the cast were obviously disabled and those who were not had to go to great lengths to differentiate themselves from the crowd. Some had deliberately put on large amounts of weight; others had covered their whole bodies in tattoos or piercings. For the first time in my life, I was in a place where to be disabled was to have an advantage. Everyone in the room knew it.

The freak show performers' reactions to me were life changing. Having recently acquired my walking stick, I was getting used to people asking intrusive questions like, 'What's wrong with your leg?' or 'What happened to you?' Here I was asked a different question. The freaks pointed to my stick and asked, 'What can you do?' To them, an obvious disability was not a sign of weakness, but a sign that I could do something that others could not.

Twenty years later, I now run programmes supporting disabled children to learn musical instruments and, as unlikely as it sounds, my interactions with the freak show continue to influence the way I work. Although the main purpose of our programme is to prepare students to participate in mainstream music settings alongside their non-disabled peers, we also aim to instil a sense of disability pride, or at least a sense of their place in the disabled world, in all our students.

We do this by 'cripping' the curriculum, that is, by showing our students that disabled people are and always have been a part of the music industry. The majority of our staff, music teachers and therapists, are adults with disability, as are the guest performers who regularly come in to work with the students. We always try to include discussions of disabled musicians and composers in our class discussions, because there is no better way to demonstrate to our students that they, as people with disabilities, can aspire to become musicians, composers, teachers, therapists or anything they want to be.

Reflecting on my own childhood, a disabled identity was something I avoided. More than that, it was an identity that I did not even know could be embraced. I saw the label as a burden inflicted on less fortunate 'others' by a society made up of 'normal' people. Now, as a proud disabled adult, I realize the power of embracing that identity. I can change the very way children imagine their own futures, just by turning up to work and being me.

CONCLUSION

These three scenes represent diverse perspectives on identity, culture and history within Australia. Each has explored the theme of dislocation in the sense of *being out of joint* with dominant or mainstream imaginations of social togetherness in Australia.

The capacity to imagine how the world might be changed for the better is an important part of Taylor's social imaginaries (2002, 2004). While music has been widely used to profile the experience of diverse communities – building acceptance and awareness of the need for inclusion – it can do more than change the way we imagine the world or, in the sense that Waddock defines social imaginaries, the 'core cultural mythology that explains the world' (2022: 435). As a living event, music holds the power to generate new forms of relating and knowing, through shared activity. In other words, more than just envisaging a world in which equity, comfort and dignity are equally afforded to all, music performance can enact this, in the ways we come together to perform and create.

In a similar way, many academics have approached the concept of social imaginaries as an exercise in affirming difference, as observers who collate 'descriptions of the different ways in which a group of people create and consolidate a collective social identity' (Lill and Dieckmann 2013: 118). These observations build a picture of

society as a collection of groups differentiated through their 'consumption of cultural artefacts, specific social norms and group practices' (ibid.).

Through the different scenes offered above, we have sought a subtle reorientation of the way social imaginaries might be approached within performance studies and beyond. We considered ways that social imagination affirms what is held in common, specifically through our shared practices and music performance, activities that make collective imagination possible in the first place. Despite differences of history, culture and assumptions about our bodies, performance foregrounds our relatedness in specific times and places. Our common coordinates as embodied creatures enable us to affirm and celebrate differences of identity and aspiration.

Skinner's account suggests that disability is too often defined in the eye of the beholder. What counts as a disability within Australian society is largely determined by others' imaginations: missing a leg would generally be an accepted precondition for receiving support and claiming a disabled identity, but an imperceptible cognitive impairment may not.

Skinner and her colleagues *play up* perceptions of disability through their music-making and embrace of the stereotypical rock 'n' roll lifestyle. By celebrating what others might think of as perversity – to revel in the 'freakishness' of disability – they affirm what is common to all sentient and sensual bodies, which can move, feel and sweat to music. If disabled bodies seem dislocated from dominant social imaginaries, these bodies also offer – each in their own unique way – the very possibility for expressing genuine human community, creativity and life.

In a similar way, vestiges of colonial memory continue to shape Aboriginal lives today, where Aboriginal bodies are not readily accepted within established social imaginaries. No matter what level of refinement in social etiquette or artistic forms, Aboriginal people will never live up to a social imaginary born of aristocratic 'sense and sensibility' – displayed in carefully cultivated images of sophistication, charm, refinement, grace and geniality.[4] Where the violin is seen by colonial eyes as a symbol of what the Aboriginal person supposedly *is not* (refined, cultivated, etc.), playing the violin is also seen as a dislocation from traditional culture. The Aboriginal violinist remains stuck between these differentiated social imaginaries.

Reframing assumptions about cultural adaptation and autonomy, Case details how Aboriginal people recognized their own traditions as a creative impetus to engage with European performance contexts. Instead of treating the incorporation of the violin and ukulele, for instance, as indicative of dislocation from traditional cultural forms, she affirms how performances that utilize such an eclectic array of technologies and styles can provide an ongoing expression of Aboriginal storytelling and community building.

Similarly, Curkpatrick's profile of *manikay* performance, within community contexts and contemporary collaboration, readily incorporates new relationships and instruments within an expansive sense of ancestral tradition. The social imagination of Wägilak musicians extends from traditions in which song forms passed through the generations, and, far from constraining present creativity, underpin new relations and responsibilities. It is this process of relational growth that is integral to continuity between past and present, where those who are not actively involved in these living relations might observe only cultural disintegration and loss.

As these scenes have shown, music-making is inseparable from human relationality and the recognition of shared times and places. Through voices, instruments and bodies that are brought into proximity to perform, new communities are formed. While questions of injustice and imbalances of power should not be overlooked, the collaborative and connective nature of music-making promotes shared understanding where prevailing liberal imagination tends to divide by history, race, culture and ability. By recognizing that social imaginations are enabled and shaped by our shared materiality as proximate, relational individuals, more inclusive collective identities can be formed through participation in the arts, by those who refuse to be restricted by the imaginations of others.

[4] Eagleton provides these terms to illustrate an *imaginary ethic*, a useful term in this context as it concerns the cultivation of morality through the projected image as a 'tangible incarnation of selfhood' (2009: 5).

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