

# CULTURE, DIFFERENCE AND THE ARTS

edited by Sneja Gunew and Fazal Rizvi

ALLEN & UNWIN

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**Mary Kalantzis** is a Professor of Education at James Cook University in Townsville. She was born in Greece and educated in Sydney. She has been a major participant in public debates concerning Australian cultural diversity and development. She has been a Senior Research Fellow at Wollongong University; the Director of Workplace Communication and Culture at the University of Technology Sydney; and has served on numerous government boards, including the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council. She has co-written many books, most notably, *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*.

**Fazal Rizvi** was born in India and educated in India, Australia and the UK. He has taught at Deakin University and is currently an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Queensland. He has published widely on expressions of racism and multicultural education, theories of democracy and ethics and public policy. He is currently a council member of the Australia Council and holds the Chair of the Australia Council Multicultural Advisory Committee.

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## Introduction

*Sneja Gunew and Fazal Rizvi*

Over the past two decades, Australia has moved rapidly from a nation committed to a policy of assimilation of all its people into a unitary culture and tradition to a country that recognises, at the level of government policy, the diversity of its ethnic make-up. Australia's massive post-war migration, initially from Europe but more recently from Asia and other parts of the world, has not only changed its demography but it has also led to irresistible pressures for cultural change and reformation. Most Australians now accept cultural difference as the basis upon which to construct a new national identity. Many are even prepared to concede that Australia has been enriched, challenged and altered by this diversity. It is realised, then, that Australian culture is a differentiated one, comprising a multitude of cultures emerging from different customs, beliefs, social and economic backgrounds and artistic traditions. But exactly what this realisation implies is less clear. Indeed, most cultural debates in Australia over the past two decades can be viewed as being linked to the questions of the symbolic and practical implications of cultural difference.

The state's response to cultural difference has been constituted by the policy of multiculturalism. At the level of rhetoric, the policy links the idea of difference to social justice, as well as to economic efficiency. It suggests that all Australians must be able to contribute to the nation's cultural and economic development. In a more material way, it encourages the creation of conditions necessary for all Australians to be able to utilise their skills and talents. Further, its principle of social justice refers to the need to ensure that all

Australians have the opportunity to obtain information and services that are appropriate to their needs in a fair and responsive manner. The state is thus committed to measures—necessary to ensure that resources are equitably distributed, and that any undesirable imbalance is identified and redressed.

Of course, the extent to which these commitments are actually translated into the practices of state institutions is an issue that is highly debatable. On the right of Australian politics many of society's ills are attributed to multiculturalism, while on the left it is seen as a smokescreen for the more basic contradictions that characterise Australian society. Part of the problem lies with the notion of multiculturalism itself. It is just as well to remember that multiculturalism emerged in the 1970s as a compromise formation designed to pacify increasingly volatile ethnic communities on the one hand and allay the fears of the dominant Anglo community alarmed by a changing demography on the other. It became partly a strategy for managing inter-group relations and accommodating the ethnic middle class. At the same time, however, multiculturalism provided symbolic resources around which it became possible for ethnic communities to politically organise themselves.

As a result, multiculturalism has remained politically controversial, and there are a number of competing discourses about what multiculturalism actually is. Although each new definition proposed by the state has sought a new accommodation, on each occasion it has been resisted by, on the one hand, the dominant community unprepared to give up its power and privileges and on the other, by the ethnic communities suspicious of the state's motivations. Contemporary debates surrounding cultural diversity and the arts have always been located within this contested terrain. The essays in this collection are set against this backdrop, seeking to explore issues that lie at the heart of the struggle to achieve arts policies and practices sensitive to the trajectories of cultural difference in Australia and to the demands of social justice.

The book was conceived out of a realisation that a great deal of work already formulated in the area was being lost as various members of peak cultural organisations came and went. Also much empirical research from the field was not being widely disseminated. In order to arrive at the next stage of conceptualising the problem and arriving at solutions, the Australia Council's Multicultural Advisory Committee (ACMAC) requested that both the Australia Council and Office of Multicultural Affairs support this publication. It was felt that essays should deliberately cover a wide spectrum of approaches ranging from the academic to those which come from the field—from arts practitioners and administrators.

The opening chapter of this book, by Sneja Gunew, explores a

range of issues concerning the three key notions around which this collection revolves: culture, diversity and the arts. Gunew argues that the relationship between these notions is complex and dynamic, never 'frozen outside history and contemporary interactive relations'. This realisation forms the basis of Gunew's analysis of the possibilities inherent in the idea of the arts for a multicultural Australia, an idea that is suggestive of a new hybridised cross-cultural art that expresses the creative energies of many non-English speaking background (NESB) artists coming to terms with new locations and social relations. Gunew's analysis implies that aesthetic traditions and excellences are invented categories often used to practice a politics of exclusion.

This is the theme of the next chapter, by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope. They argue that in Australia the use of a notion of excellence is often linked to a particular ideological position which serves to marginalise many NESB artists. They maintain that the concept of excellence can be used in three different ways: as a mechanism for discrimination against particular groups of artists; as a criterion for discriminating artistic merit; and as a notion that is used to assess merit which does not involve discriminating against particular groups. It is this third sense of excellence that they believe is essential for developing an inclusive policy for a multicultural society. The development of such an arts policy, they contend, requires a 'high-risk approach to excellence' which values 'open diversity; multiple and diffuse sources of representation interacting to open new possibilities and many-layered identities'.

This approach is consistent with Elizabeth Gertsakis's view, expressed in Chapter 3, that the ideas of 'traditional' and 'contemporary' are not oppositional, as they are so often presented, but instead refer to processes that are never static. These processes operate on each other and in the formations of history produce a different culture from the one that existed before. In relation to cultural formation, the arts in Australia take place in a transitional context, a multicultural context, represented by a chronically vexed environment for the processing of cultural meanings in general.

One of the key social sites where cultural meanings are processed is education. In Chapter 4, Fazal Rizvi describes the ways in which arts education in Australian schools have taken up the challenge of a multicultural society. He argues that both the classical and romantic traditions in arts education rest on assumptions that are antagonistic to cultural diversity. He maintains that much of education is based on a process of 'cultural stripping' wherein individuals are forced to lose their cultures in order to assume a homogenised identity. And even when cultural difference is taken into account, particular histories are reified, reinforcing the very racist representations that

multiculturalism seeks to eradicate. An alternative view of arts education, Rizvi suggests, should focus on the development of critical imagination so that students are able to articulate their diverse lived cultures within new practices of representation.

In her chapter, Henrietta Fourmile shows how developing contemporary Aboriginal arts have been informed by the intersection of various Aboriginal traditions with contemporary Western institutions. But Aboriginal arts, she argues, continue to be located in a context that can be characterised by a form of internal colonialism which structures the relationship between Aboriginal people and the state. The extraordinary monopolisation of the 'Aboriginal arts industry' by non-indigenous Australians means that Aboriginal people are unable to make a contribution to the development of a multicultural Australian culture in their own terms.

Andrew Jakubowicz discusses the issue of how contemporary films, television and the mass media aspire to an image of themselves as multicultural, yet continue to present images of Aboriginal people and the people of non-English backgrounds from the point of view of the dominant culture. While a great deal has been achieved in combating negative images, in seeking to reconstruct the vision Australians have for themselves, and in recognising and appreciating differences of gender, history and culture, Jakubowicz argues that there are a number of ways in which this multicultural project 'still faces considerable opposition, and experiences significant frustration as it engages with cultural priorities which marginalise or patronise "the other" '.

The chapter by Purushottama Bilimoria shows how one particular cultural tradition in Australia, the South Asian performing arts, has developed in its hybridised form in Australia. Bilimoria suggests that this is not simply another form of ethnic or community art, but a highly complex and refined art form with a long history of development, often in relation to its transmigration. He argues that the growth of South Asian performance style and theory, in modern India and elsewhere, holds an enormous potential for evolving a distinctive theatre/dance culture and contemporaneous vocabulary of the arts in a multicultural Australia.

Tamara Winikoff's chapter looks at another art form—urban design. Winikoff argues that the Australian multicultural society is a brave social experiment but that this is not adequately reflected in the design of public and private spaces in Australia. As a result, many immigrants to this country find that life in the suburbs is socially isolated, culturally impoverished and environmentally degraded. Much of Australian spatial design and architectural form still takes its cues from British colonial and American modernist traditions. Winikoff maintains that the challenge for urban design is

to encourage diversity in artistic expressions so that all Australians can participate in the development of Australian cultural life.

The issues of cultural development are also central to the next chapter, by Carmen Grostal and Gillian Harrison. The chapter describes some of the confusions surrounding the term 'community arts' and its relation to multiculturalism. Grostal and Harrison argue that community arts are very important to ethnic communities; and that some of the ways in which NESB professional artists in other art forms are discriminated against also apply to community artists. They insist that the critics of funding for community arts do not understand the important role it plays in broadening participation and skill levels in the community, and in supporting local content and innovation, as well as in nurturing audiences into becoming culturally aware and informed.

Just as community arts can serve to engender confidence among ethnic communities, so can the opportunities NESB artists and communities might have to participate in the making of cultural policies that affect their lives. In Chapter 10, Mary Dimech discusses the importance of consultation with NESB artists and communities in the formulation and implementation of arts and cultural policies. She argues that effective consultation requires a process of on-going negotiation at each of the stages of policy development, and that unless such a process is established NESB artists will continue to occupy a marginal position in Australian cultural life. Dimech provides some helpful practical advice on how arts organisations might conduct consultation with NESB artists and communities.

The following chapter, by Susan Faine and Anna Epstein, is also of a practical nature. It offers a checklist for NESB artists seeking support from government and non-government organisations. This checklist discusses such issues as: dealing with bureaucracy; sponsorships; terms and conditions of grants; acquittals; applications; peer group assessment; project development; budgets and accounting; languages other than English; recognition of overseas qualifications and experience; performance or exhibition organisation; and dealing with the media. The chapter ends with a discussion of some of the prejudices that seem to have become institutionalised in the operation of arts organisation.

The final chapter, by Annette Blonski, looks at one such organisation—the Australia Council. Blonski provides a brief history of the council's attempts at coming to terms with the idea of multiculturalism. She describes some of the obstacles key individuals and groups have experienced in ensuring that the council develops an inclusive policy for a multicultural Australia. Blonski's account of these developments focuses on the relationship between cultural theory and policy development, and on institutional resistances which influence

the way policy is formed and implemented within and by public administration.

The essays in this collection are written by people who have had considerable experience in debating these matters in many arenas and to many groups. All of them believe fervently that it is time to lift the discussions of the issues regarding the complex relationships between culture, difference and the arts to a new level—beyond the narrow and uninformed manner that has too often prevailed in the public sphere. Poised as we are on the threshold of a new century, it is important that Australians recognise and build on the cultural contributions of all its citizens. In recent years, Australians have been prepared to establish new relationships with indigenous Australians by recognising, among other things, their distinctive contribution to the nation's cultural development. This recognition is setting new paradigms in the arts for the international community. As the global powers are forced to deal with multiculturalism, it is appropriate that we offer here Australia's unique variations on the theme as well.