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Introduction

Festivals are most often a form of celebration of who we are in terms of community, whether this is through a shared history, culture, interests and values, or arising through a need to re-establish a sense of identity. The events and activities associated with a festival are a means to express, celebrate and sometimes even challenge what might be meant by 'community' through distinctive cultural artefacts and activities, including music, food and performance. Indeed, the core of these festival genres is performance: music and dance that seem to capture the essence of the relationship between identity and place, and that go on to create an atmosphere conducive to conviviality and interactions with others.

The ready use of festivals as a means to bring into being a sense of community in places of diverse inhabitants or to provide aid for social, cultural and economic development represents the festival as a political act. Yet both multicultural and folk festivals are relatively recent formations. Folk festivals arose out of the Australian folk music movement of the 1950s, while the policies of the 1980s supported the development of multicultural festivals.¹ Nonetheless, often the distinctions between multicultural and folk festivals are not clear, given the ways in which cultural diversity is defined and 'managed' through policy as well as the commitment to inclusivity that many festival directors and committees have. This chapter examines the ways in which multicultural and folk festivals are examples of such political acts and have become important to various claims to Australian identity and belonging in a culturally plural nation.

Multicultural Festivals and Managing Diversity

Multiculturalism, particularly in the Australian context, is commonly associated with ideas of tolerance, recognition and accommodation of minority rights, and multicultural festivals are recognised as the expression of ethnic and cultural communities. While notions of tolerance and

accommodation are problematic because of an assumed dominant social group who 'allows' difference, in general, multiculturalism is viewed as the defining characteristic of an inclusive plural society.² Yet, there are tensions inherent in these representations of belonging because such festivals must also demonstrate the broader ideals of belonging to an Australian national community's identity. This means that even in those instances when a festival promotes and celebrates cultural diversity, the ideals of national social cohesion are emphasised and given meaning through government policies. Multiculturalism was 'part of an attempt to locate Australia's national distinctiveness in its cultural diversity' and was 'driven by alliances of performers and cultural and political activists'.³

However, the concept of multiculturalism has shifted in Australian policy since first introduced in the 1970s by the Whitlam-led Labor government and subsequent Liberal Fraser government. Originally a formal policy focused on the settlement of recent migrants, especially those of non-English-speaking backgrounds, this iteration of Australian multiculturalism sought to protect against racism and discrimination, as well as the protection of common citizenship rights.⁴ Since then, successive federal governments have on the whole maintained this initial set of ideals, albeit with some reshaping with Australian multiculturalism 'framed mainly around the broader societal acceptance of the cultural rights of minority groups within mainstream society'.⁵ However, the neoliberal approach underpinning policy since the mid-1990s has sought to maximise economic returns and labour efficiency for employers.⁶ This focus was made more visible in 2017, when the Turnbull-led Coalition government shifted the policy's focus to that of the *obligations* of citizens and new arrivals and to what they can contribute to Australia, rather than how the federal government should be responsive to the needs of a culturally diverse population.⁷ This is a significant shift in Australian policy. Rather than developing policy that challenges those social structures that construct and perpetuate disadvantage within ethnic minority communities, governments now focus on anti-racism programmes that define racism 'as a personal misjudgement or attitude in need of correction, rather than a set of structures that continue to confer benefits to white Australia'.⁸ Alongside this change, the shift to a focus on preferencing applicants in the occupational-skills category of the immigration programme that began in 1996 with the Howard Coalition government has been maintained ever since.⁹ The result is that these 'neoliberal anti-racism' programmes¹⁰ are now the responsibility of local government and civil society who are tasked with managing structural disadvantage and social exclusion.¹¹

An ongoing concern about Australia's multicultural framework is in its positioning and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of a cultural diversity 'problem', defined as distinct yet connected to issues of migration.¹² This framing was emphasised by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s through revised principles of multiculturalism that attempted to be relevant to all Australians, especially as part of the reconciliation process.¹³ However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reject being viewed as one ethnic group among many, given the fact that their sovereignty was never ceded and their continued fight for self-determination, as well as the underlying assumption that Indigenous peoples share the same challenges as those from culturally diverse immigrant communities.¹⁴

The recently elected Albanese Labor government released its cultural policy, *Revive*, in 2023;¹⁵ it emphasises the role of the arts and culture in strengthening social connectedness and well-being in a culturally diverse nation. In addition, this government has demonstrated its commitment to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, with a referendum to be held to enshrine an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice in the Australian Constitution.¹⁶ Nonetheless, while acknowledging the potential of the Uluru Statement to reshape Australian law-making, there are Indigenous critiques that argue this 'should not be a replacement for genuine relationships and consultation between First Nations and local, state and federal governments'.¹⁷ Some Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics argue these concerns would be more meaningfully addressed by a treaty between First Nations and the Commonwealth.¹⁸

This background to Australia's multicultural policy development, which has also impacted on Australia's First Nations peoples, is important to understanding the role of multicultural festivals and their strong connection to especially urban local government authorities. Their predominantly urban location is unsurprising as migrant settlement patterns tend to be denser in Australia's national capitals and their suburbs, where opportunities for employment, housing, education and connections to community have historically been more readily available (although some have settled in rural areas, motivated in part by regional immigration policies).¹⁹ In general, these multicultural policies are about the management of difference within these spaces of high diversity. The official discourses of those groups controlling the festival – be they local government or other organisations – operate to produce an official 'imagined' community that the festival is then planned to address and seek to minimise potentially negative attitudes and prejudices that may be held by majority groups in the

community.²⁰ The prominence of heritage and cultural traditions that are showcased in multicultural festivals, as well as the ways in which these events are promoted in the media and local government news, serve to reinforce these imagined communities of cultural diversity.

Inner city councils – such as Moreland City Council in inner northern Melbourne, Victoria, or Brisbane City Council, Queensland – with their increasing social, cultural and linguistic diversity, utilise multicultural festivals to construct these urban locations as hospitable and supportive of diversity, with a particular emphasis on welcoming refugees and asylum seekers.²¹ For example, the Brunswick Music Festival, which has been running since 1989, continues to play a significant role in promoting social cohesion and a sense of belonging through ensuring that Moreland (now known as Merri-bek City Council) is a safe and welcoming city for migrant and refugee communities (*Moreland Social Cohesion Plan 2020–2025*). The festival line-up reflects such a plan, with performances ranging from genres such as jazz and folk (including performers from the Port Fairy Folk Festival that is held around the same time) to electronica, country and alt-pop, alongside performers from culturally diverse backgrounds who wish to showcase traditional practices or who seek to explore and expand such practices. Practices of inclusivity also extend to performers differently abled and neurodiverse. Brisbane City Council also hosts a calendar of festivals that focus on a specific ethnic or cultural community to encourage ‘a new sense of wonder in our own backyard’.²² In addition, support for diversity is exemplified by Brisbane City’s MOSAIC Multicultural Festival and the Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC, established in 1987), both of which are committed to presenting diverse cultures within a world music framework. Events at BEMAC, for example, include Global Fusion showcases that present traditional and contemporary practices of dance and music as well as food so as to ‘sweep [the audience] away on an incredible journey’ in which they experience the cultures of elsewhere.²³

Nevertheless, multicultural festivals do incorporate the cultural practices and music styles of Australian folk and First Nations musicians who work across a range of genres, such as gospel, hip hop and country and western alongside pre-colonisation traditions.²⁴ For some festival directors this is an acknowledgement that these festivals are underpinned by an ethos of performance ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’. Yet this opening-up to genres not readily categorised as ‘traditional’ cultural practice may also reflect the influence of recording companies who, in the 1980s and 1990s, sought greater diversification of music styles, especially the popular music style of world music.²⁵

This model of multicultural festivals as a means to manage diversity has also been incorporated into local government strategies along the peri-urban fringe of capital cities, where a rapidly growing and diverse population seeks affordable housing. Since 2012, Experience! The Casey Multicultural Festival has been held annually in Berwick, a small town in the outer south-east of Melbourne, one of Australia's rapidly growing peri-urban areas. As with other local government areas with highly diverse populations, the council has introduced such an event in order to 'encourage, support and manage events that enhance the liveability and celebrate the diversity within Casey'.²⁶ As a member of the council events team pointed out, 'one of the objectives of community development is to build community capacity, to be able to meet the needs of the community . . . [I]f we've got a very culturally diverse community, identification of display of cultural identity is really important in the settlement process.'²⁷

However, cultural diversity is not simply an urban characteristic. There are numerous examples of rural festivals that celebrate the traditions and heritage of earlier immigration. For example, the Swiss Italian Festa held in Daylesford-Hepburn Springs, Victoria, celebrates the history of a particular migrant community yet does this through a combination of specific cultural music performances and broader Italian popular culture references that nonetheless keep open ways for festival participants to feel they belong.²⁸ More recently, and in line with the shift in focus onto what new arrivals can contribute to Australia, the national immigration policy emphasises the immediate and future economic capacity of potential migrants.²⁹ In addition, federal government policy has also sought to encourage regionalisation, that is, the settlement of immigrants in regional and rural areas.³⁰ Local councils again draw on festivals as a strategy to lessen tensions within what often are predominantly Anglo-Celtic communities, who may perceive migrants as having negative impacts on things like job security, but also to make these new members of the community feel welcome. For example, cultural diversity is evident across Greater Shepparton in regional Victoria, although its central area is the most diverse, particularly in relation to high numbers of newer migrant groups.³¹ The council has successfully addressed tensions and racism through implementation of the *Greater Shepparton Multicultural Strategy* (2019), with 'considerable focus on endorsing and promoting multiculturalism through an array of festivals and events', and while largely a celebratory role, this served 'the policy aim of a socially cohesive community'.³²

Authenticity and Cultural Hybridity

On a superficial level, a multicultural festival can be understood as ‘people celebrating themselves and their community in an “authentic” and traditional way, or at least emerging spontaneously from their homes for a communitywide expression of fellowship’.³³ Nevertheless, this needs closer examination. A common tool to promote ethnic diversity and social harmony, the multicultural festival encourages new migrants to maintain and showcase their heritage and cultural traditions. Thus, a multicultural festival programme tends to support notions of boundedness to particular places and people, which can ensure certain people feel (re)connected and (re)united with that of the group or community. However, concerns about authentic practices tap into assumptions about some essential identity that is expressed and maintained through cultural and ethnic characteristics.³⁴ While multicultural festivals can, through calls to openness to ‘others’, generate notions of inclusivity, issues may arise because of divergent views between ‘official’ takes on how culturally diverse communities are expected to perform ‘traditional’ forms of identity. Questions around authenticity are also raised within the communities themselves. Members of communities may welcome the opportunity to maintain cultural practices for Australia’s Anglo-Celtic audiences because their own communities are less interested, wanting instead to explore new or popular performance genres.³⁵ These at times contradictory impulses offer important ways to (re)construct one’s identity and may present a relationship between place and ‘terrains of belonging’, whereby the ‘practices of group identity are about manufacturing cultural and historical belongings which mark out terrains of commonality that delineate the politics and social dynamics of “fitting in”’.³⁶

The framework of the multicultural festival is problematic because it can result in the ossification of cultural identity and practice. Moreover, these notions of identity ignore a complex spatiality of both presence and absence, and a yearning for an ideal community grounded in nostalgic notions of a homeland that may no longer exist.³⁷ In addition, notions of cultural authenticity may also preclude ongoing development of arts and cultural practice, including the possibilities of cross-cultural collaborative works.

Exclusion therefore can operate at many levels. As a result, ‘actions around cultural diversity tend to be framed either through discourses of inclusiveness, and celebrated as ‘proof’ that [Australia] is a truly

multicultural and tolerant nation, or criticised for the way in which these actions reinforce models of exclusivity and paternalism'.³⁸ Some critics go further, arguing that multiculturalism and its promotion of the tolerance of difference are part of strategies aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of white power, a 'form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism'.³⁹ In this critique, multicultural festivals in Australia are not about inclusivity, rather the focus is on containment and the subsequent enrichment of Anglo-Australia through a managed Anglo-Celtic appropriation of this diversity.

Geographies of Encounter

From the Australian nation's perspective, multicultural festivals offer ways to manage diversity and ensure a cohesive national identity as well as encouraging socio-economic benefits derived from tapping into the skills potential of migrants. Yet, from the perspective of migrant populations, festivals offer important opportunities to participate in meaningful activities that connect community members to specific traditions and values.⁴⁰ At the same time, the idea of 'the other' as a social group in a culturally diverse community has important implications for everyday life, something that is not lost on local government authorities, who use festivals in order to manage diversity at the local level. Thus, development of policy discourse focused on diverse community members needs to address the question, 'Who has the right to public space?'⁴¹

Public spaces are important sites for social relations because it is here that different types and forms of relational networks overlap and meet. Tensions can arise, though, because of perceived or real fears about crime, violence and terrorism; racial intolerance; uncertainty and insecurity, which results in some groups feeling uncomfortable and excluded from public space.⁴² How individuals and groups respond to diversity is itself varied, ranging from celebrating a sense of shared connectedness, to discomfort, feelings of alienation and exclusion, through to those who will use public space as a means to challenge normative processes of place making and belonging. Multicultural festivals are used as a deliberate framework for a 'geographies of encounter',⁴³ which encourages the acceptance of otherness through recurrent sociality and engagement between strangers, with the aim of creating a sense of community.⁴⁴ The relatively 'safe' framework of a multicultural festival is an important avenue for such encounters and often promoted in terms of a local

authority's commitment to creating a welcoming, inclusive and accessible community.⁴⁵ Therefore, multicultural festival events are much more than simply a source of financial gain; rather, the processes of festivals are significant to a politics of belonging because of the ways in which they are utilised as a common framework for community celebration and for reinvigorating notions of a shared community. Thus, these festivals facilitate new forms of belonging and enable active public engagement, as well as incorporating activities that foster social harmony and integration.⁴⁶

The challenge for multicultural festivals lies in understanding, identifying and measuring the impacts of events on the local community in ways that capture their intangible benefits – such as civic pride, community cohesion, community identity or sense of belonging – and addressing issues of social justice in ways that acknowledge the complex, fragmentary, difficult and even agonistic social relations that operate in public spaces.⁴⁷

Folk Festival Origins in the Search for an Australian Folk Music

Australian folk festivals, like those celebrating cultural diversity, are sites of ongoing dialogue as to what a national belonging may mean. Australian folk festivals were part of the search for a distinctly 'Australian' folk culture and especially music, which nonetheless originated in the music traditions of elsewhere, particularly that of the British Isles.⁴⁸ This transplanted culture contributed to a core repertoire of song understood as created by convicts, rural workers and white settlers in the nineteenth century that resonated with the ideas of Russell Ward's Australian legend – of mateship, anti-authoritarianism and the 'rough-hewn, down-to-earth values of the bushman'.⁴⁹ Cultural historians point to the importance of the tradition of bush ballads and folk songs in supporting and maintaining this image of national identity, which was reinforced by the *Bulletin* writers in the 1890s as well as the Australian Communist Party of the 1930s and 1940s.⁵⁰ This search for a distinctive Australian identity expressed through an 'authentic' Australian folk tradition drew inspiration from the folk revivals in the UK and the work of Cecil Sharpe and the English Folk Song Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the People's Song Movement in the US in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵¹ Post-war migration from the UK ensured that Australian audiences for British and Irish folk music traditions were reinvigorated and introduced to new audiences as migrants took up employment, especially in mining, in regional and remote areas.⁵² However, this folk tradition is embedded within racist assumptions of who

belongs to the Australian national imaginary, an exclusionary practice that has its origins in the nation's first Act, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, more commonly known as the White Australia Policy.

These concerns for creating an 'authentic' Australian national culture influenced the development of the Australian folk movement of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵³ The folk music scene started in events such as the monthly folk club open-mic nights, often located in inner urban coffee lounges, universities and hotels.⁵⁴ Performance practices emphasised participation and face-to-face social groupings that blurred distinct boundaries between performer and audience, focusing instead on music arising out of 'an ever-evolving communal process' and therefore different from that of commercial and professional genres.⁵⁵ During the 1960s, folk music moved away from the British model of vocal performance and was replaced by the more exuberant, 'rough proletarian bohemianism' of the bush band.⁵⁶

Bush Music and the Development of Major Folk Festivals

There had been small folk music festivals prior to the 1980s, such as the Port Phillip District Folk Music Festival held in February 1967 at the Teachers College, Melbourne University (the forerunner of the National Folk Festival). The search for a vernacular song tradition can be understood as part of a broader folk revival that started in the mid-nineteenth century in Western societies,⁵⁷ although such a revival in Australia occurred post-World War II and was influenced by post-war migration, especially from the United Kingdom. This migration has shaped what is understood as folk music in Australia, with performances having a marked preference for British and Irish revival music.⁵⁸ The festival structure played an important part in Australia's folk revival movements, with the first national Australian Folklore Festival held in Sydney in 1955, hosted by the Australian Folklore Society.⁵⁹

However, the popularity of the folk festival was a response to the popularity of the new performance styles of bush music and the emergence of the bush band in the 1970s. Around this time, the Wild Colonial Boys was formed in Sydney with a repertoire of traditional Australian song and dance tunes, which increased its audience appeal.⁶⁰ The change in performance style also came about with changing patterns of entertainment. In states like Victoria, new liquor licensing laws meant extended hotel hours, and publicans sought ways to make use of their under-used and spacious lounges by encouraging independent music groups to perform.⁶¹

A type of venue very different from that of the coffee houses, performers in hotels needed to be heard over the audience.⁶² For many folk music performers this meant a need to alter their performance approach as hotel audiences did not necessarily give them their full attention. In Melbourne, The Bushwackers were one of the first folk groups to use amplification, not only to be heard but also to actively interact and address the audience.⁶³ The musical style and instrumentation of the bush band that arose – the use of amplification, strong rhythms provided by a drum kit and/or a lagerphone, blending Australian bush songs and Irish dance tunes, along with stage talk and narratives embedded within strong socialist ideals – while infuriating folk music purists, attracted new audiences.

The rapid popularity of this folk scene meant larger venues were needed. Inspired by US examples such as the Newport Festival, many of these early clubs consolidated and started to organise festivals, which became the key performance sites for folk music.⁶⁴ In the 1980s, a festival circuit was established through organisations that replaced small local committees of enthusiasts with permanent administrative structures supported by government funding.⁶⁵ These major festivals continue today. The National Folk Festival, now held annually in Canberra, originally travelled around the country in the years 1969 to 1991 under the auspices of the Australian Folk Trust.⁶⁶ However, the increasing size of the festival made it difficult for hosting states to find suitable locations, and the festival's organisers suffered heavy financial losses. Since 1994, the festival has been held annually in Canberra, apart from in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, and in 2021 when a two-day event was held over the border in Queanbeyan, New South Wales.⁶⁷ The Port Fairy Folk Festival is located in the Victorian coastal town of Port Fairy and was first held in December in 1977, before moving to the Labour Day long weekend in Victoria in March 1981. The success of the Geelong Folk Music club nights and bush dances ('Bullockies Balls') prompted founder Jamie McKew to hold the festival at Port Fairy because of the authentic Cornish and Celtic cottages as well as the many venues available, including small halls, a community centre, historic pubs, the Gardens Caravan Park and what was described by McKew as 'generally a traditional atmosphere'.⁶⁸ However, unlike the boisterous and lively folk music scene in pubs, these major folk festivals are now structured and promoted as family-friendly occasions through programming that includes activities such as workshops, markets, dances and balls as well as programmes specifically for children, such as children's singing and storytelling workshops. Alongside these major festival events, smaller folk festivals are held throughout rural and regional Australia and are

often part of these communities' economic and cultural development strategies.⁶⁹ For example, smaller festivals such as the Cygnet and Tamar Valley Folk Festivals in Tasmania attract tourist dollars but also enhance social capital and a sense of community, often through volunteer opportunities.⁷⁰

Contemporary Folk Festivals

These major national folk festivals initially sought to celebrate particular notions of an authentic Australian folklore and culture that drew on distinctly Australian ideas associated with bush living, along with Irish and British music traditions. However, the definitions of folk and folk music have shifted, and what is meant by the folk music category is defined more broadly by festival organisers and audiences to include that which 'belongs to someone, some nation', opening up the folk festival space to music genres other than that of an Anglo-Celtic, British or Irish folk tradition.⁷¹ Yet this openness may raise questions similar to those found with the programming of multicultural festivals regarding who makes decisions about these categories of performance and hence 'authentic' folk identities.

The increasing diversity of the category of folk music and how this has reshaped folk festivals is especially evident in current major folk festivals, such as the Woodford Folk Festival, first held in 1987 at the Maleny Showgrounds as the Maleny Folk Festival, Queensland, until it was moved to Woodford in 1994 to cater for the increased audience numbers. The festival's programme features diverse cultural and ethnic music genres and offers important insights into the ways in which folk festivals can facilitate belonging through rituals and performances rather than the specific focus on a music genre. In this case, the 'fire event', the climax of the festival, functions as an affirmation of membership in the Maleny festival community. Those who attend the festival identify as outside the mainstream through their political affiliations (left-wing, 'green' politics and 'new age' interests) or performance practices – such as the use of traditional, usually acoustic, instruments – as well as by embracing a multiplicity of ethnic and regional styles in performances.⁷² In many ways, major contemporary folk festivals therefore converge with the aims of Australian multicultural festivals. Nonetheless, this convergence raises important questions as to how Australia's Indigenous peoples have been ignored and positioned in folk and multicultural festival structures.

Prior to the mid-1980s, Indigenous cultural activities were rarely part of the Australian folk festival scene.⁷³ In the 1990s, with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1992, reconciliation was established as an official strategy through which ‘dispossessed indigenes or settlers . . . might come to feel that they properly belong in the nation’.⁷⁴ Following this period there is a noticeable change, with Indigenous performers becoming integral to festival programmes, including the incorporation of appropriate cultural protocols such as a Welcome to Country. From a First Nations perspective, perhaps these festivals can offer ways to refashion and ‘enter the right way’ into relationships with Country.⁷⁵ However, there remain the unresolved impacts of colonisation and dispossession, and what reconciled coexistence requires.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Belonging is commonly understood in terms of emotional attachment, of feeling ‘at home’ and ‘safe’. Nonetheless, underpinning such apparently uncomplicated notions lie complex concerns of identity and identification, of the narratives that give life to our experiences of belonging and how these various constructions are attributed ethical and political value.⁷⁷ Yet even within these frameworks, belonging is never fixed and coherent, but rather fragmented, partial and mobile. Hence, at another level the politics of belonging, even ‘the dirty work of boundary maintenance’,⁷⁸ involves the struggles around defining and determining what is actually involved in processes of belonging while simultaneously opening up space for reconsidering and renegotiating the multiple experiences of connection to the national space.

In the Australian context, multicultural and folk festivals can offer important insights into the problematic relationships between place, community, belonging and the national space. These festivals raise questions about the stories told of historic ties to Britain, post-war migration and economic development, urban versus rural living and the ongoing ramifications of colonisation and relations with Indigenous Australians, all of which attempt to qualify who belongs to and represents the Australian ‘national’ experience. Questions about belonging to such variously imagined communities also ask us to consider what it means to be a member of any community, and the sorts of ways in which we then articulate and perform membership.⁷⁹ Festivals are therefore significant to the politics of belonging, with performance making claims to an Australianness shaped by specific histories and self-justifications.

Notes

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