Aboriginal culture can more easily be disregarded while it remains marginalised. Yet when it moves into the mainstream it is often accused of 'selling out'.

STEPHEN MUECKE argues that the dichotomy is a misleading one.

"Hey, listen you guys, we've got a good idea. How about you and me try and get down and come back to where we started from, stand on an equal footing?"

Mandawuy Yunupingu

Mandawuy Yunupingu is Australian of the Year. He led the Aboriginal rock band Yothu Yindi from NE Arnhem Land in the far north of Australia to a position where, in 1991, their Treaty single hit the top ten. But let's go back to an earlier video clip whose title describes this process: Into the Mainstream. Over the past few years there has been a centralisation of the (Aboriginal) margin going on, and it calls for new political strategies in cultural policies—the arena where meanings are made.

Yunupingu is a man with a mission: university educated, but from a community which has always been relatively isolated from the massive depredations that 200 years of colonisation have wreaked upon Aboriginal cultures. He wants to bring together the 'white-fella' (balanda) and the Aboriginal (Yolngu, his tribal group). His version of this political/cultural consensus is supported by a number of intersecting discourses, as the images and lyrics in the video clip show.

Without seeing it here and now, you'll have to take it on trust that there are three stories being told here. One is about pan-Aboriginality, a new concept in a land where traditionally about a million people used to live in relative isolation, without any unifying political structure, but with some cultural continuities. Even as more and more Aboriginal people are participating 'in the mainstream', among them there are still conflicts and differences. The struggle is hard against entrenched patterns of discrimination, yet the stakes are high: there is a whole 'Aboriginal industry' tied in with the tourist industry, knowledges (museums, anthropology), and the delivery of welfare and other social services.

The images of Aboriginal art in the clip inscribe this pan-Aboriginality: images from the Kimberleys (to the west of Yirrkala, where they are singing from), of Wandjinas, the haloed mouthless heads, gods of the rain, flip over to the now famous 'dot' style of painting from Central Australia, and the more traditional bark paintings from Yothu Yindi's own country. This cultural cut 'n' mix says more about the contemporary Aboriginal situation than traditional practices—by which I mean that it says more about the way art entrepreneurship and tourism 'appropriates' traditional designs as a way of promoting the whole country, even though the designs have very specific reference in the home 'countries'.

The group seems to have paid more attention to musical copyright than that relating to the images in the clip. Yunupingu said in an interview:

We had to draw on copyright for the traditional sections so that we weren't being sell-outs to our own culture. This requires us to go down and sit with our elders and solve the problem.

The producers of the clip, Axolotl, had the images cleared for use by the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council.

The second story is about consensus, building bridges, a metaphor much used in the Christianisation process of Aborigines. It is also...
the name of a recent album on which blacks and whites play together. Christianity, with a dash of liberation theology, is perhaps more important than radical politics in the construction of pan-Aboriginality because of a common missionary background in most cases, and an ability to transform and adapt Christian narrative and ritual to Aboriginal ways. “Making money can be one thing, building bridges can be another,” they sing in another song.

The last story is about achievement, economic and cultural. They want to “strike or penetrate the music industry in Australia, and the world for that matter” at the same time as delivering a moral message about “living together, learning together” as the kids are shown getting down and dancing at a bush concert. Up there on the stage is their teacher from the Both Ways School (in Yirrkala, Yunupingu is headmaster), and the close-ups on their faces say one thing: this is the future of Aboriginality, and ‘future’ has suddenly become an indigenous buzzword: “We want to give them encouragement, a sense of direction, to feel proud of their Yolngu culture.”

Other Aboriginal groups like No Fixed Ad-
the African roots of Rock—even though the group was keen to meet other indigenous people when they were in North America. His rhetorical point is simpler: we are sovereign in our own country, but we can play your musical game too. And they do; the didjeridoo provides a slow cycling bass, sometimes squawking when voice is added to lip vibration, and a more punctuated rhythm is in the clicking of the bilma, clapsticks. The one blocks the bass area, while the other

arts, but especially painting, were being bought cultural renaissance, as all forms of Aboriginal people demonstrated in Sydney against 200 years with Aboriginal traditions—a compromise that. different matter from stylistic theft, the use of boundaries, by stylistic quotation. This is quite a according to which one can assume that it is also be taken as a metaphor for cultural politics, clip leads me to posit a kind of 'affirmative appro­

''Watch out bro', you gonna 'lectrocute yourself!' I can imagine his friends screaming with laughter: 'Alright' to dialogue respectfully across cultural boundaries'

Cloud formation in the west today
Thunder and rain reaching here tonight
Listen to the music of the spear-grass crying
Down along the rivers and the valleys of the Yolngu land

This is all locally significant. The change of seasons as the ‘wet’ arrives has spiritual and practical consequences; the ‘crying’ of the grass is no accidental metaphor, from this writer especially. This is history: the time of spears and rapid degradation of Aboriginal culture is gone, but land rights have restored the Yolngu sovereignty and pride.

For Yothu Yindi, the ‘mainstream’ is both living in white society and continuing to flow with Aboriginal traditions—a compromise that was not always expressed at the Bicentennial march in January 1988 when 20,000 Aboriginal people demonstrated in Sydney against 200 years of colonial rule. There, more liberationist rhetoric was employed, even though events hardly touched on the violently revolutionary. At the same time, others were speaking of an Aboriginal cultural renaissance, as all forms of Aboriginal arts, but especially painting, were being bought up in a big way in New York.

The complex rhetoric of Yothu Yindi’s video clip leads me to posit a kind of ‘affirmative appropriation’—sometimes called fusion—for their musical style. ‘Affirmative appropriation’ can also be taken as a metaphor for cultural politics, according to which one can assume that it is ‘alright’ to dialogue respectfully across cultural boundaries, by stylistic quotation. This is quite a different matter from stylistic theft, the use of designs without appropriate copyright clearance. And it also causes one to reconsider the usefulness of the spatial metaphor of centre and margin for cultural politics.

Aboriginal teachers always say: “Follow the tracks of your mother; don’t stray”. And mothers might say to their children: “Don’t ask too many questions, don’t be garrulous: watch and listen”. This is a politics of the example, as opposed to a politics of critique. Talking about European unification recently, French philosopher Jacques Derrida had occasion to develop this notion of the exemplary. In The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe, Michael Naas, his translator, introduces Derrida’s essay by saying the question of the example is the question of politics. Giving priority to the rhetorical conditions of the example enables us to examine the “possibility of beginning not with a politics of which we would then give examples, but with examples out of which we might invent a politics”. And, indeed, it is hard to imagine a political speech which did not work towards a generality on the basis of specificities; it is through giving examples that the politician attempts to forge identity and identification. The evocation of ‘nation’—or, indeed, ‘republic’ in the current context—becomes a rhetorical divide whereby new identities can be mobilised.

Under what heading, Derrida asks, can one begin to think about political discourses to do with national and supranational sovereignty and identity? Especially when names of individual nations like France and Spain are being subsumed under the broader heading of Europe? Could the provisional heading for this project be the postnational, indicating a provisional reconstruction towards nationhood which investigates its own rhetorical tactics?

Derrida’s own examples refer to Europe and its Others, since it is always a question of relations—gazing over borders—when it comes to the definition of nation. Europe developed as Europe because it defines non-Europe as Other. Now, as European nations disintegrate and reform amid a resurgent racism—towards Africans (in France and Italy), and Gypsies and Jews (in Germany and central Europe)—non-Europeans especially are an irritating presence for the radical conservatives like Le Pen in southern France, the neo-Nazis in Germany, and those in the UK who still consider the continent to be full of foreigners. Similarly, current uses of ‘Australia’ tend to expose our versions of the heart of darkness.

Rejecting both the complete unification and the fragmentation of Europe, Derrida calls for a renewal of Enlightenment values and liberal democracy. While Derrida continues to see Enlightenment values as imbued with Eurocentric
work for sale or for collection and preservation in museums and galleries. Under this model his work as a traditional man would tend to be subsumed under a kind of past-tense cultural framing: 'primitive', 'timeless', 'natural' and so on.

2) Another way would have been to opt for a 'community arts' model, a model which would also depend on government money to set up workshops for the production of objects for local sale within the Aboriginal community or to tourists. Pike might then have become a designer for silk screening on T-shirts or have done paintings for direct sale. He could have combined this work with option (1). But I don't think this option was available to him, or it is not yet available. Prior to the time spent in jail, his life around Fitzroy Crossing was not spent in ways that earned him any great respect in the Aboriginal community. To be fully a part of it, to participate in meetings and ceremonies, he would have had to be sober like the Christian Aborigines who use the church and their own cultural organisations to consolidate a delicately surviving group of cultures.

3) The third option was, in any case, virtually in place when he went back to the Great Sandy Desert on parole. Culley and Wroth were starting things moving to set up Desert Designs with Pike's work as the first major design story. Later on, when the Byers Company in Sydney took up the manufacturing contract, the designs were being seen on a full range of men's, women's and children's wear, and then later the 'total design concept' fleshed out to Oroton accessories, shoes, rugs, Sheridan Sheets, Speedo, and so on into overseas franchises. Pike thus became a contract design artist whose prints and paintings are now being sold alongside the products which also bear his designs. For the Desert Designs company there is a kind of balancing act between the notion of Jimmy Pike the artist—for whom they sometimes feel compelled to do a romantic promotion of the artist as 'genius/Aboriginal/isolated in the desert'—and the Jimmy Pike products which the big stores like Grace Brothers market alongside Jenny Kee, Weiss and Ken Done.

The third option was the one which fitted in best with Pike's situation; the necessity for rehabilitation, his isolation from his own community, his 'bourgeoisification' and the desire for a regular income. Under these conditions he has become precisely the sort of Aboriginal private business promoted by Mick Miller in his report for the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations in 1985, sent around in videotape versions to Aboriginal communities. Miller deplored the fact that in the cities Aboriginal people seem to be only employed by government or their own organisations. He states that the private sector
employs 75% of the workforce, and that Aboriginal people should not only be part of that 75%, but they should also be setting up businesses and thus creating money and employment in their own communities and breaking down somewhat the welfare provisions which keep many rural communities going. Jimmy Pike is thus the ideal representative for this model. As a kind of entrepreneur in his own culture, he has succeeded in transposing the designs from his traditional past in the Great Sandy Desert to media suitable for fashion prints and has thus escaped the confines of museums of the 'timeless dreamtime' and government grants, and has opened up the possibility for further employment of his own people in an industry which need not necessarily belong only to white people and their ideas.

In a quite different sense the use of Aboriginal design in fashion is close to the traditional idea of 'body painting'. Providing the designs are 'public' and not 'secret/sacred', the idea of body decoration through fashion may be closer to Aboriginal ideas than framing paintings and 'capturing' them for the museum and gallery market. The concept of body decoration spans both Aboriginal and European cultures; both cultures could be seen to have this common concern to transform the image of our bodies and in the process make them relate to our country, especially with a range of line and colour which is quintessentially Australian at a time when nationalism is running high and nationalist discourses are turning, as always, to 'the land' to look for a 'source'.

Jimmy Pike's success depends in part on these nationalist formations, but it is also the case that he has created a kind of 'writing'—defined broadly as cultural meaning—which is not destined to be fixed in books or museums. Rather, it penetrates the mobile social spaces of the whole of Australian society by being carried around, nomadically, on people's bodies. It becomes, therefore, an art of everyday life, a 'smart' dress or shirt for the suburban dweller, something for the beach or the Kakadu Klub. There is thus a subtle diffusion of Aboriginality through the social spaces of the metropolis rather than the ghettoisation of Aboriginal cultures in the places we know, have always known, where to find them: the fringe camps or the museums.

Becoming mainstream, for any minority, can involve cultural losses. But it can—perhaps even needs to—involve escaping the cultural prisons which are always lurking in the background. Jimmy Pike's success depends in part on these nationalist formations, but it is also the case that he has created a kind of 'writing'—defined broadly as cultural meaning—which is not destined to be fixed in books or museums. Rather, it penetrates the mobile social spaces of the whole of Australian society by being carried around, nomadically, on people's bodies. It becomes, therefore, an art of everyday life, a 'smart' dress or shirt for the suburban dweller, something for the beach or the Kakadu Klub. There is thus a subtle diffusion of Aboriginality through the social spaces of the metropolis rather than the ghettoisation of Aboriginal cultures in the places we know, have always known, where to find them: the fringe camps or the museums.

The margin-centre opposition really starts to disappear when European systems of knowledge are placed so as to demonstrate the long history of their operation as the effect of their colonial Other, a reversal encapsulated in Franz Fanon's observation: "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World". White Australians, as colonisers, were therefore never acting autonomously; they were dependent on those they were enslaving for the sense of what they were doing. Racism, therefore, can't simply be removed with policies on 'positive' images in films or mass media. The best we can hope for is an historical understanding of the effects of placing one representation against another. And then not turn around and decide that one should be central.

Yes, I'm afraid so—postmodernism. The postmodern idea of a politics of exemplification—paths to follow which go somewhere—can be opposed to the 'transgressive' politics of modernist critique, which constantly rediscovers morally ascendant positions on behalf of the marginal. Postmodernism in cultural politics makes a case for regional authority; limited 'regimes of truth' at specific sites which can be respected without the one (the centre) having access to an overarching critique. It also allows for the possibility of movement out and away from established identities and stereotypes towards hybrid identities. This may be the case for Kim Scott's first novel True Country (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993), which seems to create yet another mode of being Aboriginal in Australia—one infused with the stresses and strains of hybrid relations, with a delicate and poetic voice in-between English and the Aboriginal vernacular.

For marginal identities coming into the mainstream needn't mean being preoccupied with its legitimising power. Fortunately, in Australia there is already a formal 'culture of difference'—multiculturalism—in which identities find their strongest definition by being grounded in narratives of formation (history) and perpetuated in narratives of transformation. Among British and American theorists 'hybridity' seems to be a new buzzword, one that involves acknowledging one's complex cultural position. This transforming of identities emerges in cross-cutting cultural spheres where texts are inspirational, even life-enhancing, materials. African American theorist Michele Wallace says in Invisibility Blues: "Race is a game played with mirrors called words...But I can't tell whether 'game' is a cynical or joyful word here. I guess it cuts both ways.

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