Identities in Action Conference, Gregynog, 10–12 December 1999

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Daniel Chandler and Meic Llewellyn of the Department of Education at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, nearly achieved the impossible in their construction of the *Identities in Action* conference. By allowing for the free interweaving of several identity discourses over a tantalisingly brief weekend, they provided a practical forum for the sympathetic mutual understanding of the studies of cultural- and self-identities, marginalised communities, minority languages, and gender and queer studies. Each block of time was organised into four different 'strands' which then culminated in workshops and discussion sessions: *Music and Identities*, *Cyberspace and Identities*, *Organisational Identities*; *Identities and Place*, *Gender Identities*, *Political Action and Identities*; *Queer Theory and Gay Identities*, *Museum of the Future*, *Children's Identities and the Media*; *Language and Identities*, *Personal Identities*, *Representations and Identities*. The unfortunate fact of such an undertaking is the time restriction imposed upon it. Had the conference lasted even a full five days, we may have seen not only the formation of imagined communities, but intriguing societal developments between them.

Line Grenier (Université de Montréal, Québec) opened the conference with her paper, 'The usefulness of infamous fame: identity and belonging in Québécois popular music'. By offering Céline Dion as an example of the identity problematic between Québécois and mainstream cultures, Grenier suggested three key terms and their definitions: *fame*, that cultural space defining who is remembered and how; *infamy*, defiance of the canon, be it a gender, political or nationalist metanarrative; and *usefulness*, what may be defined as an artitst's cultural effectivity. When the conference then fragmented into its many interweaving strands, the importance of these three keywords in the musical strand became clear, as did their commonality across the other strands.

The musical strand itself began with Meic Llewellyn's discussion of 'Welsh popular music and the affirmation of youth identities'. Noting the satirical and political elements in Welsh pop music and the problem of using the term 'popular' to describe a music understandable by only a minority of the Welsh population, his paper offered an overview of the cultural impetus behind the creation of certain Welsh musical identities.[1] Liv Sovik (Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brazil) followed with 'Popular music as Brazilian identity discourse: rap as heir to *Tropicalismo*', a fascinating exploration of the roots of the Brazilian cultural production explosion, of *Tropicalismo* as metanarrative of Brazilian identity, and of the appropriations of a 'universal culture', rap, used to readdress Afro-Brazilian culture within a national identity discourse.

Michelle Duffy (University of Melbourne) spoke about 'The performance of identity: the community music festival', approaching the idea of cultural pluralism vs. community coherence and the inclusivist ideals of 'multiculturalism'. Duffy explored, among other things, the idea of music as analogy for marking out territory. By considering rhythm as defining the milieu between self and non-self, as a

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metaphor for ownership, she showed that the community music festival represents on the one hand the connection between place and identity, and on the other hand, the cultural fluidity perceptible in a culturally diverse community. Jeff Melnick (Babson College, Massachusetts) finished the day's musical proceedings with 'Paragons and jesters: space and role in doo wop music'. He began with a historical summary of the development of doo wop, contrasting the heavily romanticised notion of street corner harmony with the reality of the independent culture cultivated in inner city housing projects in New York, Chicago and other major US cities. The 'innovative innocence' suggested by the producers of doo wop recordings belies their element of exploitative child labour, the record companies having removed the young (Black) teenage musicians from the safety of their surroundings, stripped their musical product of its relevance to their communities and exploited the prototypical sound for the larger (White) audience.

The musical strand concluded the following morning, with Meic Llewellyn's report on 'Some patterns of identification revealed amongst a Welsh audience participating on a tour by a Basque rock band'. This served both to connect the musical strand with the ongoing minority language strand, and to connect the conference proceedings with the evenings' musical entertainment. Mr Llewellyn is active in *Ein Gilydd* (Each Other), an organisation working toward building contacts between Welsh musicians and those of other small nations of Europe and elsewhere; and the bands who played over the weekend at Gregynog had taken part in Ein Gilydd's most recent exchange, between Wales and the Basque Country. Noting the similarities between the two cultures – the size of the two countries and of their minority language-speaking populations, their struggles against the cultural dominant, a solidarity against hegemonic languages – Llewellyn considered the concept of *métissage*, the recovering of histories, the collective construction of meanings, in the clash between traditional and contemporary cultures.

The discussion sessions served to relate the musical strand to the conference as a whole, touching on the notion of 'folk', of a historical musical metanarrative, of a minority identity perceptible within a dominant cultural product. Again, time prevented full exploration of the breadth of issues raised; but throughout the rest of the conference it was possible to approach similar issues through different modes of address. By the time the closing panel session completed its series of two-minute definitions of 'identity', one thing was clear: power is in Place, be it cyberspace, minority-language media, adopted territories, MTV, long-block housing projects, Gregynog, or pockets of linguistic isolation on the margins of the mainstream culture. There has been talk of the Identities in Action proceedings becoming available on the Web, or on paper; such a collection would be a valuable resource for students of music, of cultural studies or of any interdisciplinary interest in expressive culture.

Endnotes

1. A longer version of this paper is printed, by coincidence, in this issue of the journal (Editors).

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