

**Organised Cultural Encounters:  
Collaboration and Intercultural Contact in a Lullaby Choir**

Samantha Dieckmann & Jane W. Davidson

**Abstract**

This article examines the early stages of the development of an intercultural lullaby choir in Melbourne, Australia. The community choir emerged from an applied ethnomusicology collaboration between researchers from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne, and Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures, a not-for-profit community organisation that provides training and support to newly arrived and recently settled migrant communities. The project's shift from an open-ended exchange of personally meaningful lullabies to a formal ensemble will be interrogated, revealing how ethnomusicological research is defined by the relational dynamics and social arenas within which it is conducted. By way of ethnographic vignettes, this article outlines key stages of the project's chronological development while also providing insight into participants' experiences of the resulting musical encounters. Given this dual focus on process and outcome, ethnographic research findings are framed by theoretical work on intercultural contact zones and organised cultural encounters. Sites of intercultural encounter will be brought into view, highlighting how organisational decisions are experienced by participants in corporeal, temporal and affective ways. Like many applied ethnomusicology projects with intercultural objectives, by virtue of its institutionalisation the choir does not embody the transgressive and unexpected characteristics of sites of encounter. At the same time, the sensory embodiment of actively participating in intercultural music-making, learning and teaching manifest key components of 'meaningful encounter'. In addition to exploring how participants' multiple social identities are constructed, legitimated and challenged in musical contact zones, this paper addresses the procedural, ethical and theoretical methodological implications that have arisen from the research.

**Introduction**

This article recounts and interrogates the early stages of the development of an intercultural choir in Melbourne, Australia. Initially envisaged as a colloquial and open-ended intercultural exchange through the sharing of lullabies, the project's shift to a formal ensemble reflects both "the dynamics of 'partnership' between scholar and the social subjects involved in ethnomusicological research" (Hofman 2010:22), and the ways in which organised cultural encounters are "tied to the particular social arena with which the encounter is associated (...) shaped in important ways by the existing norms, discourses, roles and hierarchies that govern these arenas" (Christiansen, Gaal & Hvenegaard-Lassen 2017:601). The project was designed to be collaborative, with the specificities of any ongoing implementation to emerge from discussions with those involved in the first intercultural exchange. As will be explained, the performativity that emerged in the initial intercultural music encounter lent itself to an inadvertent formalisation of both the transmission and performance of lullabies.

Negotiations in the project design and implementation will be illuminated through three ethnographic vignettes, to outline key stages of the project's chronological development. The first vignette describes a planning meeting between the authors/applied researchers and the leadership of the partner organisation, Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures, a not-for-profit community organisation that provides training and support to newly arrived and recently settled migrant communities. The second vignette features the project's initial intercultural music exchange, an exploratory "Lullaby Swap" in which members of shared language groups selected and presented lullabies to other groups. Participants in this initial cultural encounter were primarily drawn from VICSEG's culturally diverse staff, and the Lullaby Swap included presentations by multilingual groups and individuals from Pakistan, the Philippines, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Poland, England and (as it was named at the time of the participant's departure) Czechoslovakia. Although their migration histories varied, with one participant moving to Australia as early as 1947, most of the participants migrated from 2008 onwards. The choir that emerged from the Lullaby Swap will be introduced through the final vignette, which recounts one of the ensemble's early rehearsal sessions. These vignettes have been chosen not only to address the article's primary concern with the collaborative negotiations around the project's design and implementation, but also to provide some insight into participants' experiences of the resulting musical encounters. As the project's collaborators, the ways with which participants engaged with each other and the musical material were inherently linked with shifts in the project's trajectory. Given this entanglement between process and outcome,

it is important to draw attention to the “event of the encounter” (see Wilson 2017a) itself. The site of contact will be brought into view, highlighting how the organisational decisions taken were experienced in the corporeal, temporal and affective ways in which participants encountered each other at the contact zone. Of course, the nature of the musical engagements, the value and meaning of the encounters (and for whom), and any adjustments to the way the project was organised, were all shaped by the intercultural aims overarching the project as a whole. Therefore, before presenting the vignettes, the next section will outline and contextualise the project’s theoretical framework.

### **Coburg in Melbourne, Australia**

The Lullaby Choir is based next to VICSEG New Futures’ head office in Coburg, 8 kilometres north of Melbourne’s central business district. In the city’s popular imaginary, the suburb is associated with multicultural cuisine, reflecting the demographic findings of the most recent census that approximately 40 per cent of its residents were born outside of Australia. The suburb’s top 10 languages spoken at home (other than English) provide a sense of the cultural and linguistic make-up of its diverse population: Italian, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Mandarin, Nepali, Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Urdu and Hindi. Because of its geographical setting, approaching VICSEG New Futures with a community music initiative in mid-2016 was particularly timely. The organisation’s leadership suggested that the project could form part of a joint venture by local businesses to contradict the anti-immigration sentiments championed by the protest group Reclaim Australia, who had recently staged insurgences in Coburg (Hall 2016; Ham 2016). This aligned with the research agenda in that the increasing political volatility around migration policies, notions of national belonging, and violent extremism in Australia more broadly, formed part of the impetus for inquiring into the role music might play in intercultural relations.

### **Intercultural contact zones and organised cultural encounters**

From a theoretical standpoint, focusing on intercultural relations represented a move away from the celebration of strong cultural or ethnic identities, emphasising the space in-between and the possibilities offered by dialogic cultural exchange (see Meer & Modood 2012). As

Sze and Powell (2004) explain, “Multiculturalism tends to preserve a cultural heritage, while interculturalism acknowledges and enables cultures to have currency, to be exchanged, to circulate, to be modified and evolve” (186). Lullabies were chosen to reflect this intercultural framework, building on previous findings that cross-lingual lullaby sharing can facilitate the development of Kim’s (2015) intercultural personhood (see Marsh & Dieckmann 2016). Kim’s theory of intercultural identity development posits that extended communication across cultural boundaries leads to processes of cross-cultural adaptation, bringing about an increasingly intercultural transformation in a person’s identity orientation and cultivating “a mindset that integrates, rather than separates, cultural differences” (7).

The development of intercultural identities is conceptually linked with notions of the intercultural contact zone, building on Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis that prejudice and discrimination can be reduced through increased everyday contact. Wilson (2017b) explains that the “assumption that being-together, co-presence, dialogue, and intermingling can, under the right conditions, educate, create familiarity, inspire social transformation, and play a significant role in the development of democratic values,” has drawn attention to “encounters with others” as a site of interest (606). Pratt’s (2007 [1992]) much-cited work on the in-between spaces in colonial encounters overturned the discourse that such contact zones are exclusively sites of domination and subordination. Instead, she contended that marginal groups may select from the materials emanating from the dominant culture, adopting and appropriating chosen elements for their own purposes. At the same time, Pratt highlighted the asymmetrical power relations that exist in most intercultural encounters. In line with this, this article aims to engage with critical interculturality (Guilherme & Dietz 2015), accounting for the relations of power that exist not just with respect to the intercultural space in-between the participants, but also those that “saturate the research site and are the conditions of knowledge production” (Somerville & Perkins 2003:256) in the contact zone of collaborative research.

While Allport’s intergroup contact hypothesis remains salient and continues to be developed, proximity alone does not necessarily equate to changes in values and behaviour (see Wilson 2017a; Valentine 2008). In the discipline of human geography, consideration is increasingly being given to what Amin (2002) refers to as *micro-publics*. This involves the intentional assembling of people – who are assumed to lack commonality in one or more identity categories (for example, culture, ethnicity, age, class, legal status, or sexuality) – around a

group activity. Predicated on the notion that a single encounter, and banal everyday exchanges, are limited in terms of the opportunities they present for meaningful interaction, such activities aim to facilitate a “[break[ing] out of patterns of interaction” enabling participants to “learn new ways of thinking and relating” (Mayblin, Valentine & Andersson 2016:214). Askins and Pain (2011) argue that not just *any* activity will achieve these outcomes, with the choice of the activity materials and the need for repeated activities central to the success of a meaningful encounter. Mayblin et al. suggest that “contact must occur on multiple occasions, in multiple sites, and with a variety of intensities in order to become ‘meaningful’” (216). According to Mayblin et al., meaningful encounters include a combination of three distinctive forms of contact: contact that aims to build bridges across difference; contact which builds upon common interests; and banal everyday social interaction.

The growing body of literature on *organised cultural encounters* demonstrates the range of activities that might facilitate meaningful intercultural engagement, while also highlighting the challenges and even contradictions associated with such activities as they are explicitly designed to foster attitudinal or behavioural transformation (see Bessone 2017; Christiansen, Galal & Hvenegaard-Lassen 2017; Simonsen 2017; Whyte 2017; Wilson 2017a, 2017b). Contradictions include that cultural difference is seen as the source of both the conflict to be addressed, and the solution for the problem (Christiansen et al. 2017). In cultural encounters (organised or otherwise), difference is considered a key site for possibility and creative innovation, and “rigorous but respectful dialogue about cultural, disciplinary and other differences has the potential to create exciting new forms of knowledge construction” (Manathunga 2009:169). Of course, this creative potential is evident across the disciplines of applied ethnomusicology, community music, music education and music psychology, in which there are numerous examples of musical activities being used in what could be conceptualised as organised cultural encounters (for example, Balandina 2010; Bartleet 2016; Bayley & Dutiro 2016; Boyce-Tillman 2009; Kreutz 2014; Sæther 2013; Sweers 2015; Marsh 2012, 2015; McIntosh & Ramnarine 2016; Pettan 2010; Veršnik 2010). The way in which musical and cultural differences are navigated during these encounters, and the resulting creative outcomes, form core areas of interest for those who research intercultural musical engagement. By investigating the *organisational* in the Lullaby Choir’s organised cultural encounters, this article stands in conversation with the body of applied ethnomusicology literature that interrogates the practices involved in undertaking interventionist and

collaborative projects using ethnographic methodologies (Arujo 2008; Hofman 2010; Reigersberg 2010; Mackinlay 2010). Before discussing how the Lullaby Choir evolved through various negotiations, however, we will elaborate upon the project's particular focus on lullabies.

## **Lullabies**

Identifying lullabies as a topic of interest originated in a series of conversations about their poignancy, and the potential of working with them in the community music space. Preliminary ideas were supported by the body of literature about the ways that lullaby practices relate to memory, emotional regulation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, cultural identity, place-making and caregiving. In establishing an applied project aimed at examining music and intercultural relations, we were drawn to the universality represented by lullabies. As songs which are used to soothe or lull infants and young children, across the world lullabies represent some of the earliest encounters with heritage music, language and culture (Kim 2012; Pettit 2014; Juvančič 2010). Given their function in regulating moodstates, lullaby practices also inherently involve emotional communication (Baker & Mackinlay 2006; Ilari 2005; Juvančič 2010), a characteristic which has positioned parent–infant music-making at the centre of theories of communicative musicality that espouse the intrinsically musical nature of human interaction (see Malloch & Trevarthen 2009). Conversely, we also valued the cultural specificity of lullaby practices. Lullaby lyrics serve to transmit family history and personal memory (Pettit 2014) and enculturate young listeners (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2012; Sturman 2012). Our approach to generating intercommunity alliances involved providing a platform for these distinctive identities to be enunciated, understood and valued across cultural, linguistic and religious difference.

We also aimed to draw on the shared experience of parenthood and caregiving, as a way to develop understandings between culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse groups. Singing lullabies in the home is meaningful not only for the infant or child audience, but also for the performing caregiver. Lullaby practices have been found to regulate and strengthen parents' emotions and mental states, providing a coping mechanism in the midst of caregiving (Baker & Mackinlay 2006; Pettit 2014). The genre also facilitates intimate emotional expressions, as the privacy of singing to one's infant is a safe space to address the complexities, contradictions and frustrations of parenthood, familial relations, and broader

societal issues and political conflicts (Juvančič 2010; Pettit 2014). Because of these qualities, lullabies offer strong connections to the past while providing a vehicle for addressing the challenges of resettlement, coping with trauma, and conflict resolution (Juvančič 2010). Certainly, the project examined in this article is not the first to recontextualise lullabies, functionalising them for particular social and emotional outcomes (Juvančič 2010; O’Callaghan 2008). It was partly inspired by the first author’s involvement in a research project lead by Kathryn Marsh; an intercultural lullaby group in Sydney, Australia, which provided a safe social space in which mothers could be comforted in the familiarity of their own traditions while developing a knowledge of lullabies from diverse other traditions in their multicultural country of resettlement (Marsh & Dieckmann 2016). Similarly, the second author’s comparative exploration of children’s music provided a framework for investigating cultural wellbeing (Davidson & Emberly 2012).

### **The role of researchers**

As will be explored, all aspects of the project’s implementation were subject to change based on the priorities and interests of the project’s partners and participants. However, its foundational focus on both intercultural relations and lullabies was decided upon prior to any collaboration, demonstrating the extent to which researchers’ involvement (and the institutional investment it entails) impacts upon the knowledge created in and through collaborative projects. Despite attempts to adopt ‘horizontal participative strategies’ in our research methodologies, our initial framing of the project (as both intercultural, and about lullabies) reveals its limitations as reflexive rather than “intensely ‘participatory’” (Arujo 2008:15). Here, the initial focuses and goals are defined by the researchers, but all subsequent steps have been collaboratively negotiated. The vignettes to which we will now turn will detail some of these negotiations, addressing both the methodological implications of the project’s reconfiguration and the ways it relates to understandings of organised cultural encounters.

Throughout the text, we reflect on researcher positionality, necessitating a clarification of our distinctive roles. Both authors are still involved in the community-engaged, applied ethnomusicology project being examined here. The second author, Jane Davidson, is the Chief Investigator and instigator of the research project, and has been involved in managing

project partnerships, producing performance outcomes, securing funding and contributing to both public and academic outputs. The first author's involvement has been more participatory, attending regular music sessions as a learner, accompanist and eventually, conductor (though the shift to these roles occurred after the events described in this article, and are beyond the scope of this article). As this article is directed by the latter's grounded ethnographic experiences, wherever first person pronouns 'I' and 'me' are used, they refer to the first author.

### **Vignette One. August 26, 2016. Lullaby Project meeting at VICSEG New Futures head office.**

Maree (the General Manager) and John (the Chief Executive Officer) introduced me to Urmila (Communications Manager), before we all took seats around the table. It was the second time I had visited their head branch in Coburg, having come with Jane in May to scope out the potential for collaboration. Weaving my way through the building, on my way to the meeting room in which we sat, I was struck by how culturally diverse the staff was. Since the May meeting we had emailed John and Maree a second version of the draft proposal, outlining the aims, implementation plan and outputs, amended in response to their previous feedback. We were meeting now to formulate concrete plans for next steps. Although they were enthused by the initial ideas as represented in the first draft, which involved intergenerational lullaby sharing in a few of their established community playgroups, they recommended that we start smaller, plan more conservatively, allow the shape of the eventual programme to grow organically from a pilot activity. Maree then presented me with a 3-page document, the result of a preliminary lullaby collection exercise she had embarked upon, unprompted, in preparation for our meeting.

The excitement stirred up by the gathering exercise carried into the planning meeting, as Maree described the way that discussing and sharing lullabies had "struck a chord" with those involved. The conversation between Maree, John, Urmi and I evolved until it was agreed that we should begin with a simple, informal musical encounter; a lullaby swap.

### **Reconfiguring project structure and participant recruitment**

The vignette above draws attention to the processes of interpretation and negotiation inherent in applied ethnomusicology projects. Determining the shape and direction of the Lullaby Project involved reconciling our research agenda with both the level of support and participation that VICSEG New Futures could accommodate as well as, more importantly, working towards applied objectives that represented their interests as our partners and research collaborators. Bendrups (2015) suggests that balancing these varying interests is possible when “common ground with research collaborators [is established] from the beginning, in which mutually beneficial and often tangible outcomes can be foregrounded” (90). Towards this end, and knowing that both collaborative research and organised cultural encounters can involve unexpected shifts in the way a project is implemented, we were tasked with providing VICSEG New Futures with a proposal outlining our vision for the partnership and the intercultural musical exchanges that would constitute our research foci.

Emphasising that the document was “a working draft” in which we “raised many questions” and invited John and Maree to “share [their] expert knowledge with feedback and suggestions” (email correspondence from authors to VICSEG New Futures’ leadership, May 29, 2016), the first draft of the project proposal reflected the reasons for which we targeted the not-for-profit organisation. Their extensive suite of services includes actively supporting hundreds of families through playgroups run in local schools and community centres across the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne. Wanting to “recruit 30 triads of grandmothers, mothers and children of culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse backgrounds (...) who would be willing to share lullaby practices from their heritage” (Lullaby Sharing Project Proposal, Draft 1, May 29, 2016), VICSEG playgroups seemed to offer a wide network of potential participants. The proposed cross-institutional partnership also involved curating the collected lullabies, in audio-visual, musical notation, and written formats, in an open-access archive. We envisioned producing related music education materials that could be disseminated throughout VICSEG’s playgroups as well as local schools, libraries and early childhood centres. We expected that the production of such materials would be of significant interest to VICSEG New Futures, but we were steered towards revising the project to include a more modest, open-ended initial phase. As evident in the above scene, this direction culminated in the conception of an isolated intercultural exchange activity. The resulting Lullaby Swap, described in Vignette Two, was delivered in two-hour sessions and held over two consecutive days in September 2016.

As part of this reconfiguration of the project's structure, participant recruitment strategies were modified. Maree and John indicated that there were logistical barriers to engaging with the family triads (grandmothers, mothers and children) described in our original draft of the proposal. They were, for example, already enlisted in playgroups with set structures, so additional programming would be difficult to achieve. They suggested instead that we trial the project with volunteer members of their multicultural staff, which would also provide the organisation with an exercise in team building. This proposition was particularly compelling, not only because Maree and John were well-placed to advise on the practical advantages of this convenience sampling approach (Yin 2011), but also because they were well-positioned to ensure its success. As General Manager and CEO of VICSEG New Futures, their conceptualisation of the project as a team building and (with the choir) workplace wellness activity, has meant that staff are provided time during working hours to participate. Although this has resulted in fluctuating engagement – individuals vary their participation according to current workload – having their involvement legitimised as a valid work-related activity has increased participant accessibility.

In the interests of addressing the power imbalance in applied ethnomusicology projects (Titon 2015), we repeatedly reminded our collaborators of the changeability of the proposal. The extent of resulting reconfiguration of the core components of recruitment strategy and project structure indicate how cross-institutional partnerships necessarily involve researchers “adjusting our actions to meet the criteria and agendas of local authorities or communities’ leaders, which is part of the ongoing negotiations that must occur when researchers consider the local or more general goals and practices of others” (Hofman 2010: 29). There were certainly clear parallels between our research agenda and the community sector agenda represented by VICSEG New Futures, evidenced by our interest in developing positive intercultural relations and their longstanding commitment to, “establish areas of communication, co-operation and joint action amongst migrant groups” (VICSEG New Futures n.d.) At the same time, these shifts had significant implications for examining the uses of music in organised cultural encounters.

Wilson (2017b) draws attention to the fact that voluntary participation in most organised cultural encounters indicates that, “on both sides of the encounter people are open to transformation” (611). Going further, Carter (2013) argues that spaces of organised encounter only imitate their intended emancipatory outcomes, as they meet the demand underlying the encounter and

therefore “nothing unpredictable happens” (42). It would seem, then, that the transformational possibilities for this project’s use of music as an intercultural contact zone were even more limited by participant recruitment from the same group of staff. Although culturally and linguistically diverse, their employment at a not-for-profit organisation that provides services to migrant and refugee families would suggest some degree of shared values around notions of intercultural harmony. Consequently, the research focus shifted from the potential uses of intercultural lullaby sharing amongst individuals and families who had not previously met. Instead, we became interested in the potential of such a musical exchange more broadly, including considerations of what this organised cultural encounter might enact, enhance or disrupt between those that may already have a level of familiarity with each other in a professional capacity. If “we can never predict what affects minds and bodies might be capable of ahead of any encounter” (Wilson 2017a: 455), the reconfigured musical exchanges still remained an interesting site for analysing the intercultural contact zone. We will now turn to the first of these, the pilot activity that came to be known as the Lullaby Swap.

### **Vignette Two. September 21, 2016. Lullaby Swap at New Futures Creative.**

The noise of a few dozen chattering people died down as Maree stood up to address them. They gathered in from various corners of the large room, where some had been practising, humming and swaying in small groups. Seated in a large semi-circle, three rows deep, they turned their attention to their manager. A projector screen was mounted on the wall behind Maree, which over the next two days would display videos and lyrics in Tagalog, Sinhala, and Portuguese, though at the moment it remained blank.

Maree began, “Welcome to the first Lullaby Swap, we hope it’s the beginning of a beautiful joint project together.” She introduced us (the authors), referencing the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions to segue back into the activity at hand. “We’re all connected in some way through our emotions. And I think in this case through lullabies, the experience of ourselves as tiny children, being rocked to sleep by our mothers, the experience of ourselves with our own children – if we’ve got them – singing your children to sleep. It’s a beautiful connection as humans, and I think we all share that. We share that across cultures, and we certainly share that here today, we hope. So, welcome everybody. We’ve got lots of

enthusiastic people who I've spoken to, who've been preparing and also probably discussing what lullabies mean to them, and hopefully they're going to share that today."

She asked me to say a few words, presenting me as "the leader of this project." "I think Maree's really touched on what we're interested in, from a research point of view, which is how powerful lullabies can be. Because it has [sic] a lot of memories for us, a lot of emotions, and also there's a lot of things shared between cultures even if we're singing in different languages and coming from different situations. So really, we just want to hear what you have to share with us today (...) We'd expected it to be a little less formal than this, but now you've got costumes..." Laughter. I turned to the karaoke machine, "And speakers..." "And babies," added John, the CEO, referring to the dolls of infants Nethaki and Chanuki were holding, that would feature as dance props during the performance of Sinhala lullaby දරු නැඟවිලි ගී (*Doi Doi*, "Sleep Baby Sleep"). "Yeah, babies," I agreed. "And that's lovely. But also feel free after everyone's performance, just to have a conversation about what it means to you, and you can ask questions of each other."

### **Performing identities and constructing difference**

This vignette highlights two aspects of the Lullaby Swap which stood in juxtaposition with each other. First, as Maree articulated, the shared space of New Futures Creative became interposed with memories of family and notions of home, indicating the extent to which the activity was laden with the personal and the intimate for individual participants. My own comments indicate surprise at the participants' presentational renderings of their chosen repertoire (see Turino 2008). Across the various performances, the presentations evoked similar images of bedtime rituals, and of occupying the roles of both child and carer.

Imaginations of domesticity were reinforced by stylised videos of cots, blankets, mothers cradling their babies, and even choreographed infant-soothing using prop "babies." This blurring of spheres is pictured in Figure 1, in which elements of presentational performance (separation of performers and audience, dance props, costumes, lyric sheets, applause and performers' salutations) foreground one of several featured images from the performers' personal family albums.

**Figure 1. Performance of Sri Lankan Sinhala lullaby (*Doi Doi*, "Sleep Baby Sleep").** Photo by Urmila Ravikumar, courtesy of VICSEG New Futures.

This convergence of the private and public was paralleled by participants' multiply-constituted personas. Some individuals were involved in several capacities – as grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, ethnocultural community representatives, performers, audience members and VICSEG staff members – although their attention was drawn to each of these guises only temporarily, depending on the circumstances. These fluctuations reflected Koegeler-Abdi and Parncutt's (2014:7) contention that,

Most people (...) have *multiple identities* in the sense that they belong simultaneously to different cultural groups; we may speak of *cultural hybridity*. Cultural identity is generally *ambiguous and context-dependent*: the identity that a person feels or the cultural behaviours she exhibits depend on the context in which she finds herself – the people she is with, the location, the situation.

The Lullaby Swap constituted an intercultural contact zone in that individuals were compelled to perform their cultural hybridity through enacting a range of “cultural behaviours” – for example, those associated with the professional, the familial, the performative, and the traditional – *in the same context*.

What was particularly intriguing for us, given our research focus, was the way in which participants performed their cultural heritage by categorising themselves into groups according to country of origin and shared language. Attentive to the fact that organised cultural encounters should “undermine reductive representations” (Bessone 2017:652), we envisaged a much more informal singing circle in which *individuals* would perform lullabies from their lives. We imagined, for instance, a few people from the same country of origin and language group performing different lullabies. Although we did not request this approach specifically, our focus on personal and individual associations with lullabies reflected a desire to avoid fetishising or homogenising participants' cultural identities. It has since occurred to us that while we actively avoided the “strategic essentialism” (Butler 1995) applied by researchers for the purpose of achieving particular political objectives (see Hofman 2010), the nature of our collaborators' work – providing services for recently arrived migrants – also depends upon such practices.

In addition to raising questions about the role that habituated institutional processes might play in applied ethnomusicology projects, the way participants organised themselves speaks to the nature of intercultural contact zones. If “encounters do not simply take place at the border but are rather central to the making and unmaking of them” (Wilson 2017a:456), the Lullaby Swap demonstrated how such events are not so much about the subjects of the encounter but rather, the “contingency of identity and belonging” (Wilson 2017a:452) or how “encounters *make* difference” (455). Here, participants were actively involved in constructing the boundaries that defined difference, revealing the relational underpinnings of encounters.

At the end of the September 21 Lullaby Swap, John suggested that the efforts participants had put towards their presentational performances could be given new life, by being polished and featured in VICSEG New Futures’ Annual General Meeting (AGM) in December. The performative and outward-focussed nature of John’s suggestion was reiterated at the second Lullaby Swap session:

John: We just thought that a way to consolidate this and take it forward is that everybody who wants to, and has contributed, can join into a group activity where everybody learns the lullabies of the other language groups.

Maree: So a choir, a lullaby choir.

John: So we actually practice, and we’ll give people time during the week when it suits everybody. And that will bring, consolidate what people have presented, it’ll shape it a bit more, and it’ll share it.

(Lullaby Swap, September 22, 2016)

In this way, the project came to inhabit its current form as a Lullaby Choir. In the remainder of the article, we examine the ways in which the musical transmission styles practiced in the choir, and the newly participatory nature of the intercultural exchange, changed the ways in which participants (including myself) engaged with each other, and the musical materials, in the organised cultural encounters.

**Vignette Three. October 14, 2016. Lullaby Choir rehearsal at VICSEG New Futures classroom**

We were in stitches. Husband and wife Fawad and Parveen were introducing Hindi lullaby चंदा मामा दूर के (*Chanda Maama Door Ke*, “Distant Uncle Moon”) to the choir. The other 16 people in attendance, colleagues of Fawad and Parveen, remained seated when he opened the session by playing an animated, karaoke-style video clip through YouTube. Afterwards, Fawad and Parveen started singing the song in full, indicating that the rest of the participants should join in. Hindi-speakers from countries including Nepal and Pakistan were familiar with the lullaby because it was featured in a famous 1955 Bollywood film वचन (*Vachan*, “Word”) which they had watched at some point, so they tentatively sang along. The rest of us did our best, trying to remember the video and anticipate Fawad’s next melodic movements. The difficulty of this process prompted a few questions. “How does that go?” “Can we go back?” “How do you pronounce that again?”

As she sang, Jayanthi glanced around the circle at the other participants, observing people’s performances. After what seemed like a moment of reflection she embraced the dialogical tone set by other choristers and started making suggestions to both the presenters and the rest of the choir. We responded to her comfortable assertiveness with both appreciation (glad of her helpful directions: “You sing first and we’ll follow it”) and light-hearted humour; there was something very funny about the way in which she claimed increasing levels of authority. By the time her suggestions escalated to her standing up, positioning herself next to Fawad so that she might better direct the singing, we were in stitches. Fawad and Parveen’s welcoming response to her impromptu input only seemed to exacerbate the hilarity of the situation, as Parveen sat down and Fawad exclaimed, “This is the thing! It’s a group! You are coming with the ideas. Fantastic! Thank you!”

### **Reproducing the script of the organised cultural encounter**

This scene, from the Lullaby Choir’s second rehearsal, illustrates the easy joviality that has come to characterise each session. However, the laughter reveals more than just a playful dynamic. That Jayanthi’s spontaneous instruction-giving became the focal point of amusement, was symptomatic of the ambivalence participants felt towards the rehearsal context. Although Fawad encouraged questions and suggestions, there was evidently some tension between the initiative Jayanthi took, and participants’ unspoken expectations. Since the choir’s inception, rehearsal processes have been marked by ongoing negotiations between

participants' expectations about choir rehearsal settings and polished performance outcomes and the research agenda to draw on the cultural knowledge of everyday musicians. Sweers (2015) described how, in developing a lecture around the musical interests of Swiss migrants, her interlocutors – none of whom were active public performers or musical experts – had to often be reminded that, “*it was their personal musical experiences that were important for us – not any scholarly book knowledge on which they would be evaluated*” (530). Although their personal musical experiences were central to our initial research interests, the development of the Lullaby Choir meant that the everyday musicians in our project were also called upon to direct the intercultural transmission of musical material, working towards a formal performance outcome.

In the lead-up to the December 2016 AGM performance, the most significant aspects of the rehearsal process were the repertoire to be learnt and performed, and the participants appointed the task of teaching it to their peers. These decisions were taken with the aim of presenting as widespread and global a view of diversity as possible, given the choir's membership. In practice, Maree invited staff members from Brazil, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Lebanon to teach their peers lullabies in their languages. Rather than choosing lullabies which held special meaning in their personal lives, these choir leaders elected to teach their peers songs that aligned with the values that they attributed to the choir. Fawad and Parveen's selection of Hindi lullaby चंदा मामा दूर के (*Chanda Mama Door Ke*, “Distant Uncle Moon”) was one such example. Having migrated from Pakistan, and being native Urdu speakers, they chose to teach a Hindi lullaby from India because of its cross-cultural status, being known to people from across the Indian sub-continent because of its role in a famous Bollywood film. Of course, the addition of Jayanthi as a co-leader for this lullaby further supported this rationale, given her Nepali heritage. Brazilian-born Ana made a similarly strategic decision when she chose to teach Portuguese lullaby *Se Essa Rua Fosse Minha* (“If This Street Was Mine”). Having presented three lullabies during the Lullaby Swap, she explained that “for the choir I picked the most beautiful one according to the lyrics” (Ana, Interview, March 22 2017). In contrast to lullabies about the scary folkloric crocodile character, the *Cuca*, or the “Boy of the Black Face” featured in *Boi da Cara Preta*, Ana thought it most suitable to teach the song in which, “they talk about diamonds and to make [the street] beautiful for the angel. The angel is their child” (Interview, March 22 2017).

These repertoire selections reflect the way that participants' choices had come to align with what they perceived to be the project's aims. Fawad and Parveen chose to teach choir members a lullaby that highlighted shared linguistic knowledge and cultural experience, forgoing a more specific focus on the Urdu lullabies of their heritage. Ana chose a lullaby that evoked imaginings of the beauty and unconditional love of a parent-child dyad, avoiding the fearful, folkloric-based material that characterised most of the other Brazilian lullabies with which she was familiar. That their repertoire choices were consciously shaped by narratives about intercommunity and intergenerational harmony supports the contention that organised cultural encounters are scripted and "time, place, roles and interactions are more or less strictly prescribed and regulated in advance of the encounter (...). tied to (...) established professional or institutional contexts" (Christiansen et al. 2017:601). Certainly, the choir leaders' decisions aligned with the projects' broader meta-narrative as presented at the initial Lullaby Swap (Vignette Two) where the supposedly exploratory research objectives ("So really, we just want to hear what you have to share with us today") were framed by the verbal expositions about the power and universality of lullabies, delivered by Maree and myself.

### **Cultivating openness to the unknown**

The scripts of intercultural harmony and the universality of lullabies were challenged by the practices demanded by the rehearsal sessions. The choir's contrasting repertoire of lullabies involved grasping not only various languages, but also several, distinctive singing styles. For all of the singers, the wide-ranging membership of the choir (with heritages spanning the diverse regions of South Asia, South East Asia, the Middle East, South America, Eastern Europe and the British Isles), and the resulting breadth of the repertoire, meant performing outside of the musical systems most familiar to them, and reproducing previously unexplored vocal timbres and ornamentation styles. The challenges inherent in this task were compounded by the relative inexperience of the choir leaders.

As previously mentioned, teaching a song to a choir was new to all participants. As a result, approaches to song transmission unfolded through trial-and-error. The use of audio-visual material featured heavily in the initial stages of learning a new lullaby. YouTube videos were played to introduce a song and then, following a pronunciation lesson from the choir leader, they were used again in guided sing-throughs during which the choir could familiarise

themselves with the melody. The most significant resource upon which choir leaders drew throughout rehearsals was, however, other choir members. Jeanette explained how feedback from her peers directed the way that she led subsequent rehearsals of Arabic lullaby (*Yalla tnam Reema*, “May Rima Fall Asleep”).

I don't want them to come back again and say, “No, this is difficult. We are not getting that one,” or, “We are not entering together at the same point.” How do I cue this? So it kept me thinking about it. (...) Then I felt like also by asking me the questions, it helped me a lot to know where they're struggling. (Interview, May 19 2017)

Conversations between choir members occurred not only during rehearsals, but also throughout the work week. Through these discussions choir leaders were regularly reminded that the material with which they were familiar became, in the context of intercultural group singing, a musical object requiring a certain level of exactitude and mastery. This process of recontextualisation was another device through which choir leaders experienced, “difference (...) as an outcome of each encounter, rather than a pre-existing, fixed object of analysis” (Bessone 2017:654), as they apprehended known musical material *through* unfamiliarity. This echoes Victor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation, elaborated upon by Tomas (1996) thus:

effects of defamiliarization are produced when structures of identity, grounded in old cognitive or habitual ways of apprehending the world, give way to (...) difference. In such cases, it is difference that serves as the foundation for a logic of defamiliarization. (31)

The effects of defamiliarisation persisted throughout several rehearsals, and choir leaders modified their musical directions according to increasing understandings of how their lullaby was *different* for those learning. A reciprocal process was being undertaken by the choir members who needed to grasp new languages and singing styles, defamiliarising themselves from habitual ways of vocalising. Of course, the extent of this estrangement depended on how remote the difference was. Chris, whose first language is English, explained.

It's been very interesting and I've found especially the Arabic lullaby, I thought I was very negative for about two sessions. And then I just let myself go with it and found a

sense of pride that I could actually learn (...) I didn't think that I would be able to pronounce those words because the Arabic pronunciation is so different compared to English and to European languages. So it was difficult but it ended up being a really good experience. (Interview, 22 March 2017)

Earlier, we noted the limitations upon the choir's potential as a site of meaningful cultural encounter. Its recruitment from the same group of staff, and its organised nature, suggested that it would not be "a site of destabilization (...) laden with risk, coercion and inequality" (Wilson 2017a:457) as is characteristic of encounters. However, the interview excerpt above demonstrates how the learning of another's unfamiliar language and song "both highlight[s] and unsettle[s] norms" (Wilson 2017b:615). Further, given Chris' eventual grasp of the different, and her attitudinal shift towards the experience ("it ended up being (...) really good"), we argue that the intrinsically corporeal and affective nature of active intercultural music engagement can cultivate what Bennett (2001) refers to as a "sensory receptivity" to the unsettling (in Chris' words, "negative") feeling of having one's norms challenged; an openness to a momentarily enchanting and "immobilising encounter" (5) with the unknown.

For Jeanette, the value in the cultural encounter was primarily located in her fellow choir members' efforts to master her Arabic lullaby despite discomfort with its challenging components. She compared the Lullaby Choir's intercultural approach with another activity in which she was previously involved in her role as a cross-cultural trainer, in which different language groups would perform their own verse of the same lullaby (for example, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*).

Now, the difference is how we did teaching it to others, and others are learning it (...) Multiculturalism is a big thing for me, like respecting each other and acknowledging each other. Then for me, when this came to me, it made me think (...) It's not about accepting you're a Muslim, you're a Christian, you're Samoan, you are Vietnamese, acknowledging the cultures of others (...) it's teaching it to others (...) it is how you feel like everybody was willing. Although they said it's difficult at the start, especially we have some of the letters of the pronunciations (...) they are not in another language. So, it made it hard for them (...) it adds something else because it's their willingness. Even though they struggled at this time but they kept coming (...) Not only the love also to learn it, the interest in learning that was apparent from them asking the

questions, “How do you pronounce it? Can you repeat this for me?” and then they were repeating after you. Not on the day that we were practising, it was on other days.

(Interview, 19 May 2017)

Chris’ and Jeanette’s accounts of the transmission of the Arabic lullaby reflect how, as an intercultural site, music can be doubly-constitutive, “at once *somewhere* and *something* one could encounter – at once contact zone and contact” (Whyte 2017:686, emphasis in original). Although the establishment of a choir was not part of the project’s original design, several interviews, informal conversations and ethnographic interaction with participants have revealed how Chris’ and Jeanette’s experiences are shared by many involved. Through teaching their own and learning each other’s music, participants have become receptive to having their norms unsettled, going beyond appreciating others’ differences to understanding the ways in which *they themselves* are different. Most importantly, the project has involved actively navigating this mutually-constituted difference, a process which, while proven messy and challenging, has also been creatively fruitful and edifying for those involved. By collaboratively labouring with and in each other’s language and music, many participants have commented on how the intercultural choir has affected their relationships, such that the previous respect and acknowledgement they had for each other’s identities and cultures, has deepened into a sincere and abiding engagement. These changes demonstrate how, “where an activity (...) *is* the contact zone, objects [in our case, lullabies] as conduits may facilitate transformative social relations to seep across spaces of encounter” (Askins & Pain 2011:817).

## **Conclusion**

This paper reflects critically on how the spaces of cultural encounter inhabited by the Lullaby Choir, and its preliminary iteration the Lullaby Swap, were shaped by logistical and ideological negotiations around the project’s implementation. It investigates how participants’ multiple social identities were constructed, legitimated and challenged by each encounter (see Wilson 2017a), their experiences mediated by presentational and increasingly formalised notions of musical transmission and performance. These practices were framed by the cross-institutional partnership with VICSEG New Futures, and ethnographic renderings and analyses of participants’ experiences are interwoven with an examination of the ways in which the project was reconfigured as a result of this collaboration. The various adaptations required to meet social and operational needs demonstrates how navigating such alliances can

completely shift the envisaged trajectory of applied ethnomusicology projects.

Methodological implications are not only procedural, determining (for example) recruitment strategies, but also affect ethical and theoretical considerations. The ethical deliberations around power dynamics, positionality and institutional processes with which we have engaged, as a consequence of the project's shift to a formal ensemble, are far beyond those that have been examined within the scope of this article. The paper has focused much more on the ways in which the project's theoretical underpinnings, namely the intercultural contact zone and organised cultural encounters, have been located differently as a result of the project's restructuring.

The Lullaby Choir clearly embodies some notions of “meaningful encounter,” involving, for instance, the three categories of contact defined by Mayblin et al. (2017): that which aims to bridge across difference, that which is predicated on facilitating shared or common interests, and that which constitutes banal everyday social interaction. However, the involvement of voluntary participants who have primarily been drawn from the same group of staff suggests that the ensemble does not stand up to concepts of encounter as a “very particular genre of contact,” shaped by inequality and marked by “instances in which something is ‘unexpectedly broken open’ or destabilised” (Wilson 2017a:609). While in these ways the choir may be more representative of an *institutionalised meeting place* than a *transgressive site of encounter* (Carter 2013), we argue that the sensory embodiment of actively participating in intercultural music-making, learning and teaching manifest key components of encounter. Building on Turino's (2008) assertion that participatory music making connects people powerfully and intimately because of the “*actual doing* of activities with each other” (62), music as an intercultural contact zone enables “a focus on the *doing* of encounter [revealing] an interest in the momentary enactments and rhythms of difference that undermine and contradict essentialist thought” (Wilson 2017a:464). Pushing beyond personal, cultural, lingual and institutional borders, everyone engaged in the project inhabited a shared space in which they could safely construct, negotiate and enact hybrid identities.

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