Chapter Four: Methodological Concerns

My research methodology is focused on imaging and representing my hybrid cultural origins through the recording of cross-cultural music/dance *performances*. These *performances* are framed in the creation of an interactive and non-linear multimedia work *blackBOX*. The performances have been documented through my own participation and observation, using digital film, video, and sound to record and interrogate the following propositions:

(1) 'the box' as symbolic reference to software/aesthetics and the possibilities of the interactive environment. Additionally, the 'box' marks 'one' from 'others' as part of a distinct group, or scientific categorisation;

(2) 'the song' as a mode of cultural discourse/ cultural expression, political persuasion, propaganda, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities;

(3) 'dance forms' as a symbolic strategy for moving in-between theories and cultural practices;

(4) the 'digital journey' as a metaphor for discovery of digital media and different cultural forms;

(5) image/sound/text assemblages, juxtapositions, arrangements as analogous to the compositions both musical/painterly and choreographic;

(6) a self-reflexive program articulating the 'open', ambivalent', and fragmentary' qualities of the non-sequential narrative;[1]

(7) 'migration' as migration of people, music, memories, and the migration of the old media into the new media.[2]

blackBOX utilises the Internet, CD-ROM and gallery installation to investigate, publish, and exhibit elements of the digital work, and to document the installation of the artwork. This research also contributes to the study of 'migration and cultural change', by looking at the

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[1] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity", in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge,
London, 1996.
[2] New Media Fellow, Australia Council for the Arts, the artists/academic John Conomos discusses these ideas in a conversation conducted at *Sydney College of the Arts*, University of Sydney, September 2004.

relationship between immigrant cultural production, the host nation, and cultural change.[3] It explores the genre of 'electronic writing', arranging the ensemble of fragments into image/sound/text 'compositions', using the musical analogy as an apt metaphor for the processes involved in the creation of the new media text.

Dance and *dancing* are central to the formulation of my methodology. *Dance* is used in a literal and metaphoric way to signal the construction of my hybrid cultural origins, and as a performative form documenting *the dance between* shifting musical genres and cultures, sanity and insanity. The *dance between* as a research method was sparked by the discovery of a portrait of *Serge Ermoll and His Orchestra*[4], a 1930s *dance* band in the dance halls of Shanghai. In an attempt to understand my grandparent's negotiation between their cultures of origin and their adopted nation, Australia, I formulated a way of moving between the real and the artificial. Truth about the past, historical certainty became a piecing together, a fabrication of the traces that remained after their death.

Figure 21. Serge Ermoll and His Orchestra postcard, Shanghai circa 1950

These kinds of cultural expressions provide a projection of an imagined ethnic 'identity', a desire for the whole, the complete, and 'the same', as distinct from the feelings of 'otherness' experienced by ethnic

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[3] Robert van Krieken, Philip Smith (et al), "Migration, Ethnicity and Australian Aboriginality", in *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (2nd Edition), Australia, 2001.
[4] My grandfather's Russian name Sergei Ermolaeff was anglicised to *Serge Ermoll to cater to the American and British market in the Shanghai International Settlement.*

minorities in their adopted homelands.[5] Their 'imagined community' fulfils their need for cultural pride, positive ethnic representation, and self-expression. It allows a space for their struggle for identity and to recuperate fragments of their cultural expression. It allows social dissidence and the dreams, hopes, aspirations and sorrows that are an intrinsic part of living. Finally, it allows vestiges of cultural traces to be transported so that these refugees/migrants can find temporary unity by participating in these music/ dance forms.

blackBOX explores Russian émigré, Indian, and Greek 'imagined communities' via the device of the virtual unfolding of three digital boxes: *chineseBOX, jewelBOX,* and *pandorasBOX.* It focuses on the musical idiom as a language that speaks of the experience of dislocation and migration. Black American *Jazz* travelled across the Pacific to Japan, and the treaty port of Shanghai, where Eastern European, Philippino, Jewish and other immigrants took it up. There are many comparisons between the cultural conditions for the evolution of *Rembetika* (Greek blues) and the evolution of African American music and jazz culture. The roots of both forms evolve from songs of 'struggle', where the music forms a kind of political resistance and allows the musicians and audience to transcend the realities of oppression. Jazz music, has its roots in the black music culture of the United States, and in many ways the Greek blues is a comparative form, an articulation of struggle. Ironically, both jazz and *Rembetika* originated in a traditional 'folk' form but have evolved into more abstract 'classical' forms of music in the contemporary context.

Taximia in *Rembetika* is the elaborate improvisational introduction to a song; in the same way that Hindustani music has an introductory *Alaap. Rembetika* (the Greek blues), travelled to the United States in the 1930's with the Greek economic migrants/refugees. It developed in the urban Greek ghettos of the United States and like modern jazz has seeded many contemporary local variations.

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[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1987.

Figure 22. *Rembetika* dancer in contemporary Athens
Taverna (tavern) from Gail Holst's *Road To Rembetika*[6]

Rembetika music consists of songs created to express the joy and despair
of Greece's urban refugees and ghetto dwellers in the first half of the 20th
century. *Rembetika* songs, passed along by word of mouth, were a major
way of communicating emotions such as patriotism and comradely union
among émigré Greeks in Australia and the U.S.A. The *Rembetika* blues
tradition is thus a popular musical form and performance style.[7] In the
words of Elias Petropoulos "…*Greece is diaspora*, scattered all across
the world, as communities of political and economic migrants…In a very
real sense, as much as a fixed geopolitical entity, *Greece is an 'imagined
community'*…[8]

As *blackBOX* research developed from an investigation into
multimedia and musical forms, particularly the East/ West dialogue
(dialectic), I discovered that one of the reasons I was drawn to Hindustani
music was that it is based structurally on musical systems that are very
close to my own Greek *Rembetika* culture. Indeed, *Rembetika* is the
amalgam of modal and tonal forms of music and sounds 'oriental'. The
song that encapsulated this search is one recorded by Roza Eskenazi
entitled "Rast Gazal" where the two-way relationship between Asia Minor

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[6] Gail Holst, *Road to Remetika: music of a Greek sub-culture, songs of love, sorrow and hashish*, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni, Evia, Greece, 1994, p12.
[7] Elias Petropoulos, "Introduction" in *Songs of the Greek Underworld: The Rembetika Tradition*, (Translated by ed Emery), Saqi Books, London, 2000.
[8] Elias Petropoulos op cit.

and Greece is vibrantly clear. "Rast Gazal" reminded me of the patterns of many *Odissi* dance music items that I studied, particularly the introduction (*Alaap*). *blackBOX* contains my reflections on the *Odissi*/ *Kuchipudi* dance forms and *Hindustani* music.

Broadly speaking, classical Indian dance and music, specifically *Odissi*, while having religious origins in temple worship, re-emerged in modern Indian society after British suppression of the '*Mahari*' or '*Devdasi*' traditions, where the form was employed by temple dancers attached to religious deities. *Odissi*, an oral tradition handed down from teacher to pupil is derived from its Indian epic basis in mythic and folk tradition, having connections with the village *Chhau* and martial arts practice. This links it with the *Rembetika* form, an urban Greek tradition, descended from Asia Minor. *Hindustani* classical music was brought by the *Mughal* emperors to India from Central Asia and Turkey. Like Jazz, both these melodies of the 'modal' type[9] are not based on scales, in the Western sense:

> …but on modal types which can be written out in the form of a scale but which have characteristic phrases and patterns of movement. Certain notes are more important than others; certain relations between notes are stressed. In classical Arab music, there were hundreds of these modes or *makams* and each was felt to have a special character suited to a particular emotion, mood or time of day. Just as a classical Indian musician has a large number of modal types at his disposal from which he can choose a rag and build a complicated pattern of improvisation, so the Arab or Turkish musician has a repository of *makams*. Having chosen, he can then explore its possibilities in a *taxim*, or semi-improvised piece. Early *Rembetika* musicians still used the word *makam* for the modal types but they soon became known as by the Greek word *thromi* – literally roads. The word *taxim* acquired a Greek form *taximi* (plural *taximia*)…[10]

[9] Gail Holst, *Road to Rembetika: music of a Greek sub-culture, songs of love, sorrow and hashish*, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni, Evia, Greece, 1994, p64.
[10] Holst op cit p65-66.

Figure 23. *blackBOX* interface still from *pandorasBOX* depicting
Greek diasporic musical and personal effects

blackBOX aims to negotiate and translate media representations of race and ethnicity by exploring the cultural productions of minority groups. It also provides a means of participating in these representations by taking up "new media" to expose creative gaps, limits, and margins.[11] In many ways this work is an attempt at an independent challenge to media institutions and imagery that have tended to be a white domain, lacking black or marginal representation in their structures and images.[12] *blackBOX* seeks to subvert such institutions by a production that engages with difference, where the production and outcome become a 'participation', a point of struggle, negotiation, and site of resistance by ethnic minorities to the power of dominant forces.[13]

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[11] Linda Leung, "Tactics and Technologies of Resistance: the Web as Minority Media", in *Where Am I? Locating Self and Ethnicity on the World Wide Web*, PhD Thesis, University of East London, May 2001, p48.

[12] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margin to centre*, South End Press, U.S.A, 1984, p2.

[13] Linda Leung, "Tactics and Technologies of Resistance: the Web as Minority Media", in *Where Am I? Locating Self and Ethnicity on the World Wide Web*, PhD Thesis, University of East London, May 2001, p48.