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The art of being different: exploring diversity in the cultural industries
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PROLOGUE
Abaji was born in Lebanon, ‘the country of all exiles’, to an Armenian-Greek father born in Izmir, and an Armenian-Syrian mother born in Istanbul. He began to play the guitar at the age of ten. He was passionate about music, he told me, but not about music of the Orient. He left his native Lebanon in 1976, at the start of the war, headed for France. There he felt something was missing in his musical skills and started taking Brazilian percussion classes, expanding his understanding of rhythmic structures. Gradually, and by distancing himself from his early experience of war and suffering, the Orient came back to him, through his music. Like a musical magician, when an instrument does not convey the exact sound he is searching for, he assembles a new one. His collection of instruments is so impressive, collected during various travels across continents, that part of it is now exhibited in the entrance of the Quai Branly museum, in Paris. He describes himself as a Parisian Lebanese, representing France’s diversity and his Lebanese roots. He has struggled for recognition by the music industry: his French is fluent, accentless, nor does he don a djellaba. He is not considered exotic enough, he says.

I. is a bespoke tailor based in London. Being Asian is not part of her work. Yet as a woman of Asian origin in a quintessentially British, male-dominated environment, she feels she has had to work harder to build up her profile and counter prejudice. For several years, she traded under the name ‘Yours suitably’ because she felt her name would be a barrier and limit the coverage she could get with her track record. When I met her in early 2009, she expressed the wish to be rewarded and recognised for her contribution to the fashion industry, competing with ‘the heavyweights’. Up to then, she had received numerous awards, but they were mostly linked to her Asian background. In 2010, after 20 years in the business, the unconditional award finally came, in the shape of an MBE for services to the fashion industry.

Diversity in the cultural industries is a complex matter, as these brief portraits show. It raises questions about the (expected or actual) positioning of the other in relation to cultural repertoires and symbols. It evokes distant geographies and places, and their articulation in the here and now. It leads to valuations of authenticity and exoticism, at the interface of diverse regimes of value. It opens discussions about one’s creative zeal and inspiration and related chances and opportunities in a business environment. It highlights the potential discrepancy between the process of expressing one’s identity through one’s work, and the reception of the outcome by others. While humble to the claim of offering an exhaustive theoretical and empirical analysis of these questions, the following chapters offer a contribution to our understanding of diversity in the cultural industries from a variety of vantage points, particularly the dynamics of production and valorisation of diverse cultural content in the cultural industries, and the embeddedness of these processes and industries in institutional dynamics and place.

1 Taken from Abaji’s website, www.abaji.net