

4 | Singing Country in the Land Now Known as Australia

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Introduction

Before we begin this chapter, we would like to acknowledge Country, written with an initial capital letter to distinguish landscapes as ‘nourishing terrain’ – living and multidimensional.¹ Country includes every sentient being, including the land and waterways, the skies and cosmos. We acknowledge that we, defined as people, are not superior to any other living being. In fact, we are another part of Country. We begin the chapter like this to frame our way of thinking, being and knowing in the land now known as Australia. When our Creators graciously gave us what Tanganekald Meintangk legal practitioner and scholar Professor Irene Watson considers Raw Law, they sang it up from the Country.² It was not man who was created first, it was sound, and that sound became songs in the form of Raw Law. And although a foreign system of laws has been imposed upon this Raw Law, it does not take away any of its importance, nor does it precede, smother, denounce or replace the Raw Law. It has been here since time immemorial, and it will remain long after all our bones have turned to dust.

As a pair of music-making researchers who are Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung (Lou) and Noongar (Clint), we approached the idea of writing about singing and language revitalisation in a book about ‘Music in Australia’ with mixed feelings. The settler-colonial nation state ‘Australia’ and the idea of ‘music’ have been imposed on Country in recent years as part of a process of codification within a narrow and limiting English worldview. As Tuck and Yang explain, ‘To codify is to manage, to arrange in an order that is meaningful to the coder. Coding is something we do to objects. Codes stand in for objectified living things. Codes become objects themselves, to be treated objectively, in the way that the living things would not allow.’³ ‘Music in Australia’ geographically locates a topic but does not come close to encapsulating what Romaine Moreton describes as the ‘sensuous power of the life-world in its infinite vibration and rhythm’.⁴ ‘Australia’ exists as a perpetual denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander sovereignty. 'Music' unfavourably decontextualises, isolates and objectifies elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expressive culture. In this context, English terms such as 'music', 'chant', 'song' or 'poetry' do not convey their beauty or significance in Indigenous cosmology, 'for the whole of existence is song – the audible and the inaudible'.⁵ We listen to Country and the music within Country. Everything has a song and a story. If you listen deeply, you will hear it. As Professor Irene Watson reminds us, 'the natural world is still singing even though the greater part of humanity has disconnected itself from song'.⁶ Country and expressive culture have a reciprocal relationship. Country is happy when it hears singing in the local language and we often talk about song *belonging to* Country.

The land now known as Australia is home to enormous ecological diversity and long-standing traditions of singing in more than 200 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, frequently with interrelating percussion, dance and visual design, and occasionally accompanied by the northern Australian didgeridu.⁷ Australia's continuing legacy of settler-colonialism has positioned most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in various states of threat, fragmentation and silence.⁸ The 2014 National Indigenous Languages Survey indicates that only 'around 120' Indigenous languages are still in use and that 'about 13 can be considered strong' across all generations.⁹ Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are working to revitalise and sustain their languages while simultaneously responding to continued social, cultural and economic marginalisation. Indigenous languages and expressive cultures are not just important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but vital in maintaining intimate human relationships with the unique and diverse landscapes that songs, dances and languages emanate from.

Ecomusicologist Aaron Allen points out that 'environmental problems are not based entirely in scientific and technological understanding; rather, they have both scientific and cultural roots and solutions'.¹⁰ Although the English language certainly does not belong to the land now known as Australia, it dominates musical, cultural, social and civic life here. Lexicographer Jay Arthur finds the English language itself 'constantly disappointed' by Australian landscapes, where drought and periodically bare waterways are normal.¹¹ Arthur describes English-speaking settler-colonists as being 'haunted by the image of the Default country [England], which was narrow, green hilly and wet – which meant that Australia was understood as vast, brown, flat and dry'.¹² Environmental crisis may not

just be the fault of flawed science and economics, but also a disconnection between culture and nature exacerbated when the language spoken and sung in a landscape does not promote and reinforce values conducive to local environmental health.¹³ A resurgence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expressive culture may not necessarily halt environmental degradation, but it could certainly increase the diversity of perspectives on how to exist within, appreciate and interact with Australian landscapes.

Globally, decline and death in Indigenous languages, Indigenous people and the natural world are inherently linked.¹⁴ Aboriginal fire-management practices are clearly environmentally significant, with their reduction since colonisation resulting in ecological change and increasingly catastrophic bushfires.¹⁵ Aboriginal musical practices have ecological importance too. Ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon explains, 'persons sustain music and music sustains people'.¹⁶ Expanding on this, we recognise how music also sustains Country and Country sustains music. The late songwriter Archie Roach sings on his album *Into the Bloodstream*, 'Heal the People, heal the land, and they will understand, it goes hand in hand'.¹⁷ Country obviously sustains people, and if suitably inclined and informed, people can help sustain Country. Based on his study of Aboriginal ecological management practices, historian Bill Gammage notes the connections between song and landscapes: 'Senior people who learn more song expand their geographical and spiritual knowledge and acquire more rights to responsibilities, including the duty of singing country into life, sometimes beyond their boundaries. In turn a properly sung song's plains, hills, rocks and waters care for its people and animals'.¹⁸ While the English settler-colonial worldview tries to divide and separate nature, culture, and health, they are all interconnected and if you undo one part, everything unravels. Rather than a one-dimensional desire for music revival, an ecological ethos underpins most of the determined efforts across the land now known as Australia to reinvigorate expressive culture, particularly singing and Indigenous languages.¹⁹ This chapter will discuss our own experiences of this and highlight trailblazers and torch-bearers who are also singing for Country.

Song and Language Revitalisation

Music is at the core of the most successful examples of Indigenous language revitalisation worldwide in Hawaii and New Zealand. However, a 'language cannot be saved by singing a few songs', and public performance is not necessarily an instant remedy for issues of language endangerment and

intergenerational trauma.²⁰ Notwithstanding the diverse histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and challenges to their vitality, communities continue to value their languages highly. In some communities, endangered Indigenous languages may be so venerated that some individuals may not feel confident enough to engage in language revitalisation programmes for fear of making mistakes.²¹ Jagera and Dulingbara linguist Jeanie Bell discusses how many Aboriginal people in Australia feel ‘sadness, regret and sometimes anger that we did not have a chance to speak the “languages of the land”, our heritage languages’.²² Trauma associated with the suppression or absence of language can inhibit language revitalisation and Indigenous communities can be understandably wary of sharing their languages and songs with non-Indigenous people.²³

In a relatively short space of time since the early 1970s, the public and institutional denigration of Aboriginal languages and culture in the land now known as Australia has given way to interest and even celebration. Suddenly, Indigenous songs have become important as evidence for Native Title and emerging opportunities associated with tourism, land development, academia and the arts.²⁴ However, Arrernte writer Celeste Liddle observes that in these domains ‘[w]hen language is used or gifted, it is either maimed through thoughtlessness and mispronunciation, or it is downright rejected’.²⁵ Describing this lingering disregard for Aboriginal languages among non-Indigenous Australians, Liddle states:

I see Aboriginal words as a gift – not meaning that we are freely giving them to mainstream Australia for their unbridled use, but rather that, in the face of continual assimilation policies, ranging from Stolen Generation kids being flogged for using lingo all the way to continual threats against bilingual education programs in schools, the fact that we still have words and languages is a miracle.²⁶

In the face of continued struggle, singing in your own endangered Indigenous language can be empowering and healing.²⁷ However, in institutional and public contexts across the land now known as Australia, this can be a tricky thing to do.

Senior Aboriginal people have long used music to teach languages in clandestine ways that would keep the younger generations safe. In her 1951 book *Music Has Roots*, Anna Vroland reported ten songs from Aboriginal groups, one of them being ‘Bura Fera’, the Yorta Yorta version of the hymn ‘Turn Back Pharaoh’s Army’. Translated by elder Mrs Therese Middleton and written down by Lou’s great-great-grandfather Thomas Shadrach James, ‘Bura Fera’ was popularised in the 2012 movie *The Sapphires*.

Here was a ground-breaking moment for Yorta Yorta language to infiltrate major cinemas, reaching global audiences who had never heard an Aboriginal language before. Exceeding all expectations, 'Bura Fera' became a YouTube sensation, reaching far and wide across the globe, with soloists, duets and trios, family groups, school and community choirs, students and musicians alike singing their own versions. Within its original pretext of encouraging church attendance, 'Bura Fera' provided a rare opportunity to sing Yorta Yorta language in safety, without fear of violence or punishment from the mission manager.

Singing is meaningful in the context of Country but also as an act of resilience and resistance to settler-colonialism. Aboriginal music is always political and singing in an Indigenous language can 'unsettle white Australia's sense of belonging'.²⁸ In response, institutions and audiences in the land now known as Australia still tend to position its original languages as 'exotic and somewhere else',²⁹ as evidenced by Yolŋu artist Gurrumul Yunupinju being pigeonholed in the Australian Recording Industry Awards' category for world music despite his output being aesthetically consistent with the 'adult contemporary' genre. His musical collaborator Michael Hohnen stated, '[i]t's a shame when you sing in an Australian language that you get labelled "ethnic"'.³⁰ Despite publicly stated desires to embrace Indigenous music, desperately few opportunities are afforded to Indigenous communities to nourish and sustain song traditions at their core.³¹ Recent opportunities to showcase Aboriginal languages in music, including the performance of translated anthems at sporting events, do not necessarily engage with the original song traditions of the land now known as Australia on their own terms.

In the context of Indigenous language revitalisation, song has proven to be a popular and reasonably effective language-learning tool for children and adults, increasing awareness of appropriate sounds, rhythms and intonations.³² For example, a Kurna songbook was crucial to language revitalisation around Adelaide, South Australia, throughout the 1990s.³³ School-based learning often involves Aboriginal-language translations of English tunes, although some teachers also advocate the use of more 'traditional' Aboriginal songs in language-learning settings.³⁴ The dynamic relationship between song and language can complicate both approaches.

There is frequently more to be considered in translation activities than the simple substitution of isolated Aboriginal terms into an English-language framework. Teachers adapting English-language musical staples like 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' must avoid presenting the human

body as a dissected and isolated entity rather than an integral part of Country. Our 'body' and the bodies of all beings frequently share language with the landscape. For example, in the Noongar language *kaat* is mountain and head, and *bonitj* is island and knee. In Dja Dja Wurrung, *kalk* is a term for bone, stick and certain trees. Arbitrary translation of English songs into Aboriginal languages risks undermining the foundational values and connections to Country and kin embedded in our languages.

Aboriginal songs embody these connections, but in many long-standing singing practices, sung language can be pronounced and structured differently from spoken language.³⁵ The polysemy and poetic design of Aboriginal songs can also embed them with multiple layers of meaning and allow for various interpretations by people across time and space.³⁶ Deep understanding of the poetics of song and the ability to create new songs in old styles is usually one of the first casualties of language loss.³⁷ Aboriginal songs may be challenging for people in the early stages of language learning to understand, but they can certainly be inspiring.³⁸ For example, new Noongar songs created in the old style invigorated language learning for the cast of *Hecate*, the Noongar adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and among high-school students in the south of Western Australia.³⁹

Original Languages in Popular Music

Although not necessarily constituting a musical genre, the many varieties of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical expression are unified by their potential to share local Indigenous perspectives with broad national and global audiences, and increasingly, by their inclusion of Indigenous language content.⁴⁰ In 'a major work by one of Australia's most important cultural ensembles', Black Arm Band Company's 2009 production *Dirtsong* was performed in eleven Aboriginal languages, some of which had not been spoken or heard for over 150 years.⁴¹ Today, more than seventy examples of music videos for commercially released singles featuring Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages are currently available online via YouTube, most of which have been produced over the past decade. The year 2022 marked the beginning of the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), and musical activity involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages continues to ramp up across Australia. While the present moment is marked by a burgeoning interest and excitement, there is a long history of Indigenous-led public advocacy for

Indigenous languages and musical traditions in the domain of popular music.

Back in 1945, long before the internet era, Wulli Wulli tenor Harold Blair was one of the first Aboriginal singers on the radio in the land now known as Australia. So broad was his impact that ‘Aboriginal inmates of faraway Fremantle Gaol [Western Australia] celebrated as they “listened in” to his performance broadcast from Brisbane’s Lyric Theatre in Queensland.’⁴² In 1956 Blair recorded his only commercial release, a 7-inch EP of *Australian Aboriginal Songs*,⁴³ mostly derived from a 1937 manuscript collection of songs from southern Queensland transcribed and translated by H. O. Lethbridge.⁴⁴ Again demonstrating Blair’s cross-continental impact, in 1958 Noongar soprano Nancy Ellis from Katanning, Western Australia, performed the ‘Hunting Song’ from *Australian Aboriginal Songs* on national television.⁴⁵

Despite its relative lack of commercial success, the EP is a significant milestone as a work in Aboriginal languages presented by an Aboriginal recording artist. In the 1950s, non-Indigenous Australians rarely understood or appreciated the cultural and linguistic diversity of Aboriginal peoples. As a result, the material on *Australian Aboriginal Songs* was presented and performed publicly as ‘Aboriginal’ music, decontextualised from the regional origins of the songs themselves and the language content within. Almost a century after the release of *Australian Aboriginal Songs*, senior Gunggari woman Ethel Munn began singing songs from the Lethbridge collection with her local community as an act of language reclamation, stating, ‘I’ve always believed it’s easier to sing in languages than it is to talk in it . . . Because the language has been lost for so long it’s very difficult to pick up where we left off.’⁴⁶ Blair’s EP sits precariously between two eras, the early twentieth century, when these songs were transcribed, and the early twenty-first century, as they are being sung anew in their communities of origin.

Harold Blair and Nancy Ellis broke barriers in terms of the inclusion of Aboriginal song in broadcasting in the 1950s, but in 1983 Warumpi Band’s song ‘Jailanguru Pakarnu’ (Out from Jail) was acknowledged as the first single in an Indigenous language to be commercially released and appear on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s music television programme *Countdown* (1974–1987). ‘Jailanguru Pakarnu’ is sung completely in Luritja, a language from Papunya, Northern Territory. Kalaw Kawaw Ya and Kala Lagaw Ya singer from the Torres Strait Christine Anu explains that as creators of ‘the first rock song in an Aboriginal language to achieve widespread airplay and recognition’, Warumpi Band ‘set the precedent for future Indigenous composers to write in their own mother tongue and celebrate Aboriginal culture and

values'.⁴⁷ Around the time 'Jailanguru Pakarnu' hit the airwaves, artists from many corners of the land now known as Australia, including Soft Sands, Isaac Yamma, Josie Boyle, Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, and Babu Mamoos, were also incorporating Indigenous languages into a diverse array of popular music genres.

The surge in Indigenous musical expression throughout the 1980s led to another seminal moment in popular music history. Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty' (The Filthy Lucre Remix) reached number eleven on the ARIA singles charts in 1992, being the first single performed almost completely in an Indigenous language (Gumatj of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory) to do so. It also charted overseas. Yothu Yindi's leader Mandawuy Yunupingu explained how an archival audio recording of his great-great-grandmother's brother's son performing was returned to his community and triggered the composition of the Gumatj sections in 'Treaty'.⁴⁸ The Filthy Lucre Remix version of the track remains a staple of DJ sets and is still heard in clubs around the world.⁴⁹ The commercial success of the remix over the original version of the song has been attributed to its de-politicisation on account of excising most of the English-language lyrics, which describe the Australian federal government's failure to negotiate a treaty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁰ However, the English lyrics had been written collaboratively with non-Indigenous songwriters Paul Kelly and Peter Garrett, and Yunupingu explicitly instructed Melbourne production team Filthy Lucre to retain the 'Yolngu side, the Aboriginal side . . . so that it doesn't lose the magic that we've got'.⁵¹ While most of the lyrics in the remixed version are unintelligible to non-speakers of Gumatj, they serve a powerful symbolic function, reminding listeners of the presence and persistence of languages and songs of Country over which sovereignty was never ceded.⁵²

The United Nations Assembly has declared the next ten years the decade of Indigenous languages, and so it is important too to highlight some of the current work that many Indigenous artists, musicians and performers are doing and have done for the past twenty to thirty years to sustain song traditions into the future. Much of this work is inspired by oral traditions of song, sometimes augmented by engagement with audio recordings and written records, and always focused on Country. Artists releasing popular music in otherwise underrepresented Aboriginal languages include Deline Briscoe and Troy Brady (Yalanji),⁵³ Emma Donovan (Gumbayngirr),⁵⁴ Gina Williams (Noongar), Theona Councillor (Naaguja) and Ripple Effect Band (Ndjébbana, Na-Kara, Burarra, Kune, Kunwinjku).⁵⁵

Sharing Songs

While commercial popular music is a dynamic new domain for sustaining Indigenous languages, songs have always been shared across the land now known as Australia.⁵⁶ This was even clear to early ethnographers including William Howitt, reporting in his nineteenth-century notes on Kulin 'song-makers':

The makers of the Australian songs, or of the combined songs and dances, are the poets or bards of the tribe and are held in great esteem. Their names are known to the neighbouring peoples, and their songs are carried from tribe to tribe, until the very meaning of the words is lost as well as the original source of the song.⁵⁷

Howitt continues to report that one song travelled exceptionally far from what seemed to be its place of origin, stating '[t]he distance between these extreme points is about five hundred miles in a direct line, but it by no means gives the length of the course followed by the song in its travels'.⁵⁸ Similar colonial observations about the respect for song-makers and the ways in which songs travelled through communities were recorded across the land now known as Australia.⁵⁹

Indigenous song contributes to the maintenance of knowledge and social harmony.⁶⁰ While some songs are necessarily restricted to special people, places and purposes, Aboriginal travelling songs were once the continent's most popular and widespread music. One such song, known by various names including 'Wanji-wanji', was known and performed 'from Esperance in the south-west to the Victoria River District in the north, and from Broome to Wilcannia in New South Wales' and is still sung in certain places today.⁶¹ It is regarded as a 'song with no boss', as no one knows its exact language or place of origin. The enduring popularity of 'Wanji-wanji' demonstrates appreciation for Aboriginal song as not just poetic oral literature, but music. Amongst Indigenous performers and song-makers today, it also is evident that the sharing and trading of songs with neighbouring groups, and other practices of song custodianship, continue.

Many recent research projects on Aboriginal song involve working with archival audio recordings and the descendants of recorded singers to develop ways to reconnect with songs that may not have been heard in a very long time.⁶² Many singers have spent countless hours with archival audio to reclaim and share their regional song traditions, including Ngarluma man Patrick Churnside focusing on *taabi* songs of the Pilbara, Western Australia;⁶³ Jesse Hodgetts learning to sing old songs in support of the continued revival of Ngiyampaa and Wiradjuri dance of New South

Wales;⁶⁴ a collective including Rona Charles and Johnny Divilli reviving Junba in the Kimberley, Western Australia;⁶⁵ and Clint workshopping old songs among Noongar community groups and artists ahead of creating new ones.⁶⁶ Factors including cultural suppression, the global exploitation of Indigenous music,⁶⁷ plus various local dynamics associated with the politics of identity and belonging can make families and communities wary of sharing old songs, even if such songs may have been widely known and sung in the past. The Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights, born out of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), reflects the need for Indigenous ways of being, knowing and living to be considered, acknowledged and embedded within Australian legislation, protecting the rights of community-owned cultural heritage material such as songs.

Lou's programme titled Sovereign Language Rematriation through Song Pedagogy (SLR), specialises in Indigenous community engagement rematriating Indigenous languages with outcomes such as the establishment of song repertoires, choirs, performances and audio and visual recordings. In addition, the SLR programme content includes ethics protocols and practices, Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights (ICIPR), copyright law in Australasia, arts business management and Indigenous arts business production models. Lou continues to write songs in her languages of Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung. Drawing on over thirty years of experience in the arts, Lou builds capacity in communities, leaving an everlasting legacy of cultural ontological practices.

In the early nineties the group Tiddas recorded two Indigenous language songs: 'Inanay' and 'No Goon No Pah'. Both songs were taught to Lou by family and in turn were taught to the other members of the band, Sally Dastey and Amy Saunders. Teaching and later recording the songs, Tiddas acknowledged that they were accountable to the songs, protecting and carrying the songs for their lifetime. This meant several responsibilities would occur. Copyright of the song and the royalties made by the performances of the songs would go back to the community. All requests for the songs' use that came to Tiddas were vetted and researched to make sure the songs would not be abused or used in a disrespectful manner. All attribution would be attributed to Tiddas' arrangement of the songs and not to an 'ownership' or 'composer'. This was a work-around so that the songs' royalties would come directly to the band, and any moneys earned distributed to community organisations instead of the funds sitting in an unretrievable account labelled 'traditional' and not being dispersed to community.

Conclusion

As performers and scholars invested in sustaining the original sounds of the land now known as Australia, the authors of this chapter recognise the multilayered complexity of the endeavour, honour the legacy of those who came before us and acknowledge our peers and comrades in song. Despite the problematic history of how some recordings of songs were originally collected, archival recordings have proved valuable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in revitalising and sustaining their local traditions and developing new creative practices.⁶⁸ Regardless of what was recorded in the past, it is up to the people of today and tomorrow to speak and sing the languages of Country, and the responsibility to Ancestors, community and Country that comes with singing in an Indigenous language cannot be overstated. As we are custodians of knowledge and Country, we are custodians of song, art and dance. As song-makers we are conduits, receiving songs from kin, Ancestors, and Country itself. Song passes through us, not as a possession, rather as relational accountability and responsibility.

Notes

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