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**61.1** | New Writing from  
Western Australia  
Fiction  
Poetry  
Essays  
Reviews

# Westerly

Guest edited by  
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## Singing Back to the Archive Clint Bracknell

Dr Clint Bracknell is a Wirlomin Nyungar from Western Australia and senior lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, the University of Sydney.

Nyungar (also spelled Noongar, Nyoongar) is the endangered Aboriginal language of the South-West of Western Australia, constituting perhaps Australia's largest Indigenous cultural and linguistic bloc (Thieberger). Research and analysis of Nyungar song traditions undertaken in cooperation with the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Wirlomin Project), a Nyungar language organisation with over eighty members, led to a series of workshops in the Albany region of Western Australia from 2013 to 2015 involving the repatriation of archival songs. These 'song workshops', occurring as an extension of story and language consolidation workshops coordinated by the Wirlomin Project since 2007, yielded significant findings relating to Nyungar song and demonstrated a new model for Aboriginal music revival (after Livingston; Bithell and Hill). They provided a forum for the sharing of previously unrecorded Nyungar songs and enabled archival songs to be reconnected to their cultural context, with workshop participants providing additional information, or 'metadata' (Toner 2), not found in the archival records alone. Incorporating critical reflections on these community workshops, this paper will examine the complexities Aboriginal people encounter in reconnecting with songs in an endangered ancestral language. Furthermore, it will suggest strategies to support music sustainability, including a process of learning from and 'singing back' to the archive as a means of community empowerment.

'Learning to perform' has been cited as an important ethnomusicological research methodology (Baily 1). Utilised in the context of a critically endangered musical tradition, this paper will expand upon theoretical concepts associated with learning music 'by ear' (Lilliestam 195) in order to highlight the need to connect Aboriginal songs to contextual 'packages' of meaning (Turpin), consolidating links to geography, story, individuals and families. The opportunity to listen to performances of Nyungar song,

even if not necessarily learning to sing, also emerges as an important factor in the maintenance of Nyungar language and cultural identity. Facilitation of such opportunities requires that certain willing and capable individuals participate in ongoing 'stewardship' (Titon 137) of ancestral Nyungar language song texts, as well as undertake complementary musical activities including the composition of new songs relevant to community interests. The re-establishment and circulation of a repertoire of Nyungar songs may help sustain a regional tradition, and provide a means to demonstrate and learn more about Nyungar song.

As a large and diverse cultural group, including over 30,000 members dispersed across the South-West of Western Australia, the Nyungar stakeholders of such research are dissimilar to the revivalist groups often described in music sustainability literature, either living in reasonably segregated remote regions or as diaspora attempting to strengthen links back to a common point of origin (Bendrup, Barney and Grant; Bithell and Hill). Nyungar are not in control of their vast homelands, and remain significantly outnumbered by the dominant colonial or migrant group, constituting less than 3.5% of the total population of the South-West of Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics). As is the case with many colonised countries, such as Wales (Llewellyn), Nyungar are recognised by Australian law as Australian citizens, and can only currently assert distinct Nyungar 'citizenship' via communicative practices, including media, language and song. In relation to Welsh cultural heritage, Evans (295) states, 'the way to annihilate a nation is to destroy its culture. The way to delete a culture is to destroy its language'. With the inherent difficulties associated with maintaining an endangered Aboriginal language (Bell), the persistence and performance of a distinct Nyungar musical tradition may be of significant value in years to come.

### Workshopping Songs

After archival research and analysis of Nyungar songs undertaken on the request of the Wirlomin Project, I presented initial findings in five workshops and acted as a participant-facilitator, presenting audio and text, whilst prompting discussion of the songs, language and contextual information. Efforts were made to learn some of the most relevant and accessible archival songs, but due to my junior status within the Wirlomin clan, senior participants largely determined the agenda. Members of the Wirlomin Project participated in these workshops in groups fluctuating between fifteen to thirty people, along with representatives of the Wirlomin reference group and executive committee leading each session.

This reference group and committee are formally acknowledged by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and function to facilitate the consolidation and development of relevant archival material (Henderson et al) and the oral history and language held by senior people in the group (Scott and Roberts). Updated due to bereavements, in 2015 the reference group included Hazel Brown, Albert Knapp, Helen Nelly, Russell Nelly and Henry Dabb, and executive committee members Iris Woods, Roma Winmar, Kim Scott, Ezzard Flowers and Connie Moses.

There was a general consensus among workshop participants that traditional Nyungar songs are important vestiges of Nyungar cultural identity and part of asserting a common Aboriginal group identity in the South-West of Western Australia. A clear link between music and identity is commonly articulated in music sustainability projects around the world (Seeger). Bithell and Hill (3–4) describe the issues common to such revival efforts, including:

1. 'Activist' agendas of revivalists to affect socio-political change;
2. Selection, reinterpretation and reinvention;
3. De-contextualisation and re-contextualisation;
4. Legitimation and authenticity; and
5. Methods and infrastructure required to support revived music.

The notion that song could strengthen Nyungar 'citizenship' is certainly reflective of an agenda to improve Nyungar socio-political standing (Koch), but the motivation around the revival of Nyungar song traditions also speaks to a broader purpose associated with Aboriginal ideas of the importance of song in a metaphysical sense (Ellis). The fragmented nature of many records of Nyungar song and the endangered state of the language necessitates interpretation, notwithstanding the effects of cultural change over time, within the original geographical and cultural context of the song tradition. Existing community recollections of song traditions, and even of whole song texts, provide evidence not only of their diminished status, but also suggestions as to how to promote the ultimate survival of Nyungar song. Thus, workshops with the Wirlomin Project have allowed for the re-contextualisation of songs, the authenticity of which has mostly been judged on the basis of the intelligibility of Nyungar language in song texts, the identity of the performer of the song text, and the degree of connection between the song and existing Nyungar stories, knowledge and understandings.

The archival collection of Nyungar song is relatively sparse compared to the documentation of Aboriginal song traditions from other regions in Australia (Moyle). However, the volume of Nyungar song recordings and transcribed lyrics has often been overwhelming for participants. Kim Scott, Iris Woods and Roma Winmar agreed that the number of songs collected in the archival study would take a long time to discuss and recirculate. Furthermore, the 'different' language used in some of the audio recordings prompted Albert Knapp and Ezzard Flowers to discuss the merging of Nyungar and neighbouring languages in song, and possible differences between spoken and sung language (Bracknell). The enthusiasm of participants such as Russell Nelly to become familiar with and perform the archival songs was tempered by the emotional toll he and other participants discussed in relation to the loss of language and song traditions. These factors necessitated a slower, more deliberate process of engagement with the songs.

As has been the case in similar projects involving the repatriation of recorded songs to endangered language communities (Gummow; Lancefield), participants have responded to repatriated song recordings with quiet contemplation approaching reverence. Sometimes, this is because the performers are deceased family members, and, at other times, listening to the songs has reminded participants of hearing senior relatives sing in the past and provoked feelings of regret about having not recorded them for posterity. The extent of language loss in the Nyungar community today significantly limits the revival of Nyungar song traditions, and the trauma and dislocation associated with language loss and the loss of Aboriginal song traditions in Australia carry serious emotional weight (for example, see Grant; Bell). Even highly regarded Nyungar singer Charlie Dabb, who provided a recorded repertoire of Nyungar songs to C. G. von Brandenstein in the 1970s, conveys sadness in relation to the difficulties of song transmission and critical of his own language abilities. In relation to a song he inherited, he states:

*Ngany yuang nidjiny kwab djinang – Birdiya*  
 It is good to share this [song], see? Boss!  
*Ngany warra – Daaliny warra – Ngany yuang nidj djinang*  
 I am bad. My tongue is no good. [Still,] I share this [song], see?  
*Boordawan boordu ngan kwerl kwab – Kaadidjiny boordal nyundukan*  
 Sooner or later my name will be well regarded. You will all understand later.<sup>1</sup>  
 (von Brandenstein)

Presumably, the dwindling number of Nyungar speakers with whom to converse in 1970 at Esperance, and the lack of regular opportunities to perform songs, left Dabb a little out of practice, and unsure of his own abilities. Such insecurity was present in the workshops, especially when we attempted to sing Nyungar songs, but the attempt also sparked memories of song traditions and associated information, and provided a means for the transmission of additional, previously unrecorded songs.

Charlie Dabb states that he was given songs from his father, but senior Nyungar man Albert Knapp sang songs at workshops with the Wirlomin Project he had not been necessarily taught, but that he remembered listening to when he was very young. Hearing some of the recorded archival performances played in the workshops inspired Knapp to share and record two songs, stating that:

Here are a couple of songs grandad used to sing. I'll give them to you. I've never given them to anybody else. I'm getting old now and I probably won't ... If I don't give them to you, because you're interested, I might take them to my grave. I don't want to do that.

In the late 1940s, Knapp's grandfather used to stay in a *kornd*, or hut, always a little way from the rest of the camp, distancing himself from the younger people, but Knapp would hear him singing at night in the days before he was sent to the Aboriginal children's home at Gnowangerup. His curiosity as a child about what his grandfather was singing resulted in the transmission and survival of two short Nyungar songs. Knapp's performance is highly significant in that it embodies the idea of 'singing back' to the archive, disproving the idea of the archive as a finite source for information and truth on the topic of Nyungar song traditions.

As a key component to the approach of 'singing back', workshop participants offered significant contextual information to accompany the repatriated archival songs. When playing Lomas Roberts' (Miniter) recorded performance of a song about the *kurli*, or bush turkey, I displayed a picture of the bird. Upon seeing the picture, Roberts' eldest sister Hazel Brown proceeded to tell the group of its habitat, regulations around killing and consuming the *kurli*, and her own experiences of seeing and hunting it. Some other participants revealed that this was the first time they had heard Roberts sing, an indication of the few opportunities for the performance and transmission of Nyungar song. It was in fact Roberts' nephew Jason Miniter who had recorded his uncle singing as part of an oral history project in 2001 when studying at Curtin University with the assistance of Nyungar language teacher Dr Tim McCabe. Miniter

provided the recording to me for digitisation and use in this project, the audio recording itself functioning to support the transmission of song amongst Nyungar.

The song features a repeated motif and a complex, seemingly improvised, section. In the first workshop, the group focused on translating the lyrics in the motif, accounting for differences between spoken and sung language. The song's regular rhythmic pulse and the reasonably narrow pitch range of its melody enabled everyone to begin singing the motif as a group with relative ease. The group looped and repeated this motif, with some participants keeping time clapping, and at subsequent workshops, sung it as an item of shared performance repertoire. This conscious decision to start a process of musical revival with more accessible song texts and, in this case, via a process of simplifying a song, is consistent with choices made by many Aboriginal people striving to sustain musical traditions amid tumultuous socio-cultural situations (Wild; Payne; Dussart). Such adaptability is symptomatic of a living tradition, rather than a fossilised one (Baily). Interestingly, as a threatened species, the *kurli* is rarely sighted along the south coast of Western Australia, but in the months following this motif being sung for perhaps the first time in more than a decade, participants reported hearing of increased sightings in the region. Learning and performing this motif within a community and family context resulted in the sharing of relevant geographical and cultural information, has created a fresh impetus and had lasting effects on singers and Country.

### Learning through Performance

In workshops with the Wirlomin Project, songs were learned 'by ear' and by listening to audio recordings and those amongst us who 'carry' songs. Lilliestam (201) explains that musicians who do not rely on notation as a mnemonic aid use four different types of memory, all working 'in combination with each other' in order to learn a piece of music:

1. 'Auditive' memory refers to when music is heard, remembered and reproduced;
2. 'Verbal' memory remembering is the verbal descriptions of different sections of songs or musical elements;
3. 'Visual' memory is about remembering what the instrument looks like when playing a certain chord or melody; and
4. 'Tactile' memory is remembering what it feels like to make the music, and is often referred to as muscle memory.

Lillestam (202) also refers to the use of ‘mental maps’ for recalling music, stating that:

[W]hen we hear music, we make our own mental pictures of it in our brains. These mental maps, which may be very personal, can be produced when we play and, together with the other four types of memory, work as a mnemonic aid.

This line of thinking is especially relevant to informing a process for learning to perform Nyungar songs. Connerton (28) states that, ‘[c]ognitive psychologists can indeed acknowledge, without prejudice to their premises, that the memories of people in different cultures will vary because their mental maps are different’. This suggests that the very process of remembering Nyungar songs may depend on distinctly Nyungar ‘maps’.

Using ‘auditive’ memory is key to learning Nyungar songs, but notions of ‘verbal’, ‘visual’ and ‘tactile’ memory take on new importance in the context of endangered Aboriginal vocal music. It is easy to simply imitate songs on old recordings, but the performance of such songs also requires that they be situated within a particular linguistic and cultural context. In the case of learning Nyungar songs, ‘verbal’ memory must also encompass a degree of fluency in Nyungar language. If one is unaware of the language in the song, even if it is altered ‘song language’ (Bracknell), there is a danger of incorrectly applying stress, tone and rhythmic patterns of the language, and consequently diminishing meaning. ‘Verbal’ memory can also relate to the expansions on meaning a performer may provide, or the ‘story behind the song’. ‘Visual’ memory seems unnecessary in the context of learning vocal music, but could be widened to encompass important cultural specificities such as memory of who one saw singing the song, the location of the performance and who else was present. It can also include memories of landmarks or animals referred to in the song, plus the visual designs or dance patterns which accompany a song, as evidenced by Charlie Traveller’s clear memory of ‘pretty girls dancing’ informing his recorded archival performance of a Nyungar song (Hercus). ‘Tactile’ memory may refer to not just the muscle memory of singing certain pitches and rhythms, or reproducing particular vocal timbres, but could also embrace the emotional and spiritual ‘feeling’ invoked by singing in one’s ancestral language. Additionally, it may encompass physical memory of participating in dance or movement accompanying a song text. Thus, the four kinds of memory may combine to capture elements that constitute a song ‘package’ (Turpin), and construct a mnemonic map.

Music scholars have argued that one can only acquire ‘a certain essential kind of knowledge about music’ through performance (Baily 86). Ethnomusicology, for example, considers learning to perform ‘good method’ (Myers 31). Ethnomusicologist performers such as Baily have usually learned to play from exponents of various musical traditions, and have used audio recordings as a backup or practice tool. Unlike the kind of learning by ear from recordings Baily (90) describes, learning to perform from archival recordings of Nyungar songs is not so straightforward because the music requires intense re-contextualisation. Learning songs from archives, especially when they are relatively inaccessible to many people in the home community in which the music originated, can also imbue the singer with significant responsibilities to sustain the song tradition and share songs with others ‘back home’.

Describing the post-fieldwork period sometimes experienced by researchers who learn to perform the traditions they study, Baily writes of the tendency for researchers to become living fossils, continuing to perform music in the manner they learned it during past fieldwork in a distant community, oblivious to ‘processes of musical change’ (96). Reflecting on his position as a performance-based researcher knowledgeable in the traditional music of Afghanistan, Baily explains that ‘[w]hen the Afghans want “traditional Afghan music” ... they send for us’ (96). As musical cultures are by their very nature in constant state of flux, the performing music researcher can function as a reference point on past musical practices. At a point such as this, Baily considers the entire paradigm of research to have flipped, stating that:

[T]he researcher becomes a resource, the archive of field recordings invaluable remnants of a cultural heritage, the fieldwork part of the informants’ own music history ... At the end of the day, the researcher becomes the researched (96).

I mention these points in order to emphasise the danger of expertise on Aboriginal song being restricted to researchers who may be disconnected from the communities from which the music they study emanated. Günther (74) has characterised learning to perform music from a culture other than one’s own as part of the wider acculturative process of intercultural ‘transfer and retransfer’ of music. However, scholars who perform can function in a similar manner to archives, by exercising authority over the ‘authenticity’ of specific cultural traditions of colonised and disempowered minorities, and mediating perceived ownership of such traditions (for example, see Hill).

This kind of ‘ownership’ can distance the researcher from the community, and function to cast them as an ‘outsider’ (Herndon). Awareness of such dynamics, especially in regard to Indigenous Australian music, has led many ethnomusicologists to undertake collaborative research, which is ‘increasingly acknowledged as key to meeting community needs’ (Bendrups, Barney and Grant 156). Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-authorship of papers and conference presentations has become more common in recent years (for example, see Corn and Gumbula) and constructive engagement with issues of music sustainability is increasingly viewed as fundamental to good music research (Corn). As a further response to issues of cultural appropriation, the term ‘stewardship’, has come to be increasingly used in ethnomusicology (Titon). Implying that people are caretakers rather than owners of cultural resources, Titon characterises musical ‘stewardship’ as understanding that musical traditions are ‘best maintained by managing the cultural soil surrounding them’ (124). By implication, a strong Nyungar community means that Nyungar song will thrive. The converse could also be true, considering the links between cultural strength and positive social outcomes in Aboriginal communities (Palmer).

### **Recirculating a Repertoire**

Wirlomin song workshop participants refer to the ‘harsh history’ of colonisation and Nyungar cultural suppression in Western Australia (Haebich), but as Kim Scott remarked in one of the workshops, ‘there are lots of individuals around that are carrying precious stuff and trying to bring all that material together and hand it on’. The following excerpt of a workshop discussion serves to further illustrate the link between song and cultural resilience:

Albert Knapp: It was harsh, you know, and you see me now...  
Russell Nelly: And you’ve got songs...  
Albert Knapp: But that’s how we got through that, those periods, those very harsh periods.

Unfortunately, many in the Nyungar community are dealing with complex issues of poverty, dislocation and trauma shared by most Indigenous peoples in various global contexts (United Nations), which impact upon the time and resources community members are able to devote to cultural maintenance activities. In this situation individuals must take steps to consolidate and sustain repertoires of traditional song with the support of relevant cultural authorities.

The ultimate outcome of the repatriation activities and song workshops undertaken with the Wirlomin Project over the course of this investigation of the aesthetics and sustainability of Nyungar song traditions has been the resolution amongst the Wirlomin Project reference group and executive committee that, due to the degree of difficulty in learning the songs, the difficulty of access and the variable quality of archival recordings, more work must be done to effectively facilitate a gradual process of learning, performing and recirculating Nyungar songs. Additionally, as a large portion of the total number of Nyungar songs recorded have been documented in written records, with no accompanying musical notation (Bracknell), it is impossible to definitively know and reproduce the musical sounds of these songs. It may be possible to graft melodies based on existing audio recordings of songs onto the written lyrics that lack a melody, but for this to be an empowering process it would be best attempted by a group of Nyungar people familiar with and connected to the songs concerned.

### **Conclusion**

Workshops undertaken over the course of an investigation pertaining to the aesthetics and sustainability of Nyungar song have enabled participants to listen to, reflect on and perform Nyungar songs heard on archival recordings or ‘carried’ by individual participants. In re-establishing the connections between Nyungar songs texts and their geographical and cultural context, workshop participants have provided ‘metadata’ (Toner 2), inclusive of memories of the singers and Nyungar song traditions, more generally, as well as the contemporary relevance of such songs in an era of language endangerment. Opportunities to listen to and reconnect with Nyungar songs become sites for healing and the maintenance of cultural strength. Such workshops have also informed a gradual process of consolidating and enhancing Nyungar song whilst learning from and ‘singing back’ to the archive.

Nurturing links between Nyungar songs and geography, story, individuals and families is of key importance in any process of learning Nyungar songs. Notions of ‘auditive’, ‘verbal’, ‘visual’, and ‘tactile’ memory employed to learn songs ‘by ear’ (Lilliestam 195) may be expanded to include these contextual factors. Especially in this instance, by learning to perform Nyungar song, we learn more about Nyungar musical traditions, and Nyungar culture more generally. Having spent a great deal of time listening to archival records of Nyungar song as a researcher and a member of the Nyungar community concerned to maintain their

vitality, I therefore carry a responsibility to avoid the ‘fossilisation’ of Nyungar song by seeking out opportunities to recirculate song texts and reinvigorate musical practices in the region. It is with the guidance of the Wirlomin reference group and committee that I continue to endeavour to achieve this aim.

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### Note

1 The English is my rough translation of Nyungar language on the audio recording.

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## **From the Earth Out: word, image, sound, object, body, country.**

Sandra Phillips and  
Alison Ravenscroft

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In this essay we speak to the significance of Indigenous story, and for textual practices that enable Indigenous story its distinctive and multiple enunciations. We approach these questions through a discussion of our work on a new digital *Indigenous Story* project, which aims to make its own contribution to the wider project of developing places for the publication of Indigenous story that are shaped by the standards and practices of Indigenous storytelling rather than by those of European-centred editing, publishing and critical practices.<sup>1</sup> What follows are our first efforts to document the ways in which we are currently thinking about story and the ethics of textual production and publication. This aims to be an ethics that does not impose itself on contributors to the site but arises in a dynamic relation with these men's and women's textual practices as they themselves enquire into the nature of story and its generative processes. In this way, the project is potentially one in which all its contributors are in fact participants who keep pushing the project along new lines.

We have a long interest in these questions, and in what Indigenous story is, why it matters, and what the conditions of its publication, exhibition and broadcast might need to be if its multiplicities are to be sustained. We are interested in the cultural work that Indigenous stories do, and how to ensure that they can keep doing this work, recognising the importance for Indigenous men and women's sense of agency and standing in the world, of we/they having power and authority over the ways our/their stories are told and circulated. These are stories that hold truths or knowledges other than the ones that this nation tells itself