

Nations of Song

Aaron Corn

Eye-witness testimony is the lowest form of evidence.

— Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist¹

Poets are almost always wrong about facts. That's because they are not really interested in facts: only in truth.

— William C. Faulkner, writer²

Whether we evoke them willingly or whether they manifest in our minds unannounced, songs travel with us constantly, and frequently hold for us fluid, negotiated meanings that would mystify their composers. This article explores the varying degrees to which song, and music more generally, is accepted as a medium capable of bearing fact. If, as Merleau-Ponty postulated,³ external cultural expressions are but artefacts of our inner perceptions, which media do we reify and canonise as evidential records of our history? Which media do we entrust with that elusive commodity, truth? Could it possibly be carried by a song?

To illustrate this argument, I will draw on my 15 years of experience in working artistically and intellectually with the Yolŋu people of north-east Arnhem Land in Australia's remote north, who are among the many Indigenous peoples whose sovereignty in Australia predates the British occupation of 1788.⁴ As owners of song and dance traditions that formally document their law and are performed to conduct legal processes, the Yolŋu case has been a focus of prolonged political contestation over such nations of song, and also raises salient questions about perceived relations between music and knowledge within the academy, where meaning and evidence are conventionally rendered in text.

This article was originally presented as a keynote address to the joint meeting of the Musicological Society of Australia and the New Zealand Musicological Society at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, in December 2010. It was designed to be delivered as an integrated inter-media work in which spoken

1 deGrasse Tyson, Neil. 2008, 'UFO Sightings', *Neil deGrasse Tyson*. <<http://www.haydenplanetarium.org/tyson/watch/2008/06/19/ufo-sightings>> accessed 1 February 2012.

2 Faulkner, William C. 1957, *The Town*, Random House, New York, p. 88.

3 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1964, *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., pp. 159–90.

4 All spellings of names and words from the Yolŋu languages follow the conventions used today throughout the Yolŋu communities of Arnhem Land (Zorc, R. David. 1996. *Yolŋu-Matha Dictionary*. Reprint. Batchelor, NT: Batchelor College).

words, projected photographs, recorded songs and only minimal projected text came together to make a case for music as a palpable vehicle for meaning, and thus knowledge, which was simultaneously reasoned and poetic. Much like a song itself, it deployed emotive poetical devices and repeated hooks, over overtly technical exegesis, to shape audience understanding.

Stephen Wild and Ruth Lee Martin invited me to redeliver this address for a new audience at One Common Thread, the International Council for Traditional Music Colloquium on Laments, at The Australian National University in Canberra in April 2011. Being largely concerned with the Yolŋu song tradition, Manikay, in which there is an intrinsic aesthetic of *warwu* ('sorrow, grief, sadness, worry'),⁵ my original keynote resonated well with the theme of the lament as a shared human form of expression. This article therefore demonstrates how Manikay expresses and mediates sacred relationships between living humans, the deceased and their ancestral forebears. Yet it also serves as a lament of my own for the morbidly high attrition within Australia of Indigenous song and ceremonial traditions that have been lost to the world since the British occupation of 1788, and the continuing endangerment of those that survive to this day.

Reflected in a Sound

Imagine me reflected in a sound.

There is a song in my mind that takes me to a place of great beauty and antiquity. As its melody undulates through my synapses, I can sense this place anew. I can feel the fine, white sands squelching between my toes, so soft and light it is like walking on a cloud. The sands whistle with the wind as it ripples across the bay, over the sandbars, and towards the adjacent island. The air tastes of salt, and, close to shore, a rip current emits a constant, gentle roar. In the brilliance of the sun silhouetted against an expansive white cloud, a lone gull cries out to her chicks nested on yonder island. With each beat of this song echoing somewhere between my ears, my footsteps take me from the water's edge to climb a steep, sandy embankment into a leafy grove. I sit here under the wide, low branches of a tamarind tree, where I can survey the soft sands, the rip current, the sandbars and the island before me.

Though I am far removed from the nearest city or town, other people surround me in this place—generation upon generation of them—and they watch me as I sit. I can see them paddling a canoe back to shore after a long day of hunting. My hunger piques as the aromas of roasting fish and boiling turtle eggs waft

⁵ Corn, Aaron 2009, *Reflections and Voices: Exploring the music of Yothu Yindi with Mandawuy Yunupijnu*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, p. 11.

over from their campfires. Children do backflips on the beach and build designs in the sand. They each move in rhythm with the song, which somehow seems to carry their combined voices as well—one voice made of many intertwining threads. Slowly they come together and file onto the beach carrying a flag of deep blue. They dance with vigour, and embed it deep into the sand. As the flag ripples in the wind, they call me by name. I now dance with them amid these abundant environs and, with the song in my mind, my own voice blends into theirs. Though this is not quite right. Because it is not really my voice at all, but rather an amorphous yet familiar voice of the one made of many.

Though I did once experience some of these things at a place I can recall having visited, this tableau is much more than a simple recollection. The remainder of what I describe here comes not from my own memories at all, but rather from the song itself—from the way that its lyrics, its melody, rhythms and form, and matching choreography reveal intimate details of place accrued through generation upon generation of dutifully curated knowledge. The song takes me to that beach as though I were standing there right now with the soft sands between my toes and all the other details I described. Yet now we face a dilemma. At this moment of realisation, I can offer no evidence whatsoever that any such thing is going on in my head—no proof of a song, or the place I say it describes. Even more spurious is the premise that, because of the song in my mind, I feel some kind of personal connection to this place and those who dwell there.

I have no evidence at all.

This is why I am fascinated by music—the common object of our studies—but particularly song: that combination of organised sounds particular to our species, which, in English, we call music and words. William S. Burroughs once described the word as a virus,⁶ yet song is perhaps the most viral of our cultural forms. By their very design, songs are both memorable and portable. They can slip into our psyches unawares and haunt us without warning. In infancy, they sing us to sleep. In childhood, they taunt us in the playground, and in adolescence and young adulthood, they express our desires and give release to our anxieties.

Whether we evoke them willingly or whether they manifest in our minds unannounced, songs travel with us constantly, and just as they are so easily internalised, they are also easily personalised. At the crossroads of memory and fancy, in the twilight between experience and imagination, songs frequently hold for us fluid, negotiated meanings that would mystify their composers. On the teenage mix tape of the past and the digital playlist of the present, we freely assemble them at will as authentications of ourselves at particular times

6 Burroughs, William S. 1962, *The Ticket That Exploded*, Olympia, Paris, p. 49.

and places, or into particular times and places, as fluid permutations of our sonic selves. At play here, there is also a constitutive social mechanism that takes us out of ourselves and lends us that fleeting sense of belonging to some intangible, greater whole. Our negotiated associations with these playlists to our lives enable us to identify and maintain bonds with others: with our kith and kin, with our communities and countrymen, with those who speak our language, and with our generational peers.

The changing times of Bob Dylan⁷ and Band Aid's bid to feed the world⁸ are now long gone. Yet it is worth remembering that more than once in human history, whether in the streets or via live simulcast, complete strangers have come together in the name of a good song. Public opinions and political persuasions can turn on these tides with startling alacrity, and usher in major social change. This is a remarkable phenomenon when you consider that our synaptic processes—the ones that enable us to sing silently in our minds—are so infinitesimal that they are all but imperceptible. Trivial though this may seem, take a moment to think about the multi-billion-dollar advertising industry that deploys all kinds of music, via all kinds of media, for the sole strategic purpose of swaying our feelings to influence our decisions. Of course, I am expounding quite generally to build a case for music as a palpable vehicle for meaning, and thus knowledge. So, to progress this argument further, I must now take us back in time to another beach entirely.

Another Beach Entirely

On 25 September 1996, I found myself on the beach at Gunyajarra in Arnhem Land on the far north coast of Australia. I was young and naive, I was absolutely sure of myself, and I was proud to be Australian. But that was before our government's dilution of the *Native Title Act*, its mandatory detention of asylum-seekers, its dissolution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and its exemption of the NT Emergency Response from the *Racial Discrimination Act*. No, but in the mid 1990s, I still revelled in the afterglow of a progressive Australia that had finally, after two centuries, come to recognise the continuing native title of its own Indigenous peoples.

Songs by Midnight Oil,⁹ and Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly¹⁰ stirred my sense of social justice and support for Indigenous rights. But on the radio and the television, and in music stores nationwide, was another pervasive band of

7 Dylan, Bob 1964, *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, [LP], Columbia.

8 Band Aid 1984, *Do They Know It's Christmas?*, [Record single], Phonogram.

9 Midnight Oil 1986, *Diesel and Dust*, [CD], CBS.

10 Carmody, Kev and Kelly, Paul 1993, *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, [Record single], EMI.

musicians with a very simple message. They wanted constitutional recognition for the human rights and continuing sovereignty of all Indigenous Australians. The name of their band was Yothu Yindi. They wanted a treaty, and they wanted it now. Yothu Yindi's hit song 'Treaty'¹¹, from its second album, *Tribal Voice*, galvanised public opinion in Australia in the early 1990s, and helped to shape a political climate that permitted Indigenous native title claims to be assessed through the judicial system. The song's one stated aspiration, however, never eventuated, and, to this day, Australia has no treaty or constitutional recognition for Indigenous sovereignty of any kind, despite repeated Indigenous calls to this effect through parliamentary petitions in 1988, 1998 and 2008.

Mandawuy Yunupiḡu was the founding lead singer and composer of Yothu Yindi, and it was on our first meeting that I found myself at his house by the beach at Gunyaḡara back in September 1996. Since then, our relationship has influenced my work enormously. We have variously published together, given lectures together and made music together. In September 2005, I interviewed Mandawuy for the opening keynote of the Musicological Society of Australia Conference on Music and Social Justice in Sydney.¹² But perhaps most importantly, Mandawuy and I have travelled together through the vast living expanses of his people's remote homelands in Arnhem Land. Mandawuy's people, the Yolḡu of north-east Arnhem Land, define their ownership of these homelands, and in turn their very humanity, through their ability to sing and dance the traditional law of their ancestors generation after generation.

In the 1960s, Mandawuy's parents were central to the struggle against bauxite mining on their sacred homelands. Their seminal parliamentary petition of 1963 led them to the Supreme Court, where they presented evidence of traditional placenames, songs, dances and designs that, under their own Yolḡu law, clearly proved their sovereignty. The presiding Justice, Richard Blackburn, could indeed recognise that the Yolḡu possessed a system of law. Yet on 27 April 1971, on the very first morning of my own life, Blackburn instead ruled that this Yolḡu law had formed no part of Australian law at any time in history.

As a child of those times, Mandawuy could well have grown to face the world with cynicism or indifference; but instead, he chose to promote the ideal that Indigenous peoples and Anglophones could coexist in Australia in equity and mutual respect. He first achieved this through his work with schools in Arnhem Land in the early 1980s, where, as an assistant principal, he championed a bicultural curriculum that made it legitimate for Yolḡu children to be taught in both their own languages and English. This bold challenge to the Anglophonic homogeneity of Australian education has been threatened ever since, and most

11 Yothu Yindi 1991, 'Treaty', *Tribal Voice*, [CD], Mushroom, track 2.

12 Corn, *Reflections and Voices*, pp. 23–43.

recently, by the Federal Government decree that all formal schooling in the Northern Territory commence with four hours of solid tuition in English each day. This is despite the many endangered Australian languages that are still spoken among the Territory's Indigenous communities as a first language, and the typically limited exposure of their children to English before they commence school.

With the formation of the band Yothu Yindi in 1986, Mandawuy began to compose songs with which he theorised his bicultural model as an extension of the formal relationships that maintain balance and order among Yolŋu clans. His song 'Mainstream',¹³ in particular, on Yothu Yindi's debut album, *Homeland Movement*, refers to *ganma*—places where freshwater and saltwater currents owned by different Yolŋu clans of equal social standing are found to mingle in a balanced interaction that produces a yellow foam on the water's surface. Mandawuy's songs also frequently refer to the balance within Yolŋu society between a child's clan and a mother's clan, which the Yolŋu call *yothu-yindi*. A considered respect for different peoples and epistemological traditions and the renunciation of any one people's aims to assimilate another were the main messages that Mandawuy hoped would be taken away from these allusions. He further conceived of *ganma* as a new kind of intellectual space where the world was invited to share in Yolŋu perspectives in the hope of generating new kinds of intercultural exchanges and understandings with others.

It was in this spirit that Yothu Yindi's philanthropic arm, the Yothu Yindi Foundation, established the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture in 1999. After I met the eminent Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton at the first Garma Festival, she and I spent the next half-decade taking classes of undergraduate students from Melbourne and Sydney to this event to learn from our own Yolŋu mentors. It was also here that Mandawuy, Langton and I worked with Allan Marett to establish the annual Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, in 2002, and the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, in 2004. I now co-direct these initiatives with the Indigenous educationalist Payi-Linda Ford.

One from Many

Equally as prolific a mentor to me has been the Yolŋu elder Neparrŋa Gumbula: a de facto supervisor of my PhD, my academic colleague at the University of Melbourne and later at the University of Sydney, and the only Yolŋu investigator in history to have led a project funded by the Australian Research Council. We

13 Yothu Yindi 1989, 'Mainstream', *Homeland Movement*, [CD], Mushroom, track 1.

came into our relationship both ascribing to the kind of balanced bicultural exchange processes that Mandawuy has espoused. From our first meetings at Galiwin'ku in Arnhem Land in November 1997, Neparrŋa made it clear that my debt to him in return for tutelage as an elder would be repaid with knowledge and intelligence drawn from my own social and professional spheres. As I grew in my knowledge of the myriad musical resonances of Yolŋu society and law, Neparrŋa's own research networks also grew in return. This balance in our relationship has since enabled him to locate the earliest known collections of Yolŋu heritage in museums and archives worldwide, which include invaluable vast records of his own family's history. Steeped in generations of inherited Yolŋu law and knowledge, Neparrŋa now spends much of his working life correcting ethnographic inaccuracies found in the paper trail that follows these collections: all the minute details of his people's history and heritage that collectors documented inaccurately or failed to record.

From Neparrŋa's perspective, the privilege of his tutelage has always been a function of my adoption as his child. Newcomers conventionally misinterpret this common provision under Yolŋu law as a quaint customary nicety. Yet its intent is far more serious as it serves to reinforce that no-one, not even an adoptee into Yolŋu society, is above the law. Though I was certainly his student, Neparrŋa was definitely never my informant, as he might have been cast by an ethnographer of some previous generation. There was no etic neutrality in which we could find shelter either. There were only two Australians from disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds trying to make sense of each other's emic perspectives, and attempting to generate a more balanced understanding of Australia's colonial legacy. At the time, we wrote:

Accepting that Yolŋu leaders have been and still are equal, if not leading, partners in research endeavours that draw on their hereditary knowledge, rather than casting them as mere sources of data without the capacity to think and engage with others theoretically, is a necessary part of decolonising and, indeed, humanising the academic project so that ownership of research processes and their outcomes can be shared by all contributors.¹⁴

Under Neparrŋa's tutelage, most of my education in Yolŋu law and knowledge has been through song, starting with originals by bands like Yothu Yindi that draw heavily on traditional themes and materials. But increasingly over the past decade, I have also been schooled in Manikay, the tradition of openly knowable songs and dances that Yolŋu have inherited from the original ancestors who

¹⁴ Corn, Aaron and Gumbula, J. Neparrŋa 2006, 'Rom and the academy repositioned: binary models in Yolŋu intellectual traditions and their application to wider intercultural dialogues', in Lynette Russell (ed.), *Boundary Writing: An exploration of race, culture and gender binaries in contemporary Australia*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, pp. 170–97, at pp. 190–1.

named, shaped and populated their sacred homelands. One of our ongoing projects has been to make comprehensive archival records of Neparrŋa and his siblings performing their own hereditary Manikay repertoire. To understand these songs in any depth, it was not enough for me to record them, or even to deconstruct them analytically. I was encouraged by Neparrŋa and his family to learn how to dance and how to accompany them on *yidaki* (didjeridu), and to study the meanings of their lyrics through transcription and English translation. It was only through these processes that I could begin to know Manikay in the way that even a Yolŋu child can take for granted—through an embodied synthesis of gnosis and praxis.

On our many shared travels interstate and overseas, Neparrŋa and I came to perform the Manikay series for the homeland of Baripuy quite frequently, and it is through this teaching, in particular, that I have learnt much about the processes and poetics of Yolŋu law and knowledge that would have been difficult for me to understand by any other means. Through the knowledge these songs carry, I have come to know how string made from possum fur symbolises the souls of the recently deceased—never-ending and ever-travelling in the lake at Gapuwiyak—protected by the poison spines of attendant eel-tailed catfish schooling along its spiral path. Emus stomp the earth with a loud whomp, and soak their feathers as they drink from a freshwater stream where the air is alive with the sounds of babbling water and small croaking frogs. The path of the stream's current reveals a floor of white clay—the same white clay that elders gather and comb into the hair of youths being readied for initiation into adulthood. Tortoises comb through waterweeds lining the lake floor at Gapuwiyak, which are as white as the hair of the elders. They are detectable only when the air bubbles they exhale break the lake's calm surface with an audible blub. Sulphur-crested cockatoos perch in lofty paperbark trees and sob for the dead, while flocks of red-winged parrots whistle overhead as they make their way to feast upon ripe, wild plums in a simultaneous celebration of the death that comes from life and the life that comes from death.

This could easily begin a description of a Yolŋu acoustemology in the school of Steven Feld¹⁵ for all the elements are there: the sounds of an environment in which humans live overlapping with and echoed in the musical forms that we create. Yet also active here is a deeper level of signification embedded within the heterophonic texture of the Manikay form. Just as no two individuals of a species in nature are ever exactly the same, neither are any two iterations of any individual Manikay song item. Even when the songs are performed by two or more singers in unison, each singer follows the same melodic and lyrical templates for a performance, yet is free to realise these in a multitude

15 Feld, Steven 1990, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, weeping, poetics, and song in Kaluli expression*, Second edn, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

of different ways over rhythmic anchors provided by *biłma* (paired sticks) and *yidaki* (didjeridu). Together, their voices give the illusion of one comprising many: delicately intertwined voices gracefully permutating around the idea of a unified melody, but full of ever-shifting and ever-resolving dissonances. Songs like these exist for each Yolŋu homeland, and when Neparrŋa and I made our first recordings of the Baripuy Manikay repertoire with his family at Djiliwirri in June 2004, they described how the ancestors who remain eternally present and sentient there were watching us from the stream running behind. The hairs on their necks tingled in response, for in Yolŋu epistemology, when people sing Manikay, their voices are not theirs alone, but rather mingle with those of the ancestors themselves.¹⁶

Such are the nations of song where humanity is defined, ancestral lineages are reckoned and ownership rights over country are evidenced through the human ability to sing and dance in the traditions of ancestors. This system of codifying generations of knowledge about the natural forms and ecologies found on country enabled humans to survive and thrive in Australia for scores of millennia, and gave rise to formal musical structures that echo the simultaneously individuated aesthetic roughness found in natural forms.

Consider all the nuanced resonances and complexities that a universal map of the Manikay tradition might reveal: all the crosscutting relationships among its thousands of discrete song subjects, each linked to multiple sites across hundreds of homelands owned by dozens of different Yolŋu clans, who are related to each other through a universalising network of sprawling family ties. Consider how these songs assert the humanity and ancestry of the thousands of people within those clans who presently own the Yolŋu homelands, and the thousands upon thousands more from whom they trace descent. Consider how all the species inhabiting and interacting amidst the varied ecologies of these homelands are each recorded in multitudinous songs of the Manikay tradition, and how their subjects span all the classical Yolŋu media in a way that allows for a song to be danced, a dance to be painted and a design to be sung with seamless intelligibility.

Finally imagine how all those who sing Manikay take stock words and phrases, and take stock melodies and rhythms, to assemble each new iteration of a song in their own individuated ways, and all within an aesthetic tradition that nurtures endless adaptation. Even the lyrics of Manikay, which comprise cryptic strings

16 Corn, Aaron with Gumbula, J. Neparrŋa 2007, 'Buđutthun Ratja Wiyinymirri: formal flexibility in the Yolŋu Manikay tradition and the challenge of recording a complete repertoire', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 2007, no. 2, pp. 116–27, at pp. 116–17.

of names and archaic words, are explicitly designed to offer no straightforward narrative linearity, and can be sequenced quite differently by each singer within each new performance.

These structural ambiguities can also be found in *Crossing Roper Bar*, an opus by the Australian Art Orchestra¹⁷ directed by Paul Grabowsky and Benjamin Wilfred, which, through years of deep listening and experimentation, has grown to marry the aleatory of Manikay with the indeterminacy of jazz. Needless to say, it changes significantly with each performance, refusing to submit to easy notation, analysis and objectification. For those of us who grew up reading music from the page, it can be difficult to accept that the idea of a single work can be so amorphous and embrace such broad variances. Yet in reality, this happens on some scale with all music either intentionally or circumstantially. As Grabowsky himself argues, even when we listen to the same recording of a work over and over again, it changes over time because we ourselves grow and age.¹⁸ Within the Manikay tradition, however, the variations found within natural forms are so deeply embedded aesthetically that its structures deliberately echo this organic growth and decay. The series of Manikay songs led by Benjamin Wilfred on which *Crossing Roper Bar* is based deals with this theme explicitly. Its first song subject is the ancestral ghost Djuwalparra, as he looks for wild honey amid the forest canopy on the Yolŋu homeland of Njilipidji for which Wilfred is a hereditary owner. In its later subjects, Djuwalparra's voice becomes the wind and, finally, the cry of the masked lapwing in lamenting the dead. His pervasive presence in the Njilipidji series acknowledges the natural biological cycle through which life ends in death and decay to create and sustain other life.

The Unfound Spear

This is but a small sample of the richness that Manikay holds and the creativity it inspires. Before the British occupation of 1788, such nations of song formed vast bodies of polity that spanned the Australian continent and, even amidst Australia's capital cities, their legacies live on today. Though the majority of Australians today may not recognise a mastery over one's hereditary songs, dances and ceremonies as desirable in a political leader, this nonetheless remains central to the classical ideal and contemporary practice of leadership in many Indigenous communities nationwide. Often I wonder what the world's Anglophone societies would be like if we expected our politicians and executives to be similarly illuminated.

17 Australian Art Orchestra 2010, *Crossing Roper Bar*, [CD], Australian Art Orchestra.

18 Grabowsky, Paul 2010, The complete musician, viewed 3 February 2012, <<http://www.anu.edu.au/vision/videos/901>>

In the early 1960s, as the Yolŋu struggle against mining was just taking form, William S. Burroughs was contemplating the viral nature of words and Bob Dylan began vanishing into a folk tradition of his own invention. Also at that time, the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty were challenging us to think of human cultural expressions as products of our bodily entwining with the world—the source of our silent inner perceptions that render the meanings we ascribe to the world inseparable from our own existence within it.¹⁹ As such, our externalised cultural expressions are but artefacts of these perceptions, and, depending on the epistemological constructs of the many diverse cultures in which we live, some we reify and canonise as evidential records of our history and some we do not. In Yolŋu epistemology, Manikay is indeed considered a medium that can project the human mind into the various Yolŋu homelands its repertory describes. This is precisely because the Manikay repertory is accepted by Yolŋu to be an evidential record of their homelands as observed by the original ancestors who dwelt there, and as handed down to their present descendants over countless generations.

Here, I am drawn back to the place of great beauty and antiquity that my mind sang silently into cognisance as this article began—that place of whistling soft sands and sea breezes, rip currents and sandbars, and tamarind trees and turtle hunts. This nation of the blue flag is the homeland of Luṅgutja on Arnhem Bay to which I travelled in June 2005 with another influential Yolŋu colleague, Djanḡirrawuy Garawirrtja. As a senior hereditary owner and ceremonial leader for Luṅgutja, Djanḡirrawuy knew all the Manikay for Luṅgutja, but, having been raised in the Yolŋu town of Galiwin'ku, had never before been there. Through his songs, however, he nonetheless demonstrated an intimate knowledge of his country, and would sometimes comment that '[e]very time I sing these Manikay, I go there in my mind'.

Djanḡirrawuy led the Manikay performance that we recorded there with his family, and chose the precise spot where we would sit for its significance in Luṅgutja's songs. We sat on the beach facing the sea from which the white sands gave way to the sacred waters of Muṅurru in which a rip current gently roared before us. Further out lay the two sandbars that shelter the souls of Djanḡirrawuy's clan in a shallow strait between the mainland and the island beyond. Behind us, atop a steep, sandy embankment, was the tamarind tree, with its wide, low branches, where the maiden ghost Wurrathithi sits in the shade and eternally mourns the dead. Before we began recording songs of Luṅgutja's sacred waters, Djanḡirrawuy made the ancestors who reside there a traditional offering of tobacco. By the day's end, he was delighted that the ancestors had recognised him as a true descendant of their lineage by offering up to our party so rich a feast of turtle eggs.

19 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, pp. 159–90.

Occasionally I come across colleagues or acquaintances who quip that a people can only remain indigenous when they still live permanently on their traditional lands. Yet does not our species cultivate and internalise songs precisely because they are so intrinsically portable, and therefore enable us to perpetuate endearing links to places from which we have moved, or been involuntarily removed? The Manikay tradition is built on this understanding. The human mind can carry country and ancestors from one generation to the next, and realise their agency anew every time their songs are performed formally in ceremonies or even informally. In Yolŋu epistemology, the corporate ancestral record passed to humanity through Manikay endures while the memories of individuals fade. Years later at the Garma Festival in August 2010, Djangirrawuy elucidated on this mechanism further: 'Once, a spear was thrown from Yilpara to Lungutja, where it hit the cliffs and turned them red with blood. But nobody now can find the exact place where that spear landed. It can only be found in your mind when you sing it in Manikay.'

Such perspectives are neither fanciful nor trivial. They reveal our inherited and enculturated biases towards the various kinds of media to which knowledge can be ascribed. Which would we consider capable of supporting fact: a book, a photograph, a spreadsheet or perhaps a world ranking of top universities? Which do we entrust with that most elusive commodity, truth? Could it possibly be a song? As someone who has formally studied music of one kind or another since the age of four, I find these questions intriguing. They challenge our notions of what knowledge is and where we accept that evidence can be manifest, and they expose the prejudices we face when our studies of music are measured against disciplines that chiefly vest meaning in text. Had the society of my birth been more accepting of this possibility then perhaps Justice Blackburn would have ruled in favour of Mandawuy's parents, and they would never have experienced the anguish of seeing their homelands desecrated by mining. Perhaps all those repeated calls for a treaty that recognises the sovereignty and human rights of Australia's Indigenous peoples might, by now, have precipitated some constitutional reform.

Imagine Mandawuy's father saying that his people's roots run deep into country and that the names called out by the original ancestors to demarcate these places are legally enshrined in Manikay. Imagine Justice Blackburn wanting to see evidence of fence lines and mapped boundaries, and deeds of title over property.

Imagine me reflected in a sound.

Imagine Mandawuy's mother saying that her people prove their lineages and hereditary ownership in country through their ability to perform the law: the

names, songs, dances and designs handed down from the original ancestors. Imagine Justice Blackburn wanting to see evidence of genealogies and registers—a paper trail reaching back before the British occupation of 1788.

Imagine me reflected in a sound.

Imagine Mandawuy himself saying that his people do not care—that they continue to pass on their law regardless of its rejection and trivialisation by the Supreme Court. Imagine Justice Blackburn ruling that this law forms no part of Australian law at any time in history.

Imagine me reflected in these sounds.

There are those in our society, perhaps in the majority, who believe that, without a textually recorded history, a people such as the Yolŋu can hold no traditional sense of nationhood and law. So, all things being equal, it lamentably boils down to this. One person's ephemeron is another's foundation. One person's art is another's law: paintings on bodies versus books bound in leather; song versus scripture; our minds, embodied in word and deed, versus theirs.

The Song of Farewells

Voices of the blue-flag nation still ripple through my mind. But now they sing of *djāpana*, the coral sunset—a lament that farewells loved ones who are absent or lost. I am no longer on the beach at *Lungutja* with its whistling soft sands, but rather sitting in my office at The Australian National University as these words I type. From the window behind me in the hot, dry sun of a November afternoon, I can see Capital Hill and the Australian flag flying atop Parliament House. Outside my office door, on the balcony overlooking the stairwell, a blue flag stands to remind me of business unfinished and debts unpaid. I wonder if people will understand the interpretative risks taken here to interrogate this problem through the praxis and poesis, and the intimacies and imperceptibilities of songs.

My Yolŋu colleagues constantly tell me that all of our thoughts and experiences have always existed nescient in the human form, yet are only revealed to us in the now in particular permutations for particular purposes. This is indeed the lesson of *Manikay* with its cryptic and ever-permutating realisations. All we have in this reality are the physical resources we encounter and our common will to pass our corporate knowledge for manipulating them into posterity. Beyond this, it falls to each new generation to build on our cumulative knowledge from the past to create the new.

This is not so different from the scientific precept that the universe is ordered unto immutable physical constants and that the goal of human discovery is to unlock and harness their secrets. Natural phenomena that our ancestors once found mysterious, like bacteria and electricity, are now established and understood as commonplace fact. What cannot we explicitly prove due to present limitations of human understanding? Perhaps the workings of songs within us, and the interiorised spaces of the mind they stimulate, are so difficult to quantify because we do not yet fully understand ourselves either physiologically or psychologically. The mind's capacity for song, with all its multitudinous forms and associations, encourages us not to dismiss too hastily every enduring ancestral truth that perhaps cannot yet be quantified.

Yet songs are indeed powerful. They have the power to soothe, the power to persuade, the power to provoke, the power to educate and the power to lament. They have the power to insinuate themselves into our inner selves, and they have the power to convey meaning over vast stretches of time and space, and to recall distant memories that were perhaps never ours. The burgeoning bodies of literature and practice in music therapy, psychology and education that are built on our cognitive responses to these stimuli are not a random phenomenon. Songs are integral to the way that we make sense of the world, and vest our lives and communities with embodied meanings in it. As a species, we are wet-wired for song. We habitually construct and project ourselves through the creation and assemblage of songs throughout our lives. We reflect ourselves in them and, in turn, they reflect us.

Reflected in their sounds, we are each a nation of song.

In Memory

These silent words are my lament for the many Indigenous song and ceremonial traditions, like Manikay, that thrived on the Australian continent before the British occupation of 1788. As I draw to a close, I remember another child of Lunḡutja reflected in the coral sunset. Born in 1950, Djirrimbilpiḡwuy Garawirrtja was Djangirrawuy's older brother who, from the mid 1960s onwards, was an avid pioneer of new music and broadcasting in Arnhem Land. It was at his invitation that I first travelled to Galiwin'ku in August 1997. He remained an innovator until his untimely death in May 2009, with his YouTube video of the Chooky Dancers from October 2007 having sparked the first Yolḡu Internet sensation.²⁰ Now he has passed between the sandbars, I dedicate this article to him. It was his song all along.

20 Chooky Dancers 2007, 'Zorba the Greek Yolḡu style', *YouTube*, viewed 23 February 2012, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw>>

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