

**ABORIGINAL SONG
POEMS**

GATHERED BY ROBERT WOOD

JUMP UP BULLOCKS: AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL SONGPOETRY

In an era where cultural appropriation and identity politics approximates an earlier discourse about mimicry and empire, I often think of the complicated politics of being non-Indigenous working with Indigenous material. What would Lionel Shriver or Claudia Rankine say? Although I can only speak about Australia and song poetry in particular, I think this question of authority, artifice and ownership resonates anywhere in the world, particularly in settler societies such as America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

I came to Australian Aboriginal song poetry through my brother-in-law, who is an initiated Ngarluma man from Roebourne. The first time I visited his traditional country was in 2003 and since that time I have conducted research and cultural heritage work in the region with Indigenous owned and run organisations. I myself am not Indigenous but I am also not white. In Australia, the national conversation revolves around Indigenous and white relations, with poets of colour being marginalised to a large extent. This might have similarities to the black-white debate in the United States, which dominates and might even provide a template for how raced paradigms of thought operate in a great many places.

Through my brother-in-law and his family, I maintain an interest in a specific Aboriginal language group – Ngarluma – which itself resists a paradigm invented by colonisation – namely, the Aboriginal, the Indigenous, the native. Yet, I undertake archival work in song poetry right across Australia precisely because it can be a form of engagement that is an olive branch in the ongoing and traumatic war of colonisation that exists here. In other words, being conscious of privilege means one has a responsibility not only to critique that privilege, but to also create a new vision of the world. Australian Aboriginal song poetry is that for me, precisely because it uses beauty and truth to reorient and reclaim the colonial relations of power, which are historically negative though complicated in and of themselves. This is to not to deny the possibilities of my appropriation and the missteps I take, but to speak of the virtues of recontextualisation, which is to say the utopia enabled by a critical historical poetics.

That many of the [non-Aboriginal] anthropologists who go into the Aboriginal field become valued members of those communities and that this continues to happen, means that we should think less of the raced abstract when it comes to these songs and more of the lived reality. Articulating that lived reality with nuance and insight means thinking through

individual subjects in individual situations, and learning to see the complications of any endeavour. In that way, our critique might begin to reflect the complexity of the world and not confine 'the Aboriginal' to anything other than what an individual has the power to choose.

That the text is what is ultimately left behind is what matters though. And these song poems have much to do with the expectation of 'Poetry' at the time they are translated and published. Just as Yeats translated the Upanishads and Pound worked with Chinese, there is a cross-cultural engagement that should be read as being connected to these poetries. That there is an ongoing language genocide in Australia is a loss to all humanity precisely because with it we lose a corpus of aesthetic thinking and political possibility. What should we do without *tarruru* to describe the last evening glow above the horizon, that peace of mind and that dying down *all at once*? This definition is as important and indefinable as *duende* and matters for everyone. That we are yet to see this means we fail to see the rich complexity and enmeshment of words that are defined as environmental, emotional and embodied. And that, surely is a loss for thinking poetically for anyone, anywhere in the world.

An interest in Australian Aboriginal song poetry can raise consciousness, can let people know that this is a rich cultural heritage that is still ongoing and *has a history and with that a future*. History is not, in of itself a good thing, but it can contain lessons and beauty, richness and power, for those who choose to see it that way. This is part of a history of *weltliteratur* that stops along the way with Goethe and Lorca. It is salutary to learn from the past though, and in that way, perhaps the case of Ted Strehlow, who I have drawn on before is important.

Although his first language was Aranda and despite the fact that he grew up and lived on Aranda country for most of his life, Strehlow can be seen as a sort of paradigm of engagement coded as 'white'. As John Morton writes in his article 'The Strehlow Collection of Sacred Objects' [<http://www.clc.org.au/articles/info/strehlow/>]:

Strehlow was part of an advanced guard of people who came to positively appreciate Aboriginal culture. In that sense, he was progressive, perhaps even genuinely heroic in his endeavour to magnify Aboriginal life. However, if we stop our assessment there, we neglect a whole portion of his history.

Indeed, Strehlow was part of that community and so was enmeshed with those politics, politics that cut across race and right into families, language groups and other social identities. What we might learn is that the assumed privilege of being a white man is no

longer tenable. What we might learn for the future is that collaborations and solidarity can happen across intersectionalities not only based on assumed collectives but on ideas of ourselves as a group that is yet to come. In that way, an idea of ourselves can be to refuse the non-utopian dreams of nations and embrace the continental brilliance that exists on a land mass mislabeled Australia. That is a poetic task that matters politically. In that way, I hope these poems are read in the spirit of generosity, collaboration, repatriation and hope that they are intended.

Yet it is imperative that we are critical of history, that we maintain the rage, not because we are righteous enough to assume we do it better, but so that we are clear eyed about our very possibilities. And so, the selections I have made for this sequence focus on race with whiteness being made particularly visible. In some sections, writers, presumably white, appear to translate work that would have the gaze turn back on them, containing critiques of whiteness itself, but they can also be seen performances that make whites the centre of the story. This case of ventriloquism comes out in many nineteenth century texts with their dying race theory. The self-loathing guilt of settlement seems to appear in a piece from the *Bendigo Advertiser*, Friday 11 April 1856. This is only one of the poems selected here, but what I intend to demonstrate is the complicated legacy of song poetry collaboration, particularly in its raced dynamic.

There is, of course, a history of collaboration that comes after Strehlow that I would like to think has a better relationship between informant and anthologist, one that demonstrated the way in which Indigenous people themselves speak stronger than before and shows that we are on the right path. This is also there in Stuart Cooke and George Dyungayun, Brian Geytenbeek, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Alice Moyle, Sally Treloyn. I include one final poem in this regard – Pompey Clumppoint’s ‘Baby Cockatoos’ from Bob Dixon and Martin Duwell *The honey-ant men’s love song* – to demonstrate when a poet is named rather than invisible and what might be possible if we have a relationship of solidarity across race rather than holding onto stereotypes or conservative notions of what one is or should be. It is that final note of hope that I want to end on, to show how Australian Aboriginal poetry contains universal possibilities of self-consciousness, history and collaboration for a future that is better for all.

* Re-publication does not necessarily imply endorsement.

** Effort has been made to contact the relevant communities from which these songs come. I understand the delicate cultural practices around songpoetry and it is not my intention to disrupt this. If I have done so I apologize unreservedly and would also like to make it apparent that the presentation of these works is wholly for educational rather than commercial reasons.

SONG ONE

The Wannon blacks, however, have a carobra song which sets this matter at rest —
In darksome grave the blackman sleeping lies
Until he hears anew the voice of spring,
Then from the stinking ground he upward hies,
Like summer insect with its dewy wings,
Who quits its winter tomb to chirp and sing;
Or like the torpid bird or golden snake,
Which yearly lives and loves, and droops and dies;
Or like the bud which blooms within the brake,
Or Bunyip which doth till death despise.
All those and many more avouch that he must rise. —

Unnamed, *Geelong Advertiser*, Wednesday 26 September 1855, p 4

SONG TWO

The white man came with iron hand
And from the black one took his land ;
Sent bullocks in his woods to roam
And drove him from his father's home,
Eats his fish, his turkeys carves,
While their poor wandering owner starves;
Then claps a placard on his door
To warn away the homeless poor.
The time will come by fate decreed
When he himself shall want a feed;
Without a friend, without a bier,
Without a sigh, without a tear;
In the grave shall furnish then
To worms what he refused to men.

Unnamed, *Bendigo Advertiser*, Friday 11 April 1856, p 3

SONG THREE

Weare! Weare!

Sweet summer draws near,

With balmy breath from the northern sphere.

Fish will be plentiful--game will abound,

And the sweet little yam spread its leaves on the ground.

Weare! Weare!

In thy reeds so sere--

The swans canoe and her egg will appear;

The insect will sport on its dewy wing,

And the Corock hail the demise of spring.

Weare! Weare!

The ensuing year

Will furnish work for the Coolie's spear,

And the cranky white fellow bushed on the stream:

O how the lubras will laugh at him!!

Weare! Weare!

Though the sun shine clear--

The white-fellow shuns thy banks so drear;

For Oona's leangle or Cup's boomerang--

Will carry as far as his bang, bang, bang.

Weare! Weare!

We will quambie here

And Corobra still from year to year.

The white-men will jump up bullocks; but we

Will ever remain as the eagle free.

Unnamed, *Empire*, Friday 5 August 1859 p 6

SONG FOUR

Yaam Song from Lower Murray

I am with the white people,

But all mu tribe in the camp at home,

And I am living with the white people

And I am amongst other Blacks,

And can not understand their speaking.

Wheregara was my country,

But I am covering myself with the blanket now,

And I am not covered with the opossum rug,

And I can not make it:

Can not get the opossum to make the rug,

I am with the white people now –

And I can not go to my home yet!

I am married to my color,

Being now with white people,

And if I want to marry my colour,

I must go home –

And if I marry to my color

And if I go to another country,

With the white people,

And leave behind my lubra,

Perhaps white people take her
And give her to another Black –
And this I do not like!

Ludwig Becker Letters (1860)

SONG FIVE

ABORIGINALS are very fond of singing, though their songs might not be considered very musical from white people's point of view. They are very original in composing their corroboree songs, which generally are founded on incidents that have happened during their simple lives. Aboriginal children at the mission stations, delight in singing, and are quite clever in translating "white men's songs" into their own language. Mr. R. H. Croll, in an article In Stead's Review gives several songs of children in the Arunta language, spoken by tribes in the northern part of South Australia. Here Is one of them:

Jinga arbalama
Larbarinja nuka
I mankilna kuta
Jinga ilbaukama
Ara ntjara indora
Inka kat mugala
Lata bula ta itja
Ninteula juntama.

This means:

"I do not know the name of my sadness—I always think of the olden days when plenty kangaroos sat on the hills. Today I can not find a single one."

The Queenslander, Thursday 22 May 1930, p 56

SONG SIX

A Warrego Lament

Meen guttee meen ga li na

Ya rin jay a reen yer mo

Dtharrdinga buthee

Marber go thun bin a yun ga

Ween jin ah!

Ween jin ah!

Been a guttee bookiyaka!

Happy hunting ours before

Happy hunts we know no more

Stick and sad are we

Broken hearts, wasting till we die.

Curse the whites!

Curse the whites!

Why must it be?

Why must it be?

From H O Lethbridge *Australian Aboriginal Songs: Melodies, Rhythm and Words truly and authentically*, Allan: Melbourne, 1937, p. 12

SONG SEVEN

Furious with rage, he is rushing along with high lifted knees.

The bat men are advancing abreast in a long line;

Over the endless sandhills they are advancing abreast in a long line.

The white bat men are rushing along with high lifted knees

To surround the camp they are rushing along with high lifted knees.

“Let us jointly hit them with out clubs;

Let us jointly hit them upon their foreheads!”

“With ringing weapons let us thrust our spears through them;

Let us jointly thrust our spears through them!”

Hiding himself, he bends the branches apart;

Behind a mallee tree he bends the branches apart.

Craning his neck, he is watching [them].

Their slain are in heaps –

The slain are covering the ground.

The warriors decked for battle –

The warrior decked for battle are stripping off their patterns, are stripping off their patterns.

Ted Strehlow *Songs of Central Australia* (Angus and Robertson: Sydney, 1971), p. 268

SONG EIGHT

Baby Cockatoos

Waiting hopefully in the end of a hollow log

They swallow noisily, their voices beg

Waiting hopefully in the end of a hollow log

They swallow noisily, their voices beg

For the food their mother brings

Waiting hopefully in the end of a hollow log

They swallow noisily, their voices beg

For the food their mother brings

Pompey Clumppoint, 1964 in Bob Dixon and Martin Duwell, *The honey-ant men's love song*, UQP, 1990