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The Emotional Business of Noongar Song

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ABSTRACT

This article explores connections between history, emotion and Aboriginal song in the south of Western Australia. Songs performed in the Noongar language in the 19th and early 20th centuries provide insight into the emotional worlds of Western Australia's past. Historical documentation reveals how Noongar sang to deal with rapid changes associated with colonisation, with song acting as a conduit for cultural resilience. Today, the Noongar language is endangered, and few people remember the old songs. Community aspirations to claim, consolidate and enhance cultural heritage have driven a collaborative process of translating, interpreting and revitalising some of this repertoire. Listening to and performing Noongar songs at community gatherings today stirs strong emotions, feelings of connection to the past and senses of both loss and hope. In this context, songs are also key to maintaining links to ancestors, language and a sense of community.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous performance; language revitalisation; music revival; Aboriginal; Noongar; emotions; colonisation

Introduction

This article investigates the association of emotion with Noongar song from the south west of Western Australia (WA). It will draw on historical records to establish a context to frame emotional responses to Noongar song today, focusing on the experiences of participants in contemporary workshops to revitalise endangered south coast Noongar singing traditions. While returning archival recordings to their communities of origin is now a common research practice,¹ few of the communities involved in such work have endured monumental disruption to song traditions akin to the Noongar experience. Because Noongar singing was suppressed and denigrated throughout most of the 20th century, the contemporary performance of surviving songs carries significant emotional weight.

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¹Jason M. Gibson, "Ethnographic Sound Collections and Australian Aboriginal Heritage: Kaytetye Song Traditions Remembered," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 6 (2019): 537–52; Dan Bendrups, "Sound Recordings and Cultural Heritage: The Fonck Museum, the Felbermayer Collection, and its Relevance to Contemporary Easter Island Culture," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 2 (2015): 166–76.

Over 30,000 people, including the author of this article, identify as Noongar (also spelled Nyungar),² which constitutes one of the largest Aboriginal cultural groups in Australia, extending across a large urban and rural area in the south-western corner of WA, including the capital city of Perth. The Aboriginal language of this region is also known as Noongar.³ Although language revitalisation initiatives undertaken since the 1980s have increased awareness of the language, Australian census data indicates that fewer than two per cent of Noongar people speak the Noongar language at home.⁴ Historian Anna Haebich directly links this ongoing state of language endangerment to “the many cruelties and injustices of colonisation”.⁵ An estimated 98 per cent of Aboriginal performance traditions are considered lost, and because these traditions are primarily sung—that is, based in language—it is concerning that just 13 of more than 200 Aboriginal languages maintain fluent speakers across all generations.⁶ The small number of speakers does not reflect the significance of Noongar language to Noongar identity,⁷ hence the need to find new methods to support language, cultural heritage, community and identity that are adaptable to changing social, political and economic contexts.

The United Nations Expert Group on Indigenous Languages has declared Indigenous language loss a global crisis, and this phenomenon is most prevalent in Australia, where support for Indigenous culture and languages is considered “essential for Closing the Gap” between the disparate health, education and economic outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.⁸ The Australian Human Rights Commission has also found that “connectedness to culture, family and land, and opportunities for self-determination” can assist with significantly lower morbidity and mortality rates.⁹ Indigenous people affirm that traditional performances, languages and associated ways of knowing are fundamental to positive health outcomes and identity.¹⁰ Generally, participation in music is identified as supporting social connection and self-esteem.¹¹ As ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd

²“Settlement Agreement,” South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, <http://www.noongar.org.au/settlement-agreement> (accessed 14 May 2019).

³Nicholas Thieberger, *Linguistic Report on the Single Noongar Native Title Claim* (Perth, WA: South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, 2004).

⁴Clint Bracknell, “Maaya Waab (Play with Sound): Song Language and Spoken Language in the South-West of Western Australia,” in *Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Indigenous Australia*, ed. James Wafer and Myfany Turpin (Canberra, ACT: Pacific Linguistics, 2017), 45–57.

⁵Anna Haebich, *Dancing in Shadows: Histories of Nyungar Performance* (Perth, WA: UWA Publishing, 2018), 3.

⁶Penny McLintock, “Indigenous Song Loss a National Crisis,” *ABC News*, 20 August 2008, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-08-18/indigenous-song-loss-a-nationalcrisis/480762>; Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata, and Jakelin Troy, *Community, Identity, Wellbeing: The Report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2014).

⁷Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, “Moorn (Black)? Djardak (White)? How Come I Don’t Fit In Mum? Exploring the Racial Identity of Australian Aboriginal Children and Youth,” *Health Sociology Review* 18, no. 1 (2009): 119–36.

⁸“Culture and Closing the Gap,” Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Office for the Arts, http://iaha.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/000214_cultureclosinggap.pdf (accessed 14 May 2019).

⁹Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *2009 Social Justice Report* (Sydney, NSW: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009), 61, <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-0> (accessed 14 May 2019).

¹⁰Kathy Abbott, “Return to the Heart,” *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal* 28, no. 2 (2004): 4–5; Peter Phipps and Lisa Slater, *Indigenous Cultural Festivals* (Melbourne, VIC: Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, 2010); Alfred Michael Dockery, *Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians* (Perth, WA: Curtin University, 2011); Myfany Turpin, “Finding Arrernte Songs,” in *Recirculating Songs*, ed. James Wafer and Myfany Turpin (Canberra, ACT: Pacific Linguistics, 2017), 90–102.

¹¹Gabriel Solis, “The Black Pacific: Music and Racialization in Papua New Guinea and Australia,” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 2 (2015): 297–312; Brydie-Leigh Bartleet et al., eds., *Engaging First Peoples in Arts-Based Service Learning: Towards Respectful and Mutually Beneficial Educational Practices* (New York: Springer, 2016); Mara Culp, “Improving Self-Esteem in General Music,” *General Music Today* 29, no. 3 (2016): 19–24.

Titon explains, “persons sustain music and music sustains people”.¹² However, the survival of Indigenous language and song can be assured only by continued use in the communities and environments where they are most meaningful.

There is considerable evidence of the importance of song in Noongar society. The 19th-century observations of colonists in WA draw attention to the frequent nature and multiple functions of Noongar singing.¹³ Ethnographer Daisy Bates’s early 20th-century field notes demonstrate the continued presence of Noongar singing traditions, their flexibility in dealing with new topics associated with colonisation, and their ability to induce nostalgia.¹⁴ Archival audio recordings from the second half of the 20th century document Noongar expressing regret and sadness associated with diminishing opportunities to perform and hear old songs.¹⁵ Recent community workshops in the south coast region of WA to interpret and revitalise songs first recorded in that era reveal the ability for Noongar songs to evoke feelings of connection to the past. Historical literature, archival material and contemporary testimony combine to illustrate ways in which emotion is intrinsic to Noongar song. Song is simultaneously a tool to share emotion and an object to be emotional about.

Contemporary research concerned with music and emotion offers insights into how we could interpret the relationship between music and emotion in the past. It is generally accepted that personal experiences, social and cultural factors impact the way individuals and groups perform and experience music.¹⁶ Although there is a lack of consensus on the exact nature of the philosophical and psychological relationship between music and emotion,¹⁷ listeners often mistake their own emotional responses to music with the music itself being imbued with expressive emotion.¹⁸ Historians of the emotions often conclude that in any particular local context, emotions are either “subject to fundamental changes over time” or “remain essentially the same in different periods”.¹⁹ Aware of these contrasting possibilities, psychologists and music researchers have advanced the idea that we still may understand something about how people experienced music in the past by investigating the ways in which we experience that same music today.²⁰

Some scholars engage with historical documentation of Noongar singing activity as a means by which to determine something of the motivations of Noongar people in the past.²¹ Such material is predominantly the result of observations by outsiders who have

¹²Jeff Todd Titon, “Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint,” *The World of Music* 51, no. 1 (2009): 119–37, 122.

¹³Clint Bracknell, “Conceptualizing Noongar Song,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 49 (2017): 93–113.

¹⁴Daisy Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, ed. Isobel White (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 1985).

¹⁵Carl Georg von Brandenstein, “Sound Recordings Collected by Carl von Brandenstein,” AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive, 1967–70, Canberra, ACT, tape recording; Nicholas Thieberger, “Ngatju Project, Language Elicitation and Songs, WA,” AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive, Canberra, ACT, 1986, cassette recording.

¹⁶Jane W. Davidson, Frederic Kiernan, and Sandra Garrido, “Introducing a Psycho-Historical Approach to the Study of Emotions in Music: The Case of Monteverdi’s *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*,” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 1, no. 1 (2017): 29–58.

¹⁷Davidson, Kiernan, and Garrido, “Introducing a Psycho-Historical Approach”.

¹⁸Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129.

¹⁹Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 111.

²⁰Davidson, Kiernan, and Garrido, “Introducing a Psycho-Historical Approach”.

²¹Tiffany Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George’s Sound* (Nedlands, WA: UWA Press, 2009); Martin Gibbs, “Nebinyan’s Songs: An Aboriginal Whaler of the South West,” *Aboriginal History* 27, no. 1 (2003): 11–20; Isobel White, “The Birth and Death of a Ceremony,” *Aboriginal History* 4, no. 1 (1980): 33–42; Tiffany Shellam, “Miago and the ‘Great Northern Men’: Indigenous Histories from In-Between,” in *Indigenous Mobilities: Across and Beyond the Antipodes*, ed. Rachel Standfield (Canberra, ACT: ANU Press, 2018), 185–207.

limited understandings of Aboriginal languages, concepts and performance practices.²² Despite the inexpert nature of these sources, interpretation of Aboriginal-language dialogue and lyrics written down in the past can enhance historical practices of cultivating “double vision to retrieve from British descriptions clues as to autonomous action” on the part of Aboriginal people.²³ Despite the “great distance in time from the present and the subsequent dispossession, disruption and dispersion of Aboriginal communities in south-western Australia”,²⁴ many would also espouse the value of collaboration with relevant contemporary Aboriginal people to understand the motivations, thoughts and feelings of Aboriginal figures in the past, if only to avoid relying solely on the values and interpretive skills of the researcher.²⁵

Membership of a specific ethnic group may not necessarily grant privileged knowledge.²⁶ However, being Noongar, for example, can bring a sense of responsibility to ancestors, a contemporary community and a shared cultural heritage. This kind of positionality can inform alternative perspectives on, and critiques of, historical material. Given that “there is no purely objective stage, devoid of interpretation, in the process of cultural analysis”,²⁷ such perspectives may be vital in undertaking multi-level interrogation of colonial accounts often written to serve imperialistic agendas and steeped in colonial bias and fantasy.²⁸

Historical Descriptions of Noongar Song

The enigmatic early 20th-century ethnographer and journalist Daisy Bates wrote that for Noongar people, “on all occasions, music is the medium of expression of their feelings”.²⁹ Emphasising this point, early 19th-century colonial administrator Sir George Grey pointed out that “under all circumstances [the Noongar] finds aid and comfort from a song”.³⁰ Grey and Bates listed “gratification of personal vanity”, “light-hearted joyous disposition”,³¹ anger, gladness, hunger, contentment, fear, frenzy,³² “mourning, rejoicing, inciting to battle, mimicry, eulogium of personal prowess, jealousy, revenge, challenge and abuse”,³³ love, lamentation and humour as cause for song among Noongar.³⁴ Grey

²²Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1993).

²³Inga Clendinnen, “Spearing the Governor,” *Australian Historical Studies* 118, no. 1 (2002): 157–74, 163.

²⁴Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe*, 20.

²⁵Clint Bracknell, “Re-Imagining Frontiers: A Reflection on Tiffany Shellam’s *Shaking Hands on the Fringe*,” *Westerly* 57, no. 2 (2012): 32–36.

²⁶Inga Clendinnen, “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?,” *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006): 1–72.

²⁷Gary Tomlinson, “Web of Culture: A Context for Musicology,” *19th-Century Music* 7, no. 3 (1984): 350–62, 352.

²⁸For example, see Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization From the Tempest to Tarzan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Fernanda Peñalzo, “On Skulls, Orgies, Virgins and the Making of Patagonia as a National Territory: Francisco Pascasio Moreno’s Representations of Indigenous Tribes,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 87, no. 4 (2010): 455–72; Jim Anderson, “Daisy Bates,” in *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, ed. Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins, and Fiona Paisley (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), 217–31; Michael Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture: The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1994): 2–13.

²⁹Daisy Bates, “A Southern Corroboree,” *Western Mail*, 25 December 1907, 67.

³⁰George Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia: During the Years 1837, 38, and 39* (London: T. and W. Boone, 1841), 123.

³¹Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 314.

³²Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 122–23.

³³Bates, “A Southern Corroboree,” 67.

³⁴Daisy Bates, “Manuscript of ‘Native Tribes of Western Australia,’” Series 12, Section XI 3a.ii, Box 6, Additional Collection of Songs, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT, 1904–12, 3.

stated that, due to this variety of theme and function, “their songs are therefore naturally varied in their form; but they are all concise and convey in the simplest manner the most moving ideas”.³⁵ As the most prolific writers documenting Noongar culture in their respective eras, Grey and Bates emphasised song as integral to the expression and experience of emotion.

British colonisation of the Noongar region—officially beginning in 1829 with the founding of the Swan River Colony on the lands now known as Perth—soon resulted in the installation of a new and restrictive “emotional regime”.³⁶ Noongar endured the full impact of British invasion and the ensuing “deaths, dispossession, loss of land and culture, racism, segregation, removed children, forced assimilation and dire poverty within a rich country”.³⁷ While Grey observed a wide range Noongar singing over the course of his expeditions in the early 19th century, and Bates visited government reserves to record senior Noongar singing in the early 20th century, by the 1960s and 1970s, researchers had great difficulty locating Noongar to share language and old songs.³⁸ As part of the colonial enterprise’s “civilising process”,³⁹ suppression of the Noongar language and opportunities to perform and learn songs increasingly restricted individual, social and collective experiences and expressions of emotion.⁴⁰ Communities possessing “a common stake, interest, values and goals” may resist restrictive regimes and shape their own emotional worlds.⁴¹ Fostering fellow-feeling between the singer and audience is a primary aim of much singing activity;⁴² song, therefore, represents a means by which disempowered populations may practise this kind of subversion and resilience.⁴³

Grey wrote of Noongar mourning songs: “Nothing can awake in the breast more melancholy feelings than the funeral chants of these people. They are sung by a whole chorus of females of all ages and the effect produced upon the bystanders by this wild music is indescribable.”⁴⁴ Rather than highlighting lyrical content, Grey focused on the importance of melody, presentation and delivery as affective qualities of Noongar song, stating that “it is the peculiar character of their songs which renders them under all circumstances so solacing to them”.⁴⁵ Grey deemed it “probable that what is most highly estimated by this people is that the cadence of the song, and the wild air to which it is chanted, should express well to their ideas the feelings and passions intended to predominate in the mind at the moment in which it is sung”.⁴⁶ Grey hypothesised that the perceived

³⁵Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 123.

³⁶William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 324.

³⁷Anna Haebich and Jim Morrison, “From Karaoke to Noongaroke: A Healing Combination of Past and Present,” *Griffith Review* 44 (2014): 1–8.

³⁸Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*; Bates, “Manuscript of ‘Native Tribes of Western Australia’”; Wilfred Douglas, *The Aboriginal Languages of the South-West of Australia* (Canberra, ACT: AIAS, 1968); Carl Georg von Brandenstein, *Nyungar Anew: Phonology, Text Samples and Etymological and Historical 1500-Word Vocabulary of an Artificially Recreated Aboriginal Language in the South-West of Australia* (Canberra, ACT: Pacific Linguists, 1988).

³⁹Norbert Elias and Edmund Jephcott, *The Civilizing Process, Vol. 1: The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

⁴⁰Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

⁴¹Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 24.

⁴²Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

⁴³Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments; The Blues: Feel Like Going Home*, directed by Martin Scorsese (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Cappa Productions, 2003).

⁴⁴Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 126.

⁴⁵Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 122.

⁴⁶Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 123.

success of a Noongar song or performance was based more on emotive quality than aesthetic appreciation. It is doubtful, however, that he and other colonial observers would be appropriately positioned to appreciate qualities such as poetics, intertextuality, humour, novelty or innovation.

Ethnomusicologist Tamsin Donaldson observes that, more so than any other factor, the “feelings and opinions of English speakers in Australia have had a greater influence on the quantity and quality” of written interpretations of Aboriginal song.⁴⁷ Indeed, colonial attempts to record evidence of Aboriginal performance activity were often predicated on the notion that “Indigenous peoples are remnants of a past doomed to extinction”, essentially positioning us as “innately obsolete peoples” and denying us agency.⁴⁸ Yawuru barrister and academic Michael Dodson explains that most representations of Aboriginal people and culture are constructed in comparison to the dominant culture, often to serve needs of the colony or nation state.⁴⁹ Dodson asserts that the qualities ascribed to Aboriginal people in such descriptions is largely dependent “on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself”.⁵⁰

Early colonial accounts of Noongar song—and other Aboriginal performance traditions⁵¹—are laden with comparisons to European traditions. In 1833, colonist George Fletcher Moore described Yagan, a Noongar of Perth, lamenting the occupation of his homeland:

Yagan stepped forward and leaning with his left hand on my shoulder while he gesticulated with the right, delivered a sort of a recitation, looking earnestly in my face, I regret I could not understand it, I thought from the tone and manner that the purport was this: “You came to our country — you have driven us from our haunts, and disturbed us in our occupations. As we walk in our own country we are fired upon by the white men, why should the white men treat us so”. This song reminded me of a chorus in a Greek tragedy and was commented upon and explained in this way by the other natives, who seemed all to act as subordinate characters to Yagan.⁵²

Although Moore, who nevertheless compiled one of the earliest detailed accounts of the Noongar language,⁵³ could not understand the lyrics, the performance and melody moved him sufficiently enough to evoke classical antiquity. Bishop Salvado of the New Norcia Benedictine mission in WA in the 19th century stated that Noongar song possessed “something of the elegance and beauty of the old Phoenicians and the gravity and seriousness of the Doric school”,⁵⁴ while Robert Menli Lyon characterised “the whole of each tribe” as “bards”.⁵⁵ Even in the early 20th century, Bates stated, “crude and savage as many of their songs sound to unfamiliar ears, there is yet in them the same intense

⁴⁷Tamsin Donaldson, “Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts,” *Aboriginal History* 3 (1979): 62–83, 69.

⁴⁸Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 4.

⁴⁹Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 9.

⁵⁰Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 8.

⁵¹Alfred William Howitt, “Notes on Songs and Song Makers of Some Australian Tribes,” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 16, no. 3 (1887): 327–35; Theodor George Henry Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1971).

⁵²George Fletcher Moore, “From a Correspondent,” *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 1 June 1833, 87.

⁵³George Fletcher Moore, *A Descriptive Vocabulary of the Language in Common Use Amongst the Aborigines of Western Australia* (London: William S. Orr and Co, 1842).

⁵⁴Bates, “Manuscript of ‘Native Tribes of Western Australia,’” 2.

⁵⁵Robert Menli Lyon, “A Glance at the Manners and Language of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia with a Short Vocabulary,” *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 30 March 1833, 52.

expression of feeling which actuate the most famous European singers”.⁵⁶ These comparisons use Noongar as what Dodson would call “a counterpoint against which the dominant society can critique itself, becoming living embodiments of the romantic ideal, which offers a desolate society the hope of redemption and of recapturing what it feels it has lost in its march forward”.⁵⁷

Despite these observations, denigrating historical descriptions of Noongar performances are far more common in the colonial record. The naturalist Charles Darwin dismissed a Noongar performance he witnessed in March 1836 on the south coast of WA as merely “a group of naked figures ... all moving in hideous harmony”.⁵⁸ In the late 19th century, Janet Millett described a Noongar rainmaking performance at a time of drought in 1865 as a “most disturbing and oft-recurring hubbub”.⁵⁹ Journalist William Nelson wrote of Noongar man Fred McGill staging a music and dance performance for the entertainment of non-Aboriginal people in and around Esperance, WA, observing that “Fred, with any amount of pipe-clay and grease and nakedness, danced some kind of war-dance with half a dozen similarly decorated warriors to the accompaniment of thigh-slapping and singing by a score of more or less nude women. From a black man’s point of view no doubt the entertainment was an unqualified success, whilst from a white man’s point of view it was simply grotesque and curious”.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, the writer’s preoccupation with the nakedness of the performers precluded any further description of the musical accompaniment at this event. Bates frequently dismissed Noongar performances as “exceedingly primitive”, and her overt focus on the exotic, secretive and sexual perhaps reveals more about her journalistic requirement for sensationalism than anything else.⁶¹

Grey variously characterised Noongar song as “barbarous and savage sounds” and “discordant noise”,⁶² while being short, repetitive and nevertheless for a Noongar audience “lulling and harmonious in the extreme ... producing much the same effect as the singing of a nurse does upon a child”.⁶³ Such descriptions position Noongar song as inferior to European music and infantilise Noongar audiences. Implicitly, they provide proof of colonial achievements of “progress” and superiority, inherently ascribing a supposed “moral and intellectual poverty” to Noongar people, which reassured colonists of their position as “paragons of humanity, products of millennia of development”.⁶⁴ The overriding emphasis on emotion and expressivity in historical descriptions of Noongar song serves to construct Noongar as wild and unrestrained, thereby justifying the colonial imposition of a restrictive emotional regime. Suggesting that Noongar song could constitute something more than the outpouring of wild emotion, Grey’s observation that some Noongar performances have “a very peculiar mystical character about them”⁶⁵ only begins

⁵⁶Bates, “Manuscript of ‘Native Tribes of Western Australia,’” 4.

⁵⁷Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 8.

⁵⁸Charles Darwin, *Journals of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World: Under the Command of Capt. Fitzroy* (London: John Murray, 1845), 450–51.

⁵⁹Edward (Janet) Millett, *An Australian Parsonage, or, the Settler and the Savage in Western Australia* (London: Edward Stanford, 1872), 230.

⁶⁰William Nelson, *An Aboriginal Life’s Story* (Kalgoorlie, WA: Hocking, 1913), 9.

⁶¹Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 321.

⁶²Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 124.

⁶³Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 122.

⁶⁴Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 8.

⁶⁵Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 225.

to hint at the significance of Noongar song to local knowledge systems, social cohesion and the sophisticated maintenance of relationships between people and landscapes.⁶⁶

Singing and Resilience

As has been the case among Aboriginal communities across Australia,⁶⁷ Noongar continued to perform and create songs during periods of extreme cultural and social stress, through the early stages of British colonial occupation in the mid-19th century and the various eras of segregation and assimilation in the 20th century. As Tamsin Donaldson notes in her study of Wangaaybuwan songs of northern New South Wales, one of the ways in which Aboriginal people have “responded to the rapid changes overtaking their way of life was to make songs expressing their reaction”.⁶⁸ Noongar composed songs narrating their observations of colonisation, from introduced industries such as pastoralism and the offshore whaling industry, to new pastimes such as going to the horse races.⁶⁹ Although incorporating new subject matter and, at times, vocabulary, songs like these are examples of a Noongar tradition of expressing and experiencing emotion via song.

Grey transcribed lyrics for songs composed about Miago, a Noongar who accompanied the surveying vessel *H.M.S. Beagle* in 1838.⁷⁰ The first, “ship bal win-jal bat-tar-dal gool-an-een”, was constantly sung in his absence and roughly translated by Grey as “whither is that lone ship wandering”.⁷¹ The song likely does more with the poetics and rhythm of the language to emphasise the rocking motion of the ship on the water. Such was the popularity of the former song that in his expedition journal, Grey mentioned Kaiber, his Noongar guide, singing it on occasion.⁷² While this song operates on one level to commemorate Miago setting out on his journey, it also seems to function as a lament capable of stirring fellow-feeling among a whole community.

Although there are old Noongar terms for canoes, it is worth noting the inclusion of the English word “ship” in a Noongar lyrical setting. As the Noongar language does not include sibilant sounds, this is presumably for novel effect. The English term “sail” is also present in the song composed about Miago’s adventures upon his safe return: “kan-de maar-o, kan-de maar-a-lo, tsail-o mar-ra, tsail-o mar-ra-lo”, interpreted by Grey as “unsteadily shifts the wind-o, unsteadily shifts the wind-o, The sails-o handle, the sails-o handle-ho”.⁷³ Grey defined the poetic innovation “kan de” as “move unsteadily,

⁶⁶For discussion, see Bracknell, “Conceptualizing Noongar Song”.

⁶⁷Roy Goddard, “Aboriginal Poets as Historians,” *Mankind* 1, no. 10 (1934): 243–46; Carl Georg von Brandenstein and Anthony Thomas, *Taruru: Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara* (Adelaide, SA: Rigby, 1974); Barry McDonald, “Evidence of Four New England Corroboree Songs Indicating Aboriginal Responses to European Invasion,” *Aboriginal History* 20, no. 1 (1996): 176–94; Luise Hercus and Grace Koch, “Wire Yard: A Song from Near Lake Eyre,” *Aboriginal History* 23 (1999): 72–82; Mary-Anne Jebb and Doug Marmion, “Singing the Train: A Nyamal Song is Heard Again,” in *The Music of Endangered Languages: FEL XIX—NOLA*, ed. Nicholas Ostler and Brenda Lintinger (Hungerford, UK: Foundation for Endangered Languages, 2015), 122–27; Myfany Turpin, Jennifer Green, and Jason Gibson, “Mustering Up a Melody: An Anmatyerr Cattle Truck Song,” in *Language, Land and Story in Australia: Essays in Honour of Luise Hercus*, ed. Peter Austin, Harold Koch, and Jane Simpson (London: The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2016), 450–65.

⁶⁸Donaldson, “Translating Oral Literature,” 65.

⁶⁹Clint Bracknell, “Wal-Walang-al Ngardanginy: Hunting the Songs (of the Australian Southwest),” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (2014): 3–15.

⁷⁰Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 126.

⁷¹Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 126.

⁷²Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 34.

⁷³Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 126.

as a ship”,⁷⁴ which is likely derived from a Noongar word for dance, “ken”. Murray Newman performed a song for the anthropologist Norman Tindale in 1966 about another Noongar who accompanied a colonial expedition. Its lyric “kayepa kerl, ah now, ah now” reflects the protagonist’s relief to be returning to Esperance, in WA, a place known to Noongar as “kayepa kerl”.⁷⁵ The English-language refrain “ah now, ah now” seems an aesthetic decision to stress the cross-cultural nature of the expedition experience, as any Noongar exclamation could have been used in its place.

Colonial place names may also be incorporated into Noongar song traditions. Bates describes a lament composed and repeatedly sung by an unnamed south coast Noongar woman in the early years of colonisation when her husband was imprisoned at the fledgling settlement of King George Sound, known today as Albany, WA. Bates characterised the song as a “most pathetic tune ... handed down in the girl’s family, and sung to me by one of her last descendants: ‘ngaia ngunna demmardung, geejena mel, boorneen warra been, kinjoor down’”, translated by Bates as “mother-in-law, my husband is gone. I look through the bush. My eyes are like spears, but I cannot see him. (He has gone to) King George Sound”.⁷⁶ Rather than using a Noongar place name, the singer invokes the new colonial name, King George Sound, adapted here to “kinjoor down”, directing all of the emotion associated with forced separation from her husband to this imposed term.

As the colony increased its stranglehold over the entire south west, many Noongar were removed from Country and relocated, with government policies and other factors significantly restricting their freedom of movement thereafter.⁷⁷ After being moved to the government reserve near Cannington, Noongar singer Baaburgurt created a song⁷⁸ characterised by Bates as a “song of exile sung by a Capel district native who had been taken away from his country and, becoming blind while absent from his home, was never able to see his hills and streams again”:

boojera, boojera, naang injal? naang injal?
 my country, my country, where is it? where is it?
 boojera, boojera, naang injal? naang injal?
 my country, my country, where is it? where is it?
 boojera nyee kwela naang nganya dwonga burt,
 this country I know not its name, I know not,
 marreemba yoganin kooroo weeriba ingarda,
 wandering and standing I look far and far,
 marreemba yookain kooroo weeree weeriba,
 wandering, standing, my eyes seek for it afar,
 marreemba yookain tallaroo, marreemba yookain,

⁷⁴George Grey, “Vocabulary of the Aboriginal Language of Western Australia,” *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 24 August–12 October 1839.

⁷⁵Norman Tindale, “Site Information, Songs, Cultural Discussions from South-West WA,” AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive, Canberra, ACT, 1966–68, tape recording.

⁷⁶Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 340.

⁷⁷Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

⁷⁸Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 338.

wandering, standing or dancing, wandering, standing,
 boojera boojera, naang injal, naang injal?
 my country, my country, where is it, where is it?

Bates noted that the “air of this song was melancholy in the extreme and expressed a high degree of feeling and passion. The long drawn out aa and oo uttered in the high cracked voice of the singer caused the ready tears to fall from the eyes of those who were also exiled from their own ground, and who sat round listening to the improvisation of their fellow exile”.⁷⁹ This evocative description of affect reveals something of the nostalgic function of Noongar song in the early 20th century.

Due to the prolonged dislocation of Noongar from their regional homelands in the early 20th century, these songs served to forge and maintain emotional bonds between fellow exiles and locals experiencing “solastalgia”, emotional pain experienced when “the place where one resides or that one loves is under immediate assault”.⁸⁰ Bates explained that a “young King George Sound native was brought up to the York district, and after a time, getting tired of his exile from his own country and not wishing to tell his friends that he wished to leave them, he sang the following song: dardara wan tum me, dardara wantum me, boojoor my counteree, ngora walla kuttijee, boojoor my counteree, dwonga walla kuttijee”, which she translates as “I want white pipeclay to decorate myself, I want to return to my country. I think my country is calling me. I hear my country calling me”.⁸¹ Interspersed with English—“wantum”, want them, and “my countree”, my country—this song expresses not just a longing for Country but a yearning to apply white pipeclay for dance. Aboriginal performance is frequently characterised by the indivisible relationship between location, dance, visual design, story and people.⁸² Bates’s observations about the song’s reception provide evidence of the fellow-feeling it created: “As soon as this song was heard, all the younger companions of the visitor decorated themselves and gave him a little kening [dance], bestowing also many gifts upon him, in return for many which he had during his stay presented to them, including all his own personal ornaments or clothing.”⁸³ This account reveals not only the emotive qualities of the song but also the generosity and support among Noongar in this period, while effectively living as refugees in their own region.

Revitalising Song

Records of Noongar song collected prior to 1965 include only lyrics written using a range of different orthographic conventions and short scraps of musical notation.⁸⁴ Audio recordings are more immediately useful to the contemporary Noongar community in

⁷⁹Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 338.

⁸⁰Glenn Albrecht, “Tipping Points in the Mind: The Drama of Solastalgia and Soliphilia,” presented at TEDx Sydney, 22 May 2010, <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxSydney-Glenn-Albrecht-Envir>; also see Matt K. Matsuda, “Acting Faith and Nostalgia in New Caledonia,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 39, no. 3 (2013): 70–80, 71.

⁸¹Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 340.

⁸²Catherine Ellis, *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1985); Turpin, “Finding Arrernte Songs”.

⁸³Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, 341.

⁸⁴As listed in Bracknell, “Maaya Waab (Play with Sound),” 47.

efforts to revitalise song traditions.⁸⁵ Community workshops undertaken from 2017 to 2019 to recirculate archival audio recordings of Noongar songs from the south coast of WA as part of the Australian Research Council funded project “Mobilising Song Archives to Nourish an Endangered Aboriginal Language” have involved both the interpretation of lyrics and intensely emotional reconnection between people and the songs of their deceased fathers, grandfathers and uncles. Although these workshops have consisted of a group of Noongar people working in a methodical, scholarly way with old recordings, there has been an obvious emotional dynamic to proceedings. Senses of pride and loss have permeated these sessions—feelings that often underpin the reclamation of cultural material once held in archives. Developing old recordings of songs to the spiritual, emotional and intellectual point at which the community can breathe life into them again requires a necessarily gradual process, enhanced by the cultural, genealogical and geographical connections between the people, songs and Country involved.⁸⁶

Due to my pre-existing connections with the Roberts and Dabb families as part of the same Wirlomin family group and a member of the language and culture organisation Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories,⁸⁷ this project initially focused on archival audio recordings of songs performed by Charlie and Sam Dabb⁸⁸ and Lomas Roberts.⁸⁹ Regular community workshops held since 2017 began with an expert group consisting of the senior descendants of these men—who agreed to act as contemporary song custodians—and experienced Noongar language teachers such as Yibiyung Roma Winmar and Iris Woods. As the workshops moved from initial phases of reconnection and interpretation to vocalisation, they have gradually expanded under the guidance of the expert group to include concentric circles of Noongar people connected to the south coast region. As a result, a significant number of south coast Noongar people have now heard these songs. Emerging from that group of listeners, a number of brave and talented individuals have performed them at community gatherings and public events, including the 2018 Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, held at Edith Cowan University in Perth.

Colonisation, assimilation policies and an imposed emotional regime functioned to inhibit much Noongar singing in the 20th century. Up until the early 1970s, a Noongar person’s continued access to human rights inherently depended on their ability to keep overt cultural expressions such as song and language private.⁹⁰ Opportunities to perform, hear and learn Noongar songs were dramatically reduced over the course of this era, to the extent that Henry Dabb—son of Sam Dabb and nephew of Charlie Dabb—remembers that in the 1960s and 1970s, he only “used to hear them singing when they felt *free*, you know”.⁹¹ Gaye Roberts—daughter of Lomas Roberts—reveals that even through the 1980s and 1990s, “I never heard Dad sing, but he would’ve been proud of what we’re doing, bringing the songs back to life and getting them out there

⁸⁵Clint Bracknell, “Connecting Indigenous Song Archives to Kin, Country and Language,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19, no. 2 (forthcoming).

⁸⁶Clint Bracknell, “Connecting Indigenous Song.”

⁸⁷Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories, <http://wirlomin.com.au> (accessed 14 May 2019).

⁸⁸von Brandenstein, “Sound Recordings Collected by Carl von Brandenstein.”

⁸⁹Timothy McCabe and Jason Miniter, “Interview with Lomas Roberts”. Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Archive, Perth, WA, 2001, cassette recording.

⁹⁰Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

⁹¹Personal communication, 15 February 2019.

for everybody to learn”. The inhibition and shame imposed upon Noongar as a result of colonial and subsequent governmental restrictions on the expression and experience of emotions has had a lasting negative impact. Overcoming deeply held inhibitions associated with speaking and singing presents a significant challenge to Noongar song revitalisation.

At the beginning of workshops in Albany and Esperance to facilitate the singing of old Noongar songs in late 2018 and early 2019, participants would listen to the few members of the expert group who felt confident enough to perform. The participants—many of whom were usually closely connected to one of the original singers—were asked to share immediate emotional reactions hearing the songs. Overwhelmingly, their responses emphasised pride in the existence of these songs and the sense of connection they felt to the original singers and each other as a result of hearing them performed. In some cases, participants expressed surprise about how fluent, aesthetically pleasing and evocative the songs sounded, especially younger participants who had not previously heard old Noongar songs. As well as feelings of nostalgia, many participants described an alluring quality and a sense of “spiritual presence” that accompanied the songs, along with a “powerful resonance” that focused their attention during performance and lingered after. In the earlier workshops, there were also some admissions of nervousness at the prospect of trying to sing one of the old songs.

In each singing workshop, various strategies were employed over two hours to facilitate singing, including vocal breathing exercises, the annotation of lyric sheets with expressive cues, call-and-response, memorisation activities and small-group practice. At the conclusion of each workshop, participants were asked for their reflections. All participants felt tired, winded, relaxed and relieved, but they shared a proud sense of accomplishment. Many also described feelings of exhilaration, joy, confidence and a belief that they were growing stronger in knowledge of Noongar language and connection to culture, family and ancestors through singing the old songs. Some of the more enthusiastic participants felt hungry for more, and even the most reserved among us revealed that the shame or shyness they had in relation to speaking and singing Noongar language was gone. One particularly stoic and typically masculine individual said that all of the singing had left him feeling “really loose”.

Henry Dabb and his sister Annie Dabb—deputy chairperson of Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, daughter of Sam Dabb and niece of Charlie Dabb—led a singing workshop at Esperance, WA, in 2018 in which we performed some of the songs at the locations they were originally recorded in 1970 and would have been sung in the vicinity of many decades prior. Annie Dabb is steadfast in the idea that, “when we do take it back to country and sing it, it makes them [our ancestors] happy. They’re proud we’re taking it back, and they know that our language is not dead. They’re proud we’re carrying it on, just bringing it all back to life ... It makes my spirit happy”.⁹² Her daughter Wanika Close agrees that in performing the songs, “we’re giving back to our ancestors. They sang it on country, we should too ... It’s making us who we are today ... we’re learning them and it’s bringing our identity back to us from the land”. Henry Dabb says that “even though they’re gone, when we do the songs at Bandy Creek [in Esperance] and that, you can feel them there with us”.

⁹²Personal communication, 16 December 2018.

Performances of Noongar song on archival audio recordings certainly have emotive musical and lyrical qualities. Many of the songs feature long, extended notes, vocal melisma and onomatopoeic wordplay. However, the contemporary Noongar responses to the old songs are not just responses to inherently emotive musical and lyrical content; they are also due to the history, kin relationships and connection to Country that these songs embody. Historical descriptions of Noongar singing associate the widest possible range of emotional expression and experience with song. Despite, or perhaps due to, the restrictive emotional regime imposed as a result of colonisation, the few old surviving south coast songs carry significant and wide-ranging emotional weight today.

Conclusion

Historians of the emotions may variously consider emotions to be forms of practical and bodily engagement with the world⁹³ or performative utterances⁹⁴—expressive and potentially influencing acts. The emotive qualities of Noongar song certainly made an impression on historical observers and evoke a spectrum of feeling among those of us involved in song revitalisation activities today. With full awareness of the biases and underlying motives behind historical descriptions of Noongar singing as highly emotional, the depth of emotion associated with song among contemporary Noongar reflects some degree of consistency with what we might infer from the historical record about the emotional worlds of Noongar in the past. Performing old Noongar songs today makes us feel good, loosens us up, increases a sense of connectedness to ancestors, community, culture and Country. The sense of nostalgia we experience in performing old songs today is not just “about things lost—but stolen”.⁹⁵ It is buoyed by feelings of cultural resilience and the possibility of further resurgence.

Dodson states: “I see Indigenous peoples as having twin projects: at one level, we must understand the motivation behind the historical constructions of Aboriginality, and understand why they have had such a grip over colonising populations; simultaneously, we must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous peoples.”⁹⁶ Although descriptions of the unbridled emotional nature of Noongar song support colonial constructions of Aboriginal people as uncivilised and impulsive, they do so from an etic perspective that is nevertheless guided by imperialistic values. By relating to one another and Country through our old songs and language, we begin to escape the restrictive emotional regime imposed by colonisation and maintained through the nation state’s continued marginalisation of Aboriginal values, concerns and perspectives. Enriching our Noongar repertoire and vocabulary through enhancing archival and historical song material with community knowledge and innovation in processes of cultural revitalisation may further empower us to engage with the world not only in relation to “non-Aboriginality” or “imposed representations”⁹⁷ but on our own terms.

⁹³Monique Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 193–220.

⁹⁴Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*.

⁹⁵Matsuda, “Acting Faith and Nostalgia in New Caledonia,” 75.

⁹⁶Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 6.

⁹⁷Dodson, “The Wentworth Lecture,” 9.

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