Sounds of Australia: Aboriginal Popular Music, Identity, and Place

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Abstract

During the late twentieth century, Australia started to recognize the rights of the Aboriginal people. Indigenous claims for self-determination revolved around struggles to maintain a distinct cultural identity in strategies to own and govern traditional lands within the wider political system. While these fundamental challenges pervaded indigenous affairs, contemporary popular music by Aboriginal artists became increasingly important as a means of mediating viewpoints and agendas of the Australian national consciousness. It provided an artistic platform for indigenous performers to express a concerted resistance to colonial influences and sovereignty. As such, this study aims to examine the meaning and significance of musical recordings that reflect Aboriginal identity and place in a popular culture. It adopts an ethnomusicological approach in which music is explored not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of its social, economic, and political contexts. This paper is organized into three case studies of different Aboriginal rock groups: Bleckbala Mujik, Warumpi Band, and Yothu Yindi. Through these studies, the prevalent use of Aboriginal popular music is discerned as an accessible and compelling mechanism to elicit public awareness about the contemporary indigenous struggles through negotiations of power and representations of place.

Keywords

Aboriginal Popular Music, Bleckbala Majik, Warumpi Band, Yothu Yindi, Australia

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In the Northern Territory of Australia, the relations between musical performances, rights to geographical place, and social identity are strongly marked. Aboriginal identity is closely linked to the expression of ancestral laws, which establish mythological links to the land by relating spiritual beings to individuals and clans.¹ Following the divergent histories of conquest, colonialism, and indigenous rights disputes, the introduction of media and commercialism has led to the genesis of several forms of Aboriginal popular music. This new musical identity has provided an artistic platform for indigenous performers to express a concerted resistance to colonial sovereignty and its influences.² As such, this study aims to examine the meaning and significance of these musical activities and recordings that reflect Aboriginal

1. Ian Keen, "A Bundle of Sticks: The Debate over Yolngu Clans," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no. 3 (2000): 432, doi:10.1111/1467-9655.00024.

2. David S. Trigger, *Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in Northern Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 219.

identity and place in an Australian popular culture. In this paper, I adopt an ethnomusicological approach in which music is explored not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of its social, economic, and political contexts. This paper is organized into three case studies of different Aboriginal rock groups: Blekbala Mujik, Warumpi Band, and Yothu Yindi. Through these studies, the prevalent use of Aboriginal popular music is discerned as an accessible and compelling mechanism to elicit public awareness about contemporary indigenous struggles through negotiations of power and representations of place.

Blekbala Mujik

Blekbala Mujik is one of a number of Aboriginal rock groups to achieve success during the early 1990s. Their top charted song, “Nitmiluk,” forms the basis of this case study, in which I will explore the functional links between popular music and Aboriginal socio-political strategies.³ In particular, musical readings of “Nitmiluk” trace the process of reclaiming and reinscribing Aboriginal identity after colonial experiences. Additionally, they confer ways in which contemporary musical expressions of Aboriginal identity are used to represent a peaceful resolution in competing land claims of indigenous and non-indigenous jurisdictions. This case study will examine how Aboriginal popular music plays a significant role in the mediation of geo-political conflicts and construction of social identity.

3. Peter Dunbar-Hall, “‘Alive and Deadly’: A Sociolinguistic Reading of Rock Songs by Australian Aboriginal Musicians,” *Popular Music and Society* 27, no. 1 (2004): 41, doi:10.1080/0300776042000166594.

The song title, “Nitmiluk,” refers to a vast series of gorges and chasms that stretch for twelve kilometres along the Katherine River in West Arnhem Land of the Northern Territory (see fig. 1). This area is the primary frontier for attempts by indigenous communities to reclaim colonized spaces.⁴ Perhaps most relevant to this case study is the land’s qualitative role in the creative cultural expressions of local artists and performers; popular music has accorded a means for indigenous musicians to mobilise mainstream engagement with themes of Aboriginal pride and consolidation. Essentially, this music acts as a cross-cultural strategy to promote awareness of indigenous land rights issues.⁵ As Blekbala Mujik’s lead singer, Apaak Jupurrula, states:

Music is perhaps one of the few positive ways to communicate a message to the wider community. Take, for example, politicians. They address an issue, but people will only listen if they share those particular political views. Music has universal appeal. Even if you have your critics, people will still give you a hearing.⁶

4. Tony Mitchell, “World Music and the Popular Music Industry: An Australian View,” *Ethnomusicology* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 326, doi:10.2307/851717.

5. Peter Phipps, “Performances of Power: Indigenous Cultural Festivals as Globally Engaged Cultural Strategy,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 35, no. 3 (2010): 218, doi:10.1177/030437541003500303.

6. K. McCabe, “In His Own Image,” *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*, November 1995, quoted in Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 214.

FIGURE 1. Map of Aboriginal traditional lands in Northern Territory, Australia

In this sense, Aboriginal popular music represents existing wider socio-political concerns such as shifts in government policy and Australian race relations. As the challenge for indigenous land rights intensifies, Aboriginal popular musicians are becoming increasingly important as mediators in the mass media, writing and singing about “Aboriginal methods for melding disparate worlds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.”⁷

Aboriginal songwriters and performers have frequently addressed the topic of reclaiming traditional lands in their music. This is predominantly accomplished by applying musical markers of Aboriginal identity to their songs and portraying empowerment through the text.⁸ In reading “Nitmiluk” as a musical text, it is possible to identify the practices that Blekbala Mujik have used to render traditional Aboriginal ways of expressing oral history into contemporary music. In this manner, their music has employed discrete strategies to signify and generate enlightening narratives of the country.

Blekbala Mujik regularly integrates elements of traditional and contemporary musical styles. By incorporating multilingual texts and hybrid musical structures in their songs, they garner awareness for Aboriginal culture. As reasoned by Jupurrula, “We want to inform audiences that we are strong within our cultural beliefs, that we still maintain our traditional

7. Karl W. M. Neuenfeldt, “Yothu Yindi and Ganma: The Cultural Transposition of Aboriginal Agenda through Metaphor and Music,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 38 (1993): 1, doi:10.1080/14443059309387146.

8. Eric Maddern, “‘We Have Survived’: Aboriginal Music Today,” *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1749 (November 1988): 596, doi:10.2307/966788.

ideology and understanding of a world view.”⁹ This suggests that Aboriginal popular music exists with the immediate purpose to relay current affairs in Aboriginal life to the broader listening public. In general, indigenous rock groups have been largely associated with the land rights movement since the 1970s.¹⁰ Blekbala Mujik affirmed this political stance during a press release about the song’s conception: “‘Nitmiluk’...is the traditional place name for Katherine Gorge National Park, handed back to its traditional custodians, the Jawoyn people, in September 1989...[we] were asked by the owners to write some music to help celebrate the hand-back.”¹¹

“Nitmiluk” operates as an effective apparatus for Aboriginal identity construction, which is pertinent to the advocacy of agendas and demands of indigenous cultural revival. The song’s music and text demonstrate an ability to manifest various layers of Aboriginal expression. It is comprised of a three-part structure that combines two distinct

9. Christie Eliezer, “Reggae’s Global Pulse,” *Billboard*, July 6, 1996, 45.

10. Chris Gibson, 1997, “‘Nitmiluk’: Song-Sites and Strategies for Aboriginal Empowerment,” in *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Conference; Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, University of New England, Armidale, September 27–30, 1997 (Sydney: University of New England Press, 1997), 162.

11. Elder, Bruce, “Sophistication from the Heartland,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 1995, quoted in Peter Dunbar-Hall, 1997, “‘Nitmiluk’: An Aboriginal Rock Song About a Place,” in *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Conference; Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, University of New England, Armidale, September 27–30, 1997 (Sydney: University of New England Press, 1997), 155.

musical styles together.¹² With didjeridu and clapsticks accompaniment, the first section is a traditional Arnhem Land song that is traced to Aboriginal musical customs in the north-eastern corner of the Northern Territory. The following section presents a contrasting instrumentation that is characteristic of a reggae rock genre. The conspicuous musical dichotomy between the traditional and rock sections of the song is additionally highlighted through the use of different languages: the traditional sections, sung in the Jawoyn language, are juxtaposed with the rock section in English. Since language functions as a means of defining and naming Aboriginal territories, this multilingual arrangement serves as a geo-political statement about the return of traditional lands, while retaining access for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations.¹³ In this manner, “Nitmiluk” asserts the Aboriginal conceptualisation of a common land, differing from those of Western colonial ideologies. These subjects of reconciliation and sharing of the land are emphasised in the adoption of a descending traditional melody as the basis for a melody in the rock section (see fig. 2).

“Nitmiluk” readily engages with the sounds of country music, as evident in its use of a recurring guitar lick (see fig. 3). Recognised by various critics, this prominent

12. Peter Dunbar-Hall, “Style and Meaning: Signification in Contemporary Aboriginal Popular Music, 1963–1993” (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 1994), 140.

13. Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, “Singing About Nations within Nations: Geopolitics and Identity in Australian Indigenous Rock Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 24, no. 2 (2000): 45, doi:10.1080/03007760008591767.

feature is the stylistic backbone of Aboriginal rock music.¹⁴ Mudrooroo explains the widespread appeal of country music as similar to Aboriginal cultural sensibilities that embody inherent relationships with the land: “Country and western songs in time replaced most indigenous secular song structures. This was because the subject matter reflected the new indigenous lifestyle: horses and cattle, drinking, gambling, the outsider as hero, a nomadic existence...the whole gamut of an itinerant life.”¹⁵

FIGURE 2. Traditional melody as basis of rock melody in “Nitmiluk”

Traditional Melody

Rock Melody

14. Chrib Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall, “Nitmiluk: Place and Empowerment in Australian Aboriginal Popular Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 44, no. 1 (2000): 48.

15. Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (South Melbourne, Vic.: Hyland House, 1997), 111.

FIGURE 3. Recurring guitar lick in “Nitmiluk”

Another significant characteristic of “Nitmiluk” is the inclusion of didjeridu and clapsticks in the rock section. As musical markers of Aboriginal identity, these traditional instruments are rhythmically integrated with the drum kit. Given the colonial background of intense racism and exclusion towards indigenous Australians, this unique configuration of mixed instruments represents new possibilities for cross-cultural understanding of indigenous attachments to the land.¹⁶ These discourses of common nationhood are deliberately expressed in the repeated one-bar rhythmic cells of traditional instruments throughout the song’s structure.

In addition, “Nitmiluk” consists of two didjeridu playing styles: the rhythmic drone of East Arnhem Land and the hooted upper partials of West Arnhem Land. By ignoring traditional systems of restrictions placed upon the instrument, Blekbala Mujik does not adhere to one didjeridu playing style, but instead embraces the two discrepant styles, as common in contemporary music.¹⁷ By taking on diverse performance practices, the song conveys a collective musical expression

16. Fiona Magowan, “Playing with Meaning: Perspectives on Culture, Commodification and Contestation around the Didjeridu,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20464931>.

17. Dunbar-Hall, “Style and Meaning,” 140.

that encompasses the perspectives of both the localised Jawoyn musical culture and the national Aboriginal cultures.

“Nitmiluk” provides a medium for delineating indigenous bonds with the land, which is read through distinct musical signifiers of Aboriginal identity.¹⁸ By creating an amalgamation of discrete musical elements, Blekbala Mujik has ensured the song’s relevance to listeners from other Aboriginal cultures and the wider non-indigenous audiences. The themes of shared identity and place embedded in “Nitmiluk” actively engage with geo-political relations to invoke a desirable resolution in indigenous land rights struggles.

Warumpi Band

Warumpi Band is another Aboriginal rock group that has facilitated the advancement of the land rights movement. This second case study consists of musical and textual readings of their place-related song, “Warumpinya.” The song delineates the socio-cultural discourses an Aboriginal rock group has used to construct a popular music statement about a regional indigenous area; Warumpi, situated along the north-western border of the Northern Territory.¹⁹ For the Luritja people, who are traditional owners of Warumpi, the landmark continues to form a nexus of spiritual and cultural customs where it has become the principal vehicle in driving socio-political strategies towards self-determination. In effect, the song is interpreted as an articulation of indigenous

18. Magowan, “Playing with Meaning,” 84.

19. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, “Singing About Nations within Nations,” 55.

empowerment, which reads “Warumpinya” as a cartographic medium for outlining Aboriginal identity and country.²⁰ This is achieved by examining the implications of adapting traditional languages, song structures, and instruments into the cultural production of Warumpi Band.

Like many other Aboriginal rock groups, Warumpi Band combines elements of traditional and contemporary musical styles together to communicate to the broader audiences about Aboriginal cultures and histories. As clarified by Helen Chryssides, “Music is a powerful instrument to bring about reconciliation and black and white unity...a cultural fusion of the contemporary elements of 200 years and the traditional ones of 40,000 years. By combining the two, we can start to build a better future through music.”²¹ The recitation of names of physical locations in Aboriginal rock songs is seen as a contemporary assertion of indigenous relationships with the land, which constitutes one of the defining aspects of Aboriginal identity.²² This preeminent function mirrors one found in traditional music: the role of song in expressing land ownership, and therefore both group and individual identity.

The association of traditional geographical names with the mythological phenomenon, Dreamtime, constitutes the

20. Chris Gibson, “Decolonizing the Production of Geographical Knowledges? Reflections on Research with Indigenous Musicians,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 88, no. 3 (September 2006): 281, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0459.2006.00221.x.

21. Helen Chryssides, *Local Heroes* (North Blackburn, Vic.: Collins Dove, 1993), 248.

22. Chris Lawe Davies, “Aboriginal Rock Music: Space and Place,” in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, ed. Tony Bennett, et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 250.

ideological root of Aboriginal identity. The Dreamtime is based on the spiritual idea of holistic creation, which refers to the sacred era when ancestral beings generated every life form and physical site in the universe where the people, plants, animals, landforms, and celestial bodies were all interrelated. This metaphysical connection was illustrated in a remark by Warumpi Band's main guitarist, Neil Murray:

[Warumpi Band is] a name that was given to us. We were just a band from Papunya, and the proper name for Papunya is Warumpi. It refers to a honey ant-dreaming site...the...important place there is not the buildings and the settlement, but rather the land. The most significant feature of that land to Aboriginal people is the nearest dreaming site, which is Warumpi, a small hill nearby where honey ants come out of the ground...there are places in the landscape people can show you that are charged with the story of the ants.²³

In his recount, Murray focused on the intrinsic relationships between individuals, clans, and their ancestral past, which firmly established the links between spiritual and physical realities. This philosophical approach of Aboriginal traditional songs continues to be expressed in popular music.

The physical site of Warumpi serves as the key musical subject of the song. The song's text provides

23. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 138.

metaphorical threads that connect people with places.²⁴ Sung entirely in the Luritja language, “Warumpinya” connotes an exuberant celebration of the traditional land. The construction of Aboriginal identity in “Warumpinya” relies on the definitive role of land in the Luritja dialect. As mentioned in anthropological accounts by Stephen Davis and John Prescott, “Place names are usually recited or sung...and the language in which they are publically uttered confirms the identity of the group that holds primary rights in the territory.”²⁵ From this observation, the use of a traditional language in “Warumpinya” can also be construed as a cartographic strategy that implies indigenous land sovereignty over British colonial rule:

Yuwa! Warumpinya!
 Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya
 Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya
 Nganampa ngurra tjanampa wiya
 Nganampa ngurra Warumpinya!
 Yuwa! Warumpinya!

[Yes! Warumpi!
 They always say our place is bad
 They always say our home is no good
 It's our place, not theirs
 It's our home, not theirs
 Yes! Warumpi!]²⁶

24. P. G. Toner, “Tropes of Longing and Belonging: Nostalgia and Musical Instruments in Northeast Arnhem Land,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20464927>.

25. Stephen Davis and John Prescott, *Aboriginal Frontiers and Boundaries in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992), 72.

26. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, “Singing About Nations within Nations,” 56.

Throughout the text, the echoing themes of Aboriginal dignity and sovereignty are a response to a tangible set of geo-political circumstances. They challenge the racial narratives of exclusion and separatism espoused by those who fiercely oppose indigenous land rights.²⁷ According to Murray, “Warumpinya” was thus written with the purpose of refuting Western attitudes to the traditional land: “Warumpi was a centre of enforced assimilation in which people from the surrounding tribal groups...were expected to assimilate into white Australian society. Most people think it’s a real hellhole of a joint. But for a lot of people, it’s their home. That’s what this song is about.”²⁸ However, the emotional and idealised message of the song is advantageously conveyed on a different level to non-Aboriginal listeners. “Warumpinya” employs a traditional language that excludes all audiences, except those with an existing knowledge of and concern for Aboriginal culture. While the language reveals the story of a particular site and its associated political contexts, it is also a radical tool for education in which indigenous knowledge is disseminated for social gain and recognition. As John Stapleton comments, “Although there is a good deal of novelty in their use of an Aboriginal language, Warumpi Band believes there is value in reinforcing these languages, which are slowly dying, and in educating wider audiences that they are legitimate.”²⁹ In line with current policies of Aboriginal

27. Francesca Merlan, “Indigenous Movements in Australia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (October 2005): 475, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.34.081804.120643.

28. Andrew McMillan, *Strict Rules* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 129.

29. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 150.

cultural revival, these agendas affirm the traditional attachments to territory and the validity of indigenous land rights in a contemporary situation.

Assertions of Aboriginal identity are also found in ways that relate “Warumpinya” to the traditional music of Arnhem Land, which requires an analysis of the song’s structure and instrumentation. “Warumpinya” is based on alternating musical sections.³⁰ The four-line verse is repeated a number of times with instrumental breaks. This structural framework is characteristic among the repertoire of traditional Arnhem Land songs. As defined by Jill Stubington, “Australian Aboriginal singing, with its short, constantly-repeated texts and rhythmic patterns is heavily repetitive. The falling melodic patterns are highly characteristic, and the overall effect is often quite hypnotic.”³¹ In addition, “Warumpinya” includes two different uses of ceremonial boomerangs in the rock group’s line-up. First, the rhythmic pulse of the traditional instrument is only used in the verses, which is deliberately aligned with the backbeat of the snare (see fig. 4). Second, a prolonged rattling effect of the boomerangs is produced at the song’s conclusion. These two performance practices coincide with those ascribed in Arnhem Land traditional songs.³²

30. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, “Singing About Nations within Nations,” 55.

31. Jill Stubington, *Singing the Land*. (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2007), 190.

32. Dunbar-Hall, “Style and Meaning,” 113.

FIGURE 4. Rhythmic alignment between voice, boomerangs and drum kit in “Warumpinya”

The image displays a musical score for the song "Warumpinya". It consists of five staves, each representing a different instrument or voice part. The top staff is for the Voice, written in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a half note C5, a half note B4, a quarter note A4, and a whole note G4. The second staff is for Boomerangs, written in a simplified rhythmic notation with vertical stems and flags. The third staff is for Hi-Hat, also in simplified notation. The fourth staff is for Snare, and the fifth staff is for Bass Drum, both in simplified notation. All five parts are perfectly aligned rhythmically, with each measure containing a single note or rest for every part, demonstrating a tight rhythmic alignment.

Warumpi Band’s proactive use of popular music to enlighten aspects of their traditional background shows an understanding of the pivotal mechanism of propagating cultural knowledge for negotiating political power outside Aboriginal communities.³³ Fundamentally, this contributes to public awareness of the imbalances that exist in the distribution of power and resources in contemporary Australia. As noted by Peter Manuel, Aboriginal popular music is the leading mechanism in maintaining a valid cultural expression. He states, “We can...observe that the unfortunate mortal blows dealt to many traditional musics and cultures have been balanced by the extraordinary proliferation of new non-Western pop genres.”³⁴ This impression is further

33. Chris Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall, “Contemporary Aboriginal Music,” in *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music in Australia*, ed. Shane Homan and Tony Mitchell (University of Tasmania, Hobart: ACYS Publishing, 2008), 264.

34. Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), vi.

reinforced by Philip Allen's assessment of globalisation's effect on the symbolic linkage that has subsumed into the Aboriginal musical rhetoric as a symbiotic relationship with the land: "Even though the style of music was changing away from the more traditional ways, the same themes of land, events, and important occasions were still being sung about by Aboriginal people. This, as in the old days, was a way of communicating...[about] historical events and issues of importance."³⁵ "Warumpinya" therefore performs a crucial role in signifying indigenous politics. The song is conducive in inscribing Warumpi as a physical space of geo-political importance, pointing to potential directions in which Aboriginal empowerment and regional development strategies could take.³⁶ To this end, Warumpi Band has formed a musical expression of Aboriginal identity that assists in contextualising a political landscape for both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences. In so doing, they reveal the current lack of legal recognition of traditional sovereignty.

Yothu Yindi

Aboriginal popular music has presented a unified front to the West through mass-marketed recordings containing socio-political messages. This final case study is based on the Arnhem Land rock group, Yothu Yindi. Through their music, the band aims to crystallise the broad

35. Philip Allen, "An Unbroken Tradition: A Tradition That Adapts," *Tjunguringanyi* 12, no. 2 (1992): 16.

36. Chris Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall, "Mediating Contemporary Aboriginal Music: Discussions of the Music Industry in Australia," *Perfect Beat: The Journal of Research into Contemporary Music and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2004): 22.

spectrum of their political claims and assertions of indigenous land rights.³⁷ Textural readings of various Yothu Yindi's songs are detailed in this study to examine how the meanings and structures of traditional musical texts are being translated into a popular music genre as part of the symbolic construction of Aboriginal identity and place.

The band's name stems from the traditional ideology of kinship relations between *yothu* ("mother") and *yindi* ("child"), which links the physical with the spiritual world, and the past with the present.³⁸ In dismissing European cultural values, Yothu Yindi restructures the musical texts by implementing a mixture of ritual symbolisms and concerns with colonial hegemony, as commented by Stephen Yunupingu, singer of the *Soft Sands* band:

We have to protect the background and be strong because our ancestors fought for their rights. Through words and feelings in the songs, we show our political history. We claim the rivers and the land through song. You can change the song but not the land. The land is our *märr* (essence)—it stays forever.³⁹

37. Jill Stubington and Peter Dunbar-Hall, "Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty': Ganma in Music," *Popular Music* 13, no. 3 (October 1994): 246, doi:10.1017/S0261143000007182.

38. Philip Hayward and Karl Neuenfeldt, "Yothu Yindi: Context and Significance," in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics, and Popular Music in the Pacific*, ed. Philip Hayward (London: Cassell, 1998), 177.

39. Fiona Magowan, "The Land Is Our *Märr* (Essence), It Stays Forever: The Yothu-Yindi Relationship in Australian Aboriginal Traditional and Popular Musics," in *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 1994), 147.

Yothu Yindi's adapted musical texts emphasise socio-political motives of Aboriginal identity that underpin their rights to the land. The song "Tribal Voice" expresses the right for equal recognition between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.⁴⁰ It is an enthusiastic proclamation for Aboriginal communities to unite against the encroaching discourse of government policies:

All the people
In the world are dreaming (get up, stand up)
Some of us cry, cry, cry
For the rights of survival now (get up, stand up)
Saying "Come on, come on"
Stand up for your rights (get up, stand up)
While others don't give a damn
They're all waiting for a perfect day
You'd better get up and fight for your rights⁴¹

In this song, the fourteen of the thirty-two clans of the Arnhem Land region are then called upon to unite and account for their struggles to survive:

You better listen to your Gumatj voice
You better listen to your Rirratjingu voice
You better listen to your Wanguri voice
You better listen to your Warramiri voice⁴²

40. Aaron Corn, "Land, Song, Constitution: Exploring Expressions of Ancestral Agency, Intercultural Diplomacy and Family Legacy in the Music of Yothu Yindi with Mandawuy Yunupingu," *Popular Music* 29, no. 1 (January 2010): 83, doi:10.1017/S0261143009990390.

41. Aaron Corn, *Reflections & Voices: Exploring the Music of Yothu Yindi with Mandawuy Yunupingu* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), 85.

42. *Ibid.*, 86.

From this point, the idea of indigenous sovereignty becomes an imperative constituent of the song's meaning. The recognition of Aboriginal rights does not just involve identifying the people, but also their homelands and the song associated with them. However, this geo-political notion of traditional land ownership is frequently met with fierce opposition from the non-indigenous population.⁴³ As such, the prospect of losing land to mining companies has dominated current debates among the wider Australian institutions, policies, and audiences.

In another song, "Treaty," Yothu Yindi stresses the dilemma of land ownership by reflecting on the Australian bicentennial tensions in 1988, which marked the doctrine of *terra nullius* ("land belonging to no one") that underwrote British sovereignty over the nation.⁴⁴ These feelings of mistrust were intensified by the threat of losing more land to mining companies, as expressed in the musical text:

Verse 1: Back in 1988

All those talking politicians
Words are easy, words are cheap
Much cheaper than our priceless land
But promises can disappear
Just like writing in the sand

43. Randy R. Grant, Kandice L. Kleiber, and Charles E. McAllister, "Should Australian Aborigines Succumb to Capitalism?," *Journal of Economic Issues* 39, no. 2 (June 2005): 393, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4228151>.

44. Jane M. Jacobs, "'Shake 'im this country': The Mapping of the Aboriginal Sacred in Australia—the case of Coronation Hill," in *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*, ed. Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose (London: UCL Press, 1993), 115.

Verse 2: This land was never given up
This land was never bought and sold
The planting of the Union Jack
Never changed our law at all⁴⁵

However, “Treaty” offers a possible solution to local and national tensions in the form of reconciliation. Based on the desire for unity through cross-cultural exchange and equality, these sentiments are emphasised later in the musical text. Water metaphors are used to indicate a dynamic future for the co-existence between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians:

Now two rivers run their course
Separated for so long
I’m dreaming of a brighter day
When the waters will be one
Treaty yeh! Treaty now!⁴⁶

In this way, David Coplan observed: “The language of a song is thus a vehicle for bringing comprehension and autonomous social action to bear upon forces so often beyond the singers’ control.”⁴⁷

Sung entirely in the Yolngu language, the song “Matjala” adopts the *yothu-yindi* ideology of working and

45. Corn, *Reflections & Voices*, 74.

46. Lisa Nicol, “Culture, Custom and Collaboration: The Production of Yothu Yindi’s ‘Treaty’ Videos,” in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics, and Popular Music in the Pacific*, ed. Philip Hayward (London: Cassell, 1998), 188.

47. David B. Coplan, “Musical Understanding: The Ethnoaesthetics of Migrant Workers’ Poetic Song in Lesotho,” *Ethnomusicology* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 367, doi:10.2307/851936.

caring for each other as the constructive way forward for a cordial settlement between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The rules of traditional song composition have been appropriated to suit a contemporary music genre. The song's text uses a collection of imageries that symbolise the social identities of different Aboriginal clans. In ritual, each of these totems enacts a complete song item.⁴⁸ Here, they are combined in the complete text, which is musically modified to suit Western melody, harmony, and rhythm.

In "Matjala," the symbolic imagery of driftwood is an identifier of the Rirratjingu and Gumatj clans. This analogy is then extended to their ancestral spirit that is referred to as *Maypurumburr* ("morning star pole"). This totem comprises of a wooden pole to which feathers are attached to represent the backbone or foundation of the clan's identity (see fig. 5). The branches of the pole signify the interrelated links within the clan through descendants from marriage.⁴⁹ Thus, textual allusions to the driftwood and the pole envisage the clan's traditional knowledge, linking them with their homeland and ancestral spiritual realm:

Gumatj Rirratjingu nhina mala wanggany
Miyaman manikay ngaraca Maypurumburr
Ngathi miyaman Gunda Rirraliny
Dhiyala nhin. Mala wanggany.

48. Vicki Grieves, "Aboriginal Spirituality: A Baseline for Indigenous Knowledges Development in Australia," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 28, no. 2 (2008): 369, <http://www3.brandonu.ca/library/cjns/28.2/07Grieves.pdf>.

49. Toner, "Tropes of Longing and Belonging," 18.

[Gumatj and Rirratjingu sit together as one people
They sing the song of Maypurumburr
They cry of the stony gravel path
Here they sit. One people.]⁵⁰

FIGURE 5. *Maypurumburr* (“morning star pole”)

50. Magowan, “‘The Land Is Our *Märr* (Essence), It Stays Forever,’” 150.

Through affiliations with Aboriginal physical and spiritual identities, Yothu Yindi's music has provided a figurative core that enables indigenous Australians to maintain a strong independent identity that is resistant to colonial influences. This expression of Aboriginal identity was depicted in an interview with Yothu Yindi's lead singer, Mandawuy Yunupingu:

There is a fear of losing one's culture because of the white man's influence. So what we've tried to do with Yothu Yindi is creating something about Aborigines taking pride in their identity, taking pride in their music, taking pride in their dance, taking pride in their rituals, taking pride in their secret sacred ceremonies. All those aspects of reality one should take seriously, which shouldn't be considered as if trivial.⁵¹

Further, the symbolism of sunset in "Matjala" comprises a double meaning. The deep red glow in the clouds and sky evokes the blood of descendants who have been killed throughout Australia's troubled history.⁵² The song serves as a harrowing memory of those who are gone, eventually fuelling ongoing efforts to fight for recognition of indigenous rights. Yunupingu expressed this sentiment in a

51. Karl W. M. Neuenfeldt, "Yothu Yindi: Agendas and Aspirations," in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics, and Popular Music in the Pacific*, ed. Philip Hayward (London: Cassell, 1998), 199.

52. Stubington and Dunbar-Hall, "Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty': Ganma in Music," 258.

poignant statement: “It’s not just the sunset on the west side but at the deceased’s homeland itself and the *warwu* (worry, anxiety) within it. By singing we send the message through the sunset.”⁵³ At the same time, by describing the spectral colours of the sunset, “Matjala” is also representative of the movement towards reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians:

Djapana warwu
Lithara Wartjapa
Miny yjinydja Garrumara

[The sunset carries our worries
It burns a deep red pink and orange
The colours of the vibrant red glow]⁵⁴

From these textual readings, imageries form an integral component of Aboriginal cultural expression. However, the prevalent use of Aboriginal dialects in Yothu Yindi’s music means that the majority of non-indigenous audiences are excluded from developing a deeper appreciation of its symbolism. To remedy this barrier, these ritual values are reinforced through Yothu Yindi’s stylised use of dance space, the energy of the visual display, and the articulation of traditional instruments and voices.⁵⁵ These artistic strategies are specifically employed to enhance a non-indigenous understanding of Aboriginal culture.

Yothu Yindi ultimately transfers entire concepts of Aboriginal worldview into the meaning of their songs. In

53. Magowan, “‘The Land Is Our *Märr* (Essence), It Stays Forever’,” 150–51.

54. Corn, *Reflections & Voices*, 64.

55. Nicol, “Culture, Custom and Collaboration,” 185.

executing musically and textually innovative devices to highlight social anxieties and concerns, they gained unique exposure to huge local and international audiences during the early 1990s. Moreover, they demonstrated that the understanding of musical texts is not a necessity for inducing support for a cause. As summarised by Roman Jakobson, “Performance and context actively constitute one another and are not empirically divisible.”⁵⁶ From this understanding, through their music, Yothu Yindi show a common concern for the welfare of the individuals. Both the visual effects and the sounds of their songs are actively engaged in the socio-political backdrop of Aboriginal identity.⁵⁷ As such, Yothu Yindi has constructed an influential and successful way of using an indigenous performance aesthetic to articulate the demands of Aboriginal groups.

Aboriginal popular music remains a critical force in mediating socio-political agendas and imparting the aspirations of indigenous communities onto the Australian and global consciousness. While tension and struggle pervade indigenous affairs at the national level, contemporary Aboriginal artists recognise the indispensable value of music as a tool for raising political awareness to a wider listening public.⁵⁸ This form of communication with non-indigenous Australians continues to be a major medium to promote

56. Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 371.

57. Rosita Henry, “Performing Place: Staging Identity with the Kuranda Amphitheatre,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (December 1999): 355, doi: 10.1111/j.1835-9310.1999.tb00029.x.

58. Martin Stokes, “Music and the Global Order,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (October 2004): 67, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143916.

acceptance for strategies of nationhood and recognition of rights in land and law. As illuminated by Lily Kong, “Popular musics are not only reflective of social change, but are implicated in social change as mediatory texts.”⁵⁹

One of the most significant functions of popular music is the consolidated representation of Aboriginal identity and place. Through my investigation of the three case studies, I have offered an analytical framework of how the localised contexts of Aboriginal rock groups contribute to the construction and expression of Aboriginal themes and issues on a national level. While several indigenous Australians affiliate themselves with a specific language-speaking community, the portrayal of Aboriginal identity in the mass media often appeals to the idea of Aboriginal people being an ethnic grouping within the Australian nation, analogous to an indigenous black nation within a larger multiethnic one.⁶⁰ As a consequence, Aboriginal rock groups operate under a pan-Aboriginal identity that is increasingly networked with other activities, such as protests, rallies, and symbolic acts, to engage in mainstream Australian politics. With this homogenised depiction of Aboriginal identity and place, popular music successfully emerges as a unified political block

59. Lily Kong, “Popular Music in Geographical Analyses,” *Progress in Human Geography* 19, no. 2 (June 1995): 189, doi:10.1177/030913259501900202.

60. Kay J. Anderson, “Constructing Geographies: Race, Place and the Making of Sydney’s Aboriginal Redfern,” in *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*, ed. Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose (London: UCL Press, 1993), 138.

along with the indigenous land rights movement in the face of unfavourable socio-political circumstances.⁶¹

Beyond reinscribing indigenous meanings and initiatives on a post-colonial setting, Aboriginal rock groups have also asserted the validity of traditional sovereignty over the country that calls for reconciliation of the tensions between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. For Jupurrula, “The underlying feature...is about being one, of Australia’s people being one, being together in various aspects of what we do, particularly having to live in this part of the world as a collective group I guess. The concept is actually reconciliation.”⁶² Thus, Aboriginal popular music functions as a symbolic marker of indigenous land rights struggles and a source in which musical inspiration can be drawn. Through music, both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians are able to make sense of the socio-political relations that continue to be contested and negotiated in the country.

61. Michael C. Howard, *Aboriginal Power in Australian Society* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1982), 65.

62. M. Smith, “Blekbala Songlines,” *Drum Media*, January 1996, quoted in Chris Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall, “‘Nitmiluk’: Place, Politics and Empowerment in Australian Aboriginal Popular Music,” in *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jennifer C. Post (New York: Routledge, 2006), 398.

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