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Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Indigenous Australia

edited by Jim Wafer and Myfany Turpin

426 pp., Hunter Press, 2017,
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Recirculating Songs is a substantial volume, comprised of 17 chapters (plus an introduction and index), by 28 authors, on the documentation and revitalisation of songs and singing practices in Indigenous Australia. The seventeenth of these chapters is a structured and annotated list of colonial-era musical translations of Australian Indigenous songs (Skinner and Wafer). The rest of the contributions approach the matter from a range of disciplinary perspectives including ethnomusicology, anthropology, linguistics, and history. Several of the authors are themselves members of the Indigenous communities whose songs are being considered. Given the number of chapters, an unavoidable weakness of the book is that each contribution is very short and can hardly provide in-depth analysis of the situation it presents. However, it is precisely the number and diversity of chapters that makes *Recirculating Songs* an important source book for whoever is interested in Indigenous songs and their revitalisation in Australia. The volume brings answers to key questions on the topic: what, how and why.

What?

Recirculating Songs offers a rich account of Australian songs, ranging from a number of traditional styles (the majority of the chapters) to more recent creations (for instance, Kelly and Harkins on songs from the mid-North Coast of New South Wales, which include some English lyrics; Fairweather, Mathias and Whaleboat on Meriem Mir Christian songs). The number of regions covered is also extensive and widely distributed across the continent. Two chapters present what we know of songs

in south-eastern Australia, where little has been recorded due to early colonisation (McDonald, Wafer). More radically modern productions such as rock bands and pop singers are not included. This is understandable as this would require another volume of the same size, but modern practices will be an interesting topic for future publications (see below).

The descriptions of songs in this volume often feature transcripts and scores, supporting specialised discussion of musical structure for the benefit of ethnomusicologists and other specialists (e.g. Laughren, Turpin and Turner on south-east Queensland songs). However, none of the chapters limits itself to such technical formats: the songs are also always discussed in less technical aesthetic terms. The descriptions and analyses of the songs themselves are also well contextualised against musical practices such as *savoir-faire* and concepts surrounding compositional techniques (see Wafer on composition in the Hunter Valley, and his Introduction to the volume) or aesthetical evaluation (McDonald). Importantly, readers are able to readily access recordings, using their smartphone and the QR codes printed in the book.

How?

Most significantly, *Recirculating Songs* offers a detailed, rich and extensive account of the diversity of revitalisation practices and activities around songs and music in Australia. Chapter after chapter, we discover a myriad of different contexts, purposes and tools. We learn for instance about the central role of digital technologies for some revitalisation projects (Treloyn and Morumburri Dowding on *Thabi* songs of the Pilbara), about ‘revitalization cultural camps’ (Turpin on Arrernte women’s song revitalisation enterprise), teenagers’ programs (Emberly, Treloyn and Googninda Charles on youth programs in the Kimberley), as well as the role of songs in festivals, tourism and other public-performance contexts (Nancarrow and Cleary).

Being marginally involved myself, as a linguist, in a song-maintenance process involving a form of ‘cultural camp’, the volume has greatly helped me to put things into perspective and understand the aims and implications of the activities I have observed. *Recirculating Songs* will be a source of data and inspiration for those willing to assist in and/or develop their own projects.

Why?

Another central contribution of the book is to show and explain why songs are important, and what their preservation can contribute. Several chapters highlight how songs can serve as ‘snapshots’ of past lives, bearing the marks of the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced (Kelly and Harkins). Songs also inherently encapsulate insights about languages (Brown et al. and Brown and Evans

on Arnhem Land song traditions). As discussed by Bracknell regarding Noongar songs, these insights are not always immediately accessible, but sometimes need to be deciphered – which makes the exegesis of songs all the more important.

Apart from the knowledge they encode, songs are also eminently emotional cultural items to which people are profoundly attached, as highlighted by Hercus and Koch in their discussion of ‘lone singers’ – the ‘last singers’ of songs that will not survive them. Several chapters point to the empowering role of songs (e.g. Emberly, Treloyn and Googninda Charles’s analysis of youth programs). In fact, many of the chapters, authored or co-authored by Indigenous cultural activists, singers or musicians involved first-hand in the projects they discuss, attest *in themselves* to the value of songs as cultural responses to the hardships of colonisation.

One question that may deserve further attention in the future is the nexus between the attachment to songs on the verge of being forgotten, and the cultural flexibility evidenced by resolute musical innovations.¹ Hercus and Koch describe the sadness and nostalgia of ‘lone singers’. At the same time, several chapters in the book document how new generations can also produce and cherish novel forms (Kelly and Harkins; Fairweather, Mathias and Whaleboat). Beyond this particular volume, the vitality of modern musical productions in Indigenous Australia is obvious. Many Indigenous musicians enjoy significant local success (e.g. Blekbala Mujik, Wildflower and other artists produced by Skinnyfish Music, to cite only a few, from the regions I am familiar with); some of them are nationally acclaimed (Yothu Yindi, Gurrumul). While there is certainly no reason to assume a contradiction between these tendencies – preservation and innovation – it will be interesting to see further research discuss how they interact with and complement each other, both conceptually and in practice.

Recirculating Songs offers a solid basis for reflection as well as action around the documentation and revitalisation of Indigenous songs in Australia. As such, it will be a precious resource for many readers across related disciplines and fields.

Reference

Ottoson, Ase. *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

1 Ottoson, *Making Aboriginal Men and Music*.

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edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2020 by ANU Press,
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