

**Gay'wu Group of Women. *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines.***

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Longlisted for the 2020 Stella Prize, *Song Spirals* is a groundbreaking publication, a unique invitation into Aboriginal women's traditional cultural practices. Written by a collective of Yolŋu and non-Indigenous women known as the Gay'wu Group of Women, their name, Yolŋu for dilly bag, deftly captures the potent container of ideas that reflect the complexity of Yolŋu ontology, epistemology and knowledge. They were given their gay'wu by the Djan'kawu Sisters, ancestral beings who create 'Country, the people, animals, plants and birds. The Djan'kawu Sisters gave us our knowledge, language and Law' (xxi). The text, expressed through song lyrics and stories both traditional and personal, spirals in and out, interweaving layers of time and space and all that contains.

Readers might be familiar with the terms songlines or song cycles, but as the women explain:

In this book, we call them songsprials as they spiral out and spiral in, they go up and down, round and round, forever. They are a line *within* a cycle. They are infinite. They spiral, connecting and remaking. They twist and turn, they move and loop. This is like all our songs. Our songs are not a straight line. They do not move in one direction through time and space. They are a map we follow through Country as they connect to other clans. Everything is connected, layered with beauty. Each time we sing our songsprials we learn more, go deeper, spiral in and spiral out. (xvi)

There is responsibility in reading this book, more so to writing a review. As Sandie Suchet-Pearson, one of non-Aboriginal members of the collective, has said, 'Sharing these stories is not only generous, but also hands on a responsibility to people reading the book. Readers are responsible for taking care of that knowledge—it's not something to be taken lightly' (Molloy 2019). The women tell us 'Respecting the knowledge means not writing about things that you don't understand, not putting things into your own words . . . You can talk about your own experiences and think about how to take lessons from our book into your life' (xxv). Readers are asked to honour and acknowledge the women's knowledge, understanding the limits of what can be shared because some of the layers of meaning in the songsprials are 'too deep and sacred to share' (xxiv).

The Gay'wu Group of Women is a collaboration between five Yolŋu women and three non-Aboriginal women that has existed for over twelve years. Sisters Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs and Banbapuy Ganambarr are elders of Yolŋu in North East Arnhem Land and each a community leader in her own right. Their daughter, Djawundil Maymuru, joins her mothers in the collective. Associate Professors Kate Lloyd, Sandie Suchet-Pearson and Sarah Wright have collaborated on a series of cultural and research projects with the Yolŋu women. Lloyd, Suchet-Pearson and Wright have been adopted into the sisters' family. In being family, they are guided in their journey and the journey together with the sisters. They 'see what it's like being in Yolŋu shoes' (103). Extended details of the women, their relationships, and their affiliations are given in the publication.

Together with Bawaka Country, the Gay'wu Group of Women form the Bawaka Collective. The Collective has published on numerous aspects of their research, including 'Gathering of the Clouds: Attending to Indigenous understandings of time and climate through songspirals' (Bawaka Collective 2020). This recent article concentrates on one of the songspirals described in *Song Spirals*, Wukun, in order to consider how to address climate change from a non-Western perspective.

*Song Spirals* is not easily defined, and certainly cannot be categorised as an academic text; it is rich storytelling, deeply poetic, and deeply intellectual. Distinct as it is from academic accounts of the Yolŋu, including ethnomusicological endeavours, it nevertheless acknowledges work that has been previously carried out by non-Aboriginal researchers. At the same time, it is recognised that far too much has been produced by white male academics. Some academic texts are provided as additional sources in the notes section at the end of the publication. Although I am somewhat familiar with elements of that material, particularly that produced by one of the few female academic voices, Fiona Magowan, the difference in learning something of Yolŋu women's musical practice is made richer through the intimate voices of the Gay'wu Group of Women. As the women themselves declare, 'This book is important and powerful because it comes out of Yolŋu minds, Yolŋu hearts, Yolŋu mouths. It is us, speaking for ourselves' (x).

These women speak eloquently, poetically, intimately, proudly, confident in their knowledge and the endeavour of this publication. Their ways of knowing Country, which means not just land but also the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, the ancestors, stories, songs and feelings, everything that comes together to be Country, is intertwined and complex. It is an embodied cartography of place:

Country is the keeper of knowledge . . . Country gives the knowledge . . . It guides us and teaches us. Country has awareness, it is not just a backdrop. It knows and is part of us. Country is our homeland . . . Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way we emerge together, have always emerged together and will always emerge together . . . And Country is the songspirals. It is milkarri . . . It is our cry, the sounds of our keening . . . We keen milkarri for Country and Country keens its milkarri with us. (xxii)

Only women sing milkarri; they cry the songspirals, they keen the songspirals. Milkarri 'is an ancient song, an ancient poem, a map, a ceremony and a guide, but it is more than all this too. Milkarri is a very powerful thing' (xvi). Songspirals have been here forever, they tell us, they come from the land and they create it too.

The volume is divided into five major parts. Each is a songspiral: Wuymirri, the Whale; Wukum, the Gathering of the Clouds; Guwak, the Messenger Bird; Witiitj, the Settling of the Serpent; and Gon-gurtha, the Keeper of the Fire. Each songspiral is translated and some of its poetic meanings are shared. The songspirals, we are told, are ancient but fresh. 'They are always sung. The Rom, the Law, behind songspirals never changes, but the spiral, and the words in them, are always in emergence' (xxvii). While those translations are fascinating and the description of connections—to land, sea, sky, to family, to each other—are explained at some level, the deeper meanings are not ours to know. The deepest layer is the hidden language and 'is only for those who understand, the ones who are taught, only those who have reached that level' (4).

There is enormous complexity in this book and at times one feels lost in the spirals. You wonder, haven't I read that already? But no, not quite like before. There is always a nuance of difference, a fresh set of concepts to grasp, another important aspect of milkarri to gather into your own dilly bag of understanding. There is some curious repetition of words, such as mercurial, but we come to understand that is because of the limitations of English translations for Yolŋu concepts. It is an enriching read and inevitably you get caught by the emotion, for songspirals are grief, pain, joy, love, healing. They are portals into Yolŋu structures of meanings, connections and knowledge that is unfamiliar to most of us but so rich and meaningful that you question your own.

*Song Spirals* is sure to be a challenging read for most readers who are not Yolŋu or familiar with Yolŋu worldviews. Readers from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups might have an easier experience than non-Indigenous readers. Non-indigenous anthropologists and ethnomusicologists might be expected to have some understanding of the content compared with general readers who, as one other reviewer noted, might feel 'unfamiliar with and . . . ill-equipped to understand' (Schroder 2020). But even with an anthropological and ethnomusicological background I will need to read this publication repeatedly, as well as the numerous resources created by the Bawaka Collective, to feel I can comprehend the complexity of songspirals.

As the women tell us in the Djalkiri, the foundation, 'Reading this book is not just about reading and relaxing, it is harder and deeper, but it will give you a chance to understand our culture. It is our life' (xxix). If you're willing to commit, reading this book will not only give you a generous glimpse into Yolŋu worldview but it might also shift your understanding of what it means to be Australian. *Song Spirals* certainly provokes a personal response.

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