

'I Know That Face'

***Murundak: Songs of Freedom* and the Black Arm Band**

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Coming together with the Black Arm Band you realise that, you know, you're not alone—you're not the only one doing this, you're not the only one going out there, you know, singing songs about, you know, about the injustices that have happened to our people.

Archie Roach, *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*

—INTRODUCTION

This essay selects particular moments within the 2011 film *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* which reveal and create strategies used by Aboriginal people to maintain individual memories, recreate collective memory, revive culture and seek justice at both the personal and national levels. Just as the touring concert documented by the

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Figure 1: *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* film poster

Source: Daybreak Films

film enacted deliberate cultural interventions at the specific locations of its performances, the documentary film continues to mediate this intervention, linking the local sites of the national (and British Imperial) reception and swelling the ranks of audience.

We argue that through the film's remapping of 'country' and re-authorising of the Aboriginal troubadour subject, *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* constructs an alternative Australian history for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewers. It manages to construct a history of this scope and magnitude through a variety of strategies: through interweaving various aural and visual texts of memories; through offering the lens and microphone of history to its musical activist actors; through the affective engagement of its soundtrack; and through its positioning of the spectator-audience as receptive to Aboriginal words and points of view. Three

main overlapping phases of the Aboriginal post-contact story are given prominence in this history: the long struggle for survival, recognition and rights against a context of dispossession, prejudice and injustice; the process of healing from this intergenerational legacy of abuse; and the journey towards reconnection—across territory and across generations—with kin and country.

Using the resources of narrative development, *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* gathers, regenerates and interlinks memories of Aboriginal struggle and renewal, suggesting the dimensions of both breadth and depth: breadth in that these memories are drawn from a wide diversity of sources and sites, indicating their representativeness and reach across the vast geography of the continent; depth in that they are shown to have been inherited, and treasured, by successive generations in a continuing line of transmission. These memories become unified—without sacrificing their specificity—by means of the film’s central, knowledgeable and charismatic actors, the musical force called the Black Arm Band, which is itself a constellation of this rich diversity and intergenerational connection—indeed, several members of the band explicitly liken the band to a family. As the film’s protagonists, the Band members are accorded the respected positions of spokespeople about Aboriginal history, advocates for Aboriginal justice and ambassadors for reconciliation. As a celebrated group of individuals who have, through varying circumstances, overcome great obstacles on their paths to success, they collectively serve as a model of community—diverse but united; politically committed but not divisive; modern and mobile, yet still connected (or in the process of reconnecting) to traditional lands, culture and family.

—MURUNDAK, THE CONCERT: ‘WE HAVE SURVIVED’

murundak is the title of the first concert production of the Black Arm Band, an ensemble of Aboriginal musicians and guest artists who delivered their premiere performance at the Melbourne International Arts Festival in October 2006.¹ Aboriginal singer-songwriters including Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Kutcha Edwards, Lou Bennett, Rachel Maza, Joe Geia, Stephen Pigram, Bart Willoughby, Dan Sultan, Emma Donovan, Jimmy Little and Kev Carmody were joined by non-Aboriginal artists such as Paul Kelly, Shane Howard and John Butler to perform such classics as ‘We Have Survived’, ‘Took the Children Away’, ‘Brown Skin Baby’, ‘Solid

Rock', 'Treaty' and 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'. This outstandingly successful production went on to tour for the next two years.²

Although the film does not make specific mention of previous and similarly empowering concerts, it should be acknowledged that the *murundak* concert did not spring from nowhere. Many, but not all, members of the Black Arm Band had played together before, including at major concert events, and some—Bart Willoughby, Joe Geia and Stephen Pigram, for example—had previously been involved as key performers in events such as the 1988 'Building Bridges' concert in Bondi, the Broome Stompen Ground gigs, and the annual 'Invasion' and 'Survival' concerts in Sydney, Melbourne and elsewhere, as well as numerous country-based festivals. As Chris Gibson writes:

Major concert events and indigenous festivals which have become permanent fixtures on the Australian music calendar include the Barunga Festival, held at the Aboriginal community of Barunga near Katherine in the Northern Territory; 'Survival Day' concerts held every Australia Day at La Perouse in Sydney; Darwin's Sing Loud, Play Strong concerts (which in 1996 toured nationally; CAAMA, 1988); the World of Music and Dance festival in Adelaide; and other regular benefits for the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Watch Committee and Aboriginal Legal Aid services.³

It is within this rich and politically progressive festival context that *Murundak*, as a cultural phenomenon, was able to be created.

As a live performance *murundak* undoubtedly performed historical work. In 'charting the soundtrack of over four decades of Australian Aboriginal life' and including narrative and visual references to a much longer past, *murundak* was both a cultural history of Aboriginal protest music and a social memoir of Aboriginal struggles for justice.⁴

Publicity on the official Black Arm Band and *murundak* concert websites focuses on three major themes: history, survival and identity. Connecting these themes, like an indissoluble breath, are songs and struggle, two inseparably related forms of cultural expression and social action. Rather than being compared as opposites, history and the contemporary experience are described as co-extensive, yoked together through this metaphor for the continuity and connectedness of Aboriginal identity:



Figure 2: Archie Roach, Bevan Gapanbulu Yunupingu and Bart Willoughby
Source: Still from *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*, courtesy Daybreak Films

Never before had as much musical talent from Aboriginal Australia come together on one stage to share the story of Aboriginal struggle and the music it inspired.⁵ It is a living, breathing expression of Aboriginal history, resilience and identity and is the songbook of the civil rights movement in Australia charting the soundtrack of over four decades of Australian Aboriginal life. *murundak* is alive with songs that express joy, hope, struggle and compassion. *murundak* re-orchestrates many anthemic works and is performed by many of the original songwriters and artists.⁶

This understanding and expression of Aboriginal Australian history in terms of its aliveness and its currency is hugely significant for a nation of people who were threatened with extinction. The spectre of attempted genocide is built into the very title of the concert production.⁷ The English translation of *murundak* is 'alive'—a word that stands as an incontestable counter-assertion to the colonial, social Darwinist discourses of extinction that described the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia as a doomed and dying race, and the corresponding practices and policies which threatened their survival at both the biological and cultural levels. In 1937,

for instance, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, A.O. Neville, pronounced, 'the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full-blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it [the Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference of 1937] recommends that all efforts be directed to that end'.⁸

Against this history, the title *murundak* amplifies the sentiment and stance of one of the many anthemic songs featured in the concerts and in the film—Bart Willoughby's defiant protest song, 'We have survived':

You can't change the rhythm of my soul
You can't tell me what to do
You can't break my bones by putting me down
Or by taking the things that belong to me.
We have survived a white man's world ...
And you can't change that.⁹

The title also goes a step further than simple assertion in that, as a word from the Woirurrung language, *murundak* must be translated in order to be understood by non-Aboriginal listeners. Thus the concert offers its address, symbolically at least, under the sign of Aboriginal cultural ownership and is, in the first instance, addressed to Aboriginal people. The tables have been turned in a post-colonial move that symbolically and significantly reframes the relationship between 'them' (the non-Aboriginal) and 'us' (Aboriginal Australians).

—PERFORMING A CULTURAL INTERVENTION

As a touring concert, *murundak* used the combined forces of live musical performance and projected archival stills and film clips—sound, image and performer—to deliver its aims directly to assembled audiences at particular venues throughout Australia and also in London. As a documentary of this concert *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* has, by virtue of its filmic medium, necessarily lost the live performance dimension and the particular frisson that occurs in the atmosphere between the Black Arm Band musicians and the crowd. Watching the concert footage and listening to the soundtrack, we are one step removed from the experience of actually being there at the gig. However, other intensities are gained by film's inherent capacity for controlling shots and edits and orchestrating point-of-

view. While it contracts the duration of individual song performances, the film greatly expands the number of concert locations and registers the duration and scope of the concert tour. It also greatly expands the audience reach of the Black Arm Band, its history and its motivations.

But it is not our intention here to make comparative evaluations of the concert versus the film. The concert is the primary source 'document' for the film and also its *raison d'être*, but equally it provides a platform from which the work started in the concert could be recorded, preserved and amplified in the film product. By also weaving together interviews with the artists, and footage taken at band rehearsals, backstage and on the road, the film becomes an expanded history of a concert that was itself a history of songs and struggles.

In reconstructing a history of an oppressed and marginalised people, the film provides a framework upon which the retrieval and representation of memories can be built. Memory is engaged in a number of different dimensions and forms, including personal, oral testimony, traumatic, inchoate memory and recorded 'public' or 'official' memory. The film provides opportunities for the marginalised, individual memories of trauma and survival to gather volume, and a sense of shared existence, through being multiplied and repeated through different voices, songs and stories. This is powerful and important cultural work because, as Maurice Halbwachs writes, memory needs social frameworks:

It is in society that [people] recall, recognise and localize their memories ... Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs ... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection.¹⁰

It is in this sense that the film can call itself a 'social memoir', a text that allows Aboriginal memories to be recognised and articulated as collective memory, imbued also with a living sense of history, historical agency and justice.¹¹

Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson describe the ways in which contemporary Aboriginal musicians use musical expression as interventionist texts, 'making music as deliberate representations of themselves, Aboriginal cultures and places' with a

desire to 'broadcast these ideas nationally and internationally'. They state that this use of music:

may be seen as responding to myths about Aboriginal people and culture, the result of the need to counteract degrading images and treatment of Aboriginal people. Taken another way, this music is sometimes more overtly protest music. At the same time it becomes a proactive use of music as a means of affirming identity, and of reviving and reinterpreting cultural practices, some of which had been limited to older generations. In Aboriginal English this concept is summed up in the term 'survival', and music has played a large part in this agenda, both as expression of culture, and expression about culture.¹²

As Rachel Maza says to audiences from the stage during the Womadelaide concert, the Black Arm Band sets out to perform a deliberate 'cultural intervention' into the racially biased political interventions and cultural misunderstandings that Aboriginal people were and are subjected to in Australia. It is with this 'interventionist' cultural history, of both concert and film, that we are concerned.

—CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE NATIONAL HISTORY

Murundak: Songs of Freedom develops around a tripartite structure where a progress narrative of Aboriginal activism—from struggle, through healing, to reconnection—stands out from, and answers back to, a background of white Australian policy making. Following the Black Arm Band as it tours across Australia and around London, the film chronicles the band members' readings of the contemporary politics of Australian history, highlighting their current activism and embedding it in a longer and larger context of Aboriginal protest. Full authority is given to Aboriginal points of view throughout the film, authority which is distributed in a variety of types of discourses—notably those expressed in songs, performances, archival news reportage and testimonials—and enhanced by the filming of individual band members in 'country', that is, in their places of birth and/or family history. Reinscribing these locations as places of belonging, the film delivers a secure, place-based platform from which the Black Arm Band performers are 'naturally' authorised to be troubadour spokespeople for the nation's full history.

In his discussion of a number of significant national inquiries and legal judgements concerning Aboriginal issues that occurred during the 1990s, Chris Healy has described the ways in which these 'institutional practices of memory ... reconfigured the relationships between Aboriginality and national heritage'.¹³ He makes special note of the pronouncements and recommendations concerning the telling of history that are used in public reports such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), the Mabo judgement (1993), the Wik judgement (1996) and the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997). For instance, in relation to the Mabo judgement, Healy writes:

It is not just that 'a distortion in the history of Australia' has to be corrected. A new history is required; a new history that not only tells different stories about Aboriginal people, but also tells different stories about non-Aboriginal people.¹⁴

Murundak: Songs of Freedom is not, of course, a legal or governmental document. It is a pleasurable cinematic production, addressed to and able to reach a different audience through its specific medium. It is, however, an equally significant document in which the conditions of reception have been made possible by the momentous and painful struggles of Aboriginal communities and their supporters to bring their histories into the public record. This long campaign, fought on many fronts over many decades, has slowly, but powerfully, contested the dominant *terra nullius* version of colonial Australian settlement. The film repeatedly remembers these struggles and is itself a confident testament to successful outcomes—especially to those achievements that relate to being heard, to creating spaces for Aboriginal memory at the national level and thereby affecting the national dialogue. As Lou Bennett says, when reflecting on the changed historical landscape following the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008—a major and pivotal event within the film's structure—'as a nation we're starting to just listen'.

Murundak: Songs of Freedom offers the type of history that the authors of the Mabo report called for; one 'that not only tells different stories about Aboriginal people, but also tells different stories about non-Aboriginal people'.¹⁵ The film offers more than a parallel to mainstream history of a marginalised and oppressed group of people. It constructs a post-contact, living history of Aboriginal survival that is also an alternative national history. The national history performed by the film

combats the deeply entrenched and popular pioneer-settler-digger narrative of Australian nation-making, a narrative which made a fierce come back in the so-called 'history wars' that raged through the decade of John Howard's prime ministership.¹⁶

—A NARRATIVE OF MEMORIES

Murundak: Songs of Freedom is full of memories. People, places, performances and songs are all entwined in this film's representation of an unextinguished Aboriginal heritage of survival, struggle and renewal in the face of a multitude of injustices and losses. This heritage is remembered in individual testimonies by members of the Black Arm Band; through representations of touring and locations; in songs and concert performances; and through the inclusion of archival footage. In the remainder of this article we turn our attention to a detailed consideration of these memory performances within the film.

The public archive

Murundak: Songs of Freedom immediately inserts its subject—the musicians and their performances—into a historical narrative of protest. Interwoven through testimonies is a selection of archival film footage that creates a visual record of public protest by Aboriginal people since the late 1960s. Archival footage signifies public memory. One of its purposes in the film is to provide a base of recorded Aboriginal history with which the band members can connect, and upon which they can extend their stories. We see footage of demonstrations campaigning for civil rights, land rights, Aboriginal sovereignty and human rights. There is also background footage during the concerts of the establishment of the Tent Embassy—a foundational moment in the establishment of pan-Aboriginal identity which produced the Aboriginal flag. The first piece of archival footage sees activists from the 1970s taking to the streets, marching together under a banner that reads 'Free Black Australia' and others that read 'No Mining on Sacred Land' and 'Support the Kimberley Land Council'. A few frames further in, the film shows more feet, and more banners inscribed with the words 'Is White always right' and 'we have bugger all'. The film also employs the motif of the journey to link the contemporary musicians, their music, lyrics and stage, to the past activists, their chanting, slogans

and platforms. As the demonstrators took to the streets in past years, so the Black Arm Band take to the road to launch their concert of protest. As the protagonists of the film, the Black Arm Band members are the figures who focus and unite its narrative, and who, through their journeying, draw others into its texture.

While embedding its contemporary 'touring band' narrative firmly within this long history of political struggle, *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* also progresses its three phases of protest, healing and reconnection through a structure that selects three key political moments in Australia's recent history, all of which are directly witnessed and commented upon by the Black Arm Band musicians. These are John Howard's public criticism of 'this black armband view of our past'; Kevin Rudd's National Apology to the Stolen Generations; and the Northern Territory intervention that followed and responded to the publication of *The Little Children Are Sacred Report*. The film reconstructs these events of public rhetoric, delivered by the leaders of state, using televised speeches and radio reports and interviews. As publicly mediated texts, they register the shift in attitude within government policy from denial to responsibility in relation to the dispossession, dislocation and marginalisation of Aboriginal people since European settlement.

It is interesting that the filmmakers chose to begin with Howard's disparagement, rather than, say, Paul Keating's stirring Redfern Park speech (which is not included in the film at all). The significance of Howard's denial is that it expressly calls for an end to remembering. It was Howard's words that provided the catalyst for the defiant formation of The Black Armband and its *murundak* concert tour. Even before the title credits, the main body of the film opens with the following printed text, extracted from Howard's speech (a longer section of this speech is later viewed by the band on a television screen backstage at their Sydney Opera House concert):

This black armband view of our past reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. I take a very different view. John Howard.

In addition to the band appropriating Howard's phrase, first coined by Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey and relentlessly circulated by the media and right-wing political strategists and academics, the film as a whole responds to Howard's 'very

different view' of history; a view which is, of course, the settler view.¹⁷ According to Howard's view, grief and mourning—at least as far as Aboriginal dispossession and abuse are concerned—are illegitimate ways of remembering, and inappropriate bases for building a history of the nation. The privileged positioning of Howard's words at the opening of the film foregrounds the counter-discursive strategies that will work through the film, and indeed through the music and activism it charts.

The second text—newly elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's televised National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008—takes up much more screen time and space in the film, and is accompanied by extensive footage of large crowds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians moved to tears as they view it on huge screens from the lawns outside the Parliament House in Canberra. Howard's speech is remembered in the film as divisive, and Rudd's as reconciling. In a radio interview that blares from the tour bus as the band take to the road, the interviewer puts the following question to Rachel Maza: 'Some media historians have criticised the black armband view of Australian history. You think that's fair?' Maza replies:

Like we've just had this apology and that's exactly what the Black Arm Band reference is—it's to John Howard's government not able to say sorry—and here we are, a month out of hearing what was one of the most historical moments in Australian history.

Howard's disparaging term, the 'black armband', is repositioned and re-referenced by the Aboriginal musicians: the 'black arm' becomes aligned with skin colour and the body;¹⁸ the 'band' becomes aligned with the collective, the group; the trace of mourning in 'armband' still echoes, but its meaning has now become integrated with the rightful grieving of, and for, Aboriginal-identified identity. The confident tone of *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* is in no small way attributable to the belief, inspired by the national apology, that Australia is ready to listen to its whole history. As Chris Healy has written:

Rudd's apology brought into existence a new public truth, built on the persistence of Aboriginal memory ... an emblematic memory; a new sense of the past in the public sphere which integrated personal memories with a framework for interpreting historical experience ... As well as gesturing towards a bright and better future, the leader began by speaking about a damaged and painful past.¹⁹

The third key political announcement that is represented as mobilising the Black Arm Band, the Federal Government's Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), is heard being discussed on radio as the tour bus heads into the Northern Territory. In 2007, the Federal Government announced the NTER and began what quickly became known as the NT 'intervention'. This policy involved measures such as 'sending police and the army into remote communities, alcohol bans, winding back Aboriginal land rights under the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act, health checks for Aboriginal children and the quarantining of welfare payments in 73 Aboriginal communities'.²⁰ Jacqueline Phillips, national director of ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation) has written, 'while few denied the urgent need to act, many were shocked and angered at the failure to engage communities in developing solutions'.²¹

Playback of radio interviews with different band members about the effects of this policy on remote Aboriginal communities is part of a layered audio that accompanies the *murundak* tour. It is proof of a network of communication via technology that remote communities rely upon and exploit. Members of the Black Arm Band speak disparagingly of this 'disgusting' contemporary policy as a huge step backwards, likening it to the paternalistic days of missions when rations were handed out to Aboriginal people. It is against the backdrop of this policy, and while taking their concert to Northern Territory communities, that the Black Arm Band make their counter-announcement, declaring their performance to be 'a cultural intervention'. Where the government's intervention is about controlling, prohibiting and restricting, the Black Arm Band's intervention is about freely giving and being received in a spirit of trust. This play on words is typical of the tactical strategies the Black Arm Band employs in its self-referencing and positioning. By appropriating a key phrase and turning it back on itself in a delegitimising move (as they have also done with their band's name), the *murundak* cultural intervention becomes an intervention in the government's intervention.

Testimonials

Throughout the film, specific song performances are consistently introduced and framed by the writers and singers' first-person recollections of the songs' conceptions and reflections on what the songs meant to them and other listeners at

the time of their first recordings. These song-related recollections, or histories of songs, are also used as a way of linking to more painful personal and social testimonials. As Joe Geia puts it:

When I was demonstrating in the 70s there was a lot of Aboriginal people going to court for being politically minded or demonstrating in a public place. Talking with a megaphone and fighting against the Queensland police I always thought the megaphone wasn't all that good, you know—I should get a roadie to set all this up for me, get me a big 12 channel and I'd say it politically through the music.

There are two main types of testimonials given throughout the film: testimonies that emphasise survival and testimonies that express loss. The former come from veteran activists such as Joe Geia, Bart Willoughby, Dave Arden and Stephen Pigram, who have battled and survived 'the white man's world ... the torment of it all' (to quote from the chorus of Bart Willoughby's 'We Have Survived'). As Willoughby puts it: 'Some of us old fellas, we've got some sort of Vietnam syndrome, you know, and we've never even been in a war.' The latter type of testimony comes from members of the Stolen Generations, such as Ruby Hunter, Kutcha Edwards and Archie Roach, who tell personal stories of being taken from their families as children. We see archival footage of Aboriginal children being educated in mission schools accompanying Ruby Hunter's and Archie Roach's paralleled testimonies of being taken from their families. The footage appears without voice-over commentary. It is offered as visual supporting evidence of Ruby's and Archie's stories, its theme of the intrusive regimentation and control of children makes a chilling contrast between a faceless policy and the intensely personal testimonies that are being disclosed.

Both types of testimony, moving in themselves, also resonate throughout the entire film, and provide deep layers of connection between the individual songs. They also provide participants with occasions to reflect upon the salvation and transformative role of music. Joe Geia, for instance, describes the elation that comes from the collective support of the band contributing its voice, its harmonies: 'Sharing the stage now, you know, in our music performance, saying yeah sister, yeah brother, I'll uplift your lyrics, your song.' Bart Willoughby describes 'We Have Survived' as 'destined, 'cause of—how things were developing. It's music being nurtured in wartime, 'cause it is a battlefield out there.' Ruby Hunter talks about her

years of living on the streets and how this experience of homelessness, poverty and addiction was the basis for her song writing. Addressing the London audience, Kutcha Edwards holds up framed photographs of his deceased parents and dedicates his song 'Is This What We Deserve?' to their memory. Archie Roach recalls not wanting to write what has become the anthem for the Stolen Generations, 'Took the Children Away', partly because he was too young to remember being taken:

It wasn't really my idea at the start, to write a song about being taken. My Uncle Banjo said 'why don't you write a song about when you was taken away.' And I said 'but why would I want to write about that. Don't remember that much about it anyway, I was just a little fella. And he said, he looked at me and he said, 'yeah but I do.' He started telling me these yarns, you know, about me father.

Writing of the first person testimonies in the *Bringing Them Home* report, Healy notes:

one of the terrible consequences of these [assimilation] policies ... is the absence of memory produced by the removal of children from families and communities. In many cases, witnesses do not have memories of family, law, country or language, not because they have been forgotten, but because the time during which these experiences would have been acquired was stolen. Stolen time cannot be returned.'

Healy agrees with John Frow who, he writes, argues that 'giving public voice to witnesses, in tracing the scars, and in enumerating policies and practices ... enables remembering to open up a space of listening in the present and, perhaps, to reshape contemporary conversation about pain, ethics and justice'.²² This process is borne out by Archie Roach's story. Thus the experience of writing 'Took the Children Away' became the means not of restoring a memory that had been lost, but of becoming reconnected to the story of his loss. Roach describes this as a profoundly healing process, for himself and for his audience of listeners:

I just feel it, filling up my whole being, you know, and you walk away, stronger, you know, and you're not bleeding, you're not hurt, you haven't hurt anybody else, you know, you haven't bled them. You might have touched them [he pats his chest] here—and that's all you want to do to

people now, it's the only place you really want to touch them, here [pats his chest again].

On tour to sites of memory

The many images of the band members driving, walking or flying between locations spatially represents, and synchronises with, the temporal passage of memory as it tracks into the past from the present—as if remembrance is a process and memory is a destination, a quality residing in specific geographical locations. Members of the band, and by extension the audience, are put into contact with the memories held in country, through travelling, gathering and being received at particular places.

The 'journey' also works as a mode of politics and remembering in *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*, as in Aboriginal politics more generally, and, as mentioned earlier, journeying is an organising principle within the film. Past and present activist 'movements' are subtly linked through the motif of the bus ride: the 1965 Freedom Ride through New South Wales, for example, is referenced within the film and there is a sense of 'repetition' of this historically significant bus journey in the band-on-tour scenes.²³ It is hard to resist seeing the parallel between the students protesting racial discrimination as they travelled from town to town drawing public attention to the barriers that existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents and the Black Arm Band as they drive into, meet with and film the remote northern Aboriginal communities affected by the contemporary intervention policy. At the same time, journey is powerful trope in the memories, representations and narratives of the Stolen Generations—and in this sense *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* bears resemblance to films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Philip Noyce, 2002) and *Link-Up Diary* (David McDougall, 1987) where the journey to return home provides the narrative centre.

Murundak: Songs of Freedom begins with Emma Donovan's feet walking down a red dirt track in central Australia. This visual trope of travelling through country heralds one of the core projects within the film—to remap Australian country by identifying sites of political campaigns and personal origins for Aboriginal Australians. Emma, one of the youngest members of the Black Arm Band, is singing



Figure 3: Emma Donovan

Source: Source: Still from *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*, courtesy Daybreak Films

the song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', co-written by Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly—possibly the most famous of all Aboriginal protest songs and certainly an anthem of the land rights movement. The song is a ballad that remembers the land rights struggle of the Gurindji people at Wattie Creek in the 1960s, and memorialises the heroism of its leader, Vincent Lingiari. The song emphasises the link between places and Aboriginal political history. Sung by Emma, in country, this history is carried by, and resounds within, a new generation.

Most of the testimonies of individual band members are given within country; that is, the shot literally frames human figures against various outdoor locations. Stylistically, this resists the colonising gaze that has persistently naturalised native people within landscape, while instead asserting a spatial context from which memories can be spoken. This visual mechanism subtly, yet effectively, re-joins the dots between individuals, families and homelands, and suggests a rich tracery of lines of connection across the country.

The film also distinguishes members of the band by concentrating on their disparate starting locations, focusing briefly on each in turn as they prepare their

departures, walking, loading cars, driving, waving goodbyes, before their convergence at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the premier performing arts location in contemporary Australia. This demonstrates the scope and diversity of the artists' journeys—the variety of homelands, the different routes across the country they each take—and from this diversity comes the strength of the call to arms.

Murundak: Songs of Freedom divides the *murundak* tour into halves. In the first the band is engaged in what Marcia Langton has called 'an intercultural dialogue'—mainly with non-Aboriginal audiences through large-scale festivals (for example, Womadelaide, Perth), international concert venues (such as the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, London) and stages in the capital cities (like the Sydney Opera House).²⁴ Their arrival in London links the band's contemporary protest back to a memory of English colonial imperialism. As Shane Howard remarks 'the consequences were returning, with attitude and a story to tell'.

The other performances occur where the band comes back their starting points, directing the audience, in a returning movement, to locations that are sources of personal and family relationships and also of a shared political history for the members of the band. In Alice Springs, for example, we see Dan Sultan introducing his aunties to other band members and in Broome Stephen Pigram is congratulated



Figure 4: Dan Sultan

Source: Source: Still from *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*, courtesy Daybreak Films

by his daughter after a concert. In Nitmiluk (overwritten by Europeans as Katherine Gorge) the site of long and bitter struggles for Aboriginal land rights and now the federal government's intervention policy, the Black Arm Band sing Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty', with lyrics in English and Yolngu. This acknowledges that the ongoing struggle of individual communities with regard to their land and heritage is shared and supported by all Aboriginal communities. After this performance the local Aboriginal audience invade the performance area, shaking hands with the members of the Black Arm Band in a show of solidarity. During his interview in his Yolngu country, Gapanbulu Yunupingu, who plays the diggeridu and dances in traditional style throughout this song, recalls that 'Treaty' was written by his grandfather, Mandawuy Yunupingu. He smiles, and says 'I get proud when I hear that song.' Gibson and Dunbar describe Yothu Yindi's songs as:

a form of history, a Yolngu retelling of events from a Yolngu perspective and [they] embody a period of Yolngu legal action, to have their tenure to land recognised. They provide an example of what Attwood (1996) calls 'the new Australian history' ... They do this partly by positioning Yolngu as the centre of the discourse, rather than using them as mere attendant figures.²⁵

Driving into the Northern Territory the film imagines the moving bus as an entity which is advancing in solidarity towards the Aboriginal people living there. In the concerts held in these remote communities the members of the Black Arm Band are swelling the ranks of protest by taking their cultural intervention into the current Northern Territory intervention and reminding communities, through specific songs, of other examples of Aboriginal survival from other historical struggles in the Territory. 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' sings the story of the successful Gurindji land claim, led by Vincent Lingiari; 'Treaty' was written as a protest against the acquisition of Yolngu land in the Gove Peninsula for mining. These songs, which memorialise acts of organised Aboriginal resistance, are led by the band's younger singers, signalling that the memories of these protest events have been vouchsafed to the new generations; they are refreshed, strong and resonant with contemporary life. Emma Donovan articulates her sense of responsibility and authority in the role of inheritor and guardian of cultural memory: 'Some of the songs are older songs that I grew up on and that my dad used to play me, and that was my introduction to

our people and our song, and our story', she says. Reflecting on the production as a whole, Donovan says:

murundak, cos it means alive, for me it means, it's like, you know, singing up them songs again, singing up country again and bringing back things to life ... It almost feels like we are saying that anger for people. When you look at the show as a whole, like when you look at *murundak* and what it stands for, it's like all our stories into one, that's almost like, our big fist, you know.

Reconnection and revival

The number of songs sung in Aboriginal languages increases throughout the film, lending weight to Yunupingu's observation that many Aboriginal people, especially those whose families were displaced and dispersed, have lost their languages. But, he notes with pleasure, 'they are trying to get them back.' It is with the younger generation of Aboriginal musician activists, and with their determined optimism and efforts at language revival, that *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* concludes. Dan Sultan, Shellie Morris, Emma Donovan, Ursula Yovich and Gapanbulu Yunupingu are positioned as the spokespeople for carrying forward the constructive work of protest and Aboriginal renewal. Dan Sultan sings verses of Stephen Pigram's 'Yuln Yuln Girl' in the Yawuru language with his musical 'uncles', the self-described veterans of Aboriginal musical activism, Stephen Pigram, Archie Roach and Joe Geia. Shellie Morris sings the lead, in Yolngu, of 'Treaty'. Emma Donovan sings a lullaby she has written in her local language of Gumbaynggir. It is an example of reviving family relationships through a shared language. The song was written specifically for her nieces, and yet it also contains memories of the Stolen Generation. The lyrics call for protection—'keep you from harm the world can bring'—and each verse rounds off with a request not to forget your dreaming:

Giingan Ganggurriny

Nagaaja Ngiinda Bayi

There is, equally, recognition from the older band members that the younger generation, as inheritors of the pioneering achievements of their elders, have other topics to sing about. Archie Roach describes Dan Sultan's 'Your Love is like a Song' as a sign there can be more than protest songs to sing; the existence a new generation

of songwriters, able to sing less overtly political songs, Roach says, means that the old protest songs have done their job.

It was Shellie Morris's reconnection with her Aboriginal family that provided the inspiration for the title of this article—'I Know that Face'. Morris's song 'Swept Away' recounts the importance of finding her birth family for her sense of personal wellbeing and completeness. Her story, as she says, is not of the Stolen Generations, and her song also recognises her adopted parents, who encouraged her quest. Shellie's song and her story speak of the ongoing desire, and need, for recognition of, and between, Aboriginal people—from their feet in country to their searching faces:

The pieces have been picked up because of you,
The puzzle's been linked up because of you,
And I'm so swept away with your love,
My love,
The grass looks greener because of you,
The breeze smells sweeter because of you,
And I'm so swept away with your love.



Figure 5: Shellie Morris

Source: Source: Still from *Murundak: Songs of Freedom*, courtesy Daybreak Films

It was only through recognition, in Shellie's story, that all the scattered pieces could be reconnected. This is a compelling metaphor for thinking about the future of Aboriginal identity and society in this country.

—CONCLUSION

In projecting a secure, confident and reliable position of address for its Aboriginal subjects within the symbolic space of a pan-Aboriginal community, *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* also invites its non-Aboriginal audience into this space, positioning it as a good listener, and a trustworthy witness, receptive to the story being told. Through the fluid musical texture of the film's soundtrack (which is also the heart of its subject-matter) the film is able to affect the emotions of the viewing listener (or the listening viewer) and gain their assent to the film's affirmations and protestations via immersion in rhythm, harmony, grain of voice and tone of instrument as well as the persuasions of testimony, argument, narrative and the visual elements of meaning.

We read *Murundak: Songs of Freedom* as a significant work of repositioning, reclamation, and, it follows, alteration of perspective, such as Anne Hickling-Hudson calls for with regard to cinematic representations of Aboriginal people:

It is only the definition of black reality from a conscious black perspective that will lend more dignity, more humanity and human diversity, more articulate logic and positiveness to the portrayal of black experience.²⁶

Shane Howard, author and lead singer of the land rights classic, 'Solid Rock', sums up this pivotal point regarding perspectives and positions: 'it's hard for white Australians to look at the past because it's just not pretty. This is who we have let ourselves become.' In visually representing the uniformly positive reception of the concerts by its diverse audiences—from the near-total non-Aboriginal 'mother-country' London audience to the almost exclusively Aboriginal audience at Fitzroy Crossing—*Murundak: Songs of Freedom* sutures (and seduces) its viewers into the concert-attendees' perspectives and listening points. The film audience is thereby constituted as a 'just' Australian—a new and ideal interlocutor who is already 'there': already willing and already ready to listen. When Rachel Maza Long, in her role as concert narrator, offers the following statement, it is with the conviction that the audience agrees: 'If you're going to sing about a country you need all the stories,

the good and the bad. You can't have the hope without the anger; you can't have the healing without the hurt.'

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—NOTES

¹ For a full list of the singers and musicians involved in this production see the Black Arm Band's website: <<http://www.blackarmband.com.au>>.

² Building on the success of *murundak*, the Black Arm Band has produced two other major touring productions: *dirt song* (premiered 2008) and *hidden republic* (premiered 2009). For the sake of clarity we have used the lower case *murundak* throughout this article to refer to the live concerts, and footage of the live concerts, while the film title has initial capitals—*Murundak: Songs of Freedom*.

³ Chris Gibson, "We Sing Our Home, We Dance Our Land": Indigenous Self-determination and Contemporary Geopolitics in Australian Popular Music', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 16, 1998, p. 171–2.

⁴ Quotation taken from <<http://www.blackarmband.com.au/our-productions/murundak/>>.

⁵ The emphasis in this statement is on the scale, rather than the originality, of Aboriginal collaboration and representation in this production.

⁶ <<http://www.blackarmband.com.au/our-productions/murundak/>>.

⁷ This is not to imply that all treatment of Aboriginal people was genocidal, but simply to acknowledge the resonance of this term as it is invoked and opposed by the word '*murundak*'. There are complex debates about whether the assimilation policies of the 1930s were genocidal in intent or not. For a recent discussion of assimilation, see Russell MacGregor's *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2011.

⁸ A.O. Neville, quoted in Ronald Wilson (Commissioner), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Canberra, 1997.

⁹ This song provided the soundtrack for the London performance of *murundak*'s promotional video in 2008. The promotional video for the film's Australian distribution by Daybreak Films features three songs: 'We Have Survived', 'Took the Children Away' and 'From Little Things Big Things Grow.'

¹⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, p. 38 (first published 1941).

¹¹ We are aware that questions may be raised about the politics of contemporary cultural intervention that relies on particular modes of remembering, testimony and tropes of survival and resilience. However, our project in this article is to illuminate rather than contest the representational strategies used in the film.

¹² Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, p. 56.

¹³ Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, p. 113.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Raymond Evans speculates 'it is probably no coincidence that the various Howard governments revitalised Anzac reverence ... with the same degree of enthusiasm as they denounced the black armband reprobates' and argues 'the bloodshed of the real foundational saga is subverted and replaced by the glory and veneration attending the reticulated retelling of the Anzac blood-letting. The first story is as immersed in forgetting as the second is enmeshed in remembering.' Raymond Evans, 'The Country has Another Past: Queensland and the History Wars' in Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (eds), *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Aboriginal Australia*, ANU EPress, Canberra, 2010, pp 12-13.

¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the so-called 'history wars' in which the phrase 'black armband history' became the pivot for contesting arguments. There is a very large literature on this topic, but one might start with the following articles: Mark McKenna, 'Different Perspectives on Black Armband History', *Australian Parliamentary Library – Research Paper 5*, Canberra, 1997-98; Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003; and Robert Manne, 'In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right,' *The Australian Quarterly Essay*, Schwartz Publishing, 2001. See also Geoffrey Blainey, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', in *Quadrant*, vol. 37, July/August 1993 and Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.

¹⁸ The arm has powerful metaphoric connotations which this title also exploits: for instance, to take up arms is to go into battle; arms also signify unity and solidarity, as in the expression arm-in-arm, for example.

¹⁹ Chris Healy, 'Apologising for Stolen Time', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no 36, 2008, p. 7.

²⁰ Jacqueline Phillips, 'Let Aboriginal Communities have a Say over Intervention', *Age*, 22 June 2010 <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/let-aboriginal-communities-have-a-say-over-intervention-20100622-yuuf.html>>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*, p. 117.

²³ For a brief description of the Freedom Ride, see the National Museum of Australia website: 'In February 1965 a group of University of Sydney students organised a bus tour of western and coastal New South Wales towns. Their purpose was threefold. The students planned to draw public attention to the poor state of Aboriginal health, education and housing. They hoped to point out and help to lessen the socially discriminatory barriers which existed between Aboriginal and white residents. And they also wished to encourage and support Aboriginal people themselves to resist discrimination. The students had formed into a body called Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) in 1964 to plan this trip and ensure media coverage.' <http://indigenousrights.net.au/civil_rights/freedom_ride_1965>.

²⁴ Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p. 31.

²⁵ Dunbar-Hall, p. 203.

²⁶ Anne Hickling-Hudson, 'White Construction of Black Identity in Australian Films about Aborigines', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1990, p. 271.

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