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Singing the Coast

Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins

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In 2003 I walked the major songline that I know of in Wurundjeri country, my home country; from the sea to the source of the Yarra River which runs through Melbourne. I am non-Indigenous, but I walked with the blessings of Wurundjeri elders. I had spent years prior working with Wurundjeri to co-create community theatre based on their sharing of their traditional and non-traditional stories. So when I walked the Yarra on my 21-day pilgrimage, I held these stories in heart and mind, and they were the depth and ground of a truly transformative experience. Yet the stories available to be passed on in my country are so partial, so fragmented; indeed, much of what my teachers taught me they learned from books of stories recorded by early anthropologists. Which is why reading *Singing the Coast* by Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins has been a revelation.

Gumbaynggirr country stretches from just north of Woolgoolga to south of Macksville on the New South Wales north coast, and inland to Thora and Glenreagh. Tony Perkins, Garby elder, worked for 10 years with writer and researcher Margaret Somerville in a slow process of trust building and gradual disclosure. Over this time the depth of meaning entrusted to him by his elders is shared with Margaret, who then shares her experience of this with the reader.

Thus *Singing the Coast* skilfully combines two very different narratives. It is the record of Tony Perkins and other Indigenous people sharing between themselves, reclaiming and consolidating traditional knowledge and then working out what and how to present it for those who wish to know it. It is also the record of a non-Indigenous woman observing and supporting this process, being included in the unfolding knowledge, and spending the necessary time in place, and thereby having her own profound experience of country. It is generous in its sharing of stories, opening up opportunities for the reader to connect. It is a document of courageous, patient processes by both Indigenous people and their non-Indigenous collaborator. It is the way these two narratives are interwoven that gives this book its extraordinary power.

When Whites first started taking up selections in this part of New South Wales, Northern Gumbaynggirr people were forced to find somewhere outside of the fences that were being erected all through their country. A swampy area between the coast and Corindi Lake that no Whites claimed became their base. They called it 'No Man's Land'.

No Man's Land was a place that somehow escaped notice of early missionaries and protectors, and so Gumbaynggirr language and culture could survive and thrive in the midst of colonial expansion. Chapter 3 starts off with stories mainly from No Man's Land of food gathering, fishing, collecting fruit that many of us who have spent time in the bush would relate to. Chapter 4 recounts how they created shelter and serviced other practical needs, a fusing of new materials with traditional practices. As we read further into these chapters, complex layers of relationship, deep history, ancient practices are revealed. Somerville records verbatim the oral stories of the Gumbaynggirr; personal, moving, tragic, funny and informative stories. I found myself getting slightly frustrated at the way her repeating of the story details felt a little as if the stories' innate authority and power were not quite trusted. But in a more generous reading of this repetition, I can see it as Somerville repeating back to her teller what she has heard. She is showing the listening process, her absorbing of and respecting knowledge. For she writes a number of times of the importance of non-Indigenous listening: 'These songs are not only about singing the country for Aboriginal people; they are about singing the country for all of us. They require a singer and an audience, a teller and a listener'.

This listening is an important part of the powerful second chapter, 'Crying-Songs to Remember'. Unfolding layers of story surrounding a massacre site are told, linked back with traditional stories (the massacre site at the mouth of an estuary, Red Rock, was an ochre gathering site) and linked forward with stories of remembrance, empowerment and cultural renewal.

Somerville calls her work 'oral place story' rather than oral history — her work emphasises 'the relationship between places and people in the present, layered through deep time'. Somerville writes of how in order to do this work, she has to attend very closely to Gumbaynggirr country. She speaks of how this attention creates 'embodied intimacy' and of how a different sense of self arises from this attention. This is the 'self-becoming-other', the self relational to all that surrounds us; human and nonhuman, animate, inanimate, natural forces. I wonder if the work she does to become part of Gumbaynggirr country in this way is part of how she can enter into an understanding of spirits in places, which she describes in chapter 5. She relates how Tony's stories of spirit animals;

bat-like creatures that were linked to the life of one of his elders are 'right at the limits of my understanding, and the ability of the English language to transmit Gumbaynggirr meanings'.

This raises the question as to how different languages are structured so that they can contain meaning on the cusp of knowing. When, as in many Aboriginal languages, the same word can mean multiple things, one word can then convey a whole system of relationships and connections. She writes of how '... the English language had to be bent to hold traces of Gumbaynggirr meanings'. Yet there is also the case that language has to be bent to if it is to hold traces of experiences that are on the edge of our ability to express in words. Spiritual experience is a strong example of this. I sense that Somerville, through the lyricism and detail of her descriptions of place, is attempting to create writing that sings. A writing style that does justice to the songs of country. She is uncertain of how to approach Aboriginal spiritual meaning, yet finds her ground through her growing love of place and the detail she gives to the writing task. Her experience is that 'the quality of care and attention is spiritual in itself ...'.

Qualities of attention and empathy are demonstrated in the following excerpt from chapter 5, *Spirits in Places*: 'It is hard to write the sense of the missing bits, the importance of silence and of respecting what cannot be said. It is important to tell these partial stories in a way that they are not experienced only as absence but as fertile potential'.

This is nuanced; it could be speaking of partial knowledge due to loss sustained by indigenous people through dispossession and colonisation. It could equally refer to the partial knowledge of the outsider, the non-Indigenous. There is a common ground here. One of my teachers, Dulumunmun, Uncle Max Harrison, a Yuin elder, speaks of how we all need to reconcile with the earth, with country. In times of environmental crises, we all have a learning journey ahead, but we would do well to take forward, in perhaps new guises, the ancient wisdom that has sustained this land for so long. As Somerville says in her opening chapter: 'In these times of rapid environmental loss it is now more urgent than ever that we listen to these stories about how to learn and inhabit our places differently'. We could learn from the grounded sense of responsibility the Gumbaynggirr develop throughout their lives of living in country.

As Tony says, 'Things were very special, you know, very special thing here, you had to really look after that. You grow up and you know you went through all your life, you grew up with it, with what was given to you to look after'. Deep mapping is one of ways the Gumbaynggirr are recording and reanimating knowledge.

Deep mapping is the process whereby the larger narratives are reconnected to country, reclaiming their original status as songlines. Ongoing language work and storytelling in country keeps the local connections strong and helps

people to care for country ... a process of singing the country anew.

Chapter 6, *A Language of Landscape*, tells the story of Tiger Buchannan, (*Maruwanba Maruungga*). Tiger was born in 1898, the last storyman in the Nambucca Valley. His foresight is a great gift to contemporary Gumbaynggirr people, for he was passionate about recording language and story, and he worked with anthropologists and linguists to preserve as much as he could. The revival of language, now taking place at the Many Rivers Language Centre, is indebted to his legacy. This inspiring project is based in Muurbay (White Fig) a former mission church in Nambucca Heads. Somerville describes their process: 'We ranged over the whole of Gumbaynggirr country recording stories from the edge of living memory. Many of these stories were partial, some secret and not for public access, and all were part of the fragile process of piecing together the jigsaw puzzle'.

Chapter 7, *Connecting the Dots*, captures the excitement of the creative and collaborative process of bringing Gumbaynggirr people from throughout the region together to record their far flung stories. When united, there is an enormous body of knowledge to be handed down to subsequent generations and shared too, when appropriate, with the non-Indigenous. Yet it also honours the losses entailed here:

... we all live in the shadow of initiation. It is so close and there has been so much loss. There is also so much that remains in the places, in the songs, and in the stories that were handed down from the Old People, in their memories and recordings. It is a time to stay in this moment of 'exquisite care and attention', to feel the voices, the songs, and the places with all of our senses, emotions and intellect, and to ask again about how we can sing our places differently.

In a deeply moving passage, Garby elder Gary Williams imagines the last initiation in southern Gumbaynggirr country:

I like to think of it as the last hurrah, you know the men of high degree and they could see, before they got too old you know, they could do one last ceremony before the wide world closed in ...

It is true that the wide world has closed in, yet work such as is described in this book is opening up new, exciting possibilities for contemporary Indigenous people. It starts with the question: 'How can we bring traditional understanding of singing the country, singing for the renewal and wellbeing of people and places, into a contemporary present?'. And it presents this invitation: 'we want to tell the stories of these places for you so that we can all learn to "sing" these coastal places again'. *Singing the Coast* does a wonderful job of exploring this vital question. And through the sharing of Gumbaynggirr knowledge both ancient and contemporary, we are given the generous opportunity to learn to sing with them. It is a profound gift.