

I saw them colours of your flag

A Speech-Based Composition on Aboriginal Sovereignty

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¹ Submitted on: April 09, 2017. Approved on: June 16, 2017.

The piece *I saw them colours of your flag*,² for solo voice with effects, was written for Lauren Redhead on 26 February 2016, and released a few days later as part of Redhead's album *solo speaking* (2016).³ On 21 February, Redhead had shared with me and a few other composers, the idea of working on a new album of text pieces at an extremely short notice:

I'd like to make a little online album of sound poetry pieces (text/speech pieces). These needn't be long or complicated but I'd love to record something old or new from all of you! My plan is to record it on Friday and/or at the weekend. Not much time, I know. If you fancy making me a little sketch on your lunch break or so that would be wonderful! Even a very short piece [...] one/two/three/more parts all welcome (REDHEAD, 2016).

I decided to take up the challenge, and started working on a textual idea, to be developed into a piece. Lauren's call implied unusual approaches to various aspects of the composer/performer collaboration, such as:

- (1) the short amount of time given to write and record the piece;
- (2) the specific request for text/speech pieces;
- (3) the willingness to work on sketches rather than on meticulously elaborated pieces;
- (4) finally, the indication of multiple parts pieces, which implies the use of electronic processing to layer and sync the various parts after the initial recording.

The idea of speech-based pieces originated from a piece Alistair Zaldua had written for Redhead in 2013, which was titled *solo speaking* and gave the name to the full 2016 album. The challenge of creating an impromptu piece based on text rather than on music made me visualise the possibility of sharing a precise, discernible political message through the text. The option of juxtaposing different layers of the same voice also entailed a certain amount of sonic experimentation, whereby I could hope to get interesting phonic and semantic combinations by superimposing different speech lines.

The textual/musical material is made up of a poem in three verses, with each verse containing three lines. In between the three verses, there are two prose intermissions. A short sung coda concludes the piece. Each of the three verses is to be declaimed as a single vocal layer, while the prose intermissions and the sung coda are to be superimposed to a looping repetition of the verses.

At the time, I was in Sydney as a visiting researcher, and had freshly experienced Australia Day (better known as Invasion Day or Survival Day, celebrated on 26 January), and the shameless parade of

² A recording of the piece is available at <<https://laurenredhead.bandcamp.com/track/marcello-messina-i-saw-them-colours-of-your-flag-2016>>

³ The album also featured music by Alexander Hunter, Caroline Lucas, Adam Fergler, Steve Gisby, Lauren Redhead, Charles Amirkhanian, and Alistair Zaldua.

whiteness it involves, on the face of the dispossessed owners of the land. As Joseph Pugliese puts it, Aboriginal sovereignty is “both usurped *and* unextinguished” (2015: 92, original emphasis): while settler-colonial Australia has usurped Aboriginal sovereignty, Aboriginals have never ceded their sovereignty.

On 26 January 2016 I did not want to participate to the celebration of the persisting invasion of the land where I was temporarily residing, and hence decided to participate to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders counter-event in Sydney, called Yabun Festival. To reach the festival, I travelled to Redfern Station to then walk to the Venue; on leaving the station, I was able to admire the Aboriginal flag painted on every wall (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 – The Aboriginal flags on Redfern’s walls and fences. Source: the author’s personal archive, January 2016

This gave me a clear idea of the unextinguished sovereignty mentioned above, and I used this experience to write the incipit of the poem:

Soon as I got off at Redfern Station,
I saw them⁴ colours of your flag,
On fences, walls, and everywhere.

Designed by Harold Thomas in 1971, the Aboriginal flag is composed of a black upper band and a red lower band, with a yellow circle in the middle. According to Thomas himself, the red lower band symbolises the ochre earth typical of the Australian continent, while the black lower band represents Aboriginal peoples, and the yellow circle is the sun (AIATSIS, n.d.). While walking through the Redfern area though, my spouse and collaborator Teresa Di Somma suggested to me a different interpretation of the flag: she read the red lower band as a pool of blood, and the black band as a night that persists

⁴ Here the use of “them” instead of “those” is a dialect variant from Yorkshire, where I lived for several years before my experiences in Brazil and Australia.

even while the sun is shining. This rather angry analysis inspired the next three verses of the poem:

The land and sea are soaked in blood,
And though the sun's still shining high,
The sky is dark as there's no day.

I then concluded the poem by declaring my wholehearted commitment to the Aboriginal flag, seen as a symbol of the unceded and unextinguished sovereignty mentioned above:

I'll wrap myself in your proud banner:
I love it, as – unlike this country –
There's no fucking white in it.

The last line might sound as an anti-caucasian provocation: however, I meant to express no bitterness towards so-called “white people” *per se*, but rather towards whiteness as a global paradigm of oppression. In fact, I also refer to the white Commonwealth stars that populate the National Australian Flag together with the ubiquitous Union Jack, and to the infamous Immigration Restriction Act, commonly known as “White Australia Policy”, a law that was in force between 1901 and 1973, and that openly used race as criterion of exclusion for immigrants. Among other things, the White Australia Policy was particularly harsh towards Southern Italians, as Australian officials used to apply remarkably brutal methods to establish the degree of whiteness of prospective Southern immigrants (PUGLIESE, 2002). In the second vocal intermission, and as a response to these practices, I claim that “I’m a filthy wog⁵, and proud!”.

As many occupied territories, Australia is full of toponyms that celebrate the invaders and silence indigenous histories (WINDSOR, 2009, p. 71-72). Regarding this, I soon noticed that Yabun Festival takes place every year in Victoria Park, a place named after the notorious British sovereign: in the first prose intermission I wrote that “I went to Victoria Park on that day, because, how the hell do you want to name a bloody park round here?” The counter-celebrations organised as part of Yabun were repeatedly interrupted and perturbed by flag-waving Anglo-Australians, and this was also reflected in the first prose intermission, which mentions “those clowns with their blue flags [who] were trying to hijack your event, breaking in your shows, interrupting your speeches, as if the whole country hailing the fucking invasion wasn’t enough for them.” In other words, I was witnessing instances of the continued usurpation of Aboriginal sovereignty practiced by settler Australians in order to mark ownership over the land. In this context, the Australian National Flag, with its blatant references to the British Empire, constitutes a clear marker of colonial arrogance.

⁵ This pejorative term is used to denote non-white people (mainly Southern Europeans, North-Africans and Asians) in Australia

The bloated and noisy waving of the settler-colonial flag reverberates effortlessly within the massive void represented by the apology issued in 2008 by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd with regards to the “stolen generation”, namely the Aboriginal children removed from their families to be adopted by white families or institutionalised (MOOKHERJEE et al., 2009: 346).

The apology did not change the reality of mass incarceration and deaths in custody assigned to indigenous children. Similarly, the official end of the White Australia Policy does not mean that contemporary Australia has got any better with immigrants. On the contrary, Australia is known internationally for what Pugliese describes as its “immigration gulag archipelago” (PUGLIESE, 2015: 89), which refers to the practice of detaining refugees and asylum seekers in offshore sites (Manus Island, Nauru) where national laws (e.g., those that would protect detainees from torture and rape) are suspended.

One of the last chapters of my stay in Australia involved a trip to Canberra, where I visited the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (Fig. 2) that stands in front of the Old Parliament. The Tent Embassy in Canberra is yet another testimony of an unextinguished indigenous sovereignty, to which my piece is, ultimately, a passionate homage.



Figure 2 – a view of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. Source: the author’s personal archive, May 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Lauren Redhead, Teresa Di Somma, Lara Palombo, Joseph Pugliese, Amala Groom, Behrouz Boochani, Iqbal Barkat and Alec Hunter.

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I saw them colours of your flag

Marcello Messina

written for Lauren Redhead

Soon as I got off at Redfern Station,
I saw them colours of your flag,
On fences, walls, and everywhere.

LOOP 1

STOP!



You know they celebrate that **crap** at the end of January, when they got here in 1788 and started plundering your land and killing your people? Well I went to Victoria Park on that day, *because* ||: **how the hell do you want to name a bloody park round here??!** :|| No, seriously, what the **fuck**, but then there was also your own counter-festival down there, and *guess what?* Those **clowns with their blue flags** were trying to hijack your event, breaking in your shows, interrupting your speeches, as if the whole country hailing the **fucking invasion** wasn't enough for them!



LOOP 1

STOP!

The land and sea are soaked in blood,
And though the sun's still shining high,
The sky is dark as there's no day.

LOOP 2



Have you looked at their flag instead? What's that thing on the top-left corner? 🎵 "It clashes with the sunset" * 🎵
No, seriously, what the **fuck**, does this country really need to **identify** with something that's ||: 10.000 miles away?? :|| I read somewhere that someone uses the word Aussie ||: exactly to describe **themselves as opposed to you**,:|| I could be wrong here, but for those idiots I might even have more chances to be called an Aussie than you, ||: **isn't that ridiculous?** :|| But then I wouldn't want to be called like that, **I'm a filthy wog, and proud!**

* Sing along the tune in correspondence of the same words in: Billy Bragg, 2003, "Take Down the Union Jack", on *England, Half-English*, Elektra, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPHIP6AftY>



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Marcello Messina

written for Lauren Redhead



LOOP 2



LOOP 2

I'll wrap myself in your proud banner:
I love it, as – unlike this country –
There's no fucking white in it.

LOOP 3



||:  There's no fucking lies in it! **  :||****

** choose a tune ad libitum

(THE END)

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Instructions: this voice piece is for one voice with effects or for multiple voices (4 people). The text is divided in a poem in 3 stanzas (in rounded rectangles), and free-talk sections which entail repetitions, various types of emphasis, and some singing.

The 3 stanzas in rounded rectangles are declaimed one time and then repeated in loop. This can be done digitally or by employing multiple performers. The [stop!] sign indicates momentary or permanent interruption of the loop(s). The  symbol indicates a rest from the loop. Usually this happens when another stanza is declaimed for the first time. **N.B. repeated loops should be somewhat quieter than the first time the stanza is declaimed.**

The sections in sharp rectangles contain some interpretation indications, as follows:

bold indicates angry emphasis, obtained mainly by raising the volume of the voice.

italics indicate witty emphasis, obtained by raising and lowering the pitch/intonation of the voice.

underlined indicates informative emphasis, obtained by pronouncing the word slowly, clearly and loudly, in a way to attentively explain a concept.

||: :|| indicate repeats. The number of repeats is always at the performer's discretion

  indicate singing. More instructions are given in this case.