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Stuart Cooke (ed. & trans.), *George Dyungayan's Bulu Line: A West Kimberley Song Cycle*  
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The cover of *George Dyungayan's Bulu Line: A West Kimberley Song Cycle* needs more names. An innovative experimentation in both aesthetic and material structuring, this book features at various points up to seven figures performing in various functions and subversions of poetic and critical authorship.

The text as such is fairly evenly split between context and song; the former a full thirty-four pages of acknowledgements, preface, commentary, and philosophy. Most of this is Cooke, speaking to his role as facilitator in an often anthropological tradition of songpoetry translation, best known through the work of TGH Strehlow (1908-1978) and RM Berndt (1916-1990). Although in dialogue with this history, it is clear that Cooke's project has been significantly founded upon Stephen Muecke's extensive work into West Kimberley narratives of country, namely his assistance with Paddy Roe's recently rereleased collection *Gularabulu* (1983), and Muecke, Roe, and Krim Bentarrak's collaborative *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (1984). Muecke's preface to the book stands as more than a mere endorsement of Cooke's translational project; much of the book's ethical premise is dependent on Muecke's situating of Cooke's interpolative act as just one more social mediation in a process of sustaining the Bulu line and bringing songpoetry into a wider body of Australian representation. As such, both Muecke and Cooke are at pains to stress this as a communal poetics. And certainly, nurlu songs are a poetic mode born from revelation and transferral. The seventeen verses of the Bulu line were given to George Dyungayan (c. 1900-c.1995), a Nyigina lawman of the Goolarabooloo, by the spirit of his late father, Bulu. The two sections of the line describe a journey made by Dyungayan and his father (appearing as a balangan, or spirit of the dead), and of a series of phenomena taking place across Nyigina and Warrwa country. After Dyungayan's passing, ownership of the series was transferred to his brother Paddy Roe, then to Roe's grandson Phillip. With the assistance of Dyungayan, Roe, and Butcher Joe Nangan, musicologist Ray Keogh recorded and transcribed the cycle in the 1980s as part of his doctoral thesis, *Nurlu Songs of the West Kimberleys* (1990, University of Sydney). Most of the poetic text has been taken directly from Keogh's thesis. Cooke's interpretations in English appear after an initial synopsis, Nyigina transcription, gloss with English definitions of phrasal units, and sometimes quite extensive poetic mediations through Dyungayan, Roe, and Butcher Joe. Here Cooke is actively resistant to ideas of authoritative, omniscient translation, as they appear in the work of Strehlow and Berndt,



It is difficult to judge the success of Cooke's ambition. Although clearly driven by a sincere enthusiasm for nurlu and the West Kimberley, there are moments when the project is overwhelmed by its own justification. On first encounter, the preface stands as a necessary but exhausting demystification of the entire poetic interface. Read in dialogue with *Reading the Country* and *Gularabulu*, which Cooke has written on in *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (2013), there is a strong sense of the rich poetry of the West Kimberley for readers to witness. As Cooke says of the Bulu line; "[I]t draws people together to perform and watch its performance; it attracts whitefellas from all over the country to learn about it and write about it and translate it . . . Bulu's spirit is an enormously potent charge that draws spaces and times into proximity" (*An Introduction to The Bulu Line*, 22).

It is when Cooke invites readers to attempt their own poetic interpretations, to "let the force of the *Bulu* keep rolling", however, that my vague discomfort with the project turns to a real concern (*An Introduction to The Bulu Line*, 19). Whilst sincerely meant, I'm sure; as a Dharug-raised Bundjalung woman with no kinship connections to the Kimberley and Nyigina, this horrifying gesture confirms my suspicion that Cooke's project is one aimed primarily at non-Indigenous readers, and raises questions regarding the extent of the text's permissions. RD Wood, in an essay on Cooke's oeuvre for *Australian Poetry Journal*, advances a number of concerns which are again, more occupied with the Bulu's relation to dominant non-Indigenous poetic modes in Australia. In asking how the book might have been otherwise structured, so as to present George Dyungayan's poetry first and allow the reader to approach our own meanings, Wood suggests Muecke and Cooke's framing labour implies "a latent fear that the poems are actually, after all this, not that powerful" (*The Raw and the Cooke*, na.).

This too, misses the point. Just as I do not feel privileged to enter into the Bulu without permission from custodians, without walking the country across which it stretches, I do not feel privileged to the sophisticated and immemorial knowledge systems surrounding the work Cooke aspires to share. There is no doubt that I am deeply appreciative to have read some of this song cycle, and that Cooke's sparse verses are affecting responses. The anxiety with which his extensive explanation is positioned seems to stem from sincere affection and desire to do right by Dyungayan and Keogh, and I felt Cooke's aesthetic achievements were of secondary interest for the text. When I began to learn my own language, I treasured such resources, and we must not forget that from Keogh's work, the Bulu line has been repatriated and preserved for the Nyigina people. However, as the child of *Reading the Country*, a far more elaborate collaborative project which used narrative, translation, philosophy, photography, and painting, I feel there is space, need, and ability for Cooke – or better yet for the Goolaraboolo and Yawuru people Cooke thanks in his acknowledgements – to do this work on a scale capable of giving contextual and aesthetic justice to the song cycle. But just as there are no fixed beginnings, ends, or meanings that we can apply to the Bulu, this book does not move towards fullness of meaning, rather, it encourages us to find beauty in unsettlement, if not discontent. There is no latent fear that the poems in this book lack power, as Wood suggests; rather, there is only the concern that Cooke cannot do justice to their power in such a confined space.

## Works Cited

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