

Posts in a Paddock: revisiting the Jimmy Governor tragedy, approaching reconciliation and connecting families through the medium of theatre

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Abstract: A descendent of the O'Brien family, closely related to those who suffered tragic irretrievable loss at the hands of Jimmy Governor when he murdered a pregnant women and her toddler child in 1900, recounts her family's journey of reconciliation. The sight of the "posts in a paddock", the remains of the original homestead in which the deaths occurred and the only disappearing reminder of this tragedy on what is still the family farm near Wollar, north-east of Mudgee NSW, moved the author to explore the stories from her family and also from the Governor family. This realization took her on a journey to gather up, and introduce to each other, members of both families and to workshop their stories as a means of seeking a resolution to the tragedy. This journey eventually came to include descendants of Jimmy and Ethel Governor and led to reconciliation through participation in the development and performance of a play. The final outcome is a theatre piece marked by interracial collaboration and establishing common ground through intercultural dialogue, understanding and an overriding shared wish for reconciliation.

Keywords: Aboriginal, theatre, reconciliation, Jimmy Governor



“My name is Jimmy Governor, and I was born on the Talbragar River in the Mudgee District. I am about 25 years of age...”
– Jimmy Governor (*Maitland Daily* 1900)

Figure 1: Photograph of Jimmy Governor © Davies 1972.

Jimmy Governor has become an Australian icon. His story of oppression and murderous rampage inspired Thomas Keneally’s 1972 novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* that was later adapted into film by Fred Schepisi in 1978. As well as this, he is the subject of five books, the first being by Frank Clune in 1959, followed almost two decades later by Brian Davies’s *The Life of Jimmy Governor* (1978). The historian of Aboriginal Australia, Henry Reynolds, wrote of the comparison between Jimmy Governor and Jimmy Blacksmith (1979), and most recently Laurie Moore and Stephan Williams have published *The True Story of Jimmy Governor* (2001).

Jimmy Governor’s life is still a source of debate and conjecture because he seemingly lost all reason and massacred many people, beginning on the Mawbey property where he was working and living with his young family in 1900. He terrorized the white settler colonial society of the Hunter Valley and midnorth coast region while he was “on a rampage” seeking revenge for all of the occasions he had been slighted.

Jimmy was an Aboriginal man of mixed race, reportedly with lustrous red hair, born to Tommy and Annie Governor around 1875. He was the eldest of a family of eight children. He worked from job to job on properties in the Hunter Valley with his father and brothers, and later in the central west of NSW. They often worked for rations and no money. For some time he was a tracker with the Cassilis Police. He was known to be skilled and ambitious, he was able to read and write, and he married a white woman when he was twenty-three years old—the sixteen-year-old Ethel Page. Jimmy and Ethel’s inter-racial marriage was taboo in the settler colonial society of the time; it was very unusual for an Aboriginal man to have a European wife at that time. The pressures of living in isolation, feeling ostracized, being paid unfairly and supporting a young family began to mount.

While completing a fencing contract with the Mawbey family, Jimmy and Ethel were accommodating a small group of Jimmy’s relatives, who also worked with him as the contractor, at their camp by the creek. Following a dispute about payment and the distribution of rations, on the 20th July 1900, Jimmy murdered women and children who were in the Mawbey household. Jimmy went on the run with his brother Joe and wrote a list of all the people who had ever treated him badly. He started working his way through the list—murdering people.



Figure 2: Photograph of the Posts in the Paddock © Michelle Blakeney 2009

The O'Brien family story

My relatives, members of the O'Brien family, were on that list. Jimmy Governor murdered Elizabeth and her son James O'Brien in 1900. When they died, Elizabeth was pregnant and James was fifteen months old. The house where Elizabeth and James O'Brien lived and were murdered in 1900 is on the farm where my mum grew up. Their slab hut in the middle of an isolated paddock was left to fall away, all that remains are the vertical hardwood posts of the hut, standing in the paddock like ghosts.

I can remember being taken there as a little girl, shown the ruins of the house and told the story of what had happened. The story, as it has been told to me, is that Jimmy, my great grandfather Terry O'Brien and his brother Mick went fishing together. No one could swim and a fight broke out about who was going to take the net across the river. The fight spilled over into a physical fight between Mick and Jimmy. Mick was losing. My great grandfather stepped in to fight in his brother's place. Terry was a considerably bigger man and he won the fight. Adding insult to injury Mick yelled from the sidelines, "Kill the black bastard". Years later Jimmy returned. He murdered the pregnant Elizabeth and the toddler James. The attending midwife, Mrs Bennett, was so badly injured, she was believed to be dead. Jimmy wrote, "Kill the bastard" on the cheque book at the O'Brien's house. Mrs Bennett managed to crawl from the house to the road, where she met Mick O'Brien, told him that his family was dead and not to go to the house, but to go for help. He did this and never returned to the house where his family had died.

Jimmy was hanged in Darlinghurst Gaol in 1901 after three months evading capture. Although it is not often referred to, Jimmy's wife Ethel was pregnant when he was hanged and they also had a young boy already born, Sidney Governor.

In 2007 my grandpa died. At his funeral my son, then sixteen months old, wandered over to the graves of Elizabeth, Mick and James O'Brien. As he was standing there, I realized that my son was the same age as Elizabeth's little boy was at the time he died such a brutal death. Later, at my Grandpa's house, I found a slide of the ruins of Elizabeth and Mick's house taken in the 1960s. I felt compelled to look into this story.

The *Posts in the Paddock* (see Figures 2 and 3) represent a picture of the silence and grief surrounding Australian history. The most significant moment of this process for me was reading my grandpa's memoir. In particular, a small section where he acknowledges that his father said that the land at *Poggy* changed when Aboriginal people no longer burned back the grass to attract new green growth and kangaroos. Before discovering these two lines in his memoir, no one in my family had ever spoken to me about the previous presence of Aboriginal people at *Poggy*. Confronting my Grandfather's admission that Aboriginal people hunted at *Poggy*, that the land changed when they were no longer hunting, and knowing that since colonisation, no-one other than members of my family have "owned" *Poggy*, represented a huge shift in my own relationship to Australian history.



**Figure 3: The *Posts in the Paddock* ruins.
Anonymous photographer 1968, in possession of the author.**

This shift in understanding about the past exists within my family also. My uncle Tony O'Brien wrote the following:

The area known as *Poggy* is a relatively small island of rich basalt soil (about 2,000 hectares). It is an oasis of pasture with very little natural water, surrounded and isolated by generally much less productive sandstone-derived land, a part of the Goulburn River National Park. The O'Brien family has "owned" title to about a quarter of the land at *Poggy* continuously for more than 120 years (since

1889). Held initially by my father's uncle Michael O'Brien, then by my grandfather, Terence, until after his death in 1946, then to my father until his death in 2007, when the title passed to my name. The term "landowner" is a misnomer, for no person can ever "own" land. Old NSW Land Title documents, as I read them, infer that the God of Britain "owns" the land and is represented by the reigning monarch of the day, who "grants" a title for conditional use. The "God of Britain" claim to title, of course, has existed for but a hair's breadth of time. The O'Briens have never cultivated the land at Pogy for crops, it has been used to graze livestock: in earlier times sheep (there are some high boundary fences remaining today which were needed to keep out dogs and dingoes), and in later years beef cattle, since powered earthmoving equipment, pumps and polythene piping have allowed the creation of a more substantial and reliable distributed water supply. The story represented by the posts is a part of our family history. My understanding from my father (born 1914) was always that it was best left alone, that it was not a simple one-sided story I think that my grandfather did not speak of it to my father, and that my father's knowledge was told to him by others, not family. I am unaware of any written family history of these events. It was revealing to discover and understand, as the Posts in the Paddock project developed, that there is a sense of disquiet shared with the Governor family about the possible details of the true story of Jimmy and Ethel, and a sense of anguish from both sides that such a tragedy could happen. This is a story without heroes. From any viewpoint there are so many "if only" situations that may have averted this horrible event. This is a story for our times. Australia is a land of displaced and/or dispossessed people making their way in the world. We can all learn from the story of Jimmy and Ethel, to be more aware of the difficulties that come with integrating cultures, and to seek understanding rather than intolerance (Khan 2011: 13).

The Journey

I am Co-Artistic Director of My Darling Patricia, a theatre company founded in 2003 with longtime collaborator Halcyon Macleod. Our work is inspired by photos and found objects; the detritus and residue of stories and memory. Armed with one slide, my knowledge of this story within my family and an impulse to look further, Halcyon and I started research for *Posts in the Paddock*.

Lily Shearer an Aboriginal woman from Brewarrina in northwest NSW, in her capacity as the Indigenous Performance Broker at Performance Space considered our proposal to continue the work of reconciling the Jimmy Governor and the Posts in the Paddock story. Lily took the project under her wing and importantly introduced us to Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor and Nadeena Dixon, mother/daughter musicians and artists. Aunty Rhonda's perspective was crucial to the development of *Posts in the Paddock* as a theatre piece. As the daughter of renowned Aboriginal activist Chicka Dixon, Aunty Rhonda has lived a life immersed in the Aboriginal struggle for rights, recognition and equality and she has a Masters of Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing. She introduced us to the concept of *Dadirri* as a practice of deep listening (Grieves 2007: 7, 24). In that spirit, of deep listening and understanding of the larger forces that exist in our lives, we sat down

together; Aunty Rhonda, Nadeena, Lily, Halcyon, my mum Katy Britton (née O'Brien) and I to develop ways of dealing with this tragic story from our past that also marks Australian history so deeply.

We talked, we read and we listened. At the end of the week we decided that we wanted to meet Aunty Evelyn Powell, Jimmy's niece, who lives in Wellington in western NSW to find out more from her as a member of the family of Jimmy Governor. We also decided to travel together to the ruins of the house where my relatives died to be in the same space as the Posts in the Paddock. Lily organised for us to have transport assistance with the use of a vehicle from the Redfern Community Centre and Michelle Blakeney, a Sydney-based Aboriginal filmmaker and photographer came along to document the process. We travelled to Wellington and stayed with Su Williams who threw open her doors to welcome and support us. She introduced us to Aunty Evelyn. Aunty Evelyn told us first hand about growing up as Jimmy's niece: "Even my own people, Koori people would say (disparagingly) 'Oh you've got a bit of Governor in you—you know'" (Evelyn Powell September 2009).

At the posts in the paddock, Lily and Aunty Rhonda conducted an Aboriginal smoking ceremony in order to spiritually cleanse the site. The sunset and the cows wandered over to have a closer look. In his program essay, Djon Mundine OAM writes:

The story of Jimmy Governor is a "memory walk" across a physical and social terrain, evoking many emotions and feelings. It brings out and plays on all our human qualities: sorrow, pain, hate, regret, stoicism, expression, success, joy and optimism. The posts in the paddock are the frame posts of the O'Brien family home—the scene of a murder. The posts recall to mind the Tiwi Pukumani grave posts that changed the course of Aboriginal art history in 1958 at the Art Gallery of NSW. Similar spiritual objects existed in carved trees throughout NSW. The carved trees provided the location of where the bodies lay; they are both burial markers and revelatory. They remind, they are mnemonic entities.

(Khan 2011: 6)

My Uncle Tony, the farmer who now owns "Poggy", the property on which the ruins stand, participated in the smoking ceremony and he and his wife Jo welcomed us all into their home.



Figure 4: Photograph of Lily Shearer conducting Smoking Ceremony © Michelle Blakeney 2009

Back in Sydney we started to try to translate the experience into the foundations of a theatre work. We began working with puppeteer Sam Routledge, puppet maker Bryony Anderson, sound designers Declan Kelly and Phil Downing and, importantly, with actor LeRoy Parsons who added immensely to the development and the impact of our work.

When we first approached LeRoy as an actor we were unaware of his family connection to this story; he is in fact a Dainggatti/Yuin man from NSW and a direct descendent of Jimmy and Ethel Governor. We had nearly completed our first creative development together when LeRoy revealed his family connection and so then our developing group started to meet and talk with LeRoy's extended family. This family history had not been spoken about very much within the family, however LeRoy's aunt Loretta Parsley researched Jimmy Governor's story extensively on behalf of her father and she found that her family is descended directly from the child Ethel and Jimmy conceived around the time of the murders in 1900.

Laurie Moore historian and author of *The True Story of Jimmy Governor* talks about this quality of seemingly finding many connections with people while researching Jimmy's

story:

Along the way we talked to so many people whose parents and grandparents were a part of the story. Some of these meetings made us think that they were “meant to be”. On our first trip to the Breelong sites, for example, we stopped in Mendooran to ask directions. There were only two people in the street and one of them was a grandson of Jacky Underwood’s captor. Near Blackville I stopped to talk to a drover. We soon discovered his grandfather had employed the young Jimmy Governor (Moore and Williams 2001: vii).

For us too, so many developments began to feel like they were “meant to be”, especially that LeRoy had turned up to play the part of his ancestor Jimmy. We were all too well aware of the dangers of turning this into a whitewash and not telling the Aboriginal family’s view of the story adequately. Thomas Keneally recognised this as a problem and he said, “If I were writing *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* now, I would not want to write about it from the point of view of the half aboriginal Jimmy” in the way he had attempted to in the book *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. He elaborates:

My statement that I would not now attempt to write *The chant* [of Jimmy Blacksmith] from within black consciousness was not meant to promote some sort of no-go zone for writers, but to extend a faltering hand across the gulf of culture. After all, we know now that one of the problems has been the false certainty with which we white fellas have presumed to know about Koori grief. We can observe it from the outside, but it is the Aboriginal people themselves who own that tale and have bitterly earned their right to tell it (Keneally 2004: 9).

The story of Jimmy Governor succinctly encapsulates so many issues of Australian history that seem to recur over and over again. Keneally says:

There are parallels between Australia in the late 1960’s when I was writing this book, and Australia in 1900. In 1901 the Indigenous people of Australia had no place in the Constitution, and just before I wrote the book, they were given a place, insofar as the Federal Government was given the power to legislate for them—all these parallels seemed too good to be true. It was also the form—the neat, nifty ways the historic tale encompassed Australian problems. The lessons from the tale were obvious. (Keneally 2004: PS: 8 [a separately numerated section at the end of the book])

Understanding the concept and practice of *Daddiri* and the emphasis on asking permission that exists within Aboriginal culture we came to realise that the fact that we found LeRoy and that LeRoy found us took on a *spiritual* dimension. While it was with a sense of trepidation that we had approached the telling of this story as time went by we began to feel as if our journey was the right action and we were on the right track to contribute to resolving this tragic story of black and white relations from Australia’s history. It was having these interactions that seemed “meant to be” that kept us pursuing our line of

enquiry. Without both LeRoy and I as principal actors and creative developers having a family connection to this story, it would have been impossible to tell the story we told, it would have been like trespassing.

Jimmy Governor's hanging in 1901 was postponed to allow for the celebrations of the Federation of Australia after which Aboriginal people were officially counted under the Flora and Fauna Act. In the referendum of 1967, when Thomas Keneally was drawn to this story, Aboriginal people were officially recognized as Australian citizens. In 2007, during the process of working on *Posts in the Paddock* the Australian Government apologised to Aboriginal people through the agency of the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in the following way:

To the stolen generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the parliament of Australia, I am sorry. I offer you this apology without qualification.

We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied...I know that, in offering this apology on behalf of the government and the parliament, there is nothing I can say today that can take away the pain you have suffered personally. Whatever words I speak today, I cannot undo that. Words alone are not that powerful; grief is a very personal thing. I ask those non-Indigenous Australians listening today who may not fully understand why what we are doing is so important to imagine for a moment that this had happened to you. I say to honourable members here present: imagine if this had happened to us. Imagine the crippling effect.

Imagine how hard it would be to forgive (Apology 2008).

Forgiveness is often difficult and in the case of the Jimmy Governor and *Posts in the Paddock* story forgiveness was required from both black and white. For example, the Aboriginal artists that we worked with to create *Posts in the Paddock* have pointed out that one of the reasons the story of Jimmy Governor captured imaginations and newspaper inches in its day is because the victims were white. The black victims of crime and indeed of massacres were not noted or identified in any way.

The Governor family story

For this reason we were fortunate to learn of the Jimmy Governor story from a member of his own family. Aunty Loretta Parsley a direct descendent writes:

My great grandfather James (Jimmy) Governor was born to the period of time when European culture was beginning to implement a social class system in Australia, and to dominate Aboriginal cultural and heritage practices. Jimmy demanded respect and was a law-abiding citizen. His notoriety in becoming a bushranger was forced on him by what he considered an unfair, unequal system. His demise and demeanor were affected by the fact that he had married

a non-Aboriginal woman called Ethel Page, my great grandmother.

The period of 1875 to 1901 gave rise to a major transition in Australian culture and politics that brought significant changes to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. During this time many events were to occur that would change the shape of Aboriginal lives. People were relocated and subjected to uninvited changes that were later to fracture the stability of many peoples lives, both black and white.

I believe that Jimmy had a strong connection to his country and a great loyalty to his family. His spirit was his ownership and identity was to be the best provider for his old family and his new family. Ethel expected that Jimmy would be a loyal husband and a protector of her and their child Sid. Sid and Ethel were to become the most stable and grounding force in the events that led up to Jimmy's capture and consequent hanging in Sydney. Documentation throughout the police records of Jimmy's internment and up to his subsequent hanging suggests that Ethel had diligently maintained contact and showed her dignity, pride and her loving commitment to Jimmy until he was hung in Darlinghurst Goal on 18 January 1901. After Jimmy's death, Ethel was to continue her love and commitment to her family. In the year following Jimmy's death my grandmother, Thelma Hazel Violet Governor, was born to Ethel in Wollongong, on 9 April 1901. Birth certificate records validate and confirm that James Governor was her father. Sid Governor was to live on the east coast of NSW but he changed his name to Sid Duncan. I believe this was done to protect him from the stigma of being Jimmy's son.

For the rest of her life, Ethel remained a devoted mother, and a loving and caring wife. After her marriage to her second husband Frank Brown, an Aboriginal man from Wreck Bay, she bore nine more children: Robert, Daphne, Alma, Eunice, Dorothy, May, Victoria, Frank and Charles. She lived in the Ulladulla region and raised her children. She played an active role in the community and was known for her generosity and compassion, helping those less fortunate than herself. She was a creative person who was frequently asked to crochet garments. One of her garments is featured in the collection of the Clyde River and Batemans Bay Historical Society. Ethel kept her family close to her and she had the support of her mother, Julia.

Ethel lived a productive and honorable life and she made her own positive contribution to society. She passed away in Sydney on 31 December 1945, and was buried at the same cemetery as her beloved Jimmy. Ethel's last surviving daughter Victoria, aged 91, presently resides in Ulladulla. Many of my Grandmother Thelma Hazel Violet Governor's—known as Violet—descendants now live on the east coast of NSW. Violet's blood streams from the heritage of her father Jimmy and is washed and cleansed in the saltwater of his daughter's living descendants.

Violet married George Parsons in 1918. She and George had four children: Cyril, Robert, Ethel and Ruth. All of Violet and George's children are deceased, but are survived by children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and great great grandchildren. Jimmy's journey has led his descendants to ensure that issues of the past, present and future events in the historical and political arena are respected and valued. We are all guided by our own spiritual destiny (Khan 2011: Pg 15).

My Darling Patricia

Our research for *Posts in the Paddock* resulted in two interconnected art works, an installation and a theatre show that reflect the journey we have taken in exploring these stories and their relevance to the personal lives of Australians and to the life of the nation. Within the installation, we worked to create an opportunity for people to hear the stories we have heard. Sound designer Declan Kelly edited together interviews with family members that we conducted over the three years of development. These voices were combined with field recordings, the sound of birds flying overhead and wind and footsteps moving through the grass, recorded on site. All this is located within a sound design of original music and heard emanating from within eight delicate paper posts that evoke the ruins of the house where my family were murdered. This installation was designed in collaboration with Fiona Foley, a distinguished Aboriginal artist from the Hervey Bay area of Queensland.



Figure 5: Photograph of the *Posts in the Paddock* Installation Designed by Fiona Foley, My Darling Patricia, and Declan Kelly. Photograph ©Heidrun Lohr, 2011.

Bryoni Tresize, a journalist for *Realtime*, an Australian arts magazine, describes the theatre piece in this way:

Posts in the Paddock begins as an installation. What first appear as charred tree stumps stand waiting in a pile of rubbery ash. They are the leftovers of a time brought into the present with a choir of voices that chitter-chatter and interrupt. Words are indeterminate, histories intersect and are lost. We tread carefully looking at others who are listening. Our ears and bodies are being trained...Next we are seated looking down into the landscape we have just inhabited. Those stumps—once close, now distant—have been brought into focus by the unsuspecting connect between our bodily tactility and theirs. They are the aftermath; the scene of the crime, the wood that has stood while all else has fallen away. We watch a history unfold. Jimmy is there, installing a fence, flirting with Ethel. They rarely speak, but actions are followed... Jimmy's inevitable execution is theatrically envisaged in the form of a drum of sugar that is poured over his head, an image reminiscent of the mournful ecstasy one might find in a Bill Viola work; his features become tremulous, almost translucent. We see Ethel watching his ghost walk away. The second half of *Posts in the Paddock* includes Britton and Parsons recounting the research and development phases of the work. The personal here is important, as much for what it factually narrates as for how it positions the makers in relation to the history in which they imagine themselves. Author Chris Healy writes that the "intercultural space of Aboriginality" in Australia is "constituted by strange and transient patterns of remembering and forgetting" (Healy 2008). In this respect, something of the past remains in Britton and Parsons, whose very bodies charge an uncanny sense of repetition and return as they work to acknowledge both the tracks of remembering and forgetting that circulate this history. This is rare theatre: part remembrance, part conjecture, part mourning, part apology and part reckoning (Tresize *RealTime* issue #107 Feb-March 2012, p. 38)



Figure 6: Sam Routledge and LeRoy Parsons in Posts in the Paddock. © Heidrun Lohr 2011

These lines from the play, called *Scar*, were written by Halcyon Macleod of *My Darling Patricia* for Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor. They conclude our telling of Jimmy's story in *Posts in the Paddock* and are a reminder of the role of hurt, trauma and memory in the lives of people, even over generations:

To see killing. And for a child. It's not good. The Mawbey kids did. See it. See their siblings. A lot of our people seen it for sure. Back then. You have to hold that somehow. Hold the hurt. Everyone does it different, but somehow you got to hold it—there (cups hand in front) or there (makes a fist). The way a wound heals. It needs some saltwater, and it needs sunlight, needs to be seen, needs time to pass. The body—it can mend. True 'ay. Bones knit back together, when skin is split, the blood congeals there to protect what's been exposed—fleshy bit. And under that scabby crust, like a miracle, there's new skin grows, and that old bit, the scabby bit falls off. Underneath, like a beautiful pink shell, that new skin under a scab. But it's not new. It's a scar. It might be pink like new skin at first, but a scar darkens, it's knobby and tough. That scar tissue is stronger than the skin that's never been harmed. Gotta be, to keep it all together “ay”.

The original protagonists of this story have passed on. They were a generation of Australians who were too close to the shame, the guilt and the sadness of this story to look at it. Mick O'Brien never returned to the house where his young family died, but a lot of

time has passed and this history needs to be addressed. We approached telling this story carefully, with respect and with an emphasis on family. This story is a tragedy. The murders that Jimmy Governor committed took place against a backdrop of dispossession, displacement, oppression and in many cases, the murder of now nameless Aboriginal people. As well as the people whose stories and names we know and can tell you about, we want to remember the traditional owners, past and present, of that land and all the names and the stories we will never know.

The theatre production of *Posts in the Paddock* concludes with the following song written and sung in Wiradjuri by Nadeena Dixon. It is a circle song and as its structure repeats we are invited to consider the passing of time in the language of the place this story is from.

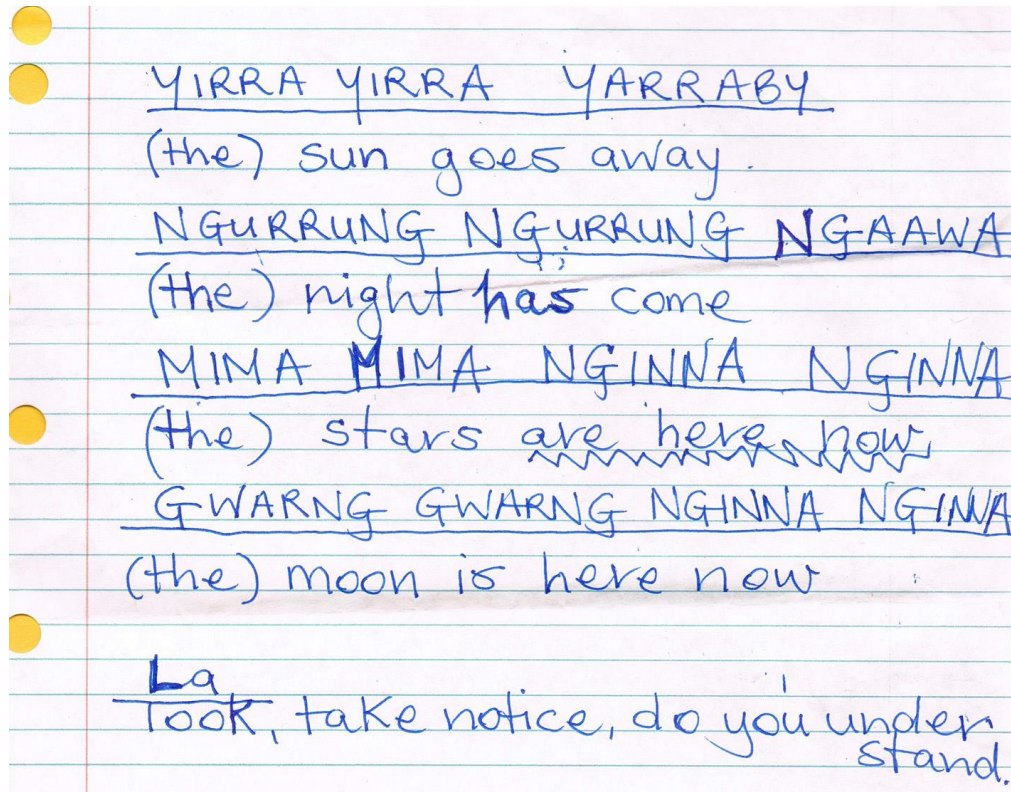


Figure 7: Image of Nadeena Dixon's Lyrics for "Yirra Yirra Yarraby".

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