



"Singing The Land"

The cycle between music, land, story and image
in Black Arm Band's *dirtsong*



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Zellerbach Hall, University of California Berkeley

Table of Contents

How to Use this Engagement Guide	3
Your Starring Role in the Theater (theater etiquette for students)	4
About the Black Arm Band.....	5
Artistic Concepts: “Singing the Land”—The Cycle between music, land, story and image in <i>dirtsong</i>	6
Resources.....	7
Original Text That Inspired <i>dirtsong</i> by Alexis Wright.....	8
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY (pre-performance)	10
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY (post-performance)	12
<i>dirtsong</i> Photos	14
Cal Performances Education Program Donor List	18
About Cal Performances Classroom	19



How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #BlackArmBand@Cal

We invite you to challenge yourself and your students to think with the curiosity and passion of the arts. This engagement guide is organized around 4 key artistic practices (as identified by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards at <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/>)

Investigating: Questioning, exploring and challenging.

Imagining: Opening the door to what's possible, and even to what seems impossible.

Creating: Making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

Connecting: Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

You'll be able to link on specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about. The body of the Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show.

We've included a pre-performance engagement activity and a post-performance activity for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

Artistic Literacy: Having the skills and knowledge you need to connect meaningfully with works of art—that's what we mean by artistic literacy. We think that means something different than knowing the names of all the different instruments musicians might play, or being able to reproduce the exact melodies you might hear during a show. To us at Cal Performances, it means you and your students will have a significant glimpse into the artistic process and will have a chance to try to solve the problems the artists aim to solve creatively. It means that the next time you see a performance, you'll be able to use these same insights to connect with a work of art through the artist's process and that this will deepen your experience as an audience member.

The artistically literate student audiences comes to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages—and their teachers and adult mentors—will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

Enjoy the show!

Your ★ STARRING Role in the Theater



As an audience member, you are a STAR, too! You play an important role in the performance community. The artists need YOU in order to give you their best work.

S.T.A.R. Audiences

S = Support the artists by being attentive and focusing on the performers.

T = Tune in: listen and watch for understanding (and for Black Arm Band, watch for how the musicians work together – with their percussion/rhythms, droning sounds and vocals – and how the images on the stage make part of the story with the music.)

A = Appreciate the performers by clapping at the right time. For example, when a scene or dance ends, or when the stage lights fade to dark.

R = Respect the performers and other audience members. At a performance, you, the others in the audience and the artists are sharing this experience together and are part of a performance community. Think about ways you can best support the community's performance experience.

We know you will be a STAR today and will help you classmates shine too!

About the Black Arm Band

In their own words:

“Black Arm Band is an Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) organization and one of Australia’s leading performing arts companies, widely acclaimed in Australia and internationally for our distinctive music theatre performances, celebration of indigenous music, culture and language and uniquely powerful visual imagery. Our musical tradition and presentation is forged from over 40,000 years of living culture, infused with contemporary styles that have been adopted as their own by Aboriginal Australia. We are a flexible ensemble of highly skilled *blackfulla* and *whitefulla* musicians and artistic technicians who represent the apogee of Australian music theatre.”



More about Black Arm Band

At the heart of **Black Arm Band's** work is a relationship with the indigenous communities from where their work draws its inspiration, including ongoing interaction with Elders and community. Black Arm Band connects their artistic integrity to the land in a way that they can share it with the world.

Exceptional artistry, authentic storytelling, profoundly affecting performances and an artistic memorandum of celebration-revolution-reconciliation are the features of Black Arm Band that have imprinted us on the landscape of Australian Indigenous arts.

Over nearly 10 years, the company has provided professional pathways and opportunities for many artists and performed to over one million people. Black Arm Band's current performance, titled *dirtsong*, inspired by the words of award-winning author Alexis Wright, mixes traditional approaches and contemporary songs, existing repertoire and newly commissioned music to conjure a sense of 'country' as not only a geographical place, but as encounters, memories, obligations and nature.



Black Arm Band performers include:

Vocalists: Troy Brady, James Henry, Nicole Lampton, Shellie Morris, Ursula Yovich

Band: Tjupurru: yidaki/didjeribone, Benito Cortez: violin and viola, Rory McDougall: drums, Michael Meagher: bass, Patrick Wolff: tenor saxophone and clarinet Jacob Smolowe: piano

“Rich, melodious and undeniably intoxicating, the Aboriginal languages shared in song are beautiful, all 13 of them... Director Steven Richardson duly notes our history of language annihilation and has nurtured musical ‘conversations’ to remind us of the wonders of diversity... World-class performance...” - Dash Taylor, Adelaide Independent News.

Artistic Concept: “Singing The Land” -- The cycle between music, land, story and image in *dirtsong*

How do the Black Arm Band musicians take inspiration from the land to create a performance that tells the story of the land and its people using music and images?

“*dirtsong* is about land, language and people and the connection between the three is innate to us (Aboriginal people)...whether we’re from the cities or the country, we all come from that earth, we all go back to that earth.” - Lou Bennett, musician



Because dirt is everywhere, and dirt is of the earth, the title *dirtsong* offers a clue about how Black Arm Band thinks of their music as belonging to and being about the land and about being a people of the land. Every culture has its own music that is an important part of its identity, and the traditional music of the original people of Australia draws on the environment to generate unique sounds and rhythms. If you know how to listen, you can hear the land and the people in the music, and see how the images in the video at the performance of *dirtsong* are part of the song. The song is the land, the land is the story, the people are the story and the video (pictures) are the song. It’s a circle of art that celebrates the richness, joy, sadness and hope of over 40,000 years of Aboriginal life in Australia.

Loss and Disruption: The relationship between the land and people is one of mutual interdependence. The preservation, nurture and care of the land is a timeless cycle for Indigenous Australians. But this relationship was disrupted when Europeans came to Australia in the 18th century, and dislocated the original people. As happened in the Americas, there is a long history of Indigenous people being forced off of land they’d lived on for hundreds, even thousands of years, and losing a connection with their communities, their history, their original languages, their spiritual beliefs, their families and their livelihoods. Many Indigenous Australians identify with the Black Lives Matters Movement in the United States, as well as with the Native Americans currently taking action to protect the environment at Standing Rock in North Dakota.

The spirit of resilience and reconciliation: For Indigenous people in Australia, the land around them contains their history and the history of everything on and in the land. And that history is in the music, which is like a map of the land and the people. In Aboriginal traditions, the land was created through music and music “sings” the land into being. Black Arm Band performs *dirtsong* in 11 different Aboriginal languages, tapping into the old traditions to tell the modern story of Aboriginal life in Australia today. The performers wear the colors of the earth and reach out to all of us in song.

The images and the lyrics are inspired by an award-winning Indigenous Australian writer, Alexis Wright, who is well-known for her activism about land rights for the original people of Australia. *dirtsong* taps into both modern and traditional stories to make music celebrating the long history of the original peoples of Australia as a living story of today. The land (called “country” in Australia) has evolved to include cities, farms and other communities built by people, as well as open country and open skies, bush country and the outback. The spirit of the land and the people are in the music and in the images, each of them calling out the beauty and strength of the other.



A pair of bare feet making contact with the earth while the musicians' voices swoop and spin is a great image for the connections you'll hear in *dirtsong* between the music, the land and the stories of the people.

Resources

Cal Performances Program Notes for Black Arm Band's *dirtsong*

https://calperformances.org/learn/program_notes/2016-17/pn_black-arm-band.pdf

Childrens Books on Indigenous Australian (many more on these sites below)

<https://www.readings.com.au/collection/recommended-indigenous-australian-childrens-books>

<https://www.creativespirits.info/resources/books/children>

Welcome to Country. Auntie Joy Murphy with art by Indigenous artist Lisa Kennedy

The Rainbow Serpent. Dick Roughsey with illustrations by P. Trezise

Nginingawila Ngirramini: Our Story. Tiwi College Alalinguwi Jarrakarling (Girls sharing stories)

Stories for Simon. Lisa Miranda Sarzin and Lauren Briggs

A brief overview of Aboriginal/Indigenous Australians

http://www.aboriginalart.com.au/aboriginal_australia.html

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/>

Black Arm Band Social Media Links

Website <http://www.blackarmband.com.au>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/theblackarmband/>

Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/blackarmband/>

Sound Cloud <https://soundcloud.com/black-arm-band-company/sets/dirtsong>

Original Text That Inspired *dirtsong*

by Alexis Wright

Alexis Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria, is one of Australia's finest writers. Her novel *Carpentaria* won the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize.

This is dirtsong—It comes from where we
bin start off.
Comes from country line.
Long time singing song for country.
dirtsong coming up from where everything
start off.

Coming up from ancient song for making
country good—looking good all of
the time.
Singing it up, singing it up, looking after
it well.
Should be like that, very important for
spinifex, gidgee, mulga,
Plenty good food, plant, water hole,
animal each country place,
Sky place,
Sea place—looking after em.
Keeping story alive for country,
make it alive—singing the songs,
Living the stories,
Holding the knowledge,
Following the story,
That is the Aboriginal law belonging to us.
dirtsong—happening now!

Country!
Country for me! You listening?
Are you listening to me?
Coming up close now.
I am country. Listen to me!
I am your government—I am the land.
This country speaks proper way.
Law right up top.
It has to be above other laws.

That Canberra law underneath—any
Australia law underneath—only little law.

Yeah, I reckon old Law is everywhere.
See it over there in the hill where the old

spirits live, inside rock, tree, wind, sky,
all animals and these old ones are coming
through the elders singing the country with
all the knowledge for big law.

I cannot be any other way.
I am not your way.
Everyone must listen to the land to live strong.

Land strong with Law.
Indigenous law.
He is the right constitution for this country.
I am here.
Sitting down here.
My country, he's alright, very good.
I am happy now.
First time I am happy.
I like that country and go back and stay there.
It is desert country, all flat, and big range on
side—that far—and all the sandhill going
the other way.
We done ceremony—making corroboree,
and all that for our own country.
I know everything: what Dreaming I got,
law that my father lend me.

I am here.
Sitting down here.
Sitting where grandparents' grandparents lived.
Watching my country, watching story—
creation story, law story.
Growing up children.
Growing up country.
Looking after.
Side by side.
Proper way for this country.

I don't know what other people do
to the country.
I cannot understand it.
It is a crying shame to see the country

like this.
Yep! We have seen all the change.
There were a lot of good things right through
this country—but memories now.
Still though, the Indigenous law for land
stands strong, I don't know how, but it does.

We got to make the stories.
Sing the stories back.
Bring the country back.
Singing it up.
Bringing it back.
Bringing up feeling.
Feeling it in the heart.
Giving it back to the country.
Listen for the heartbeat.
The heartbeat now—with the pulse of the land,
The bird; The tree; The grass and the wind.
Bringing it up.

Dry country some places now
Too much

I don't know if we will get rain soon.
Who will make it rain?
I can't make it rain
Some of them old people passed away now,
you know, the rainmakers.

They been make it rain.
Make it rain and the country come back.
You got to look after the rainmakers.
People need to listen
Listen carefully
The wind blows strong
Through the tree it blows
Come visiting you
Spirit talking to you
It comes in dreams
You can hear it too
We are made the same, you and I
Hot wind bringing the goose
Bringing fish
Rain storm.

Alexis Wright's words written in recognition of the recorded voices of elders in the books Take Power and Story About Feeling by Bill Neidjie.



Alexis Wright

Engagement Activities

Engagement Activity #1 (Pre-performance) “SINGING THE LAND”: Artistic Exploration

Guiding Questions

- How can music or sound inspire visual images?
- How can a visual image evoke a sound or song?
- What is the interaction between sound and visuals?
- How do words convey their own sounds and visuals?

Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive listening. Close observation and reading. Translating sounds to visuals. Imagining story.

Overview

Time needed: 30-60 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will draw images inspired by sound, and make connections with Alexis Wright’s *dirtsong* poem.

Supplies and Prep

- Black Arm Band photos (on pages 14-17)
- Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements).
- Chalk pastels
- Black Arm Band [dirtsong video](#)

Instructions

Step 1

Listen & Imagine

In *dirtsong*, Black Arm Band artists wanted to create a musical “map” that tells the story of Aboriginal land, its people, both past and present, and the language and song that the land brought into being.

Start with everyone at table groups. Play the YouTube clip from *dirtsong*. Listen to it once with your eyes closed.

- What images do you see in your imagination as you hear the music?
- What colors do you see in your mind’s eye? What shapes, and lines?
- Is there a story that’s beginning to come together in your mind?
- Do you see a landscape in your imagination? Are there animals, or beings in that landscape?

Step 2

Listen & Draw/Doodle

- a) Pass around *dirt song* photographs (face down) to each table group. Listen to the music again, but this time after listening for a few moments, turn the photographs around and choose one of them that speaks to you.
- b) Begin to doodle, color or draw with pastels on top of the photograph sheet while you listen. You can make different lines with the chalk: thin, thicker and swashy. It's ok to doodle over parts of the image, draw pictures on top of it, add shapes and different colors. Give yourself permission to draw whatever the music inspires you to draw on the picture. (As you work, do not blow on your card. Tap it on top of paper in the middle of the tables.)

Reflection: Turn and talk to someone at your table about what you heard/imagined/drew. Share at your table, then take comments from the whole group. (For young students share out in large group.)

Step 3

Create sound for your picture

- a) Look at your images again, and think back to what you heard in the *dirt song* clip. Imagine a sound that evokes a part of your image, or your feelings when you were creating it.
- b) Make that sound all together as a group on the count of three, 1-2-3!
- c) Half of room repeats their sounds (the other listens). Switch: the other half repeats their sounds while the first half listens. Try "conducting" the class. Can they make their sounds louder, softer, slower, faster, higher, lower?

Step 4

Read closely Alexis Wright's text

- a) Read Alexis Wright's text together. Students may take turns reading sections out loud.
- b) Give definitions for the Aboriginal words, or students may research these online.
- c) Read the poem over again, this time to yourself. Highlight or underline the words and phrases that resonate or stand out for you.
- d) If certain passages conjure an image in your imagination, go ahead and add these doodles or drawings to your photograph sheet.
- e) In groups, discuss what stands out for you from the poem. What do you "hear" clearly, and why is this meaningful to you?
- f) Read the poem again out loud or silently, by yourself or with a partner, and this time choose 2 or 3 words that really speak to you.
- g) Using different colors and styles, add these words to your photograph sheet.
- h) Reflect together on what it was like to hear and read the poem and why certain words and phrases stayed with you more than others.

Step 5

Watch the *dirt song* trailer video and look for how the music and the images come together to tell a story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-kxPpuOfZI>

See you at Cal Performances' Zellerbach Hall on Monday, February 13 at 11am for the Black Arm SchoolTime show of *dirtsong*!



Engagement Activity #2 (Post-Performance)

“SINGING THE LAND” IN BLACK ARM BAND’S *dirtsong*: Reflection & Artistic Exploration

Guiding Questions

How do the Black Arm Band musicians tell stories using songs and images?

What is the relationship between songs and pictures in *dirtsong*?

How does the quality of the music combined with the pictures/video evoke different emotions?

Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive listening and responding. Remembering. Expressing.

Overview

Time needed: 30-60 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will reflect on Black Arm Band’s performance of *dirtsong* in kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal ways. They will explore embodying images from the show, recall what they saw and heard, thought and felt during the performance, and will make connections between what they did in their pre-performance activity and what they experienced at the performance.

Supplies and Prep

- Open space for students to stand and move around a bit (no large movements required).
- Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements)

Instructions

Reflection

Step 1

Embodying images from the show





- In a circle, let’s go around and each person show with your whole body something you saw in the performance. (For example, you might show us one of the musicians playing an instrument, or show us an image from the video.)
- After each person demonstrates with their body, our whole group will repeat the movement or pose.



Step 2

Journaling and/or drawing reflection

- Think about what you **saw** during the performance. Right now, just remember things you actually saw with your eyes, not what you might have seen in your imagination. Write down and/or draw or doodle some things you saw.
- Remember what you **heard** during the performance. Again, focus on what your ears actually heard, not what you might have imagined among the sounds. Write down and/or draw or doodle some things you heard.
- Now, we can bring in what we **thought** and imagined! Write down, draw or doodle some things you thought about or imagined during the performance.
- How did you **feel** during the performance? What emotions or feelings came up as you heard the music and watched the musicians and the video images? Write about and/or draw or doodle these.
- On a white board or easel sheet make four quadrants, and title them See/Hear/Think/Feel. As a class, let's share some things you saw first. (Write these in the See quadrant. If students share something they interpreted or imagined, remind them to share something they actually saw with their eyes.) Now, let's share some things you heard... some things you thought ... some things you felt during the performance. (Capture these in each of the quadrants.)

SEE 	HEAR 
THINK 	FEEL 

Step 3

Discuss & Reflect Together Using these Questions

- What did you expect the performance to be like? How did you connect this with what you actually experienced at the performance?
- What in the show made you think of the activities you did before seeing the show?
- What surprised you? What seemed a little familiar? What seemed really strange?
- What questions would you ask the artists if you could? What artistic advice might you share with someone who was going to see the performance?
- Where did you hear or see in *dirtsong* that made you think of Alexis Wright's text?
- What do the following quotes from Lou Bennett, a Black Arm Band artist bring up for you:

"*dirtsong* is about land, language, and people, and the connection between the three is innate in us [Aboriginal people]. It's something that's always been there, always will be in humankind, but in our mob it's very evident in our everyday life. Whether we're from the cities or the country, we all come from that earth, we all go back to that earth."

"You know, some of those old men and women that travel through bushland, they sing the country; and when they sing the country they know where they are. It's like a map to them."

– Lou Bennett, Black Arm Band artist

- What do the pictures from *dirtsong* (on the following pages) make you think of?

You might consider seeking curricular connections in literature, geography and history. If you design a lesson that you'd like to share, please let us know! We'd like to include it on our blog or in future workshops for teachers...









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Cal Performances thanks the following donors for their gifts in support of our Artistic Literacy (Education & Community) Programs:

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For information on supporting our Artistic Literacy (Education & Community) Programs, contact Sarah Sobey. Phone: 510.643.7053 / Email: ssobey@calperformances.org.



About Cal Performances and the Cal Performances Classroom

The mission of Cal Performances is to produce and present performances of the highest artistic quality, enhanced by programs that explore compelling intersections of education and the performing arts. Cal Performances celebrates over 100 years on the UC Berkeley Campus.

What is a Cal Performances Classroom?

Your classroom, of course!

The arts are an endlessly replenishable resource for a lifelong love affair with thinking, learning and feeling across disciplines and cultures. They connect fluidly with curriculum throughout the school years, and – perhaps with more endurance – they connect us to ideas and reflection on human experience that can't be easily expressed any other way.

Each season at Cal Performance, you will find a menu of compelling performances and classroom opportunities for any age. You can create your Cal Performances classroom through any or all of our artistic literacy programs for grades K-12.

Cal Performances holds artistic literacy on a par with language and numerical literacy. Those who are artistically literate hold the keys to a lifelong engagement with the arts, able to unlock and make personal connections to any work of art, regardless of level of familiarity with the work and the artists.

Artistic literacy skills are developed in the Cal Performances classroom as students and teachers are engaged in the artist's process. These skills are embedded in everything we do, from pre-performance talks to community conversations to teacher workshops and artist visits to the classroom.

Cal Performances Department of Artistic Literacy Staff:

Rica Anderson, Manager of Student Engagement

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