

# ETHNOGRAPHIC SONGWRITING IN SARDINIA, ITALY: MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the author's scholarly and artistic work in Sardinia, Italy during her 2019-2020 Fulbright year. It explores the album of original songs and the ethnographic book that developed out of that year, and goes on to discuss other projects, including a study abroad program, a retreat and a small business, that were also inspired by the Fulbright experience.

**Keywords:** ethnography • songwriting • Sardinia • singer-songwriter • fieldwork



## INTRODUCTION

I went to Sardinia, Italy, on a Fulbright in 2019-2020, as both a cultural anthropologist and a singer-songwriter. I had first arrived on this western Mediterranean island in 2017, when I was slated to play a month-long tour, as a singer-songwriter, with a Sardinian tour booker who later became a good friend and colleague. Driving across the island, on windy streets through small mountain villages and by the raw, wild sea, playing shows in 15th century Aragonese towers by the sea, and hearing some of the most beautiful singing I've ever heard, sealed the deal for me: I felt deeply connected and wanted to come back. I returned every summer after that, first playing mostly shows and visiting with new friends, then, eventually, thinking about how I might transform my love for Sardinia (spelled 'Sardigna' in Sardinian) into a sustainable research project in some fashion. Since I am an ethnographer, a singer-songwriter, and an Italian speaker, I decided to try to combine these skill sets into a Fulbright proposal that was both a research and an artistic project.

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And so, in June 2019, I returned by ferry to Sardinia, this time for almost a year, splitting my time between the small, rural village of Santu Lussurgiu, in the Sardinian foothills, and the bustling city of Cagliari, where I had an office and a faculty affiliation at the University of Cagliari. It was a year full of singing, long, luxurious lunches, artistic growth, and of deep friendships and connections formed.

For my Fulbright research project, I wrote collaborative songs ('cowriting') with anyone that wanted to write with me and had a story to share—shepherds, storytellers, songwriters, language activists, teachers, high school students, actors and veteran musicians. I treated the act of song co-creation as a kind of long-form interview and the songs that we wrote as part of my research "data." I documented every stage of the writing process, from song 'seed' to the final recording—and also interviewed my cowriters about our creative process along the way. We then recorded these songs on site, in my tall stone house in the village, also recording the soundscape of the swallows flying down the street to capture a sense of the place.

During my Fulbright, I also began studying the Sardinian language, a politically non-dominant language spoken only on this island, and one of the closest living cognates to Latin. Since my project focused on the connections between music and language and the relationships between Italian and Sardinian speakers, it felt important to learn the language 'from the inside out.' Sardinian as a language is complex, and has multiple variants: I studied two of these variants, Logudorese and Campidanese, one spoken in the village where I lived, and one spoken in the city of Cagliari and the surrounding southern plains and coastal areas. Since there are strong feelings about which variant should be spoken, where, this learning process led to important research insights into social class, language stigma and language politics as they are linked to speaking Sardinian and Italian. I ended up also writing, and performing, a number of songs in Sardinian, a sonic act of language reclamation performed by an outsider but which, unexpectedly, validated the Sardinian language for other Sardinians in ways I hadn't anticipated. You can hear these dynamics in the song "Tiria" ([link in notes](#)) which features the Sardinian singer and musician Matthew 'Baro' Papperi singing in Sardinian and made to sound like a bluegrass song.

In addition to cowriting songs and learning Sardinian, I also took country line dancing classes, to better understand the ways that roots music, and American country music, circulate internationally (I am a country artist and learned to line dance when I lived on the Navajo Nation, so this part was of particular interest to me). I encountered some surprises in this research, including the prevalent use of the Confederate Battle flag—a strong symbol of anti-Blackness in a US context—on the dance class logo. This led to many heart-searching conversations with Sardinian colleagues, classmates and teachers as I tried to figure out my own role as an American, Fulbrighter, scholar and artist in this scenario, while also trying to be a respectful as a guest in another country. I document much of this journey in the forthcoming book, *Sing Me Back Home: Ethnographic Songwriting and Sardinian Language Politics* (University of Toronto Press).

## OUTCOMES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

My year by the sea, as I like to call it, was transformative in many ways. Having the space, time and ability to really live into being in Sardinia, as a long-term resident, greatly increased my confidence and ability as an Italian (and beginning Sardinian) speaker (I am told I now speak Italian with a Sardinian accent). It also increased my comfort with day-to-day logistics and a general know-how of how to navigate this space in a culturally appropriate manner, enough so that I now regularly host and lead groups of international visitors to Sardinia.

## A MUSICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

It also led to the writing of my second musical ethnography, *Sing Me Back Home: Ethnographic Songwriting and Sardinian Language Politics*, which will be published with the University of Toronto Press in fall 2024. The book details, in ethnographic storytelling form and through songs, my journey into Sardinian language politics, village life, and the complex ways in which American music and American popular culture circulate in Sardinia. A multisensory ethnography that draws heavily on songs as a form of storytelling in their own right, each chapter begins with a song from the album *House on Swallow Street* (detailed, below), featured as QR codes for easy access on the reader's phone. My Fulbright research also became a number of academic research articles and Op-Eds.

Another outcome of the Fulbright experience was the release of the album *House on Swallow Street* (Talk About Records, 2021), an album featuring twelve songs, written, recorded, produced and released in Sardinia. Upon its review, the album was favorably reviewed by music publications across Italy, including in *The Manifesto*, *Il Giornale della Musica*, and in one of two main newspapers in Sardinia, *L'Unione Sarda*. As a reviewer from the Italian *Il Giornale della Musica* noted,

Imagine a song with a sweet tinkle of arpeggios, as Joan Baez might have written in the early Seventies, and a clean and sensual contralto that swirls on very, very North American vowels and consonants. Imagine that at a certain point that same voice inserts the following sentences, in Italian: «But are you American? And why did you come to Sardinia? Are you sure you want to live here?». All true. Now imagine a recording of a flight of swallows made just outside the door of the house, and then the same folk singer voice starting to sing, this time in Sardinian. In almost perfect Sardinian, right with that way of swallowing and grinding certain sounds that is truly unavoidable for those coming from Massachusetts. You will have just discovered one of the most sensationally original records (folk? World? Imaginary ethno? Real ethno?) of recent times (Festinese 2021, translation mine).

## **A STUDY ABROAD COURSE**

Once I returned from Sardinia in 2020, I began crafting a study abroad course at my University, so that students from my minority majority institution could experience some of the growth, magic and delight that I did during my Fulbright year. In this course, now three years running, I travel with my students to my field sites, living in the village of Santu Lussurgiu and the city of Cagliari: we dive into Italian language immersion, do workshops in traditional Sardinian singing, and meet with poets, songwriters, ethnomusicologists and singers. We also attend community festivals and events. This year, for example, we will be participating in an annual village pilgrimage, in which we walk up the side of a mountain, carrying a small saint, together with residents of a village in the region known as the Barbagia. Once we arrive at this second festival village, we will enjoy traditional food, dancing and listening to traditional singing groups from across the island. The study abroad course (see link, below), which is now also open to community members on a non-credit basis, is accompanied by an eight-week course, “Song and Ethnography of the Mediterranean: Sardinia, Italy,” in which students read, listen and watch materials to prepare them, culturally and ethically, for the study abroad experience so they can show up fully and be respectful guests.

## **A RETREAT AND WORKSHOP**

The final important development of my Sardinia experience has been the development of a yearly international songwriting retreat in the village of Santu Lussurgiu. This retreat, featuring cultural immersion in the village and community building through collaborative songwriting, is called “Songs of Sardegna” (see retreat link, below). It features songwriters from across the island, paired with songwriters from across the US and around the world, who come together for one week and are paired together, each day, to write a song inspired by a prompt. Because of the intensity of cowriting, cross-cultural and international bridge-building are built into the fiber of the retreat, and have resulted in recordings, albums, tours and more. In the retreat, there is also a strong emphasis on supporting local foodways and local artists and businesses and on fair trade more broadly: We eat meals prepared for us in the village, live in houses spread across the village, go to the market each morning, and do jam sessions in the local bar. I cofacilitate this retreat, each year, with a different Sardinian songwriter in residence, and we offer a final concert, free and open to the public, to village residents. The retreat is offered at a steep discount for Sardinian participants, so they can also attend. This year (2024), the retreat will feature voice lessons offered by a two-time Fulbright winner, Native lyric tenor Bo Shimmin. I met Bo when I was living in Cagliari, while he was an ETA (he is now living in Milan, studying voice at the graduate level and working as an Arts Administrator).

## **A SMALL BUSINESS**

Last year, inspired by my Fulbright year, I also launched my own business, Sing Me Back Home Retreats, which offers place-based, culturally immersive songwriting retreats around the world. These retreats fuse my passion for songwriting and anthropology, and allow me to share my love for the places I have lived with a much broader group of artists, writers, scholars and intrepid travelers. I currently offer retreats in Sardinia, on the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and on the island of Cyprus (see link, below).

## **FULBRIGHT IMPACTS**

Since the completion of my Fulbright, I have become involved in Fulbright in numerous ways: I am a Cultural Anthropology reviewer for the Fulbright Scholar commission, and I created a position in my College as Fulbright Faculty Liaison, a position I now hold, to encourage more Faculty and Students in the arts to apply for Fulbrights. Together with our Honors College Dean, I review internal student Fulbright submissions on campus each year, participate in ‘mock’ interviews to assist candidates in their applications, and also mentor campus faculty submissions.

Most importantly, since 2020, I have successfully invited two different Fulbright scholars for extended stays to our campus. This semester, I am faculty host for Australian Senior Fulbright scholar and Fulbright Indigenous Scholarship, Dr Naomi Sunderland, of Griffith University. Sunderland’s research focuses on First Nations wellness and music and songwriting as a social determinant of health. She and I are co-teaching a class, this semester (2024), “Songwriting in Community,” which uses a trauma-informed approach to teaching creative process and wellness. She is also completing research for a major research project looking at First Nations wellness in Australia and the American southwest, called the Remedy Project.

In fall 2024, I will serve as Faculty Host for another Fulbright Scholar, a Sardinian ethnomusicologist and filmmaker. The scholar will come to New Mexico as a Scholar in Residence (SIR) for two semesters, teaching in the Music Department. In fall 2024, he will teach a three-credit course to undergraduate students in the Music Department called “Audiovisual Frames: Experiencing Music Through Video Making,” one of his main areas of research expertise. The second three-credit class he will teach (spring 2025) will be: “D.I.Y: Ethos, Aesthetics and Modes of Production of Do it Yourself in Music,” his other area of research specialization and the focus of his dissertation research. For both semesters, our SIR scholar will also teach a one-credit performance ensemble on multipart singing, a style of a cappella singing unique to the island of his native Sardinia, Italy.

During his ten-month stay in New Mexico, the SIR will give research talks in the Department of Music, at the Latin American and Iberian Institute, and in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. The SIR will also have the opportunity to serve on Master's thesis committees, to guest lecture in the Italian language courses of UNM faculty members, and to offer regular mentoring and advising sessions with undergraduate students interested in pursuing the field of ethnomusicology. In order to extend his reach for students across campus, the SIR's two academic courses will also be cross-listed with courses offered in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature and the Latin American and Iberian Institute.

While in New Mexico, the SIR's proposed research will focus on the creation of a feature-length ethnographic film documenting musical expression and verbal art within the Genízaro community. Due to northern New Mexico's unique history of Pueblo and Hispanic encounter and the history of Genízaro maroon communities, very little of which has been documented, this is a film that can only be made in person and in situ, and can only be made in New Mexico.

I am immensely grateful for all the opportunities that Fulbright has provided for me personally, and for US and international scholars more broadly. The Fulbright experience has become a central thread in my research, artistic and personal life, and I look forward to seeing where the journeys and connections formed through Fulbright will bring me next.

## NOTES

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The author performing the cowrite, “Il Paese dei Brividi,” with cowriter and accordion player, Matteo Scano, in the village of Santu Lussurgiu, Sardinia (Italy). Photo credit: Diego Pani

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#### BIOGRAPHY

Kristina Jacobsen is an ethnographer, singer-songwriter, and cultural anthropologist. In 2019-2020, she received a US-Italy Fulbright Scholar grant (“Con il Sud”). An Associate professor of Ethnomusicology and Anthropology (Sociocultural & Linguistic) at the University of New Mexico, her research focuses on language reclamation, expressive culture, popular music, and arts-based research methodologies. Her first book, *The Sound of Navajo Country: Music, Language and Diné Belonging* (UNC Press, 2017), was the winner of the 2018 IASPM-US Woody Guthrie Award for most outstanding book on popular music. Jacobsen is a touring singer-songwriter, a Fulbright Scholar (US-Italy, 2019-2020), and fronts the feminist honky-tonk band, The Merlettes. [www.kristinajacobsenmusic.com](http://www.kristinajacobsenmusic.com) (music), [www.singmebackhomesongwritingretreats.com](http://www.singmebackhomesongwritingretreats.com) (retreats), [www.ethnographicsongwriting.com](http://www.ethnographicsongwriting.com) (blog). She can be found on social media at: [@singmebackhome\\_songwriting](https://www.instagram.com/singmebackhome_songwriting), [@jacobsen.kristina](https://www.instagram.com/jacobsen.kristina), and at <https://www.facebook.com/HonkyTonkAmericana>. You can reach kristina at: [kristinajacobsen@gmail.com](mailto:kristinajacobsen@gmail.com)

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