

Maya Waabiny

MOBILISING SONG ARCHIVES TO NOURISH AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

CLINT BRACKNELL

INTRODUCTION

TURRBAL, YAGERA, THANK YOU for caring for this land we meet on today. It is a big responsibility and what I consider a very human thing to do. When last here, for the AIATSIS research conference, I witnessed an impassioned local performance to welcome attendees. In the old days, we visitors might have been expected to perform in response. Although a number of Aboriginal people were there, many of us may not have had a song to share—at least not yet.

I am Noongar, with a Noongar mother and white Australian father. I have a Noongar wife and son. My ancestral Country is far from here, along the southern coast of Western Australia. Here in Brisbane, our endangered Noongar language is strange and foreign. I speak about it in the hope that the things we are doing in the southwest might be useful to people here and elsewhere.

It is an honour to be invited to present as part of the Academy's auspicious 50th Symposium. This year's theme 'Humanising the Future' resonates with my interest in the intersection between tradition and digital technology. This lecture is held in honour of Sir Keith Hancock, who contributed to the foundations of environmental history studies in Australia. Although his biographer Jim Davidson notes that Hancock 'shared the general ignorance of the extent of Aboriginal resistance', he rightly critiqued

characterisations of Australia as untouched wilderness.¹ This continent is an inherently peopled landscape, Country with a capital C—'nourishing terrain' as Deborah Bird Rose would put it—alive and intertwined with Aboriginal people and knowledge systems.² Our longstanding and very current environmental crisis can be understood as not just the fault of flawed science and economics, but also a disconnection between culture and nature, between humans and landscapes.³ Although frequently overlooked in scientific research, factors supporting human connection to the environment such as story, language and song are key to people's everyday wellbeing.⁴ Our future is dependent on Country. Things that most connect us humans to Country—like language, story and song—are crucial to our future.

NOONGAR LANGUAGE AND SONG

More than 30,000 people identify as Noongar, making it one of Australia's largest Aboriginal cultural groups, extending across an extensive rural and urban area in the southwest corner of Western Australia, including the capital city of Perth.⁵ The Aboriginal language of this region is also known as Noongar.⁶ While community-instigated language revival since the 1980s has increased awareness of the language and its various mutually intelligible regional dialects, Australian census data indicates that less than 2% of Noongar

▲ Background montage using article figures.

people speak the Noongar language at home.⁷ Historian Anna Haebich challenges the commonly-held illusion that Aboriginal people in Australia simply lost their culture, which, she writes, ‘suggests a deliberate ignorance and forgetting on the part of settler colonists that validated the many cruelties and injustices of colonization’.⁸ Noongar were the first population in Western Australia to face the full impact of British invasion and the subsequent consequences: dispossession, dislocation, racism and poverty.⁹ Pressures associated with occupation and frontier violence in the nineteenth century and assimilation and segregation policies throughout the twentieth century diminished Noongar knowledge systems and what Hancock himself characterised as Indigenous ‘complex civilisation’.¹⁰

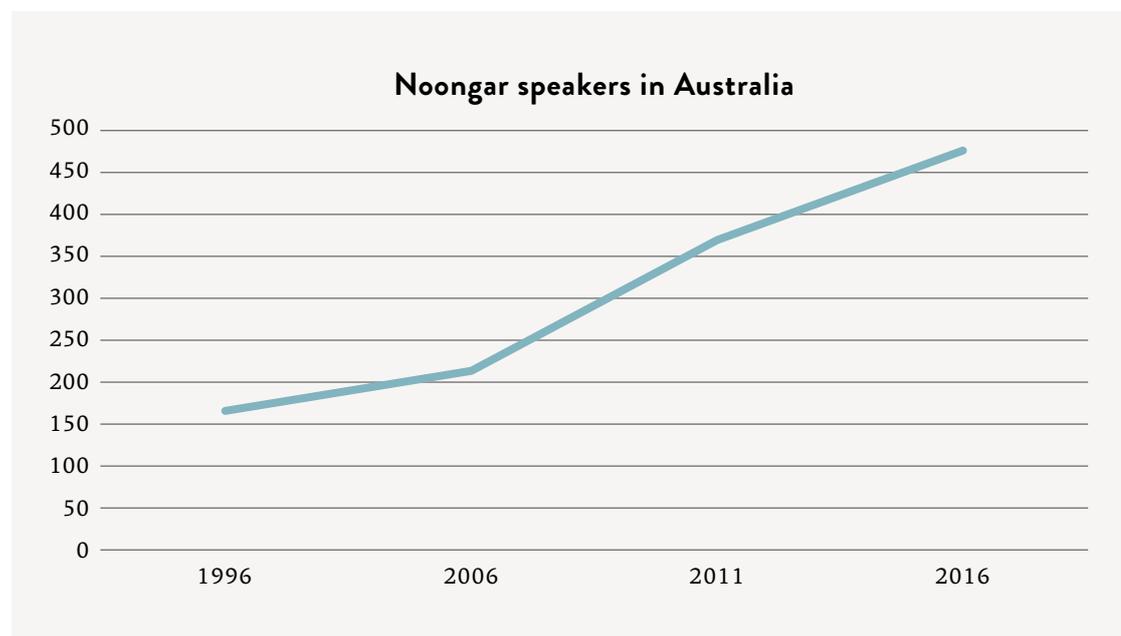
Despite challenges to its vitality, the Noongar language remains important to Noongar people, motivating the Noongar community to pursue cultural sustainability agendas.¹¹ Census statistics reveal a slowly growing community of speakers, or at least a growing identification with the language (fig. 1).¹² This increase is a likely result of Noongar language revitalisation efforts undertaken over the past three decades. Michael Walsh notes similar gains made by Aboriginal language revival movements elsewhere in southern Australia.¹³ The

importance of Noongar language to Noongar identity is even greater than suggested by the relatively small number of contemporary speakers, hence the need, now, for new methods of supporting language, cultural heritage, and community that can also be adapted to future changes in social, political and economic contexts.¹⁴

Support for Indigenous languages is vitally important because they, as linguist Marianne Mithun states, ‘represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history’.¹⁵ According to the most recent United Nations Expert Group on Indigenous languages, Indigenous language loss is a global crisis, with one of the worst ‘hotspots’ being Australia—where Indigenous culture and languages are considered by the Australian Government’s Office for the Arts to be ‘essential for Closing the Gap’ of health, education and economic outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.¹⁶ The United Nations (UN) has declared 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages. According to the UN, there are approximately 370 million Indigenous people around the world. Language is a crucial way for Indigenous people to express history and culture—and the right to one’s language is a crucial component of the UN declaration on the rights of Indigenous people. Yet the UN also reports that 40 per cent of the almost 7,000 languages spoken around the world are

► Fig 1.
Representation of the increase in identifying Noongar speakers across Australian, Census records from 1996 to 2016 (ABS 2019).

IMAGE:
REDRAWN FROM
AUSTRALIAN BUREAU
OF STATISTICS CHART





in real danger of disappearing. In Australia, an estimated 120 Australian Indigenous languages are still spoken in some form, yet 90 per cent of these are considered critically endangered, so there is a real risk that these languages will cease to be spoken within our lifetime.¹⁷

In the Noongar context, and, I imagine, many similarly endangered language contexts, community attitudes, language materials and domains for language use are the most crucial considerations in projecting future language vitality. Over a relatively short space of time since the early 1970s, there has been a shift in Australia to a generally more positive perspective on Aboriginal culture, with the public and institutional denigration of Aboriginal languages and culture giving way to interest and even celebration. This is due in part to pressure for broad public access to ‘compelling constructions of Aboriginality’,¹⁸ as a result of increased academic curiosity about Indigenous knowledge, the importance of Indigenous languages as evidence for Native Title, and emerging opportunities in the tourism and entertainment industries. However, despite these positive changes at a national level, very little time or space has been provided for communities themselves to claim, consolidate and enhance cultural heritage and knowledge.

Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories (Wirlomin) was established as an incorporated organisation in 2010. It arose from collaboration between senior Noongar Hazel Brown, Lomas Roberts, and their author nephew Kim Scott on the 2005 book *Kayang*

and Me, and formalised the longstanding efforts of people belonging to the Wirlomin family clan from the south coast of Western Australia to maintain Noongar language and culture. Other groups and organisations are also working to sustain Noongar as a spoken language. A Noongar Language Centre operates out of Perth and a small number of committed LOTE teachers provide Noongar language education at Western Australian primary schools including Moorditj Noongar Community College in Perth. Many Wirlomin Noongar formally gather a few times each year to share and build Noongar language, stories and song, reconnecting fragmented elements of intangible cultural heritage and re-uniting them with Country. We choose to do this by starting with a small community of descendants of archival ‘informants’ and language custodians, then progressively sharing with ever widening circles, employing the following staged process:

1. Connecting archival language material with its home community of origin;
2. In community workshops—interpreting, enhancing and making decisions about this material as a dynamic group including the descendants of archival informants and contemporary language custodians;
3. Reconnecting story and language to Country via visits to relevant sites; and

▲ **Fig 2.** Reconnecting story and language to Country at Point Ann, Fitzgerald River National Park with Roma Yibiyung Winmar and Iris Woods.

IMAGE: CLINT BRACKNELL

4. Sharing with the broader local community, visiting schools and publishing books.

Although sharing language and story with the broader public is empowering, the actual process of developing the books in the community workshops is potentially more useful to language revitalisation than publishing them. While we would read the stories in the community workshops, reading from a page in a classroom-like setting was uncomfortable for some of us, and some senior people involved were interested in finding better ways to involve and inspire the younger generation.

THE POWER OF SONG

In language education, singing is well established as an effective means of increasing practice of pronunciation and memorisation of vocabulary and structure. The way a song gets stuck in your head can even trigger involuntary practice. Generally, participation in music is identified as supporting social connection and self-esteem.¹⁹ Apprentice-like processes of learning, practising and performing song can also have positive effects on social cohesion. As evident in the relatively successful language revival contexts of Hawaii and New Zealand, song provides a medium for sustainable activities around performance competitions, tourism and formal education.

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A ten-year study of Indigenous Australians in Central Australia found that ‘connectedness to culture, family and land, and opportunities for self-determination’ can assist with significantly lower morbidity and mortality rates.²⁰ Indigenous people affirm that traditional performances, languages and associated ways of knowing

are fundamental to positive health outcomes and identity.²¹ However, an estimated 98 per cent of Aboriginal performance traditions are considered lost, and because these traditions are primarily sung—that is, based in language—it is concerning that just an estimated 13 of more than 200 Aboriginal languages maintain fluent speakers across all generations.²² Much Noongar singing in the twentieth century has been inhibited by colonisation, assimilation policies, and an imposed emotional regime; and until the early 1970s, it was imperative for Noongar people to keep overt cultural expressions such as song and language private, in order to continue to access human rights.²³

The continued use and performance of Indigenous song and language are essential for their survival, in the communities and environments where they are most meaningful. Singing in the Noongar language has been key to the effectiveness of *Waabiny Time*, Australia’s only nationally broadcasted early childhood television program featuring an Indigenous language. Gina Williams, Della Morrison and other Noongar artists have also released contemporary music featuring the language and participated in parallel youth education programs. As ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon explains, ‘persons sustain music and music sustains people.’²⁴

WORKING WITH OLD SONGS

Arising from my involvement with Wirlomin—building a website and helping with community workshops—I was tasked in 2012 by Roma Yibiyung Winmar and Iris Woods to help get together a repertoire of old Noongar songs, which most of the senior people in our group remember hearing, but as a result of child removal and assimilation policies, were denied the opportunity to learn. Investigating colonial accounts of Noongar performance over the course of a PhD program in music and Indigenous studies at the University of Western Australia, I was struck by how such accounts were predicated on general notions—as Yawuru barrister and academic Michael Dodson noted in his seminal Wentworth lecture of 1994—of Indigenous peoples as ‘remnants of a past doomed to extinction’ and ‘innately obsolete.’²⁵

Indeed, as Dodson asserts, particular qualities ascribed to Aboriginal people in colonial descriptions were largely dependent 'on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself.'²⁶ Representations of Aboriginal people and culture have often been constructed in comparison with the colonising culture to serve needs of the colony or nation state.

Colonial surveyor Sir George Grey characterised Noongar song as 'barbarous and savage sounds' and 'discordant noise'.²⁷ He wrote that they were short, repetitive and nevertheless, for a Noongar audience, 'lulling and harmonious in the extreme [...] producing much the same effect as the singing of a nurse does upon a child'.²⁸ Such descriptions position Noongar song as inferior to European music and infantilise Noongar audiences. Implicitly, such descriptions seek to highlight colonial achievements of 'progress' and superiority, inherently ascribing an alleged 'moral and intellectual poverty' which reassures and comforts settler-colonists as 'paragons of humanity, products of millennia of development'.²⁹ Grey's observation that some Noongar performances have 'a very peculiar mystical character about them' only begins to hint at the significance of Noongar song to local knowledge systems, social cohesion and the sophisticated maintenance of relationships between people and landscapes.³⁰

There are significant traces of Noongar song in the archives. Mostly, these are descriptions of performances and written lyrics heard by non-musically minded colonial observers between 1801 and 1930. From 1965 onwards, there are a handful of recorded examples of Noongar song. Access to most of the more recent examples is restricted. One of the richest accessible sources for south coast Noongar song is C.G. von Brandenstein's 1970 field recording at Esperance with Noongar brothers Charlie and Sam Dabb. Linguist Doug Marmion from AIATSIS let me know about unearthing von Brandenstein's field notes in a remote German anthropological museum a few years ago. Some songs are featured in the notes and on the audio recording. Both are imperfect sources and inconsistent with each other,

but nevertheless provided valuable material to be explored in the current ARC funded project 'Mobilising song archives to nourish an endangered language' led by myself with Professors Kim Scott and Linda Barwick.

In one poignant moment on von Brandenstein's 1970 field recording, Charlie Dabb concludes the performance of a particularly striking song with the statement: 'Boordawan boordoo ngany kwerl kwop. Kaadidjiny boordal nyoondookan.' It roughly translates to 'Sooner or later my name will be well regarded. You will understand later'. Charlie Dabb's niece Annie Dabb says that her uncle knew what we would be doing years later, that he was foreseeing how we would bring the songs back. This paper was originally presented on her birthday and dedicated to her. Her insight reveals how Charlie Dabb used opportunities afforded by audio recording technology of the day to continue the life of his Noongar songs. Annie Dabb and her older brother Henry Dabb serve as custodians for the songs of their uncle and father recorded by von Brandenstein. The first part of our project to recirculate songs involved figuring out—with the advice of the Wirlomin cultural elders reference group—who could act in this capacity to guide what happens with the interpretation, sharing and performance of the songs.

The second part of the project involved community workshops with song custodians and Noongar language experts they appointed, particularly Roma Yibiyung Winmar and Iris Woods—two of the longest tenured Noongar language teachers in the southwest region. In many more remote parts of Australia, an Aboriginal song may be performed even when the lexical meaning of its lyrics is not widely known. In our endangered language situation, investigating what each of the archival songs was about was key to informing decisions about how they should be shared and performed. Our expert group shared biographical, geographical and linguistic information not present in the archive, thereby enhancing it and proving how incomplete and disjointed the archives really are. This process was assisted by referring to a 45,000-entry dataset we compiled of historical and



▲ **Fig 3.** Baboor illustration by Roma Yibiyung Winmar
IMAGE: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE ARTIST ROMA YIBIYUNG WINMAR

contemporary Noongar word lists. Highlighting the difficulty in translating the songs, one song was determined in the workshops to be about a man in the waves; and how waves can look like people. However, rather than explicitly referencing waves, it suggests images of them crashing and the water subsequently receding back to the ocean (fig. 3).

SINGING OLD SONGS

As our small group began to move from interpreting to singing the old songs, guitars and percussion sticks were brought in on the suggestion of song custodians to assist with maintaining coordinated melody and rhythm. The emotional reconnection involved in singing the old songs was palpable. Workshops to facilitate singing old Noongar songs were held in Albany and Esperance in late 2018 and early 2019. At the beginning

of these workshops, participants—many of whom were closely connected to one of the original singers in the archival recordings—listened to those few members who were confident enough to perform, and were asked to share their immediate emotional reactions. Overwhelmingly, the participants emphasised the pride they felt in the existence of these songs, and spoke of feelings of nostalgia, and a sense of connection to the original singers and to each other as a result of hearing the songs. Younger participants in particular, who had not previously heard old Noongar songs, were surprised at how fluent, aesthetically pleasing, and evocative the old songs were.

Participants would also describe the songs themselves as having an alluring quality and a heightened sense of ‘spiritual presence’. They spoke of a ‘powerful resonance’ that focused their attention while listening and

lingered long after the song had concluded. As some participants admitted to being nervous at the idea of singing one of the old songs, strategies were employed over each two-hour workshop to build confidence and capacity. These included the annotation of lyric sheets with expressive cues, memorisation activities, vocal breathing and warm-up exercises, call-and-response, and small-group practice.

Participants also gave their reflections at the end of each workshop. Although feeling tired and sometimes 'winded', they were overwhelmingly relaxed and relieved, proudly sharing a sense of accomplishment. After singing the songs, participants described feelings of confidence, joy, exhilaration, looseness, and the belief that they were growing stronger in their knowledge of Noongar language and connection to their culture, family and ancestors as a result. Performing together left some of the more enthusiastic participants feeling hungry for more. Even the most shy among us revealed that through singing the songs, they let go of shame they had previously held in relation to speaking and singing Noongar language.

Annie Dabb and others involved emphasised the key importance of reconnecting the songs with the places in which they were originally performed. Diverse examples of recirculating archival Aboriginal song in the Kimberly region including those by Sally Treloyn and Rona Charles, in central Australia by Myf Turpin and Rachel Perkins and at many other places, illustrate the potential of recordings in music sustainability but also the underlying need for dedicated time and appropriate places to practice and perform.³¹ In lieu of regular opportunities to sing and limited access to space, we have sought to leverage digital technology to support song recirculation and practice. This initially involved developing karaoke videos based on some of the archival and more recent recordings of Noongar songs.

Poverty amongst Noongar means that despite widespread smartphones, internet access is not a given. Additionally, the staged process of sharing the songs—mandated by the song custodian group—meant that Bluetooth peer-to-peer sharing of these videos would be

the most effective and suitable solution for recirculation. In addition to allowing control by the community over dissemination, the face-to-face nature of Bluetooth filesharing meant that there was social interaction occurring in ways similar to how a song may have been shared orally in the past. Unfortunately, Apple's proprietary technology will not allow all smartphones to share files via Bluetooth. Building on the relatively successful community circulation of the karaoke videos, a desire for more instructive visual representation of melody and the percussion that we added to the songs has led to the development of animated graphic scores for some of the songs.

After the carefully staged song recirculation process undertaken over the course of this project, select repertoire was shared publicly in 2019. This included performances for NAIDOC week in Katanning and Albany, the Regional Mental Health Conference in Albany, plus an impromptu performance on the foreshore in Esperance for an entire local primary school after a morning spent singing with the Noongar rangers at the Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation headquarters. As part of a performance protocol decided on by the expert group, the performance of each song began with the acknowledgement of the original singer in the archival recording and the person or people responsible for the song today. Singing these songs in public enabled a kind of feral recirculation, whereby anyone with a smartphone could film and upload videos of the singing to social media sites. While the democratisation of technology that enables this kind of dissemination is certainly not detrimental to the aim of recirculation, at the conclusion of this project we have resolved to publish online resources with context and additional resources to support the sharing of Noongar song.

CONCLUSION

How can we humans connect with each other and Country in the future? Regional Indigenous song traditions are certainly a big part of the answer to that question. Nourishing community capacity to sing and speak in



▲ **Fig. 4.** Clint Bracknell delivering the 9th Hancock Lecture at the Academy's 50th Symposium, Brisbane, 2019.

IMAGE: T.J. THOMSON

endangered Indigenous languages may even enhance our ability to cope with known and as yet unforeseen challenges we face as a species.³² The esoteric and evanescent nature of Aboriginal song makes this work complicated.³³ Trauma associated with imposed assimilation policies and resultant language loss in Aboriginal communities necessitates gradual and empowering processes of song and language revival.³⁴ Processes undertaken to recirculate Noongar songs have shown that while communications technology can be leveraged to support this agenda, it comes with its own limitations. Ultimately, these efforts show that a significant investment of time and space is the only way to enhance community capacity to sing the old songs again. As Irene Watson observes, 'the natural world is still singing even though the greater part of humanity has disconnected itself from song'.³⁵ Getting reconnected should really be a priority. ¶



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