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# Rebuilding as Research: Noongar Song, Language and Ways of Knowing

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## ABSTRACT

In Australia, language and song are integral to maintaining Aboriginal knowledge systems. British colonisation and ensuing Australian government policies of assimilation have adversely impacted these knowledge systems, at least partially by functioning to dramatically diminish the vitality of many Aboriginal languages and song traditions. As a Noongar researcher motivated by community-oriented goals, I employ a multidisciplinary approach to enhance the revitalisation of the endangered Noongar language and its song traditions in the south coast region of Western Australia. This work draws on established methods from ethnomusicology and linguistics, engaging with community knowledge-holders and archival records to rebuild repertoire while increasing opportunities to gather together, sing and speak. While the processes developed to aid this endeavour may function as useful models for others involved in similar projects across the world, its aims are primarily oriented towards empowering the local community. Given the continued development of approaches to Indigenous research, this article will discuss the potential for language revitalisation, song and performance to expand available ways of knowing.

## KEYWORDS

Indigenous knowledge;  
Indigenous performance;  
language revitalisation;  
music revival; Aboriginal;  
Noongar; Indigenous  
research

## Introduction

Referring to the threatened status of Samoan language and performance traditions, Tui Ātua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi explains that the “the depths of our Indigenous cultures are lost” without song and performance, while imploring anyone interested in researching Indigenous knowledge to focus on “chants and dances, for these cultural institutions are the history books of our ancestors”.<sup>1</sup> Within academia, there is limited scope to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing the world “beyond the reach of dialogue and meaningful enunciation”<sup>2</sup> via performance. The rapid endangerment of Indigenous languages and

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<sup>1</sup>Tui Ātua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, “Clutter in Indigenous Knowledge, Research and History: A Samoan Perspective,” *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 25 (2005): 62–3.

<sup>2</sup>Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Towards a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 247.

performance traditions as a result of the ongoing colonisation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples reduces “the diversity of ways of being in the world” and compromises “our future ability to adapt to as yet unforeseen changes”.<sup>3</sup> The challenge of how to sustain endangered Aboriginal performance traditions and languages is, therefore, a significant and pressing question in local and global contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Intimate connections between Indigenous languages, songs and people mean that issues of endangerment cannot be treated simply as intellectual puzzles to be solved.<sup>5</sup> Collaborative and usually cross-cultural relationships are integral to research focusing on the revitalisation of threatened Indigenous traditions.<sup>6</sup> Engagement with the academy as research collaborators or scholars can form part of broader strategies of revitalisation and resurgence<sup>7</sup> and may bring increased access to potentially useful archival material, disciplinary methods and funding. On the basis of strong and enduring relationships, senior Indigenous people may task Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers with particular responsibilities to ensure the continued sustainability of the Indigenous traditions they study.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, Indigenous disciplinarians—particularly linguists—draw on academic training and resources to lead work in support of cultural revitalisation initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

This paper will discuss particular research methods I employ to embolden revitalisation of the critically endangered Noongar language of the southwest region of Western Australia (WA) and the song traditions of its southern coast. It will situate this work in the context of Indigenous academia and suggest how revitalising Noongar song and language may help expand presently available ways of knowing. My research mainly involves the analysis and repatriation of archival material while engaging appropriate and knowledgeable community members in the re-contextualisation and co-interpretation of song and language data via group discussion and workshops. I draw on linguistic processes of comparative reconstitution to bring together Noongar language data from historical and contemporary sources.<sup>10</sup> Building upon the archival repatriation methods that characterise

<sup>3</sup>Allan Marett, “Vanishing Songs: How Musical Extinctions Threaten the Planet,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 19, no. 2 (2010): 249–62, 251; also see Nicholas Evans, *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>James Wafer and Myfany Turpin, eds., *Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Indigenous Australia* (Canberra, ACT: Pacific Linguistics, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Mari Rhydwen, “Strategies for Doing the Impossible,” in *Proceedings of the Second FEL Conference 25–27 September, Edinburgh*, ed. Nicholas Ostler (Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages, 1998), 101–06.

<sup>6</sup>Katelyn Barney, *Collaborative Ethnomusicology: New Approaches to Music Research Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians* (Melbourne, VIC: Lyrebird Press, 2014); Susan D. Penfield and Benjamin V. Tucker, “From Documenting to Revitalizing an Endangered Language: Where Do Applied Linguists Fit?,” *Language and Education* 25, no. 4 (2011): 291–305.

<sup>7</sup>Allan Marett and Linda Barwick, “Endangered Songs and Endangered Languages,” in *Maintaining the Links: Language Identity and the Land*, ed. Joe Blythe and R. McKenna Brown (Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages, 2003), 144–51; Adam Gaudry, “Researching the Resurgence: Insurgent Research and Community-Engaged Methodologies in the 21st-Century Academic Inquiry,” in *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Susan Strega and Leslie Brown (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2015), 243–65; Michael Asch, John Borrow, and James Tully, *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup>Amanda Harris, Nicholas Thieberger, and Linda Barwick, eds., *Research, Records and Responsibility* (Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2015); Sally Treloyn, Matthew Dembal Martin, and Rona Googninda Charles, “Cultural Precedents for the Repatriation of Legacy Song Records to Communities of Origin,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2016): 94–103.

<sup>9</sup>Eve D. Fesl, “Ganai: A Study of the Aboriginal Languages of Gippsland Based on 19th Century Materials” (PhD thesis, Monash University, 1984); Jeanie Bell, “Why We Do What We Do! Reflections of an Aboriginal Linguist Working on the Maintenance and Revival of Ancestral Languages,” *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* 30 (2007): 12–18; Jakelin Troy, “The Sydney Language Notebooks and Responses to Language Contact in Early Colonial NSW,” *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 12 (1992): 145–70; Payi Linda Ford, *Aboriginal Knowledge and Country: Marri Kunkimba Putj Putj Marrideyan* (Brisbane, QLD: Post Pressed, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Alan Dench, “Comparative Reconstitution,” *Historical Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 57–73.

much Australian ethnomusicology,<sup>11</sup> the community singing workshops developed in the latter stages of my current research have been partially inspired by scholarly evidence of the effectiveness of song in second-language acquisition.<sup>12</sup> Being Noongar, with pre-existing family and community networks, I have responsibilities that motivate, enable and sometimes constrain this work.<sup>13</sup>

In Australia and elsewhere, substantial critique surrounds the inherent discursive inequality between researchers and Indigenous communities.<sup>14</sup> In addition to drawing on established disciplinary methodologies—as I have done from ethnomusicology and linguistics—Indigenous researchers may also be called upon to articulate a distinctive and sometimes fragile Indigenous epistemological perspective, or way of knowing, learned outside of the academy and based on cultural traditions.<sup>15</sup> Given that Indigenous peoples could be defined by shared problems faced in relation to sustaining threatened languages and cultural practices amid ongoing colonisation,<sup>16</sup> pressure to share uniquely cultural insight in any context—let alone in academia—may be difficult to respond to.

Indigenous language revitalisation could be useful in this regard. Suggesting that languages are manifestations of different ways in which people know the world, linguist Marianne Mithun proposes that they represent “the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history”.<sup>17</sup> While the colonial language imported from foggy old England “could not speak adequately about” Australia,<sup>18</sup> Aboriginal languages are intrinsically local. Australia is home to over 200 critically endangered Aboriginal languages, although only “around 120”—including Noongar—are still spoken and “about 13 can be considered strong”.<sup>19</sup> As is the case with many oral traditions, sung texts constitute “the primary locus for Indigenous literature”.<sup>20</sup> However, an estimated 98 per cent of Aboriginal singing traditions have

<sup>11</sup>Dan Bendrups, Katelyn Barney, and Catherine Grant, “An Introduction to Sustainability and Ethnomusicology in the Australasian Context,” *Musiology Australia* 34, no. 2 (2013): 153–58.

<sup>12</sup>Yukiko S. Jolly, “The Use of Songs in Teaching Foreign Languages,” *Modern Language Journal* 59, no. 1 (1975): 11–14; Tim Murphey, “The Song Stuck in My Head Phenomenon: A Melodic Din in The LAD?” *System* 18, no. 1 (1990): 53–64; Carmen Fonseca Mora, “Foreign Language Acquisition and Melody Singing,” *ELT Journal* 54, no. 2 (2000): 146–52; Hitomi Nakata, “Correlations between Musical and Japanese Phonetic Aptitudes by Native Speakers of English,” *Reading Working Papers in Linguistics* 6 (2002): 1–23.

<sup>13</sup>Clint Bracknell, “Say You’re a Nyungarmusicologist: Indigenous Research on Endangered Music,” *Musiology Australia* 37, no. 2 (2015): 199–217.

<sup>14</sup>Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Karen L. Martin, “Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no. 76 (2003): 203–14; Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup>Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Joseph P. Gone, “Considering Indigenous Research Methodologies: Critical Reflections by an Indigenous Knower,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (2018): 45–56; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Race and Cultural Entrapment: Critical Indigenous Studies in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 102–15.

<sup>16</sup>“Indigenous Peoples at the UN,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Indigenous Peoples, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html> (accessed November 19, 2017).

<sup>17</sup>Marianne Mithun, “The Significance of Diversity in Language Endangerment and Preservation,” in *Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Prospects*, ed. Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 189.

<sup>18</sup>Jay Mary Arthur, *The Default Country: A Lexical Cartography of 20th Century Australia* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>19</sup>Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata, and Jakelin Troy, *Community, Identity, Wellbeing: The Report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2014), xii.

<sup>20</sup>Adrienne Kaeppler and J. W. Love, eds., *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 9: Australia and the Pacific Islands* (London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 408.

been discontinued since colonisation.<sup>21</sup> Focused and long-term efforts can nourish the recovery of some of these traditions.<sup>22</sup>

Over a relatively short space of time since the early 1970s, the public and institutional denigration of Aboriginal languages and culture in Australia has given way to interest and even celebration. Contemporary factors including mounting academic curiosity about Indigenous knowledge, the need to provide compelling native title evidence,<sup>23</sup> and emerging opportunities in the tourism and entertainment industries create pressure for broad public access to “compelling constructions of Aboriginality”.<sup>24</sup> Despite the national shift to a generally more positive view of Aboriginal culture, very little time or space has been provided for communities to claim, consolidate and enhance our heritage and knowledge among ourselves, with or without the support of academic institutions. Regardless of its degree of perceived scholarly importance, the research I engage in is geared towards redressing that imbalance, resourcing and staking out time and space for community-based revitalisation of Noongar language and song.

## Background

Over 30,000 people identify as Noongar and share an ancestral language belonging to a region covering the urban/rural southwest corner of WA (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>25</sup> This constitutes Australia’s largest Aboriginal cultural bloc in terms of geography and population. In contrast to many of the small remote Aboriginal communities in Australia—in which most residents are Aboriginal people—we Noongar are a clear minority group in our homelands. We are dispersed across many small towns and city suburbs, though bound by networks of relationships, sociolinguistic practices and common Noongar ancestry and histories. My cultural elders from the south coast of WA describe our family clan as Wirlomin Noongar. This name is derived from the Noongar word for curlew, *wirlo*. Wirlomin literally means curlew-associated people. Noongar—also sometimes spelled Nyungar—can mean person, man, ally or even mankind/humanity. For more than a decade, many Wirlomin Noongar interested in language revitalisation have gathered and organised around senior cultural custodians—particularly Kayang Hazel Brown and her siblings—as Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc. (Wirlomin for short)—to claim, consolidate and enhance our shared language and cultural heritage.

As an organisation, Wirlomin has over a hundred members and is guided by a cultural reference group and executive committee. We have used sporadically awarded government and industry funding to hold regular community workshops, publish six bilingual books and present at schools and public events. This work has been bolstered by the Australian Research Council project, “Mobilising Song Archives to Nourish an Endangered Aboriginal Language” (2017–2019), with music researcher Linda Barwick

<sup>21</sup>Penny McIntock, “Indigenous Song Loss ‘A National Crisis’,” *ABC News*, 20 August 2008, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-08-18/indigenous-song-loss-a-national-crisis/480762>.

<sup>22</sup>Andrea Emberly, Sally Treloyn, and Rona Googinda Charles, “Children, Knowledge, Country: Child and Youth-Based Approaches to Revitalising Musical Traditions in the Kimberley,” in *Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Indigenous Australia*, ed. James Wafer and Myfany Turpin (Canberra, ACT: Pacific Linguistics, 2017).

<sup>23</sup>Grace Koch, “Music and Land Rights: Archival Recordings as Documentation for Australian Aboriginal Land Claims,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 55, no. 1 (2008): 155–64.

<sup>24</sup>Jeremy Beckett, ed., *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup>“Settlement Agreement,” South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, <http://www.noongar.org.au/settlement-agreement/2009> (accessed November 19, 2016).



**Figure 1.** The shaded area indicates an approximation of the Noongar language region.

and Wirlomin chairperson Kim Scott. Wirlomin is certainly not alone in its efforts to sustain Noongar as a spoken language. Revitalisation movements since the 1980s have resulted in a slowly growing community of speakers, with consecutive Australian Bureau of Statistics census surveys recording Noongar as a language spoken at home by 167 people in 1996, 196 people in 2001, 240 people in 2006, 369 people in 2011, and 475 people in 2016.<sup>26</sup> Even so, very few speakers would consider themselves fluent. Because the language has not received sustained scholarly attention, there is presently no authoritative published Noongar dictionary or grammar, and Noongar is not currently taught at universities.

### Indigenous Academia

Despite the shift towards embracing elements of Aboriginal knowledge in academia, few universities offer courses in Aboriginal languages and song traditions taught by Aboriginal people. At the University of Adelaide in the late 1970s, Catherine Ellis appointed senior Pitjantjatjara songmen as senior lecturers in acknowledgement of their commensurate

<sup>26</sup>Clint Bracknell, "Maaya Waab (Play With Sound): Song Language and Spoken Language in the South-West of Western Australia," in Wafer and Turpin, *Recirculating Songs*, 45–57.

expertise as Aboriginal performers and knowledge-holders.<sup>27</sup> This groundbreaking move would come to be remembered as an exception to the rule. Today, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics are accomplished disciplinarians and are not necessarily employed on the basis of their abilities to speak or sing in an Indigenous language. Nevertheless, historicities and contemporary practices generate and maintain Indigenous identities<sup>28</sup> and inform Indigenous ways of “doing” knowledge in academic contexts.<sup>29</sup> Membership of a specific Indigenous group does not necessarily grant privileged knowledge, but being Noongar, for example, can certainly bring a sense of responsibility to ancestors, a shared cultural heritage, and a contemporary community.

Many Aboriginal writers argue that we are “one of the most researched groups of people on earth”.<sup>30</sup> Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests that this claim conveys “a sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research” among Indigenous peoples, many of whom still consider “research” a dirty word.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the fraught position of Indigenous researchers in the academy cannot be overstated. Indigenous scholars—like most academics—face pressure from universities to “publish or perish” and are expected to regularly produce research outputs to justify their ongoing employment. This pressure can be at odds with the lengthy timeframes required for collaborative research with Indigenous communities and may conflict with the moral imperative to prioritise the needs of one’s own Indigenous community above one’s individual academic career.<sup>32</sup> A growing subfield of inquiry seeks to articulate and advance the use of Indigenous methodologies and research approaches as a critical response to both academic exploitation of Indigenous knowledge and lingering cynicism about research in Indigenous communities.

Noonuccul researcher Karen Martin proposes an “Indigenist research” approach as a centring of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing in “alignment or harmonisation” with “aspects of western qualitative research frameworks”. Métis scholar Adam Gaudry defines “insurgent research” as being similarly “grounded in an Indigenous worldview” and responsibilities to the relevant community.<sup>33</sup> These and other aligned approaches underpinned by a “pro-Indigenous ethos” could possibly incorporate a variety of disciplinary methods.<sup>34</sup> Still, Nakata rightly urges critical scrutiny of the ways disciplinary knowledge “discursively and textually produces” an Indigenous position,<sup>35</sup> while Moreton-Robinson proposes “dismantling and destroying racialised knowledge”, which is “operationalised within and constitutive of disciplinary knowledges”.<sup>36</sup> In music studies, for example, writing down and notating an Indigenous song could be considered tantamount to its colonisation: unjustly reducing and

<sup>27</sup>Rob Amery, “The History of Aboriginal Languages and Linguistics at the University of Adelaide,” in *A History of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Adelaide 1876–2012*, ed. Nick Harvey et al. (Adelaide, SA: University of Adelaide Press, 2012), 265–98.

<sup>28</sup>Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages*, 365.

<sup>29</sup>Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages*, 365.

<sup>30</sup>Martin, “Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing,” 203.

<sup>31</sup>Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

<sup>32</sup>Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 30–31.

<sup>33</sup>Gaudry, “Researching the Resurgence,” 263.

<sup>34</sup>Gone, “Considering Indigenous Research Methodologies,” 9.

<sup>35</sup>Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages*, 365.

<sup>36</sup>Moreton-Robinson, “Race and Cultural Entrapment,” 115.

enshrining it in a foreign written form according to a narrow interpretation, and consequently trapping it as an artefact of the past.<sup>37</sup>

Gone advocates an increased focus among Indigenous scholars on “practices associated with orality and literacy in Indigenous communities”.<sup>38</sup> In many Aboriginal contexts, languages, song and performance traditions are vital to maintaining social and environmental cohesion. Revitalisation movements instigated by Indigenous communities in response to the endangerment of languages and traditions often draw on archival literature and develop methods for writing, typing and texting in Indigenous languages that were originally oral.<sup>39</sup> In his study of the effects of literacy and orality, historian Walter Ong suggests that oral culture “keeps its thinking close to the human life world, personalising things and issues, and storing knowledge in stories”.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, Ong describes writing as a mechanism that functions to separate, divide and distance things.<sup>41</sup>

Gaudry’s “insurgent research” aims to produce material “intended to be read by the community” and “used to further the possibility of community action”.<sup>42</sup> My research on the revitalisation of Noongar song trials approaches for using archival literature, language and music analysis, plus the development of written resources, as a springboard for enhancing an endangered oral tradition. This undertaking supports a broader movement of resurgence,<sup>43</sup> with motives beyond academia. Throughout the process, the emphasis is on nourishing the network of sprawling connections between kin and Country, a term used in Aboriginal contexts to signify land as “nourishing terrain”—alive, multidimensional and intertwined with local Aboriginal people and culture.<sup>44</sup>

## Language and Song

Jagera and Dulingbara linguist Jeanie Bell explains that many Aboriginal people in Australia feel “sadness, regret and sometimes anger that we did not have a chance to speak the languages of the land, our heritage languages”.<sup>45</sup> The attempted cultural assimilation of Aboriginal people in WA was facilitated by various state government policies enabling the institutionalisation of Aboriginal children and the withholding of human rights from Aboriginal people deemed uncivilised by government authorities—for example, those observed speaking Aboriginal languages or engaging in traditional performance practices.<sup>46</sup> The remnants of such policies were still in effect until the early 1970s. As an

<sup>37</sup>Gary Tomlinson, *The Singing of the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup>Gone, “Considering Indigenous Research Methodologies,” 11.

<sup>39</sup>Nicholas Thieberger, *Paper and Talk: A Manual for Reconstituting Materials in Australian Indigenous Languages from Historical Sources* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995); James Reinl, “Can Texting Teens Save a Threatened Hawaiian Language?” *Al Jazeera*, 29 January 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/01/texting-teens-save-threatened-hawaiian-language-160127082505270.html>.

<sup>40</sup>Walter J. Ong, “Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought,” in *The Written Word: Literacy in Translation*, ed. Gerd Bauman (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>41</sup>Ong, “Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought,” 36.

<sup>42</sup>Gaudry, “Researching the Resurgence,” 263.

<sup>43</sup>Michael Elliott, “Indigenous Resurgence: The Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2018): 61–81.

<sup>44</sup>Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 1.

<sup>45</sup>Jeanie Bell, “Language Attitudes and Language Revival/Survival,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 34, no. 4 (2013): 408.

<sup>46</sup>Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

indication of their impact, well less than two per cent of Noongar people reported speaking Noongar language at home in the 2011 Australian census. Correspondingly, recent public festivals celebrating Noongar culture feature very few Noongar language songs.

Because Noongar is an endangered language in a historical context of colonisation, dispossession and disempowerment,<sup>47</sup> a sense of ownership of the language is extremely important to Noongar collective and individual identities.<sup>48</sup> Given that the south coast of WA is one of the world's major biodiversity hotspots<sup>49</sup> and extremely longstanding Noongar cultural practices are intertwined with that local ecosystem,<sup>50</sup> it stands to reason that we Noongar may view our heritage as unique and distinctive, even if for no other reason than it is ours. While the effects of colonisation and assimilation agendas have functioned to decimate many Aboriginal languages, many Aboriginal people are “working with what remains in determined efforts to rebuild ourselves and our families and communities back to a point where we are no longer just victims of a system that set out to destroy us”.<sup>51</sup> Much of what remains of critically endangered Aboriginal languages—such as Noongar—includes written records created by surveyors, missionaries, academics and various other observers with their own historically motivated agendas. Wirlomin is just one of many Aboriginal cultural organisations attempting to consolidate and enhance Noongar language and song, significant cultural domains diminished by assimilationist intervention.

I began volunteering with Wirlomin towards the end of 2010, tasked with building a simple website to host audio recordings of bilingual stories the group had developed over a three-year period of community language workshops. Initially spearheaded by Noongar language teachers Iris Woods, Yibiyung Roma Winmar and Kim Scott in 2007, this long process was carried out to consolidate archival Noongar language material in its home community, reconnecting it with the descendants of people who spoke with researchers, analysing it through the prism of community knowledge, and beginning to share heritage material with an expanding circle of people.<sup>52</sup> After establishing the website, I quickly became heavily involved in Wirlomin activities, assisting with the organisation of subsequent workshops and serving on the committee. Given my background as a musician, senior members of the Wirlomin reference group encouraged me to find out more about old Noongar songs so we could incorporate singing into our language revitalisation activities.

As many senior people in our group remembered their elders singing but had trouble recalling details of the actual Noongar songs, it has been necessary to consult not only the community, but also sources including historical descriptions of Noongar performance and communication practices, written Noongar vocabularies and song lyrics collected from 1801 to the present day, and audio recordings of Noongar song performances and

<sup>47</sup>Penny Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>48</sup>Patricia Baines, “The Heart of Home: The Intergenerational Transmission of a Nyungar Identity” (PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 1987); Cheryl S. Kickett-Tucker, “Moorn (Black)? Djardak (White)? How Come I Don’t Fit In Mum? Exploring the Racial Identity of Australian Aboriginal Children and Youth,” *Health Sociology Review* 18, no. 1 (2009): 119–36.

<sup>49</sup>Lydia Hales, “Biodiversity Hotspot in WA Explained,” *Australian Geographic*, 19 February 2014. <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2014/02/western-australia-biodiversity-hotspot/>.

<sup>50</sup>Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

<sup>51</sup>Bell, “Linguistic Continuity in Colonised Country,” 47.

<sup>52</sup>Kim Scott and Iris Woods, *Mamang* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2011).

language elicitation collected from 1960 onwards. The fragmented and ambiguous nature of such sources demands a rigorous process of cross-checking and consultation with the descendants and families of the Noongar people who originally shared information with researchers. Ethnographic research has been characterised as being suspended between the two poles of familiarity and strangeness.<sup>53</sup> Most of the few existing audio recordings of Noongar song are presently held in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Canberra, almost 4,000 kilometres from the Noongar region. Similarly, Noongar language and song in written historical descriptions and word-lists have been rendered strange, reflected back at us through the prism of colonial observation. The process of retrieving Noongar language and song from audio recordings is therefore a double-sided exercise in engaging with the archive—itself strange to, and distant from, most Noongar—and the familiar yet partially obscured Noongar voices it contains.

## Words and Meaning

With the goal of preparing a repertoire of old songs from the south coast of WA for Noongar people to sing today, it has been necessary to first establish some historical understanding of aesthetic and functional traditions of practice. Enthusiastic and varied colonial descriptions of Noongar songs—as lullabies, laments, recitatives, ceremonies, histories, comedies and poetic compositions—provide evidence to characterise the scope of Noongar song traditions, although the conflicting nature of the material and the evanescent status of Noongar song in the community today obfuscate hard conclusions.<sup>54</sup> While around 70 examples of old Noongar songs appear in written records between 1841 and 1930, they are missing either musical notation or, more occasionally, lyrics. Due to the relatively recent spread of audio recording technology, there are also comparatively few audio recordings of Noongar language and song to draw upon.

These audio examples are almost all poorly recorded in terms of equipment, microphone technique and background noise. However, they are the most readily useful resource for rebuilding a south coast Noongar song repertoire. The early stages of working with Noongar songs featured on audio recordings from the south coast region of WA originally made between 1966 and 2001<sup>55</sup> involved a process of initially identifying song performances on field recordings, extracting digital copies of each song and compiling associated metadata from fieldnotes, audition sheets and other relevant literature. I consulted with the senior descendants of the singers on the recordings and was instructed that the first step in a process to get these songs performed again should involve developing a more solid idea of what the songs mean.

Elsewhere in Australia, Aboriginal people may readily sing songs originating from distant regions, in languages other than their own.<sup>56</sup> As Noongar, we needed to know what we were singing about in our own language in order to connect the songs to kin and Country. As an initial step to support this aim, I began compiling a dataset of

<sup>53</sup>Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 43.

<sup>54</sup>Clint Bracknell, "Conceptualizing Noongar Song," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 49 (2011): 92–113.

<sup>55</sup>Clint Bracknell, "Maaya Waab (Play with Sound)".

<sup>56</sup>Myfany Turpin et al., "Aboriginal Australia's Smash Hit That Went Viral," *The Conversation*, 20 March 2019. <https://theconversation.com/aboriginal-australias-smash-hit-that-went-viral-112615>.

Noongar wordlists to assist in translating the songs performed on archival recordings. Drawing on all accessible historical and contemporary Noongar wordlists, including a number I transcribed from archival audio recordings of language elicitation, this dataset now consists of over 45,000 individual entries of over 1,500 terms.

As is the case when working with many other endangered Aboriginal languages,<sup>57</sup> any study of Noongar language is necessarily dependent on interpreting a range of idiosyncratic archival texts and short wordlists collected by non-linguists.<sup>58</sup> Historical transcribers rarely understood the complexities of Noongar language, or possessed formal linguistic training. As a result, the language is often written using a range of inconsistent, frequently problematic orthographies. Due to the variable quality and quantity of historical Noongar wordlists, linguist Alan Dench applied a process of comparative reconstitution to consolidate historical sources and produce a small Noongar vocabulary in 1994.<sup>59</sup> Comparative reconstitution is an extension of classical philology, the historical and linguistic analysis of “classical” languages—such as Latin—preserved in written sources.<sup>60</sup> Dench found that the endangered status of Noongar language obfuscated understandings of the language’s phonetic and phonological facts, and the extent and nature of its dialectal diversity. Rather than simply convert all historical forms to a standard orthography, Dench sought to also explain and represent variation in the historical wordlists, accounting for differences due to dialect, orthography, borrowings (the use of English near-homonyms), and cognates (words with a similar form and meaning).<sup>61</sup>

In order to translate the lyrics of Noongar songs featured on audio recordings from the south coast region of WA originally made between 1966 and 2001,<sup>62</sup> I expanded upon Dench’s approach, cross-referencing each lyrical form heard on the audio recordings with terms in my Noongar wordlist dataset. I accounted for variables in the original transcriptions including different orthographies, incorrect glosses and misheard sounds. I also sought to provide scope for dialectic diversity and the possibility that the Noongar language spoken in language elicitation sessions may differ from sung Noongar language. Although it represents a reasonably complete representation of publicly accessible Noongar language data, my wordlist dataset is far from comprehensive and certainly not authoritative. Instead of approaching the interpretation of the songs in a reductive way—simply matching the lyrics heard with the closest representation in the wordlist dataset—we needed to reconstruct a fuller contextual picture around the songs themselves.

Over a period of two years, I ran the songs through collaborative interpretation workshops with descendants of the archival singers and Noongar language experts they invited. These workshops functioned to recontextualise the archival songs back in the local community and provided time for us to cross-reference their lyrics with our understandings of Noongar language, relevant stories and Country. Working together in the workshops to translate the songs, we would sometimes hear an unfamiliar-sounding lyric and search

<sup>57</sup>Nicholas Thieberger, *Paper and Talk: A Manual for Reconstituting Materials in Australian Indigenous Languages from Historical Sources* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995).

<sup>58</sup>Alan Dench, “Comparative Reconstitution,” *Historical Linguistics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 57–73.

<sup>59</sup>Alan Dench, “Comparative Reconstitution”; Alan Dench, “Nyungar,” in *Macquarie Aboriginal Words*, ed. Nicholas Thieberger and W. McGregor (Sydney, NSW: The Macquarie Library, 1994), 174.

<sup>60</sup>Ives Goddard, “Philological Approaches to the Study of North American Indian Languages: Documents and Documentation,” in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, vol. 10, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 727–45.

<sup>61</sup>Dench, “Comparative Reconstitution”.

<sup>62</sup>Clint Bracknell, “Maaya Waab (Play with Sound)”.

the wordlists to find corresponding archaic terms, such as *ngerany* (beautiful) and *baaboor* (the sound of water moving or churning). Reflection on the variety of English language translations of particular Noongar words—for example, *bily* (navel, umbilical cord, river, stream, pool, creek, gully) and *birt* (track, road, way, path, string, sinews, vein)—facilitated discussion of the Noongar worldview reflected in the language. Many times, this process of collaborative interpretation would result in a number of different, but usually related, lyrical interpretations. For example, one repeated lyric could be heard and alternately understood as either *maarorl warany* (hanging in the atmosphere) or *maakor wardan* (wintery sea), suggesting that the songs may have been composed with a kind of poetic ambiguity in mind. While the wordlist dataset is not authoritative or particularly straightforward to work with, it holds value as a resource to consult in the workshops.

The feelings, opinions and literacy of English speakers in Australia have traditionally had significant influence on the “quantity and quality” of most written interpretations of Aboriginal speech and song.<sup>63</sup> The written versions and translations of the archival songs we produced in the workshops reflect our own diverse feelings, opinions and approaches to literacy as Noongar. I distributed typed lyric sheets for each song with detailed linguistic glossing in the earliest workshops, but the group quickly advised me to simplify future resources to the bare essentials, including just the Noongar lyrics and a glossary of possibly relevant key words. This glossary was later augmented with pithy, impressionistic English-language descriptions of what each song represents and evokes. Despite the existence of a standard Noongar orthography,<sup>64</sup> most of us involved in the workshops invented our own individualised spelling systems for representing the lyrics and would write in notebooks and annotate the lyric sheets as we listened to the archival recordings. Our multiple Noongar interpretations of the archival songs were broad, collaborative and expansive, connecting the songs to Country and our contemporary aspirations.

Despite the primarily oral origins of many Indigenous languages, literacy has been a key component of language revitalisation movements across Australia and elsewhere in the world.<sup>65</sup> The ability to read and write in an endangered language also expands the possible domains for language use, which may contribute to increased language vitality.<sup>66</sup> Songs are useful too. Many teachers of critically endangered Aboriginal languages use songs translated from English or newly composed for educational purposes.<sup>67</sup> Songs composed in the old idioms by fluent Noongar speakers offer rare insight into the poetics of language and serve as relatively stable texts to practise, perform and embellish—and from which to build new spoken and sung repertoire. Furthermore, participating in the singing of old songs provides opportunities for visceral experiences.

<sup>63</sup>Tamsin Donaldson, “Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts,” *Aboriginal History* 3 (1979): 69.

<sup>64</sup>Rose Whitehurst, *Noongar Dictionary: Noongar to English and English to Noongar* (Bunbury, WA: Noongar Language and Cultural Centre, 1992).

<sup>65</sup>Efi, “Clutter in Indigenous Knowledge, Research and History,” 66; Mindy J. Morgan, *Bearer of This Letter: Language Ideologies, Literacy Practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

<sup>66</sup>Matthias Brenzinger et al., *Language Vitality and Endangerment: International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003). [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Language\\_vitality\\_and\\_endangerment\\_EN.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Language_vitality_and_endangerment_EN.pdf).

<sup>67</sup>John Hobson et al., eds., *Re-Awakening Languages: Theory and Practice in the Revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous Languages* (Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2010).

## Performance and Knowing

Music researcher Allan Marett describes the profundity of being trained and given responsibilities to perform within an Indigenous tradition, stating that “it is one thing to describe such things. It is quite another to participate in them, and at certain moments to be given responsibility for bringing about this realignment of the worlds, and for sustaining the liminal space on which ceremonial efficacy relies”.<sup>68</sup> One of the most salient goals of ethnomusicology—the sub-discipline of musicology originally primarily concerned with non-Western music—is the understanding of music on its own terms. Originating in the 1960s, the ethnomusicological concept of “bi-musicality” advocated a methodological approach to engage in active performance and composition in musical idioms of “other” cultures to receive feedback and, consequently, glean stylistic and behavioural information.<sup>69</sup> Since renamed “intermusability”,<sup>70</sup> the core of this approach relies on actually learning to perform in order to experience a previously impossible way of knowing. Linguist Michael Walsh warns against “killing the specimen on the dissecting table” via subjecting Aboriginal song texts to “finer and finer analysis”.<sup>71</sup> Through not just analysing but learning to sing these old Noongar songs, we reaffirmed and expanded our own Noongar understandings of the world.

Song is a particularly evocative domain of cultural expression.<sup>72</sup> In his discussion of postcolonial aesthetics, theorist Bill Ashcroft explains the concept of “presence” as a privileging of the “aesthetic moment”.<sup>73</sup> Before analysis or appreciation, the immediate presence of song is first understood in a “moment [of] non-cognitive apprehension”, constituting “a form of knowing that lies beyond interpretation”.<sup>74</sup> Simply put, the presence and performance of song can provoke an instantaneous response, prior to interpretation. While such visceral experiences may not necessarily be core business for universities, a primary function of Aboriginal performance is to create of a feeling of being in the moment—with kin, in Country.<sup>75</sup>

Marcia Langton explains the challenge for Indigenous researchers to “communicate our own personal understandings as honestly and rigorously as we can without losing our essential and often visceral understanding of what we have experienced”.<sup>76</sup> Recently, I gathered with the family of one of the Noongar singers captured performing on an archival field recording. After many months building to this moment through translation, interpretation and analysis, we practised and performed one of his old songs in the

<sup>68</sup>Allan Marett, “Vanishing Songs: How Musical Extinctions Threaten the Planet,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 19, no. 2 (2010): 256.

<sup>69</sup>Mantle Hood, “The Challenge of Bi-Musicality,” *Ethnomusicology* 4, no. 1 (1960): 55–9; Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); John Blacking, *Venda Children’s Songs: A Study in Ethnomusical Analysis* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1967); Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>70</sup>John Baily, “Learning to Perform as a Research Technique in Ethnomusicology,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10, no. 2 (2001): 85–98; “Ethnomusicology, Intermusability, and Performance Practice,” in *The New (Ethno)Musicologies*, ed. Henry Stobart (Chicago: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 117–34.

<sup>71</sup>Michael Walsh, “Australian Aboriginal Song Language: So Many Questions, So Little To Work With,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2007): 128–44, 140.

<sup>72</sup>Bill Ashcroft, “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51, no. 4 (2015): 419.

<sup>73</sup>Ashcroft, “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics,” 419.

<sup>74</sup>Ashcroft, “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics,” 419.

<sup>75</sup>Catherine Ellis, “Time Consciousness of Aboriginal Performers,” in *Problems and Solutions: Occasional Essays in Musicology Presented to Alice M. Moyle*, ed. Jamie C. Kessler and Jill Stubington (Sydney, NSW: Hale and Remonger, 1984), 153.

<sup>76</sup>Langton, cited in Marret, “Vanishing Songs: How Musical Extinctions Threaten the Planet,” 261.

dunes by the creek, near the place he once camped and was recorded singing in 1970.<sup>77</sup> Collectively, we felt a sense of recovery, resilience and connection to the past, present and future—buoyed by the understanding that this was the right thing to do.

## Conclusion

A key issue in studies of endangered song and language is how to reduce the distance between archival material and communities today seeking to engage in revitalisation activities. Aiming to embody Noongar ideologies and address the discursive inequality between the academy, archives and the Noongar community, my research approach to south coast Noongar song and language revitalisation is grounded in a pro-Noongar ethos and undertaken with activist intent.<sup>78</sup> Working with archival audio and historical wordlists, it builds on ethnomusicological archival repatriation methods and linguistic processes of comparative reconstitution.<sup>79</sup> Rather than focusing on analysis or archival preservation, it prioritises community participation and strives for the re-embodiment of archival songs in people and Country.

In Gone's discussion of Indigenous research, he challenges scholars to distinguish distinctively Indigenous practices associated with orality and literacy.<sup>80</sup> In the context of south coast Noongar song revitalisation, we Noongar carry a healthy distrust of the supposed truths in written historical records, which motivates the cross-referencing and critical analysis necessary for consolidating and enhancing material held in archives and historical literature. This detailed and rigorous work leverages literacy as a tool for revitalising oral traditions. The ultimate goal of this research is to be together and sing on Country in order to nourish Noongar ways of knowing and being. Rather than weigh into debates about separation and collaboration in Indigenous research,<sup>81</sup> at this stage I merely suggest that we not lose track of the fact that Indigenous knowledge has intrinsic relationships with languages and song traditions—many of which are critically endangered. Referring to his own Samoan context, Efi states: "What matters in the pursuit of Indigenous Pacific knowledges is that it survives—and survives because it gives us meaning and belonging. Everything else is clutter."<sup>82</sup>

I would suggest that, emerging from the history of academic study, analysis, appropriation and denigration of Indigenous cultures, a goal of Indigenous research might be to use all existing ways and means—available via the academy, archives and elsewhere—to increase our opportunities to engage in and develop the kind of visceral understandings that give us life and connect us to Country and kin.

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<sup>77</sup>Carl Georg von Brandenstein, "Sound Recordings Collected by Carl Von Brandenstein," AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive, Canberra, ACT, 1967–1970.

<sup>78</sup>Bracknell, "Say You're a Nyungarmusicologist".

<sup>79</sup>Bendrups, Barney, and Grant, "An Introduction to Sustainability and Ethnomusicology in the Australasian Context"; Dench, "Comparative Reconstitution".

<sup>80</sup>Gone, "Considering Indigenous Research Methodologies," 11.

<sup>81</sup>Asch, Borrows, and Tully, *Resurgence and Reconciliation*.

<sup>82</sup>Efi, "Clutter in Indigenous Knowledge," 68.

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