Maya kora koorliny (language comeback): Access and arts in Australia

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University of Western Australia

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EDITORS:

Gabriela PÉREZ BÁEZ (University of Oregon)

Justin SPENCE (University of California, Davis)

ABSTRACT

Australia is home to hundreds of Indigenous languages, most in various states of endangerment and revitalisation. This paper concentrates on two pressing challenges, how to make historical language material more useful to Indigenous peoples reviving their languages, and how to increase opportunities for Indigenous peoples to build and maintain language capacity. It provides a snapshot of language revitalisation activity in Australia, focusing on the development of a dynamic online platform for Indigenous language manuscripts designed to increase Indigenous community access to primary-source language material. It will also share a case-study on the long-term revitalisation Noongar language in the southwest of Western Australia. Building on foundations established via community meetings and collaboration with linguists in the 1980s, Noongar language revitalisation has escalated in recent years amid burgeoning Noongar performing arts projects across theatre, film, and music led by Noongar creatives.

RESUMEN

Australia es el lugar de origen de cientos de lenguas indígenas que en su mayoría se encuentran a diferentes niveles de riesgo y revitalización. Este trabajo se concentra en dos retos que apremian: la necesidad de hacer que la documentación lingüística histórica sea de mayor utilidad para los pueblos indígenas que buscan revitalizar sus lenguas, y de incrementar las oportunidades para que los pueblos indígenas puedan generar y mantener capacidades lingüísticas. El trabajo presenta un panorama sobre la revitalización que se lleva a cabo en Australia, enfocándose en una dinámica plataforma digital para materiales de archivo de lenguas que mejora el acceso para las comunidades indígenas a estos materiales. También se presenta un estudio de caso acerca de la revitalización a largo plazo de la lengua Noongar en el suroeste de Australia

occidental. Con base en reuniones comunitarias y una colaboración con lingüistas en los años ochenta, la lengua Noongar ha tenido un apogeo en años recientes sobre todo en el contexto de las artes escénicas Noongar incluyendo proyectos de teatro, cine y música por parte de creadores Noongar.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the only contribution from Australia in this volume on reawakening languages, this paper will outline the region's complex and diverse Indigenous language ecology. It will describe some of the challenges of language revitalisation in the Australian context, not least of which is Indigenous peoples' access to language documentation and resources, discussing a project working to increase the online availability of Indigenous languages of Australia: ARC LIEF project *Nyingarn: A Platform for Primary Sources in Australian Indigenous Languages* (LE210100013 2021-2023). Finally, as a Noongar musician and language researcher, I will share an abridged history of Noongar language revitalisation in the southwest of Western Australia. Beginning in the early 1980s, this movement has surged in momentum amid recent Noongar-led, Noongar-language projects across theatre, television, film, and music. In addition to the need for improved access to primary source materials in endangered Indigenous languages, language revitalisation may be enhanced through interaction with the performing arts. This could involve both reviving old domains of expressive culture and applying Indigenous languages and performance practices to tasks of reinterpreting and reframing existing works, as demonstrated in *Hecate*, the Noongar adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and the recent Noongar-language dub of the 1972 Bruce Lee film *Fist of Fury*.

2. INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIA

The pervasive experience of settler-colonisation links hundreds of linguistically and culturally diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the lands and waters now known as Australia. Grouped together as approximately 700,000 people and accounting for approximately 3 per cent of Australia's total population, Indigenous people remain statistical minorities within our own homelands (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). British occupation, frontier violence, and subsequent Australian government policies promoting assimilation continue to adversely impact the vitality of more than 200 distinct Indigenous languages spread across the continent, positioning most of them in varying states of endangerment and silence (Department of Infrastructure Transport, Regional Development and Communications, 2020). Only 'around 120' languages are still spoken and 'about 13 can be considered strong', with fluent speakers across all generations (Marmion et al., 2014, p. xii).

Although not a measure of proficiency in language use, the 2021 Australian Census identified 150 Indigenous languages being spoken in homes across Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). The four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages with the largest groups of speakers are reported as follows:

ABS Language label	Number of speakers	Locations with highest number of speakers
Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole)	7,596	Bamaga and Surrounds, and Thursday Island, QLD
Kriol	7,403	Ngukurr, Minyerri, and Wugular (Beswick), NT
Djambarrpuyngu	3,839	Galiwinku, Ramingining, and Milingimbi, NT
Pitjantjatjara	3,399	Pukatja, Amata - Tjurma Homelands, Kaltjiti (Fregon), and Irintata Homelands, SA

Table 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages with largest groups of speakers

Kriol and Yumplatok are by far the most widely spoken Indigenous languages in Australia and have developed via contact between older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and English. These two distinct languages nevertheless still reflect the unique Indigenous cultural worldview of their speakers (Meakins, 2014; Ponsonnet, 2020). Notably, the languages with the greatest number of identifying speakers are in remote areas of Queensland (QLD), the Northern Territory (NT), and the central Australian region of South Australia (SA).

Interestingly, revitalised languages from long-colonised parts of urban and rural southern Australia that the Census identified as being spoken very little a decade ago such as Wiradjuri in central New South Wales and Noongar in the southwest Western Australia now have more identifying speakers than many languages with comparatively greater continuity of intergenerational language learning (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022). Concerningly, there is an observable reduction in identifying speakers of 'strong' languages like Arrernte and Yolngu Matha:

Indigenous language	Identifying speakers in 2011	Identifying speakers in 2021
Wiradjuri (NSW)	151	1,544
Noongar (WA)	369	1,536
Arrernte (NT)	2081	1,476
Yolngu Matha (NT)	2,446	1,800

Table 2: Change in Number of Speakers Over 10 Years

While not indicating anything about frequency or fluency in particular languages, these Census results highlight the ongoing crisis of Indigenous language endangerment in Australia while illustrating the recent attitudinal and aspirational gains achieved through language revitalisation (Walsh, 2010). A range of historical, social, and cultural factors significantly impact language vitality and the perceived success of revitalisation movements.

In addition to its enormous linguistic diversity, Australia is home to an extreme diversity in language ecologies, the ways languages interact and coexist in the context of culture and community (Simpson et al., 2019). In some communities, Indigenous languages are still acquired by children and used every day. In many others, local languages only exist as trace memories, a few words, or phrases. Diversity is core to any discussion of 'Indigenous communities', as the term itself can variously refer to remote, rural, and urban contexts across which Indigenous peoples may be localised or widely dispersed and bound by common dynamic geographical, cultural, or political interests (Morphy, 2009). The Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary which is a foundation of Australian media and institutional discourse also means that 'the Indigenous community' is sometimes problematically deployed to refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples simultaneously.

Despite the diverse histories of Indigenous languages and ongoing challenges to their vitality, Indigenous peoples continue to value their languages highly. In some communities, endangered Indigenous languages may be held in such high esteem that people avoid engaging in language revitalisation activities for fear of making mistakes (Bell, 2013). Jagera and Dulingbara linguist Jeanie Bell reveals how 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' (Bell, 2013, p. 408). The historical denigration and prohibition of Indigenous languages is inextricably connected to language revitalisation, alternately serving as both a constraining and motivating factor.

Since the early 1970s, public and institutional ignorance of Indigenous languages and culture in Australia has quickly shifted to interest and celebration. Seemingly overnight, Indigenous languages have become important evidence in Native Title cases, and increasingly relevant to tourism, land development, academia, and the arts. Arrernte writer Celeste Liddle cautions that even in this era of apparent Indigenous language optimism, '[w]hen language is used or gifted, it is either maimed through thoughtlessness and mispronunciation, or it is downright rejected' (Liddle, 2019). Explaining what she understands as a lingering settler-colonial disregard for Indigenous languages, Liddle states:

> *I see Aboriginal words as a gift — not meaning that we are freely giving them to mainstream Australia for their unbridled use, but rather that, in the face of continual assimilation policies, ranging from Stolen Generation kids being flogged for using lingo*

> *all the way to continual threats against bilingual education programs in schools, the*
>
> *fact that we still have words and languages is a miracle (2019).*

Even in this challenging context, engaging in the revitalisation of one's endangered Indigenous language can be empowering and healing (Bracknell, 2020a). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are working to consolidate and sustain their languages while at the same time responding to continuing cultural, social, and economic marginalisation.

Indigenous languages frame culture and identity. Yiman Professor Marcia Langton AO explains:

> *In many parts of the Aboriginal world, languages are sacred as they are given to us by*
> *the ancestors. Indeed, languages are owned by those people who can claim a sacred*
> *genealogical link to an ancestral speaker of that language. Place, identity, and the laws*
> *that apply among the people who live on the same area of land are bound together by*
> *their language (Langton, 2019, p. 35).*

Indigenous linguistic diversity is crucial and intentional, connecting people to their ancestors, histories, and each other. Across Australia, hundreds of different languages reflect the languages of the ancestors, with each language identifying a stretch of landscape and the people to inherit it. Use of a particular language situates people, implying knowledge and connectedness associating individuals with distinctive locations and affiliations (Sutton, 1997).

Indigenous languages are not just important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but integral to the maintenance of reciprocal relationships with the distinctive landscapes they are connected to. 'Country' is frequently capitalised in Indigenous contexts to denote 'nourishing terrain', landscapes alive and intertwined with Indigenous peoples, culture, and knowledge (Bird, 1996, p. 1). Across the continent, most Indigenous groups have some version of a story in which languages are fundamentally and eternally linked with Country. Senior Akarre woman Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM describes the relationship in this way: 'We come from the Land, and the language comes from the Land. And everything that grows from the Land, it really relates to our language as well' (Turner, 2010, p. 194). Country is happy when it hears the local Indigenous language, and we often talk about song being embedded in Country. Tanganekald/Meintangk Professor Irene Watson's observation that 'the natural world is still singing even though the greater part of humanity has disconnected itself from song' (Watson, 2014, p. 33) signals the potential for Country itself to motivate and inform language revitalisation.

The importance of language to culture, heritage, and identity manifests in the extraordinary efforts made across many communities to revitalise languages long after settler-colonial institutions had declared them extinct. According to Gubbi Gubbi and Gungulu linguist Eve Fesl:

The many decades of linguistic persecution, which persisted until the present time, only adds to the desire of the Indigenous Australian individuals and community to regain and claim whatever they are able. In the case of language this may be only a few words or sentences, but these are cherished far beyond what most non-Indigenous Australians are able to comprehend (Fesl, 1993, p. 164).

Indigenous language revitalisation movements worldwide have increasingly seen Indigenous researchers investigating archival collections to help fill the knowledge gaps in endangered language communities today. Communities with no living speakers may rely heavily on the reinterpretation of archival material, but even communities with speakers may find archaic vocabulary, turns of phrase, and genres to enhance the scope of their language (Baldwin et al., 2018).

3. FINDING THE WORDS

Across Australia, archival Indigenous language collections have been mobilised to enhance the maintenance and revitalisation of expressive culture. The late leader of Arnhem Land rock group Yothu Yindi, Mandawuy Yunupingu described how composition of the Gumatj language sections in the global hit song 'Treaty' was inspired by an archival audio recording of his great-great-grandmother's brother's son performing an old song (Marett et al., 2006). Other examples of singers accessing archives to revitalise regional song traditions include Ngarluma man Patrick Churnside focusing on *taabi* songs of the Pilbara, Western Australia; Jesse Hodgetts supporting the revival of Ngiyampaa and Wiradjuri song in New South Wales; a group led by Rona Charles promoting *junba* in the Kimberley, Western Australia; Fred Leone's recent work across Queensland and the Northern Territory; and the author of this paper recirculating old Noongar songs in community workshops ahead of composing new ones (Hodgetts, 2020; Treloyn et al., 2021; Bracknell et al., 2021)

Despite archives serving as a wellspring for revitalisation activities, some families and communities can be wary of sharing archival material in their endangered language. The rarer something is, the more valuable it becomes. Historical suppression and global exploitation of Indigenous culture (Mills, 2017), along with local dynamics associated with the politics of identity and belonging, may motivate contemporary calls to restrict even culturally 'open' material known and shared in the past, like historical wordlists and linguistic fields notes (Henderson, 2013). Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights, born out of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, reflects the need for protection of Indigenous arts and culture on Indigenous peoples' terms, but there are currently no Australian laws that prevent people from speaking, writing down or using Aboriginal languages. Amid renewed public interest in Indigenous languages, some Indigenous language revitalisation groups have proactively set up processes through which people can contact them and

seek permission to use their language.[1] Overwhelmingly though, access to endangered Indigenous language material in archives is controlled by holding institutions, not Indigenous communities.

While archives can hold valuable information to support Indigenous language revitalisation, it is not always easy to access and make sense of. While there are rare examples of settler-colonists attempting to understand and record Indigenous languages, the general lack of detailed documentation reflects a prevailing disregard for Indigenous cultures and people. For most the hundreds of Indigenous languages in Australia, there is actually very little recorded. When records do exist, they are often only paper manuscripts held in a single library. While the application of models of open standards in the digital and online structuring, storage, and presentation of manuscript materials is commonplace in Europe and North America,[2] this approach is yet to be significantly taken up in Australia. As a result, valuable collections of manuscripts remain inaccessible. In the case of Indigenous languages of Australia, there are so few primary sources that each one should be considered as a national treasure to be made accessible for use, especially by the descendants of speakers recorded in those sources.

In Australia and North America, training programs have been developed to assist Indigenous peoples to access, interpret, learn from, and share archival documentation of their languages (Thieberger, 1995; Baldwin et al., 2018; Hobson et al., 2018). As a further response to Indigenous peoples' pressing need for better access to early sources in their languages and the responsibility of academics to work with Indigenous communities to make materials more readily available, a current three-year project funded by the Australian Research Council is building an online system to discover, ingest, convert, present, and search as many primary-source historical manuscripts of Indigenous languages as possible. This system is taking shape as 'Nyingarn' (the Noongar word for echidna), a platform with images of the original documents and searchable, tagged text. The way an echidna collects ants is an analogy for the collection of manuscripts in this project. The project team includes chief investigators from the Australian National University, the University of Queensland, Latrobe University, the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Adelaide, and the project is guided by an Indigenous Steering Committee.

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[1] One example is the approach by Kaurna Warra Pityanthi, see https://www.adelaide.edu.au/kwp/requests/

[2] Nyingarn is inspired by platforms for classical European documents, like: Virtual Humanist libraries and Perseus Digital Library, in addition to other projects like: TICHA: A Digital Text Explorer For Colonial Zapotec; The Early Modern OCR Project; and Kant's papers. Online research tools to help in the organization, transcription, and analysis of archival materials for Indigenous languages have also been developed in North America (for example, see Baldwin et al., 2016).

Ultimately, Nyingarn will dramatically improve digital access to primary sources for Indigenous languages of Australia, using various means to turn images of manuscripts into text, including Optical Character Recognition (OCR), and crowdsourcing transcription (using DigiVol). At this stage of the project, the team have been identifying source manuscripts in state and national institutions, working with relevant Indigenous community groups to determine appropriate access conditions for materials, developing metadata systems, and building the online access platform. Soon, a series of Nyingarn training workshops will be made available to Indigenous community members, research students, and more experienced researchers, the aim being for the platform to gradually become more well-known, trusted, and refined though user feedback.

Although there is nothing else like this in-development platform currently available for Indigenous languages of Australia, Nyingarn is based on linguist Nick Thieberger's experience designing a system for online presentation of ethnographer Daisy Bates' voluminous Indigenous language manuscripts. 'Bates Online' made 22,000 pages of early Indigenous language manuscripts from Australia accessible using the Text Encoding Initiative, an international standard for XML, to encode text and images (TEI Consortium, 2007). Especially when language documentation is handwritten and difficult to read, seeing an image of the original page is important for verifying the text. While Bates Online serves as a prototype, it lacks Nyingarn's workflow for ingesting manuscripts. The Nyingarn platform can be broadly understood as an active working space and a repository for interaction, consolidation, and dissemination. Documents housed in Nyingarn will all have metadata attached, and encoding in plain text, making the system future-proof by design.

Acknowledging the importance of archival manuscripts in Indigenous languages to language revitalisation movements, Nyingarn is being developed to make them appropriately available online, increasing accessibility for Indigenous people in even the most remote areas. Once the platform is complete, it will streamline language research, and allow primary Indigenous language sources to be searched in ways that were previously impossible. Consulting primary source materials in endangered Indigenous languages can lead to the enrichment of local vocabularies diminished by years of language suppression, revealing useful old words that may have fallen out of use. In regions undergoing dynamic revitalisation movements such as Noongar in the southwest of Western Australia, the greater accessibility of archival collections has directly contributed to thriving indigenous arts practices.

4. NOONGAR LANGUAGE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

Noongar of the southwest of Western Australia constitute one of Australia's largest Aboriginal cultural blocs, both in terms of population and a vast estate of lands and waters which includes the capital city of Perth, the city of Albany, and the town of Esperance. Over 30,000 Noongar people share

one endangered ancestral language with at least three regional dialects. While Noongar language is clearly visible across education and the arts today, it is nevertheless still emerging from the devastation of an unjust settler-colonial history (Haebich, 2018). The International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 began amid increasing engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across Australia. As a pronounced example, the Australian census recorded a 200% surge in people identifying as speakers of the Noongar language of between 2016-2021 – increasing from 475 to 1,536 people. This data, along with sustained language revitalisation efforts since the 1980s reflect the importance of language to Noongar identity.

Noongar people carry deep oral histories and a once routinely musical expressive culture intrinsically linked to local landscapes (Bracknell, 2023). Western Australia was claimed by the British in 1829 and became part of the nation state of Australia in 1901. Over the past two centuries, most Noongar families have been marked by experiences of sanctioned and arbitrary frontier violence followed by rigorous government policies of segregation and cultural assimilation. Noongar vocabulary has nevertheless been co-opted into Australian English vernacular courtesy of official placenames such as Joondalup, Coolbellup, and Quairading, along with colloquial terms to describe local fauna and flora, including animals like the quokka and tammar, and trees like jarrah, plus implements like a gidgee (fishing spear). As a result, many people in the south of Western Australia regularly employ a smattering of Noongar in everyday speech although the language is rarely heard strung together in full sentences and conversations. Increased public acknowledgement of Noongar culture and language in recent decades masks the fact that Noongar remain the poorest and most incarcerated people in our own homelands, now one of the wealthiest places on earth.

There is a sense of optimism and energy around Indigenous languages in Australia, with national calls for local languages to be taught in schools. However, for many under-resourced languages like Noongar, there is an initial urgent need to develop a community of speakers and resources that engage with the language at a deeper level. In the absence of an exhaustive Noongar dictionary or detailed technical grammar, Noongar language revitalisation activities draw on community knowledge and a diverse array of historical language materials. Between 2019 and 2021, Noongar artists led the production of ground-breaking Noongar-language theatre, television, and film projects. These projects coalesced around the development of a burgeoning Noongar-speaking collective of artists and their families. Performance is at the core of the most successful examples of Indigenous language revitalisation worldwide in Hawaii and New Zealand. However, a 'language cannot be saved by singing a few songs' (Berresford Ellis & Mac a'Ghobhainn, 1971, p. 144), and public performance is not a sure-fire remedy for issues of language endangerment and intergenerational trauma.

Interlinked Noongar language revitalisation efforts since the 1980s were initiated by a range of senior language speakers including late Cliff Humphries, Ned Mippy, Kathy Yarran, Hazel Winmar, and Peter Farmer Snr, who met together with supportive linguists including Wilf Douglas, Alan Dench, and Nick Thieberger to develop resources, officially recognise Noongar as a single language with three mutually intelligible dialects, and develop a spelling system. Diversity of opinion on how best to spell 'Noongar' and various other words reflects diversity in the use of Noongar language more generally. Developers of the *Noongar Our Way* language learning kit Glenys Collard and Sandra Wooltorton explain that:

> *[t]here are several identifiable Noongar dialects in existence at the present time. Each dialect varies slightly in the pronunciation of words, some suffixes, and sometimes in the word itself. Sometimes, some will say: 'That is wrong! That is not how you say it. You should say it like this…' We regard everyone who already knows it, who learned it from their own parents or grandparents, as right. They have simply learned another variation of the word. Be aware of this. It need not cause difficulty or confusion (Wooltorton & Collard,1992, p. ix).*

After decades of keeping the Noongar language hidden from authorities, it can still be challenging for senior Noongar and their families to speak openly about it and reach consensus on the finer details.

Since the 1990s, a small number of committed teachers have provided Noongar language education at Western Australian primary schools including Moorditj Noongar Community College. Noongar language classes are also offered by community organisations including Langford Aboriginal Association, and in at least one prison. Books by Yelakitj Tom Bennell and Ralph Winmar prominently featured Noongar language, ushering in the publication of various illustrated story books in the twenty-first century. Since 2010, Noongar Radio 110.9fm aired Noongar language segments originally hosted by Charmaine Bennell. The children's television program *Waabiny Time* also premiered in 2010 on the National Indigenous Television Network, promoting the language to a national audience.

A diverse range of Noongar words have been recorded since the early nineteenth century and are generally consistent with Noongar vocabulary still in use today. Analysis of accessible language material also reveals many Noongar terms that have fallen out of use for various reasons, including fewer people conversing in Noongar as their first language. The limited use of Noongar language in expressive culture and performing arts over the past hundred years has also adversely impacted the retention and expansion of Noongar vocabulary. One of the greatest challenges in sustaining Aboriginal languages in Australia is a lack of resources – a question not simply of institutional or archival resources, but a lack of support for human creative and intellectual resources. The UNESCO

Expert Group on Endangered Languages identifies nine factors contributing to language vitality (Brenzinger et al., 2003). These include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute numbers of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Loss of existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies
8. Community members' attitudes towards their own language
9. Amount and quality of documentation

In approaching Noongar language revitalisation through the performing arts, it is worth considering the loss of existing domains – particularly traditions of 'corroboree' song and dance – and responses to new domains for language use such as theatre and film.

The word 'corroboree', originated from a language of Sydney, is used in English as a general descriptor for Aboriginal song, dance, and performance events. In Aboriginal English, 'corroboree' is frequently used to describe open and unrestricted, everyday music as opposed to the more serious performance genres known variously as 'ceremony' or 'business' (Turpin, 2017, p. 241). While some songs are culturally restricted to necessary individuals, places, and purposes, Indigenous travelling corroboree songs were once this continent's most popular and widespread music, crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries (Turpin et al., 2020).

Aboriginal music is principally vocal and based in language, so intrinsically linked to the diversity of Aboriginal languages. As music, poetic techniques, accompanying visuals, movement, and performance context can all convey meaning, truly understanding an Aboriginal song usually requires more than literal comprehension of lyrics. In his book *The Guruma Story*, the late Gordon Lockyer from the Pilbara region of WA notes:

> *With English songs, if you understand English, you should know what he's singing about, but with Aboriginal songs it's not quite the same. The meaning is there, but you can't say what every little word means – the sound gives you the meaning of it all. They sometimes change the words a bit to make them fit in (Stevens, 2001, p. 63).*

Across the continent, the poetic and polysemous nature of songs means they can be interpreted and reinterpreted in diverse and multilayered ways across time and place (Garde, 2005; Keogh, 1990). However, deep understandings of the conventions and poetics of Aboriginal song traditions, and the ability to create new songs, is often an early casualty of language shift (Walsh, 2007; Grant, 2014).

Poetic language use and rhythmic complexity are characteristic of Noongar song, but most Noongar today only speak and sing in English. As few people can remember, create, or perform Noongar songs, most public performance of Noongar dance since the 1970s has been accompanied by the didgeridoo – an instrument from the far north of Australia (Zeppel, 1999; van Den Berg et al., 2005). Since at least 2010, I have been deeply interested in Noongar song and have learned from a few senior Noongar who carry or carried old songs. I listened intently to archival recordings and workshopped old Noongar songs among Noongar community groups, usually family of the singers on the old recordings. For some Indigenous people, as senior Gunggari woman Ethel Munn from southwest Queensland said, 'it's easier to sing in language than it is to talk in it' (Antrobus, 2016). Recirculating old Noongar songs increased interest and engagement with Noongar language among the small community and family groups I worked with, signalling the potential for song to contribute to broader language revitalisation (Bracknell, 2020b).

On the advice of senior Noongar speakers including Roma Yibiyung Winmar, Annie Dabb, Barry McGuire and Professor Len Collard, I applied what I had learned from studying the aesthetics of old Noongar songs to creating new original songs in the old style that could be shared freely and potentially have greater positive impact on language revitalisation. Noongar dancers Trevor Ryan, Rubeun Yorkshire, Kyle Morrison, Ian Wilkes, Mark Nannup and I developed new corroboree repertoire for bullsharks, dolphins, stingrays, bobtailed lizards, dragonflies and groundwater that we could share with other Noongar and eventually the general public (Bracknell et al., 2021). These works featured in Perth Festival 2022 as part of the *Noongar Wonderland* installation at Perry Lakes in Perth and the music was released under the name Maatakitj on streaming platforms in 2022. These new Noongar songs and dances emerged after two major Noongar works in the 2020 and 2021 Perth Festival programs.

4.1 A NOONGAR MACBETH

New Noongar songs created in the old-style invigorated language learning for the cast of *Hecate* – the Noongar adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This adaptation reframes Macbeth as acting against the laws of nature and mother earth herself, embodied by Hecate, the queen of the witches often omitted from productions of *Macbeth* but brought forward here as the titular character. As part of his initial agenda as artistic director at Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, Kyle J. Morrison devised the original idea to present a Shakespearean work in the Noongar language in 2009. As a Noongar and Yamitji man with a lifelong love of theatre, Kyle sought to bring together two things he intensely values – Shakespeare and Noongar language – and make both more accessible and relevant for Noongar people and broader audiences. As written Noongar is mostly recorded in wordlists and short stories, Morrison also sought to significantly bolster the Noongar corpus by commissioning a full adaptation of

Macbeth. His unique vision inspired more than a novel translation of Shakespeare's play about power, greed, and violence in eleventh-century Scotland. *Hecate* is driven by the idea that by working together and engaging with our endangered language on our Country, we can be strong enough to stand alongside anyone – even the coloniser's purportedly greatest writer – and tell a story bigger than Macbeth: A story about the power of language and culture to connect us to each other and connect us to Country.

My wife Kylie Bracknell and I co-translated *Hecate* with editorial guidance from Roma Yibiyung Winmar, a senior Noongar language teacher with over three decades of experience revitalising the language. Kylie adapted and directed, while I served as musical director, composer, and sound designer. The original cast included Noongar actors Della Rae Morrison, Maitland Schnaars, Bobbi Henry, Trevor Ryan, Kyle J. Morrison, Ian Wilkes, Rubeun Yorkshire, Mark Nannup, and Cezera Critti-Schnaars. Other Noongar deeply involved included Mark Howett as lighting designer, and cultural consultants Judy Bone, Jill Dewar, and Mitchella Hutchins. The decade of development toward *Hecate* provided a unique opportunity for a troupe of Noongar creatives to be immersed in their endangered Aboriginal language.

Shakespeare's work is canonical, and *Macbeth* has been adapted and presented in various non-European global cultural and linguistic contexts, particularly in Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Throne of Blood* (1957), the Bollywood film *Maqbool* (2003), and Inuvialuit, Cree and Dene writer Reneltta Arluk's reimagined *Pawâkan Macbeth* (2020) staged partially in Cree. *Hecate* is not alone in its mobilisation of Shakespeare to address local concerns, particularly in contexts of language endangerment. Based on a 1945 te reo Māori translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, the 2002 feature film *Te Tangata Whai Rawa o Weniti*, was produced to bolster Māori language revitalisation.

Prior to *Hecate*, Australia's only other mainstage Shakespearean work with an all-Indigenous cast – Malthouse Theatre's adaptation of *King Lear* titled *The Shadow King* in 2013 – featured a linguistic mélange of English, Yumpla Tok (Torres Strait Creole), Kala Lagow Ya, Yolngu, Baard, and Katherine Kriol, and was guided by a non-Indigenous director. As an anomaly in Australian theatre history, 1999 saw Indigenous actors constitute at least half of the cast in three separate Australian Shakespearean productions: *As You Like It* (Company B), *Romeo and Juliet in Black and White* (Bell Shakespeare) and *Romeo and Juliet* (La Boite and Kooemba Jdarra). However, all actors performed in English. Premiering in 2022, Queensland Theatre's *Othello* includes some dialogue in Yumpla Tok and Kala Lagow Ya.

Hecate remains the first full work of Western-style theatre presented entirely in the Noongar language, and just the second such work in any Aboriginal language of Australia, the first being *Ngundalehla Godotgai*, a 1997 version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* performed in the

Bundjalung language of northern New South Wales. *Ngundalehla Godotgai* was presented with English surtitles by the Bangarra National Indigenous Dance Troupe at 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney and directed by non-Indigenous Irish theatre specialist Clara Mason. Presented without surtitles and led by a Noongar director and creative team, *Hecate* is more than a significant creative achievement; it is an embodiment of Noongar self-determination. Performing Shakespeare in Noongar has provided a range of very rare opportunities for Noongar and the broader public to actively engage with the Noongar language. It also provided many challenges.

Shakespeare used well over 20,000 unique English word forms in his poems and plays. One of the most comprehensive dictionaries produced in an Aboriginal language to date is for the Warlpiri language from the Northern Territory, which includes over 10,000 entries (Laughren, 2022). While children still grow up with Warlpiri as their first language today, by contrast, to adapt *Macbeth* into Noongar, we could not exclusively rely on our own knowledge of the language and the memories of senior speakers.

There is a persistent myth that Shakespeare invented hundreds of new English words including 'bubble' and 'zany'. Rather than being a linguistic innovator, as a typical member of the artistic community, Shakespeare was responding to and reflecting cutting-edge developments in the English language of the day to appeal to contemporary audiences. As Professor of English Literature Jonathan Hope reminds us,

> *[l]anguages are collaborative, communal efforts – words come into being thanks to the morphological and phonetic resources of the language, and its cultural contacts, not because a few users are divinely gifted wordsmiths (Hope, 2016, p. 45).*

While not necessarily provoking the invention of new words, *Hecate* provided us with the opportunity to reintroduce and revitalise archaic Noongar vocabulary. For example, the term 'kambarn' appears as 'gambarn: to associate' in John Brady's 1845 *Descriptive Vocabulary* and as 'kampern: gathering' and 'kaamp: meet' in C.G von Brandenstein's unpublished 1970 fieldnotes. Incorporation of this word into the script for *Hecate* led to the cast and creative team sharing it with a broader community of speakers. While our communal, collaborative effort facilitated the readoption of many old Noongar terms, this process began with comparing and discussing archival sources.

Outside of the intellectual and creative challenge, the main achievement of *Hecate* was facilitating a brave and supportive space for language revitalization and the development of a community of speakers. Reverence – for Shakespeare in the arts community and Noongar language in the Noongar community – nonetheless raised the stakes for *Hecate*. Kyle J. Morrison describes how the cast and creative team approached the project:

We really needed to learn the difference between respect and reverence, that was the biggest lesson that we learnt from working with Bell Shakespeare Peter Evans started talking about the difference between respect and reverence. You can respect anything right up until you are full of its respect and still change it and edit it and augment it, but if you revere something, you're not going to change it. The level of reverence for Shakespeare in this country is stupid, but with the right respect, you can invest in it. It's the exact same idea with Noongar language, you know, there's this reverence around Noongar language and this fear that you can't get it wrong. Do you know how many times I've got Noongar language wrong? I've been in front of hundreds of people and got Noongar language wrong but I'm not going to stop, you've got to fall over and get back up, you've got to stumble. So, there was this idea that you can't make a mistake in Shakespeare, and you can't make a mistake in Noongar language because of reverence, but as soon as we get rid of reverence of anything, then with all respect you can create everything anew (personal communication, 2022).

For many Noongar, Shakespeare would be symbolic of settler-colonial ideas about high culture, and indirectly, the suppression of Noongar culture. Australian institutions have supported and promoted Shakespeare on a scale incommensurate with the paltry support recently extended to Indigenous languages – languages that past governments hoped to wipe out. *Hecate* subverts and capitalises on Australia's deference to British arts. As Roma Yibiyung Winmar states:

Everyone knew the name Shakespeare, but he was from another century, another world. Then he came into our world long after he was gone and helped promote our language (personal communication, 2022).

Shakespeare's cultural cachet attracted the government and philanthropic support, media attention, and audience interest to support the long development period required for the Noongar actors involved to reclaim and learn to perform in their endangered language.

The significance of the ensemble becoming able to speak and comprehend Noongar for themselves cannot be overstated. For *Hecate* to work practically as both a theatre production and a clear act of language revitalisation, the cast needed to do more than memorise and repeat Noongar dialogue. Actors had to be aware of their verbal cues and be able to react and improvise during any point of the performance to unintended script deviations. To increase the cast's Noongar comprehension and communicative skills, Kylie as director embedded a 'Noongar only' hour, during which participants could only interact using the Noongar language, into each workshop and rehearsal day. This approach was effective, echoing the success of more large-scale language immersion methods used in revitalisation programs in New Zealand and Hawaii (May 2013). *Hecate* also provided

its audiences with an unprecedented opportunity to be immersed in Noongar language for the show's full 90-minute runtime. *Hecate*'s first preview was almost exclusively attended by Noongar and other Indigenous people, and every night of the play's inaugural season sold out and received standing ovations.

Hecate's premiere season in Perth Festival closed on 16 February 2020, exactly one month before a State of Emergency was declared in Western Australia due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Every performance concluded with a standing ovation. *Hecate* headlined *The Australian*'s review of best stage shows of 2020 and was awarded eight Performing Arts WA Awards, including Best Mainstage Production and Best New Work. Kylie Bracknell also received Australia's prestigious Sidney Myer Performing Arts Award for her work on *Hecate.* These achievements were the result of a decade-long timeframe necessary to adapt and translate the work, engage with senior Noongar speakers, and develop a Noongar acting ensemble. In the long lead-up to *Hecate*, many Noongar people, including performers, participated in language gatherings to help nourish a community of speakers. While some of these gatherings were directly connected to developing and casting the production, others were far less formal, held outside or in donated venues and involved Noongar from all walks of life, often with their children in tow. Throughout the whole process, *Hecate* paid homage to the senior Noongar speakers who retained the language through the harshest years of injustice and assimilation and kept the focus on Country.

4.2 FIST OF FURY NOONGAR DAA

After 2020, maintaining the speaking community developed over the course of the *Hecate* project was challenging. Redubbing the 1972 Bruce Lee film *Fist of Fury* in Noongar for Perth Festival 2021 allowed the team to work within mandatory COVID-19 isolation protocols, keep Noongar actors in work, involve Noongar speakers who had never acted before, and recruit young Noongar keen to participate in language revitalisation for the first time. Bruce Lee was the first non-white hero many senior Noongar people saw in the movies, so the project was enthusiastically supported by Perth Festival's Noongar Advisory Circle and the broader Noongar community. As a film about the tragedy of imperialism and the futility of resistance, *Fist of Fury* has resonances for Indigenous peoples in Australia.

The original 1972 version of the film was released in Cantonese with the audio track recorded after initial filming, as was industry standard in that era of Hong Kong cinema. *Fist Of Fury* also featured several non-Cantonese speaking actors. As a result, even the original Cantonese version has some unsynchronised lip-synching of footage to speech. The dubbing in the English version is comically inaccurate and forgoes much of the detail in the original Cantonese dialogue. We intended to pay homage to the original film by creating a technically sound and appropriately detailed dubbed version in our endangered Indigenous language.

After working to adapt Shakespearean English for *Hecate*, we attempted to use as little English as possible to get from *Fist of Fury*'s Cantonese to Noongar. Melbourne artist and interpreter Felix Ching Ching Ho glossed the Cantonese with basic English words and then I translated to Noongar, without having to completely render the script into English first. Kylie and I then had to match the Cantonese meaning with Noongar words that could also fit the movement of character's lips on screen. Translating *Fist of Fury* continued to motivate further re-expansion of Noongar vocabulary and speech domains, for example, discreet Noongar terms for older and younger brothers – *borong*, *kardang* – were important in reflecting the relationships within the film's kung fu school. After not using surtitles for *Hecate*, we left creating the subtitles for *Fist of Fury* late in the process, translating to English from the onscreen Noongar a few days before the film premiered.

We had established a workflow for dubbing after completing two Noongar episodes of the TV show *Little J and Big Cuz*.[3] To our knowledge, the resulting rerelease of the movie, as *Fist of Fury Noongar Daa* is the first dub of an international feature film into an Indigenous language of Australia. It screened at Perth Festival, with additional regional screenings in Esperance, Albany, Margaret River and Collie, Sydney Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, and Festival du Cinéma Aborigène Australien in Paris, France. This project capitalised on the success of *Hecate*, expanding the number of Noongar performers involved and engaging with their language. In the longest extended examples of unbroken Noongar speech in many decades, *Hecate* immersed audiences in Noongar language for 80 minutes and *Fist of Fury* presented 102 minutes of Noongar language dialogue, interspersed with the various grunts and whistles associated with kung fu fight scenes.

5. CONCLUSION

The focus on performance as a language revitalisation activity is not new, but this reflection on the Noongar experience highlights the potential for archives and other historical resources to boost creativity in contexts of language reclamation, and the key importance of these resources when translating and adapting creative works of scale. The development of ensembles for the play *Hecate* and film dub *Fist of Fury Noongar Daa* created a burgeoning community of speakers while providing audiences with brief language immersion experiences. While Noongar remains an endangered language, with less than three percent of Noongar people claiming to be speakers of Noongar language in the Australian census, the 300 percent increase in identifying speakers over the past decade demonstrates clearly growing interest in the language which shows no sign of abating. Recent activity in the dual naming of places and businesses, along with the development of Noongar opera and ballet productions, and the increased use of Noongar seasonal terminology in media and

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[3] available on ABC iView: https://iview.abc.net.au/show/little-j-and-big-cuz-indigenous-languages

institutions attests to this. *Hecate*, *Fist of Fury Noongar Daa*, and the recently released music from *Noongar Wonderland* have increased language awareness and motivated the development of further creative work incorporating Noongar language. While it is difficult to gauge the impact of these works on more than 30,000 people who comprise the Noongar community and rarely use more than a handful of Noongar words, they have raised the bar in terms of what is possible artistically in the language revitalisation space, provided lasting resources for sustaining Noongar language into the future, and helped to destigmatise the act of speaking Noongar. Hearing mostly Noongar audience members leaving the theatre, cinema or dance ground repeating dialogue or singing songs they just heard certainly makes the entanglement between language revitalisation and the arts seem productive.

In the context of Gumbaynggirr language revitalisation in New South Wales, Michael Walsh writes about conditions in which the revitalisation of Indigenous languages of Australia can 'sometimes work' and proposes a fifteen point 'wishlist for successful language revitalisation programs' (Walsh, 2010, p. 32). Acknowledging the low likelihood of any language program meeting all these ideal conditions, Walsh attributes the relative success of the Gumbaynggirr program to sustained commitment, a strong connection between culture, oracy and language, the training of teachers and linguists, and access to significant language materials with appropriate use of technology. The Nyingarn project is primed to contribute to improving the latter condition by working to locate archival Indigenous language manuscripts and make them dramatically more accessible and user friendly. One factor that Walsh does not include on his 'wishlist' is the scope for Indigenous language revitalisation in the performing arts. By reviving the language domain of song and activating Noongar language in new domains of Shakespearean theatre and international film, our Noongar team has built on the 1980s foundations of language revitalisation and extended the scope of use for Noongar language, engaging a new and expanding generation of nascent speakers.

The performing arts projects discussed in this paper are a small sample of many Noongar language activities occurring simultaneously across multiple diverse groups and organisations. In 2013 at the University of Western Australia, linguist John Henderson once described the ideal conditions for language revitalisation to me as 'letting many flowers bloom'. He also emphasised the importance of torchbearers for endangered languages, to carry them forward. Successful language revitalisation requires a foundation of cultural integrity, language materials, knowledge, and rigour, plus sustained community interest and commitment. There is also sometimes a need for Indigenous peoples to take culturally informed risks, applying Indigenous languages in new and unexpected contexts to expand their future possibilities.

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