

# Noongar ecomusicology in southwest Australia

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**Abstract** The vitality of eco-centric Noongar language and song traditions Indigenous to Western Australia's urban-rural southwest region has been continually compromised by environmental and social upheaval since the onset of settler-colonisation in the nineteenth century. The Noongar region is today recognised as an area of globally significant biodiversity under significant threat, and a global drying hotspot. This article considers how revitalising and publicly sharing Noongar expressive culture could destabilise the separation between nature and culture imposed and maintained by settler-colonial systems. It positions Noongar performance revitalisation in the transdisciplinary field of ecomusicologies, considering the potential for Indigenous expressive culture to help move the needle on nature-culture challenges and motivate action on pressing global environmental issues. While many Indigenous communities are engaging in processes of revitalising culture, language and performance across Australia, the ecological and social benefits of revitalised Indigenous performance genres are yet to be fully realised and understood, especially in urban-rural contexts. Given the primary function of Indigenous expressive culture to maintain reciprocal relationships among communities and everything in landscapes, broader public engagement with Indigenous performance could productively enrich perceptions of local environments among all Australians. Still, tensions exist between the resource-intensive demands associated with reaching large audiences through festival productions and the eco-friendly, community-focused motivations for Noongar language and performance revitalisation.

## Introduction

Noongar (also spelled Nyungar) is a term used today to describe the Indigenous people, language, and Country of the Western Australia's urban-rural southwest corner, including places known today as the capital city of Perth, the city of Albany, and the town of Esperance. 'Country' is capitalised in Indigenous contexts across the places now collectively known as Australia to signify landscapes as nourishing terrain, alive, multidimensional, and intertwined with local Indigenous people and culture (Rose 1996). In the Noongar region, as has been acknowledged across Australia, the maintenance of reciprocal relationships between everything in Country depends on the powerful adaptive, affiliative, and affective qualities of Indigenous song – grounded in language, movement, and Country itself (Ellis et al. 1978; Marett 2010; Patrick 2015; Poelina et al. 2023). Britain's establishment of the Swan River colony in 1829 began a process of linguistic, cultural, social and environmental devastation across the Noongar region. Despite ongoing settler-colonial strictures, Noongar expressive culture – including language, song and performance – continues to re-emerge in new and creative ways (Haebich 2018; Bracknell & Bracknell 2024).

Today, Noongar boodjar (Country) is at the epicentre of ecological crisis as a recognised global biodiversity hotspot and a global drying hotspot (Kala et al. 2021). It is home to the world's most isolated capital city in a non-island state and a flashpoint for racism and injustice. More than 30,000 Noongar people – around 3 percent of the total population – are among the poorest and most incarcerated people in our own homelands, now one of the wealthiest places on earth. As a song-maker and language activist, my practice is inherently tied to my geographical and cultural connection as a Noongar (person) Indigenous to the region and the social and environmental issues that impact it. For more than a decade, I have collaborated and contributed toward the resurgence of Noongar language, song and performance through creative innovation, guided by experiences of Country, archival research, knowledgeable senior people, and performance activists committed to Noongar cultural sustainability. In addition to its primary functions as Indigenous cultural revitalisation and creative practice, this work can be

positioned among many diverse ecomusicologies contributing to that trans-disciplinary field (Pedelty et al. 2022:23).

Although historically suppressed, critically endangered, and drastically under-resourced, Indigenous performance in the place now known as Australia functions to maintain extraordinarily longstanding ways of relating to and interacting with Country that support human connection to the environment. Across Australia, Indigenous music is principally vocal and based in language, so intrinsically linked to the vitality, endangerment, and revitalisation of Indigenous languages. It is also based in Country and community, so inseparable from environmental and social conditions. Internationally, there is a pressing need for culturally diverse creative responses to language endangerment, social dysfunction, and environmental crises. In this context, the revitalisation and public sharing of eco-centric Noongar performance practices could help move the needle on nature-culture problems and potentially spur action on global concerns – including climate change – in the local context.

## **Noongar Dance Music**

Regularly infrequent rainfall has long characterised the Noongar region, giving rise to longstanding performance genres that pre-empt and mark rain events. A pastoralist at York in Western Australia described a loud and striking Noongar ‘rainmaking’ performance at a time of ‘drought’ in 1865, stating:

[A] most disturbing and oft-recurring hubbub was kept up all night by the whole company, who beat and stamped upon the ground in unison, producing an amount of noise that was perfectly astounding, their bare feet and the hardness of the soil being taken into consideration (Millet 1872:230).

While this pastoralist would have appreciated the rain that followed the performance, their description derides Noongar expressive culture in a manner typical of most colonial accounts of the era (Bracknell 2015). Although framed by a deficit discourse, nineteenth-century colonial descriptions of Noongar song and dance like this nevertheless still hint at the power of performance to maintain strong Indigenous social and ecological bonds (Hae-bich 2018; Bracknell 2017). Colonial, missionary and state attempts to eradicate Noongar expressive culture aimed to break those bonds and advance the settler colonial project.

Paradoxically, after successive governments led cultural assimilation policies until at least the 1970s, there is currently increasing demand for locally distinctive Indigenous content in Western Australia's arts and tourism industries (Dockery et al. 2021). While pastoralists in the nineteenth century were kept up all night by unamplified, fire-lit Noongar performance, today's broad and diverse audience for arts festivals in Western Australia expect big sound systems and elaborate lighting effects using drones and video projection. Such resource-intensive requirements that seem at odds with the eco-centric core of Noongar song but seem vital to engaging large contemporary audiences.

To create a sense of spectacle and wonder around Noongar song and dance in the context of a large-scale arts festival, multidisciplinary Noongar artist Kylie Bracknell and I co-produced *Noongar Wonderland*, a multi-sensory light, sound and dance experience for an outdoor setting at Perry Lakes Reserve, Western Australia over 3-5 March 2022 as part of Perth Festival. We utilised world-class lighting by Noongar designer Mark Howett, and I collaborated with ARIA award winning music producer Paul Mac to infuse my new Noongar songs with elements of electronic dance music (Bracknell and McDermott 2023). Noongar performers Trevor Ryan and Rubeun Yorkshire led a group of dancers performing in response to this pre-recorded soundtrack, evoking bullsharks, dolphins, stingrays, bobtailed lizards, dragonflies, and groundwater. They invited the hundreds of audience members to dance during the final songs of the night. In evaluation surveys conducted by Perth Festival, audiences communicated increased feelings of connection with the local environment and Noongar culture because of *Noongar Wonderland*.



**Figure 1.** Noongar Wonderland at Perry Lakes, Western Australia 2022. Image by Court McAllister.

Notwithstanding this relative success, tensions exist between the revitalisation of Noongar performance traditions and the presentation of Noongar performance in festivals designed to attract large audiences. Ideally, by utilising arts festival opportunities to simultaneously develop the capacity of Noongar performers and raise the standing of Noongar performance in the settler-colonial milieu, spectacles like *Noongar Wonderland*, with amplification and lights, may hopefully serve as a gateway back to more consistent and environmentally sustainable modes of Noongar performance. ‘Ecomusicologies’, as a transdisciplinary field, offers useful frameworks for considering this kind of ecologically entangled music practice, particularly given the ambiguous relationship between resource-depleting presentation formats and intentions to raise environmental awareness (Pedelty 2011). In Australia, further investigation is needed on the ecological and social benefits of revitalised Indigenous expressive culture, especially the potential for Indigenous performance to enrich perceptions of the environment among all Australians. This article will situate Noongar performance in an ecomusicologi-

cal framework, discuss the culture–nature problems inherent to its present context, and suggest possible paths forward.

## **Ecomusicologies as a framework**

Noongar performance maintains and enacts reciprocal relationships with Country, constituting a distinctively ecological use of language and song. This is paradoxical to the fraught separation of nature/environment and culture, a key theme in ecomusicologies (Allen & Dawe 2015). Investigating ‘sound, music, and musicking in ecological contexts’ ethnomusicologies simultaneously consider issues of ‘environmental justice, biodiversity, and ecological crises, including climate change, pollution, habitat degradation, and mass extinction’ (Pedelty et al. 2022:3). Although the term ‘ecomusicology’ arose in the 1970s, this kind of music research remained uncommon until this millennium. Emphasising interconnections and complexity, ecomusicologies productively expand understandings of organised sound into not only cultural but environmental dimensions. Building on Jeff Todd Titon’s earlier suggestion that ‘sustaining music means sustaining people making music’ (2009:6), Robin Ryan points out that sustaining music must also necessarily entail ‘sustaining environments’ (2015:64). Across Indigenous traditions of Australia, song is considered pivotal to environmental maintenance (Marett 2010; Patrick 2015; Poelina et al. 2023). Given the interconnected threats to cultural and environmental vitality, work across ecomusicologies often aims to help music communities maintain cultural and environmental survival (Pedelty et al. 2022).

Ecomusicologies increasingly intersect with Indigenous knowledges, with the diversity of this engagement helping to demonstrate ‘that there is no singular “cohesive concept” to be derived from Indigenous lifeways and no magic bullet that one can apply to the creation of sustainable soundscapes or communities’ (Pedelty et al. 2022:12). Common themes in this work nevertheless include how ecologies contribute to the creation and resilience of music, and how Indigenous music practices contribute to environmental advocacy. For example, Helena Simmonett writes about musical inspiration among the Yoreme in Northwestern Mexico emerging from the ‘sacred environment’, constituted by ‘the world of the sun, the sea, the trees, the flowers, the mountains, the rocks, and so forth (2014). Exploring similar themes,

Rebecca Dirksen outlines how Vodou spiritual practices imbue Haitian culture with environmental awareness and new Haitian popular music with messaging ‘on sacred nature and environmentalism’ (Dirksen 2023:126). Both studies draw on the idea of ‘sacred ecology’, defined as ‘the diverse, complex, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interface between religions and spiritual ecologies on the one hand, and, on the other, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms’ (Sponsel 2012:xiii). In many ways, overt separation of the spiritual and the environmental is antithetical to Indigenous conceptualisations of Country across Australia, nourished and promoted by musical activity.

Performance can powerfully maintain the presence of Indigenous peoples and knowledge in Country, simultaneously functioning as a strategy of resilience and revitalisation. Offering an illustration of music revitalisation promoting Indigenous knowledge in Nigeria, Olusegun Stephen Titus details how the present-day threat of flooding in Ibadan has motivated Yoruba musicians to advocate for a return to longstanding Indigenous spiritual relationships with waterways (2019). Reflecting on the persistence of song among the Spokane in Washington State USA despite colonial theft, damage and pollution of their lands, Chad S. Hamill states ‘expression of Spokane culture reinforces our identity and solidifies our presence, merging the past with the present in a sacred continuum that, in its totality, constitutes the Spokane world’ (2023:148). While Indigenous performance is incredibly important to maintaining inter-group solidarity and cultural sustainability, global environmental challenges have motivated many Indigenous peoples to reach outside their communities via performance too.

In the context of climate change, Candice Elanna Steiner describes how Pacific Islanders use performance to ‘make Islanders’ voices heard and their human faces seen in order to encourage support from beyond the region for mitigation and adaptation efforts’ (2015, 149). Chiao-Wen Chiang explains how Yami/Tao of the island Pongso no Tao, Taiwan have shared new song repertoires in concerts, festivals and workshops (2020). These immersive experiences have enhanced appreciation of Indigenous knowledge and the environment among non-Indigenous residents and tourists, helping to mitigate the potentially damaging impacts of increased tourism while advancing long-term anti-nuclear waste agendas (Chiang 2020). Susan Jacob describes how protestors seeking to protect the sacred mountain Mauna Kea in Hawaii

carried out a tribute ceremony – including precontact kahiko and newly composed chants, songs, and hula – and a subsequent online music jam event livestreamed across the world, thereby ‘bridging the past and the present, and connecting Mauna Kea with the people who protect it’ (2020). Rather than pursuing singular goals such as policy change or emissions reductions, Indigenous environmental movements are more frequently holistic, seeking to reveal and nourish “interconnected relationships, including human and more-than-human communities” (Pedelty et al. 2022:22). Indigenous performance has always been key to the ethical imperative of sustaining Country and culture for future generations.

In Australia, large-scale contemporary festivals – usually relying on amplification, lighting, and significant travel for audiences and performers – are currently one of the main forums for Indigenous Australian public performance to be staged, learned, shared and revitalised (Brown & Treloyn 2024). Mark Pedelty offers a sobering illumination of how the resource-intensive nature of contemporary performance practices can contradict performers’ eco-friendly posturing in his investigation the failure of most popular rock bands playing overtly environmental, activist-themed music to mitigate negative environmental impacts of tours, musical production and performance (2011). Eco-friendly themed or ‘green’ music festivals in Australia have been studied in relation to how they can provoke environmental awareness and education about environmentalism, and the ways in which a sense of community experienced by patrons can positively influence their ecologically responsible behaviours (Alonso-Vazquez and Ballico 2021). Dan Bendrups and Donna Weston offer four domains for ‘systematically exploring the ways in which festivals engage with ecological concerns’, including promotional, logistical, conceptual and spatial elements (2015:67). Given the ecologically minded intent of most Indigenous performance productions, it seems important to expand understandings of their holistic impact and how they might help shift the needle on nature-culture challenges.

## **Humanising Country, Countryfying Humans**

Climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the endangerment of Indigenous languages are interconnected global challenges with an overwhelmingly asymmetrical distribution of cost (Dabelko & Conca 2019). Indigenous

peoples are the most adversely impacted and are still the last to be heard. Despite recent policies of inclusivity in Australian arts institutions, most Indigenous languages and parallel performance traditions in Australia remain critically endangered, and institutional support remains more tokenistic than transformative (Bracknell & Barwick 2021). A general lack of space and time in contemporary Australian life to nourish Indigenous performers, languages, and traditions of singing and dancing constrains the development and potentially deep impact of Indigenous creative responses to pressing local and global issues.

Australia's settler-colonial legacy of environmental destruction and the suppression of Indigenous languages and culture purposefully restrains and limits Indigenous language and song revitalisation. It can also motivate activism and new Indigenous creative responses, with the revitalisation of Indigenous language and song kicking back against settler-colonial notions of 'implied extinguishment of human stewardship' (Langton 1999:26). Environmental degradation can threaten Indigenous cultural practices, but Indigenous expressive cultures are particularly adept at adapting with environmental change and sustaining ecological knowledge and values over extremely long periods of time (Curran et al. 2019; Nunn 2018; Marett 2010). Indigenous languages and performance are embodiments of how profoundly linked human and nonhuman systems are. While environmental change is identified as a threat to the sustainability of Indigenous knowledge and intangible cultural heritage (Pearson et al. 2021), ecological crisis and language endangerment are interlinked global issues that can draw diverse communities together with a shared sense of purpose. Indigenous languages and performance can support and enhance a sense of affiliation between people and Country, which seems crucial as we face environmental challenges together.

In response to the global crisis of Indigenous language loss, the United Nations has declared 2022–2023 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. Most of Australia's hundreds of Indigenous languages are critically endangered and under resourced (Battin et al. 2020; Marmion et al. 2014; Budrikis and Bracknell 2022). Acknowledging the importance of these languages in improving health, education, and employment outcomes for Indigenous peoples, The Australian Government's 2021 Closing the Gap Implementation Plan lists 'Outcome 16: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2021:66). As an acknowledgment of the broader national importance of Indigenous expressive culture, an Australian Curriculum rationale statement on Indigenous languages explains that ‘Learning to use these unique languages can play an important part in the development of a strong sense of identity, pride and self-esteem for all Australian students’ (ACARA 2022). Greater consideration of the ways Indigenous languages and performance function to support human appreciation of Country can help move beyond purely anthropocentric justifications of their continued existence in settler-colonial Australia.

Lexicographer Jay Arthur finds the English language ‘constantly disappointed’ in its descriptions of Australia landscapes where drought is normal, and waterways are periodically bare, because the English language is imbued with ideals and expectations associated with English landscapes (1999:73). Arthur explains that in describing Australia, settler-colonists have ‘created this new country haunted by the image of the Default country, which was narrow, green hilly and wet – which meant that Australia was understood as vast, brown, flat and dry’ (1999:73). Arthur asks if it would be better to have “another language in which more truly to imagine Australia” rather than continue frame it in terms of deficiency with English (1999:73). We already have many Indigenous languages, unburdened by historical echoes of the English countryside, which offer deep and profound conceptualisations of their local landscapes.

As an example of a more eco-centric worldview expressed within an Aboriginal language, the Noongar language term *bily* describes both a waterway and the navel. Rather than creating expectations of England’s brimming lakes and flowing rivers, this polysemy poetically conveys the normal infrequency of local water supplies. Other polysemous Noongar words include, *kaat* (head and hill), *bookal* (lower back and knoll), *bonitj* (island and knee), *maar* (wind and hand), *ngaangk* (sun and mother). Additionally, *boodjar* is land and *boodjari* is pregnant. These terms intimately link landscapes to the body, humanising Country and ‘Countryfying’ humans. As a more visual example of this principle, the late Ngarinyin artist from the north of Western Australia, David Mowaljarlai created a map of Australia he named *Bandaya* (1993), illustrating interconnected storylines and trade routes. Herein, Coun-

try is not just labelled with the names of settler-colonial cities and towns, but humanised with body parts: head and neck, shoulder, ribs, legs, and feet.

Ideally, Indigenous language and ways of knowing can underpin nuanced ecological understandings and encourage environmental stewardship, or “caring for Country”. A resurgence in the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across Australia will not necessarily halt environmental degradation. However, this kind of restorative cultural change could certainly increase the diversity of perspectives on how to appreciate and interact with local landscapes. Globally, decline and death in Indigenous languages, Indigenous people, and the natural world are inherently linked (Drissi 2020). Aboriginal fire management practices are clearly environmentally significant, with their reduction since colonisation resulting in ecological change and increasingly catastrophic bushfires (Bird & Bird 2021; Walker 2020). Aboriginal expressive culture has ecological importance too.

The late Songwriter Archie Roach sings on his album, *Into the Blood Stream*, ‘Heal the People, heal the land, and they will understand, it goes hand in hand...’ (2012). Country obviously sustains people, and if suitably inclined and informed, people can help sustain Country. While the English settler-colonial worldview tries to divide and separate nature, culture, and health, they are all interconnected. If you undo one part, everything unravels. Rather than a one-dimensional desire for language revival or music revival (Livingston 1999), an ecological ethos underpins most of the determined efforts across the landscapes now known as Australia to reinvigorate Indigenous expressive culture (Patrick 2015; Treloyn et al. 2021; Hodgetts 2024).

## **The Noongar Context**

Noongar of the southwest of Western Australia constitute one of Australia’s largest Aboriginal cultural blocs, both in terms of population and a geographical spread. Although Noongar language has some representation across education and the arts today, it is nevertheless still emerging from the devastation of an unjust settler-colonial history (Haebich 2018). The Noongar region was the first area impacted when the British claimed Western Australia in 1829. 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. As a result, the language is now rarely heard strung together in full sentences, conversations, or songs.

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 (Austlang 2024). Although this census data does not indicate anything about the frequency and fluency of language use, it combines with sustained language revitalisation efforts since the 1980s to reflect the importance of language to Noongar identity and Country (Wooltorton & Collard 1992). There is currently a new 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. Books by Yelakitj Tom Bennell and Ralph Winmar prominently featured Noongar language (Bennell and Collard 1991; Winmar 1996), 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 Noongar language to a national audience. Over the years since, Noongar artists have led the production of ground-breaking Noongar-language theatre, television, and film projects. Building on a language revitalisation movement that began in the 1980s, these new works coalesce around the development of a burgeoning Noongar-speaking collective of artists.

Receiving international attention, the 2020 Noongar language adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* titled *Hecate* mobilised and transformed a canonical settler-colonial piece to articulate Noongar views on social and environmental responsibility (Bracknell and Bracknell 2024). Practices of sharing and singing Noongar songs were essential to the success of *Hecate*, especially

in developing language capacity and confidence among performers. Song, chant and other performance modes based in language are at the core of the many successful examples of Indigenous language revitalisation worldwide. In Hawaii, Kahaunaele Kainani describes mele as “a sure-fire hook for learning language and worldview” (2020:541) and in New Zealand, where “the singing of Maori waiata and action songs and the performance of haka, are used to teach the Maori language” while simultaneously reinforcing cultural identity among young Maori (Meijl 2011:292). However, performance is not a sure-fire remedy for issues of Indigenous language endangerment and inter-linked intergenerational trauma.

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, reach consensus on details about the language, and engage in performance contexts. 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. Despite the endangered status of Noongar language, musical engagement nevertheless continues to be vital to Noongar lifeways, manifesting in everything from popular music festivals to karaoke and radio requests (Neuenfeldt 1995; Haebich 2018; Bracknell and Kickett 2017).

Analysis of historical records and Noongar language terms for singing and suggests multiple functions of song in Noongar society of the nineteenth century, including laments, songs for dance and entertainment, news and gossip, identifying oneself, and arrivals and departures (Grey 1841; Bates 1904–1912). While some Noongar performance repertoire may be customarily restricted to certain audiences and participants, the wide variety of written descriptions of Noongar performances in the nineteenth century suggests that a range of Noongar singing practices – and even ceremony associated with maintaining Country and kinship – were openly practised and sustained despite the presence of colonists (Bracknell 2017). In the 20th century however, entrenched settler-colonisation of Noongar lands, assimi-

tion policies and an imposed emotional regime inhibited most speaking and singing in the Noongar language (Bracknell 2020). Up until the early 1970s, access to human rights for Noongar people inherently depended on avoiding overt public cultural expressions such as song and language (Haebich 2018). Consequently, from the onset of colonisation until the late 1970s, opportunities to perform, hear and learn Noongar songs were dramatically diminished.

Noongar song is characterised by poetic, flexible use of Noongar language and rhythmic complexity but most Noongar today predominantly speak and sing in English and are immersed in the ubiquitous 4/4 metre of American popular music. 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). 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 including family of the deceased singers recorded performing on field-tapes from last century (Bracknell 2020). 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 revitalisation of language and Country.

Although returning archival recordings to their Indigenous communities of origin has become a common research practice (Barwick et al. 2019), the contemporary performance of surviving songs can carry significant emotional weight (Bracknell 2020). Recirculating Noongar songs among the family singers and their broader local Noongar community has been found to support individual and collective identity maintenance and feelings of connection (Bracknell 2020). However, because Noongar singing was suppressed and denigrated throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Noongar songs – as powerful expressions of culture – can also give rise to tensions associated with the politics of Indigenous identity and belonging (Bracknell 2015). As a result, some individuals have sought to retroactively impose tight restrictions on previously open and unrestricted songs which may have been widely known and shared among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the past. In this context, it is not necessarily suitable to share old Noongar songs publicly in hopes of enhancing appreciation of Country.

## New Noongar Songs

On the advice of senior Noongar speakers including Dr 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 create new original Noongar songs in the old style. As newly created songs, they could be shared freely, and potentially have greater positive impact on language revitalisation and raising environmental awareness. This new repertoire formed the core of three major multi-day performance events in Perth: *Noongar Wonderland* as part of Perth Festival in 2022, *Song Circle* presented as part of Tourism Western Australia's inaugural EverNow festival in 2023, and an expanded remount of *Song Circle* in EverNow festival's 2024 iteration. The new Noongar songs have been widely used in school performance contexts, supported by lyric and dance instruction videos available on the [mayakeniny.com](http://mayakeniny.com) website. They were also released on music streaming services as *Noongar Wonderland* (Bracknell and McDermott 2022) and a self-titled *Maatakitj* album (Bracknell 2023). Sustained public engagement with this repertoire signifies interest in its ecological themes and the glaring need for continued development of Noongar language resources.

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. Truly understanding an Aboriginal song usually requires more than literal comprehension of lyrics, as musical features, poetic techniques, accompanying visuals, movement, and performance context can all convey meaning. 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 (Brehaut et al. 2001:63).

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). In addition to an understanding musical conven-

tions, language and poetics, the creation of new Noongar songs is dependent on Country.

As a forerunner to *Noongar Wonderland* and *Song Circle*, I worked alongside Noongar dancers including Trevor Ryan, Rubeun Yorkshire and Kyle Morrison to develop and present an experimental performance in response to Perth's waterscapes for Perth Festival's 2021 *Day of Ideas* event at Perth Concert Hall. This song and dance performance embodied the up-river journey of the kworlak 'bullshark' *carcharhinus leucas* from the salt water to the fresh water and enacted the presence of groundwater which emerges as wetlands and estuaries (Bracknell et al. 2021). Working as Noongar creative practitioners guided by years of mentorship from senior community members, our creative method involved:

1. Using multisensory environmental observation as creative impetus.
2. Consulting senior Noongar and archival material to inform creative decisions, and;
3. Physically trialling and reflexive workshopping of choreographic, vocal and conceptual ideas with a group of Noongar performers.

This process continued to guide the development of new repertoire that we could share with other Noongar and eventually, the general public.

While certain Indigenous songs are culturally restricted to necessary individuals, places, and purposes, Indigenous "travelling songs" were once this continent's most popular and widespread music. Some repertoire was so popular it crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries (Turpin et al. 2020). Given the contemporary sensitivities around sharing old Noongar songs, my intention was to create new Noongar songs with no restrictions. As impressionistic vignettes based on observations of Country, these songs do not hold culturally restricted information, but nevertheless may prompt deeper discussions among Noongar about associated story and knowledge while also engaging a broader audience in processes of reconceptualising the local environment.

## Sharing Songs

*Noongar Wonderland* provided an opportunity to share these songs with a large audience, bolstered by dance beats, lighting and the logistical and promotional support of Perth Festival. Yawuru and Gija playwright Barbara Hostalek discussed *Noongar Wonderland*'s significance in Seesaw Magazine, describing how the outdoor setting, lights, songs, dance, artworks, and storytelling worked together to create a valuable communication of Noongar culture and how it facilitated learning with the broader community (Hostalek 2022). The music for *Noongar Wonderland* was pre-recorded because I was unable to travel Western Australia and perform live due to state border restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the novelty of the electronic dance music infused *Noongar Wonderland* soundtrack effectively drew audience and media attention (Jones 2022), live singing nevertheless seems core to the affective power of Noongar performance and a maintaining the continuous cultural practice of singing to Country.

Weeks after *Noongar Wonderland* premiered, the border had opened and I visited Esperance on the south coast of Western Australia, working with a small creative team including Noongar director and performer Kyle Morrison, Noongar elder Annie Dabb and a group of almost fifty Noongar high school students to develop dances for songs associated with specific sites there. We used no amplification, just voices and wood percussion. Kyle had danced at *Noongar Wonderland* and attested that the energy created and felt by everyone participating in Esperance was even more palpable than in Perth for *Noongar Wonderland*, even without the amplification and lights. This experience in Esperance was incredibly effective as an act of Noongar performance revitalisation, strengthening cultural identity and appreciation of Country among the young Noongar involved. However, it did not engage the non-Indigenous majority population of Noongar Country, ultimately the group with the most environmental impact and collective power to prioritise pro-environmental policy agendas. This socio-political context highlights the necessity of opportunities for broader public engagement with revitalised Noongar performance and communication of eco-centric understandings via the “kinaesthetic thrill and corporeal empathy” experi-

enced by participants and audiences activating voice, movement, and the senses (Bracknell et al. 2021:405).

The success of *Noongar Wonderland* led Perth Festival and Tourism Western Australia to engage Kylie Bracknell and I in mid-2023 to help fulfil their brief to provide a regionally distinctive experience of Indigenous culture within a new annual festival named EverNow which premiered in October 2023. In a relatively quick response to this brief, we co-produced a multi-night event named *Song Circle*, the only element of EverNow to be Noongar-led and feature live performances by Noongar people. Presenting this international-scale work based on traditions of Noongar performance required deeper investment of time and space to engage with Noongar performance revitalisation and Country, plus in this case, the creation of many new Noongar songs and dances fit for widespread public exposure. Regardless of the performance outcome, the development workshops and rehearsals for *Song Circle* provided an exceedingly rare opportunity for high-level training focused on an endangered Indigenous language and performance tradition in an urban setting.

Inspired by the innovative Mowanjum Festival in the Kimberly, Western Australia (Treloyn et al. 2021), and Milpirri Festival in the Tanami Desert, Northern Territory (Patrick 2015), we worked with a broader Indigenous creative team, including Rubeun Yorkshire (Noongar/Yamatji), Janine Oxenham (Yamatji), and Simon Stewart (Kidja), to make strategic decisions about how to incorporate technology, involve younger people, and represent Noongar culture for diverse audiences. Our objective was to reinvigorate the live performance and presentation of Noongar song while increasing public appreciation of local ecosystems. The resulting production immersed audiences in music, dance and light over five nights in Supreme Court Gardens in the centre of Perth – a large, grassed park encircled by skyscrapers and busy roads, which was once an abundant swampland. A raised revolving stage sat in the gardens, surrounded by a ring of sand – a performance space in the round. Here, I was joined by singers including Della Rae Morrison and a trio of percussionists, to perform a cycle of Noongar songs reflecting on creatures and features of the Noongar region, as a troupe of male and female dancers respond to the music on a ring of sand surrounding the stage. Performances ran for 15 minutes on every half hour from 5.30pm–9.30pm for five nights.



**Figure 2.** Song Circle in Perth, Western Australia, October 2023. Image by Jess Wyld.

The iterative repertoire comprised all six of the songs I created for *Noongar Wonderland*, about groundwater, bobtailed lizards, dragonflies, dolphins, stingrays, and bull sharks; two songs evoking rainfall from ‘Bindari’ (Bracknell 2024), my 2023 piece commissioned for the internationally renowned Kronos Quartet; and the concluding song from *Hecate*, the 2020 Noongar adaptation of *Macbeth*, about the omnipresence of Country and the temporary nature of human existence. Although punctuated by electric guitar and various percussion instruments not found in older Noongar performance genres, all the songs presented in *Song Circle* employ the distinctive poetic techniques, melodic style, and uncommon metre observed in many old Noongar songs (Bracknell 2022). Audiences were mostly unfamiliar with the Noongar language in the songs, so a pre-recorded English-language explanation of their ecological themes played between each set, and the dancers communicated the meanings of each song via movement. Repeated performance cycles from dusk until dark provided audiences with opportunities for gradual understanding through visceral engagement. This cyclical performance

structure was echoed in the production design, with the circular dance ground and revolving stage.

Audience surveys conducted by Perth Festival indicated that *Song Circle* left people with a deeper impression of the connections between Noongar performance and nature, and a stronger interest in further engagement with Noongar understandings of Country. Perhaps more importantly in the context of cultural revitalisation and decolonisation, *Song Circle* was a transformative experience for the performers involved, as an exceedingly rare opportunity for immersion in Noongar language and Noongar-led performance practices. Senior Noongar cultural consultant for *Song Circle*, Dr Roma Yibiyung Winmar shared her thoughts on the production's ability to highlight cultural continuity and connection to Country through creative innovation:

*Song Circle* – no beginning, no end. A continuous celebration of our culture and heritage. Proud to observe dedicated individuals journeying as one to share our amazing culture to the outside world (Government of Western Australia 2023:2).

*Song Circle* was integral to the inaugural EverNow festival in 2023, as the only Noongar-led element of the festival. It advanced revitalisation of Noongar language and expressive culture, long suppressed and under-resourced but now central to WA's aspirations as a unique tourism destination and potentially key to reframing the ways locals and visitors conceptualise landscapes in more reciprocal ways.

*Song Circle* was remounted for the second EverNow Festival in 2024, with a new extra cycle of songs and dances. While it was anticipated that *Song Circle* would return in 2025, Perth Festival and the Western Australian state government suddenly chose to cancel it and *EverNow*. The creative and intellectual groundwork for *Song Circle* – involving more than a decade of research nourishing Noongar song revitalisation and community development activities – was supported by Australian Research Council project grants, and there is currently no consistent institutional support for Noongar performance training and creative development. *Song Circle's* contributions to the revitalisation of Noongar language and culture, along with its agenda to encourage the broader public to value Country, relies on us, The Noongar creative team, maintaining the goodwill of non-Indigenous programmers and government. We must also maintain pressure on Perth Festi-

val and Tourism Western Australia to match the ecological themes presented with ecologically sound – and ideally supportive – production values.

## Conclusion

Ecomusicologies aim to draw together the discursive domains of “music, culture, sound, and nature at a time of environmental crisis” (Titon 2013:9). They demonstrate how music can cultivate environmental awareness and the potentially adverse impacts of music practices on environments (Pedelty 2011). The literature deploys the scientific terms ecology and sustainability as metaphors for understanding music in a rapidly changing world, grounding aural and performative experiences in space and place while both investigating and advocating for musical expression in response to ecological crisis (Allen & Titon 2023). Recent work drawing on Indigenous knowledge considers the nexus between the philosophical/spiritual and the ecological/environmental, emphasising the eco-centric qualities inherent to Indigenous worldviews (Simonette 2016; Dirksen 2023; Hammil 2023).

In the south of Western Australia, Noongar expressive culture exists to continually interlink humans with Country in reciprocally nourishing relationships. Emerging from a context of environmental, social and cultural destruction, Noongar language and song are endangered but nevertheless fundamental to Noongar collective and individual identities. Given that the southwest of Western Australia is simultaneously recognised as a global drying hotspot and one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots (Kala et al. 2021), restoration of abiding Noongar performance repertoire intertwined with that local ecosystem is of pressing concern. Community engagement and empowerment was central to *Song Circle*, where Noongar and other Indigenous people were engaged to develop, realise and perform new Noongar works honouring and embodying human connection to Country. We are in a period of transition, attempting to reinvigorate Noongar expressive culture from its roots and engage the broader settler-colonial public via performance in the hope that they can begin to value landscapes, as our ancestors always did.

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