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Performing *kayepa dordok* living waters in Noongar *boodjar*, South-Western Australia

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Abstract

Performance through language, song and dance provides alternative knowledges and ways of understanding, in this case, developing deeper relationships with living water. Drawing on Indigenous Noongar culture from south-western Australia, this paper addresses the question: How can relationships between living underground, estuarine and riverine water bodies (*kayepa dordok*) be performed? Two new inter-linked Noongar works in response to local riverscapes were developed for, and performed as part of, the 2021 Perth Festival. The first was to embody the return journey of the bullshark, from the salt water to the riverine fresh water; the second was to enact the presence of the unseen groundwater – which emerges as wetlands and estuaries strewn throughout the landscape – on its return to the sea. The method used to derive the song and dance, and the impact of the performance itself, are described. The experiment makes a case for multiple benefits associated with re-establishing connections among culture and nature by drawing on Indigenous perspectives, through performance giving voice to a relationality between river systems and people.

KEYWORDS

estuary, groundwater, indigenous performance, Noongar, song

1 | INTRODUCTION

The deep sands of the coastal plains of the south-western region of Australia are water-filled; and water flows through them, appearing occasionally at the surface to fill interdunal depressions that make an extensive wetland system, then back underground on its way to the ocean. These groundwater flows interact with rivers that meander across the plains. The dynamic interdependent relationship between ocean, rivers, wetlands and groundwater is embodied in local Noongar knowledge systems as *waakal* or *maadjet*,¹ ever-present and conscious ancestral beings frequently referred to as water snakes in the English language. This system informs Noongar belief that harm to any body

of water known as a *waakal's* resting place will cause the country to dry up and die. Holistic and spiritual representations can allow us to see and hear what cannot otherwise be seen and heard.

The groundwater aquifer and escarpment reservoirs of the Perth region store and provide water for a population of 2 million people, most of whom would benefit from access to more intimate water literacies, beyond scientific interpretations and consumerist discourse. The term Noongar is used to describe the Aboriginal people, language and culture of a large urban/rural area, encompassing the south-western corner of Western Australia, including its capital city of Perth (Thieberger, 2004). Over 30,000 people identify as Noongar (also spelled Nyungar), which constitutes one of the largest Aboriginal

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cultural blocs in Australia (SWALSC, 2009). Performance – Noongar language, song and dance – is fundamental to the maintenance of Noongar knowledge and may assist the people of Perth in developing deeper relationships with water and give voice to *kayepa dardok*, or in English, living water.

Country – the “nourishing terrain” (Rose, 1996) – is alive and intertwined with Aboriginal identities and knowledge systems. In Australia, Aboriginal performance traditions are central to social cohesion, wellbeing and knowledge of Country (*boodjar* in Noongar). Performance also empowers place. Aboriginal performances situated on Country offer ways for all Australians to understand and interact with our fragile yet dynamic environment. Indeed, it is difficult to comprehend Aboriginal values and relationships to Country without some understanding of the diverse performance traditions to which Australia is home. Aboriginal painting has garnered considerable national and international attention over the last 50 years, but it was, in the first instance, a *performative* form. Painted motifs depicting relations with Country which serve as mnemonics for the performance of story, ceremony and law were adapted from designs originally developed for sand illustrations and bodily adornment (Ryan, 2006). The Pitjantjatjara language, like many other Indigenous languages, has a single term for all phenomena marking performance – including dance, music, storytelling and visual design (Ellis, Ellis, Tur, & McCardell, 1978). Isolating any one element of such multi-modal performances is antithetical to the worldview they arose from.

A precondition for social acceptance and commitment to environmental protection and enhancement in the face of current threats is the realisation of just how profoundly linked are human and non-human systems. Many sustainability programs are conducted on this basis, whereby natural environments and intangible cultural heritage – including performance traditions – are seen as interconnected (Rees, 2016). To this end, diverse knowledges and ways of understanding must be embraced and brought together with scientific, political and cultural practices. Performance – knowledge acquired through shifting weight, gesture, meaning, and through full body activation – is one of the most powerful means of communicating such knowledges via the kinaesthetic thrill and corporeal empathy that one gains in watching others perform (Banes & Lepecki, 2007).

Across the world, music and story which evoke feelings of closeness with nature are relied on to enhance a sense of place, and to ease the common contemporary condition of human displacement from the environment (Feld & Basso, 1996; Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010). Given the mutually supportive relationship between ecological vitality and the continued presence of local Indigenous cultures, including language and performance, engaging with Indigenous understandings of landscapes may enhance our ability to deal with present and future environmental challenges (Ingram, 2011; Marett, 2010). This has been further demonstrated through those ecomusicological studies which focus on the relationship of society to the environment (Allen & Dawe, 2015). Ecoacoustics and ecologically responsive musical practice as a whole increasingly prioritise innovative approaches to building community awareness of environmental change via music compositions based on climate data and other forms of acoustic

mapping (Barclay, 2014; Blasch & Turner, 2016; Farina & Gage, 2017; McKinnon, 2013).

Working in a region where Aboriginal song, language and landscapes face shared threats to their continued vitality, this paper addresses the question: How can we perform living underground, estuarine and riverine water bodies (*kayepa dardok*)? The aim here is less to communicate environmental knowledge or awareness per se. Rather we hope to find ways to evoke those intangible sensations and emotions which link humans to broader systems as epitomised by Noongar concepts and experiential modes such as song, dance and performance. These knowledges, and the way in which they are transmitted, exceed (though do not exclude) rational speech and text. Noongar relations with *boodjar* are not simply conceptual. They are *psycho-emotional* and *spiritual*. Communication that emerges out of bodily form, movement and expression is therefore best suited to communicating these feelings to those who have yet to bond with Country and the living water that sustains it.

2 | GIVING RIVERS VOICE THROUGH EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE

Giving rivers a voice – indeed giving a mountain, hill, ocean, soil, wetland, perhaps even city, a voice – confronts a worldview that differentiates nature from culture, where nature is reducible to its component parts and re-assembled as if a machine to perform a function for humanity. The same worldview which separates the biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) in a system, instead of seeing the whole “living system”, is another example of the harmful dichotomous assumptions that structure the way we tend to think about our relationships in the world. If, as the New Zealand example of the Whanganui River shows, water bodies can be considered living entities with both “rights” and as geomorphic forms of agency as manifest through “self-adjustment, diversity of form, evolution, and catchment-scale connectivities”, then rivers may be assumed to deserve and indeed already possess voices and other forms of expression (Brierley et al., 2019, 1,640). More importantly, local human inhabitants are already part of that collective voice and its expressions, and need to become further reciprocally embedded productively.

The experimental performance discussed here premiered as part of *A Day of Ideas: Beneath the Surface*, a collection of talks and presentations about *Bilya* (river) staged by the Perth Festival at the city's Concert Hall on the 27th of February 2021. It arose out of creative work between two of the authors of this paper, dancer Trevor Ryan and singer Clint Bracknell. Trevor Ryan is a Noongar (Wadjuk/Yuat) and Yamatji man (Wajarri/Badimaya) who grew up in the Fremantle area. He is a graduate of Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Arts and has a long history as a performer and facilitator of Noongar performance, from 1999 to the present. This includes the role of King Duncan in the Noongar-language adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* entitled *Hecate*, which premiered in 2020 (see Bracknell, 2022, in press). Clint Bracknell's Noongar roots are in the Ravensthorpe-Esperance region but he grew up in Albany. He took a keen interest in

Noongar language after hearing his lecturer in Perth, senior Noongar man Professor Len Collard, speak full sentences in the endangered tongue. As well as working as a music teacher, performer and composer, Clint has completed a doctorate on the aesthetics and sustainability of Noongar song. In addition to internationally recognised work on Noongar song archives, Bracknell co-translated *Hecate* (2020) and composed its music. Co-author Pierre Horwitz is a *nyidiyang* / settler-descent scholar of social ecologies of water and wetlands, and is a member of the research team working with Trevor and Clint. Jonathan W. Marshall, also of *nyidiyang* / settler-descent, has been a scholar and critic of dance and performance for over 20 years, and is working with the team to further unpack and situate the choreography.

3 | PERFORMANCE AND ECOLOGY

Our river path crosses the sanded plains of the Noongar *boodjar* on which we now live. A Noongar name for this body of riverine, estuarine and lagoonal water is Derbal Yerrigan. It is also referred to as the “Swan River” in English. As Collard observes, the Derbal Yerrigan rises and falls as it breathes with the tide. This is where feminine breezes from the land and masculine breeze from the sea perpetually chase one another as lovers (Bracknell, Collard, Palmer, & Revell, 2015). Seen from the perspective of Western knowledge, the rivers and groundwaters that traverse Noongar *boodjar* are active geomorphic and archaeological entities, shifting and arranging materials, soils and dissolved salts, dispersing and transporting them over a duration of deep time. For Noongar, however, the geological, the archaeological, and the present, are not widely separate.

Creation of the physical landscape and the ever-manifesting ecological and social order is commonly known among Noongar as *nyiding*. “Dreaming”, an overly-simple English term, is used to refer to this foundational Aboriginal concept that contains many connotations and is difficult to explain (Dodson, 1988; Glowczewski, 1999; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2015). Noongar woman Ngilgian refers to *nyiding* as “in the cold time of long ago” (Bates, 1904a-12: 29). With each contemporary utterance, *nyiding* evokes past ice ages – an ancient and cold creation time (Robertson, Stasiuk, Nannup, & Hopper, 2016; Stocker, Collard, & Rooney, 2016). Similarly, the sinuous path of Derbal Yerrigan represents the paths of the ancestral and ever-present entities – *waakal* – that created and maintain it. Watercourses such as the Derbal Yerrigan and the groundwater systems still trace these ancient routes, and each time a dance is performed, a song is sung, or a story is told, *nyiding* is actualised in the now through kinaesthetic action. Our bodies breathe and move, resonating with the land.

UK theatre-maker Mike Pearson and archaeologist Julian Thomas (Pearson & Thomas, 1994:134) have proposed the concept of “theatre archaeology” as a critical performance practice which works to “synthesize (reconstruct, represent, simulate)” those actions, histories, or performances which are “past”, using surviving material and immaterial remains at a site or location. Theatre archaeology strives to bring into the present the history and relationships embedded in the

landscape, its memories, its myths, and its material structures. The term “theatre archaeology”, then, is “a paradox”, involving the application of “archaeological” as well as historical and ethnographic techniques to source and reinterpret “an ephemeral event” or events (Pearson & Thomas, 1994:134). Pearson and Thomas (1994:134) conclude that “while performance may leave limited material traces” in the landscape, it nevertheless generates “narratives” into the present, linking material remains and strata with corporeal experience (see Marshall & Duncan, 2018). Archaeological evidence of Noongar habitation in the Perth region dates back at least 38,000 years, while *nyiding* narratives refer to ancient, geological times including the Permian Ice Age and Holocene sea level rises (Robertson et al., 2016). One might therefore think of dance as a way for these ancient, geomorphic traces to bubble up to the surface and flow from within the deep time and space of the groundwaters and Derbal Yerrigan, in a form of revivifying theatre archaeology.

At the 2021 Perth Festival's Day of Ideas, senior Noongar man Dr Noel Nannup's response to the question “what is special about the sediments” of Derbal Yerrigan, described the river transporting sediments from the source, far away inland, to the sea. Wherever they deposit and lie on this route, these sediments may be walked by Noongar. They are sourced from land and catchments often far upstream, and they infer both access and responsibility along routes travelled by Noongar and water alike. Our river path conveys not just the sediment, but this relationality of belonging. At the same event, senior Noongar woman Viv Hansen encouraged the audience to imagine a quiet encounter on the bank of Derbal Yerrigan, under the ti-tree, and by throwing a small handful of sand into the river, to explain themselves as being there with meaningful intent – addressing Country itself. Voicing through ceremony and performance on Country, enlivens the interdependence and connectedness of rivers, to whom humans belong. Voicing thereby enables gratitude (for sustenance and sustainability), respect (for spirit), a re-iteration (to remember, to perform) and a celebration.

There has been some work employing contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian performance to allude to environmental degradation and climate change. The Broome based Marrugeku company, for example, produce syncretic contemporary Aboriginal dance. Their production *Cut the Sky* (2015) offered a wordless narrative focused on Indigenous and non-Indigenous climate refugees facing an impending climatic event (Gilbert, Pigram, & Swain, 2021). *Kwongan* (2019) produced by Perth-based company Ochre in collaboration with Daksha Sheth Dance Company from Kerala, western India, directly sought to raise awareness of environmental issues; each performance concluded with a young person being invited onto the stage to speak about climate change (Glance, 2019). Productions by the national Aboriginal dance company Bangara also typically contain an implicit message of environmental warning. These companies all work across multiple – and often hybridised – traditions of practice. Marrugeku draw on European dance theatre, contemporary Burkino-Faso choreography, and Yawuru/Bardi forms, as well as other influences. Bangara's members strive for an inclusive, continental model of Aboriginality, but their physical language is nevertheless

principally a fusion of Euro-American Expressionist dance (Graham technique) and forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expression from across the continent (Marshall, 2001).

4 | NOONGAR PERFORMANCE

Restoring on-Country performance is not necessarily about embedding environmental politics in Aboriginal dance, but investigating and innovating within a regional Noongar performance tradition to enhance a sense of connection with local landscapes among participants and audiences. The endangered state of Noongar performance traditions in particular and ongoing environmental concern make this work both timely and significant. While some Noongar performance idioms may be customarily restricted to particular audiences and participants, the wide variety of written descriptions of Noongar performances in the nineteenth century suggests that a range of Noongar performance practices – and even ceremony associated with maintaining landscapes and kinship – were openly practised and sustained despite the presence of outsiders (Bracknell, 2017a). Still, the onslaught of settler-colonialism dramatically diminished opportunities to perform, hear and learn Noongar songs and dances.

From at least 1905 onwards, Noongar people were only able to survive by avoiding overt public expressions of Noongar cultural identity, such as language and performance (Haebich, 2018). As discriminatory government acts were being overturned in the 1970s, emerging opportunities for more consciously “traditional” Noongar performances, especially in the areas of education and tourism, led to the formation of the Middar Aboriginal Theatre in 1976. Co-founder Richard Walley (cited in Van Den Berg, Collard, Harben, & Byrne, 2005:29) explains,

The thrust behind setting up Middar was the belief that Aboriginal culture and Nyungar culture in particular had been marginalised and it [Noongar culture] was something that people wanted to study but didn't believe actually existed.

Contrary to this assumption, in public and privately, Noongar have made concerted efforts to maintain cultural continuity. Consequently, Noongar language and song were able to be given in evidence in 2006 for the first and only successful native title claim over metropolitan lands in Australia (Koch, 2008).

There is therefore a longstanding tradition of Noongar songs often being accompanied by dance and punctuated with percussion (clap sticks or other instruments). Despite being “so widely recognised as a symbol of Aboriginal music that it has become metonymic” (Vellutini, 2003:132), the didgeridoo only became popular in Noongar performance in the late 20th century, spearheaded in fact by Middar. Bodily adornment, painting and the application of ochre has long been common in Noongar performance, with designs varying in accordance with the repertoire and dancers involved. Today, aesthetic decisions associated with creating new Noongar performances that give voice

to Country can productively draw on archival and historical information to enrich the advice of senior Noongar people and the experiences of performers.

5 | DEVELOPING A PERFORMANCE

Bringing together scientific and Noongar perspectives on ecology through performance, Trevor, Clint and the team worked to create two new interlinked Noongar performance works in response to local riverscapes: the first to embody the up river journey of the *maadjjet*, *kworlak* or bullshark, *Carcharhinus leucas* from the salt water to the fresh water; the second to enact the presence of the unseen groundwater – which emerges as wetlands and estuaries strewn throughout the landscape – on its return to the sea. Working as two Noongar creative practitioners drawing on years of mentorship from senior community members, the creative method involved:

1. Being on-Country, using multisensory observation as impetus for creativity; for example, rehearsals were held in the afternoon on the banks of Derbal Yerrigan, as the breezes changed and the birds came in to the reed banks nearby (Figure 1);
2. Consulting senior Noongar such as Barry McGuire and Roma Yibiyung Winmar, together with archival materials, to inform creative decisions, and;
3. Physically trialling and reflexive workshopping of choreographic, vocal and conceptual ideas with a group of Noongar performers (including Trevor Ryan, Clint Bracknell, Kyle Morrison, Rubeun Yorkshire, and Mark Nannup); this might then be considered a combination of culturally appropriate “yarning” or Noongar dialogic practices (see Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) with established protocols in Performance-As-Research for the creative arts (see Nelson, 2013).

The process is broadly similar to that which Swain (2014) outlines for Marrugeku, where Indigenous dancers and consultants identify “traditional” or typical styles of movement, gesture or embodiment which are then explored through semi-improvised rehearsal

of the material, applying their own cultural intuition and individual imagination to transform the underling rhythms, tones and textures into reflections on their [understanding of the stories being evoked] ... The results of this explorative work were in turn presented to local cultural custodians ... [as well as] Working closely with cultural custodians on research, conceptual development, narrative structures and choreographic investigations.

In the case of this project, the guidance of senior Noongar performer Barry McGuire was especially valuable to the creative team and performers. He spoke about Noongar knowledge of natural springs in the Perth region and how they connected to groundwater and ceremony. McGuire characterised all water as living, moving and changing

FIGURE 1 Trevor Ryan and Mark Nannup rehearse the bullshark dance [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



constantly – and *waakal* being a manifestation of that life, determining places that people can or cannot venture safely. Drawing on his own experiences as a dancer, he highlighted the intensity and power conveyed by having performers always face the audience, with chests out and heads held high. To reflect the loving relationship between people and *boodjar*, he advised that dancers step forward, rather than pull back and kick the ground. His brief demonstration of Noongar dance form and singing were especially instructive in developing the performance. He also shared ideas for body paint design.

Bracknell's development of the songs for the performance drew on his experiences singing with senior Noongar people including McGuire. Despite a few notable exceptions, it is rare for Noongar people today to sing old Noongar songs learned from elders. Most traces of Noongar song in historical archives are merely written records of lyrics rendered in a variety of unreliable orthographies (Bracknell, 2020). Very little historical music notation of Noongar song exists and the few accessible audio recordings of Noongar singing made since the late 1960s feature what would mostly be described as “rememberings” of songs, rather than fully-fledged performances (Bracknell, 2017b). Analysis of historical descriptions of Noongar performance and 19 more recent examples recorded between 1965 and 2015 has resulted in rough conclusions about aesthetic conventions typical of Noongar vocal music (Bracknell, 2016, 2017b).

Despite the observation that Aboriginal song styles in Australia are “obviously more related to each other than to anything outside the continent” (Tunstall cited in Breen, 1989:7), it would be tokenistic to create new Noongar songs relying only on general “superficialities: a descending melody, a regularly repeated stick beat” (Ellis, 1991:14). Noongar songs exhibit a range of structural characteristics which imply the existence of multiple song genres and a significant degree of flexibility in the song tradition. Some of the vocal rhythms in Noongar songs are syllabic, with each syllable assigned a note to emphasise a strong regular beat. Other Noongar songs are more melodically and rhythmically adventurous. As is

common in Aboriginal music of neighbouring regions (Breen, 1989), examples and descriptions of classic Noongar song indicate the prevalence of repeated melodic contours concluding with a descent in pitch. Considering the interaction between text, rhythm and pitch in greater detail, most recorded Noongar songs are relatively isorhythmic, overlaying repeated text and vocal rhythms with different, alternating, melodic contours. Based on studies conducted in other regions of Australia (Marett, 2000), consideration of accent and timbral vocal quality is equally as important as matching the melodic, rhythmic and structural characteristics of recorded songs from the past in attempts to maintain a distinct Noongar musical style.

The first two songs for the bullshark part of the performance were “revealed” during Bracknell's and Ryan's visit on-Country, to a location along the Derbal Yerrigan at which bullsharks are known to visit. As in many non-Western musical cultures, songs are considered as emerging from non-human entities rather than being the creative innovation of individual composers. As Noongar woman Ngalbaitch explained to ethnographer Daisy Bates, a Noongar singer trying to find a new song may “seem to hear it coming into their ears and going away again, coming and going until sometimes they lose it and cannot catch it. The *jannuk* (spirit) will however fetch it back to their ears” (Bates, 1904b-12: 36/208). While the musical material for the ground-water songs came much the same way, the lyrics were partially inspired by words transcribed by Bates of a song performed by Baaburgurt or George Elliot of Wonnerup, in which the flood waters and ocean are characterised as “*dem mala goombala*” (great ancestors) “*nyinjanning*” (kissing) and “*ngundeering*” (laying) (1904b: 34/442–3). Although unintelligible to most of the audience, explanation of the songs with performers in the workshop phase helped inform the development of the dances. These songs use understandings of Noongar song poetics explored in prior studies (Bracknell, 2017b). The resulting performance took place after three two-hour development sessions with the dance ensemble.

6 | IMPACT AND INTERPRETATION

The bullshark dance starts with the sound of clap sticks emerging from the darkness. Five male dancers assemble in a line. They are adorned with white pipeclay and fluorescent stripes which wrap their bodies like ribbons, streams, or pathways. The glow of the stripes under the light produces a degree of visual confusion regarding the spatial placing and dimensions of the dancers. Fluorescent lines seem to come out and hover in a plane slightly in front of the dancers. Turner (1991) and Schechner (2003) argue that prior to the commencement of most rituals – as well as most theatrical works – the spatial, temporal and material components of the performance are set apart from the everyday. A “liminal” or transitional zone is created. In this case, the bodily adornment immediately produces the sense of a liminal, extra-normal body; a body which reaches out to other forces and lines of energy.

As the principal repeated chorus is sung, the dancers raise first the right, and then the left leg up, while maintaining an upright torso. The leg stamps are high, with the foot coming from above the knee before being driven down in a single movement. This however is not a Western, militaristic or balletically drilled dance. Different bodies perform different nuances. Some of the stamps are tremendous, with the arc of the leg seeming to reach nearly to the hip, whilst others are quick strikes from shin level. The body is held lightly suspended about the hips such that the torso almost floats. With each stamp, the pelvis drops and rebounds. Stamping produces a direct, corporeal and kinaesthetic relationship with the ground and the earth. Here however there is a balance between hard and soft action, between the use of extreme physical force, versus a more supple approach. Energy is not only expended here. Bodily trajectories and energies point to more than just *boodjar* (earth/ground) here, but also to liquid forces located on a horizontal strata (the plane against which the foot makes contact, which aligns with the surface of a water body, the ground, and the pathways along which water and waves transit) and a vertical one (waters and entities located deep below, further down in the direction of where the foot travels).

The first break in the dancers' collective linear rhythmic expression occurs where they move to stand, arms loosely held apart at the torso, as they step lightly from side to side in a shaking movement. This shake corresponds with a shift to a more rapid, climatic rhythm in the clap sticks. The dancers then return to stamping and the energy builds. In short, audiences see and share in an act of both *grounding* (orientating oneself to *boodjar*, including water) and *extension/expansion* (orientating oneself outwards along horizontal lines of force, trajectory, and across the collectivity of the dancers themselves).

In the next chorus the dancers bend forward to roll their forearms up and down in front of their bodies, more explicitly alluding to vertical transits. They then again oscillate from side to side, arms slightly open. As the strength of the stamping settles into a forceful, regular beat, the energetics of this act spreads throughout the body. On some dancers, as the right leg is raised, the left shoulder is slightly dropped, and vice versa. This tipping of the shoulders around the hanging axis

of the pelvis brings more force into the leg, but also consolidates each beat, each strike, each act, as one which moves through the entire being of the actor. For spectators, it also adds a certain drama. One can visibly see performers prepare for each subsequent act as they bend forward towards us. The performances may be set apart from normal space and time, but this liminal space bows out beyond the line of the dancers, into the auditorium and hence into community and Country.

Now a sixth dancer moves through a gap in the line. His stripes are a different colour, and he proceeds with weighty but relaxed authority. Clapping his hands together and holding his arms in a triangle before his head, the figure enters and then sweeps with each arm down and to the side, first left, then right. His head inclines down, the gaze following the gesture, further investing it with calm assurance. The other dancers form a V behind him, with the new dancer at the apex. Having established the scene, there is some extemporisation on these themes. The lead performer moves at right angles to the other dancers, bringing the clasped V of his palms and arms up and down in a gentle, bouncing action. There are pushes and breaks in the spatial planes here. Throughout, forces have been moving up and through barriers and regions, but never in a manner suggestive of conflict of violence. There is kinaesthetic balance and reciprocity.

Leading into the groundwater dance, the performers turn and shiver again, the line receding on the stage; a mild withdrawal. The next section is dramatically signalled by the dancers turning their palms outwards, hands held at the waist, to reveal paint on their hands which glows under the light. Stamping again, the rhythms are different: faster and shifting. This time all of the dancers close their palms together and make a V with their arms in front of them, holding their arms roughly at waist height. Arms lead, gliding left and right in front of the dancers in a curved, jabbing movement. Arms come up and separate, and a gesture of supplication emerges. One arm lifts towards the sky, while the other is slightly lower, pointing akimbo to reinforce the trajectory of the lead arm, before the gesture blossoms upwards and outwards, both hands tracing a semi-circle above the head and down to the sides. Forces have flowed through and above the point of the head, like a fountain or rainbow (the latter a sky-bound image associated with *waakal*).

The final section of this experimental dance focuses more explicitly on waters and breezes parting and withdrawing, with bodies moving in lines through, behind, and in front of each other. Every second dancer moves back whilst others stay forward. The forward dancers jump into a wide legged position, pelvis dropped, bringing their arms up in line with their shoulders, before tracing with their hands a curve towards the floor, shoulders coming back together in the process. The body is dynamically moved between a wide, open stance, and a folded, inward stance. Corporeal forces expand, ebb and flow, like Derbal Yerrigan. As the two lines of dancers swap, with first one group, then the other, coming to the fore, several different phrases are executed, before a single line is re-established, palms held out flat towards the audience. The flows become more unified and directional, with arms swinging back and forth outward and behind from

alongside the torso. As a concluding vocal phrase “*ngarda baranginy ngarda dabowlariny*” (below gathering, below diving) is repeated, everything becomes more composed, is simplified and unified into this basic gesture, which is literally permeated by the on-stage sound waves produced by the vocalisation and the percussion, and which metaphorically resonates with the forces of *boodjar*.

With the final song and the lyric “*nyidingara dema kayepa koombarla yarndi*”, literally “what about the great ancestral waters?”, dancers repeat a loosely synchronised gesture, wiping the paint from their bodies and flicking it toward the audience. They separate into two groups and exit each side of the performance area. No bows are taken – this work is to be continued. The question in the lyric, the gesture of rejection, and the exit itself reflects what the performers understand as the unresolved nature of settler-colonial relationships with *kayep* and *boodjar*.

7 | CONCLUSION

In developing what was described as an “extraordinary performance” (Perth Underground, 2021) with the aim of giving voice to living waterscapes and their intersecting relationships, Ryan and Bracknell have drawn on archival and historical material, the guidance of senior knowledge-holders, and on-Country observations of as Noongar creatives.² The songs and dances initially functioned as a conduit between *boodjar* and the Noongar ensemble during rehearsals, creating space for discussion, silence and visceral experience. As a staged performance at the Perth Concert Hall for a large audience as part of a day spent discussing Perth’s rivers, it provided a non-didactic articulation of our relationship with waterscapes. Audience feedback highlighted how the neon body art, the density of the songs performed, and the sound reinforcement – live electronic percussion and microphones – functioned to differentiate the performance from past experiences of Noongar song and dance, evoking a sense of wonder and mystery in tribute to awe-inspiring nature of *boodjar* itself.

Brierley et al. (2019:1649) describe how current law in New Zealand “institutionalizes the assertion of human ownership and control over nature, which is arguably unethical and deserves rigorous challenge rather than passive acceptance”. The same could be stated about Australian law. Scientists, artists and their peers need to act to “pluralize and enrich the ethical foundations” of watercourse management and relations “rather than reinforce colonial notions of ownership and control” (Brierley et al., 2019:1649). An appeal to intangible values conveyed by tangible, corporeal sensations (dance, embodiment, song, affect) is one way to promote this. Support for Indigenous “cultural movements to reconnect” with landscapes should be integral to “open and progressive” approaches to the science and management of those landscapes (Brierley et al., 2019:1649). Performances like the experimental one discussed in this paper gives a glimpse into Noongar performative modes of connecting to landscapes and demonstrates the potential for deeper, felt relationships between people and living water.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the Noongar language, the terms *waakal* and *maadjet* both refer to a giant ancestral water snake. *Waakal* is also used to describe the south-west carpet python and *maadjet* can refer to various shark species.

² Video resources developed after this performance are available at www.mayakeniny.com

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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