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The Land Still Speaks: Ni, Katitj!

Sandra Wooltorton,¹ Len Collard², Pierre Horwitz³

Introduction: *Wiilman wer Kaneang Noongar Boodjar* – Past and Present

In this paper we reflect on land, language and law in *Wiilman Noongar Boodjar* (Country), which has recently become known as the Upper Blackwood River Catchment in the South West of Western Australia. By intertwining historical perspectives with Western science and Noongar *katitjiny* (knowledge and understandings, or rationality) we argue that this region is alive, that it does have a language and that there is a message to be heard. History shows that the voice of the land might be diminishing, but signs of a transformation are evident, where a conciliation of these voices enables real listening to ancient insights and deep participation with place.

There are a variety of perspectives used in this paper: historic, scientific and imaginary. The paper is framed through a Noongar⁴ language and cultural lens, since the setting is *Wiilman wer* (and) *Kaneang Noongar Boodjar* (see plate 1 overleaf), also known as the Narrogin-Williams, the Katanning and the Wagin-Woodanilling zones of the Upper Blackwood River catchment in South West Western Australia (see plate 2 overleaf). This paper builds upon concepts developed in the article entitled “Stories want to be told: *Elaap Karlaboodjar*”, in Wooltorton, Collard and Horwitz (2015) in *PAN: Philosophy, activism, nature* (11). Whilst the previous article emphasised history, this current paper emphasises phenomenological science. The Noongar words in the title, *ni*, *katitj*, translate to English as: listen, understand.

Through a Noongar lens, we can relearn our understanding of the world in a more relational, dynamic and communicative way. For instance the term *Boodjar*, Country⁵, is inclusive of ecosystem and people. Similarly *Boodjari* means pregnant, full of life. *Boodjari* is an extension of the word: *Boodjar*, which is understood as ‘nourishing terrain’⁶. Since the landscape is productive and nourishing it is female – it is a nurturing, creative, fertile place. It is understood to be animate, energetic and interactive in a reciprocal way. In this paper the use of Noongar language – the language of the South West for the millennia – enables a deep, inclusive comprehension of place.

It was before the *Nyittiny*, the last ice-age, when an awesome, incredibly powerful storm of energy – Noongar understand it as the massive *wargal* or rainbow serpent – slowly carved out the terrain as it travelled from Boyagin Rock across the landscape, gouging out the rivers, streams, brooks and waterholes as it travelled⁷. As it has done since the dawn of time, water symbolically and practically re-enlivens the catchment ecosystem each autumn, winter and spring. A *Wargal* still sleeps at Boyagin Rock, so it is a very spiritual place to be – for all people who care to listen and pay attention.

A vivid mind's eye, a deep interest in the life of animals and plants, a desire to be deeply perceptive of nature and a commitment to be intuitive with stories of place are helpful in visualising *Wilman* and *Kaneang Boodjar* (Country). There are many ways to view our world and our place in it, and these senses will be helpful in comprehending the full meaning of the following yarn:

The *Wargal* or Rainbow Serpent and the *Waitj* (Emu) were creator beings of the world of the Nyungar. This world dictated by the prevailing weather meant the family (moort) moved through the landscape. They followed in the footsteps of their ancestral fathers who had been taught and guided by the creators who had provided and stocked the Country with wildlife, species of plants, *kalleep* or places to camp [home] and water sources to sustain everything. The storylines, song-lines and Dreaming associated with the creation of all life form the basis of the Nyungar

belief system (*kundaam*). This treading in the steps of our fathers reaffirms the beliefs, values, the social structures and fabric of the creation of the earth, the water and the sky and all things that live in and on it.⁸

Because of the work of the ancestors, the resulting water courses are also song-lines which hold the stories, parts of which are embedded in each nook, cranny and bend in a catchment. Water is the evidence of these creator ancestors, many of whom are still embodied in particular places today, therefore waterways are precious and sacred. So naturally, they still need to be cared-for by people.

These assertions and activities have meaning and validity from the point of view of a Noongar *katitjiny* rationality or *kundaam*, a knowledge system underpinned by the meta-narrative trilogy of interconnection between *Boodjar* (Country), *moort* (relatives or relations) and *katitjiny* (knowledge, or learning). In this system *moort*, in the sense of a person's relations, can be animals or plants in a particular place. An example of this is the statement: "Yongka [kangaroo] is my uncle" and "jarrah" [a species of tree] is my brother", which makes sense through a kinship structure which includes human and more-than-human kindred. This way people are tied to place in a manner that guarantees meaning and familiarity⁹, a connection called: *gurduboodjar* – which translates as love of place¹⁰. This is 'home', in the sense of the English adage 'home is where the heart is'. In Noongar language, it is the place with whom one is related and where one's more-than human relations are established, as they have been since time immemorial. So home-place is also Noongar family which involves the implied familial obligation to care for all these many-species relations including the ground. There does not seem to be an easy English translation for this concept. The word: 'property' invokes the English sense of 'private ownership' – which to some extent communicates a sense of belonging and responsibility, albeit an individual one. *Karlap* (often spelt 'kallip') was translated in 1850 by an interpreter, who was also an English migrant, as:

Kallip: denoting a knowledge of localities; familiar acquaintance with a range of country, or with individuals. Also used to express property in land; as *Nganna Kallip*, my land.¹¹

The difference seems to be the application of the term. In English, land ownership carries an administrative depth which conveys a formal/societal recognition and right to trade it. So it is possible at least that the 'depth' is abstracted to, and attached to, the legal administrative level. It may be accompanied by a 'place attachment', but these days this does not *usually* come with *familial* obligation, understood as an ongoing obligation from the deep past to continuing and future generations of human and more-than-human family. We assert land trading could never happen in Noongar tradition, since one cannot sell love or relations of love, or the familial obligation to care for one's 'home-place'. It could theoretically be possible for money to change hands and legal deals signed, but the familial obligation to care always remains.

Thus through the logic of relationship and interconnection which operates at all levels the *kundaam* as understood by all Noongar language speakers is tied to each micro-narrative which is the local and specific. An example of the micro-narrative is the Narrogin *ngama* (water-hole), which holds the story of the mallee-hen, now embedded in the town-name Narrogin (which means mallee-hen foot tracks). There are more than 45,000 years of landscape-embedded stories about the sense of place. This is the substantive human history of the *Wiilman wer Kaneang* Noongar *Boodjar*. Deep knowing through storied memories of a 'long now' – a condensed *kura, yeye wer boorda* or past, present and future – together with cycles of time, underpin *kundaam*, the connected Noongar epistemology-ontology.

In coming to be familiar, to know and understand how the landscape is alive and speaks messages comprehensible to humans, we need to allow for the possibility that the world may not be as expressed by the English language; which has evolved to explicate the post-enlightenment period of Cartesian rationality. Noongar language is needed to fully comprehend some of these connections in Noongar *Boodjar*, because languages themselves are active and hold messages¹⁰. For this reason in this document we use some Noongar terms because they are more expressive and inclusive and therefore embellish an English translation.

In showing how the land is alive and that it speaks, Noongar meaning-making processes are significant in that individuals can only speak for their *karlap*; their shared property in land or the *Boodjar* for which one is co-responsible. In the same vein, the senior knowledge person present (or most experienced in regard to the issue being

discussed) has precedence over others, giving respect and acknowledgement to his or her life-time of wisdom. Once the appropriate participants are identified, the rules of dialogue focus on sharing insights as opposed to arguing the point in an adversarial way. This process is called *ngulluckiny wangaliny*, meaning 'sharing conversation', and involves *wango djinang* (inquiry or looking into the yarn), *wango birniny karnijil*, talking to dig up truth, *katitj moordoin* (strong knowledge) for *ni katitjiny koorliny* (going along learning, listening, understanding and knowing). The word for speaking, *wanginy* is the same as that for alive in the sense where green trees are alive¹². Through this synergistic process of *ngulluckiny wangaliny*, we will assert that the land is alive and that it holds stories of wisdom for action guidance and reflection which only some humans and more-than-humans can comprehend.

Wiilman wer Kaneang Kura, Boodjar – History and Geography

The region has a climate of cool, wet winters and warm to hot, dry summers characteristic of a global Mediterranean pattern. The geological structure of the landscape – the granitoid formation underneath – is of the ancient Archaean geological era, meaning it is about half as old as the earth itself¹³. The most common soil types in the region are sandy duplex (layered) soils and ironstone gravelly soils, often with neutral, sodium-affected clay subsoils and acid sandy topsoils¹⁴. Along with other parts of the South West Ecological Region which stretches from Shark Bay to Esperance, the area is extremely biodiverse with high levels of rare local species¹⁵. Many flora and fauna partnerships have evolved which are highly beneficial for these old, climatically buffered infertile landscapes (OCBILs)¹⁶, in which many floristic species have limited seed dispersal.

Quendas, bilbies, bettongs and potoroos are the main digging marsupials which are local species in the upper Blackwood River catchment. Each quenda, for example, moves about 3.9 tonnes of soil annually, in turn caching seeds, burying leaf litter and nutrients and leaving indentations which pool the water into the ground¹⁷. However where fauna become locally extinct there is a corresponding consequence to the plant species and ecosystem health dependent upon them¹⁸.

In the 1840s when the sandalwood cutters and kangaroo hunters began working the South West to the east of the *Kaarta Moorda*, also known as the Darling Range, the area was referred to as the Mallee Belt by the new settlers. Farmers took up grants in the Williams District and sheep grazing began in Katanning in the 1860s. These days the main land-use is agriculture, with about one tenth remnant vegetation and about one percent being townsites.¹⁹ Unfortunately activities such as land clearing and increased use of nutrients have resulted in degraded river vegetation and increased salinity levels. As of 2006, 351 species and subspecies of plants in the South West Ecological Region were listed as threatened²⁰. As a result, combined with downstream urbanisation and industrial growth, the Blackwood River is now experiencing a significant decline in water quality and ecosystem health. The problem of Western Australia's salinity is said to be one of the worst examples of dryland salinity in the world.

... the [Western Australian] wheatbelt has a little known but unenviable reputation: in no other region in the world is there thought to be an area as large which has been cleared of its natural vegetation in so short a period.²¹

From the Western scientific standpoint these statements are objectively measurable and therefore valid. Historically speaking, colonisation of land and people has produced the decline in vitality of *Wiilman wer Kaneang* Noongar Country, while Western science has monitored it. For example, the first recorded observations of salinity in the state were made by Lieutenant Bunbury in the Williams and Avon Rivers in 1833²². In 1838, a report was issued by a district forest officer that ridge top laterite areas in the Avon Catchment should remain uncleared to help prevent erosion and salt rise. However, the official response was that a few isolated patches would be unlikely to have an important bearing on the district's soil erosion problems²³. The relationship between stream salinity and land clearing in the Northam-Toodyay district was reported again in 1897 and five years later the Cranbrook railway water supply became salty²⁴. The government analyst referred to the relationship between clearing and salinity in 1907, and in 1912 the Blackwood River at Bridgetown was deemed to be too salty for use by the railways²⁵.

A report published in 1917 showed that revegetation eliminated salt problems. In 1923 the connection between the increase in salt levels and destruction of native

vegetation was again reported, this time via a key paper to the Royal Society of Western Australia²⁶. Katanning is located in a low, flat part of the landscape and has the uncomfortable reputation of having the worst salinity problem in Western Australia. In 2001 it was reported that the salty water table was only a metre below the surface, and many older buildings were beginning to show salt-induced decay²⁷.

Katanning received a 'super towns' grant of \$8.75 million for the period 2011/12 from the Western Australian Government's Royalties for Regions program, judged according to the criteria of: "potential for population expansion, potential for potential economic expansion and diversification, strong local governance capabilities, and generation of net benefits to Western Australia"²⁸. Today much of the *Wiilman wer Kaneang* region has been cleared for agricultural land use: 95% in the case of the Narrogin Zone²⁹. Broad-acre farming is the dominant farming model, with cropping taking up over half of the land area in the Narrogin Zone, and pastures and grazing being the main agricultural activity³⁰.

Noongar traditional sites are also threatened by salinity, as this quote from Noel Nannup shows:

The Dreaming Trails follow natural drainage lines which occupy the lowest parts of the landscape, such as those valley floors that are highly susceptible to rising ground water tables. These Dreaming Trails were also the places burial sites were located. Therefore, both Dreaming Trails and the burial sites along their edges are at risk from salinisation. If a site turns to salt, its significance is lost or changed.³¹

Over the years via racist, oppressive policies that are now well-documented, Noongar people were systematically removed from their land and into government settlements such as Marribank near Katanning and the various town camps situated on the margins of towns such as Narrogin³². However, or perhaps because of this marginalisation, Noongar culture continued to be practised. For example here is a short account by Noel Nannup which shows that Noongar stories are still being told:

In March 1994 at the request of Mr Angus Wallam, I accompanied him on a journey from Wagin to Jillikin Rock, which is about 20 kilometres east of Kulin. As we travelled, Angus told me how he could remember his grandfather telling him about the Trail. He recalled being told about people travelling up the river; that's the Blackwood from the coast to Puntapin Rock near Wagin, then on to Wave Rock, which is an important meeting place for Noongars and Wongis. I was told that I would see Jarrah trees growing at Jillikin rock (near Kulin). These trees had grown from seed taken out there by Noongar people in the early days. Angus said that he did not know of any Jarrah trees that grew any further to the east of there And CALM³³ doesn't know either. On arrival at Jillikin rock, Angus was upset to find the largest of the Jarrah trees had been cut down... We climbed to the top of the rock and looked north east out over Jillikin Lake. In the distance I could see standing about the horizon what Angus assured me, was Wave Rock... We then looked back towards Wagin. We could see a chain of lakes stretching into the distance. These lakes no doubt had provided the people with a natural trail through this area before it was cleared. (Noel Nannup)³⁴

As shown above, Noongar stories are still being told – including those that provide explanations for individual specimen location.

In this section the point we seek to make is that Western science methods have long showed deteriorating conditions due to salt incursion. Recommendations to be more selective in clearing vegetation have long been made. Noongar stories have also been threatened by policies and practices of the dominant society, and rising salt now threatens remaining Noongar sites. Next, we make the case that despite the slow demise of *Boodjar*, her *wiernak boodjera*, her³⁵ spirit as active agent remains, and that deep participation using our human sensitivities; in other words our capacity to perceive and be reciprocally sensuous with nature enables these animate phenomena to be directly experienced.

The Land Speaks: *Boodjar Wangkiny*

Our thesis statement is that *Wiilman wer Kaneang Boodjar* still speaks, although this voice was not heard by the settlers who belittled, marginalised and banished Noongar wisdom from society, ultimately resulting in intergenerational social and environmental

injustice together with salinity and decreased fertility. We illustrate this voice through Noongar narratives and phenomenological science.

We assert that Noongar *Boodjar* still holds stories which live across time and place, and can be understood through a Noongar rationality known as *kundaam*. In other words, the land is still alive and holds wisdom intelligible through Noongar language, stories, practices and traditionally-developed perceptual abilities. The premise is that there are clearly observable phenomena, able to be experienced by people who are open to experiences of deep connection with nature and each other. To experience these phenomena does not require any new or in-depth abilities. Rather, there is a need for a process of keeping an open mind, being deeply observant, and holding a deep respect for Noongar history and stories. This Country is a storied one, with embedded evidence in sometimes unexpected places.

A collection of Eddie Bennell's stories were published in 1981. They provide an example of stories created even in a changing historical context. One of those stories was set years after settlement:

This particular incident took place many years ago on the outskirts of a town in the Great Southern area of Western Australia, approximately 250 kilometres from Perth. There was at this time a group of Aborigines camping at a large farm...³⁶

The story features a curious, adventurous child who is distracted on his way to the shearing shed by a dozen or so curlews. (Curlews represent a good omen for some people and evil to others.) In the story the child is led away to witness an event featuring two magnificent warrior birds, a magpie and a curlew, the most beautiful he has ever seen in his life. These two birds represent all the tribes within a thousand kilometres. Wirrla, the leader of the curlews has raped the wife of Coorrla, the leader of the magpies – a crime needing serious punishment since she is now pregnant and therefore has been banished. The *mubarrn* (medicine or law) man beckons thousands of *Mummara*, (small, mischievous, magic, usually invisible, stinky black men who live in rocky areas) to play the role of judges and witness the fight for life that is now called for between the two aggressors. The two leader birds appear in human form and fight a long, arduous, bloody contest to the death of Wirrla, and the judges bestow upon the rape victim the renewed right to accompany her husband in their daily lives. Within this story the ancestral beings are present, as are *mubarrn maaman* or men with special powers, while the *mummara*, who are usually invisible, are visible in this narrative.

Bennell's story illustrates a number of very important points. First, ancestral characters and spirits still make themselves apparent to those with an open mind and deepened capacity to perceive and participate with the animate world in which we breathe, walk and talk. Second, it illustrates the leadership role of the *mubarrn maaman* in modern Noongar society, who evokes the perceptual capacity to engage reciprocally with characters of the ecosystem. Finally, it reveals the role assigned to the *mummara*, as empowered judges of human behaviour and keepers of the moral code. Even though normally invisible, *mummara*, can in some circumstances be heard and can occasionally be seen³⁷, providing evidence of *Boodjar nitja wangkiny*: this land speaking.

The settlers and their descendants, in their defence, did not know how to listen with Noongar rationalities and they could not know how to observe, listen deeply and participate with *Boodjar*. They did not know that there are clearly observable phenomena still commonly noticed today, such as birds or trees who bring messages. For instance, the *weerlow* or curlew appears when a close relative is about to die. Here is an example told by Janet Hayden:

... when Uncle Aub Hayden died. When he died, we had him [*weerlow*] right at the window knocking ... This bird, he just wouldn't leave us alone and tormented us for two days³⁸.

On the other hand, as explained by Sealin Garlett, *Darlmoorluk* the twenty-eight parrot is known for being the happy bird, keeping the camp safe and reassuring all that there would be no lurking dangers nearby for children³⁹. Similarly, when sitting quietly under sheoak trees in the summer – on a natural carpet of soft needles, sometimes messages from old people's spirits can be heard if, as Dr Richard Walley explains, you know how to "tune in"⁴⁰.

Rather, the settlers and their descendants transported to this country their hierarchical beliefs of Aboriginal inferiority and intention to make Noongar *Boodjar* resemble their English dreams of countryside. They brought their ways of

understanding nature through an English cultural lens – which is underpinned by a Cartesian rationality of separation of people from nature, beliefs that defend the control and subjugation of the environment, and a simplistic understanding of an objective science⁴¹.

The *Wiilmen wer Kaneang* practice for aeons has been to acknowledge the ancestors by speaking directly to the energies and spirits of the land, in Noongar language which is structured for this communication. The custom is to sing out loudly, when entering at any place, to announce arrival and respect for the ancestors and their descendants today. In the announcement, respect is shown for the trees, animals and birds nearby, and the spirits of the land who are known to be present in the location.⁴² It is to explain intention to care for *Boodjar* and its creatures and people, and a request to in turn be cared for and kept safe. It is this practice that is key – it can be sung to the landscape, or just projected loudly. This is a reciprocal practice, a clearly articulated Noongar virtue, in that *Boodjar* then has an obligation to provide sustenance and resources. It is appropriate to include Noongar language should this be spoken by the singer– but any language is sufficient since the attitude or intention is the significant component. This land is alive spiritually: *wiernak boodjera* – it has spirit, mind and purpose, or *conatus* – which is understood in ecological philosophy to be a tendency towards self-actualisation. *Wiernak Boodjera* – Earth spirit – is clearly evident to those who acknowledge and recognise it.

Today, scientists know that about 10% of the original vegetation and faunal species of the Upper Blackwood Catchment – *Wiilman wer Kaneang* Country – remains. From a scientific perspective, this ecosystem has been greatly weakened. In recent years though, considerable replanting of endemic species has occurred, and remaining old-growth vegetation has been protected from introduced grazing animals by fences. These practices continue, and are valued by catchment managers and policy makers alike. Equally as importantly, Noongar language has always been a spoken language and it is still being used to communicate with *Boodjar*. Noongar language facilitates a relational, synergistic, communicative and cooperative relationship with nature through its meanings, discourse and use. Stories of place are still heard, sung, danced, drawn and communicated within the language of the land, which is based upon love of place: *gurduboodjar*, along with a deep reciprocal, experiential relationship.

The logic of Noongar language, which facilitates conversation with place between members of the ecosystem both human and more-than-human, falls outside of that which is generally considered acceptable evidence for measurement and explanation in the language of empirical sciences. However, any worldview is culturally determined and even the rationalistic view of post-enlightenment scientific ‘objectivity’ has been shown to be underpinned by a faith in the value of withdrawing the observer from the phenomenon being observed. This changes any claim to absolute objectivity into an item of belief, thus problematizing any such claim; including those which assert that emotions and beliefs can be put to one side while observation, logic and inductive reasoning prevail.⁴³

Deep within its place-based language logic, Noongar *katitjiny* or *kundaam* integrates awareness of the circularity linking a belief system and its language. One example of this is the usage of the word: *karl* which means both the place of one’s fire and home, because home is the area in land – *karlap* – an extended family is obliged to care for by burning, along with storying and other cultural activities.⁴⁴

Across Australia, the biophysical sciences are now aligning with Aboriginal sciences: underground water courses are being verified by hydrologists where the songlines and dreaming stories indicated⁴⁵. Further to this, for quite some time biophysical scientists and deep ecologists have sought ways of explaining ecological phenomena. To use Noongar language, they have engaged the synergistic process of *ngulluckiny wangaliny*: enlivening talk – discussing ways of deeply understanding *Boodjar* in the full sense of its meaning as nourishing terrain – as animate, energetic and reciprocally interactive. For instance ecological literacy, from Capra’s and Luisi’s point of view, is:

...our ability to understand the basic principles of ecology, or principles of sustainability, and to live accordingly. [It] involves not only the intellectual understanding of the basic principles of ecology but also the deep ecological awareness of the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and of the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are embedded in, and dependent upon, the cyclical processes of nature.⁴⁶

This web of interconnected meaning inspired deep ecological philosopher Mathews to show that human meaningfulness arises from the spiritual capacity to maintain the ecosystem, when she notes that the crucial element is our attitude itself⁴⁷. This is a central and highly significant Noongar understanding – that caring for Country is part of caring for self and family – and this is a deeply felt obligation. There is no distinction in Noongar language, between kinship with people and relationship with Country – the vocabulary is the same and as such we are all implored to care for Country as if it were an extension of ourselves and our human kin. Noel Nannup concludes a Noongar cosmological account as follows:

They dreamed their language, the language is in the land the people are taught the language which is always returned to the land through ceremony when they die. They also dreamed that there would be six seasons, and that during each season there would be six basic diets. The people were now ready to perform the sole purpose of being, to care for everything.⁴⁸

The point we are making in this section, is that using an appropriate rationality, the land's active living nature – *wiernak Boodjera*, or the spirit of place – can be recognised, heard and understood. Specifically, with Noongar language logic and skills of participation, we recognise that the land speaks as kin – as it has for so long been understood by Noongar people. Since time immemorial, *Boodjar* has provided food, sustenance, shelter and security as well as holding stories for the future. Using a well-understood Noongar reciprocity, *Boodjar* has been acknowledged, monitored and cared for with song, pronouncements, poetry, art and dance. For this, an active practice of listening to Country and its inherent wisdom is required.

In a climate-changing world, these skills are of crucial importance in local and regional transformation towards a more sustainable future. Whilst only 10% of the living nature of *Wuilman wer Kaneang Boodjar* remains, there is time to turn the trajectory around. Such a process could concurrently revitalise Noongar language and culture and enable enhanced experience and perception of the biodiversity of the area now often referred to as the Upper Blackwood Catchment. *Boodjar wangkiny wer wangaliny*: land speaks and sings, announcing it is alive and its spirits need to be cared for through *gurdaboodjar* – love of place. Through the Noongar practices of *ni*, *katitj koorliny* we may once again learn to go along and listen and understand how Country thrives and can nurture our continued existence on, and in, and as part of – its web of interconnected meaning and kin.

Conclusion: *Boodjar Wangkiny Wer Wangaliny*

Wuilman wer Kaneang Noongar *Boodjar* is a storied place. Stories are embedded across landscapes, the work of ancestors who left evidence of their activities, demanding that they be acknowledged, recognised and rules they set down be followed. These ancestors can be shared by all peoples who now call this place home. The characters have walked, trudged, flowed and etched their way across *Wuilman wer Kaneang Boodjar* for aeons. Landscape elements such as hills, rocks, ecosystems, particular plant communities and plants and animals themselves, some endangered – hold stories to be safeguarded for now and the future. And now and again, personalities from those stories make themselves known. *Mummara*, for instance, do appear from time to time. Sometimes only their stinky evidence is apparent – and other times, an outline against rocky crags is visible in the semi darkness. They remind us to behave properly – giving respect to all human and more-than-human beings with whom we share our place.

Boodjar wangkiny. The Noongar word for alive is the same word as to speak. The land is alive, and the land speaks. In Noongar language, there can be no argument. The land still speaks, but these days it seems comparatively few people hear it. This Noongar rationality is accessible through English language, however it needs to be understood that English discourse has serious shortcomings. It is underpinned by embedded Cartesian understandings of separation, and a simplistic understanding of an objective science. In Noongar *boodjar* or Country an experiential journey of Noongar language learning can help to break down these barriers, enabling the learner to see, hear and encounter the world differently. As Mathews and others have noted, the attitude of maintaining the ecosystem spiritually, gives humans a deep sense of meaning. To this we would add a deep, rewarding sense of wisdom gained by active participation with nature.

Ultimately, this paper presents an argument for a local Indigenous rationality for solving problems created by a mistaken worldview that has caused severe land degradation. Salt-afflicted dry lands and seasonally bare lands – which cry out to passers-by – have been created by the treatment of this land that follows near-complete misunderstandings about the landscape's capacity to absorb comparatively sudden and broadscale shocks associated with an attempted cultural conversion. Compared to the age of *Wiilman wer Kaneang Boodjar*, 90% land clearing in less than 150 years is a trauma from which the land is visibly struggling to recover. That same rationality removed the rights of the long-time Noongar relatives of *Boodjar* who are obliged to care for her, and almost extinguished the songs, stories and respect she needs. However it is not too late.

The stories remain, the language is being relearned, and revegetation and catchment management are taking place. It is a place-based enlivened participation that is needed to comprehend the meaning of observable ecological phenomena such as special types of birdsong, unexpected sounds or messages and possibly – evidence of *mummara* and other language-embedded insights. This turn to *Boodjar*, to Noongar local place, needs Noongar language along with embodied experience. The argument in this paper is verbal, abstract – however it is the practical, place-based knowing – the result of Noongar language and practical experience – to which we refer. To experience the depth of relationship with place known as *gurduBoodjar* – the love of place whereby landscape and its more-than-human features are recognised and treated as kin – is a lifetime undertaking. The interconnected meta-narratives of *Boodjar*, *moort* and *katitjiny* cannot be learned by reading a page of written words without being 'in place', and learning through the sensuousness of *Boodjar*.

This apparent illogicality is not mythical – even in the best sense of the word – even though this story might be labelled archetypal or perhaps historical. However there is an inherent paradox, which is that in order to experience these phenomena, one must concede their possibility at the outset. In other words, unless one acknowledges the land is alive, and that it has comprehensible messages, one cannot cherish its voice. We are saying that this place-based practice of deep listening, sincere observation and accumulative, experiential insightful learning; of intentionally coming to know one's place as the subject of profound love, will gradually facilitate capacity to hear, recognise and heed the voice of *Boodjar*. *Ni, katjij: Boodjar wangkalin* – listen, understand – *Boodjar* (Country) is singing.

We suggest new research questions to continue the recent trajectory of *Boodjar* coming back to full life. We need questions for the complex interconnected multi-dimensional problems of society – to reflect the need for multi-and interdisciplinary responses to questions of transition to an ecological way of thinking and caring for Country. For instance: while producing food and sustenance for humans, how can *Wiilman wer Kaneang* lands be revegetated with endemic plant communities, and the land reconditioned, to enable the return of the endangered macrofauna – so that the bilbies, bettongs, quenda and other creatures can return to their obligatory activities of burying seeds for themselves, for *wiernak boodjera* and the future? And in terms of linguistic diversity, how can Noongar language be taught in schools and communities so that people can come to experience and understand an Earth-based rationality?

We recommend that philosophers and activists for nature lead the way for all Australians to sing out to Country wherever in Australia you are: to acknowledge the cultural custodians, to tell Country where you come from, where you are going, that you will care for Country and at the same time, request to be nurtured by her. We suggest that environmental and social scientists acknowledge local Indigenous people, language and stories of place at the outset of their research, and provide evidence where this is available. We advocate that all research conducted in Australia acknowledge the local Indigenous custodians, and include published materials and local Indigenous researchers so that Indigenous perspectives are addressed and taken into account.

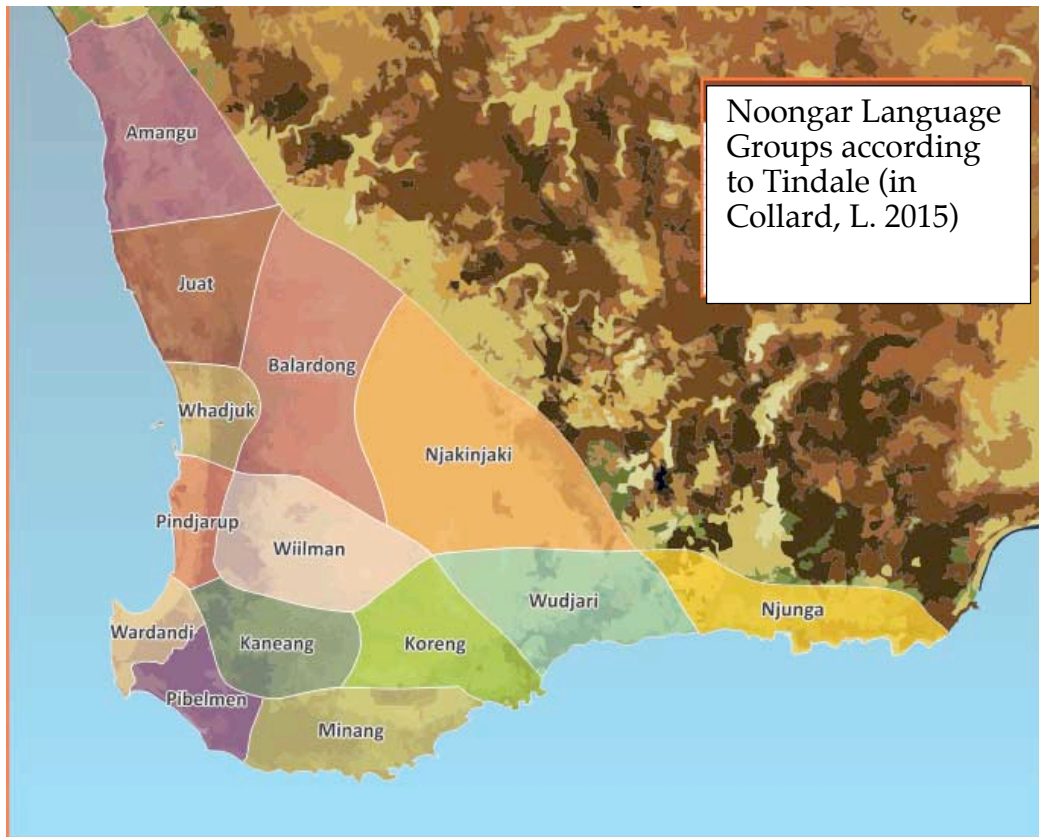


Plate 1. Willman Boodjar, coloured pale pink and olive green on this map.

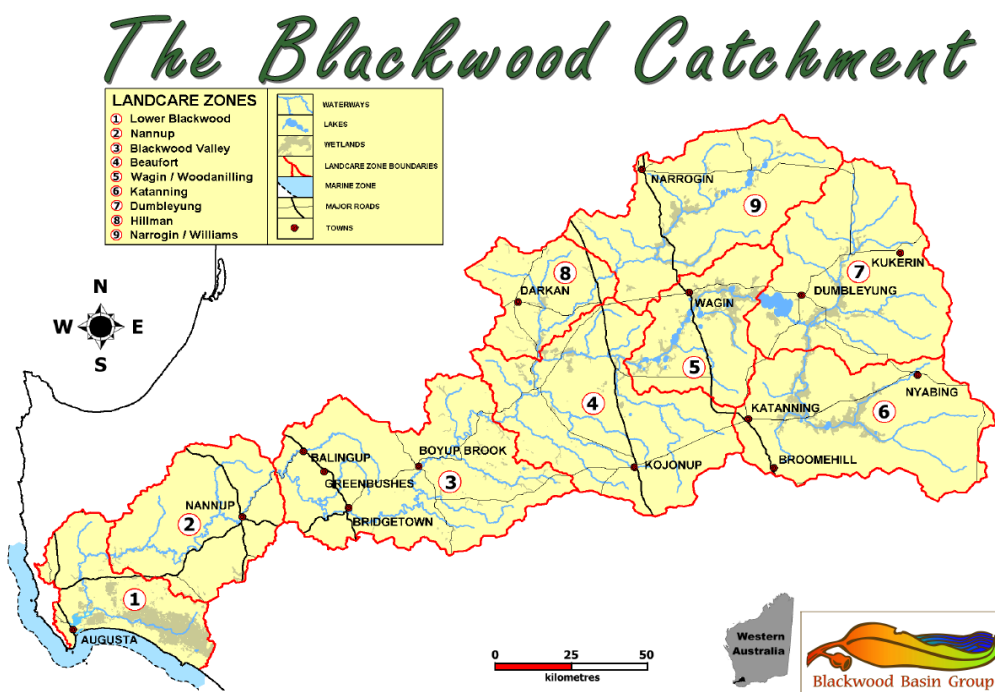


Plate 2: Blackwood Catchment Map. Thanks to Sara Dulux of the Blackwood Basin Group for permission to use this map.

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Notes

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2. Professor Len Collard is an Australian Research Council Chief Investigator with the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. He has a background in literature and communications and his research interests are in the area of Aboriginal Studies, including Nyungar interpretive histories and Nyungar theoretical and practical research models. Len is a Whadjuk Nyungar and is a Traditional Owner of the Perth Metropolitan area and surrounding lands, rivers, swamps, ocean and its cultures.
3. Pierre Horwitz is Professor of Environmental Science at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. He has over 30 years of research experience in coastal and inland wetland ecosystems in southern Australia, where his policy intentions are related to better integrating the social and environmental determinants of human health.
4. 'Noongar' is a word meaning 'people' in what is now acknowledged as the Noongar group of languages of South-West Western Australia. Historically, each of these languages or dialects have their own names. Similarly, each Noongar group who speak a dialect or language have their own names; such as the *Wiilman* or the *Kaneang*. In this essay we interchange occasionally between the use of the words *Wiilman*, *Kaneang* and Noongar. This is because there are not yet comprehensive documents referring to *Wiilman* or *Kaneang* people, so we have used more general Noongar information which applies. Similarly, there are many Noongar dictionaries from different regions, each recorded by different British speakers with their own diverse English accents. Therefore, the spelling we use is not consistent with any particular dictionary, although we attempt to use the orthography in use by the Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation: <https://www.noongarboodjar.com.au/?v=6cc98ba2045f>
5. To denote respect and acknowledge its living spirit, 'Country' is capitalised.
6. A term first used by Debra Bird Rose, in Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).
7. South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, "Spirituality," South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, <http://www.noongarculture.org.au/spirituality/>.
8. Wheatbelt NRM, *Nyungar Budjara Wangany: Nyungar Nrm Wordlist and Language Collection Booklet of the Avon Catchment Region* (Northam: Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management; Australian Government, nd), p.8
9. Daisy Bates, *The Native Tribes of Western Australia*, ed. Isobel White (Canberra, Australia: National Library of Australia, 1985), p.193
10. George Fletcher Moore, *Descriptive Australian Vocabulary* (London: WM. S. Orr & Co., 1850), p.45
11. *Ibid.*, p.54
12. *Ibid.*, p.120
13. South West NRM Region Appraisal Team, "Resource Management Technical Report 309: Hillman and Narrogin Zones (Blackwood Zones 8 and 9) Rapid Catchment Appraisal," (Department of Agriculture and Food: Government of Western Australia, 2006).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Stephen Hopper, "Ocbil Theory: Towards an Integrated Understanding of the Evolution, Ecology and Conservation of Biodiversity on Old, Climatically Buffered, Infertile Landscapes," *Plant Soil* no. 322 (2009).
16. *Ibid.*
17. Leonie Valentine et al., "Foraging Activity by the Southern Brown Bandicoot (*Isodon obesulus*) as a Mechanism for Soil Turnover," *Australian Journal of Zoology* 60 (2012).
18. Hopper.
19. South West NRM Region Appraisal Team.
20. Cheryl Gole, "South West Australia Ecoregion: Jewel of the Australian Continent," (South West Australia Ecoregion Initiative, 2006).
21. Quentin Beresford et al., *The Salinity Crisis: Landscapes, Communities and Politics* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2001), p.11
22. Department of Agriculture and Food, "Salty Bunch of Dates," Government of Western Australia, http://www.agric.wa.gov.au/PC_92421.html.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Beresford et al., pp.158-161
28. Royalties for Regions, "Regional Centres Development Plan (Supertowns): Background and Information," Government of Western Australia; Department of Regional Development and Lands <http://collie.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/SuperTown.pdf>; Dean Taylor, "Shire of Katanning: Notice of Ordinary Council Meeting, 27th February 2013," Shire of Katanning, http://www.katanning.wa.gov.au/fileadmin/user_upload/minutes/February_Agenda.pdf.
29. South West NRM Region Appraisal Team.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Beresford et al., p.32
32. Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the South West of Western Australia 1900-1940* (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1992).
33. In this quote, the acronym CALM refers to the government department then called: Conservation and Land Management.
34. In Beresford et al., p.30-31
35. In Noongar language, the earth (ground) is gendered feminine.

36. Eddie Bennell and Anne Thomas, *Aboriginal Legends from the Bibulmun Tribe* (Perth, WA: Rigby Publishers, 1981), pp.21-24
37. It is not uncommon for *mummara* to be seen in the South West. There are many stories of *mummara* being observed in the jarrah forest in rocky areas near Mumballup, a small town near one author's home in Wardandi Noongar country. (The town name: Mumballup translates as 'place of the *mummara*'.)
38. Len Collard, Sandra Harben, and Rosemary van den Berg, "Nitja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyinyiny: A Nyungar Interpretive History of the Use of Boodjar (Country) in the Vicinity of Murdoch University," (Murdoch, Western Australia: Murdoch University, 2004). p.68.
39. *Ibid.*, p.74
40. *Ibid.*, p.66
41. Michael Bonnett, "Monograph: Special Issue," *Journal of philosophy of education* 37, no. 4 (2003); Bird Rose; John Bradley, "'Hearing the Country': Reflexivity as an Intimate Journey into Epistemological Liminalities," *The Australian journal of Indigenous education* 41, no. 01 (2012).
42. Clint Bracknell, "Kooral Dwonk Katitjiny (Listening to the Past): Aboriginal Language, Songs and History in South-Western Australia," <http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ch01.pdf>; "Wal-Walang-AI Ngardanginy: Hunting the Songs (of the Australian South-West)," *Australian Aboriginal studies*, no. 1 (2014).
43. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), pp.32-34; Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 2013), p.239-257; Geoffrey Berry, "Under the Dominion of Light: An Ecocritical Mythography" (PhD, Monash, 2009).
44. This is explained in more detail in Sandra Wooltorton, Len Collard, and Pierre Horwitz, "Stories Want to Be Told: Elaap Karlaboodjar," *PAN: Philosophy, activism, nature* 11 (2015).
45. In the LaGrange Agricultural Opportunities Project, hydrologists verified a number of Karajarri stories in terms of age, depth and location of water: Personal Communication. Also see: <https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/news/media-releases/la-grange-interactive-groundwater-map-underpins-future-agriculture-near-broome>
46. Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.291
47. Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (UK: Routledge, 1994).
48. Noel Nannup, "The Carers of Everything," in Swan Region Strategy for Natural Resource Management (Perth, WA: [file:///C:/Users/213509/Downloads/Nannup+-+CarersofEverything%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/213509/Downloads/Nannup+-+CarersofEverything%20(2).pdf), 2003), p.4

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