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Ever-widening circles: Consolidating and enhancing Wirlomin Noongar archival material in the community

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Abstract

Returning archival documentation of endangered Indigenous languages to their community of origin can provide empowering opportunities for Indigenous people to control, consolidate, enhance, and share their cultural heritage with ever-widening, concentric circles of people, while also allowing time and space for communities to recover from disempowerment and dislocation. This process aligns with an affirming narrative of Indigenous persistence that, despite the context of colonial dispossession, can lead to a positive, self-determined future. In 2007, senior Noongar of the Wirlomin clan in the south coast region of Western Australia initiated Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc., an organisation set up to facilitate cultural and linguistic revitalisation by combining community-held knowledge with documentation and recordings repatriated from the archives. Fieldnotes created in 1931 from discussions with local Aboriginal people at Albany, Western Australia have inspired the collaborative production of six illustrated bilingual books. Working with archival research material has presented challenges due to issues of orthography and legibility in written records, the poor quality of audio recordings, and the incomplete documentation of elicitation sessions. As the archive is so fragmentary, community knowledge is vital in making sense of its contents.

Keywords: archival repatriation, Noongar, Aboriginal, language revitalisation, music revival

Introduction

Although colonisation has decimated Aboriginal languages and song traditions in Australia, many Aboriginal communities are working with both senior knowledge-holders and archival documents to, as Aboriginal linguist Jeanie Bell (2002: 47) puts it, resist being "victims of a system that set out to destroy us." This chapter will discuss processes developed by an Aboriginal cultural organisation based in both an urban and rural region of Australia to

consolidate, enhance, and share the group's endangered language, song tradition, and cultural heritage. In 2007, senior Aboriginal people belonging to the Wirlomin family clan from the south coast of Western Australia (WA) organised as Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc. (Wirlomin) in order to formalise longstanding efforts to maintain local Noongar culture and work on repatriated archival cultural material with the Noongar community. The six published bilingual stories Wirlomin have developed and illustrated so far – *Noongar mambara bakitj* (2011), *Maamang* (2011), *Dwoort baal kaat* (2013), *Yira boornak nyininy* (2013), *Noorn* (2017) and *Ngaawily nop* (2017) – originate from both archives and community knowledge. Today, more than a hundred people including the authors of this chapter are registered Wirlomin members.

Many of us formally gather a few times each year to share and build Noongar language, stories, and song, reconnecting fragmented elements of intangible cultural heritage and re-uniting them with Country. Our intention was, and is, to claim, control and enhance our heritage. We choose to do this by starting with a small community of descendants and progressively sharing with ever-widening circles, employing the following staged process:

1. Connecting archival material with its home community of origin;
2. Interpreting and making decisions about this material as a dynamic group including the descendants of archival informants and contemporary language custodians;
3. Reconnecting story, language, and song to Country via visits to relevant sites; and
4. Sharing with the broader local community, visiting schools, and publishing books.

Although we have only applied this process in our south coast Noongar context, as will be described in more detail below, we feel it could be a useful model for groups working with similarly endangered Indigenous languages.

The status of Noongar language

In Australia, 669,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people account for approximately 3 per cent of the nation's total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). The most recent National Indigenous Languages Survey indicates that only "around 120" of more than 200 Aboriginal languages are still spoken and that "about 13 can be considered strong" (Marmion, Obata & Troy 2014: xii). More than 30,000 Aboriginal people in the predominantly urban/rural southwest corner of WA identify as *Noongar* – also sometimes spelled *Nyungar* – a word meaning 'person', 'man', 'ally' or even 'mankind/humanity' in the local Aboriginal language and used today to refer to the Aboriginal people, country, language, and culture of the region (Douglas 1968). This constitutes one of the largest Aboriginal cultural blocs in Australia in terms of geography and population (SWALSC 2009; see Figure 1). Although the Noongar language remains critically endangered, consecutive Australian Bureau of Statistics census surveys recorded Noongar as a language spoken at home by 167 people in 1996 (McConvell & Thieberger 2001: 44); 196 people in 2001 (AIATSIS 2005: 75); 240 people in 2006; and 369 people in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). It appears that language revitalisation movements since the 1980s have resulted in a slowly growing community of speakers, or at least a growing identification with the Noongar language.
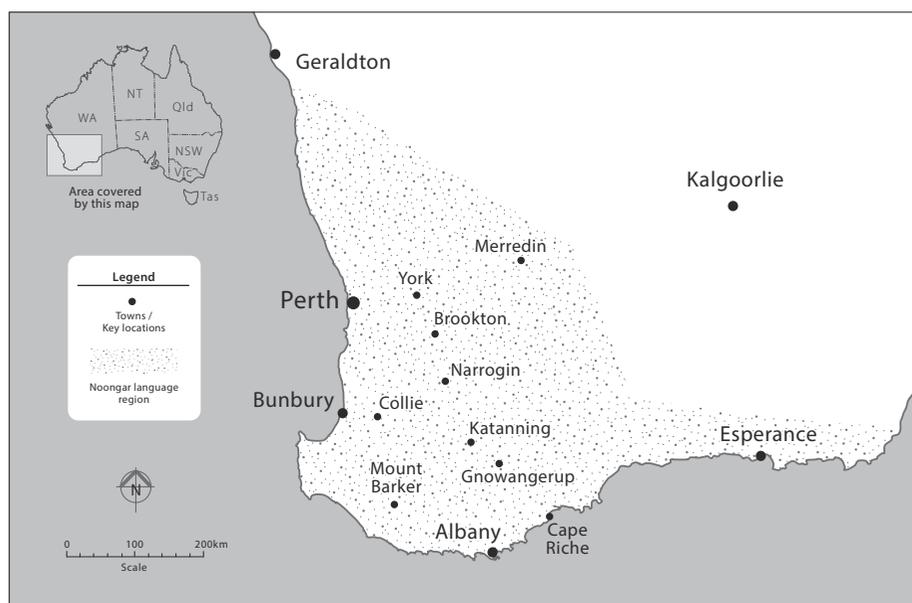
Figure 1. The Noongar language region of Western Australia and key locations mentioned in this chapter (map: Brenda Thornley)

A 1985 Noongar language conference at Marribank – also known as Carrolup – near the town of Katanning in the south of WA brought Noongar people interested in sustaining the language together with linguists such as Wilf Douglas, Alan Dench, and Nicholas Thieberger. At that time, there was a "a clear interest among members of the Noongar community to record what was still known among the older people and to pass that knowledge to younger people" (Thieberger 2004: 7). At a subsequent meeting in 1990 at Wellington Mills Recreation Camp, located in between the towns of Bunbury and Collie in southern WA, participants including the late language custodians Cliff Humphries, Ned Mippy, Kathy Yarran, Hazel Winmar, and Peter Farmer Snr worked together to create a Noongar language resource replete with sentences and songs, while officially recognising Noongar as a single language with three mutually intelligible dialects (Bunbury Noongar Aboriginal Progress Association 1990).

Two years later, a large-scale meeting was held with many of the same senior participants and the broader Noongar community at Narrogin, WA to reach agreement on a spelling system (Whitehurst 1992). Then a reporter for Golden West Network (GWN), Gina Williams recalls more than a dozen different possible spellings for the word *Noongar* being proposed during the meeting and remembers that "the bulk of the time was spent on deciding how best to spell that single word" (pers. comm., 19 October 2018). After hiding the Noongar language from authorities for so long, it must have been a difficult process for language custodians and their families to openly speak about it and reach consensus on its finer details. Although tensions were high, the group agreed upon a standard orthography, as "everyone in the room realised this was really important" (Gina Williams, pers. comm., 19 October 2018). Speaking about the senior language custodians involved, Williams states:

> This was a time when everyone else thought Noongar language was dead. These people are still here – their voices resonate in this language and it is a privilege. These magnificent people were so generous with their knowledge. (Pers. comm., 19 October 2018)

These meetings informed the production of resources including the *Noongar dictionary* (Whitehurst 1992) and the *Noongar our way kit* (Wooltorton & Collard 1992) to support the introduction of Noongar language as a Language Other Than English (LOTE) subject in WA schools and a variety of other language education initiatives in ensuing years.

Wordlists and recordings

Many collections of transcribed Noongar words exist. British naturalist Robert Brown collected the first in 1801 at Albany (1800–1855) and Protector of Aborigines Charles Symmons authored a published grammatical description of the Noongar language in 1842. In the early 20th century (1904–1912), journalist and ethnographer Daisy Bates surveyed a large number of Noongar people across the southwest region to compile a series of diverse and detailed vocabularies, all of which are now accessible online (Thieberger 2016, 2017). American graduate student Gerhardt Laves became the first trained linguist to study Noongar when he visited Albany in 1931 as part of a broader study of Aboriginal languages. Laves (1929–1932) used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to transcribe stories told by speakers of the southeastern Noongar dialect – Kurin. His work languished in obscurity for more than half a century but has since been returned to Australia and undergone processes of community repatriation and digitisation (Henderson et al. 2006; Henderson 2008, 2013), and partially inspired the official establishment of Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc.

Linguist Ken Hale's (1960) interview with Tom Cowan and Tom Kickett at York, WA is possibly the first audio recording of Noongar language elicitation. Subsequently, Douglas (1964–1967) and CG von Brandenstein (1967–1970) made audio field recordings as part of their Noongar language research. All of this material is held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) archives today and together comprises less than five hours of Noongar speech. Douglas's significant 1960s fieldwork at Mount Barker, Gnowangerup, Narrogin, Brookton and Merredin – along with his continued collaboration with the community – underpinned a series of published Noongar vocabularies (1968, 1976, 1996), and Carl George von Brandenstein's time in Esperance, WA with Charlie Dabb and other Noongar speakers informed his published 're-created' vocabulary *Nyungar anew* (1988).

More recent recordings of Noongar conducted as part of language revitalisation projects are held at the AIATSIS archives with conditional access available (Thieberger 1986; Bunbujee 1989–1990). Additionally, 83 audiocassettes and 15 videocassettes featuring Noongar language custodian Cliff Humphries recorded and transcribed by Tim McCabe (1997) are held at the State Library of Western Australia, although access is presently restricted. Early this century, historian Bob Howard made a range of Noongar wordlists available online. He and Tim McCabe also produced audio recordings with Noongar speaker Alma Woods which are currently held at the Albany Public Library (Thieberger 2007: 62). Additional audio recordings of language elicitation with speakers including Lomas Roberts (McCabe & Minter 2001), Hazel Brown

(Scott 2002) and Albert Knapp (Bracknell 2015) are held in our project archive and serve as documented evidence of the persistent presence of Noongar language.

Noongar language revival

Wirlomin is certainly not alone in its efforts to sustain Noongar as a spoken language. Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation operates out of Bunbury, WA and a small number of committed LOTE teachers provide Noongar language education at WA primary schools including Moorditj Noongar Community College. Noongar language classes are also offered by community organisations including the Langford Aboriginal Association and – due to the continued efforts of Tim McCabe to share the knowledge of the late Cliff Humphries – at least one prison. Community radio station Noongar Radio 110.9fm features Noongar language segments and the children's television program *Waabiny Time* on the National Indigenous Television Network showcases the language for a national audience, albeit at an early childhood level. Furthermore, actors from Yira Yaakin Theatre Company performed Shakespearean sonnets translated into Noongar at the Globe Theatre, London, UK in 2012, serving as a forerunner for a variety of youth education programs.

The Noongar language is still emerging from the devastation of an unjust recent colonial history. Many Noongar people literally had the language "flogged out of them" (Della Rae Morrison, pers. comm., 19 October 2018) and past government policies of assimilation implicitly denied basic human rights to Aboriginal people who spoke their languages in public (Haebich 2000). Recently there has been a rapid movement from denigration and wilful damage to something more like public interest, if not celebration, of the Noongar language, particularly in terms of its importance to all people in southwest Australia – not just the Noongar community – for identity and belonging. Within this context, it is reasonable to demand that Noongar stories and songs first be consolidated among, and shared from, the Noongar community. This belief guides the beginning of the Wirlomin process – returning archival material to its home community and providing empowering opportunities for language revitalisation.

Who are Wirlomin?

The Noongar word for bush stone curlew, *Burhinus grallarius*, is *wirlo* and -*min* is a suffix used to describe a collective of people associated with or similar to something. *Wirlomin* is used as a proper noun to name our clan, group and family. The *wirlo* is a predominantly nocturnal, skinny, long-legged and large-eyed bird that relies on camouflage for survival. When we visit schools, Hazel Brown sings out its eerie call to groups of children and delights in telling them how scared she was when she first heard its voice. As she says, *wirlo* can disguise itself so well you might never see it. Partly because of its blood-curdling call, some Noongar groups regard *wirlo* as a messenger of death. For us Wirlomin, it is a spiritual companion and, often being invisible, its defining characteristic is its voice. This vulnerable bird speaks from the realm of spirit to remind us of our place and of who we are. Noongar language can also function in that way.

Wirlomin is a communal identity used to refer to a particular Noongar community that is now stretched across a wide area of southern WA. Hazel Brown and Helen Hall are among

the last of a generation of senior Noongar people who have ensured the survival of the term. Hazel Brown explains:

> Old great-great-grandmother's old father used to shout like a curlew, and disguise himself to look like a curlew. And that's why that family called themselves Wirlomin. *Wirlo*, that means curlew, see? And actually they're a very shy bird. You'll hear them, but you'll very seldom see 'em. Unless you're very quiet, very quiet … (Scott & Brown 2005: 22)

She refers to a specific Wirlomin site and ritual:

> We got right in the swamp, freshwater, got right up there close, and just before we get towards where the old camps were, Daddy said, "You gotta stop here now and make a fire. You gotta make smoke and let 'em know that you're coming."
>
> So he cleared the ground and he got a little bit of dry grass and he dug a hole and he lit a fire. He had to be very careful 'cause it was summertime and we didn't have any water.
>
> The fire burned up and he chucked some green bushes on; and then the smoke, see. Soon as the smoke went up … well, you shoulda heard the curlews, boy. Hear them singing out. They singing out over there, and then on this side. All around us …
>
> Daddy sang out: "Wirlo wii wii wii …"
>
> He said, "That's it, you're right now. That's the Wirlomin people letting us know. We're right now." And he just hit the two sticks together like that, and no more.
>
> We heard 'em, but we didn't see one. (Scott & Brown 2005: 24)

The *wirlo* may be hidden from view but heard by those who go through certain processes, wait and listen out. One might benefit from working with endangered Indigenous languages in a similar fashion.

The network of Noongar people connected to Wirlomin heritage covers a large area of ancestral country, ranging from approximately Cape Riche along a quite narrow strip of land reaching beyond Esperance. This area intersects with territory specified in the Tindale map (1974) as: *Koreng* – after the southeastern dialect *Kurin* (Laves 1929–1932); *Wudjari* – a term from the neighbouring Ngatju language, according to von Brandenstein (1988: 131); and *Njunga* – presumably one of the many alternate spellings of Noongar. The southeastern Noongar region is also referred to as *Ngokgurring* – 'shell' people (Taylor in Curr 1886: 392) and *Kwetjman* – 'boney' people (Douglas 1976: 6). More than anything, these names suggest a multiplicity of relationships between people and place.

Archives and the home community

Along with material collected from our senior people over the past 10 years or more, Laves' Noongar language fieldnotes have been crucial to Wirlomin language revitalisation activities. His notes were neglected until the 1980s when his family sent them to Australia to be placed under the guardianship of AIATSIS. In 2006, AIATSIS, John Henderson at the University of Western Australia and a reference group of Noongar people including descendants of Laves'

informants and key stakeholders set in place an initial protocol for the return of the Laves material to its community of origin. Some of those in the reference group worried that it is one thing to suggest rules for who should control the access to those materials, but another thing altogether to find a way to genuinely return that material to a community of people descended from the informants, let alone consolidate it in ways that bring that community together.

As Wirlomin people, many of the individuals involved in the Laves reference group chose to band together and develop relevant material over a series of workshops under the guidance of elders descended from Laves' informants. Wirlomin committee member Iris Woods explains:

> We're very proud that our old people did come down to Albany and talk about their language. They sang in song, they talked about the history, but mainly stories. So everything was written down and recorded by this Laves. When I first laid eyes on the paperwork and saw that written material and Kim said this is what the story's about, it actually brought tears to my eyes because I was proud … it's a treasure to me. (Pers. comm., 12 September 2015)

In 1931, Bob and Malcolm Roberts, Fred Winmer, Simon Williams, and George Nelly told Laves stories that would inspire many of the Wirlomin books.[1] Hazel Brown was only a child in 1931, and Bob Roberts was a young man. She and her siblings Lomas Roberts and Audrey Brown called all the informants 'uncle', and their father was brother to two of them (Bob Roberts and Malcolm Roberts) and brother-in-law to another two (George Nelly and Simon Williams). Gerald Williams was the son of Simon Williams. George Nelly had died when his children – Helen Hall and Russell Nelly – were still very young. Since we began this process, a number of Wirlomin people important to the return, consolidation and development of material have passed away, including Lomas Roberts, Audrey Brown, Gerald Williams Sr, Edward Brown Sr, Geoffrey Woods, Gerald Williams Jnr, and Russell Nelly. The aging of our senior people and the turbulence in our community means that there is no doubt we will lose more key people.

Wirlomin was incorporated in 2010 as an organisation with a cultural elders reference group (CERG) and committee. As a voluntary organisation, Wirlomin has relied on a diverse range of small federal and state government grants, plus support from two separate Australian Research Council projects, to continue its work. Longstanding Wirlomin committee members include senior Noongar language teachers Yibiyung Roma Winmar and Iris Woods, and Noongar cultural ambassador Ezzard Flowers, who had previously overseen the repatriation of the 1940s Carrolup paintings by Noongar children from Colgate University in the USA. Wirlomin is also indebted to the tireless efforts of non-Indigenous committee secretaries Mary Gimondo and Lefki Kaillis as generous collaborators in the cross-cultural team so important to an organisation like this.

In recent years, the Wirlomin CERG has expanded from its initial focus on representing the senior descendants of Laves' informants in order to facilitate work with archival audio recordings. CG von Brandenstein's (1967–1970) field recordings at Esperance feature captivating – although poorly recorded – performances of Noongar song by brothers Charlie and Sam Dabb (Bracknell 2017). As the children of Sam Dabb and nephew and niece of Charlie Dabb,

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1   *Noorn* (2017) is based on a story Tinjel Fred Roberts told to his great-grandson Ryan Brown.

Henry and Annie Dabb guide the process of working with this material. Albert Knapp is also now a member of the CERG after graciously sharing two old Noongar songs – and one of his own composition – with Wirlomin members at a number of meetings and workshops. Every year, Wirlomin members review the CERG members group and nominate new members in order to ensure solid cultural governance for working with heritage material.

Making decisions

The Wirlomin CERG provides archival material with a grounding in cultural context and kin. Wirlomin committee member Yibiyung Roma Winmar describes the process of workshopping the Laves material with the elders:

> Well, everyone came down here to Albany to return the stories back to the descendants. All the families that were involved and the family groups came together. We sat down and went through the manuscripts word by word actually. And people'd say, "Yeah, I remember that, and this is the way it's said," and it was, well, people cried and cried some more, you know with happiness and, well, relief, because there was a time when our language was suppressed and now here we have it back from somebody else. Gifted back more or less overseas to come back to West Australia. It was unexpected. And then I think you sort of realise how much you had valued it and how much you'd missed out on. (Pers. comm., 12 September 2015)

Guided by the CERG, Wirlomin workshops involve the gradual interpretation of archival heritage material and the group working together to reach consensus on orthographic and semantic issues. For example, Laves wrote the surname of his 1931 informant Fred Winmer as *Windmill*, *Williams*, and *Winmer*. Sometimes it has been written elsewhere as *Winmar*. Elders of our group preferred the spelling *Winmer* to reflect their sense of how it should be pronounced. This was only one of many discussions about how we might best match the spelling and sound of a particular word.

The IPA Laves employed in his notes is hard to read, and rather idiosyncratic. His notes have no punctuation, and often no translations. We studied the current standards for IPA and, after applying it to transcriptions of recordings of Lomas Roberts, Cedric Roberts, Audrey Brown, and Hazel Brown speaking Noongar language, went through parts of Laves' transcriptions with some of the elders identified as being related to the informants. Lomas Roberts had heard parts of some of the stories before, recognising words and phrases, although he was befuddled by some of the text and said some of the language did not sound right.

There seemed to have been changes in Noongar language in the 70 plus years since Laves had made his notes. When pronouncing a particular word in the way indicated by Laves' script, Lomas Roberts' elder sister Hazel Brown said, "Yes," with a look of surprise, "we used to say it like that" (pers. comm., 15 January 2007). Occasionally, the elders pointed out mistakes that Laves appeared to have made in translation. Often, they were reminded of stories and anecdotes, or encouraged the group to talk about things that may otherwise have

been neglected. Even in the early stages of this process, it was easy to see the value-adding quality of bringing together archives and elders.

Linguist John Henderson (2008) had digitised and converted Laves' manuscript to searchable typescript, making the material far easier to read and work with. However, in a Noongar community workshop setting, using digital files projected up onto a screen at the front of the room imposed a counterproductive classroom-like structure on proceedings. Alternatively, transcribing the material in Laves' notes onto butcher paper facilitated a more dynamic and flexible workshop environment. The butcher paper could be put on the floor in the centre of an inner circle of elders, with others gathering outside, coming in and moving away. The elders would pick up pens and scribble over the paper, making corrections.

Some of our most recent workshops focused on interpreting Charlie Dabb's songs recorded by CG von Brandenstein (1967–1970). The small group involved included Henry and Annie Dabb, Gaye Roberts, Roma Winmar, Iris Woods, Justin Miniter, and the authors. Before the workshops, we edited the songs and relevant metadata out of the long, digitised field recordings. As a group, we spent whole days meticulously listening to each lyric on repeat and at various different speeds using Transcribe! software. We would make annotations and corrections on lyric sheets, often using our own personal orthographic conventions.

At one point, we were puzzled. It seemed as if Charlie Dabb was singing the English word *white* at the beginning of a song. The original tape recordings sounded sped up, dubbed at a higher speed, so we reduced the speed and pitch of the audio back to something sounding more like what the original performance would have sounded. After this modification, we heard more nuanced vowel sounds and a few consonants that had not previously been noticeable. Henry Dabb asked for confirmation of where the song had been recorded (Pink Lake, near Esperance, WA). Then he suggested that his uncle Charlie Dabb was not singing *white* but *waalitj*, a Noongar word for the wedge-tailed eagle. This discovery opened up an understanding of the rest of the lyrics, which had once seemed obscure but were suddenly revealed to be describing an eagle hanging in the sky.

Contextualising in Country

As longstanding Wirlomin member Olivia Roberts explains, "Every story that we share actually has got a place so we're mapping back to where we and where our rellies [relatives] used to go" (pers. comm., 12 September 2015). During the first cycle of the process to claim, control and enhance our heritage – culminating with the publication of *Maamang* (2011) and *Noongar mambara bakitj* (2011) – we filmed Hazel Brown and Lomas Roberts taking us to places that connected with the stories we had developed, and to old camping and dancing grounds and other sites along the south coast of Western Australia that were important to them. Fifty copies of an edited version of that film were distributed at the start of our second cycle of workshops. In late 2012, we visited one of the sites where the core version of *Dwert baal kaat* (2013) belongs, and retold it with its text of rocks, earth, and water as our witness. Some of us visited some of the more remote sites associated with this story in 2015 and 2018 with support from South Coast Natural Resource Management, a government organisation.

Yibiyung Roma Winmar played a major role in putting *Ngaawily nop* (2017) together, helping with the text and also, with her daughter, Alta, doing the illustrations. Yibiyung came with us when we took the story to its origin landscape, and although it is part of her ancestral country she had never been there before:

> It's very emotional. I feel full. I feel full of tears, I feel full of joy. It's hard to explain, like when somebody's been away for a very long time and they've returned on a journey and you rush out to meet them and there's all these hugs and tears and … The project now has enabled me to come to these places … It's a spiritual journey, to be walking this way again, reinforcing that bond to Country. (Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc. 2010)

In an Aboriginal context, the term 'Country', written with a capital letter, signifies land, sea, and sky as "nourishing terrain" (Rose 1996: 1): alive, multidimensional, and intertwined with local Aboriginal people and culture. Embedded with aspects of an ancient worldview associated with its place of origin, an Aboriginal language is one of the most powerful manifestations of the spirit of Country.

Sharing with the broader Noongar community

Before the publication of each Wirlomin book, we have held an event at the Noongar Centre in Albany, WA, featuring an exhibition of the book illustrations as artwork, photographs from all the workshops so far, and a reading of each of the stories. We have also ceremoniously handed out advance copies of the books, sometimes including a CD of the stories being read aloud in Noongar language to the Cultural Elders Reference Group and other individuals who represented key families in the Albany Noongar community. Our intention was to celebrate the stories, as well as to create a sense of community ownership and a situation where individuals might find employment in schools and other places because of their knowledge of both the stories and the process of their creation. More than this, we wanted to use these stories to bind a community together rather than allow rivalry over our collective heritage to exacerbate other community tensions and tear us apart, as sometimes happens in oppressed communities. We hoped the people who received the stories would share them with their family and friends.

As part of the process of returning stories to their home community and sharing them from there, we have also given presentations at local schools. These sessions usually begin with an introduction of ourselves as Wirlomin Noongar, an illustrated explanation of our process, then the sharing of some of the published stories and one or two songs. The team of presenters has varied slightly as individuals felt ready to take on greater roles, and has always included elders. These presentations placed some of us in a novel position: non-Indigenous people were listening avidly to what we had to say, and grateful for what we were sharing. Judging by the enthusiasm with which Noongar students introduced themselves to our group, and the extent to which they wished to share stories told in their own families, many other Noongar people also felt proud.

Although some among our group of presenters have teaching experience, most of those involved had little prior experience of presenting like this, certainly not as a group. At the end

of a string of visits to south coast schools in 2012, Wirlomin member Connie Moses said, "I'm just so proud to be part of the journey. We are a team … we're growing together. I just can't wait to get up and dance and sing. It's just so wonderful to hear everyone speak" (Scott & Nelly 2013: 35). Iris Woods noticed increased group cohesion as the week progressed, stating: "It was deadly because we did it all and we were a group, one and all. You could feel the power among us" (Scott & Nelly 2013: 35). Ezzard Flowers acknowledged the highly charged and visceral nature of the presentations, observing the need to "acknowledge where each of us are at emotionally, spiritually and socially, because that can affect your performance too" (Scott & Nelly 2013: 35). Russell Nelly stressed the personal significance of Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Inc. as part of his journey of connecting to heritage and family:

> All you people here, you're my family whether you realise it or not. I wanna tell you it's a privilege to share what we feel with the kids … I get emotional at times, but when I get emotional I'm listening to the old fellas. Because they're talking to me, along with them talking to you guys … Wirlomin is not just a name. Prior to this I was lost. I had circumnavigated Australia three times looking for my identity and it brought me all the way back to Katanning. I heard of the Wirlomin mob. I thought, no they don't want me. That's all changed now. We've got something tangible. What we've lost, we are resurrecting it. So, my people, we go with our heads up high, proudly. (Scott & Nelly 2013: 35)

Evidence of community development via developing and sharing stories and language is implicit in these observations. Decolonisation is a word some might also apply to this work (Araluen 2017): shaking off some of the legacy of oppression, and reconnecting with cultural heritage so as to heal and strengthen ourselves today. Neither 'community development' nor 'decolonisation' are commonly used in our community, but their conceptual heft is recognised.

Conclusion

A small minority of the original Noongar population survived the first 50 years of colonisation (from 1829) (Aboriginal Legal Service 1995). Western Australia was then home to an apartheid-like regime until deep into the 20th century (Haebich 2000). Noongar language, and the Noongar community itself, is still recovering from that. This is the fundamental basis for the kind of work described here. Australia is a stolen country. Noongar language was nearly taken from us. The circumstances in which Noongar cultural heritage was decimated demand that language revitalisation be undertaken as part of a process to empower Noongar people. This is possible by starting with a small 'home community' and progressively sharing with ever-widening circles. The fragmented and incomplete nature of archival records relating to the Noongar language emphasises the need for those within its home community of origin to make corrections, add missing metadata and make informed decisions about their cultural heritage material. In revitalising language by running it through living Wirlomin Noongar bodies, we make ourselves instruments for this deep, spiritual heritage that thousands of generations have entrusted to us in this part of the world.

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