Conceptualizing Noongar Song

CLINT BRACKNELL

As of 2011, an estimated 669,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 3 per cent of Australia's total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Of that population, over 30,000 people from a uniquely large urban/rural area in the southwest of Western Australia—including the author of this article—identify as Noongar (also spelled Nyungar). This makes Noongar one of the largest Aboriginal cultural groups in Australia (SWALSC 2009; see figure 1); and yet, the Noongar language is critically endangered, with just 369 speakers acknowledged in the 2011 Australian census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Noongar language is not unique in this regard; the most recent National Indigenous Languages Survey indicates that only "around 120" of more than two hundred Aboriginal languages are still spoken and that "about 13 can be considered strong" (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014:xii). Music traditions, often strongly tied to language, are disappearing too: approximately 98 per cent of Aboriginal musical traditions have been lost since colonization (Corn 2012:240). As is the case with most of Aboriginal Australia, traditional Noongar music is primarily vocal, featuring lyrics in the Noongar language. This implies an inextricable link between Noongar language and Noongar song traditions, a co-dependency that is critical for the vitality of both.

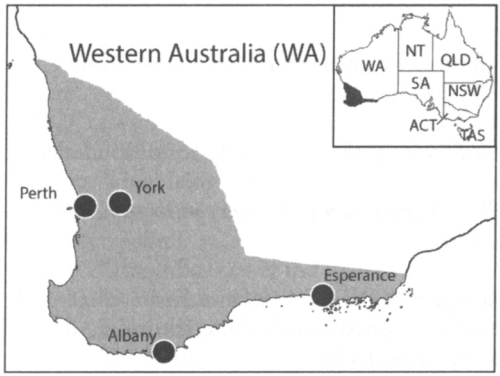


Figure 1. Shaded area indicates Noongar language region of Western Australia (produced by Ashley Quirke, 2017, with ArcGis ® software. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved).

In general, British colonization of Australia began in the south of the continent and gradually spread north, causing disruptions to Aboriginal cultures (Haebich 2000; Reynolds 1982). Some scholars suggest that a longer period of colonization in the south resulted in European music gradually overwhelming the Aboriginal music traditions of these regions to a greater extent than more northerly areas (Donaldson, Gummow and Wild 1998:465). Indeed, since

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the establishment of the Swan River Colony (Perth) in Western Australia in 1829, Noongar endured the full impact of foreign invasion, "deaths, dispossession, loss of land and culture, racism, segregation, removed children, forced assimilation and dire poverty within a rich country" (Haebich and Morrison 2014:1). In this context, the intergenerational oral transmission of Noongar language and song diminished considerably.

Historical evidence suggests that the Noongar language was once sung as frequently as it was spoken (Bracknell 2014), although this no longer remains the case. While archival manuscripts and audio recordings suggest a diverse regional song tradition (ibid.), few old songs are recalled by the senior generation of Noongar speakers today. However, the continued transmission of Noongar song and language is not to be underestimated. For example, testimony in Noongar language and the performance of a single Noongar song figured significantly in Noongar claimants winning the first and only successful native title claim over metropolitan lands in Australia in 2006 (Koch 2008).[1] Furthermore, the recent repatriation of archival song recordings to the Noongar community has triggered memories of additional old songs not previously recorded (Bracknell 2016).

Over the past decade, my growing awareness of the precarious nature of Noongar language vitality and a sense of responsibility to my Noongar family has motivated me to actively pursue a greater understanding of my ancestral Aboriginal language. Concurrently, I am assisting an Albany-based cultural organization, the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, with language revitalization activities in the southwest of Western Australia. Encouraged by senior Noongar to learn more about the aesthetics and potential sustainability of Noongar song, I also am undertaking a largely ethnomusicological investigation of mostly archival song material. Importantly, I acknowledge that my motivations as a researcher "are 'activistic' and Noongar-centric, coalescing around individual and collective desires to maintain and strengthen Noongar identity, cultural distinctiveness, and well-being" via the revitalization of an endangered language and parallel song tradition (Bracknell 2015:212).

As part of a broader study of the aesthetics and sustainability of Noongar song, this article examines historical evidence, oral accounts, and Noongar vocabulary in order to reveal functions and characteristics of Noongar song. My intention is to establish an historical and sociocultural context to inform future musical and linguistic analysis of Noongar performances. After considering approaches to the functional categorization of Aboriginal Australian song, I review Noongar-language terminology used to describe musical activity, pointing to the significance of language itself as a form of cultural archive. The first part of this article concentrates on the communicative function of Noongar song and

1. This decision was subsequently appealed by the Western Australian State Government and overturned by the Federal Court.

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its transmission. In the second part, I describe several types of songs, including Dreaming songs, crying songs, and songs for dance performances, illustrating a broad and multifaceted regional music culture.

WHAT SONG CAN DO

Koch and Turpin identify various roles of Aboriginal song in central Australia. They state: "One of the most important reasons Aboriginal people sing is to assert their relationship to the ancestral beings who shaped the earth, created the social order and cultural practices. The very power and presence of these beings is recreated through performance of songs and can affect the natural environment" (2008:169). Expanding on this point, and emphasizing the important link between certain songs and geographical locations, Gammage explains: "Senior people who learn more song expand their geographical and spiritual knowledge and acquire more rights to responsibilities, including the duty of singing country into life, sometimes beyond their boundaries. In turn a properly sung song's plains, hills, rocks and waters care for its people and animals" (2012:126). Additionally, Koch and Turpin point out that central Australian songs are key features of formal initiation rites, and are also performed to shame, harm, attract (e.g., love songs), heal, or entertain (2008:169).

Researchers have studied how Aboriginal singing functions in dispute resolution (Pilling 1958) and power plays (von Sturmer 1987), as well as how song is used to evoke memories of deceased relatives (Evans 1995) and increase the prestige of performers in the community (Reynolds 1994). Furthermore, H. Reynolds (1982) provides examples of Aboriginal communities using song to quickly spread news of recent events over considerable distances. In 1846, former Chief Protector of Aborigines George Augustus Robinson stated that the "rapid communication of the natives in this respect is astonishing" (quoted in Clark et al. 1996:61). These functions, demonstrated in examples drawn from all over Australia, appear to be shared by Noongar song in the southwest of Australia.

Various models for the classification of Aboriginal songs in accordance with their cultural and social function have been presented (Walsh 2007). Laurisden, for example, offers broad functional categories, including clan, sacred, entertainment, and charm songs (1983:77). Based on work in Arnhem Land, Moyle distinguishes men's and women's songs before listing detailed subcategories (1974:47–89). Approaches to categorization may also blend function with musical characteristics. Treloyn (2006), for example, considers group—rather than solo—Aboriginal singing traditions in the north of Western Australia: she distinguishes *junba* group repertories in North Kimberley from the communal Aboriginal singing styles of neighbouring regions, and identifies three different types of *junba* via local nomenclature and descriptions of function and performance.

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Because Noongar song is no longer performed widely, it is difficult to account for the potential breadth of the tradition through application of similar functional categories to the currently sung repertoire. Indeed, Gummow's study of similarly diminished Aboriginal song traditions in New South Wales points to the importance of historical literature in assessing the scope of precolonization musical practices. Gummow contrasts "song categories identified by *Bundjalung* people" with "song categories identified from the literature" (1992:74). As Noongar musical practices also have endured considerable disruption, examining and synthesizing evidence found in historical literature, oral testimony, and the Noongar language itself supports a more detailed understanding of the scope of traditional domains for Noongar song.

NOONGAR SONG VOCABULARY

Noongar did not keep written records during precolonial times; analysing Noongar language used to describe musical activity, however, may provide insights on historical functions and contexts for song performance. Ethnomusicological research depends on awareness of the vocabulary and terminology used by communities to invoke culturally specific conceptualizations of music (Feld and Fox 1994:27). Ethnomusicologists are keenly aware of the need to devise "strategies to avoid subsuming Aboriginal performers' realities to our systems of knowledge" (Marett 1991:44) and this approach is generally compatible with a deeper discourse in recent Indigenous music research, which asserts the right for Indigenous people to interpret their own culture for outsiders via the privileging of Indigenous worldviews and language (Browner 2000).

Western and non-western categorizations of what constitutes speech and what constitutes song can vary considerably (List 1963) and terms for singing in Aboriginal languages often carry a range of meanings (O'Grady 1984). For example, Alpher (1991) associates one term for singing in the northern Queensland Yir Yoront language with five additional definitions. Furthermore, Mackinlay explains that at Borloola in the Northern Territory, the Yanyuwa term *ngalki* pertains to "that thing which marks the individual identity or essence of something," covering taste, smell, positioning, musical structure, melody, rhythm, and other musical qualities (2005:85). In general, blurring the boundaries between what non-Aboriginal people consider speech, emotional expression, and song is common in Aboriginal Australian contexts (Stubington 2007:1).

Moisala notes that "because languages are formed over the course of time in the contexts of society and culture, they may be approached as reflections of social and cultural systems" (1995:10–11), supporting the assumption that analysis of musical vocabulary provides deeper understandings of musical cultures. Indeed, a language such as Noongar, which carries few markers of the incorporation of

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other languages, could be considered to "represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history" (Crystal 2000:38). Accordingly, any interpretation of how people conceptualize music can only be enhanced when underpinned by an understanding of how they use language.

Enlisting Noongar music terminology as a research tool is complicated by the critically endangered state of Noongar language and song; the widespread use of the English language among Noongar today; and, the absence of a complete authoritative description of the language. However, analysis of the most comprehensive Noongar wordlists—compiled between 1840 and the present day—reveals a number of common terms associated with singing (Grey 1840; Moore 1842; Bates 1904–12; Laves 1931; Douglas 1968; von Brandenstein 1988; Dench 1994).[2] The high degree of polysemy evident in these Noongar terms may indicate specific conceptualizations of song.

Figure 2 lists Noongar terms describing song activity, demonstrating the range of meanings contained within a single term. Noongar word lists also include the terms *waang* and *maaia* listed in figure 2 with qualifiers (e.g., see figure

NOONGAR TERM	TRANSLATION	INFERRED CONCEPT
waang	speak/sing	song as communication
maaia	song/melody/voice/sound	song as an aesthetic object to be composed, performed or received
maal, waal	cry/sing	laments or expressions of grief
ken	sing/dance	song performance linked to dance
yiada (yiadi)	sing/song-without-dance	song performance independent of dance

Figure 2. Noongar terms with their direct translations and the concept they infer.

NOONGAR TERM	TRANSLATION	INFERRED CONCEPT
baam waang	hit speak/sing	song accompanied by percussion
kerla djena waang	boomerang feet/step speak/sing	song accompanied by boomerang percussion and stomping
koordang waang	spouse/heart-with speak/sing	love songs
waab waang	play speak/sing	fun songs and dances for entertainment
ken waang	sing/dance play	
keda waang	carry speak/sing	song custodianship or transmission
maaia ked	song/melody/voice/sound carry	

Figure 3. Noongar terms (*waang* and *maaia*) with qualifiers, direct translations, and the concept they infer.

2. The Noongar language has been documented with a range of inconsistent orthographies. For the sake of consistency, all Noongar words in this paper have been converted to the standardized Noongar spelling system first described in Whitehurst (1992).

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3), revealing additional information about song topic, aesthetics, function, and accompaniment. Certain words that appear less commonly in these vocabulary lists nevertheless expand our understanding of Noongar song practices. *Maarral* (singing along), listed only in Laves' (1931) linguistic work, suggests the participatory nature of communal Noongar singing. And a compound term, *yooert yiadi*, used by Noongar singer Charlie Daab, refers to both a particular species of Butcherbird and "good-taste song." This reference suggests the existence of Noongar criteria for what constitutes a "good" or pleasing melody (von Brandenstein 1988:143).

SONG AS COMMUNICATION

Use of the Noongar term *waang* to refer to both speaking and singing may indicate something of the function of song in interpersonal communication among Noongar (see figure 2). In one of the earliest accounts of Noongar singing, Phillip Parker King wrote about a lengthy conversation between a Noongar man who boarded his ship and the man's compatriots on the shore. Overheard in 1821 when King was visiting the place now known as Albany, the Noongar man apparently "explained everything to them in a song" (1827:118–119). Similarly, colonial surgeon Isaac Scott Nind, making observations of the same southern location in 1831, explains that Noongar "when in conversation, not unfrequently break out into a kind of chant" (1831:47). Prominent colonist George Fletcher Moore provides more detail, stating: "They chant in a tone of recitative any striking events of the day, or give vent their feelings when excited, beginning in a high tone, and gradually descending to a low deep tone by regular intervals" (1842:113). These early testimonies imply that the Noongar language was sung almost as much as it was spoken.

The historical importance of sung words is apparent in the function they served in Noongar society. In describing Noongar use of vocal music to facilitate interfamilial and intercultural communication, Grey suggests that the use of song in conversation between individuals and groups is integral to adhering to protocols of social interaction:

> Under no circumstances is a strange native allowed to approach the fire of a married man … Their huts being placed at a little distance from one another, such an arrangement would appear to put an end to anything like social intercourse or conversation; but they have invented a means of overcoming this difficulty by making a species of chant, or recitative, their customary mode of address to each other. In an encampment at night … suddenly a deep wild chant rises on the ear, in which some newly arrived native relates the incidents of his journey, or an old man calls to their remembrance scenes of other days, or reminds them that some death remains unavenged: this is done in a loud recitative, and the instant it is commenced every other sound is hushed. A native, while thus chanting, is rarely or never interrupted, and when

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> he has concluded another replies in the same tone until the conversation, still conducted in this manner, becomes general. (1841:105)

In this, and in the following observation, Grey illustrates that song is employed as a means of formal introduction among Noongar, indicating the seemingly elevated status extended to words chanted or sung, rather than spoken: "If natives meet in the bush the foregoing ceremonies are in part observed: both parties at their first meeting sit down at a distance from one another, preserving a profound silence and keeping their eyes fixed on the ground; after a time one of them commences a chant about himself and from what great family he has sprung" (1841:107).

The importance of knowing a person through their song did not necessarily diminish with the arrival of colonists, with some Noongar quickly becoming familiar with English-language songs and incorporating them into conversations with newcomers (Green and Mulvaney 1992:281; Bracknell 2014). Indeed, Noongar used song to deal with new experiences and challenges associated with colonization (Goddard 1934). George Fletcher Moore describes Noongar leader Yagan performing a song akin to the "chorus in a Greek tragedy," which Moore interprets as a grand proclamation on the inequities of the British invasion (1833:87). Yagan's song is evidence of Noongar speakers purposely using melody and rhythm to signify the importance of a communicative speech act, even when addressing colonists.

The conversational function of song, as well as the capacity to incorporate new elements, points to another quality: there was a significant improvised element. Describing the improvised nature of Noongar singing, Nind writes of some Noongar songs being "perhaps entirely extempore" (1831:47) and Calvert states that "whatever passion or feeling seizes them, the black fellow must express it in song" (1894:38). As another example, in his expedition journal the explorer Sir George Grey recounts that his Noongar guide, Kaiber, "lulled" him during a particularly difficult section of their journey "with native songs composed for the occasion" (1841:17–18). Grey's account of Kaiber's instantaneously composed songs makes a clear distinction between Noongar singing as conversation and as functional performance. The frequency of such exchanges is underscored in Millet's statement that "the natives sing continually" (1872:85).

Making observations on the form of Noongar music, Grey observes that "the natives of Western Australia are very fond of singing and dancing" and describes the repetitious nature of some Noongar songs: "The songs are short, containing generally only one or two ideas, and are constantly repeated over and over again in a manner doubtless grating to the untutored ear of a European, but to one skilled in Australian music lulling and harmonious in the extreme, and producing much the same effect as the singing of a nurse does upon a child" (1841:122). Perhaps explaining the apparent brevity of Noongar song texts, Millet considers the songs she heard to be of "a surprising length" given that the performer "drew a deep

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breath at the starting, and neither replenished his lungs nor brought his ditty to a conclusion until the original stock of wind was thoroughly exhausted" (1872:85). Evidently, early accounts of Noongar songs mostly highlight their economic, enthusiastic, extemporary, and communicative nature.

Although the previously cited examples are based on observations of Noongar men, evidence indicates that Noongar women also regularly sang and composed vocal music. Nind describes how "women more frequently sing by themselves" (1831:47) and a newspaper article from 1833 describes Noongar "women encouraging them [the Noongar men] by their songs" (Macfaull 1833a:166). While Grey (1841) provides transcripts of the lyrics for up to eleven very short Noongar songs that rarely feature more than four repeated lexical items, he also provides English translations for much longer songs that were composed and performed by women. These transcripts indicate not only the variety of scale featured in Noongar music, but may also provide some insight into women's singing practices. Still, ethnographer Daisy Bates (1904–12) transcribes lyrics for a wide range of economical and epic Noongar songs that were composed and performed by both women and men, indicating that singing and song-writing were not always a gender-exclusive or restricted practice and that the length of songs was not gender-related. Further evidence to support these conclusions can be found on comparatively recent audio recordings featuring Noongar men performing short songs composed by their mothers (von Brandenstein 1967–70; Thieberger 1986).

Sung words fulfilled a variety of uses in Noongar society and a wide variety of forms and genres existed. Terminology such as *waab waang* (play-speak/sing) and *ken-waab* (sing/dance-play) in Noongar word lists suggest lullabies (Bussell 1937:5), children's songs, or frivolous performances, while the compound term *koordang waang* (spouse/heart-with speak/sing) implies a genre of Noongar love songs (Bates 1904–12; Brown 2002; see figure 3). It is entirely possible that some newly improvised songs later became part of regional Noongar repertoires, memorializing particular incidents and events. Indeed, senior Noongar Angus Wallam straightforwardly explains that "singing songs was another way of telling yarns" (Bennell v State of Western Australia 2006:93). Just as topical songs in the *tabi* (or *jabi*) style of the Pilbara, Western Australia, may incorporate contemporary phenomena such as airplanes and trains (von Brandenstein and Thomas 1974; Jebb and Marmion 2015), some Noongar songs describe horse races, sheep, boats, and trains (Bates 1914–12; von Brandenstein 1967–70). Reviewing the evidence, it appears that a great many Noongar individuals once routinely composed, performed, and shared songs.

CARRYING SONGS

Song functions as a device to assist the recollection of historical information and experiences. Macfaull proposes that this usage is related to the composition

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of songs as part of everyday Noongar communicative activity: "There is further confirmation of this in their daily practice when particularly excited; they will associate the name of the person who has performed anything particularly novel to their minds, with the effect produced, and gingle [sic] the two for some time, in the character of a catch or round" (1833b:130). Drawing similar conclusions, Robert Menli Lyon characterizes each Noongar individual as a singing historian, explaining: "The whole of each tribe are bards; and their evenings are generally spent around their fires, singing or rather chanting their poetical compositions. I have reason to believe that their history and geography are handed down from generation to generation orally in verse" (1833:52).

And, indeed, Bates states that particular "legendary songs became thoroughly familiar to each successive generation owing to the constant relation of the family legends by one or other story-teller" (1904–1912; 1985:335). Compound terms to describe singing, such as *keda waang* (carry-speak/sing) and *maaia ked* (song/melody/voice/sound-carry), in Noongar wordlists underscore the concept of song custodianship and transmission of a long-standing repertory (Bates 1904–12; see figure 3). Yet Noongar repertories contain more than ancient songs; they were constantly added to by contributors from each successive generation.

Lyon, Macfaull, and Grey's assertions are supported by reports of Noongar singing and sharing songs based on major events in the region. Providing a solid example of this phenomenon in the early twentieth century, Bates (1904–12) describes a performance that was handed down to Nebinyan, a senior Noongar man, from his grandfather. Nebinyan's grandfather was among four Noongar men who witnessed a military drill performed by soldiers under the order of British Captain Matthew Flinders of the HMS *Investigator* on 30 December 1801 when visiting Albany, Western Australia. At the time, Flinders' botanist, Robert Brown, observed that "the natives especially the old man attentively watch[ed] their motions and with a rude stick attempt[ed] to imitate them" (Brown et al. 2001:104). An impression of the drill was incorporated into Noongar traditions to be passed on to future generations and mark the occasion in collective regional history (White 1980). The early twentieth century performance of the inherited piece, as Bates (1904–12) details, involved Nebinyan painting his body with red ochre and white pipeclay in the style of a military uniform to perform the dance and, presumably, an accompanying song.

In research on Aboriginal music from other regions, Stubington (1979:15) explains that to accrue status as a "songman," one must be able to perform well-known existing songs and, most importantly, also be able to create new songs. Nebinyan may be considered in these terms. While he inherited his grandfather's performance about the military drill—a composition that survived in his family for over a century—Nebinyan also drew inspiration from his own experiences for his own compositions. Nebinyan continued his ancestors' tradition of documenting history in performance and, in doing so, added to the collective

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history of his people. Reporting on her experiences coordinating a showcase of Aboriginal performers at the Perth Carnival in 1910, Bates writes of Nebinyan as follows:

> Nebinyan, born at Two People Bay, which formed part of his people's run, is the oldest Southern native living. He was a whaler for 39 years, working along the coast from Albany to Esperance, and along the south-western coast … [H]e is the custodian of all dance and other songs, many of which he was the composer, taking the subjects from his whaling or hunting experience … Nebinyan sang of the hunting of the tammas [wallaby] into the swamps … and then the gathering and the feasting afterwards. He sang of the whales he pursued, and how they took him farther and farther away from his Kal (fire). Then the harpooning and final death of the whale. The great seas that beat upon the Leeuwin and Southern Coast were also alluded to in song and recitative (1910:45).

This description clearly indicates Nebinyan's significance as a performer, composer, and custodian of Noongar song. The fact that Nebinyan inherited his grandfather's song leads Gibbs (2003:12) to suggest that Nebinyan also inherited his position as a "songman" with its attendant recognition and responsibilities to document his own experiences in song.

Accounts of Nebinyan point to the complexities of composition and authorship in Noongar traditions. Colonial observer Grey, for example, suggests that "there is reason to believe that a good deal of it [Noongar singing] is traditional, and may date its origin from a very remote epoch" (1841:124). And, based on his conversations with Noongar men from Albany visiting Perth, in an 1833 newspaper article Macfaull suggests the ancient and inherited origin of some Noongar songs: "Their songs are as they have been described, their traditional history, and although comprising few words, on inquiry it will be found that a distinct legend or tale attaches to each, which it is their delight to explain" (1833b:130). Yet Armstrong, a nineteenth century interpreter at Swan River colony, observes that "there appears to be some rivalry, each tribe exchanging the effusions of its 'balladmongers' for those of its neighbours" (1836:797). His account suggests that the composition of songs was competitive between different Noongar groups. What the account of Nebinyan does is highlight the role of songmen in both carrying ancient traditions and renewing them through the contribution of new compositions.

DREAMING SONGS

The examples discussed so far all point to the existence of a culture in which song is central to both everyday communication and to the maintenance of a shared collective memory—qualities that have been observed in many Aboriginal Australian contexts (Will 2004). Song is also connected to the

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spiritual life of communities: Noongar songs sustain what is known to most non-Aboriginal people as Dreaming. "Dreaming" is an over-simple translation of a foundational Aboriginal concept that contains many connotations. It involves manifestations of ancestral beings as the physical landscape, as the social and ecological order that the ancestors created, and as animals, plants, or natural features, such as wind and fire (Glowczewski 1999). This concept is referred to by different terms in different Aboriginal languages. *Jukurrpa* is the term common in desert languages. The Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land use *madayin*, meaning beauty or nature (Corn and Gumbula 2007), and the Ngiyampaa of western New South Wales refer to *thingkaa* (meat)(Donaldson 1990). In the Noongar context, polysemic words including *biirt* (track/sinew/energy), *maat* (path/leg/stock), and *kooranap* (place-associated-with-long-ago) are connected to this idea (Bates 1904–12; Douglas 1968).

The association of song with Dreaming explains some of the complexities of authorship recorded by colonial observers. The attribution of Aboriginal song creation to ancestral spirits in the ancient past and in the present via dreams may explain colonial observer Grey's inability to discern whether lauded Noongar composers were "living, or belonged to ancient times, or … [were] merely imaginary beings" (1841:123). Noongar attribution of song composition to non-human entities is clearly demonstrated in Noongar singer Ngalbaitch's description of a Noongar "trying to find" a song: "They 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 1904–12). Providing an example of this phenomenon, another Noongar singer, Ngilgian, describes receiving a song in a dream: "I dreamed I was dancing on the whale's back and balancing myself on one thigh" (quoted in Bates 1904–12). Ngilgian's song is a new song, attributed to a dream and relevant to ancient local Dreaming associated with whales.[3]

In an attempt to account for distinctions in authorship, Keogh (1990) describes three general modes of Aboriginal song composition common to the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia:

1. Topical songs composed by people in the same manner as popular music;
2. Ancient songs originating from the Dreaming and handed down through countless generations; and,
3. New songs referencing the Dreaming, revealed to people by ancestral spirits associated with the Dreaming.

3. Scott and Woods (2011) provide an introduction to a Noongar whale Dreaming story.

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Barwick (1999) similarly distinguishes ancient and new Dreaming songs (like Ngilgian's song) within the neighbouring Western Desert area of Western Australia, both of which may reference particular sites of significance and totemic affiliations (Ellis and Barwick 1987). Additionally, these songs may employ esoteric language and be subject to stringent protocols denoting which individuals have authority to perform or share particular songs and the layers of information associated with them (Marett and Barwick 2007).

Similar to the ancient and new Dreaming songs described by Ellis and Barwick (1987), Noongar songs recorded and transcribed in the twentieth century refer to a number of specific locations in and above the southwest of Western Australia, including the Pleiades—or Seven Sisters—constellation (Bates 1904–12) and Mondrain Island off the coast of Cape Le Grande (von Brandenstein 1967–70). Furthermore, Moore (1842) and Bates (1904–12) list what they consider to be a variety of imported and local performance genres associated with specific regions or directions. These genres and directions include:

North: *yabaroo; yalaar*
Northeast: *daardar*, *doodar*; *moordawa*, *moorardang*; *yakaro*; *nilke*; *yenma*
East: *yarrangoo*; *dyoolkyt*
Southeast: *kakarook*, *kakara*; *wirbe*
South: *mirdar*; *yoolydanmitj*
Southwest: *bibbalmin*

Daardar and *mirdar* are also terms used to refer to the white pipeclay and red ochre, respectively, with which performers adorned themselves (Laves 1931; Douglas 1968; von Brandenstein 1988). *Yenma* is a likely adaptation of the Pitjantjatjara word, *inma*, used to describe performances in central Australia (Barwick 2006:60). However, little is known about these performance genres, making it difficult to be certain where they originated from and whether they relate to local Dreaming or are intended more purely for entertainment.

While some performance repertoire seems to have travelled great distances, Bates writes that many songs "are entirely local and are not sung outside the tribe which composed them" (1904–1912; 1985:335). She also describes Noongar songs associated with particular local totemic systems, the performance of which may be restricted to certain individuals on the basis of seniority and totemic affiliation (Bates 1904–12). However, senior Noongar Murray Newman comments on the reduced emphasis on secrecy and gender restrictions in Noongar singing traditions compared to those in neighbouring regions (Tindale 1966–68). Still, certain powerful songs are commonly associated with affecting the natural environment; limiting or increasing rain, wind, or the availability of particular flora and fauna and

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their use, consequently, is often restricted to senior people responsible for the Country concerned (Keogh 1990; Koch and Turpin 2008).[4]

Providing Noongar examples of this phenomenon, senior Noongar woman Hazel Brown remembers songs which influence or communicate with whales, dolphins, gropers, and salmon that are associated with specific areas along the southern coast of Western Australia (Scott and Brown 2005). In an observation about the dynamic relationship between Noongar, song, and Country in York, Millet outlines a Noongar rainmaking performance at a time of drought in 1865 (1872:230). Furthermore, Bates describes Noongar rain songs, charm songs to increase the number of swans and swan eggs at a particular location, and performances taking place "when the red gum was in blossom" to assist the spawning of salmon and sea mullet (1904–12). The qualities of song described in these examples emphasizes the importance of song in communities as a conduit between spiritual life, social organization and local ecosystems.

CRYING SONGS

Song is closely connected with expressions of sadness and grief. Indeed, Noongar man Joe Northover clearly describes *winyarn* (pitiable) song as a distinct category within Noongar singing traditions (Bennell v. State of Western Australia 2006:94) and the terms *maal* or *waal* can mean both sing and cry in the Noongar language (Grey 1840; Moore 1842; Bates 1904–12; Laves 1931; Douglas 1968; von Brandenstein 1988; Dench 1994; see figure 2). Such songs are used to mourn the deaths of family members, but also to lament other forms of separation. For example, Grey describes a Noongar lament composed at Perth to commemorate a local Noongar, Miago, setting out aboard the surveying vessel HMS *Beagle* in 1838. While Miago was away, this lament was "constantly sung by his mother … during his absence" (1841:126). Bates (1904–12) provides another example of a *winyarn* (pitiable) song composed by an unnamed south-coast Noongar woman during the early years of colonization. The song was authored when her husband was imprisoned at the fledgling colony at Albany and, subsequently, was passed down through the generations to her granddaughter, who performed the song. Bates also describes Noongar singer Baaburgurt improvising a song in which he laments the loss of his homeland; the singer had "been brought away from his country … and located on the government reserve" (1904–12).

Grey observes of Noongar expressions of grief and mourning at funerals that "nothing can awake in the breast more melancholy feelings than the funeral chants of these people. They are sung by a whole chorus of females

4. In an Australian Aboriginal context, the term "Country," written with a capital letter, signifies land as "nourishing terrain" (Rose 1996:1)—alive, multidimensional, and intertwined with local Aboriginal people and culture.

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of all ages and the effect produced upon the bystanders by this wild music is indescribable" (1841:125). Grey's description of a Noongar funeral song features younger and older women singing different parts separately and in unison, lamenting a brother they will never see again. As is common throughout Aboriginal Australia, Noongar women wail to mourn deceased relatives and community members, the sustained, tuneful nature of which blurs the boundaries between singing and crying.

Several terms are used to refer to the types of songs performed for funerals. *Kaambarniny keniny* (meeting singing/dancing) is one term recorded to describe Noongar funeral performances (von Brandenstein 1988:64). Such "songs after burial," including one performed by Ngalbaitch and transcribed by Bates, use poetics that describe "blood" as "tearing at the body, to leave it" (1904–12). Citing Balbuk of Perth, Bates explains another type of funeral song: "When a relative is buried the natives amongst the Southern Tribes return to their camp, [and] as soon as darkness comes on they perform … to the Janga or spirits of the dead man, asking him to go over to the sea [and] not to look back at them as he goes nor come back to tease them at night when they go for water but to go away for ever" (Bates 1904–12). Bates notes the lyrics of one of these songs, supplied by Balbuk, which, literally translated, ask "where is the spirit?" and "where is my brother?" (1904–12). The wide range of expression present in Noongar lamentations and crying songs emphasizes the significance of song in dealing with many different situations of despair in Noongar society.

SONG AND DANCE

Referring broadly to Aboriginal Australian performance, Barwick explains that "in many languages a single word is used to denote song, dance and associated ceremony and body decoration" (2006:60). The Noongar term *ken* (sing/dance) may also function in this manner. Grey provides further evidence of this connection. He explains the relationship he observed between Noongar song and dance such that "some songs have a peculiar dance connected with them; this however is not always the case, and I have occasionally seen the same dance adapted to different songs" (1841:124). While pointing to the connection between song and dance, Grey's statement also implies flexibility within Noongar traditions. Indeed, the Noongar term *yiada*, or *yiadi*, refers to singing without dancing (see figure 2).

Noongar performances of ceremony, song, and dance often took place when neighbouring groups visited, "matrimonial engagements" needed organizing, or decisions needed to be made about moving within Noongar territory (Hammond 1933:49). Furthermore, Hammond states that Noongar "used to hold many small corroborees in the warm weather for their

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amusement and to pass away the evening," suggesting the frequent nature of informal Noongar song and dance performances (1933:53).[5]

Song and dance traditions were adapted to deal with conditions of contact and colonization during the nineteenth century. Many accounts by colonial observers describe how performances were organized spontaneously for colonists, sometimes with clear intents and purposes. Moore, for example, describes undertaking a journey to look for suitable pastoral land, guided and accompanied by a group of Noongar. Upon reaching a particularly fertile area, some of these Noongar entertained him with a song and dance performance:

> The several figures did not differ materially from those which were familiar to us, but the words which accompanied each change contained strong allusions to passing events; so much so, that I am led to believe these ceremonials are to them as important as eras, and serve the purpose of historic records. It had been told to them, that Mr Lennard and myself had grants here, and were likely to form establishments on our respective grounds. This was alluded to in one of their songs, and was expressed to the following effect: That the fires of Dyandala and Millendon (the names of our places on the Swan River) would soon be removed to Coonarup; that we should have plenty of wheat, and they would have plenty of bread. (Moore 1835:486–87)

Younger Noongar observers, male and female, appeared to regard this performance with some interest, but the old people, perhaps in despair over the newly developing frontier economy and social order, paid little or no attention to it. Moore's account points to the ways in which Noongar adapted performance traditions to suit their interests, using song and dance as a means of defining terms of reciprocity with colonists in a rapidly changing context.

During the late nineteenth century, one of the first British colonists at the fledging Jerramungup pastoral station in the eastern southwest of Western Australia, describes a particularly large-scale Noongar performance. Ethel Hassell's account described an event involving over two hundred people and lasting between three and four hours. According to Hassell, it was held to celebrate her return to the station with her firstborn child (1936:696). Hassell states that Noongar performed "many dances at their great parties," noting that "in some dances all of the men took part, in others there were often only a few performers" (ibid.). In the performance described as celebrating her return to Jerramungup, women sang a low plaintive song, and men kept time by stamping on the ground, singing and dancing in a complex arrangement of moving circles (Hassell 1936:696). Hassell observes that:

5. The term "corroboree" is considered to be the Anglicized version of a word meaning "dance" in Dharug, an Aboriginal language from Western Sydney, New South Wales, and is generally used to describe Aboriginal song and dance performances in Australian Standard English (Stubington 2007:228).

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> This dance … was seldom performed. Their headdresses were of every sort their ingenuity could conceive, all the birds and beasts having contributed to their adornment. The time kept was perfect. The instant the women's song was finished the men took up their shout, and when they stopped the women, without a pause, commenced their song again. When the men and women joined together, the shouting blended with the soprano notes of the women. The men kept excellent time to either the shouting or the singing. (1936:697)

Hassell also describes a "comic" song and dance performed by only a few individuals, plus a ceremony involving song and dance associated with seasonal firing of the land (1936:698–700). Even these limited descriptions illustrate the wide variety of function and scale present in Noongar song and dance performances.

CONCLUSION

Some Noongar performances, as Grey observes, have "a very peculiar mystical character about them" and, in certain cases, may be "unwillingly" exhibited "in the presence of Europeans" (1841:225). However, the variety of performance descriptions by colonial observers suggests that, while colonist interference was not welcome, the mere presence of outsiders did not deter Noongar from performing. Even the more private and esoteric performance traditions associated with managing local ecosystems and maintaining Noongar cosmologies were practised and sustained in the face of colonial presence. As has been the case across Aboriginal Australia (Donaldson 1979), Noongar in the southwest of Western Australia continued to perform and create songs during periods in which traditional culture was under extreme stress—that is, from the early era of British colonization beginning in the mid-nineteenth century through to more recent times (Bracknell 2016). Descriptions of Noongar songs and performance in historical and archival records serve as examples of a Noongar musical tradition in which singers communicate and memorialize their experiences in song while maintaining relationships with kin and Country.

This article proposed that polysemic terms like *waang*, *maaia*, *waal*, *maal*, and *ken* (see figure 2) carry more than descriptions of music. Particularly as Noongar contains so few markers of other languages, these terms potentially function as an archive of a precolonial era suggesting understandings of song that overlap with conceptualizations of communication, aesthetics of sound, expressions of grief, and performances that include dance. Various historical accounts illustrate the characteristically musical nature of Noongar society and the importance of song for communication among the Noongar during the nineteenth century. These examples reveal that words that were sung—rather than spoken—had special status, effectively capturing audience attention through their dramatic delivery. The range of accounts also reveals the breadth

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of sung Noongar repertoire, ranging from completely improvised vocal music to recent compositions and ancestral songs. The nature of song inheritance and composition speaks to a tradition of Noongar songmen who perpetuate songs from the deep ancestral past and memorialize recent history by performing well-known songs and, most importantly, by creating new ones.

It is clear that both Noongar men and women perform and compose songs. While some songs may be composed as direct responses to recent events, others are revealed in dreams and align with local Dreaming. Although some repertoire was restricted on account of gender, seniority, regional affiliation, or geographical location, many Noongar also composed, performed, taught, shared, and inherited songs within public traditions. Some songs may be integrally linked to a specific dance, although this is not always the case—hence the need for the term *yiadi* to describe song independent of dance (see figure 2). Performances may involve more than two hundred people, or just one individual, and can be staged to serve entertainment, celebratory, or ceremonial functions. Although esoteric Noongar songs associated with cosmological understandings and relationships certainly exist, they are just one facet of a broad scope of Noongar sung repertoire.

Due to their performance context and audience, most Noongar performances described by colonists in historical and archival records must be considered as cross-cultural acts of diplomacy and commerce. While historical records, oral testimony, and language relevant to Noongar singing provide evidence to characterize the scope and nature of Noongar song traditions, the fractured nature of the material and the evanescent nature of Noongar song in the community today obfuscate hard conclusions. Nevertheless, this article has established that Noongar song can be understood as ancient, dynamic, adaptable, multifaceted, and historically omnipresent. A context has been established for further examination of Noongar song and language, a deeper understanding of which may contribute to Noongar cultural sustainability in the future.

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