

Essay: The Not-So-Barren Ranges

Kim Scott

Approx. 7,000 words

k.scott@curtin.edu.au

The Not-So-Barren Ranges

Abstract: An impressionistic and informal essay written near the end of a novelist's Australia Research Council funded research project: 'Developing narratives from language and stories indigenous to the south coast of Western Australia', and informed by how that research project morphed into an emphasis on revitalization of Noongar language, and the attempt to restore connections between a particular Creation Story and landscape in area regarded as 'massacre territory'. An sympathetic reader might think of the topic as 'The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project meets The Barren Ranges'.

1.

We stood on an otherwise deserted beach on the south coast of Western Australia, looking across jostling waves to a series of headlands obscured by distance and sea-haze. George handed me the binoculars. 'Look,' he said, and pointed to where the closest headland and ocean met at the end of the bay's curve. Through the glass my domesticated, suburban eye saw something that reminded me of a power pole. But this was too thick, too tall, and there are no power poles in this part of the Fitzgerald River National Park. No roads even. George might be right; it could be a person. A giant.

We were there to re-unite a Creation Story – recovered from the archives - with its landscape of origin. The linguist's notes said:

When the dogs went into the water he tried to call them back by running along the coast calling ... But the dogs all dived into the water as seals. After they changed into seals he... turned into a stone like a monument (Laves 1931).

A published version says:

Yey, maam dwoort baalap boya nyininy kaalyakoorl...

You go down that way today and you'll see the man still standing there. And

at the other place you'll see the seals rolling down the hill into the water.

They're rock now, and this story is part of our country forever (Nelly 2013: 30).

Some of us had been there before, but not with the story. Was this tall, perpendicular rock part of its topographical text?

Looking through that lens, I remembered a song in the language indigenous to this coastline – Noongar – and which I had first encountered in the historical archives. Described as having been composed 'after the arrival of ships and the use of telescopes had been attained' it begins, remarkably enough, in English:

Captain on a rough sea

Captain on a rough sea

Captain on a rough sea

Then moves to Noongar language, which has been translated thus:

I hear singing near the shore. I look with my glasses for land. It is only cloud.

(Bracknell 2015: 173; Bates1985: 341)

In stark contrast to most of the texts in the historical archives, the un-named nineteenth century composer explores the point-of-view and language of his cultural 'Other', and has his protagonist playing with the new technologies of ship and telescope. I admire the composer's poise, particularly because they are riding a wave of change that will – arguably - destroy that which makes them so impressive.

If the nineteenth century was a time of change in terms of colonial relationships in Western Australia, then so – at least potentially - is the early twenty-

first, not least because of the historic Noongar /Government of Western Australian Native Title Agreement. The agreement is yet to be implemented, but some say it is time for 'nation building' (Kelly 2015). Perhaps.

Not quite 'washed away by the 'tide of history' (Genovese 2004) as may have been expected, those of us on that isolated south coastal beach were limping back to the peaks of ancestral country with a measure of authority; the 'tattered banner' of its language and heritage (Jolly 1995).

It may have been our group that the man with the telescope heard singing, although of course there were nearly two hundred years between our respective observations! And the composer? We made our observations along the same coast, united by landscape and heritage. I'd like to think we were looking for each other.

2.

This is a personal essay, and perhaps provincial in its concerns, so let me offer some background information. It may be useful to have a map of the south coast of Western Australia.

There were ten of us on that isolated beach in the Fitzgerald River National Park. Eight of us were members of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (WNL&SP), two were staff of the non-government organisation South Coast Natural Resources Management (NRM). Nine of us were descended from those Native Title legislation calls 'Apical' ancestors with 'Traditional' connection to the area. Those ancestors were born in before or in the earliest years of Western Australia's colonisation, and at places around or within the national park. Two of us – myself among them – were academic/artists; one was a plant-operator, and one time

chair of SWALSC; one was a SWALSC employee, on leave; four were pensioners or 'unemployed'.

The linguist referred to is Gerhardt Laves. Laves documented the language of a number of Noongar men in Albany in 1931. One of those men, George Nelly, gave him a Creation Story, of which the WNL&SP has published a version – *Dwoort Baal Kaat*. The story *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is linked to topographical features and place names in the FRNP; it belongs there.

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Story Project (WNL&SP, www.wirlomin.com.au) is a not-for-profit cultural organisation established to consolidate and enhance a specific Noongar cultural heritage, particularly of language, story and song. It organises workshops, does presentations at various cultural events and publishes stories and songs. Drawing upon its members (for example, Brown 2005; wirlomin.com.au) and a range of archival material in doing so. Most of its advisory group and governing committee are descendants of the informants in the Laves Noongar archive (Henderson 2006).

The WNL&SP seeks to consolidate and enhance a specific heritage in its home community, and to empower its members through the controlled sharing of that heritage. It conducts workshops in song, story and language; presents at schools and festivals; makes trips to country to reconnect language and oral history with landscape; and produces publications. Most of the people on that beach were members.

South Coast Natural Resource Management (NRM) is an organization that coordinates and administers funding provided by the Australian Government and the Government of Western Australia specifically allocated for natural resource management. Its work is organized under the themes of Land, Water, Biodiversity,

Cultural Heritage and Coastal and Marine (South Coast Natural Resource Management 2015).

We were in Noongar country—Noongar being the Aboriginal people of the south-west of western Australia—an area encompassing Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, and major regional centres including Albany, Bunbury and Esperance, stretching from east of Cape Arid National Park and stretching in an arc to Dongara at its northern extremity (Collard and Harben 2010; von Brandenstein 1988; Douglas 1968). Despite the fact that Noongar people constitute the largest Aboriginal language group in Australia (SWALSC 2009), various factors associated with colonisation have diminished the intergenerational oral transmission of Noongar language, story and song (Colbung 1980; Thieberger 2004). Thus, Noongar language is presently considered ‘critically endangered’ (AIATSIS and FATSIL 2005: 188).

Fitzgerald River National Park (FRNP) - in Noongar country - has nearly 20% of WA’s flora species and is one of Australia’s largest and most botanically significant national parks. It was gazetted under UNESCO’s ‘Man and Biosphere’ programme in 1978 as the ‘core area’ of the Fitzgerald Biosphere. The coastal communities of Bremer Bay and Hopetoun sit at the west and east boundaries of the park, and the towns of Jerramungup and Ravensthorpe at its northern boundary.

Those two towns have historically been hostile to Noongar people.

3.

A publication dating from the nineteenth century describes the pioneering homestead buildings at Jerramungup this way:

Strong jarrah shutters fastened on the inside also two strong jarrah doors which were securely bolted at night. The stone house for the men, also the

stables of stone, and a well of water near the house, which stood on the side of the hill, with a clear piece of ground overlooking the river in front, and the fields all round. Built as a fort in the still earlier days it was comfortable and well protected in case of siege.

There was a small room where the guns and powder and stores were kept (Hassell 1975: 9)

Ravensthorpe is infamous for the sort of conflict hinted at in the above quote.

Because the word massacre makes some members of the Ravensthorpe community, defensive, I will refrain from using the term here. However, there can be no doubt that a number of Aboriginal (Noongar) people were killed as revenge for John Dunn's assassination in 1881. Reports of the incidents vary, but most agree that John Dunn was killed at Cocanarup Station in 1880. Yandawalla (a.k.a. Yungala) was arrested and charged with the crime. Dartaban (a.k.a. Dartemera; 'Jumbo') was also involved, and was a witness in Yandawalla's trial (1881). Yandawalla was acquitted of the murder of John Dunn. Reprisal killings of Noongar people occurred seemingly occurred both prior to and following that acquittal.

A newspaper from the 1930s refers to these times, and begins by describing an area on the Phillips River at the fringe of FRNP as:

...one of nature's beauty spots. It is situated in a rough boulder strewn gorge, the steep sides of which are carpeted with luscious grasses, daisy everlastings, and rock fern, over which tower the tall Yate and smaller Jam trees, the blossoms of which feed hundreds of screeching parrots and parakeets. By following the watercourse up into the gorge one comes to a small waterfall forming a cul de sac, and there... jambed down a deep crevice between two huge rocks, lay a whitened human skull.

The article continues to explain how that human skull came to be there:

...members on the station were then granted license to shoot the natives for a period of one month, during which time the fullest advantage was taken of the privilege. Natives were shot from the station through Lime Kiln Flat, Manjitup and down to where Ravensthorpe is now situated. In the course of their guerrilla warfare the whites arrived one day at the Carracarup Rock Hole, and, knowing it was a watering-place for the blacks, they crept quietly over the hill until they could peer down to the hole. There they saw two natives who had just risen from drinking. Two shots broke the stillness of the gorge and two dusky souls were sent home to their Maker. The bodies were left lying at the rock hole where they dropped as a grim reminder to the rest of the tribe of the white man's retribution (*Western Mail* 1935: 8).

A Western Australian novel developed from research into the area's history has this epigraph, taken from a series of community meetings:

Many Nyungars today speak with deep feeling about this wild, windswept country. They tell stories about the old folk they lost in the massacre and recall how their mothers warned them to stay out of that area. One man describes how Nyungars will roll up their car windows while passing through Ravensthorpe, and not even stop for food or petrol. The whole region has bad associations and an unwelcoming aura for them. It is a place for ghosts, not for living people (Scott 1999).

I write of history, but intended to concentrate on land and language. A specific locale and language make my concerns provincial, but there are international parallels. The writer, artist and cartographer, Tim Robinson, writing of Ireland and its indigenous language, says:

In talk about land and language, there is always a whiff of this third element, blood, and the three have historically made up a deathly stew.

4.

It was dark when we first got to the campsite, and the headlight beams scoped the darkness, bit by bit declaring that this was the clearing we sought. It had been a long, slow trip. There may be a Native Title agreement being implemented between Government and the Noongar community, but we'd nevertheless had to negotiate with the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) to gain access to the particular area of the park we required, and it was indeed fortunate that most of our group regularly fished and hunted in the area and so were familiar with the rangers. We had driven three hours on the bitumen, hosed down the cars – part of a suite of precautions against the 'dieback' disease threatening the flora of the region (Department of Environment and Conservation 2010) – and for another three hours wound our way between trees, the vehicles shoving aside shrubs and saplings as we followed the faintest of wheel tracks. Now and then we came across the curiosity of a padlocked gate, and needed the keys we'd collected from DPaW.

We put up the tents in the car headlights. Lit a fire, put some food on. Someone passed around a guitar to see who could 'tickle its strings'.

We talked about what we hoped to confirm: topographical features that matched the story, where those features were, and what the linguist's notes suggested. And we recounted the story of an ancestral figure hunting with his brother's dogs, moving from east of where we were, across the plains of the park to our north. Time after time the dogs run down game—kangaroo, wallaby, emu, quokka—but, by the time the man reaches them, the animal has been eaten and nothing remains. The man

is displeased; he is hungry. They move back this way (we said), from north-west of where we were talking by the campfire. On high land by the ocean, our ancestor rests, observing the dogs until, sated, they fall asleep. He lights a fire around them. The dogs awake and, leaping through the flames, tumble down a slope into the sea. Then they swim east, back to the other brother (Scott and Nelly, 2013).

The slope they rolled down into the water was close to our camp. We pointed into the darkness toward the ridge. Somewhere out there, in the morning... , but we could see nothing beyond the firelight.

There is a song about this event, of the dogs leaping through the flames. We sang it late that first night. We did not know it then but in the morning we would see the granite boulders; the dogs tumbling toward the water and the man looking after them and calling as they, now become seals, swim along the coast and into the distance.

5.

In 2012—three years before the trip of which I write—twenty five senior members of the WNL&SP visited Cocanarup homestead, the place at the centre of the historical killings, at the invitation of the owners. Cocanarup sits on the Phillips River, and near the town of Ravensthorpe. The visiting group included Hazel Brown and Henry Dabb, senior people descended from Dartaban, the ‘accomplice’ mentioned in accounts of John Dunn’s death. Neither of them had been on the property previously, and Hazel even said she’d promised her mother she’d never go. However, she thought it was necessary so we could all ‘move on’.

The two old brothers who had grown up on the property put on a barbeque, and presented the Wirlomin group with twenty or so grinding stones they’d collected

on their property, further up the Phillips River. Then they took us there, to where, mostly in the nineteen-sixties-and-seventies, they'd collected them. The stones were conspicuous, they told us, because of how they were positioned and because of how different they looked from the other stones around them. And then you felt how they fitted your hand. 'They must've been carried here; so we kept them.'

There were fresh water springs in the rocky river bed even though the river itself, when it flows, is saline. The old brothers showed us an old clearing where, they told us, nothing much ever grows. There were still the remains of a fence around the clearing that was here when they bought the property. Perhaps that was why nothing grows here, they said; the sheep must have grazed it right down.

The clearing is surrounded by sandalwood trees, and younger jam trees behind them. To us, it was obviously an old dancing ground. In the lower corner, there is an arrangement of stones, as of a burial. Is it possible that thousands of years of dancing and of feet compressing the earth have kept it this way ?

They took us to rock water holes covered with slabs of stone. It seemed important, being a group of descendants returning to country that colonial history had made taboo, and to lift the stone slab from a water hole where countless generations sipped.

It might mean something; it might mean nothing. We felt better for having confronted the taboo, and for finding our way to this special place just a little further upstream from where the killing began.

6.

As of May 2015 the Ravensthorpe Shire has a memorial to the Cocanarup story. Initiated by a report from two Noongar women with ties to the district (Forrest 2004).

The memorial site looks our over the Phillips River valley. There is an information board about the homestead, a plaque written in both Noongar language and English, and boards along a walk trail display quotes from various Noongar community members and families.

The messages on those various boards can be quite contradictory.

Many Noongar people have long shunned Ravensthorpe, calling it a taboo place (Eades and Roberts 1984), but there were also Noongar who remained. The 1901 Police Book—year of the town's proclamation—tells us that blankets were given, among others, to:

Johnny Cackle, Mary, Friday, (old) Fanny, Billy Nelly, Kitty, Buttercan, Willebung (Dunn's property), Dinah (Chester's farm), Tilby (Police Occurrence Book 1901).

We know the children of some of these individuals were living among the White community of Ravensthorpe within decades of Dunn's death. Women, especially, seemed to have been encouraged. That is not to say it was comfortable. Local histories make it apparent that a number found the circumstances so discouraging their dark-skinned children were told they were from Fiji, Mauritius ... Anywhere else.

Other survivors were lumped onto reserves and missions with Aboriginal people from other areas, and generations survived the 'apartheid' years as best they could.

It was late 2015 when we followed the *Dwoort Baal Kaat* story through this region, an area infamous for its hostile history. We came with language and story that belonged here and nowhere else and had been bequeathed, as Jared Diamond says in

Guns, Germs and Steel, by those who first created human society in this part of the world, eons ago. At our centre were direct descendants of Dartaban, the Noongar involved in the altercation with John Dunn and which began the infamous killings. Also with us was the son of the man, George Nelly, who had given the linguist the story in 1931.

Russell Nelly is in his mid sixties. He never heard his father tell the story. Russell and his older sister, Helen, went into the mission as very young children because, they were told, their father and mother had died. For most of his life Russell didn't know his family, or where he belonged. All he knew was that he was a black man in racist Australia. It's a story common to many of those among what's known as the Stolen generations, who were taken from their families as part of Australia's assimilation policies in the twentieth century (National Sorry Day Committee).

When we read the transcript of George Nelly's offering to the linguist we did so together, slowly and repeatedly. There was the linguist's International Phonetic Alphabet to negotiate, for one thing. Russell and his sister, Helen, were not the only ones who cried as we began to bring their father's story back to life.

7.

I mentioned looking through the binoculars on the beach.

We had driven from the campsite, following the inlet until it terminated at the beach sand. To the east, a series of headlands, and a ridge high against the morning sky sloping toward us. There are irregularly spaced 'blowouts' - wide patches of sand - among the older, vegetated dunes along the coast

The clean lines and sharp edges of these huge undulating 'blow-outs' look quite beautiful from a distance, and the windblown sand seems almost like

smoke or mist surrounding them. Up close it's different: harsh and dry, and the stinging sand whips at your skin and hair.

We drove from the beach up into the dunes, moving from vegetated areas to where it was still denuded but littered with stones. The stony dunes rose high, and we stopped where the land dropped steeply again to an 'inlet' – a lake of sorts, about 7 kilometres long, replenished mostly by rain falling running down the steep sides of the ridge the other side, all granite sheet and tight packed heath and shrub. There are also fresh water springs at its inland edge. It was mostly dry when we were there, the water remaining at either end. We were at its beach end, and from our high vantage point we could see a large pool among the dunes closest to the ocean. The wind clutched and threw stinging grains of sand at us as we studied the high ridge looming across the way, that ridge of the Barren Ranges. A cluster of huge boulders gathered at the high edge of that ridge, and from there other boulders of similar size were scattered down the slope, as if frozen, it occurred to us, in the act of rolling down the slope.

The next day, we drove around to the other side of the ridge. Boulders spilled from that side too, tumbling toward the sea.

Even below that ridge, we were still high above the sea and, from our vantage point, someone pointed out a handful of emus drinking at the beach edge of the inlet.

We picked our way down from those stony dunes, and back to the beach. The emus scrambled over the fore dunes, feet flicking sand at our vehicles in panicked indignation.

We pulled up and walked into the shade at the corner of the bay, where the sand met the lowest boundary of the steep and stony ridge.

A fishing net had washed in among the rocks at this sheltered intersection of white sand, sea and stone, had rolled itself into a rocky corner, and grown large with the sand its mesh and folds had accumulated. The waves lapped, but could not quite reach.

Three young birds—‘Oystercatcher’ chicks—huddled at that sheltered and very improbable intersection, motionless and trusting to their camouflage. We crouched to study them although—spotted and grey like damp, seaweed-straggled sand—they clearly did not want to be noticed. Some in our party picked them up. Still they did not move. When one was placed back on the ground again, it skipped swiftly to the protection of rocks and sand and the sea slid across, lifted and took it from our reach.

We wouldn't be able to get to that Tall Man at the point, not on this trip at least, and so we turned back. Among the dunes again, some one pointed out what looked like a stone seal, lifting its head and thrusting its chest as if, having rolled down the slope from that cluster at the top, it was making its way from inlet to ocean.

8.

The dogs tumbling to the sea, the man looking out over the ocean – these are ‘textual’, topographical features on the slopes of the Barren Ranges; West Mt Barren, Mid Mt Barren and East Mt Barren were all named by Matthew Flinders in 1802. He was not the only maritime explorer to comment so disparagingly. Land-based explorers were of a like mind:

Most properly has it been called Mount Barren for a more wretched looking country never existed than that around it” (Friends of the Fitzgerald 2015).

The name of this explorer – Eyre - features in the park. So does the story of another explorer, J S Roe. In fact, Roe Highway goes right by my city house in Coolbellup, so I might well take it straight back to the Barren Ranges, where the man after whom it is named wrote of one large area in the dunes not so far away:

The entire 'sand patch' was in motion and enveloped in a thick cloud of sand, moving along with as much facility as smoke, and gaining only fresh impetus by the perpendicular resistance it frequently encountered. To move at all amongst these animated sandheaps with our loaded horses seemed at first a proceeding of rather doubtful issue, on account of the fancied quicksands, but on Bob's assurance it was a safe road, always used by the black fellows to avoid the adjoining rocky scrubby country, we advanced into it, and found the footing tolerably firm throughout its whole extent of three or four miles ...

While traversing that part of this dreary waste which borders on the sea-coast, we came suddenly upon the skeleton of a human being ... Our native immediately explained they were the remains of one of three seamen who had quitted a Hobart Town whaler some 18 months ago in the vicinity of Middle Island for the purpose of walking to Albany. The natives seemed to have been fully aware of the death ... and ascribe it to actual starvation and exhaustion, disclaiming most strongly having used any personal violence, but on the contrary, having endeavoured to assist the only one of them they saw before his death, who had, however, through fear or distrust invariably pointed his gun when any of the natives offered to approach him .The unfortunate man now before us was said to be one of them (Brown 2005: 41-42).

Roe and his group place the body under a cairn of stones, thinking of sand and fossilized bones. His guide was Wirlomin Noongar man, Bob Roberts. An ancestor of ours. Earlier in the journal, Roe wrote that he had learned from Bob how:

*Fresh water is always to be found among sand hills of the sea coast
abreast, by scraping a small hole in the sand*

Finding the body has clearly disturbed Roe's little group, and they continue on their way:

... remarking on the sad spectacle we had just witnessed, having in all probability been occasioned chiefly by want of water, which was everywhere to be had in abundance within a stones throw, by scratching a small hole in the sand (Brown 2005: 42).

Here, Roe reassures himself with what he's learned from his guide. The journal shows that Roe came to rely so much on him that young Bob Roberts almost became the expedition's leader. Roe uses phrases like:

I deferred to the native's judgement...

On the authority of our native...

I learned from our native ... this changed my intention ... and induced me to proceed in the opposite direction (Brown 2005: 40).

Bob's leadership, although obvious, was not nurtured.

Despite a history apparently intending otherwise, South-Western Australia's vernacular is imbued with Noongar language. There are all the place names, for one thing—names of towns and localities that derive from Noongar language—and a glance at the map will demonstrate their uniqueness. Also, many Noongar words provide the common names for Western Australian plants (eg jarrah, karri, tuart...) and animals (eg. dugite, quokka, numbat...). A peculiarly Western Australian word for spear (gidgee) is derived from Noongar (kitj). Perhaps such usage indicates the pervasive connection of land and language, and hint at what such a heritage might contribute to a sense of 'belonging' and identity.

By contrast, it has been argued, the Australian language refers to a "default country" rather than something tangible and 'here'. The home of the English language is narrow, green and wet; so Australia is inevitably wide, brown and dry. The word "drought", so the argument goes, unfairly judges what is naturally irregular rainfall. "River" does not really capture that thing in Alice Springs prefixed by Todd, where the water flows underground, let alone those many Australian "rivers" – like the Phillips, the Gairdener, the Fitzgerald that – those rivers in the FRNP that usually consist of a series of pools, favour distributaries over tributaries, and rarely if ever reach the sea. Australian place names often express disappointment, Arthur would continue; consider Lake disappointment, Mt Misery or Useless Loop. Just east of FRNP is 'Starvation Harbour'. The Barren Ranges sits with such place names. Indigenous languages might show us things differently (Arthur 2003).

On this trip to FRNP, along with linguists' notes and fractured oral history, we relied on Noongar place names to reunite a creation story with its landscape.

Noongar language is endangered. It was listed as 'extinct' in the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) catalogue until 2009, and then updated to 'living' (SIL 2015). Elsewhere, it has been classified as 'threatened' (Ethnologue 2015) and statistical data suggests that it was spoken at home by 163 people in 1996, 213 people in 2006 and 369 people in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015).

Written, the language seems even more frail; even the word Noongar is spelled in various ways: Noongar, Nyoongar, Nyungar... When it comes to place names, the varieties of spelling become even more perplexing. The word for dog, which in the WNL&SP is spelled 'dwoort' in order to better capture the south coast dialect, is most often spelled 'dwert' by Noongars. If not for our desire to respect the emerging consensus on Noongar spelling would have spelled it 'twoort'. You can see traces of this word, in place names within and all around the FRNP. They provide a trace of the story's path, and moving from east to west, include:

Tooardup (east of FRNP, where the man borrows his brother's dogs);

Twertatup creek (off the Phillips River, and near the dancing ground where the grinding stones were collected);

Twertup Creek (there are numerous 'twertup' references in this vicinity);

Wetj koorl (which might almost be a complete sentence—'dwoort wetj koorl'—from our book, *Dwoort Baal Kaat*).

So, as it narrates itself from the east, Russell Nelly's father's story intersects with the Phillips River, upon which Cocanarup homestead is situated, before continuing across the FRNP and returning, via the sea, to a point near the south-eastern corner of the park.

10.

We crept along in three 4WD vehicles, through an area botanically labelled as the 'Esperance Sand Plains' (Beard 1984) and characterised by bristling mallee, stands of yate trees, isolated instances of the skeletal sepulcralis tree, the sentinel-like royal hakea and tallerak that at night looms in the headlights like ghosts.

Each day we used the vehicles to try to access topographical features relevant to the creation story we carried with us. Not exactly meandering, the condition of the tracks and the terrain made it circuitous and slow. We navigated ourselves according to the story, the linguist's notes and the knowledge of those in our group who know the country best.

The last of three vehicles winding single file their way through the scrub I was subject to the sight, at regular intervals, of the front vehicle coming to a stop and a rifle barrel, at first wavering from the passenger window, then held motionless and level as it fixed on its target. Most times, the barrel was raised again, and we drove on. But one time in particular, the cars came to a stop in a plain of mallee, and close beside a tall stand of banksia and sheoak trees which blocked my view of the rifle's target. The barrel wavered, came to a fixed position quickly, and I expected to hear the sound of it being fired. But it wavered, and there was no gunshot. The barrel was raised, and withdrawn back through the car window. We waited for a long time without anyone getting out of their car. Perhaps it was ten minutes, and as I was about to break protocol and open my door to go see what was holding us up the cars began to move again. As we drove slowly past the stand of trees that had screened my sight of what seemed to have gained the attention of the cars in front I saw a kangaroo

staring back at me. No, it was two kangaroos, not ten metres away, and standing in scrub that concealed their heavy haunches so that only their chests, shoulders and heads were exposed. There were very close together, one behind the other. The one closest stared, it seemed defiantly, as the lifted its head so that its furry throat was exposed to our view. The kangaroo closest to us reached back over her shoulders and stroked the head behind her, before clasping it fervently.

They were (I'm not sure which terminology to use) having sex. Making love. Mating. Whatever, it was not a time for killing.

Been too much killing around the FRNP.

That gun was only fired once on our trip, to kill a racehorse goanna. One of us who'd been lucky enough to have been shown how, prepared it in the old way: use a stick, not a knife; put ash on your fingers to ensure a good grip in order to pull its guts out through its mouth; break its legs, and cook it in the ashes.

That evening we talked a lot about a YouTube video that showed how to gut a rabbit without using a knife. The internet reception is very poor on that part of the coast, otherwise we would have taken out a phone and had a look.

11.

We thought we had had found the place where the dogs enter the water and transform into seals. To be absolutely sure I think we'll have to revisit many time with different groupings of people. Along the coast from that spot there is a flat rock barely above the ocean surface, not far from shore - a place for sunbaking seals.

The linguist's notes tell us the seals kept swimming past that rock, swimming back to their master, the first brother:

The other dogs ... went right up along the coast, about 100 miles. Come to a place on the coast called ... That's where his brother was fishing... Then the dogs came all around, popped their head out of the sea and he looked at them and the dogs took a dive back and the man turned into a rock... The second bro is a figure like a rock with dog-like figures around (Laves 1931).

We'd spent days tracking the story. The notes mentioned a place east of the FRNP, but there were no rocks there, only long sand beaches and wide sand plains.

Nevertheless we headed that way, slow-drive-crawling away from the chicks nestling in netted sand, from emus dipping their toes in cool water, from seed-grinding stones and songs of regeneration; it was hot, our destination still several hours away.

Then we were on bitumen again, suddenly rushing to the eastern edge of the park with still – we thought – a distance to go, when the front vehicle stopped and waved us down.

One of the youngest members of our group came running from that car toward us. He pointed to the mountain rearing above (It mightn't be called a mountain elsewhere in the world, but it is here; it loomed one side of us, the sea the other).

Clint had been falling asleep, he said; skull resting against the window glass, eyelids heavy, he saw what reminded him of one of those 'Easter Island statues'; a great head, the forehead, the eyes, nose, chin. It was looking out over the ocean. On the lower parts of the same slope, down to the sea, rocks angled up to that same stony visage. From where we were looking at them, they could have been seals.

The area the notes named was still kilometres away. A Noongar name became a shared, colonial place name and shifted; this part of the story—seals returning to the brother—belonged here.

12.

I offer no conclusions in this essay. I have written about offshoots and coincidental bloomings of a research project that mutated and grew to support Noongar language and story revitalisation, and their connection to specific country and community. Language revitalisation alone, can of itself offer a powerful historical narrative :

Language loss, language retention, and the possibility of language revitalisation, then, can be emblematic of the whole history of colonial dispossession, Aboriginal persistence and a self-assertive and self-determined Aboriginal future (Jolly 1995: 4)

But I speak of more than language revitalisation. I offer a little band of survivors, following a retreating tide of history, and returning; a small community of descendants of those who first created human society in this part of the most ancient continent on the planet providing the catalyst for the realisation and connection to a sense of place deeper than the history of its colonisation.

Earlier in this essay I quoted the Irish writer, Tim Robinson. My ancestry is Irish, along with Noongar, and it pleases me to receive encouragement from such an international source.

Robinson concludes the chapter I had cited, thus:

I present to you a new word: 'geophany'. A theophany is the showing forth, the manifestation, of God, or of a god; geophany therefore must be the showing forth of the earth. In the west of Ireland there is a language and a placelore uniquely fitted to the geophany of that land (164).

The part of Australia of which I speak also has its own unique language, and it is one that has been neglected and discouraged. That is not to say that language more recently attached to an area is without value (even if, sometimes, that value is in the

acknowledgement of its own barren-ness) but there can be no doubt that enormous potential resides in a place's 'Abiding Stories' (Swain 1993) and even, I suggest, in collaborations to again listen and retell them.

Robinson again:

We, personally, cumulatively, communally, create and recreate landscapes – a landscape being not just the terrain but also the human perspectives on it, the land plus its overburden of meanings (162).

But that is Ireland. I have been musing of Cocanarup, and transformation.

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