

A man wearing a high-visibility yellow long-sleeved shirt and a black cap is looking upwards towards a tree. The tree has several small orange objects on its trunk. The background is a dry, hilly landscape under a clear blue sky.

# HEALING COUNTRY

A Case Study of Boola Boornap, Western Australia

**Cover Photo**

Photography: Frederic Loudon

Location: Boola Boornap, Northam, Western Australia

Description: Tommy, a Ballardong Noongar man, and I searched for Bush Tucker during our work break. We found tree gum on the Mungart tree (*Acacia Acuminata*), which is a sacred tree.

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Throughout this thesis, I have approached my research with a decolonising mindset, incorporating methodologies that honour First Nations ways of knowing, such as yarning. I strive to present the perspectives and voices of the Noongar people with the respect and prominence they deserve. I am particularly grateful to Tommy, George, Dawn, Felicia, Bianca, Yuki, Ine, Jesse, Marcus, Clayton, Dylan, Dave, Charles, Genevieve, Oral, Heidi, Alan and Andrew for their invaluable insights and experiences.

As a Western academic researcher, I present my work within the frameworks and requirements of Leiden University. Consequently, comparisons to Western frameworks are necessary to fulfil academic criteria and facilitate broader understanding. These comparisons are not intended to place Western knowledge above Indigenous knowledge but rather to bridge understandings and create dialogue between different epistemological systems.

I am deeply grateful to the NLE and Boola Boornap community for their generosity, patience, and willingness to share their stories and knowledge with me. This thesis is as much a product of their insights and guidance as it is of my academic endeavours. Any shortcomings in this work are entirely my own, and I hope this research contributes positively to the ongoing efforts of Healing Country. I aim to articulate new ways of understanding so that scientists and Indigenous knowledge holders can come together, respect each other's epistemologies, and provide a better outcome for all who inhabit Boodja.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, Lustra+ Scholarship Fund, Leids Univeristeits Fonds, my Soup group and Professor Mark Westmoreland for their patience and guidance throughout this academic year. Your support has been very helpful.

# Abstract

This thesis explores "Healing Country" through a detailed case study of the Noongar Land Enterprise Group and the Boola Boornap tree nursery in South-West Australia. Healing Country represents a journey of ecological restoration intertwined with the cultural and spiritual revival of the Noongar people. This research integrates participant observation, semi-structured interviews, yarning—a culturally embedded narrative exchange—and ethnographic filmmaking. The combination of these methods captures the deep connection between the Noongar community and their ancestral lands.

The study reveals that Healing Country transcends traditional Western scientific epistemology, highlighting an experiential relationship with the land that is deeply felt. Historical challenges from colonisation and policies like the "1905 Aborigines Act" have left lasting scars on the Noongar people, making their healing process both ecological, cultural and, most importantly, personal. Insights from Noongar leaders, such as Oral McGuire, highlight the necessity of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary ecological practices. These perspectives challenge Western thought and advocate for a holistic approach that respects the spiritual and cultural dimensions of resilience.

The recent referendum on establishing an Indigenous Advisory Body in Australia, which resulted in a "no" vote, validates the ongoing struggle for respect, true recognition and integration of Indigenous perspectives within mainstream policies. Reflections from community members illustrate the need for genuine collaboration and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. This research argues for the importance of embracing the indefinable, respecting deep spiritual connections, and fostering an inclusive approach to ecological and cultural restoration.



With the Boola Boornap Community, March 2024

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## Entering the Unknown

Under the relentless summer sun, the thermometer hit 40 degrees. Alan, CEO of Noongar Land Enterprises, remarks, “This has become a relatively normal temperature here in southwest Australia over the past few years.” We are heading to Boola Boornap, which means “a place of many trees” in the Noongar language. Boola Boornap is a tree nursery on the edge of the Wheatbelt, roughly 100 kilometres from Perth, close to an early settlers' town called Northam. Looking concerned, Alan says, “You should be prepared; the views ahead can be quite shocking.” I don't know what to say, so I simply nod and gaze out of the window, letting his warning sink in.

Leaving the city's expanding suburbs, we merged onto Highway 94. Initially, lush forest, with the occasional kangaroo, framed our path as we drove over the hills on the city's edge. However, as kilometres passed, the view out of the window began to change. The vividly alive forest gave way to expansive barren paddocks. “This area used to be one of the world's richest in biodiversity,” Alan tells me. It now looks bare and degraded, stretching endlessly left and right of the Highway to the horizon, a visual testament to the ecological challenges at hand. Alan points out with a note of urgency and sadness in his voice: “You see what I mean, Freddy? This is the land we are trying to restore, and it goes on for hundreds of kilometres more; we have a long, long way to go.”

We arrived at Boola Boornap, where the whole team was called together for morning tea at 10 o'clock, something they called “smoko.” While the entire staff gathered, I sought the opportunity to introduce myself. I explained that I was a researcher from the Netherlands, deeply interested in the concept of Healing Country, which I had initially believed could be understood entirely through a rigorous academic approach. However, fast forward three months, it became clear that the intricacies of Healing Country extended beyond the confines of purely conceptual frameworks. There existed a deeper, more experiential layer that demanded an acceptance of the limits of my understanding.

I told everyone that I was in no rush to conduct interviews, hoping to integrate smoothly into their daily routine over the coming months. Post-smoko, Dave, the production manager, guided me through the tree nursery. As we walked, I shared the observations I made looking through Alan's car window—how the landscape turned from lush to barren. Dave noted and smiled. “That's nothing yet, Freddy,” he remarked. “A few hundred kilometres further, the soil turns utterly lifeless, overwhelmed with salt.” As we walked through the labyrinth of young seedlings, each tiny tree seemed a defiant whisper of hope against the overwhelming silence of the degraded land beyond.

## Planting the Seeds

“I just thought it was all about planting trees with no real benefit. But then, 5–6 years down the track, you go back to these certain places that you have done, and you see trees, now 6–7 metres high, from little seedlings getting put into the ground. You find a sense of pride inside yourself as an Aboriginal person, what you are actually doing for Country” (21:37–22:02),

said Tommy, a Ballardong Noongar man working at the Boola Boornap tree nursery in Northam, Western Australia (WA). His words reflect the profound connection and restoration of the relationship between the Noongar people and their ancestral lands, underscoring the importance of Healing Country. The once-deep connection between the Noongar people and their land was severely damaged as colonial forces disrupted their culture and traditions. Many Noongar lost touch with their cultural heritage and, with it, their profound relationship with the land (Pickup, 1998). The significance of Country was not just wounded but almost erased. The effort to plant and nurture trees symbolises more than ecological restoration; it represents the slow and painful process of cultural and spiritual revival, striving to reconnect with the roots that were almost lost to history.

This thesis embraces a multimodal decolonising pluriversal approach to capture the depth of the Healing Country concept. Escobar (2020) advocates for this pluriversal approach, which recognises and integrates multiple epistemologies and values diverse perspectives and knowledge systems. Furthermore, Escobar (2020) criticises the Western modernist paradigm for its tendency to impose a universal way of knowing. This approach is essential for the decolonising methodology of this thesis, which seeks to integrate and honour Noongar's knowledge in achieving comprehension of the concept of Healing Country. By developing an inclusive framework that appreciates diverse ways of knowing, this research incorporates Indigenous epistemologies that honour the holistic and spiritual dimensions of Healing Country. This involves engaging with Indigenous knowledge holders and rethinking the fundamental structures of research to allow for genuine epistemic plurality (Escobar, 2020).

Alongside traditional ethnographic tools like participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this study incorporates yarning—a culturally embedded practice

of narrative exchange that holds profound significance in Aboriginal communities. Yarning facilitates a dialogue rooted in respect and trust, allowing more profound insights into personal and community narratives (Lewis, Hill, Bond, & Nelson, 2017). A detailed exploration of yarning and its methodological implications and applications within this research will be elaborated upon in a subsequent section of this thesis. The inclusion of ethnographic filmmaking further enriches the multimodal approach, providing a visual and emotional dimension that textual data alone cannot convey (Westmoreland, 2022; Ruby, 2000). The multimodal strategy aligns with the decolonising aims of this thesis, as it respects and amplifies Indigenous epistemologies and provides a holistic and visual representation of Country. Throughout this thesis, one will find quotes from my interlocutors that correspond with scenes in the ethnographic film. Each corresponding quote is accompanied by a timestamp, directing the reader to specific moments in the film where the dialogues occur, enabling observation of not only the verbal expressions but also the accompanying emotions and activities.

My research investigates how the Noongar Land Enterprise Group (NLE) and Boola Boornap lead and embody the concept of Healing Country in South-west Australia. Through a combination of written text and an ethnographic film, I aim to articulate new ways of understanding that bridge the divide between scientific approaches and Indigenous cultural knowledge. Initially, my goal was to understand their practices in restoring ecological and cultural health. Yet, immersing in Noongar perspectives taught me the importance of respecting and amplifying their knowledge rather than interpreting it solely through my own framework. The innovative practices and deep spiritual connection these groups preserve and restore through Healing Country provide a powerful model for contemporary ecological and cultural restoration. This study highlights the broader significance of Healing Country and Indigenous-led restoration, demonstrating how the concept and these practices play a crucial role in contemporary ecological and cultural efforts in the Wheatbelt and beyond.

## Cultivating Understanding

The Noongar are First Nations people from WA's southwest area. The territory where Perth now stands was previously occupied by the Wadjuk community, which shares a cultural history with multiple groups in the Southwest. Approximately 100 kilometres east of Perth, the Ballardong Noongars maintain a broad and rich culture, characterised by a strong attachment to Country and a complex social system (Johnston, 2011). Due to colonisation and the introduction of European farming practices and land management, the ecosystems that the Noongar people have been stewards of for tens of thousands of years have been severely harmed (Pickup, 1998). Their deep attachment to Country is reflected in Lore, traditional beliefs, and practices that have directed their relationship with their environment (Van den Berg, 2002). For this research, I conducted extensive fieldwork with the Ballardong Noongars, a distinct subgroup within the broader Noongar nation. This case study focuses on their unique cultural practices and perspectives, providing specific insights into their contributions to ecological and cultural restoration. Throughout the thesis, I will refer to them as "Ballardong Noongar" to maintain the specificity and respect for their identity. However, when discussing broader implications or generalising findings to the wider Noongar context, I will use the collective term "Noongar." This dual approach ensures that the particular contributions of the Ballardong Noongars are highlighted while also situating their practices within the broader framework of Noongar cultural and ecological restoration. Understanding the concept of Country in the Aboriginal Australian context is essential. Country as described by Datiwuy Elder Laklak Burrarrwanga:

“Country incorporates people, animals, plants, water and land. But Country is more than just people and things, it is also what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to laws, custom, movement, song, knowledges, relationships, histories, presents, futures and spirits. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can communicate, feel and take action. Country for us is alive with story, Law, power, and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So you see, knowledge about Country is important because it's about how and where you fit in the world and how you connect to others and to place” (Burrarrwanga et al., as cited in Emmanouil, 2016).

A crucial aspect of Noongar's identity is its deep connection to and reciprocal relationship with Country, which is reflected in their cultural and ecological restoration efforts. Central to these efforts is the NLE. Established in 2014 as an Aboriginal-led non-

profit grower group based in Noongar Boodja (Noongar for Country), the NLE is a 100% First Nations cooperative that integrates cultural and ecological principles of the Noongar people. A core aspect of NLE's mission is Koorndaam, the Noongar cultural first law, which embodies principles of respect, sustainability, and a profound understanding of Boodja. NLE's primary purpose is to develop commercially viable land-based enterprises that support economic development while preserving cultural heritage (NLE, 2023).

In 2021, NLE acquired the Boola Boornap tree nursery, which has become a central player in landscape restoration efforts in the Wheatbelt region, an area severely damaged by European farming techniques and colonisation. Boola Boornap currently produces around one million seedlings per year from over 150 native species. During my 2.5 months working at the nursery, I witnessed firsthand how these seedlings are used in revegetation and restoration projects across the Wheatbelt, contributing to the healing of both land and community. The historical degradation of the Wheatbelt due to colonial policies, which will be discussed in a later section of this thesis, underscores the importance of these efforts. Boola Boornap revegetation projects involve seed collection, germination and nurturing of native species, followed by strategic planting and maintenance. These efforts aim to restore biodiversity, improve soil health, and reduce erosion, directly addressing the ecological damages caused by past practices.

Boola Boornap, a site at the start of ecological restoration, serves as a microcosm for the broader Healing Country initiative. "Healing Country is to regenerate all the trees and much more. It's so good to bring all that back," explained Dawn, a Ballardong Noongar woman working at Boola Boornap. Dawn is a mother of eight girls and one boy, highlighting the importance of maintaining cultural practices. "I try to take my kids out to the bush that is left to teach them about our traditions and the land. It's a good learning experience," she shared. Dawn also reflected on the challenges her community faces due to the loss of cultural practices:

"I have been working with kids all my life. I've always tried to keep them on the right path, but it's hard because there is a loss of respect for family and elders. Through planting and restoring the land, we're helping to rebuild those connections."

"It's always good for Aboriginal people to be back on country, sit around in the bush, listen to the birds, a bit of nature and get away from the stressful life in the towns and community" (21:14-21:23)

shared Tommy. This statement reflects a deep connection to Country, which is a vital aspect of Noongar culture and well-being. Efforts like those at Boola Boornap highlight the importance of healing the land, which is intertwined with preserving cultural practices and improving holistic well-being.

NLE/Boola Boornap is a case study of a First Nations-owned grower group aimed at Healing Country, which integrates cultural and ecological restoration through the concept of Koordnaam. By employing Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, this thesis situates local findings from my fieldwork into broader social and historical contexts. This methodology seems appropriate since it links the NLE community's practices, knowledge, and lived experiences within the larger colonial and contemporary socio-ecological framework impacting their lives. By connecting micro-level observations with macro-level dynamics, this research aims to offer a nuanced and context-sensitive perspective of Healing Country. Additionally, one will be able to read personal reflections throughout this thesis that acknowledge my role, position, and bias in the context within which this thesis is conducted.

## Watering Narratives: Methods for Capturing the Spirit of Healing Country

I used a variety of qualitative research techniques to explore the concept of Healing Country in great detail. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, yarning, and ethnographic filming were some of these techniques. Every approach added something different to my comprehension and made clear the intricate relationships that existed between the Noongar people and their ancestral land. The central method of my research was yarning, an ancient storytelling technique that is profoundly ingrained in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. In contrast to traditional interviews, yarning is an open, considerate sharing of narratives that respects Indigenous knowledge systems (Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2013). Kovach (2009) underscores the importance of these relations and conversation methods since they allow for the co-creation of knowledge that is respectful, ethical and meaningful for the Indigenous

participants of my thesis. With the help of this approach, I was able to establish a close relationship with my interlocutors and enable them to freely and meaningfully share their experiences.

Yarning is not merely a method of data collection but a relational process that creates a protected space where participants feel safe to share their stories. This protected space is upheld by four main principles and four sub-principles that ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of the research. These four main principles include respect, reciprocity, relationship, and responsibility. Respect involves acknowledging the knowledge and experience of the participants and treating their stories with dignity and reverence. Reciprocity emphasises the mutual exchange of knowledge and benefits, ensuring that both the researcher and the participants gain from the interaction. Relationship highlights the importance of building and maintaining meaningful connections with participants, their communities, and the land. Responsibility involves the ethical obligation to use the knowledge shared appropriately and to maintain ongoing engagement with the participants and their communities (Barlo et al., 2021).

Moreover, the sub-principles of dignity, equality, integrity, and self-determination are crucial in upholding the yarning methodology. Dignity pertains to valuing each participant's identity, history, and relationship to the community and land, ensuring they are treated with the utmost respect throughout the research process. Equality ensures that all participants have the same rights and responsibilities within the yarning space, fostering an environment of mutual respect and fairness. Integrity involves maintaining honesty and fairness in the research process, ensuring that the knowledge shared is used accurately and truthfully. Self-determination allows participants to control their contributions to the research, deciding how much information to share and how it will be used, thereby maintaining their agency and authority over their knowledge (Barlo et al., 2021). Ethical considerations are paramount in this context. My interlocutors have all signed a contract that upholds these principles, consenting to the use of their names and data in the film and this written text and acknowledging their full understanding and willingness to participate as indicated.

Deloria (2021) and Smith (2021) highlight the importance of respecting Indigenous epistemologies, which encompass spiritual and relational dimensions that resist reductionist definitions. Deloria (2021) stresses that Indigenous knowledge systems are rooted in a profound connection to the land and community, offering a worldview deeply intertwined with spirituality and relationality (Deloria, 2021). Smith (2021) elaborates extensively on the necessity of decolonising methodologies in research. She argued that Western frameworks marginalised Indigenous ways of knowing. Smith (2021) continues that decolonising methodologies involve recognising and dismantling these colonial biases and structures within academic research. This process requires researchers to engage with Indigenous communities in ways that are respectful and collaborative, ensuring that Indigenous voices and perspectives are central to the research process. I have endeavoured to follow the guidance of Smith (2021) to actively voice knowledge holders and prioritise their epistemologies, and in doing so, I have used numerous quotes to ensure the perspectives of my interlocutors are authentically represented and respected over paraphrasing.

A unique aspect of yarning is its ability to facilitate a deep, iterative engagement with participants. Unlike conventional interviews, yarning involves multiple rounds of conversation and reflection, allowing for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the research topic (Barlo et al., 2021). This iterative process not only enhances the depth of the data collected but also respects the relational nature of Indigenous knowledge, where understanding unfolds over time through sustained engagement. De La Cadena (2010) further enriches this perspective by demonstrating decolonising tactics, which reveal how Indigenous movements include nonhuman elements in their political and social activities. This activity not only challenges but also crosses Western political and epistemological borders by including earth-beings such as mountains and rivers as active political agents (De La Cadena, 2010). Inspired by this, I've included similar holistic techniques, acknowledging the sentience and agency of natural beings as critical to Healing Country. Barlo et al. (2021) emphasise the role of Ancestors in the yarning process, highlighting how they protect and guide the research space, making it sacred and accountable. This spiritual dimension is integral to the methodology, ensuring that the research is conducted in a way that honours and respects the ancestral connections of the participants.

Kovach's (2009), Geia, Hayes, & Usher's (2013), Barlo et al. (2021) and Lewis et al.'s. (2010) emphasis on the relational aspect of methodologies while doing research with Indigenous peoples provided the theoretical foundation guided by the use of yarning, ensuring that the research approach and process itself is a reflection of the values and practices I have aimed to understand and document. Additionally, the use of yarning in my thesis highlights the pluriversal approach by facilitating relational ontologies that respect and honour Noongar ways of knowing (Escobar, 2020).

Barlo et al. (2021) further articulate that data within the yarning methodology are not merely inert information but living entities that are intricately linked to the people, context, and knowledge systems from which they originate. This relational ontology necessitates building a deep relationship with the data, treating it with dignity and reverence. The process of yarning requires time and sustained engagement, as separating the data from its context or the person it originates from is antithetical to the methodology's principles. This holistic approach ensures that the knowledge shared is honoured and respected within its cultural framework, maintaining its integrity and authenticity (Barlo et al., 2021).

In yarning, the researcher must spend considerable time with the data, developing a relationship that acknowledges its living nature. This involves recognising that the data cannot be separated from the individuals who shared it or from the cultural and historical context in which it exists. Treating data as a living entity means it is imbued with the essence of the participants, their ancestors, and the land, necessitating profound respect and ethical engagement from the researcher (Barlo et al., 2021). The data, seen as a gift, comes with responsibilities that I, as a researcher, must uphold, ensuring the knowledge is used appropriately and remains connected to its source.

One of the most significant yarning sessions was with Oral McGuire, a respected Noongar leader and board member of NLE. Yarning with Oral was impactful due to his extensive knowledge and leadership in both cultural and ecological restoration efforts. Sitting under the shade of a gum tree, Oral spoke passionately about the responsibilities of caring for their land. "Our connection to the land is not just physical; it's spiritual. Healing the land is about healing ourselves," he said, his voice filled with conviction.

Numerous yarns mirrored this idea, emphasising Healing Country's rich spiritual and cultural characteristics where people have truly healed themselves through being engaged with Healing Country.

I had the privilege of staying at Oral's property for a couple of days, where we yarned for hours. One evening, he took me to the highest hill on his property, overlooking the land he started to restore 15 years ago. In the foreground was a lush forest, while the background revealed the degraded land of a neighbouring farmer. We sat there as the sun was setting, sharing a couple of beers.

As we watched the sun dip below the horizon, Oral turned to me and asked, "Why are you here, and what do you want to know?" I shared my deep sadness about the exploitative nature of Western thought, how we have become individuals who aim for personal success, often at the expense of the land and its resources, and my desire to learn from him and others around him. Oral listened intently and then said:

"Freddy, everyone in the Western world strives for perfection. However, the only thing that is perfect is nature. Once one becomes one with nature, they become perfect. So, therefore, just sit and be".

Building on the foundational relation and trust laid out through yarning, I conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed my interlocutors to guide our conversations; this approach blends structure with flexibility and, therefore, lets the interviewed voices shape the dialogue, uncovering the meaning behind practices and lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). For instance, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Alan at his house in Perth. Alan shared his journey of how he came to lead NLE during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. He described the initial difficulties of building relationships through virtual meetings and the importance of establishing trust in person.

"Being a non-Indigenous person leading an Aboriginal organisation, it is something. You have got to be constantly aware of where your boundaries are, what you can speak on behalf of, what's inappropriate for you to speak on behalf of, and where you get permission from people before you do certain things".

Alan's insights highlight the delicate balance required to respect cultural boundaries while fostering collaboration. He explained,

"Healing Country and healing people is absolutely real. If you see people working at the tree nursery or doing wattle seed harvests, their whole physical appearance and demeanour change. It's so important because we have cleared 90% plus of the land for broadacre farming, and there's no spirit there. If you're just going into an empty paddock every day, it's absolutely soul-destroying".

Participant observation was another key component of my ethnographic research. By fully integrating myself into the daily activities of Boola Boornap, I aimed to observe and participate in the practices of landscape restoration. This approach allowed me to engage in routine tasks, such as planting native species and collecting seeds, while simultaneously reflecting on the cultural and environmental significance of these activities (Agar, 1985). Agar highlights that participant observation involves a dynamic interplay between engaging, watching, reflecting, and assessing everyday behaviours and actions. This method enabled me to document the specific settings and nuances of each interaction, offering deeper insights into the symbolic and functional aspects of the community's ecological practices. By following Geertz's (1973) technique of "thick description", I aimed to capture the intricate layers of meaning embedded in each activity and interaction.

Furthermore, the ethnographic film shows the dynamic relationships and efforts at landscape restoration among the Noongar people and the NLE community. Based on the concepts of visual ethnography, the film captures conversations, practices, and daily routines of the NLE community and employees at Boola Boornap. The film offers an observational component that is crucial for comprehending the intricate relationship between ecological resilience and cultural well-being since it integrates both visual and auditory recordings (Ruby, 2000 & Pink, 2006). This method was inspired by influential visual anthropologists like David and Judith MacDougall (1998), who highlighted the value of visual media in illuminating the nuances of cultural settings and human behaviour. Westmoreland (2022) argues that the integration of multimodal methodologies is crucial in contemporary anthropological research, as it broadens the scope of inquiry to include various sensory experiences. This approach enhances the depth and richness of ethnographic data and fosters a more comprehensive understanding of cultural phenomena (Westmoreland, 2022; Takaragawa et al., 2019). By using film as a research tool, I am able to engage diverse audiences and provide a nuanced and richer representation of Healing Country.

The methodological observations and insights provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of Healing Country. As we delve into the next section, it becomes evident that the rejuvenating bond between Country and culture fundamentally shapes the Noongar people's resilience and efforts at ecological restoration.

## Replanting Hope

In this segment, we explore the historical challenges faced by the Noongar people and their long-lasting effects on their connection to the land. The changes brought by colonisation significantly impacted both the ecology and the cultural practices of the Noongar people, altering their relationship with their ancestral lands. This section highlights the ongoing efforts to restore both the land and the cultural heritage of the Noongar people through historical research and first-hand accounts from my fieldwork.

## Unrooting Culture: Impacts of Colonisation

In the late 1820s, British colonists arrived in the southwest of WA, which caused a significant shift in the lives of the Noongar people. The British viewed WA through the doctrine of "Terra Nullius", considering it 'unoccupied' despite the apparent presence of Aboriginal people. The British colonists exerted control, which led to increasing conflicts over resources and land (Western Australian Government, 2020). Colonial practices from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century significantly disrupted the Noongar people's cultural practices and way of life. For example, the "1905 Aborigines Act" aimed to assimilate Aboriginal people into European culture. The Act imposed a biological definition of Indigenous identity, resulting in the separation of children from their families, the repression of language and culture, and social and political marginalisation (Johnston, 2011). Trouillot (1995) provides a framework for understanding these dynamics through his exploration of how power shapes historical narratives, often silencing them. Trouillot (1995) discusses the concept of 'unthinkable history' where significant historical events, in this case, "Terra Nullius", the 1905 Aborigines Act, and many more horrible policies by the colonialists are rendered invisible by dominant narratives. The concept is essential to understanding the

marginalisation of Noongar's history and the importance of reclaiming their narratives in the context of Healing Country (Trouillot, 1995).

Dawn told me about the impact of the 1905 act on her and the lives of her family during a semi-structured interview:

"It is something we call The Stolen Generation; it's a shame, you know. Many people were taken from their families in those times, and it's still a journey for everyone to understand what's happening and what happened then and now, so yes. My mother was taken, all my father's nephews and nieces were taken, and we had to care for them while we were growing up, so yes, we needed to maintain that close bond with family. it was quite tough, quite tough".

Additionally, the colonial exploitation of natural resources and alterations to the landscape have had lasting effects on biodiversity and ecosystems in WA. These environmental changes led to soil degradation and loss of native species (Beresford, 2001). The area where the research was undertaken is called the Wheatbelt, which measures about 700 kilometres by 400 kilometres (Conacher, 1986). The application of developmental policies in the Wheatbelt resulted in an extensive clearing in multiple phases: the post-World War One and post-World War Two military settlement schemes and the "New Farmlands" and "Million Acres a Year" initiatives. In all of these cases, the commonwealth funding facilitated the entry of farmers onto Noongar Boodja through very low prices, start-up aid and affordable loans (Beresford, 2001). Sutton (1952) pointed out that such extensive settlement and land clearing was unprecedented anywhere in the world. In the extensive clearing post World War I, salt emerged as a significant issue for farmers; however, the findings of salt in waterways and on cleared fields were ignored in favour of rapid development (Wood, 1924). Nearly 90% of all native vegetation in the Wheatbelt area had been removed by the early 1980s (Laurie, 2000).

Reflecting on these transformations, Tommy and George shared their perspective:

"We are now restoring it back to what it was when we first came here. You go out today and it's all bare around places, and you don't really see many bushes around; it's just paddocks and open country. You can see a little bit of bushland down there, but remember, one time ago, this whole country, WA, our area, was full of bushland. Before agriculture came in with cropping and all that sort of stuff. Just seeing old pictures of our country before the farmlands came through it" (18:48-19:21).

Dave, the non-Indigenous production manager at Boola Boornap, also shared his thoughts on the challenges at hand:

"It's unfair to leave it up to the landholders to pay for all the remediation work when in a lot of cases they've inherited the issues from previous generations and a lot of those were forced on people through government policy where they had to clear land, even though they knew it should not be cleared because it's unsuitable and there would be problems in the future".

Graeber's (2006) analysis of capitalism and its impacts on social relations is particularly relevant in understanding the economic and environmental exploitation of Noongar Country. According to Graeber (2006), capitalism transforms social relations and structures by commodifying natural resources and human interactions. This capitalist model can be seen in the colonial development policies, such as the military settlement schemes and the "New Farmlands" initiatives that promoted the development of farms in WA. Vast amounts of land were quickly cleared for agricultural use, driven by capitalist imperatives for growth and profits (Graeber, 2006). The clearing of the native vegetation thus resulted in environmental degradation at the expense of Noongar peoples' land, ecological knowledge and culture.

Understanding the historical effects of colonisation is critical in the context of environmental restoration. The extensive clearing and subsequent salinisation have not only degraded the land but also disrupted the ecological and cultural balance of the region. Efforts like those at Boola Boornap aim to reverse some of these impacts by reintroducing native vegetation and restoring the natural landscape.

At Boola Boornap, the morning sun cast long shadows across rows of seedlings, revealing a vibrant patchwork of green. As I walked between the trays of young plants, Dave joined me. His deep understanding of botanical names and their unique benefits amazed me every time. For instance, he identified salt-tolerant species like *Atriplex halimus*, various *Melaleucas*, and *Eucalypts*, effortlessly explaining their contributions to landscape restoration. His enthusiasm was contagious, highlighting their resilience in saline soils and their role in healing the land.

Dave often reflected on the historical context of colonial policies that led to widespread land clearing and subsequent salinisation (Wood, 1924; Laurie, 2000). "Our biggest

challenge here in the Wheatbelt is salinity,” he said. As we walked through the nursery, assessing the success rates of recent seedings, he detailed the role of Boola Boornap and NLE in broader revegetation efforts. Collaborating with various stakeholders, they tailor solutions to each landscape’s unique needs, sometimes planting up to 200,000 seedlings at a time. This involves assessing soil and salinity levels and examining existing vegetation to determine the best mix of species, hence the diverse range of plants.

“Timing is everything,” Dave noted. “We plant in the cooler, wetter months to ensure the best survival rates and follow up to make sure they’re establishing well.” Spending countless hours with Dave, I gained extensive knowledge about Western Australian native species and developed a deep appreciation for his unwavering commitment to Healing Country.

Reflecting on my time at Boola Boornap, I recognised the profound impact of their work. Planting, cultivating, restoring, and rejuvenating is an intricate dance aimed at fostering a symbiosis between land and life for all that inhabit Boodja.

## Resilience: “Healing Country is a Contemporary Practice”

Several of my interlocutors have discussed the synthesis of Western scientific paradigms with Indigenous cultural epistemologies. I follow Oral’s guidance to “articulate these new ways of understanding”, aiming to bridge perspectives from my interlocutors with Western theories. Rather than placing Western knowledge above the knowledge of my interlocutors, I seek to highlight the value and contributions of each, creating a more holistic view of resilience and ecological stewardship. This analysis continues the previous discussion on decolonising knowledge and adopting a pluralistic approach and sets the stage for a later section where I advocate for the Two-Eyed Seeing framework, integrating both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing to contribute to Healing Country.

Despite the devastating impacts of colonisation, the Noongar people have shown remarkable resilience. Holling (1986) defines resilience as adapting and continuing existence amidst change. In this thesis, socio-ecological resilience is understood in terms of the interaction between disturbances and reorganisation within these systems.

Folke (2006) highlights the relevance of cross-scale interactions, the dynamics of systems, and the role of learning, innovation, and adaptive capability. Plummer (2010) defines resilience as a system's innate ability to self-organise, improve learning and adaptive capacities, and withstand significant changes without losing its essential functions. Miller et al. (2010) define resilience in social-ecological systems as a duality of persistence and adaptation. Their argument supports the idea that resilience includes not just the ability of systems to withstand disruptions but also their ability to reorganise and adapt to changes. This view supports the findings of Plummer (2010) and Folke (2006), who believe that systems' self-organisation, learning, and adaptive skills are critical to resilience. Miller et al. (2010) expand on this by investigating how systems handle change while maintaining their basic functions, which is consistent with Holling's (1986) and Folke et al.'s (2003) viewpoints on the adaptability of socio-ecological systems and their components.

When I asked Oral about the meaning of Healing Country, he provided evidence of socio-ecological resilience, explaining that Healing Country is a contemporary practice that emerged from cultural adaptation to a new environment, reflecting a deep connection and reciprocal relationship with the land:

“Healing Country is very much about a cultural responsibility that, as First Nations people, as Indigenous people, as traditional owners, as custodians, all of the above, places us, you know, in a very special position as humans with long-established responsibility, obligation, and rights. Healing Country traditionally, you know, more than 190 years ago, our world, people that were here, and the same old people as us, weren't practising Healing Country processes or management. They were simply managing natural resources and managing, you know, the resources of land and nature. So, Healing Country is a contemporary practice that's come about because of the extractive nature and the destructive nature of agriculture and European land management practices and beliefs, and philosophies, methodologies even, about the way the land, you know, this land, our land, has been developed, settled, and commercialised or industrialised. So, we've done a great disservice to the natural elements of the landscape and the environment that we live on here (06:07-08:38). So, Healing Country is very much a statement made by Indigenous peoples, I think globally, but certainly here in Australia, that was a very much needed sense of responsibility to care for Country again. And so, bringing us back not only onto the land or into the environment and into the landscape, it was very much about bringing back the spirit of ourselves and our knowledge of our spiritual connection to start more effective practices of management, land management, that was absolutely aligned to our cultural and spiritual obligation and responsibility. So, Healing Country is a massive concept. Can we heal this land? I think probably not in our

existence as humans. I think the final healing of the land will be done by the land itself. So, Healing Country is as much about healing nature and the land and the natural resources on the land, but more importantly, it is actually about healing ourselves” (27:12-28:34).

Oral emphasises that Healing Country has evolved as a necessary response to the extensive ecological disruptions caused by modern agricultural methods, industrialisation, and European land management philosophies. This practice represents a shift from traditional methods that primarily focused on sustainable resource management to contemporary approaches aimed at repairing and restoring environmental damage. By integrating traditional ecological knowledge with innovative techniques, Healing Country effectively addresses modern environmental issues such as soil degradation, wind erosion, biodiversity collapse, and climate change. This evolution reflects a dynamic adaptation where traditional custodial responsibilities and spiritual connections to the land are blended with contemporary strategies. Such integration not only mitigates the severe impacts of colonisation and industrialisation but also demonstrates the resilience of Indigenous practices in maintaining the continuity and functionality of socio-ecological systems amidst significant disturbances (Folke, 2006; Kadykalo et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2010). Importantly, this process of healing extends beyond environmental restoration; it also fosters personal and communal well-being. By restoring and caring for the land, individuals and communities experience spiritual renewal and strengthened connections to their cultural heritage, illustrating a holistic approach where ecological and personal healing are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

To avoid imposing a Western perspective, I am to foreground Orals views on resilience. Oral told me that resilience for Indigenous peoples involves not only environmental sustainability but also cultural survival and human well-being:

“Our resilience is evident in our survival and adaptability despite enormous intergenerational trauma and historical attempts to destroy our culture. I think it creates a bit of a conflicting dichotomy. We are, in terms of human evolution, the healthiest and strongest, and yet we face more sickness and unwellness among us. So, with mental health issues, suicides, and these harsh aspects of our reality—how are we dealing with that? True resilience involves maintaining healthy relationships with the land and ensuring access to healthy ecosystems. When the land suffers, we suffer too. Biodiversity and ecological health are crucial for our overall well-being, and managing, restoring, and caring for our landscapes is vital for our human health and resilience.”

Furthermore, Oral calls for bridging sacred knowledge and spiritual connections into land management resonates with Folke's (2003) and Kadykalo, Cook and Young's (2020) advocacy for integrating different knowledge systems while maintaining distinctiveness. Respecting and elevating different epistemologies thus seem essential for learning and fostering socio-ecological resilience. When I asked Oral about the practical implications of this bridging, he explained:

“These are contemporary issues that have been created in record time. They've been manifested because of these complex issues and behaviours and practises the white fellas brought to this land. So, our cultural knowledge struggles; it does not have the words, it doesn't have ceremonies or songs or, behaviours, or practices to deal with these technical and contemporary issues: soil degradation, wind erosion, biodiversity collapse, and climate change . Science is driven to find solutions for these things, and it has done a body of work. So, we need to bring that together, because what cultural knowledge always has - and I think will always trump science, and scientific theory particularly - is that culture is always about the practice of doing: doing ceremony, doing songs, learning knowledge, using knowledge, passing on knowledge”.

Back at Boola Boornap, Tommy further elaborated on this idea of resilience, collaboration and integration of different knowledge systems.

“You can't just point the finger saying, 'You're not listening.' Instead, you need to collaborate on solutions, blending the Wedjala (white) way and the black-fella way, and come to a consensus on how to proceed. Change won't happen overnight, but by working together to find the best approach, progress can be made that respects both perspectives. It's about finding a middle ground where everyone's opinion is considered and reaching an agreement on how to move forward. Unfortunately, there's not enough of this collaborative effort happening yet”.

Boola Boornap exemplifies contemporary resilience through its blend of Noongar knowledge and modern ecological techniques. The nursery incorporates adaptive strategies that align with the strategic goals of NLE (2024). For example, the different planting methods at Boola Boornap involve traditional seed collection methods and innovative propagation techniques to cultivate a diverse array of native plants, supporting ecological resilience by enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem stability. Additionally, the nursery fosters a community-led approach where local Noongar people actively engage in planting and restoration activities on Boodja. This involvement reinforces socio-ecological resilience by embedding cultural practices in environmental management (NLE, 2024). Boola Boornap thus offers a model for integrating culturally appropriate practices and ecological science, demonstrating how resilience can be

cultivated through both traditional and contemporary means in the pursuit of Healing Country.

In the context of cultural ecology theory, Sutton and Anderson (2010) argue that cultural responses to environmental challenges are critical adaptive mechanisms. Cultural ecology is the study of how human societies and environments interact and how cultural practices shape and are shaped by ecological conditions. Furthermore, it highlights that culture itself acts as an adaptive mechanism that encompasses social and political systems (Sutton & Anderson, 2010). Thus, the insight provided by Oral and Tommy reflects this cultural mechanism, in which traditional practices are re-contextualized to address contemporary ecological challenges.

The Noongar people's enduring resilience and Oral's reflections on Healing Country underscore the deep and continuous relationship between their ecological, spiritual, and cultural practices. The concepts of socio-ecological resilience and cultural ecology are evident in how traditional practices are being adapted to tackle modern environmental challenges. The stories of pain and healing illustrate that Healing Country encompasses more than ecological restoration; it involves a profoundly emotional, cultural, and spiritual connection to the land. Through this journey, I have come to understand that the concept of Healing Country fundamentally challenges Western academic thought, urging respect for this connection that cannot easily be seen or defined. As we delve into the next section, I will further explore the holistic worldviews that underpin these practices.

## Boodja

This section dives into the Noongar people's holistic worldviews and their relationship with Country, or Boodja. It highlights how the well-being of the land and people are inextricably linked, reflecting a deeply ingrained concept that informs their everyday interactions with the land. The Noongar practices and beliefs incorporate spiritual, cultural, and environmental management, emphasising resilience and continuity. We explore how these comprehensive viewpoints are crucial to their identity and their ongoing connection to Boodja using their own words and experiences.

As months passed, working at the nursery and actively engaging with my interlocutors, I began to form real bonds and trusting relationships. My work at the nursery entailed everything from seeding and doing cuttings to organising plants in seed trays of various sizes. The longer I worked at Boola Boornap; people began to realise that I genuinely cared about their cause. As a result, they started to open up more about their experiences and beliefs.

One day, I was working with Tommy on sorting native plants and filling up whole trays. Tommy shared with me a few stories, including the tale of “Woodartji”, a mythical creature from Noongar lore. He described the “Woodartji” as a kind of Aboriginal Bigfoot, but smaller, to help me understand the spirit from my Western perspective. The Woodartji is a spiritual creature that lives in the bush, around rocks and caves, and is known to whistle once, twice, or three times. “If it whistles three times,” Tommy said with a serious expression, “it means you are in big trouble.” Writing this makes me realise that this description probably will not do justice to the lore, but it does add to the depth and spiritual complexity of the Noongar people's relationship with Country.

Throughout my time in Australia, I have had the privilege of meeting more and more individuals dedicated to Healing Country. I was invited to a BBQ, where all major stakeholders in large-scale holistic landscape restoration in WA were present. At this BBQ, I got the opportunity to meet Heidi Mippy, a Noongar and Thiin-Mah Warriyangka woman who has dedicated over 26 years to community development, working with Indigenous communities in various government roles. Heidi now serves as the Indigenous Liaison manager with the Indigenous Stewardship, Biodiversity and Environment Group at Curtin University. She sits on the Board of the ARC Training Centre for Healing Country at Curtin University, where she leads the socio-economics research theme (Healing Country, 2022). At the BBQ, we had a yarn, and she told me she was previously an employee of NLE and would be open for a yarn /semi-structured interview the following week.

A couple of days later, I arrived at the campus of Curtin University, where I met Heidi under a big, beautiful tree. The yarn soon turned from small talk to subjects on

epistemologies, ontologies, and integrating different knowledge systems. When I asked Heidi how I, as a white researcher from the Netherlands, could, for example, do justice to words such as Boodja within an academic thesis, she told me that Boodja is often translated to land in English, but it is a living breathing entity, with spiritual and cultural fabrics interwoven with people's lives. It also represents the water, wind, the skies, and everything that lives in that space. It is about a reciprocal relationship between people and their land; therefore, it is hard to define in words. Further on in the conversation, Heidi explained:

"So it's not about asking a million questions to define and understand what that is but respecting that we have, we have certain knowledges, and that just understanding that and accepting it is okay. If we're comfortable in that space, and that's a bit about taking out ego, right? Because a lot of the time, people just want to know; if you don't understand, you feel threatened, so you want to understand, and that's, that's almost that science inquiry mind that happens. But if we can take that aside and then go, alright, now here's this middle ground, and where does this information bounce off each other, or complement each other, or make sense? That's the sweet spot of Healing Country" (22:55-23:37)

This made me realise that capturing the essence of Boodja or Healing Country requires more than just translation into Western academic work. It demands a deep respect and acknowledgement of the holistic and interconnected worldview inherent to Noongar's knowledge and culture. Thus, by accepting and valuing perspectives without trying to dissect and understand them from a Western standpoint, one can more authentically approach that "Sweet Spot" of Healing Country.

Heidi's perspective aligns with Hoffmans's (2010) and Barlo et al. 's (2021) principles of relationship, respect, responsibility and reciprocity, which are central to Aboriginal knowledge systems. The framework presented by Hoffman (2010) stresses that in respecting Indigenous knowledge systems, one must acknowledge its holistic nature, encompassing both sacred and secular aspects, with knowledge transmitted through collective group processes. Battiste (2000) highlights this through a postcolonial lens, stating that it is important to accept indigenous epistemologies in addition to scientific methods. She claims that it is imperative to acknowledge and value Indigenous knowledge systems to achieve a shared sustainable future (Battiste, 2000). Additionally, Martin (2012) further supports the approach of advocating for integrating Indigenous knowledge and Western ways of knowing, explained in her two-eyed seeing framework.

This framework argues that the historical dominance of positivism dismissed Indigenous knowledge as unscientific, and integration and respecting both perspectives is needed to solve complex problems that affect Indigenous peoples (Martin, 2012).

The range of viewpoints that are extensively represented in academic and public discussions regarding the impending need to repair damaged ecosystems globally reflects the complexity of integrationism. Western academic beliefs are strongly supported by scientific research and environmental advocacy groups. These viewpoints often highlight the ecological and biological dimensions of the issue, stressing the necessity of data-driven solutions as well as the role that innovation and technology play in reviving ecosystems. On the other hand, researchers such as Lertzman (2010) have highlighted the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge with Western scientific knowledge. Lertzman (2010) argues that the integration of these two knowledge systems yields comprehensive solutions to complex environmental problems. Reflecting on the conversation with Heidi, for true integration, Western scientists should put aside their egos and find a middle ground where different knowledge systems can co-exist and enrich one another. Moreover, since Healing Country is not solely about ecological restoration but also about the spiritual relationship with Country, Western scientists must appreciate and respect these intrinsic cultural and spiritual aspects to foster both ecological recovery and the spiritual well-being of Noongar communities.

## Roots of Injustice: Quest for True Recognition & Respect

Althaus (2019) adds to the discussion from the previous section by addressing the necessity of recognising, celebrating and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and being in public policy. Althaus (2019) argues that Indigenous knowledge is a gift that ought to be respectfully integrated into informing policy-making processes. This viewpoint is particularly relevant given the recent referendum in Australia, which was a proposal to amend the Australian constitution to establish an Indigenous Advisory Body that would provide non-binding advice to Parliament and the government on matters affecting Indigenous Australians, which resulted in a “no” vote (Reconciliation Australia, 2023).

Throughout my time in Australia, the topic of the referendum often came up in yarns with my interlocutors, deepening my understanding of the struggles and why healing is needed. Heidi offered a revealing perspective on the referendum:

"I didn't support the referendum. I felt like it wasn't enough... I thought if we're gonna do this, let's do it properly and actually give us real rights. The reason I didn't want to talk about it was because I didn't want mainstream Australia to vote no... but the results across the whole nation were really upsetting for me. Like, I just went, what is wrong with you people?"

Oral further highlighted the complexity of achieving equity within existing structural systems. He stressed that real equity requires the active participation of First Nations people in the design and development of policies, laws, and strategies.

"Well... it becomes even more complicated and complex, which means we need more people contributing to, you know, the policy settings, the laws, the use, the strategies, you know, the tools, the structures, whatever it is that we need to do the job, to get the job done. If we can't share in the design and the development of these new ways of being and knowing, we are kidding ourselves."

Oral articulated his discontent with being expected to conform to the existing systems without receiving the same level of respect and recognition for his identity as a Noongar man.

"I'm expected as a Noongar man to conform, comply, and contribute, you know, equally to the way things get done or the way things are. This is how it is; you just need to step up because the law says, or the policy says that. And more and more, you know, as I enter into my elderly years, or more senior years, that becomes more and more repugnant to me. So, I don't comply. I comply less than I did five years ago, two years ago, especially if I don't feel that I am gaining a level of equity and, respect and rights for me to be who I am. Who am I? I'm not Australian. I'm Noongar. Can you handle that, Prime Minister or Farmer Jack? Sometimes, I think they can't because they want me just to be Australian, like he is, or she, or they are. Am I part of Australia in my own way? Yes, and I have the right because I am the first person, First Nation, and I belong here" (23:45- 24:51).

Oral highlighted the importance of self-reflection in understanding societal issues, particularly in light of the referendum. He urged individuals to ask themselves, "What did it teach you about yourself?" This question is crucial for personal growth and societal change.

"The referendum taught us a lot about ourselves... If you're saying that you're learning about yourself and then us, all collectively, hasn't shifted and changed, and you haven't learned anything more from that one experience that we all went through, I would question your sanity and your intelligence."

Thus, Oral suggests that such a significant event that the referendum should naturally lead to personal and collective growth if people have self-reflection. Alan echoed similar frustrations regarding the referendum. He expressed his deep anger at the way Australia reacted to the vote, both leading up to and following the referendum.

"I have a very different attitude to our Australian people as a result of that referendum. I think the majority of Australians are racist. I thought that since the Mabo case and those sorts of things occurred, which are now 30 years ago, we've moved a long way towards accepting not only accepting the First Nations people as a part of this country but accepting that they have more rights than what we're currently having and greater access to land and those sorts of things. But the referendum showed me that's not the case. In reality, a lot of people overseas, such as yourself, actually appreciate our First Nations culture more than we do."

Alan also shared how his interactions with non-First Nations individuals have changed post-referendum.

"The referendum emboldened some people to express blatantly racist views, making constructive dialogue more difficult. I think I've definitely changed a bit of how we interact with non-First Nations groups and people since the referendum. There's now very much a case of being a lot more wary of who you're entering into partnerships with and a lot more blatant in relation to what's in it for us. If it's not, bugger off."

Heidi's, Oral's and Alan's reflections showcase the lived realities and needs of First Nations communities. The 'no' vote in the referendum illustrates the significant work that remains to be done to achieve this middle ground. Healing Country is, thus, intricately tied to this struggle for recognition and integration. The integration of knowledge systems and the acceptance that one does not need to understand it all, putting away one's ego into mainstream practices, are therefore essential for true healing to happen. Acknowledging the wisdom, culture, and perspectives of Aboriginal people is essential for creating a more inclusive Australian society that respects and incorporates holistic worldviews.

I find it important to mention that as an outsider from the Netherlands, my understanding of the referendum and integration of knowledge systems is shaped by my personal bias, background, and perspectives. I approached the concept of Healing Country with a Western scientific approach. Still, through my interactions and spending time with my interlocutors, I aim to minimise the imposition of my cultural frameworks, engaging in reflexivity. Thus, having set aside my ego, as Heidi suggested, we can delve into the final section.

# Healing Country Is Healing People

As one could have read so far, I struggled with my Western academic background to categorise different aspects of Healing Country. However, the longer I stayed in WA and engaged with people, the more and more evident that some elements of knowledge and spiritual connection to Country elude precise definitions. This realisation led me thus to a critical turning point: embracing the indefinable. My attempts to find the Sweet Spot of Healing Country via a Western academic lens revealed both the merits and limits of such frameworks. While these methodologies are helpful analytical tools, they may be insufficient to capture the intricate meanings buried in crucial concepts such as Boodja, Country, and Healing. Recognising these constraints, my research has relied on pluralistic and decolonising frameworks that incorporate both Western and First Nations viewpoints. This approach aligns with Wittgenstein's (1953) notion that the limits of our language are the limits of our world, suggesting that acknowledging these boundaries can lead to a more respectful and comprehensive engagement with cultural phenomena. By embracing and integrating these complexities, my research contributes to a broader and more inclusive understanding of the intricate relationship between people and Country.

## Embracing the Indefinable

During my time in Australia, I often spoke to farmers who were at least trying to address the salinity encroachment on their land. One such farmer, whom I'll refer to as Farmer X, owned a farm of around 15,000 hectares and wanted to plant 10 hectares for carbon credits and perhaps improve his soil. When I asked him about the salt on his property, he nonchalantly replied, "Ahh, next year, we will just use more fertiliser." Farmer X's wife asserted that they knew the farm and property very well because their family had been there for over 100 years, passing down much knowledge about the land.

This statement left Alan and me dumbstruck. We exchanged glances, reflecting on the knowledge Aboriginal people have held for over 65,000 years. In my talks with Farmer X, we discussed hunting kangaroos. He corrected me and said, "Shoot, not hunt." As a hunter myself, I understand that hunting is done ethically, with respect for the animal

and the environment, and often for purposes such as sustenance. Shooting, in contrast, is often about controlling pests. Farmer X then mentioned, "I try to shoot kangaroos, but as soon as I open the gate or even come close, they hear me and smell me, and they are off."

A couple of weeks later, I visited Orals' property. He conducted a Welcome to Country ceremony, where I was cleansed with smoke from the *Acacia Acuminata* and spoken to in Ballardong Noongar language. A Welcome to Country ceremony is a traditional practice conducted to welcome visitors to their ancestral land, seeking to protect and bless them during their stay. After the ceremony, I hopped on the back of Oral's pickup truck, and we drove into a field where he had done restoration plantings with seedlings from Boola Boornap six years ago. We drove through a gate and parked the car in the middle of the recently planted field. As we stood there discussing the rapid growth of the plants, a group of around 15 kangaroos walked towards us. This starkly contrasted with my earlier conversation with Farmer X, where kangaroos fled at the first sign of human presence. It was a profoundly special moment, one I did not capture on film but experienced with my own eyes. Oral said:

"Those kangaroos carry the spirit of my ancestors. You have just been officially welcomed to Country, my Country, our Country, and they come to welcome you because they know you are a good person who cares about the state of the environment."

This moment had a profound impact on me, realising and experiencing for the first time the spiritual connection that people had been telling me about but which I had not fully grasped. My hands and body warmed up, and I felt something I had never felt before—a true connection to the planet and a stark realisation that we, as human beings, are just small fractions of being in a much larger system. Additionally, this realisation made me acutely aware of my own position and the limitations of my experience. Although I felt a deep connection in that moment, I recognise that this feeling is never as strong or as intrinsic as the connection Noongar people have to their land. Their bond, forged over tens of thousands of years, is ingrained with layers of spiritual, cultural, and historical significance. While I cannot fully comprehend or embody this connection as they do, my experience has deepened my appreciation and respect for the profound relationships they maintain and are restoring with their land, and it has taught me the importance of approaching their knowledge with even more respect, humility and openness.

My visit to Oral's property revealed a profound aspect of Healing Country that transcended scientific explanation. While ecological restoration is crucial, it's the spiritual dimension – the perceived presence of ancestral spirits welcoming me – that elevates the process. This encounter underscored the limitations of Western scientific epistemology and the importance of embracing the indefinable. By integrating, elevating and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems that incorporate these spiritual connections, we can move towards a more holistic approach to finding that “Sweet Spot” of Healing Country, fostering a deeper sense of responsibility and respect for the land. This approach not only benefits the environment but also significantly enhances the well-being of the Noongar people.

## Blossoming Bonds

To further illustrate this connection between land and personal well-being, Heidi shared a powerful personal example involving her oldest daughter. She experienced mental health challenges and sought conventional medical treatment, which did not provide her with the relief she needed. Heidi shared:

I'll give a personal example around what that means or what that looks like. My oldest daughter, who's 19, had a, you know, just a bit of a rough time last year and went to see a mental health staff, so a psychologist and a psychiatrist. And I remember during her treatment of how they were trying to understand why she was feeling how she was feeling; she said to me, "Mom, can you just take me out to Uncle Oral's farm, and I'll be right then," you know, like, and, it was beautiful, it's that example is like, she knows that the best thing for her is just to sit out there on Oral's farm, who Oral, who's her pop, and her spirit can be strong, and her mind can be clear, and then she's able to think about what to do next. But she was feeling so overwhelmed with being in a hospital or being in a doctor's environment where they are asking questions and trying to probe around or, you know, to diagnose or find out what was wrong with her. I really love that. For me, that was like such a profound moment because this girl, like, I wasn't worried about her after that because she knows what she needs, and therefore, she's gonna be fine. But probably just before that, the day before, I was quite worried about how she was. That's an example involving my own child. There are plenty of examples just like that with young people that, if they just had access to people like us on country, or country itself, but if they're able to clear that fog that's causing confusion, or in their mind, or at the time, and be in a better position to know how to make good choices or to do the things that they need to do to make themselves strong (25:00-26:56).

This example shows the importance of Country having a healthy Country and access to this healthy, undegraded Country in providing not just physical but also mental and

spiritual healing for the Noongar people. Furthermore, Jesse, a non-aboriginal worker at Boola Boornap and the son of Dave, also highlighted how healing country is a reciprocal relationship between country and people:

"When people and local Noongar people go out and do these plantings, and then going back and seeing the results of that, is one of the best, one of the most inspiring things I think people can be a part of. There can be nothing better than seeing land that was just salt-affected or, if it's on the top of the hills, experiencing wind erosion and it's impossible to farm. So we go in, plant that area, and then in a few year's time, we go back, and it's bush (16:33-17:13). The physical restoration and rehabilitation of Country, tied with the experience of local people going into that Country, doing the work, and then seeing the results, is hard work. It's extremely hard to restore Country. But, if you go out there and slog it out for weeks and weeks, bond as a team, and then four years later go back and see the results of that planting, it has a huge effect on people. It really heals."

Boola Boornap and the work of NLE, as described by Jesse, exemplify the culturally safe space where meaningful work contributes to personal healing and the health of the land. This holistic approach demonstrates that ecological restoration in the Wheatbelt is intrinsically tied to personal and community healing, illustrating a profound connection between Healing Country and individual well-being. Oral also shared his view on how Healing Country is effectively healing people.

"So, healing ourselves is, you know, in our language, or in our cultural world, we speak of land, of Country, being medicine for us. And that's simply the holistic well-being benefits that we get by simply being on our tribal traditional lands. It is very much embedded in our concept, in our desire to come back and heal Country. So, healing is no different in principle to when we are ill or sick ourselves. We certainly don't function as we would normally do on a functional daily basis, and we actually take time out, and we care for our spirit and our inner self, as physical self. So, healing Country is no different when we think of Country as an entity that is an extension of, or central to, our spirit and our self, our soul. You know, we apply the same principles of rest and recovery, nurture, and caring for our mother, our brother, elderly, and, of course, so caring for Country in that same context is very important in terms of how we think about it, and certainly how we put in place practices and activities or actions, you know, to achieve the outcome of healing the land."

These three personal examples provide a window into the holistic, cultural, and spiritual example of what Healing Country means to them. While these descriptions of experiences do offer a form of definition, it is crucial to acknowledge that they do so in a way that embraces complexity and resists Western reductionist categorisation. As Oral mentions, Country is the spirit of ourselves and our soul. This suggests that while I can directly quote lived experiences of healing, there remains an indefinable essence

tied to the lived, spiritual existence of the Noongar people that this thesis will not be able to convey in text.

The ethnographic film, in contrast, comes slightly closer to capturing this essence by documenting nuanced expressions through visual storytelling. The conversations with Heidi and Jesse from the quotes above and all the other corresponding quotes used in the film paint a clear picture of feelings and movements that the text cannot convey alone. Heidi's emotional resonances are captured in the visual media as she talks about her daughter's relief when visiting Oral's farm. The clip captures her facial expressions and tone, which brings empathy and understanding into her words. Similarly, Jesse's description of the community's efforts to restore landscapes while he is cultivating at the same moment indicates sincerity and that he truly believes what he says. Moreover, the film captures the larger cultural and environmental context surrounding these personal experiences. By showing landscapes, the act of cultivating and growing seedlings in the nursery, and the transformation of the land, the film provides a holistic view of Healing Country efforts by the NLE community. This approach makes their stories and experiences more accessible and relatable to a wider audience. Pink (2006) supports this view by highlighting how ethnographic film can also evoke embodied sensory experiences, thereby also playing with the emotions and senses to transform the audience's understanding. Thus, the audiovisual medium provokes sensitive experiences that prompt the viewers to reflect on their own perceptions and knowledge. This approach alters the audience's comprehension through emotional and sensory involvement, something that text alone can't do.

Additionally, I have included lots of landscape shots in the film. According to Vivanco (2002), landscape shots enhance the viewer's understanding of cultural context. The degraded landscapes, in contrast to the green oasis that Oral's property is, provide a powerful backdrop to the spoken narratives. The landscapes do more than just set the scene in the film; they visually narrate the impact of colonisation and the ongoing relationship between Country and people. Furthermore, throughout the film, different native plants are discussed, such as Quondong, Sandalwood, Mungart, Eucalypt and Net bush; I used object elicitation and, in this case, plant elicitation as a method to deepen participant observation. The native plants serve as prompts to evoke discussion on their

historical, cultural and ecological significance. For example, the Mungart tree, regarded as sacred, symbolises spiritual heritage; the Sandalwood, largely removed from the Wheatbelt in the 1800s, highlights historical exploitation and loss; and the Net Bush is valued for its role in ecological restoration. The approach aligns with Harper's (2002) concept of elicitation techniques, demonstrating how plant elicitation enriches qualitative data by linking sensory experiences with verbal narratives. By integrating these tangible elements into the interviews, the film effectively converts the complex interplay between culture, ecology and personal identity.

# Collecting the Seeds of Restored Country

The nursery's cultivation and planting of native species are critical to restoring the Wheatbelt's ecological integrity. This showcases the resilience of both the environment and the people that inhabit Boodja. Through the perspective of cultural ecology, Boola Boornap demonstrates how traditional ecological knowledge and contemporary practices may coexist, providing a route where old wisdom leads current restoration efforts. The nursery's efforts go beyond simple environmental restoration; they reignite spiritual connections and cultural traditions. At Boola Boornap, the cultivation of these native plants is used to develop a stronger connection to Boodja, embracing the indefinable essence of Healing Country, which combines the ecological health of the landscape with culture and spirituality. This holistic approach underscores that the seeds of restored Country are planted not only in the soil on Boodja but within the community's collective spirit, reaffirming that true restoration encompasses ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, thus nurturing the land and the people in harmonious reciprocity.

Undertaking the research for this thesis has led to meaningful friendships with my interlocutors and has profoundly reshaped my academic approach, that not everything can be grasped with intellectual comprehension. As Heidi suggested, setting aside my ego has been crucial. In a world obsessed with categorisation and control, there is profound wisdom in accepting that some significant truths elude complete understanding and resonate deeply within the broader tapestry of life. The tension between the definable and non-definable elements of Healing Country that I have examined reflects the broader challenges of decolonising knowledge.

Embracing this non-definable element of Healing relates to the spirit of Country. Through pluralistic theoretical frameworks that respect Noongar epistemologies, I have demonstrated that Healing Country indeed heals people and challenges Western paradigms such as anthropocentrism, reductionism, and the need for intellectual control. The rich tapestry of meaning I have described in these texts does not fully capture the lived experience of the Noongar people. Therefore, the accompanying ethnographic film is necessary to bring us one step closer to finding the Sweet Spot of Healing Country.

Additionally, this journey has taught me a lot about the interconnectedness of humans, other beings, and even non-beings on our planet. What happens elsewhere in the world is inherently connected to what happens to you. We are all part of a bigger system. Nature speaks to us when we feel the wind on our faces; it means something. Tornadoes, floods, droughts, and extreme weather conditions are all ways of communicating with us. Country is stressed, Country is disturbed, Country is crying. We should become more attentive, listen to others, respect and not feel threatened, and share knowledge and objectives to create a better and more sustainable outcome for all. If we continue going as we are, progress will not be possible. Two significant lessons I learned from Noongar's knowledge are: first, listen to Country. Just go out, sit, and be. Secondly, take care of Country, and Country will take care of you.

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