

## ***Hecate*: Adaptation, Education and Cultural Activism**

Clint Bracknell with Kylie Bracknell

### **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss collaborative processes, leading and learning associated with *Hecate*, which premiered at Perth Festival 2020 as a co-production between Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company and Bell Shakespeare. *Hecate* is the first Shakespearean work, in this case *Macbeth*, to be performed entirely in one Aboriginal language from Australia, specifically the Noongar language from Western Australia's southwest. Every performance elicited a standing ovation (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations 2020). *Hecate* was adapted and directed by Kylie Bracknell and co-translated with editorial guidance from senior language teacher Roma Yibiyung Winmar. I, the primary author of this chapter, was involved as a co-translator, composer and sound designer. As part of the continuing legacy of settler-colonialism in Australia, most of its hundreds of Aboriginal languages are severely endangered or 'sleeping', not currently spoken by the people they belong to (National Indigenous Languages Report 2020). Annual global language reference publication *Ethnologue* lists the Noongar language (also spelled Nyungar) and its regional dialectic variants as dormant or extinct (Eberhard et al. 2020), which makes *Hecate* all the more remarkable.

Over 30,000 people identify as Noongar, making it one of Australia's largest Aboriginal cultural groups (SWALSC 2016). However, in the 2016 Australian census just 475 Noongar people reported that they use the Noongar language at home (Austlang n.d.). Given that Noongar placenames and words to describe fauna and flora have been co-opted into common Western Australian English vernacular, considerably more of the population regularly use smatterings of Noongar language vocabulary in their everyday speech. Still, the Noongar language is rarely heard strung together in full sentences. Building on millennia of Noongar performance traditions (Bracknell 2017), and more recent performance history (Haebich 2018), *Hecate* is the first full work of Western-style theatre presented entirely in the Noongar language. More than being a significant artistic achievement, presenting Shakespeare in Noongar has provided a very rare opportunity for Noongar people and the general public to actively engage with the Noongar language in a variety of ways.

The development of *Hecate* provided a unique space to work with and perform in Noongar language but this opportunity arose because engaging with the English literary tradition – and particularly Shakespeare – attracted the necessary government and

philanthropic support, media attention, and audience interest to support this safe yet brave space. This was always apparent to Yirra Yaakin theatre company's artistic director Kyle J. Morrison who invited Bell Shakespeare to collaborate as a partner. Bell's association with *Hecate* began in 2017 with artistic director, Peter Evans, who saw this as an exciting opportunity to support an incredibly unique retelling of *Macbeth*, in line with the belief held by both Bell Shakespeare and Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company that Shakespeare should not be 'stuck in the past' but is the 'lens through which we can explore and question the present and imagine our future' (Bell Shakespeare 2020). This collaboration was effective due to the manner in which Bell Shakespeare supported Yirra Yaakin in realising its vision for *Macbeth*, rather than asserting control as Australia's national theatre company specialising in Shakespeare.

One of greatest challenges in revitalising Aboriginal languages in Australia is a lack of resources – a question not simply of financial or archival resources, but of human creative and intellectual resources too. The UNESCO Expert Group on Endangered Languages identifies nine factors contributing to language vitality (Brenzinger et al. 2003). These include:

1. Intergenerational language transmission;
2. Absolute numbers of speakers;
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population;
4. Loss of existing language domains;
5. Response to new domains and media;
6. Materials for language education and literacy;
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies;
8. Community members' attitudes towards their own language; and
9. Amount and quality of documentation.

This framework enables the categorisation of languages in terms of their endangerment status and assists in developing language maintenance strategies. As an arts intervention in the context of language endangerment, the development and staging of *Hecate* directly addresses all of these points. It nourished a new group of Noongar language speakers, activated a new domain for language use (Western theatre), and produced educational resources, while challenging deficit attitudes toward Aboriginal languages. The creation of *Hecate* connects

with an array of collaborative endeavours particularly associated with revitalising an endangered language.

The initial vision of the project quickly met the realities of language endangerment, setting into motion a decade-long timeframe necessary to adapt and translate the work, engage with senior Noongar speakers and Australia's national theatre company Bell Shakespeare, and develop a Noongar acting ensemble. In the context of building a confident troupe of speakers for this project, teaching and learning Noongar language were approached as collaborative enterprises, necessarily distanced from didactic, classroom-style pedagogy. Language development sessions with the cast emphasised orality over literacy. This approach was carried over to school workshops undertaken after *Hecate*'s first season. Reverence – for Shakespeare in the arts community and Noongar language in the Noongar community – raised the stakes for *Hecate*. The processes developed in response to this pressure may serve as a guide for future endeavours intersecting with issues of translation, cultural endangerment, and de-colonial imperatives (Jazeel 2017).

### **Shakespeare waangkiny (Shakespeare speaking)?**

Domestic and international interest in Aboriginal languages among non-Aboriginal people has increased in recent decades, especially given the United Nations' 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and upcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (UNESCO 2020). While new opportunities continue to arise for Aboriginal people to engage in the explanation and promotion of their cultural heritage (Henderson and Nash 2002: 1), Aboriginal people may hold a wide range of attitudes towards the revitalisation and public exposure of their languages (Bell 2013). Due to trauma linked to forced assimilation with the settler colonial community,<sup>1</sup> some older Aboriginal people may 'voice their opinion that traditional language and culture should remain in the past', whilst others may not be willing to participate in language projects 'due to shyness or the belief that they do not have enough language knowledge' (Bell 2013: 402). Working with Bundjalung and Gidabal people of south-east Australia, music researcher Margaret Gummow explains that:

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<sup>1</sup> The attempted cultural assimilation of Aboriginal people in colonial Australia was facilitated by various Australian state government policies, including the Aborigines Act (1905), Native Administration Act (1936) and the Native (Citizenship Rights) Act (1944) in Western Australia. It generally involved the institutionalisation of Aboriginal children. Additionally, citizenship rights were not available to Aboriginal people deemed 'uncivilised' by government authorities, for example, those people who continued to speak Aboriginal languages in public (Haebich 2000).

[T]oday, many Aboriginal people are possessive of their culture and rarely perform songs on request. The songs and language that are still remembered are precious possessions from the past that owners hang on to. This is understandable when we consider the history of European contact (Gummow 1994: 48).

It is also understandable that many Aboriginal people are reluctant to have themselves, their languages and their cultures put ‘on display’ for the entertainment of newly interested non-Aboriginal audiences, especially when many of these opportunities place Aboriginal people in the position of having to defend their identities whilst also attempting to disprove the many stereotypical or inaccurate representations of Aboriginal culture in media, films and literature, and upon which non-Aboriginal audiences have constructed erroneous discourses around issues relation to Aboriginality (see Langton 1993).

*Hecate* premiered a decade after Yirra Yaakin theatre company’s artistic director Kyle J. Morrison first hatched the idea of performing Shakespearean works in the endangered Noongar language, beginning with *Sonnets in Noongar* (2012). In 1833, colonist Robert Meni Lyon wrote in reference to Noongar people that ‘the whole of each tribe are bards’ (1833: 52). However, colonisation since 1829 and ensuing assimilation policies in southern Western Australia have adversely impacted the transmission of Noongar language, stories and songs. Today few people are familiar enough with the Noongar language to appreciate the nuances of its poetic forms. Paradoxically, due to Shakespeare’s ubiquity in formal education and global popular culture, many Noongar people are familiar with at least a few lines of Shakespeare.

Yibiyung says ‘Everyone knew the name Shakespeare but he was from another century, another world. Then he came into our world long after he was gone, and helped promote our language [laughs]’ (personal communication 28 October 2020). Rather than a simple act of kowtowing to European cultural aesthetics, rendering Shakespearean works in the Noongar language, from a Noongar perspective, is a political statement. As someone with at least three decades of experience teaching the Noongar language in schools, Yibiyung is adamant that ‘our languages aren’t valued. They never have been... Kids going into missions and having to learn English because their own mother tongue wasn’t acceptable’ (personal communication 28 October 2020). Speaking back to the most highly revered of English playwrights in an Aboriginal language may serve as a rebuke to the deficit discourses built up around Aboriginal languages which have both facilitated their endangerment and hampered their revival (Bell 2013; Pascoe 2018).

### **Koondam koorong-koorliny (weaving the dream)**

Kyle J. Morrison was inspired by connections he found between Shakespearean themes and Noongar experiences. Over a decade, he drove this project from an initial ideas stage to the eventual premiere of *Hecate*, based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Translating *Macbeth* into Noongar is the culmination of a long, collaborative process between Morrison – the visionary – and one of the authors of this chapter, Kylie Bracknell (nee Farmer) – the adaptor, co-translator, and director. As the artistic director of Yirra Yaakin theatre company, the only Aboriginal theatre company in Western Australia, Morrison's original concept was to develop a Noongar *Othello*. He wanted to bring Shakespeare to a wider audience and recognise what he understood as synergetic relationship between Shakespearean themes and Noongar culture. To Morrison, this relationship is apparent across all of Shakespeare's plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes places between spirit and conscious realms, *As You Like It* explores reconnection to Country<sup>2</sup>) as well as in the richness and expressiveness of Shakespearean English and the Noongar language. *Hecate*'s associate director, James Evans, says 'the extraordinary thing about Shakespeare is that his stories are timeless, universal, not just for one culture but for the entire world' (Yirra Yaakin 2020).

In 2010, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre initially suggested a collaboration with Yirra Yaakin theatre company to translate *King Lear* into Noongar. Morrison's initial exploration of this possibility quickly established that developing a full-length play in an endangered language would require a long timeframe and particular expertise. The Globe returned with the idea to translate Shakespeare's sonnets. Morrison approached a number of individuals and organisations associated with the Noongar language with the idea of translating Shakespeare, but the success of the *Sonnets in Noongar* project was in large part due to collaboration with Kylie Bracknell, who understood not only what was required for word-to-word translation into Noongar language, but the adaptation of the Shakespearean subtext into a Noongar production. Over her twenty-year career in the performing arts, Bracknell had previously performed as an actor in two Shakespearean productions. More importantly, since her teens she had dedicated herself to learning the Noongar language from senior speakers and subsequently presented *Waabiny Time* (Trimboli and Farmer 2009; 2012), Australia's first national children's television program in an Aboriginal language (Noongar). Morrison and

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<sup>2</sup> In an Aboriginal context, the term, "Country", written with a capital letter, signifies land as "nourishing terrain", alive, multidimensional and intertwined with local Aboriginal people and culture (Rose 1996: 1).

Bracknell's collaboration lead to the Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company developing and presenting *Sonnets in Noongar*, a selection of Shakespeare's sonnets in Noongar as part of The Globe Theatre's Cultural Olympiad in London in 2012, setting the stage for a larger project to translate *Macbeth*, the result being *Hecate*.

Morrison's initial vision and Bracknell's adaptation – spurred into bold and brave territory by award-winning writer and dramaturg, Kate Mulvany – demanded that *Hecate* be not a direct translation, but something entirely new, imbued with a distinctly Noongar sensibility. *Hecate* brings together Shakespearean and Noongar ideas about femininity, Country, consciousness, and spirituality in its exploration of the way the land is affected and changed by human decisions, and where *boodjar* (Country) is the reigning monarch. Morrison describes this as allowing for conversations between consciousness, people, and non-corporeal entities, and imbuing every character with the nobility of having their place in the world. He considers *Macbeth* as providing a framework for the possibility of creatively telling a story in Noongar language that is physically far enough removed from Country to avoid cultural sensitivities and issues of reverence and ownership, but close enough philosophically to be understood by the Noongar audience that it was made for.

Morrison's aspirational vision for the piece quickly met the reality of working with an endangered Aboriginal language. Current Yirra Yaakin chairperson Ellery Blackman states:

We completely supported Kyle J. Morrison and his vision for Shakespeare in Noongar. We also trusted his ability to mature that vision and transition its ownership to Kylie Bracknell—and Kylie's ability and leadership to take that vision and create an amazing production (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations 2020).

Translation was never going to be straightforward, and significant community development work needed to be undertaken not only in forming a Noongar ensemble who could perform in the Noongar language, but ensuring that senior Noongar language speakers were respected and supportive of the project. Blackman describes how 'what was essential to us was a clear and defined channel for engaging with elders and seeking their input, approval, and acceptance at every stage' (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations 2020). Over the decade-long process building to *Hecate*'s premiere, Morrison became such an adept Noongar language speaker that his contribution to the *Hecate* ensemble as actor in a variety of dialogue-heavy roles was integral to the success of the project, not just his initial vision as Yirra Yaakin's artistic director.

### **Dabakarn waangk (careful talk)**

Over the decade leading up to *Hecate* (2020), over fifteen Noongar performers participated in multiple, usually week-long workshops facilitated by Kylie Bracknell. This functioned not necessarily to develop the work, but to develop an ensemble comprised of Noongar language speakers. Each workshop stirred emotions whilst offering a trusted healing sanctuary that steadily combated the residue effects of language loss whilst supporting new reclamation journeys for this tailored ensemble. None of the performers had spoken fluent Noongar language from an early age, and only some had heard it. Kylie Bracknell explains:

The Noongar language has not been taught strongly enough in our Noongar community for it to flow down to the younger generations to use in everyday conversation. Sadly, past government policies actively suppressed the Noongar language. As many community members attest, our elders were flogged for using it (Bracknell 2016).

Aside from addressing the obvious logistical and artistic challenges of the project, the workshops leading to *Hecate* assisted performers and invited senior language speakers to ‘heal from the intergenerational trauma associated with Aboriginal language loss’ (Bracknell 2016). There is inherent danger in attempting to learn and perform in one’s endangered Aboriginal language. Acknowledging the surety of discomfort, Bracknell’s workshops fostered ‘brave spaces’ where those involved could sit with discomfort, while also looking after each other’s wellbeing (Studham 2020). Creating a dynamic brave space allowed the workshops to adapt in response to the articulated needs of the group, whether that meant providing time for acknowledgement or deciding to revisit a particular item on a later day.

The task of learning enough Noongar language to articulate something as complex as Shakespeare was daunting for all involved. Notwithstanding the fundamental differences between Shakespearean English and the Noongar language, *Hecate*’s cast and creative team were also struck by the stark phonetic differences between Australian English and the Noongar language. These include the prominent nasalised vowel ‘æ’ (as in ‘ash’) which is not found in the Noongar language but is common to the varieties of English that most Noongar people speak as their first language today, and the emphasis placed by Noongar speakers only on the first syllable of each word – a feature not found in varieties of English. Such differences in accent and syllable-stress had an undue influence on how the cast

pronounced Noongar, which was written using English orthography (i.e. the Latin alphabet). To compensate for such marked language differences, the repeated performance of songs as an oral pedagogy in language learning contexts can promote and reinforce correct pronunciation and emphasis (Techmeier 1969).

Years before the script for *Hecate* was finalised, I developed a handful of songs for the production based on Shakespearean text that Kylie Bracknell sourced from *Macbeth* and other plays. As early as 2017, although casting was far from being determined, everybody participating in the workshops would learn and repeat the songs. Kyle J. Morrison and other cast members consider the songs pivotal in their growth as speakers and maintained Noongar singing practices months after *Hecate* was staged. This outcome adds evidence to the theory that the mnemonic qualities of song can help invigorate and sustain language acquisition (Miyashita and Shoe 2009). It also demonstrates how song can effectively inform the stresses, tone and rhythm of an endangered Aboriginal language (Edwards and Hobson 2013). More importantly, the communal singing rehearsals bonded the group of performers through unified action. In the moment of keeping a song going, everyone was in it together.

Eventually, an oral and embodied approach to learning the Noongar language was complemented by text-free approaches to familiarise the cast with the narrative arc of *Macbeth*. Kylie Bracknell encouraged Bell Shakespeare's Peter Evans and James Evans to direct the cast through a fifteen-minute retelling of the play, complete with entrances and exits, feigned violence and vocal expressions – just not dialogue from the play. Seeing and feeling the story, rather than pouring over the work's dense text, gave the cast and creative team a more fluid and playful view of the *Macbeth*. It also allowed Bracknell to take a birds-eye-view of the whole story which assisted in the adaptation process.

As perhaps the most challenging activity in *Hecate*'s development, Kylie Bracknell instigated a 'Noongar only' hour for each workshop day, in which participants could only interact using the Noongar language – no English. It was important to her that the actors involved understood the words in the script as Noongar speakers themselves as, after all, they would need to be aware of their cue lines. In a small way, this approach aligns with the relative success of language immersion programs in New Zealand, Canada and Hawaii (May 2013). Bracknell describes how '[a]t the very beginning of this project, these tough exercises would bring a fair bit of silence to the room for sixty minutes or more. Now, it's hard to get sixty seconds of quiet time amongst them, and that brings joy to my heart' (Bracknell 2016). Often, it would be these 'Noongar only' hours which would trigger discomfort amongst performers and require time and space for thought, group discussion and response. It was

risky work, but as Yibiyung suggests, ‘If you’re reclaiming your language, aren’t you going to grab it with both hands?’ (personal communication 28 October 2020).

Bracknell also chose the ‘Noongar only’ hour as the time around which to invite senior Noongar language speakers to visit the nascent ensemble. Although she invited a range of different senior people from the Noongar community to visit the workshops leading to *Hecate*, few accepted the challenge of speaking only in Noongar for a full hour. Rather than necessarily add to the pressure of this activity, the senior language speakers who participated would often offer phrases or words for the performers to try out prior to the hour commencing. After the ‘Noongar only’ hour, they would join the group in reflecting on the difficulty of avoiding English after having it imposed on our lives for so long. Much like the effect of group singing, having to rely on each other in the context of the ‘Noongar only’ hour strengthened the ensemble and the bonds between the ensemble and the senior language speakers.

Yibiyung was the senior language speaker who participated in the most ‘Noongar only’ hours with the ensemble. Of the first Aboriginal community preview night and the subsequent opening night, she remembers ‘just looking at the faces of others [senior Noongar people] who were there and they’d recognise a word and they would just [she smiles]. They were crying, they were so overwhelmed, they were happy’ (personal communication 28 October 2020). Anticipating the need for audiences to connect and reflect, Kylie Bracknell arranged for Noongar woman Mitchella Hutchins to host ‘kambarnap’, an outdoor meeting area with a fire before and after each performance of *Hecate*. More than a collaboration between creatives and cast, *Hecate* was a collaboration with the Noongar, and even the broader community. Through the framework of Shakespeare, *Hecate* was able to lead non-Aboriginal audience members into a ‘different cultural realm’ (Marshall 2020), some describing the production as ‘a miracle’ and ‘original, transporting and necessary theatre’ (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations 2020).

### **Djoowak waangkiny (next-generation speaking)**

Shortly after *Hecate*’s premiere season, Perth Festival organised for a subset of the *Hecate* cast and creative team (myself, Kylie Bracknell, Roma Yibiyung Winmar, Kyle J. Morrison, Rubeun Yorkshire, Della Morrison and Cezera Critti-Schnaars) to share the *Hecate* songs in sessions with three Perth high schools. Of the three participating cohorts, one was mainly Aboriginal students, one was a mixed group with mainly non-Aboriginal students, and one was a mixed all-female group. Taking the *Hecate* songs to high schools allowed us to trial the

oral pedagogy that had worked well with the cast in the development workshops. These sessions were purely oral, focusing on call-and-response singing, small group practice and collaboration with facilitators to develop short performance pieces.

Based on Perth Festival's feedback data, these sessions resulted in increased knowledge of Noongar language and Noongar songs, and belief in the value of singing as an effective mode of language learning:

#### *Knowledge of Noongar language*

- before the workshop 50% of students said they knew nothing about Noongar; After the workshop, 88% of students said they knew a few words (48%) or phrases (40%) in Noongar

#### *Knowledge of Noongar songs*

- before the workshop, the majority of students (94%) had either never heard any Noongar songs, or were only familiar with Noongar songs from *Hecate*; after the workshop 48% of students said they can sing some songs in Noongar

#### *Belief that singing helps learn another language*

- before the workshop 24% of students thought that singing would help them learn some sentences in another language; after the workshop, 55% of students believed that signing would help them learn some sentences in another language

#### *Anticipated and experienced feelings*

- After the workshop, at least twice as many students reported wanting to learn more songs, more Noongar language, and feeling excited about learning Noongar songs. Three times as many students reported feeling confident about learning Noongar songs, while the small number of students who initially felt 'silly' or 'stupid' learning Noongar songs dropped from 4 to 1.

The relative success of these school incursions was contingent on a number of factors.

The songs themselves are musically and linguistically challenging enough as to not be too easy for high-school aged students. Having at least three facilitators and a senior language speaker present at each session provided a strong grounding for the activities to take place

and increased the potential for effective small group work. Although the co-ed groups worked with both male and female facilitators, Aboriginal gender protocol considerations led to us deciding that the all-female student group only worked with female facilitators. Importantly, because these Noongar songs are based on translations of Shakespearean text, like *Hecate*, they carry the cultural cache to encourage a broad range of people to engage. Furthermore, as the sessions were highly participatory, they allowed for something like an ‘instantaneous response, prior to interpretation’ (Bracknell 2020: 221). The students had little time to second-guess their participation before being swept along in a visceral and distinctly Noongar experience.

## **Conclusion**

As a settler-colonial nation with a noted cultural cringe (Philips 2006), Australia places high cultural value on Shakespeare. Yibiyung describes an ‘cultural activist’ as someone who ‘activates the minds of other people’. In *Hecate*, Shakespeare’s venerated status has been subversively used as a chink in the settler-colonial armour through which Aboriginal cultural activism, and deeper ‘felt’ intercultural understanding has been achieved as a result of various collaborative processes, most importantly in developing a Noongar language-speaking ensemble of Noongar actors. The increased ability to draw funding and publicity explains why the first full theatrical work in the Noongar language in modern times is an adaptation of Shakespeare and not a wholly original Noongar story. At the same time, from the perspective of the creative team *Hecate* as a piece of theatre was but a happy by-product of the broader agenda, to revive a community of Noongar speakers.

Yibiyung says that ‘using Shakespeare as a vehicle to showcase our Noongar language adds something else. It is wonderful to start off and then reach the peak and be looking back knowing that everything was done properly’ (personal communication 28 October 2020). From Kyle J. Morrison’s initial idea to translate Shakespeare and his collaboration with Kylie Bracknell resulting in a significantly extended timeframe for development, to the respectful and supportive mode of collaboration with Bell Shakespeare, to supporting an extended group of Noongar performers in expanding their language in a brave space under the watch of senior language speakers, this project has strived to do things properly. That brave space extended out to audiences via the kambarnap meeting space and schools through the song sessions. *Hecate* was likely the last show many people in Western Australia saw before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. For many of the team

involved and audience we have kept in touch with, it has inspired an increased focus on our place in the world and distinctly local connections.

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