Karla Kurliny
Coming Back Home
I pay my respects to my Elders, my Bworan and Karbarli, past and present, from who the knowledge has come.

This book comes from the koort (heart) of nguny (our) Bworan and Karbarli (Elders), people who have sat with us and told us their stories. The people featured here are just some of the many Bworan and Karbarli who love to share their stories.

Three years ago, I sat in a Working Party meeting with Gnaala Karla Booja members and asked whether they would like to take part in a project to record our culture. The arts in our culture are our heritage – passed down by our old people – and important healing tools. Culture – song, dance and music – all play a major role in our Noongar people's lives.

A lot of healing was needed in our region, and for that healing to happen we worked alongside CAN WA, who we asked to help us tell our Elders' and young people's stories.

Our partnership began in February 2011, in Harvey, where our first Gnaala Karla Booja workshop took place. Pilar Kasat and Monica Kane introduced CAN WA and explained its role, and asked Gnaala Karla Booja for permission to come into the people's lives and share their culture and heritage through the arts.

This was the first step of the Gnaala Karla Booja and CAN WA partnership, a partnership that has lasted three years. Further workshops were held in 2011 and 2012 at Lake Navarino, Pumphreys Bridge and Cannington. Both Noongar young people and Elders were involved in the projects. Bworan and Karbarli were interviewed and photographed, and youth residency workshops took place at Roelands Mission.

Along the way, I have been inspired, and I will never forget the tears and the laughter that I have shared with loved ones, including some people who have passed on. They have passed on, but, their stories are still here. This book is like footprints that shows us the paths our Elders have travelled.

Gerí Hayden
Chairperson, Gnaala Karla Booja Native Title Working Party
When Reconciliation Australia commenced in 2000 it gave the issue of governance top priority. Native people from Canada and the United States were enlisted to describe how they had learned that culturally appropriate governance was at the heart of healthy communities. Working with the Australian National University and others brought this into national focus and governance became a word that was dropped into every conversation about Indigenous disadvantage.

As the word became a buzzword, there was a puzzling counter-movement. Aboriginal people saw their rights to make decisions about their communities and their lives diminished. They had less to govern. The first question that needs to be asked is this: what do we wish or intend to govern?

The Noongar people face new opportunities through native title and land negotiations, through Elder determination to maintain culture and heritage, through the maintenance of families and through the tragic issues of youth crime and imprisonment. These are all opportunities for Noongar decisionmaking, and having effective, culturally appropriate ways of governing themselves is vital.

I welcome this publication as a window into a genuinely Noongar way of going about their business. More than ever before, Noongars need a Noongar voice and not just the voices of individual Noongars. To achieve that requires a system of governance that Noongars see as legitimate.

This will only be achieved by engaging communities and building local capacity. This project facilitates the leadership and the engagement between Elders and the young that is needed.

Fred Chaney AO
2014 Senior Australian of the Year for his outstanding contribution to human rights and reconciliation
The Noongar people’s best voice is their own voice.

The way our old people showed us they loved us was by taking us bush and showing us culture and sharing all that with us. A lot of that is lost to our young people today.
Being Aboriginal is being proud – proud of who you are, where you come from, your colour.

They are probably all sitting around us, watching us – the spirits. What’s this old fella talking about?

I’d like to think I’m representing them as well as myself ’cause I want better things for my family, for my culture and for my people.
I grew up with Mum on the reserve. I wasn't taken away. One day, the ladies came to take us away. I thought I was going too! I wanted to play the piano, step-dance and all that, and I was all ready to go.

When they came back with the truck, Grandpop was waiting for them, and he said, ‘What are you back here for?’ And they said, ‘We've come to pick the kids up.’ He said, ‘Over my dead body! If you don't get out of this place, I'll get my gun and show you what I'll do.’ They took off.

When Grandpop said, ‘You can't go,’ I was so disappointed, because I wanted to step-dance, I wanted to learn music, I wanted to learn the piano. Mum took us back and she said, ‘Oh, you wanted to go, did you?’ She said, ‘Pack your clothes up and go.’ When I went to get my clothes, she had a great big stick waiting for me, and she whacked me around the legs. That was my punishment for even thinking to go.

Now I think about what Mum did. She said, ‘If you go with those people, you will never see me again. You won't see us, and you never know what those people will do to you.’ Now, I realise I'm glad I didn't go, and I thank Mum for that.

Beryl Harp
My best memories are travelling in a horse and cart everywhere. We used to go out to my great-grandma and grandpa’s hometown. I remember going out there and the trips we took to get there. We didn’t get there in one day, of course – maybe two.

We just lived in this cart, and we’d go along and we’d jump out and pick flowers. When it got dark and the horses were tired, we’d pull up alongside the road and chuck the tarp over the cart. Some would lie on top and some underneath, and we’d make a fire and settle down for the night. Sometimes we’d argue about who’d sleep up top or underneath. I slept up on top most times.

And we’d continue our journey. We’d eat whatever we had – a bit of damper, sometimes kangaroo – we didn’t really worry. There were a lot of us. We travelled like gypsies in those days – one family per cart.

Lois Winmar
When you have meetings, you set a time and allow for about half an hour for them to turn up. You can't say to them, 'Hey, you're late!' You conduct the meeting and the activity when everyone is there 'cause it would be pretty useless having a meeting without the participants. That's a basic way of saying we are on Noongar time.

Shirley Haywood
Once we took lunch to school. It was damper wrapped up in newspaper, and we stuck it in the tree. When we went to get it at lunchtime, the crows had eaten the whole lot! The tree was full of crows! That happened lots of times. It took us a while to get smart. Then we used to hide it in the classroom.

Shirley Haywood
When you come to rivers and waterways, you sing out and introduce yourself.

I took the boys down one time ... and I said to my grandson, 'Come here.' He said, 'What?' I said, 'What can you hear?' And he goes, 'I can't hear anything.' I said, 'Have a look at the top of the trees. What's happening there?' He said, 'They are all moving.' And I said, 'Yeah, but what can you hear?' He said, 'Wind.' And I said, 'You can hear that wind coming fast at us across the top of trees.'

All of a sudden, his eyes opened up, and he said, 'Oh yeah! The top of the trees are moving.' I said, 'That's all our old people coming down, coming to see and say hello to us. You just sing out and tell them who you are.' The wind reached the river, and then it all stopped. His little eyes were 'ooooooo'.

Les Wallam
I look back and I think of all the Noongar kids who weren't treated fairly. I missed half a year of school 'cause the bus driver wouldn't pick us up and take us to school. We lived out in the bush. As he was only licensed to carry so many and they were all white kids, we couldn't get on the bus.

We weren't allowed to go to the movies in the town hall. We had to wait 'til all the tickets were sold. If there were any left at the end, we could get in. If they were all sold, we had to go back home.

Teachers didn't want to teach Noongar kids, even in Wagin. I went to school there. They were all the same. I went to about six different schools. They were all the same.

Shirley Haywood
They came and took us from school. My brothers told me that Mum had a feeling something was wrong. She was standing on the side of the road waiting for the bus to drop us off. When the bus went straight past, she just dropped to her knees and started crying. She knew the welfare had grabbed us.

Gloria Kearing
Culture is a thing of belonging – inside your head, inside your heart. It'll never leave you; it will always be there.
Once you understand the bush, you can understand your culture. Once you get respect, you’ll understand what the Elders are trying to teach you.

Then, one day, you will stand up and say, ‘I am a Noongar person and I respect my culture and my boodja.’

Gloria Kearing
If I know I have to get a message across, I won't single out somebody in a group and embarrass them by saying, ‘You’ve got a problem.’ I'd give the message to the whole group. I'd say, ‘Of all us Noongar people sitting here …’

We take ownership of all the issues as Aboriginal people. We say, ‘How are we all going to deal with it?’

Les Wallam
When I was young and we were going to school here in Pinjarra, they made us feel ashamed of our culture. They would bring out books with naked black fellas. They were laughing and saying, 'Oh, that's how you were.' This made Aboriginal people feel ashamed.

Now, I see my grandchildren at school. They are not ashamed. That makes a big difference to me. They are learning more about our culture.

I've got a little grandson who stands up and says, "I'm a Noongar."

Gloria Kearing
Storytelling is very important – then other people can understand about you. Then they are gonna understand where I am coming from, where I've been and where I wanna go to.

Gloria Kearing
Grandmother used to live with us in the camp, and I knew she loved gilgies. We never had torches in those days. We'd light a piece of paperbark, go down to the creek bed and chuck them all in a bucket.

At night, you can hear the old girl, grandmother, cracking them shells and that – having a good feed. That made us feel good, knowing that she was enjoying what we caught. You got a sense within yourself that you made at least one person happy.

Harry Nannup
I sing out for the old people, I sing out to the spirits to the kangaroo! You chuck the sand on the ground and you hit the ground and you sing out.

You tell him I’m hungry and your meat is good meat. You tell him your children are hungry and need a feed.

When you shoot that kangaroo, you gotta sing out and thank him for his meat...and let his spirit go. You say thank you for the meat...cause I’m hungry too and you gave yourself up for me to feed.

Joe Northover
Noongars have a way of laughing – laughing at situations. That's the best way that we've got. That's part of our culture – a way of dealing with pain or grief. We do have this ability to laugh at situations and see the funny side of things.

Les Wallam
You can only deal with the things you can deal with. You can only control the things you can control. Don't try to control something or worry about things outside of your control – you don't have ownership of that. Only control the things you can control.

I always tell my grannies, 'Don't let someone else's problem become yours when negative things are thrown at you. If an attack is thrown at you, leave it where it belongs, with that person, don't absorb it.'

Les Wallam
I usually say, ‘What's your mum's name? And your grandfather's name?’

And I'll say, ‘Oh, I know them!’ and that's the way I get into yarning with them.

You go backwards, you don't go frontwards – that's the way Noongars are.

Beryl Harp
Gnaala Karla Booja (GKB) means 'our fire land' and includes the Noongar people who have historical and cultural links with traditional boodja (land). We speak the Noongar language and identify ourselves also by the term Noongar, meaning 'person', or 'human being'. Boodja (land) is the centre of our culture – our people feel safe on boodja; it is home to family spirits, stories, histories and futures. "Where you see a Karlap (our home lands) there will always be a Karla (camp fire burning)."

Our land boundary covers approximately 34,427 square kilometers of the South West of Western Australia and stretches broadly from just south of Perth down the coast to just before Busselton. From there it heads east until just north of Konjonup then north to Corrigin and back west to the coast south of Perth.

Source: GKB Strategic Plan
Acknowledgements

CAN WA wishes to thank everyone who has supported, provided advice and assisted this project.

Workshop participants (where recorded)
February 2011, Harvey; April 2011, Lake Navarino near Waroona;
June 2011, Pumphreys Bridge near Narrogin; August 2011, Cannington
The four workshops explored the meaning of culture, identity and place, identified and mapped important journeys
and places, discussed community governance and cultural priorities, and collected and recorded Elders' stories.

Alphabetical order
Breanne Abraham  Beryl Harp (deceased)
Clive Abraham  Leon Harp
Clive Abraham, senior  Ted Hart
Nanna Gwen Abraham  Charne Hayden
Jessica Abraham  Elizabeth Hayden
Marina Abraham  Geri Hayden
Marion Abraham  Janet Hayden
Matthew 'Pop' Abraham (deceased)  Norm Haywood
Merv Abrahammv  Shirley Haywood
Travis Abraham  James Khan
Winston Abraham  Jeanette Kickett
Isla Bennell  Damien Michael
Lera Bennell  Florence Morrison
Wayne Bynder  Harry Narkle
Barbara Stamner-Corbett  Jennifer Narkle
Ernie Corbett  Temegan Narkle
Joann Corbett  T Penny
Joyce Dimar  Violet Pickett
Annette Garlett  Karrie Annie Kearing-Salmon
Yvonne Garlett  Rhona Wallam

Our Spirits' Stories Are Still There –
Gnaala Booroong Wangkiny Wongi Nidja Nyiny
September 2011, Wandering Mission

This oral history recorded Elders' memories
of growing up near Pumphreys Bridge and
Wandering Mission.

Janet Hayden  Beryl Harp (deceased)
Matthew 'Pop' Abraham (deceased)  Geri Hayden
Sima Khan-White (deceased)  Janet Hayden
Sima Khan-White (deceased)  Norm Haywood
Les Wallam  Shirley Haywood
Lois Winmar  Gloria Kearing
James Khan  Harry Nannup
Joe Northover  Les Wallam
Rhona Wallam  Lois Winmar
Video editing workshop participants
March 2013, Roelands Mission, Bunbury. A film-editing workshop for youth residency participants.

Jessica Abraham
Dawn Alone
Isla Bennell
Lera Bennell
Tahnee Garlett
Yvonne Garlett
Lee Hart

Glen Hayden
Janet Hayden
Norm Haywood
Shirley Haywood
Jarmaine Jackson
Sid Jackson
Dennis Jetta

Wilma Jetta
Graeme Miller
Harry Nannup, junior
Casey Penny
Renata Ugle
Steven Ugle
Les Wallam
Melba Wallam

Rhona Wallam
Olman Walley
Doug Wheatby
Carlin Williams
Janine Williams
Jarrod Williams
Nathan Williams
Peter Woods

Youth residency participants
November 2012, Roelands Mission, Bunbury
The youth residency shared stories between Noongar Elders and youth.

Youth
Jessica Abraham
Leonie Abraham
Adrian Barrett
Leslie Hart
Leroy Hill
Kaycee Penny
Shynade Penny
Shonnika Ugle
Shakira Whitby
Jarrod Williams
Nathan Williams

Elders
James Hayden
Janet Hayden
Liz Hayden
Gloria Kearing
James Khan
Harry Nannup
Les Wallam
Travis Abraham
Lera Bennell
Beryl Harp
Janet Hayden
Norm Haywood
Shirley Haywood

Gloria Kearing
James Khan
Harry Nannup
Les Wallam
Joe Northover

Elders featured in portraits
November 2013
Collie, Pinjarra, Narrogin and Perth

CAN WA
Pilar Kasat
Monica Kane
Geri Hayden
Natalie Scholtz
Graeme Miller
Mylène Ragon

Artist facilitators
Bill Bunbury
Arif Satar
Audrey Satar
Catherine Simmonds
Curtis Taylor
Project overview

In 2010, CAN WA and the Gnaala Karla Booja Working Party partnered in the cultural mapping and community governance pilot program. The program was intended to be different from others by:

- being community driven and grass-roots based
- incorporating creative and cultural elements, such as storytelling and the arts.

The cultural mapping part of the program saw the Noongar community identify projects, sites, stories, people and buildings that are culturally important to them and that they wished to record, or map. The program also saw participants describe and explain how the community organises itself, makes decisions and allocates roles and responsibilities, including leadership roles – aspects of a community that are collectively known as community governance.

CAN WA researched and read widely on the subject of Aboriginal community governance. A key resource was the Indigenous Community Governance Project – a partnership between the Centre for Aboriginal Policy and Economic Research and Reconciliation Australia. Over a period of five years, this project summarised the similarities in how different Aboriginal peoples across the nation structure their authority and hierarchies, make decisions, manage conflicts and adapt to walk in two worlds. It observed how culture and communities evolved and adapted to changes over time.

Between 2011 and 2013, CAN WA facilitated a range of community activities including community gatherings, residential programs, Elders storytelling, youth skills development workshops, cultural mapping workshops and workshops that used photographs as prompts to discuss important subjects.

This workshop is something that needs to be done more. We said we want to go back to the bush and do things because there's a breakdown in society and there's a breakdown in our own black society. What we've got to do is try to mend broken homes. We've heard enough about the pain that is out there. We've seen that and we've witnessed it here. I've seen men's tears, which I've never seen for years and years. So, you know, it's good. You men, don't be ashamed of those tears – they're precious. When you cry, it means that, inside you, your spirit is alive. You want something done, and it's coming out, and it's coming out in tears.

That's what those old fellas used to say, and you've got to remember that.

Janet Hayden, Lake Navarino, 2011
Elders from the Gnaala Karla Booja region formed a group that guided the activities. CAN WA listened carefully to the Elders’ advice and considered the community’s needs. Gatherings took place throughout Gnaala Karla Booja country and involved families from Pinjarra, Bunbury, Collie, Boddington, Narrogin, Brookton and Pingelly. More than 300 Noongar people participated. The aim was to bring together Elders to share culturally rich stories with younger generations.

In 2012, CAN WA published an oral history: Our Spirits’ Stories Are Still There or Gnaala Booroong Wangkiny Wongi Nidja Nyiny. Three Elders shared their stories as part of this project. Sadly, two of those Elders have since passed away. The late Sima Khan-White told us, ‘I’ve been waiting a long time to do this, and now I’m ready. It is time my story is told.’

This project brought together Noongar Elders and young people in a forum where they were able to speak openly about the challenges of passing culture from one generation to the next. Through dance and theatre, young Noongar people described their struggles. The Elders responded by communicating the pain they feel as they lose the young to incarceration and suicide. Elders described how one failing of current housing, legal, education and health systems is that they are structured without any allowance or acknowledgement of how Aboriginal cultures are organised. They expressed their urgent wish for young people to learn their culture, to stay connected, to be strong and to become future leaders.

The CAN WA and Gnaala Karla Booja partnership’s approach has proven successful, and CAN WA intends to incorporate this learning and pursue the development of a nationally accredited course. It is hoped that a course that strengthens community governance at the local level could provide Aboriginal people with the tools to improve consensus and decision making for the long term.
The DVD Karla Kurliny

Return the Knowledge – Korl Koort Kaartadjin

Noongar Elders talk about Noongar ways, including governance and culture. The Elders advise the young to seek cultural knowledge from their old people, to learn their stories and to connect with their culture. Korl koort kaartadjin. It is time to return the knowledge!

Youth Pathway to Knowledge – Koolong Mart Kaartadjin

This short documentary features the young Noongar people who participated in a creative residential workshop. The workshop was born out of the Elders’ request that their young people connect with their culture. ‘Our young people are dying,’ Elders told us. ‘They need their culture.’

The young people talk about their perceptions of Aboriginal culture and traditional knowledge. They share their experiences of drugs and alcohol through theatre performances. Elders and youth together grapple with the challenges they face when navigating modern life and the legacy of colonisation.

This DVD-R video disc is compatible with DVD video players and computers with compatible DVD Video playback software installed.