

Feeling and Hearing Country

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Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi explained that her Country cannot hear English, it can only hear Yanyuwa. We support Dinah's position – because the English language underpins the Australian colonial project, and has been used to separate, ignore and take from Country, her peoples and their knowledges. Country responds to people, however, for example when there is empathic, creative communication and engagement with landscapes, and when *liyan* and *wirrin* is the basis for human and ecological wellbeing. We propose a practice for people new to this participation; of 'becoming family with place'. It integrates four ways of knowing, to celebrate an onto-poetic for Country that is experiential, creative, propositional and participative – a post-conceptual knowing for human flourishing. It is for coming home to Country, and is for learning and educational purposes.

Introduction

We acknowledge the Yawuru, Nyikina Warrwa and Noongar cultural custodians, guardians of the lands on which we live and work. We convey our respect to the custodians of all Australian First Nations and honour their knowledges, the people and more-than human kin everywhere who keep the law of the land, and the Ancestors and old persons from every nation now living in Australia⁷. We respectfully offer our contribution towards the task of re-engaging First Nations' knowledge and wisdom in Australian sovereignty, democracy, governance, laws and daily life, recognising 60 millennia of place-based wisdom. Along with Dodson⁸ and Yunkaporta⁹, we know that Indigenous knowledges and frameworks are vital for the future survival of species and nations. Yunkaporta¹⁰ writes that it is not so much the content of Indigenous knowledges, but how they can bring change that is important now, and this is the direction we take in this article. We also offer our work as a response to the state of the world, in the frame proposed by Mathews:

The ecological crisis is demanding an integrative thought-shift no less profound in its existential consequences than the presocratic shift towards reason and away from naïve animism that occurred in the cradle of Ionia two and a half thousand years ago¹¹.

By way of introduction, our Western Australian writing group comprises a Nyikina Warrwa woman from the Kimberley in the northwest, and five people raised in Wadjuk Noongar Country: a Balladong Wadjuk Noongar woman, a Wadjuk Noongar man, and two men and a woman whose ancestries are Indigenous to places outside Australia¹². We use a democratic process for synthesising perspectives through listening and honouring a set of ethics based on reciprocity, that have been in place as long as the Wunan and Warloongariy Law in the Kimberley¹³, and the Kundaam Law in the southwest¹⁴.

The Storyline

Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi, who was John Bradley's teacher of Yanyuwa language and of Yanyuwa ways of knowing for over 35 years, explained that her Country cannot hear English, it can only hear Yanyuwa. In the article, Bradley stated:

The several hundred oral languages Indigenous to Australia are all parts of the old and ancient growth forests of the human mind. There are questions here about the possibility of ever really [learning] to hear these rich ecology of utterances, that from an Indigenous perspective are derived from the very earth itself.¹⁵

Geoff Berry¹⁶ responds that while he does not speak the earth's language, there can be a mutual communication and shared aliveness between an English speaker and Country anyway. He suggests that compared to his Country's Yuin traditional owner's engagement with place, his practices of intimate communications with place, "are, of course, pathetic. Yet efforts they are..."¹⁷. Whilst we do not accept that Berry's efforts are in any way pathetic, his statement captures the complexity of the task which is at once linguistic, cultural, ecological and philosophical. Indigenous languages are place-based, and earth centred governance is pivotal. In 2018, we wrote:

We are saying that this place-based practice of deep listening, sincere observation and accumulative, experiential insightful learning; of intentionally coming to know one's place as the subject of profound love, will gradually facilitate capacity to hear, recognise and heed the voice of Boodjar. Ni, katjij: Boodjar wangkalin – listen, understand – Boodjar (Country) is singing¹⁸.

This statement is in support of Berry's stance, although our position in the article is that the voice of Noongar Country is Noongar language, because people and place have co-adapted over deep time. For English speakers, we propose the cyclical process of 'becoming family with place'¹⁹ as a way of re-engaging more meaningfully. This is tricky because as described by Bradley²⁰ and Berry²¹, the English language uses oppositional binaries (such as nature/culture, spirit/matter, oral/written) which create unhelpful separations of concepts that as Latour²² explains, are really two sides of the one coin. Keeping this in mind, there may still be opportunities for newcomers to listen and speak out the names and words that are written in and about the land. Sometimes locality signs or old maps carry this information²³.

Bradley²⁴ also points out that place-based languages were seen by English speakers as subjective and biased compared to English language, which the English understood to be rational and objective. In this simplistic way, colonial processes recast the conceptual richness and complexity of Indigenous languages into a form English speakers could read. By and large, the binaries underpinning the English language, combined with colonial privilege, have prevented full comprehension of Indigenous concepts and frameworks by English speakers.

In this paper, we first make some broader connections, then consider Nyikina Warrwa and Noongar responses to the question of engagement with Country. We then

consider interdisciplinary responses, before synthesising the perspectives into a coherent position.

Making Connections

In response to language issues, Yunkaporta²⁵ comments that because English has a history as a trade creole, it can change shape wherever it travels. Collard²⁶ explains that in colonial times in the southwest of Australia, English was hybridised because the colonisers needed to understand Noongar language for purposes of mapping, interpreting and visiting the landscape. Evidence of this is in hundreds of Noongar place names signposted and mapped across the southwest²⁷. Additionally, much vocabulary now part of Standard Australian English, particularly naming endemic species, are in fact Noongar words; a small selection of the many examples include the very prominent plants of jarrah, marri, moort and balga, and animals like gilgies, chuditch, kwenda and woylie. This exemplifies the capacity and opportunity for understanding, challenging and adapting English language to the current circumstances of the world. Noongar language is part of the ecological and cultural experience of every southwest Australian, even if they are not aware of this fact.

Previously, we have explained concepts such as 'the long now', which brings past, present and future together into a continuing present²⁸. This is an Indigenous concept which has the effect of bringing the archetypes, spirits and shadows of the past – including colonisation – into the continuing present. Thinking of time not as linear but as 'always here' facilitates a recognition that stories, patterns and meanings exist in the landscape, as they have always done²⁹. These abilities remain even if people do not acknowledge and engage with them. In the same way, colonial memories are always here.

Importantly, in this conversation we need to recognise Country as animate, as agency and as relational. As Bawaka Country et al.³⁰ explain, within relational ontologies there is responsibility to pay close and careful attention within more-than-human worlds, and an obligation or necessity to respond as part of these worlds. They say:

[Country] means home and land, but it means more than that too. It means the seas, and the waters, the rocks and the soils, the animals and winds and all the beings, including people that come into existence there. It means the connections between these things, and their dreams, their emotions, their languages and their Rom (Law). It means the ways we emerge together have always emerged together and will always emerge together.³¹

Once we begin to understand the world in a relational way, previously occluded connections and linkages become apparent, sometimes in surprising ways, revealing meanings previously 'hiding in full view' and human and more-than-human capacities not previously recognised or engaged.

In her beautiful treatise on the ecological self, Mathews³² teaches that human meaningfulness arises from the spiritual capacity to maintain the ecocosm, with the vital contribution being the attitude itself. She describes an atomistic, pluralistic archetype, and its monistic alternative, within which:

[our] self-love is expanded—by our awareness of our unity with Nature—to encompass the wider systems of Nature, then we experience the kind of joy in existence to which Spinoza was pointing³³.

In 2009 Mathews engaged in a colloquium called 'Coming into Country' at Hamilton Downs near Alice Springs. Participants were welcomed by cultural

custodians with whom they visited places and listened to stories. Mathews writes of experiences of active engagement of the world, of 'Country', whereby the events unfolded according to a logic of synchronicity, and 'meaning' seemed to lead its own emergence. Kimberley man Frans Hoogland was at the colloquium, and he explained Liyan (spelt as le-an, below):

In order to experience [this feeling], we have to walk the land. At a certain time for everybody, the land will take over. The land will take that person. You think you're following something, but the land is actually pulling you. When the land starts pulling you, you're not even aware you're walking – you're off, you're gone... Do you feel the sand you walk on? Are you aware of where your feet step? Are you aware of the trees you just passed, the birds that just landed? How much do you see? That has to shift and as soon as it does, we get a shift in mind that drops down to a feeling. Then we wake up to feeling, what we call le-an here, and we become more alive, we start feeling, we become more sensitive. You start to read the country. Then all of a sudden there's an opening down there. Before there was only a wall, but now that tree has meaning, now that rock has meaning and all of a sudden that thing takes you. You just follow. Then you wake up, and you see a lot of things and the country starts living for you. Everything is based on that feeling le-an, seeing through that feeling.³⁴

Many other instances of that which Mathews describes as the world's poetic responsiveness were experienced by participants, and she proposes an onto-poetics, the "poetic meanings that structure the core of things"³⁵. An Indigenous songline is an example of onto-poetics: revealing communicative worlds within worlds, and the agency of Country.

A Jungian analyst, San Roque³⁶ describes thinking in landscape-related patterns which is characteristic of Indigenous people through a multi-millennial and multi-generational heritage of place-based connection. He explains that landscape-patterned thinking is often magical or poetic thinking, understood as a love for and with Country. It is relational, and is reciprocated in the way people are loved by Country. He rhetorically asks: how can Country 'hold' someone, speak to someone? This reflects the depth of relationship with Country.

All this is to say that Country does not understand English because English is not yet conducive of meaningful engagement with place. It is still a narrow, linear, disengaged language, full of dualities and exclusions. The rationality of English has removed Country's carers and law men and women. Because of its language of chain saws, bulldozers, frack mines, dams and extraction, Country recoils in sadness.

Below, we offer a Nyikina and a Noongar response to the question of relationship with Country.

Nyikina Response

For visual imagery, it may be helpful to view the film called: *Martuwarra's Right to Life*: <https://vimeo.com/437025089/1c71ec7856>. Nyikina is one of the eight still spoken Kimberley Indigenous languages of the first nations who relate to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Country, as home.

At present the Martuwarra Fitzroy River is threatened with massive agricultural developments and extractive colonisation on a wider scale than the river's catchment³⁷. A perspective of the Martuwarra is offered below, through the voice of a Nyikina Warrwa (person) who through identity and heritage, belongs to the river.

'Singing Not Crying' – from the Martuwarra-Fitzroy River of Life!

I am Yoongoorrookoo, Rainbow Serpent singing. Travelling high up in the sky and down through rivers, land and sea. I hear the humans crying now, how woeful their cries continue to be! What is happening in our nation state, our nation home, our country? I see below me ... floods and fires crisscross this torched country.

Then the floods, then the drought, then more heat. Indigenous leadership and water governance missing in action. Buried within – systemic racism, structural violence. Hidden at all levels of governance and bureaucracy. Wake up I say, you human beings wake up and hear me belly crawl.³⁸

'Feeling Country', or giving voice to Country through deep empathy, is described as follows by a research team member:

The rivers are speaking but are the humans listening? Perhaps the question is: can my Country understand human beings? Who are these human beings, and what are they doing? Woonyoonbool, through our ancestors teaches us a non-verbal empathy with Country, with river, with Martuwarra. This Country is everyone's home. As Nyikina people, we have a fiduciary duty to look after our home. The language of Country is beyond English. We have stories from the beginning of time that inform respect for Country and people. Country holds *liyan*: it holds memory and knows people. Have you ever had this feeling, but you have never been here – but you know Country knows you? All our stories tell us about relationship with Country, and all of these things. We grow up with totems: to teach us how to have a relationship with a non-human being. We have a living language adapted to our living place. To talk up language is to wake up Country, to sing and dance traditional way is to wake up Country, to make Country happy, to help Country sing with joy and life.

We need ecological jurisprudence and Earth justice, giving Country a legitimate voice. We need to recognise the deep significance of Indigenous knowledges which are age-old, we need to value perspectives that are time honoured. This is all about listening and feeling.

Noongar Response

For visual imagery, please view the film called: *Noongar of beeliar*: <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/noongar-of-beeliar-swan-river/>. Noongar, the language of Noongar *Boodjar* (Country), is undergoing a cultural resurgence in the southwest of Western Australia³⁹. 'Feeling Country' is described by a Noongar research team member as follows:

Noongar people refer to one's spirit as *wirrin*. *Kwop wirrin* means good spirit or spirits, while *warra wirrin* means bad spirit/spirits. Noongar people believe that our ancestors' *kwop wirrin* are in the hills, the trees and the rocks. Their *kwop wirrin* is everywhere. Noongar people carry their own *wirrin* and so are able to connect with the *wirrin* of our ancestors. When we move about *boodjar* (Country), our *wirrin* speak to each other through "feeling", in an emotional way. Our ancestors will let us feel both the *kwop wirrin* and the *warra wirrin* around us. Our senses become heightened, we become more aware of our surroundings. If there is *warra wirrin* – one gets that prickly feeling of uneasiness – our gut instinct kicks in. Culturally we associate this uneasiness with our stories and knowledge of the *spirit world*. Noongar people will intuitively go to their cultural knowledge for explanations or 'rules'.

Before Noongar people set off on an activity or bush walk on Country, they will check in with their cultural knowledge of the land and make a mind map of where to and where not to go. However, if we go walking in the bush and inadvertently go to a place we shouldn't be near, where there is *warra wirrin*, then we need to

move away until that uneasy feeling leaves us. Then we know we are in a safe space again.

Becoming Family: Coming Home to Country

So if Country engages people and more-than-human beings through place-based language, memory, respect, *liyan*, *wirrin*, stories, reciprocity, onto-poetics, expansive love, care, inclusion, dance, metaphor and art as foundation of its system, how does someone accustomed to the mode of thinking referred to by San Roque⁴⁰ as industrial (or economic), readjust? The answer to this question is necessary for social change, for the Martuwarra Fitzroy River and elsewhere, and is relevant for schools, universities and education institutions everywhere.

San Roque⁴¹ writes about the significance of psychological intercultural recognition, in the sense of understanding each-others' way of thinking, for 'thinking together' as collaborative problem solving for facing monumental Indigenous cultural change. We also advocate 'thinking together' as collaborative problem solving for socio-cultural change towards a regenerative world, with immediate application in water governance, landcare and species recovery.

'Becoming family with place'⁴², a metaphor describing place-based conceptual inclusiveness, is an 'inside nature' learning perspective, amplifying the love required for re-engaging Country as home. Yunkaporta⁴³ shows how Indigenous landscape-integrated pattern thinking integrates complex place-based ecologically interdependent self-organising human-inclusive systems. These, he suggests, function via culturally-embedded ecological rules for systemic governance. There is a now-published set of Noongar rules, for example⁴⁴. A Noongar cultural sense of home exemplifies these ideas:

These assertions and activities have meaning and validity from the point of view of a Noongar *katitjiny* rationality or *kundaam*, a knowledge system underpinned by the meta-narrative trilogy of interconnection between *Boodjar* (Country), *moort* (relatives or relations) and *katitjiny* (knowledge, or learning). In this system *moort*, in the sense of a person's relations, can be animals or plants in a particular place. An example of this is the statement: "Yongka [kangaroo] is my uncle" and "jarrah" [a species of tree] is my brother", which makes sense through a kinship structure which includes human and more-than-human kindred. This way people are tied to place in a manner that guarantees meaning and familiarity, a connection called: *gurduboodjar* – which translates as love of place. This is 'home', in the sense of the English adage 'home is where the heart is'. In Noongar language, it is the place with whom one is related and where one's more-than human relations are established, as they have been since time immemorial. So home-place is also Noongar family which involves the implied familial obligation to care for all these many-species relations including the ground. There does not seem to be an easy English translation for this concept.⁴⁵

Home-place, in this way, is family – characterised by love, kinship, ancestral ties and reciprocal obligation. Home is not a hut or shelter however, which is ephemeral and seasonal. It is *karlaboodjar*: home Country, the landscape a group's *bidiya* (leaders, persons who know *bidi*, the tracks) is responsible for burning, maintaining and caring for – including its stories, more-than-human kin, ceremonies, arts, music, spirits – and *wirrin*.

Practice

The extended epistemology-ontology of Heron⁴⁶ is helpful in the 'becoming family' project because it potentially includes an onto-poetic which – it seems to us – engages *liyan* or *wirrin* through "empathic communion"⁴⁷. Mathews suggests that the kind of

engagement ontopeotics allows, "is possible only to the extent that the world is understood as in some sense a communicative presence". She explains ontopeotics as intuitive, mythic, imaginative or theoretical⁴⁸.

Liyan is hard to learn, according to the late Nyikina man Paddy Roe, Goolarabooloo elder and leader⁴⁹:

Frans says to Paddy: 'How do I develop that liyan?

Paddy (laughs). I know. Because that's the hard one. My people straight away when we go from camp, we start from the camp. We think about there — which way we got to go? All right, we go this way. When we get half way, something make me feel liyan wrong too. We better go this way. Might be somebody over there waiting with spear or something.

Frans: so when you go country you feel?

Paddy: We feel it

Frans: and how can we learn that one?

Paddy: We got to teach you. We feel him.

Frans: for the traditional people, that liyan, maybe same place as our intuition comes from, that never gets pushed away, that's the first and last voice.⁵⁰

Becoming family with place is about feeling-with and 'thinking together'⁵¹. For the practice, Heron's (1996) extended epistemology-ontology is useful. He developed Cooperative Inquiry⁵², a form of action research that integrates four forms of knowing. The first is unmediated experience, such as a bush walk [experiential knowing, which is a holistic, tacit form of knowing]. The second represents that experience in terms of imaginal, artistic, musical, poetic or metaphoric patterns [creative or presentational knowing, which is also tacit, holistic or empathic]. The third deciphers and critiques the language-related concepts [conceptual or propositional knowing, which is discursive and discrete]. This conceptual stage is also the locus for people Indigenous to place thinking together with people whose ancestries are from elsewhere. The fourth is practical knowing, informed and illuminated by the prior forms [post-conceptual or participative knowing, which encompasses each of the prior forms.⁵³

In Heron's work, post-conceptual or participative knowing is the epitome, being a rich bricolage of each of the prior ways of knowing. Similarly, Mathews advocates, "moving beyond reason rather than stepping back from it"⁵⁴. She inspires us to: "Awaken into the actual presence of a living, speaking world that responds to our address and thereby brings us into the actuality of encounter"⁵⁵. To know something deeply and fully though, to have truth-values, these forms of knowing are cycled, which can be messy, unpredictable, surprising, wonderful or occasionally disappointing. Mathews comments that the original project of philosophy was an art of living as well as a mode of inquiry⁵⁶.

Conclusion

"His wild understanding of this place just announced itself. A gestalt, a coherent whole, an ecology of connections, intelligible in an unlanguage world".⁵⁷ Bob Jickling, an environmental educator, describes a child who could find no words to articulate his new, holistic, 'wild' comprehension of a place. Was it a feeling of awe, joy and deep interconnection that cannot be spoken? In his conclusion, Jickling suggests: "ontological understanding is rooted in the perception of patterned resonance in the world"⁵⁸.

We have assembled a position which is summarised here. English as a language is a visitor and foreign to Country in Australia, and structures a world for those who carry it. English language speakers are invited to participate in co-adaptation, or co-becoming with Country over time. Until very recently, humans have related to Country as 'Home', and humans who speak Indigenous languages still do. There is hope, perhaps a radical hope as Jonathon Lear⁵⁹ has described, in which concepts can be reconstructed following a cultural apocalypse.

Indigenous languages express landscape-based patterns, which culturally embed people within ecologies of place. Within these ecologies, people craft existence through cultural rules⁶⁰, and engage with Country as home-place, through an onto-poetics of metaphor, imagery, empathic communication, story and conceptual/post conceptual richness and reflection. Synchronicities and emergent meanings characterise participation in these cultures, and capacities such as *liyan* and *wirrin* link human and ecological wellbeing. Such relational ontologies are inclusive of all beings and reflect an animate, storied world which is nurturing, fertile and alive.

Country has always communicated, it resonates in discernible patterns through the language, *wirrin* and *liyan* of its people and more-than-human beings. Rivers sing out compellingly and powerfully. But who are these humans who refuse to engage their basic capacities, their human hearts, because of their industrial/economic thinking? We assert that all Australians need an ecological jurisprudence and Earth justice, giving Country a legitimate voice.

We offer the notion of 'becoming family with place' as an onto-poetically integrated practice of engagement, to facilitate place-based kinship and renewed participation. Country needs the discourse of love, care and relationship, in the languages it understands – one of which is kinaesthetic and empathic. It needs humans who feel and hear Country, and respond. It needs dance, singing and loving attention to awaken its energies, animate its spirits and entities, and activate its fertilities for regeneration. All around the world there are climate catastrophes and ecological tragedies. As well, there are regenerative ways of engaging Indigenous knowledge systems, and these are essential right now. Teachers and educators of all institutions and communities are called to this work.⁶¹

Notes

1. Anne Poelina is a Yimardoowarra marnin: an Indigenous woman of the Mardoowarra Fitzroy River, who is an Adjunct Professor with the Nulungu Research Institute in Broome. She is a global water leader and has been a research consultant and research fellow for various universities for more than 28 years.
2. Sandra Woollorton is Associate Professor, Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome. A transdisciplinary academic, her interests include education for social change, ecological philosophy, sustainability transition cultures and place-based stories, particularly those relating to the relationship between people and place.
3. Sandra Harben is a Noongar yorga and traditional owner of the Wadjuk region which includes the lands, waters and ecosystems of the Perth metropolitan area. She is a Noongar language speaker who is Director of Richmond Consulting, and she leads cultural workshops. Sandra has authored considerable research and community-focused articles on understanding and caring for Country.
4. Professor Len Collard is with the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. He has a background in literature and communications and his research interests are in the area of

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- Aboriginal Studies, including Nyungar interpretive histories and Nyungar theoretical and practical research models. Len is a Whadjuk Nyungar and is a Traditional Owner of the Perth Metropolitan area and surrounding lands, rivers, swamps, ocean and its cultures.
5. Professor Pierre Horwitz is at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. His research and teaching have included an ecosystems approach to the relationships between biodiversity, culture and human health and well-being, with a particular interest in fire and water in Noongar boodja.
 6. Dr David Palmer is a Senior Lecturer in Community Development at Murdoch University. He has been researching community-based projects throughout WA and other parts of the country, and partnering for research with Indigenous organisations for many years.
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41. San Roque, C. (2018). A Glass Darkly. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 15(2), 91-102. doi:10.1002/aps.1570).
42. Woollorton, Collard et al. (2020) extends the work of Buchanan, J., Collard, L., & Palmer, D. (2019). Koorliny birniny, ni, quoppa katatjin: respect and ethics in working with Indigenous Australian communities. In P. Westoby & S. Banks (Eds.), *Ethics, Equity and Community Development* (pp. 123-143). Bristol: The Policy Press.
43. Yunkaporta (2019).
44. As an example, see: <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/noongar-lore/> (scroll down).
45. Woollorton et al. (2017), p. 2.
46. Heron (1996). *Cooperative inquiry: Research into the human condition*. London: Sage Publications.
47. Heron (1996, p. 20).
48. We understand it this way. Although intertwined, tacit or holistic elements are pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic, while discursive or discrete elements are conceptual or propositional. To over-simplify, deep immersion in the experience or artistic/musical encounter is without the mental narrative; not yet extracted into conceptual form. It comprises: 'feeling with'.
49. In the account, Paddy is speaking to Frans Hoogland in a conversation cited by McDuffie, M. & Poelina, A. (2018). Nyikina collaborative filmmaking in the Kimberley: 'learning to listen with your eyes, and see with your ears'. In P. Morrissey & C. Healy (Eds.), *Reading the Country: 30 Years On*. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney. p. 230.
50. Ibid.
51. San Roque, 2018.
52. Cooperative Inquiry is capitalized to denote the form originally recommended by Heron (1996).
53. (Ibid).
54. Mathews, F. (2017). Come with Old Khayyam and Leave the Wise to Talk. *Worldviews*, 21(3), 218-234. doi:10.1163/15685357-02103002 (p. 229).
55. Mathews (2017, p. 231).
56. Mathews (2017).
57. Jickling, B. (2015). Self-willed learning: experiments in wild pedagogy. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 10(1), 149-161. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-014-9587-y>. (p. 154, 155-160).
58. Ibid., (p. 160).
59. Lear, J. (2006). *Radical hope: ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. London, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
60. In this paper, we have responded to the question about place-engagement and language. We have not included landcare or traditional ecological knowledges, as this is a broader (but relevant) question.
61. We wish to thank Peter Reason for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.