

# **Finding a Place in Story: Kim Scott's Writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project**

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In Kim Scott's *True Country* (1993), the narrator draws the reader close and says, 'You listen to me. We're gunna make a story, true story. You might find it's here you belong. A place like this' (15). Although the narrator goes on to speak of '[a] place like this' as 'a beautiful place . . . Call it our country, our country all 'round here' (15), there is an initial ambiguity in what the word *place* represents; it could be story or country. It could be both. Read in this sense, belonging can be more than settling into a physical environment, belonging could be finding your place in a story.

Scott's memoirs, essays, novels and involvement in the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project bring together, build upon and retell multiple and overlapping stories—of history, of heritage, of possibility—a process through which Scott, the characters in his novels and a wider Noongar community navigate and attempt to locate themselves. In doing so, Scott recounts, (re)creates and engages with unequal 'power relationship(s)' (Scott, 'Covered Up With Sand' 120) between colonised Aboriginal communities in Western Australia and the colonisers, as well as the lingering legacy of this inequality. The increasing dominance of colonial practices and worldviews devastated Aboriginal communities through massacre, disease, theft of land, separation of families, attempts to breed out the Aboriginal race, and the smothering of Aboriginal languages and stories. Playing on the idea of place and placement, this essay will focus on the way language and story implement and/or represent the oppression and marginalisation of Noongar communities while, ambivalently, enabling a rejuvenated and empowered Noongar voice. It will ask where Scott and a wider Noongar community, language and heritage are positioned in relation to and through story, as well as who determines where they are placed. Central to these considerations, is the seemingly contradictory actions that Scott performs as a member of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project that returns, reclaims, and rejuvenates Noongar language within the community *and* as a celebrated Australian author writing in the coloniser's language and its dominant literary form: the novel.

The term 'Australian author' in itself is problematic, as are 'Indigenous author' and 'Indigenous Australian author,' because they seek to implicitly position writers within a fraught national, literary and cultural territory. Such categories can serve to re-enact colonial mindsets that belittle Indigenous culture and dehumanise Indigenous people<sup>1</sup> as well as subsuming 'Indigenous literature' within a more dominant literary space. Speaking to the latter, Scott comments on the silencing that occurs in this process:

Some might place Australian Indigenous writing within the realm of Australian Literature, but there is a wider context; that of the emergence of Australia, as a nation, at the same time as some stories which have grown from our land continued or were adapted, or died forever. Australian literature, in such a context is a sickly stream. (Heiss i)

Ambivalently, literature is the means through which Scott prefers to work out and express his Noongar heritage; he, as an author living in and descended from Noongar country, is both working in and negotiating with the coloniser's language. The struggles between the often contradictory and strained cultural and linguistic heritages that influence Scott's writing are consistent themes in his novels and essays. Scott has said of his background, 'I have ancestors among the Noongar, and I have ancestors among these colonists' ('Strangers' 1). Importantly, Scott does not shy away from either heritage or their brutal shared history, which saw 'the people indigenous to south-western Australia . . . decimated within decades of the arrival of English-speaking colonists' (Scott, 'Strangers' 1). Scott describes his writing and projects in the following way:

On the one hand, I explore and create narratives in English, and let the work find its way according to largely aesthetic, 'literary' considerations. On the other, I try to revitalise my ancestral language by bringing together archival linguistic knowledge and descendants of the linguistics' informants' in ways that, by spreading in ever-widening, concentric circles, attempt to help a contemporary Noongar community (as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board puts it) 'claim control and enhance' our heritage. (Bradley et al. 58)

Scott's writing is significant precisely because it develops continuity between his Noongar ancestry, his colonial ancestry and his strengthening sense of self today while maintaining and confronting inherent tensions and contradictions that this continuity presents. Scott admits that he had to relearn how to think and write in a way that was true to who he is, as his education was not a place that held his Noongar world or worldview. Speaking about the experience of writing his first novel, *True Country*, based on his experience teaching in a remote Aboriginal community, Scott reflects, 'Education . . . affects not only what you think but the positions you're put into' ('Disputed Territory' 166). He goes on to say:

I became aware of how my formal education's stories interfered with what I was trying to say. As that novel begins, so did the writing of it, but more so with a sensibility akin to that of frontier stories, of pioneer stories, of an individual consciousness seeing Aboriginal people as 'the other.' ('Disputed Territory' 168–69)

I would suggest that these statements refer not only to Scott's difficult experience in a new physical location, but also to the difficulty of negotiating his place as an educated writer writing in English and as a Noongar descendent within Australia as a colonised nation. And so Scott's stories, his mastery and destabilisation of the dominant language, are both indicative of colonialism and also an attempt to open up the literary space for his and future voices and the silenced voice of his Noongar ancestors:

I'd like to think that writing fiction is sometimes a way to explore, to rethink and possibly to retrieve or create something from between and behind the lines on the page. As such it can help the revitalisation and regeneration of an Indigenous heritage, in so far as it involves 'shaking up' and making space within the most readily available language—that of the coloniser—for other ways of thinking. ('Covered Up With Sand' 123)

Ironically, it is precisely because Scott's knowledge of the English language is so great that he is able to destabilise it.

Rather than a didactic resistance to the dominant language and its stories, Scott's wordplay and use of archival material expose language and history's susceptibility to manipulation, thereby undermining the hierarchical authority of the written word and its linguistic colonialism. The written word, far from being definitive, is portrayed as having an ambiguous and slippery nature, serving the whims, needs and prejudices of those who control it. In the Alfred Deakin Lectures, Scott describes his discovery and reaction to an archival photo in A.O. Neville's eugenicist text:

I went into the West Australian archives, where certain stories of our shared history are kept, and found the picture, 'Three Generations.' It's from a book called *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* . . . It was published in 1947. *Its place in the community*. What does that mean? The book explains how to 'uplift and elevate' indigenous people; it describes how Aboriginality can be bred out, how people can be cut off from indigenous family and filled with shame. In effect, he's talking about *their place in our community*. (*Neurosis* 256)

In *Benang* (2000), the chapter 'first white man born' begins with an excerpt from *Australia's Coloured Minority*: 'As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane . . .' (11). Immediately after this quote, the character Harley wakes up, his face pressed against the ceiling of his grandfather's house:

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except—right in front of my eyes—a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation.

Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against the ceiling. (11)

Neville's ideology is immediately undercut by Scott's literal enactment of Neville's instructions. Harley awakening to find his face pressed against the ceiling and his subsequent confusion—his brief belief that he had gone blind overnight—is visually comic. It plays on the absurdity of Neville's eugenicist beliefs. Harley's 'blindness' is in fact caused by the surface whiteness of the ceiling, a metaphoric equivalent of the racial blind-sightedness of Western Australia's policy to absorb and assimilate Indigenous people into white society. Like the ceiling paint, such ideas of whiteness lack 'depth' and 'variation.' As Lisa Slater rightly asserts in her essay, 'Kim Scott's *Benang*: The Ethics of Uncertainty,' Harley's "'propensity for elevation" . . . satirises and laments the colonial regime's project to *raise the native up*' (150)

Harley's elevation also reflects his placelessness—a dislocation from his culture, language and family history. While Scott's wordplay draws attention to the absurdity of Neville's 'white Australia,' it also emphasises the harmful and demeaning reality of the racial and racist placement of Indigenous communities in Western Australia under Neville's 'protection.' Noongar communities are physically placed on the fringes of Western Australia's social centres, and Harley, Katherine, Topsy, as well as many other Aboriginal girls and boys, are placed socially and physically beneath Ern as he 'fucks them white.' These positions are largely determined by and in relation to the dominant social group so that someone else continually defines Noongar place, culture and personal identity.

In *That Deadman Dance* (2011), the initial optimism of First Contact in King George Town<sup>2</sup> slowly deteriorates into an oppressive attempt to silence Noongar language and culture. The friendship of Cross and Wunyeran is literally displaced and written over in the settlement's historic and social memory. Their shared grave is dug up, Wunyeran's remains are smashed and moved to an unmarked grave while, in significant contrast, Cross has a tombstone erected in his honour. On these events, the narrator comments: 'It seemed Geordie Chaine and Governor Spender had for once agreed: this was more appropriate to Cross's important role in the history of George Town' (354). Chaine and Spender, using their positions of power and their language ensure Cross's place in history. Wunyeran, lacking the 'right' words, lacking a recognised social position, is destined to be forgotten. In the story of King George Town, as told by Chaine and Spender, the strength of Cross and Wunyeran's friendship becomes irrelevant because it is not acknowledged. As Bobby Wabalanginy discovers, strength comes not only from what you say but whether you are listened to. While entertaining tourists, he remarks, 'We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours . . .' (106).

Paul Carter suggests in *The Road to Botany Bay* that some Aboriginal communities had 'unwittingly hastened their own historical eclipse' (340) through their willingness to share and participate in cultural exchange. He argues that, 'by a deadly irony, it is the attempt of the Aborigines to speak English which consigns them to historical silence' (327). However, in *That Deadman Dance* Scott makes a significant distinction: the Noongar community were not disempowered through cross-cultural exchange, but by their lack of strategy as they entered into it. Tragically, individuals like Bobby did not know they needed a strategy. Learning from this history, Scott's enthusiasm for collaboration, appropriation and the sharing of story is tempered by his concern that Noongar communities could potentially lose control and ownership of their language and stories in this process. As Scott states:

It seems to me that any 'global discourse' has strong homogenising tendencies, and therefore we need to strengthen regional voices so they remain true to their own imperatives at the same time as being empowered to enter into exchange and dialogue. ('Covered Up With Sand' 124)

Scott's active involvement in the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Wirlomin Project) arguably exemplifies his aim to achieve this 'strength' and 'continuity' and strategically navigate literary and cultural areas of exchange.

The regionalism practised by the Wirlomin Project places, protects and celebrates story within the Noongar community. Noongar custodians determine how, when and with whom stories are shared, thus ensuring that sharing the Wirlomin Stories does not result in the same weakening of Noongar language and culture that occurred during First Contact, but rather in what Scott calls 'value-adding' (Brewster, 'Anchor' 238). Wirlomin publications *Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* describe the outcomes of the project within the Noongar community:

'Decolonisation' is a word some might apply to this project: shaking off some of the legacy of an oppressive history, and reconnecting with a pre-colonial heritage so as to heal and strengthen ourselves today. . . . these words are [not] common in our community, but the concepts and their importance are recognised. (*Yira* and *Dwoort* 34)

The Wirlomin Stories are inspired by the stories that Freddie Winner, George Nelly and Bob Roberts, among other Noongar informants, told the American linguist, Gerhardt Laves, in 1931. Laves' notes, given to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in 1985, were eventually typed up and it was decided that the Noongar community should be consulted on the access and use of the notes' contents. The process eventually led to the 2006 publication of 'A Protocol for Laves' 1931 Fieldnotes.' One of the key outcomes of this document is the placement of the language and stories contained in the fieldnotes within the Noongar community and under its custodianship. As the protocol states: 'According to copyright law, Laves owned the copyright in the fieldnotes because he wrote them. He didn't "own" the stories themselves . . . ' (Henderson et al. 5). Instead of Laves' notes being the source of story, they become part of a process to return Noongar language and story to its community.

The books published through the project are Noongar-to-English interlineal translations that also incorporate visual and aural forms. It is an approach that marks a departure from Harley's anger in *Benang*, where words are used to confront and literally inflict pain on the perpetrators of colonial abuses like Ern. The accompanying essay in the latest Wirlomin Project stories, *Dwoort Baal Kaat* (2013) and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* (2013) describe the intent and emotion of the language project in this way: 'Of course, any talk of altering power relationships is political, but going about it in this way doesn't seem so. It doesn't seem so angry, for one thing. And perhaps some of us have been damaged just from carrying so much anger' (*Yira and Dwoort* 34).

An important dynamic of the project is that its participants are choosing to share story with 'ever widening circles of people' (Scott, *Mamang* 30); they are not 'giving it away' (Scott, interviewed by Brewster, 'Anchor' 238). The invitation to story generates an empowered generosity<sup>3</sup> that welcomes readers into the narrative. Implicit in such an invitation is the storyteller's ownership of the narrative that is about to take place. As described in *Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy*, the members of the Wirlomin Project 'found a rare power, that between an audience and it [sic] storytellers. One group gives its attention, the other gives a story; it's a paradox: empowerment through giving. And it is wise to watch the balance in that exchange' (*Yira and Dwoort* 34).

However, to reach this point of balanced generosity in and with story, the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project enforces a period of exclusion. This time allows the Noongar community to cultivate, connect and construct their language and stories within the community and with descendants of the original storytellers. It is a time to decide what the project will share in its cultural exchange with a wider audience and what will be held back.

The decisions around these points of access are pivotal in strategically placing the Noongar community, their publications and language in an empowered position within social and literary spaces. Scott explains this strategy in his collaborative memoir with Hazel Brown, *Kayang and Me* (2005):

In order to help strengthen Indigenous communities—and that's the only means by which an Australian nation-state will have any chance of grafting onto Indigenous roots—we need some sort of 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies, a moratorium, a time of exclusion to allow communities to consolidate their heritages. After that, exchange and interaction from relatively

equal positions should be possible, because that's how cultural forms are tested and grow. (79)

Scott's views, like Alison Ravenscroft's 'strangeness' in *The Postcolonial Eye* and, in a broader context, Édouard Glissant's 'opacity' in *Poetics of Relation*, contribute to a debate around the ability or right to 'know' another culture's language and story, in the light of difference and the dominance of one culture over the other. Scott does not necessarily see Noongar and non-Noongar relationships creating possibilities through the resolution of difference, but rather through the exchange and appropriation of different, independent and resilient languages and forms. Story, in its creation and sharing, blurs boundaries but also preserves them, creating a space that at once connects, creates a necessary distance and respects ownership.

The principles underlying Scott's work consistently manifest themselves in the content and form of his stories.<sup>4</sup> So although the Wirlomin Project implements a moratorium, the publications also connect to Scott's larger body of work and reach for an audience much wider than the Noongar community. Scott suggests that his literary achievements are useful for 'arousing interest in this other stuff' (Brewster, 'Anchor' 229)—the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project. In this way, the overlapping nature and connectivity of Scott's work could be seen to take root and spring from Indigenous language and story. Hilary Emmett uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome—a network of intersecting lines that 'has no beginning or end . . . it is always in the middle' (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 25)—to map connections and continuities in *Benang*; this concept could be extended to Scott's work as a whole. Indeed, it is difficult to look at any of Scott's texts in isolation; engaging with one work will inevitably lead to another. Speaking on the interconnectedness of his work, Scott says:

the cultural work which comes out of *Kayang & Me* is continuing in *That Deadman Dance*. You say they are different books. I see the last page of *Benang*, for instance, as showing a fictional individual wanting to be a part of cultural consolidation with a small community of descendants. *Kayang & Me* takes that up as does this language project. (Brewster, 'Anchor' 230)

The Wirlomin Project, therefore, also engages with and perhaps enacts Scott's concept of 'grafting onto Indigenous Roots.' The layout of the interlineal publications reflects the reclamation of Noongar story onto which other translations and versions of this story can be built. It is also significant that the Wirlomin Project describes these publications as 'old stories retold,' a description that connotes innovation and appropriation while maintaining a strong link to heritage. Both the English and Noongar retellings are Noongar literature. In this instance, therefore, 'moving toward . . . an admirable postcolonial position: a grafting of the newcomers' culture and being onto Indigenous roots'<sup>5</sup> (Scott, 'Covered Up with Sand' 122) goes beyond a non-Indigenous desire to connect to place (as in the above quote) to also incorporate a Noongar reconnection with their heritage that generates possibilities for the expression of contemporary Noongar identities and creativity. Furthering the notion of grafting, both *Mamang* (2011) and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (2011) appear in *That Deadman Dance*.

In *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, the fight that takes place between a Noongar man and a spirit could be read as a fight about place in its many guises and the tensions between the spirit of country and its human occupation. The Noongar must defend his right to belong in and to the

country. He must defend his use of the land. Although the Noongar ancestor is granted permission to hunt by a group of mambara, shares his kangaroo with another group of spirits, and intends to share his remaining food with family, a lone mambara is offended by the Noongar's actions, claiming the country and the animals within it as his own. Considering the Noongar's selfless behaviour, the motives for the mambara's challenge are unclear. The answers are not necessarily in the book's written text. Scott writes: '[I]s the Noongar related to the "mambara"? Geoffrey Woods' illustrations help answer such questions' (38). In the light of this comment, the images become more than reflections of the text; they are integral to the telling and interpretation of the story. Throughout the book, the figure of the Noongar and the mambara are depicted as being alike. Even their stances are mirror images of one another. The Noongar and the spirit creature are, as Scott suggests, related, if not one and the same entity.

The continuity between Noongar and spirit changes the context of the fight. The fight could be interpreted as an internal struggle over the right to place and to belong and the meaning of these two concepts. The Noongar man occupies and uses place with generosity, the mambara with possessiveness. At the climax of the fight, the Noongar throws his 'old people's boomerang' into the air. It stops and spins 'so that it looked like a waterhole in the sky' (26). The mambara sees his reflection in the whirling boomerang and is silenced and stopped by the sight. At the same time, the Noongar ancestor rises into the sky, 'flying.' The old people's boomerang—a representation of Noongar heritage and cultural history—creates continuity between the Noongar and the mambara; through it the Noongar ancestor realises 'He was a very special person, but he never knew until the old people's boomerang showed him' (28).

The Noongar's (self) discovery is shared as soon as the Noongar returns home. In a scene that demonstrates the importance of language and story, it is not the remaining food that sustains and nourishes the waiting family, but the Noongar's story of adventure: 'When he got home to his people no one cared that he didn't have much food. They wanted to hear his story—this story. They were all warm beside the fire and laughing together' (30).

Through the sharing of story, both in telling and listening to it, each Noongar individual realises how special they are and each rises into the air also. Once again, no mention is made of this in the text; Woods' illustration on the corresponding page shows each member of the Noongar's family floating in the sky. The story of *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* that appears in *That Deadman Dance*, however, is altered in a sobering way.

In this version, Chaine throws the boomerang away and turns against Bobby, Menak and Wooral. In this moment, Bobby realises that Chaine and some of the other settlers are not loyal friends. The creation story is distorted so that while there is an echo and continuity of Noongar story in the novel, a loss and confusion is attached to this heritage also:

Chaine flung the boomerang away contemptuously, and it flew a surprising distance across the scrub, low and spinning, before it curved up into the air and hovered turning and turning and turning . . .

All the men looked, couldn't help themselves. Even Chaine, even Skelly and Mr Killam; they just stood and stared as it spun, so fast it blurred and seemed to almost melt and become a pool of water in the sky.

Bobby and Wooral and Menak looked at one another. They had thought Geordie Chaine would stand with them, and not against Menak. And Jak Tar? With the others distracted and staring, Bobby and Wooral led Menak—injured dog in his arms—back to his camp.

The boomerang fell with hardly a sound; cushioned, suspended by the mallee, it was gently lowered to the soil, twig by twig. The men looked at one another, looked around. What? And they began to pack up their things, moved to another game of cards, another tot of rum on Chaine, who said, See me in the morning, I always have need of good workers elsewhere. (343–44)

Similarly, the story of *Mamang* is a continuing motif throughout *That Deadman Dance*, although the story of the whale is, like *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, brutally and tragically recontextualised. Bobby becomes the Noongar man who dives into the whale, squeezing and stabbing at its heart. He is also, in the novel's historical context, a key aid to the frenzy of King George Town's whaling operations. Once again, the presence of the Noongar creation story in Scott's novel shows a link to and estrangement from his Noongar roots.

Like his Noongar ancestor in *Mamang*, Bobby has an adventurous and courageous spirit. After returning from his time away 'becoming a man' (296), he too is celebrated: 'Bobby came home on the shoulders of brothers and uncles and cousins and, coming home high, held in the sky, he saw things with new eyes. They carried him because he was important, because he was boss . . .' (301).

Bobby's courageous spirit also propels him into settler society, into their language and ways of seeing and being in the world. However, he does not emerge from this adventure as a hero. Bobby becomes disorientated, needing to dive under the surface of seemingly conflicting words and stories to find his way:

He thought of them all: Christine Chaine. William Skelly. Soldier Killam and them two boys . . . Kept his thoughts moving: Mr Boss Kongk Chaine. Missus Chaine. Menak and Manit then, but not them because they did not have the sound of the voice he heard, and he realised he was thinking in letters, too, doing the names of people and here MENAK and MANIT did not fit either, and soon as he tried the letters the memories would not come, and the letters broke or moved apart like a boat hit by the whale's tail, when all its planks just fell apart, floated separate and the best you could do was tie an oar crossways . . .

And then as if underwater and heading up to the surface there was light and the skin of the sea and he broke through . . . (302)

The use of the creation stories creates ambivalent characterisation in *That Deadman Dance*. It also, however, complicates Scott's place, as author, and as a member of the Wirlomin Project, in relation to these stories. While the Wirlomin Project controls the sharing of story to an ever-widening audience in their publications, what are the implications of Scott's inclusion of these stories in his novels as literary devices, especially considering the novel's reach to an arguably very different and much wider audience? It is interesting to consider whether Scott has incorporated the two creation stories into *That Deadman Dance*, or whether his novel grafts onto the two Noongar creation stories, or whether *That Deadman Dance* could be read

as a site of narrative exchange that undertakes the task of linguistic, literary and cultural reciprocity.

The questioning, reimagining and negotiation of the hierarchical literary space is crucial in the writing and reading of Scott's writing. I want to suggest that Scott portrays and positions Noongar literature as a continuation of playful, intelligent and generous appropriation and exchange of language and story with other cultures, rather than a compromised and marginalised form of Eurocentric literature.<sup>6</sup> Scott's view aligns itself with Penny Van Toorn's argument in her seminal work, *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, that

the 'loss' of Indigenous oral culture can be difficult to quantify. On the one hand, non-Indigenous people have failed to perceive the extent of Indigenous cultural loss and understand its dire ramifications. On the other, it is sometimes the case that 'losses' are actually adaptations or transformations of traditional Indigenous practices—transformations that are not recognised as such by non-Indigenous people, who underestimate the normal dynamism and exposure to otherness that so-called 'traditional' cultures are accustomed to. (11)

Scott ultimately practises and argues for dynamic narrative and cultural engagement that seeks out sites of productive exchange between Noongar and non-Indigenous participants in ambivalent territories, but also, importantly, envisages the possibility of reciprocity in the future.

Alongside these necessary gaps between cultures are gaps of historical and familial disconnection where stories have been silenced, hidden, lost or confused by the colonial process. Scott, in this respect, writes *into* and *from* these spaces, making fertile ground out of murky territory through exchanging and sharing stories. The paradox of the literary space and language, therefore, is that it can threaten but also provide the possibility of decolonisation. *That Deadman Dance* opens with a scene of Bobby writing: 'Kaya. Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn't help but smile. Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!' (1).

This prologue is more than an interchange of Bobby remembering and writing, it shows Bobby appropriating settler language and form to welcome the reader into the story. The greeting, the written Noongar word, '*kaya*,' is imbued with generosity, strength, and innovation so that, despite the failure of Bobby's dance at the end of the novel, we can come back to the hope in his writing and the possibility of continuity through creating something new. As Scott says, 'perhaps the dance as a form is not necessarily the form that's going to powerfully speak to this mob. . . . But just possibly writing is [the form]' (Brewster, 'Anchor' 233).

The effectiveness of the diversification and innovation of language and story in the Wirlomin Project comes from the combined strength of its Noongar roots and its recognition of language's possibilities, and its limitations. Publishing can potentially compromise storytelling by needing to find a strained equivalency between language's different natures and forms. Scott asks:

How, with justice, can these words be shared?

To a writer, publication seems the obvious answer. However, that would make the stories accessible to everyone, especially wealthy book-buyers with good literacy skills, two categories which feature, largely for historical reasons, few Noongar people. Therefore, publication might mean that those old-time storytellers speak to their own descendants only after everyone else has heard their stories of the place in which they live. Consider the historical context: indigenous people being displaced from land, dispossessed and disempowered. You wouldn't want publication repeating anything like that.

Surely, justice requires words and stories to be returned to, and consolidated in, a community of descendants, and shared from there. (*Just Words?* 158)

Considering that the Noongar language is one that 'is best transmitted orally' (Scott, *Kayang* 12), how, as a writer, does Scott share Noongar language and story without compromise?

The Wirlomin Project negotiates narrative content and form to support each language's inherent value and independence. The diversification of the written text into sound recordings, accessible online and as a CD, expands the parameters of a mostly print driven format, allowing the Noongar language to be shared in ways that express its diversity, openness to appropriation and exchange as well as returning to and building upon its oral foundations. In this way, the Wirlomin Project manifests Noongar continuity in a respectful, perhaps true way, albeit strategic, which ensures that the Noongar community share their stories not only as storytellers, but also as the stories' custodians. It also argues that stories like *Mamang*, *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, *Dwoort Baal Kaat*, and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* belong within Noongar community and country; that it is from here that these stories should emanate, engaging with a widening audience.

Kim Scott's explanatory notes on behalf of the Wirlomin Project once again demonstrate the close connection between the physical place and the place of belonging, of loss and possibility, all of which are expressed and held within the network of story:

We have gathered around the papers—dry and brittle as old skin—left by a linguist who listened to our community elders who have long passed away. . . . We have encouraged ourselves to listen and to give voice to the sounds of long ago and to thus resonate with the ancient human sound of this edge of the continent. We may be some distance from what is often called the most remote capital city on the planet, yet to us it can feel like the very centre. We are glad you have joined us as part of this ever widening concentric circle. (*Noongar Mambara Bakitj* 40)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 'Guides and Explorers: Australia's Cultural Identity Now,' Scott tells of searching for one of his novels in a Sydney bookstore, only to find it in the Australiana section, 'a category dedicated to corrugated iron dunnies, windmills and bobbing-corked hats, and—apparently—anything labelled 'Indigenous Literature'' (15).

<sup>2</sup> Western Australia's Albany region.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *True Country*'s opening chapter title is 'First Thing, Welcome' (15); *That Deadman Dance* greets the reader with the Noongar word *kaya* (1); and Harley introduces himself directly to the reader in the first chapter of *Benang*. Such gracious introductions usher the reader over a narrative threshold into the story, but they also draw attention to the fact that such thresholds exist.

<sup>4</sup> For example, *Benang*'s sprawling and confusing structure mimics Harley's 'rhizomatic kinship' (Emmett) and erroneous 'paper genealogies' (Scott, *Just Words?* 157) creating 'an intimate relation between . . . aesthetics and politics' (Emmett 175–76).

<sup>5</sup> This quote refers to an event during the first years of Western Australia's 'friendly frontier' in which a Noongar man, Mokare, 'accept[s] and use[s]' a new cultural form, the line from a British song, 'Oh where have you been all the day, Billy boy,' as a greeting. Echoing Penny van Toorn's argument mentioned later in the essay, Scott sees this interaction as a site of witty innovation and fertile exchange of language and culture, rather than an insidious colonial oppression. In *That Deadman Dance*, the character Wunyeran reenacts this incident emphasising the possibility Scott sees in the historical event.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Brewster also identifies a 'narrative of the enduring sovereignty of the Noongar' (Brewster, 'Whiteness' 63) in her reading of *That Deadman Dance*, a novel, which she sees as shifting 'the loss paradigm—which is so often used to characterize Aboriginal polities and communities—onto the white Australian constituency' (69).

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