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Voices in Australia's Aboriginal and Canada's First Nations Literatures

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Volume 13 Issue 2 (June 2011) Article 9
Kim Scott & Eden Robinson
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.2 (2011)
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Abstract: In his text "I Come from Here" Nyoongar novelist Kim Scott suggests by means of "yarning" that the authority of Indigenous people and language is primary to an authentic "sense of place." Scott uses an accumulative, episodic, and personal narrative style to argue that the return "to," and consolidation of cultural material "in," a "community of descendants of the informants" must be founded upon principles of community development. Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by sharing of ancestral material with ever widening, concentric circles is how this process results in respect and partnership that empowers community life.

Abstract: In her text "99.99% True & Authentic Tales" Haisla/Heiltsuk novelist and short story writer Eden Robinson explores with humor how the past and present coexist in contemporary Haisla life. In the process, Robinson also depicts some of the challenges faced by Canada's First Nations writers, whose readers can become so determined to experience the culture represented to them that they wish to live not only in an author's hometown but in her very home. In this way Robinson explores issues of voice, authenticity, and the process of making meaning: to whom does a story belong and who has the right to tell it? How can a story be told?

Voices in Australia's Aboriginal and Canada's First Nations Literatures

Kim SCOTT
I Come from Here

"I write from south-west Western Australia." In writing those words I may place myself beyond the horizon of many readers: here at the extreme periphery of down-under. *Kaya.* I write from the land of the Noongar. I am writing in a language we share, and yet wish to speak of what it has meant to me, as an "Indigenous literary writer," to work with my ancestral language although I have been — perhaps remain — linguistically displaced. I send fragments of trees, paper. Send electronic, digital stuff. Send words. Fractured sentences.

At a public gathering, a foreign linguist spoke our old tongue and made the hairs on my neck stand on end, made me bristle in all sorts of ways. I felt angry. How could he utter these sounds, and yet my brothers and my sisters and myself be unable? Disabled. Another occasion: a group of Noongar people trying to resuscitate our language under the guidance of a different linguist. He corrected them, complained of the lazy tongue that our socio-economic version of the English language breeds. I felt responsible. And, again, angry. Some people say it's better not to learn language from such as those, in such circumstances; not from strangers, not from Them. Better that the tapes and word lists, the leaves of paper and imprint of songs were buried with the body that last uttered them. Better that than to learn our tongue from a white man.

I do not wish to appear mean-spirited and resentful. Some linguists spent time with our old people, developed relationships with them, won their trust. Now their informants have passed away, and in some parts of Noongar nation our tongue has withered, dried and turned to dust. I believe the language indigenous to this place must surely be its finest cultural expression, the utterance of it the very centre of our identity. Some say that we can make ourselves resonate with its sound, its stories and songs, and that we can thus make ourselves instruments of spirit. But ours is a critically endangered language. So what has this to do with literary fiction, written in English? I will get to that, but first I want to offer a little example of what a small group of us — we Wirlomin Noongar — have done in the area of language regeneration, in the way of trying to claim, control and en-

Eden ROBINSON
99.99% True & Authentic Tales

Once upon a time, The Village Idiot shot a mama eagle. "Oh, you are a super genius," the villagers said. "Doorknob." They snapped their eyes at him, called him names behind his back and accused his mother of drinking when she was pregnant with him. She was annoyed. She refused to help him pay for his car insurance. The Idiot had to hitch to town to grab groceries, play Keno or rent DVDs. No one would pick him up — except C., who ran an illegal taxi service and charged him ten dollars each way. Meanwhile, the baby eagles were fluffy and helpless and the villagers said, "Aww." They fully expected the babies to die, but fed them anyway. Thus, the fluffy babies grew into sulking, hulking speckled teenagers who squawked furiously whenever they wanted to be fed. They squawked a lot. They squawked as they brooded on porches; they squawked as they glared through living room windows; they squawked and then sniffed out undefended trashcans. "Well, winter'll kill 'em," was the general consensus.

In the midst of the falling autumn leaves, the eagles disappeared and people were sad, but not too sad. Old Man Winter arrived, parked his behind in his La-Z-boy, kicked off his socks and popped open a frosty refreshment. The snow fell and fell and fell, and then it rained and made the roads slushy, then it froze and turned icy, and then it snowed again, and then it rained, and then it snowed. And just when people were ready to bang their heads against their snow blowers in despair, spring arrived. The eagles returned, performing a dramatic reveal: they were thoroughly majestic, *muy macho*, stately, handsome bald eagles. That profile! What a wingspan! "Wow," everyone said.

The eagles swooped down, slicing through the crisp spring air to brood on porches, glare through living room windows and sniff out undefended trashcans. Tourists flocked to the village to have their pictures taken with "tame" eagles. The people of Kitamaat Village, however, were sick of hand-feeding their ungrateful brood. "Get," they said when they opened their doors to find yet another eagle on the porch. "Lazy bastard."

The eagles waited for the villagers to feed them. When this didn't happen, the eagles

hance our heritage. We Wirlomin — the word means "curlew-like" — and the particular curlew I am referring to nests on the ground, relies on camouflage, has a discomforting voice. It places its feet very carefully, and walks on its long legs with considerable poise. In our struggle to consolidate our old language, an elder took some of us to a site in ancestral country along the south coast of western Australia and we ran through it all again: clear an area of ground, dig a small hole with our hands, sing this one song in the old language. Light a fire in the hole, throw green bushes onto it. Suddenly, smoke wrapped around us in shifting tendrils, and the cry of curlews suddenly rose from behind, in front, to each side. There were voices, but nothing we could see. The voices ceased as the smoke dissipated. An old man clapped his hands, said we can continue now. "That's our old people letting us know they know we've returned."

Roundabout the year 2000, I returned inspired from a visit to Canada. It was a "literary," Indigenous writers tour, and I'd been inspired by a few small communities where we'd been welcomed, inspired by how people were dancing and drumming and speaking their language and stories back to life. I wondered if we might somehow do the same back here where it feels like the centre, but is apparently the very periphery of down-under in an upside-down world. There were tapes and transcriptions I'd begun with an elder, and her grandson and I began the business of organising that material. We began putting back together the language she'd carried from her childhood and youth several decades ago. She was pleased with this, but after those decades of denigration, and fitful efforts by one or another organisation at rebuilding our heritage with government funding in an era of "self-determination," she was also wary of the way those exercises sometimes exacerbate community rivalries and tensions. "Better we do it on our own," she said. And — surprising me — she suggested we do a book. So we began. Finished it. Published it. There was not a lot of interest outside of our extended clan. Then someone from the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Studies called me. Had I heard of the Gerhardt Laves archive? He was a linguist, and had written down the stories of some of our Noongar people in 1931. No, I hadn't heard. Had I heard there was a community started dive-bombing bird feeders, doing smash-and-grab raids on chicken coops and carrying off cats. In an unfortunate synchronicity, many toy breeds of dogs popularized by starlets such as Paris Hilton had been adopted by the more fashion-forward villagistas and many toy canines were pounced on and ripped apart, still kicking as they were devoured.

Well. The honeymoon was over. The eagles had gone too far. The villagers, not wanting to appear wildlife unfriendly, broadly hinted to The Idiot that if he wanted to finish his job and kill the formerly fluffy but now pet-devouring eagles, you know, that would not bother them one little bit. The Idiot was not interested. Someone else could do the dirty work. He'd learned his damn lesson. And so the villagers had to keep their smaller pets indoors, which wasn't a bad idea considering the burgeoning grizzly and black bear populations. The eagles mated and had babies who learned to rifle through garbage cans and savour gourmet pets.

Eventually, the babies of the babies grew apart from the village and never wrote, never called, couldn't be bothered to visit. Sometimes, we'd catch a glimpse of them in the tall trees or surfing high on an updraft, crying out their ode to freedom. "Ah, shut up," the villagers said.

2. The Inherent Authenticity of Living on a Reserve

Dear Ms. Robinson, Hello. I have your email from your website. I loved *Monkey Beach* and would like to come live with you this summer. I am from ___, Italy, but am studying in Toronto. Please send me your address.

Sincerely,
G.

Dear G.,

Hello! Thank you for your kind words about *Monkey Beach*. Unfortunately, I have subletted my one-bedroom in Vancouver as I will be teaching workshops at a writer-in-residency and living in a university dorm this summer. Hope your stay in Toronto is fun.

Cheers,
Eden Robinson

Dear Eden,

I want to live in the place your book is set. I want an authentic experience on the Ki-

meeting about the material? No, I hadn't heard that either. I told a few others about it, and we went along. Odd. Publication — telling stories — can put you in the eye and let you whisper in the ear of someone who might be able to help you, some faraway friend you never knew you had. That opportunity came almost by chance. Scribbles and ink trails, leaves of rectangular papers, mildewed, stained, swollen and frail from long storage in an attic half-a-world away, rescued from temperature fluctuations, from moisture and drying. These papers came flying back to this continent — none of us even knew about them beforehand — and arrived at the epicentre of Australian Indigenous collection and storage which is still, I would remind you, a long way from our home. Copies were flown again to the premier state university. Copies of the frail, slightly-smelly papers were transformed into sharp digital versions. Then someone was chosen to call a community meeting. But it wasn't chance that had us ready to act, to grab that dead material as thin as the skin of ghosts, and begin to bring it alive. I don't think it was just serendipity that allowed us to so quickly find the descendants of that linguist's "informants."

There was a man named George Nelly. One linguist — name of Gerhardt Laves — wrote down some of his stories on paper. We found his daughter and son. Their father died when they were three and seven years old. They were put in the mission. They were told both their parents had died. They remember seeing their mother walking beside the side of the road, outside the mission fence. We found some other key descendants of Laves's informants, and we asked them whom we should invite to come along and talk about the paperwork the Laves family had sent back to Australia. When all those invited guests gathered together we named the key descendants, and in front of that small and intimate crowd gave them back the paper records of their fathers or grandfathers or uncles. There may have been fifty people in that room. I think we were all crying. As someone said, these days we only get together at funerals. We're trying to improve that situation. And then, with their permission, we tried to read that linguist's International Phonetic Alphabet aloud. One of us had taken the trouble to learn it. We read one of George Nelly's stories out loud, beginning in a whisper.

It would take a much longer essay to contamaat reserve. Could you ask your parents if I can stay with them? I am a very good cook and I like to garden.

Yours,
G.

Dear G.,

I'm happy that you are so interested in the setting of *Monkey Beach*. My aunt runs a bed and breakfast in the village and she was one of my cultural advisors for the book. She also loves to garden. I'm sure you two would get along great. Please find her name and phone number enclosed if you would like to contact her yourself.

Cheers,
Eden Robinson

Hey Eden,
We're scheduling the next AGM for September. Are you in town or will you be back in Van? Where do you want me to courier the package?

G. says hi. She got the hang of the pressure cooker and is helping Gran with the smokehouse. They're going down the channel tomorrow to pick cheequa. She wants to know if you can come.

C.

C., got the package, thanks. I'll be in Windsor until Tuesday, so I'll need the conference call numbers again. Who's G? Is that your granddaughter?

Hey Eden. Your friend G. from Italy. She was walking around the village and Gran invited her for supper. She's been bunking in the spare room since July and is leaving next week.

Um, C., I have no idea who this G. person is. She sounded a little off on the emails she sent me. Is your gran okay?

Haha. G.'s okay. She invited Gran to her parents' place in Italy and Gran was so tickled. Gran made her stop drumming in the front yard, though, because the neighbours were complaining.

3. The Treaty Archives

I was an archival assistant in the Treaty department for a year and a half. The archive was in an old school room that had been the

vey that experience adequately. It's more complex than I can say. We talked about how much you can trust paperwork. About what we may have lost, and what we retain. How we can rebuild ourselves. We talked about spirit. And how language might change a little, but spirit remains. George Nelly's daughter, in her late sixties, listened to her father's stories. She heard his voice amidst the rest of us disputing this and that. George Nelly's son — Russell — in his late fifties and a powerful man, stood up in front of us in tears. He had travelled widely, and knew Aboriginal people and communities across the continent. This is what matters, he said. What we are doing here. Not going somewhere else trying to find what is real. Not listening to someone else telling us who we should be. Hazel Brown, the eldest and our leader, remembered all the people whose stories had been written down in this strange alphabet. She remembered even their "archaic" sound. She led her cousins and siblings, a small group of our elders, in telling stories about them. Reluctantly, the elders accepted the value of paper records. "I guess they would know more than us, wouldn't they? They were *our* elders." I am perhaps one of the weakest and most disconnected in our community. There are lots of explanations for that, but none worth bothering with just now. We had gathered around the skin of ghosts, gathered around stories and sound that began again as tentative whispers. Hazel Brown gathers some of her brothers together: Lenny, Chubbo, Lomas. Explains who I am. She sits at the end of the trestle table at a funeral wake, tells me to stand beside her. Introduces me to people she believes I need to know, and to whom I should be introduced.

I'm a driver. One of her brothers directs me. I go to Native Title meetings with him, on Hazel Brown's instructions. We visit old places that are important to him. Me too. This waterhole, then this one. I am following another of his nephews along a narrow, dry sandy creek bed. It turns, here — he reaches into a wall, draws out ochre. He tells me the word for this particular ochre, and who has given us permission to be here. One of Hazel Brown's cousins bathes my feet in emu oil. I am only telling you this so I can speak of generosity, of privilege and honour. We get some help from a local Noongar place. They have buildings, budget, staff — we share the same objectives. We listen to the recording of that first workshop. Keep the good bits. Write

source of many bad memories for people in their boomer years. Alumni of the dark days would enter the archive room and shudder, staring at the walls — a yellowish lime-green which had not been painted since they were students — and at the chalk boards and yellow benches.

"Blech," one man said. "I feel violated all over again."

When my father was the Public Works Foreman Manager, he'd transformed the school into an office building, carving the basement into a warren of offices. Over the years, the departments that did active fieldwork like Fisheries or maintenance jobs like Public Works had been moved to the Resource Centre and away from the Band Office, where the more administrative work took place. The Centre had been condemned at least three times before I was hired. Asbestos lingered in the walls and the wiring was eccentric. One wall of the Archives was a series of ancient, single-paned glass windows. In the winter, little piles of snow would drift around the sills. One side of the building was up against a densely forested hill with a path that led up to the graveyard.

I had worn a suit the first few days, but the dress code at the Resource Centre was fleece and steel-toed boots. My supervisor was a retired anthropology and linguistics professor who, in addition to doing research and writing reports for the Council, also taught Quileute, lectured on cruise lines to Alaska or spent time in his condo in Mexico. Mostly, I was alone with three hundred banker boxes of paper.

I loved working alone at night, lost in the endless information. The fluorescent lights hummed and crackled. The building creaked. But after ten o'clock, the urinal in the men's bathroom across the hall would start flushing and no matter how loud I played my radio, I could hear it in the background. I complained about it to the janitor, who quirked her eyebrows. "The urinals were taken out ten years ago," she said.

The archives were upstairs and most of the other offices were downstairs. People would wander in an out at odd hours and I'd hear them through the old ventilation system. I was sorting through a box of Traditional Use Studies when I heard my cousin Diane laughing downstairs. She was the Environmental Manager and often popped in to check reports or finish up projects. I poured myself a

the stories our together, change what we must, add what we can. We are healed by doing this. Three of us record ourselves reading and talking about the stories. Sitting in a little room, with a little machine. Haven't practiced doing it like this, never knew this would happen. Machine. Classroom. That old sound in us, and we are the ones sharing it. That's this story.

We went to some schools. Noongars crowding in there, too. Students and their parents, adding their piece, speaking up. We showed the pictures we'd made. Sang a song. No one was dancing, not in the schools. Not yet. These are not overtly political stories. Not stories of whitemen against the Noongar: all that stuff, strife, trouble, turmoil seems to end up with mostly us being the ones hurt. They are about the responsibility and joy of being a manifestation of the spirit of this place. They are about deep being. The protagonists take risks, trust their heritage and what their fathers told them, their mothers too. They venture out on their own. They *orbit*, they move away and return. Are very mobile, but held to a centre. Are like meteors and comets and stars. They suggest a respectful movement out to the periphery and beyond. Be what you can, of this centre. Perhaps there has been too much unbecoming, too much "don't." Protocol might mean much more than that. This language work informs a recent historical novel of mine, although indirectly. It made me realise the possibility that Noongar people on the cusp of colonisation thought it impossible that strangers could want, let alone be able, to conquer the spirit of place. I like to use what I grew up with, that which is a part of my heritage and education but far from the centre to which I have been referring, those cultural products which are from far over the horizon. T.S. Eliot, in his great poem of the twentieth century, *The Wasteland*, suggests there is healing in the old sounds of Sanskrit. We have an old sound here, too. Faraway over and beyond the horizon, we are gathering fragments, piecing them together, returning them to the landscape which provides their "referents." We are hunting down our sound. This is healing. It's probably not something we can do on our own. We probably need collaboration and partnerships. But would like a greater say in their formation and utterance.

Author's profile: Kim Scott is a Wirlomin Noongar man from the south coast of Western Australia

cup of coffee and wandered down to shoot the bull with her. The lights were off. I heard laughing again, but it was coming from the furnace room, a large, dark cluttered space where no one went to have a good chuckle.

Another night, I was making my way across the parking lot to my car when I heard something scraping against the dumpster. I froze, holding my car keys out in front of me, ready to stab. The scraping made its way around and a young, skinny light-furred brown bear poked its nose up in the air, pawing at the dumpster, making the metal squeal. Whew, I remember thinking. That's a relief.

My job was mostly to watchdog the archives. I kept the papers from wandering off and kept track of who borrowed what. I also sorted through random boxes that people would bring in and weed out the travel expenses from the rare finds — reports on archaeological findings about Old Town, a list of everyone in the village who owned a car in 1973, a traditional use study where people were interviewed about their fishing experiences in the first salmon canneries in our territory.

The archive windows faced the Recreation Centre, which was usually busy with kids playing basketball or feasts or memorials. Sometimes, I'd catch movement on the long flat roof and assumed it was kids goofing around where they weren't allowed. I had just come across some letters from Dr. Paul Woollacott, complaining to an M.P. about the sewage getting caught in the eulachon nets and fouling the taste of his favourite fish when a smear, a darting shadow caught my attention. A tall, hunched figure ran across the Rec Centre roof, pausing to lean over and stare at the doors which had been propped open to cool the gym where the junior boys' basketball team was practicing.

"Oh, that," one of my co-workers said the next day. "Some dead guy. Who knows what he wants."

The Resource Centre was finally torn down this year. The Treaty Archives are now in a room in the back of the new council office. I visit them once in a while, but they aren't the same without all the dead people running around. You get used to them, like neighbours who always borrow your stuff, play their TV too loud and chat your ear off about their kids and then suddenly move, leaving behind a silence.

(prior to colonization). He began writing for publication when he became a teacher of English and his second novel, *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) won the Miles Franklin, the RAKA Kate Challis, and the Western Australian Premier's Book Award. His novel *That Deadman Dance* is forthcoming by Bloomsbury USA in 2012. Scott teaches at Curtin University. E-mail: <k.scott@curtin.edu.au>

Author's profile: Eden Robinson is a Haisla / Heiltsuk author who grew up in Haisla, British Columbia. Her first book, *Traplines*, a collection of short stories, won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and was the 1998 *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. *Monkey Beach*, her first novel, was shortlisted for both the Giller Prize and the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction in 2000 and named a notable book by the *Globe and Mail*. She published her novel *Blood Sports* in 2006. Robinson lives in Kitamaat, British Columbia. E-mail: <eden_robinson@hotmail.com>