It is an honour to address this Australian Academy of the Humanities conference on Human Rights and Humanitarianism, though I rarely frame my own creative work in terms of ‘Human Rights’. I can’t remember the last time I approached the blank page thinking ‘Social Justice’ or ‘Social Change’ either. It’s surprising then, that a word like ‘Decolonisation’ can be appropriate, particularly if we ... understand decolonisation as the unravelling of assumed certainties and the re-imagining and re-negotiating of common futures.¹

I know at least one novelist who fancies that as a job description.

Equally, I’m not confident of any immediately effective role for a novelist — or a scholar for that matter — in ‘fixing’ Human Rights issues. Novelist Tony Birch sounded like family to me when he considered giving up writing for activism because he didn’t want his children saying ‘he might have worked his arse off writing fiction but he did fuck all for the planet.’²

No, we don’t want to be remembered like that.

So, having tripped on my own diffidence so soon, let me begin again:

I’m indeed honoured to be one in a line of speakers demonstrating the ‘extraordinary breadth and depth’ of our Fellows’ contribution to the Australian and international humanities community, and to enriching the cultural life of the nation.³

Honoured, and daunted too.

I’ve read previous lectures in this series. The breadth and depth is such that I wonder any single audience could appreciate it all.

I’ve decided to be led by Inga Clendinnen, whose work I greatly admire — and who I magnanimously forgive (temporarily) for dismissing novelists as opportunistic entertainers who merely ‘delight’ rather than ‘instruct or reform’.⁴ In her own Annual Academy lecture, *Backstage at the Republic of Letters*, Inga said she would fall back to the default position of the Humanities and talk about herself.⁵

So I’m going to do that too. I’ll reflect on some things I’ve read and written and — bluffing on breadth if not depth — sample some pages of literature, dab a little history, spatter politics and legislation and generally attempt to provide a picture of the view from my particular vantage point.

Firstly then, let me explain my own stumbling introduction to the Republic of Letters. The first book I read — the first *real* book — was Mark Twain’s novel, *Tom Sawyer*.⁶ My father’s father — from whom my own father was estranged, and from whom I get my family name — sent it to me in the post inscribed ‘To dear Kim with love from Grandad Scott 5ᵗʰ September 1964’. I was seven.

It wasn’t Christmas. It wasn’t my birthday.
being fully immersed and yourself, but also someone else. Seeing with other eyes. The best stories, she said, allow ‘spaces where people can meet’.

Obviously, I missed a lot of *Tom Sawyer* on that first reading, and I was hardly alive to nuance, but I do remember being terrified when Tom and Becky become lost deep in the labyrinth of a cave at the same time as avoiding the book’s baddy, the Native American — ‘Injun Joe’ — who was also down there, in the darkness and hollows underground. They saw his candlelight and, in fear, snuffed out their own. The great mass of darkness closed in.

By the time I was that far into the book my reading had improved a great deal; I was ‘dwelling’ in the story at that moment.

Tom and Becky escaped the caves. But ‘Injun Joe’ didn’t. The young reader I was didn’t think he deserved his fate — what was wrong with objecting to people digging up dead bodies, or wanting treasure? Injun Joe ended up trapped inside a huge door that sealed the caves immediately after Tom and Becky found their way out. When they found Injun Joe the broken knife he’d used to chip at the heavy door lay at his side and, scattered all round, the candles he’d gnawed in his hunger.

Why did he send it now? I might have wondered. Didn’t he know I couldn’t read big books?

My father’s name was ‘Tom.’ I loved him, but he wasn’t around all that much in those days. I could easily read that word, ‘Tom’. There it was, on the cover.

Was this book about my father? Looking at the picture you’d think I should have known better; the character there looks nothing like him. I was blind and innocent.

*Tom Sawyer* begins:

‘TOM!’

No answer.

‘TOM!’

No answer.

‘TOM!’

No answer.

TOM TOM TOM...

It could’ve been a drumbeat.

I was a naïve, but very motivated reader.

I thought I would find out about my dad, from when he was a kid. The details matched: an orphan, yes; being raised by his Aunty, yes...

I thought we had entered into a sort of compact, my grandfather and I. Secretly, he would tell me of when my own father was a boy.

Was that a betrayal of my dad?

Perhaps this shows how a story can make you complicit, part of a community excluding others.

The noted Western Australian novelist, Elizabeth Jolley, used to speak of ‘dwelling’ in stories —
I don’t remember much of Injun Joe. Never really met him. Never met my father there either, despite the title. In fact, it was rare in the first part of my life to meet an Indigenous/Aboriginal character in my reading, and certainly not an admirable one. Even in later readings I think I missed the sense of Injun Joe as villain. Poor Injun Joe; locked in, locked up, locked out, locked down, his pleas unheard. He was both villain and victim. I wonder whether he was tempted to turn that knife on himself. It could be an Australian story, and about our treatment of the ‘Other’. Tom Sawyer, the hero, is there from page one, getting others to white-wash the fence, do his work for him; the neo-liberal huckster. But, I go too far …

My other reason for starting with Twain is because of his take on Australian history. You will know the quote. Australian history, Twain said, is ‘always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer and so pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies’.8 I don’t know about beautiful, but there are certainly lies in our history. Lies, like Terra Nullius. Lies, like those old departments for ‘Aboriginal Protection and Welfare’ that were more about the protection and welfare of non-Aboriginal interests. Lies like we’re all equal before the law. Certain names resonate with this. In Western Australia we might say Ward, Dhu, John Pat, Elijah Doughty … But there are many, many more. Lies, as in betrayal.

Here’s a timeline, of sorts:

- 1989: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is established.
- 1991: The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is established, and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody presents its report.
- 1992 (June): The ‘Mabo Case’ is won.
- 1992 (December): The Redfern Speech.9
- 1993: The Native Title Act is passed.

Not a comprehensive list, but I wanted to start with ‘Self-determination’ if only because it is fundamental to Indigenous human rights,10 and because the change from ‘Assimilation’ to ‘Self-determination’ is such a radical policy shift. The timeline shows a twenty-year trajectory toward a more equal power relationship between Aboriginal people and other Australians. The creation of ATSIC is noteworthy because some form of Indigenous representative governance is usually regarded as central to achieving improvement in socio-economic outcomes and rights, and because there needs to be some sort of “power equalisation mechanism” capable of requiring government to negotiate with Indigenous people on equal terms.11 Further, any such model of representative governance should be able to ‘influence Cabinet decisions, function as an advocacy body for Aboriginal aspirations, have a political focus, and probably be responsible for some programs’.12 My quotes aren’t from the formation of ATSIC decades ago, but from discussions leading to the Uluru Statement from the Heart which was released — and quickly rejected — so very recently, and its considered, pragmatic opinion of constitutional change and the place of Indigenous people in the nation some further two decades from that peak of 1993.13

I include Keating’s Redfern Speech in my timeline because a Human Rights approach to Self-determination begins with ‘acknowledgement of the impact of historically-derived disadvantage on Indigenous peoples’.14 Singular in its responsibility and courage, and more significant than an apology to the Stolen Generations, the Redfern speech acknowledges the impact of history, specifying that: …it was we who did the dispossession.
We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.
We brought the diseases. The alcohol.
We committed the murders.
We took the children from their mothers.
We practised discrimination and exclusion.
It was our ignorance and our prejudice...

These are rare cadences in Australian political-speak. ‘Well may we say’ that the Mabo Case declaration and the Redfern Speech represent a pinnacle in Australian history, if our measure is justice and equality for Aboriginal people and Australian citizens. Things fell away from there.

The following timeline tracks a return to an older power relationship:

2004: ‘The disbanding of ATSIC.
2012: Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is formed.
2017: Uluru Statement from the Heart offered, and rejected.

This second list tracks a move away from ‘Self-determination’, and what the Redfern speech calls ‘the basis of a new relationship’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Note these words from a prominent Aboriginal intellectual in 1993:

If the commonwealth is genuine in its desire to secure reconciliation with Aboriginal people then full and uncompromising respect for those legal rights and the historical truths established by Mabo is not negotiable. For a people to have been denied their legal rights under the laws of the colonies for the past 200 years, to face the prospect of further denial and extinguishment of rights — after the country’s highest institution has declared their existence — would be tantamount to declaring war against them. There will never be peace and reconciliation if legal rights under Mabo are denied or rendered impotent, and never again will there be an opportunity for a genuine accommodation of Indigenous people within this nation.

These words from the heady days of fresh Native Title legislation and the Redfern Speech indicate the compromise and negotiation that had already gone into the compilation of the Uluru Statement. Still not enough.

‘The Apology’ may seem an anomaly in my second list. While recognising its importance to many Aboriginal people, Noel Pearson commented that:

We have been ... victimized in history, but we must stop the politics of victimhood. We lose power when we adopt this psychology. Whatever moral power we might gain over white Australia from presenting ourselves as victims, we lose in ourselves. My worry is that this apology will sanction a view of history that cements a detrimental psychology of victimhood, rather than a stronger one of defiance, survival and agency.

Sanctioning a view of history is bad enough, but it may be worse. In Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights, the Indigenous (Athabascan) academic Dion Million argues that communities seeking redress for injustices perpetrated on them by the colonial nation-state put themselves in a position of ‘full-victimhood’ and effectively relinquish power. That, she says, is incompatible with self-determination because to require apology is to relinquish agency. Million points out that
healing, in a neo-liberal context, can come to mean a bio-medicalising of historical trauma, and emphasis on individual healing for ‘traumas that are actually outcomes of power relations with states’.19

‘Close the Gap’ in this way is not about empowerment, but quite the reverse.

Million is mostly discussing Canada, but gives the Australian Northern Territory Emergency Response a special mention: ‘Australian Aboriginal people’s ... violation by the Australian state, where the sexual abuse and incest that were diagnosed in a prior moment of trauma then became a policy rationale for further colonisation... .’20

The insistence on a certain power relationship between Australia and its Aboriginal people — this refusal of anything like Self-determination — seems a defining characteristic of Australian identity — some say it’s a psychosis.21

Why is Australia the only English speaking settler colony without even a single treaty? Yet another lie in our history is the lingering perception that Aboriginal people are ‘inferior’.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the folly of this. In The Biggest Estate on Earth, Bill Gammage shows fire deployed across the continent with a complexity and skill ‘greater than anything modern Australia has imagined’, explains why colonists spoke of a land like ‘a gentleman’s park, an inhabited and improved country’ and how an organised ‘mosaic of grass and trees’ of ‘springs, soaks, caches and wetlands’ channelled, persuaded and lured prey in predictable ways.22

Gammage explains that ‘a mobile people organised a continent with … precision … They were active, not passive, striving for balance and continuity to make all life abundant, convenient and predictable’.23 He uses the example of intricate ‘installations’ consisting of tiny, many-coloured feathers painstakingly glued to sand with blood as evidence of how indigenous cultures enabled abundance and ‘time to spend nourishing the mind … a spiritual and creative practice’ that was ‘voluminous and intricate’.24

Ross Gibson, in 26 Views of the Starburst World, articulates the strengths of oral culture over print, the improvisation and fluidity it enables, and demonstrates again the importance, in many Aboriginal cultures, of sound over sight.25

Bruce Pascoe’s Dark Emu helps us rethink the notion of Aboriginal people engaging in random nomadic activity, and even provides evidence of buildings and agriculture.26

Tony Swain, in A Place for Strangers, explains a worldview that prioritises place instead of time. Not adequately characterised by a line, nor even a circle (merely a line ‘eating itself’), place-consciousness means an awareness of rhythms — the many rhythms of moon, sun, tides and winds, plants flowering and spilling their seeds, gestation birth and death... — and how an awareness of the intersection of these rhythms gives a, secondary, sense of time and provides for both prediction and an acute sense of ‘the now’. All these rhythms, he articulates, are held in stories embedded in landscape, in ‘abiding stories’ for which topographical features are the text.27

To return to the Republic of Letters for a moment: when Elizabeth Jolley spoke of ‘dwelling’ in stories, she meant print stories, novels and works of printed fiction. But imagine, dwelling in ‘abiding stories’ for which landscape is the text, and resonating with the rhythms of place.

Despite an oral tradition — or perhaps because of it — classical Noongar tradition led to the Republic of Letters, although entry was usually barred. Penny van Toorn’s Writing Never Arrives Naked offers many examples of this propensity for literacy, and I can offer examples from Noongar country.28

The nineteenth-century Bishop Rosendo Salvado concluded his observations of how easily a Noongar boy began to read and write by asking ‘If the same experiment were conducted in the most highly thought-of school in Europe, I wonder if a boy of nine would learn forty letters in ten minutes, have them all off by heart, and be able to repeat their names backwards and forwards?’29

The colonial diarist Andrew Collie mentions the curiosity of Nakinah — his Noongar guide — about the ‘expedition journal’ Collie is maintaining. Later, Collie notes how this popular literary form has influenced the Nakinah, who has ‘treasured up in his memory a detailed recollection of the various incidents and scenery,
arranged in the form of a diary, where each day was designated by some leading distinctive mark, in place of numerals.\textsuperscript{10}

Literary ‘form’ was not the only thing subject to ‘sampling’ and interrogation. Around the same time, another south coast Noongar man produced a pen-and-ink drawing (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{11} Its author, Galliput, was one of three Noongar men who asked to be taken aboard a ship leaving what is now the town of Albany, so they could visit the infant Swan River Colony and talk with people.\textsuperscript{12} The historian, Tiffany Shellam, says they were thus using ships as vehicles for significantly extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country.\textsuperscript{13} While on that visit they also attended a piano recital, performed a ‘kangaroo dance’ as their contribution to the occasion, and drank tea while sitting in armchairs. Galliput sampled the pen and ink, and no doubt the culinary delights and society, at a tavern in the colony. Writing and ships were not the only novel cultural products with which he and his people were experimenting.

There are many examples of the inclusiveness of classical Noongar culture, its flexibility and readiness to bring new cultural products into its own traditions. That inclusiveness extends to language and colonial place-names. Daisy Bates documented examples of a Noongar song using English language and names of a colonial ‘camp.’\textsuperscript{14} This glimpse of a classical Noongar cultural frame containing colonial experience suggests what might have been, and perhaps what might yet be.

You will note I have not been emphasising warrior-hood. I want to think about these people as more than just warriors, although that is of course a trope of colonial histories.

The south coast town of Albany, Western Australia, has a statue of Mokare, so called ‘Man of Peace’ near the top of its main street. The statue has a plaque: ‘In recognition of the role Mokare played in the peaceful co-existence between Noongar people and the first European settlers.’\textsuperscript{15} Not surprisingly, many Minang Noongar people in Albany would prefer greater attention to his resistance to the colonisers: ‘Mineng man, Oscar Colbung, told me of the ambivalence felt by some members of the Albany community about Mokare’s reconciliation statue. A peaceful
warrior? What did that say about Mineng resistance, he pondered.\textsuperscript{16}

There is danger in my emphasis. It can be easily abused. The generous, confident spirit of early Noongar like Mokare — the behaviour I’ve been stressing — can be co-opted to tell yet another lie: Aboriginal people didn’t resist colonisation.

I reject that.

I take resistance as a given and as obvious. But the initial impulse of people like Mokare was not just resistance. Why should it be? Proud, curious, inclusive, respectful, for them the ocean was a means of communication, not a moat. As one among many possible manifestations of place, one wants to understand and incorporate difference, to grow with it.\textsuperscript{17} They were much more than just warriors, and to my mind an emphasis solely on (failed) military-style resistance is as empty as the Gallipoli Myth, and in danger of becoming reactive and dependent on the ‘other’, in danger of being trapped within an ugly and brutal infrastructure of power.

As a judge of (Indigenous) writing competitions I have read too many stories that have been ambushed by the genre of military history. Frustration and powerlessness already has people turning on one another. There is too much lateral violence.

I have offered only a few examples from among the many similar manifestations of a pre-colonial, classical culture. I find them inspiring, and the potential elaborations and futures they suggest thrill me.

But instead of being able to build on this, we are obliged to first deal with the lies and, in so doing, run the risk of being ambushed and trapped within a shrill and brittle structure we were trying to escape.

But I have digressed. Enough of the lies and such; I was talking about me.

I was saying it was 1964 and I was reading \textit{Tom Sawyer}.

Then it was the 1970s and I was entering university, a callow youth with little political awareness. I might have been in one of those nineteenth-century novels I was soon studying, moving country to city ...

I was studying literature, at the ‘fag-end’ of that discipline perhaps. There was no creative writing at my university, though it is arguable whether that would have provided a better fit. I was studying literary theory, African literature, World literature. There was no Aboriginal literature, at least not at that university. There was within a few years, but that’s another story ...

It was the 1980s, the 1990s ... I had begun trying to write poetry and fiction, was beginning to wonder about the loud, repeated stories I’d learned. I was wondering about myself and isolation.

I went to archives for the first time, the site of the language of our shared history (it is shameful to think of one’s ignorance). I read manuscripts and local histories, the publications of experts and authorities on my kind of Australia. There were some recurring and particularly ugly expressions, which in my notes I converted to LFBA (Last Full Blood Aborigine), and FWMB (First White Man Born).

I found a book which seemed firmly grounded in these phrases: A.O. Neville’s \textit{Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community}. Unintentionally, I wrote the latter part of this title as ‘their place in our community’. A ‘Freudian slip’, I was marginalised in reading it. There are many photographs in this book, but one in particular caught my eye. It is of three people — three generations in a line, backs to each other, smiling into some distant future — captioned:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Three Generations}  
(Reading from Right to Left)
\begin{itemize}
  \item 1. Half-blood — (Irish-Australian father, full-blood Aboriginal mother).
  \item 2. Quadroon Daughter — (Father Australian born of Scottish parents. Mother No. 1).
  \item 3. Octaroon Grandson — (Father Australian of Irish descent. Mother No. 2).\textsuperscript{38}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

Lured into the Republic of Letters, I had thought Tom Sawyer might be my dad. Stumbling in the archives, I thought the fellow at the end of this line could be me.

\textit{Uplift}, I read in this tome. \textit{Elevate a despised people. Breed out the black. Fill with shame. Isolate.}
I wrote a novel, a kind of companion piece to *Australia's Coloured Minority*, in which my uplifted narrator often finds himself trapped in the ceiling corner of white rooms. Pale, scarred and damaged; a freak hovering in the campfire smoke surrounded by extended family, he sings the sounds indisputably of place. A metaphor for Indigenous language.

Allow me to read an edited version of the last paragraphs of that novel. Never intended as such, I nevertheless sometimes think of these paragraphs as some sort of manifesto:

Children, becoming white, gathering at the woodheap, learned to work for indifferent and earnest fathers. Yes, the birth of even an unsuccessfully first-white-man-born-in-the-family-line has required a lot of death, a lot of space, a lot of emptiness. All of which I have had in abundance.

And also — it must be said — some sort of luck. I mean in that I am still here, however too well disguised.

*Yoowarl koorl, yoowarl koorl.*

Speaking from the heart, I tell you that I am part of a much older story, one of a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return and remain. Even now we gather, on chilly evenings, sometimes only a very few of us, sometimes more. We gather our strength in this way. From the heart of all of us. Pale, burnt and shrivelled, I hover in the campfire smoke and sing as best I can. I am not alone.

There are many stories here, in the ashes below my feet — even my grandfather’s.

I look out across the small crowd, hoping it will grow, hoping to see Uncle Will’s children, and those of his sisters, and theirs in turn. And my father’s other children?

There is smoke and ash in my skin, and in my heart too. I offer these words to those of you I embarrass, and who turn away from the shame of seeing me; or perhaps it is because your eyes smart as the wind blows the smoke a little toward you, and you hear something like a million million many-sized hearts beating, and the whispering of waves, leaves, grasses...

We are still here, Benang.19

There is only so much ‘deconstruction’ and ‘resisting’ that one can do. There needs to be some source to draw on.

I have briefly referred to the great resource of pre-colonial indigenous cultures and languages. Probably many of us here — enlightened people — appreciate this and may even wish to access it. But after decades of denigration and attempted destruction of this heritage, followed by an only relatively recent move toward its celebration, it should be returned and consolidated in its home community so that members are not further disempowered when all — tourists, strangers, others — are more familiar with it than they.

Noongar language is endangered. Over thirty thousand people identify themselves as ‘Noongar’, but the language was listed as ‘extinct’ on the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) catalogue until 2009 when it was updated to ‘living’.20 Elsewhere, it is classified as ‘threatened’.41 In 1996, 163 people apparently spoke it at home; but by 2006 this number had increased to 213, and by 2011 to 369.42

I think these figures over-state the endangered case. There are more speakers and, as you can see, the number of speakers is increasing.

However, it is undeniable that Noongar classical heritage is not as strong, rich and accessible as it might be; an endangered language, ancestral country integral to culture inaccessible, a people scarred by dispossession, injustice and historical trauma. Australia is stolen country. Only a tiny minority of the original population survived the first fifty years of colonisation in most regions. Aboriginal people suffered an apartheid-like regime for most of Australia’s colonial history. Of course the legacy of this history is with us today.

Recovery and rebuilding an Aboriginal community and heritage — or so my little old novel would suggest — relies on restoring and strengthening connections between place, people and language.
I wish to now talk about just such a program, and one with which I am closely involved: the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project.

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project is a community-based organisation with around one hundred members. It has been operating for over ten years and relies on volunteers and intermittent funding. The project is not primarily about teaching or learning Noongar language, though that is a component. Rather, the project tries to return and consolidate a particular region’s classical Indigenous cultural heritage (with an emphasis on language and story and song). The Wirlomin project flowed from a book — Kayang and Me — co-authored with Noongar elder, Hazel Brown. There was a lot of information that didn’t fit so well there, things like Noongar language, stories, songs, site knowledge and genealogical affiliations — the sort of material integral to a sense of place and identity and to a family and community of which Hazel Brown was the centre. That knowledge was in danger of being lost.

Hazel Brown’s personal ‘database’ has been complemented with material supplied by her siblings and other older ‘clan’ members along with that from official archival sources. One such source is the notes of the linguist Gerhardt Laves who visited Albany in 1931. The Wirlomin project’s initial reference group consisted of, along with Hazel Brown, a number of key descendants of Laves’s informants and evolved from consideration of a protocol for community engagement with the Laves Noongar language material. The Wirlomin reference group plays a key role in issuing invitations to the workshops at which attendees engage with and develop stories and songs in Noongar language.

The project is founded upon the process these workshops allow, one of ever-expanding — and shrinking — concentric circles, with members of the Cultural Elders Reference Group at its centre.

Stories and illustrations are developed, draft versions distributed, presentations made to schools and community events, and trips to ‘country’ taken to reunite language, story, song and oral history to landscape.

The workshops include language learning, story development, picture book illustration and training in presenting to audiences.

The project has published six picture-books. Books are near its heart, though more as a vehicle than an end in themselves. Developing the stories into picture-book form allows the core community to engage with and explore the stories in various ways; books allow multiple people to be at the cross-cultural cusp as authors, illustrators or presenters/performers; and books provide a focus and even a form of validation.

The first workshop, for want of a better term, was held in 2006, attended by around 60 Noongar people, and was mostly about declaring an intent to build language and story and a sense of community, and to return — if not formally, then with some serious decorum — copies of significant archival language material to key individuals and also trial some ways of engaging with it. Within minutes of formally gathering, everyone was crying. They were sweet and sad tears. Were we weeping because, as someone said, ‘These days we only get together for funerals? Or because we might bring something — our language, our ancient stories, our long presence here, even our old people — properly alive again?’ We were thinking to strengthen connection to heritage, build a strong and grounded identity.

The old stories the Wirlomin Project offers rarely feature oppressed, marginalised figures. Or if so, they don’t stay that way.

The stories feature protagonists with confidence and agency.
In *Mamang*, the ‘hero’ dances out onto the back of a whale that surfaces near the rocks upon which he is standing. Trusting a story and song of his father’s he dives into the whale’s spout and, the words and melody resonating in the cavernous whale’s interior, he sings his father’s song in which a character does exactly as he is doing now. He trusts his heritage to take this risk. When the whale surfaces he looks through — or it might be with, the language is ambiguous — its eye, and sees no sight of land. Eventually, the whale is stranded on a sandy beach, and two women standing there are surprised and delighted when our hero emerges from the whale. The women’s people welcome him, and all feast upon his story and song. Years later, he returns to his home with the two women and children. He has trusted himself and his heritage to expand his — and their — world, orbited home again with this knowledge.

Similarly, in *Noongar Maambara Baakitj* the hero follows a trail no one else can even see; weaponless, he nevertheless succeeds in the hunt. He encounters spirit creatures respectfully, even engages in contests with them. In this journey he discovers new dimensions to his abilities and identity, and also returns with the story of his adventures to delight his family.

In both these stories young people orbit away from and back to home, face challenges, and expand their sense of self and their community’s capabilities by doing so.

*Yirra Boornak Nyininy* is a colonial story; there is a farm, relationships with non-Noongar people and sheep. Like the song I quoted earlier, colonial experience grafted to the ancient roots of Noongar culture.

*Ngaawily Nop* tells of a boy who goes looking for family. Initially rejected, he is claimed by the place itself and transformed into a being more wonderful again. At workshops, this story spoke particularly to members of the Stolen Generations who were in fact strengthening community bonds in joining us.

I mentioned that the project does presentations at schools and community events, offering stories, songs and the like. It is still unusual for many Noongar people, accustomed to being at the margins of institutions, to find themselves the centre of positive attention for sharing their sense of identity and heritage.

After a week of presenting to different schools for the first time Connie Moses said, ‘I’m just so proud to be part of the journey. We are a team, you know, and we’re growing together. I just can’t wait to get up and dance and sing. It’s just so wonderful to hear everyone speak, especially the elders. Uncle Russell, from earlier in the week to now has just been inspiring, listening to you. Fantastic.’

After also presenting for the first time, and on the same tour of regional schools, and being asked to reflect on the experience, Elder Russell Nelly said that:

I want to tell you it’s a privilege to share what we feel with the kids ... I get emotional at times, but when I get emotional I’m listening to the old fellas. Because they’re talking to me, along with them talking to you guys ... Prior to this I was lost. I had circumnavigated Australia three times looking for my identity and it brought me all the way back to Katanning. I heard of the Wirlomin mob, I thought no, they don’t want me. That’s all changed now. We’ve got something tangible, I always tell you we’ve got something tangible. What we’ve lost, we are resurrecting it. So my people, we go with our head up high, proudly.

A member of the ‘Stolen Generations’ who never knew his mother and father after he was a baby, Russell Nelly articulates the importance of reconnection with people and country, to identity and culture, as against the experience of being subject to racism. His father was an informant for a linguist. The Wirlomin Project allowed him not only to hear his father’s stories in language, but also to reunite a Creation Story of his father’s with the landscape which serves, in part, as its text.

The return of people to their ancestral country appears to be beneficial beyond reuniting creation stories and landscape. On such a trip in 2008, elder Roma Winmar explained that:
It’s very emotional. I feel full. I feel full of tears, I feel full of joy. It’s hard to explain, like when somebody's been away for a very long time and they’ve returned on a journey and you rush out to meet them and there’s all these hugs and tears and ... It’s a joy, but you’re shedding tears and it’s the same sort of thing ... Being here with this mob it’s great. Before my mother died — she had a massive stroke — and before she died she said, ‘Roma, soon as I get better I’ll take you back down to where I came from and I’ll take you to all these places’. The project now has enabled me to come to these places but without my mother, and I suppose it’s feeling the loss of her not being here ... But maybe she is here, in spirit, and that dream is being fulfilled for me I just ... (indicates tears)... Take no notice. It’s a spiritual journey, to be walking this way again, reinforcing that bond to country. 

The formality of these occasions was in large part derived from the act of calling individuals from the audience by name, and presenting them with the picture books in front of the little crowd. The elderly individual in question was accorded this treatment. A photograph of him returning to his seat shows tears in his eyes. I guess he felt honoured. Perhaps forgiven. Perhaps, that he belonged.

His reaction surprised some of us, and suggested to me the potential of the structure of the storytelling situation to transform, even if only temporarily, pre-existing power relationships. It also suggests the latent power of regional Indigenous heritage and a paradox; empowerment through giving.

It is a risky strategy, especially in the context of a history of lies and betrayal.

On one occasion, while trying to locate a story in its landscape by tracking a story along a trail of shifting place names, memories, oral histories and local history archives, the Wirloomin Project was invited onto a property infamous as being the place of origin of an historical massacre.

It was a decision to consider: accept the invitation or not? Some strands of the community had not visited the area for the generations since the massacre, and those many decades of legislation controlling movement and rights made it hard to get back and reconcile oneself with what had occurred.

We accepted. After a barbeque lunch, the current owners presented us with grinding stones they’d collected decades ago. They felt ashamed at having done so, they said, and understood our group represented descendants of the Noongar people who’d lived here. They took us to what they thought may be significant sites, and which proved to be, including a dance ground, lizard traps and rock pools of spring water.

About twelve months after the above visit, I returned to a rock water hole in the area eighteen months ago with a small party that included one of the elders who received the grinding stones. The elder told one of the men with us to reach into the water hole, feel for something left there. When one of the ancient, hand-shaped stones was lifted glistening into the sunlight it felt as if we recreating part of a ceremony.

Research confirms Roma Winmar’s words; improved social and personal well-being comes from strong attachment to Indigenous cultural traditions. Notably, such improvement is not dependent on pleas of victimhood, or on relinquishing power. Further, the benefit — and the ‘healing’ implied herein — is not limited to Indigenous people.

The Wirloomin project, as already indicated, formally distributes pre-publication copies of stories to members of the local community at a public meeting. As one of the people involved in the project, I must confess my intention at this stage was, as part of consolidating the stories in a ‘home community’, that only Noongar people would receive these copies. However, elders in the reference group insisted that an elderly member of a pioneering family of the region be given that honour also. I objected to this, arguing that this individual’s family had stolen our land, and that members of our Noongar community — in fact, some of the elders with whom I was discussing this — had lived like slaves on the man’s property. The elders held their position because, they said, the man in question has grown up with them and knew some Noongar language.
It has been claimed that ‘language loss, language retention, and the possibility of language revitalisation, then, can be emblematic of the whole history of colonial dispossession, Aboriginal persistence and a self-assertive and self-determined Aboriginal future.’

This is a different way of telling our history, and of connecting the future with ancient traditions. But I am talking about more than just language revitalisation, although that is a major component of story and song revitalisation. This helps us escape from a reactive trap, or an impoverished narrative reduced to the binary of ‘Stolen Generations’ vs ‘Native Title’. It gives us something more than violent warriors or suffering victims, and offers a recovery from invasion by rebuilding ancient stories and songs in regional communities.

Of course, this is a small and isolated project I speak of that may not be replicable elsewhere. Of course, it could easily falter and die along with some of its key people. Of course, connecting language traditions with country often relies on negotiation with private landholders. But there is the possibility of transformation of social structures and identity.

Which I think brings us back to things I was talking about earlier, legislation and policy and ‘Treaty’ and the like; the ways and means needed (along, I would argue, with story and song) to change power structures.

Aboriginal Australia is diverse. I’ve not been speaking about what’s usually regarded as remote, traditional Aboriginal Australia. My focus is Noongar country along the south coast of Western Australia. My sense is that programs like that which I have outlined offer an opportunity, as Nicholas Evans says in the 2017 *Humanities Australia* journal, to create ‘a more authentic view of who we are in this part of the world, grounded in the intricate and diverse cultural products of fifty millennia of human occupation … an opportunity to create a type of culture that so far we have failed to nourish in this country.’

I am talking about the starting point for the possibility of anchoring a shimmering nation state to its indigenous roots being the descendants of regional pre-colonial Australia, and have suggested — by the example of a small and isolated project — the potential for a transformed, nourishing and inclusive culture to be built from there. Stories connect people to one another and to place. They are an important part of the currency of identity and belonging. Indigenous languages, stories and songs are major denominations in that currency.

I talk about stories being returned and consolidated in home communities of people descended from those who created human society there. I don’t suggest the stories are locked away forever. Stories grow from the exchange of breath, from moving to and fro, from investment and exchange; that is, they grow from story-business. I would like them to be invested in and appropriate exchange negotiated. In using such terms — currency, denomination, invest, negotiate — I perhaps move away from literature and story and toward something like implementation, something like legislation, something like the benefits of a new relationship. Something like a treaty.

Let me finish with an anecdote from an older Noongar man, since passed away. A man scarred by racism, who’d learned to utilise violence as the only way to deal with it in small country towns.

Returning to a little country town after a week clearing his ancestral country for farmers, he was picked up and imprisoned by the local policeman. The policeman took the trouble over the weekend to tell him that he — the policeman — was enjoying time with his, the prisoner’s, wife. And then, released from prison, my uncle was run out of town.
He found a way to rain violence upon that policeman.
That’s Human Rights some decades ago, of course.
But all that was just by way of introduction to the source of the anecdote. Let’s call the source, Fred.
Uncle Fred told me about this man who approached him in a public space, came up very respectfully. An immigrant. A dark man, Uncle Fred told me. Indian, he thought. Uncle Fred, scarred from white Australian oppression, was colour-conscious, but for all that far more accommodating than a great many non-Aboriginal people living in the towns and regions where he spent his time.
‘May I shake your hand?’ the stranger said, offering his own. ‘Thank you for having me in your country.’
Nobody had ever said anything like that to Uncle Fred before. Certainly no white man ever had.
He shook his head in amazement. He was very pleased. It mattered. He considered the possibility of an alliance between Noongars and such immigrants.

KIM SCOTT FAHA is a multi-award winning author, Professor of Writing at Curtin University and an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His most recent novel, Taboo (2017) won the Book of the Year Award and Indigenous Writer’s Prize in the 2018 NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, and was longlisted for the 2018 Miles Franklin Literary Award. His other books include That Deadman Dance (2010), Lost (2006), True Country (1993), Benang: From the Heart (1999), and Kayang and Me (2005) — co-authored with Hazel Brown. He has won many prestigious Australian literary awards, among them the Miles Franklin Literary Award (twice), the Western Australian Premier’s Award (twice), the Kate Challiss RAKA Award (twice), the Victorian Premier’s Literary Prize, the regional Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal. He is also the recipient of an Australian Centenary Medal (2003) and was named the 2012 West Australian of the Year, having been nominated in both the Indigenous and Arts and Culture categories.
A descendant of people living along the south coast of Western Australia prior to colonisation and proud to be one among those who call themselves Noongar, Kim is founder and chair of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Story Project which, among other achievements, has resulted in the publication of two English/Noongar language picture books, Mamang and Noongar Mambara Baktij (UWA Publishing).

3. Letter of Invitation to Kim Scott to present the 48th Annual Academy Lecture.
9. More than an apology, this was an acknowledgement of what many of us call the ‘truth’ of Australian history, and what should follow from the recognition of Native Title.
12. Linda Burney, in Maguire, p. 125.
16. Of course I am quoting E. G. Whitlam here, echoing the cadences and pointing to the betrayal of the coup most often referred to as ‘The Dismissal’. In this instance I plucked the quote from the Guardian newspaper <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2015/oct/31/gough-whitlam-40-years-on-the-dismissals-bastardry-still-intrigues> [accessed 5 February 2018].
20. Million, p. 150.
25. For discussion of ‘sound over sight’ see Ross Gibson, 26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788–91 (Crawley, W.A.: UWA Publishing, 2012), pp. 100–07. See also Jane Lydon, Eye Contact (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 25. ‘In Aboriginal languages, it is hearing, not vision, which is extended to denote know, think, or remember, while see is more likely to be used for specific forms of social interaction (flirt with, love, supervise/oversee).
31. See Tiffany Shellam, Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George’s Sound (Crawley, W.A.: UWA Press, 2009).
32. There are many spellings of this name.
33. Shellam, p. 249.
34. See Daisy Bates, The Native Tribes of Western Australia, ed. by Isabel White (Canberra, A.C.T.: National Library of Australia, 1986), pp. 340–42: ‘In the early days of the settlement of King George Sound the husband of a young woman was arrested for some offence and brought to King George Sound where he was kept prisoner for some considerable time. His wife, who attached herself during his term of imprisonment to his mother, frequently sang the following song to a most pathetic tune, the song being handed down in the girl’s family, and sung to me by one of her last descendants:
Ngaia ngunna demmardung
Gejena mel,
Boorneen warra been,
Kinjoor down.
Mother-in-law, my husband is gone. I look through the bush.
My eyes are like spears, but I cannot see him.
(He has gone to) King George Sound...
... The story of the song relates to a man who was like a spirit (white man) and who was wrecked at sea. The Southern spirits all come from the sea and from the various rocks in the sea, and the spirit in the song was in distress a long way from shore...
Captain on a rough sea
Captain on a rough sea
Captain on a rough sea
Eeta ngarunga ngarung nyee,
Glad omara we-ra genening,
Eeta ngarunga ngarung nyee,
Yuk nyee jinanna wera genening
Yuk nyee jinanna wera genening
Eeta ngarunga ngarung nyee
Karrgo, karrgo, karrgo,
singing here on the shore,
my glass held in my hand,
singing here on the sea shore,
Jinjannup (another name for Kooranup) women dancing with averted faces, Kooranup women dancing with averted faces, Singing here on the sea shore.

35. Plaque on statue of Mokare, York St, Albany, W.A.


37. I use terms like ‘manifestations of place’ to allude to some of the discussion in Swain.


39. This is an edited extract from the last two pages of Kim Scott, *Benang* (Fremantle, W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999). It was edited and performed for the opening of the Perth International Arts Festival’s opening event, *Home*, in February 2016.


47. Connie Moses, quoted in Kim Scott, ‘Not So Easy: Language for a Shared History’, p. 211.


52. Lesley Jolley, *Waving a Tattered Banner?: Aboriginal Language Revitalization* (Brisbane, Qld.: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, University of Queensland, 1995), p. 4.