

# ‘Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots?’ Kim Scott talks to Anne Brewster about *That Deadman Dance*

## Anne Brewster and Kim Scott

This interview focuses mainly on Kim Scott’s novel *That Deadman Dance*. The main topics of conversation include Scott’s involvement in the Noongar language project (and the relationship of this project to the novel), the novel itself, the challenges of writing in English, the resistance paradigm and Indigenous sovereignty and nationalism.

### The Noongar language project

*Anne:* I wanted to ask you about your very different books. What’s it like looking back at *Kayang & Me*, the book that you finished before *That Deadman Dance*?

*Kim:* Well, it’s a continuing project actually. *Kayang & Me* was a way to thank Hazel Brown as much as anything. And it began me on a lot of language work which I’m still doing. I’ve got a couple of books coming out later this year, bilingual books. They’re Noongar creation stories from along the south coast, where we’ve connected the informants, or the work of the informants in 1930, with their descendants today. So Aunt Hazel’s uncle, Bob Roberts, her father’s brother, was one of the informants. The politics of archival and cultural material is very much about returning it to community. We got the group to invite people to a meeting in Albany and in front

of everyone there we gave them their dad's or their uncle's or their grandfather's stories back and within about ten minutes everyone was crying. I had taught myself a version of the International Phonetic Alphabet, which is what this early 1930s material was written in. I read the stories back to the descendants of the informants and we recorded it all. And then a few months later I cross-referenced all that with all the other South Coast linguists' work, trying to get a dialect back.

*Anne:* So these were stories written in Noongar?

*Kim:* Yeah, in Albany, in 1930. Gerhardt Laves was the linguist's name. There's a website about him that David Nash has put together. We had another weekend where we played with those stories, illustrated them. We put together fifty copies of each of the three stories on a DVD with me, Roma Winmar and Iris Woods reading the stories aloud in Noongar. We handed them out at the community meeting. We had an exhibition of the artwork in the Noongar centre in Albany. We did the DVD with a couple of Elders — Auntie Hazel and her brother — showing us, doing oral history, telling us about the old camping sites, the dancing grounds, which each story is connected...

So this represents the return and consolidation and enhancing of archival material, which is what *Kayang & Me* is about: archives and oral history working together. And relationships between people with that heritage. As for my current literary activity, given the imperatives on an Indigenous literary writer, the strong pressures to do something like supply ammunition for the cause ... I don't know if that gets the best out of literature. In the most recent book, I've tried to work with ambivalence, and complexity, lots of points of view and ...

*Anne:* In *That Deadman Dance*?

*Kim:* *That Deadman Dance*, yeah. And the other work—that community work, the regeneration and consolidating of culture in its own community and empowering people

through the sharing of that in a controlled way—is the politics, for want of a better word. The literary stuff is about provoking and trying to open doors to a much wider audience, arousing interest in this other stuff. I'm almost in the position of creating a sort of cultural literacy, so that I can have references through the novel to this other work. This is definitely the case with *That Deadman Dance*.

One of the Noongar stories that I work with, which I refer to in the opening page and touch on again and again, is about a Noongar man entering a whale and making it, through song and controlled violence, take him from the place east of Albany to somewhere in Albany. It's all in language. The story talks about an affiliation, a spiritual affiliation with the ocean, pre ice age, and creatures in the water with whom you are really strongly affiliated, spiritually. In these Noongar creation stories there are very powerful protagonists, there are a lot of quests and people prepared to innovate, trusting their heritage. Bobby Wabalanginy [in *That Deadman Dance*] is like that.

So that gave me some courage—doing that other work—to have a character who is so confident in himself and his heritage that he'll willingly and readily appropriate new cultural products, new ways of doing things. He just does not have it in his mind that anyone could ever want to conquer another's country, because he was so connected with it: you're the same, you and your country. How can anyone ... how impossible ... so that is what I'm playing with.

So that sort of 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 a fictional individual wanting to be part of cultural consolidation stuff with a very small community of descendants. So *Kayang & Me* takes that up as does this language project.

*Anne:* You have talked about the relationship of fiction to archival and community work. Are they different processes which complement each other? Is the relationship between them a political relationship?

*Kim:* Not so much political, although it's partly in the context of politics. No, it's connection stuff. It's really nice to work in

a literary way with words and language and with the cleverness that one may have in that realm, with a community of descendants of place (the South East, South Coast, Western Australia). I've come to think that there's really something deep in sound, a sort of purity in Indigenous languages, a spiritual component.

In 'The Wasteland', T.S Eliot closes with Sanskrit; he heals himself: 'these fragments I've shored against my ruins'. I thought: that's what language can do. The idea of being linguistically displaced and dispossessed, even in one's own country; and then language comes back and ones makes oneself an instrument for it and for the spirit of place.

### Bobby Wabalanginy

*Anne*: This reminds me of the subtitle of *Benang*: 'from the heart'. It seems to me that *That Deadman Dance* is also centrally about feeling. It's a story from the heart, from the body and from the land. I was talking to you earlier about the ending which I read as tragic, as filled with despair.

*Kim*: Originally my intentions were to end the novel on the upbeat. But I'm not convinced that that is the best way to use literature — as political ammunition. It's too reductionist, and you don't get the strengths of it. So with this novel I wanted ambivalence and a lot of generosity. No real strong baddies in there. So the story itself, until the end, doesn't fit the conventional narratives we have of our shared history. Ending it like I did, I thought might be a way of setting up all sorts of resonances to do with possibility and loss. I hope the story is about creativity and spirit, about strength: strong Noongar characters. And about possibility being lost. And so the connection between the resolution and the conventional historical narrative does, I hope, a lot of political work through those resonances. This is a reasonably positive story, a story of affirmation. And the ending reminds us how it intersects with the historical narrative, the theme of which is something close to defeat.

The title, 'That Deadman Dance' is a reference to the military drill, Flinders' military drill turned into a dance and kept going as a dance. When I think about that, I think ... wow, what a powerful thing to do, to turn a violent drill into a dance. Appropriating cultural products of the other. And perhaps one can do that with a novel. Early in the book, Bobby Wabalanginy has some pages that he shows to his descendants ... you know, when they come to see him in the camp and he's a broken, defeated, embittered fella. For me the ending is sad and bad, but it is still ambivalent ... is this what has really happened ... ? And then after that ending [Bobby as a defeated, embittered fella] is that bit, earlier in the book [chronologically], where he offers these few pages on which he's attempted to document some of his stuff. You know ... there's an oil skin ... his whaler's journal. And that's a tradition, like with Bessie Flowers, from which one can make a literary tradition with really strong Noongar roots.

So the Dead Man Dance was a powerful act of appropriation ... or was it the beginning of something like the end ... ? You know, it's a dead man doing it. But the fact that the Noongars appropriated the dance and the fact that you can write a novel as a Noongar person, is in itself expressive of continuity, in that the resolution of that novel—the end, the last page—is not the end. There are possibilities still.

*Anne:* I was intrigued by Old Bobby. He seems like a time traveller, like he travels into our time and is talking to us.

*Kim:* No, no, that's commodification.

*Anne:* He's 'entertainment' for the 'tourists'?

*Kim:* There's some hurt in that. The commodification. He's a convenient black fella.

*Anne:* He seems also to have *maban* (clever man) qualities. He manipulates audiences very effectively. As you say: all right everybody is laughing at him, but when people are laughing at you, you've got their complete attention. They're receptive and you can do something with that.

*Kim:* And you've got them vulnerable as well. It's a giving away of defences.

*Anne:* I thought that the novel aligned Bobby's storytelling with the practices that various Noongar people were performing on the landscape.

*Kim:* Yeah, it also helps signal that the story's not over yet. In the novel there's a linear resolution, but there's a couple of other things going on. There's the Old Bobby telling stories. He's not in a strong position, but he is not completely out of the picture in terms of power and, as I mentioned; he has that little journal. The novel begins with him scribbling on a piece of slate. And there's other times when he's playing with language. It's open to possibility. The idea of the journal has to be a thin strand because that is an aspect of our reality.

And the Dead Man Dance may have been a mistake, you know—him learning that dance, and doing so much appropriation of the cultural products of the Other; being a little bit nonstrategic. I'm allowing for the possibility that that is a mistake. But the thin strand that is not a mistake is that journal. As a novelist, you see where I am there. As a novelist I'm working in that tradition of keeping the culture and stories alive.

*Anne:* So was performing the dance a mistake? Do you mean generally that Bobby was mistaken because he was too generous and open and giving?

*Kim:* No, he takes on the military dance that becomes the Dead Man Dance. He's an expert at that and he fancies that his whole dancing quality is all about rhythm, for example, the dancing on the ship. I think it's really important, that idea of rhythm. In some of that he may have erred. He's not quite the dancer he thought he was; or perhaps the dance as a form is not necessarily the form that's going to powerfully speak to this mob—the ones that get up at the end of the novel, dismissively; he hasn't got them. But just possibly, writing is [the form]. So it's not a mistake what he did there ...

That explains the whole sequencing of the novel as well. If I had Old Bobby's storytelling at the end it wouldn't really work, in my opinion. But to have him as an old storyteller early in the novel shakes it up, makes it a little bit awkward for people. If I had the old storyteller at the end he would certainly appear defeated. Having his storytelling early like that, and then a little glimpse — when he is talking about defeat (that is, when some of the descendants come see him) — a little glimpse of his attempts to work with language (that he gave up on) is enough. This harks back to the 'writing never arrives naked' thesis.<sup>1</sup> Bessie Flowers, Manjat, the whole Noongar literary tradition, are linked into those sort of things, the possibility.

*Anne:* ...and the ending?

*Kim:* The whole ambivalence of that ending then is ... 'it's a mistake'. You can read it as 'well, he was fucking stupid wasn't he ... ?'

*Anne:* The novel seemed to me to present a positive, optimistic scenario initially. To some extent the ending pulls the rug out from under you a bit ...

*Kim:* Oh yeah, that is the idea. My interest was in a positive story and to talk about Noongar people as very impressive. They were a little bit naïve and silly in some ways, because they were not being strategic enough, but I wanted to turn that into a strength. And then the possibility that I could finish it in a way that allowed it to resonate in really interesting ways with the overwhelming well-known narrative of defeat, and the discordances, means that it becomes political in a way that works with the strengths of story. That's the whole new bit for me you know. Can I do this? Can I make a positive yarn and still make it political? Using the stuff of fiction to do what nothing else can do ...

*Anne:* I read it as your melancholy getting the better of you ... [laughs]

*Kim*: Well, there is a fair bit of that in there. Issues like: what is it to be a novelist today? We've got very limited power. We're like a dancer ... [laughs] one of those artists that's most easily commodified perhaps. You know it's the dance that does the work for you. I want all these things in there. I'm not saying it's one or the other. And that's the ambivalence that you can do really well in stories. Story is layers and interpretations; let's have a think about this and provoke. It's not a haranguing thing; it's not a lecture.

*Anne*: It has poetic resolution. A powerful, affective closural scene. The book isn't very strongly plot driven. Rather, it has a number of mini plots.

*Kim*: Yeah ... If there is one it's strategic thinking versus something like creativity.

*Anne*: Going back to *That Dead Man Dance*, I thought it had some comedy in it and there is humour in the dance that ends the book. There's an element of fun in the dances, but the tragedy is in the turning away of his audience. That was for me a very traumatic moment. There was a level of attention that is ethically required at that moment — as a courtesy — and the withdrawing of that attention felt like a hostile act.

*Kim*: Yeah, no, on one level, being a novelist, I was just thinking about creativity of course, about the creative arts and commodification ... [laughs] You know like Bobby Wabalinginy's name means 'all of us playing together' ... from the root word 'waban'. So, on one level there's a little bit of the novelist's bitterness in there — creativity, play, trust in spirit and creativeness. The novel is in part an expression of that, but it's also ... these are not good times ... and the whole spirit that I try and work with is always in danger of being turned into something less than I would hope it is, if that doesn't sound too arrogant. But there's the intentional fallacy. That stuff's all in my head.

*Anne:* Do you mean the spirit you work with as a novelist or as someone working on these Noongar cultural projects (for example, language reclamation)?

*Kim:* Ah, it's all the same thing. To me they're really one. I'm a literary novelist; I don't see that as working against being a Noongar person. I see that as absolutely the same thing. And some of my inspirations I have listed in the acknowledgments [the Afterword] of *That Deadman Dance*. There are many instances: Mokare<sup>2</sup> singing that song, the expedition journal, a diarist seeing the expedition journal structure and recitation, Bessie Flowers,<sup>3</sup> the Noongars wanting to go on a boat, as Tiffany Shellam says.<sup>4</sup> That whole spirit is there: we'll just take those new cultural products because they're in our place now and we'll see what we can do with them. They had that real confident trust in their heritage.

So because your heritage has been diminished, you do this other work that I was talking of earlier [language reclamation], and you get the inspiration from those fellas in early contact and that's what you work with. So in this novel, the characters are like those fellas in early contact and not a few generations into an oppressed culture. So you're not in the dead end of polemics, constantly reacting against the status quo with anger. You're trying to work with healing and the strength of the cultural tradition, the heritage. Not to be shrill, polemic or trapped in the paradigm that's being set up for us.

*Anne:* One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the episodes about whaling. The slaughter was rather horrific, given that it was for commercial profit. It made me wonder if ...

*Kim:* I'm glad it makes you wonder about that sort of stuff. It seemed to me it was partly a way to talk about the violence of colonisation, as a backdrop, as a metaphor. There's violence all around this fella Bobby and a couple of his mates. There's terrible things going on. But also, again, I wanted just to think about a [strong] culture like that and about individuals so willing to grab new forms.

It's the Dead Man Dance thing again. You can lead yourself into great trouble doing that. Here is a new technique. Menak strands a whale in the early days. That is a source of great wealth for Noongar people and festivity. When you've got technology it allows you to kill whales more readily and to make yourself a powerful person by sharing that wealth. And I hint that that's what is happening for Bobby and some of the others. They're welcomed in those other camps around the whaling base ... with all those young man impulses. There's something like arrogance in there. There're dangers in there. As there is the Dead Man Dance. A young man taking a form or a new technology and using it, you know — 'because I can do it, that's what I do, and this is my place'. There're dangers in that.

And so there is a need to think about this, to be strategic in a contemporary sense that relates to us. This is not a big thing in the novel, but it's part of what's big for me: living in an oppressed community, we carry all the markers of oppression, and we've picked up some really bad stuff in recent generations as well as hanging on to some really good stuff. It's worthwhile to think about that: the processes of decolonisation. So the whaling allows me, in an ambivalent way and, I hope, in a rich way, to think about those things. To look these innocents: they're surrounded with so much and they're about to be struck with enormous violence and people are dying all the time, but because they're young men, they're not completely cognisant of that.

In that older whaling story where the man enters the whale, he controls the whale; this doesn't sit comfortably with stereotypical notions of Indigenous cultural relations. What's implied in this story is controlled violence. It provokes thought because it moves away from — it questions and challenges — ideas of being in harmony with the environment. It makes it nice and complex for me. When the man enters the whale he controls it via song but also by stabbing, squeezing its heart. And he's trusting the song that is about a man doing exactly what he's doing. He's trusting that, and he's using the whale, he's working with the whale. He strands it at the end and he comes out of the whale. There are two women on the beach and he has delivered wealth to them. And that particular story,

a creation story, informs this novel. That story ends with him returning, heading back east, from somewhere like Albany, with a whole bunch of kids and two pregnant women. So he's returning to his home country as a powerful person with wealth and he has bestowed wealth on that community he's lived with. That connects to *That Dead Man Dance* and the whaling, the ambivalence of it. The whaling is good in some ways, but there're dangers in it as well.

### The coloniser's language

*Anne:* I've been reading lots of books for the Commonwealth Writers Prize judging these last few years and I have been struck at how many people are writing historical novels. You have talked about the language recovery projects that you're engaged with in the Noongar community. But do you see any kind of resonances between *That Deadman Dance* and white Australian historical novels?

*Kim:* I'm not sure ... I think part of the impulse is to find heroes for oneself, to go back and to rework the most readily available historical narrative that you're given, as a Noongar person. But I imagine that's what others are doing. That's what Kate Grenville was doing, I think, with *The Secret River*: trying to find a place for herself that she's comfortable within this pretty harsh history. There's a difference though for colonised people, carrying the legacy of oppression, the imperatives are I think greater. The impulse to rework, to find a story you can tell yourself and your people. And, I guess, the more shook up the current times are, the more dispute there is about the question: what is that historical narrative?

*Anne:* It seemed to me *That Deadman Dance* was similar to *Benang* in that it was crucially interested in the relationality of white people and Noongar people, constantly going back to that edge. Cross-racial interpersonal relationships seem to be very important to you. I'm thinking in *Benang* of Harvey and his grandfather and in *That Deadman Dance* of Bobby and Dr Cross.

*Kim:* Yeah, I think that's part of the literary thing. You know, the relationship between reader and writer. The novel's a very intimate form, one on one. I'm reluctant to talk about Noongar culture and spirit. But I do think about human centeredness and that linguistic ability that you see in those early contact situations. I have Bobby and Wunyeran working with that ability to use language to get people closer. And then there's the whole business of spirit in the coloniser's language, that's an interface too and I'm reproducing that in those Noongar and non-Noongar characters.

*Anne:* The spirit of the coloniser's language ...? Do you mean the spirit of the colonisers in *their* language?

*Kim:* No, no, I mean the Noongar spirit in the coloniser's language. At one stage I was using the working title 'arose a wail', meaning the surfacing of a whale, but also the inarticulate cry of anguish, the 'cussing' of Noongar consciousness in the English language. This is a butting up of sorts, an intimate butting up of difference, with the black and non-black characters. In all those things is that intersection, that meeting point. But I'd like to think it's from a strong Noongar centre. In my heart I'm trying to put myself or Noongar culture at the very centre of things. The Noongar spirit has to get into the language and then it's working. You find yourself butting up against people who *only* have that language in a sense.

*Anne:* Language is a way of conducting and undertaking and performing a connection, a dialogue. It's ...

*Kim:* ... interiority, put out there ...

*Anne:* ... in a ceremonial way. Your characters are straining for some kind of ethical contact. And although relationships draw on feeling, those feelings are made ceremonial through language.

*Kim:* Yeah, that is something that I care about. I like song for the same sort of reasons. Mokare<sup>5</sup> doing that 'Oh Where have you been all the day Billy Boy' song. There is a practice that

some Elders have informed me of, that of Noongars exchanging song. When Noongars meet one another, you give your sound, you give your song; that's how you know people. I find that really worth thinking about. It appeals to me also because I like language, I like song and sound.

*Anne:* I guess in many cultures there's a sense that language doesn't work only between human beings. When people pray to God, for example, they imagine that they are engaging in some kind of spiritual communication through language. And I understand that when Aboriginal people go to country they call out to the spirits and greet them. So in this sense human language can work in other ways ... not just within the human realm.

*Kim:* Yeah, yeah ... that's what I said before, that spiritual dimension. I think you can do a real lot with English, mind you, but with Noongar language ... What I hope to do, is to have Noongar inform English. When you think about it, Indigenous language is the language coming from the people who first created human society here. That's starting to get pretty bloody serious, you know, to speak of things such as spirit and antiquity and continuity. As for myself, I think: what can I learn from Noongar language and stories? How can I share that in the translation process? You're not giving it away. You're value adding. Recreating new possibilities. I'm really interested in that sort of movement. That's a sort of 'schizoid' literary process. Where can I go if I trust myself and do the literary thing, the intuitive thing, and then the intellectual at a later date? And then the other bit is being with a community of descendants on country, doing these old sounds. What can we do together? I would like to try keep those two things going and separate and see how they cross-fertilise.

### Sharing a heritage/The resistance paradigm

*Anne:* If I can change the topic, I'd like to task you about the limited rapprochement between politicians and Aboriginal communities. There seems to be very little will or courage on politicians' parts to undertake reform. Julia

Gillard saying recently ‘well it’s going to be very hard to close the gap’ sounded like she was setting up an excuse ...

*Kim:* Well, it might be almost impossible to do what they’re talking about in that sort of language ... ‘close the gap’. I work in the area of health and there’s a lot of research that indicates that the more Indigenous communities feel they have a sense of self-determination and a connection with their language and land, the better their health is. There’s a fellow, Michael Chandler, who has done a lot of research on suicide. In Native America there are terrible youth suicide rates, but when you isolate youth in communities, those that have a strong connection with their traditional classical heritage don’t have the same sort of problems. It’s an issue of discontinuity. Chandler talks about the paradox of change and continuity on an individual basis, particularly in adolescence. He argues that Native Americans tend to have a narrational sense of identity: relational and narrational. They can tell a story about how they connect with others and with their place and their heritage, whereas non-Indigenous people have this essentialist notion, ‘my birth right’: ‘I stay the same, an essence of me stays the same’. And it’s a fallacy to translate that to Indian culture. But you can see the attraction of doing so, for a culture that’s had its fundamentals denigrated, and great efforts made to destroy it and trash it.

The fundamental need is for collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. But I would argue what’s really fundamental is that sense of continuity and the strength that comes from things like language. For the nation state and this Australian identity crisis to be healed — as well as us (you know it’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous in it together today) — we need strong Indigenous roots in a regional basis. We can get to this position, as I found with the Noongar language project. And what I have Bobby doing a lot of in this novel is sharing a heritage. That’s really, really powerful. To have non-Indigenous people interested in Noongars, and in what we are speaking about concerning our heritage, is a really powerful position to be in. We very rarely get those situations where it’s Indigenous people giving and sharing and being valued for doing so. There’s only a minority

of us doing it. One example is tourism, which I think is a cheap version of that sharing of culture. *That Deadman Dance* says a lot about these sort of things, you know, the dangers of commodification versus the great power of sharing your heritage, and helping people through sharing that heritage. All that ‘closing the gap’ rhetoric ... I think if we could work on consolidating a heritage in its regions, in its place—a community of descendants sharing that with ever-widening circles of people—that would do a lot for Indigenous health and wellbeing. Particularly when you use what Aboriginal people offer as definitions of health and wellbeing—not just the physical but social, psychological, spiritual ...

*Anne:* It seems as though a lot of Aboriginal casualties are men. I know from the Bureau of Statistics that Aboriginal mortality rates are unique in the sense that the deaths are distributed pretty evenly throughout age groups which is unlike the mainstream figures. So there are many people, especially men, dying in their twenties, thirties and forties.

*Kim:* I don’t know for sure, but I often wonder about that paradigm of resistance. That’s what we have been doing and for absolutely understandable reasons. But it seems to me that there is enormous strength—although it’s really hard in a political sense to do it—in that givingness, that generosity, that spirit, that ‘look at what we were back then, let’s try and be like that’, and not buying into this bloody trap that we’re in. Particularly regarding the construction of masculinity.

*Anne:* Can you say more about that ‘trap’?

*Kim:* Well, I’m talking about the reactive, resistance paradigm, with all its attractions. But it’s the wrong narrative, I suspect, for us as Noongar people. Look at our early history ... that’s not our way. Yagan<sup>6</sup> is often described as a resistance warrior but at an earlier stage of his life, his mob, it seems, were feeding farmers that would otherwise have starved. They kept them alive out of that enormous generosity of being the people that first created human society here. And the trust and arrogance that Bobby’s got were part of that generosity which

resonates with the Yagan story. And then there's the taking of flour from the flour mill—that is insisting on reciprocity: 'this is our way, it's give and take, brother, it's give and take'. And there's a bit of violence happens then ... 'you've broken our custom, you've got to do it this way or you're stupid, you can't live here'... and then the great sadness of Yagan's death. A couple of kids who he's befriended and trusts, shoot him on the sly. They've just got a gun with them and they shoot him while they're all sitting down together ... man!

So rather than buying into that polemic, let us insist on things like respect, reciprocity, the importance of continuity of place and relationships. Continuity of place I would argue—that's fundamental. And it's just really hard to get back to that because we've got this whole oppression thing. We've got to fight to expand the world again. But I would like to think there's ways of expanding that world again by trying to ignore polemics. Polemics is always there, resistance is always there, but that's not the big story.

*Anne:* The resistance model can lead to burn out ...

*Kim:* And you're playing on the white man's terms all the time. So for a man, there's violence, which would have been a ritualistic violence at one stage. You prove your masculinity through a dance, for instance. You prove your strength through a dance, which Bobby is so good at. Or through dodging spears. Rituals, you know: the spear fights. Stand there and wait till the last moment to move aside as the spear goes past. All that ritualised masculine strength and speed ... And what are we left with now at a community level? We're left with a non-ritualised violence and 'lateral' violence.

### Indigenous nationalism and sovereignty

*Anne:* We were talking earlier about regionalism and you were saying that you were uncomfortable with the word 'national' when referring to Aboriginal communities and their literature.

*Kim:* The sort of things that word has been used to justify

make it a bit awkward for me to use. But if by the word we mean communities of people descended from those who first created human society in parts of the continent, then I am happy enough with it. In fact, that is why I am interested in it: it has produced pan Aboriginalism and rights as a strategy to create space for the real thing and the connection to the long continuities. That is of primal value. Continuity in place: from that you get the importance of relationship of all sorts. In literature — in terms of language and stories — continuity is really important for we Indigenous people because that's the culture, that's spirit. Culture is a manifestation of spirit. That's not an intellectual concept; that's what I feel.

I was saying to someone earlier today that I had a story in *The Best Australian Stories 2009* called 'A Refreshing Sleep'. It's a lightly fictionalised story. I was invited to sleep at the homestead of a massacre site, adjoining Ravensthorpe. It was a really rich experience. I've written a lot around this issue, the massacre of Cocanarup, in *Kayang & Me*. There's an old homestead there, and the people that own it reckon there are marks on the walls from spears that were thrown around massacre time. But the point I'm making is that spending the night there was a really rich experience for a range of reasons, which are in the story. I don't like new ageism or mumbo jumbo stuff but there was a strong sense of being welcomed by ancestral spirits. That's why Indigenous regional roots and connecting with and strengthening them, are very special. It's a privilege and a very important thing to draw strength from. You also need the other political strategies but they are inevitably reactive. And so I would argue that you need both those things. But if you haven't got the root stuff happening, it's limited: where can you go? You're playing someone else's game.

*Anne:* In *That Deadman Dance* you appear to use the idea of family and friends as a kind of model for cross-racial reconciliation or co-habitation. As if Noongars engaging with the white people to become family and friends provides a model for contemporary Australia. But can a non-Indigenous person be accommodated by the spirits of the ancestors and the place?

*Kim*: I think they can. I wouldn't want to move too quickly to that. I'm certainly signalling those sort of things. But that is not a quick movement. There are a number of other things involved there in the novel. Noongars were in a position of power. So that was the prime and very necessary thing. Once that is established, then there may well be other possibilities that come from that.

It's not dissimilar when you go to so-called traditional Aboriginal communities and you get a skin name. I don't want to speak for any other communities, but it seems to me that white people receiving skin names sometimes react as if they're really special people. But the giving of those names is really just about fitting white people into the Indigenous scheme of things. Again, the idea is that it's an Indigenous culture and heritage that you are being fitted into, not the other way around. So when you make that sort of shift, instead of saying Indigenous or Noongar literature is the niche within some other sort of literature, you start to think *it's all Noongar* and then literature has been accommodated within the Noongar heritage and tradition.

That allows you to start moving. And once you start thinking about all those things then more becomes possible. This is an Aboriginal nation, you know; it's black country, the continent. Some people are starting to think about: can we graft a contemporary Australian community onto its Indigenous roots? Possibly. I'm not saying we can. Possibly. But if you want to do that it would have to be in the regional way. Can you anchor a shimmering nation state via those regional Indigenous roots? It's a possibility. I'm not saying that's what we necessarily need. But *That Deadman Dance* is thinking about that possibility: what was going on then [at the time of first contact]? There was a strong belief in spirit of place. The Noongar were thinking: We own the place, it's ours, and we're loving, generous, gentle people and we can fit people into the scheme of things. And there's reciprocity involved. I find that a useful thing to think about because it makes me think about that heritage which I particularly value. It's important to strengthen it and consolidate it. It's a really strong and powerful thing that you can fit a lot of other stuff into.

*Anne:* And would you describe what you're talking about—the continuity of Noongar culture and people and connection with place—would you define that as Noongar sovereignty?

*Kim:* Yeah. That's a useful sort of metaphor. But sovereignty is a translation—it's a metaphor and it's strategic. It's not a Noongar word. Noongars talk about *birt* or *biirt* or *bidi* in other dialects. It becomes *birdiya*. *Birdiya* comes from the root word, *birt*, which means 'sinew', 'path', 'energy', the 'life force'. The orthography is not completely agreed upon. *Birdiya*, is one who's mastered that or, at least, understands it. There's a whole lot of things going on in there you know.

*Anne:* And those words could be an alternative for sovereignty?

*Kim:* Perhaps. They lead you towards the idea. I mention that after saying sovereignty is a metaphor, just to suggest... I'm not going to give an answer to it really. But that's of interest to me—looking at language and what concepts come out of it. I'm just touching on and suggesting there is something really deep and conceptual in these Noongar terms. As there is in *boodjar* for earth, and *boodjari* also means 'pregnant. *Ngangk* is 'sun' as well as 'mother'. *Bily* (or *bilya* in some dialects) is river and it's also navel or umbilical chord. So there's a lot more complexity in these concepts of connection and inter-relationship, than there is in the world-wide use of the term like 'mother earth'. There's an interrelatedness...

*Anne:* Between body and land ...

*Kim:* Yeah. And one of the words for hills is *kart*, which is also a word for head. Sometimes a group of hills will be called a word that also mean 'backs'. So there's the human form and other life forms latent in the landscape. *Nyitiny*, *Niertior neirdi*—cold, or the cold time—is sometimes used in Noongar as a word for what's elsewhere referred to as the dreaming. There're other words used for that, too. So conceptually, it implies a thawing. You can think of it—at least it seems to

me — as latencies and potentialities being realised, not always in the same way but from the same source, or spirit, I guess. You start thinking about those sorts of things which are at least as useful as a politically important, strategic concept like sovereignty. I'm not denying the importance of that term. But there are regional, Indigenous languages and I'm sure there are regional words everywhere which could be used instead of the term 'sovereignty'. There's a whole conceptual issue that is very useful to work with and to unpack.

*Anne:* To finish off I'd like to ask you if you think white critics, readers and scholars can play a role in the dissemination of Aboriginal literature?

*Kim:* Yes. Collaborations, and partnerships are very important in all these areas.

*Anne:* And what are your thoughts on reconciliation?

*Kim:* Not negative. But I'm wary that it's become like a 'brand' thing, a bland thing. I don't knock the sentiments behind it (though do we all agree on what those sentiments are?). Many of us use the word, but perhaps our usage doesn't necessarily involve thinking and reflection. There's a need for continuing 'cross-cultural' exchange, I think, for negotiation, and the reconciling to history — our different parts in it. How to be and live on this, the oldest continent on earth, where some of us are descendants of the people who first created human society here are, by and large, at the bottom of the heap, collectively ...

*Anne:* Thanks, Kim.

*Kim:* Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

This interview took place on 17 February 2011 at University of Western Australia, Perth, and 19 March 2011 at UNSW Writers' Centre, Sydney.

**Notes**

- 1 Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006.
- 2 One of the early Noongar characters documented in the settlers' journals. Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, Picador, Sydney pp. 398-9.
- 3 Scott, p. 399.
- 4 Tiffany Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound*, UWA Press, Perth, 2009; Scott, p. 397.
- 5 This is the Noongar person who has been one of Scott's inspirations in *That Deadman Dance*.
- 6 An early Noongar warrior and diplomat.