

BRISBANE WRITERS FESTIVAL 2011
Panel discussion: Losing Language, Losing Knowledge

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Sunday, 11 September 2011
Auditorium 2, State Library of Queensland

Losing Language – Losing Knowledge

Brisbane Writers Festival 2011

Panelists: Wade Davis, Andrew Westoll, Susan Hawthorne.

Chair Faith Baisden.

Welcome, everyone, to one of the very last sessions of the Brisbane Writers Festival for 2011.

Thank you all for coming today, once again. Before our introductions, I'd like to start this session by reflecting on the presence of the people who've lived here for tens of thousands of years.

My name's Faith Baisden, and I'm a descendant of the Yugambeh Aboriginal People. Yugambeh country is just to the south of Brisbane, so our families shared much with the Yuggera and Turrbul people of around the Central Brisbane area. I feel very honoured to have been invited to chair this session today. I'm guessing it's because for a long time now I've been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages around the country. I'm currently Coordinator of the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee and also of the Eastern States Aboriginal Languages Group and, just to keep busy, I've also been writing some children's books that hopefully can be used to teach little ones how to learn their traditional languages.

But I'd like to introduce you now to our three very respected guests.

Wade Davis is the best-selling author of several books. He's also an award-winning anthropologist, ethnobotanist, filmmaker and photographer, and his writings and photographs have appeared in numerous publications. His book *The Wayfinders* is subtitled *Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world*.

Andrew Westoll is a journalist and author. *The chimps of Fauna Sanctuary*, his latest book, is about Andrew's experiences with a family of ex-medical-laboratory chimpanzees living out their retirement on a hobby farm near Montreal. His first book, *The riverbones*, is the tale of his time spent in the remote jungles of Suriname.

Susan Hawthorne, on the end, is the author of six collections of poetry. Her book, *Cow*, is a collection of poem which leads the reader to view the world with empathy, wit and mysticism through the experience of the cow. Susan's writing draws on her knowledge of Sanskrit and Ancient Greek languages, and is about those who have lost their histories.

Can you please join me in welcoming them all today. (applause) Thank you.

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Now, I believe that just by being here today you're all showing that you have a fair understanding of some of the issues that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. But I'm really excited about having this conversation with people who can bring in a global perspective, who can link us to other cultural and ecological emergencies, and an understanding of languages as holding their place across time and the enormous historical importance of that fact. So I'd like to start by asking each of our panellists to tell us a bit about themselves, their writing and their perspectives on this subject. Can we start with you, Wade?

WADE DAVIS: My pleasure. First of all, thank all of you for coming out on a sunny day in Brisbane. I wouldn't be here, probably, if I didn't have to be here. (laughter) You're wonderful. You know, language loss is the canary in a coalmine: it's really the indicator of a greater trend, which is the erosion of cultural diversity. And I think the reason we're so concerned about the language loss is not only because a language is not just grammar and vocabulary; it's by definition a flash of the human spirit; it's a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes in the material world. You know, every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of social and spiritual possibilities. And language loss has been a constant in history, just as species have gone extinct.

But, again, the biological analogy is really à propos. In general, over the last 600 million years, speciation – the creation of new forms of life – has outpaced extinction, and the world has become biologically an ever more diverse place. By the same token, languages have come and gone through time: we don't speak Babylonian or Syrian, Latin in the streets of Rome. But before these languages disappeared they left in their wake descendants: in the case of Latin, the 12 Romance languages of Europe. Now, again, as in the case of biological diversity, languages are being lost at a rate that is catastrophic and unprecedented, a kind of watershed of destruction. And what's fascinating about this is that, whereas in the realm of biological diversity there is of course some controversy as to how many species exist, what is the pace of extinction, what are the causes of extinction, there is a haunting consensus in the academic linguistic community that across the world fully half of the languages of humanity are not being whispered into the ears of infants.

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And one of the things that this causes one, as a non-linguist, to ask is, ‘Why did it take them so long to ring the bell on this?’ And one of the explanations that some linguists have explained to me is that, at MIT, Noam Chomsky, who is sort of the greatest theoretical linguist of our time, had this kind of idea of deep structure in languages such that the language that any one culture speaks was just a sort of phenotypic expression of what was essentially a genotypic architecture of language which was immutable and could not be damaged, and so whether a language came or went or not was sort of irrelevant. And that may be a simplistic explanation of a theory that I scarcely understand, but it did hold firmly in the linguistic community for a longest time, until suddenly – about 1997, 1998 – Michael Krauss at the University of Fairbanks in Alaska and Ken Hale, a wonderful character, now deceased, at MIT, woke up and said, ‘What if the Emperor has no clothes?’ And suddenly, and mercifully, over the last decade or two there has been a waterfall of new projects, new books, heralding this terrible backdrop to our age and indeed sparking efforts at documentation and revitalisation of languages.

People often say to you, ‘Why does it matter if a language – you know, if a language is sort of spoken by a handful of people, is there a value in its revitalisation? Can it truly be revitalised?’ Well, it’s important to remember that even the gesture of attempting to revitalise a language suddenly brings children to the knees of the grandparents, suddenly validates the integrity of the culture. And even if a small group of people in Australia, who probably may never again speak their mother tongue completely, just the fact that the society recognises the vitality and legitimacy of that language is important in terms of this overall gesture of restitution that Australia has embarked on.

And, you know, I think the reason we’re so concerned about language loss is because it’s an indicator of this greater trend, which is the erosion of cultural diversity. And we have this kind of conceit in the West that while we’ve been indulging technological wizardry the other peoples of the world have been somehow intellectually idle. Nothing could be further from the truth. The great revelation, as I mentioned yesterday, of modern genetics is that we’re all cut from the same genetic cloth. We all are descended from the same handful of people who walked

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out of Africa 60,000 years ago. Race has been exposed as a total and utter fiction. The human genetic endowment is a single continuum. But what that means is that every culture on Earth shares, by definition, the same raw intellectual acuity, the same mental or intellectual potential; and so how that genius is expressed is simply a matter of choice and cultural orientation. That old Victorian idea that there was sort of a ladder of success that placed Victorian England at the apex of the pyramid of civilisation has been exposed and ridiculed by modern anthropology as an artefact of that century as relevant to our lives today as the idea that clergymen had then that the Earth was only 6,000 years old. And so what this really means, fundamentally, is that the other peoples of the world aren't failed attempts to be modern or failed attempts to be new; they're unique answers to this fundamental question, 'What does it mean to be human and alive?' And when they answer that question they do so in the 7,000 voices of humanity, and those voices which encode unique adaptations, unique ways of being, unique visions of life itself, collectively become our overall repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us in the ensuing millennia.

And, finally, these cultures are not destined to fade away as if by natural law; they're not failed attempts to be modern; they're dynamic, living peoples that, in every case, are being driven out of existence by identifiable forces. And that both is an optimistic observation, because it suggests that if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction we could be the facilitators of cultural survival, but it also puts a responsibility on us to do precisely that.

Thank you. (applause) There's so much there that I'm sure we'll come back to and go into further, but now I'd like to ask Andrew, if you'd like to talk to us about your work please.

ANDREW WESTOLL: Well, I thought it would be a great way to start to bring one of those voices – you brought one already, but to bring another voice, a voice that I'm quite familiar with, from my first book, which is called *The riverbones*. And I thought we would play a little bit of a game – it's late in the afternoon – just to get everyone going. If I say a sentence to you, will you say it back to me? Okay. So we're going to speak a language here – and it's been a while, so I may need to check

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my notes – but you have to sing it, okay? Here we go? (recites in language, mimicked by audience)

So that is the traditional morning greeting in a Saramaccan village in the jungles of Suriname. The Saramaccans are the largest tribe of Surinamese Maroons, and I don't know how many people here know about the Maroon cultures, but the Surinamese Maroons are the direct descendants of West African slaves who were brought over to work the plantations of what used to be old Dutch Guyana on the north-east shoulder of South America. And, basically, almost upon arriving and being put into the plantations, they started escaping, and having come from West Africa, from the jungles of West Africa, where do they escape to? They escape south into the bush. Ninety per cent of Suriname is still covered in pristine rainforest. And so, over the course of a hundred years back in – beginning in the mid-1600s, the Maroons of Suriname engaged in about a century of war with their Dutch overseers, continually raiding the plantations that they had escaped from, rescuing more of their people and bringing them into the bush. And what's so incredible about the Surinamese Maroon culture is that you can be walking in a South American rainforest today – which is what I did for five months – and you can stumble upon what is essentially a West African village. The Maroons stayed where they escaped to. They stayed on the banks of the rivers in Suriname, the five major rivers. Even after amnesty, even after the war ended, they were allowed to stay there and they chose to stay there. And so a lot of my travels in Suriname, which are all the source of my first book – it's also where I used to study monkeys; that's a whole 'nother story – is based on this Maroon culture and being accepted into this Maroon culture.

And the core of this journey of mine was straight into the heartland of the Maroons, the Saramaccan region of the language you guys just spoke, to a place called Asidonopo, and this is where the Graman[?], the great chief of the Saramaccans lives with his family. And I journeyed there because I wanted to interview him – as a young, brash journalist with no idea what I was doing. I hopped aboard a bunch of boats with different missionaries going down the Suriname River, finally made it to Asidonopo, and – wouldn't you know it? – the

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Graman wasn't there. He was up dealing with a bunch of other Canadians who were currently raping and pillaging the gold deposits in Suriname, so he was up there mediating a dispute between the local people and the Canadian company. But so what I did: I arrived, and – wouldn't you know it? – my boatman started to speak with a woman who was carrying a bunch of dishes in a bucket on her head and he looked very deferential and he was telling my story and he said, 'You know, this white man has come a long, long way,' and she just said, 'Ah, no trobe[?]' – which means 'No trouble' – 'Follow me.' And I just – I didn't know what it meant and I just stood there, and all my boatmen were, like, 'Go, go, go, go, go, go.' Turns out this was the Queen of Saramacca and she had just invited me to live on the ground floor of her home, the royal home, and wait for her husband to return. So I spent a week in, basically, the spiritual, cultural homeland of the Saramaccan Maroons, a lot of which I recount in the middle section of this book.

This area, the Upper Suriname, is the home of something called 'Fesitan'[?], or 'First Time', and these stories, First Time is a whole – it's over 200 stories, Creation stories, of that 100-year war with the Dutch overseers, and today First Time is still recounted and passed on through the elders in the Saramaccan villages to a very select group of young people, and increasingly fewer and fewer young people. Most of the time they're more interested in getting out of the village, going to find employment, going to the main capital city, Paramaribo. But a few do stay, and I owe – a lot of what I learned about First Time, the stories of First Time, from a great anthropologist of the Caribbean region, Richard Price, and Sally Price, his wife, wrote unbelievable books about First Time. They are the most knowledgeable people outside of the Saramaccan culture.

So one other thing I wanted to mention – well, I just thought I would just explain that the first – the crucial story to First Time, which is when a man, a rebel slave named Aiaco[?], travelled down the Suriname River with his *obia*[?] – I think this is how you say it – which is essentially – and I don't know if it's actually a person or a spirit that he brought with him from Africa, but his *obia* is sort of his diviner, his shaman, and his shaman – they got to the end of the Suriname River, or the beginning, where it breaks off into the Ganliu[?] and the Piquinliu[?], the Small and

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the Big River, and he did a divination there, and the *obia* said, ‘This is where we should settle.’ And that exact point is where Asidonopo sits, this town, this village, the royal village.

So the crucial part, I think, for our talk today is that these stories are still passed down in the traditional tongue, in the language that you guys all just spoke. And so I thought I would just end my little section with one more little callback – this is not from the Saramacan language; this is from Sranan Tongo, which is the creole that is spoke all over Suriname by almost every cultural group in the country, and there are many. So would you agree to play along one more time? Okay. We’re just going to go word by word. (recites in language, mimicked by audience) And this is something that the most famous guide, bush guide, in Suriname once said to me, and it means, ‘If you don’t learn what you have, you’re going to lose it.’ And I thought I would just end my little piece on that note, in that language. (applause)

And, Susan Hawthorne now for your observations please.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Good afternoon. I’m going to start with an invented chant. It’s from my book called *The butterfly effect*. (recites chant) About 30 years ago I learnt Ancient Greek and what I did there was I applied the rules of linguistic shifts to play with the words in that, and there are some recognisable words in there: there’s *lapis*, as in lapis lazuli; there’s *Sappho* – Sappho, Saffa; then there’s *Saraswati*, who is the goddess of language in Ancient Greece; and *savoir*, which is of course the French word ‘to know’. And I wrote this after I discovered that there was a river called the Saraswati, which is a mythical underground river in India. It used to be on the surface but it has gone underground some many thousands of years ago. Saraswati is also the goddess of language. And so it seemed like an apt metaphor for the loss of language and the loss of memory that surrounds us.

One of the elements that is very rarely spoken about in talking about preservation of language is the role that women play in language acquisition and language maintenance; and, while there are clearly exceptions, it is by and large still women who are the first teachers of language. They sing, they burble with their babies, they

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interact with toddlers, they encourage, and they quietly correct and shift the ways that children speak, and they display correct usage. So while in recent years there has been some recognition of the role that women play as ‘social glue’ in communities, it’s still generally not talked about, the ways in which maintain knowledge and so forth. And if you lose your language, if you lose the language, the words for particular kinds of plants and so forth, then you also lose an awful lot of knowledge associated sometimes with medicine and healing.

In 1969 I actually enrolled in a PhD which I never finished, and in a way I feel like I’m still writing this unfinished PhD, because I keep coming back to it. I wanted to write about ancient belief systems, and instead what I do is I write fiction and poetry and, you know, the odd political commentary as well. But more recently – and that’s what took me originally to studying Ancient Greek, you know, because life has strange byways; and then recently to studying Sanskrit. I’ve been studying Sanskrit now for close on five years, and just in the last couple of months I’ve finally come across Prakrit, or the Prakrits, actually. Sanskrit is a language which in Sanskrit is called *Sanskrita*, which means ‘the perfected language’, and it’s the language spoken by Brahmins and by men. So upper-caste men. The Prakrits – and they are multiple – are spoken by women and also lower-caste men. So recently we’ve been studying a play by Kalidasa, and I got into it and I thought, ‘What’s this? What’s these weird words here?’ And it suddenly occurred to me that this must be Prakrit. And the interesting thing is that you cannot enrol in a course in Prakrit anywhere. So far I have discovered one book on the subject, and probably there are some others – but, you know, there’s a whole library of books that you can get about Sanskrit, and there is this one book about learning the Prakrits.

So the reason that I’ve finished up here is because Sanskrit then took me to India, in some ways. I got a residency, an Asialink literature residency, and I went to Chennai to four months, where I worked on my collection, *Cow*. Now, the word ‘cow’ has lots of really interesting resonances, and I discovered the Sanskrit word for ‘cow’ is ‘gahl’[?], which in the genitive becomes ‘gava’[?]; it changes in all sorts of interesting ways. But out of that comes the Greek word *gynê* for ‘woman’, the Norwegian or the Norse word *kvinna* and the English word ‘queen’. So I

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finished up – this cow came into my poems, and she was called ‘Queenie’, and she took over the manuscript, I have to say, she really did. (laughter) And she insisted that I talk about all sorts of things to do with cows. (laughter)

In Sanskrit, when you learn Sanskrit, they say in order to learn Sanskrit then you have to use the four legs of the cow: the first leg is the teacher; the second leg is the student; the third leg is the other students that you’re learning with; and the fourth leg is time. And time is an absolutely critical issue when learning a language, and even after five years I feel like bubs, you know, I feel like I know nothing – except I must know more than I did when I started.

So what I’m going to do, I’m going to read a poem from *Cow*, but magically Faith also – I’d actually picked out to read, and Faith’s picked it out too. She’s really on the ball. The only thing you need to know – in my poetry collection, it has a whole lot of marginalia so that I can use Sanskrit words and Greek words and Arabic and so forth, because you cannot assume people know these languages any more. But, interestingly, the words *alef*[], which is Hebrew, *alpha*, which is Greek, and *alif*[], which is Arabic, guess what they mean: they mean ‘cow’ or ‘ox’. They pop up everywhere. Once you start looking, there are cows absolutely everywhere. (laughter) I mean, look up into the night sky. What do we see? The Milky Way. Who put that there? The Galaxies, you know: where does the word ‘galaxy’ come from? It comes from the Greek word *gala* for ‘milk’. So out of this I think that I could say that the universe was probably created by a cow. And the sound of the universe in Sanskrit is ‘aoum’. Now, if you say that backwards – – – (laughter)

Okay. So this is Queenie, and the poem’s called ‘What the linguist says about Queenie’:

She was dancing over India and out fell the languages
Thousands of them, written in hundreds of alphabets
A dancer and a linguist, Queenie steps out the letters in the sands of
Phoenicia: *Alef, Alpha, Alif, Ox and Cow*
Travelling east and west, her hooves have split
The letters morph through Tocharian and Gāndhārī
Prakrit, Sanskrit, Tamil and Pali
There are many trade routes, many tales in the passage of these letters
Finding the edge of sound and shape
She traces vowels in the cave of her mouth.

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The consonants travel from larynx to lips.
She teaches them the sounds of the universe. (applause)

If you get a chance to buy the book – which you can't here, because they've all sold out –

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: No, they haven't.

– yes–

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Have they?

– it has 40 wonderful cow photos over the cover that you took yourself? Yes. Including one elephant.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Well, cows are elephants and dugongs and whales and camels.

I know. But you don't have the dugong.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: I know. I hadn't seen one at that point.

Well, before we invite some questions from everybody, I just wanted to put up one question to the panel: Why is it that everyone has cared so much about the loss of plants and animals before they've hit onto the idea that, 'Hey, we'd better look at these cultures and languages.' Why is that?

WADE DAVIS: Well, I think that's itself a relatively recent phenomenon. If you think about it, 30 years ago no-one spoke of biodiversity or biosphere; now that language, those words are part of the language of schoolchildren. And you can get very pessimistic, but it's useful to reflect back and think 30 years ago just getting people to stop throwing garbage out of the car window was an environmental victory. You know, until Apollo went around the dark side of the Moon, we had never seen an earthrise, and in that crystal moment of awareness on Christmas Eve 1968 the whole paradigm of humanity shifted because we suddenly realised that the Earth was not an infinite frontier but a finite orb floating, as the astronaut said, in the void of space. And everything shifted at that point – I mean, like a wave of illumination went around the world, and I think even the fact that women went from the kitchen to the boardroom and gay people from the closet to the altar and people of colour from the woodshed to the White House was all part of a transformation

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that we're all still part of, you know. And so no-one spoke of species loss; no-one spoke of cultural loss.

I remember I – famously, the night that his Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama first spoke in the West was at Harvard college, Harvard University, and I was a student, and that same night E.O. Wilson, the great biologist, was introducing Norman Myers, who had just written a book called *The sinking Ark*, which is one of the first books to draw attention to the biodiversity crisis – and, if you can believe it, literally they were kitty-corner to each other – in introducing Myers and apologising for the sparse audience, because all the kids were across the street to hear the Dalai Lama, E.O. Wilson, one of the most remarkable and venerable scientists of our era, literally said – and I quote – ‘If even Harvard students would rather be across the street listening to that religious kook, you know how far we’ve got to go in the realm of biological – – –.’ In other words, even then, the biologists were talking about plants and animals; the anthropologists were talking about culture; and no-one was linking the obvious fact that the erosion of biodiversity was directly related to the erosion of cultural diversity. Well, now, of course, Wilson would be the first person to lament those words. And I can tell you that I was the only kid on campus that night racing back and forth between the two

But I think we've come to this whole new awareness, so I don't think we should be too concerned about it. The bigger issue is that what do you do about it, strictly in terms of language. And one of the challenges is that documenting languages, let alone revitalising languages, is a lifework. You know how hard it is to *learn* a complex language; well, to actually create a dictionary and to compose a grammar requires huge amounts of sort of academic training, and unfortunately in linguistic departments around the world that kind of documentation is not valued. So we pump out these thousands of linguists who are trained in theoretical models that are really kind of completely kind of pointless, but you don't get a PhD if you want to go to the Penan in Borneo and simply document the language and the grammar. It has no academic reward. So in order to do this work the cost wouldn't be that much; it's been estimated to document and create dictionaries and grammars for every language on Earth would be less than the cost of a single US naval destroyer,

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of which there are many. The problem is to create the cadre to do so. You'd have to have a cultural revolution in the academic field of linguistics to produce the cadre who would be dedicated enough to do that.

Mercifully, it's happening. I mean, just as a final – I mean, one of the things I love, you know, I so admire anthropologists and real ethnographers, and I so admire linguists. I met a wonderful girl from Brazil, a scion of an elite family in Brazil, who had dedicated her life to learning a language that was spoken by three people, and when they died she'd be the only repository of this knowledge. And I find that, in and of itself, a gesture of great poetic integrity.

Susan did you want to say something on this?

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Yes. Even though Sanskrit is the language of men and Brahmins, which doesn't exactly allow me into it in a way, theoretically, I still think that if we had more people learning Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and other language that have been part of the kind of linguistic basis of an understanding of linguistics in the past, we'd be in a better position to be able to learn other languages. I mean, for example, Sanskrit has eight cases and has singular, dual and plural. Now, among the other languages in the world that has dual is desert Aboriginal languages – Warlpiri, for example, has a dual. Sanskrit has a locative, which is a locational case. In the desert languages, certainly Warlpiri has cases that indicate direction, the direction in which a person is walking. So there are things like – there are actually crossovers of understanding, and it doesn't have to be the same language that is your starting point, but understanding how languages work and how languages shift – you know, where you have languages that are neighbouring language, how the shifts happen from one to another – is very useful in terms of being able to go out into the field and do that. But Sanskrit died at La Trobe University at the end of last year, because the one person teaching it, Professor Greg Bailey, he has retired. He didn't want to, but it was – you know, that was it.

It was time.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: And there are students around the country trying to keep up learning language in spite of the fact that there's great resistance on the part of

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universities, because of course there's no money in it – or, at least, that's their view, that there's no money in it.

ANDREW WESTOLL: I think one of the real optimistic things that we don't often talk about with language, I mean, I think I obviously agree that languages has come in as a sort of – with activists behind it later than, you know, the sexy species out there and the beautiful plants out there to protect. But I think with the internet and with technology the way it's going, the protection of languages has a huge potential to just accelerate right past the ecological concerns – – –. I was just in, strangely enough, Hollywood covering a technological breakthrough called Ortsbo, and it's this tool – and I don't know how many people in there are sort of into social media, but most of us are chatting or something online – it's this tool that synchs immediately with your Facebook, with your Twitter, with your chat, whatever you're writing, with your email, and it simultaneously translates it into one of 54 different languages. That idea is mindblowing, but is also mindblowing because it's the obvious next step in the internet technology, in the revolution, is having – – –. Language used to be totally *unsexy* on the Web; it used to be all English; and now there's this ability for everyone to communicate in whatever language – slowly, every language they want.

WADE DAVIS: Well, there's 1500 languages on the Web right now.

ANDREW WESTOLL: Are there? Yes. So I guess Ortsbo's got a lot of catching up to do.

WADE DAVIS: But the challenge there is that there are about 80 languages are spoken by 90 per cent of humanity –

ANDREW WESTOLL: Right.

WADE DAVIS: – so the question is will that program deal with the others. And just because a language is spoken by – you know, the value of the language is not a correlate of the numbers of people that speak it –

ANDREW WESTOLL: Right.

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WADE DAVIS: – any more than a culture is. And this is what's so disturbing, is the pace. Every two weeks somebody dies and carries with them into the grave the last syllables of an ancient tongue.

And there's one other issue with the online languages, and that's ownership of that language once it's put out there, because that then takes it away from the ownership of the people who are speaking it. So that's a problem for people to struggle with as well.

ANDREW WESTOLL: Yes.

But I'd like to ask if anyone has any questions at this stage. We've got a microphone there.

QUESTION: Thank you. I just want to comment – I really want to acknowledge you, Faith, for the work that you do in national language, Indigenous languages.

Thank you.

QUESTION: I live in Australia's most remote Aboriginal centre, community, in the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, and I'm one of the few speakers of Kukatja – not fluently yet, but I've been there for nine of the past 12 years and been involved in the community for 17 years. And two people – there are only – we have seven languages, because it was set up as a mission, and so we have seven languages. Kukatja's the one that's spoken the most. We have two people left who are speaking Ngardi, and both of them will die shortly. And we have all of the other languages are totally threatened, so they're not in very good situation at all. Now, while you're talking about what's going on the internet, I mean you can walk into government departments or whatever and they'll give you an option to get a translator who speaks Italian, which is totally valid, but there's never been an initiative in Australia to actually try to translate for people – I'm a cultural translator; I'm a sociologist; I translate between worlds. I was grown up by the women elders to translate for them and to translate for whitefellas back into their culture. And what you're talking about, worried about, the thing about the connection between language and culture, the governments have just not got there. And I'm really interested – like, for example, with our organisation, the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre, where lore means ceremony and

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culture means custom, the government's never supported it, and yet it's women's initiative, it's Indigenous women's initiative, to heal their community, and I'm really interested in hearing about initiatives that are taking place or could be taking place to actually look after that, to hand those resources over to Indigenous peoples, so that culture can be looked after and the language can be looked after. Under the Northern Territory Intervention, the government's banned Indigenous culture languages in schools and people have to study English, but people will get lost and there will be suicides as a direct result of that. So if anyone – I'm just wondering what you've come across in your journeys.

I think that a ray of hope in terms of Australia is that in 2009 the Federal Government did agree to release a National Indigenous Languages Policy. For groups like the Eastern States Aboriginal Languages Group we can now go to government or different departments and say, 'Here is this policy. You have to work to that. You've got to make changes in what you're doing.'

WADE DAVIS: I think it's really – one thing that, you know, the last sacred cow, the sacred cow of the development paradigm: first of all – oh, excuse me.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: That's all right. I'm used to it.

WADE DAVIS: But, you know, genocide is universally condemned, the physical extermination of a people; but ethnocide is not only not condemned, in many corners of the world – the World Bank and elsewhere – it's promoted as proper modern development policy. And the last sacred cow, that no-one's prepared to go after, is education and literacy. This is assumed, universally, to be only a positive force, but throughout the world, in fact, literacy is very often the frontline tool for acculturation and assimilation. And so invariably what happens is that people all around the world in Indigenous communities, in order to – whether it's survive periodic droughts in North Africa or in Sub-Saharan Sahel or whether to survive challenges in the Andes – everybody needs these days to have a foot in the nation state's cash economy, and the way to do that is to get at least one child literate and educated, and so families all around the world send – generally, I'm sorry to say, it's an older boy – and they're sent into educational systems that generally are either in frontier areas or, if they're not missionary schools, they're certainly the pedagogy of

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the state, and very often the state doesn't think that pastoral nomads fit its image or that agrarian non-cash economies fit the national state's image of itself, so the kids end up going into school as nomads, acquiring a modicum of literacy, but in the context it teaches them to have contempt for who they are. So they graduate as clerks and then enter an unemployment rate of 50 per cent for high school graduates, but they can't go back because they've been taught to be ashamed of who they are.

And the only way around this is to have pedagogies that reflect traditional culture, so that the same basic skills of reading, writing, whatever you want to call it, are taught within a context that also reveres and respects the traditional knowledge. And a friend of mine, Carol Black, made a film that you must see, called *Schooling the world*, which is the only film I know that really takes off after this idea of the universality of education. Think, for example – I don't know how many of you know this book – *Three cups of tea* by Greg Mortenson, okay? – well, if you don't know, this has been exposed as a total scandal because it turns out it was complete fraud; he never built any schools; he raised \$60 million of a foundation that he used mainly to buy his book on Amazon.com to keep it at number one on the *New York Times*; he's been investigated by the Attorney-General of Montana; the whole thing was a scam from start to finish. But that cult of education was such that every US soldier who went off to Afghanistan was given that book, right? And this is this whole thing. And there is this fantastic scene in Carol's film I'll just describe, where they just march into a school in Ladakh and what you have there is you have a very sweet teacher being forced to teach in English, a language she doesn't understand, to kids who don't understand English, and the school lesson is in biology and they're talking about xerophytic plants. Now, xerophytic plants, for the non-botanists, are just a technical term for plants that grow in dry habitats, but this is how the lesson goes:

Xerophytic plants. Bad plants. Plants that grow bad place.
Ladakh, bad place. Xerophytic plants.

Meanwhile, the kids are just mimicking this, and you look out the window of the school on this stunningly beautiful landscape, incredibly interesting flora, and every one of the grandparents of those kids knows those plants with the same intensity

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with which a PhD botanist from Princeton would know them. And yet you see graphically what happens to kids, and this happens all around the world. But the opposite happens, is when you actually bring school systems into line with traditions, then you acquire the skills, the kids acquire the skills, but in a context that makes them proud of who they are. It's not rocket science.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: No. It's not rocket science.

Another question?

QUESTION: This is a follow-on to Andrew's point about technology. So 150 years ago or more – 2000 years ago – if a language died you would never be able to hear it spoken again. But today, with technology, we have the ability to record these people speaking the language and perhaps, if they're bilingual, I would assume explaining how the language works. In these languages that are disappearing, are efforts being made to get those videos done and to archive them? I mean, what you mentioned, Wade, about the academics, that's one thing; but couldn't we have a corps of young people out there with hand-helds?

WADE DAVIS: Well, it's actually – the only really hopeful thing, Bill, is that literally, when I first stumbled on this statistic on language loss was from Michael Krauss. I just was writing something up for a *National Geographic* magazine article I was doing, and it just blew my mind. I couldn't believe that people weren't screaming because of this consensus half the languages being lost in a generation. And really there were only a few scholars concerned at that time. 15 years, 20 years later, it's night and day. I mean, conferences, Rosetta Stone – I mean, there are programs all around the world people trying to do exactly that. But, as I suggested, one of the challenges is creating the cadre to do so, which means validating that academic practice as something you can get an academic degree in. It's so important that the culture of academic departments of linguistics shift – as they are shifting, in some universities; I mean, there are some incredible centres of language revitalisation and documentation now that didn't exist 15 years ago.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Can I just come in here and say that, just as with the way in which biodiversity has been pirated through development programs and the like,

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while I agree it's very important to have languages recorded, but we also, I think, have to be very wary that those languages don't then get colonised. You know, microcolonialism has happened, you know, through the Human Genome Diversity Project. We could finish being in some kind of world where languages are colonised or recolonised. And then the problem is that, once things get colonised, they get distorted, and so things that once meant something, the meaning changes; or perhaps the language is used for some purpose to know something that was previously passed on between members of a community and now is put outside the community for anybody to buy. So I think we need to be quite political about how these things are done and not just go in with our tape recorders and willy-nilly put them up there on the internet.

WADE DAVIS: But, Susan, you point out something very important, which is it's not just about the language; it's that these languages are the reflection of culture -

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Exactly.

And the knowledge.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Yes.

WADE DAVIS: And, you know, I mean, we could document every language and put it into a digital archive. What good will that really do humanity if the people that speak the language have been eradicated or assimilated or violated.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Well, that's why I made the analogy with the Human Genome Diversity Project, because in fact all the money has gone into creating that project just in case all the people die. Well, hang on a minute: why not do something so not so many people are dying?

And if I can just give you a little bit of hope for what's happening in Australia, our groups are supporting community-based projects, so with not so much the focus on the academic and the linguists, it's about getting back to community and getting the hand-holds out there and training young people – people of all ages. It's really great to see the young people sitting down with the elders, so the young ones are using their technology and getting the elders to speak to them and capturing it that way. There's not enough of it being done; we need to encourage the government to give more money to these programs; but, you know, it's a tiny amount that they've got available.

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ANDREW WESTOLL: Are there countries that are doing this well?

No.

WADE DAVIS: I wouldn't say countries, but ---.

I mean, actually, North America is probably on a similar footing to Australia.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Well, I think one of the other things in – I'm also in publishing, and one of the great things happening in publishing amongst independent publishers is the invention of the word 'bibliodiversity', talking about how the smaller publishers are the ones who maintain the diversity of books, and 'multiversity' I think is a useful term to use when talking about culture. And I think that – this is where I actually finished up doing my PhD, and wrote a book called *Wild politics* – so coming in and looking at how policies on ecology and biodiversity, where the successes are but also where the failures have been can be very useful just in terms of trying to give us some clues of where we might move in terms of language.

Yes?

QUESTION: My question was – well, I've got about 12, but I'm aware that I can only really ask one. So I've heard this theory about Indigenous languages being matrices-based languages and our language is a binary-based language; is this a theory that – because I'm not a linguist, but ---.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: No, I don't think that you can make those kinds of mad assumptions.

QUESTION: Generalisations.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: I mean, I think that the fact that both Sanskrit and Warlpiri both have a dual suggests that actually maybe there's not that much difference, that different languages have different structures and different languages indicate different things that are important to the particular culture, but I don't think that there's a difference between what might ---. I mean, it's an accident what counts as an Indigenous language and what counts as a non-Indigenous language.

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QUESTION: I heard it explained in great detail by an Indigenous educator at one stage, but it was very interesting. And, while I'm at it, I'm from the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, so if anyone here today would like to donate you will be helping protect languages in Australia, and you can just go onto the website, Indigenous Literacy Foundation, and find out what we're doing. It's essentially literacy, but we also are writing down languages and translating early childhood books into language.

Okay. Thanks, Susie. Any other questions? Yes, right up the middle there, if we can.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Can I put in a plug for poetry?

Yes.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: Because poetry has actually been the thing that has maintained cultural knowledge – poetry and song. Andrew indicated this at the beginning and end of his talk, and if you consider that a story like the Mahabharata, which fills 12 volumes, or the Odyssey or the Icelandic Sagas or the Jangwal story from Northern Australia and many, many others, those song cycles, oral literature and so on, that's where the culture is held, and it's held in people's minds.

That's right, yes.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE: And I think that the fact that poetry is such a kind of almost dirty word in publishing is a very sad statement about our society, because poetry is in all of us and it's a very important part of maintaining languages.

Oh, absolutely. I think we have time for just one more question.

QUESTION: The development of Esperanto as a new language is impotent because it doesn't have a culture, and on that point as well the development of Modern Hebrew from Biblical Hebrew has been very successful because it does have an Israeli culture.

WADE DAVIS: I think that's really true. I think Hebrew is the one great example of a culture being literally – I mean, a language being reinvented and becoming a real, vital national language. Obviously, Esperanto was kind of a technocrat's

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fantasy. I mean, one of the reasons English is so successful is it's such an efficient language. I mean, any of you have published a book in Spanish you'll find that a book is 200 pages longer in Spanish.

And in German it's 300 pages longer.

WADE DAVIS: You know, English is just this wonderful language. We should always celebrate our own language, too, and English – it's just that I don't want to be a cultural nerve-gas, you know.

Thank you.**I'd like to introduce to you Lilla Watson, who'd like to say a few words.**

LILLA WATSON: This is not a question; it's more in the form of a comment. And I just wanted to say that, in Australia here, anthropologists, many anthropologists, have been very puzzled because of the great number of languages there are in this country. There are at least 300 Indigenous languages and just as many, or many more, dialects. Now, in some areas, there's small groups of people teaching the local language. Aboriginal people quite understand why we had so many different languages: because of the importance and sacredness of the land and the language that belongs to it. And there's small numbers of people who are teaching the Indigenous language in the schools. And what I want to say is if this could be increased. Because what it does [is] it teaches the children a greater respect for the land. It teaches children to, hopefully, start to take on responsibility for that land they live on because they're learning from the Indigenous people the very important nature of the land and how we need to go about healing that land now.

And if that could happen on a larger scale throughout the country, I think Aboriginal people are so willing, so very willing, to share their knowledge with other people who've come from elsewhere. And unfortunately we see people who are only too willing to limit their own intellect and stay within their own terms of reference, when Aboriginal people are so willing and available to share what knowledge they have, and especially to health land. I mean, just a brief comment: I mean, women's languages are so important, and there's always been women's

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language in this country, and I'm sure in other cultures as well; only it needs to be recognised in a very positive manner, and that hasn't always occurred.

The only other thing I guess I'd like to say is that my dear sister, who is deceased now, but she had a message for people which I think can be understood in any language, and her message was, in terms of healing the country and making a contribution to healing what's happening in the world today, she asked the question, 'Will you be an honourable ancestor for our future generations?' Thank you.
(applause)

Back in 1984, I heard Lilla give a lecture here in Brisbane, and in that lecture she said that, for Aboriginal people, the future extends as far forward as the past, and that means a 40,000-year plan. Now, if we can make it for the next 40,000 years, Lilla, I reckon we'll be doing okay and we will have managed to retain the languages and biodiversity and all the other things that are important. So thank you.

And that's a really beautiful note I think we'll have to finish on there, because we've gone over time. Thank you so much, everyone, for coming, and can you once again thank Wade, Andrew and Susan. (applause)