interrupting
mythic community

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… once myth is interrupted, writing recounts our history to us once again. But it is no longer a narrative—neither grand nor small—but rather an offering: a history is offered to us … What is offered to us is that community is coming about.[1]

I have written this story wanting to embrace all of you, and it is the best I can do with this language we share … 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 … I offer these words, especially, to those of you I embarrass, and who turn away from the shame of seeing me … We are still here, Benang.[2]

If nation is increasingly perceived as a less than honourable institution formed through war, invasion and geo-political territorialisation, and government is widely denounced as the site of political intrigue and the means of subjectification of citizen–voters, community appears to escape this critique and to be viewed as an idyllic formation based on bonds of affinity. However, this romancing of community is disrupted by trans-cultural and sub-cultural formations that expose the fantasy of a harmonious, homogenous community. While community is often conceived as arising organically from familial, tribal or cultural similarity, or as constituted through a common history and shared cultural institutions, this totalising conception of community is interrupted by the demands of difference and heterogeneity and by a questioning of the idyll of community authenticated in myths of archaic origin.

Jacques Derrida, for one, has condemned community as a mechanism of exclusion. Through its homogenising tendencies, he suggests, community threatens politics, ethics and responsibility.[3] Derrida concludes that community does not provide a useful concept for

thinking sociality and he elaborates instead alternatives such as hospitality[4] and non-fraternal friendship.[5]

Other theorists, however, have proposed a reformulation, rather than repudiation, of community, despite its troubling association with communal exclusions. In this paper I trace and appropriate the work of Benedict Anderson, Jean-Luc Nancy and Walter Benjamin in order to investigate contending representations of Australian community. Benedict Anderson's constructivist formulation of *Imagined Communities* provides a much needed antidote to the essentialism of organic and communitarian framings of community. Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* also reveals the cultural construction of community but recognises, alongside this, an inherent sociality expressed through sharing and exposure to others. Both theorists are influenced by Walter Benjamin's insistence that culture informs and forms history, politics and sociality, yet each reinterprets this insight to produce differing, even contrary, formulations of the cultural production of community.

Elaborating these conceptions of community, I apply them, in particular, to a reading of the 2000 Olympic Games opening ceremony. This mythic representation of Australian national community reveals both the homogenising white-washing of dominant Antipodean sociality and the fracturing of this myth by a differing experience of community that interrupts the dominant story. Exploring this interruption of community, I draw on Kim Scott's novel *Benang*, which disrupts chronological temporalities, revealing the conjunction of past events and present experiences, so as to make possible an alternative community. While Anderson and Nancy, in disparate ways, postulate the cultural structuring of community, Scott performs the fracturing of homogenous community through the disjunctive structuring of his narration of Australian nation.

— The time of community

Walter Benjamin's image of a 'storm blowing from Paradise', constructed in response to the expansion of fascism in 1930s Europe, still has resonance today. For Benjamin, that tempest both hurls the wreckage of the past at us and forces us blindly and irresistibly into the future. He writes:

> Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet … a storm is blowing from Paradise … [It] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[6]

Against an understanding of history as a 'chain of events' occurring within 'homogenous, empty time'[7] Benjamin focuses on the single event. He elaborates a theory of the 'now-time'

that preserves historical moments threatened with extinction through their non-recognition. 'Now-time' crystallises in monadic form moments, memories, events, and histories that are obliterated by the homogenising cataloguing of meaningless data into universalising histories. Instead, Benjamin proposes 'blast[ing] a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework … [so that] the lifework is preserved in this work'.[8]

Benjamin's philosophy of history and time has been reformulated and adopted by Benedict Anderson in order to chart how transformations in the perception and experience of time facilitate the construction of imagined national communities. Anderson's constructivist theory of community challenges the essentialism of organic formulations of community in which race, geography, family and other seemingly 'natural' characteristics underlie community formation. Importantly, this influential formulation of national community as an imagined formation associated with the mass productions and distributions of early print-capitalism has enabled the possibility of understanding community as a cultural artefact.

Drawing on Benjamin's reformulation of time and history, Anderson argues that national communities were only imaginable in the context of a transformation in the perception of time. For Anderson, an earlier form of Messianic time is replaced by secular homogenous, empty time that is a by-product of print-capitalism. With the mass distribution and consumption of newspapers and of novels (and their serialisation), time is no longer perceived as structured by a divine order of 'prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, measured by clock and calendar'.[9] This new form of homogenous, empty time is associated with both the simultaneous consumption of papers and novels and the reframing of time within the text. Readers imagine a community of others alongside them, consuming the same materials, thus creating the possibility of identity without personal interrelations. More important though, for Anderson, the early realist novel is structured by the time of the 'meanwhile' in which the reader perceives the various characters in simultaneous action alongside each other while the characters themselves may have no direct connection. This omniscient narrative perspective creates a world in which the reader 'like God, watch[es] A telephoning, B shopping, and D playing pool all at once'.[10] The novel represents a community of individuals living alongside each other, and acting simultaneously, within homogenous, empty time; it is this, according to Anderson, which enables the imagining of a bounded national community.

Anderson relies on Benjamin's distinction between Messianic time and homogenous, empty time, but interestingly while Anderson relegates Messianic time to the past Benjamin conceives it as an alternative that may enable an unravelling of the homogenous, empty time of capitalism. For Anderson, Messianic time is an experience of pre-modern Europe when religious belief predominated and meaning and significance were constituted through an association of presentiment and completion facilitated by divine intervention. In this framework time does

not relentlessly march on, but is marked by the concentration of disparate events into meaningful constellations.[11]

While Anderson understands Messianic time as a manifestation of a bygone sacred era, Benjamin conceives Messianic time as a revolutionary tool that would explode the empty meaningless continuum of modernity. For Benjamin, Messianic time is not confined to the era of religious belief and is not dependent on sacred formations but is a conceptual procedure that enables the retrieval of historical moments obscured by the biases of dominant histories. Messianic time is marked by days of remembrance that are given significance by their relation to the present; it does not construct a 'sequence of events like the beads of a rosary' but is structured by constellations formed through the association of past events with the present.[12]

While Benjamin is clearly disturbed by and critical of the homogenous, empty time of the modern capitalist era, Anderson is more sanguine in his analysis of the time of national community. While Anderson acknowledges that some may see nationalism as a pathology, for him, the important task is to analyse and understand the existence of nations and to ask why nation generates a willingness to kill and die in its name.[13] Indeed, despite the repressions that may have been justified in the name of nation—including abuses of colonial conquest—Anderson suggests that the belief in the goodness of nations, though naive, is necessary.[14] He concludes his introduction to *The Spectre of Comparison*, for example, by saying that 'it is both possible and necessary, against, one might say, the evidence, to think well of nationalism'.[15]

Nevertheless, while Anderson believes nation is a necessary phenomenon, it is also one that has failed to fulfil its early utopian promise of universal progress.[16] Moreover, in his most recent reflections on the nation Anderson suggests that the novel has lost its pivotal role in nation formation. The novel no longer speaks to a national audience but is now produced for niche markets. Significantly, novels no longer recreate homogenous, empty time but 'transcend or disrupt' the synchronicity of an omniscient perspective.[17] Anderson's analysis suggests that in the late twentieth century the national novel '"performs" the impossibility of transcending … as well as of escaping' the barbarism of civilisation.[18] The novel no longer supports nation formation but instead reveals that the nation is '"ill-fated," "accursed," and even "damned"'.[19] Rather than reconciling disruptions within nations by creating a sense of home and community, novels now reveal the tragedy and shame of nations.

— Incommensurable community

Homi Bhabha has responded to Anderson's analysis in the context of his discussions of the postcolonial novel. He rejects many of Anderson's formulations pointing out that Anderson's construction of nation relies on a cultural homogeneity that displaces both subaltern experience and 'culture's in-between'.[20] Bhabha writes that: 'In embedding the *meanwhile* of the national narrative, where the people live their plural and autonomous lives within homogenous,

empty time, Anderson misses the alienating and iterative time of the sign'.[21] Bhabha suggests that Anderson's articulation of the unity of national community and the synchronicity of homogenous, empty time overlooks minoritarian voices and the liminality of culture.[22]

Moreover, Bhabha suggests that this obliteration of the plurality of community is exacerbated by Anderson's discussion of a simultaneous process of remembering and forgetting that underlies the nation's self-narrative. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson not only proposes a transition from Messianic time to homogenous, empty time as a necessary precondition for the emergence of nations, but also suggests that each nation invents a primordial national history that anamnesically reconstructs earlier events as part of its antiquity. Earlier wars, massacres and deaths are remembered and commemorated as conflicts within the fraternity of the nation rather than as conflicts with enemies. This simultaneous remembering of the event and the forgetting of certain of its details extends the antiquity of the nation by recasting the nation not as emerging from these conflicts but as predating them. The nation is represented not as an entity produced through war in which the enemy is conquered but as already pre-existing these conflicts and therefore as primordial. As Anderson writes, 'Having to "have already forgotten" tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be "reminded" turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies'.[23] The nation is thereby anamnesically recast as 'loom[ing] out of an immemorial past'. More important, this enables a perception that the nation is destined to 'glide into a limitless future'.[24]

For Homi Bhabha, just as the synchronicity of homogenous, empty time creates a unification of national identity that obliterates the minority, so too this national 'obligation to have already forgotten' certain events 'performs the problem of totalising the people and unifying the national will'.[25] Anderson's reliance on both the synchronicity of homogenous, empty time and the diachronic time of remembering to forget the past creates a complex structuring of time, which sanctions the conception of nation to be imagined as a unified totality thereby excluding alterity. Bhabha's critique exposes Anderson's toleration of the homogenising effects of nation formation and the consequent marginalising of alterity. He rejects Anderson's proposal of 'an "imagined community" rooted in a "homogenous empty time" of modernity and progress'[26] and instead focuses on cultural difference and the disruptions within community:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is ... the articulation of cultural differences ... How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?[27]

Bhabha rejects Anderson's homogenising narration of nation and instead traces the antagonisms inherent in community so as to articulate difference and interconnection in-between community.

While acknowledging these inadequacies, I suggest that Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and *Spectres of Comparison* provide, nevertheless, a productive alternative model for community that challenges the communitarian insistence on shared history and traditions and allows a recognition of the cultural basis for community. Moreover, in his recent reflections on the significance of Anderson's thought for the re-imagining of national communities, Jonathan Culler augments Anderson's analysis of the late-twentieth-century novel by suggesting that the omniscient narrative voice of earlier novels has been replaced, in the postcolonial novel, by a juxtaposition of opposing narrative perspectives. Culler suggests that:

> unlike the 'old-fashioned novel' whose narrative voice easily encompassed characters unknown to each other and created 'in the mind of the omniscient reader' the community to which they could belong, which was or was like that of the nation, here there is no all-encompassing narrator, no possibility of inventing a voice that can include all those who might be claimed by the nation.[28]

Culler suggests, though, that this oscillation between discordant perspectives need not undermine community but may instead recreate the nation as a community without unity. Citing Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, Culler argues that the postcolonial novel may not destroy the possibility of national community but may suggest alternative formations in which community is a 'spacing rather than fusion, sublation, or transcendence'.[29] In this Nancian framework, community is not understood as based on common identity or on a common work or united project but is a sharing or openness to others, which recognises 'the differential experience of the other as a finite being'.[30]

Jean-Luc Nancy's work on community, then, promises an alternative formulation of community that overcomes both the exclusions of communitarian community and enables cultural re-imaginings beyond the homogenous nationalism conceived in Anderson's formulation of *Imagined Communities*.

Interrupting community

Like Benedict Anderson, Jean-Luc Nancy also proposes a relation between literature and community but Nancy's formulation suggests that literature may interrupt unified community rather than resuscitate unity in community. While Anderson reveals the construction of a homogenous, empty time of unified community facilitated by the synchronic narrative

structure of the novel, Nancy suggests that literature reveals an incompletion or limit that interrupts mythic narratives and the mythic foundations of unified community.

Nancy concedes that myth founds community—'mythic speech is communitarian in its essence … Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another infinitely and immediately'—but for Nancy, this mythic communion is necessarily interrupted.[31] Importantly, this interruption disrupts the unity of community based on common mythic origins and identity, and opens up a possibility of a community that shares with others and with difference.

This disruption or this interruption of myth is inherent in myth itself. Myth is both a story of origin and foundation—the story, for example, of a nation's or a community's origin—and at the same time is a misconception or a fiction. As Nancy explains, this dual meaning or functioning of myth generates an 'infinitely ironic relation … engendered by a kind of internal disunion'.[32] For Nancy, myth is essentially totalitarian as it is a fiction that founds a communion that assimilates everything into its totality.[33] But this communion and the community it founds are also interrupted by the oscillating juxtaposition of myth as foundation and myth as fiction. Nancy insists that myth as a story of origins does indeed create community but also, as an ironic realisation of its own fictionality, disrupts community. Myth preserves 'modes of observation and reflection' that 'still remain at the basis of our civilization'[34] and therefore myth creates the foundations of community. Yet, 'man' sees and knows that what he 'lives so completely and intensely is a myth'.[35] As Nancy concludes, myth 'harbours simultaneously and in the same thought a disabused irony ("foundation is a fiction") and an onto-poetic-logical affirmation ("fiction is a foundation"). That is why myth is interrupted. It is interrupted by myth.'[36]

It is the questioning of foundation facilitated by the fictionality of myth that interrupts the myth of communion, communality and unified community. This interrupted myth engenders an interrupted or inoperative community. With the interruption of myth, a silence, a space, is opened that disseminates rather than unifies, and so resists the fusion, completion and totalisation of community. Nancy speculates that this silence or space created by the interruption of myth—though emanating from within myth, through the paradox of myth—may be called, tentatively, literature. While literature is undoubtedly related to myth, unlike myth, it does not produce foundation, completion and totality. Literature is never complete, never reveals a final reality or a totalised vision: 'it reveals rather the unrevealable'[37] and this unrevealable is the interruption of community understood as communion or union.

However, this is not to suggest that literature and myth are separate texts or genres; rather both myth and literature operate within a work, and literature is that which interrupts myth within a work. This interruption operates through incompletion. Literature is never complete

in the sense that it always circulates, passing from author to reader, from author to author, from text to text:

> It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes on to another work by the same author or … into works of other authors. It does not come to an end where its narrative passes into other narratives, its poem into other poems, its thought into other thoughts, or into the inevitable suspension of the thought or the poem. It is unended and unending—in the active sense—in that it is literature.[38]

This incompletion of literature enables passage, movement, sharing. It is thus not so much a work or production but an unworking or unravelling that enables a re-articulation of community.

Nancy concludes, and we may here mark again his difference from Anderson, that literature does not create community but indicates the operation of community: 'It is not because there is literature that there is community … And the interruption reveals that it is because there is community that there is literature'.[39] Literature is an expression of interrupted community that involves revealment, sharing, touching in the relation between the singular beings of community. To write is to touch, share, appear: writing is therefore an expression of community.[40]

While literature does not create community and is instead the expression of community, nevertheless, '[e]ach writer, each work inaugurates community'.[41] So in a curious invaginating gesture, literature is both engendered by the sharing of singular beings and engenders this community of singularities. This inauguration, however, is not to be confused with the founding function of myth, for myth constitutes a totalising completion of community while literature inaugurates an interruption of this totality which makes sharing possible. Each touching (whether of bodies or of texts), every touch, arises from and simultaneously creates community: 'What is inaugural is this forward movement … from you to me, from silence to speech, from the many to the singular, from myth to writing … this inaugural act founds nothing, entails no establishing, governs no exchange'.[42]

— Antipodean community

The operation of myth in founding unified community, as well as the interruption of this mythic unity, can be traced in the celebration of Australian national community represented in the 2000 Olympic Games opening ceremony. In this mythical re-enactment of the origins and foundations of Australian culture and identity a dominant white history is re-articulated to incorporate multicultural difference and the Aboriginal other within a harmonious unity. This mythic union is created, in part, by avoiding direct references to invasion and massacres, the White Australia policy and the compulsory detention and internment of those seeking

refuge, though, as I will argue later, these omissions nevertheless leave traces that interrupt the totalising narrative.

The opening pageant of the games depicts Australian national community and identity as emerging organically from the seascapes and landscape of the Australian continent, and as evolving from the Aboriginal 'Awakening' corroboree that inaugurates and represents primordial antipodean life. This representation of the origins of Australian community—incorporating as it does Aboriginal life—appears to overturn an earlier white Australian myth encapsulated by the legal term 'terra nullius', which claimed that this land was empty prior to white settlement. In the Olympic pageant Aboriginal origins are finally acknowledged but only by transforming the myth of terra nullius into a myth of Aboriginal antiquity. While Aboriginal life and prior occupation of land are acknowledged in this ceremony, this is accompanied by what Anderson has identified as a 'characteristic device' of forgetting the tragedies of war and conflict. Here white invasion is 'forgotten' and Aboriginal existence construed as representing the organic and ancient past of the nation.

Moreover, the opening ceremony envisages an easy reconciliation between the young white spirit of Australia, represented by 12-year-old Nikki Webster, and Indigenous Australia, represented by Djakapurra Munyarryn, who, hands joined, together watch the unfolding of the nation from its ancient origins in traditional Aboriginal culture to its endless future depicted in the word 'Eternity' writ large on the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge. Webster, as child, also represents the future of Australia (not coincidentally a white future) while Munyarryn conjures the elders and patriarchs of the nation, its history and its past (which is Aboriginal). The reconciliation is thus a comfortable one between the mythic Aboriginal past and the futural white 'Eternity'. The 2000 Olympic nationalist celebration of Australian culture, then, depicts, as Anderson has observed, an ancient nation 'loom[ing] out of an immemorial past and glid[ing] into a limitless future'.[43]

This mythical re-imagining of Australian nation arguably involves a forgetting of 'tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be "reminded"'.[44] While the 'forgotten' massacres of Aboriginal people at the time of European settlement are intermittently acknowledged and remembered in histories that record the massacres and through the erection of monuments that mark massacre sites (for example, at Myall Creek and Bluff Rock), the Olympic ceremony evades again these tragedies in order to facilitate its fantasy of congenial integration.

This amnesic occlusion of massacres and invasion is facilitated by the depiction of first contact through the figure of Captain Cook. Sailing by on his *Endeavour*, Cook waves, surveys the land and records his travels, while the narrator explains that this is 'the dawning of a new era' and that 'Australia's ancient reverie is disturbed by an irresistible force with the arrival of a new culture and a new people'.[45] Resistance by Aboriginal people is thus disguised by refiguring the new white age as an 'irresistible force', frontier wars, massacres and murders

are recast as 'disturbance', and invasion is characterised as 'arrival'. The myth of harmonious evolution from ancient Aboriginal origins to 'an age of discovery [and] the beginning of modernization' is contrived by conceiving first contact as a 'dawning' rather than as invasion.

This utopian and (an)amnesic representation of racial reconciliation and harmony is repeated in the subsequent depiction of mid-twentieth-century immigrant 'Arrivals'. A kaleidoscopic dance of multi-nationalities adds 'colour' to the new nation while a serious-voiced commentator explains that 'Australia opened its arms to refugees ... and people from many, many lands' and that this 'was a process encouraged by governments of the time in the 40s, 50s and 60s'. He continues: 'populate or perish was the cry and what it did was transform Australia into the multicultural society we have today under southern skies'.[46] Unsurprisingly, given Anderson's reflections, this celebration of Australian multiculturalism forgets both the White Australia policies of the past and its current manifestation in resistances to asylum seekers.[47] Instead we are serenaded by Nikki Webster singing about 'a world of harmony' 'under southern skies' while Munyarryn and the other Aboriginal performers serenely survey the ongoing 'settlement' of their country.

But it is not just the fanciful depiction of racial harmony and imperial benevolence that is disturbing in this myth of Australian nation. The obliteration of the feminine is also perturbing. The only significant representation of femininity in this fraternal story of origins is the girl-child, Webster, who depicts the spirit of the young and future Australia. While she may function as a figure of reconciliation assimilating otherness into her bright white utopia, the mapping out of Australian national identity and history is figured through the masculine. From the figure of Djakapurra Munyarryn through to Captain Cook, Ned Kelly and the 120 stock horses and riders (some undoubtedly women but nonetheless depicting an archetypal masculine pursuit), to the shearing sheds, wood choppers, stock whippers and jolly jumbucks of rural Australia, to the troupe of tappers depicting industrial work and the lawn mowing of quarter-acre suburbanisation, masculine imagery and pursuits predominate this imagining of Australiana. We may speculate that this is an accurate depiction of the mateship of Australia, and the fraternity of the state, but we may also wonder why Australianness cannot be conveyed through a depiction of the activities of women. Perhaps the prams and nappies of the family home, the brooms and mops of domestic service (often performed by Aboriginal girls taken from their families) and the typewriters and notebooks of secretarial work are too ubiquitous to convey the specificity of Australian national identity; or perhaps they are rendered too mundane, too quotidian, to justify elevation into symbols of whatever nation.

Despite these occlusions and evasions however, this is not an unambiguous myth of racial harmony and fraternal mateship for the myth is disturbed or interrupted by the incongruity of the narrative and the multiplicity of its possible interpretations. Myth, as Nancy indicates, is interrupted by literature, and unified communality is interrupted by exposure to and sharing

with others. Within the Olympic pageant the ironic aspect inherent within myth—the irony that within its function as a foundation of community there is also evidence of its fictive elements—fractures the superficial unity. The fictionality of the pageant fractures the totalising foundational trajectory, while the story of felicitous racial harmony and fraternity functions as both parody and critique of contemporary debates about reconciliation and asylum seekers.

In the context of the Australian Prime Minister, and the Australian Government, refusing to apologise for the treatment of Aboriginal people and thereby undermining the possibility of reconciliation, the depiction of friendship between white and Aboriginal Australians, represented simply and powerfully in the joined hands of Nikki Webster and Djakapurra Munyarryn, can be read as a critique and rebuke of the government's failures and as a hope for a better future. Moreover, the representation and narration of a hospitable welcome of refugees and immigrants, juxtaposed against current policies that include mandatory detention of refugees and border-patrols to repulse asylum seekers, may provoke shame and disquiet about Australia's current parsimonious animosity to the latest new 'arrivals'. The Olympic ceremony's depiction of friendship and welcome thus functions as a commentary and as an ironic reversal of the enmity and aversion contemporary white Australia and its government exhibit towards Aboriginal and foreign others.

Moreover, the dissimulating representation of invasion as organic evolution and 'the dawning of a new era', and of Australian restrictions on immigration and rejection of asylum seekers as an 'open[ing] [of] arms', is a thin disguise which can only serve to recall that which it attempts to conceal. The entire narrative of the opening ceremony is structured as a dream of the white girl-child, who at the outset spreads her beach towel, falls asleep and dreams this fantasy of the history of Australia. As dream, it may represent the hope of a better future, but in order to create this felicitous fantasy, it necessarily enacts the dream mechanisms of negation, condensation and displacement. War and massacre, by negation, become evolution and congenial integration; border control, immigration restrictions and vilification of refugees, through condensation and displacement, become open-armed welcome. But this dream of reconciliation and hospitable welcome is also interrupted by the repressed content that haunts the hopeful fantasy. The repressed content returns in the incongruous moments that shatter the dream. The improbability of the serenity with which Munyarryn and his compatriots accept the white 'arrival' shatters the mythology of harmonious integration. Cook's ushering in of the 'dawning of a new era', with its dissimulating evasion of invasion, nonetheless recalls invasion through the associations between Cook, British imperialism, conquest, invasion and massacre.

The opening ceremony, I suggest, functions as a myth of Australian national origins and unified community. Yet it simultaneously interrupts and unravels its own totalising narrative by ironically reversing current Australian policies and sentiments and by remembering, as

it attempts to forget, the tragedies and shame that lie behind its fantasised national harmony. It functions as a narrative of nation, which, in accordance with Anderson's speculations, (an)amnesically rearticulates the past so as to forget its own foundations in racist policies by remembering to incorporate the racial other as archaic heritage or as local cultural colour within the present and future white 'Eternity'. However, as Nancy's formulations would suggest, the opening ceremony also interrupts its own mythologising. The representations of racial harmony, of friendship and of hospitality are not simply a denial of invasion, violence and enmity (although they are also all of these) for they, in addition, function as a commentary and critique that interrupts current policies of inhospitality and animosity.

The opening ceremony myth can be read then as a dissimulating celebration of Australian racial harmony, as a hopeful dream of a better future and as a haunting return of repressed events revealed through their very negation that interrupts the myth of a unified Australian national community. Yet, while this myth of unified nation is interrupted by the operation of its inherent fictionality, I want to argue, returning to Anderson and Benjamin, that myths of national community are most profoundly interrupted through a rearticulation of time. If, for Anderson, the early realist novel relies on the device of synchronic temporality to perform the time of the unified nation, for Benjamin, Messianic time—the articulation of past and present into the now-time—may retrieve the repressed to make possible alternative futures. This method of blasting a lost moment out of homogenising histories may also shatter the myth of unified community, revealing the fractures and dissonances of interrupted community. Kim Scott's novel, *Benang: From the Heart*, I suggest, retrieves a lost past not so as to preserve the memory of that past but so as to reinvent the lost and fractured now-time of the community.

— OFFERING COMMUNITY

Kim Scott's novel is structured neither synchronically (relating the simultaneous lives of its various characters) nor diachronically (mapping out a historical progression across generations). While the narrator, Harley, is in search of his Aboriginal origins, which have been obliterated through biological and social absorption and family separations, his tracing of his origins fluctuates back and forth like waves. Harley's frequent references to the ebb and flow of the sea—'a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return and remain'; 'the blooming and dying' of the sea; 'The sea … blossoming; white, gone, white, gone white gone … Like ectoplasm, like breathing'—reflect the pulsations and repetitions of the narrative structure.[48] Harley's search reveals not historical development but rather 'the same thing happening over and over'.[49]

This metaphor of waves and of repetitious oscillation, of flux and reflux, operates multiply in the narrative; it is a temporal structuring by which events and characters appear, disappear and reappear, but it also evokes the waves of invasion, massacre and dispersion of Aboriginal

people and, at the same time, the repeated return of the seemingly 'dying' race who 'return, return and remain' and who 'are still here, Benang'.[50]

This undulating structure of surge and pulsation may be equated with a Benjaminian Messianic temporal structure. Events dispersed across time and with no causal relation are formed into constellations so as to retrieve and revive their signification. The first reference to the massacres of the Benang people is obliquely intimated through the juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated events: an Aboriginal woman fleeing her adulterous white husband; and a small child running, bewildered, towards the massacre scene. These two events, while separated by generations and decades, intersect through their narrative articulation:

When Kathleen found Ern embracing Topsy … [she] did not slam the doors, did not stamp her feet. She was in the dusty street, near where—so many years ago—her Aunty Harriette had run toward the violence, not understanding her own terror. Harriette had been only a toddler, and her father, Sandy One, had chased her, caught her, thrown her to Fanny who had quickly hidden her away.

   Now it was Jack, who—seeing Kathleen striding into the distance—ran after his sister.[51]

Forty pages later, the story of the massacre returns, resonating still with the pain of the later incest and violation:

Fanny … saw a small group of men women children, running and falling before station men on horseback.

   And suddenly the child, Harriette, had somehow fallen from the wagon, and was stumbling toward the distant violence … Sandy One leapt to the ground …[52]

This condensing of the massacre in the aunt's childhood and the incestuous embrace in the niece's early marriage, roughly forty years later, while causally unconnected are affectively intertwined. The violence and violation of each event, the horror and terror they evoke, create an association on the level of affective sensation. Moreover, linking the violence of the one event with that of the other interrupts the technique of historical distancing so frequently adopted to assuage guilt and deny responsibility for earlier massacres. Chronological histories, which empty past events of their current significance through the creation of a homogenous, empty time, are interrupted by Scott's conjunction of past and present revealing the shared violence, horror, fleeing and attempted rescues that structure these disparate events. Scott's device of coalescing the past and present, like Benjamin's now-time, creates a temporal iteration so that the past never passes but returns in a repeated 'rhythm of return, return and remain'.[53]

This device of temporal condensation and iteration recurs throughout Harley's episodic and

disjointed narrative of separation, dispersal and reconnection. Various characters search their mirrored reflections for traces of their Aboriginal heritage—some seeking this connection, others fearing the reflected white prejudices, which construct them as lacking. Again, the various reflections and desires of great aunt, great uncle and great nephew, explored in different times and contexts, are synthesised to create affective connections and interpretations:

> Separately, neither speaking of it to the other, Jack Chatalong and Kathleen Scat would face their gloomy and distorted reflections. They considered their noses, lips, skin, wondered at lesser brain capacity—according to what they read—allowed by their skulls. I [Harley] have also studied my features in the mirror, searching for resemblances to my own people and, growing increasingly bitter at my [white] grandfather's apparent success, I have wondered what else has been taken away, and what remains.[54]

While Jack and Kathleen fear discerning traces of a repudiated race, Harley hopes to recover a lost heritage covered over by white integration. Nevertheless, all are confronted with a reflection created by white expectations and insinuations:

> So many of us have considered ourselves in my [white] grandfather's various mirrors, trying to see what Ern and his others see. Perhaps Harriette also, since she could read and write, but perhaps never enough to become contaminated by it.
>   Yes, reading about ourselves can be just like looking in such a mirror.[55]

The juxtaposition of these various anxious examinations, though some desire and others reject their reflected Aboriginality, and some occur in the early 1900s and others in the present, reproduce the dread and self-hatred inflicted by the white mirror of racism.

These and numerous other constellations structure the novel. The aligning of racial 'uplifting' and becoming-bird confounds the eugenic attempt to 'civilise' the 'native'. The white narrative of 'uplifting' the Aboriginal race segues into the floating and bird-like drifting of Harley who 'hover[s] on the shifting currents and—look[s] down upon [his] family', of his Uncle Will who was 'up in the air with me' and of his grandmother Topsy who is 'fine-boned as a bird' transforming 'uplifting' into flying.[56] Juxtaposing the various claims to have created 'the first white man born' further resists the civilising mission. Harley's white grand-father claims to have produced the 'first white man' in Harley by breeding out Harley's Aboriginality, but Harley's great-uncle Will had already been pronounced the first white man.[57] Unbeknownst to these later eugenicists, however, Harley's great-great-grandfather, Sandy One, by successfully passing on his own terms, is the first 'Sandy One' by several generations.[58] But Sandy One, while passing as white, 'was no white man' for he lived with and protected his people.[59] These various stories of (un)becoming-white and remaining Benang are woven together to unravel whiteness and revive a hidden racial identity: 'Sandy One was no white

man. Just as I am no white man, despite the look of me'.[60] All these monadic interconnections bring into the present the experiences of ancestors, the histories of massacre, separation and dispersal, the policies of eradication and assimilation. They inhabit the present and they are experienced and felt again through and in the narrator's, the author's and the reader's 'time of the now'.[61]

However, this is not simply a disjunction of time that interrupts diachronic and synchronic temporality but is also an interruption of the myth of unified nation and harmonious community. The myth of Australian unified community, and of white civilisation and benevolence, is likewise interrupted. Most significantly, reinscribing their continuing resonances in the present overturns the myth of the passing away of historical events.

Interrupting a myth of national unity, Kim Scott offers a story, a narrative, a literature, told him by his uncles, read between the lines of the Aborigines Department files and dissected from the historical records. A story passed down the generations, passed from author to author, from reader to reader—passed on again to us, rewritten here, reread now, unworking and unended. Kim Scott offers a rearticulated history, an interrupted community, embracing even those who turn away:

> I acknowledge that there are many stories here … I look out across the small crowd, hoping it will grow … I offer these words, especially to those of you I embarrass … and you hear something like a million million many-sized hearts beating, and the whispering of waves, leaves, grasses …
>
> We are still here, Benang.[62]

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1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 69.
2. Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 2000, p. 497.
3. Jacques Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida', in John Caputo (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A*

Conversation with Jacques Derrida, Fordham University Press, New York, 1997, p. 13.

4. Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, Verso, London, 1997.

6. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1989, pp. 357–8.

7. Benjamin, p. 261.

8. Benjamin, p. 263.

9. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1993, p. 24.

10. Anderson, p. 26.

11. Anderson, pp. 22–4

12. Benjamin, p. 263.

13. Anderson, pp. 5–7.

14. Anderson, pp. 163–206.

15. Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparison: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 26.

16. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparison*, p. 335.

17. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparison*, pp. 334–5.

18. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparison*, p. 359. Anderson is here referring to Benjamin's insight that 'every document of civilisation is at the same time a document of barbarism', Benjamin, p. 256.

19. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparison*, p. 359.

20. Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's in between', in David Bennett (ed.), *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1998.

21. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 159.

22. Bhabha's critique relates to Anderson's earlier work *Imagined Communities*. Anderson's later *The Spectre of Comparison*, in which he discusses the differing effects of the postcolonial novel on concepts of national community, arguably overcomes some aspects of Bhabha's critique.

23. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 201.

24. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 11–12.

25. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 160–1.

26. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 6.

27. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 1–2.

28. Jonathan Culler, 'Anderson and the Novel', *diacritics*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, p. 32.

29. Culler, p. 32.

30. Culler, p. 32.

31. Nancy, p. 50.

32. Nancy, p. 52.

33. Nancy, p. 57.

34. Levi-Strauss, cited in Nancy, p. 55.

35. Levi-Strauss, cited in Nancy, p. 55.

36. Nancy, p. 55.

37. Nancy, p. 63.

38. Nancy, p. 65.

39. Nancy, p. 66.

40. Nancy, p. 67.

41. Nancy, p. 68.

42. Nancy, p. 68.

43. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 11–12.

44. Anderson, *Imagined communities*, p. 201.

45. International Olympic Committee, *The Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games: A Sydney Celebration* (video distributed by Warner Vision Australia), 2000.

46. International Olympic Committee, *The Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games*.

47. I refer here not to the post-Tampa treatment of asylum seekers (which occurred after the 2000 Olympic Games) but to a longer-standing policy of compulsory detention of refugees applying for asylum after arrival in Australia. See Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998, especially pp. 105–66, on 'Ethnic Caging'.

48. Scott, pp. 497, 148, 191.

49. Scott, p. 141.

50. Scott, p. 497.

51. Scott, p. 135.

52. Scott, p. 176.

53. Scott, p. 497.

54. Scott, p. 140.

55. Scott, p. 160.

56. Scott, pp. 456, 149, 135.

57. Scott, pp. 151, 171.

58. Scott, pp. 485–6.

59. Scott, p. 496.

60. Scott, p. 496.

61. Benjamin, p. 263.

62. Scott, p. 497.