

## **‘A heart that could be strong and true’: Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* as queer interior<sup>1</sup>**

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Although it was a publishing success when it first appeared in the early 1960s, Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* (1961) has since attracted scant critical interest.<sup>2</sup> Critical commentary on the novel has briefly resurfaced in response to various re-prints of the book (including a Penguin edition) and, more especially, in response to Ted Kotcheff’s now more culturally familiar cinematic adaptation. *Wake in Fright* the film (1971) was a success on the European festival circuit (it ran for five months in Paris and London) and was re-released in 2009 after it was ‘found’ in a US archive. Its significant influence on Australian New Wave directors is now acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> What interests me is not the question of critical neglect so much as the way in which commentary about both the novel and the film has largely centred on its thematic hostility to an Australian town and its male-dominated community. Critics have overwhelmingly emphasised the negativity of *Wake in Fright*’s narrative and insisted that it exemplifies a contemporary demystification of a national type in late twentieth century culture as Cook’s portrayal of working class masculinity is focalised through the perspective of a middle-class, educated outsider who watches and judges from a critical distance. Often taken to be a fictional representation of the author himself, *Wake in Fright*’s schoolteacher conjures an arid, empty interior populated by bullying men. In doing so, it draws a ‘derogatory’ distinction between country and city, periphery and centre (Temple ix). This supposedly hostile or menacing subject matter has, furthermore, itself generated critical hostility, and this negative reception has not been limited to scholarly readers of novel and film. According to director Ted Kotcheff, at one of the first screenings of the film, a man jumped out of his chair and yelled ‘That’s not us’ at the screen.<sup>4</sup> What is this recognition of a non-recognition that dominates reception of *Wake in Fright*? In posing this question in relation to what I see as the novel’s ambivalent themes and affect, this essay provides an alternative reading to reception of the narrative that has understood it as an outsider’s experience of exile and alienation in the Australian interior.<sup>5</sup> It’s true that *Wake in Fright*’s main character, John Grant, experiences a destabilising of personal boundaries. However, as I show in what follows, the exact source of this ‘menace’ or aggression which threatens Grant’s subjectivity not only remains undefined, it is the source of pleasure as well as pain.

My purpose in taking up this line of argument is not simply to counter dominant reception of the novel and film. Nor is it about uncovering what are – in the case of both the novel and the subsequent film version – quite obvious homoerotic themes and drives, including the hyperbolic characterisation of masculine men as perversions of national types. My approach differs from the kind of queer reading taken up by David Coad who – in his reading of sexual difference as a hypervisible, gender performance in a range of iconic Australian texts – declares an ‘Outback’ that is ‘finally outed’ (126). Indeed, my reading in what follows is

focused not so much on *Wake in Fright*'s masculine men as on the way in which the novel's narrative point of view – focalised through a receptive, even effeminate, schoolteacher (John Grant) who hails from a metropolitan centre – operates as a vector for a kind of authorial or professional disillusionment that is, nonetheless, focused on the savage, virility of working class men. In particular, I want to explore how the narrative's melancholic perspective renders itself in opposition to, what is depicted as, a hypersexual masculinity that is also perversely desired as the site of uncanny familiarity. Like the 'That's not us' yelled at the original cinematic screening of *Wake in Fright*, Grant's narrative writes a simultaneous hatred and desire, repulsion and erotic attraction towards both the novel's physical and menacingly violent men and the arid environment of the interior. In doing so, Grant's outsider perspective evokes a more generalised, postcolonial recognition of non-recognition in postwar Australia – this misrecognition is one that is based on an ambivalent desire to belong to a place that, it seems, continues to resist settlement.

In the first section of this essay, therefore, I connect the melancholic portrayal and affect of *Wake in Fright*'s metropolitan observer to broader anxieties about authorial production and literary distinction taking place in postwar Australia. In doing so, I draw attention to the gendered and spatial contours of a particular kind of masculinist, authorial production that, despite the postwar boom that engendered successful careers in the metropolis, tends towards the gloomy. Here, I suggest that *Wake in Fright*'s melancholy might be the result of anxiety about literary distinction, and relate to fears about the domesticating effects of institutionalisation, rather than simply an outsider's experience of alienation in regional Australia. Melancholy is recognised as a dominant motif and affect in Australian (post)colonial production that has been associated, not with identification or a sense of belonging, but with the uncanny as *unheimlich*, or not home. Whatever form it takes, therefore, a focus on melancholy would seem to reinforce rather than challenge spatial, class-based but also sexualised divisions (such as the idea that there is an unbridgeable gap between the cosmopolitan metropolis and the 'native' interior).

*Wake in Fright*'s sexualisation of the feared 'other' is not, however, distinct from its evocation of place. In postcolonial terms, Grant's narrative understands outback Australia and its inhabitants as both the excess and the disintegration of society and therefore as the space of uncontainable, unclassifiable desire: the unconscious of civilisation and the civil subject. In the second section of this essay, I explore *Wake in Fright*'s melancholy and subjective instability via recourse to a psychoanalytic framework. Leo Bersani's reading of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, as a text that allegorises the formation of the ego via temporal and spatial divides, proves particularly useful for my reading. Here, Bersani draws attention to an unconscious but productive instability structuring Freud's text. As Michael Snediker argues, Bersani's reading of Freud counters potential pessimism about the limits of social connection and of identifications with place in the modern world. In marshalling such readings, my argument thus attends to *Wake in Fright*'s unconscious signs and meanings to suggest that this is a text that traces changing attitudes to masculinity, sexuality, class and race and explores the possibilities and limits of human relationality in a queer rather than conformist Australian interior.

### 1. The schoolteacher 'rules the roost'?

'*Wake in Fright* is a searing demystification of the Australian outback,' writes one critic, 'but rather than the landscape more conventionally concealing the psychopath 'within,' a veneer of egalitarianism shrouds a rigid, self destructive complicity played out in various rituals of

male-bonding and mateship.’<sup>6</sup> But to what extent does this kind of critical commentary create a false opposition between Cook’s apparently dystopic portrait and more nostalgic histories of the rural and of working-class masculinity, such as that found in Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*?<sup>7</sup> Published only three years before in 1958 and drawing on the author’s study of nineteenth-century folklore and balladry, *The Australian Legend* idealises the aesthetics of the ‘common man’ as the basis of an Australian ethos. Ward reads, or rather hears, in the ballads what he argues is the voice of the pastoral worker of the Australian interior – the loyal, communitarian and rebelliously anti-English values expressed in these songs form the basis of his argument for the existence of an Australian ‘mystique.’ Significantly, however, Ward’s *Australian Legend* briefly explores the existence of homoerotic attraction in this homosocial environment. As David Coad points out, Ward recognises the existence of homoerotic attraction in the ballads but simultaneously categorises it as other, as ‘a true sublimation, with no physical element’ (quoted in Coad 89). While Ward’s recognition of the homoerotic as a sign that is also not a sign (has ‘no physical element’) seems to be the inverse of Cook’s depiction of menacing, overbearing physicality in a mining town, there are similarities in the ways in which both Cook and Ward perform their own versions of professional, disaffected melancholy which is understood as other to the working-class masculinity that fascinates both writers.

Cook’s own statements about writing *Wake in Fright* in many ways reinforces continuing critical classifications of the novel as a tale of menace that evinces its author’s ‘deep distaste’ for remote town life (see Birch; Smith; Temple). In a 1972 interview, recorded the year after the release of the film version of *Wake in Fright*, Cook stated that the novel came out of his ‘vivid and traumatic’ working as a journalist in Broken Hill for the Australian Broadcasting Commission:

I was very strongly impressed with Broken Hill, hated the place, hated the people, hated the atmosphere, hated the environment, hated the whole thing, and this hatred finally popped out as ‘Wake in Fright’ eight or ten years later (Transcription, De Berg Tapes 591:1[7])

While Cook’s ‘hatred’ is tempered by the enduring and ‘strong’ impression of Broken Hill, there is no doubt that this book generates animosity. But whence does this hatred emanate? Or towards what is it directed? Is Cook the subject or the object of the feeling that impressed itself on him so strongly? In *Wake in Fright*, this ambivalence is less about the town and its men than it is about the unclear affect that is generated by the schoolteacher as he recognises and then is unable to classify, or stabilise, that which he observes. This ambivalence can also be linked to Cook’s musings about the role of authorship in everyday Australian life and in a way that has implications for thinking about the spatial and gendered contours of literary and other forms of professional distinction in postwar Australia.

Schooled at the selective Fort Street public high school, which provided him with a background in Latin, English and History, Cook’s reflections on his career as an author have implications for the class (city professional vs rural worker) and gendered (effete intellectual vs tough working man) distinctions his novel appears to set up. Before winning critical and popular acclaim for *Wake in Fright*, a break that allowed him to become a full-time novelist and then a film director, Cook worked on a number of metropolitan and regional dailies. His various journalistic posts included a stint at Broken Hill – allegedly the source for *Wake in Fright*’s fictional mining town of Bundanyabba – and then (although he believed himself to be incompetent) a period working for the ABC. In an interview in 1977, Cook emphasises the

diversity of government and journalistic jobs available in Australia in the late 1950s and 60s and he stresses that these opportunities enabled his authorial career much more than his own driving ambition or talent. The interview followed a summer residential school held at the University of New England, Armidale to which Cook and the dramatist, Bob Herbert, were invited as writers in residence. Cook presented a talk entitled ‘Never Go to University’ and made the comment that writers ‘shouldn’t go near the places’[sic]. At university, for Cook, ‘something is ground out, dried up, faded away and not, just not, allowed to flower.’<sup>8</sup> It is ironic, given the theme of *Wake in Fright*, that Cook views the contemporary university as a creative desert. His melancholic view of the over-regulated workplace has something in common with Russel Ward’s nostalgia for the nomadic balladeers of the Australian interior and can be linked to the effects of intensified professionalization in the post World War II period.<sup>9</sup> This was a time in which, as David Carter argues, the ‘canonisation of Australian literature ... was an institutional effect of its professionalization in the academy’ (30).<sup>10</sup> Australian literature emerged as a viable subject to be taught and researched and one that could be valued not only as a distinct field but as a site from which challenges to the cultural imperialism of the English canon could be made.<sup>11</sup>

Russel Ward was one highly influential scholar who made his reputation in this period and it is significant that *The Australian Legend* (1958) not only re-canonises rural, working-class masculinity as representative of Australian nationalism, it does so through a melancholic tone. This is evident from the opening paragraph of Ward’s book when he evokes an Australian spirit that ‘derives rather from the common folk than from the more respectable and cultivated sections of society’ (1). Although *The Australian Legend* came out of his PhD thesis, a publication that enabled his academic career, it already seems that Ward is lamenting that literary distinction. Pathos and nostalgia are also present in abundant measure, particularly in the many quotations of bush ballads. However, countering this melancholy is one brief paragraph in which Ward glancingly refers to a racial other, an unsung presence in the cultural landscape. Here Ward qualifies his argument that the ‘bushman’ stands in for the ‘true Australian’ and suggests another influence:

If, as has been argued, the bushman’s *esprit de corps* sprang largely from his adaptation to, and mastery of, the outback environment, then the Aborigine was his master and mentor. (186)

Like his brief allusion to a ‘sublimated’ homoeroticism, Ward’s reference to an unspecified Aboriginal ‘mentor’ is a recognition that functions to reinstate the physical presence of the ‘bushman.’ Yet, the reference to an Aboriginal ‘master’ who mentors the bushman subtends Ward’s original logic in which the cultivated intellectual derives from the common folk and in a way that suggests the collapse of the sexual, racial and class boundaries otherwise entailed in the legend. The idea of Aboriginal ‘mastery’ and mentorship extends – via a specifically racial (and, by implication, sexual) discourse – the pastoral logic of Ward’s book in which the intellectual or expert takes his inspiration from the ‘common folk.’ It provides a context for the workingman of Ward’s thesis – his Rousseauian ‘noble bushman’ – who is at once at ease with his fellow workers and rural surroundings and an appropriation of a silenced, racial and sexual other.

The pathos underpinning Ward’s exemplification of the workingman, especially if understood in the context of the development of professionalised forms of mastery in Australian educational institutions, can thus be understood as destabilising the authenticity, the Anglo-Celt origins, of Ward’s ballad singer. The melancholic tone of Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, with its nostalgia for an older version of working-class masculinity,

masks what is to me a more interesting acknowledgement: the possibility of reciprocal knowledges and influences between Aboriginal and colonial cultures. Like Ward's melancholic tone, however, Cook's description of the institutionalised writer as a fading flower avoids the possibility of such a critique through its recourse to a familiar position that laments any domestication or feminisation of the male intellectual. In this way, Cook's reading of the fate of the intellectual in Australian culture echoes Patrick White's devastating critique that, in Australia, the 'schoolmaster and journalist rule what intellectual roost there is' (126). The suggestion, from both writers, that the only intellectual culture that exists in Australia is suburban and middle-brow carries with it the gendered anxiety that suburbia, with its claustrophobic spaces and nuclear family structure, threatens autonomous models of masculinity.

In *Wake in Fright*, Cook's fictional schoolteacher does not 'rule the roost' so much as lament the unsung potential of his students in a literal, rather than metaphoric, desert. *Wake in Fright* begins with the schoolteacher, John Grant, lamenting his enforced position as a teacher in a small school in a remote town called Tiboonda where 'there is no sewerage, there are no hospitals, rarely a doctor ... electricity is for the few who can afford their own plant ... no picture shows and few dance halls; and the people are saved from stark insanity by the one strong principle of progress that is ingrained for a thousand miles east, north, south and west of the Dead Heart—the beer is always cold' (8). Later, he refers to the 'deep sadness' that he feels 'permeates the outback' and to a 'wild placidity' in the stars above (143). Seemingly in concert with this melancholic depiction of isolated place and community (the inland as 'Dead Heart') are the lyrical allusions that bookend the novel. However, alongside this romantic expressivity is *Wake in Fright's* tropologically dense imagery and aurality (a 'wild placidity') that counters the outsider's reading of a 'Dead' interior. My emphasis on the meaning of the novel's aural and lyrical energies is not meant to evoke nostalgia for idealised stereotypes—to do so would be to risk recuperating or idealising images of the 'noble bushmen' as the repository of nationalist values. However, the novel's lyricism does become interesting when thought about in relation to the remarkable, albeit at times aggressive, sexual energy that pervades the novel as a whole. The fine line, in *Wake in Fright*, between the depiction of a bullying, menacing masculinity and the raw, sexual appeal of the men Grant meets comes to a head in the ambiguous sexual encounter between the main protagonist, the city-bred schoolteacher, and one of Bundanyabba's men. Read in the light of the novel's aurality, through which the main protagonist registers his heightened awareness of his surroundings, my argument draws attention to the novel's lyrical ambivalence as well as its portrayal of perversity, rather than conformity, at the heart of the rural experience.

At the beginning of the novel, Grant leaves Tiboonda for a brief sojourn in Sydney. His journey begins – as it concludes – with his hearing a song just as he is about to board a train:

Even before the train pulled into the siding, he could hear the singing. On every slow train in the west they sing, the stockmen and the miners, the general storekeepers and the drifting workers; the Aborigines and the half-castes shyly joining in on the outskirts. And somebody always has a mouth organ, and they sing with tuneless gaiety the songs of the American hit parades which filter through the networks of the Australian Broadcasting Commission or from the static-ridden apparatus of the occasional country radio station. (12)

On the train ride home, after a stop-off in the town of Bundanyabba thwarts his plan of moving on to Sydney, Grant hears another song. This time the song is a fragment from the folklore ballad, 'The Dying Stockman':

But hark there's the wail of a dingo  
 Watchful and weird I must go,  
 For it tolls the death knell of a stockman  
 From the gloom of the scrub down below.

This verse comes from an anonymous Australian ballad and expresses a feeling of communion with place that is very different from Grant's professed exile.<sup>12</sup> The first line of this ballad's chorus, 'wrap me up in my stockwhip and blanket,' expresses the wishes of the speaker (presumably a stockman) who wants an unostentatious funeral. Wishing to be buried in the 'gloom of the scrub down below,' the speaker implicitly rejects the trappings of colonial culture. Along with this ballad, that John hears, are the sentimental waves of sound coming from the American hit parades. Cook's inclusion of this lyrical expression of working-class stoicism and rebellion, hailing from an oral, working-class tradition, points to the novel's interest in a folkloric, albeit melancholic expressivity that is not unlike Ward's nostalgia for the common song of the people in *The Australian Legend*. However, these are not the only sounds Grant hears in the supposedly 'Dead' landscape. They begin with the 'eager voices' of John Grant's classroom and continue through to 'the dischordant [sic] sounds of the singers' heard on the train to Bundanyabba that form 'a senseless rhythm' (13), further on 'the train driver sounded his whistle just the same and, in the darkness, there were children waving just the same' (14). Such aural impressions, forming both calls and responses, emanating from human and non-human alike, crowd the novel. Grant stops in the town of Bundanyabba, on route to Sydney, where he is unable to resist the compulsion to bet all his money in a game of two-up. During the intense excitement of the game, Grant refers to 'noise [that] no longer crashed into his brain but beat more remotely around him' (22-3). Having lost all his money, and enticed to drink away what money he does scrape together, Grant fails to escape the town in time to reach Sydney during the two-week break. Confused and disoriented, Grant later makes a reference to the talkers of the city as 'Yabba-men' (and, like Ward's allusion to an unspecified Aboriginal presence, Grant also here refers to a vague impression when he wonders 'wasn't Yabba Aboriginal for talk?' 26). The allusion to the biblical city of Babylon – these talkers leave an 'impression' but make no real sense as Grant is unable to 'tie the threads of the thought together'[sic] (26) – becomes more explicit when on the train back to Tiboonda 'the babble of voices [forms] a cacoon of sound around him' (172). At one point, he refers to the 'nasal twang developed by people unable to open their mouths because of the dust' (66) Later, the aridity of the place and the incoherent sound blur together: 'a warm drone, like bees, very big bees, on a hot, very hot day' (66). Further on still, the sound of a fox yapping served only 'to increase their immense isolation' (86).

Discussing poetic representations of place, Ivor Indyk identifies in Australian pastoral a tentative lyricism, a reluctance to express a full range of emotion or to see 'the Australian landscape as suitable for the celebration of desire' ('Pastoral Poets' 354). Even more interesting is Indyk's later essay about the Aboriginal in Australian pastoral in which he notes the lack of a human addressee in the poems of Charles Harpur and, later, Judith Wright to observe that the land, rather than another human occupant, is infused with a kind of savage, mystical otherness. This reading applies to *Wake in Fright* but only to a certain extent. *Wake in Fright's* Grant can be described as a reluctantly desiring subject but he not only describes

he also hears sounds and sees images that emanate from an often indistinct object. Grant's ambivalent desire or tentative lyricism, if connected to what I've been calling the novel's insistent aurality, troubles the idea that this is simply a narrative of white (post)colonial exile and alienation, of failure to identify with place.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. 'Wild Placidity': *Wake in Fright's* material unconscious

There are a handful of readers that are attentive to *Wake in Fright's* contradictions and ambivalences.<sup>14</sup> For example, *New York Times* critic, Anthony Boucher read it, on first publication in the early 1960s, as a coming of age novel and wrote that the publisher's had mis-judged the novel in marketing it as a suspense. In an *Australian* newspaper review from 2001, Matthew Spencer begins by arguing that Cook's novel is the 'Australian outback's very own *Less Than Zero* and that it stands up as a 'coming of age' drama.' Yet, despite this comparison to an American novel also characterised by its main character's discordant sensitivity to a desert landscape in Los Angeles, this review interestingly ends by alluding to and then dismissing *Wake in Fright's* romantic lyricism as meaningless:

Cook is best when he's describing the energy of the two-up game or the menacing strangeness of an outback night, where a slaughtered kangaroo can disappear without trace. But the author, who died in 1987, was young when he wrote it, and when the exuberance of the big scenes fade we are left with the drunken musings of a young man overusing the semi-colon when pondering the universe: 'The stars, the western stars, so many, so bright, so close, so clean, so clear; splitting the sky in remorseless frigidity; pure stars, unemotional stars; stars in command of the night and themselves; undemanding and unforgiving; excelling in their being and forming God's incontrovertible argument against the charge of error in creating the west.' Now, I've no idea what that means, but mercifully the next line reads: 'The car stopped and Dick opened a bottle of beer with his teeth', and we are back with the booze and the benzedrine and what Cook does best. ('Outback of the mind')

This review is striking in the way it reproduces the idea that *Wake in Fright* is essentially an outsider's experience of 'menacing strangeness' at the same time as it suggests that something else is at play. In other words, it both reads and refuses to read ('I've no idea what that means') what I have been arguing is the novel's emotional or lyrical expressivity *and* receptivity. It toys with, before dismissing, what the sensate aspects of the novel have to do with the larger narrative. Why does *Wake in Fright's* schoolteacher see a 'remorseless frigidity' in the stars and how might this enigmatic expression be connected, rather than divorced, from the next image, that of the miner 'Dick' opening a bottle of beer with his teeth? The latter characterisation of tough (or is it a rough?) masculinity that insists on conformity is widely understood as the novel's menace but this response seems almost wilfully misleading in its refusal to think through the novel's disparate elements. The miners, Dick and Joe, are never tough in the sense they are aggressive or bullying towards Grant. Their characters could be described as rough in the sense that they engage in unsophisticated play and loutish behaviour but also in the sense that there is something incomplete about them. The description of them as 'elaborately casual' is telling in relation to how the narrator views their masculinity – it's almost as if they approximate rather than convincingly perform traditional masculinity. Director Ted Kotcheff – whose film of *Wake in Fright* may be the best reading of the novel's unconscious effects – reflects on Cook's main themes, including the role of the 'outsider' in a male-dominated working-class town, and also on what it meant to be a film-maker and a foreigner (Kotcheff is Canadian) when directing on location in

Broken Hill, NSW. While Kotcheff states that he felt like ‘the Man from Mars,’ he acknowledges the importance of this outsider position in allowing him to see things ‘that they [miners and other men] don’t see.’ At the same time, Kotcheff destabilises the authority of his directorial vision when he talks of how he went there ‘to observe them and empathise with them’ and states that ‘I’m not the judge of my characters, I’m their own best witness.’ He also compares the masculine energy of the two-up scene and the rough play of the characters, Dick and Joe, to his own experience of meeting men in Broken Hill. Describing how one man ‘didn’t want to hit me, he wanted me to hit him,’ Kotcheff states that ‘homoerotic’ is too strong a description for what he nevertheless observed as, not so much menacing aggression, but rough masculine play and a desire for ‘human contact.’

In his *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*, essentially a study of subject/object relations as constituted through art and literature, Leo Bersani argues for the prevalence of a self-shattering subjectivity and a kind of theoretical or discursive collapse in twentieth century works that are engaged in what he sees as a psychoanalytic process, a thinking through of the relation between thought and the body. In one chapter, that is particularly pertinent to *Wake in Fright*’s themes, Bersani analyses Freud’s *Civilisation and Discontents* in order to deconstruct Freud’s question ‘our civilisation is largely responsible for our misery. Why?’ (13). Freud’s argument is to do with whether we moderns are miserable as a result of civilised society’s renunciation of an aggressive instinct, a primal urge. For Bersani, this question is less interesting than the theoretical incoherency that *Civilisation and Discontents* falls into as its exploration of the relationship between the individual and civilisation becomes less about misery or happiness than about ‘an anatomy of sexual desire’ (17). This textual incoherence, Bersani argues, is structural and has a bearing on how Freud saw his own professional distinction, his text also contributes to a ‘problematics of the exceptional individual’ (16). Indeed, Bersani argues that it is the footnotes of *Civilisation and its Discontents* that play havoc with Freud’s main argument in this book. Most especially, Bersani sees a moment of joyful abandon in the footnotes that troubles Freud’s argument that individual self-regulation and renunciation of narcissistic pleasures, in modern society, necessitates unhappiness. In the footnotes especially, as Bersani sees it, Freud explores the connection between aggression and joy as Freud experiences an ‘oceanic’ rather than a menacing feeling in the act of renunciation. This suggests, to Bersani, that the footnotes are the psychoanalytic unconscious of Freud’s work:

Wildness springs into the Freudian text from these secondary thoughts, these afterthoughts, these bottom of the page thoughts. The footnotes redefine individual happiness, civilization and the supposed conflict between the two. (14)

Despite this reading, Bersani emphasises the existence of self-shattering identifications and the prevalence of theoretical collapse and textual incoherence at the heart of *Civilisation and its Discontents*’ meaning. In his book, *Queer Optimism*, Michael Snediker looks at the tendency, among queer theorists such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, towards negativity via their deconstructions of normative models of identity and sexuality. Snediker asks whether such an emphasis on self-shattering and melancholy risks ignoring a text’s potentiality, its joyful effects (Snediker 10-11), which might include trusting the unconscious reflections held in the footnotes of Freud’s texts. It is not only queer theory that has drawn on melancholy, and psychic self-shatterings, in order to challenge normative models of personhood. Discussions of identification with place, or rather melancholic *non-identifications* with place, have characterised both writings and criticism in colonial and



postcolonial Australian work that lean more towards gloomy predictions than joyful abandon.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of Snediker's emphasis on a potentially joyful Freud in Bersani's reading, my argument is that it is possible to read *Wake in Fright* not purely as the melancholic lament of an alienated, traumatised outsider. What can be made, for instance, of a title that contains neither a subject nor object but rather a state of being that is about to happen (wake). Of course the wake is into fright. Or is it? What if fright were understood as an emotion that causes one to wake? Read in this way, the title also points to the highly sensate lyricism and sound of the novel, as it prepares the reader to be alert to a sensation. The novel is crowded with inchoate impressions and inexplicable signifiers that trouble, or make indistinct, the exact object of its main character's hatred. In the end, as I've argued here, it's possible that at the heart of Cook's and his character's hatred may also be hatred's counterpart, that is an intense sexual pleasure.

Grant's 'impressions' come to a head the night of a roo-hunting expedition with Doc Tydon and his 'elaborately casual' friends, the miners Dick and Joe. During this expedition, and contrasting with the opening depiction of the landscape as a 'Dead heart,' Grant's experience is of a densely, occupied landscape. In the passenger seat, Grants watches the 'rush of visual effects' containing a multitude of eyes: 'the animals of the scrub,' 'possums, sheep, foxes, dingoes, cattle, kangaroos, rabbits, rats, emus, wild-cats, bandicoots, all turning their eyes into the giant, white beam that pointed its way through their bush' (83). After discovering, with both horror and excitement, that Tydon eats the kangaroos' testicles, Grant accepts the challenge to wrestle an 'impassive' kangaroo that bears 'down on them as though in a passionless attack.' Again Grant is at once excited and 'horrified by the breathing of the kangaroo' (107) as he compares the encounter to the Romans 'when they matched men against exotic beasts in arenas' (83).

Immediately following this episode is Doc Tydon's seduction of Grant. At this stage penniless and homeless, and after several drunken, disoriented days in the town, Grant has reluctantly stayed on in Tydon's house, accepting his rough hospitality even though he is the most explicit object of Grant's animosity. The reader is told that Grant hated Tydon 'with a clear, hard hatred' (98). Notwithstanding what Grant's hatred might mean, in terms of unconscious or hidden textual meanings, it's also worth reflecting on what this hatred means in terms of Tydon's standing in the novel, that is in terms of the kind of masculinity he represents. While the 'Doc' in Doc Tydon seems partly parodic, it also suggests that Tydon is slumming in Bundanyabba. For example, Tydon declares himself a 'doctor of medicine' but at the same time ostentatiously eschews professional distinctions and high-class pretensions. He is an alcoholic who revels in shooting expeditions with Dick and Joe yet he also stands apart from their boyish revelry, as if he is not of their social class. Furthermore, Tydon's views on sex (which he compares to 'eating') are surprisingly liberal as are his views on women. In the following excerpt, the narrative enters into Grant's 'train of thought' but also confuses the boundaries between his and Tydon's 'talk':

No, he would sit here and let Tydon tell him about his sex life, or supposed sex life, or rather supposed life—it was certainly sexy ... he lost his train of thought. Tydon was still talking.

'But what's wrong with a woman taking a man when she feels like one?  
'I .... don't really know.'

‘You don’t know because there’s nothing wrong with it, nothing. It’s a damned sensible, civilised way to behave.’

‘And yet you’ll find people who’d call Janette a slut—women who’d like to act like her, and the men she hasn’t given a tumble.’

‘Are you coming shooting?’

‘Yes. Sex is just like eating, or sleeping or eliminating. It’s a thing you do because you have to or because you want to. Have another drink. And it’s been surrounded by all the mystery and ballyhoo of centuries for God knows what reason. (86-7)

From this passage, Tydon is beginning to look less like Grant’s hated other than his alter-ego, or perhaps even his mirror image. Parallels can be made here between Grant/Tydon and Marlow/Kurtz of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The latter novel is also comparable to *Wake in Fright* in that, as Edward Said has so eloquently shown, *Heart of Darkness* is a narrative that functions not as so much as a tool of cultural imperialism as a subversive critique of the business of colonial conquest.<sup>16</sup> I’m not arguing here that *Wake in Fright* contains either an explicit or implicit critique of, say, the effects of the business of mining in regional Australia. It doesn’t. However, what it does offer, through what I’ve been arguing are unconscious elements at work in the text, is a critique of processes of masculinist dis-identification and, by extension, the forms of professional and/or metropolitan distinction that might attend this dis-identification. Grant’s character can be understood as one whose fantasmatic projections of self-autonomy, his arrogant belief in his distinction from the male-dominated social group in Bundanyabba, ultimately fails and is in tension with other ways of being.

What troubles Grant’s self-autonomy is not only his sensitivity to the sounds and images that crowd his environment but also the existence of an unconscious desire – a recognition of pleasure that is then transformed into misrecognition. After the roo-hunt, Grant covered in blood is wrestled to the ground by Doc Tydon. The next morning, this rough act, like Cook’s veiled reference to a traumatic and vivid experience in Broken Hill, is remembered as a ‘something’:

It was all to do with being drunk because this could not, did not, happen to John Grant, schoolteacher and something. Tydon was a foul thing. But so was John Grant. Oh God, that light! But it was going out. And it went out. But what had happened before was terrible. It should not have happened.

It could not have happened. It had happened twice. And then nothing for a long time. (116)

Grant’s reference is to a ‘something,’ a sign of a sign. Grant’s inability to speak openly of the sexual act is in tension with the insistence that ‘something’ did happen, twice. The doubled presence here of an overdetermined sign that exists but cannot be interpreted can be aligned with the narrative structure for which Grant’s view is the primary point of focalisation. Throughout the novel, Grant’s perspective is privileged but it is also objectified in a novel that complicates subject-object relations.

This blurring of boundaries between self and other can be seen in the opening pages of the novel when Grant contemplates his classroom before leaving the outback school for his summer break. Like Thomas Gray’s flower that is ‘born to blush unseen/And waste its sweetness on the desert air,’<sup>17</sup> Cook’s students represent unrecognised potential. The reader is only fleetingly introduced to the teacher’s

... twenty-eight pupils, twenty-seven at school only because the law insisted on their being educated until they were at least fifteen or because some desperate farmer, clawing a living from the clods of the great inland plains, thought that in education there might be for his child a little hope that he had abandoned.

And the twenty-eighth, young Mason—eleven years old, hungry to learn, eager, intelligent and inexplicably sensitive, but doomed to join the railway gangs as soon as he was legally old enough, because his father was a ganger. (3-4)

The teacher here projects onto the child a certain pleasure in the idea that his ‘inexplicable sensitivity’ will never come to scholarly fruition – that his intelligence will never flower but that he will simply follow his father the ‘ganger.’ Cognate with this melancholy is the schoolteacher’s focus on the deep sadness that ‘permeates the outback’ and projects an ineffective appreciation of the land’s ‘wild placidity’ (143). Like his students, the teacher is ‘wearily’ fulfilling a government requirement at this outback post. Also like the ‘desperate farmer’ who ‘claws a living from the great inland plains,’ Grant encounters resistance in his unyielding student. Echoes of White’s reading of Australia as the Great Emptiness can also be heard here, as the teacher contemplates the ‘silent centre of Australia, the Dead Heart’ that lies further west.

The teacher’s melancholic desire, linked to the ‘inexplicable sensitivity’ of his student, is also to be found in the multitude of animal eyes that fill the ‘wild placidity’ of the desert night as Grant trains his sensitivity towards an unrecognised potential in the wilderness. In these ways, Cook’s novel alludes to the failed simplicity of reading the Australian inland as a ‘Dead Heart’ rather than an occupied interior. Nevertheless the counter reading of the landscape as a ‘Dead Heart,’ despite acute sensitivity to a ‘something’ else out there, also has overtones of Grant’s deflowering in the hands of Doc Tydon. The sexual undercurrent here raises questions about the gendered anxieties that attend institutionalisation and fearful perceptions about the taming of a singular, autonomous masculinity. This institutional distinction is also at play in Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents* a text that generates, as Bersani elucidates it, the very theoretical incoherency that Freud argues is renounced in civilised society as it reproduces ideas about the unstable, porous boundaries of the self and blurs the boundary between the individual and the larger social group. Such themes are subtly addressed in the song Grant hears when he first leaves Tiboonda and again when he is returning after his misadventure in Bundanyabba. The song is one from the American hit parades that, according to the narrator, ‘filters through the networks of the Australian Broadcasting Commission.’ Like the footnotes that, as Bersani argues, form the unconscious of Freud’s narrative, the way in which these lyric begin and end *Wake in Fright* may also function as the narrative’s unconscious, troubling what could otherwise be taken as a menacing tale of postcolonial exile:

There is a heart that’s made for you, the singers were chanting ...

A heart that needs your love divine  
 A heart that could be strong and true  
 If only you would say you’re mine.  
 If we should part my heart would break,  
 Oh say that this will never be,  
 Oh darling please, your promise make,  
 That you’ll belong to only me. (13)

This is an ostensibly simple lyric. In its banality, however, is a sentiment about the possibility of interpersonal relations and, also perhaps, about the reciprocity that underlies all creative productions. Like the ‘oceanic’ feeling of Freud’s text, the heart in this song resides between a ‘you’ and a ‘me’ and, heard as Grant travels through the desert, belies the supposed silence and emptiness of this interior.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous referees of this essay for extremely useful feedback. Professor Leigh Dale’s generous and thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this essay is also greatly appreciated.

<sup>2</sup> Published in England and the USA, Cook’s novel was also translated into several languages and included as a prescribed text on school curricula (Temple vii). According to Peter Temple, Anthony Boucher reviewed the book favourably in the *New York Times*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, in Mayer and McFarlane, the note that *Wake in Fright* was one of ‘the finest films made in Australia’ (122). Brian McFarlane notes, in *Australian Cinema 1970-1985*, that it was ‘good enough to set the whole 1970s revival going several years before it took off’ (42). As Ted Kotcheff proudly claims, in the 2009 DVD interview, some of the most prominent directors of the 70s revival (Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi) have personally acknowledged the importance of his film.

<sup>4</sup> See interview, 2009 DVD, with Ted Kotcheff. See also Shirley and Adams comment, in *Australian Cinema: the First Eighty Years*, that ‘despite excellent reviews around the world and good public response in London and Paris (where it ran for five months), *Wake in Fright* was perhaps too uncomfortably direct and uncompromising to draw large Australian audiences’ (245).

<sup>5</sup> An exemplary instance of this kind of response is the *Sydney Morning Herald* review of the novel following its original publication. See Edwards, ‘Our Grim Outback’. For contemporary discussion of novel as dystopic representation of place and community see Kent; Lynch; Morton. For similar treatment of film see Ambler; Elder and Moore; Jennings, O’Regan; Stratton; Turner.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Savage, ‘The Lost Cult of Wake in Fright’ <http://www.intensities.org/Essays/Savage.pdf>. Accessed Tuesday 5 October 2010. See also Tom Lynch, ‘Literature from the Arid Zone’, for discussion of book as dystopic view of landscape from an ecocritical perspective. The impression one gets from books such as *Wake in Fright* is that the people of the arid interior are ‘other’. (77)

<sup>7</sup> See Elder in particular

<sup>8</sup> John Ryan ‘An Interview with Kenneth Cook’ *Westerly* 3 (September 1977) 75-83

<sup>9</sup> For a counter argument to Ward’s sentimental treatment of Australian nationalism, see Graeme Davison.

<sup>10</sup> See also Dale and McKernan.

<sup>11</sup> The last chapter of Leigh Dale’s *The English Men*, discusses the emergence of Australian literature as a field that presented a challenge to English-ness, and defenders of the English canon. Dale notes that Australianists tended to do so by celebrating a uniform, nationalist ethos of working-class egalitarianism at the expense of recognizing Australia’s cultural diversity

<sup>12</sup> This ballad is collected in T. Inglis Moore’s, *A Book of Australia: With 52 Photographs*. Sydney: Collins, 1961

<sup>13</sup> For example, Graeme Turner points to a dystopic trend which underpins late twentieth-century Australian cultural production and contributes to a national preoccupation with the pressures of social conformity rather than, say, transcendentalist individualism or pastoral connection. See also Tim Bonyhady’s chapter, ‘A Pastoral Arcadia’, in *Images in Opposition* in which he argues that views of Australia as an arcadian pastoral were in irreconcilable conflict with Aboriginal uses of the land.

<sup>14</sup> See Bird; Docker; Kotcheff interview. See also Bill Collins comment: ‘*Wake in Fright*, it’s not just another movie for entertainment, it’s a movie which almost holds a mirror up to life and it could be a mirror up to your life. It could be a mirror up to mine’. ‘*Wake in Fright* restored for re-release’.

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Transcript of *The 7.30 Report* Interview. <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2550081.htm>  
 Accessed 15 October 2010.

<sup>15</sup> This melancholy affect is particularly prominent in critical responses to Marcus Clarke's reading of the Australian landscape as 'weird melancholy'. See in particular Michael Wilding's 'Weird Melancholy: Inner and Outer Landscapes in Marcus Clarke's Stories'.

<sup>16</sup> See Edward Said, 'Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*'

<sup>17</sup> from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1750)

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