

Disputed Territories as Sites of Possibility:  
Kim Scott's Writing and the Wirlomin Noongar  
Language and Stories Project

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# Abstract

Kim Scott was the first Aboriginal author to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2000 for *Benang*, an award he won again in 2011 for *That Deadman Dance*. Yet despite these national accolades, Scott interrogates the very categories of Australian and Indigenous literatures to which his work is subjected. His writing reimagines, incorporates and challenges colonial ways of thinking about people and place. This thesis reveals the provocative proposal running through Scott's collected works and projects that contemporary Australian society (and literature) should be grafted onto regional Aboriginal languages and stories as a way to express a national sense of "who we are and what we might be". Scott's vision of a truly postcolonial Australia and literature is articulated through his collected writings which form a network of social, historical, political and personal narratives.

This thesis traces how Scott's writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Wirlomin Project) reconfigure colonial power relationships in the disputed territories of place, language, history, identity and the globalised world of literature. Ultimately, Scott intends to create an empowered Noongar position in cross-cultural exchange and does so by disrupting the fixed categories inherent in these territories; territories constructed during the colonising and nationalising of Australia. Due to the range of the disputed territories identified in this thesis, there is an engagement with a variety of theoretical frameworks including Val Plumwood's ecopoetics, Bakhtinian dialogic, Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, David Damrosch's world literature, Martin Nakata's cultural interface and, importantly, Scott's own writing on regional Noongar literature. Each of these approaches to Scott's writing and the Wirlomin Project analyses how Scott begins a process of decolonisation, finding sites of Noongar empowerment, truth-telling and reciprocity in areas of cross-cultural dispute. Scott's writing problematises the concept of a bound and unified nation in a constructive way.

This thesis is broken into seven chapters that chronologically examine each of Scott's texts within a particular disputed territory and critical framework. The first chapter performs an ecocritical reading of Scott's short fiction and poetry (these works span the period from 1985 to 2015) and is followed by analyses of language and *True Country*, history and *Benang*, Noongar identity in *Kayang and Me*, the globalised world of literature and *That Deadman Dance*, Noongar empowerment through the Wirlomin Project, and a revisiting of these key areas in relation to *Taboo*. Increasingly, the Wirlomin Project becomes the nexus of Scott's creative, personal and political trajectories and this thesis argues that, through the community-run project, Scott seeks to position an empowered Noongar heritage at the heart of a conflicted country and its stories.

## Author statement

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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The contents of this published chapter are incorporated into chapter six of this thesis.

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# Introduction

Scott's ancestral home is Noongar country—the south-east coast of Western Australia between Gairdner River and Cape Arid. In his first published essay, Scott describes Noongar country as 'boundary territory; between peoples, between desert and sea. In some of the maps – to the extent that you can ever trust them – it is even that labelled “disputed territory”’ (2000a, 171). The boundary territories in Scott's writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (Wirlomin Project)—a community initiative to return and strengthen Noongar language and story within the community—are metaphorical manifestations of the tensions between colonial and Noongar cultures in relation to the land, country, language, history, identity and literature. The key contention of this thesis is that these disputed territories double as sites of possibility to strengthen Noongar heritage and shift the discourse around Australia's people and places.

Scott's distrust of the map speaks to a broader distrust of colonial frameworks throughout his work. Benedict Anderson argues that the map, interlinked with the census and the museum, 'illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain' (1983, 184). This thinking, Anderson continues, 'was a totalising classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state's real or contemplated control: people, regions, languages, products, monuments and so forth' (1983, 184). By questioning the map, Scott questions the legitimacy of the colonial authority and connection to place that continues to underpin Australia's national identity today. Scott's writing and projects embody multiplicity, diversity, contradiction and uncertainty in their narratives and processes rather than the singularity and linearity so characteristic of what Lisa Slater in her essay 'Kim Scott's *Benang*: The Ethics of Uncertainty' has called the 'colonial logic' (2005, 148). Scott consistently exposes how the application of the colonial logic has erased, misrepresented and misunderstood Aboriginal people, their land and culture.

In ‘Disputed Territory’, Scott uses the liminal position of Noongar country—being between land and sea—as an analogy for the liminal position of his writing that contends with, and incorporates, the legacies of both his colonial and Noongar heritage. By Scott and the members of the Wirlomin Project questioning the fundamental logic of colonial controlling mechanisms, they also question the fundamental assumption that colonial and Noongar cultures are isolated entities locked in opposition. Scott’s work not only seeks out the conflict between these cultures and worldviews, but also their overlaps, exchanges, and appropriations.

The liminal quality of Scott’s work speaks directly to the reluctance in his writing to didactically divide, categorise or define his Noongar heritage in such certain terms as befitting the colonial logic. Scott’s representation of and discussion of Noongar country, language, history, identity and literature in his fiction and nonfiction is ambivalent. Even his choice to identify exclusively as Noongar—a choice that, he argues, is politically imperative in Australia—contends with what being Noongar truly means (Brown 2005, 179). Scott considers both the opportunities in and the destruction wrought by colonisation. In its most reciprocal and respectful moments, colonisation provided the possibility of cross-cultural exchange between putatively equal parties and it is this dynamic, Scott argues, that contemporary Australian society must seek to rebuild. However, due to the devastation of Aboriginal languages and cultures, an equitable relationship first requires the empowering of Aboriginal communities before this exchange can occur. Scott’s narratives are notable for incorporating both Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives. Importantly, while Scott uses Noongar language, story and epistemologies as a counterpoint to the colonial logic, he complicates this seemingly oppositional binary by also writing against *and within* established colonial paradigms.

John Fielder has observed that Scott, a man with Noongar and European heritage, ‘makes no secret of his struggle with “schizoid” tendencies’ (2005, 5). Indeed, many of his Noongar protagonists, such as Billy in *True Country* (1993), Harley in *Benang* (1999), and Bobby in *That Deadman Dance* (2010), struggle with the same ‘schizoid’ state caused by their descending from both Noongar and

colonial heritages or from their ambivalence in cross-cultural exchange. Contemporary Australia—having both Aboriginal and colonial histories—is also depicted as suffering from the same condition because, as Fielder notes, this ‘schizoid element ... pervades our history, our culture, our national mythology’ (2005, 5). The portrayal of this underlying conflict in Australia’s national identity, what Sheila Collingwood-Whittick has described as ‘the pain of unbelonging’, is central to Scott’s writing (2007, xl).

Scott’s fiction and nonfiction do not depict these contestations as reconciled or attempt to resolve these differences by constructing a singular national identity. Scott, in fact, questions Australia’s post-colonial status. In ‘Covered Up With Sand’, he points out that in Australia many of the markers of post-colonial society do not exist whereas the racial classification of the colonised and coloniser as well as the ‘power relationship characteristic of colonial societies’ continue, resulting in a nation where ‘Indigenous communities remain at a disadvantage compared to the rest of the population’ (2007a, 123). Rather than being post-colonial, Scott’s writing intervenes in the process of decolonisation. Drawing on the definition of decolonisation in Rob Garbutt, Soenke Biermann and Baden Offord’s ‘Into the Borderlands: Unruly Pedagogy, Tactile Theory and the Decolonising Nation’, Scott finds an apt description for his work: ‘the unravelling of assumed certainties and the re-imagining and re-negotiating of common futures’ (Scott 2018, 5). These negotiations take him into the disputed territories of land and country, language, history, identity and literature. It is here that the unravelling occurs in order for new ways of thinking about who Noongar people and the wider Australian population are and who they could be.

Lisa Slater’s essay on *Benang* identifies central features of Scott’s writing such as the representation of ‘plurality’ and ‘uncertainty’ developed as a counter to, or in addition to, the colonial logic (2005, 157–8). She notes that Scott refuses to ‘propagate the enforced Western vision of Aboriginality and [instead] forms uncertain representations that arise out of Nyoongar traditions, the experience of

racial violence and plurality of individual and social life' (2005, 157–8).<sup>1</sup> Slater also states that if 'Scott desires to transform contemporary Australia and displace colonial logic, then he ... needs Harley to ... open up a site—a meeting place—in which Australians can begin to rearticulate the country and themselves, in the hope of forging a new ethics of engagement, and thereby constituting a “new” country' (2005, 148). The connection between Scott's fiction and his own political and community-focused ambitions are also emphasised in this thesis, albeit with a greater focus on the central position of the Wirlomin Project.

Additionally, this thesis identifies the discursive meeting places as the disputed territories depicted in Scott's writing while recognising his writing and projects as disputed territories in and of themselves. These disputes are traced beyond *Benang* through Scott's collected works and the Wirlomin Project which are read as a 'continuing project' grounded by Noongar country, language and stories (Scott 2012a, 228). With the exception of *True Country*, each of his major works takes place in Noongar country that is distinct from the state-based region 'Western Australia', itself a subdivision of the nation state. This thesis posits Scott's collected work as regional literature but in doing so emphasises the foregrounding of localised Noongar country and community.

Lyn Jacobs acknowledges that 'to live in Australia, especially Western Australia, is to be involved in a vital, ongoing dialogue with people and place, partly because Indigenous prior occupancy and custodianship of the land exists ... like an undertow as consistent as the roll of surf on a beach' (2007, 318). Scott and the members of the Wirlomin Project are entering this dialogue as Indigenous custodians. If Jacobs' description implies that the presence of Indigenous occupancy and custodianship is an unseen yet powerful force—'an undertow'—in national conversations about Australian identity and belonging, Scott and the

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<sup>1</sup> While Scott used the spelling 'Nyoongar' to refer to his community and region in *Benang*, he now uses the spelling 'Noongar'. This thesis will use the latter spelling to align with Scott's most recent work and that of the Wirlomin Project, except in quotations.

members of the Wirlomin Project aim to make this force visible. Scott is a key voice in Australian national discourse regarding people and place. He contributes a complex and community-based ‘regional perspective’ through his writing that includes a personal history specific to Noongar country and his community and is also tied to the narrative of Western Australia and the Australian nation (Scott 2007a, 124).<sup>2</sup> In a national discourse in which Aboriginal people are often spoken of but are rarely given the opportunity to speak themselves, Scott’s writing is an increasingly significant and provocative voice among an ever-growing number of Aboriginal voices in Australian literature. It not only emphasises the atrocities of the past, it emphasises the need to listen to the range of stories about this continent’s shared history and an even more ancient Aboriginal history from both Noongar, non-Noongar, written and oral archives. The source material is often, as Scott describes it, ‘perverse’ yet inspirational, evidencing how navigating disputed territories can be both a traumatic and constructive process (Scott 2000a, 162; 1999, 497; 2001, 265).

Leading up to the publication of his first novel, *True Country*, Scott had published several poems and one piece of short fiction. This early work is indicative of his sustained interrogation of colonial representations, classification and devastation of Noongar country and its people. His second novel, *Benang*, won the Miles Franklin Literary Award which Scott would again win for his fourth novel, *That Deadman Dance*.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps unexpectedly, *Kayang and Me* (2005) followed the critical success of *Benang*. A collaborative life-writing project with Noongar elder, Hazel Brown, *Kayang and Me* can now be seen as key point in a spatial reading of Scott’s interconnected writings and projects because it articulates his strengthening connections to a ‘strong Noongar centre’ (Scott 2012a, 237). A year after its publication, the Wirlomin Project was

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<sup>2</sup> In this instance, Scott’s use of the word, ‘regional’ refers to his Noongar perspective.

<sup>3</sup> *Benang* won the award in 2000 (sharing the award with Thea Astley’s *Drylands*) and *That Deadman Dance* won the award in 2011. As yet, Scott and the Waanyi author Alexis Wright are the only Aboriginal writers to have won this award.

established and Scott's strategic negotiation of his role as an individual author in the Western tradition and a member of the Wirlomin Project becomes more overt.

The Wirlomin Project works with Noongar language and stories from both archives and elders within the community. The archival source material largely comes from stories told by Noongar 'informants' to American Linguist, Gerhardt Laves recorded in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Stored by his family until 1985, the notes were then sent to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. The return of Laves' notebooks provided an opportunity to consolidate the language and stories that had been lost or considerably weakened since they were told in 1931. In 2002 meetings were held with representatives from AIATSIS, the University of Western Australia, descendants of the original 'informants', and chosen representatives from various Noongar communities (including Scott). The result of these continual meetings was the publication of 'A Protocol for Laves' 1931 Noongar Field Notes' in 2006. This set of guidelines ensures the protection of these stories by a group of Noongar custodians who can control how, when and to whom the stories are shared.

Both *That Deadman Dance* and *Taboo* (2017) weave the stories developed by the Wirlomin Project into their narratives, evidencing how Scott's writing has since become inextricable from his work with his home community, an entanglement deliberately promoted by his essays, interviews and lectures. What occurs is a retrospective reconfiguring of Scott's writing around his home community, their language and stories which root his narratives in country.

The Wirlomin Project have produced six bilingual publications from 2011 to 2017 (Scott is a key storyteller for each), a website containing online recordings of the stories in Noongar and English, and videos of the process of reconnecting stories with country. These materials are products of the Wirlomin Project's return and rejuvenation of a diminished Noongar language and culture. Such a process embodies the politics and ethics of decolonisation promoted by Scott.

Asked by Charlotte Wood whether he thought all Indigenous writing is political, Scott replied, 'I think so. I find myself encouraging people to not be so



overtly political, you know—to reduce the political overtness, because it's there anyway, if you're known to be in the [Indigenous writing] niche, or if you're labelled with that' (2013b, 8). Such self-awareness of the inevitable politicisation of his work manifests in a deceptively subtle provocation of what the Australia nation has been, is and could be; a provocation that positions the Noongar community, literature and language at the centre of these discussions. As Scott 'does not want to risk limiting Nyoongar people in yet another colonising discourse' (Slater 2005, 148), he provocatively proposes a contemporary Australian society (and literature) that could be grafted onto Aboriginal languages and stories as a way to express a national sense of 'who we are and what we might be', a proposal repeated in his 2011 Miles Franklin oration (Scott 2007a, 124). Such a proposal acknowledges and attempts to remedy the trauma of colonisation which 'deracinates, physically displaces and physically disorientates all those concerned' (Collingwood-Whittick 2011, xiii). Scott's writing and projects engage with the inherent racism in Australia's history and contemporary society, its continued negation of a genocidal history against Aboriginal people and the anxiety of unbelonging. In this context, Scott puts forward Aboriginal communities as a potential conduit between a disconnected white Australia and the country it inhabits.

The possibilities of disputed territories are detailed in 'A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History' (2008), which outlines the central methodologies and opinions guiding Scott's work – namely that fiction and history can each critically reimagine the past, that there are productive possibilities of engaging regional Aboriginal languages and communities in historical research and that the re-examination of colonial power relationships can reveal a 'confident and innovative' Noongar community participating in cross-cultural exchange (Scott 2008b, 96).<sup>4</sup>

Scott's literary trajectory aligns with the increased publication and interest

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<sup>4</sup> 'A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History' was published in *Westerly* but presents Scott's research developing *That Deadman Dance* as part of his PhD from University of Western Australia.

in Aboriginal arts and culture in Australia that occurred from around the 1988 Bicentenary onwards. Although such ‘writer-activists’ as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Belinda Wheeler contends that it was not until the mid-1980s that ‘a large portion of Australia’s non-Aboriginal community wanted to explore literature written or performed by Australian Aboriginals’ (Rooney 2009; Wheeler 2013, 1). Key texts like Adam Shoemaker’s *Black Words, White Page* (1989) and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra’s *Dark Side of the Dream* (1991) drew attention to the breadth and diversity of Aboriginal literature and, with Australia’s Bicentenary acting as a provocative reminder of Australia’s colonial past and abuse of Aboriginal people and culture, began to analyse Aboriginal literature in light of its historical and social contexts while also reevaluating central myths and narratives of the white Australian nation. This rereading aligned with the rise of revisionist historiography exemplified by such works as W. E. H Stanner’s ground breaking Boyer Lecture series published as *After the Dreaming* (1968), Henry Reynolds’ *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (1981) and Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987). The new trajectory of Australia’s growing engagement with its shared history and Aboriginal culture and perspectives was interwoven with a surge of Aboriginal literature in various genres including life writing, fiction, poetry, film, drama, and music (Wheeler 2013, 1). The ‘emerging canon’, to use Belinda Wheeler’s term, coincided with the first anthologies of Aboriginal writing, *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (1989) and *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (1990) that established Aboriginal literature as an ongoing body of work. Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) was also a milestone in this field, gaining popular national and international acclaim. It was during this time that Scott began to publish. His first poem, ‘In Perspective’, appeared in the Fremantle Arts Centre’s broadsheet *Patterns* in 1985. However, this increased presence and interest in Aboriginal writing was accompanied by questions concerning the authenticity of the ‘Aboriginality’ of these works.

Three years before *True Country*, Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) had published *Writing from the Fringe* (1990), a key text on Aboriginal literature.

Despite the subsequent controversy surrounding Narogin's identity, his work articulated the difficulty for Aboriginal authors whose creative practice occurred within the categories, language and forms of their colonial oppressors. Moreover, Narogin notes that this dominant society was also positioned as the key editor and audience of Aboriginal writing, effectively trapping the field within non-Aboriginal frameworks of literature. Whether or not Scott's writing was directly influenced by Narogin's work, the two share many of Narogin's criticisms of the persistent colonial framework of Australian literature. Scott arguably handles these in a more nuanced and inclusive way. By redefining the non-Aboriginal elements of literature as part of an ongoing Noongar culture, he is able to suggest that a perceived trap may also be a means of escape.

While Scott has chosen to identify as Noongar, his writing complicates the simplistic division of colonial and Noongar cultures into binary opposites. His writing navigates the political and ethical considerations that press upon an Aboriginal writer writing for a mostly non-Aboriginal Australian audience. These considerations are made all the more challenging in light of Scott's attempt to articulate his particular Noongar heritage that is at once excluded from, part of and shaped by a colonial Australian heritage. Even though his work is at the forefront of an increasingly recognised canon of Aboriginal Australian literature, it disrupts any assumption that this canon exists in a truly post-colonial society. Scott interrogates the categorisation of literatures in Australia revealing how the expectation and, perhaps, the onus of stories being either Aboriginal or Australian or both perpetuates a colonial logic that rigidly classifies people and place.

In her critique of Morgan's *My Place*, Jackie Huggins claims that Morgan 'has always belonged to a white world which applauds her and which has now become her parameters and measures of Aboriginal "success"' (Huggins 1993, 462). Huggins' comments draw attention to the politicisation of the Aboriginal writer and the imperative that Scott has described to declare his allegiance to either the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal community. Scott, through his academic work, has constructed his own parameters of 'success' measured by his connection to his Noongar heritage and usefulness within his home community. That being said, he has garnered considerable critical success within the 'white

world' and sits within a movement of 'leading innovators in collaborative expression across the generations, across art forms, in life writing, storytelling, film, performance, and video art, taking power in their responsibility for custodianship and transmission of culture' (Jose 2013, vii). Scott constructively negotiates the tensions across this cultural and literary terrain, using his success in a wider national context to benefit his home community. In other words, Scott sees the possibility in this disputed territory.

Moving chronologically through Scott's fiction and nonfiction, while also acknowledging a non-linear network of Scott's writing grounded in Noongar language and culture, this thesis links each text to a particular 'disputed territory' and critical framework. Each chapter analyses how Scott engages with the tensions between Noongar and non-Noongar engagement with land, language, history, identity and literature in a constructive way.

Chapter one performs an ecocritical reading of Scott's poetry and short fiction spanning the years 1985 to 2015. In these works, Scott shifts between Noongar and non-Noongar epistemological and ontological perspectives of landscape and country. Scott depicts Noongar country as neither a place of newness nor exile, countering the colonial logic embedded in what Judith Wright has called the 'double aspect' of the colonial experience (1965). Confronting the myths of *terra nullius* and a pastoral Arcady, Scott's poetry and fiction depict a vibrant ecosystem interwoven with nature, people and stories disturbed and diminished by colonisation. Drawing on similarities between the Aboriginal concept of country and the notion of place in Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land' (2006), the chapter focuses on how Scott resists the rendering of the land as a passive subject to be tamed, surveyed and classified or owned.

In chapter two, *True Country* is analysed in relation to language. *True Country* is based on Scott's time teaching in a remote Aboriginal community in the north western part of Australia. In particular, the chapter considers how the novel represents the role of the English (written) language as one of the colonial controlling mechanisms described by Anderson. Scott's inclusion of a variety of

linguistic forms in the novel challenges the English written word's superiority, authority and veracity. Using Penny van Toorn's *Writing Never Arrives Naked* (2006) and Karen Barad's 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart' (2014) as formative texts, the chapter emphasises the dynamic nature of Aboriginal languages and storytelling practices that include the interplay between their own oral and written traditions *and* those introduced through colonisation.

Scott reimagines his recent family history amid the ideas and practices of the assimilationist project in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940 in his second novel, *Benang*. Here, Scott uses *and* disputes settler-colonial history. As in *True Country*, he destabilises the dominance of the written record in *Benang*. Like other critical readings of the novel,<sup>5</sup> this chapter reads *Benang* as a work of what Linda Hutcheon has termed historiographic metafiction (1988). Through this theoretical lens, we can see how Scott installs the historic archive in his novel while simultaneously questioning the empirical validity of such historic sources through the use of irony and wordplay, as well as the juxtaposition of divergent archives. The multiplicity of histories and narratives in the novel resist a singular and dominant colonial narrative creating instead a 'rhizomatic' network of competing, complimenting and divergent histories (Emmett 2007).

Chapter four focuses on Hazel Brown and Scott's collaborative memoir, *Kayang and Me*, in relation to Noongar identity. Martin Nakata's concept of the 'cultural interface' in *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* identifies the porous nature of cross-cultural relationships, which is particularly relevant to the way Brown and Scott attempt to articulate a multi-faceted Noongar

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<sup>5</sup> Other academics such as Amanda Johnson and Pablo Armellino have used the same theoretical approach to describe the interplay of history and fiction in Scott's novel. In Katrin Althans' *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film* (2018), the chapter, 'Un-Singing Historiography: Kim Scott's *Benang*' observes how Scott uses the historic records 'against themselves' (104). This chapter, then, does not introduce the connection between *Benang* and historiographic metafiction but, rather, uses the connection to highlight the broader trend of Scott's writing to unsettle and to challenge discourses of Aboriginal history, language, identity, literature and relationships to country. *Benang*, as historiographic metafiction, is one clear example of a disputed territory (in this instance, archive, memory and fiction are in tension with one another) being transformed into a productive discursive space through Scott's writing.

identity that unsettles the boundaries between Noongar and non-Noongar cultures (2007, 198). Their exchange reveals a personal and collective Noongar identity that is at times contradictory, personal and collective—yet one that is strong and continual. They argue that the process of colonisation does not render Noongar people as victims. Tiffany Shellam’s *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* (2009) and, once again, van Toorn’s *Writing Never Arrives Naked* are useful companions to Brown and Scott’s stories of Noongar individuals actively, strategically and creatively appropriating non-Indigenous practices into their own culture.<sup>6</sup>

The chapter also considers the tensions in Indigenous life-writing, especially those between oral and written stories, the individual and the collective, and the editor and ‘informant’. Using Michèle Grossman’s *Entangled Subjects: Indigenous/Australian Cross-Cultures of Talk, Text, and Modernity* (2013) as a pivotal text, this chapter notes how Scott is uniquely positioned as subject, collaborator, transcriber and editor of *Kayang and Me*. These are fraught positions that require him to confront the inadequacies and privilege of his chosen form of storytelling—literature—while also believing in the written word’s ability to create a space for more inclusive and just exchange.

Chapter five analyses *That Deadman Dance*, a historical novel tracing the breakdown of Western Australia’s ‘friendly frontier’, in relation to the field of world literature. Scott’s literature is rooted in Noongar country and community but not bound by localised and state-based regions from which he writes; *That Deadman Dance* also incorporates national and transnational literatures. Therefore, Scott’s writing can be read as local, regional, national and world literature, blurring the distinction between Noongar and Australian literature, and Australian and world literature. Drawing on Pheng Cheah’s differentiation of the globe and the world in ‘World Against Globe: Toward a Normative Conception of World Literature’ (2014), this chapter focuses on how Scott does not depict word and local literatures as exclusively oppositional areas or forces but as woven and

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<sup>6</sup> Scott has regularly referenced both Shellam and van Toorn in his own academic work.

sometimes complementary spaces. *That Deadman Dance* portrays and is an example of the far-reaching scope of regional literature and shared literary horizons. Through the novel, Scott reconfigures understandings of what Noongar language, identity and literature is and can be and pushes for a way of thinking about literature and language that can accommodate multiplicity, diversity and liminality.

Scott's search for and strengthening attachment to his Noongar roots is reflected in the trajectory of his writing, particularly through the increasing prominence of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project—the subject of chapter six. The project has produced six publications of ancestral Noongar stories: *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (2011), *Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* (2013) and *Ngaawily Nop* and *Noorn* (2017). Scott's involvement in the group is more than a side-project. The stories and process of the Wirlomin Project influence the narrative content, creative process and ethics of his work. In chapter six, each of the key themes discussed in this thesis are revisited: the land, language, history, identity and literature in order to highlight how the Wirlomin Project continues the disruption of colonial logic within these disputed territories.

The centrality of the Wirlomin Project is further highlighted in chapter seven that analyses *Taboo*'s fictionalisation of members of the Wirlomin Project and the effects of revitalising language and returning stories to country. In this novel, the dispute between Noongar and non-Noongar versions of history, the struggle to restore and revitalise language and the pain of deracination reoccur. The Noongar community's language and storytelling programs provide the possibility of reconnecting with Noongar heritage and country as a way of healing ongoing traumas.

Tracing Scott's writing in relation to a community-based, shared and pre-colonial Noongar history observes the progression of Scott's strengthening

connection with this heritage from his early work in the 1980s to today.<sup>7</sup> Scott has been returning to his roots through and with the Wirlomin Project which has become the source and heart of his work. In an interview with Kathryn Trees, Scott describes how writing *True Country* ‘led [him] to explore other articulations of Aboriginality ... It was the start of a personal quest’ (1995, 20). This quest crosses disputed territories, sites of trauma, conflict and ambivalence that also double as sites of possibility.

Scott explains that ‘the cultural work which comes out of *Kayang & Me* is continuing in *That Deadman Dance*’ and also suggests that the conclusion of *Benang* that describes ‘a fictional individual wanting to be a part of cultural consolidation with a small community of descendants’ is also taken up by *Kayang and Me* and the Wirlomin Project (2012a, 230). This rhizomic quality of his writing means that ‘it is difficult to look at any of Scott’s texts in isolation; engaging with one work will inevitably lead to another’ (Quinlivan 2014). In *Benang*, Harley ‘shouts back into history and listens for the echoes, the reverberations, the thousands of voices, that cry out with their stories’ (Trees 1995, 21). Scott, too, is ‘listening back’ as he seeks to create an empowered position for his Noongar community at the heart of a conflicted country and its stories (Trees 1995, 21).

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<sup>7</sup> The exception to this structure is the first chapter in which I discuss the theme of place in relation to Scott’s poetry and short fiction. Although Scott’s first published piece of writing was a poem, ‘In Perspective’ in 1985, he has continued to publish shorter pieces of writing.



# Chapter 1

## Shifting ecological perspectives: Scott's short fiction and poetry

### Introduction

Scott's relationship with his Noongar country is integral to his writing and language projects. The enduring Noongar connection to the land and its inhabitants is ever-present across his collective work to date. Scott critiques colonial and subsequent national relationships with the land that are often characterised by the non-Aboriginal desire to dominate, possess and control the surroundings. His short fiction and poetry depict Noongar country, colonial land and national landscapes as territories that are both physically and conceptually in dispute. Scott uses this tension between Noongar and non-Noongar territories to undermine the legitimacy and romanticism of European occupation and European agricultural practices in Australia's national discourse. He registers what Judith Wright has termed the 'double aspect' of colonial landscapes—the land as a place of exile and the land as new opportunity (1965). Scott represents country as a site of interweaving and reciprocal ecologies, of narratives, as a place that has been stolen, as a taboo place of massacre, and as home.

Jane Gleeson-White in her ecocritical essay on *That Deadman Dance* and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* asserts that Scott 'rewrite[s] Australia in the voice of the regional, and offer[s] ways of reconsidering the relation of human and non-human which contest our prevailing models and their role in the ecological crisis' (2013, 1). This rewriting foregrounds Noongar *boodjar* (Noongar country) and the coming together of human *and* non-human beings through language and story, which shares aspects of Val Plumwood's concept of place as an interwoven

system of interdependent ontologies that are in an inseparable and a reciprocal relationship.

The reciprocity between Aboriginal communities and their country is characterised by the nurturing of the land and, in turn, being nurtured by the land. Such an exchange requires ecological literacy, a term that Fritjof Capra in ‘Speaking Nature’s Language: Principles for Sustainability’ defined as ‘understanding the basic principles of ecology and being able to embody them in daily life. It entails thinking in terms of relationships, connectedness and context’ (cited in Wooltorton 2007, 30). Ecological literacy can be understood to be part of Plumwood’s concept of place and Deborah Bird Rose’s description of country as ‘a place that gives and receives life (...) [that] is lived in and lived with’ (1996, 7).

In Scott’s writing, the ability for some Noongar characters to ‘read’ country is contrasted with the ecological illiteracy of newcomers—pioneers, settlers, convicts. The latter experience their environment as an eternally foreign land; their misreading of their surroundings resulting in the failed, albeit destructive, attempts to tame the land. By shifting between Noongar, colonial and national perspectives in his stories, Scott highlights the non-Aboriginal *lack* of knowledge thereby displacing the authority and singularity of the colonial logic embedded in Australia’s national narratives of place.

In Scott’s hands, Arcadian landscapes become myths that ignore Australia’s environmental degradation caused by European agricultural practices. The motifs of fences, roads, telephone wires and scientific lines of classification evoke human-made lines of possession and categorisation so typical of the colonial mindset.. These brutal, illegitimate and ultimately superficial incursions in Noongar country are shown to eliminate and oppress Aboriginal people by consolidating the colonisation of supposedly vacant country. They exist in contrast to interconnected Noongar songlines. Noongar presence and perspectives in Scott’s fiction debunk the *terra nullius* myth but also examine the legacy of this colonisation and degradation of Aboriginal land in the form of modern-day environmentalism.

The notion of place is fraught in the Australian national context, not least because of the conflicting claims over the land made by European explorers and

colonisers that deny Aboriginal sovereignty. Scott's writing taps into national anxieties about belonging and interrogates the environmental, social and personal need for Aboriginal relationships with country to form meaningful connections to place. This need is all the more pressing if we consider Philip Mead's interrogation of the community, connectivity and literary universality in the digital age that describes 'unavoidable questions and anxieties about the foundational elements of personhood, community and sociability that arise from this potentiality of movement between cyber and other social spaces' (2012, 138).

Plumwood emphasises narrative as a means to create place. This argument is both highly relevant to Australia's national mythologies and resonates with Aboriginal notions of country. Her ecocritical definition of place rejects dualistic perspectives on pure culture and pure nature in favour of place being a 'story' made up of 'the unique interwoven pattern of nature and culture' (2006, 39). Scott's own storytelling process actively connects with his Noongar country to and from which he is writing. There is a possibility that Scott's narratives also provide a way for his readers to connect as well thereby finding their own sense of place.

In his poetry and short fiction, Scott writes about the reciprocity functioning in Noongar ecosystems, the loss of self felt by Noongar individuals due to their disconnection with place and the physical effects on the environment from colonial and national acts of possession. Underpinning these concerns is the issue of non-human agency. In his writing, non-human entities act and are acted on thereby diminishing the separation of human and non-human nature. This depiction contrasts with the colonial and national understanding of the land best summed up in the term 'landscape'. Plumwood criticises the term for the way it 'draws on a colonial as well as androcentric model which frames the land as passive, visually captured, something to distance from, survey and subdue' (2006, 123). Scott's representation of country as a vibrant and active ecosystem rather than a passive entity can therefore be read as critique of the colonial logic. Furthermore, Scott's recasting of pioneers, settlers, and convicts as perpetrators of violence against Noongar people and their thriving ecological practices discredits the national project of colonisation.

Much of Scott's short fiction pieces are instalments of larger works in progress. As such, different publications often retell and rework a core narrative, revisiting plots, characters and settings across separate publications. 'Registering Romance' (1995), 'The First One' (1996) and 'Into the Light (after Hans Heysen's painting of the same name)' (2000) each follow a white man (John, Johnny One, and the drover respectively) and his Noongar wife Fanny as they traverse the colonial frontier. Incidentally, these characters correspond with Sandy One Mason and Fanny Benang in the novel, *Benang* (1999). 'Capture' (2002) and 'Asleep' (2005) were intended as part of a larger novel with the working title *Naatj*, which has not been published. The protagonists of these two stories are Peter and Cory Noonan (their names change to Peter and Corry Wright in 'Asleep'), environmental experts who exploit the land they claim to be saving.<sup>8</sup> In 'Asleep', Scott adds two Noongar characters, Pa and his grandson Owen, who challenge Peter and Corry's knowledge and ownership of the environment. The short story 'A Refreshing Sleep' (2009) about two Noongar cousins visiting a homestead built on a massacre site and the poem 'Wangelanginy' (2002) about the powerful link between language and country resonate with *Taboo*. 'Lost', a story about a young English girl who goes missing in the forest and the poem 'In Perspective' about two people following a railway line are discussed as isolated works.

Each of these writings engage with Noongar and non-Noongar relationships with and within country. They contest the legitimacy of colonial 'settlement' and interrogate the foundation myths upon which the Australian nation was built. Scott shifts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives of and on the land creatively documenting what Bill Gammage would later

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<sup>8</sup> The change in the protagonists' names from 'Capture' to the more recently published 'Asleep' is maintained in this thesis. More than the change of the couple's last name from Noonan to Wright from one story to the next, the subtle change in the female character's name is maintained also. When referring to 'Capture' the spelling is Cory—with one 'r'—when discussing 'Asleep', the spelling is Corry—with two 'r's.

describe in his ground-breaking work, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011), as ‘fundamental differences in thinking’ (2011, 311).<sup>9</sup> Gammage’s study of Aboriginal land management practices noted that Aboriginal people lived in an ecosystem in which, ‘all things had a place, so newcomers must be accommodated’ whereas ‘in the white world savages had no place’ (Gammage 2011, 311). While Aboriginal people saw themselves as custodians of a balanced ecosystem, Europeans ‘intended to possess’ and therefore saw themselves as owners and masters of their environment (Gammage 2011, 311–12). Although, Gammage concedes, both Aboriginal people and the newcomers ‘could attach to land and devote lives to its care’, the manifestation of these attachments and care were profoundly and irreconcilably different (Gammage 2011, 312). Pre-dating Gammage, Scott’s writing showed non-Aboriginal characters viewing the land, flora and fauna as a potential cornucopia waiting to be reaped. By contrast, non-Aboriginal perspectives in Scott’s work revealed the land as a danger that must be tamed, a vacant space to be developed and owned, a scientific subject, or a weak entity needing protection.

Gammage describes the two ways of thinking about the environment post-1788 in the following way: ‘one saw a landscape rich in lore and Law, while the other saw profit. One defended by religious sanction, the other by force. One cared for a local fragment, the other was a fragment of an export economy, inspired and trammelled from overseas’ (Gammage 2011, 312). Scott’s poetry and short fiction draw out these contradictory attachments to the land as a way of correcting the national view of its past (and present) ecological and agricultural practices, as well as confronting the atrocities at the core of Australia’s colonisation.

The colonial will to conquer and tame the land in order to force it into production set up an unequal power dynamic between human and non-human

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<sup>9</sup> In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood identifies the key myths of colonisation, such as, ‘the chief myth of progress, ... the confrontation with an inferior past, and inferior non-western other and the associated notions of indigenous cultures as backward, earlier stages of our own exemplary civilization’ (16).

participants in nature that denies an interwoven system of multiple and independent ontologies. Plumwood explains that:

[in] human-centred frameworks, hegemonic forms give rise to an exaggerated sense of the human side's contributions and just deserts, and an underestimation of non-humans. They promote slave-like models, and distort our understanding of both agency and co-agency. (Plumwood 2006, 117)

In Australia, the 'human/nature dualism... [in which] Western construction of human identity ... [is] "outside" nature' (Plumwood 1993, 2) is complicated by the coloniser's equating of Aboriginal people with flora and fauna. The brutal oppression, subjugation and division of Aboriginal people described by Plumwood is present in Scott's work. The colonial bid to explore, trade, possess and 'settle' is both corporeal and environmental—the Noongar body must contend with 'the persistence ... of that spirit of empire' (Scott 1996, 119). As Plumwood has argued, '*both nature and indigenous peoples have been colonized*' (2006, 135, Plumwood's emphasis). Therefore, the human-centred framework of Australia's occupation is, specifically, a European-centred framework that sets up a master–slave dynamic in which both the non-human *and* the Aboriginal people are oppressed. Both are co-opted into the Western constructs of the pastoral and the remote (and therefore dangerous) wilderness that deny both non-human and Aboriginal people's agency.

Scott's fiction and poetry reconfigures colonial narratives as both incorrect and incomplete, treating declarations of progress and civility with disdainful irony. The projected success and glory of the colonial enterprise become inseparable from the dispossession, exploitation, exclusion and abuse of the Noongar people and the land. By holding the tensions between opposing yet overlapping constructions of place, Scott addresses the arrogance but also the anxiety, guilt and loss borne out of Australia's colonial history. By correcting the national narratives around Australia's occupation, settlement and agricultural development, he pushes to re-establish respectful and reciprocal relationships

between Australia's people and their surroundings environment that are informed by Aboriginal knowledge and experience of and in country.

## **Scott's writing as anti-pastoral literature**

Scott's short stories, 'Registering Romance', 'Into the Light' and 'The First Born' are part of the anti-pastoral literary tradition, which aims to recast the 'pastoral' as pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country (Gifford 1999, 2). In Scott's stories, the pastoral myth—narratives depicting glorified landscapes and their agricultural promise—is present, linked to Western modernity that underpins the colonial mindset. However, agricultural promise is directly contrasted with the environmental degradation caused by European agricultural practices and the clearing of land occurring during Australia's colonisation.

In 'Registering Romance', John a non-Noongar man whose partner is a non-Noongar woman named Fanny, seems to move through two different worlds. John travels twice to Fredericks Town, the first time alone and the second time with Fanny. The opposing worldviews of John's two guides create two vastly different journeys. On the first, John recalls that:

his horse ate the poison, and died along with scores of sheep. He walked—behind boss horse sheep—across the broken grazed ground, through a variety of shit. There was never enough water. And it was all sandplains, that time, sand and sharp rolling stones. There were salt lakes, and brackish streams. They ate tinned dog, listened for the croaking green canaries, slept at the Star Hotel.  
(37)

This scene is embedded as a flashback within the primary narrative in which he and Fanny travel to register their newborn baby. As such, John's first experience of a harsh and dangerous land that is destitute, depleted and ungiving is brought into tension with his much-altered experience of the land in the company of Fanny. Moving away from the settler's grazing paths, Fanny leads her family 'back to her country which began at the ranges' following Noongar songlines that

Fanny ‘knew . . . from having listened, as a child’ (39). They encounter nourishing environments filled with an abundance of life and resources. In these places:

there were kangaroos all about, keeping an eye out ears up for them. These animals scratched their chests – their paws were just like the flowers – and there was such exuberance in their bounding motion.

Fanny and John moved across grassy plains. It was parkland. You could look across, and yeah it was green and soft and undulating; it was hill and dale stuff, with creeks running through grassy plains and tall trees here and there.<sup>10</sup> They were yate trees towering,<sup>11</sup> their high crowns glistening in the afternoon sun. And their yellow sap; that yellow sap it tasted like sugar. (37)

Fanny’s knowledge of country, or eco-literacy, enables her to feed her family. She steers John to food and fresh water sources that he cannot locate. When John drinks from a pool, he tastes each part of a thriving ecosystem and it seemed to him, ‘that what he tasted was not water but a reflection; of pale pink and white blossoms, shaped like stars’ (38).

The health of the land under Noongar custodianship contrasts with the deterioration of the land after colonisation. The water that had once filled John becomes dry when he, at some point in the future, ‘rested on his face in a salty creek’ (38). The contrast of how the land is seen by the newcomers and experienced by Noongar custodians is also starkly emphasised.

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<sup>10</sup> Scott also uses the term ‘hill and dale’ in the story, ‘Lost’ (2006) in which an English wife’s expectations of an imagined Australia is disappointed by the reality of the place in which she arrives. Winifred Powell laments that Australia ‘wasn’t like what they’d been told. There seemed to be no pastures or meadows or fields, and the very few brooks did not chuckle in quite the same way. This was no *hill-and-dale* country, and there were few forest glades’ (Scott 2006, 6–7, my emphasis). Reading ‘Lost’ and ‘Registering Romance’ together highlights that the vibrancy and curation of the land as ‘hill-and-dale’ appears through an Aboriginal perspective but not from a non-Aboriginal perspective.

<sup>11</sup> This is Noongar country, as evidenced by Scott’s use of the term yate tree – a breed of Eucalyptus tree that is indigenous to the southwest of Western Australia. The word ‘yate’ is both its common name and the name used by Noongar people to describe the plant.



By holding these disparities, Scott's writing contests the European ideal of Arcadian or 'utopian ...[places] that project onto an idealised future, a restoration of rural' values that fuelled the agricultural ambitions of Australia's early colonial history (Gifford 1999, 20). While European explorers and settlers alike pursue the pastoral myth, Scott's characters experience the land as a disappointing and harsh wasteland. Australia's 'development' characterised by infrastructure, grazing sheep, and enterprise is a story of lifeless regression that ignored and brutalised the already productive land and its inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Fanny knows the Arcadia for which they search, yet she is marginalised and silenced by the colonial project. By ignoring and denying Aboriginal relationship with country, the newcomers deny themselves the possibility of being part of the very thing that they desire—a bountiful and sustaining environment.

Scott's description of the fertile environment as 'parkland', and 'hill and dale stuff' can be likened to Elizabeth Macarthur's comparison of New South Wales to 'an English park' with trees that 'give it the appearance of a wilderness or shrubbery, commonly attached to the habitations of people of fortune' (Bird Rose 1996, 72). Scott's replication of the colonial tendency to give the land in Australia ill-fitting European attributes draws attention to the layering of place that occurs during the process of colonisation. As Victoria Reeves, in her comparison of Scott's *Benang* and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), argues, 'Since the white perspective is directed by a longing for the unattainable heartland of Britain, the

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<sup>12</sup> The growing dominance of the township over the land shares similarities with Judith Wright's 'Country Town' which observes:

This is a landscape that the town creeps over;  
a landscape safe with bitumen and banks.  
the hostile hills are netted in with fences  
and the roads lead to houses and the pictures. (Wright 2016, 14)

While the settlers attempt to contain and conquer the land with their man-made infrastructure, Wright describes the coloniser's persistent feelings of anxiety and alienation in this unfamiliar country:

And yet in the night of the sleeping town, the voices:  
This s not ours, not ours the flowering tree.  
What is it we have lost and left behind?  
Where do the roads lead? It is not where we expected. (Wright 2016, 14)

coloniser must establish himself as native to this new place through a reproduction of culture, society and place. Only then can he reconstitute his heartland' (2013, 9).

However, the hill and dale stuff and Macarthur's 'park' are not necessarily inaccurate. As mentioned, Scott's fiction precedes Gammage's work on Aboriginal land management. His use of European perspectives in his work incorporate, intentionally or not, what Gammage sees as evidence of Aboriginal people curating their surrounds in ways beneficial to their hunting and living practices. In addition to *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident* (2014), details sustained Aboriginal land management and cultivation practices.

In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe is driven by the same purpose as Scott: to shift the Australian people's view of their nation's history and correct the assumptions and misinformation surrounding Aboriginal culture. He observes that:

[m]any readers of the explorer's journals see the hardships they endured and are enthralled by the finds of grassy plains, bountiful rivers and sites where great towns could be built; but by adjusting our perspective by only a few degrees we see a vastly different world from the same window. (2014, 12)

This window, reminiscent of that described by W. E .H Stanner in his Boyer lecture, has 'been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape' (1969, 25). For Pascoe, successful Aboriginal farming and architectural practices have been excluded from the nation's collective consciousness, perpetuating the understanding of Aboriginal cultures in conveniently simple terms as nomadic hunter-gatherers, a characterisation that shored up the legitimacy of colonisation under the pretext that Australia was *terra nullius*. Through his fiction and poetry, Scott angles the reader so that they can look out the window from a fresh perspective—a Noongar perspective. From here, what was excluded can be seen: the atrocities and mistakes of the colonial project, and the knowledge and care of country by its Aboriginal custodians.

Further dismantling the pastoral myth is the ‘ekphrastic’ short story, ‘Into the Light (after Hans Heysen’s painting of the same name)’ (Pree, 2016). The story responds to Hans Heysen’s painting, *Droving into the Light* (Fig. 1), which, according to The National Gallery of Australia, ‘ostensibly deals with the droving of sheep’ and ‘chiefly celebrates the magnificence of Australian eucalyptus trees’:

Nevertheless, the combination of a nationalistic gum-tree motif with a theme of end-of-day homecoming is symbolic of a new age: a unified Commonwealth of Australia had been created and was still in the process of formation. *Droving into the Light* is one of Australia’s greatest Federation pictures. (‘Hans Heysen’)

The gallery’s description links Heysen’s work with an early Australian nationalism that celebrates the birth of a utopian ‘new age’ based on pastoral values. Jeanette Hoorn details how Heysen came to ‘embody the white settler vision of pastoral life in Australia’ that was at the core of this continent’s national identity (2007, 203). His artworks are classic examples of Federation landscapes that depict the ‘rural or newly urban’ development of Australia by its newcomers in a tone that ‘expected their audience to be equally proud of their beloved land’ (Radford 2001, 18).

However, ‘Into the Light’ is imbued with anger and shame rather than pride. The nationalistic worshipping of the land, what Hoorn has termed ‘pastoraphilia’, rings hollow in comparison to Aboriginal connections to country (2007, 195). Ron Radford, commenting on his exhibition of Federation landscapes at the Art Gallery of South Australia, acknowledges that the ‘spiritualisation of the landscape [by Federation artists] had some unconscious affinity with the Aboriginal recognition of a spiritual relation between people and place’ (2001, 18). However, he explains that while the spirituality of Federation landscape art remained conceptual, ‘for Indigenous Australians the spirituality of a place is a specific, perceptible relationship between physical features and ancestral creators’ (2001, 18). Scott underlines the difference in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal constructions of place through his intertextual juxtapositioning of Heysen’s painting and his fictionalised account of the painting’s narrative. As Nathanael

Pree observes, Scott ‘shows the ambivalence of white ownership—an inability to live with the land and a bipolar perspective expressed through the rider’s clichéd ruminations on moving up and out of darkness into light’ (104).

‘Into the Light’ is a story about a Noongar woman, Fanny, her cruel and righteous droving husband and their children. Scott’s fictive landscape is bloodied and broken, a place of massacre and ecological turmoil. ‘Into the Light’ is, therefore, not an ekphrastic piece of writing but a meditation on what is absent; those people and events that are left out of the frame. It is part of Stanner’s ‘Great Australian Silence’ (Stanner 1969).

Hoorn states that pastoral landscapes ‘separated pastoralism from the forced occupation of the land’, which resulted in men, like the drover, being foregrounded while pre-existing Aboriginal use and custodianship of the land were hidden (Hoorn 2007, 10). Subverting this trope, Scott reveals what was once hidden including the deaths and marginalisation of Aboriginal people killed in the process of nation building. ‘Into the Light’ questions the heroism of Australia’s working class idols as well as the success of their agricultural. Scott’s drover is a failure:

This country had failed him, despite its promise. There was no rain. You got a little bit of ground, and had to make do with that, had to make it produce. It couldn’t, didn’t; not enough to earn the money they now needed. (122)

The drover’s disappointment in nature is caused by the disjuncture between his imagined Arcady and his experience of a useless and ungenerous land that he must farm. The illogic of the drover, and those like him, induces him to attack the land in order to force it into submissive production. He moves past a tree, ringbarked to ‘make it produce’ (122). Such an approach exhibits a master-slave dynamic whereby the land is a slave to the pastoralists’ whim and will.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The master-slave dynamic is reminiscent of Judith Wright’s ‘Eroded Hills’ (1953) which depicts the hills as ‘stripped . . . beggars . . . naked and whipped . . . bandaged in snow, their eyelids clenched to keep out fear’ (2016, 76).

‘Into the Light’ problematises Heysen’s portrayal of the drover’s homecoming after a hard day’s work: if this country is the drover’s home, then the painting denies the existence of Aboriginal country and Aboriginal custodianship; it sanitises the invasion and theft of land. Heysen’s drover is the ‘characteristic metaphor of the heroic lone white male ... throughout colonial history’ that is part of the pastoral idyll (Langton 1996, 18). Conversely, Scott’s drover is a man convinced of his superiority over his Aboriginal wife and children. The reader follows him as he walks along a road that cuts into a devastated land. The man is not going home, he is lost, hungry and thirsty in an unfamiliar place. The idyll is exposed as a myth.<sup>14</sup>

Scott’s short story aligns with the tradition of anti-pastoral literature. When Gifford asserts that in pastoral literature, ‘the natural world can no longer be constructed as a “land of dreams”, but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without divine purpose’, he may well be describing the world of Scott’s drover (Gifford 1999, 120). Scott subverts the divinity suggested in *Droving into the Light* in his story when the drover notices that:

the pale trunks of trees he’d killed–tried to kill–were smeared with red gore where the light struck them. The light filled his gaping mouth, and held his restless, stinging tongue.

He went into the light and there, soaring above him yet, were the remains of dead limbs which had fallen, clubbing the ground.  
(122)

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<sup>14</sup> In ‘A Refreshing Sleep’, Warren and Leanne, two Noongar cousins, visit a homestead that Leanne was ‘taken into’ as a child. Noel Wharton, the owner of the property, has paintings hanging on the wall that, like Hans Heysen’s work, propagate the pastoral myth. The paintings portray ‘horses, some attached to carts and coaches. Horses drank from a painted stream, and one or two trees leaned over them in the golden light’ (Scott 2005b, 15). In a similar way to ‘Into the Light’, there is a disjuncture between the divine image hanging on the walls and the true story of the land that it depicts: the Wharton homestead in which the paintings are housed is the fictionalised site of the Kokanarup massacre.



Figure 1: Hans Heysen, *Droving into the Light*, 1914–21, oil on canvas, 121.9 (h) x 152.4 (w) cm

The golden light in this passage becomes the perpetrator of the violence against the land in the way it ‘struck’ the trees drawing out the red gore from their limbs.<sup>15</sup> There are obvious parallels between the Noongar massacre alluded to in the story and the massacre of the trees. Pree observes an elegiac quality in Scott’s description of these deaths: ‘the ring barked and dying giants representing nothing less than the fate of his people and was metonymic for the country itself’ (106). However, Scott’s implementation of elegy imbues the genre with a certain irony. The light of Western enlightenment and religious deliverance in Heysen’s painting is recast as a brutal force in Scott’s fiction that even reaches the drover himself. Rather than a shepherd saving his Noongar family from darkness, he is a man lost in a world of his own making (123). The conceit and deceit of the colonial will to conquer is ultimately an unwitting act of self-destruction. The

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<sup>15</sup> The corporeal imagery of trees also appears in ‘Registering Romance’ in which Scott depicts the violence of felled trees ‘so-straight and upright posts remained raw and red, with the life smell still clinging to them’ (36). Additionally, ‘Lost’ describes the ‘groan and sigh’ (7) of an ancient tree being cut down and Scott likens the ringbarked trunks to ‘tombstones’ (8).

story seems to prove Deborah Bird-Rose's observation: 'The interdependence of all life within country constitutes a hard but essential lesson—those who destroy their country ultimately destroy themselves' (1996, 10).

The devastating consequence of land clearing and farming sheep—perhaps unintentionally shown in Heysen's painting—were driven by the irrational pursuit of an 'Austral Arcady' that was coupled with capitalist enterprise (Seddon 2003, 42).<sup>16</sup> George Seddon explains that:

raising of sheep on pastoral leaseholds is an historic land use, and a great deal of sentiment is attached to it. Many of the pioneering pastoral families showed enterprise and courage, and ... also amassed considerable wealth [...] But that wealth could not have been acquired without a double exploitation: that of cheap labour (Aboriginal) and virtually free land. (2003, 38)

'Into the Light' is a story that opposes the strong sentimental attachment to the pastoral myth, a myth associated with 'images of the drover, the shearing shed, the merino on the face of a coin and, of course, of the swagman' in Australian culture (Seddon 2003, 38). The magnificent and majestic gum trees, a dominant motif in Heysen's paintings, are stripped bare and sparsely scattered over the land. The land is scarred by roads and fences, its dry topsoil stirred by the grazing sheep's hooves—is it the dust that causes the light to be golden?<sup>17</sup> Scott's story highlights the injustice, brutality, exploitation, foolishness and failure surrounding and carried out by these treasured icons. Heysen's evocation of the sublime in his landscape becomes a scene of destitution and environmental degradation once it is retold through Scott's fiction.

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<sup>16</sup> For more detail on the destruction caused by agricultural practices, see Nicholas Gill's 'Life and Death in Australian "Heartlands": Pastoralism, Ecology and Rethinking the Outback'. Val Plumwood has also discussed the harmful effects of grazing on ecosystems in her essay, 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land'.

<sup>17</sup> Scott also describes the destructive effects of sheep farming on the land in 'The First One', the narrator observing that 'when the sheep came, the land changed. The earth's water exposed obscenely to the sky. Trees falling, new grasses. Oh, it goes on and on' (119).

## **Grids, fences, roads and telephone wires: Noongar perspectives on Australia's lines of (dis)possession**

Scott represents colonial logic through the motif of straight lines—grids, fences, tracks, and boundaries. These lines are not only indicative of colonial lines of possession and incursion, but also Western social and scientific frameworks, such as racial and cultural hierarchies, which inform colonial logic.<sup>18</sup> Fielder suggests that Scott's preoccupation with the linear is also an

exploration of the dominant white culture's psyche in Australia – a psyche he describes as troubled, unstable, ambivalent. This troubled psyche's desire for linearity and purity represents an obsession with lineage manifested in the racial and cultural engineering by 'modern' thinkers in Australia. (2005, 5)

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<sup>18</sup> John Fielder also observes that Scott's use of the linear movement of modern-day train and car travel in 'The Train Driver's Conceit' (1996) could signify 'the single-minded and narrow mindset of Western culture' (2005, 3). Fielder's inclusion of 'The Train Driver's Conceit' is without reference, most likely because the poem was publicly exhibited on Westrail trains rather than published. The poem is reproduced in full in Fielder's essay which I, in turn, reproduce here:

### **The Train Driver's Conceit**

In the bad times you're shackled.  
It's clutch, key, an uneasy grinding  
shift  
alone in the belly of a  
petrol-sniffing poison belcher.  
Or you might be waiting, furrow-browed,  
scanning the lines for some power,  
in passing, to stop, collect and  
take you freely humming along until  
We're moving from all ways,  
in always the One Way.  
So though some are departing,  
and some are returning,  
there's others transcending what linear energies  
lead us toward and passengers think must forever retreat;  
the vanishing point.



Equating linear forms with the colonial logic is not exclusive to Scott's work. In Judith Wright's 'Flying-Fox on Barbed Wire' (1954), a flying-fox 'trapped on the cruel barbs of day' and 'stabbed with a pin' conveys 'the violence of colonial intrusion: the barbed fencing of space, the realigning of lines of movement and communication' (Kinsella, foreword, xix).<sup>19</sup> In an agricultural context, Seddon explains how the land was 'ruled up by straight lines . . . ignoring natural features, creating artificial . . . property lines that are often inimical to sensible land management' (2003, 36).

By contrast, the sacred geography of country is a network of living organisms, experiences, stories, performance and transformations. Bird Rose explains that the Australian continent:

is criss-crossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth. Performing rituals, distributing the plants, making the landforms and water, establishing things in their own places, making the relationships between one place and another. Leaving parts or essences of themselves, looking back in sorrow; and still travelling, changing languages, changing songs, changing skin.  
(Bird Rose 1996, 35)

Scott depicts the criss-crossing 'permeable' tracks of country and Dreaming as being under attack from rigid lines of possession and exclusion (Gammage 2011, 139). His poem, 'In Perspective', depicts persistent lines of possession in a contemporary setting. Two people walk down railway tracks surrounded by dunes, gulls, sky and ocean riven with 'lines, grids, fences' that separate, trap, and mislead:

Today we walked along the railway  
One dune behind and parallel to the beach.  
We balanced on a line, one on each,

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<sup>19</sup> The imprisoning linearity of colonisation is also depicted in Gordon Bennet's artworks such as *Possession Island* (1991) and his *Home Décor* series. Bennet and Scott both reconfigure colonial histories to emphasise the strategic injustice and oppression of colonisation that is often absent in Australia's national literature and art.

And saw we'd meet, as perspective, proper, told us.

Between us and the dune, a fence.  
Barbed wire, rusted, chopped up our view  
That was of dune only, sand blank and scraggled.  
A gull rose above the close horizon  
Rolled its lidless eye, and dipped.

We stayed fenced. (Scott 1985)

The world of the poem is bleak. The railway and fence are products of colonial enterprise. The 'scraggled' dunes and chopping barbed wire are in conflict. The wire is inharmonious and violent. Yet, there is some hope. The rusting metal indicates the power of the salty atmosphere acting against the man-made incursions. With time, the rust seems to suggest, such incursions can be resisted; broken down.

In 'Registering Romance', Fanny and John also observe the increasing linearity in their surroundings. Walking near the newly erected telegraph poles, they 'could see how the wire divided the sky, how clouds crossed it, not faltering; birds rested, then flapped randomly away. Lines such as these carry messages; so they listened to this one sing in the wind' (Scott 1995, 36). Once again, however, there is evidence of ecological resilience and resistance: the clouds and the birds still move freely across and within the altered environment.

Scott's depiction of colonial logic continues in 'Capture' and 'Asleep' – the latter being a reworked version of the former. While the stories are set in contemporary Australia, the central characters have a similar mindset to the drovers, explorers and settlers in Scott's other works. Just as colonists renamed and claimed authority over the land, Cory and Peter classify, collect and claim ecological subjects. In other words, their environmentalism doubles as modern-day colonialism. Fielder notes that:

Colonial power relations are characterised by the tendency to not listen, to not enter into dialogue, to not reciprocate, and to not enter into respectful relationships with Aboriginal people as equals. Capturing, controlling, domesticating and assimilating have been primary colonialist strategies.' (2005, 10)

Peter and Cory use each of these strategies in 'Capture'. The titular capture alludes, at first, to their physical capture of an 'unknown' creature but comes to describe the process of scientific classification as the creature comes under their control as a subject of research. The creature is therefore caught twice.

Peter and Cory photograph the creature for analysis, substituting its existence with a passive image. It is the image with which Peter and Cory interact—'Mug shots, close-ups; shots of it sprawled on the floor, others of it strapped to a table' while the creature itself is 'rendered unconscious. Necessarily' (26). The silencing, exploitation and imprisonment of the creature is suggestive of the colonial abuse of Aboriginal people who, treated like flora and fauna, were studied as specimens.

Of course, Peter and Cory have flora and fauna too. In their nursery, there are plants labelled "Indigenous" ... plants which *typified* habitats ranging from dune, to heath, to mallee'; 'a few thin knots of a scrambling and resilient looking plant fringed a clump of granite rocks, plants which—given more space—might have formed a sea of mallee scrub'; and '*an example* of a balga tree, or blackboy (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*), which to judge by its size must have been several hundred years old, and had been transplanted from its own environment (31, my emphasis).

In *Hunters and Collectors* (1996), Tom Griffiths asserts that the antiquarians of Australia's past, despite their apparent materialism, were more attuned to a sense of place through their 'cultivation of field skills, attention to locale, undisciplined breadth, engagement with memory and "sensuous enjoyment of material things"' (1996, 3). Yet in 'Capture', Peter and Cory's desire for material objects is not about sensuous enjoyment, it is about possession. Scott's depiction of the nursery emphasises how Peter and Cory render the non-human environment as 'puzzling objects for cabinets of curiosities' (Griffith 1996, 3). Add to this an excessive accumulation of neglected taxidermy kept in a room that is 'more storage than display' (29) and Peter and Cory's behaviour seems more appropriate for an Imperial Hunt which Griffiths describes as a 'quest for sport, science and trophies' (1996, 12).

While claiming to search for 'culture' and 'identity' in the non-human world, Peter and Cory commodify their environment. The taxidermy animals are

their trophies and so the true nature of Peter and Cory's relationship with their surroundings becomes apparent: conquest.

Peter, 'as a consultant [with an] ... entrepreneurial and innovative attitude to Indigenous flora and fauna', trades country rather than being a part of it. His 'thin and struggling livelihood had grown from the collection and supply of indigenous plants and seeds' (25). Even more disturbing is Cory's disappointment upon discovering that her thesis subject, the endangered dibbler, is not going to become extinct. In an ironic tone, 'Capture' describes how Cory's:

passion had been crippled when—almost as soon as she had resumed her studies—a second population was discovered and the animal's extinction seemed unlikely. She considered switching to another subject of study, perhaps biotechnology. (26)

In these instances, ecological crises are portrayed through entrepreneurial and professional lenses. Conservation becomes business. Scott's ironic depiction of the colonialist strategies embedded in supposedly altruistic environmentalism emphasises a persistent disconnection of non-Aboriginal communities from their surrounding ecology. Scott undermines Peter and Cory's expertise and questions their motives behind their interest in the local flora, fauna and the unknown creature that they capture.

'Capture' and 'Asleep' are part of a larger discourse linking conservationism with the ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal land. For example, Marcia Langton has criticised the bureaucratic demarcation of conservation areas that places Aboriginal country under government custodianship. She argues that sanctuaries like national parks further legitimise the colonial theft and degradation of the land and justify the continued dispossession of Aboriginal people. Peter and Cory's research are part of the colonialist environmentalism that, Langton would argue, enact 'a disguised and politically acceptable dispossession of Indigenous people' (Langton 1996, 22). There is perverse irony in this predicament. Langton states that:

with the possibility of life-threatening rupture in the global ecological system, the national park estate legitimates the conquest

of the continent. The state proves itself to be a responsible custodian of the land it has not yet allowed to become degraded. [...] It is seen to be managing its estate according to the new ecological theory of the human place in Nature. (1996, 26)

The ‘successful’ conquest and destruction of nature legitimises the federal ownership and custodianship of the land because ecological degradation, although a colonial legacy, necessitates the protection of flora and fauna by the government.<sup>20</sup>

It is significant that Peter and Cory’s property is connected to a national park, a detail that encourages a critical and ironic reading of the couple’s environmental ethics. ‘Capture’ resonates with Langton’s argument that national parks belong to ‘an institution of power which governs and commodifies “nature”’ (1996, 24). It also subtly reminds the reader that the need for government conservation only emerged *after* the colonial newcomers arrived on this continent. For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal people had successfully practiced sustainable ecological management. As Bird Rose states, ‘Aboriginal people were not conservationists in this contemporary sense of the term because they did not have to be. They had managed the continent in such a way that they did not have to face the massive loss of life-support systems’ (1996, 4). Reading Scott’s work in this context, Peter and Cory’s admirable professions and the national park they live near are products of colonisation and the enforced cessation of Aboriginal land management.

Scott’s classifies the national park as a ‘protected and privileged space’ that creates such a division between people and place that it is akin to ‘Frontier territory’ (29). This evocation of Australia’s colonisation asserts that the colonial

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<sup>20</sup> The logic of the national park has a similar logic to the Labor government’s argument against the Noongar Native Title Claim (Single Noongar Claim). In the Single Noongar Claim colonial injustices like the attempted genocide of the Noongar people, the dispossession of Indigenous land, and eugenicist policies of assimilation were used to disprove Noongar Native Title as they ‘proved’ the disconnection of Noongar people to country. (South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council; Host and Owen 2009, xiv)

lines of dispossession, separation, ownership, and exclusion continue into the present day, often in seemingly benign forms. For example, the Noonan property is distinctly separate from their surroundings: 'The back door was firmly shut and so ... Cory peered *through* the kitchen window, *within* the high fences, tried to see *into* the shed *out* back' (29, Scott's emphasis). It is remarked that the "backyard" is far too humble a word for what was behind Peter and Cory's house. They came from a long line, a tradition, of shed builders and backyard gardeners, and their securely fenced "backyard" was a refuge' (29). The backyard is indicative of Scott's representation of Australia's national identity as being entangled with its colonial past. Scott's rendering of national park, personal property and country as being disputed territories in a physical, spiritual and ideological sense, draws attention to contemporary Australia's need for Aboriginal knowledge of country to forge meaningful connections to place.

A reworking of 'Capture', called 'Asleep', was released in 2005.<sup>21</sup> In this version of the narrative, the creature captured by Peter and Corry (Scott changes the spelling of the protagonist's name from *Cory* to *Corry*) is revealed to be a Noongar spirit (*mammari*). The revelation ignites Peter and Corry's ambition. They imagine the professional accolades that could befall them if they were to master the creature and, through their research, extend their perceived knowledge of and access to Aboriginal country.

Scott introduces Owen, a young Noongar boy who is also Peter and Corry's gardener; and Pa, Owen's grandfather. The two men stumble across the violent capture of an Aboriginal spirit, yet it is not *Tjanak*, *Balyet*, *Mambera* or *mammari*, *Djimbar* or *Woodartji* or any other spirit Pa knows (117). Pa says 'Naatj' or 'what's this?' when he sees the creature who turns its head in recognition of language. Pa's knowledge of language means that he and Owen become embroiled in Peter and Corry's experiments. Peter asks Pa, 'Well, but *mammari* and that, you think they're real...?' (119). The 'and that' in Peter's query dismissively positions the spirit among those things beyond Peter's

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<sup>21</sup> 'Asleep' was intended to be part of a novel, *Naatj* that remains unpublished.

empirical understanding of the world, beyond his own sense of ‘real’. He diminishes the uniqueness of this spirit, its sense of place and language into a generic other.

Pa at first tries to rectify Peter’s generalisation of the spirit creatures as *mammari* and then seems to wrestle with the concepts of these spirits being ‘true’ or ‘real’ before eventually bending to Peter’s way of seeing and being in the world: ‘Mambera–mammari–and yes, well, true. They’re real’ (119). This brief exchange reveals the tensions between the Noongar and non-Noongar epistemologies and ontologies. Pa’s ability to speak the language does not inspire Peter and Corry to participate in Pa’s world or listen to his words. They want to use Pa’s knowledge to control the creature and elevate their own standing within the academic community. Like ethnologists who have misunderstood and misallocated Noongar words and meanings, Peter and Corry take Pa’s query, (*naatj*) and make the word the spirit’s name— “‘Good a name as any right now,’” Peter laughed’ (120). In an interview with David Malouf, Paul Carter explains that ‘Europeans thought language was the essential medium of occupation. Force was used but to make it legitimate, it had to be justified in terms of language’ (1989, 102). The act of naming the *mammari* parallels the naming process that occurred as part of the colonial project. Both are characterised by the same inaccuracies and the will to consolidate an illegitimate possession.

Carter also notes that Captain Cook’s spectacularly subjective choice of place names, like ‘Pigeon House Mountain’, is discordant with the sites which they supposedly signify and so ‘preserve and even enhance the otherness’ of the continent in Cook’s mind (1987, 31). In other words, the act of naming does not indicate Cook’s understanding of an area but confirms his detachment from it and therefore ‘preserves the irony of the explorer’s position and the contingent nature of his knowledge’ (Carter 1987, 31). Such irony is present in ‘Asleep’. In the moment Peter and Cory misunderstand the word *naatj* for the name of the creature, Scott ironically casts the naming process as an act of possession that highlights Peter and Corry’s ignorance rather than knowledge.

‘Capture’ and ‘Asleep’ expose the unjust, ignorant and self-serving foundations of Western forms of research and environmentalism in relation to

Noongar country. The conflicting ways the land functions as country, property and national park in Noongar and non-Noongar understandings of place productively provoke a dialogue about the necessity of Noongar language, story and experience of country in a contemporary Australian society.

## **Writing against *Terra Nullius* and Wilderness**

Carter observes that colonists created ‘an imaginary place in advance of a physical one’ (1987, 152)—the Austral Arcady and the savage wilderness are two examples of these imaginings. The land was not only a place of promise but, also, an adversary in the minds of colonialists. Before home could be recreated on the other side of the globe, this wild strange place needed to be tamed and its associated sense of alienation banished.

The colonial imagination produced a dispute between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences of land and country; a dispute present in Scott’s writing. The colonial projection of an unoccupied, yet hostile place, illogically included Aboriginal people as part of this imagined hostility. Of course, such presence undermines Australia’s foundational myth of *terra nullius*. These contradictory and erroneous constructs of place are used by Scott in his writings. In ‘The First One’, John Forrest, the ‘Premier Man’, sees ‘scrubby sand plains’ and ‘[d]ense and useless thickets’ that he must tame, conquer and develop (108). Scott notes that the Premier ‘feels threatened by clumps of bare granite which stands all about him’ (108). The ‘*wild and unknown country*’, as John Forrest’s diary describes it, is set in opposition to the civilised nature of the newcomers and their culture (109). But how unknown is it?

The Noongar narrative voice provides a contrasting viewpoint. John Forrest’s expedition party had:

four white men. The two famous exploring brothers, a policeman, and one to tend the horses and equipment.

(But lots of us watching them, eh? Well ... a considerable number, anyway.) (109)



That John Forrest's supposed discovery and claim over a part of the country is witnessed by pre-existing Noongar custodians comically refutes *terra nullius*. The interjecting Noongar voice provides a counter-narrative to stories of exploration, discovery, and legal settlement indirectly acknowledging the deeply contested and fraught issues of Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights.

Scott's short stories join other works that revise settler-colonial representations of a threatening Australian 'wilderness' in Australian art and literature. Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* (1902) depicts the male threat within the bush rather than the threat of the bush itself. This perspective is also adopted by Leah Purcell, albeit from a uniquely Indigenous perspective, in her rewriting of Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (2016) for the stage. The long history of re-appropriations of 'The Drover's Wife', recently the subject of Frank Moorhouse's *The Drover's Wife: A Celebration of a Great Australian Love Affair* (2017), is testament to the iconic status of the story and its stoic protagonist. Yet, Purcell's version establishes, for the first time, a powerfully revisionist Indigenous version of the story that weaves in her family history and makes a 'hero' of Lawson's antagonist – the 'blackfella' who stacked the hollow wood pile (Purcell, n.d.). So, too, does Scott revise time-worn narratives.

Traditionally, the settler-colonial depiction of the hostile Australian environment is articulated through the trope of being lost in the vast and unknowable bush. As examples, Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903), Henry Lawson's poem 'Babies in the Bush' (1899), Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), and Frederick McCubbin's painting *Lost* (1886) depict the land as an enigma and a threat. Aboriginal people are typically part of that threat or peripheral to these narratives. In Scott's short story 'Lost' (2006), the trope of the lost child, so prevalent in Australian art and literature, is subverted when the reader experiences the story from a Noongar perspective. The unknowable wilderness suddenly becomes known through Noongar eyes. Here, the story is narrated by characters who are not lost at all and, as in Purcell's 'The Drover's Wife', Aboriginal characters become heroes.

'Lost' centres on the search for a non-Aboriginal girl who is 'taken by the wilderness' in the southern forests of Western Australia (11). Two Noongar

trackers, Fred Nellie and George Nine, are asked by the police to help with the search. Elspeth Tilley in *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-bush Myth* (2012) explains that a 'key paradox in white vanishing' occurs when the *other* 'is at once an object of desire and derision' (86).<sup>22</sup> In 'Lost', the pioneering community ridicule Fred and George but ultimately need them to decipher, what they believe to be, an unknowable and strange wilderness.

However, the story deviates from the lost child trope because Scott foregrounds the massacre of the ancient karri trees rather than the search for the missing child. Wandering through the forest in search of the girl, the search party 'now and then saw an isolated ringbarked tree and it was clear that someone, fuelled by spite rather than wanting to clear land for any own productive purpose, must have selected the very largest' (17). By depicting the senseless violence against the trees, Scott suggests that the pioneer, rather than the forest, is the threatening force. As a result, the traditionally demonised bush is depicted as the victim rather than the predator.

The Noongar trackers treat the land, its karri trees, and sky as a sacred place. Fred muses that that an 'evening of stars and moon and such towering, tapering columns was greater than any church or cathedral' (3). The thought of Noongar spirits 'running among the trees' scares him but he is aware that his fear is caused by the darkness of the night not the land itself (4). This distinguishes Fred from the non-Aboriginal pioneers who 'were scared of the forest ... [and who] must be real scared now, what with one of their kids gone missing' (4). While the Noongar tracker is entranced by the majesty of the forest, the newcomers dare not stare too long at the environment around them.

Fred sees the forest as a place of worship and as a sanctuary much like European churches and cathedrals. The equivalency of Noongar and non-Noongar sacred sites disturb the colonial understanding of what is good and evil, safe and unsafe. Fred finds comfort in the trees, yet the newcomers 'liked to dwell on the

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<sup>22</sup> The use of the 'other' refers to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) which is cited by Tilley (2012, 86).

detail of their buildings, the little things of their lives, because otherwise it was overpowering, the scale of the bush, the size of the trees, the slow progress in shaping it, in making civilisation' (11).

In 'Lost', non-Aboriginal fear of country is depicted as illogical paranoia. Harnessing elements of Australian gothic literature that, as Gerry Turcotte examines, is traditionally bound to the colonial imagination, Scott subverts the mode (Turcotte, 1998). Winfred Powell, the mother of the lost child, imagined that 'the ringbarked trees had moved closer, were leaning in' as though ready to attack (19). Similarly, the search party reflect that, 'there were plenty of dead karris near the little town, and surrounding each isolated hut. Almost like a hostile army, if you cared to think about it' (22). The conflict between Fred's and the non-Noongar perspectives of place once again undermines the colonial logic revealing the savage wilderness as a self-manifested threat.

When a fire starts in the bush, the search party believes that the forest deliberately prevents their escape. They reflect that, 'it's hard to run quickly in the forest. It plucks at you, trips you, does not afford you the vision that you want and gives you no sight of a finish line' (22). However, the fire is revealed to be controlled back burning, lit by Noongars who had raked the ground in preparation of the flying embers and who had full knowledge of the movement of the wind and oncoming rain. The search party, so sure of the savagery and ruthlessness of the wild land, stands helplessly as the two Noongar trackers return with the lost girl underneath the first drops of rainfall. Uncomprehendingly:

the men stared up at the tree, at the fire like a great blossom  
already wilting, and the embers red and dying within the circle  
beneath it.

'The wind, the rain ... As if ...'

'Not really wilderness then, is it?' (24)

The final thoughts of the stunned men are an affirmation of Aboriginal land management and knowledge of the land which ultimately exposes 'wilderness' as mythic. These newcomers may not understand the Noongar custodianship of country, but by the end of the narrative they witness it. The continued

‘development’ of the land, then, can only be viewed as a *knowing* dispossession of the land’s rightful owners.

The justification for Australia’s colonisation relied and continues to rely on the strategically sustained imagining of the continent as vacant wilderness or *terra nullius* at the time of invasion. Plumwood explains that:

erasure or denial inhabit the heart of the colonial project, in which the colonized other is seen as empty of potential for independent creativity, agency or desire. This appears in an extreme form in the colonial construction of the Australian continent as *terra nullius*, an empty, available land – in contemporary capitalist terms, as vacant space or developmental potential. (2006, 121-2)

Iterations of colonial myth-making are present throughout Scott’s short fiction. The drover in ‘Into the Light’ tasks himself to ‘make something from the *nothing* that was there’ (Scott 2000b, 121, my emphasis) and Pa in ‘Asleep’ sarcastically comments that ‘It’s a free country, they reckon, since whiteman found it’ (Scott 2005, 119). The supposedly vacant space was officially conquered through ‘writing the continent’, a term Langton uses to describe the use of ‘titles, maps, boundaries, and registries’ to categorise the construct of “‘Terra Australis Incognita’” (1996, 29).

Plumwood asserts that ‘wilderness’ as a pure, untouched land denies the massacres that have occurred on this continent (Plumwood 2006, 20). The denial of injustices is also linked to the denial of heritage. By classifying parts of country as wilderness, sacred sites including those of massacres, are diminished or erased. Furthermore, the ‘naturalizing’ that equates humans with nature is apparent in Langton’s observation that Aboriginal people have been grouped with flora and fauna on Australia’s currency and stamps (Plumwood 2006, 133).<sup>23</sup> She interprets this equation as a strategic evasion of colonial atrocities stating that linking ‘Aboriginal images with Australian fauna has less to do ... with the still virulent

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<sup>23</sup> Scott cites Langton in his essay, ‘Guides and Explorers: Australia's Cultural Identity Now’ (19) and his review, ‘Jerramungup Dreaming: Ethel Hassell's My Dusky Friends is Finally Published’ (340).

eugenicist and social Darwinistic notions, than with the need to associate images of the victims of genocide with the more pleasant and distracting images of cuddly, furry creatures (Langton 1996, 16). As such, the denial of Aboriginal people and practice as being distinct from the non-human environment silences the act of colonial genocide within a ‘culturally reconstructed wilderness’ (Langton 1996, 18).

Both Scott’s reference to Hans Heysen’s colonial painting and the photographing of the Noongar spirit in ‘Capture and ‘Asleep’ resonate with Plumwood’s writing on visuality. Plumwood notes that the visual framing of place ‘requires little in the way of symmetry (one can see without being seen), reciprocity, or consent, and allows the seer to be set sharply apart from what is seen. Sight has been interpreted and structured through an account in which the object of attention is passive and othered’ (2006, 123–24).

Alternatively, an Aboriginal understanding of place is not one-sided. Bird Rose explains that:

For many Aboriginal people, everything in the world is alive: animals, trees, rains, sun, moon, some rocks and hills, and people are all conscious. So too are other beings such as the Rainbow Snake, the Hairy People and the Stumpy Men. All have a right to exist, all have their own places of belonging, all have their own Law and culture. (1996, 23)

Indeed, Scott’s descriptions of country evoke sound, touch, taste, smell as well as sight, portraying a more reciprocal relationship between human and non-human agents. In ‘The First One’, Johnny One follows Noongar men in the hope of being given food and shelter. In this scene, Scott engages multiple senses to create a profile of the land and the Noongar men that is active. Sleeping near the men’s camp, eating their freshly speared mutton, Johnny One notices snow falling from the sky. The sensory scene incorporates sight: ‘He saw the fire, and longed for it’ (122), ‘He could see the snowflakes as they fell (123); sound: ‘He listened to their voices’ (122), ‘In the now painful quiet’ (122); smell: ‘The scent of sheep on the fire.’ (122); taste: ‘He tasted mutton’ (123) and ‘He took some [snowflakes] in his hand, tasted it.’ (123); and touch: ‘There was no trace of warmth from where the morning’s sun had touched the rock, but there was still the fire’ (123).

Bird Rose states that, ‘Areas which Europeans have often seen as desolate and lacking life, and which are certainly inhospitable to many species, are likely to be seen quite differently by the Aboriginal people who belong there (1996, 24). Scott’s fiction can be understood to argue the same point. The tension of conflicting yet overlapping colonial and Noongar perspectives in Scott’s writing also highlights the missed opportunities for the newcomers to know and cultivate their new environment. By identifying and acknowledging the *illogic* colonial constructions of place, Scott reveals a need for an understanding of place influenced by, if not founded on, Aboriginal notions of country. Outside of his fiction, Scott has more directly evoked the possibility of a contemporary Australian society connecting to the land by grafting onto its Aboriginal roots (Scott 2012a, 243; 2007a, 123).

## **Conclusion**

Scott’s writing foregrounds the weak and weakened connections to country, not only in relation to non-Aboriginal relationships of place, but contemporary Noongar relationships with place also. His work interrogates the anxiety inherent in the Australian sense of belonging; and anxiety caused by ‘the ‘insecurity, uncertainty, and doubt’ of a nation founded upon injustice (Scott 2005b, 19). The characters of Cory and Peter embody how many Australians . . . wanted to put down stronger roots in this country of ours . . . [and] consolidate their home in this land, its light and air and earth (Scott 2002a, 25). However, words like ‘belong’, ‘continuity’, and ‘identity’ are depicted as empty without the Aboriginal understanding of place to give them meaning.

Scott has argued that it is Aboriginal language and story that will graft a contemporary Australian society onto its Aboriginal roots. Scott’s poem, ‘Wangelanginy’ (2002)—a Noongar word that means something like ‘speaking ourselves back together again’—stresses the importance of language and story in creating a strong sense of place. The reciprocal interconnectedness of country is present in the poem’s personification of whispering trees and the way the narrator mistakes the wind for ‘my own breath fluting / over sharp-edged sedge and rocky

beds (99). Importantly, the narrator comes to understand the wind as ‘not me, or mine / but this land that still breathes’ (99). The vital agency of country describes Noongar custodianship rather than possession of place. The land’s breath also metaphorically alludes to the language of country and the ‘old people’ that *still* breathe and may possibly speak, albeit from a ‘shrivelled . . . tongue’ (99).<sup>24</sup> By listening to these voices, Scott seems to suggest, Australians can connect to country and belong in a meaningful way.

Scott’s writing is part of a larger discourse that challenges Australia’s national mythologies. Plumwood encourages humans to ‘rethink, relocate, and redefine our protective concepts for nature within a larger anti-colonial critique’ (2006, 135). Such sentiments are also voiced by Gammage who contends that, ‘we have a continent to learn. If we are to survive, let alone feel at home, we must begin to understand our country. If we succeed, one day we might become Australian’ (2011, 323).

Scott’s short fiction and poetry hold the tension between an imagined nation and Aboriginal perspectives of country. From this dispute arises the possibility of Australians reconfiguring their sense of place to create a legitimate and informed feeling of home. This new way of being would be part of respectful and reciprocal relationships with Aboriginal country. In Scott’s own words, he is asking his readers to consider, ‘the possibility of Australia’s indigenous peoples—having formed the first human societies here, and with the natural environment so integral to their cultures—becoming some sort of conduit between land and nation’ (Scott 2005b, 15).

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Wangelanginy’ describes breathing life back into an ancestral language and is embedded in country. Scott returns to this imagery in the Wirlomin Project publications and *Taboo*.





## Chapter 2

### The language of *True Country*

#### Introduction

Colonial incursions into the land have threatened the interconnectedness of Aboriginal relationships in and with country. The coloniser's language was violently forced onto landscape and physical environment, and settler-colonial possession legitimised through English as a default language that carried embedded within it European notions of land and place. The colonial use of language in Australia sought to cover up Aboriginal country by overlaying the pre-existing narratives of place, ongoing land management and custodianship with a colonial mythology. This mythology also negated Aboriginal voices and belonging.

*True Country* destabilises cultural, racial, and epistemological hierarchies stemming from the perceived (and enforced) superiority of the English language. Scott interrogates the relationship between language and identity to reveal the colonial 'othering' of Aboriginal people in written texts. Importantly, he also reveals the dynamic nature of Aboriginal languages and storytelling practices that use Aboriginal dialect alongside appropriated English. Scott's own ambivalent position as a Noongar writer using the coloniser's language is expressed in the novel's differing treatment of written and oral languages that, as Philip Mead observes, is part of:

an ongoing, fragmentary, individual, geographically specific and inter-personal project in articulating a self in relation to place and community, a project that deploys (just as it resists) the formal, narrative possibilities of the novel to articulate that project to history, but not to any incipient or hegemonic narrative or nation.' (2012, 150)

The divergent and contradictory form of the novel described by Mead is expressed in *True Country*; a book that holds the tension between different forms of storytelling, Aboriginal and colonial uses of English, and the different historical perspectives of people and place. Scott's use of the novelistic conventions does not limit his ability to present a distinct Aboriginal perspective and storytelling practice.

Despite writing *True Country* in Australia's colonising language and using a culturally dominant literary form—the novel, Scott creates a language and narrative style that deliberately unsettles Australia's literary tradition that has typically excluded Indigenous stories and storytelling practices. In his essay, 'Covered Up With Sand', Scott describes the opportunity that he sees in Aboriginal literature:

I'd like to think that writing fiction is sometimes a way to explore, to rethink and possibly to retrieve or create something from between and behind the lines on the page. As such it can help the revitalisation and regeneration of an Indigenous heritage, in so far as it involves 'shaking up' and making space within the most readily available language—that of the coloniser—for other ways of thinking. (2007a, 123)

These other ways of thinking are present in Scott's earlier work, like *True Country*. The narration of the novel is in a collective Aboriginal voice and written in Aboriginal English, to use J. M. Arthur's term (Arthur 1996). The diversity of expressions unsettles assumptions about the opposition and separation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages, paving the way for further disruptions of how the reader understands written and oral cultures, and literacy and illiteracy. One of the key achievements in *True Country* is that Scott disrupts hierarchies of power associated with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages.

In *Caliban's Voice*, Bill Ashcroft states that language has power because it 'provides the terms by which reality may be constituted, it provides the names by which the word may be "known". The system of values it conveys ... becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourse is grounded' (2009, 1–2). *True Country* depicts how the English language, being the national language of education, government and history, creates a Eurocentric reality (and colonial

logic) that continues a legacy of marginalising Aboriginal people by marginalising their languages and stories.

Billy Storey and his wife Liz travel to Karnama, a (fictitious) remote mission town in the Kimberley, to teach in the local school. The move is linked to Billy's attempt to connect with his Noongar (spelled Nyungar in the novel) heritage, a part of his identity with which he is struggling to come to terms<sup>25</sup>. The local residents suspect that Billy is, as they say, 'a bit like us' (82) and conjecture that he is Noongar<sup>26</sup>. Slowly Billy finds his place within the local Aboriginal community by 'shaking up' the way he tells stories about and to them. He also learns to listen to the Aboriginal voices already there. Billy's growing excitement and understanding of himself when he listens to the stories of the Karnama elders is contrasted with his students' lack of interest in the classroom. Billy starts to question the relevance of the texts he is teaching in his classroom – their form and the standard English in which they are written do not engage the students. As the novel progresses the authority of the imperial language, especially in its written form, diminishes while the collective Aboriginal voice becomes more empowered.

## **The language of authority and erasure**

There is an uneasy relationship between Billy, as a Noongar teacher, his students and the English language texts that pass between them. The language and stories of the education system reinforce colonial discourse and dictate modes of communication. This creates an alienating pedagogical experience for Billy and his students that confuse their feelings of belonging within country. Billy's search for a sense of self mirrors Scott's own journey, creating a slippage between fiction

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<sup>25</sup>In *True Country*, Scott uses the spelling 'Nyungar'. As stated, this thesis uses the most recent spelling of Noongar, except in quotations.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Brewster notes the ambiguity of Billy's Aboriginal heritage: 'Whether this [Karnama] is his country or not remains unconfirmed although it is hinted that he is related to Walanguh through his grandmother.' (2015, 24)

and autobiography as ‘author and narrator map onto each other’ (Trees 1995, 21). Scott’s own alienation within the education system and his disillusionment as a teacher clearly influences Billy’s characterisation.

The school’s curricula, its texts and language are not of Karnama’s world and so education becomes a process of indoctrination into the mainstream culture *and* a denial of Aboriginal languages and identity. The school continues the linguistic colonialism of early Australia that controls from, as Ashcroft would describe it, an imperial centre (2009, 1) This type of control - ‘whether by displacing native languages, by installing the imperial language as a “standard” against other variants denigrated as “impurities”, or by planting the language of empire in a new place – remains a potent instrument of cultural control’ (Ashcroft 2009, 1).

Fatima, an Aboriginal elder, recounts being forcibly removed from her family as a child and her assimilation into Australian life. Both Fatima and her sister were abducted by missionaries and taken to Darwin and later Beagle Bay Mission to be educated. When the two girls eventually return to their families in Karnama, they have lost the ability to speak in their community’s language. Fatima recounts that ‘We didn’t know how to speak the language. We forgot about our language. We talk in English. I couldn’t understand my mummy. I forgot all about our language. We forgot about it’ (38).

Fatima and Mary’s successful ‘inclusion’ in Australia is dependent on their distance from their language, culture and kinship. Christian faith, English language (especially the written word) and Western culture and logic are positioned in the imperial centre, the forced destination for the two sisters. Aboriginal languages, culture and logic were positioned at the periphery. Penny van Toorn describes how:

colonial government and church authorities viewed literacy as a tool of assimilation, an effective means of hastening the ‘inevitable’ progress of ‘primitive’ peoples into the modern white Western world. Writing and literacy thus entered Indigenous Australian life worlds most often as part of a colonialist Christian agenda. (2006, 12)

As a result, Karnama's language, stories and culture are threatened by what Jeanie Bell has described as 'deliberate cultural and linguistic genocide' (1994, 48). The colonialist Christian agenda described by van Toorn can be detected in Scott's depiction of Karnama's church and school, each continuing their bid to 'improve' the local population by separating them from their cultural practices, including their language.

The institutional management of Karnama by outsiders who have flown in from urban areas creates a hierarchy in the community. The outsiders assume positions of authority over the locals in the school, mission, government office and national park. Many of these characters such as Alex, the school principal, and his wife Annie are inherently racist and entitled. They are blind to their privileges that the local community do not share – air-conditioned cabins and wine that is drunk without the social stigma attached to the locals' drinking habits. This is not a post-colonial environment in the sense that colonisation and colonial oppression has not ceased. The continuing colonialism of Australia is a subject Scott has expounded since writing *True Country* (2007a) . The novel's representation of Australia's unresolved inequalities acts as an early fictive representation of Scott's political viewpoint in more recent publications. The mission staff hold opinions of the local Aboriginal community that still follow a colonial logic. At the welcome dinner, Father Paul explains to the new guests that:

'When the mission first came here they were dying out, in terms of numbers. It's only the last couple of decades that the numbers have started to increase. There's a lot of children now.' (29)

The Social Darwinist underpinnings in the conversation continues in Alex's response:

'As a people they can't last,' said Alex. 'They need to organise themselves. Set some sort of goals. Face up to the way things have to be done nowadays.' (29)

The exchange evokes the 'doomed race' theory that regarded extinction 'as the Aboriginals' inescapable destiny, decreed by God or by nature' (McGregor 1997, ix). The idea developed in Australia from the early nineteenth century in line with

the proliferation of the natural sciences in England and continued ‘flourishing’ in the late 1800s and early twentieth century before it eventually declined in the 1950s (McGregor 1997, ix). Its continued presence in Scott’s *Karnama* is a pointed reminder of an active colonial logic at work in contemporary Australia. Father Paul’s reference to the community as numbers is a dehumanising act. Additionally, Alex’s assertion that the Aboriginal people need to comply with ‘the way things are done nowadays’ reasserts a distinction between a supposedly civilised present that contrasts with the primitive origins of Aboriginal culture.

The stories taught in the local school and church are an extension of this discourse. As such, the students are indoctrinated with narratives that either exclude or misrepresent their Aboriginal identities. Billy’s increasing awareness of the curriculum’s exclusion of his students prompts his search for new ways to teach and connect with his class, ways that acknowledge and support their Aboriginal heritage. He is also searching for ways to support and express his own Noongar identity. Billy’s position can be likened to Scott’s liminal position as an author descended from the Noongar community writing in the colonial English language. He is with and without stories. Scott explains that in ‘literature’ and formal education:

you get the point-of-view of the colonisers and their representations of Aboriginal people; and you occasionally get the thoughts of Aboriginal people but these are usually from within the constraints of the colonising language. Oh, and of course, people such as myself are researched from a similarly constrained position. There are all these deceits and dangers of ‘paper talk’.  
(2000a, 163–4)

Scott’s reference to the ‘constrained’ position from which researchers critically engage with his writing is indicative of a predominantly monocultural and monolingual education system, a system represented in *True Country*’s local school. In the process of writing his first novel, he says:

I became aware of how my formal education's stories interfered with what I was trying to say. As that novel begins, so did the writing of it, but more so with a sensibility akin to that of frontier stories, of pioneer stories, of an individual consciousness seeing Aboriginal people as ‘the other’. (2000a, 168-9)

The absence of any representation, let alone self-representation, of Noongar heritage and language in Scott's own education has clearly influenced the characters and events in *True Country*. Billy struggles to reconcile his role as a government teacher in an Aboriginal community so disengaged and disconnected from the language and curricula he must teach. He realises something must change.

Billy visits Fatima to record and transcribe her stories. He wants to capture her spoken words faithfully in written form with the intention of sharing these with his students. He understands that Fatima's stories will potentially engage his students more than the prescribed texts on the curriculum. Yet, when Billy visits, he comes armed with mission archives in order to verify Fatima's stories. He unconsciously defers to journals and logbooks as the authoritative text. At one point, Billy stops listening completely. While Fatima recounts the murder of Mary Nangimara – an unrecorded brutality in Karnama's history, Billy distractedly turns pages trying to clarify an insignificant detail: the colour of an item given to Mary by the monks. Fatima has said the item was 'red material', but Billy remembers reading that it was a red dress. Finally, Billy 'discovers' it was a scarf—the item Fatima had described previously. The incident highlights the power play of language and how the written word controls understandings of the past. Orality is perceived as vulnerable, unreliable and therefore illegitimate other to the reliable and legitimate written text - its validity is assured through its very form. Billy bows to the authority of the written archive rather than Fatima's story. However, the revelation of Nangimara murder shows that the written record may be incomplete or inaccurate.

Scott treats the dispute between oral and written forms constructively by highlighting how the convergence and comparison of histories provide a more complete perspective on the past. Characteristically, he champions plurality in his narratives by finding value in divergent, contradictory and overlapping stories. The mission books and Fatima's oral history refute, validate and sometimes complement one another: Fatima 'was pleased by examples which confirmed her memory, gratified by those which corroborated it, annoyed with those which differed' (41). Fatima wants these written histories to both inform and validate her

stories, however the captions in the mission books ‘rarely named the Aborigines’ (41). The extent to which Aboriginal stories have been negated and misrepresented in the official archives evidences the need for collaborative histories; Fatima has much to add, clarify and reject in these journals.

In one instance, the local Aboriginal community is depicted as violently antagonistic in a story about the spearing of a Father Vega and a Father Giraldi. The mission journals state that members of the community surrounded the mission and attacked without provocation. However, Fatima remembers the story handed down to her from her mother that recalls how the missionaries shot a dog from the community, believing it to be a wild dingo. The community subsequently surrounded the mission and speared the fathers as payback. The important detail about the shooting of the dog is not mentioned in the journals. This omission makes Billy realise the value in listening to Fatima. He says to her:

‘Yeah, see that’s why I want to talk to you, and the others maybe, because the book doesn’t ... it just tells you what one eye saw, they don’t tell you the background, like about the dog ...’

Fatima said, curtly, ‘Yeah, because they don’t want to.’

I considered it a moment and returned it as, ‘Well, they don’t know. They don’t want to, and they don’t know.’ (49)

Billy concedes that the bias in the written archives is not only an act of denying Aboriginal perspectives, but also the product of wilful ignorance due to the lack of exchange between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Billy’s interest in Fatima’s stories acknowledges the stories and ways of telling stories that are negated in national constructions of history, literature and government. The bringing together of seemingly disparate archives, storytelling practices and cultural perspectives is shown to be challenging, yet productive. Billy must relearn how to think, write, listen and collaborate in order to articulate who he is and where he belongs in a truthful way.

## **Aboriginal literature in the coloniser’s language?**



In an autobiographical essay 'Strangers At Home' (2007), he admits to writing the first draft of *True Country* in a default language that was not his own. When editing the novel, he recognised that:

my fluency was the result of a rather innocent, perhaps mindless, utilisation of the conventions of a social realist literary tradition, and the sort of perspectives offered by my formal education and the media. I recognised the local attitudes of my local newspaper's travel sections, a sense of visiting remote Aboriginal communities, and presenting Aboriginal people only as some sort of exotic 'other', and as subjects to be observed from a distance. (2007b, 2–3)

In *True Country* Scott distinguishes his authorial voice from those to which he had previously been exposed. The insidious way dominant language and writing conventions can other Aboriginal people is highlighted in the chapter 'Amazing?'. When Beatrice, a young Aboriginal girl, starts behaving erratically she is hospitalised in Wyndham and then Perth for an 'unknown' condition. Western medicine cannot diagnose Beatrice's illness. The Karnama elders, however, discover that Beatrice has been sung and so the community, not the doctors, must be the ones to treat her. The event is documented in the newspapers as a mystical phenomenon:

#### GIRL SAVED BY BLACK RITUALS

An amazing series of rituals to rid a dying black girl of a tribal curse was carried out in one of Perth's major hospitals.

The girl was believed to have been cursed by Aboriginal elders.

A clinical psychologist became concerned that the child had been 'sung' and arranged for the Aboriginal tribal elders to perform an exorcism on the comatose child in Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

Being 'sung' is a ritual similar to the so-called pointing of a bone.

The elders, from the Kimberley, visited the child three times. The child has returned to her community and is fit and well. (219)

The news article exoticises the act of singing by describing it as a ‘tribal curse’, and racialises the practice by describing it as a ‘black ritual’. Beatrice also becomes a ‘black’ girl within a default white perspective.

Furthermore, singing is made an equivalent to the Catholic ritual of exorcism, a mis-association that traps Aboriginal knowledge in non-Aboriginal frames of reference. The equivocation denies the fact that ‘there are other ways, and other brains’ besides those of non-Aboriginal minds and practices (218). The media’s incredulity towards other ways of thinking can be seen by the inverted commas placed around ‘sung’ or the description of the ‘*so-called* pointing’ of the bone (my emphasis). In both instances, the legitimacy and reality of the Aboriginal world are questioned. It is clear the article is intended for a non-Aboriginal readership and so, by presenting this article through the lens of the collective Aboriginal narrator, Scott scrutinises the tradition of writing on Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal authors for a non-Aboriginal readership.

The title of the chapter, posed as a question, undermines the journalist’s depiction of the event by questioning whether it really is ‘an amazing series of rituals’. For Aboriginal elders like Walanguh, the power of Aboriginal spirituality and lore is a part of everyday life, not a journalistic curiosity to be sensationalised. Scott’s writing critiques the deployment of language as a colonial tool. It is shown to misrepresent, dispossess, oppress and suppress Aboriginal people in the form of books, legal documents and news articles while simultaneously propping up the authority and exclusive perspective of Australia’s non-Aboriginal people.

Gabriella, a young Aboriginal woman, is a key character who resists and critiques the hierarchy of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal storytelling and language. She attends a Melbourne university because, rather than becoming a nun in Karnama, she ‘wanted to become an accountant, or a teacher, and to come back to Karnama and live in a house like those the teachers had’ (77). She returns home during her study breaks and increasingly sees the disjunction between life on the mission and that of wider Australia. The two realities are disconnected and Gabriella realises that, ‘the bridging course she did at uni didn’t connect these worlds’ (92). The ‘Aboriginality’ being taught at university, similar to that being

taught in the mission, does not engage with or reflect life in Karnama. Gabriella recounts how the university:

gave her Aboriginal Literature to read. Her voice inserted quotation marks. She said it was dreaming stories, and they weren't so good to read, not like being told them. Or they were in the language that she didn't understand and then in English which made them sound silly, or as if they were only for little children. Or it was history stuff. Or sometimes just like any old story, but with black people. Or off-white people. (91)

While the inclusion of Aboriginal culture and stories at university can be viewed as progressive, their representation and translation in this institutional setting is problematic. There are inconsistencies in the transformation of Aboriginal dialects into English and oral stories into written forms. Gabriella notes a simplification of these stories that makes them seem childish. As in Scott's education, the absence of Aboriginal perspectives and voices creates a strained equivalence (at best) in the process of translation and exchange. However, it is here, in the strenuous and tense space between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal storytelling practices that Scott writes. It is into this disputed territory that *True Country* enters.

By using a collective Aboriginal voice to narrate *True Country*, Scott frees the vocabulary of Indigenous lore—words like singing and sung—from the quotation marks of local journalism. The need for Aboriginal self-representation in Aboriginal stories is a key focus within the novel. Yet, the difficulties in realising such an ambition are made clear.

This impetus for Billy's project to record and transcribe the Karnama dialect and stories is personal and unavoidably political. In contemplating the purpose and worth of continuing the project, he asks Gabriella:

'When you, I, we, don't know quite who we are these days, why try to tell others this, or that something has gone wrong and the world is not quite right? Because otherwise we have to listen to them, be silent, watch their visions, feel our earth vibrate as they hammer it with thick ankles and well-shod feet, probe and jackhammer drill.' (96)

Billy decides not to be silent; he refuses to listen to destructive national rhetoric or to entertain the non-Aboriginal version of country and Aboriginal people. The project, Billy hopes, will give voice to the Karnama locals and himself as a Noongar man. He decides to resist being a passive enabler of the colonial narrative in his role as a schoolteacher. By recording, transcribing and sharing the elders' stories he begins to alter the unequal power dynamic of narrative exchange occurring in the mission. Billy stumbles as he speaks to Gabriella. The shifting pronouns of you, I and, eventually, we, articulate Billy's search for his own identity in relation to those around him and the ultimate production of a collective Aboriginal voice.

The Aboriginal English in *True Country* is both a rejection of the 'innocent, perhaps mindless utilisation' of the Anglicised literary tradition, and an acknowledgement of its influence (Scott, 2007b, 2). Scott reflects that the process of incorporating Aboriginal English into his writing was not easy, especially because he had not previously seen it in a written form. He admits to being 'repelled by [his] own writing, [his] own fluency, by a slick surface of language which created a barrier to prevent [him] exploring and giving expression to neglected aspects of [his] own sensibility' (2007b, 3). Scott breaks through this barrier in the novel. He explains:

I'd struggled to get something that I'd only heard, but never seen on a page. I wrote it as one would poetry, attending to rhythm and syntax. And in fact it was this voice, this style, that helped me escape the prison I was enclosed in, a prison made by the conventions of colonial social realism, and even empiricism. (Scott 2007b, 3)

So while retaining the novelistic form, Scott was able to challenge the traditional narrative features and imperial language attached to it. His experimentation produces a shifting narrative voice, metafictional elements and multiple representations of characters and events. The dominance of the 'slick' and alienating language of Empire is displaced as Billy and the Aboriginal community take control of the story's narration. The predominant use of Aboriginal English makes *True Country* more than a polyphonic novel that expresses differing perspectives. The multilingualism of official English, Aboriginal English and

some Noongar language create a discursive space for differing languages and stories to critically engage with one another; \directly countering English linguistic imperialism. Even though Scott belongs to a community of people ‘brutalised’ by colonialism, his use of, and experimentation with, conventional literary forms and language confronts the tension of being an Aboriginal writer using the tools of this brutality. It is an empowered act, not one of acquiescence (Perth interview with Scott, 2013).

Similarly, Billy’s transcription of the elders’ story in written Aboriginal English is not necessarily a submission to the authority of English literacy and the written text. Billy attempts to open literary and pedagogical spaces for more inclusive and complex Aboriginal narratives. Writing about *True Country*, van Toorn notes that his students, in order ‘to enter into the world of literacy, ... must cross not just one but two bridges—that between oral and written forms, and that between Aboriginal and standard English’ (1994, 47). The written transcriptions of the Karnama people’s oral history and, more broadly, the Aboriginal English throughout *True Country* follows this same path.

Stephen Muecke, in his introduction to Paddy Roe’s *Gularabulu*, states that:

Aboriginal English is a vital communicative link between Aboriginal speakers of different language backgrounds. It also links blacks and whites in Australia, so, as it is used in these stories, it could be said to represent the language of ‘bridging’ between the vastly different European and Aboriginal cultures. It is therefore in this language that aspects of a new Aboriginality could be said to be emerging. The fact that it might be playing this important and interesting communicative role makes it seem purist and unnecessary to take traditional languages as a starting point. (Roe 1983, iv)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Van Toorn also draws comparisons between *True Country* and Muecke’s transcriptions of Paddy Roe’s spoken stories in *Gularabulu* and *Reading the Country*.

Muecke's argument that there can be a non-separatist understanding of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages, destabilises the argument that English, especially written English, is *only* a colonial language.<sup>28</sup> Scott, like Muecke, sees possibility in the disputed area of language, namely in the new forms of language that have emerged since Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal exchange and even in the decimation of many Aboriginal dialects. His use of Aboriginal English in *True Country* also seeks to destabilise the perceived divide between English and Aboriginal dialects, and written and oral languages. Aboriginal English, in this context, exemplifies the resilience and continuation of a creative and adaptive Aboriginal culture.

Yet, Scott has spoken of his uncertainty in using the English language and the novel as his means and modes of expression. He acknowledges that if you are a Noongar author, 'you're writing in the coloniser's language' (2013c, personal interview). As a 'man of letters', he questions the relevance of his work to his 'home community' ultimately deciding that writing 'is a way of exploring or trying to solve that dilemma for myself (2013c, personal interview). The process of coming to terms with the conflicting, yet not mutually exclusive, languages, histories and identities in Australia's shared history is at the heart of Scott's work.

Scott reflects that 'I didn't grow up speaking two languages. I didn't grow up speaking my own ancestral Indigenous language—Noongar—in addition to English and, in fact, only began learning Noongar language and dialect' (Scott, 2007b, 1). Consequently, at the time of writing *True Country*, he (like Billy) did not have the choice to write in Noongar or English. Scott's first language is English and so his reconnection with his heritage and the Noongar language, as a writer, began in the 'coloniser's language'.

Melissa Lucashenko – an Aboriginal writer of Goorie and European descent – has stated that 'Every time an Aboriginal person picks up a pen ... it's

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<sup>28</sup> Notably, the different approaches to literature by Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer who wrote in English, and Kenyan writer Thiong'o wa Ngugi, who has chosen to write exclusively in his local dialect of Gikuyu, highlights the political tensions with which Scott's work is engaging (Ngugi 1985).

always a political act' (de Kretser 2013). This politicisation risks understanding Aboriginal writing as an act of subjugation or subversion thereby defining it in relation to non-Aboriginal literature. Yet Aboriginal writing, as evidenced by Scott's work, can also express the dynamism of language—its susceptibility to being appropriated, manipulated and shared. This is not necessarily a negative consequence or one that is particularly new. In *True Country*, English exists beyond its standard form and continues to move in ways that were not intended by its colonial enforcers. Scott's literary techniques are innovative and adaptive, disrupting more predictably conventional or realist forms of narration to open up a space for dynamic language and multiple perspectives.

Martin Nakata writing on the 'cultural interface' (2007) is particularly relevant here. The interface, he explains, constitutes 'complex and contested terrains of overlapping knowledge systems [in which] different understandings often conflict, contradict, produce incoherence and make it difficult to "make sense" of these contradictions' (2007, 197). Scott, arguably, writes from and about the cultural interface. Indeed, *True Country* depicts the overlapping development of both English and Aboriginal languages that cannot be so easily separated. While Aboriginal languages have been heavily influenced by English, English has not remained static. It too has been acted upon.

## **Re-turning language**

In *True Country*, Aboriginal English is but one of the many forms and registers English takes in the novel. Spoken, written, formal and colloquial language are all represented in the novel to give voice to the variety of characters that live or pass through Karnama, Aboriginal country, the individual and the collective. Through the strategic use and celebration of linguistic difference, Scott destabilises the authority of institutional languages and literature of the kind found in Billy's classroom. Scott's treatment of language has been analysed by scholars such as Penny van Toorn and Eleanor Hogan within a Bakhtinian framework. Van Toorn has stated that 'Scott's text deconstructs unitary concepts of language, voice, medium, and narrative form. *True Country* is a heteroglossic, orally-grounded

printed text which articulates a space of overlap between varieties of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal verbal art' (1994, 41). Similarly, Hogan describes how the 'diversity of languages and dialects indicate the heterogeneity and hybridity of the community' in *Karnama* (Hogan 1998, 103).

The analysis of language in the novel can be illuminated further by the application of Karen Barad's essay 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart' (2014). Barad's contribution to new materialism describes a methodology that 'troubles dichotomies, including some of the most sedimented and stabilized/stabilizing binaries' (2014, 168). In light of Scott's revisiting of disputed territories and unsettling of binaries associated with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, new materialism and Scott's writing resonate with one another.

In 'Posthumanist Performativity', Barad challenges the colonial logic implicit in Eurocentric notions of 'human' and 'inhuman' (2003). Yet Alison Ravenscroft, in her essay 'Strange Weather: Indigenous Materialisms, New Materialism, and Colonialism' (2018), notes that Indigenous understandings of these entities remain outside the new materialist framework which therefore installs the very Eurocentrism that they purport to challenge. Furthermore, she observes that:

oral and written textualities composed by Australian Aboriginal people, who read and write relationship in ways that are among the most complex in the world and who theorize the "human" as deeply con-substantiated in relation to the "inhuman," risk remaining outside the considerations of key new materialist theories as if Aboriginal people had never spoken. (2018, 356)

Ravenscroft describes the possibility of a reading practice 'based in estrangement' as a way of de-centring the Western-centric knowing reader-subject' (2018, 259). While Ravenscroft focuses on Alexis Wright's work as 'making strange what was once reassuringly familiar', this thesis focus on the uncertainty Scott generates in his reader-subject by immersing the them in the disputed territories of Australia's shared history; by fracturing or diffracting what was familiar (2018, 259).

Like Aboriginal configurations of country, the process of diffracting diffraction problematises temporal and social separations between now and then,



the self and the other – ‘there is no moving beyond, no leaving the “old” behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then’ (Barad 2014, 168). Barad describes the act of diffracting diffraction or ‘re-turning’ as ‘iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling’ (2014, 168). Citing the paper ‘Not You/Like You’ (1988) of Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, literary theorist, composer, and professor Trinh Minh-Ha, she argues that difference is not necessarily a tool of separation but one ‘of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance’ (2014, 169). This thesis posits that a ‘reading practice’ immersed in the discomfort and uncertainty of disputed territories of language, history, the self, and the environment constructs possibilities for new ways of thinking about Australia’s shared histories and need to belong. The very complication and entanglement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives, cultures and forms of expression can establish the means of coming together.

The curated heteroglossia in *True Country* reconfigures the perception of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages as both in dispute and part of linguistic *continuity*.<sup>29</sup> Scott explores the possibility of multiple storytellers and multiple voices coming together to create a more balanced, albeit contradictory narrative. Yet, perhaps because of these contradictions, the narrative is more truthful.

Karnama’s new arrivals immediately experience the diffracted state of the English language. The narrator observes that ‘For their first few months here all teachers understand them [the students] clearly when they repeat lines from videos in American accents but are puzzled by the local English’ (102). Yet local English and standard English are not the only dialects in Karnama: ‘There’s all sorts of languages spoken in Karnama. Spanish, Spanish English, Philippine Spanish, Philippine English, Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal English, Australian English, Politician English. And more. Got them all nearly’ (141). There is also

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<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Nakata also describes the cultural and linguistic continuity of Islander communities stating that ‘while we have maintained continuity with our former knowledge tradition, much of the content of this tradition has been transformed in its interactions with Western knowledge systems and continues to evolve in interactions with Western knowledge and its institutions, technologies and practices’ (2007, 198).

the colloquial English of the transient outsiders—the educated teachers such as Billy, Liz, Annie and Alex who work at the school, or the government administrators Jasmine and Gerrard. Interestingly, their register differs from the more pointed Aussie slang of the construction workers temporarily camped on the mission.

The diffracted state of language in this remote area, and the re-diffraction of it in Scott's writing, is captured in the chapter 'We Drink', which tells the story of Raphael's drunken joyride in the mission's Toyota from a variety of perspectives: the novel's narration by an Aboriginal elder, a senior student's journal, another student's drawing, and the children's gossip. The truth of what occurred builds from the collective reconstruction of the event as the typically authoritative narrative voice becomes just one of many storytelling acts. The reader learns from the narrator that the 'Toyota [was] speeding recklessly around the corners of the small tracks leading around the edge of the camp' (130). The senior student's journal links Raphael's recklessness with a corrosive culture of drinking in Karnama. It describes how:

Someone brought grog to Karama [*sic*] and all the people get drunk and they start having fights with one other that drinking business makes the older people like Fatima Walanguh Sebastian Samson very upset so when all the people are better next day the old people talk out loud to all the people who was drunk and tell them what they think of them when they are drunk and of course they feel shame. (131)

The event also had a heroically comic element to it as shown by Francis's drawing of:

a muscular and bare-chested Aboriginal man careering through the mission grounds in a Toyota. White people fled in all directions. Young black families gathered in bunches and laughed and cheered, some older ones sat under the trees watching glumly. (131-2)

Similarly, the schoolchildren enthusiastically and somewhat reverently gossip about Raphael's escapade: 'all the kids were talking about how Raphael was

driving like he was in a race and how he pinched a car from the mission. They were excited and impressed with his daring' (132).

'We Drink' is an example of Scott's re-diffraction of an already diverse range of language and story. It indirectly undermines the singular authority of imperial English in its written form. The dispersion of narrative voices resists the strict boundaries inherent in the colonial construction of language.

Hogan astutely observes that:

while the use of English and Spanish in *Karnama* marks the impact of colonisation, the variety of 'Englishes' and 'Spanishes' spoken expose the hybrid, intersubjective underpinnings of Australian cultural identity. The viability of these dialects point to a kind of 'babel' effect through which the hegemony of colonialist languages has been confused and dispersed through their hybridisation. (1998, 104)

As such, the diversity of dialects in *True Country* shows both the pervasive dominance of colonialism *and* the regional appropriation and subversion of colonial hegemony as asserted through English. Barad's concept of 're-turning—not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew' is an apt description of Scott's treatment of language in *True Country* (2014, 168).

Scott also deploys performance as a successful mode of communication that emerges from the tension between the written and oral spheres. During Billy and Fatima's discussion of the *Karnama*'s historical logbooks, Billy gradually moves away from merely reciting the words on the page. He starts to perform them. Billy engages Fatima through mime, looking up from the novel and looking her in the eye. Billy recounts:

I stared at Fatima, then turned my face slowly, keeping my gaze upon her the whole time. It is not like me to do such a thing, and I was surprised at how positively Fatima reacted to it. I continued to mime as I read. 'Her eyes without resting on any one of us in particular kept moving one to another.'

I paused and said to Fatima, 'She was probably really frightened.'

Fatima's hands were clasped at her chest. 'Yeah yeah,' she said, nodding vigorously. And then, suddenly, we both burst into laughter. I think we were enjoying the re-creation of the story. (45)

This performance reveals the value of imaginative storytelling in installing a reciprocal and respectful dynamic between storyteller and listener/viewer/reader. Both Fatima and Billy enjoy the *re-creation* (re-turning) of the story in the mission journal as they collaboratively imagine what was *probably* done or felt. In this instance Scott is one again indicating the potential for archive, both written and oral, and something like fiction to retell the past as a true story. Billy's re-turning of the text frees him from an empirical understanding of history and allows him to connect with Fatima and her stories.

The internal assemblage of viewpoints and languages—spoken, drawn, written, performed—in *True Country* carry echoes of Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke and Krim Bentrak's, *Reading the Country* (1984) that uses Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadology to construct its text. Muecke describes nomadology as:

a way of looking which is specific ... a way of representing things (in discontinuous fragments, stopping and starting). It is an aesthetic/political stance and is constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform, the central authority, the hierarchy ... without for all that ascribing to any form of anarchy. (Bentrak 1984, 15)

*Reading the Country's* intention to unsettle the hierarchy of language of and perspectives on place are relevant to Scott's fictive efforts to re-diffract language and narrative viewpoints. *True Country* also seeks to depart from the singular and the uniform.

*Reading the Country*, however, is ultimately framed by a dominant authorial voice: that of Muecke. This occurs for two main reasons. The methodology of the text, while theoretically sound, requires Muecke to communicate the intention of the text and in doing so establishes his voice as the pivotal intermediary between theory and practice, between text and reader. His role as intermediary also extends to critiquing Bentrak's scattered images and to the representation of Paddy Roe's dialogue on the page. Mudrooroo has criticised

*Reading the Country* because he believes ‘Paddy Roe’s discourse becomes imprisoned between slabs of academic prose resembling nothing more than the walls of a prison’ (1990, 151). He goes on to say that ‘In these white productions there is an absence of critical and political comment on the part of the subject, and no analysis of Aboriginal-being-in-Australia’ (Narogin 1990, 151). This is harsh criticism for a text that essentially seeks to equalise the power relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal narratives of place. However, Mudrooroo’s criticism draws attention to the difficulty of creating a work that seeks to equally represent difference in language and story when the form of the book limits the expression of that difference. Ultimately, how can the Indigenous voice speak for itself in its translation to written English?

## **The individual author and collective narration**

Billy is paralysed by questions about the ethics of telling the community’s stories: whether he has the right to tell them, how he should tell them, and whether there is any purpose in telling them. Talking with Jasmine and Liz, Billy admits that the transcriptions, ‘don’t read well, not without a lot of editing’ (288). He explains that the process is ‘problematical, see. I write for the kids, but I edit. So, do I change it too much? Do I write only for the kids here? Who speaks? Have I the right too...’ (288).

The act of writing down Aboriginal people’s stories has the potential to further obscure and assimilate their voices into the mainstream rather than empower them. Billy’s intention to write up the stories recorded by Fatima, Sebastian and other elders in the community is complicated by his self-doubt. Murray, the mission’s mechanic and tradesman, considers Billy’s project futile. He says to Billy, ‘Why bother? You want to encourage them? They’ll lie to you you know. Still, I guess you could fix up their English when you write it up for the kids or whatever’ (117). Murray’s comment points to Billy’s dilemma: to what extent should the speaker’s words be edited? Or to reframe this question, how visible should the editor be? As Michèle Grossman rightly points out, considering

Australia's colonial history, the act of transcribing Indigenous stories has political, cultural and social implications because:

the issue of how stories, and the texts that represent them, mutate or are transformed during the journey towards publication is not the only issue at stake; it is the issue of who manages and controls these changes, who can lay claim to the cultural histories that authorize and sanction them, whose terms dictate such transformations, whose interests they serve, whose desire they allow to speak, whose subjectivities and agencies they affirm, undo or complicate. (2013, 178)

This problem of performing a true translation helps explain Billy's reticence to pursue his project of recording and writing the Karnama people's stories; Billy realises that the project will inevitably transform rather than transcribe their words. *True Country* performatively navigates obstacles like those encountered in *Reading the Country* by attempting to minimise the insertion of an individual authorial voice. As a result, Billy's narration is eventually replaced with a collective Aboriginal voice that speaks through the text without mediation. Of course, what may be possible in the world of the novel is not necessarily so outside of it. Scott remains the sole author of *True Country*, the polyphony and collectivity of the novel is fictive.

Scott's roles as an individual author and member of a larger Noongar community create a palpable dilemma that is continually negotiated in his work to date. However, these dilemmas can be read as productive spaces for storytelling. Both *Reading the Country* and *True Country* can be seen as constructive experiments in ethical, inclusive and diverse storytelling that are responses to the colonising act of deploying non-Aboriginal language and stories to dominate, silence, and erase Aboriginal people and histories.

The academic writing on Scott's *True Country* often discusses the novel's shift from first person singular to first person plural narration. Van Toorn describes how 'at some point part way through it, we begin to realise that the story-form has changed, has been grafted onto Aboriginal roots as it were' (1994, 42). Hogan reads the changing narration differently, arguing it is an alternation between Billy Storey and a 'collective, tribal Aboriginal subject who surfaces like

a chorus at intervals in the text, often to offer an alternative perspective to that of Billy, the urbanised, white-educated Aboriginal' (1998, 97). While Hogan's assertion that Billy's voice and that of the collective remain separate throughout the novel may be true in the novel's initial stages, it does not account for Billy's incorporation into the collective voice. It is significant that the collective voice provides an alternative to Billy as 'I' by welcoming him to become part of the narrational 'we'.

The opening chapter is a direct address to the reader in the plural first person from the Aboriginal community; the collective 'we' speaks to the reader, 'you'. The text then moves into first person from the perspective of Billy and eventually becomes a collective Aboriginal voice, although who is speaking remains unclear. The shift in narrative voice tracks Billy's growing connection to his Aboriginal heritage. Billy comes to accept and embrace the elders' stories and the need for his own uncertain, yet interrogative, authorial voice drops away. The collective narration is expressed in Aboriginal English and as the novel progresses the voices of the Aboriginal community become increasingly empowered.

Van Toorn observes that 'In rendering Aboriginal speech in the printed text of *True Country*, Scott engages in a transcription project similar to that undertaken in the novel by Billy Storey' (1994, 47). In this way, *True Country*, doubles as the completed project that Billy embarks on in the novel; an assemblage of his own writing and his transcriptions of the elders' recordings that are continually taking place beyond the novel's pages. Fatima and Sebastian use Billy's tape recorder to record their stories of everyday Karnama life. This, the reader can assume, is happening regularly because, in the chapter 'We May Fly and Sing', Fatima and Sebastian visit the school to get new batteries for the recording device. As such, Billy's project – the process of telling, crafting and sharing stories is alluded to within the novel itself. *True Country*, provides Billy's transcriptions to the reader, perpetuating the illusion that the taped stories speak directly to their audience through the text and so, when 'Reading *True Country*, we do hear the voice, and can see the bodily gestures of those who speak and listen—or don't listen' (van Toorn 1994, 46).

In 'A Beginning', Billy is told that his Noongar grandmother has died. This event marks the end of his narration. As told by the elders, Billy realises that all his nana's stories, her language and knowledge are lost to him 'now she is proper gone'. The elders continue:

And Billy stands in a noisy classroom and knows that all those things he was building up to asking her now will never have answers. And he's doing with Fatima, Sebastian, Samson what he should have done with her, and even with his father but that was too long ago and he didn't think then. (98)

Billy keenly feels the importance of connecting to his heritage after his grandmother's death. Once the link between himself and his Noongar family becomes more tenuous, he realises that he must act to strengthen his familial and cultural ties. The novel's complete transition to the collective narration reflects Billy's connection to his Aboriginality and the Karnama community. He is now held within their story. The narrator explains that, 'Billy is doing it with us now, and Gabriella too. We might all be writing together, really' (98). The suggestion of a collective storytelling process further implies that *True Country* doubles as a novel written by all the Karnama community. This possibility destabilises the Western idea of the individual author by using the novel form and text to convey Aboriginal oral histories that 'demands collaborative interaction between two or more individuals' (Pascal 2004, 7).

By bringing together elements of both Western and Aboriginal storytelling traditions, Scott blurs the line between these two practices and suggests the possibility of each informing the other. The perceived binary of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories, already dismantled by Scott's re-diffraction of language, is once again unsettled by the novel's shifting narration. Scott has described being motivated by 'a presence outside of and greater than the language, outside of the story' while also using 'the tools of the colonising society' in his writing (2000a, 170). In this way, Scott experiments with new ways of authorial self-expression that depict Aboriginal voices in literature.

The novel, as a collaborative work by Billy, Gabriella, Fatima, Sebastian and others, while also being a work written by Scott, constructively resists a



singular truth or perspective typical of the colonial logic. *True Country* addresses and uses the silences and gaps in Australia's dominant national discourse. Within the world of the novel, Billy and Gabriella decide to act on the need for the written word to express a complex and truthful Aboriginal worldview and identity despite, or perhaps because of, their own diverse and fractured identities. *True Country* suggests that inclusive and empowered storytelling is the way to bring together individuals and communities devastated, dispossessed and disconnected by the colonial process. The narrators of the novel also seem to know that the stories Billy records are the key to him finding his place; to belonging. The narrator suggests, 'What he want? What about those stories? He should look there' (246).

Both Penny van Toorn and Richard Pascal have put forward the possibility of Billy's death at the conclusion of the novel. For van Toorn, Billy's drowning enables Billy's spiritual rebirth while Pascal concedes that Billy's 'drowning' could also be a near-death experience. Yet, if the collective narration in *True Country* is read as a metafictional element of the novel in which the Aboriginal English is the transcribed recordings performed in the world of the novel, Billy's survival becomes certain. He has lived to write these recordings down. Speaking to Gabriella, Billy realises that '...there's something in common that must be offered ...' (96). *True Country* is the offering that Billy and Gabriella imagine.

The ending of the novel actually marks the beginning of the writing process when Billy, visited by Walanguh, realises that he is the man to write the true story and, after the novel's end, assumedly begins to do so. The possibility for language and story to empower, heal and unify is an underlying belief throughout Scott's writing. Almost 20 years after *True Country*, Scott reflected on his novel *That Deadman Dance* in an interview with Anne Brewster. In that novel, the protagonist, Bobby Wabalanginy, has a journal that, like Billy's project, is a source of latent potential. He suggests that, 'just possibly, writing is the form' to communicate an Aboriginal perspective to a wider community; could be the form to which people will listen. It's an idea already taking shape in *True Country*, a novel in which language and story, even in their written forms, have the potential

to empower and reconnect Aboriginal people not only to one another but also to country.

## Conclusion

Language is a site on which the struggle between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities continues to occur. It is a disputed territory. Yet, Scott's writing emphasises that this dispute cannot be understood in such binary terms as oral languages and written languages or English and Aboriginal dialects. The multiplicity of narrative forms and modes of exchange in *True Country* demonstrate the ongoing interaction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages in Australia. English, despite having institutional power, is susceptible to change and appropriation. Scott's use of Aboriginal English in *True Country*—as well as the novel's depiction of rock paintings, dance, dynamic oral storytelling, drawing, collaborative retellings of the past and the language of country—show both the breadth and possibility in linguistic exchange. It shows the coloniser's language being acted upon.

The diversity of languages re-presented in *True Country* are dynamic entities without clear boundaries. Aboriginal stories exist orally and through the written word; in Billy's transcription the two come together. The uncertainty with which Billy faces the seeming incongruity of oral histories and written archives is ultimately constructive. He finds a new way to tell his and the Karnama people's story *because* of this conflict. Penny van Toorn has written about how the English written word is both an oppressive and empowering force for Aboriginal people. In this context of assimilationist missions, she notes that:

Writing and reading were, on the one hand, an onerous schoolroom task, part of the white man's agenda for 'lifting up the savage races'. But writing also proved to be a most valuable weapon when Aboriginal people wished to level complaints against mission and reserve staff, or halt government plans to sell off their adopted homes. (2006, 14–15)

Writing can be a disciplinary tool of colonial power and a weapon of resistance for the colonised. In *True Country*, it is representative of a discriminatory

bureaucracy and an often irrelevant and inappropriate education system. Yet Billy's storytelling project suggests the possibility of 'opposing' storytelling practices to empower Aboriginal individuals and their communities while also giving voice to those excluded from Australia's official histories. When reading some of the transcriptions to his class, Billy, in spite of his self-doubt:

wanted to be some sort of seer, a teller of tales, the one who gives meaning, and weaves the unravelling and trailing threads of the lives and histories here together so that people can be held up and together by the integrity and sense of the patterns. He who sings the world anew so that you know where you are. (195)

*True Country*, as both a story marking the completion of Billy's project and Scott's first novel, show writing as a process that can acknowledge difference and remain inclusive. The world of the novel is sung anew by collective narrators who speak and write to their audience, observing disparate and often unresolvable perspectives and languages. Yet, there is hope. Fatima and Billy's struggle to communicate across Aboriginal and English dialects as well as bringing together oral and written history show the possibility in the disputed territory of language. Billy and Fatima's meeting show how disparate stories and modes of exchange can inform each other, that contradiction can be constructive. It is only through the contradictions between Fatima's history of Karnama and the histories written in the log books that Billy realised he needed to listen, that there was more to the town's story and more than one way to tell it.

In his second novel, *Benang*, Scott continues to interrogate the authority of colonial discourse. As a work of historiographic metafiction, *Benang* installs Australia's assimilationist discourse into his narrative while simultaneously unsettling its validity by, once again, re-diffracting it into a polyphonic dramatisation. As in *True Country*, Scott sees the value in depicting the inherent plurality of any narrative, especially national histories, thereby opening up space for stories to be inclusive of and formed by Aboriginal voices.

## Chapter 3

### Disputing history in *Benang*

#### Introduction

In *Benang*, as in *True Country*, Scott writes from and into the gaps in Australia's historical record unsettling the notion of a singular historic truth inherent in the colonial logic. *Benang* can be read as using *and* challenging both settler-colonial history and the dominance of its written record. From this novel onwards, Anne Brewster suggests, Scott 'becomes increasingly interested in critiquing the historical discourses—governmental, scientific, philosophical, and popular—according to which Aboriginal people have been defined and managed' (2015, pp. 21-22). Indeed, his blurring of historiography and fiction highlights the negations and fabrications in national records in relation to Aboriginal people—are these records fact or fiction?

The style in which Scott critiques historical discourse makes *Benang* a work of what Linda Hutcheon has termed historiographic metafiction (1988). Through this theoretical lens, we can see how Scott installs the historic archive in his novel while simultaneously questioning the empirical validity of such historic sources using irony and wordplay and by, to revisit Barad's theory, re-turning already divergent archives. Scott makes it clear in the novel that history is a disputed territory and by disturbing and undermining national histories with counter histories told from Noongar perspectives he makes room for collaborative and pluralistic depictions of Australia's past that include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal narratives.

*Benang's* metafictional play with the boundary between fiction and history contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between these two genres. Inga Clendinnen, in her controversial essay, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?' (2006) severely criticises Kate Grenville's use of history in *The Secret River* and argues for a clear delineation between fiction and history. Yet Scott

believes such a distinction is and should be blurred. His assemblage of history and fiction in *Benang* establishes a multifaceted approach to writing the past, which ultimately focuses on an individual and national need to empower local Aboriginal histories and language. Scott confesses that he found Clendinnen's argument, 'chastening' because he identified with those people who do not see a 'ravine' between history and fiction (Scott 2008b, 102; Clendinnen 2006, 34). Rather he agrees with the idea, one that Clendinnen views with disdain, that 'the gulf between writing imaginative fiction and writing evidence-bound history – is no more than a dent in the topsoil, or possibly only a line scratched in the sand by historians desperate to defend their territory' (2006, 34). Scott concludes that 'the work of novelists and historians can sometimes seem very similar' (2008b, 102). Such similarity does not only develop because of the imaginative elements within historiography but, also, and significantly for this chapter, the critical engagement with the past in fiction.

Amanda Johnson challenges the position put forward by select historians that 'dramatic accounts of the past ... [are] anachronistic, unethical and ... *untrue*' (2011, 2). She instead seeks to '[re]affirm how novelists as diverse as Kate Grenville and Kim Scott have engaged with colonial archive materials, deploying particular narrative techniques that enable them to generate compelling postcolonial dramatisations of colonial pasts' (Johnson 2011, 2). By critically engaging with the traces of the historical archive and the process of history-making, Scott develops a discursive relationship between contemporary 'knowledge' of the past and the need to encourage divergent histories of the past for the future. His historic novel differs from that of Grenville because it is not a "seamless" imaginative myth' (Johnson 2011, 3). To participate in *Benang* and appreciate the broader relationship between history and fiction, it is necessary to analyse 'how narrative techniques serve and construct meaning' (Johnson 2011, 2). Johnson argues that:

Grenville and Scott can be considered as exponents of post-colonial polyphony, creating texts that differently evoke a discursive social, cultural and historical intertextuality. These writers seek to move beyond idealised, racist images of Aboriginality, but they also eschew submission to earlier endemic

forms of political correctness that suppress portrayals of Indigeneity altogether in the name of ethical considerations of otherness. They are also writers who resist sentimentalising Australian pasts in relation to colonial settlement. (2011, 14)

While this description stands true for *Benang*, greater distinction needs to be made between Scott and Grenville's narrative techniques and ethical approaches to fiction. As a non-Aboriginal writer Grenville makes an ethical choice not to include the Dharug voices or perspectives in *The Secret River*, a choice that was not repeated by Andrew Bovell in his stage production of the novel first performed in 2013. Bovell acknowledged that the narrative's shift in form forced a correction of the limited diversity in the novel's polyphony and perspective. He states, 'we simply couldn't have silent black actors on stage being described from a distance. They needed a voice. They needed an attitude. They needed a point of view. They needed language' (cited in Barnwell 2016, n.p.). The changes to *The Secret River* in its adaptation to the stage highlight the conventional form of Grenville's novel and its adherence to the conventions of historical fiction. The emotive focus on William Thornhill overtly sentimentalises Australia's settler origins, relying on readers to identify and sympathise with Thornhill as the protagonist of the story even though his subsequent violence towards the Dharug people and theft of their land complicates this sympathy.

Alexander Slotkin defines historical fiction as an expression of 'your full understanding of events, despite gaps in your knowledge' (2007, 224). In this way a modern writer 'may produce a *counter-myth*, to play into and against the prevailing myths of the nation' (Slotkin 2007, 231). Both *The Secret River* and *Benang* can be read as counter-myths to Australia's national history. Yet *Benang* is something more. Scott questions the very process of history-making and the plausibility in any definitive understanding of the past and, as such, writes a work of historiographic metafiction, not historical fiction.

Harley, a Noongar adolescent and the novel's narrator, comes to realise that an absolute knowledge of the past, his identity and kinship as well as the possibility of writing a singular counter-narrative to Australia's official history are myths in themselves. As in *True Country*, Scott re-diffracts a range of language and stories to emphasise how these discourses participate in the development,

implementation and cover-up of Australia's assimilationist policies. Anna Haebich, whose research largely focuses on Western Australia's discriminatory government policies, has observed a new wave of assimilationist studies entering into the field of history. These studies, much like Scott's *Benang*, consider:

the discourse and logics of assimilation; its shifting and multiple leanings; gaps between articulation of policy and implementation of programs; local experiences and responses; political struggles and resistances; outcomes and legacies; persistence in public thought; and political agendas in current debates justifying or discrediting the policy. (Haebich 2002, 70)

There is an overlap between the focus of assimilationist studies and the focus of *Benang*, which is testament to the blurred lines between history and fiction. History itself is a disputed territory that is explored in the narratives and counter-narratives written into *Benang*. Whether history or fiction more truthfully represents the past is also disputed. Scott's writing re-turns Australia's shared history in a way that showcases the possibility and need for multiple narratives and voices in this process of historiography. The Noongar and non-Noongar archives often contradict one another. However, these contradictions are productive because they create a more inclusive and informed understanding of the past.

### **Reading *Benang* as historiographic metafiction**

*Benang* has three epigraphs: the first from the Eades and Roberts submission to the Seaman Land Inquiry in 1984 and the second and third from Western Australian newspapers, *The Daily News* and *West Australian*, dated in 1933. While the two articles espousing the eugenicist ideology of the time position the novel within 'true' events of Western Australia's assimilationist policy, the Eades and Roberts submission describes the Noongar people's grief over the death and displacement wrought by these racist policies. The different perspectives, not only between Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives but also between historical and contemporary understandings of this period, foregrounds Scott's critical engagement with the past and the polyphonous reconstruction that creates in the

novel. The subsequent narrative of Harley, a young boy with both Noongar and Scottish ancestry searching for his family history, inevitably becomes entwined with the nation state's history of genocide committed against Aboriginal communities.

The epigraphs span half a century of history and perhaps the most important statement before the novel even starts is the silence of that fifty-year gap between the racist colonial mindset expressed in the newspapers and the Noongar people grieving for their murdered ancestors. Scott writes from this gap, filling the silence with Noongar history that includes stories of family, the dream of a white Australia, and the documents and words that have built convenient national myths absent of any wrong-doing.

*Benang* is both a story born of the historic archives and a story that engages critically with this history. Harley insists that he 'intend[s] to write a history,' although 'not one on such an exalted level' (9). Consequently, his story is not about 'a famous man, an explorer, a pioneer, a politician'—the heroes of colonial storytelling—but is instead about 'a simple family history, the most local of histories... [that seeks to] make certain things clear' (9-10). Despite these intentions, it becomes apparent that the 'local' everyday lives of Harley and his ancestors are bound to the history of the nation, bound to the whim of those explorers, pioneers and politicians. Often Harley's story comes into direct conflict with the nation's record of the past, while also challenging the multiple family histories already constructed by his own relatives. *Benang* is built from the scientific research of Ernest Solomon Scat, Harley's grandfather and fictional cousin of the historic figure Auber Octavia Neville—the Chief Protector of Aborigines, the stories of his two Noongar uncles, Jack Chatalong and Will Coolman, as well as many other archival documents and oral histories. As a result, Scott reconfigures a singular history as multiple histories laying bare a disputed territory of constructed and subjective versions of the past. The contradicting stories complicate Harley's project: 'What was it? A family history? A local history? An experiment? A fantasy?' (33). The confusion over the genre of Harley's story is one way Scott questions the fixed categories typical of the



colonial logic. The purpose of Harley's writing is to make the past 'clear' and this clarity does not reside in a singular generic domain.

*Benang*, as historiographic metafiction, focuses on the similarities between the creation of history and of fiction. Linda Hutcheon notes that these two genres:

derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they both have been identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventional in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (1988, 105)

Harley's writing, much like Scott's, is both a research-based and creative process. Harley refers to his family history in literary terms suggesting that he and the reader should call the people in his story "characters" (102). The transparency of his creative process and the fictional framework he attributes to his work is further shown by his consideration of his story's intended audience and their response to the structure of his storytelling. He admits 'I worried, as any reader must do, at this late and sudden introduction of characters. Except that for me it was not characters, but family' (168). It is significant that Harley blends history-making with fiction because this acknowledges that both are constructs employing narrative techniques.

Clendinnen railed against such a blurring of distinction in the *Quarterly Essay*. Yet in her 1999 Boyer Lecture Series 'True Stories', she champions the imaginative element embedded in historiography that enables empathic and self-analytical readings of the past. Reflecting on Nicolas Baudin's account of an encounter between French scientists and a Noongar woman on the south-west coast of Western Australia, she identifies the silences within this record: the mindset of the scientists, and, more profoundly, the mindset and experience of the unnamed Noongar woman. She asserts that the multiple perspectives needed to avoid a reductive and singular version of the past requires the liberation of:

our imaginations to taste experiences other than our own – what it was like to be that woman on the beach, what it was like to be one

of those rather embarrassed French scientists. That imagining expands our moral comprehension. (1999, 7)

In this sense, Clendinnen is one of ‘many historians ... [who] have used the techniques of fictional representation to creative imaginative versions of their historical, real worlds’ (Hutcheon 1988, 106). She argues that giving voice to the multiplicity of the past results in ‘good history made out of true stories’ (Clendinnen 1999, 9). For her, Baudin’s record is only one version of an event that was and continues to be formed by many perspectives and, consequently, many stories. Clendinnen’s reasoning in ‘True Stories’ could qualify Scott’s *Benang* as ‘good history’ while also being considered good fiction. The novel not only provides a Noongar perspective on the past but also implements a more inclusive historiographical methodology that creates an interplay between diverse archival sources, academic research and imagined stories that, at times, complement but often contradict one another.

Scott’s re-diffraction of the colonising language and its texts continues in *Benang*’s depiction of the attempted genocide of Noongar people through the process of assimilation. In the early twentieth century eugenics, a distorted social application of Darwinian scientific theory, was widely expounded in the Western world. As a discourse it found particular purchase in Western Australian government policy and practice. Scott uses Anna Haebich’s description of the 1936 Aborigines Act in her seminal work *For Their Own Good* as an epigraph to the chapter ‘in white and black’ (Haebich 1988, p 349). The inclusion of Haebich’s work lends the novel an academic quality that once again unsettles the ‘fictitious’ status of its content. The 1936 Act stated that an Aboriginal person ‘included all persons of the full and part descent, regardless of their lifestyle’, yet made the following exceptions: ‘all “quadroons” over the age of twenty-one unless classified as “native” by special magisterial order ... and persons of less than “quadroon” descent born before 31 January 1936’ (149). These exceptions fuelled the belief that there was a point along the genetic line where Aboriginal people could become white. Such a belief is a central motivator in *Benang*, both in Ern’s determination to create the ‘First White Man Born’ and Harley’s equally

determined desire to be Ern's failure in this mission. Harley's family maps onto and is mapped by these historical and political timelines:

It was Ern's ambition to have the first white man in the family line. And he was almost quickly successful, because Topsy gave birth on 30 January 1936 to a child, Ellen. Unfortunately, from Ern's point of view, Ellen – though *legally* white, was not a male. (149–50)

Scott curates rather than incorporates Haebich and Harley's work. The distinction lies in the way Haebich's research is separated from rather than merged into the prose of the novel. This positioning of the two genres differentiates between the research and the fictionalisation of Western Australia's assimilationist history so that Haebich's historic work is both distinct and a part of the novel. On the one hand, using the excerpt from *For Their Own Good* makes a claim for the novel's historical accuracy— rather than challenging Haebich's work, Scott is personalising the Western Australian policies that she describes. On the other hand, Haebich's work acts as an epigraph to the chapter so that it is both physically and aesthetically separated from the main narrative text in its placement and italicisation. Each historic document, whether letters, newspaper, publications or laws is italicised in *Benang* and it is important to consider what lines, if any, Scott is drawing between history and fiction using this typographical device.

As in historiographic metafiction, Scott 'install[s] and then blur[s] the line between history and fiction' by simultaneously including and marking off historic texts in his novel (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 113). His comprehensive use of the archive and works of history is referenced in *Benang's* acknowledgements. While he asserts that the novel 'is a work of fiction even though some of the characters are based on real people, and its landscape, upon real land', he also discloses that 'Will Coolman's historical writings and the story of the curlew are based upon some fragments written by my own Uncle Will Coleman, and which I remember reading in my youth. The names correspond somewhat, but I never knew him so I am sure the reality and the book diverge' (497; 499). Ironically, the division between the official history and Harley's narrative invites comparison between the different versions of the past forming a dialogic relation between history and

fiction. As a result, the distinction between that which is real and that which is imagined (or remembered) becomes increasingly unclear.

*Benang* contends with an often-biased written history and a fragmented oral history that are often in dispute. While Harley is reliant on both these archives, he becomes aware that each source in isolation provides only limited access to his Noongar heritage. Yet these differing and disparate sources are, to refer to Barad once more, *re-turned* by Scott in the novel so that a fractured history becomes a site of possibility. Harley gathers together Ern's scientific writings, words of Jack Chatalong and Will Coolman, the letters of Jack Chatalong, A. O. Neville's treatise on assimilation, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Their Place in the Community* (1947), and various letters between Noongar and non-Noongar residents and local government authorities. Importantly, Harley does not have to decide between these narratives and, following Scott's argument for cross-checking official archives with the human archives of Aboriginal elders and story in 'A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History,' he draws on each of the various sources to write his own story. Harley's reconstruction is not seamless; these various archives misdirect as much as they guide his attempt to connect with his Noongar heritage. *Benang*, then, is not a simple retelling of the story of a young Noongar man and his ancestors, but a commentary on how history is made and how it shapes us. It is precisely because of Scott's contestation and deconstruction of the historic archive through Harley's narrative that the reader is able to see history's construction. *Benang*, as a postmodern novel, 'confront[s] the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, but it is more than willing to exploit both' (Hutcheon 1988, 106).

Hutcheon observes three main characteristics that make up historiographic metafiction: protagonists who are 'ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures'; a tendency to 'play upon the truth and lies of the historical record'; and the relegation of notable 'historic figures' to secondary roles (1988, 114). Scott deploys each of these features in his novel. With Harley picking up the pen and writing his family's story, A. O. Neville is pushed to the background. His

assimilationist policy as a brutal force and tragic legacy in the lives of the Noongar people remains, yet it exists in relation to and within the stories of the novel's protagonists: Harley, Jack, Will, Sandy One, Kathleen, Topsy, Tommy, Dinah, Harriette and Fanny, so many of them nameless in the archives. The reconfiguring of history gives space for new perspectives, new heroes and new plots within this field both revealing and closing in the gaps in records of the past.

## **Creating sites of tension between history and fiction**

### **I. Re-turning the archive**

*Benang* re-turns a multiplicity of narratives that make up Harley's 'family history'. The new materialist idea of 're-turning' is an act of 'turning it over and over again', an act of revisiting and reconfiguring the way *Benang* problematises the dichotomy of history and fiction through its curation of differing versions of the past (2014, 168). These sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent narratives create a history comparable to that which emerges in Fatima and Billy's first recorded interview in *True Country* because they inform, contradict and confuse each other without resolution. Once again, Scott challenges the sufficiency of a singular monovocal narrative as a way of engaging with the past and as a way of telling stories now and into the future. In line with the purpose of historiographic metafiction, *Benang* is less concerned with discovering a singular truth than with 'the question [of] whose truth gets told' (Hutcheon 1988, 123). Anne Le Guellec notes that the bringing together of archives and the multiplicity of perspectives in *Benang* unsettle a 'colonial linear perspective' which is a key feature continuing through Scott's work to date (Le Guellec 2010). As Harley admits, 'I am confusing things, not following an appropriate sequence' (97).

While *Benang* is the product and process of Harley's personal search for a sense of place, his story is part of, diverges from, incorporates and questions broader national and Noongar histories and draws on various archival sources. As Harley states 'I acknowledge that there are many stories here, in the ashes below my feet – even my grandfather's' (495). *Benang* is, paradoxically, a multifaceted and personal history; a work of history and fiction; a coming together of diverse

narratives that also resists the easy confluence of perspectives as a result of these meetings. These postmodernist aspects in *Benang*'s narrative style productively contribute to a discourse about how individuals and nations construct knowledge and choose to remember and retell the past.

The variety of historical sources in *Benang*, once installed, undermine and subvert the singular authoritative voice of official history. Scott achieves this by challenging the discriminatory colonial logic used against Aboriginal communities and the erroneous and incomplete accounts of Western Australia's brutal assimilationist era. Amanda Johnson notes that within:

the ruminations of the scholar Harley ... Scott deliberately transposes other sign systems or fragments thereof—racist sloganeering, letters and instructions from the administrative colonial archive, fragments of song—all of which enable proliferations and confusions of semiotic meaning. As these sign systems rise and fall against one another, the 'abandonment' of former [colonial] sign systems occurs, namely those forming racist, romantic and anthropological discourses of Aboriginality. (2011, 15)

Scott destabilises what is assumed to be empirical evidence by re-contextualising 'factual' archival sources like birth certificates, scientific research and photographs. If each of these items, like the photograph, captures a particular person or moment, *Benang* zooms out from this isolated snapshot to reveal the narrative beyond the frame. Once this contextual narrative is considered, the vulnerability to manipulation of perceived facts becomes evident.

When Ern organises a family portrait, the purpose is not to capture the historical moment but to alter and misrepresent it. The following extract describes Ern and the photographer's construction of the scene. Through the fictional mode of storytelling, Scott is able to not only analyse the photo but also its production:

Ern took the children to a photographer. Topsy wore gloves, the powder was thick on her face. She was still very young, very thin, and moved with the precise steps of a bird.

'Stay in the car,' said Ern. And he carried the children away.

Flash!

Flash!

Ern thanked the photographer, and returned to where Topsy was waiting.

He handed her the children, 'I'll be back,' and walked briskly away.

The photographer looked up, politely querying his customer's return.

'I'd like ... that is, I've seen photographs with the colour in them, like a painting. Can you do that?'

'Certainly sir. I can colour them, subtly, with a brush.'

The photographer showed Ern some examples.

'You see, said the photographer, 'the cheeks, the eyes, the hair and clothing. But, I'm afraid. It would be helpful if you could bring the children so that I may take some notes. It's busy today, and I've had several children already. My memory ...'

The boy has hazel eye, you would've noticed. Their hair is fair. Rather like that.'

Ern pointed to one of the photographs.

'Rosy cheeks?' the photographer queried, sizing up the situation.

'Yes, a lovely effect.' The photographer complimented Ern's taste.

'Lovely children. Very like you in looks, sir, if I may put my opinion.' (155)

Ern wants the photographer to fabricate his children's whiteness and accentuate their European heritage. The photograph's purpose is not to capture his children as they are but the potential he sees within them if their assimilation is successful. Photography, here, performs an erasure rather than a record of Harley's Noongar heritage. The incident does capture, however, Ern's larger scientific ambition to absorb his family's Noongar heritage into the white race. Early in his story, Harley writes that:

The whole process – my family history, as it turns out – appealed to Grandad's sense of himself as a scientist who *with his trained mind and keen desire to exert his efforts in the field investigating native culture and in studying the life history of the species, supplies an aid to administration.* (28)

The italicised text is an excerpt from A. O. Neville's *A Coloured Minority* that describes the temperament and role of a scientist. The inclusion of Neville's words in Harley's characterisation of Ern emphasises the personal consequences

of Ern's embodiment of Neville's destructive ideology. The internalisation and ventriloquisation of these oppressive discourses figuratively scar and act as a discursive counterpoint to the external scarring that Harley later inflicts on Ern in retaliation. The convergence of Harley and Neville's voices is one example of the polyphonic nature of *Benang* and, specifically, Harley's dialogue. The insidious effects of Neville's ideology are acknowledged in the paratext of *Benang*; Scott credits *A Coloured Minority* with being a 'continual – albeit perverse – source of inspiration' (497).

The recontextualisation of Neville's text within a contemporary Noongar story told by a young Noongar man recasts the admirable science of the past as destructive, dehumanising and genocidal propaganda. Neville's beliefs, his detached language and Ern's interpretation of *A Coloured Minority* jar with Harley's storytelling resulting in a fractured narrative. Ern and Neville's history does not sit comfortably with Harley's Noongar point of view. Harley informs the reader that, according to Neville, 'It was the *selective separation from antecedents* which seemed most important, and with which Grandfather was a little lax. It was one of the areas where he had erred with my father' (28). Here, the scientific word 'antecedent' contrasts with Harley's use of 'father.' Underneath the jargon, the separation from antecedents is the separation of families and the destruction of any link to a cultural heritage. This disjuncture in expression and meaning allows Scott to critique the rationale behind the science of the past by giving voice to various characters who experience and are continuing to experience the discrimination, injustice and abuse of these theories that were applied to the everyday lives of Noongar people. Harley's polyphonic dialogue once again bitterly ventriloquises Neville's work when he angrily and sarcastically recalls Ern's research:

'You have me,' I would smile at him. 'Your living proof. Study me, Grandad, your conclusive evidence. Another *one without history, plucked from the possibility of a sinister third race.*' (in Grandad's day, apparently, there were only two!) (29)

The reductive racial divisions that Ern employs, as well as the fear of the 'half-caste' 'third race' is, from a contemporary viewpoint, deeply racist and



scientifically unsound. *Benang*'s positioning of these harmful views from the past within Harley's present-day narration enacts a form of resistance to these eugenicist ideologies. By distinguishing and then embedding the scientific discourse into Harley's speech Scott also unsettles Harley's role as the passive and voiceless subject of Ern's experiments while simultaneously invoking a contemporary Noongar perspective on these assimilationist practices.

The curation of historical text and fiction creates tension between the non-Aboriginal record and the Noongar experience. As the reader experiences the narrative mostly through Harley's narration, a Noongar history is positioned around and against the written record prompting the reader to engage with conflicting stories of the past. Harley relays memories of the fairer-skinned Noongar children being taken from Aboriginal compounds and into schools and missions that sought to absorb them into the white community. The stories are retold in the second person so that the reader is placed in the Noongar child's position, strongly evoking the squalor, the physical and sexual abuse, the isolation and the loss:

Locked up an evening, wire over the windows. Things in the mattress bit you, and you welcomed the other things into your bed. Because of the warmth, see, and the company.

You dreamt that you were punished, like the boy you'd seen put into a bag and suspended from a rope tied high in a tree. Swinging. (...)

In daylight you were bundled into a train again. A proper carriage this time, and a man in a suit watched you. A woman dressed in stiff white clothes receives you at the station. (...)

And yes, the children here were all paler, as you must've realised, taking the cue from your inspectors. It was all so much nicer here.

So do you disappear from me, from us? Accept this kind of death?  
Keep secret your many miseries, your joys and laughter too? (92–3)

Harley's final questions appeal to the reader to understand why it is necessary for him to write his story. As a boy who was taken and separated from his family, he has had to decide whether to disappear, to float away or to stay grounded and sing, to write, to share his story. The importance of such acts, in concert with the

strengthening of personal and familial senses of self, is the way that they destabilise the authority of colonial and religious authorities that advertise benevolence. Immediately after Harley's description of the Aboriginal compounds and missions, he 'laughs' at a church newsletter in which a Christian's account of these same places is absurdly different (93). It states that:

*A visit to a native settlement is always a joy to me. Any place where they are caring for the original inhabitants of Australia should receive the sympathetic support of all who have made this country their home. [...]*

*What a blessing for the natives that they have got a sympathetic superintendent and self-sacrificing staff.*

*Segregation is the only thing for the Aborigines. But let their segregation be Christian, and the natives taught to be useful ... (93-94)*

The newsletter asserts that Aboriginal utility is dependent on segregation, indoctrination and assimilation in a colonialist Christian society. It follows that Harley questions his own worth and purpose in the novel and it is with great irony that he recalls how he remarked, 'I do hope I am being useful, I used to say to Ern. I do hope I am being useful' (94). Ern's use of Harley is scientific and sexual. It is starkly different to Harley's self-determined use as a storyteller. Through his story, he facilitates his own and his family's reconnection with each other and their Noongar heritage. Similarly, Scott has commented on the need for his writing to be 'useful' in empowering Noongar communities and their stories, useful to the process of decolonisation (2013c, personal interview).

When the disparate archives are brought together within and against Harley's own writing, and within Scott's fiction, Ern and Neville's science loses its authority over Harley's knowledge of himself and the past. Turning to his wider family, Harley describes how Jack Chatalong's words 'drowned my grandfather's own, flooding them so that Grandad's filed notes and pages seemed like nothing so much as debris and flotsam remaining after some watery cataclysm. It was rubbish, for sure, but I clung to it for so long because it was all I knew' (59-60).

Initially, his own story is limited to his grandfather's papers—scientific notes, letters, and genetic maps—and he admits that 'my grandfather's intentions

deafened and blinded me, and so I began with where the paper starts, where the white man comes. I thought, trapped as I was, that this was the place to begin' (32). Yet as Harley spends more time with his uncles, his story expands and the path towards his Noongar heritage becomes less narrow. This is literally depicted in Harley's departure from the confines of Ern's study into Noongar country where he talks and listens to his ancestors. Rather than Harley's sense of self being dictated by Ern's scientific ambitions, Jack and Will encourage Harley to look inwards to find his story. Harley reflects that:

I had listened to my grandfather roar.  
Now it was the voices of these other two old men, and Uncle Jack,  
tapping me on the chest (as, more and more, others would later do).  
'You feel it in your heart? Say it like you feel it.' (148)

Jack drives Harley to meet his wider family, an Auntie Olive and Auntie Norma who knew Harley's father, Tommy Scat. Their memories are another archive that inform Harley's story. Jack orchestrates a coming together of stories:

'Now your father,' said Uncle Jack, taking the initiative. 'He lived with Harriette when he was little, didn't he?' He was asking me, he was asking Will, he was asking the women to contribute.' (364)

Despite his name his continuous chatter, Jack Chatalong contributes to a Noongar written archive through letters to government officials. This is an important inclusion in the book because it challenges the idea that Noongar people were passive victims of the assimilationist policy. Jack's writing shows his participation in the processes of government. His letters could be interpreted in a variety of ways: as a complicit agreement with the government views on white superiority, a clever use of the government's own bureaucratic language to achieve personal freedoms; an empowered involvement in political discourse. These readings are not mutually exclusive and, as a result, Harley's family history becomes a complicated network of narrative relationships that move between oral and written Noongar and non-Noongar stories.

In the chapter '*what reason*', the reader discovers through a series of letters written by Jack to A. O. Neville protesting Section 63 of the *Aborigines Act*

1905 that he has been banned from the local pub (62–67). The correspondence between administrative and judicial officers to determine Jack’s suitability to drink at the pub shows the petty bureaucratisation of Aboriginal lives. It must be noted that Jack’s protest against his exclusion from the pub embodies the colonial logic; he emphasises that he is not entirely black, he does not consort with other blacks, and he can read and write. Jack questions the logic of the Aborigines Act while also trying to comply with that logic. He asks:

*am I under the Aborigines Act or am I not and if I am under the Aborigines Act I don't think it is right that I should be under the Aborigines Act Because I do not mix up with them nor live with them and I am always with white people. (66)*

Jack’s contribution to the written archive disrupts the oral and written binary ascribed to Indigenous and non-Indigenous languages respectively. Similarly, in *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, van Toorn insists upon the long and dynamic history of Aboriginal literacy. Nadine Attewell also foregrounds the many practices of Aboriginal literacy in her reading of *Benang* noting that the novel ‘suggests, in fact, that the *process* of recovering indigenous literary and intellectual history is a critical element of the work indigenous literary and intellectual history does in the world’ (2012, 4).

Harley’s other uncle, Will Coolman, is also a writer. Harley discovers that Uncle Will has written a very different family history to his own after finding Will’s notes for ‘a little history of this region, and of his family’ among Ern’s papers (165). The manuscript was intended to be a counter-history to ‘the publication of a little booklet, a feeble local history, to which he had taken exception’ (165–6). In this publication Will asserts his father, Daniel Coolman’s, claim to being one of the first pioneers and settlers in the face of counter claims in the local history. Will essentially enters into a discursive battle of ‘firsts’ in which he ironically negates his link to an ongoing Noongar custodianship and use of the land that exists through his maternal history in order to champion his father’s position. Will’s identification with his paternal heritage in place of his maternal Noongar heritage makes it clear that Will wants to tell a different story from that told by both his brother and nephew. In his own way Will is also trying to correct

an erroneous historical record, yet Harley is shocked by Will's version of history and his desire to exist within the colonial–settler perspective. In light of his own response to his family's story, Harley remarks that:

It was incomprehensible to me: Uncle Will, who had been refused 'Susso' in the Depression and told, instead, to go to the Aborigines Department for rations; Uncle Will, who had barely escaped being sent to a Mission or Native Settlement. Uncle Will desperately wanted to name his father as among the very first to 'settle' at Gebalup, and he scarcely wrote of his mother. Yet it was she who gave him his rights to be here.' (166)

Will's history continues the dispossession of his Noongar community by the government and newcomers alike. Importantly, Scott's reconstruction of Noongar history presents, at times, an uncomfortable view of Noongar shame and complicity that coexists alongside empowerment, generosity and affection. Scott depicts a variety of Noongar stories that represent a complex Noongar identity. This complexity, ultimately, respects the diversity and dynamism within a community of people.

Significantly, Will, Harley and Jack's written work is indicative, not only of their contribution to a family, local and national history, but also their access to colonial histories of the time. The ability to write and read English means that each of these characters are confronted with the consequences of Western Australia's assimilationist laws but also, just as cruelly, the racist reasoning behind them. In 'Disputed Territories' Scott finds a description of an Aboriginal man, Fred McGill, whose literacy, in the Western sense of the word, gives him access to English texts espousing the colonial mindset of the time. Scott imagines Fred's disorientation as the sense of himself as an Aboriginal man meets the distorted representation of Aboriginal identity in *The Bulletin*:

Fred McGill, also named –so these sources tell us–Tichenbut, seems an educated man; and a tribal man. I think of such a man reading *The Bulletin*, with its masthead proclaiming, 'Australia for the white man.' How difficult would it have been to read such a thing, to read any of the English language texts of the time? And I wonder how he was allowed, by those sorts of texts he read, to

think of himself as an Aboriginal person. What did the word 'aborigine' mean to him? (Scott 2000a, 163–4)

This historic figure is incorporated into Jack's character as Scott describes a Noongar man who participates in and engages with colonial narratives only for this effort to be met with a greater sense of exclusion:

Jack read old newspapers he had collected, and – in the very act of doing so – dispelled and disproved what those very same papers said about him and his people. But it was hard for him to be aware of this, and it was a lonely battle because he felt as if the print was a wall advancing at him, pushing him further and further away.

*A Menace in our Midst: the Aborigines Camp in our Town*

It was very hard to get past such a headline. Such words made it hard to even remember how to read. (137–8)

Attewell notes that 'Harley implies that it is what one reads about oneself that is disfiguring' and so in addition to the physical abuse suffered by Harley and the wider Noongar community, Scott also draws attention to the brutality of colonial narratives that Harley and his family internalise (Attewell 2012, 7). As discussed, this internalisation is depicted in Harley's dialogue, which ventriloquises the harmful discourse, and in Harley's sadistic mutilation of his grandfather. Harley admits that by writing into his grandfather's body he wanted to scar and shape him with my words because he had so disfigured me' (287). Harley is therefore sharing in Ern's linguistic masochism as a means of retribution. This violent act exposes the cruelty of the colonial agenda and discriminatory policies by literally bringing them to the surface and making them viscerally felt.

In *True Country* and *That Deadman Dance*, Scott portrays the English language and the written form as a tool of colonial oppression, yet both Ern and Harley's acts of violence in *Benang* literally dramatise how writing and texts can also be used as weapons. Clendinnen asserts that:

stories are potent. They can rouse normally indolent people to action ... But when people are using stories as weapons, they will simplify them, and with simplification a great deal can be lost. (2006, 41)

Similarly, Slater states that ‘writing has been a crucial weapon deployed in the interests of colonial violence’ (2005, 147). Indeed, Neville’s, *A Coloured Minority* became a deadly ideology manifested in the Western Australian government’s discriminatory and genocidal assimilationist policies as well as a broader denial of Indigenous rights across Australia that lingers today.

## II. Irony

Harley’s literal use of the written word to punish his grandfather is reminiscent of the machine in Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* (1914) through which the judicial sentence is transformed into a literal sentence etched fatally on the body. In the story, a traveller is shown a machine that punishes offenders by writing their crime onto their flesh. It becomes apparent that both judicial and punitive systems are defunct—criminals are condemned without trial as their guilt is assumed and the machine is increasingly falling apart, its decline indicative of its decreasing popularity and support within the colony. Kafka’s short story is a chilling account of the brutality, injustice and absurdity of unchecked colonial authority and the language it employs to sustain, enforce and justify its own illogical cruelty. Like the machine, one of the ways colonialism functions is through its strategic and brutal deployment of language, relentlessly making its mark on those that ‘threaten’ the civilising process.

Significantly, Kafka’s officer explains to the traveller that the criminal, after six hours of pain, will eventually reach a type of ‘enlightenment’ in which he will innately understand his crime; the harrow serves to both physically transform and morally reform its victim (Cumberland 2013, 206). The purpose of this enlightenment, however, seems futile considering the ‘enlightened’ victim is left strapped to the machine until his death. The claims to justice and enlightenment show the embedded justifications of the colonial machine and their integral role in maintaining and cloaking a brutal system. With the wavering belief in the machine, the machine’s maintenance is neglected and the apparatus deteriorates and malfunctions. In a bid to prove his belief in and loyalty to the machine, the officer gives up his body to the apparatus. But rather than providing ‘enlightenment’ to its victim through physical indoctrination—the machine is

meant to inscribe ‘Be Just’ into the flesh of its victim—the needles of the harrow stab blindly at the officer eventually thrusting a spike through his forehead (Kafka 2011, 36). Stripped of its linguistic cloak, the real purpose and effect of the machine is revealed as ‘crude murder’ (Kafka 2011, 42). As Margaret Kohl states in ‘Kafka’s Critique of Colonialism’:

the story points to the way that both the authoritarian and liberal understandings of justice insist upon a link between punishment, enlightenment, and moral reform; it exposes the way that this legitimizing function can obscure the reality of punishment. (2005)

Like Kafka’s story, Scott depicts the brutalising effects of colonial language as well as its power to enforce and legitimise its own acts of violence, injustice and discrimination. The supposed integrity and accuracy of the written word is unsettled in both stories. *In the Penal Colony* shows the colonial machine breaking down and inflicting an unintended and crazed ‘justice’ on its operator, the penal colony’s officer. In *Benang*, Harley notes that even though his ‘blade drew letters with a fine white line ... all precision would be lost in gushing blood’ (286). Kafka’s heavy use of irony to depict the injustice of the judicial machine is also taken up by Scott, using this narrative technique to show the absurdity and the tragedy in Western Australia’s assimilationist policy.

According to Hutcheon, the meaning of irony lies in the relationship between the ironist and the interpreter of the intended irony; irony at its base is about an unspoken understanding between these participants. She states that:

Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its ‘victims.’ (1994, 2)

In *Benang*, the space between the different settings of the novel—Western Australia’s recent assimilationist history in the early twentieth century and the present day—provides Harley and other characters with hindsight on past events. The relationship between contemporary characters engaging with their heritage mirrors that of a contemporary reader engaging with Australia’s recent history



portrayed in the novel. In both cases, the modern perspective on what is now widely seen as state-led genocide provides the friction between those ‘who don’t get’ the injustice of assimilation—those policymakers and perpetrators of Aboriginal abuse at the time, and those that do ‘get it’—the Noongar community and the informed contemporary reader. Hindsight is used because the reader and, indeed, Harley and Jack, all *know* that the ‘improvement’ of Noongar people was a racist pursuit to wipe out an entire people, one that, although unsuccessful, was devastating.

There is rich irony in A. O. Neville’s title being the Chief Protector of Aborigines considering his desire to eradicate Aboriginal people through their absorption into a white race. In the novel, James Segal, the fictionalised Travelling Inspector for Aborigines, jokes that ‘the Chief Protector sometimes became too zealous, so that people need a protector to protect them from The Protector’ (49). Similarly, Mr Mustle, a wealthy white landowner, holds the role as president of the Australian Natives Association. The Association does not, as could be assumed, represent Australia’s First People, but ‘those citizens (white, of course) born in Australia’ thereby negating pre-1788 history and installing white settlers born in the country as the First Australians (204). *Benang* uses irony to angrily engage with the discrimination, genocidal policies and brutality enforced on the Noongar community by the Western Australian government and its citizens.

Hutcheon notes that ‘Historiographic metafiction espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference; “type” has little function here, except as something to be ironically undercut’ (1988, 114). In the context of Western Australia’s eugenic practices, Scott’s undercutting of ‘type’ is deeply political, cultural and personal. *Benang* must engage with the obsessive classification of Noongar individuals into full-bloods, half-castes, octoroons, quadroons and the notion of successfully producing the first white man born out of an Aboriginal lineage. Ern’s mission to make Harley the first white man born is misdirected and ultimately founders. While Harley rebels against such an identity, hoping to be his grandfather’s failure, it is revealed at the conclusion of the novel that Sandy One has Noongar ancestry and, in a eugenicist framework, is the first

white man born, not Harley. Despite race's apparent power to determine behaviour, values and intelligence—thereby clearly revealing a difference between superior white people and inferior Aboriginal people—Ern, the scientist, and the government officials enforcing classifications of Aboriginality, could not detect Sandy One's racial and cultural heritage. The revelation further complicates the mapping of Harley's family history and undermines Ern and Neville's carefully constructed scientific theories and experiments. Significantly, and ironically, the information about Sandy One's heritage does not come from written archives but the memory of an elderly Mustle gossiping to Mr Starr. The official paper trail left behind of births, deaths and marriages becomes a misleading, inaccurate and incomplete path.

Harley's confusion in following his ancestry through the written archive undermines the accuracy of these records. Harley's dislocation from his family is compounded by the government's generic labelling of Noongar individuals and the inaccurate transcribing of peoples' names in the public record. The titular character, Fanny Benang, remains enigmatic, not only because stories connecting Harley to her have become fractured but also because various authors of official documents do not accurately write her name. The chapter, '*ern to close*' begins with a letter to A. O. Neville; it takes only one line before Harley must interject and unsettle the confidence with which the letter begins:

*To the Chief Protector of Aborigines:*

*There is an Aboriginal woman name of Fanny Benang ...*

Benang? Consider the spelling of hard-of-hearing and ignorant scribes: Benang, Pinyan; Winnery, Wonyin. It is the same people. We are of the same people.

Fanny? It was really a no-name, a mean-nothing name. Not a name used to distinguish between people. We cannot depend on such names put down on paper. (103)

While the correspondence in the novel reconstructs the hierarchical lines of communication between government and its people, the archive does not, at least in isolation, provide many answers to Harley's questions about his family. Hutcheon states that the "scene" of irony involves relations of power based in

relations of communication. It unavoidably involves touchy issues such as exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion' (1994, 2). Scott's reconstruction and consequent deconstruction of a paper trail that lures the reader away from rather than towards Fanny Benang is a continual source of irony in the novel. This irony works as a function of historiographic metafiction because Scott implicates the reader in Harley's search for his family through the written archives only to confound these expectations by the novel's end; he installs the historic archive only to reveal its flawed nature. *Benang* is not linear, its structure follows Harley's fractured research into his family history and so the reader experiences the past and the discovery of 'characters' as Harley experiences them. Characters and events are re-experienced multiple times from multiple perspectives and diverse narratives do not necessarily correlate with each another.

Consequently, the promise of a completed family tree gives way to an open-ended continuation of finding connections – 'Benang' is more than just the name of Harley's ancestor, it also means 'tomorrow'. As Hilary Emmett observes, kinship in *Benang* has a more rhizomic structure and as a result, the name Benang:

does not simply mark a now-known point of origin the way a family name might, but in denoting the past and the future in equal measure Benang disrupts the temporal and spatial structure of the family tree. For all that Harley traces his roots back to Fanny Benang and Sandy One Mason, the details about their pasts ... simply open up more questions about their kinship identities. (Emmett 2007, 177)

Scott undercuts any resolution by revealing the fallacy of a singular truth and so the reader is thwarted in their desire to draw conclusions. Hutcheon states that through historiographic metafiction the collective readership 'realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know [the] past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process' and Scott, through *Benang*, seeks to continue a conversation rather than end it (1988, 122). Perhaps Harley's most important realisation is that, ironically, 'there is no other end, no other destination for all this paper talk but to keep doing it, keep talking, to remake it' (472). The violence, the inaccuracy and the deliberate fallacies associated with the

written word make a disputed territory of Australia's shared history. The vestiges of the written word—the archival paper trail and stories—authored mostly but not entirely by non-Aboriginal writers seek both to deny and yield up truths about the past that impact contemporary understandings of identity, justice and claims to country. Harley's bid to continue writing, like Scott's, signals that this disputed territory of history-making is also a site of possibility. By continuing, Harley and Scott turn a singular version of history into a diversely polyphonic and inclusive multiplicity of histories and truths.

### III. Wordplay and the manipulation of language

Hutcheon, referencing Wallace Martin's essay 'Women's Writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*', argues that the 'conventions of narrative in both historiography and novels ... are not constraints, but enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making' (1988, 121). Consequently, it is the disruption of these conventions that 'is bound to upset such basic structuring notions as causality and logic' (Hutcheon 1988, 121). *Benang*'s narrative techniques—its non-linear structure, its curation of fiction and archival sources, its use of irony and its own keen use of wordplay—destabilise the logic of the state's assimilationist discourse, policy and practice, as well as challenging the logic of a singular national history. Consider Scott's literal interpretation of Neville's *A Coloured Minority* that argues for the elevation of Indigenous people through their absorption into the white race. The intended cause and effect of the scientific process is subverted through Scott's fiction so that, rather than becoming the 'elevated' first white man born, Harley literally is elevated to become a floating narrator adrift in the novel's pages.

Words in *Benang* are at different times malleable, vulnerable, duplicitous, and subjective. Scott's wordplay expressed through Harley's ironic tone or use of double entendre subvert archival language and, more broadly, destabilise the objective authority of the written language itself by emphasising language's relationship with its environment and its author. Consequently, the reader is reminded that each narrative in the novel, including official documents, has been

constructed and is therefore subject to bias and error; words are both manipulated and manipulative.

In the case of Ernest Solomon Scat's personal implementation of Neville's eugenicist policies, Scott uses double entendre to make a direct link between the scientific and theoretical language of Neville's ideology and the physical and sexual abuse of Noongar women and children that it inspires and legitimises. The ideological probing of race becomes a euphemism for physical and sexual violations. Below is an excerpt from the chapter titled 'blue me' in which Harley describes his experience of being his grandfather's scientific and sexual subject of interest. It is laden with sexual innuendo that undermines the intellectual motives for Ern's pursuit of a superior race:

*blue me*

Perhaps it was hearing of this trace of blue which aroused my grandfather's interest in me above any other of those countless offspring of his. His curiosity about colour, about the remnants of it, the dilution of it. His interest in genetics. Perhaps it was this sort of detached interest; *that of the scientist, with his trained mind and keen desire ...*

I recall reading of a man who, sometime around the advent of electricity, received an electric shock and it was said that he turned blue, and remained so for a very long time. The mosquitos were afraid to bite him, and the orgasms he experienced and delivered were ... Well, *he* attracted a lot of interest.

Who knows, my grandfather may have had some similar experience within his own family. He may have wondered if the blueness of mine was, to use his language, a *throwback* to an ancestor. Perhaps he had also read of the incident with electricity. All I know is that it certainly aroused his curiosity.

While I was ill and listless he investigated me most rigorously.  
(413)

The title of this chapter alone is dense in its associations. The word 'blue' splits into several meanings and stories. Initially, '*blue me*' makes literal references to the rumour of a blue gene in Harley's racial physiology and the increased sexual prowess of an electrified man. Yet both these stories allude to the systematic abuse and exploitation that is detailed in the wider terrain of the novel.

As in the case of ‘half-caste’ or ‘quadroon’, Harley’s identity has once again been reduced to a colour: vein-like blue. Playing on the assimilationist practice that seeks to override Harley’s ‘black’ Noongar heritage, ‘blue me’ makes a commentary on what is not said, what is not acknowledged. Significantly, if Harley were to acknowledge his Noongar heritage, albeit in the racial language of the day, the result would be ‘black and blue me’. This combination plays on the idiomatic imagery of bruising and so there is a suggested risk associated with Harley’s claim to his Noongar ancestry in the face of eugenicist ideologies. Scott satirises Ern’s experimentation with ‘whiteness’ linking the enforcement of these ideologies with Harley’s physical abuse. Early on in *Benang*, Harley recounts the experience of being moved to his grandfather’s house and being placed under his care. It is a time punctuated by beatings—punishments to expedite and ensure Harley’s ‘whitening’ through a formal education. Harley recounts that having ‘brought home a report which indicated that I was not achieving to my potential, was somewhat lazy’, his grandfather

suddenly struck me to the ground and delivered a kick which sent me sliding across the floor. It was a startling violence, and as I lay there curled up in shock he told me I was to stay in the room and study for the duration of the holiday. (17)

The electric shock in ‘*blue me*’ echoes with Harley’s ‘shock’ at Ern’s violence. It also strongly references another account of Ern’s perverse disciplinary methods in which he cures Harley of his bed-wetting by designing a system ‘whereby an electric shock was administered to [Harley’s] penis each time the sheets became wet (16-17).

The electrified man in ‘*blue me*’ becomes sexually potent after his electric shock—both giving and receiving extraordinary orgasms. The association Harley makes between the man and himself stresses Ern’s ulterior motives towards Harley; Ern’s pursuit of whiteness is entangled with his pursuit of sexual gratification. Both electrocuted men ‘attracted a lot of interest’. Words like ‘keen desire’, ‘aroused’, ‘curiosity’; the phrase ‘he investigated me most rigorously’ and the homophonic reading of ‘*blue me*’ as ‘blew me’ are all suggestive of Harley’s rape that is hidden ‘between and behind the lines’ of Ern’s scientific and familial

research (Scott 2007a, 123). By ‘shaking up... language,’ Scott does succeed in making room for Harley’s story to be heard and reveals the linguistic justification and euphemistic cover up of Ern’s predatory sexual abuse of both Aboriginal women and children (Scott 2007a, 123). The impact of Harley’s violation is apparent in the reading of ‘blue’—as a metaphoric association with depression. Harley’s lack of health, his state of being ‘ill and listless’ while Ern raped him, points to the trauma of these sexual encounters and racial categorisations. In a subversion of Harley’s statement ‘Well, old man, fuck me white’ Ern has failed in his assimilationist ambitions but succeeded in displacing and brutalising his grandson (27).

Pointedly, the above excerpts hinting at Ern’s early abuse of Harley occur in a chapter titled ‘*raised to this ...*’ which directly responds to A. O. Neville’s plan to racially absorb and socially assimilate, or ‘raise’, Aboriginal individuals into white society. Michael Griffith, in his essay ‘Need I repeat?: Settler Colonial Biopolitics and Postcolonial Iterability in Kim Scott’s *Benang*’ also identifies the ‘tropes of raising, uplift, elevation and drift [that] reverberate throughout *Benang*’ (2010, 159). He observes that by having such tropes engage with ‘living Nyongar characters like Uncle Jack Chatalong, Scott puts into play a deconstructive repetition of colonial biopolitics to reanimate the specters of Aboriginal kinship buried between the lines of such archival marks’ (2010, 159-60). The engagement between the biopolitics of the government assimilationist policies and the experience of living Noongar characters in *Benang* is one example of how Scott establishes a disputed territory as a foundation for his fiction. It is a productive feature, however, one that strengthens Noongar identity and story because it opens up Australia’s official histories to criticism providing the possibility of new readings and retellings of the past. As such, Ern’s attempts at elevation are ridiculed because they are depicted as beating Harley down.

At the beginning of the chapter ‘*first white man born*’ Scott includes an excerpt from Neville’s *A Coloured Minority*: ‘*As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane ...*’ (11). Immediately after this quote Harley wakes up, his face pressed against the ceiling of his grandfather’s house:

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except – right in front of my eyes – a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation.

Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against the ceiling. (11)

Neville's ideology is immediately undermined with Scott's literal portrayal of the ideological and biological crossover in Neville's cultural progressionism. Scott humorously subverts the Aboriginal embodiment of Neville's plan as Harley awakening to his face pressed against the ceiling and his subsequent confusion—his brief belief that he had gone blind overnight—is visually comic. It plays on the absurdity of Neville's eugenicist beliefs. Harley's 'blindness' is in fact caused by the surface whiteness of the ceiling that is the metaphoric equivalent of the racial blind sightedness of Western Australia's assimilationist policy. As with the paint of the ceiling such ideas of whiteness lack 'depth' and 'variation'. Slater rightly asserts that Harley's "propensity for elevation" ... satirises and laments the colonial regime's project to *raise the native up*' (2005, 150).

Harley's floating form and his temporary inability to see ahead literally enact his displacement from kinship and country, as well as his loss of identity. Rather than Ern's civilising project facilitating his insertion and acceptance into white society Harley is set adrift and becomes *placeless*. Searching through the trove of Ern's archives for his story, Harley is aware that these sources of history alone are not enough to ground him, that they do not contain everything he needs to know about who he really is and where he came from. Harley states that:

Floating through the house towards the room with its window and mirror, I revised my work so far. How heavy I was with words, with notes quotations journals year-books newspaper cuttings archives scribbles. The squeezing from my grandfather's hand. How burdened I felt with all this, and yet I drifted and floated. (158–159)

The weight of language and story is a paradoxical motif throughout Scott's writing. A singular written history of the nation becomes a burden to Harley, the weight of which ironically disconnects him from family and literally disconnects



him from country. However, his own writing is a grounding force. He says, ‘It apparently helped knot and tie me down. Even now writing, my hands stay easily at the keyboard and I loop my legs to settle in the chair’ (147–148). It follows that *Benang* does not question the importance of the written word but its claim to a singular authoritative history. Harley’s story comprises oral narratives, written archival sources, and song from both Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives. It is due to the polyphonic and open nature of Harley’s text that his own writing process, as opposed to the paper trail of white history, has such a different effect on his mental and physical being. Once Harley moves beyond purely researching Ern’s written archive for his sense of belonging, once he starts singing, listening and writing himself, he becomes more connected with his past, his family, and (literally) to his place in the world. Since writing grounds but also frees Harley, a double movement occurs in the novel, whereby he gravitates towards old and new stories creating a momentum towards continuity and possibility. These ideas are indicative of Scott’s belief that writing, as one form of inclusive storytelling, is instrumental in rejuvenating, consolidating and forming Aboriginal cultural heritage and identity.

## **Conclusion**

Harley’s process of writing a local family history prompts questions about how histories are made, who makes them, what gets included and whose stories get told. Ultimately, his sprawling, fractured, inconclusive, honest, inclusive and polyphonic narrative is as much about the process of sharing stories as the story itself. Harley is engaged in productive disputes. Since writing *Benang*, Scott has argued that ‘cross-referencing the archives against the views of members of a community that has relied on oral rather than archival history can, if nothing else, help “shake up” and “unsettle” the surety of the archives’ (2008b, 103).

Dramatising Scott’s argument, Harley’s story is drawn from a variety of sources in a variety of forms, each supplying a fragment of his fractured Noongar heritage. Scott reflects that to write ‘good history’ he needed to find ‘true stories’ yet he found that ‘researching the archives to understand the perceptions of

historical Aboriginal (specifically, Noongar) people can be frustrating, since they are not the ones doing the recording and their voices are rarely heard' (2008b, 93). For Harley, like Scott, piecing these stories together is a difficult process, one that is still continuing by the novel's conclusion.

In 'A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History', written nine years after *Benang*, Scott notes the importance of how Tiffany Shellam's *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* (2009) and Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) imagine an Aboriginal perspective to complement and complete the existing written archives. This methodology, he reasons, provides an opportunity to balance out non-Aboriginal historical readings of the past yet acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in this process when there is a 'reliance on the interpretative skill of the researcher' (2008b, 97). The stories told by Aboriginal communities could provide a more informed narration yet, like Shellam, Scott 'is not so confident' that relying exclusively on oral stories is without its flaws (2008b, 97). Due to the destruction dealt to Aboriginal languages, people and country through colonialism, many oral accounts have been lost or are fragmented. Confronted with incomplete histories across written and oral archives, and across Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives, Scott sees a third way to move forward and into the past: 'I want to suggest that combining the two sources, particularly by "workshopping" relevant archival material with those people who carry oral histories, can be a useful way of "value-adding" to those archives' (2008b, 97).

The tension within Harley's story is produced by the 'cross-referencing' of archives and so *Benang* evidences Scott's ongoing contemplation of the possibility of bringing together different narrative forms, genres and sources as a productive way of revealing the gaps and contradictions in personal, familial and national histories. Harley and his family take on the colonial history presented to them—in the dual sense of carrying its burden and challenging it. *Benang* is born from the gaps in those colonial records; it is both a modern Noongar response to false national histories and an appropriation of those histories within the Noongar community's own history. As Fatima adds to and corrects the mission log books in *True Country*, Harley, Jack, and Will correct and add to the colonial paper trail laid before them.

In the opening pages of the novel, Harley describes the body of a young boy being dumped at the edge of town: an incident that he ‘merely happened upon,’ he states, ‘in my fitful attempts to *supplement* Grandad’s research and my Uncles’ memories’ (9, my emphasis). Here, the word *supplement* is indicative of Scott’s treatment of the archive in *Benang*, not as empirical evidence but varied stories that are able to inform, complement, contradict or add value to each other. Therefore, the italicised archive is consistently in conversation with the plain text of Harley’s story as characters present their own opinions and perspectives on the historic material. Paraphrasing from the *West Australian Royal Historical Society: Journals and Proceedings*, Scott has Harley read a line of official history that states, ‘*There was never any trouble. Never blood spilled, or a gun raised in anger*’ (183). Immediately, Jack and Will pull apart this statement:

Uncle Jack laughed. ‘Don’t need guns when you got poisoned flour, poisoned waterholes.’

Even Uncle Will, ‘Yeah, that’s not right.’

‘No.’

‘That’s what they’d like to think.’

‘Yeah. There must’ve been death everywhere, for us, for Fanny and Sandy.’ (183)

Later in the novel, Fanny recounts the unacknowledged story behind the massacre of Noongar people in the fictional town of Gebalup (this is an imagined reconstruction of the massacre in Ravensthorpe), the same massacre referenced by the Eades and Roberts report in the epigraph of the novel. In the novel, Fanny frees a Noongar man who has been chained and tortured by the Done family. Fanny is not only a witness to that man’s abuse but witness to the ropes in the stables and veranda of the property that were used to tie up women, presumably as a means of imprisonment but also as a way of restraining them as they were raped. When the man is unshackled, he grabs an axe and kills a white man, one of the perpetrators of these crimes and flees. Harley recalls from his research that the family of the victim was granted a permit for ‘a revenge killing’ (175) that sanctioned the killing of eighteen Noongar people to deliver justice. Jack clarifies Harley’s findings, stating, ‘More than that, they killed just about everyone around

here. Most Nyoongars still won't come here, just wind up the windows and drive right through Gebalup' (175).

The fictionalising of the Ravensthorpe massacre in the area of Kokanarup blurs history and fiction as a way of creating the 'truth' about the past.<sup>30</sup> This slippage allows important information relating to crimes perpetrated by the victim of the Noongar man to come to light. The killing of the white man, presumably a member of the Done family, is not an unprovoked murder but a retaliation against the rape and abuse of Noongar women. Furthermore, the reader learns that the already grossly unjust permission to murder eighteen Noongar individuals is exceeded. This Noongar perspective on the Ravensthorpe massacre corrects and augments the historical archive. The silenced and suppressed truths of the past are given voice through the coming together of Harley's research and writing, and Jack's oral history of country.

The disputed territory of history and fiction in *Benang* emphasised by Scott's use of irony, wordplay, use of disparate archives, and non-linear structure generate a productive discussion about the role of history in current and future national discourses, especially in relation to Aboriginal societies. The novel's honesty about the difficulty in negotiating competing and incomplete archival sources, yet its belief in the positive possibilities in bringing these stories together, presents a model for a more critical, comprehensive and just engagement with the past. Harley tells the reader that 'Increasingly – reading and reciting my work – I wanted to impress each of my audience; I so wanted to somehow bring Uncle Jack, Uncle Will and myself together. And if Ern could follow, so be it. But I seemed unable to satisfy our diverging needs' (349). Yet Harley's concerns seem unwarranted in *Benang's* approach to history. It is precisely because of Harley's recognition of multiple and divergent stories and his attempt and failure to bring these stories together that *Benang* can make a necessary movement away from a singular and monovocal national history.

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<sup>30</sup> *Taboo* develops the fictionalisation of the Kokanarup massacre in detail. The same stories appearing here in *Benang* are retold in the novel as though appropriating the sharing of oral histories through the generations in the written form.





## Chapter 4

### Fault lines: The continuing story of Noongar identity in *Kayang and Me*

#### Introduction

*Benang*'s critical representation of Western Australia's eugenic policies challenges the belief that Aboriginality can be defined and understood purely along racial and genealogical lines. Noongar identity, from a bureaucratic perspective, functions within a racial hierarchy that construes it as biological, not cultural. These imposed frameworks of Aboriginality come into dispute with the depiction of Noongar identity in *Kayang and Me* (2005) co-authored by Hazel Brown and Kim Scott. The memoir contends with the overlapping colonial and Noongar heritages that form contemporary Noongar identities, and the weakened connections to kin, country and heritage due to Australia's racially motivated political policies. Importantly, the memoir attempts to articulate a Noongar identity that is diverse, at times contradictory, personal and collective, yet one that is strong and continual. Rather than finding this identity in either shared bloodlines or shared oppression, Brown and Scott use stories as the site and means of belonging.

In *Kayang and Me*, Scott continues to use writing as a process of finding his place within the Noongar community. He considers the possibility of an empowered Noongar identity that confronts the dislocation of individuals from their Noongar heritage throughout the ongoing colonisation of Australia and the associated misrepresentations of Noongar identity by non-Noongar groups. The memoir is also an articulation of Brown's identity. The two authors share stories and, sometimes, converse directly with one another in an intergenerational negotiation of a collective Noongar identity. Brown and Scott's exchanges and

alternating self-reflections enter into several disputed territories, especially those between oral and written stories, the individual and the collective, and the editor and ‘informant’ that are characteristic of the Indigenous life-writing genre. *Kayang and Me* leaves many of these conflicts unresolved. This lack of resolution also extends to the memoir’s discussion of historical, social and political fault lines running between Noongar and non-Noongar groups, and within Noongar individuals, like Scott, who embody two cultural heritages. Crucially, *Kayang and Me* productively uses these external and internal conflicts to tentatively build a discursive space that is able and willing to accommodate the many expressions of Noongar identity and, possibly a wider non-Noongar society.

### **Navigating the fault lines in Noongar identity**

For many Noongar people, the colonial invasion of country caused one world to split in two as a ‘fault line’ emerged between Noongar and non-Noongar ways of being (Brown 2005, 177). In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young observes that the dominant models analysing cultural interaction ‘stress separateness, passing by altogether the process of acculturation whereby groups are modified through intercultural exchange and socialization with other groups’ (1995, 4–5). Models such as Nakata’s cultural interface, van Toorn’s work on Aboriginal writing and Scott’s own fiction and nonfiction present alternative models that acknowledge porous and adaptive cross-cultural exchange resulting in diverse and complex articulations of Indigenous identities. Scott’s work of postcolonial criticism relies, in Young’s terms, on ‘two antithetical groups, the colonizer and the colonized, self and Other’ (1995, 5). Yet he complicates these disputed territories expressing a more complex relationship between groups that, at times, collapses these constructed binaries. *Kayang and Me* aims to articulate a continuing Noongar identity that remains on a ‘social and historical fault-line’ (16). Brown and Scott use this fissure to create a complex dialogue about identity that liberates it from extant constructs of Aboriginality which are both reductive and limiting.

Scott explains that Noongar people are now ‘spread further and wider than country towns of the south-west, some in the “black” community, some in the



“white”. Some move in both – which may effectively be the same as being in neither’ (88). The discursive separation of cultural groups by race creates a constrained understanding of Noongar identity, one that negates those who exist across the lines of separation. Scott addresses this sense of placelessness by unsettling the validity of colonial logic behind racial categorisation thereby creating new and inclusive ways of understanding Aboriginal identities.

As depicted in *Benang*, Western Australia’s eugenicist policies counterbalanced a Noongar person’s freedom of movement within white society with their restricted interaction with their Noongar community. The idea and practicality of participating in both worlds became increasingly difficult; as Scott states, ‘in the south of Western Australia our colonial history’s racial and economic imperatives have made it very unusual to meet someone who is not either stranded in one of two worlds, or stretched between them’ (228). *Kayang and Me* is an important text because it articulates the fracturing of the Noongar world from colonisation and the resulting isolation and confusion in both Brown and Scott’s and, arguably, a wider Noongar identity. The need to choose one’s place on either side of the line is still strong and could be, Scott argues, an obligation. He notes that within ‘the Noongar community ... I think there’s feeling to “marry black”. It makes sense that people feel that way, given the history and how it continues’ (179). Scott also feels the need to maintain and consolidate a weakened Noongar heritage by choosing sides. He positions himself personally and publicly within the Noongar community ‘as Indigenous’ (16). Scott states:

I am a Noongar person—yet so fair of skin, not recognisably Aboriginal at all. In that way my sense of identity is defiant, not reliant upon the perceptions of others, and challenge to any who insist that identity is just about skin colour and racial characteristics. (16)

While Noongar identity is not racial, there is still a continuing ‘legacy of oppression’ based on race that he, his father, Brown and those before them experienced in their own way. Scott discloses that he has both Noongar and Scottish ancestry, that his wife is of Irish German descent and his children are fair

skinned. The legacy of oppression extends to his children who are called ‘boongs’ and ‘niggers’ but also ‘white cunts’ (179). These confused attacks reflect Scott’s description of being in both worlds yet neither at the same time (88). Being stranded and misrepresented in this way is also indicative of the erroneous conflation of race and Aboriginal identity in Australian discourse. Scott confesses to accepting the, ‘political imperative to choose either Noongar or wadjela ... [because] you can’t say you’re bit and bit, or “part-Aboriginal”, or “of Aboriginal descent”’ (179). Scott reflects that choosing his Noongar identity in a ‘divided society’ may have created a continued placelessness for his children (179). He asks, ‘have my own psychological and political preoccupations not to say spiritual inclinations – led my children into a “no-man’s land”, made them targets from either side of a social schism, a historical, racial fault line?’ (179)

While Scott on one hand is present to Australia’s social and racial divisions pressuring the formation of his identity, he and Hazel Brown also challenge the validity of these divisions. As such, Brown and Scott discursively negotiate new possibilities for expressing and understanding Aboriginal identities. Scott admits that ‘the collective struggle against racism and oppression is a major component of most people’s Aboriginal identity’ yet questions whether ‘oppression, other than the historical experience of it, [is] the best way to develop community and an array of future possibilities?’ (189). This creates a conflicted position because while he may want to break down the divisions between Noongar and non-Noongar communities, Australia’s social and political inequalities prompt him to choose only one side to belong. By doing so, Scott must contend with his colonial ancestry and his successful mobility within the dominant culture as part of his Noongar identity. *Kayang and Me* works towards this goal as Brown and Scott participate in ‘cross-cultural’ exchange that exposes a broad and diverse Noongar identity.

*Kayang and Me*, in its mode of exchange and maintenance of Brown and Scott’s distinct voices and perspectives, joins other Aboriginal voices that deny ‘the assumption ... that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on,’ as well as denying the notion that, ‘there is a “right” way to be Aboriginal’

(Langton 1993, 27). The debunking of pan-Aboriginality is also a subject in Anita Heiss's memoir, *Am I Black Enough For You?* (2012). Heiss celebrates her life as an 'urban' Wiradjuri woman thereby challenging the stereotype of the traditional and 'primitive' Aborigine created for non-Aboriginal consumption (Langton 1993, 10). Heiss says:

This is *my* story: it is a story about *not* being from the desert, *not* speaking my traditional language and *not* wearing ochre. I'm not very good at playing the clap sticks either, and I *loathe* sleeping outdoors. But my story is of the journey of being a proud Wiradjuri woman, just not necessarily being the Blackfella – the so-called 'real Aborigine' – some people, perhaps even *you*, expect me to be. (2012a, 2)

The memoir also details Heiss's involvement in a lawsuit against the newspaper columnist, Andrew Bolt, under the Racial Discrimination Act. Bolt's column, 'White is the New Black' (2009) criticised both Heiss and Scott (among other prominent Aboriginal authors) for their identification as Wiradjuri and Noongar, respectively, despite their European heritages and white appearances. The case is an example of the erroneous definitions of Aboriginal identity along racial lines and how the articulation and perception of different Aboriginal identities within community-based and national contexts are sites of contestation. In light of Australia's history of institutionalised racism, most prominently enforced through the White Australia policy, Langton points out that 'for Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the State' (1993, 28). *Kayang and Me* explores the tensions between identity and identification, and race and belonging, that are exacerbated by the pressure put on Aboriginal people to justify their individual place within their community while also presenting a unified pan-Aboriginal identity for political and bureaucratic purposes. In this hostile and reductive environment, how can Aboriginal identity express itself confidently?

Aboriginal life writing has often been the site of this expression and a site of resistance through what Anne Brewster has called 'identity politics, that is, the construction of notions of identity, which are necessary for people to form a sense of common identity and purpose' (1996, 3). Martina Horakova also notes that 'it

has been widely acknowledged that Indigenous life writing has become an important vehicle for retrieving previously repressed histories of colonial violence, forced assimilation, and state intervention' (2013, 54). *Kayang and Me* carries the political and cultural contexts of its genre.

Accordingly, Brown and Scott's personal stories speak to wider public debates and a history of social injustice attached to Aboriginal identity. However, the specificity and subjectivity of their regional storytelling resists a singular definition of Aboriginality. The genre of life writing enables them to discuss different Noongar identities that, like Heiss's memoir, dismantle reductive stereotypes of Aboriginal identity by discussing their and their family's diverse experiences. Importantly, while the identities of people within his own Noongar community are multiple and different, they are still rooted in an ongoing Noongar heritage. Diversity is coupled with continuity.

The personal and familial stories in *Kayang and Me* build a network of diverse narratives that run along kinship lines and are grounded in Noongar country forming roots for an ever changing, ever expanding concept of Noongar identity. The memoir traverses Brown's stories of racism in Australia, Scott's search for links to his Noongar heritage, the retold and reimagined relationship between Brown and Scott's ancestors, John Mason and Fanny Winnery, and the story of the Noongar policeman Bobby Roberts. These stories are tinged sometimes with pride and sometimes with shame, yet they always draw attention to strong individuals who have made hard choices about who they want to be and how they want to be known. The process of writing and speaking the stories of *Kayang and Me* looks 'searchingly across the generations, trying to understand what had happened, feeling for what we have in common and where we differ, who we are and what we might be' (208). For Brown and Scott, looking at the past is not just about exposing injustices in Australia's national narratives but also finding inspirational stories on which to build a contemporary Noongar identity. Disputed territories become sites of possibility.

Researching his ancestors, John Mason and Fanny Winnery—a non-Aboriginal man and a Noongar woman—Scott chooses to imagine a dynamic in their relationship that deviates from the white man's historically entitled and

possessive claim to Aboriginal women. It is an empathic and generous reading of the past to which he admits:

I prefer to see John Mason as a commendable man, even if the birth and wedding certificates only ever refer to his female companion as ‘Fanny – an aboriginal’. After all, perhaps it was the officials, rather than John Mason, who weren’t interested in her Noongar name, thought it unimportant. I wanted to find something like love, something like equity in their relationship, even if Mason, like [...] many others, was initially just another white man who grabbed women and took them away. (81)

The rereading of Mason and Winnery influences the characterisation of Sandy One and Fanny Benang in *Benang*. Scott subverts the notion of the ‘white man’ by making Sandy One the ‘First-White-Man-Born’. Due to Sandy’s *hidden* Noongar heritage, his mobility in the novel is that of a white man. Consequently, the reader’s experience of their relationship, and indeed the character’s own experience in the novel, is one of a cross-cultural and interracial couple, albeit one that is respectful and reciprocal. *Benang* weaves together four generations of Noongar identities through which Harley discovers a sense of belonging from both his Noongar and non-Noongar ancestry.

Scott’s ability to look at the past through a new lens opens up the possibility of finding ‘modern’ values and traits in ancestral figures thereby providing links between contemporary Noongar society and its heritage. Speaking about *Benang* Scott describes the way Harley ‘shouts back into history and listens for the echoes, the reverberations, the thousands of voices that cry out with their stories’ (Trees 1995, 21). This call and response encapsulates how Scott’s writing facilitates a dialogue between Noongar history and contemporary realities. Scott resists an overcorrection of the reductive binary that contrasts the Aboriginal savage against the civilised white man. He does not romanticise his Noongar heritage. Instead, Brown and Scott generate a more complex discussion of Noongar history and identity that is interested in ‘the mental acuity bequeathed by a culture, and its adaptability’ (36). The two authors progressively collapse the divide between a traditional and contemporary Noongar identity. This is done by unsettling the reductive stereotypes (both derogatory and adulatory) of Aboriginal

identities, and by blurring the division of white colonial and Aboriginal histories and cultures since Australia's colonisation.

One of the most important conversations in *Kayang and Me* is the discussion of Bobby Roberts, Hazel Brown's great-grandfather and Noongar tracker who assisted the arrest and imprisonment of his own people. Scott argues that 'Bobby Roberts didn't divide people according to race, and he wasn't in the habit of thinking himself a victim' (48). He conjectures whether Roberts 'may just have been a brutal, opportunistic man' or one who 'may have become so isolated and fearful and there was no alternative to co-operation, and so he admitted defeat, gave up' (53). He even suggests that 'Bobby Roberts, having come to know influential men in the new colony, appreciated their power, saw himself as their equal' (53). While Scott is not fictionalising Roberts's life in the memoir, he is enacting the historiographic methodology proposed by Inga Clendinnen in her Boyer lecture series: combining historic research with the empathic imagining of the past. Only in this way does Roberts, despite his acts of betrayal, become a complicated character demonstrative of strategic thinking and, possibly, strength of character. Scott states:

I very much doubt he wanted to give everything away – his land, his rights – only to start at the bottom of colonial society and work his way up as if he were a convict, a stranger, or someone who had to prove himself.

Whatever the case, our Bobby Roberts appears to have gained an appreciation of innovation and strategic thinking, acquired political acumen and ruthlessness. (53–4)

As such, even Roberts can be a formative source of inspiration for a contemporary Noongar identity. Tellingly, Brown and Scott argue for and implement strategic thinking and political acumen in *Kayang and Me*. It is no coincidence that the parting tale in the memoir is Brown's account of covering an important Noongar site with sand to prevent the wider non-Noongar public's knowledge of and access to it. Bobby Roberts's story, however, is shared and both Brown and Scott find empowerment in this narrative site in spite of its shameful implications. Hazel Brown insists that stories of Noongar complicity in the colonial and national oppression of the Noongar community must be told. Brown says to Scott:

A lot of people mightn't like the truth, but this doesn't concern anybody else. This only concerns our people. You got my permission to do it, write it down. Put it in a book. ...

Old Bobby Roberts, he had a privilege of harming his own people with the white-man's say so.

People are going to hear it. We're gunna write it all out, and you're putting it in the book.

There's a lot more stories that should be told, and they're gunna be told. There's a lot of things that've been left unsaid. Too many years now, half-caste people and white people been covering things up. A lot of things. Now we got a chance, we can bring it all out in the open. (47)

This insistence is all the more impressive considering that Brown's characterisation of her great-grandfather is less generous than Scott's. For her, Roberts is a traitor. Brown's need to tell this story lies in the need to end the ongoing silences and gaps in renderings of the past. She reasons, and Scott agrees, that omitting stories in the retelling of the past merely reproduces the gaps and silences of colonial history, continuing the exclusion of Noongar individuals from a shared history. Brown finds strength in honesty.

## **Something more meaningful than a simple biological kinship**

The use of story to form and inform a Noongar sense of self challenges the purely genealogical understanding of Noongar identity and kinship networks. Following bloodlines is problematic in a Noongar context because the arboreal structure of the family tree does not consider the 'rhizomatic kinship' network, to use Hilary Emmett's description, at work in the community (Emmett 2007). Scott's tracing of his Noongar heritage follows many paths and, in light of the certification of births, marriages and deaths, the genealogical path initially appears to be the most informative and reliable. Yet he discovers that following this paper trail will not necessarily connect him with his family, not only because these records prove to be *unreliable*, but because his exchange with Kayang Hazel offers another way to belong within a community and country. He reflects that:

I'd collected fossilised phrases like 'first white man born', and tossed them back into the sea of the archives in the hope of somehow making a firmer footing for myself. But with Aunt Hazel I stood on the sandy shore of my Indigenous heritage, and sensed something substantial waiting for me to grasp, and yet the only means I had to do so was laying out the words upon a page.

If writing is indeed comparable to hunting or fishing, then Aunt Hazel was showing me another way to go about it. (29)

Significantly, this new way also moves Scott away from the solitary act of writing fiction and so the departure from that genre into collaborative life writing bridges the personal need for belonging with a collective and connected way of being. In this way, *Kayang and Me* revisits the disputes between the individual and the collective, and the written and oral archives that are depicted in both *True Country* and *Benang*. The belief in strengthening Noongar roots is central to Scott's notion of an empowered Noongar and, possibly, national identity. Brown and Scott propose a Noongar heritage that can incorporate, appropriate and participate in Australia's contemporary society without necessarily resolving the fractures created by colonisation. Rather, the memoir acknowledges the unsettled terrain of Noongar identity and attempts to navigate through it.

The terms 'full-bloods' and 'half-castes', 'quadroons' and 'octoroons' erroneously conflated identity with race and defined communities by colour. In *Benang*, Harley frees himself from the scientific potential of being the 'first white man born' and relocates his sense of self among Noongar kin and their stories. *Kayang and Me* makes apparent how closely Harley's trajectory is tied with Scott's own uncertain approach towards his Noongar heritage. Like Harley, Scott's place in the community is more complicated than the dehumanised genealogical framing of Neville's seminal work, *Australia's Coloured Minority: It's Place in the Community*. Scott contemplates that:

the insistently recurring phrases 'the first white man born' and 'the last full blood Aborigine' characterise an attitude to history and identity, but I now wondered about those who, like my ancestors, didn't neatly fit into either of those categories. Is there a way to maintain connection with an Indigenous heritage, a sense of kin with ancestors, while living in a world overwhelmingly hostile to such ideas? And how would you speak of such an event [the



Kokanarup massacre] within one family whose different members might identify with either perpetrators or victims? (70)

Scott is confronted with the often inaccurate paper trail recording the ‘classic genealogies’ or ‘paper genealogies’ of his family’s ancestry (Dousset 2003, 20; Scott 2008a, 157). Both author and protagonist search for the enigmatic Fanny, their ancestor who ‘falls between and behind the lines’ of government documentation (Scott 2007a, 123). Scott’s approach to Australia’s official written history interestingly aligns with Jackie Huggins’s own work in which she asserts that ‘in order to interpret history from an Aboriginal point of view it is necessary to read between the lines of those government documents and reports’ (1998, 38). The details of Scott’s own labyrinthine search through historic records clearly resonate with *Benang*. In *Kayang and Me*, the presence of Brown’s oral history in direct exchange and conflict with Scott’s research mirrors the relationship of Jack and Will Chatalong’s stories with the written archive. In both memoir and novel, Scott brings the contested sites of language, race and kinship on which this exchange takes place into sharp focus.

Brown has a narrative and memory-based archive of familial connections that act as a counter-narrative to the written genealogical records. Scott attempts to cross-check and correlate her knowledge of kinship networks with the archives. When he realises that ‘Granny Winnery’ could refer to either Fanny Winnery or her daughter Harriette Coleman, he attempts to reconcile contradictory accounts of his ancestry. Scott considers whether:

Bobby Roberts and Jack/John Mason shared the one woman, Fanny Winnery, and this Pirrup and Harriette were what western genealogy would call ‘half’ brother and sister? Or perhaps Pirrup and Harriette were, in western parlance, cousins, because Fanny Winnery was in fact old Bobby’s sister? If so, Noongars might well call Pirrup and Harriette brother and sister. Or was brother and sister a description of a different sort of close relationship within the framework of such things as moieties and kinship with a particular heritage and region, rather than immediate genealogy? (78)

The alternation between Western and Noongar understandings of kinship expose the confusing differences in cultural articulations of family. Consequently, the

validity of the written archives recording Noongar genealogies is questioned. Do these archives accurately record the kinship networks as understood by those Noongar individuals they claim to represent? Scott, accustomed to Western ways of thinking, wants to empirically map his heritage. Brown has another approach, one less certain (in a Western framework), yet one much more confident in its Noongar roots and Noongar connections. Scott asks Brown to clarify which woman was Granny Winnery, to which she replies:

I don't know, not for sure. We can't. I only know what people said, like Aunty Ellie and old Dongup. And what Daddy said, that your father was our people. Cousin, he said. I believed him, and I still believe 'em now. They knew what they were talking about. They kept track of people.

I didn't like it. Suddenly, ours seemed a tenuous connection, and there were no papers to help me out.

'That's white man's stuff,' Aunty Hazel said, as if my reliance on paper was a disrespectful challenge.

Her emphasis was on the authority of the old people's word, and their sense of the importance of place. I respected that authority; I liked that belief in the significance of being descended from a specific and Indigenous tradition, of being part of a community of descendants, *and I wondered at the possibility of something more meaningful than a simple biological kinship.*

But I also like genealogical diagrams and sheets of paper. It bothered me that, shuffling my notes and diagrams, I couldn't be sure whether Aunty Hazel was of my father's or my grandmother's generation. Should I even be calling her Aunty? (78–9, my italics)

Brown, in her respect for the 'old people's word' offers Scott another way to link himself to his Noongar heritage. This new possibility of belonging is borne out of the impossible resolution of the written archive and oral histories to produce a singular truth of the past. The inability to truly know who Granny Winnery is prompts Scott to reconsider how he connects to his family. This is a productive process, one that frees Scott from the 'white man's' definition of family and identity. Horakova notes how 'the incompleteness, the impossibility of encompassing the entire history in the text—experienced by the younger researcher/writer (because of the missing perspectives in historical documents) as well as by the older family member (because memory is, of course, never

complete)—occupies an important position in the text’ (2013, 57). This central tension in the memoir is productive because the impossibility of knowing the past forces Brown and Scott to create or maintain connections with their Noongar heritage that are broader and, in many ways, more inclusive than bloodlines. Horakova, for instance, notes that connections are made through a ‘dialectical relationship between what is revealed, found out, and resolved and what is hidden, lost, and unresolved’ (2013, 57).

Brown and Scott contemplate a sense of being beyond biological kinship, one that relies on Noongar stories of people and place to create a more certain and empowered sense of Noongar identity. Brewster has stated that ‘Aboriginal constructions of contemporary Aboriginal culture and identity often draw upon the past. In this way they create an alternative space for themselves within white culture and they affirm the continuity and persistence of Aboriginal culture’ (1996, xiv). While Brown and Scott do look to their Noongar heritage to help articulate their current individual and collective identity, the outcomes of this process deviate significantly from those described by Brewster. Brown and Scott suggest a ‘grafting of the newcomers’ culture and being onto Indigenous roots’ rather than carving out a separate and alternative space for Aboriginal culture within the dominant white culture (Scott 2007a, 122). This is a radical idea and Scott concedes that, historically, ‘there wasn’t the language to express such a concept’ and that Noongar people, ‘unlike Aunty Hazel and me, ... had no such idea in mind at all’ (77). However, in *Kayang and Me*, Brown and Scott do attempt to describe ‘a heritage which preceded the new community [that arising within colonial Australia], and of being the first born in a new society with its roots in the old’ (77). This is a story of continuity, of a shared and conflicted history and the possibilities of the narratives and associated identities that can emerge from revisiting disputed territories in an open, honest and optimistic way.

## **Resisting a singular narrative and the ethics of a collective voice.**

Each of Scott's works contains characters who seek empowerment and stability by reconnecting with their Noongar identity. In their fictionalised forms, Billy and Harley embody some of Scott's own anxieties, struggles and beliefs about his relationship with his Noongar ancestry. This overlaying of narratives in which Scott's own familial research and experience act as the loci of the stories creates resonance between each of Scott's works. As a result, Scott's writing, although broken into separate publications, is continuous. In an interview with Anne Brewster, Scott refers to his writing as a 'continuing project' explaining that:

the cultural work which comes out of *Kayang & Me* is continuing in *That Deadman Dance*. You say they are different books. I see the last page of *Benang*, for instance, as showing a fictional individual wanting to be a part of cultural consolidation with a small community of descendants. *Kayang & Me* takes that up as does this language project. (2012a, 230)

By sustaining this 'thematic' continuity across different genres—fiction, intergenerational life writing, essays and community-workshopped picture books—Scott challenges the typical categorisation of his literature—broadening how his works can be read. The shift from fiction to life writing that occurs from *Benang* to *Kayang and Me* carries with it the suggestion that the reader is being let into Brown and Scott's 'true' stories: if *True Country* and *Benang* were inspired by Scott's life experience, *Kayang and Me*, as collaborative life writing, *is* Scott's life. However, just as Scott destabilises the notion of empirical fact in *Benang* by installing and then blurring the line between history and fiction and creating a heteroglossic account of the past, the notion of the 'real' life-story is also dismantled through Brown and Scott's honest exchanges and Scott's own reflection on the narrative process. Like history and fiction, the stories Brown and Scott tell themselves and each other are constructed, subjective and self-aware.

Michèle Grossman, in *Indigenous/Australian Cross-Cultures of Talk, Text, and Modernity*, points out that Indigenous life writing 'both incorporates and manages the relationship between talk and text and, as a consequence, frequently inscribes the presence of a collaborator, editor or co-author as a constituent of the genre' (2013, 140). As in *True Country*, the negotiation between oral and written forms of expression emerges in *Kayang and Me* through the potentially unequal

power dynamics between collaborators. Due to the mode of storytelling being a written publication, Scott must manage his own presence in and influence upon the text. By using the written memoir form there is greater opportunity (or risk) for Scott to dictate the story and shape Kayang Hazel's words to fit his own story and agenda. Yet while it is typical of the genre for the collaborative or editorial writer to influence talk, Brown's resistance to Scott's genealogical diagrams and sheets of paper and Scott's acceptance of her story, shows how, inversely, talk can inscribe text.

Scott has described his writing as a 'selfish' explaining that he uses 'stories—fiction to think' (Trees 1995, 21; Scott 2000a, 16). However, his shift from being a 'novelist, a loner' to a co-author suggests a movement away from the 'selfish' act of writing to a more inclusive and collective expression of self and community (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 31; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 37). In the treatment of these contested sites, Scott's first two novels are fictive rehearsals for the narrative ethics enacted in *Kayang and Me*.

As in his fiction, Scott makes the process of constructing and sharing stories transparent through a self-conscious and self-analytical narrative style. As noted by Horakova, *Kayang and Me*, like another collaborative intergenerational life-writing project Jackie and Rita Huggins' *Auntie Rita* (1994) is distinct from early Indigenous life writing because of these characteristics (Horakova 2013, 65). The collaborative element, or 'double voice' of the project also destabilises the notion of empirical truths because Brown and Scott's different contributions 'communicates two—sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary—perspectives' (Horakova 2013, 56). The mere choice to co-author a collective memoir establishes a disputed territory in their different stories, yet the exchange also acts as a site of possibility to articulate a more complex and resilient Noongar identity.

As discussed, the relative power that Scott has as the writer telling his story in the written form compared to Kayang Hazel as an oral storyteller having her stories transcribed and translated is implicit in the text. Consequently, even though the collaborative framework of *Kayang and Me* resists the notion of the singular and isolated author, Scott also makes a point to disclose his editorial

decisions. *True Country*'s depiction of Billy's project to record and transcribe Karnama's local Aboriginal history raises concerns about the assumed authority of the written word over oral traditions, the limitations of translating an oral Noongar language into an English alphabetic script, and the ethics of who should retell Aboriginal histories. These internal negotiations directly correlate with Brown and Scott's intentions for their memoir; they consider its distribution, enact a respectful relationship with the Noongar language and its stories, and implement a strategic framework for the sharing of Noongar language and stories with a wider non-Noongar audience.

The ability for the life-writing genre to enact rather than rehearse the narrative ethics in Scott's fiction is also a product of the genre's limitations. Arguably, life writing creates a narrative space that is less able to resolve the unequal power dynamics of language such as the power of the written word in, or the singular authority of the author over, a novel. Unlike *True Country*, *Kayang and Me*, despite its co-authorship, cannot dissolve Brown and Scott's perspectives into a shared narrative voice and, perhaps, in the context of memoir, such a shift (while admirable in *True Country*) would seem unethical. While the collective narrative voice in *True Country* is seen as empowering, *Kayang and Me* shows the need for each voice to be heard in conversation with the other.

Scott's role as transcriber and editor of his and Brown's stories places him in a unique position to influence the process and content of their published narrative. The conversation between Brown and Scott is more complicated than a simple intergenerational exchange because this exchange takes place within a literary context. Consequently, the unequal status and reception of oral and written languages, as well as the established celebrity of Scott in comparison to Brown, comes into play. Scott, as author and academic, unavoidably becomes a conduit between a non-Noongar Australian readership and Brown's oral history of a wider Noongar family and community, and a deep Noongar heritage. Scott has described how:

claiming an Indigenous identity can mean taking on the role of 'cultural broker' – even if you don't want to – and in that role, working either to maintain or increase the distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. (191)

*Kayang and Me* is both self-aware and transparent about the strategic decision Brown and Scott have made in the sharing of Noongar knowledge and story. This disclosure makes the narrative ethics of the collaborative work part of its negotiations to articulate Noongar identity. Adam Zachery Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (1997), which considers the interaction between the text, reader and author is particularly relevant to Scott's own views. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Newton calls attention 'to a common, though sometimes overlooked, fact about narrative: that the story it frequently tells is a story about storytelling. Narrative, as participatory act, is part "Said" ... and part "Saying"' or, in other words, part product and part process (1995, 3). The metafictional quality of Scott's fiction, and the transparency of the creative process in *Kayang and Me* certainly bring together the 'said' and the 'saying' in a disruptive though productive way. The dual focus expands the story beyond what is internal to the text—its characters, setting, structure and style for instance—to that which is external to the text—the text's relationship with the reader and the text's navigation of political and social dynamics. The blurring of these internal and external textual territories encourages a sustained awareness, prompting analysis of the narrative process and its ethics because the reader is implicated in the text's purpose. By considering how Scott positions the reader, the story, the Noongar community and himself (as author) in relation to each other, the productive tension between the internal and external territories of the text is revealed.

Grossman's calls for a renewed approach to life writing that goes beyond a reductionist reading of the genre as an 'uncomplicated variety' of 'confessional' or 'identity' literature. She aligns herself and argues for a foregrounding of 'autographical and life-writing [that] is just as complex, just as constructionist, and just as productively unsettled by the disjunctions between textual and metatextual subject-positions as other genres and literary representation' (2013, 66). Her focus on the power relations between editor and informant, whereby the editor is typically non-Aboriginal and the informant or 'subject' is Aboriginal, questions the validity of the hypervisibility of the non-Indigenous 'co-author' and editor in cross-cultural life writing. The role of the Aboriginal 'informant' (speaker) and the 'literate' editor/anthropologist (writer) speaks to a larger debate

over the relative authority of the spoken and written word, and this in turn is indicative of ‘debates about power, authority, autonomy, and also authenticity in collaboratively produced life-writing texts’ (Grossman 2013, 76). Grossman’s work is relevant to the life-writing genre’s power dynamics depicted and operating in Scott’s fiction and non-fiction.

In *True Country*, Scott could articulate and then, to some extent, resolve Billy’s anxiety surrounding the transcription of the Karnama community’s recorded stories by manufacturing a harmonious collective narration. However, *Kayang and Me* does not implement such fictive devices, instead staying within Brown and Scott’s narrative exchange and working with the contradictions and compromises that develop in this discursive space. The resonance between *True Country* and *Kayang and Me* illustrates Grossman’s point that life writing, like fiction, is a genre that can use complex narrative styles and techniques to construct its narrative.

Scott describes the difficulty ‘of how to capture the distinctive nature of her [Brown’s] speech while allowing it to be relatively smooth on the page’, a problem that increased when she spoke in the Noongar language (11). Scott explains that ‘the English alphabet doesn’t do justice to the sounds of Noongar’ and that Brown’s south-east dialect differs from the spelling and orthography recommended by the Noongar Language and Cultural Centre’s 1992 dictionary—the reference used for the spelling in the book (12). Scott states that he and Brown ‘opted for compromise in the interests of communicating more widely. We’ve used very little Noongar language in this book anyway, not only for the above reasons, but because it’s a language that’s best transmitted orally. You need to listen’ (12).

In the Wirlomin Project’s bilingual books *Mamang* (2011) and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (2011), Scott also comments on the difficulty of translation—not only between languages but between oral and written forms of literature. The books retell ancestral Noongar stories using archival material and descendants of Noongar ‘informants’ of these stories. Due to the written word being unable to hold the sounds, rhythms or gestures of spoken words and narrative, Scott explains that the Wirlomin Project:



wavered over the English versions of our stories: Aboriginal English, or a more formal English? The consensus was that Noongar readers would make their own versions anyway, and so we decided on a relatively standard English, flavoured by the spoken voice. We have provided a limited literal translation which attempts to compensate for the lack of gesture and tone available to words on a page. (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 35; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 41)

Despite his hypervisibility as contributor and transcriber, Scott works to undermine his individual authority over the text, exposing the limitations and compromises made in the text. The transparency of his editorial choices draws attention to the construction of the text and the ethical anxieties observed in Grossman's research that considers 'the extent to which certain kinds of textual editing practices work to disenfranchise Aboriginal agency even as they endorse Aboriginal presence in the realm of written representation' (2013, 70). In the role of transcriber, writer and editor, Scott is aware that the power balance, in the context of publication, tips in his favour, yet the narrative ethics of the book, enacted through its structure and style, do not strip either Brown or Scott of their agency.

*Kayang and Me* gives Brown the first and last word in the book, a structural choice that gives authority to an oral Noongar history and shows Scott's respect to his elder. This choice also means that Scott, despite his fame as a novelist and his role as editor in this publication, does not influence the reading of Brown's words. His narrative interaction with Brown takes place after her stories have been told, creating a discursive rather than explanatory relationship. The tensions between talk and text, between editor and informant are usually considered the result of cross-cultural exchange between the non-Aboriginal editor and Aboriginal informant. Yet *Kayang and Me* exhibit similar challenges and anxieties within an inter-generational exchange between two Noongar storytellers with Scott as the Noongar editor. The presence of these same 'cross-cultural' tensions within an exclusively Noongar exchange unsettles the positioning of Aboriginal storytelling within an exclusive domain of orality while also drawing attention to the diversity, possibility and complications of a

continuing Noongar identity and the development of cultural expressions and self-identification inherent in that continuation.

## **Finding your place in story: Wirlomin Noongar**

*Kayang and Me* is an exchange of narratives presented in an alternating structure. These stories weave together personal expressions of self while also building a collective, albeit diverse Noongar identity. Like Jackie and Rita Huggins's *Auntie Rita*, Brown and Scott's contributions are broken into small sections separated visually through differing fonts. Each section builds and comments on what has gone before. In this way, *Kayang and Me* brings together what Grant Farred calls the 'vernacularity' characteristic of Indigenous life writing with the formally written text while maintaining a distinction between the two (Grossman 2013, 290). As a result, Brown and Scott's different modes of storytelling (and their different representations in the text), refuse to resolve the linguistic fault lines of Australia's colonialism that emerged not only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities but within the Aboriginal communities themselves. The memoir opens with Kayang Hazel recalling childhood memories of family. Her dad would light a fire, in the Noongar way, to let his family know where he was, that he was okay. She recalls a story passed on to her from her Grandfather Dongup about one particular fire lit to mark a meeting at the top of a hill. She reflects that this meeting place is now the site of a massacre explaining that 'most of 'em travelled from Jerdacuttup, just to go and get killed at Cocanarup' (7).<sup>31</sup> In a few brief paragraphs, Brown conveys generations of familial Noongar history, as well as information about the Kokanarup massacre, an atrocity at the heart of Noongar culture and Scott's writing. Brown's memories are seamlessly interwoven with her grandfather's story. She retells how, 'Grandfather Dongup was bringing cattle up from Hopetoun. He said he saw smoke those Noongars

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<sup>31</sup> Since *Kayang and Me*, Scott uses the spelling Kokanarup rather than Cocanarup. Apart from in quotes and references to source material that uses the earlier spelling of the place name, this thesis uses the most recent version.

made, top of the hill, and there musta been a lot of them. They was going for a meeting, exchanging women or something like that I suppose. When he came back, there was no-one' (7). The subtle shifts in perspective ('He said', 'They was' and 'I suppose') make Brown's story both personal and collective. It allows the reader to connect with her family, Noongar cultural practices and history. Entering into *Kayang and Me* through Brown's story is like joining a discussion midway through the conversation. In a relaxed and familiar tone, Brown begins 'I remember when they used to go hunting. Dad used to be late coming back to the camp and the boys'd be wondering. I'd say, "Oh, Pa won't be long"' (7).

Immediately, the reader is in the midst of story; someone is speaking and it is time to listen. Formal introductions come later when Hazel Brown gives her name, birth date and place of birth following the mention of Kokanarup. This seemingly out-of-sequence beginning creates an engaging start to Brown and Scott's memoir but it also suggests something else about Noongar identity, or at least Noongar identity in the way Brown and Scott have decided to articulate it. *Kayang and Me* embeds the authors' autobiographical details within a broad and interconnected narrative network. The movement of the collaborative story is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic structure that envisages a sprawling root structure that 'has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*' (1987, 25). In this way, the search for personal and collective Noongar identities is not only about finding a place along ancestral lines, but about 'finding your place in a story' (Quinlivan 2014, 1).

The example of Kayang Hazel continuing and incorporating her grandfather's story of Kokanarup is similar to Scott's appropriation of Brown's stories within the memoir itself and in his fiction. The process of storytelling, listening, retelling and sharing ensures the longevity of Noongar history and story while, especially through publication, increasing their visibility and accessibility to a broader Noongar and non-Noongar community. Scott reasons that the availability of diverse Noongar stories told by Noongar people is integral to forming a strong sense of self that can elicit pride. He reflects that:

in 1960s south-western Australia, it was hard to articulate pride in Aboriginality. My father wanted me to have something more like a

faith, a psychological conviction. It was not something easily put into words. He said to be proud, that was the important thing, but he lacked the vocabulary, didn't have the right stories at hand. It's a continuing problem I think, this struggle to articulate the significance and energy of a specific Indigenous heritage. (13)

*Kayang and Me* does not necessarily end this struggle but finds the 'significance and energy of a specific Indigenous heritage' in the struggle itself. Brown and Scott's exchanges reveal contradictions, uncertainties, stories that should be told and stories that are tempting to hide. The intergenerational locking together of two disparate lives forces a broadening notion of what it means to be Noongar and how that meaning can be strengthened through sharing story in an honest and open discursive space.

Scott describes the first time he hears Kayang Hazel refer to their particular community as the Wirlomin people whose name comes from a bird, the curlew (also 'wilo'). He admits that his 'family didn't bequeath [him] a rich oral history, quite the contrary, but there was one story of a boy and his mother camped past the edge of town of Ravensthorpe, sitting around the fire and hearing the curlews calling' (25). Through sharing stories of the curlew, Scott is finally able to attach himself to place and people. It is Brown's story rather than 'paper genealogies' that provides him with a connection to his Noongar heritage.

Brown's oral history, anecdotal but rich with detail of language, lore, traditional stories, kinship and a shared colonial history, provides a new way of connecting to place and people. While this does not resolve the personal, historic and social schisms that have occurred since Australia's invasion and subsequent colonisation, they do provide a way to confront and move along these fault lines. Brown insists that 'white people ... can destroy our country but they can never destroy the memories of it. They can change it, but they can't change what we know about it' (129). Stories endure and, as part of country, provide a region in which Noongar roots can grow. Brown notes that the sharing of memories through the act of storytelling can create a space that functions as a place of belonging. As a Noongar with both Noongar and European ancestry, Scott has increasingly chosen to emphasise his Noongar roots. This choice has developed with Scott's growing understanding of his relationship in and with his Noongar community but

has also been a response to social and political tensions within Australia, a nation whose post-colonial status he questions (Scott 2007a). He remembers that his:

first novel's biographical note drafted well over ten years ago – referred to me as of Aboriginal and British descent. That was honest, as I understood it then.

Preparing the biographical note for my second novel I wrote; 'descended from people who lived on the south-east coast of Western Australia, and among those who called themselves Noongar.' (256)

In the second articulation of his identity, Scott excludes his British ancestry and connects himself to a particular place and people. This regional Noongar identity asserts itself within a collective framework; it exists as part of the Noongar community. He explains that he 'intended to emphasise the authority of that community – those who call themselves Noongar – in confirming that identity' (256). He iterates that to do so is 'a political stance' (256).

The importance of community is captured in Kayang Hazel's words as she too encourages the Noongar community to resist the shame around their heritage that forced on Noongar people since the British invasion. Brown acknowledges that, 'Lots of people, you know, were ashamed to admit that they got coloured blood in 'em. [...] There's lots of people, they've been turned away from their own kind. You'll never make it in a white man's world, they say, if you cling to the blacks' (175). Yet she goes on to boldly insist that her community must, like herself, step forward and proudly declare their Aboriginal roots stating that

We didn't ask to be born, and we didn't ask for white people to come here either. We had no choice. But colour is nothing to be ashamed of; people should be proud of their colour. They should be proud of their tradition. And our people's laws were really something. I'm not ashamed. (175)

Brown and Scott identify specifically as Wirlomin Noongar. Wirlomin, according to Brown means curlew-like. The Wirlomin people get their name from the actions of her great-great-grandmother's old father who used to call and disguise himself like a curlew. This derivation alone is testament to the possibility of story, shared through generations, to create cultural roots even in a territory of

disconnection, contradiction and shame. Brown describes the shyness of the curlew and its ability to dissolve into its surroundings as ‘a piece of dry stick’ or ‘a piece of rock’ (22). In the story about her family who one day went to a particular area to hunt ducks, the trip begins with Brown’s father lighting a fire to alert the Wirlomin people (and the spirits of the place) to their arrival. The fire also asks permission to be in that particular part of country. As the smoke snakes through the trees, the curlews cry out, ‘weee ... weeee ... *Wilo wilo wilo*’ (24). The sound, which Brown remembers ‘sending shivers down [her] back’ (24), does not perturb her father. He calms Brown and Scott’s father, Tommy, saying ‘That’s it, you’re right. That’s the Wilomin people; they’re letting us know. We’re right now.’ After a while ‘he just hit the two sticks together like that, and no more’ (24).<sup>32</sup>

The exchange between Brown’s father and the wilo contains the ethics that Scott enacts and promotes in *Kayang and Me* and across his collected works thus far. Brown’s story passes on the practice of acknowledging and respecting the authority of country. The act of lighting the fire and waiting for the wilos’ cries embodies a reciprocal and respectful relationship with people and place. It also shows the empowerment in being asked and hospitably granting permission. The wilo cry is one of authority but also generosity—characteristics that Scott weaves through his writing and projects. Scott describes the protagonists in the Wirlomin Project’s publications (the same stories shared by Brown in *Kayang and Me*) as ‘confident, talented, generous heroes’ (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 33; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 39), having qualities that, arguably, are exhibited by Brown and Scott in their collaboration. The characterisation of a confident and generous Noongar identity maintained across Scott’s texts show how the curation and articulation of a collective and diverse identity provides an opportunity to emphasise certain themes, thereby controlling the narrative in a way that empowers his home community.

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<sup>32</sup> The spelling of Wirlomin in this thesis draws on the most recent spelling of the word used by the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Projects. In *Kayang and Me*, Scott has used the spelling Wilomin.

The reference to the wilo in the Wirlomin Project and the familiar use of the term ‘Wirlomin’ Noongar in *Kayang and Me* is indicative of an increasingly empowered Noongar community who are defining their own identity. Speaking in the accompanying essays to *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* and *Mamang*, Scott explains that Wirlomin, ‘is not a name that features even in the most commonly cited Aboriginal archives’ (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 34; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 40). Furthermore, he argues that:

since we [the Wirlomin Project] are considering language survival and the weight of heritage a tongue can carry, it’s probably apt that the name is so very reliant upon oral history. The name is also associated with a particular site, ceremony, and song. (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 34; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 40)

The mention of site, ceremony and song brings the reader back to *Kayang and Me* and Brown’s story of her great-great-grandfather, shooting ducks and a song she shares with Scott. The resonance between the Wirlomin Project’s ‘old stories’ and *Kayang and Me*, in narratives and narrative ethics, enforces the significance of regional Noongar roots and the continuation of story in Scott’s writing and projects. Scott’s use of the term Wirlomin Noongar to define his community renegotiates the disproportionate amount of legitimacy given to written languages and archives in comparison to their oral counterparts and provides a Noongar construction of Noongar identity.

Scott has used his mobility in both Noongar and non-Noongar worlds, especially the mobility created from the success of his writing, to empower his Noongar sense of self, his community and to lead his readership towards Noongar roots. These imperatives share similar qualities to the curlew; similarities observed by Scott in his writing. The discussion of the curlew in *Kayang and Me*, its centrality to the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, and its appearance as a reoccurring motif across Scott’s short fiction, in particular ‘Capture’ and ‘A Refreshing Sleep’, draw attention to the curlew-like qualities of the Wirlomin.

The curlew-like qualities, shared in narrative form, articulate Noongar characteristics that Scott and a wider community can connect with as a way to

trace their Noongar roots and also form a strong future. Scott describes how, despite being an ‘endangered species along the south coast, the wilo lays its eggs in the sand. As foolish as an artist, I thought; as vulnerable as someone “of Aboriginal descent” forsaking camouflage and, with his eyes open, asking after his Aboriginal family’ (25). The metaphor of the curlew eggs applies across Scott’s work. The risk of the curlew laying eggs in a place that exposes them to the dangers of their surroundings is much like Scott choosing to write his stories in disputed territories. Yet there is bravery in this action and the risk is worth the potential for something new to be born. These places of vulnerability and of danger are also sites of possibility.

However, despite the possibility and because of the danger in the territory of Scott’s writing, there are instances in *Kayang and Me* when Brown and Scott choose to hold back, to not share their stories. These strategic silences are similar to the curlew camouflaging itself, an admission of vulnerability and a need to protect themselves. Brown and Scott both demonstrate the necessity for strategic generosity considering the extant inequality between Noongar and non-Noongar people in Australia. This ‘self-censorship and deliberate hiding of strategic information from outsiders,’ as Horakova points out, ‘is another way collaborative Indigenous life-writing becomes a powerful means of resistance’ (2013, 62).

Brown retells the time she went walking with family in country around Boat Harbour. On their walk, she reveals a fresh water source and traces of, *woodatji* – a ‘mischievous little fella’ who, while sitting on a rock, was hit over the head by a Noongar woman as ‘she stood on her left leg, with the right leg up (265). And her left foot went right into the muddy ground’ (255). Brown shows the footprints left behind by the *woodatji* and Noongar woman and then quickly covers them back over with sand. It is an important act that protects the story and the place in which it is embedded. She explains ‘We always cover it all up with sand, because if you leave it everybody will see it, and everybody will want to go and see it, see. They’ll make a sort of museum thing of it’ (255). This protection from, as Alison Ravenscroft words it, ‘the white gaze that has yet to prove itself trustworthy’ is complicated however by the story’s inclusion in *Kayang and Me* (2012, 17). The reader has, to an extent, been welcomed to the story but in doing



so, Brown and Scott are testing the reader's trustworthiness. Scott says that 'Transcribing the story, I realised it was about respect for cultural authority and traditional ownership, and that . . . I was being welcomed and warned at the same time' (256). He then directly asks whether his audience has the same respect, feels the welcoming and warning of this Noongar heritage: 'And you, our reader?' (256). Once again there is generosity, confidence, authority and a desire to bring worlds together.

## Conclusion

*Kayang and Me* emphasises a continuing link to an empowered Noongar heritage as a way of forming a Noongar sense of self rather than basing it on a continued and shared legacy of oppression. Scott does not necessarily change the narrative, rather he provides more stories that open up the possibility of what it is to be a Noongar individual that is part of a community. He and Brown also provide new ways of reading and retelling the past; it is not only what is said, but the saying (and listening to) the story that is important.

Scott's shift from fiction to life writing, from being a solo author to co-author, further destabilises the boundaries between the subjective truth and constructed narrative. This area of contestation provides the site for Brown and Scott's discursive consideration of Noongar identity as they each, as individuals and as part of a community, strive to define their connection to an ongoing Noongar heritage. Navigating to social and historic fault lines that have emerged in Australia's colonial history, Brown and Scott's stories and self-aware process of storytelling demonstrate the importance of honestly sharing the uncertainty, contradictions, shame and pride in their sense of selves as a way of defining, in their own way, an empowered Noongar identity. Scott asks, 'What is the significance of all this, other than to my own personal preoccupations?' (257). In his answer to this question he summarises the significance of *Kayang and Me* in guiding a Noongar community and an Australian nation through disputed territories. Scott asserts:

what we're talking about is maintaining a heritage, consolidating a long presence in a place, and developing relationships. We mean expanding the Noongar world so that there is one world, not two, and no need to be stuck in or between one or the other. (258)

Of course, to merge two worlds in conflict and, on a more fundamental level, challenge the belief that non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds are irrevocably divided from one another is a difficult task. Especially when, as *Kayang and Me* indicates, Brown and Scott wish to celebrate diversity, multiplicity and contradiction in a Noongar and wider Australian identity. For Scott, the controversial proposal to graft a contemporary society onto Aboriginal roots is a way to achieve this goal. It is a proposal that will cause disputes but also an idea that serves as a site of possibility generating thoughts of what could be.

## Chapter 5

### Moving between horizons: Region, nation and the globe in *That Deadman Dance*

#### Introduction

The concept of strengthening Noongar roots is also identified in *That Deadman Dance* (2010), a novel that can be read as regional literature that is rooted in, yet not bound by, the region in which it is set or from where Scott writes. While the novel is a Noongar story written from a Noongar perspective, Scott incorporates national and transnational literatures resulting in the broadening scope of regional literature. The global and the local are often framed as disputed (or disputing) territories yet *That Deadman Dance* does not depict the global and the local as exclusively oppositional areas or forces, but as woven and sometimes complementary spaces. As a result, Scott continues to extend what Noongar language, identity and literature can be.

The novel reimagines the trajectory of the relationship between Noongar and non-Noongar communities in Western Australia's 'friendly frontier' as it unfolded away from its promise of respect and reciprocity and hardened into violent dispossession. The novel ultimately conveys a Noongar perspective, but one that has capacity to enter the consciousness of both Noongar and non-Noongar characters during this period. The cross-cultural overlap in *That Deadman Dance*, particularly that which emerges in the character of Bobby Wabalanginy, resonates with the inclusive and diverse Noongar identity articulated in *Kayang and Me*.

Bobby, a young Noongar boy ambitiously, creatively and naively participates in cross-cultural exchange. His world is opened up by the 'horizon people' who bring new languages, stories and narrative forms to his territory.

Bobby incorporates these new words and practices into his own ways of being and forms of expression unsettling the boundaries between the global and the local. However, Bobby eventually realises that the European ‘settlers’ and American whalers are exploiting his people’s generosity to consolidate expanding colonial and capitalist enterprises and do not want to learn his language and stories in return. The merging of once disparate literary worlds enforces a new hierarchy of language and stories.

Scott draws on ‘old’ Noongar stories that illustrate a strong ancestral connection to country and are part of a continuing Noongar identity and literature. He also weaves canonical frontier and colonial literature like Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* into *That Deadman Dance* as an ironic counterpoint to the novel’s depiction of the ‘friendly frontier’, and to the Noongar stories contained within the novel itself. Scott has argued for a ‘regional Aboriginal literature [that]... informs a regionally based Australian literature. And for that to also serve Aboriginal interests’ (Scott 2012b). By harnessing these stories within his writing, Scott destabilises the canonical status of these global narratives to create a Noongar ‘frontier’ narrative that acknowledges the injustices of colonisation and the missed opportunity for cross-cultural exchange.

## **Regional and world literatures**

Pheng Cheah’s *World Against Globe* makes an important distinction between the world and the globe, stating that the world ‘refers to the being-with of all peoples, groups and individuals. It is the original openness that gives us accessibility to others so that we can be together’ (2014, 326). On the other hand, the globe, linked to global capitalism ‘incorporates peoples and populations into the world system by tethering them to capitalist temporality and Western modernity’s unrelenting march of progress’ (Cheah 2014, 326).

These definitions are useful in illustrating how Scott’s writing aims to create an empowered Noongar world literature, one that is regional yet open and inclusive of national and transnational narratives. This openness, however, is in

tension with the globalised literary space that has and could continue to disempower and marginalise Noongar voices and stories. In the content and process of Scott's writing, there is tension between the worldliness of his works and the awareness of a hierarchical and homogenising globe. *That Deadman Dance*'s intertextual use of global and local texts is an example of critical regionalism, an approach to literature that José Limón defines as 'a renewal of regionalist thinking, not in any isolated sense, but rather *within yet in tension* with globalization (2008, 166–7). Both Noongar and non-Noongar characters in *That Deadman Dance* are familiar with global texts like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) or popular British songs. The presence of these texts in the colony and their incorporation into everyday conversation show the opening up of expansive storytelling networks available to and used by Noongar individuals. These texts become a part of Noongar modes of communication and stories as depicted by their incorporation into Bobby and his uncle Wunyeran's everyday speech (speaking in English) and Bobby's writing of Noongar language in English alphabetic script. Such examples signal the beginnings of Noongar participation in a globalised literary world. Scott also uses these intertextualities to create a disjuncture between the idyllic representation of adventure and cross-cultural friendship in iconic frontier literature and the exploitation and inequality experienced by the Noongar characters portrayed in the world of *That Deadman Dance*.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that novels like *Robinson Crusoe* are examples of the maritime aspirations of colonial forces functioning as convenient stories that justify the invasion and theft of foreign lands while dismissing the inhabitants of these places. Embodying the same colonial logic found in colonial tales of pastoral Arcady or hostile wilderness, the deserted island is 'constructed as *terra nullius* (empty land), tropical, and extremely fertile. (Indeed, there are few Arctic island-adventure stories.) . . . the island's lack of inhabitants provides a *tabula rasa* for colonialism and the birth of a new social order (DeLoughrey 2010, 13).

Traces of colonial dominance typical of frontier literature can be found in the way Geordie Chainé, a wealthy entrepreneur, 'befriends' Bobby —Bobby is

renamed, schooled in scripture and taken on oceanic adventures. The friendship doubles as both conversion and exploitation of Bobby with the possibility of reciprocity and respect inherent in real friendship eventually exposed as a myth. Yet Scott inverts this power dynamic by appropriating *Robinson Crusoe* in the novel. Jak Tar, a crew member on an American whaling ship, decides to desert his boat moored on the Noongar shoreline and swim for land. He becomes disorientated in the ocean eventually washing up on the beach and scrambling to a granite shelf where he curls up near a campfire in a daze. When he wakes he sees a young Aboriginal boy, Bobby who in 'clear English like a dream' greets Jak Tar as 'My good man Friday' (196). Although Jak Tar parallels the non-Indigenous castaway character of Robinson Crusoe, Bobby's reference to Jak as Friday suggests that Bobby aligns himself and his community with the dominant and central character in Defoe's novel. Crusoe, as master and saviour, rescues Friday from cannibals and also 'rescues' his soul by converting Friday to Christianity and taking him back to England. Bobby, it would seem, sees his role as master and saviour and, indeed, he and his family do eventually make Jak Tar part of their community. Jak Tar and Bobby's cousin Binyan become romantically involved. It is a respectful cross-cultural relationship in which Jak Tar willingly learns Noongar language and cultural practices and is welcomed into Bobby's community.

The intertextuality in *That Deadman Dance* indicate Bobby's ability to adapt, create and incorporate the stories from distant horizons into his own world and worldview. It is remarkable that given the pointed implications of Scott's reference to *Robinson Crusoe* in *That Deadman Dance*, that Defoe's story is used to highlight Bobby's intelligence and playful use of language. Even in such politically fraught literature, Scott manages to find sites of possibility for Noongar empowerment.

The cultural and social myopia of *Robinson Crusoe* prompted J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), a retelling of Defoe's story from the perspective of a woman, Susan Barton. Linda Hutcheon comments that '*Foe* reveals that storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events – and people – but it also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the

women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century?’ (1988, 107). Similarly, Scott highlights the absence of Indigenous perspectives and voices in these literatures and histories while filling these voids in its retelling of Australia’s history from a Noongar perspective in novels like *That Deadman Dance*. The ironic presence of *Robinson Crusoe* implies a post-colonial reading of Defoe’s text whereby the *terra nullius* of the deserted island is contrasted with the wide Noongar presence in, and knowledge and use of country. It must also be remembered that the purpose of Robinson Crusoe’s journey was to bring back African slaves for his plantation. Consequently, the imperial modernity of this canonical work is important in highlighting the exploitative capitalist drive behind the colonial presence in Noongar country while drawing attention to how colonial narratives overwrite Indigenous people and place.

In another juxtaposition of the global and the local, Christine Chaine, the daughter of Geordie Chaine and the person with whom Bobby shares a mutual attraction, begins to read Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* out of boredom. It is speculated that the book must have arrived at the Swan River Colony ‘on a recent ship and had been passed around the community’, a detail that imagines global texts circulating transnationally and permeating regional centres (321). While Christine does not come to finish the novel, it is significant that this text is first introduced in a chapter that marks the maturing physicality of both Christine and Bobby and the resulting shift in their relationship. Christine puts down the book because she is experiencing the first of what will be a ‘monthly strife’ and is worried that ‘being a woman meant becoming an invalid’ (321). She notices Bobby at the jetty and in a passage that assumes Christine’s point of view, Bobby is described as ‘lean-limbed and broad-shouldered’ (324). Christine sees how ‘Bobby’s white and open-necked linen shirt showed the strong tendons of his neck and the hollow at the base of his throat’ (324–325). Bobby and Christine’s growing attraction to one another is prevented by Chaine, and as Christine comes to understand the social taboos surrounding her desire for Bobby, she too prevents a childhood intimacy transitioning into an adult romance.

The desire that Bobby and Christine feel for one another is one of several cross-cultural relationships in *That Deadman Dance* that not only evoke but also

become entangled with *The Last of the Mohicans*. Set in frontier America, in what is known as the French and Indian War, the central storyline of *The Last of the Mohicans* follows the predatory and lustful Huron Indian chief, Magua, who repeatedly attempts to kidnap and wed Cora, the daughter of Colonel Munro of the British army. Cora is disgusted by this proposal. Instead, she seems to return the noble and quiet love of the Mohican warrior, Uncas, but their forbidden union is doomed and, characteristic of a sentimental novel, Cora and Uncas both die. The novel also participates in early nineteenth-century racial politics when it is revealed that Cora's mother's heritage can be traced back to the West Indies where she is 'descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people' (Cooper 2010, 168). Colonel Munro staunchly refutes the suggestion of Cora's mixed heritage when he wrongly assumes that Duncan Heyward, an eligible suitor, prefers to marry Cora's paternal half-sister, Alice, because of her racial purity. Cooper's preoccupation with depicting, often ambiguously, cross-cultural politics (that he conflates with racial politics) is relevant to Scott's depiction of Christine and Bobby's romance in *That Deadman Dance*.

Strong social taboos impede Christine's feeling for Bobby as she makes the 'right' choice for her partner in the Governor's son, Hugh Spender. This choice conforms to her father's wishes and completes Bobby's exclusion from the Chaine family while further symbolising the breakdown of the 'friendly frontier'. Yet, once again, the relationship between Jak Tar and Binyan is used as a counterpoint to this colonial narrative.

Jak Tar, now at home in his new environment, is shepherding sheep while reading *The Last of the Mohicans*. Bobby startles him and lifts the book from his hands, reading the title out loud. While talking to Bobby, Jak Tar gets distracted by Binyan and wanders off to greet her. When Jak Tar and Binyan come back the book remains face down and Bobby is gone (345–6). In contrast to Christine and Bobby, Jak Tar's desire for Binyan is fulfilled as he respectfully participates in the language and culture with the Noongar community. The welcoming of Jak Tar into the Noongar community is very different to the Chaine's gradual exclusion of Bobby from his family. While the Noongar people do not feel superior to the



‘visitors’ on their shores, the English and Americans in the colony carry the narrative of white superiority, as represented in (and sometimes challenged by) global texts like *The Last of the Mohicans*. It would seem that while *The Last of the Mohicans* expresses an uncertainty and anxiety about cross-cultural relationships, the same anxiety that undermines Bobby and Christine’s romance in *That Deadman Dance*, the romance of Binyan and Jak Tar shows the possibility of equality and the Noongar ability (in contrast to the non-Noongar inability) to accommodate and welcome new connections. Unfortunately, Bobby’s abandonment of the book sets up his tragic ignorance of the implication of its title. Bobby does not see the dangers that the American and European newcomers present to his land and people, he also does not read about the death of Uncas, the last of the Mohican tribe, whose love for Cora is forbidden.

The purpose of analysing these intertextualities in *That Deadman Dance* is to emphasise how Scott imagines the development of Noongar language and literature as adaptive and expansive entities that incorporate and use global texts. Noongar language and literature in the novel is portrayed as being connected to texts from different horizons and thereby inherently transnational in its form and content while also being explicitly local. As is characteristic in Scott’s writing, both Bobby’s stories and *That Deadman Dance* itself are rooted in Noongar country and its stories. The central motif (or narrative root) in the novel is an old Noongar story about a man diving into a whale. The story links the novel to another canonical text, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). Scott appropriates Melville’s description of skinning a whale and the stacking of a harpoon rope (303).<sup>33</sup> The novel also incorporates a set of whalers from Nantucket—a busy

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<sup>33</sup> In the chapter ‘Cutting In’ Ishmael observes the deconstruction of the whale: ‘Now as the blubber envelops the whale precisely as the rind does an orange, so it is stripped off from the body precisely as an orange is sometimes stripped by spiralizing it’ (Melville 2007, 339). Scott also describes the blubber peeling away like an orange rind: ‘As the cable tightened the whale began to lift, the ship heeled over until—suddenly—the blubber peeled away like rind from an orange, and the ship sprung upright, masts madly waving’ (2010, 242). Similarly, Scott’s description of stacking the harpoon rope echoes Melville’s description of the same process occurs in chapter 60, titled “The Line” (Melville 2007, 313).

whaling port where Ishmael and Queequeg join the crew of the Pequod in *Moby-Dick*. These intertextualities connect the two fictional worlds in the same way the whaling ships connect geographic horizons.

*That Deadman Dance* shows the influx of ships in Noongar waters as part of the business of empire and whaling. The Noongar community participates in cross-cultural relationships on land and water eventually contending with the exploitation of country occurring across both sites. The novel, therefore, is an illustration of Christopher Connery's assertion that 'the conquest of the world ocean [was] ... coterminous with the rise of Western capitalism' (1996, 289). For example, Chaine's business foothold in King George's Sound is consolidated by catering to international whaling companies and their crews. The depiction of the entrepreneurial urge of the whaling operations resonates with Herman Melville's perspective on the industry. Connery states that:

Melville saw whaling as an oceanic activity of a particular kind and located in both its global scope and its violence a marker of a new phase in the relationship between humans and the ocean. [...] That whales were hunted for their oil, which was used in industry, is another reason to link whaling to the industrial, rather than to the agricultural economy with which one would normally associate fishing. (1996, 298–9)

Scott depicts the ambitious and adventurous zeal of this practice but also the destruction it wreaks in the ocean, on land and on the Noongar connection to country from differing Noongar perspectives. Bobby is initially complicit in the slaughtering of the whales while Menak distrusts the burgeoning whale trade and tries to convey the significance of the whale in Noongar culture through story (Scott 2008b, 99).

Menak's story draws on an ancestral Noongar story that has been published by the Wirlomin Project as *Mamang*. It describes a Noongar man who dives inside the whale squeezing and singing the whale heart to direct the creature across oceans in search of people and land. When the man comes to shore, he is greeted by two women and their family and friends. The man stays in this community, long enough to have many children and long enough for the whale to become part of the coastline. He then travels back across the horizon to his home

with his family—the people from whom the Noongar community are descended. The story builds on the novel's motif of horizons and the movements between them. Importantly, it describes the Noongar propensity for adventure and appropriation well before ships started forging their own oceanic routes while emphasising the significance of home. After all, although the Noongar man leaves in search of new lands and people, he also returns home.

The Noongar man entering the whale resonates with the biblical story of Jonah being swallowed by the whale. Yet this plot point particular to both stories is subverted in *That Deadman Dance*. In the Swan River Colony, the whalebones are used as structural components of colonial dwellings. As characters enter and leave these mammalian shelters, they also seem to enter and leave the belly of the whale. A whale jaw acts as the entrance to the home of Doctor Cross, the kind leader of the original settlement, which later becomes Chaine's residence. Entering this interior space like entering into the whale. Visiting Chaine, Bobby makes a direct link between Jonah and the Noongar story, reflecting that:

Every time Bobby walked through the whale jaws he still thought of Jonah, from the Bible story, and that old people's song. Grab the whale's heart, squeeze it, use its eyes and power to take you where you wanna be. (295)

Bobby reimagines the story of the man jumping into the whale and steering it with his song and then returning home:

In that story the man returns home, his children with him and their two mothers, pregnant again the both of them.  
*Daadi* man, him. Everybody love him.  
Jonah woulda been alright if he was a Noongar man.  
Come back home rich and people gunna love you. (295)

Unlike the whales of Jonah and the Noongar ancestor, however, Cross and Chaine's whale is dead, beached and immobile. Following Bobby into Chaine's house, the reader is met with a summation of Chaine's business-minded character:

‘Chaine know what he wants. Profits, not prophets’ (293).<sup>34</sup> In direct reference to and contrast with the biblical story, the play on words clearly indicates that in the expanding colonial enterprise money, not truth, is the religion that drives people like Chaine. The likes of Jonah, who is delivered by the whale to spread the word of God and warn against wickedness, are not present in the colony and divine intervention does not occur. In fact, it is Bobby who ironically attempts to preach to the colony’s inhabitants at the end of the novel. His performance attempts to draw attention to the injustice prevalent in the town, but unlike Jonah’s experience, his audience does not listen. The religious intertextuality of the novel reveals the hypocrisy of Christianity’s role in the ‘civilising’ of Aboriginal communities.

The Bible is part of Bobby’s English lessons with the Chaine family – ‘that book was always within reach’ – and so his literacy is infused with a new belief system expressed in the stories of ‘Jonah, and the disciples and their supper, and Samson and all his blind strength’ (288–9). While the story of Jonah provides the lesson that all of God’s children are equal and deserve compassion, Samson is pointedly a story of betrayal and a loss of strength. Bobby too will be brought down by those he loves. Yet there is a hint of hope among these parables as the narrator describes Bobby learning about Lazarus for the first time: ‘the man who dies walking out of a cold, stone cave’ (289). The story of renewed life after death connects to Bobby who remains in country, living and talking to the tourists of the present day.

The Christian values of the colony are undermined with the emergence of a new God in the world of *That Deadman Dance*: capitalist enterprise. When Chaine approaches the whale carcass that forms the entrance to his hut, Scott describes how Chaine ‘saw the curve of bone – bright, white – arching against the

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<sup>34</sup> The phrase could also refer to the series of prophecies in *Moby-Dick* as Elijah, Fedallah and the sailors themselves foresee the tragic fate of the Pequod and its crew. Similarly, the tragic demise of the ‘friendly frontier’ is already known to the reader and reinforced through the elderly Bobby’s speech to the tourists. Before Bobby’s final speech is made, the reader knows it will fail.

vault of sky, and the bright whale teeth, and the sun behind so biting and stabbing at his eyes it brought tears' (291). The imagery is reminiscent of a vaulted church with its stone walls and marble altars. Even the blinding light is Pentecostal; visionary. The scene confirms that Chaine has found a new figure of worship in the death of the whale.

The overt affinities between *Moby-Dick*, the Bible's Jonah and the Noongar story of the whale give way to ironic distinctions in *That Deadman Dance*. The function of the whale shifts in Scott's novel so that instead of the whale being a vessel driven by God's word or Noongar song, it is a hunted product pursued by ships that do the bidding of business and empires. The whaleboats are not on a metaphysical quest but a mercenary pursuit, and rather than Moby Dick retaliating against his hunters, countless whales are slaughtered close to shore. The death of these whales also serves to show Bobby's drift and departure from ancestral duties: rather than singing the whale heart he is guiding the whaler's harpoons.

However, these stories also become sites of hope and Noongar empowerment. In Hazel Brown's recollection of the Noongar man jumping into the whale in *Kayang and Me*, she too compares Jonah with her Noongar ancestor. However, she notes that, unlike Jonah:

the Noongar knew what he was doing, he *wanted* to be there, see.  
It wasn't an accident. Like he sung it to him and well, not grabbed  
– can't say he grabbed it – but he controlled it, you know, he  
controlled the whale. (Brown 2005, 31)

The Noongar relationship with the whale is one of agency and control, yet it is ultimately not destructive. The Noongar's ability to bond with and be part of this creature is directly contrasted with the character of Ahab in *Moby-Dick* whose desire to conquer the whale leads to his own death by the very creature he hunts. The tension between the transnational and local texts that are circulating within the imagined Swan River Colony of the novel in addition to the tension between *That Deadman Dance*, as a retelling of Australian settler literature, and the transnational frontier narratives referenced in the story are productively provocative. Scott unsettles the mythologies of colonial literatures—*terra nullius*,

the ‘friendliness’ of the colonial encounter—and exposes the erasures and manipulations of Australia’s foundational narratives that have disempowered and silenced Noongar voices. By bringing together local and transnational texts in an arguably national novel, Scott creates a counter-narrative about Australia’s origins, one that grieves the missed opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and respect during Australia’s colonisation and one that seeks to fill the voids in Australia’s history.

*That Deadman Dance* also critiques the power dynamic occurring in the movement of texts from their place of origin. In its depiction of Noongar literature as a storytelling practice that incorporates national and transnational literatures, it questions what can be gained and lost by communities as the boundaries between these literary spaces become more porous in an increasingly globalised world. The novel portrays the power of regional and local texts to connect people to place thereby supporting Scott’s ongoing argument that local Aboriginal literatures are necessary to ground national and transnational narratives. Such views complicate what is meant by regional, national and world literatures while also empowering local storytelling practices in the face of more dominant national and world literatures.

## **The worldliness of regional literature**

Nakata’s ‘cultural interface’ is at work in *That Deadman Dance*. The exchange between and overlap of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages unsettles the assumed divisions between cultural expressions and forms. The Noongar characters’ appropriation of English in the novel is indicative of linguistic colonialism insofar as the majority of newcomers would not learn their language, but it also show Noongar acuity and readiness to adapt. *That Deadman Dance* begins with Bobby Wabalanginy writing on a slate: *Kaya* (1). The narrator observes how ‘Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn’t help but smile. Nobody ever writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way! (1).

Bobby is experimenting with new combinations of languages and forms. His Noongar language, traditionally an oral language, is written in alphabetic script for the first time. Scott too, in depicting this scene, writes in Noongar and English and also differentiates between vernacular and formal English. They are both ‘moving between languages’ (1). Bobby’s action parallels Scott’s interweaving of ‘old’ Noongar stories and global texts in that it expresses both Bobby’s Noongar roots and his ambitious reach for new ways of storytelling. The slate, a territory that plays out the disputes between oral and written language, and Noongar and non-Noongar language and stories, is depicted as a site of possibility and excitement for Bobby. Scott explains that ‘starting with that word *kaya* and emphasising that it speaks of confidence and generosity – “yes” and “hello” meaning the same word’, is part of the process of regenerating Noongar language in a way that is useful and empowering for the community (Scott 2012b). Greeting the reader in Noongar rather than English embeds the story of Western Australia’s colonisation within a Noongar framework immediately reconfiguring the power dynamic between colonial and Noongar voices. Despite *That Deadman Dance* tracing the breakdown of the ‘friendly frontier’ and the increasingly marginalised position of the Noongar community, the structure and style of the novel enacts the idea of contemporary narratives being grafted onto Noongar roots.

Similarly, Bobby attempts to hold two worlds and two languages within his climactic performance and speech. Bobby’s ordering of Noongar and English language in his delivery critiques the increasingly unequal cultural-exchange occurring in the colony. Bobby begins speaking in English describing how the respectful exchange between the Noongar and colonial communities has diminished into a grossly one-sided exploitation of his land and people. Bobby tells his seated audience, ‘One time we share kangaroo wallaby *tammar quokka yongar wetj woylie boodi wetj koording kamak kaip ... Too many*’ (391–2). The realisation that his community have been naive in their unfettered generosity to these newcomers coincides with Bobby’s use of Noongar language. The bilingual nature of his speech is a protest against the silencing of his language and stories. It

asserts his Noongar heritage while also showcasing his mobility across both cultures—it is a powerful act. Bobby challenges his audience by asking:

‘And we now strangers to our special places.  
*Ngaalak waam. Naatjil? Why?*’ (392)

This question marks a further shift in Bobby’s speech that indicates his decision to stop being complicit in the dispossession and mistreatment of his own people. From this moment on, his Noongar language comes first. This is a return to the confidence and pride that is imbued in the novel’s opening word, ‘*Kaya*’. In this new order of language, Bobby continues his speech, saying:

*Djena bwok warra booja kenning.* These shoes might stop me feel  
the dirt I tread.  
... *Booja djena baranginy.* Sand can hold my feet instead.  
... *Noonook kaatabwok koorl baranginy.* Take this hat ...  
... *Naatjil kaatbwok.* Why wear this hat? *Ngayn yirra yak koombar  
maar-ang kaat koombar.* Clouds around my head just like a  
mountain top; *Ngaitj nol-ok, daarp koorl, dabakan, dat nyin.* I  
want shade? Slip beneath the big trees, slow down, stop.  
... *Nitjak bwoka.* My shirt.  
... *Bwokabt, ngaank ngayn maarak ngabiny.* No shirt means the  
wind and sun caress you better.  
... *Boodawan, nyoondokat nyinang moort, moortapinyang yongar,  
wetj wilo ... Nitja boodja ngalak boodja Noonga boodjar, kwop  
nyoondok yoowarl koorl yey, yang ngaalang ...* Because you need  
to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And  
how can that be, without we people who have been here for all  
time? (392–4)

The audience is not moved by Bobby’s speech and so, in the world of the novel, the speech fails for Bobby and the message that people need Noongar roots to be connected to place is ignored. The grafting of English onto Noongar roots also appears in the bilingual publications by the Wirlomin Project. This is significant because while this style of speaking is ineffective for Bobby within the story, it is effective for Scott in the context of writing *That Deadman Dance* and producing the Wirlomin Project’s publications. Scott is able to reconfigure the unequal power dynamics described in Bobby’s speech through a sequencing of speech itself that prioritises and empowers Noongar language and stories.



Bobby's tragic epiphany that the newcomers have no interest in learning these parts of his heritage directly contrast with his initial optimism at writing the word *Kaya* on a slate. Like the European and American ships, Bobby's writing, in action, form and meaning, takes him between Noongar and non-Noongar worlds. The oceanic travel routes, established for capitalist and colonial enterprise, enable the increasing literary mobility occurring in the colony and, reading from a contemporary perspective, foreshadows the expansive regional, national and global networks that literature circulates in today. Yet, while these networks enable cross-cultural exchange and opportunity, Scott argues that 'any 'global discourse' has strong homogenising tendencies' (2007a, 124). Bobby's speech performs resistance to such homogenisation and its failure supports Scott's view that 'we need to strengthen regional voices so they remain true to their own imperatives at the same time as being empowered to enter into exchange and dialogue' (2007a, 124).

*That Deadman Dance* depicts the Noongar world also overlapping with and entering into a globalised space. Yet Scott envisages the possibility of Noongar literature being worldly, and here I am referring to Pheng Cheah's definition of the world as an inclusive space. Imagine, Scott provokes, if:

instead of saying Indigenous or Noongar literature is the niche within some other sort of literature, you start to think *it's all Noongar* and then literature has been accommodated within the Noongar heritage and tradition. That allows you to start moving. *And once you start thinking about all those things then more becomes possible.* (Scott 2012a, 243, my italics)

This idea carries the characteristics of openness and unity described by Pheng Cheah's world but also comes into conflict with global structures of literature. The movement Scott proposes would emerge from regional Aboriginal roots and, therefore, would reconfigure the asymmetrical rendering of the world of literature by Pascale Casanova (2004), Franco Moretti (2013) and others that identify but also revert to centre and periphery frameworks. While Noongar literature would typically be understood as a peripheral literature, Scott places it in the centre. This

repositioning, Scott explains, would mean that for the Noongar community and Aboriginal communities more broadly:

you're not in the dead end of polemics, constantly reacting against the status quo with anger. You're trying to work with healing and the strength of the cultural tradition, the heritage. Not to be shrill, polemic or trapped in the paradigm that's being set up for us. (2012a, 235)

Of course, the young Bobby in *That Deadman Dance* is unaware of the paradigms in which he is engaging. He uses different narrative paths—song, dance and the written word—to navigate the shifting spaces around him. Bobby is a master of performance exemplified by his creation of the Deadman Dance that reimagines the British soldiers' military drill. Yet Bobby's reliance on the dance and the belief in its powers of persuasion are ultimately proved to be naive when he is unable to secure justice for himself and his people at his trial. In an interview with Anne Brewster, Scott considers that 'the Dead Man Dance may have been a mistake' because it marks Bobby's reckless appropriation of the newcomer's cultural forms at the expense of his own cultural material (Scott 2012a, 232). In this sense, he lacks a strategy to protect his own traditions as he enters into cross-cultural exchange; he did not know he needed one. In the wake of colonisation, Scott seeks to rectify the lack of reciprocity depicted in his novel and he indicates, both through *That Deadman Dance* and its surrounding discourse, that writing is the means by which to achieve this goal. Scott comments that of all the various narrative forms that Bobby experiments with 'the thin strand that is not a mistake is that journal. As a novelist, you see where I am there. As a novelist I'm working in that tradition of keeping the culture and stories alive' (Scott 2012a, 232). While Bobby's performances fades, his journal remains. The journal, therefore, becomes a site of possibility in rectifying the imbalance between Noongar and non-Noongar people because its survival denies what W. E. H Stanner later came to describe as the 'Great Australian Silence'—a deliberate omission of Aboriginal people, their heritage and connection to country in Australia's national stories (1968).

In discussing the tensions inherent in local stories being told in a globalised context, it is useful to return to the continuing motif of the whale in *That Deadman Dance*. The whale illustrates the affinity between Noongar people and the ocean but also their connection to the land, juxtaposing the seemingly contradictory concepts of stasis and movement. In *Mamang*, the whale not only extends the Noongar networks beyond country, it also returns to the Noongar shoreline and becomes ‘part of the sand and the rocks of that beach, and part of all the people there’ (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 26). This story seems to correspond with Scott’s understanding of and hope for Noongar literature to be inclusive and expansive—adventurous but rooted in a specific place and its people. Citing anthropologist, Joël Bonnemaïson, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, in her study of Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures, notes how seemingly contradictory ‘terms such as “the landed canoe” and “territorial mobility” ... have explained ... indigenous spatial metaphors by emphasizing the profoundly circular patterns of both traditional and modern migration’ (DeLoughrey 2010, 47). The whale as representative of land, sea and story is a contradictory motif in the novel, yet one that describes Noongar ‘routes and roots’.<sup>35</sup>

DeLoughrey, asserts that ‘the relationship between roots and routes is mutually constitutive [which] can be imagined in historic and material terms’ (2010, 47). This is certainly true for *That Deadman Dance* in which the imagery of whales, ships and the liminal space of the Noongar shoreline each rely on the relationship between stasis and movement. As Bobby performs a dance aboard an unsteady ship he observes that he and the whales share a ‘watery path that was hard to follow’:

...yet was that of their Noongar ancestors and his own, too, since he came from ocean and whales. That was why Menak gave him

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<sup>35</sup> This phrase refers to the title of DeLoughrey’s *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* that deconstructs national frameworks and looks at diasporic and regional literatures in a globalised world.

the story and the song that took the whale from east of King  
George Town along the coast to its very shore. (33–34)

Menak's story anchors Bobby to his Noongar roots while also directing his journey away from Noongar country and back to its shores. Yet, as Noongar individuals like Bobby or Wunyeran learn new stories, languages and narrative forms their land, and they themselves, become increasingly submerged and caught up in global currents like swimmers caught in a rip. The loosening of Noongar roots from country, both through increasing colonial oppression and an adventurous and ambitious Noongar spirit, creates new power relationships. Scott's imagery depicts the collapsing boundaries between land, people and sea that are indicative of the porous boundaries of cross-cultural exchange and globalisation. The liminal nature of the novel's world illustrates people and place in a state of flux due to the opening of these horizons. Dr Cross's illness is described as 'a wave, breaking just a little, and what was inside and beneath was spilling out' (61). While Wunyeran stands in the water his shins

momentarily became like the bow of a boat pushing a tiny wave before it, or the point of a spearhead. (...) Below and above the sea's skin did not quite match. As if there were two people, not quite the same, one visible only below water, one visible above. These legs, so dark and thin, might be spears, oars, gun barrels, even. (132)

The imagery of altered bodies changing in relation to their shifting surroundings acts as an appropriate metaphor to express the globalised world of literature. The pressure imposed from the centre of this expanded world onto its peripheries plays out in the Swan River Colony, homogenising and effectively negating a 'minority' voice. Moretti, in his *Conjectures on World Literature*, states that world literature or the world literary system (for Moretti they are interchangeable) 'is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality' (2013, 162). Bobby Wabalanginy's realisation in *That Deadman Dance* that 'We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours ...' seems particularly pertinent to Moretti's description because it describes

an unequal exchange of languages and stories (106). Pre-colonisation, Noongar language and stories were at the centre of this world, but with the opening up of far horizons this centre is loosed and pushed to the fringes of a new world order.

## Repositioning Noongar literature

In his Miles Franklin Oration, Scott states that ‘this Miles Franklin Indigenous Australian literature’ erroneously positions Indigenous literature “as some sort of subset not the cornerstone or foundation or some sort of niche” (2012b). *That Deadman Dance*’s reimagining of a shared Australian history from both Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives, as well as its portrayal of an adaptive and dynamic Noongar literature, reconfigures the relationship between Indigenous and Australian literature.

In *Kayang* and *Me*, Scott describes his pride at being placed among other Indigenous authors. Yet he is also aware of the unequal treatment that his fiction can receive due to this categorisation. Scott ironically comments that:

‘Indigenous writing’ may not even be a sub-category of Australian literature, and I don’t say that because many of its practitioners are working with narratives and forms which predate Australian literature. No, I say it because I have looked in bookshops for my own books and, failing to find them in the Australian Literature section, finally located them under ‘Australiana’. (Brown 2005, 202)

The pre-existence of Noongar stories during modern Australian literature’s development supports Scott’s argument that Noongar language and storytelling can act as roots onto which Australian literature can graft itself. As a result, there would be a connection between Australia’s oldest society, its newcomers and country. Scott contends that the grafting process need not be difficult because the trademarks of contemporary narratives—wit, cross-cultural exchange, strong protagonists and sophisticated storylines—have been present in Noongar stories well before the arrival of people from across the horizons. Nonetheless difficulties are present. Categorisation of Scott’s writing as ‘Australiana’ shows the understanding of Australian literature is very far from Scott’s ideal. Scott suggests that there is an unequal power dynamic between Aboriginal and Australian

literature indicative of colonial hierarchies which is proposal seeks to reconfigure. After all, he says, ‘it’s hardly unusual for a Noongar to deserve better than the place he’s been allocated’ (Brown 2005, 202).

When Scott won the Miles Franklin award for *That Deadman Dance*, he quoted Miles Franklin who stated that:

without an indigenous literature people can remain alien in their own soil. An unsung country does not fully exist or enjoy adequate international exchange with the inner life...a country must be portrayed by those who hate it or love it as their dwelling place...or remain dumb amongst its contemporaries. (1956, 3)

Scott agrees with Franklin’s words, but not in the way that she meant them. In the context of Franklin’s speech ‘Indigenous literature’ means national literature and, as Scott has argued, Australian literature, especially because it is mostly written in a language that is not embedded in the country of its stories, has not adequately provided a connection to place. ‘Indigenous literature’ as local and regional storytelling rooted in specific home communities and language, however, could address the feeling that Franklin describes of being both at home and in exile. The potential equality between Noongar and non-Noongar communities is represented by the respectful friendship between Dr Cross and Wunyeran, yet their bond is degraded and retrospectively dismantled. According to Wunyeran and Cross’s wishes, the two friends are buried together. However, as the colony develops, their shared grave is dug up in order to reposition Cross away from his friend’s side. The movement of bodies represents a new social order in the Australian nation in which the colonising newcomers consolidate their ownership of the land through strategic narratives that overwrite the ongoing Noongar habitation of country at the time of colonisation. It also erases the pivotal albeit naive role Noongar people played in assisting the newcomers in their exploration and settlement of their own land. Cross is reburied and his headstone bears the engraving:

*Dr Joseph Cross*  
*1781–1833*  
*Surgeon Pioneer and Land Owner*  
*1826–1833*

*King George Town Western Australia*

Any evidence of Wunyeran and Cross's friendship is destroyed with the erection of a tombstone and its authoritative words that overwrite Cross and Wunyeran's identities. It becomes an object of history, a 'fact', much like Ern's family portraits in *Benang*, to manipulate future understandings of the past. The narrator observes that 'Geordie Chaine and Governor Spender had for once agreed: this was more appropriate to Cross's important role in the history of George Town' (354). In contrast, 'Wunyeran, lacking the "right" words, lacking a recognised social position, is destined to be forgotten' (Quinlivan 2014, n.p.). However, imagery of the tombstone evoking colonial destruction and suppression of Noongar people and their presence, specifically Noongar language and story, is countered with another powerful image that undermines the success of the colonial agenda to shape history.

Manit, Menak and Bobby sing for rain to come and wash the debris of the colony away; the water rushes over the cemetery containing the marked graves of the newcomers and the unmarked graves of Noongars, those like Wunyeran. The narrator asks:

Did all those bones reach the sea and join a path of whalebones  
across the ocean floor? Or years later become part of the  
foundations of the town hall and its clock with ticking faces  
looking north, south, east and west and, right at the very steeple  
top, that very great weight: a nation's fluttering flag? (357)

This query, as the narrator admits, considers what happens to Australia 'long after this little chapter of a single plot and a few characters' occurs. It looks forward to a contemporary Australia, the one in which the reader is in, and asks whether our histories and heritage (those bones) managed to reconnect with their Noongar roots and stories (the whalebones) or merely become the forgotten foundations over which Australian nationalism (the fluttering flag) has been constructed. In these two imagined futures *That Deadman Dance* argues for an Australian nation that is grounded by regional Aboriginal roots and so continues to support Scott's provocations that Noongar literature, and indeed its language and culture, can

‘accommodate’ all literatures as well as a contemporary Australian society (Scott 2012a, 243).

## Conclusion

*That Deadman Dance* depicts the creative ingenuity of Noongar individuals to incorporate new languages, narratives and narrative forms into their everyday lives and literatures. It uses Noongar language and English as well as a variety of intertexts that broaden the notion of regional literature as narratives that are rooted in, but not bound by, the region from which they emerge. Scott’s deconstruction of reductive categorisations and challenging of unequal power dynamics is once again apparent as the boundaries between the different realms of literature, or literary horizons, are shown to overlap and the hierarchies of different literatures are contested.

Scott’s own position as a novelist prompts a metafictional focus on how certain modes of storytelling and stories from particular cultures came to dominate Noongar storytelling processes. In this way, Scott dramatises how regional literature can function ‘*within yet in tension* with globalization’ (Limón 2008, 166–167).

As European and American ships sailed to Noongar shores opening up distant horizons, the excitement and growth from cross-cultural exchange quickly turned into the oppression and exploitation of capitalist and colonial enterprise. Scott depicts how these unequal power dynamics extend to the globalised world of literature, revealing the difficulties in creating an empowered regional Noongar literature while also engaging with national and global literatures and literary networks. *That Deadman Dance* anchors a shared Australian history and connects transnational texts to Scott’s Noongar roots. In this way, empowered Noongar literature can be both inclusive and expansive; it can also be national and world literature.

As the rain sweeps up the bones of slaughtered animals and the skeletons of those long dead, the narrator notes that ‘only a kindred spirit and tongue can find them [the whalebones], maybe bring them alive again, even in some other



shape' (357). The whalebones, traces of Noongar stories and heritage, can be revived once again and guide, like the whale in the novel, Noongar communities and, now, a wider Australian public, to its Aboriginal heritage. *That Deadman Dance* performs this revival in its retelling of the old Noongar story of the whale within the form of a novel. The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project also performs this resurrection in its production of bilingual picture books which have rejuvenated the archives of an anthropologist within the community to return and strengthen Noongar language and stories within the Noongar community. In a land of unmarked graves and a path of whalebones and the bones of Noongar elders, Scott proposes that such a disputed territory could also be a site of possibility.



## Chapter 6

### **‘Well, it’s a continuing project actually ...’ Kim Scott’s writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter revisits the disputed territories in each of Scott’s works—the land, language, history, identity and literature—in order to highlight how the Wirlomin Project continues the disruption of colonial logic within these sites. More than a side-project, the Wirlomin Project is a key influence on and inspiration for Scott’s writing and typifies the ethics and ambitions in and around his work. The Wirlomin Project, in its collective process of returning and rejuvenating language and story, strengthens Noongar heritage and community. The project’s publications articulate Noongar experience in the disputed territories of place, language, history, identity and the world of literature that adds to, rather than detracts from, the group; the project and their stories are Noongar sites of possibility.

The resonances and overlap between Scott’s fiction, nonfiction and collective works create a ‘continuing project’ (Scott 2012a, 228). This network is testament to Scott’s resistance to the linearity pervasive in the colonial logic. Instead, the rhizomic quality of Scott’s writing and the Wirlomin Project across the genres of memoir, fiction, and history produce an inclusive, expansive and diverse narrative anchored by Aboriginal understandings of place. This affirms how Noongar language, and by extension Aboriginal languages, can repair and reconstruct individual, community and national identities now and into the future. The continuity of Scott’s writing and involvement in the Wirlomin Project also highlight the negotiation of his roles as an individual author in the Western

tradition of literature, a collaborative author with Noongar elder Hazel Brown, and as a part of a collective storytelling network. As discussed, Scott has been instrumental in the establishment of the Wirlomin Project due to his work with the Laves archive and drafting of the protocol that provides guidelines for those wanting to access and use the field notes (Henderson 2006, 4). He is also member of the Wirlomin Project's Reference Group, chairperson of its committee and has been a key collaborator in all six publications with other members of the project including Hazel Brown, Ryan Brown, Joyce Cockles, Helen Hall, Russell Nelly, Anthony Roberts, Lomas Roberts, Alta Winmar, Roma Winmar (Yibiyung) and Iris Woods.

By embodying all of these roles Scott harnesses the possible tension between the individual and collective to create a mutually beneficial relationship. The interconnectedness of *That Deadman Dance*, *Kayang and Me* and the Wirlomin Project stories, particularly *Mamang and Noongar Mambara Bakitj* generate additional meaning for *That Deadman Dance* and position the novel as a continuation of his ancestors' stories, Noongar identity and a narrative of a pre-colonial and shared history. The association of the Wirlomin Project's work with Scott's writing contributes to their aim to 'promote the Wirlomin books as literature/art' in 'regional centres' and to a 'book buying public' (Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, n.p). Scott is able to draw the attention of a relatively large readership to his community and their publications through his role as a celebrated author in Australia.

The way in which Scott builds upon his Noongar heritage by referencing the Wirlomin Project stories in his fiction and nonfiction can be viewed as a template for his provocative suggestion of 'grafting a colonial society to its Indigenous past and thus even transforming it' and therefore as a way of constructing a more inclusive and equal society in contemporary Australia (2007a, 124). Scott proposes that the strengthening of Aboriginal languages and stories in order to reconnect with (and develop new perspectives on and relationships to) place is integral to this reconfiguration. Referring to the last pages of *Benang*, Scott describes the 'revitalisation of an endangered Indigenous language, its stories and their physical settings to restoring a positive sense of community to a

historically oppressed and dispossessed people' (2007a, 124). This description can be aptly applied to the work of the Wirlomin Project.

### ***Dwoort Baal Kaat: A creation story***

It is not only the shared narratives that create a 'continuing project' but also the continuation of key themes across these individual and collective works. The Wirlomin Project narratives are about place—specific sites in Noongar country and how they came to be.<sup>36</sup> They are also about the importance of these sites to Noongar identity and social networks; they are about Noongar people. The Wirlomin Project's localised narratives and focus on the land acknowledge, as Scott does in his short fiction and poetry, Noongar perspectives on country that were excluded from colonial landscapes.

The 'double aspect' of European imaginings of and experiences with the land constructs the Australian environment as an 'outer equivalent of an inner reality' that is both 'the reality of exile' and 'the reality of newness and freedom' (Wright 1965, xi). This perception was 'a violent reaction of the European consciousness against what it saw in the new country' (Wright 1965, xiv). By

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<sup>36</sup> The Wirlomin Project links their stories to place by visiting narrative sites and sharing stories there. Scott explains that *Dwoort Baal Kaat* 'is connected with the Phillips River and that coastline and Jerdacuttup . . . and all through the Fitzgerald River there's these references to these dogs hunting, and all these dog references' (2013c, personal interview). The group, as with *Mamang*, takes the story back to the Ravensthorpe area, an initial stage in the return and consolidation of story, 'as part of connecting *Dwoort Baal Kaat* to its landscape' (2013c, personal interview). This return is detailed in Scott's latest novel, *Taboo*.

The Wirlomin website hosts a video of Iris Woods and Romar Winmar, descendants of the Noongar 'informants' who shared their stories with Laves, visiting the special place along the south coast of Western Australia associated with *Mamang* which reinforces the importance of the narrative site to the story with which it is linked.

Romar Winmar speaks about the feelings of being 'full' from the visit, the same feeling, she imagines, that the Noongar community felt when the Noongar ancestor returned to country from his journey inside the whale. She reflects that connecting to this Noongar heritage while being part of the place of this heritage 'is like reinforcing this bond; the country' (Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project). Being in this special place also provides the opportunity for Winmar and Woods to connect with the 'old people', especially, for Winmar, her mother, who told Winmar of her desire to take her daughter to these places before she died.

contrast, *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is not a story of exile or newness but an old and continuing narrative of Noongar knowledge of country. It is a ‘creation’ story that explains the coming into being of particular rock formations in Noongar country.

When a Noongar man goes hunting with his brother’s dogs, he thinks that he will catch a lot of food. But the dogs hinder rather than help, eating the animals they kill and leaving nothing for the Noongar man. Frustrated and hungry, the man sets fire to the spot where the dogs have fallen asleep and, alarmed, the dogs jump into the ocean to avoid the fire. The English description of the event details the location and direction of their movement stating that the dogs ‘swam along the south coast, keeping the land to their left and heading toward the rising sun’ (Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013, 20). The dogs are swimming towards their owner, the man’s brother, who is ‘far away to the east’ (Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013, 22). These directions act like a map, guiding the reader along the south coast, indicating the actual sites of the narrative.

As the dogs near their destination, the artworks by Helen (Ing) Hall, depict the dogs changing so that when they emerge from the water, the text reveals ‘They’d become seals, see?’ Seals bark like dogs, and they have head [*sic*] like dogs but ... they’re ocean dogs’ (Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013, 28). Both the Noongar brother and the seals become part of the land and the story tells us that if:

you go down that way today, and you’ll see the man still waiting there. And at the other place you’ll see the seals rolling down the hill into the water. They’re rocks now, and so this story stays in that part of the country forever. (Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013, 30)

*Dwoort Baal Kaat* illustrates the connections between land, people and story that form the interrelations of country. This depiction resonates with an ecocritical framework of place that refutes the land being defined as a purely cultural or purely natural concept in favour of being an interwoven pattern of nature and culture (Plumwood 2006, 39). To apply Deborah Bird Rose’s description of country in *Nourishing Terrains*, *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is ‘multi-dimensional’; it weaves together animals, people, plants; it shows Noongar country to include, as did *That Deadman Dance*, both land and sea; and it describes an active storytelling process that continues to link people to place (1996, 8).

Scott's characterisation of some of the Wirlomin Project's publications as creation stories immediately asserts Noongar connections to country that unsettle colonial claims of possession. Similarly, the bi-lingual way in which the Wirlomin Project's 'creation stories' are told establishes a layered articulation of place (Scott 2012a, 228). The old Noongar stories speak to the overwriting of country in the process of colonisation. This overwriting—the renaming of Aboriginal sites and people, the repurposing of land and the propagation of stories that served the colonial agenda (such as *terra nullius* or the pastoral ideal)—has resulted in Australia being made form layered, contradictory and often competing languages and stories. For example, the 'south coast of Western Australia' and 'Noongar country' refer to the same place but different and overlapping perspectives. This doubling parallels the linguistic imprinting of one culture onto another in *That Deadman Dance* as 'Bobby' replaces 'Wabalanginy' and the coastal region becomes known as 'King George's Sound' (now 'Albany'). Colonisation is shown to create a 'default country' built on the coloniser's descriptions and associations, a distant homeland rather than language associated with their immediate surroundings (Arthur 2003). As a result the country 'floats' above the land in the newcomer's imagination and language (Carter 1987, 136). The Wirlomin Project openly navigates these layered sites and, by contrast, strengthens Noongar language which is rooted in country.

Alison Ravenscroft's reflection on her travels to Harts Range in Arrente country reflects the multitude of constructed worlds in one geographic location. Ravenscroft recalls that:

I went again to Harts Range but now in my sights it wasn't *Atitjere*, Arrente country. I couldn't recapture this sense of it. From my visual field, I'd lost that place—without Paddy I couldn't retrieve this scene. The country I was in now was in many ways Harts Range as it is usually located, not on Arrente country but on Riddock Station. Two Harts Ranges (and many more), each occupying the same space but in two very different countries, two very different scenes. (2014, n.p.)

Ravenscroft's account of the experience of the doubling of place confirms the influence of ontological and epistemological categories on vision, on ways of

seeing; what is seen is dependent on what is known. As a ‘white woman traveller’, Ravenscroft’s experience of place is inevitably different from the ‘vital’ (2014, n.p.) Aboriginal experience of country. She can only sense *Atitjere* in the presence of her two friends: Shannon, a Noongar woman and Paddy, an Anmatyerre woman; without them Harts Range is merely a township, a location on a map.<sup>37</sup> Connecting and belonging to country, for Ravenscroft, is only formed through and with Paddy. The sense of loss that Ravenscroft describes and the dispute between the different scenes of the country provokes a realisation about the importance of her Noongar friend, Paddy. The possibility of connecting with her surroundings occurs through her companion. Such a realisation supports Scott’s proposal that a contemporary Australian society can create a sense of belonging and identity by grafting onto the Aboriginal roots embedded in country. The essays that accompany the Wirlomin Project’s *Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* begin by stating that the project:

shares some of the language and stories emanating from the people who first formed human society –ice ages ago – in our part of the world, the south coast of Western Australia: *Noongar country*.  
(Scott, Brown, et.al. 2013, 33; Scott, Nelly, et.al., 2013, 33)

Significantly, the almost identical line in the Wirlomin Project’s previously published *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* does not identify the south coast of Western Australia as Noongar country. The revision and editing of the text from the 2011 to the 2013 publication signals a more confident and, indeed, political articulation of Noongar connections to place and Noongar sovereignty. The clarification that Western Australia—a name that evokes colonial and national paradigms of place—is in fact *Noongar country* unsettles the Australian nation’s claims to the land and rhetorically re-establishes the Noongar custodianship to place.

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<sup>37</sup> I have opted for Scott’s most recent and preferred spelling of Noongar for the sake of consistency, however Ravenscroft uses the spelling ‘Nyoonga’ in her article.



## ***Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*: A sense of adventure and the necessity of home**

Another key theme throughout Scott's fiction, nonfiction and the Wirlomin Project is the representation of Noongar identities that can be confident, ambitious, strategic, and open to cross-cultural exchange. The Wirlomin Project stories continue to render these qualities that have previously been depicted in Scott's work through characters like Bobby Wabalanginy, Jack Chattalong, Wunyeran and even Scott's relative, Bobby Roberts, who joined the local police force. Furthermore, characters like Harley and Billy suggest the need for a strong Noongar heritage to anchor and protect Noongar identity. The Wirlomin Project provides the possibility of this anchoring process.

Two Noongar stories published by the Wirlomin Project, *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, appear in *That Deadman Dance*. The story that overlaps with Scott's novel the most is *Mamang*, which tells of a Noongar man diving into a whale. The whale then dives deep into the ocean and only when the man sings his father's old song does it surface. The man only sees ocean, so he squeezes and stabs at the whale heart to keep the whale moving—he wants to get back to dry land. He continues to sing until the whale reaches the shoreline. There, the Noongar man meets two women and their larger community. After the whale has become part of the rocks and sand, the man, now with his women and many children, travels back to the man's home. This home is Noongar country and this family, the Noongar ancestors of the members of the Wirlomin Project. The story of the whale is brutally and tragically recontextualised in *That Deadman Dance*. The violence of the Noongar man squeezing and stabbing at the whale's heart resonates with the frenzy of King George Town's whaling operations. Read against one another, *Mamang* and the slaughtering of the whales in the novel provide a greater understanding of Bobby's Noongar roots and his estrangement from them. Like his Noongar ancestor in *Mamang*, Bobby has an adventurous and courageous spirit. After returning from his time away 'to becoming a man' (296), Bobby is celebrated in the same way as his Noongar ancestor in *Mamang*. He is raised, 'on the shoulders of brothers and uncles and

cousins' because he 'was important, because he was boss' (301). However, this courageous spirit in the context of *That Deadman Dance* propels Bobby into 'settler' society, into their language and ways of seeing and being in the world. He does not return from this adventure as a hero. Instead, Bobby's participation in an unequal cross-cultural exchange sets him adrift in conflicting languages and stories where he becomes disorientated.

Bobby is able to conjure up Mr and Mrs Chaine in his mind, yet when he thinks of his elders, Menak and Manit, he is troubled because 'they did not have the sound of the voice he heard' (302). He realises that he is 'thinking in letters' and this language, the language of the newcomers from another horizon, disconnects him from his Noongar heritage (302). Bobby can spell out Menak and Manit in his thought, but as 'soon as he tried the letters the memories would not come, and the letters broke or moved apart like a boat hit by the whale's tail' (302). In this analogy, the English language, specifically its written form, is a seaworthy vessel. The ships in the novel are able to carry Bobby to different horizons and cultures and the metaphorical boat, or the English language, also enables Bobby to connect with other countries and cultures, either through literature or speaking with the whalers and 'settlers' occupying Noongar land and water. However, as this analogy points out, the English written language, at least on its own, cannot connect Bobby to his Noongar ancestors and heritage. This language, compared to the power of old Noongar stories and songs (the whale's tail), is a relatively feeble means of returning home and finding your cultural roots. The dispute between the boat and the whale, a metaphor for the dispute between English and non-Noongar languages is used productively in the Wirlomin Project's bilingual books that attempt to navigate these seemingly opposing forces in a way that directly gives back to and empowers the Noongar community. The Noongar stories incorporating English and Noongar written and oral languages, as well as the books being available as online audio recordings and in print embrace the globalised world of literature presented in *That Deadman Dance*.

The story that becomes *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* is also woven into *That Deadman Dance*, albeit briefly, and like the story of the whale it is also subverted

and recontextualised.<sup>38</sup> *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* describes a Noongar man who asks permission from mambara (spirits) to hunt in their country. The animals that he kills he shares with a group of *mambara* as a sign of respect and gratitude. Later, a lone *mambara* confronts the Noongar man claiming that he has no right to hunt in his country. The two fight, throwing boomerangs back and forth at each other. Finally, the Noongar man throws the boomerang into the air and as the *mambara* watches it spin he yells out, ‘Old people’s boomerang!’ and then ‘Mine! Mine! Mine!’ (Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 24). As the ‘boomerang stopped in the sky ..., spinning and spinning, just out of reach. It spun so fast it blurred and melted together so that it looked like a waterhole in the sky’ and the *mambara* sees his reflection in it. While the *mambara* is distracted, the Noongar man floats into the sky returning home and shares the story with his family (Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 26). Meanwhile the *mambara* breaks from his trance when ‘the boomerang clattered to the ground’ and he sits at a campfire alone (Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 32).

Scott’s appropriation of the story in his novel occurs when Menak approaches the convict, Skelly, and some other men working on the camp’s garden. He is angered by the newcomers’ abuse of the land, the depletion of the whale population and at these people’s unwillingness to share their resources with the Noongar people. Bobby tries to mediate the argument but Chaine appears and Menak steps forward with his boomerang. Chaine wrestles the boomerang from Menak and the two groups, so clearly divided, face one another. Killam and Skelly are armed. Following this:

Chaine flung the boomerang away contemptuously, and it flew a surprising distance across the scrub, low and spinning, before it curved up into the air and hovered turning and turning and turning  
...

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<sup>38</sup> A version of *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* also appears in ‘Asleep’ when Owen remembers an old story his grandfather told him about a spinning boomerang that hovered in the sky creating a pool of water. Additionally, Owen’s mother believes that a TV show, ‘The Magic Boomerang’, must have come from this old Noongar story because the boomerang had the ability to stop time (119).

All the men looked, couldn't help themselves. Even Chaine, even Skelly and Mr Killam; they just stood and stared as it spun, so fast it blurred and seemed to almost melt and become a pool of water in the sky.

Bobby and Wooral and Menak looked at one another. They had thought Geordie Chaine would stand with them, and not against Menak. And Jak Tar? With the others distracted and staring, Bobby and Wooral led Menak—injured dog in his arms—back to his camp.

The boomerang fell with hardly a sound; cushioned, suspended by the mallee, it was gently lowered to the soil, twig by twig. The men looked at one another, looked around. What? And they began to pack up their things, moved to another game of cards, another tot of rum on Chaine, who said, See me in the morning, I always have need of good workers elsewhere. (343–344)

Rather than the fight between *mambara* and Noongar as described in the title of *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, the fight in *That Deadman Dance* is between the Noongar people and Chaine and his men. Both the *mambara* and Chaine are possessive of and greedy with land—Chaine's throwing away of the boomerang is the equivalent of the *mambara* exclaiming 'Mine! Mine! Mine!'. With this action, the pretence of Chaine's friendship is finally dropped and the Noongar people realise the severity and permanency of the exploitation that is occurring. Scott's orchestrated connection between his fiction and the Wirlomin Project narratives mutually benefits Scott's storytelling and the collective. The intersection becomes a site of possibility.

In both novel and picture book, the function of the boomerang, to set out and return, is paralleled with the movement of adventurous Noongar individuals who journey from their family and home only to return and strengthen their connection to their kin and heritage. This trajectory of fictional Noongar protagonists, like the man in *Mamang*, in addition to Scott's own autobiographical journey, reflect the process of estranged Noongar individuals reconnecting with their Noongar heritage.

As the fight between Noongar and *mambara* continues in *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, the Noongar man throws his final boomerang into the air; one that belonged to his ancestors—it is an 'old people's boomerang' (Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 24). The boomerang's suspended rotation prevents harm coming the

Noongar man because it distracts his aggressor. Similarly, Bobby, Wooral and Menak in *That Deadman Dance* are able to evade Chaine and his group while they are distractedly looking at the spinning boomerang. The boomerang acts as a symbol for a strong Noongar heritage that grounds and protects contemporary Noongar individuals. It, and the Noongar heritage which it represents, cannot be so easily tossed aside; it continues to turn and return.

*Noongar Mambara Bakitj* is about the respectful use of country and establishing respectful relationships with the custodians of place. The Noongar man's generosity and gratitude in sharing his food illustrates equality and reciprocity, which is contrasted with the lone *mambara*'s possessive relationship to country. The story also illustrates the empowered hospitality of the group of *mambara* who allow the Noongar man to hunt on their land, and the Noongar man's acknowledgement of this authority. The pointed placement of this story in *That Deadman Dance*—when Bobby realises that the Noongar hospitality and generosity is being exploited rather than reciprocated—and its subversion creates ironic tension between the two narratives, highlighting the colonial disrespect and self-interest in their cross-cultural relationships. The unwillingness to share country inevitably denies the possibility of any meaningful cross-cultural exchange and is seen in stark contrast to the generosity and hospitality characteristic of Noongar cultural practices.

Both *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* are about exploration and return, both describe adventurous Noongar individuals eager for adventure and cross-cultural exchange, yet who return home to their roots. The boomerang, a symbol of this departure and return, but also of reciprocity—giving and receiving—encapsulates the depiction of a continuing Noongar identity; one that is also active in Scott's writing.

### **Sharing history in *Yira Boornak Nyininy***

*Yira Boornak Nyininy* is a story about 'shared histories, [and] social history contained within a Noongar cultural frame' (Scott 2013). In this respect, it shares the same themes as *That Deadman Dance* and *Benang*. However, unlike Scott's

fiction with its devices of historiographic metafiction to install and then unsettle the colonial narratives of a shared history, *Yira Boornak Nyininy* does not highlight the colonial atrocities against the Noongar people and is, instead, a story of cross-cultural friendship. In this respect, it is ‘enormously inclusive and compassionate’ (Scott 2008b, 103). The story is not reactive; it is not bitter.

*Yira Boornak Nyininy* begins with a Noongar man, his wife and nephew shepherding a farmer’s sheep before they decide to hunt for possum. The Noongar man is tricked and abandoned in a tall tree by his wife who leaves with her husband’s nephew. Almost starving, he is rescued by a farmer, his friend. The two travel to reclaim the Noongar man’s wife but when the Noongar man finds her and sees how happy she is he decides to return to the farm with his friend. The story is historically placed through the detail of the Noongar family acting as shepherds at a colonial homestead. The relationship between the Noongar man and the farmer, on one hand, is between an employer and employee. Yet the power dynamic in this scenario is unsettled through various aspects of the story. When the farmer visits the land where his sheep are meant to be grazing, is he checking his livestock and the work of his shepherd or is he visiting a friend? The ease with which the Noongar family leave the sheep to hunt possum suggests a different understanding of their relationship to the farmer, sheep and the land. How binding is their obligation to the farmer? Furthermore, the artwork by Anthony (Troy) Roberts shows Noongar country without the traces of the farmer or his farm. There are no sheep, homesteads or fences on the land. Therefore, while the story includes the changed use and control of the land through the colonial dispossession of Noongar people, the artwork reasserts Noongar country and weaves the farmer into *their* stories and understandings of place.

This story, read in a wider historical context, can be read as an example of cross-cultural friendship in an otherwise dominant narrative of inequality, injustice and colonial dispossession and exploitation of Aboriginal people. The selection of this story to represent a shared history is indeed, as Scott terms it, ‘compassionate’ because it does not allude to the irony of Noongar people ‘working’ on a part of Noongar country that the farmer has taken as his own. *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* story shifts the ‘loss paradigm’ of Aboriginal

Australian history, presenting instead an optimistic narrative of cross-cultural friendship, or, perhaps, of Noongar complicity in the colonial process.

This depiction resonates with the contradictory and sometimes shameful Noongar history that is, nonetheless, part of a continuing Noongar story and identity. *Yira Boornak Nyininy* is another example of Brown's insistence that all facets of Noongar heritage must be told. Whether complicity or friendship, the Noongar characters in the story have agency and 'help us appreciate different perspectives of history and its passage as anything but "inevitable" or uniform (Scott 2008b, 103). Such perspectives of Australia's shared history resonate with van Toorn's *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Shellam's *Writing from the Fringe* and Nakata's *Savaging the Disciplines*. Nakata, speaking of 'Islander agency during the colonial period', states that this period should not be thought of as merely a period of diminishment, powerlessness and loss but as:

a history of strength, of changing and re-making ourselves, of remaining ourselves — a history of dignity, intelligence, forbearance, anger, resentment and frustration; of some selling out perhaps, getting it wrong no doubt, of pragmatism certainly and so on. It is a history of how we acted in the present in that historical period. (2007, 205)

The gathering together of the different individual actions in history to form a collective identity and history can be seen in how the Wirlomin Project brings together the stories of Noongar elders and the archives of the linguist, Gerhardt Laves. These include 'a database of sorts' created by Hazel Brown that includes her own recordings as well as her siblings' research into Native Title legislation and Noongar language material (Scott 2015, 208). Scott recounts how:

Uncle Lomas pointed out mistakes that Laves appeared to have made in translation. Often, he was reminded of stories and anecdotes, or stimulated to talk about things that may otherwise have been neglected. (Scott, Woods et.al. 2011, 30; Scott, Roberts et.al. 2011, 36)

The cross-referencing of these sources is done in a consultative and transformative way.

It is not only the stories, but the strategic and considered processes of storytelling that open up the possibilities of what Australia's shared history could include and from whose perspectives it could be told. Both the telling of their stories to Gerhardt Laves and the reclamation of these stories in Laves' field notes show the Wirlomin Project's willingness to engage with different narrative forms and cross-cultural exchange. The bringing together of different cultural archives is not a compromising process. Inversely it produces greater detail in the stories and stimulates more stories to emerge from a collective memory.

### **Blurring genres: What is 'literature' and how can we use it?**

One of the Wirlomin Project's key aims is 'to promote the Wirlomin books as literature/art in Perth, Albany and selected regional centres and also to the book buying public' (Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, n.p.). The framing of their intended audience within regional and capitalistic terms (a national audience is not addressed) shows the Wirlomin Project's deep awareness and engagement with a globalised world and the benefits of their stories becoming saleable commodities in a global market. This approach benefits the community in a practical way by funding the Wirlomin Project's programs, and garners recognition of their work beyond their region, thereby maintaining the feeling of being 'listened' to. Scott recognises that, today, 'regional Aboriginal heritages are major denominations in a currency of identity and belonging: of what it is to be Australian' (2015, 212). By harnessing this demand within their own objectives, the Wirlomin Project can use the demand for their heritage in a way that benefits rather than exploits their community. Significantly, the classification of the Wirlomin publications as *art* and *literature* puts a 'value' on the books, profiting from what Bourdieu has called 'cultural capital' (1986). By classifying the Wirlomin Project's publications using the language of the Western literary tradition, the Wirlomin Project members achieve two things: firstly, they position and promote themselves to a wider readership beyond their immediate community; secondly, they are creating their own definition of literature that applies to the varied mediums through which they tell their stories.



David Damrosch has stated that ‘any global perspective on literature must acknowledge the tremendous variability in what has counted as literature from one place to another and from one era to another; in this sense, literature can best be defined pragmatically as whatever texts a given community of readers *takes* as literature’ (2014, 14). This definition is one of openness allowing for both difference and inclusion in the literary space. However, the use of the term ‘literature’ as the framework for language and story still enforces a Eurocentric perspective that has at its roots a culture of written literacy. In *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Penny van Toorn asks:

How might Indigenous Australians be included in histories of the book without being characterised (Eurocentrically) as a people traditionally without books, or (equally Eurocentrically) as a people whose traditional means of communication are bookish in function or form? (2006, 210)

Van Toorn’s argument makes clear how both centrist and comparative models can activate and enforce the marginalisation of particular cultures. I want to suggest that, like the book, the term ‘literature’ still enforces a centre/periphery relationship in which non-Western narrative forms are relatively evaluated. The categorisation of the Wirlomin Project’s language and story as ‘literature’ makes these narratives susceptible to the hierarchies within the world of literature that can discriminate against particular literary forms and cultures.

Mediating the risk and harnessing the opportunities of a globalised literary market, the Wirlomin Project determines its own classifications of art and literature. For the Noongar community these include oral stories, dance and illustrations in addition to written publications. In this way van Toorn’s question is reconfigured because the Wirlomin Project is asking how can the history of the book be characterised in relation to, and used by, Aboriginal Australians. In other words, the Wirlomin Project attempts to turn a disputed territory into a site of possibility. The Wirlomin Project’s uses literary paradigms strategically to cultivate the respectful and critical reading of the Wirlomin publications within non-Noongar literary spaces. The Wirlomin website documents the press coverage of their work, particularly the reviews of their publications in various media

outlets furthering their goal to position these works within a literary network. However, despite these efforts, there is a disjunction between how the books are promoted and how they are read. Once the publications move beyond their community, the Wirlomin Project cannot control their reception.

Reviews of the picture books often critique the process of the Wirlomin Project rather than the literature itself. Geordie Williamson's inclusion of *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* in *The Australian's* 'Books of the Year' rightly emphasises the 'complex interrelationship between culture, narrative and place' but diminishes this complexity by summing up the publications as 'modest books that children can enjoy' (Williamson 2012). Christine Nicholl's review in *Australian Book Review* states that *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* are 'a timely intervention into the continuing post-colonial destruction of this critically (and globally) endangered language', while Anita Heiss' 'Noongar Language Books for Kids' blog post, frames the Wirlomin Project's stories as an education tool for a wider Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audience, as well as being a product of and for community (Nicholls 2012, 63; Heiss 2012b). While the complexity of the Wirlomin Project's process is acknowledged, the stories themselves are not critiqued as complex literature in and of itself. This positioning of these works primarily as children's picture books is articulated in a review of *Mamang* in the *West Australian* which advises that the book is 'suitable for young children and early readers' while the backstory is appropriate for parents (2011). The distinction between the 'backstory' or process of the Wirlomin Project and the stories themselves is significant because it indirectly renders the story of *Mamang* as simplistic and easily accessible.

The potential misreading of the Noongar stories is countered by the critical framework built around the texts through Scott's nonfiction and interviews that detail the processes and intentions of the Wirlomin Project. In addition, Dr Clint Bracknell, academic and member of the Wirlomin Project's Reference Group, has detailed the literary complexity within Noongar language and stories in his study of archival Noongar song texts. These Noongar compositions, Bracknell states:

experiment with point-of-view, vocabulary and metaphor,  
indicating the ability for Noongar singing traditions to maintain

continuity and intergenerational transmission while demonstrating linguistic, thematic and semantic flexibility. (2014, 3)

The linguistic complexity that Bracknell identifies in Noongar songs is matched by the literary qualities that Scott ascribes to Noongar stories. Scott refers to Noongar literature as ‘Aboriginal epics’ and suggests that the characters in the Wirlomin Project’s stories can be read as ‘heroes’ (Scott 2012b; Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 33; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 39). These perspectives encourage a rereading of Noongar literature as complex and dynamic texts that, while being part of language regeneration and cultural consolidation, function as complicated narratives in their own right.

The confidence and optimism of the Wirlomin Project should not be confused with the naivety of *That Deadman Dance*’s Bobby as he entered into cross-cultural exchange in a globalising world as, unlike Bobby, the Wirlomin Project has constructed a strong position from which to share their stories. Scott is conscious of not ‘giving it [Noongar language and stories] away’ and ensuring that the project’s process and publications are ‘value-adding and recreating new possibilities’ (Scott 2012a, 238).

The simplicity of the Wirlomin Project’s main form of narrative, the publications, belies their complexity. In *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, Scott provides the following anecdote:

A woman came up and introduced herself: Mary Gimondo. She asked if I knew a way to produce some books for the children, books written in Noongar language.

Yes, I said, I might. But I was not sure they’d be children’s books. (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 31; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 37)

This conversation hints at the complexity of the Wirlomin Project and the difficult process of language regeneration that are embedded in the children’s book format. Even though this idea of producing books has now become tangible in the form of six publications that much critical and media analysis have categorised as children’s books, Scott’s uncertainty about whether they would be children’s books prompts a revisiting of this categorisation. The complexity of the Wirlomin Project’s process and, as will be discussed, the complexity of the publications’

structure, diction, and themes and intent, are at odds with the format and marketing of the books as children's literature. The Wirlomin Project strategically plays with genre to further their aims of sharing their stories 'with an ever widening circle of readers' (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 29).

The scope of the Wirlomin Project negotiates the possibility and risk of Goethe's heralded epoch of *weltliteratur* that, as David Damrosch rightly points out, has been greatly complicated due to the 'dramatic acceleration of globalization' (Damrosch 2003, 4). This negotiation results in the Wirlomin Project both protecting *and* promoting language and stories. Impressively, the tension between these two strategies is harnessed to cultivate sites of linguistic and narrative possibility, ultimately reconfiguring unequal power dynamics of cross-cultural exchange to create a strong regional centre from which Noongar stories emanate.

The pace of this narrative distribution is necessarily and deliberately gradual. Scott, commenting on the possibility and risks of Noongar authorship, explains that:

publication ... make[s] the stories accessible to everyone, especially wealthy book-buyers with good literacy skills, two categories which feature, largely for historical reasons, few Noongar people. Therefore, publication might mean that those old-time storytellers speak to their own descendants only after everyone else has heard their stories of the place in which they live. Consider the historical context: indigenous people being displaced from land, dispossessed and disempowered. You wouldn't want publication repeating anything like that. (Scott 2008a, 158)

To ensure that the community benefits from sharing their heritage in a way more favourable than the exploitative encounters of colonialism (as imagined in *That Deadman Dance*), the Wirlomin Project implements a strategic plan to consolidate their language and story in their home community. As Scott explains in *Kayang and Me*, the Wirlomin Project inserts a gap or temporal interval between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities which functions as a 'moratorium, a time of exclusion to allow communities to consolidate their heritages ... After that, exchange and interaction from relatively equal positions

should be possible, because that's how cultural forms are tested and grow' (Brown 2005, 258). This is a nuanced strategy that factors in the weakened Noongar heritage that must strengthen itself in a lingering colonial society, but also the importance and inevitability of cross-cultural exchange.

During this moratorium, the languages and stories are workshopped with Noongar elders and later a wider community. They are shared first with members of the Wirlomin Project's Reference Group and key families within the community, they are performed to regional audiences and the stories and the members of the project visit special sites related to the stories themselves as a way of reconnecting narrative, people and place. On a very practical level, the Wirlomin Project's prioritising of local and regional readerships and audiences benefits the community because 'individuals might find employment in schools and other places because of their knowledge of both the stories and the process of their creation' (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 33; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 39).

This period of consolidating a Noongar heritage while controlling non-Noongar access to sites and stories is designed to correct the unequal power dynamic between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. According to Scott, the process implemented by the Wirlomin Project could serve as a model for cross-cultural exchange in a truly post-colonial society because, after empowering Noongar heritage, exchange occurs between participants in more equalised positions of power. Scott notes that 'One group gives its attention, the other gives a story; it's a paradox: empowerment through giving. And it's wise to watch the balance in that exchange' (Scott, Brown, et.al. 2013, 34; Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013, 34). In *That Deadman Dance*, Bobby loses sight of this balance as did, arguably, the Noongar informants who told these old stories to the American linguist, Gerhardt Laves in 1931. It was Laves' role as a linguist rather than the Noongar people's roles as storytellers that garnered authority. The Wirlomin Project reworks this positioning, reinstalling a 'structure of storytelling [that] puts the storyteller at the centre, not locked out of the relationship' (Scott 2015, 214). In this way, the Noongar community keeps the balance of exchange in check. As evidence of this, Scott comments that the presentations performed by the Wirlomin Project within their community and in wider regional centres 'placed

some of us in a novel position: non Indigenous people were listening avidly to what we had to say, and grateful for what we were sharing' (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 33; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 39).

Through the Wirlomin Project Scott enhances the utility and accessibility of his work to his home community. Scott is actioning not just dramatising his discourse about strengthening Noongar language, empowering the Noongar community and reconfiguring unequal colonial and global power dynamics. The Wirlomin Project has chosen to share their stories with an 'ever-widening circle of readers' through the project's . . . publications (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 29; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 35). As published written texts, they circulate in a globalised literary market as products to be bought, sold, marketed and reviewed. Catering to this wider market, the Wirlomin Project must face the 'homogenising tendencies' of 'global discourse' surrounding Indigenous literatures (Scott 2007a). The homogenising effect of the literary market is analysed by Heiss who, citing Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin), notes that in 'mainstream' publishing houses, there 'will be a denial of . . . Aboriginality of language and the text will be edited towards what is considered a saleable product in a marketplace where the majority of consumers are white' (2003, 58-59). While independent publishing houses that cater for Indigenous writing help avoid these dangers, the Wirlomin Project—in addition to being published through the University of Western Australia publishing—implements a strategic and gradual process of storytelling that protects the integrity and control over their language and stories, while also promoting them to regional and national readerships.

The Laves protocol is an important document because it addresses questions surrounding ownership, accessibility, translation and cultural respect in the process of sharing stories. The protocol is intended and continues to provide 'recognition that the information in the Laves field notes is part of the continuing culture of Noongar families and people associated with the Albany region' (Henderson 2006, 3). This statement, and the protocol as a whole, asserts Noongar custodianship over the content of Laves' notebooks by differentiating between Laves' ownership of the notes and the ownership of story. In accordance with copyright law 'Laves owned the copyright in the fieldnotes because he wrote

them. He didn't "own" the stories themselves' (Henderson 2006, 5).<sup>39</sup> As such, the Wirlomin Project has been able to workshop the Laves archives with elder knowledge, building on the original records in a way that specifically connects them to people and place. These measures show a necessary shift between how Noongar 'informants' shared stories with Laves and how the Wirlomin Project shares these stories today.

The Wirlomin Project's pace of sharing their narratives (from archive to community and from community to a wider regional and national public) is deliberately gradual to ensure the community's control over the expression of, and access to, their stories. It also allows time to reconnect these narratives to the land in which they are embedded. This approach reconfigures the colonial dynamic by giving the Noongar community authority in cross-cultural exchange and, as such, empowers local community voices in regional and national networks.

## **The individual and the collective, the individual for the collective**

In *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, the Noongar ancestor returns home from a hunting trip after his fight with the mambara. He is empty handed yet 'no one [in his family] cared that he didn't have much food. They wanted to hear his story ... They were all warm beside the fire and laughing together' (Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 30). The central role of storytelling and community in Noongar culture is evident in this scene as 'it is not the remaining food that sustains and nourishes the waiting family, but the Noongar story of adventure' (Quinlivan 2014, n.p.). This story depicts, as does *Mamang*, an individual returning home to his family and community. Both stories express the independence of the individual and that

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<sup>39</sup> Scott's use of the Noongar stories in his fiction also complies with this understanding of ownership. While Scott has the copyright of *That Deadman Dance* and, with Hazel Brown, copyright of *Kayang and Me*, he does not own the Noongar stories themselves. The transparency of Scott's appropriation of the Noongar stories, particularly noticeable in the story of the whale being published before *That Deadman Dance* as a story told by Hazel Brown, affirms the Noongar custodianship of these narratives.

individual's connection to and place within the collective. The duality of the individual and the collective in the Noongar identity is seen in Scott's role as an independent author, co-author with his elder Kayang Hazel (*Kayang and Me*) and a key participant in the Wirlomin Project. Scott has said that his writing is a way of figuring out his Noongar identity yet his creative trajectory, specifically through the Wirlomin Project, has meant that his identity is not bound to the authorial process. Scott finds increasing confidence and usefulness as a member of the Noongar community as he becomes part of a collective.

Due to Scott's prominence as an author (certainly in regional and national spheres with his novels also circulating globally, as discussed by Whitlock) there is a risk that the Wirlomin Project could lose its collective autonomy by having the works read as a product of Scott's authorial voice thereby overshadowing the work of other key contributors and the Noongar community as a whole. However, the connection between the Wirlomin Project, as a community-controlled process, and Scott's novels and nonfiction, as works by an individual within that Noongar community, is negotiated to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

In an interview with Charlotte Wood, Scott recognises that he is 'a so very convenient face of Aboriginality in a way, particularly [for] non-Aboriginal people' (2013b, 9). This predicament creates 'discomfort' because Scott insists 'I'm not a spokesperson and I don't like or function in that way' (2013b, 9). However, Scott's increased authorial recognition writing to a readership made mostly from people outside his community, while also being part of the Wirlomin Project, necessitates a negotiation between his roles as an individual and a collective author. In *Shaking Hands on the Fringe*, Shellam cites Jerome Bruner who observes 'cultures are stable groups working together, but cultures are [also] made up of individuals and so we are autonomous agents as well' (Shellam 2009, 101). This dual role complicates Scott's identity as an author and his position in relation to and within his Noongar community. In the first two books, *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, Scott is named as the author of the paratextual information who writes 'on behalf of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project' (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 35; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 41). The essay is written in the first person. Tellingly, the accompanying essay in the



later publications has no prescribed author and is written in a collective voice with consistent use of the collective pronoun *we* and possessive pronoun *our*. Scott's role as spokesperson for the Wirlomin Project has been renegotiated and his voice absorbed into that of the collective.

Despite these efforts, the Wirlomin Project is still inextricable from Scott and Hazel Brown's *Kayang and Me*, Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* as well as his nonfiction writings. While Scott may claim that his own work, as an author of fiction, is a 'selfish pursuit' it does not exist in isolation (Trees 1995, 21). *That Deadman Dance*, released a year before the publication of *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, actively connects to and builds on these stories developed through the Wirlomin Project. Scott's use of these stories, the act of sharing them with a wider audience through his literature, is only possible due to their return and consolidation within the community through the Wirlomin Project. Rather than being seen to *include* these narratives, *That Deadman Dance* could be read as being rooted in the stories of his home community. Scott was simultaneously working within the Wirlomin language project while writing *That Deadman Dance* and the story of the whale first appeared in *Kayang and Me* as a story told to him by Hazel Brown. The influence of the language project on the writing of *That Deadman Dance* can be detected in Bobby's final speech and performance. The Wirlomin Project publications prompt a revisiting and rereading of *Kayang and Me* and *That Deadman Dance*.

The grafting of Scott's writing onto old Noongar stories bring together his work as an individual author and member of a Noongar community. Importantly, Scott is alive to the contradictions and possibilities of these overlapping positions. It is precisely because of the tension between his 'selfish pursuits' and community involvement that he is able to harness a national and potentially transnational readership in a global market and guide readers to the Wirlomin publications thereby advancing the Wirlomin Project's aims. As Scott says in an interview with Anne Brewster, his novels and their prizes are a way of 'arousing interest in this other stuff' (2012a, 229). By creating an intertextual relationship between the Noongar stories, workshopped within the Wirlomin community, and his writing, Scott leads his relatively wide readership towards the Wirlomin Project in two

main ways: by shifting the focus of the attention he garners for his literary work towards the Wirlomin Project and by building a critical framework around the Wirlomin Project through his nonfictional work.

## **Grafting onto Aboriginal languages**

The Wirlomin Project support Scott's argument that Noongar literature, language and heritage have the ability to 'anchor' not only himself, but a contemporary Australian society and an Australian literature (Scott 2012a). These are provocative views, and ones that destabilise cultural and racial hierarchies still functioning in Australia. Scott, from his perspective as a novelist, makes the argument that it is through language and stories, particularly the written word, that such changes can be made.

The Wirlomin Project's recovery of the Noongar language works to heal the decimation of Aboriginal languages that occurred through the colonial process. Scott has discussed the difficulty of being a Noongar writer writing in the colonisers' language, yet that language, English, is also his first language. Despite this, Scott maintains that Aboriginal languages rather than English can better articulate the story of Australia and help to enhance the wider society's understanding of and connection to this place. Consequently, the return and restoration of languages is crucial because only when these languages are strong enough to articulate stories of place can these narratives be shared with a larger public.

Each of the Wirlomin publications is a bilingual text incorporating the original Noongar language of the story with a literal English translation and an English version of that story. However, while the text moves from its linguistic Noongar origins to the English language in the layout of the page, the publications participate in a network of textual transformations between ancestral Noongar language, linguistic records in the International Phonetic Alphabet, a contemporary and consultative Noongar language, as well as a spoken and written English, to create a productive relationship between the archive, elder knowledge, and a contemporary Noongar culture. This array of languages and forms also

confirms the complexity, diversity and adaptability of the Noongar language as well as its participation in local, regional, national and transnational communication systems.

The process of sharing stories between languages and cultures presents many difficulties. While Penny van Toorn has observed a long history of Aboriginal writing, the Noongar language—Scott has insisted—is one that is best spoken because the alphabetic script cannot always express its sounds. In a personal interview, Scott steps through the process of workshopping the titular phrase of one of the project’s publications, *dwoort baal kaat*. He explains that:

we [the Wirlomin Project] worried a lot about the spelling of *dwoort*, because it’s hard to say. And we’ve spelled it differently to what is the orthodox orthography, because in the workshops people ..., when they see the letter ‘e’ in there, it looks like a rude word. ... So *dwoort* is the way it’s often said in most Noongar dialects. ... But when you put it all together, *dwoort baal kaat* it’s, there’s a lot of ‘shwa’ stuff in there. (2013c, personal interview)

The deliberation over pronunciation and spelling describe the compromises, approximations and distinctions that are made in the movements between speech and text. As with Billy and Fatima in *True Country*, Brown and Scott in *Kayang and Me*, and perhaps even Bobby writing on a slate in *That Deadman Dance*, Scott is concerned with the frequent incompatibility and confusion that occurs in the ‘double flow’ of language in cross-cultural exchange (Deleuze et al. 1985, 606). Due to the dominance of the English language but, also, the appropriation of English into different modes of Noongar communication since Australia’s colonisation, Noongar literature is not exclusively bound to stories in Noongar language. The English translations of *Mamang*, *Noongar Mambara Bakitj*, *Dwoort Baal Kaat* and *Yira Boornak Nyininy* are still expressions of a dynamic Noongar culture.

Considering that these workshops cross-reference ‘archival data and Aboriginal knowledge’ the Noongar language takes on many forms in the International Phonetic Alphabet, as recorded by Laves, spoken by Noongar elders

and rewritten in alphabetic script (Bracknell 2013, 45). The consultative and developmental process of the Wirlomin Project attempts to navigate the complications of translation and movement across these forms, but also frames these movements as opportunities. In an interview with Anne Brewster, Scott says ‘as for myself, I think: what can I learn from Noongar language and stories? How can I share that in the translation process?’ (2012a, 238). These questions indicate the Wirlomin Project’s confident and optimistic approach to narrative practices, production and dissemination by *using* the ‘double flow’ of language to experiment with Noongar storytelling practices, strengthen the Noongar language within the community, and increase the recognition of this language and Noongar stories beyond a local area. The Wirlomin Project, as the workshops illustrate, is more than just six printed publications. The regeneration of language and the sharing of stories occur across many platforms and in many different contexts. In addition to the written text, the Noongar stories have been told through song, illustrations, dance and, importantly, through oral storytelling. Each publication is also available in spoken Noongar on the Wirlomin Project website and on CD. The multiple narrative forms continue to destabilise the dominating authority of the written text and provide the opportunity to listen to the Noongar language, therefore engaging with its sounds in a way that text can only approximate.

The publications present Noongar stories in a picture book format with the text in large font on one page that is complemented by a colourful illustration on the adjacent page in each double-page spread. These features make the text welcoming, engaging and easy to follow. Furthermore, the casual tone and uncomplicated narration of the English version of each story lends itself to a younger readership. However, the ease of the English text conceals an alternate purpose for the project’s narrative choices that consider more than how the publications can target a particular demographic of the book-buying public. Scott explains that the Wirlomin Project ‘wavered over the English versions of [their] stories’ to determine whether they use Aboriginal English, or a more formal English’ (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 35; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 41). This indecision reflects an attempt to reach both a wider regional and national readership through standard English but also to prioritise and represent local

Noongar and wider Aboriginal communities through Aboriginal English. Eventually there was ‘consensus ... that Noongar readers would make their own versions anyway’ and so standard English ‘flavoured by the spoken voice’ was used (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 35; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 41). The reasoning behind, and the decision to use, standard English reveals the secured position of Noongar stories within their home communities. Due to the Noongar language being regenerated and consolidated within its community, and the dynamic and performative nature of Noongar storytelling, the publications, while developed by and for the Noongar community, are not as necessary to a Noongar readership or audience as they are to the wider non-Noongar readership. The Noongar community will retell and perform these stories in their own way and so the publication is not pivotal to their access to, nor understanding and dissemination of, these stories. Indeed, the English audio for each publication differs, albeit by a word here and there, from the written text. While the published works share the Wirlomin stories with a wider audience in a uniform way—the text and illustrations are fixed—these books are expected to prompt and, indeed, encourage further retellings within the Noongar community.

The standard English versions of the Noongar stories are not, then, a submission to a dominant language but rather a display of strategic hospitality—one that considers how to reach a wider regional and national readership, that also confidently acknowledges the strength of a dynamic Noongar literature that continues beyond written texts.<sup>40</sup> In this reconfiguring of the power dynamic between oral and written texts, the Wirlomin Project asserts the possibilities of performing stories in light of the limitations of the written word, stating that the picture books’ translation ‘attempts to *compensate* for the lack of gesture and tone available to words on a page’ (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 35; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 41, my emphasis).

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<sup>40</sup> Although without the English translation it is doubtful that the publications would gain the same circulation in a globalised literary market as a monolingual Noongar text.

And the Noongar text? Although there is a literal English translation immediately underneath the Noongar language, reviewers and critics (including myself) have not commented, or presumably not been able to comment, on the tone, structure or style of the Noongar versions of the stories. The targeted placement of Noongar stories as children's literature, in fact, subverts the genre by placing a highly complex narrative process and a language only expertly known by members of the Noongar community in an 'easily accessible' form and format. This could be seen as a deliberately constructed situation for the Wirlomin community that by sharing these stories and their language to a widening audience, has created an empowered Noongar position within regional, national, and potentially transnational, literary domains by controlling the knowledge of and access to the Noongar language. Using global literary forms like picture books creates the possibility of drawing a wider non-Noongar readership to their language and stories. However, an in-depth analysis or even the ability to teach these texts and this language arguably requires the knowledge of a Noongar community member. In *That Deadman Dance*, Bobby reflects that the Noongar people 'learned your [the colonisers'] words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours ...' (106). Now that this dynamic has arguably shifted, the Wirlomin Project puts the community in a position to tell their stories and for people to listen to what they are saying.

## **Conclusion**

Starting with *True Country*, Scott has made his way back from a contemporary Noongar setting through a shared history to a mostly pre-colonial setting expressed in Noongar language and told in a collective voice. The publication of *Taboo* has marked a return to a contemporary setting and characters, albeit ones still gathering old stories to connect them to country and heritage. In this way, the Wirlomin Project is the centre towards which his writing gravitates and from which his work springs. The stories provide a link to a continuing Noongar heritage carried through a line of descendants while the process of strengthening the language and stories within the community in a way that benefits the Noongar

storytellers enacts the increasing politicisation in Scott's work. Scott has said that his separate publications are, in fact, a continuing project; at the heart of this ongoing personal and collective narrative is the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project.

The Wirlomin Project with its bilingual publications and stories that connect to specific sites in Noongar country, provides a platform for Aboriginal communities and languages to act as 'conduits' between non-Aboriginal societies and the land (Gammage 2011, 232). However, the space for this coming together is one that cannot be neatly defined. Nor can the participants in this exchange be so easily divided into non-Noongar and Noongar communities. It is in this possibility but also the complication of strengthening Noongar language, identity and culture through cross-cultural exchange that the Wirlomin Project and, consequently, Scott's writing is situated and finds its strength.

## Chapter 7

# Revisiting trauma and the process of healing in *Taboo*

### Introduction

Scott's most recent novel *Taboo* (2017) moves even deeper into, arguably, the most sensitive area in the disputed territories of his writing. The massacre at Kokanarup has been a formative event in the creative process of *Benang*, *Kayang and Me* and the Wirlomin Project's *Dwoort Baal Kaat*; an event that still has implications for a contemporary Noongar community, some of which are descendants of those involved in the massacre. It is an atrocity of personal, historical and literary significance to Scott and the wider Noongar community yet Scott's fictionalisation of the event and seeming contradiction of opening up a taboo site and story to his readers is suggestive, once more, of the possibility that he finds in disputed territories.

As discussed, the Wirlomin Project has become central to Scott's work and *Taboo*'s focus on the group affirms this central position. While *True Country* and *Benang* stress the importance of family, language and stories in forming an understanding of self and the past, *Kayang and Me*, *That Deadman Dance* and *Taboo* graft onto the ancestral stories workshopped within the Wirlomin Project. This creative methodology enacts the core ethos of Scott's discourse: the possibility of grafting a contemporary Australian community onto its Indigenous roots as part of a process of decolonisation. Such a proposition requires strengthening Noongar language and culture while honestly engaging with Australia's brutal and difficult shared history. *Taboo*, more than any other work, portrays the difficulties and possibilities of such a process.

The novel is part of Scott's ongoing project to challenge, unsettle and demythologise the colonial logic. It confronts the traumas of colonisation that are



still reverberating through generations of Noongar individuals. Language, country, history, identity and storytelling are bound together in the novel, as they are in all his works. While this thesis has separated these different territories and attached them to specific individual publications, other combinations are possible because of the overlapping and interconnected structure of Scott's storytelling project.

In the final page of *Benang*, Harley tells the reader that he is 'part of a much older story, one of the perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return, and remain' (Scott 1999, 495). Returning and remaining could also describe Scott's own journey towards his ancestral roots, a journey also taken by his and the Wirlomin Project's protagonists like Billy, Bobby, Harley, the Noongar men who dive into the whale or fight the *mambara*; these heroes who explore new horizons yet return and reconnect with home. The work of the Wirlomin Project strengthens that home and its Noongar roots.

The ebb and flow of his writing results in Scott revisiting familiar territory in *Taboo*. He persistently retells his family's history in new ways in the hope that people will listen and turn their attention to the work of the Wirlomin Project and recognise the necessity for Aboriginal language and stories to 'anchor', not only 'a shimmering nation', but individuals as well (Scott 2012a). It is fitting, then, that the story of *Taboo* is about return. It concerns a family, Wirlomin people, returning to the site of the Kokanarup massacre in the Ravensthorpe area; the homestead now owned by Dan Horton who is a descendant of the perpetrators of the massacre. The place is a fictionalisation of the Hassel property where the rape of a young Noongar girl by John Dunn, the subsequent assassination of Dunn and the mass killing of Noongar men women and children after Dunn's death all occurred. Ravensthorpe is still today regarded by some as 'taboo' and an area Wirlomin groups are reluctant to revisit (2015, 213).

In 2012, members of the Wirlomin Project visited the Hassel homestead and in 2015 returned to reconnect the language and story of *Dwoort Baal Kaat* to the country from which it came. Noongar people had remained in the region 'infamous for its hostile history' in 'circumstances so discouraging their dark-

skinned children were told they were from Fiji, Mauritius . . . Anywhere else’ (Scott 2016, 73). Ravensthorpe, a disputed territory in its own right, is the epicentre of the disputes over language, history, identity, place and storytelling occurring in Scott’s work and projects. In *Taboo*, Scott moves further towards these conflicts knowing that they hold the possibility for strengthening and continuing an ancient Noongar heritage.

The novel is a dark story about a brutal past for Aboriginal people and an equally brutal reality in the present. The benefits of returning to the massacre site are not apparent, at least not to Tilly, the novel’s protagonist, who is among the Wirlomin groups at the request of her recently deceased father, Jim Coolman. Tilly sarcastically summarises her father’s logic: ‘Take her to massacre country. Back to the white people, the killers’ family we gave her to when she was little’ (35). Tilly, who was fostered to the Hortons as a child and later brought up by her mother while her father did time for domestic violence, has traumas of her own. Yet Jim is right, the reconnection with Noongar country, community and stories begins Tilly’s healing process and so *Taboo*, as is characteristic of Scott’s writing, becomes a story of hope and continuation.

In their reviews of the novel, Jane Gleeson-White and Melissa Lucashenko both comment on its generosity (Gleeson-White 2017; Lucashenko 2017). Lucashenko describes it as, ‘an overwhelmingly optimistic novel, even though grounded in a brutal modern reality’ (2017, n.p.). The generosity and optimism occur in Scott’s disclosure of Noongar stories, language and pain while also welcoming non-Aboriginal Australians who, as Gleeson-White puts it, ‘attempt genuine acts of reconciliation, who acknowledge that this continent is black country’ to be part of an Australian society that will grow from its Aboriginal roots (2017, n.p.).

The brutality and optimism are tightly bound in *Taboo* because, as Jim Coolman tells his daughter, massacre country is Ancestral country too (173). While the momentum of the story mimics the dramatic action of ‘a truck careering down a hillside, thunder in a rocky bed, a skeleton tumbling to the ground’— a reference, surely, to the dislocated Aboriginal experience set in motion by colonisation—Scott describes something emerging from the destruction (7). The

collective Noongar voice suggests that the ‘dear reader’ of the novel ‘might anticipate an explosion’, yet there is none (5).<sup>41</sup> This is not a story that ends in anger or devastation, although anger and devastation course through the novel’s pages (5). Rather, it is a story of healing.

Jane Gleeson-White describes how Scott ‘conjures a place – an awkward and uncomfortable emotional terrain – where Indigenous settler Australians can come together’ (2017, n.p.). This disputed territory of the novel – a mixture of historical and personal trauma – is traversed by all the characters as they seek some sort of reconciliation, with the past, each other and themselves. The narrators assure the reader that in such a journey ‘There must be at least one brave and resilient character at its centre (one of us), and the story will speak of magic in an empirical age; of how our dead will return, transformed to support us again from within’ (7). So, a story of hope, but hope achieved through acts of bravery and harnessing and listening to the magic of a diminished, yet ongoing Noongar heritage.

In a broad sense, the disputed territory in *Taboo* is truth. What is the true story of this continent and its peoples? Is there only one? It can be argued, on a national level, that Australia’s taboo is the acceptance and dissemination of an honest history that acknowledges the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people. In his speech at the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Scott refers to Mark Twain’s famous quote that Australia’s history reads ‘like the most beautiful lies’ (2018, 7).<sup>42</sup> These lies, far from beautiful, are numerous and form the bedrock of our national identity and history: *terra nullius*, the care provided by Aboriginal Protection and Welfare departments, that we are all equal before the law (Scott 2018, 7). *Taboo* is explicit in its correction and reconfiguring of

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<sup>41</sup> In the Wirlomin Project’s *Ngaawily Nop* and *Noorn*, the accompanying essays explain that ‘old books sometimes addressed an imagined, “dear reader”’ (Scott, Cockles, et.al. 2017, 35; Scott, Brown et.al. 2017, 39). The appropriation of this ‘old’ storytelling technique in *Taboo* is another connection point between Scott’s writing and his ancestral roots whereby the collective Noongar voice narrating his story continue a Noongar literary tradition.

<sup>42</sup> Scott has previously used Twain’s quote in his essay ‘Jerramungup Dreaming: Ethel Hassell’s *My Dusky Friends* is finally published’ (2013, 340).

national myths embedded in its tradition of history-making and storytelling. The novel confronts the ‘reluctance of the nation . . . to name, own and reckon with this bloody past’ (Gleeson-White 2017). As Lucashenko states, Scott is writing ‘a frontier of truth-telling, which has emerged after two centuries of colonial conflict, uneasy truces and silent shame’ (2017). Such a frontier is traumatic, yet *Taboo* shows that it can also provide the possibility of healing.

## Returning to Kokanarup

The Wirlomin arrive in Kepalup for the opening of the Peace Park. It is an event that is meant to symbolise the reconciliation between the Noongar and non-Noongar communities and, as such, they have arrived early to prepare something special for the event. Yet that is not the only reason the Wirlomin group have returned. One of the twins explains to Dan Horton that ‘we got creation stories recorded with our people, hundred years ago . . . We wanna reunite them with the landscape, bring the sounds back too’ (139). This references the Wirlomin Project’s reconnection of ‘*Dwoort Baal Kaat* to its landscape’ is depicted in *Taboo* as the more meaningful ceremony (2013c, personal interview). As Gerald notes, the Peace Park ‘was government, it was the big end of a very little town’ (254). Even though the Peace Park is unveiled, the atrocities of the massacre still lay hidden. True reconciliation cannot occur in such silence.

The Ravensthorpe Historical Society website explains the Kokanarup massacre in the following way:

conflict arose between the Dunns and the Aborigines to the point where in 1880 a native led John Dunn into the bush some six kilometres from the homestead, following sheep tracks. There was a confrontation and John was speared. His grave may be seen on the bank of the Phillips River near the homestead. There are various stories as to what caused this conflict and what happened as a result of John’s death. These differing stories are documented and can be found in the Ravensthorpe Museum.

Such an account of history, albeit an amateur one, highlights the ongoing dispute between Noongar and non-Noongar events of the past. John Dunn is named, the

details of his death told in detail. His death is acknowledged with a grave; remembered. The Noongar lives lost, the massacre that occurred are explained purely in relation to Dunn's death. The perpetrator of the spearing, those killed—shot and poisoned—in the aftermath of the killing, the Noongar girl raped by Dunn all remain nameless. By contrast, Scott's essay, 'The Not-So Barren Ranges' (2016) discloses the names of Yundawalla who was charged with the assassination of Dunn and another, Dartaban, was also involved. He details that although Yandawalla was acquitted, reprisals for the killing occurred before and after the trial (2016, 70). The naming of the perpetrators of John Dunn's assassination is a powerful act. It populates the story of Kokanarup with Noongar individuals, it brings his ancestors to life.

The events surrounding the killing of Dunn are not provided on the Ravensthorpe Historical Society's webpage because of conflicting stories of what occurred. The evasion of dispute can also, surprisingly, be detected in Scott's 2016 essay in which Scott refrains from using the word 'massacre' because it 'makes some members of the Ravensthorpe community defensive' (Scott 2016, 70). Such an act can also be considered generous. By weighing up the competing and emotional stories attached to this continent's history, Scott continues to navigate the disputed territory of history. Yet, in doing so, he demonstrates that the only constructive way forward is to move further into the uncomfortable terrain. Scott insists that 'there can be no doubt that a number of Aboriginal (Noongar) people were killed as revenge for John Dunn's assassination'; a fact that is expressed in *Taboo* with the decision, in this instance, to name the events at Kokanarup as his community understands them: a massacre (2016, 70).

The written and oral archive of the Wirlomin community's history is a constant source of material and inspiration for Scott's writing and projects. His nonfiction, *Kayang and Me*, *Benang*, the Wirlomin Project, especially *Dwoort Baal Kaat*, and *Taboo* are interconnected because of their relation to the Kokanarup massacre and Ravensthorpe region. These crossovers continually add meaning to Scott's work, even after publication. Not only is Kokanarup an unacknowledged atrocity, suppressed in the dispute between the authoritative written archive and the oral history of Noongar elders, but it is directly related to

Scott's kinship line. Kayang Hazel and Henry Dab, another Noongar elder, have an ancestor named in the altercation that initiated all the killing. Likewise, the character of Nita in *Taboo*, an elder in the group, is descended from those involved in the massacre (Scott 2013c, personal interview).

Harley's description of his writing project in *Benang* is once again a fitting description of Scott's writing because *Taboo* can be read as 'a simple family history, the most local of histories... [that seeks to] make certain things clear' (10). Further echoes of *Benang* are 'heard' in *Taboo* when Tilly boards a bus to Kepalup and an elderly woman speaks to her. The woman's name is Gloria Winnery, a name linking to Harley's ancestor, Fanny. Additionally, the genetic phenomenon of twins evidenced by Patrick and Daniel Coolman reoccur in Tilly's twin uncles, Gerald and Gerrard Coolman (23). When Tilly asks about the massacre, her uncles tell her about her family. Just as Harley learned about Fanny and Sandy Mason from Jack Chatalong and Will Coolman in *Benang*, Tilly learns of Harriette and Dinah (34-5). *Benang* and *Taboo* connect because they follow the different generations of the same family, belonging to a particular region, the disputed territory of Ravensthorpe. Scott consistently prods the reader to recall the characters of his earlier work, to recognise this family history and understand that bloodlines, history, heritage, events and stories depicted in his writing do not occur in isolation, they influence, impact and potentially strengthen the subsequent generations. In *Taboo*, Dan Horton says to his brother:

'Remember those two old Aboriginal woman [sic]? I've been thinking about them, Malcolm. Gins, we used to say. Married Irish twins. How we used to treat that family. They must all be related to them, the people coming. Tilly must've been too. Must be.' (11)

This continuity represents the legacy of oppression and abuse. Despite its contemporary setting, the Wirlomin people are still being exploited, abused, negated. They still are treated as outsiders on their own land. However, such continuity also shows a resilient Noongar spirit, the ability to survive, adapt and retell stories. Gerald explains to Dan the opportunity for the group to visit the property is 'a chance to reconnect, to face up to and heal the history of massacre'

(56). The return to the massacre site is an example of the ethos underpinning the entirety of Scott's work; that disputed territories can also be sites of possibility. While the return is a confrontation with a brutal and conflicted history, it is also 'integral to a reconnection with the past', with language, story and country (Scott 2015, 213).

As already stated, *Taboo* is a dramatisation of Scott's work with the Wirlomin Project and their 'business of taking a story back to hostile massacre territory, taboo territory' (2013c, personal interview). The Horton property is also disputed territory because it is a site of disputed history. Dan Horton says that 'There are so many different stories about what happened here' and continues 'Some say scores killed, but the paperwork . . .' (45). The inconsistencies between what is said and what is documented is a reoccurring theme in Scott's writing. Similarly, the grave of William Horton, Dan's great uncle, and participant in the massacre, states that he was '*Killed by natives.*' In response, one of the Wirlomin people comments: 'Nothing about all the Noongars killed then' (44).

The exchanges in the novel relates to the time in 2012 when the two Hassel brothers, having purchased the homestead 'four decades after the infamous killing', invited Scott and other members of the Wirlomin Project onto the property (2015, 213). Scott recalls how the Hassels 'prepared a barbeque for us, offered a speech acknowledging prior ownership by our community and expressing their grief at the horror of shared history' (2015, 213). It is a meeting that Scott has spoken and written about often. Its ceremonious, poignant and laden nature can be detected in his admission:

I keep thinking of the 'they killed the fatted calf', it's got all that, (*laughs*) somehow, it's like that. They chilled the lamb for twenty-four hours or something, they fed us. (2013c, personal interview)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The fatted calf is a biblical reference to The Parable of the Prodigal Son:

'And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to the servants: Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill

The biblical overtones in Scott's description reflect the significance of the event. Scott explains that the Hassels also 'presented us with grinding stones collected – they said with embarrassment – further up river' (2015, 213). The Hassels' embarrassment hints at how the barbeque deviates from the parable of the prodigal son. In this meeting, who is lost and who is being found? In both *Taboo* and Scott's own life, the Wirlomin community do not seek to reconnect with the owners of the Kokanarup homestead, but the language and stories of Noongar country—this is the home to which they return.

The power dynamics enacted in giving is a key idea in Scott's work. Scott depicts exchange, in his novels, essays and projects as a complicated transition; one that carries risk, expectation and the possibility of empowerment. Scott discloses that he did not want to accept the gift, yet he:

checked it out with a couple of the elders, Hazel and Henry. Henry said, showing his considerable political nous, he said, 'Well, they can give them to us but it doesn't mean we're going to accept.' Which is fairly hard-nosed. (2013c, personal interview)

After receiving the grinding stones, Henry Dab decided to donate them to the Ravensthorpe Historical Society, a move that Scott notes allows the Noongar community to 'get a bit of power to build relationships' (2013c, personal interview). Interestingly, the aforementioned description of Kokanarup on this society's website does mention that diverging stories concerning the events before and after John Dunn's death exist in their museum, which, considering Scott's assessment that 'it's . . . certainly not a left-wing, historical society', is telling.

The negotiations, hurt and power plays underlying these acts of reconciliation are brought to the fore in *Taboo*. Despite the generosity of Dan

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it; and let us eat, and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.' (Luke 15:21-24)



Horton, his view of history, his belief system and the need for recognition that the taboo site is also his home are in tension with the Noongar views, beliefs and claims to country. The Wirlomin community state that Kokanarup occupies, 'our homelands, our ancestral country' yet Dan insists, 'God wanted our family to be here.<sup>44</sup> It's a precious place for us too' (220). The tensions are increased by the disputed history of the massacre that cannot be easily resolved either.

Dan extends a peace offering and wants to resolve the conflicts of the past, yet the Wirlomin group cannot fathom a resolution without an honest history of the massacre and an acknowledgement of their rights to the land on which it occurred. Nita asserts that it was the rape of a young Noongar girl by Horton's great uncle that was the catalyst for the massacre; that his murder was in response to the fact that the Horton ancestor was 'messing around with teenage Aboriginal girls. The wrong girl. Girl. That's why he got stabbed, that's why he got killed. Assassination. That was the law' (221). While Dan concedes that this occurred, he is reluctant to hear the strong language used to describe the aftermath of the Noongar girl's rape. When Nita asserts that his homestead is a massacre site, he replies, 'That's a word that hurts us ... There were lives lost, yes, absolutely ...' (221)

A clash over how many Noongar people were killed is again framed by Scott's interrogation of oral and written histories; the perceived authority of one over the other. Dan claims that the police shot 'four culprits' who participated in the murder, plainly stating, "'That's documented'" (222). A gulf widens between Nita and Dan because he trusts the written archive rather than the oral archive of these elders. The argument continues:

'Shot more than four!'  
'Our grandfather's other brother, went out on a horse to try and talk  
with the people ...'  
'Went with a gun!'  
'They tackled him. He fired a shot and killed one, and they kept  
coming, kept coming and he fired a shot and killed another one, and

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<sup>44</sup> The characterization of the Hortons as Christians relates to the Hassels who Scott describes as 'fundamentalist Christians ... Creationists' (2013c, personal interview).

then they fled . . . They left the area and apparently after that there was never any more conflict . . .' (222)

The 'apparently' indicates Dan's anxiety in his retelling of this story. He is, in the presence of the Wirlomin group, uncertain of the truth of his narrative. The ceremony of the barbeque seems a feeble gesture in light of the deeply riven space between the Horton family and Nita's kin. They call his words 'bullshit' and Nita's claims: 'I know for a fact that white people poisoned the waterholes, and they took turns going out with the gun . . .' (222). The dispute between the two groups of descendants is not resolved, it cannot be. Nita concedes to Dan when he states, 'There are so many stories, on both sides' (233). However, Dan naively believes in reconciliation without 'bickering and bitterness' (223). Like the inspiration for his character, Dan is a fundamentalist Christian who resists the notion of divergent histories. According to his logic, 'We're all descended from Adam and Eve. Let us all be together, as people' (223). Yet such a narrative is not productive, and Scott's novel resists a reductive and false reconciliation.

## **Tilly's trauma and reconciliation**

Tilly, having turned to drugs to try and find herself, next turns to the Aboriginal Support Officer at her school, Maureen who epitomises ignorance of Aboriginal culture. She conceives of a pan-Aboriginality in which 'Didgeridoo surely means Aborigine to everyone' and forces students to dance while she makes didgeridoo sounds in the background (192). The offensive disconnect from any meaningful connection to culture serves to highlight the necessity of what Nita and her Wirlomin groups are doing – returning to country, connecting to the language and stories of that place. Maureen perceives Aboriginal identity as static, fixed in the past and linked to stereotypical images of Aboriginal culture. This is very different to how the Noongar characters conceive of themselves. While being back on country and practising the old ways in a workshop they cook damper on the fire. Someone comments that 'it's not real blackfella food, is it?' Kerry, one of the workshop leaders, disputes this, reasoning, 'It wasn't, then it was. Now it is. So are hamburgers, doughnuts, spaghetti . . . All the things we Noongars eat,

now. That's our food' (209). This simple statement encompasses the notion of a continuing Noongar identity and the inherent appropriation that occurs through that continuation; identity being both old and new ways of being.

Yet *Taboo* is not the simple story of reconciliation and resolution, at least not in the way that Maureen envisages it. Dan Horton, too, has ideas about how to mend the past, yet Scott's depiction of Tilly's trauma indicates how unworkable that solution is. Tilly is a young Noongar girl who was fostered by Dan Horton and his wife as a child. While the Wirlomin groups return to 'taboo' territory and country, Tilly is returning to a homestead that was once her home, albeit one that she does not remember. Both the Wirlomin groups and Dan Horton offer stories to Tilly in the effort to connect her to place. Dan reminisces about her as a baby and conceives of Tilly as the link between himself and his deceased wife and the Noongar community that she so dearly loved. However, these expectations for Tilly to fulfil these roles are based on ignorance. Unknown to Dan, his son Doug is a drug dealer supplying the Wirlomin community. Tilly's father, Jim Coolman, was one of his addicts. Tilly, too, is Doug's victim.

Doug seduces Tilly with the promise of making her 'feel better' and the opportunity to 'know who you really are' (172). Doug's means of achieving this so-called enlightenment is hard drugs. He gives her 'clothes and pills, music and dainty little pipes, broadband and subscriptions and needles and rituals of preparation to confirm the truth of his words' (172). The way Scott disperses ubiquitous items like clothing and the internet among his descriptions of crack pipes and hits, hint at Doug's manipulation of Tilly. His drugging is disguised as a ritual of care and gift giving. In fact, drugs are called a 'bonus'—a treat. The details of Tilly's abuse are horrific. Scott describes Tilly being drugged, stripped naked, a collar placed around her neck and made to sleep on a mattress on the floor. He treats her like an animal, 'chained her up with the dogs. Muzzled her so she could not call, and tied the dogs so they could not quite reach her' (183). In one graphic scene, Doug feeds Tilly a 'bonus' and commands her to eat dried dog biscuits from a bowl on the ground. He then:

touched her and she bent her face low, did what he said; lifted her  
pelvis up. Ashamed of herself, the pleasure her body took from him

even with the taste still in her mouth, still smeared around her lips and how she hated him.

Remembered it later; amazed disgusted, resigned to it happening again. (183)

Scott's explicit depiction of Tilly's rape and abuse are a direct response to the sanitised narrative of colonisation that is evident in Dan's version of the Kokanarup massacre. The details of Tilly's trauma deliberately echo incendiary events at Kokanarup previously described in Scott's other publications, especially *Benang*. The resonance between the depictions of abuse in both Scott's novels set generations apart fuel Scott's argument that Australia is far from being a postcolonial nation. The injustices against Aboriginal individuals and communities do not only exist in the past. As discussed, in *Benang* Fanny witnesses an old Noongar man lying by a woodheap on the Done property who was 'Less than a dog, he had no bowl of water, and a chain was looped around his neck' (173). Fanny also sees 'the ropes in the stables where women had been tied, and one of the men—either a Done, a Mustle, or Moore—working at a grindstone' (173). The repetition of torture experienced by Noongar people in the 1800s through Doug's treatment of Tilly in *Taboo* is deliberately confronting. Scott provokes the reader to feel the same horror and outrage towards Tilly's plight as the Noongar victims in Kokanarup's history. Neither Tilly's suffering nor the massacre should be glossed over.

Tilly's is not the only trauma in the novel. Her mother was the victim of abuse at the hands of Jim Coolman, both Gerald and Gerrard battle drug addiction. In fact, the Wirlomin groups as a whole endure the ongoing traumas of history and this trauma is an overarching affliction that needs to be healed. Citing the work of academic Dion Million, Scott asserts that healing is needed for 'traumas that are actually outcomes of power relations with states' (Million cited in Scott 2018, 9). Dan Horton wants to mend the wounds of the past by bequeathing his property to both Tilly and Doug as symbols of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

However, the characterisation of Doug and his abusive relationship with Tilly and other members of the Noongar community is an allegory for the ongoing

brutalisation of Aboriginal people since colonisation. As descendants of those who were slaughtered and raped and those who perpetrated the crimes, Tilly and Doug embody and continue a traumatic shared history. Doug is the cause of Tilly's father's addiction and responsible for her mother's death. He supplies drugs to the Aboriginal community and has sex with many of the women, including Tilly, who he rapes. Doug is representative of a corrupt authority born from the pioneering families of colonial times who introduced disease and alcohol into Aboriginal communities, exploited, imprisoned and weakened Aboriginal individuals and their families. Dan desires to bring Doug and Tilly together convinced that this act will be 'a Reconciliation thing, real reconciliation' (261). Yet Scott reframes the prospect of reconciliation, of reunion between the abused and their abuser, as something that cannot happen. When Dan discloses his plan to Tilly, she 'blanched as if she'd tasted something vile' causing Wilfred, Tilly's elder, to tell Dan the truth (274). It is only then that he realises the cruelty and implausibility of his proposal: 'Dan thought it was a joke; then shook his head, looked incredulous. For a time. Did not want to believe. Then confronted the truth of Wilfred's account' (275). Dan's recognition and acceptance of the unreconcilable history of Doug and Tilly is a key moment in the novel.

*Taboo* does not crush the idea of a shared future, but it does maintain Scott's stance that the disputes over language, history, identity and belonging since colonisation cannot and should not be glossed over. To do so would be an act of wilful ignorance and naivety. Dan, like contemporary Australia, must confront the brutal truth of his legacy, accept it, and think of a new way forward.

## **The possibility of healing**

Scott depicts national frameworks of reconciliation as regressive and reductive by using Tilly and Doug's relationship as an allegory for the relationship between the Noongar community and nation. Dan's imagined unity is ignorant of Tilly's trauma and Doug's abuse. Such an oversight bares comparison to Scott's argument that Australia cannot truly be a postcolonial nation as we have not

properly dealt with or moved on from the atrocities of the past. To bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together, Scott presents an alternative.

The fictionalisation of the Wirlomin Project in *Taboo*, their work with language, story and country, promotes the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project more than any other novel. Once again, Scott depicts how the process of storytelling and the power of language is central to strengthening a Noongar and wider Aboriginal and Australian identity and sense of belonging. There is a sense of this when Tilly is aboard the bus passing ‘Wagin, Narrogin, Kojonup, Katanning . . . Wangelanginy Creek: a place, it might be said in the old language, where all the voices are together speaking and where . . . some innocent babbling brook remained, some safe and sheltered course with its own momentum continuing’ (27).<sup>45</sup> The babbling brook is symbolic of the Noongar language, once a flowing creek, it has diminished but still remains ‘Despite a history apparently intending otherwise’ (Scott 2016, 76). Scott suggests that ‘the pervasive connection of land and language . . . hints at what such a heritage might contribute to a sense of ‘belonging’ and identity’ (Scott 2016, 76). Certainly, in *Taboo*, it is language that provides hope and strength to the resilient Noongar individuals. Nita, the elder in *Taboo* very like Kayang Hazel, reflects on her family’s position: ‘Not so much bush tucker now, not so much bush either. We can’t go all the places never again. But still got the lingo, unna?’ (95). The family gathers around these words.

Jim Coolman runs workshops in prison. Gerald, his brother, also in and out of prison for crimes possibly committed by his twin brother, Gerard, describes how the so-called ‘culture classes’ and ‘workshops’ were mostly attended by Jim’s ‘own nephews and cousins and grannies’ (14). Members of the ‘extended family sent Jim wordlists, genealogies, language and songs and stories and photos and stuff he was putting together with old boy, Jim’s dad’ (14). The storytelling network also includes the dead as the living ‘memorised vocabulary, and listened

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<sup>45</sup> “Wangelanginy’ is also the title a poem by Scott that describes the process of coming together. Once again, Scott’s work connects to each other.

to recordings of family, most no longer alive' (14). The power and magic of the old language pervades the novel. Gerald recalls how those words would reshape him from the inside out' (15) demonstrating Scott's belief that language can provide 'a sense of place deeper than the earlier history of its colonization' (Scott 2016, 79)

The figure that emerges from the back of the truck in the beginning of the novel – the same one that is constructed throughout the novel – is a symbol for the power of the Wirlomin Project. It is a figure made from the dead and the living, the traces of colonisation and pieces of country. It is a record of dispute and pain but also presents the possibility of healing. The materials used to create the figure are timber, river stone, bones, woven grass, seeds, feathers, sinews, fishing line, human hair and 'and even fencing wire'. These materials, symbolic of country, colonisation, the living and the dead create something powerful, a possibility of coming together even if such a concept is fragile, even if it 'teeters, begins to move, to slowly fall apart and maybe tumble . . .' (7). This figure embodies Scott's proposal of grafting a contemporary Australian society onto its Noongar roots and represents the power of the Wirlomin Project to strengthen the Noongar community through language, stories, reconnecting with country and 'listening' to the archives of both their elders and Australia's written history.

*Taboo* details how each component of the makeshift skeleton has been held and fashioned by the hands of the Wirlomin people, each is imbued with the language of country and that contact provides a connection to their heritage and to place. Tilly's blood mingles with the timber as she strips its bark to reveal a smooth surface; and the group says the names for the old devices—the spears and digging implements— 'and the words started coming to life with their tongue and their mouths and their breath as they handled that timber' (102-3). Wilfred runs the workshops; teaching the old ways and there is talk between 'the old and the young' (105). Rather than the ritual of drugs, the barbeque or naïve reconciliation, it is this ritual, the return to country, the reconnection with place and the sharing of stories, both old and new, that will empower the community and create the possibility of coming together or 'wangelanginy'.

## Conclusion

The insistent return to the disputed, albeit familiar, territories in Scott's writing—history, language, belonging, identity—are connected to the retelling of the pivotal event of the Kokanarup massacre. The massacre site in *Taboo* is one of trauma yet, because it is also the Wirlomin group's ancestral country, it is also a possible site of healing. The novel depicts the reclaiming and reconnecting of Noongar individuals to their people and place, using narrative to start healing wounds of the past. In *Kayang and Me*, Scott relays Brown's 'belief that each of us is one among many possible manifestations of the place we live in, and that recognising shared descent from specific country can be more powerful than sharing oppression' (Brown 2005, 206). This is, as Scott admits, a formidable task that requires Noongar people to 'search and reclaim cultural expressions from our own Indigenous ancestors, our own country; to devise expressions of spirituality from within ourselves, with whatever means at our disposal and arising from our histories' (Brown 2005, 201). Since these words were spoken, the Wirlomin Project has pursued the ideas articulated by Brown and Scott and the possibility of realising what they set out to do are depicted in *Taboo*.

On the night before the opening of the Peace Park, Gerald is compelled to retrace the footsteps of his ancestors. He walks across the Horton property, through the taboo site. It is a painful journey, yet a necessary one. When he begins, he questions whether the old language 'could sustain him . . . against his own weakness' and entertains the ideas that 'his connection to ancestral country was too long broken' (254). Yet Gerald emerges as one of the resilient characters in the centre of the story. Yes, he 'stumbled', but he keeps moving towards country, towards language until he hears the song and 'his old people [who] . . . came, . . . they welcomed him' (254; 273).

Scott has said that to 'simplify' or 'settle' the tension between different ways of knowing, different stories, and the written and oral archives would mean that 'you lose where all the energy is' (2013c, personal interview). He suggests that the possibility of engaging with disputed territories is not to resolve or escape the discomfort and contradiction therein, but 'to get back to where you started, constant ambivalence' (2013c, personal interview). Ambivalence, a term that



Scott regularly reaches for to describe his work, is present in *Taboo*. As Gerald walks through a disputed territory, a taboo site, Scott also describes it as a site of possibility. Gerald earlier explains to Tilly that the ‘spirity’ nature of Kokanarup ‘is not just bad. It can be good too. For us. Our old people here. Gotta be pleased to see us back. Bringing the language back’ (59).

The curlew, the Wirlomin people’s totem, is a motif across Scott’s writing. The story told by Kayang Hazel about the curlew leaping from a fire after being mistaken for a piece of wood (Brown and Scott 2005; Scott, Nelly, et.al. 2013; Scott, Brown, et.al. 2013) is retold in *Taboo*. Wilfred hopes that whatever they are making might come alive like that curlew jumping from a pile of sticks. He explains, ‘Life not just in us, you know. Not just flesh and bone, but something sparks us. Call it spirit’ (106). Like the curlew, Scott depicts the Wirlomin group as a force not easily seen, maybe even considered dead, yet with a spark can leap to its feet and continue. When Tilly throws her piece of timber into the fire, ‘She stayed long enough to watch its transformation. Dead timber coming alive’ (107). The resurrection is continued when Gerry brings life back to human bones with story and song: ‘singing bit by bit, body part by body part, the skeleton rose, ash become flesh, and came alive again’ (110). This magic dramatises the resurrection of the Noongar language through its return and revitalisation by the Wirlomin Project. The language had been listed by the Summer Institute of Linguistics as ‘extinct’, yet in 2009 the listing was changed to ‘living’ (Scott 2018, 12).

Similarly, the stories of resilient Noongar individuals, who are ‘not just warriors of victims’ marks a counter-story to what Andrew McCann has called the ‘literature of extinction’ (Scott 2018; McCann 2007). Scott’s emphasis on continuity creates an optimistic and generous tone in *Taboo* rather than the elegiac mood of traditional colonial literature with its Romantic allusions to the inevitable ‘vanishing of “savage” races in the face of what Darwin called “modern civilised nations”’ (McCann 2007, 51). Scott revives the doomed Aboriginal figure in Australia’s colonial literature, populating the nation’s stories with flawed, brave, curious characters possessing agency. If once rendered extinct, they are now living.

In one of the workshops, Kathy and Gerry tell the story of breathing life into a skeleton, retrieving a lost ancestor embedded in the earth and ‘even though it seemed dead, it sits up’ (113). Kathy makes the point that ‘someone needs to cradle the body, listen to the voice return’ while Gerry explains that ‘voices like this are really about all coming together, healing and making ourselves stronger with language’ (113). Scott, too, talks about a diminished Noongar body and the need to come together, to gather around it:

our ancestral tongue shrivelled, and the stories . . . withered and dried like old snake skin, curling back to a thin, barely-there scrap and synecdoche of what was once the living sinew and sap of our place. We have gathered around the papers – dry and brittle as skin . . . We have encouraged ourselves to listen and give voice to the sounds of long ago and thus resonate with the ancient human sound of this edge of the continent. (Scott, Woods, et.al. 2011, 34; Scott, Roberts, et.al. 2011, 40)

In *Taboo*, it is Nita, Wilfred, Gerald, Kerry, Tilly and the others who choose to care for this skeleton, who cradle the diminished body and rejuvenate it. In order to do so they return to ‘taboo’ country, a disputed territory, but one that holds the possibility of connecting them to the language and stories embedded in the place. The novel’s narrator tells the reader that ‘we always knew death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning . . .’ (3). The end also marks a beginning.

*Taboo* continues Scott’s ongoing project to unsettle the relationship of Noongar and non-Noongar perspectives on, experiences in and expressions of disputed territories - these liminal spaces of land and country, language, history, the self and literature. Scott moves towards and through these conflicted spaces, refusing to gloss over the lack of resolution in Australia’s shared history and the nation’s failure to truly be a postcolonial society. The drive to ‘go looking for difficult spots, or where the energy is’ is a defining feature of his writing, making the inherent optimism and often-described generosity of his work all the more remarkable (Scott 2013c, personal interview). In each of the disputed territories, Scott depicts the abuse, dispossession, marginalisation, assimilation, negation or misrepresentation of Aboriginal communities and culture yet resists the characterisation of Aboriginal people as mere victims. Stories of colonial brutality

can equally be stories of Noongar resilience, resistance, curiosity or even complicity in Scott's writing. Disputes can be possibilities.

*Taboo* is an allegorical refutation of any national frameworks of reconciliation that deny the ongoing trauma of colonisation. Its fictionalisation of the Wirlomin Project overtly proposes an alternative way of healing that relies on 'strengthening regional voices so they remain true to their own imperatives at the same time as being empowered to enter into exchange and dialogue' (Scott 2008a, 124). Scott seeks to position an empowered Noongar culture at the heart of a conflicted country and its stories in the same way that Noongar language, ancestral stories and community have become the grounding centre of his own work. To truly reach a postcolonial position, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities need to confront this country's disputed territories, it is there that we will find the possibility of healing.

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## Appendix: Kim Scott interview

**Edited transcript of interview of Kim Scott (KS) by Natalie Quinlivan (NQ) at Curtin University, Perth on 5 November 2013**

**NQ:** I feel like [the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project is] the centre of a lot of your writing and stories. You've said before that you're trying to draw attention to this particular project.

**KS:** I want to draw attention to it.

**NQ:** You have also referred to your fiction, your nonfiction, and involvement with the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project as a 'continuing project' and 'one story'. I'm just wondering is this deliberate or did your stories naturally begin to merge?

**KS:** You mean this project and other stuff?

**NQ:** Yeah.

**KS:** Well, with that last novel *That Deadman Dance*, that was running concurrently with this project [the Wirlomin Project]. See, this project probably started a little bit before ... and I was conscious of feeling a little disappointed with my last novel eleven years previous when it garnered some attention. It didn't seem quite enough.

**NQ:** *Benang?*

**KS:** Yeah. It didn't seem enough. I suppose I felt a little bit awkward about the post-colonial thing and who your audience is and what language you're writing in

and all that sort of thing. Now, I like novels clearly so I very arrogantly and ambitiously thought if I could do that again with a novel and have another project running contingent with it, I could create an awareness of what you might call cultural literacy. All that Noongar stuff that's out there and most people are not aware of ... and I say 'refluence' within the book.<sup>46</sup> And I could use that literary work to generate momentum in the other project.

So it's a sort of a schizoid response to that post-colonial dilemma. Which often I think we take on, or we accept the imperatives that you have to be political which normally translates to being polemical.

And I don't think literature does that all too well as a battering ram or a crude weapon. So I could fulfil some of those objectives with the schizoid thing and the literary bit – be nuanced and ambivalent and chase down, wander into murky territory, take risks.

**NQ:** You've mentioned some post-colonial territory in literature. Yet in 'Covered Up With Sand' you argue that we may not be post-colonial.

**KS:** Absolutely. I accept that. We may not be. We're one of the settler colonies, it's an awkward fit. However, I nevertheless feel an affinity with those who say the problem of writing when those with whom you most identify are the minority of your audience, you're writing in the coloniser's language. Galiano says, mistrust applause – it means you have been rendered innocuous. And particularly as a literary, a man of letters, or a literary person ... how relevant are you to that home community? So, this is a way of exploring or trying to solve that dilemma for myself.

**NQ:** You've brought up this idea of ambivalence in your writing. And there is a lot of tension, contradictions within language, within story and your writing ... open-endedness. I've said that your stories are 'one story', but it feels like these

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<sup>46</sup> Referring to 'refluent' or flowing back; ebbing.

stories aren't contained, they overlap into one another, they connect in different ways, and I'm wondering if these elements in your writing enact the continuing experience, personal, community-based, with or in Noongar language, identity and belonging?

**KS:** I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know if they do or not. I think it's gutsy to chase down ambivalence, and doubt and so on, personally. However, that may not be widely shared, that feeling. But as part of that, I don't want to say I'm the spokesperson that represents anybody else's feelings, or psychological states or anything. I like chasing down difficulty. I think that's what I like writing about, something I can't articulate all that well. I'm trying to match up a non-verbal sense of self with words and to do justice to that ... whoever else might or might not fit in that box, you know there's a lot of self-appointance.

**NQ:** I guess that might be a little bit of my point: this fitting into boxes, and, perhaps the impossibility of fitting into certain boxes: *That* is represented in your writing in the end.

**KS:** Yeah, ok ...

**NQ:** ... that sort of enactment. Do you see what I'm saying?

**KS:** In terms of Aboriginal identity?

**NQ:** And your personal identity ...

**KS:** I think all those possibilities from articulation and identity have been really diminished and reduced through our process of colonisation. We've been left with, many of us left with, trapped in a reactive loop. So a lot of what we're doing is we're reacting to our definitions and are not coming from [places that are] always as deep as they might be.

**NQ:** There's a difference between, yes, being placed and defined and doing that for yourself, placing yourself within literature, within the space. I feel like this is starting to happen within your writing or at least an aim of your writing is self-determination.

**KS:** Oh, sort of. I like to enlarge the possibilities for what it means to be an Aboriginal person living in this part of the world in this time. So that means you go looking for (*laughs*) difficult spots, or where the energy is and where the juice is as far as I'm concerned. 'Cos then you might be useful, you're no good ... there's no point reiterating what's already been said too many times. It bores me shitless, it bores me a lot, if that sounds too sort of facile, you know I haven't got enough interest in sitting at a desk writing stuff that I, and everybody else, in some cases heard too many times and doesn't ... it's not going anywhere.

**NQ:** It's not going anywhere, and you've said this, you want to be useful. You want to do something.

**KS:** Just be aware where the energy is.

**NQ:** So, the two new titles that you talked about, and I'm going to try and pronounce these, and please help me out.

**KS:** Oh look, I won't shout or anything. Too many of us do that.

**NQ:** *Dwoort Baal Kaat*

**KS:** That's a really hard one in fact 'cos we worried a lot about the spelling of *dwoort*, because it's hard to say. And we've spelled it differently to what is the orthodox orthography, because in the workshops people really stressing that, partly because, ah, to do with literacy, when they see the letter 'e' in there, it looks like a rude word (*laughs*). So, but also to really stretch that, there's a lot of stretched out diphthongs, that, just let me go with this for a while, in the dialect of

the elders carrying this language instead, *akya* or *keip* or *keipa*, they're all dialectic difference in the word for water. So *dwoort*, *dwoort* is the way it's often said in most Noongar dialects. I have trouble with this, saying this dialect, *dwoort*, *dwoort*, *dwoort baal kaat* ... yeah, I had a lot of trouble with this word myself actually, because it's *dwoort baal kaat*: 'a dog his head'. But when you put it all together, *dwoort baal kaat* it's, there's a lot of *shwa* stuff in there. Yeah, and, *Yirra Boornak Nyininy*.

**NQ:** These are the latest two books in the series, from UWA Publishing – Noongar creation stories you've referred to them before. Bilingual books?

**KS:** *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is a creation story, so it's connected to place names and landscape in the Fitzgerald River and Ravensthorpe, which if you know my stuff, Ravensthorpe is important to a lot of my writing. So, it's really pretty amazing to take a creation story back to the Phillips River, which is where *Dwoort Baal Kaat* is connected. And the other one's not a creation story but I personally found it really interesting working with that one in a community situation because it's shared histories, social history contained within a Noongar cultural frame. And given that, it's enormously, inclusive and compassionate, I think, and an amazing contrast to what we generally see of shared history which is written from the other perspective with Aboriginal people as objects rather than having agency. So the contrast there makes it really interesting.

**NQ:** Has the process though, with these latest two, changed since the first?

**KS:** It's changing all the time. What I'm noticing though is more younger people being involved because a lot of people have passed away. Although I don't think, that's simply why.

**NQ:** I mean are you still negotiating how to consolidate and return language and story?

**KS:** Oh yeah, well look the whole thing is a negotiation. I mean we get a bunch of people together and pretty well it's people that trust one another and know one another. And then we work out where we go from there. And we have the material of a couple of those elders documented. And then we have this archival stuff which is their elders, so we've had stuff like ... so we've started with a particular text, and the texts are an inspiration for what we end up with and then we've stopped working with it, 'cos it's because someone has said, 'no'. And, in that instance, they've got too upset really, because they've started thinking about their dad's story, and they're thinking about all that. So, we negotiate all the time. *(laughs)* And there's lots of negotiation going on handling the people and personalities as well as the material and what do we do with it and where we change it and how we change it and I've already touched on pronunciation and orthography and I've indicated there's placenames and landscapes associated with these stories that don't go into the publication. I've indicated that change in spelling. When we do the school tours pre-publication, that's when, and there's eight or ten of us, people are refining and redrafting the material as we do that. And we're cognisant of all that going on, so we reshape it. It's a constant negotiation.

**NQ:** And this tension seems as though it's just as important as what goes into these stories, there's also what is kept back as well, kept within the community. You talk about reaching a widening audience but there's that question of access to story as well.

**KS:** Well, there is a pretty big power thing involved in all of this, and one of the things that interests me a great deal is that, is storytelling and power relationships.

Now what we find happening over this process, it's what I call it concentric circles sometimes. Pull a bunch of people together who we reckon have got strong rights to this material; are the ones who really should be sharing, not the only ones but it's a really core group I think, and then we try and get a bunch of us in at the centre of the action. That means a bigger world than just our little community, and we don't necessarily articulate amongst ourselves that we're



thinking we have important currency or capital about what it means to belong in this part of the world, about identity and belonging because of these deep, massively deep roots, that are represented by this cultural material.

So, one of the ways to get a few of us involved in this sharing is the picture books, you know, so you've got illustrators and authors that's sort of what we'll go about it. But initially, here's some stuff from our elders that we may not have known about, just put that in there to a bunch of people and it's their dads or uncles or grandads and it's the other people and they want to know about it and we just play around with that. And then the next bit is how do we share it with a few others? We do illustrations and get a few more people thinking about being at the interface, between different communities, and then we hand it out to a wider sort of Noongar community, again, based in Albany, and the people that come along are invited by that core group, and that's also still negotiating. People can still reject it or yell at us, not that that happens actually, or they can feed stuff back to us, change it—they don't do that, that wider group, they're just collecting—and so those, they're ever-widening circles, that sort of stuff and then we film, either where the stories connect or some of the co-authors and elders involved just go on back to where stories might connect, the value-adding. All these processes are about value-adding and breaking down the binary between paperwork and oral stuff.

**NQ:** It seems like you're trying to, and succeeding in every step along the way, like you said, value-adding, and that story getting stronger as opposed to diminishing.

**KS:** And you consolidate and it's putting it back and consolidating and it's allowing it to make connections with other knowledge in the community rather than just being a product. And then it enters a realm, and it feeds back to us, telling us what, who we are and what we should do. But we got to have a lot of people that have a bit of a handle on that, so after those processes, we've got a number of people, names, that can work out what's the go, the book-signings. We didn't have a launch this time, that's just my energy levels ... but there's all those

situations. But when you do the school tours, which we do before publication, and post publication now that we have got some things happening, there's a really interesting power relationship where you've got elders, parents and kids at the centre of what's going on, and you get, and we've had classes asking, coming in, because they've heard about what's going on, and then you're in a position of power and kids putting their hand up and saying they've heard of ... and buying in the classroom, and kids coming up, Noongar kids coming up, at the end and the elders in the group, knowing and telling them where they fit in the scheme of things and the kids seeing photos of the community members that they know involved in the workshops. All that's about power shifts.

One time when we handed, on one occasion when we handed stories back at one of those community meetings, the elders had asked that a particular non-Aboriginal person, a couple of people come along, from old pioneering families. I was surprised at this and argued against it a little bit, as much as I argue against anything, because I couldn't really see that we wanted to invite along people of families who had in fact stolen the country (*laughs*) from us and it had, these elders who asked these, that these fellas come along and had worked like sort of slaves on these families' properties up until the '60s, '70s, but they insisted.

**NQ:** Why did they insist?

**KS:** They said because we grew up with them and that fella knows, and he learned a bit of Noongar language, and he knew these elders some of these elders that were talked to the linguist in 1930 or whatever [Laves' notes are recorded in 1931], and, I'm mentioning this because I've got a photo that I use in the PowerPoints sometimes of one of these fellas coming up to get his book in front of fifty or one hundred Noongar community members and going back with tears in his eyes. So there is a really interesting power thing going on there. People who you would think not in positions of power, when they've got an opportunity to use that power well, I think they do it (*laugh*).

**NQ:** And I think a shift in power through sharing and generosity...

**KS:** ... through stories, through sharing stories and puts them even, I would argue, puts them even more firmly at the guts of it all because of that act and that fella going back with tears in his eyes, you know, there's a really interesting thing that's happened.

We've also, late last year, coming out of this project and connected to this project it's hard to know how connected, about twenty-five of us or thirty of us went down to Ravensthorpe as part of connecting *Dwoort Baal Kaat* to its landscape, an initial stage. So, this will continue to go on. As part of doing that, so the story is connected with the Phillips River and that coastline and Jerdacuttup, particularly is another place down there and all through the Fitzgerald River there's these references to these dogs hunting, and all these dog references. As part of the few days staying down there, we went on to Kokanarup homestead, which is the homestead associated with the infamous massacre. Two of the people in the group, Hazel Brown and Henry Dab, have an ancestor named in the altercation that initiated all the killing. So that in itself is ... interesting, I think.

So, we went onto the property invited by the people who own it now and they've owned it since the 1920s. They put on a barbecue for us, I keep thinking of the 'they killed the fatted calf'<sup>47</sup>, it's got all that, (*laughs*) somehow, it's like that. They chilled the lamb for twenty-four hours or something, they fed us. And it took a long time for Hazel Brown to talk to these fellas. Hazel Brown, because she told her Mum that she'd never go on this property, so there's pretty interesting stuff going on. They presented us with twenty-odd grinding stones that they'd

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<sup>47</sup> This a biblical reference to The Parable of the Prodigal Son:

'And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to the servants: Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.' (Luke 15:21-24)

collected in between the 1960s and the 1990s, or something, on a property further up as descendants of the people that used to live in this bit of the territory. They're fundamentalist Christians these people, they're Creationists, so it's pretty ... negotiating, it's all negotiating. But it was a really interesting thing. And one of the elders, I checked out, one of the farmers have said, 'Kim, I want to give these grinding stones to, you know, this group of Noongar people'. I checked it out with a couple of the elders, Hazel and Henry. Henry said, showing his considerable political nous, he said, 'Well, they can give them to us but it doesn't mean we're going to accept.' Which is fairly hard-nosed. He eventually, him and Hazel did accept. And then Henry said, and his words of response, were 'We'll give a couple of them to the local historical society.' Now I think that's a really interesting move as well. In terms of when you get a bit of power to build relationships, so there, it's not a, certainly not a left-wing, historical society I tell you.

**KS:** So, you're talking 'interesting' in terms of a strategic element in there?

**KS:** It's strategic but it's also about the importance of relationships. They're acting out of a strategic sense of the importance of relationships and cultivating people, I think, when you're in power. There's just a movement towards having some sort of way to engage and this is how people react. And I mean, I think that's really powerful and generous and compassionate and tough, but certainly not bullying or, denigrating the other or anything like that. So it's culturally quite powerful and interesting, I think.

**NQ:** Since we've talked about . . . interesting elements coming through—generosity, a little bit of strategy, I wanted to talk about that, in terms of the Wirlomin Noongar Language [and Stories] Project. It's something you mentioned in *Kayang and Me*, and you call for a 'moratorium' and a 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies in order for Indigenous communities to consolidate their heritages. And I guess, to shift this power relationship, to be in

this position that you find yourself now. I guess I wanted you to talk about the strategies in getting to that point and I think the gap ...

**KS:** Well, it's what we're doing really, it's a drip feed thing

**NQ:** It's controlled in a way ...

**KS:** We're trying to...

**NQ:** Whilst being generous

**KS:** And it's not all worked out. Yeah, I've thought about some of these things, clearly, but not really worked it out because you have, there's people, and not everyone is quite at the same extent of having thought about this stuff. But I am really aware of, we have a shared history of denigration and attempted destruction of this heritage and it's only very recent that that st ..., I don't know whether that has stopped, that that has shifted a little bit and then all of a sudden in some circles, we want it all, almost. So, interpreting signage, I mentioned Fitzgerald River National Park ... and so we engage with this stuff as well, but they want it all. What are all these stories? Give it to us. And such is the haste sometimes in doing this, the rightful custodians, the community that should be the rightful custodians of this heritage because of the damage that is all around, the historical damage, are not even in the position to be in control of what's going on there. And, in fact, can be bypassed by just a few slick cultural brokers engaging with non-Aboriginal communities and the kudos and status that's there and further demoralise and diminish and whatever, bugger up this home community that should control ... So this process, it's not a ground zero thing, I'll quickly stress, but it's been given that situation, but yeah, it's about consolidating and keeping things at arm's length to see who can really participate in 'What are the stories that we tell ourselves?', 'What are the stories that we're going to tell others?', not consciously, but just through the business of story. And at the workshops a lot of these things come up though, we don't deliberately develop strategies so they do.

But stuff like the protagonists in these stories are not oppressed individuals, and they act in contradictory ways, sometimes we talk about in workshops. They're going out on their own, lots of us don't like going out on our own, they're trusting their heritage, they're taking risks, they're encountering the other, they're expanding their sense of the world, you know, they're orbiting out and back. They're really modern narratives and protagonists or they're very well suited, this is not why they've chosen them, this comes in retrospect for me. So, all these things are about that moratorium and identity, and arm's length ...

**NQ:** ... and also, part of what you do, sort of drawing this, saying they're modern characters, and it's this link I guess between a contemporary Noongar identity and culture and linking that to a heritage and saying this is a continuous ...

**KS:** Absolutely.

**NQ:** This is not something that has happened out of the blue and doing that you're debunking a lot of assumptions about what that identity and culture is.

**KS:** Yeah, I think so, I think so. A lot of the time I don't have time to reflect, it's just juice and energy and it's the right thing to do, it's intuition, you know. I think, it's creative work. I don't necessarily think of myself as bold enough in that area. But that's where the energy is and that's where it's important to be, you know, rather than pontificating. And there's a very limited range of discourse that you engage in, but when there's energy and when there's things to be done basically, you know? And I value stories and I value people, I think. And there's ways, there's opportunities to conduct yourself or to be in certain ways as against others and particularly in a community carrying a legacy of oppression, and I'm in that community. I'm much better off in some ways than others, so yeah, you've got to use that. And I've got this material that's available to me, you know, articulations of a heritage not that I haven't necessarily done it, but a number of these elders and you know a bit of paperwork. It's just getting back to people that I would want strongly connected to this stuff as well as other things there, strongly

connected with this part and this heritage and see how we rework the balance between these things.

**NQ:** I wanted to maybe, still sort of sitting on the same topic, on this power relationship, and this idea of place, and I mean that in its double sense—where you're placed and place, and I feel like they're sort of tied together, and I want to look at the role of listening, and arguably when people tell stories, the often overlooked part of that there needs to be someone to listen to it as well. And I see this crop up and I don't know whether you're conscious of it or not, but certain characters—you dedicated *True Country* to Mary Pandilow and Robert Unangou, 'who let me listen', and I wanted to talk about the role of listening in your work.

**KS** Yeah, well that's part of ... I think I'm a listener, despite my conduct at the present. (*laughs*)

**NQ:** (*laughs*) Give and take, give and take.

**KS:** Yeah, I think I can be a listener, but trying to think where your question is coming from. Again, in these school tours or with these books, individuals, these Noongars I'm with, when they see the reaction, that's really important. We did the English State Teachers' Conference, a presentation there, which is the same as what we do in schools, and we did All Saint's Literature Festival, and there's a few hundred people there. And most of this, of us in this group, there's three of us that have done a bit of work in classrooms, there's eight or ten of us in the group, so they haven't been in the situation where you get a few hundred people up clapping their hands and moving around to a song that you've written. Let alone listening to you as a group and responding when you tell them to do stuff (*laugh*) and coming up and thanking you and inviting you to come along and talk to them and talk to them, they want to listen to you. You know, that's being at the centre of the action for a while and particularly, you know, when they want to talk about history and who we are, and they want to hear what you have to tell them.

**NQ:** There's a respect in that.

**KS:** Yeah, and one of the reasons for working like this is not only the strategic and the moratorium bit, it's to cultivate an audience where there is, because I think there's been this shift in our history. And I know I've said before it's too quick from denigration to something like celebration. However, there is, what I would say, enlightened people around who want to know and hear more. So that's an opportunity, that's an area to strike gently, not like you go around and bash those people. You've got to be politically, you've got to nurture them and make that opening and make that better and that's a really powerful thing, and that's storytelling, sort of thing, but you need to help them listen more.

**NQ:** This storytelling and listening, it reminds me of the part in *That Deadman Dance* where Bobby says, 'he learned their language, their songs, stories and never realised they didn't want to learn his.' And then Billy in *True Country*, when he's interviewing Fatima and she's telling her story and he's busy rifling through the archive to try and check if she's right. And they are some of the instances where I'm thinking about this dynamic of telling stories and listening and I'm just wondering if you think that these representations of listening or not listening as the case may be, be representative of a broader power dynamic in Australia, in colonial times and now ...

**KS:** Yeah, thank you for your attention and interest. They're there because it's a preoccupation of mine and it's against bullying really. You know, where the rhinoceros or the steam train reckons it knows best, it's got its own path and direction and there's all these other things going on that are really important and we should attend to.

**NQ:** 'Cos there's dangers in that happening, again, which I guess is what we've talked about, this shoring yourself against a repetition of what happened during First Contact in this publishing process, giving stories before they're ready and suddenly, people not listening.



**KS:** We might disagree slightly. So, you made a parallel between First Contact and now, yeah, there is.

**NQ:** Not the same, obviously we're in a different spot, but in terms of ...

**KS:** They're worth comparing, that's for sure ...

**NQ:** ... this bulldozing effect and how you talked about, you get someone slightly shifty and can take it and run with it, that lack of respect could happen again and being present to that.

**KS:** That's true. I think those sorts of things are happening anyway, big time, all that stuff, that whole cultural brokerage area, visual arts you see it. Dot art is the only thing that can be, that comes out of the reductive loop. But I was just struck there, with the First Contact, because there's, the way in *That Deadman Dance*, I sort of re-storied a little bit whether perhaps First Contact is tricky and it's, I'm aware of all sorts of political spin-offs to do with that, and I'm also aware that some of those Noongar individuals in the real history, in say Albany, Mokare and others, contemporary Noongars in Albany feel really ambivalent about them. And I think that's because of the resistance narrative coming out of something very unlike a resistance narrative has gained credence and that's something that people can hang onto, but then as I'm doing to go back and say, 'look at these really generous, really talented, people who didn't believe they could be conquered, who thought conquest was impossible.' I think they're really powerful people. It is awkward in retrospect to say, 'Bugger, why weren't they cagier?' I admit this, however, as I've said, the story's not over yet. That's a good way to be, like that with a little bit of caginess slipped in as well. With a legacy of oppression you've lost a lot of those things. Not all of it and that's why I mentioned those elders being so generous, compassionate. They're the things to build upon because we have plenty of resistance type stances in the community and that's lateral violence, is perhaps exacerbated by that if that's the only story you know.

**NQ:** In the latest two books from the Wirlomin Noongar Language Project, you said, while still political, you are trying to move away from anger.

**KS:** Oh look, *just* anger.

There's a woman here, Marion Kickett, at this university [Curtin University] doing her PhD on Aboriginal resilience<sup>48</sup>, not that you get rid of the anger, but you make sure that it doesn't control things and I think that is really important there's not enough love, I sound like a hippie (*laugh*). But I heard someone, who I won't name because it might embarrass him, but an all-male gathering, land council, state government negotiations and one man saying that 'we need more love in our community' and I think that's just really on the money. That's part of where the damage is, but I'll just pick up on something else. You mention the last two books in the series and somehow implied that its very controlled which ones [are released], but really it's what story we can get going.

**NQ:** So, it's not planned which ones get released?

**KS:** It's what ones, when we're all together, what ones work well. There's a couple that haven't got going well enough yet, I mean I like 'em, but they're not worked out enough so they haven't grabbed people. But these last two, one particularly 'cos you know, we have the son and daughter of the fella that told the story to the linguist, co-author and illustrator of that book, and their dad, the informant, died when these two were really young. One was a toddler and one was a babe in arms. So that's a really important story. They didn't hear the story, they'd never heard the story in their lives and it was very emotional going through

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<sup>48</sup> 'An Examination of how a culturally-appropriate definition of resilience affects the physical and mental health of Aboriginal people', by Marion G. Kickett, October 11, 2011, PhD, diss., University of Western Australia School of Population Health, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences, Perth, Australia.

that story for the first time because of all that part of it. And the son, Russell, has been through law at Warburton as part of his own negotiation of his Noongar identity and first workshop he was, he broke down in front of us all. And I think he'd be okay in me talking about this, and having just listened to a version of his dad's story for the first time, that we all put together and said, 'What have I been doing up in another people's country? If I'd known all this was happening, I'd have been here, I should've been here.' And he's crying. That's a really important step, and he wants to share, they want to share their story now and they know they have these other stories to work, just run one at a time, let it ... let them and their kids feel what it's like in that situation.

**NQ:** The story takes the time it takes.

**KS:** And we've got these others that we can draw on now and they've got lots of stories from their own lives that are to be told if they want to channel them into this form. Yeah, so they come not quite randomly, but its intuitive and its ease too, what's most accessible in a range of ways.

**NQ:** I don't know how much time we have, but there is one thing I really did want to talk about with you that you've mentioned in varying ways, in your essays and in *Kayang and Me*. And it's this possibility of grafting a contemporary Australian community onto Indigenous roots, I'm just going to get you to talk a little bit towards that ...

**KS:** It can be a bit glib, it could be interpreted as being a bit glib that. I'm aware that in some ways it's a bit volatile, because it moves away from sovereignty arguments, arguably. You have another long answer coming. It's a little bit of bait to well-meaning and enlightened Australians, it also comes from an awareness that that's a great bit of currency in negotiations that Aboriginal groups have across the continent. It's also not necessarily though related to a pan-Aboriginal thing. So, there's some considerations, it also comes out of a bit of thinking about what happens. We haven't got a treaty or anything, but in those situations where

there are treaties sometimes, say in the northern Americas, Indigenous people or Native Americans, First Nations, get sort of niched out of existence, I sometimes think. So African Americans there are almost as *the* Other, and the Native Americans, if they're lucky they got a little treaty and they're on the casino and the reserve and there is just really awkward shit in my opinion about whose status is Indian and who's not. New Zealand is a little different, because there's a pan-New Zealand thing, not buying into arguments about the authenticity of the Indigenous peoples or anything like that, there's a pan thing, they've got the treaty. What's really interesting is the huge contribution that Maoris make to a New Zealand sense of identity, and it seems to me that they're in a really powerful position vis-a-vis some of these other situations I'm aware of.

I went to Niagara Falls a couple of weeks ago, first time, collecting evidence about this theory, only on the Canadian side, and there's nothing at all, and it's a really powerful place, you know, tacky surrounds and nothing at all about First Nations, no acknowledgement, no yarn or anything. Just nothing. Whereas what I'm suggesting is about the possibility of grafting contemporary nation-state and sense of identity onto Indigenous roots is thinking about those sorts of things, thinking about, belonging, you know, the Peter Read book<sup>49</sup> and all those other things. Quite a lot of stuff being written about wanting to access deep time, deep history, thinking about the *Dark Side of the Dream* by Hodge and Mishra<sup>50</sup>, and their thesis, their little riff on Australian identity in there, the suiciding swagman, so thinking about ... there's a need to be addressed, there is a vacuum or something, but very much that gives us enormous, currency and is something we need and only we can give to Australia so that's ...

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<sup>49</sup> Scott is most likely referring to Peter Read's *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000).

<sup>50</sup> B. Hodge and V. Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991, c 1990.

**NQ:** Is it ... this idea that Noongar language, I'm using that specifically, but that the [Noongar] story can hold the language and stories that have come since then.

**KS:** I think so, Yeah, I absolutely think that's possible.

I'm very suspicious of this ... of moves to do with Indigenous knowledges at universities because it's almost inevitably going to be reductionist and the whole frame you move into is sort of binary or Hegel's dialectic. There's all these binary things going on, whereas probably, to generalise, Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal knowledges, don't operate to the same extent relying on that binary thing. They have clichés: holistic or place-based or pattern-based ways of thinking and there's a fantastic, I think, fantastic chapter in a book by Tony Swain called *A Place for Strangers*<sup>51</sup> which talks about the Dreaming and what it might mean and ends up saying that it's about rhythms, embedded stories and rhythms and resonances. So, I haven't got time to attempt to articulate it here, but in there, in that way Swain explains it, and what you see—what I sense in the way languages talk about a world fear and that pattern or place-based way of thinking—can encompass the intellectual tools of the Enlightenment which, it's our basis ... It's pretty ridiculously generalised here, but you're sort of forced into it a little bit. And it seems to me, and again, looking at First Contact stuff and thinking about that pattern-based thing which is a really powerful way of thinking, 'cos you have relationships, not necessarily cause and effect. But things belong together, each sections of different rhythms would allow for the accommodation of non-Aboriginal stuff, worldviews within an Aboriginal world view, an Aboriginal worldview that's not restricted to what anthropologists will allow and is seen as central not something that needs to be appended to ...

**NQ:** ... or a subset or, you know, move away from those centre, periphery type structures.

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<sup>51</sup> T. Swain. *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History for Australian Aboriginal Being*. Cambridge [England]; Melbourne: CUP, 1993.

**KS:** And that we acknowledge it should be the centre.

**NQ:** Do you think that is something that, when you mention the educational environment, do you think that's something that can start being used within that academic context? I mean, do you think there is a way to shake up new ways of thinking and how we critically engage with writing?

**KS:** Oh ... it's really difficult, I don't know. I don't know. My sense and my intuition says, and again, this is where there's energy and there's juice, and this is where I wanna get but I'm naive and stupid also. The education system has its own imperatives, they shift over time, but particularly at the moment, it's very utilitarian, I suppose, and the Enlightenment model or that scientific model thinks, and I sound stupid here, but the empiricism, the isolating variables: Is it reproducible? Is it universal? Can we universalise this body of knowledge? That's, all those things, that's a whole system not just a way of thinking, it's a whole system that is very powerful and is not always open to allowing other ways in.

So, we'd need to hijack some of those other areas like creative, what maybe is in the humanities in that university way of thinking to keep strength there or, and move back as some sort of counterforce, and personally I think all that stuff can belong in a Noongar worldview, all those things. And then I'm kind of interested that you co-opt ways of looking at the world or ways of thinking as intellectual tools in a playful way. You know, I know this is a ridiculous sort of rave that I'm in at the moment (*laughs*), but this is kind of how I think of things and that's why really the First Contact stuff really, really interests me and that informs *That Deadman Dance* which is in turn informed by those protagonists and those creation stories. I wouldn't have had the guts to go against the, to take the risks that I took there, and go against that resistance model if it wasn't for those creation stories and seeing this in First Contact what was going on, people co-opting ships, you know, because it lets them do the stuff that they wanted to do better.

Penny van Toorn has talked about people co-opting print and I've seen it myself in things I've quoted elsewhere, you would have seen it, people modelling the journal in, the expedition journal, in oral recitation.<sup>52</sup> That's a greedy intellectual curiosity, it's enormous confidence and it's mimicry or playing with things, and while you still have this other source behind you, it's a good way to be. When you've got the twin forces of assimilation, which is destroy and then re-educate, then it's tricky that. But then we've got people now whose identity is to not do things. But you can't remain vibrant and relevant and authentic (*laughs*) if you're not doing things because you're getting all fundamentalist, which we sort of need to because of stuff, but it's a dead end, it's costumes and curios that tourists expect of a defeated people.

**NQ:** It's more complex than that. I was reading Martin Nakata, this idea of the cultural interface. I think that picks up on Penny van Toorn's thesis, this idea of appropriation and, I guess a sharing of culture that's, yes, come out of a tension and ambivalence in your work, but also something that's been happening for a long time, the fact that, I think, this writing and two cultures being held in one story has been happening for a long time, do you think?

**KS:** Potentially. You see moments of it. It hasn't been able to.

**NQ:** Flashes of it so that it's not that ...

**KS:** It's not unorthodox, it's orthodox. I'll say it's orthodox. It's just quite rare, but that's just the circumstances and that's the level to which a lot of Aboriginal people and communities have been crushed and brutalised, which is a horribly harsh thing to say, and that's a really dangerous ... that we've been brutalised,

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<sup>52</sup> Scott is referring to Penny van Toorn's *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (2006).

what that's meant to us. And diminished in the process. How you get out of those situations is decolonisation, which means look back at your heritage, work out through the process of colonisation what's in there.

**NQ:** And that's the continuity.

**KS:** Yeah, work on the continuity, work on what you want to drop, work on continuity in terms of before colonisation. It doesn't mean you throw everything out that's in the last few generations. Luckily, I mainly just do fiction so I don't have to get tripped up too often on how nebulous these ideas are once we've put them like this.

**NQ:** You just get to float them out there.

**KS:** I operate on the basis of this level of conceptualising but I am aware to strategically achieve some of the objectives that lie within them are out of my range, you've got to keep notions alive somehow.

**KS:** The language project's hard to keep going actually. So, we have an incorporated body, right, it's got about 80 or 90 members without pushing for membership because already that gets hard then communicating and we have to have AGMs and handle the money and all sorts of shit. So yeah, it's getting a bit tricky. As well as I should be writing another novel which I probably haven't started, might have started.

**NQ:** I mean is that something that is a priority for you. I mean, you said you wrote *That Deadman Dance* concurrently but, is right now has your focus just been on the language projects?

**KS:** Ah, frankly, my energy levels focused a lot on anxiety because it gets to a point where it gets quite, where it gets hard and you think ... and I get frozen.



And a lot of that is around the project and we've got a lot of filming surrounding that project, hours and hours of footage.

We did a two hour edit of a trip to Bremer Bay when the first book came out and we handed that out to the community, fifty or a hundred, and it's mainly elders talking so it's just a certain body of knowledge or heritage. But we've got stuff of us presenting at schools, we've got stuff on the workshops, stuff on the country, going back to the landscape, stuff of the people handing over the grinding stones and then they took us up to the actual site further up the river which was amazing. There was a dance around there and these freshwater springs, it was tremendous, so we've got all those sorts of things and its ...

**NQ:** What to do with them all ...

**KS:** Yeah ... so that's frozen me a little bit. I think it'd be really interesting to put together a little doco about the process of putting these stories together.

Individuals talking like Uncle Russell talking about his dad, you've got elders going back to country and they haven't been back to that part of country before and the business of taking a story back to hostile massacre territory, taboo territory, I think that's ...

**NQ:** ... powerful

**KS:** ... but there's also politics in this stuff, I have to tell you, we are one faction claiming connection to that area of country. There's others, you know, and I don't want to buy into a conflict like that for my own reasons, for my own wellbeing, plus those sort of conflicts take oxygen up in terms of narratives people want to run with, you know? So, all that stuff takes up a lot of time, and where's the funding going to come from after next year. I've got enough to run it next year and yeah other things I might be doing. I'm not particularly good at nitty gritty, (*laughs*) the logistics, you know, the venues, the bloody buses and the communicating with everyone to get the feel of what the dates going to be and all those sorts of things. It's getting tiresome.

**NQ:** I haven't looked at it, but the Laves archive ...

**KS:** Oh, it's huge. There's plenty in it to keep working on, but I'm relying even on working on it now. I'm relying on work I did when I first encountered it, which was early this century. I'm not finding time to look at them, there's many layers to them. We don't always deal with that material as adequately as we might in the workshops because there's a whole literacy thing there, and that's a big bit of the negotiation that goes on too. People will sometimes, because something's written down, people will take it as gospel, in those little circles. They wouldn't in the bigger circles, so you have to make sure that credence is given back to what they know themselves.

**NQ:** That's actually something that I actually did want to ask you about—that seems to strike at quite an important part of your work—that idea of different ways of knowing, and why one form of knowledge, the written word for one, the archive, is so trusted, more than other forms that aren't like that. It requires almost a leap of faith to trust them, it's just something that's constantly in your work.

**KS:** I mean, I'm interested in those things, it's all very slippery, just as things on the page can be bullshit, so can oral history.

**NQ:** It ties into this way of thinking as well.

**KS:** Yeah, but you want to get everybody's stuff up and then you can pick the cream, (*laughs*). Really, that's how I think of it. There's a lot of bullying in one form or the other, and people want to close stuff off as part of that, simplify it or settle it or something. Then you lose where all the energy is, to me, to get back to where you started, constant ambivalence.