

Country and Connections: An Overview of the Writing of Kim Scott John Fielder, Curtin University of Technology

Sometime in 1997 I was taking a train home from Perth when I started reading what initially looked like a public notice on the carriage wall. The language was a bit obscure for a railways message, and obtuse even for that genre of advertising which trades on the puzzling or the provocative. At the bottom of the poster was the name 'Kim Scott', and I realised I was actually reading poetry for public consumption. Knowing Kim personally, the poem took on even greater significance: it struck me that not only were commuters exposed to an artistic 'installation' on public transport, but they were reading a piece by an Aboriginal writer. How this knowledge influences the meanings I make of that text - as opposed to the casual commuter, unaware of the writer's identity - will be explored later. This brief overview of Kim Scott and his writing attempts to meld something I know of the man and his work.

It is worth signaling that this overview is written partly as fan and friend. I do not presume to present the authoritative or complete outline on Kim Scott's work. Complete critical distance or objectivity is an illusion, for critics, writers, and readers all have some complex investment, some stake, in the production and reception of texts, in critical distinctions. Anne Brewster has suggested that 'the study of Aboriginal literature requires a certain degree of accountability to Aboriginal constituencies outside the academy and an awareness of their irrecoverable difference'.¹ The principle of 'critical distance,' then, needs to be accompanied by an ethic of cultural accountability that acknowledges community interests. The politics of critical positioning and the complexities of cultural negotiation must be struggled with for the reconciliation process to be more than empty rhetoric. Friendship enables this to be explored in a more convivial manner, but does not simplistically guarantee authority or veracity.

In a 1996 interview, referring to the way writing by Aboriginal people is inevitably politicised, Scott states that 'I'm not very comfortable with this [politicisation] because I don't like the idea of speaking for anyone else'.² This statement says a lot about his approach to writing, which he characteristically refers to as a somewhat 'perverse' activity in which he publicly processes 'essentially. . . private' preoccupations.³ However, as this account of Kim Scott's life and his writing will demonstrate, he is far from naive about the way in which his writing is inextricably linked to social and political forces. Scott does speak and write for himself, but, in doing so, he *re-presents* the experiences of, and issues faced by, many Aboriginal people.

Collective Storytelling

One of the ways his first novel *True Country*⁴ taps into a distinctively Aboriginal tradition of storytelling is through the inclusive and collective narrative structure which functions to 'empower... tellers and listeners'.⁵ Billy's story is relativised by other voices. Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, describes Dostoevsky's work as 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices'.⁶ Similarly, in *True Country*, a multi-voiced narrative technique underlines the specificity of Scott's story as one emergent Aboriginal voice amongst other Aboriginal voices. This is a significant narrative choice for, all too often, the title 'Aboriginal writing' homogenises what is a diverse field and sets up rather narrow and rigid expectations. As Penny van Toorn points out, '[a]s well as breaking with static, monolithic models of culture, Scott's text deconstructs unitary

concepts of language, voice, medium, and narrative form'.⁷ At this historical and political juncture, Aboriginal people are emphasising diversity and difference whilst recognising a shared heritage and 'kindredness'.⁸ Scott never pretends to speak for all Aboriginal people. Indeed he stresses that, 'with *True Country* I never thought of it as Aboriginal writing. I was just writing, so I was very pleased when it was accepted like that'.⁹

Spiritual Inheritance

Scott is committed to responding positively to his 'impoverished heritage' by seeking to bear testimony to the 'continuity' and 'spiritual inheritance' of his Aboriginality (10). The colonisation of Australia has resulted in many Aboriginal people being disconnected from their country and denied their own lived connections and continuity with their own people and culture. There is a range of experiences of disconnections and shared loss. *True Country* represents a tentative first step in making a public response to what for much of Kim Scott's life had been 'a private thing,' as his 'own sense of Aboriginality was a strange mix of pride, shame and isolation'.¹⁰

The above comments come from 'Disputed Territory,' an insightful account of his background and his writing. In this piece, Scott makes sense of his identity – which is his personal, political and cultural quest – in terms of 'articulating a position . . . [he] inhabit[s] at an intersection of histories and peoples' (171). Scott is aware of the historically determined discursive constraints he works within, and both of his novels - in different ways - represent strategic and creative responses to, and negotiations with, colonialist discourses. Like many other Indigenous writers, he takes on racist and assimilationist discourses by using the language of the colonising culture as a powerful weapon: '... the hostile nature of the archives ... I wanted to use that language. Use it back on itself'.¹¹

One of Scott's strengths is his brutal self-reflection. He recognises and owns his own 'issues,' but frames his personal struggle within larger political and historical forces:

Was my writing revealing my Aboriginality, or revealing the absence of it? Who was I writing for? What purposes could my writing serve? This is a recurring problem - particularly now that I have been published - and partly arises from my own insecurity, but also - I believe - from restrictive and limiting definitions of what it is to be Aboriginal, and what is allowed of an Aboriginal writer.¹²

Scott does not disguise the struggle that confronts Aboriginal writers in relation to the narrow prescriptions laid down about what Aboriginal writing is or 'should be'. He courageously embraces this struggle as a commitment to an affirmation of his spiritual inheritance. As well as using the discourses and genres available in creative ways, Scott creatively explores identity, voice and emergent Indigenous storytelling.

Public Poetry

Looking at Scott's poetry provides some insights into his prose. The rhythm of Scott's writing, and his performance abilities, may stem in part from his poetry. As I stated in the introduction, his most prominent poem has a mass audience of unwary train commuters who encounter a piece of poetry in Western Australian trains. Commissioned by Westrail in 1996, the piece works well in the public domain at a number of levels. Titled 'The Train Driver's Conceit,' the poem deals with commuting and train travel at a surface level, but cleverly transports the reader to another level of meaning. Encountering language that moves the

reader beyond the denotative highlights the commutative nature of poetry - straight, referential writing is shifted to the symbolic, the sensory, the realm of polysemic play.

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.

While there may be some environmental elements in the poem, the poem is not a simplistic promotion of the social and environmental merits of train travel. Note that everyone is moving 'One Way' and that the 'vanishing point' has an ominous inflection. Could it be that it is the linearity of the West that is being laid bare here? Could it be that the linearity of train tracks and roads signifies the single-minded and narrow mindset of Western culture?

The fact that predominantly white readers unknowingly confront a text by an Aboriginal person who challenges the linearity of colonial, modern logic is significant. Linear minds probably struggle with this sort of text, for such poetry encourages a reading which accommodates all kinds of sidetracks and twisting trails. Ironically, however, the contemplative and mundane nature of train travel may actually offer people the chance to ruminate on the play of language foregrounded in the poem in a way that opens up meanings normally closed to congested minds.

In the car you're shackled and alone; in the train you're 'freely humming along' in what is a collective, shared experience. But, as I have pointed out, all commuters - whether by road or rail - are moving 'always the One Way.' The reader wonders who those 'others' are that transcend the linearity of modern life. One clue here may be found in the poem's title. It is 'the train driver's conceit,' and it is from his/her perspective that the comparisons are made. The driver/addresser is separate from other commuters in the first two stanzas ('you'), but there is a shift to an inclusive 'we' in the third. So the identity of the transcendent 'others' - which may include the driver, and which may include the reader - remains ambiguous.

But the title also includes another clue. Scott's characterisation of this poem as a 'conceit' foregrounds Samuel Johnson's definition of a conceit as the 'discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'.¹³ In this sense, it may not be the contrast between car travel and train travel that is of central concern here. The train is not simplistically celebrated as the great 'green' hope. Both forms of transport are defined by their linearity, conformity and compulsion - features of modernity and urban living. The 'vanishing point' has apocalyptic connotations, and my suggestion is that the 'others' in this context refers to Aboriginal people and a different way of moving, living, being. When I talked to Kim about the poem, he emphasised the fact that the poem is about different ways of seeing. He pointed out the connection with an earlier poem which also refers to railway lines in terms of linearity, boundaries and perspective: 'Through lines, grids, fences, dunes and mirrors too'.¹⁴

A Distinctive 'Voice'

It is not just what Scott writes about which makes his writing powerful, but also how he writes. I would suggest that his work is best understood in the poetic and dramatic tradition of performance and voice: firstly, because his writing possesses a distinct rhythm and resonance; and, secondly, because Scott's readings of his writing are powerful performances that exploit the vocal qualities of tonality, texture and timing. His 'performances' have the quality and appeal - and indeed emotional intensity - of a show by a singer/songwriter. Scott wins fans through his public appearances, and the way he reads tends to change the way you read his writing. There's a character and charisma there that is undeniable, which makes it hard not to sound like a fan.

Of course, the point is often made that the oral tradition of Aboriginal culture foregrounds the spoken over the written performance - not that Scott claims any special cultural knowledge of this. But he does tap into a tradition in which oral performance is highlighted, and this may represent something of the spirituality and cultural continuity that he refers to, and that he wants to rekindle. Much of Scott's literary skill resides in his ability to harness the rhythm and textures of oral language. This can be best appreciated by witnessing Scott's readings of his work. The way he modulates his voice, the way he uses pauses, the way he exploits the silence, simply has to be heard. This is in no way to diminish the 'writerly' sophistication of Scott's work - the story, the structure, the characterisation - it is simply that, more than most writers, his storytelling is so much more potent when performed.

In late 1997, Scott performed a piece he wrote specifically for a British radio station, This BBC reading is a powerful piece from the perspective of an Indigenous survivor of the colonisation process where, as Scott notes, in the South-West of Western Australia, an estimated 96% of Noongars had been exterminated within 50 years of colonisation. The radio piece begins like this:

To people in a land so very distant from my own, and yet which my schooling taught me to call the mother country, I want to say: insecurity, uncertainty, doubt. Or at least, I want to talk about those words, how they've been whispered for a long time here - two hundred years, more in some places of this continent. How now they are loud, ubiquitous; on lips, in newspapers, visible in the very air trembling above the pavement: insecurity, uncertainty, doubt - about who owns this land under our feet, about who has a right to be here, about who we are.¹⁵

The transcription of this piece does not do justice to the powerful way in which Scott dramatises the words - particularly the pause before the punctuated accentuation of 'insecurity, uncertainty, doubt.'

In his artistic performance and in his life, Scott continues the tradition of Aboriginal people's resistance and persistence.¹⁶ His writing 'takes on' neocolonialist or assimilationist discourses - discourses that underpin the still prevalent desire of non-Aboriginal Australians for Aboriginal people to accept compliantly their destiny to become assimilated into the dominant European culture. Scott regards his writing as 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. This is how Scott describes A. O. Neville's goal of complete absorption:

He [Neville] wanted to show, really, how there was no place for us. Not in his community. He wanted to extinguish us, and turn us into. . . them. So, that may help explain why I'm so prone to identity problems myself, and to what some might call schizoid behaviour. Perhaps never more so than when I fashion my words on a page, and speak them aloud.¹⁷

Scott makes no secret of his struggle with 'schizoid' tendencies, but there is little acknowledgement in Australia of the distinct schizoid element that pervades our history, our culture, our national mythology.

Taking Risks

It is daring of Scott to reanimate the absorptionist line of thinking in his second novel *Benang*, even if he is using colonialist discourses against themselves. For Scott, this is a risky enterprise, as he plays with the way he, and many others, are the historical products of such policies, practices, ideologies. It is risky because there will be people who do not believe that such thinking, such ideas, ought to be reanimated: there will be those who will criticise Scott for being too easy on the colonisers, and others who will criticise it for being too soft on the colonised. Richard Wilkes, in *Bulmurn*, takes a similar risk in his reconstruction of 'frontier' colonial power relations in the Perth region. These texts, and other similar stories, deal with the resistance and persistence of Aboriginal people. This is a topic that is difficult to deal with: how to celebrate Aboriginal resistance without concocting shallow triumphalism; how to represent colonialist oppression without portraying Aboriginal people as helpless victims, or without erasing the tensions and divisions within the colonisers.

Scott, in being prepared to integrate outright assimilationist and racist discourses, is a daring writer, a writer who uses the fictional space to explore significant social concerns for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia. He is aware of the tensions between radical Aboriginal resistance and the reactionary Social Darwinist impulse to see Aboriginal culture disintegrated and domesticated: 'One also needs to engage in polemics and everything because that's a political struggle. But it seems that there's been an effort to fit, to assimilate, to squeeze Aboriginal Australia into this white, non-Aboriginal paradigm... And it means a reduction, a diminishing into "this little box that we give to you"...' ¹⁸

Benang and Boundaries

Part of Scott's quest as a writer is to find new and different ways of writing about Aboriginality: 'Our Indigenous world has been narrowed down for us and put into a tiny box, and there is all this other Indigenous reality around us but we've got to work with what's in the little box'.¹⁹ The ironic and 'magic realist' elements of *Benang* function to deal with the past in ways that push the boundaries of predominantly social-realist reading formations. Social realism tends to conform to well-worn expectations about the 'truth' of the past, and the 'truth' of Aboriginality; however, these expectations often do not match with the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal people's lived experiences. Scott describes this as 'drab social realis[m]...' and looks for ways to rupture the limitations of this dominant form of western storytelling.²⁰

Testing these textual boundaries, Scott pushes A. O. Neville's assimilationist logic to the limit. Rather than simply blaming individuals, however, it is the cultural logic of colonialism, capitalism and cultural condescension that the text satirises. It is the barbarity, savagery and mean-spirited nature of the culture of imperialism that produces the dis-integration of Aboriginal culture and the degradation of the people who have, historically, demonstrated greater social and communal skills of sophistication, generosity and acceptance: 'When I look at our shared history, particularly in the areas that I am from, this Noongar country, there is a lot of generosity and inclusiveness by Noongar people in the early days' (6).

Even this framing of *Benang* risks over-simplifying what is a complex narrative. The novel's complexity forces the reader to work hard to trace fragmented characterisation, fantastical images/metaphors and metafictional narration. Aboriginal identity is not laid out in an accessible, trite or romanticised manner. In this sense, the reader replicates something of the role of the researcher sifting through historical documents, or the family member tracing his or her past. The uncertainty, the incompleteness, the frustration, the messiness – amidst the discoveries, the resolutions, the epiphanies, the order – this is all part of the process of dealing with the abhorrent destruction and scrambling of a culture that cultivated continuity and belonging. In the name of 'uplifting', in the amusing imagery of being so successfully elevated that staying grounded is a problem, there is the harsh reminder of systematic degradation and disconnection from the ground/land that Aboriginal people belong to.

Scott describes *Benang* as 'taking on the very language . . . [he] encounter[s] in . . . [his] research – as offensive and painful as that often is to read – and through various "literary" and imaginative means trying to "defuse" it'.²¹ *Benang* signals a distinct technical and political development in his writing. Scott's intricate research, and his intellectual and critical sharpness, is evident in this reflection on what he is doing in his second novel: 'Again, sometimes, in writing and rewriting the language of the archives, it seems possible not only to defuse, but also to hint at what that language can't say; as if something existed behind and between the lines' (12). By weaving his narrative around this archival material, he is able to make the silences and gaps speak. As Philip Morrissey points out:

Benang is distinguished in the first instance by its language: rather than self-conscious 'beautiful writing', Scott uses plain English, in a form determined by the complexity of the issues he deals with. The fineness of Scott's writing is the guarantor of his integrity as a storyteller... As a post-contact Aboriginal Genesis, *Benang* considers Aboriginal and settler relationships over an extended time-frame, taking into account individual and communal histories, personal psychology, social change and discursive

forms. In doing so it complements Aboriginal life narratives but starts where those texts end: Scott embeds personal experience in an historical and epistemological framework where it takes on its most complete meaning.²²

Benang unsettles the historical pattern of colonial power relations in such a way as to manufacture moments of carnivalesque inversion. For example, the colonialist experimentation with biological and social absorption on human ‘guinea pigs’ by supposedly well-meaning whites is mirrored in one passage where the grandfather becomes the subject of the highly ‘absorbed’ character-narrator:

I had not wanted to write a book. It was Grandfather’s idea. The pleasure I first gained from it was through my efforts of reading it to him, sharing intimacies. And although disabled by his stroke, his eyes could still bulge, his face turn red. I would wipe spittle from his chin and, after putting him to bed and smoothing his pillow down, re-read the sections that had elicited the most satisfying - for me - response.²³

This is a biting satirical instance of ‘getting a taste of your own medicine’, in which the often quoted ‘smoothing the dying pillow’ metaphor is transposed and then refigured: Harley physically smooths the pillow, whilst at the same time psychologically ‘lumpening’ it by tormenting his white grandfather. Scott very cleverly exposes the niceties and civility of the racial engineers’ ‘watering down’ schemes for their calculated project of eugenics and cultural genocide.

By incorporating direct quotations from Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, Scott signals how Neville wrote of ‘the need for both biological and social absorption [to dilute the strain’ (27). This marks not only the desire to eradicate the epidermal marker of Aboriginality, but any social and cultural identifications through ‘selective separation from antecedents’ (28). By interpolating these statements into a resistant narrative, Scott re-frames the rectitude of Neville’s motives so that he can no longer be defended as benevolent, innocent or mild in terms of the historical context. In this sense, Scott disallows the possibility of ‘cheap grace’ for a non-Aboriginal Australia that so grudgingly struggles to come to terms with its treatment of Aboriginal people. Genuine reconciliation can only be achieved through an ability to acknowledge what has been referred to as Australia’s ‘black history’, and then working with Aboriginal people to develop political and cultural initiatives that deal with social inequalities in Australia. Scott’s artistic intervention is a timely one, for in late 1997 debate about the merits of Neville’s policies and ideas surfaced in the local newspaper, *The West Australian*. From a Noongar perspective, the novel is an affirmation of survival, cultural strength, and hope, for ‘benang’ is the Noongar term for ‘tomorrow’. The last line of the novel reads: ‘We are still here, Benang’ (495).

Country and Identity

The cultural continuity and future aspirations of Aboriginal people remain closely linked to land. Most Aboriginal people – despite colonial dislocation, and even if they live in urban areas – maintain a connection with their country and the tradition, and Scott continues his links also. He spent his childhood in Albany and now lives near Fremantle. Scott makes it clear that part of the purpose of his writing is to come to terms with his own experiences and identity as an Indigenous Australian. I would suggest that his writing is increasingly exploring a sense of place, more specifically, of the South-West of Western Australia – Noongar country. Scott has made special efforts to re-connect himself to his country, the place of his

people, in order to deal with the ‘isolation and alienation’ of his life experience.²⁴ He points out how his father used to take the family camping ‘into areas adjoining or on the edge of his people’s traditional country’ (165).

In two of Scott’s poems published in *Wordhord*, there is reference to his father who died at a young age:

You saw his death, met his stare,
were left as his eyes became as drains.
I, three hundred miles away, hung from
the ‘phone and mouthed the beeps.

I wish for lines to join us now.²⁵

The first two stanzas of the poem establish the strong connection between two boys and their father fishing together, while the last two stanzas, quoted above, mark the disconnection of death. Says Scott, in ‘Disputed Territory’: ‘My father died before he was forty. I had this icy silence in me’.²⁶ Once again, it is clear that Scott uses his writing to work through these disconnections.

To speak to Kim Scott, as is evident in the interview with Guy, one quickly discovers that he is a self-effacing, understated and disarming person. At the same time, however, he is very socially and politically aware, and critically astute. In this sense, it is understandable that Scott uses his writing as a means of negotiating the social and historical disconnections in his life. Scott’s writing reaches out to make important cultural re-connections. As he points out, the country he comes from is ‘disputed territory,’ and he writes from within an historical context which is, likewise, disputed (171). Scott’s response to this historical and cultural positionality is very clear:

As a writer . . . it seems to me that my identity is about articulating a position I inhabit at an intersection of histories and peoples, and it is an obligation to speak for those people in my family who history has silenced, and by attempting this to step forward with a heritage largely denied me. (171)

Holding the tension is difficult and complex: at once struggling to connect with Noongar people and storytelling traditions whilst also being ‘a literary novelist... [which] doesn’t eradicate the fact that you are still a Noongar.’²⁷

‘Things Could be Other’: Oral Histories

One way of dealing with this tension is to shift away from fiction, and Scott has made this a priority over the past three or four years, with his third novel, *Naatj*, being ‘put on the backburner’. The focus remains on stories, but life stories and historical stories become the mode of representation. And there is an art to translating the oral word to the written, for it is quite difficult to do well. *Kayang and Me* directly connects storytelling traditions with country, culture and identity. This text draws on the stories of Noongar Elder, Hazel Brown, who was one of the Elders able to place Kim and identify his connection to her family: ‘She is the genealogical authority and she connects us up to tribal names’ (7).

Kayang's and Kim's family stories are placed in a broader social, cultural and historical context so that the archival material is interanimated with personal accounts. These accounts and this structure represent another (an 'other') history – a history that deals with some silences and gaps in official Australian history:

... when I was a little kid my dad would say to me, and it sounds a bit racist in its own way, 'You're Aboriginal.' Sometimes he would say, 'You've got Aboriginal in you.' And he would say, 'And that's the best part of you.' But that's about all he could say. And my understanding is, having been in many ways dispossessed himself, and his language and other things taken away from him, he had some sense of resentment, sullen resentment, or an awareness that things could be other. Especially in terms of one's Aboriginality. And one's sense of history. Things could be other and better than they are now. (5)

Kayang and Me provides an informed, in-depth insight into this 'other' way Scott refers to above. Stories and commentary are used to provide tracks that enable re-connection with other ways of knowing, being, thinking, and understanding. The aim is for the damage of dispossession and denigration to be transformed into a repossession and affirmation of Noongar identity – heritage, culture, and country. The dislocation and fragmentation that functioned as a key strategy of colonisation was especially intense around places of early settlement, such as Albany and Perth, so there were only a limited number of options available for Aboriginal people to survive the impact of dispossession and dislocation. Kayang Hazel and Scott explore the choices available to Aboriginal people and explain the choices they have made. Different groups, different families, and different individuals had to make difficult choices – if they had any choice at all.

In a section that explores some of the choices available, Scott undertakes an insightful examination of some of the subject positions available to Aboriginal people:

... being told to be proud of your Indigenous identity, especially without an informed historical perspective and relying on empirical evidence – the legacy of that history of oppression - can mean being trapped in a reactive loop. In wanting to affirm your identity, and wanting confirmation of it, you perpetuate too much of the way things are now, and an Indigenous identity can even come to mean *don't* achieve, *don't* succeed, because success is associated with a 'white' identity.²⁸ (emphasis in original)

As a number of Indigenous Australians have pointed out²⁹, all too often the products of poverty and oppression have come to define Aboriginality. Just like poverty traps, reactive loops tend to be structurally, historically and socially reproduced. But understanding the destructive nature of this reactive loop is a crucial step in finding other pathways.

Kayang and Me is part of a resurgence of interest in documenting the knowledge of old people in forms that enable greater understanding of narratives that give both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people insights into this land, and into new and different ways of being Indigenous. An awareness of construction and reconstruction, and a sense of making space and creating options, is evident.

'Just 'cause something's written down doesn't mean it's true either, does it?'
No.

I'm just telling it the way I saw it. That's all. I can tell you the way it really was, what it was about. Not all that "maybe-this-and-maybe-that" sort of thing.'

Oh.

'And Kimmy?'

Yes.

'We don't wanna bore people, unna? We wanna tell a good story. You should know that better than me, you s'posed to be the writer.'

Well, I know a story can be more true than the truth, and I know how a story can get to the very essence, the spirit of something. Especially when it's something like injustice, and the abuse of power.³⁰

The strong and frank relationship between Kayang and Kim is evident in the above interchange, and in dialogue that melds the oral with the written. But this text does not just present stories about pure past forms. Current issues and cultural realities are explored in the process of this exploration of identity, culture, and history. Weighty and critical issues are explored, but in a way that is grounded, reflexive and open.

Capturing Culture

Capturing an oral culture in a written form is actually quite a complex process. In the recent short story 'Capture', Scott explores the whole process of researching and writing culture. Two naturalists trap a curious human-like marsupial and, although their intentions are good, what transpires in the story is much more about their interests than that of the creature:

Like many Australians, Peter and Cory wanted to put down stronger roots in this country of ours. Intelligent and informed citizens, they understood that intimate knowledge of this creature could help consolidate their home in this land, its light and air and earth.³¹

Scott uses the naturalists' desire to capture and study this creature to construct an ethnographic account of the naturalists themselves – to represent some kind of 'essence' of western culture and its obsession with 'the other'. The paternalistic language of rescuing is featured in this narrative to capture the cold and clinical scientific desire to position, define and know things in terms of a western enlightenment understanding of the world:

The creature's observers also agreed that it was imperative to not only keep this remarkable entity alive, but to also name, classify, and, if possible, reproduce it. Having rescued it from extinction and oblivion, they would now nurse it back ... and document the entire process. (27)

Capturing knowledge, capturing culture in a way that extracts things from the complex and integrated context of everyday lived existence always runs the risk of putting on display a token or formulaic object. This story ends, however, with the 'specimen' fighting back, desperately appealing: ' "Let us be" ... "Allow us", "Listen" (32). Under attack, Peter and Cory overpower the 'creature' and sedate it, deny hearing the voice/voices.

Colonial power relations are characterized by the tendency to not listen, to not enter into dialogue, to not reciprocate, and to not enter into respectful relationships with Aboriginal peoples as equals. Capturing, controlling, domesticating and assimilating have been the primary colonialist strategies. Knowledge production, whether in the 'breeding' experiments

undertaken by A. O. Neville, is hardly innocent and benevolent. But capturing culture operates on a whole range of levels (a kind of 'capture' is inevitable in this piece itself), and Scott, in much of his work, draws attention to the politics of representation.

In recognition of the complex dynamics of neocolonial complicity and investments, it is interesting to reflect on the attraction of Kim Scott's work for academics interested in Indigenous writing. One very clear thread is that Brewster, Hogan, Van Toorn and I all make some kind of (Bakhtinian) reference to hybridity and/or dialogism in discussing *True Country*. Clearly then, Scott's writing appeals to readers interested in narratives that explore different ways of storytelling, and texts that break down entrenched cultural binaries. As Eleanor Hogan puts it, '*True Country* breaks with autobiographical convention and permits other voices to enter the narrative in a hybrid and dialogic articulation of Aboriginality'³² (Hogan 102). I make this point because it is clear that different readerships will focus on different elements of texts. This said, it is very clear that Kim Scott is an important figure in Australia today because of his creative quest to open up new and different ways of 'being black', and to provide a language for that which is otherwise un-utterable.

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¹ Brewster, Anne. *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*. Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 1995: 9-10.

² Scott, Kim. 'Kim Scott in Conversation with Elizabeth Guy,' *Westerly* (Spring 1996): 9-14.

³ Scott, Kim. 'Disputed Territory,' *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 2000: 169.

⁴ Scott, Kim. *True Country*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 1993.

⁵ Scott, 'Conversation', 5.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. by Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984: 6.

⁷ Toorn van, Penny. 'A Journey Out/Back: Exploring Kim Scott's *True Country*,' *Australian-Canadian Studies* 12.2 (1994): 39.

⁸ Dudgeon, Pat and Darlene Oxenham. 'The Complexity of Aboriginal Diversity: Identity and Kindredness,' *Black Voices* 5.1 (1989): 22-39.

⁹ Scott, 'Conversation', 7.

¹⁰ Scott, 'Disputed Territory', 164.

¹¹ Buck, Joseph. 'Trees that Belong Here: An Interview with Award-Winning Australian Author, Kim Scott.' *Boomtown Magazine*. 1(2001): 3. 16 Feb. 2005.

www.boomtownmag.com/articles/200101/benang.htm

¹² Scott, 'Disputed Territory', 168.

¹³ Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fourth Edition. Sydney: CBS, 1981: 29.

¹⁴ Scott, Kim. 'In Perspective,' in *Wordhord: A Critical Selection of Contemporary Western Australian Poetry*. D. Haskell and H. Fraser (eds). Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 1989: 305.

¹⁵ Scott, Kim. 'Native Title,' BBC Radio Broadcast, 23 Nov, 1997.

¹⁶ Keefe, Kevin. *From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal Education, Culture and Power*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies P, 1992: 90.

¹⁷ Scott, 'Native Title'.

¹⁸ Buck, 'Trees that Belong', 6.

¹⁹ Barker, 'Interview with Kim Scott', *Write Away: The Newsletter of the WA State Literature Centre*. May/June 2000: 7.

²⁰ Buck, 'Trees that Belong', 5.

²¹ Scott, 'Disputed Territory', 170.

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- ²² Morrissey, Philip. Review of *Benang: From the Heart*, by Kim Scott. *Meanjin* 1(2000): 199.
- ²³ Scott, Kim. *Benang: From the Heart*. Fremantle Arts Centre P, 1999: 29.
- ²⁴ Scott, 'Disputed Territory', 165.
- ²⁵ Scott, Kim. 'Our Father, Koo-ee-lung,' in *Wordheart: A Critical Selection of Contemporary Western Australian Poetry*. Eds D. Haskell and H. Fraser. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 1989: 306.
- ²⁶ Scott, 'Disputed Territory', 166.
- ²⁷ Buck, 'Trees that Belong', 7.
- ²⁸ Scott, Kim and Hazel Brown. *Kayang and Me*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 2005: 190.
- ²⁹ See Gilbert, Kevin. *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1978; Dodson, Mick, 'The end in the beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality,' *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1994 (1): 2-13; Langton, Marcia. "Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television . . .", North Sydney Australian Film Commission, 1993; Pearson, Noel. 'On the Human Right to Misery, Mass Incarceration and Early Death,' Dr Charles Perkins Memorial Oration, 25 Oct. 2001, Cape York Partnerships. 16 Mar. 2005
- <<http://www.capeyorkpartnerships.com/noelpearson/>>.
- ³⁰ Scott, *Kayang and Me*, 150.
- ³¹ Scott, 'Capture', *Southerly* (62.2) 2002: 25.
- ³² Hogan, Eleanor. "'Singing Our Place Little Bit New': Kim Scott's *True Country* as Borderline Aboriginal Life Writing,' *Westerly* (Winter 1988): 102.