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Kim Scott's Benang: Monstrous (textual) bodies

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IN KIM SCOTT’S *Benang*, bodies in excess of, or incompatible with, assimilationist and eugenicist discourse, narrate and make sense of their world. Scott has composed a novel that opens up a space to affirm and re-articulate subjectivities, and hence challenge the fantasy of a uniform civic body. Although he is the body who mediates the plurality of stories, his voice does not synthesise heterogeneous stories into a unified and coherent whole. Instead, Harley’s narrative—like his performance—creates a meeting place where diverse and multifarious stories are articulated. Scott introduces the reader to Harley as a hybrid, floating being:

Sing? Perhaps that is not the right word, because it is not really *singing*. And it is not really *me* who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance—leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash—through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating. Together, we listen to the creak and rustle of various plants in various winds, the countless beatings of different wings, the many strange and musical calls of animals who have come from this place right here. [7–8]

At the centre of this storying place are a body, and subject, who cannot be contained within normalised representations of Indigenous or non-Indigenous identities. Harley’s body, to borrow the words of Moira Gatens, “is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies”.² It is a productive and creative body, constituted through its constant interaction with other bodies, and is inclusive of one’s self-differentiating body.

As the product of his grandfather’s eugenicist fantasy, Harley’s body is generated from his environment. However, he is always in excess of assimilationist and eugenicist taxonomy. From the beginning
of the novel he is hybrid, miscegenated and polymorphous. Scott resists the romance of essentialism that is often the only legitimate speaking position for marginalised people. A subject’s ability to influence or be influenced by another is determined not only by their own body, but by everything that constitutes the context in which that body is, acts and is acted upon. Gatens’s concept of the body is one which privileges morphology over biology and in which the body is in constant interchange with its environment. Like Scott’s, it is a conception in which there is no meaning to bodies other than that which is determined within and by encounters with other bodies. The body’s meaning, limitations and capabilities are culturally and historically constructed. New compositions are always being generated. Throughout Benang, Scott suggests that it is the body’s openness to the environment that unsettled the colonisers and made them determine that to establish and maintain sovereignty it was necessary to make a white nation.

MAKING THE COUNTRY WHITE

Harley’s grandfather, Ern, indulges in a fantasy of being one of the pioneers of an antipodean, patriarchal state, in which the social body is imagined as unified, uniform and autonomous from the chaos of corporeality—autonomous from the maternal body. This fantasy involves him imagining that he can alone “produce” the first white man born. Ern intended to be Harley’s creator. He wanted to create the “first white man born” from himself and only himself. Despite the obvious necessity of Aboriginal women in his project, Ern desires the “first white man born” to be, to borrow the words of Gatens, motherless, a miracle of masculine auto-reproduction. Scott highlights that in the “creation” of Harley the Nyoongar women’s only capacity is as body machines, to serve as incubators and storehouses of the foetus. Their capacity as mothers, as far as Ern is concerned, is not to parent the children by educating and nurturing them, but rather as perfunctory “carers” who watch over the children in the absence of the white fathers into whose world they are being educated. Ern disposes of the women once they have borne him a male child. He desires to be read as a scientist in the service of the nation. The vagaries, impulses, and ambiguities of his body—his self—are denied so that he can uphold a fantasy of himself as a unified white, male subject whose consciousness directs his world. The complex materiality of his self is denied.
Both Kathleen and Topsy become victims of Ern’s sexual desire and eugenicist project and are denied the right to be desiring and vulnerable subjects. Ern deploys his Nyongar wives in the service of bringing his own identity into inscription. Kathleen and Topsy’s bodies mean too much to Ern. He burdens and saturates them with meaning, fantasising that he is in control of his world. Topsy, when still a very young woman, is raped by Ern and forced to become his wife, on the grounds that she is young and pretty and that Kathleen cannot bear him a son. Ern also controls the way Topsy dresses and attempts to make her literally a white woman. He insists that she keeps out of the sun and he employs maids so that her hands will not become ruined by domestic work. After she has given birth to Tommy, who cannot be legally named as the “first white man born” because of a change in the law, Ern begins a process of making Topsy white by forcing her to take baths in bleach. She is no longer useful to him as a resource to bear him a “white” son; instead, now, the only thing she means to him is that he has a black wife, when a white wife signifies respectability. Kathleen and Topsy are so violated by white men’s desires for them to yield to their inscription that they disappear from Harley’s story. They have lost their ability to make sense. Their complex material existence is denied so that Ern’s over-determined, limited self might come into being.

**Making Strange Men—Racial Discourse Shaping Bodies**

*Benang* investigates how racial discourse constitutes different power relationships which in turn shape bodies and construct subjectivities. In the hope of securing his daughters’ protection, Sandy One marries Harriette and Dinah to the Coolman twins, who appear, at least initially, not to be opportunists intent on making their fortunes on the frontiers and then investing in middle class respectability. The young couples travel through the women’s traditional country, living an easy, decent life: “[m]oving slow; hunting, drinking.... [the Coolmans] had wives who knew the country; who found them water, food, a place to camp” [170]. They make money from selling kangaroo skins. Theirs is an idyllic life, in which the women are able to live relatively freely in their own country. Scott interrupts and intrudes upon their idyll:

$suddenly$ you needed a license to sell roo skins. They found themselves ‘Gebalup’ way, near the outer limit of the women’s country, and fell in with the Mustle and Done families, who are the ‘landed gentry of this story’. [171]
Their way of life runs contrary to pioneering values and with a simple change of the law their freedom to choose this way of life ends. With the change of law, Daniel chooses, for himself and his family, a settled life, with the prospects of white respectability and economic success.

Daniel’s adherence to pioneering values and capitalism results in his body becoming monstrous and riddled with disease. In older age Daniel Coolman is a comic character, who has to be pushed around in a wheelbarrow, due to rheumatoid arthritis which has caused his limbs to become swollen and distended. His speech is distorted on account of his losing his upper lip to cancer. As Phillip Morrissey argues, Scott’s “characters are marked by the effects of racism or self-willed failure of imagination and intelligence, and this is represented by a fallen corporality.” Daniel’s body deteriorates to the point where he is referred to as “just a pile of clothes with a head on top” [340]. As the white husband and father, he is by law the guardian of his family. Their “freedom” to be lawfully considered as white depends upon them living with him. In desiring the power of the “landed gentry”, Daniel condemns his family to a limited, settled existence. It is a compromise which, in his later life, Daniel hints at to Ern:

Daniel Coolman wheezed as he spoke, and the missing lip fluted his breath in strange ways. But once you adjusted, Ern found, he was easy enough to understand.

‘Isness is ad,’ he said.

And clever Ern could see what he meant. He’d not seen a single customer enter the yard. Although later, recalling the conversation, Ern wondered whether in fact the old man had been suggesting something about the relationship between accounting, or accumulation, and a state of being. [57, my italics]

In playing on the words “is-ness” (business), which in Aboriginal English refers to ritual or spiritual concerns, Scott is suggesting that the desire for material wealth has cultivated white subjects who have abandoned an ethical and spiritual engagement with the world. Scott alleges that racism has resulted in the cultivation of a civic body obsessed with capitalist accumulation, at the expense of ethics and spiritual life. Daniel’s monstrous, sick body is a metaphor for the body politic. A lack of imagination and intelligence, and a fear of difference, has resulted in the body politic becoming cancerous and limited in vitality and movement.

Scott suggests that racism likewise results in Sandy One’s tongue becoming thickened, which causes him to be unable to find the right
words to speak his desires. Instead he is forced to agree with the white settlers:

Despite his stinging tongue, despite everything, Sandy formed the words for agreement easily. No stutter, but a consonant hissed softly. It is a strange and sibilant tongue this one I shared with, among others, he and the inspector. [492]

Sandy wants to protect his family, offer them a future, and to be recognised by the settlers as “someone”. To do so, he does not name himself as Nyoongar. He accepts the freedoms that are extended to the white citizens in the hope of saving his family. This results in Sandy One not openly practising Nyoongar cultural values. It is his wife, Fanny, who teaches their children Nyoongar ways. Sandy’s notion of survival is to continue to exist, whilst Fanny’s is the continuance and nurturing of Nyoongar modes of being. Racism causes Sandy to participate inadvertently in assimilation practices, which result in him losing control of his speech. Scott writes that Sandy had:

passion aplenty, but not the words for it. Now his words left him faster than he had ever acquired them. There was the trouble with his tongue, at the tip. It was wooden and dead, the skin turning black and flaking all the time. [251]

Sandy’s life has been so compromised by racism that he cannot speak out against prejudice, which results in his tongue becoming deadened, and useless as a weapon to defend his family. His body, like the body of the land, is a damaged body, its withering and deterioration a document of the effect of assimilation practices. Sandy’s loss of speech serves as a cautionary tale for Harley in the writing of his narrative. Unless Harley defends his family against racism, he too might lose the ability to speak.

Scott graphically depicts how discourse shapes bodies and creates specific conditions in which people live and recreate themselves.  

When Harley finds his grandfather’s study, he becomes aware that his grandfather’s relationship with him is governed by an adherence to scientific laws, which are deployed to disguise his “cunning...sly lust” [71]. Under the pretence of investigating Harley’s body to record colour variations for his scientific study of miscegenation, Ern sexually abuses Harley. Scott connects Ern’s (literal) insemination of Harley’s body to the dissemination and internalisation of eugenicist discourse which shape Harley’s perception of himself and limit his ability to escape from Ern’s abuse. Harley cannot speak clearly about Ern’s sexual abuse of him. Scott in this manner insists that Harley’s writing
is not therapy, in which he is released from the pain of his history. Scott puts his readers on notice that the violence of history cannot be resolved simply by Indigenous people, and only Indigenous people, bearing the pain of colonisation and assimilation practices. He insists that, to move beyond colonial power dynamics, Australians must become aware of the complexity and insidiousness of racist power dynamics, which have become normalised within the civic body and continue to be disseminated through narratives. In the following scene Scott’s narrative shifts from Harley studying his own reflection, which is constituted from colonial representations, to Ern’s sexual abuse, then returns to Harley’s (re)regenerative narrative:

I studied the mirror, familiarised myself with the selves revealed there...
I saw how I shimmered, just like the aliens do on the television, and although a variety of images were shown, they were all of a kind.
I turned away, turned away from the mirror. I turned my back, showed my black hole, that last aureole of my colour, my black insides. To think this lured grandfather! I had repeatedly taken him inside me, in different ways...
My births took longer, were different; not something he could discard and forget. I gave birth to all these words; these boasts. Grandfather, they spew you out. Me and you both, transformed too. [159]

Ern’s emotionally bereft scientific language becomes misconstrued in the hands of Harley. It becomes a narrative of highly charged emotional language and entangled relationships. When Harley begins his “simple family history” his memory is poor and the only language he has to write, to think and exist with, is Ern’s objectifying, unsympathetic language. For Ern, Indigenous people are a utility, bodies to be captured for his own benefit. He and his fellow eugenicists do not consider Indigenous people to be part of the civic body. Therefore they do not have to treat them justly and as respected, fellow citizens. Indigenous people are answerable to the settlers, but the settlers are under no obligation to reciprocate. To be powerful, in Ern’s terms, one utilises the other for one’s own gain. The knowledge that Harley has inherited from Ern is that to be otherwise, is to be powerless. Initially, Harley responds to this oppressive, racist dynamic by inflicting violence upon both Ern’s and his own body. As Harley informs the readers,

It may have been a desire to transform myself, or even self-hatred, which suggested I slash and cut words into my own skin. But I soon turned to my grandfather’s flesh. I wanted to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me. [37]
Ern's words have fashioned Harley's thinking and he imagines that transformation is only possible through the utilisation and abuse of others. To release himself from the confines of racist discourse, Harley joins a different social body. Harley is reconstituted by his interrelationships with his Nyoongar family and generates an alternative anti-racist narrative. Harley moves beyond racist, colonial power dynamics both by exposing racism and by participating in alternative forms of sociability and storytelling.

REIMAGINING BODIES—NECESSARY FICTIONS

Despite the role that the English language has played in colonisation and assimilationist practices, Scott deploys English to create a body of writing that does not categorise and contain Indigenous people, but rather reconnects them with other Nyoongar people. He attempts to reassemble the fragmented bodies and powers of Nyoongar people to enhance their creative, political force in contemporary Australia. He does not do so by mimicking Western notions of the unified subject, who aspires to fetishised whiteness and normality. Rather he challenges the West's limited constructions of the body and insists that it is socially and historically constructed. When Harley participates in the, albeit, fragmented Nyoongar community, his body becomes recomposed by his environment. Scott represents his characters as being situated in a concrete material reality, which informs their existence, and is beyond his narrative authority. Thus he resists entrapping Indigenous people in his textual empire. He responds politically to historical and social conditions, interrogating social narratives and power relationships, and attempting to revitalise the polymorphous body that unsettles colonialism.

In attempting to reverse Ern's process, Harley not only deconstructs Ern's ideal body, but also invests in a fluid, embodied constitution of subjectivity that is represented by Fanny, who informs his becoming. Ern's writing and thinking style is dismissed in favour of Fanny's embodied practice:

It was never random, it was never just wandering, it was never wilderness. I think it was more like my own wondering, even as I made my way through my grandfather's papers, looking for traces, for essences, for some feeling of what happened, for what had shaped it this way. Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognised the trace of her own ancestors, and looked for her people. She brought them back. I would like to think I do a similar thing. But I found myself among paper, and words not formed by an intention corresponding to my own, and I read a world weak in its creative spirit. (471-2)
Fanny understands that one's body is in constant exchange with one's environment. She attempts to connect her family with a terrain that was, and is, inhabited by Nyoongar people. As Michael Holquist maintains, the body is inter-corporeal—"the body cannot be conceived outside a web of interrelations of which it is a living part." Harley learns from his uncles that to become Nyoongar he cannot just trace his family back through the colonial records, but must, like Fanny, travel through the country of his ancestors and connect with Nyoongar people. The white settlers, who insist upon a white Australia, are inadvertently recognising the body as inter-corporeal. They want to "remove" Indigenous bodies to avoid their white bodies being transformed. Fanny recognises that to survive it is necessary to negotiate and compromise and also to preserve a Nyoongar identity. Within Scott's textual topography, no body is passive; rather all bodies are productive and determined by encounters with other bodies and places. Scott represents Fanny as a creative and desiring subject. This is in direct contrast to the eugenicists who imagine the black, female body as a silent surface for whiteness to utilise for the purpose of metamorphosis.

Unlike the eugenicists, Scott resists essentialised identities. Harley's identity is formed through identification. Harley learns, or perhaps always knew, that the self is a fiction—a construct of language. Yet it is a necessary fiction. Harley helps regenerate the Nyoongar community by naming himself as Nyoongar. Fanny too, despite the impact of colonisation upon her and her people, recognises herself not only as Nyoongar, but as Benang—the traditional owners of a particular country. In so doing, Fanny keeps the name alive. Harley takes up the name—Benang—and gathers the remnants of stories and people to strengthen the community. Scott is attempting to reverse the colonial process that controls, regulates and limits Indigenous people by categorising them. He insists on the complexity and singularity of Nyoongar people. However, political action requires that limitations be imposed to identify people as belonging to a social group. Scott writes from a position of temporary closure of Nyoongar identity, whilst also insisting on differentiation. Harley names himself as Benang, even as he considers the "spelling of hard-of-hearing and ignorant scribes: Benang, Pinyan; Winery, Wonyin. It is the same people. We are of the same people" [103]. Naming is a form of fiction but it gives Harley a place from which to speak and act.

To reverse the parenting he receives at Ern’s hands, Harley
reconnects with the multifaceted Nyoongar world. In so doing, he avoids being consumed by the colonisers’ overwhelming power and desires. Scott’s readers witness Harley’s transformation from being a floating, disembodied, “first white man born”, with a poor memory, to becoming Marban—a highly heterogeneous, self-differentiating trickster character, who has the ability to shape-change. Scott dispenses with Ern’s idealised white body, for a porous, polymorphous body, which is unclassifiable within Western taxonomy. Furthermore, Harley rejects the racial identity that is imposed upon him by Ern, and names himself as Benang. He is not a white man, nor an aberration of whiteness. Scott represents Harley as both belonging and responsible to a different social body and also demanding a place in the nation’s civic body. When Harley forms connections with his Nyoongar family and traditional country, his highly miscegenated body regains power and vitality. Harley refuses the privileges of being white. In so doing, he dismisses the value the eugenicists and assimilationists confer upon whiteness, and instead values a social body that is beyond Western reasoning.

Scott generates a revitalising narrative from fragmented and dispersed stories, experiences and bodies. The novel has a circular narrative. At the beginning and end of the novel are scenes in which Harley hovers and sings above a camp fire. Despite the confusion and fear that Harley’s performance creates, it is this “too-well disguised” Nyoongar man who acts both to embrace everyone, and also to assert the continuance of Nyoongar people. Scott disrupts normative practices of reading the body; such practices, informed by colonial power relationships, disable and silence Indigenous people. He replaces such readings with a body that cannot be authoritatively read or known. He insists that the body is both a point of connection and also radical difference. Harley is a body in transition, who acts as a point of connection between many different stories. Harley’s performance creates a meeting place, a “small circle of which I [Harley] am the centre” [7]. Scott affirms his desire to make contact, without being assimilated into a dominant and more aggressive discourse.

In creating a dialogic text, which relies on intertextuality and incorporates a plurality of voices, Scott is insisting that to reconfigure race relations, normalised, Australian cultural formations must be transgressed. Scott has conceived not only of a monstrous protagonist but also an excessive novel that refers beyond itself. In so doing, he contests the assimilationist’s and eugenicist’s desire to control,
and halt, the continual transformation of the world, hence the self. To maintain order the assimilatiomists and eugenicists insist on the uniformity of bodies, knowledge and language. Scott not only disrupts colonial order, but also asserts an alternative ideology that privileges the openness of the world and resists the colonialist function of giving meaning to whiteness. Whereas the colonisers, in all their guises, allege that the fluidity of cultural forces endangers everybody, Scott declares that it is a threat to white authority and the continuance of colonialism. Thereby, the monstrous novel, narrated by a monstrous protagonist, is a powerful political act. Harley’s body is Nyoongar due to complex social relations that are not static. As his body hovers and turns above the campfire, and the people stare in wonder, Harley produces new understandings of the body and identity. Indeed, he creates new bodies. His body is not a metaphor for that which is not white. It cannot be brought into an already established symbolic economy, but rather prevents interpretation. In so doing, Scott demands that difference and differentiation be recognised and negotiated as legitimate modes of being.

Scott’s protagonist, Harley, is constituted as tentative, yet sure; a gentle force who is contesting the ground, the body, upon which the body politic has been established. By situating such an ambiguous body at the centre of a meeting place, as one who speaks for and represents so many who have been silenced, Scott is suggesting that the body politic needs to be reconfigured to be inclusive of difference and, even more importantly, self-differentiation. It must also be recognised that every speech act is situated, in that it comes from a particular place and body, and speaks in the name of the desires of that particular body, be it individual or collective. The Australian body politic was made in the image of the unified and undifferentiated, white and male subject who wants to be seen as all mind and no body. As Radhika Mohanram argues, “colonialism and the racial categories it produced were largely expressions of white bodies from Western hemispheres recreating and reworlding non-Western regions of the world”. Vitality of life was sacrificed in an attempt by European bodies to “feel” the same in this strange, incoherent country. Scott plugs Harley’s particular body into an assemblage of Nyoongar bodies to create a force to be reckoned with by the civic body. For a country to claim truly that it is open to democracy, difference cannot be digested into a more complex unity. Australians must learn to live with unresolvable tensions. As Scott writes, “[t]here is no other end, no other destination for all this paper
talk but to keep doing it, to keep talking, to remake it” [472]. At the centre of this is Harley, a strange narrator, who cannot author his own life without the voices of many, and who cannot contain others within his “little family history”. He confounds both his own people’s and non-Indigenous people’s ability to name and know him. Scott challenges the myth of the unified body and essentialised identities, and composes a fragmented and interrupted narrative which envisions alternative inter-connections and social constellations. Scott declares that, for Australia to become postcolonial, Australians need to acknowledge that there is much beyond our knowing, and yet we still must speak, forever fumbling for the right words.

ENDNOTES
3 Gatens, op. cit. 131.
4 Gatens, op. cit. 53.
6 Mohanram, op. cit. 64.
7 Changes in the Western Australian Aboriginal Act named formally exempted “quadroons” as Aboriginal. This prevented Ern from being able to declare his son Tommy to be a white man. See Anna Haebich, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000, chapter 4.
10 Gatens, op. cit. 71.
12 Mohanram, op. cit. 64.
13 Mohanram, op. cit. xiii.