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# Kim Scott's *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty

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The narrator, Harley, of Kim Scott's novel *Benang*, suggests that he is writing "the most local of histories" (10). However, he also questions what it is that he is writing—"What was it? A family history? A local history? An experiment? A fantasy?" (33). Furthermore, throughout the novel, Harley worries that his "little history" might be resuscitating racist discourse. The questions that Harley raises regarding what it is he is writing parallel Scott's concerns with problems of style, genre and frame. The colonial ideology of assimilation was disseminated through writing, which informed non-Indigenous people's knowledge of and relationships to Indigenous people and laid the foundation for contemporary race relations.

Given that writing has been a crucial weapon deployed in the interests of colonial violence, in what style should Harley write? And how can he write of worlds which he has been estranged from, and *educated* to disavow? He is trying to recover worlds for which he has no language. For cultural regeneration to occur, events must be spoken of which, as Scott puts it, are "difficult to say" (216). To speak of the violence and betrayal that Indigenous people have survived is not only to relive that violence, but is also to experience deep shame, to which Harley's uncle Will gives testimony. To speak out of anger and resistance perhaps offers Scott a deluge of words in which to berate non-Indigenous Australians for the horror of colonisation and its continuance, but it equally reopens the wounds of Indigenous people and potentially limits them to the stifling position of the victim. If those who have survived cultural genocide have relied on silence as a practice of survival, is there, in fact, a language left in which Scott might speak of the vitality of a Nyoongar worldview? And, if there is, does he risk subjecting it to recolonisation or debasement by exposing it to non-Indigenous people's desire to

assimilate strangeness into the known? Harley's tentativeness toward and questions regarding what genre he should write in, and what forms of thinking and living he is cultivating, reflect Scott's concerns with envisioning an improved future without prescribing an equally reductive or idealised alternative orthodoxy.

However, Harley also alerts readers to the ramifications of not writing and speaking. Harley's early experiments with writing indicate that it is writing that allows him to ground himself and, once grounded, he has the ability to regenerate. Scott is perhaps suggesting that writing offers Harley an anchor in the complexity of existence and prevents him floating away. Indeed, both his Nyoongar uncles Jack and Will encourage Harley to return to writing to help ground him and to take up his responsibility to participate in a cultural regeneration.

It would, therefore, appear that Scott is caught at an ethical impasse—to speak or not to speak? Scott has created a style in which he both signals to the reader this aporia and writes his way out. This is why Harley prefers Jack's form of storytelling. Caution is necessary, as Scott does not want to risk limiting Nyoongar people in yet another colonising discourse. His style of writing disturbs colonial logic by exposing its violence. However, if Scott desires to transform contemporary Australia and displace colonial logic, then he not only needs Harley to become someone other than he is, but also 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. In experimenting with a dialogic style of writing, Harley deploys writing as a tool for transformation in which he does not capture otherness and reduce it to the same, but rather forges connections.

Much contemporary debate regarding ethics argues that ethics begins when one's certainty is disabled. Ethics is an encounter with the other whereby their radical alterity cannot be reduced to one's knowing. Simon Critchley suggests that the ethical moment is that of being “pre-reflectively addressed by the other person in a way that calls me into question and obliges me to be responsible. This is a concrete context for ethics; or rather, it is the context in which ethics interrupts the context of the world” (48). One's certainty is blocked and one is exposed to the singularity of the other. The other escapes one's comprehension. Thus, an encounter with alterity is a performative moment that cannot be regulated, foreseen or dominated in advance (Critchley 114). As Kevin Hart suggests, ethics is a “movement from the solitude of my being to a sociality that is irreducible to being or knowing” (56). The exposure to the other reveals the radical social construction of our *self*; indeed, that we are reliant on the other for our self. Hence, the ethical moment ruptures the self from self-understanding and causes anguish.

The world is beyond our comprehension, yet we are reliant upon it and those who dwell in it for our subjectivity. Ethics is reliant on self-exposure—an openness to the other. Despite the pain of the impossibility of knowing, as Andrew Gibson suggests, “it is also the seed of the most extraordinary and unexpected regenerations and renewals” (79). In the performative utterance of addressing one’s unknowable interlocutor, a gap is opened in one’s identity, in which the self is reconfigured.

To resist, challenge and reconfigure the colonial project that continues in Australia, where the colonisers’ culture, will and knowledge dominate the social field and notions of “truth,” Indigenous people must name themselves with names that are generated from histories, memories and imaginaries that are other to non-Indigenous Australians. Non-Indigenous Australians, and I speak here predominately of white, settler Australians, are confronted by cultural difference that cannot and will not conform to non-Indigenous memories or history. Hence, to respond ethically in cross-cultural engagements one must be open to otherness and not synthesise it into sameness. In so doing, one is exposing oneself to the destabilising process of not being able to recognise oneself in the other. One’s openness to the other leaves one exposed to another’s desires, and thus subject to being reconfigured and becoming someone other than one is.

One’s self is composed from encounters with otherness. To perceive of the self as emerging from encounters with otherness is to radically transform concepts of subjectivity and identity. The image of subjectivity is not one of self-consistency or fixity, but rather of fluidity and porosity. The other and otherness is not a threat to one’s being, but the site from which one’s identity is generated. In Australia both Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities are constituted from cross-cultural encounters. However, political and social action are only possible through self-limitation. To take up a speaking position one must participate in the necessary fiction of an arbitrary closure that makes politics and identity possible (Hall 137). One cannot speak out against colonialism and racism without entering into a historical and cultural dialogue that in turn positions and limits one as a particular subject.

Scott has composed an uncertain narrator to portray the intersubjectivity and intertextuality of the self and to limit imaginative desire. Scott begins *Benang* with the protagonist Harley conceived as the “first white man born” (10). He is the end result of his grandfather, Ern’s, personal eugenicist project, which participates in the wider official assimilation project of biologically and culturally absorbing Indigenous people into white Australia. Harley attempts to reverse Ern’s process by reconnecting with his Nyoongar relatives and Nyoongar cultural knowl-

edge. In constructing Harley as a subject in formation, Scott bears witness to Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) identity being created through dialogue, storytelling and embodied practices. Harley's identity is produced in the articulation of cultural differences. Scott does not seek to prescribe what it is to be Nyoongar, or Indigenous, but rather positions Indigeneity, like all identities, as culturally constructed and always in the process of becoming.

Harley does not know who he is. In a sense he must start again, not from the "clean slate" that Ern envisions, but from learning to listen carefully, feel and to open himself up to alternative ways of knowing and being. The vulnerable, unconsolated speaking position allows for a questioning: Who am I now? How can I speak this? Speaking from the position of vulnerable identity allows Scott to investigate the complexity of postcolonial Australia. It is too late for us to forget one another so we must examine the interconnectedness that history has thrust upon us. Scott explores this interconnected history through his unconsolated narrator, who cannot speak with *too much* authority. However, Harley's indeterminacy highlights the vast array of possibilities available to him. Scott thus exposes his readers to the opportunities that exist for Australia to move beyond contemporary race relations and cast off the thinking which contracts us to a history that prevents us from becoming other than what we are. In writing from a liminal space Scott empowers *Benang's* Nyoongar community to articulate alternative understandings of belonging and identity, which will act to destabilise white dominance.

Despite Harley's indeterminate identity being initially self-alienating, his position as an "unhealthy" postcolonial subject is a weapon that can be deployed against colonial history and mythology, by unsettling the logic of white, western supremacy that continues to dominate our present. As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs argue:

The nation [Australia] becomes unfamiliar to itself precisely because of the postcolonial condition in which an Indigenous population is increasingly able not just to "write back" but to produce a range of special effects, which can be unsettling right across the board. (135)

Harley's special effect is not only his "propensity for elevation," which satirises and laments the colonial regime's project to *raise the native up*, but also importantly the *unhealthy* subject that this has produced. Harley's unhealth is a *special effect* that is unsettling to the rational colonial project as it exposes its lack of power to maintain order and limit life to that which abides by its logic. Its insistence on uniformity institutes unimaginable effects. Harley's strangeness inaugurates uncertainty and hence potential anxiety in his readers who imagine their country and fellow Australians into coherence. Scott therefore reflects a strange and estranging image back at the nation.

In focusing on the moments and processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference, Scott initiates an empowering political process for Indigenous peoples (Bhabha 3). This process enables an investigation into the micro- and macro-political initiatives which instituted contemporary Indigenous realities, without prescribing and limiting Indigeneity. Initiating this process, Scott envisages Indigenous communities—local, national and global—that are anchored in history and the land and in a process of coming into being. Harley's indeterminacy becomes a site of empowerment. Declaring his identity to be provisional enables him to contest colonialism's essentialised racial identity constructs. Furthermore, self-invention demands that one be recognised on one's own terms and as a desiring subject. As Franz Fanon declares:

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered . . . I demand notice to be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is a world of reciprocal recognitions. (218)

In taking up a position in which one is “doing battle for the creation of the human world,” one is recognising that one is not *only* a colonised subject. In the act of endlessly creating oneself, one is not a slave to history.

By conceiving of an *uncertain* narrator, Scott suggests that one can author their world, but that their *text* is always incomplete and entangled in a plurality of relations. One can be an author, but never an authority, as oneself and the world are ineluctably other. Ern and his eugenicist colleagues' style of speech and writing are inadequate to represent Harley's subjectivity and to form ideologies. The eugenicists' static and prescriptive language reinforces the political authority of the unified and coherent Western subject. Mimicking the eugenicists' style of writing disables Harley from speaking of himself and his world. Harley searches for a narrative mode that takes its shape from the living heteroglossia of the self and the world. *Benang* is both the quest and an answer.

#### MAKING NONSENSE OF COLONIAL LOGIC

To reverse Ern's project, Harley enters into the labyrinth of Ern's and his contemporaries' writings, files, photos and records, and in so doing is exposed to the complexity and multiplicity of people's lives. He is overwhelmed by written records, a deluge of oral histories, fragments of stories, half forgotten memories, pain that has never been spoken and cannot find a language by which to be released, hybrid tales, stories long buried under colonial representation and stories lying quiet, waiting to be reactivated and to re-enter the world. Harley be-

comes aware of how people's personal destinies are interwoven and determined by historical contexts (Lukacs 42). He must find a style, and an ethics, of speech which allows him to connect up the many remnants that he has discovered, to write a counter narrative that enables a multiplicity of perspectives and regenerates Nyoongar cultural knowledge.

Having discovered Ern's study, Harley reads and rereads Ern's and contemporary eugenicists' writing. Harley familiarises himself with the eugenicists' conviction that whites had the moral right to be the creators of a new people from a *despised* race. Upon hearing hints of Ern's project, Harley moves from initial shock and disbelief to a firm conviction that his grandfather had intended to be his creator, and that he was the end result of Ern's fantasy: a fiction. Despite these discoveries and his desire to reverse his grandfather's process—and whatever understanding he might have come to of this process—and although he has rejected Ern's *truth*, still he remains with only his grandfather's knowledge of him: "My grandfather had reassured me, told me he knew, told me my place. I knew already the bullshit of that" (146). He deploys his floating, a consequence of Ern's project, to offer him new perspectives. Floating high above the land, moored to the earth by fishing line, Harley watches the sea blossom, "[a]ll day, blooming and dying, blooming and dying" (146). The land and the sea merge and separate. It is only his perspective that distinguishes them as different entities. He is not in control of his floating and he is torn from his new perspective of the world by gusts of wind and flung against buildings. The floating allows him new vision, but his lack of control over it prevents him from being able to "concentrate on any sort of story, no narrative" (147). Just as the sounds that issue from his body are beyond his control, so is his ability to utilise his differences for revolutionary purposes:

The cuff of my trousers caught on the guttering, and there I was; uplifted and spread out to the wind, which whistled through me, and in and out of orifices, singing some spiteful tune.

I could not concentrate on any sort of story, no narrative. My trousers ripped a little more.

Desperately I tried to get some words flowing through my head. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck I gotta I gotta gotta I must must must I will will will oh will will Uncle Will what he had said and my father and what I guessed, remembered, imagined? . . .

I was worried that someone might see. An embarrassment, such an abuse of reason. I was a freak. (146–47)

Harley's freakish behaviour, his abuse of reason, frightens and disturbs Ern. However, Harley remains lonely and isolated and still unable to participate in creatively remaking the world. The knowledge of his grandfather's project establishes a context which allows him to critique his subjectivity and his history, but it does

not offer him a language in which he can generate a counter-narrative that challenges assimilationist knowledge.

Early in the novel Harley addresses the readers, thanking them for “remain[ing] with this shifty, snaking narrative. I am grateful; more grateful than you know, believe me” (22). He indicates that the stories he has to tell cannot be told within established writing styles. Scott exposes the historical circumstances and events, and configurations of power that have led to contemporary conditions of existence. In composing a “shifting, snaking narrative,” Scott suggests that it is impossible to write in a unified and coherent style and still generate a narrative that is inclusive of the plurality of perspectives of the historical players. A closed and certain composition endeavours to deny the multiplicity of voices, the plurality of relations, and the open-ended present (Bakhtin 7). That is, Scott’s text exposes the vulnerabilities, uncertainties and fluidity of subjectivity. He suggests that a new ethics of cross-cultural engagement—Australia becoming postcolonial—is reliant on transformations of subjectivity. Transformations of subjectivity are reliant upon infusing narratives of the self with alternative stories and knowledge. Scott’s style of storytelling rehearse the process of the self being open to and reconstituted by otherness. They conceive of subjectivity, like language and storytelling, as a shared event (Holquist 28). One self is always an improvisation generated within a dialogue.

#### LOQUACIOUS BECOMINGS

Chatalong’s childish verbosity teaches Harley a style of storytelling that is in “living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the opened present)” (Bakhtin 7). Jack, or Chatalong as he is known as a child, anchors himself in a vastly complex, threatening and potentially estranging world by composing stories and sound scapes from the intense fabric of his world. At school Chatalong is gagged to stop his incessant talking, and his sister, Kathleen, reads “his eyes and small movements, fearing that otherwise she would lose touch with him completely” (259). By connecting with this talkative child—listening to stories of his childhood—Harley witnesses language being deployed differently from the way Ern and his contemporaries deploy it, and recognises the demand it makes on him to hear differently, and the opportunities it holds for self transformation. Scott writes:

Chatalong talked and talked. He liked to hear sounds emerging from himself. He farted, hummed, sang, and—when he talked—obviously shaped his words at the very last moment. It gave him an



engaging charm; it made him honest, even though so much of what he said was full of contradictions. Most of it, they were sure, was true. They were equally sure he never intended to lie. It was just that he spoke as quickly as he thought and, having picked up so many strange bits and pieces of stories in his short life, understood that the only way they could be connected was by his utterances. (250)

In his pursuit of a path that might lead him out of the limited identity which Ern bequeathed to him, Harley takes Jack's talkative younger self and Kathleen, Jack's interlocutor, as his guides.

In recalling stories of his youth, the older Jack alerts Harley to the disparity between Jack as a child and as a young man. Harley ponders:

Chatalong had been struck dumb. What happened to that easy way with words, the easy launching of them, the unthinking way he could set them into flight? (99)

After the death of Daniel Coolman, Harriette's white husband, Jack's family are no longer exempt from the Aboriginal Act and are removed from their traditional country to Mogumber Settlement. At the mission the lighter skinned children are removed, but because Jack is *too dark* to be sent elsewhere, he is instructed to care for an old blind couple. At the Settlement Jack is segregated from his country and the two people who listen to and understand him, Fanny and Kathleen. However, his mother Dinah, from whom he has been separated since he was a small child, works in the kitchen of the Settlement, and "Jack learnt many things in the kitchen, and there was an awakening, just as there have been many awakenings" (94). Although Scott does not inform the reader of what these awakenings entailed, we know that prior to being removed to the Settlement Jack was an innocent, naïve boy, despite much of what he had witnessed. At the Settlement Jack learns the harsh realities of Nyoongar people's lives and of the government's intention to destroy Nyoongar people and culture. While with Fanny and Kathleen, Jack was connected to a living, breathing Nyoongar world, which informed a deep sense of himself, his belonging and identity, and his loquaciousness enabled him to devise connections in an otherwise confusing environment. However, at the Settlement he is silenced by the realisation of the destruction that surrounds him. The old people he cares for speak to him in a language he does not understand but which

reached deep within him, made him feel like an instrument being played. But such a poor instrument because, although he felt the humming alive within him, it was more like a struggle to breathe than articulated song.

Inside his head he tried the sounds, attempted the rhythm, felt the vowels slipping together. (99)

Although he stays in touch with the rhythms, Jack is estranged from a means of expression. Jack becomes isolated, which makes him vulnerable to colonial, racist discourse. His chatter had enabled him to form connections with the world and his family and gave him a narrative authority. This in turn offered Jack a sense of belonging, identity and agency.

Jack's silence invokes a dangerous alienation and loss of identity. When a corroboree takes place at the Settlement, Jack refuses to participate. After a long silence Jack screams, "No, no, not me" (99). The performance of Nyoongar spirituality has become strange to him. Scott juxtaposes the corroboree scene with a violent racial incident in which a young Nyoongar boy is tarred and feathered as a perverse form of being disciplined into white "civilised" behaviour. The narrative jump from the corroboree scene to the scene of racial violence indicates the connections made by Jack. Scott draws the readers' attention to the effects of internalising racist discourse. Scott ushers the readers toward connecting Jack's silence—his inability to articulate the hum (his inner Nyoongar world, which offers him a sense of identity and belonging)—with the dangers of internalising a despised image of his Indigenous self. The corroboree no longer represents a spiritual connection to the country but rather a punishable offence. Scott is suggesting that Jack's alienation and estrangement from Nyoongar worldviews opens up a space in which his identity is informed by Western racial constructions. Thereby, he is filled with shame and his life force is stifled.

The readers do not witness Jack's *growth* from this alienated young man to an older, wiser, more vital man. We are not informed of how this process occurs. However, Harley's "shifting, snaking narrative" (22) demands the readers make the connection. The readers must *write in* their own connections as they are positioned, like many of the Nyoongar characters, and most especially Harley, in a confusing, violent world in which, unless they develop an interpretative autonomy, they will be created in someone else's vision. Jack is almost defeated at the Settlement. He becomes an angry, isolated, silent man, cut off from the vital life force of his childhood. Jack's survival and vitality rely not only upon being able to negotiate colonial power relationships, but also upon maintaining a connection with that which is nonsense to the colonial, assimilationist discourse. Despite Jack's inability to comprehend the old, blind couple's language, it keeps him "humming"—an alternative reality alive within him. In attempting its rhythms, slipping the vowels together, and forming sounds that say nothing, Jack rescues himself from being destroyed by the assimilationist practices. The old people's language keeps Jack connected to Indigenous culture. Like Jack's childish verbosity, and his later "deluge of words," Harley's "clumsy narrative" (165) is a style of narrative which demonstrates a plurality of relations, and in the process of authoring

his world enables him to “selectively assimilat[e] the words of others” (Bakhtin 341). Their respective narrative styles formulate and articulate their own ideologies, which are opposed to eugenicist and assimilationist discourse.

#### THE MONSTROSITY OF THE NOVEL:

##### LIBERATING QUIET VOICES AND GENERATING ANTI-COLONIALISM

The experiences of his Nyoongar relatives charge Harley with an ethical imperative to expose his self to uncertainty—to allow uncertainty to regulate his thinking and his writing, hence his self-transformation. Harley sets himself the project of beginning to “pick up a rhythm begun deeper and long before those named Fanny and Sandy One Mason” (32). He wants to transgress the lines of the eugenicist writing. Ern’s intention was to be Harley’s creator (32), and to reverse this project Harley must become both his own creator and subject to *other/s* creation stories. To do so, Harley immerses himself in a deluge of Nyoongar stories. Lost in the labyrinth of narratives—narratives that are in excess of colonial logic—he becomes unfamiliar to both himself and Ern. Scott’s dialogic narrative style suggests that to become postcolonial one must expose oneself to the destabilising process of being open to alterity.

Jack’s cautious, wary and dialogic style indicates a way of writing that might liberate alternative voices and not subsume them under the authoritative voice of the author. To write against colonial discourse Scott must be wary that the characters are not subordinated to his viewpoint or merge with his consciousness; thus, however different they might be from Ern’s representations of Nyoongar people, they would nonetheless be reduced to a single consciousness. The truth of Chatalong’s tales emerges not from the imposed authority of the speaker, but rather from the unfolding of a multiplicity of perspectives and a struggle of the plurality of languages which compose his stories. What might appear to be childish verbosity or nonsense is the key to Harley creating a writing self who practises a contemporary ethics of speech. It is in the listening to, and the writing of, that which is nonsense to eugenicist discourse that Harley is *enlightened* to the potential to transform his *whingeing* into a revolutionary writing. Harley deploys that which is *nonsense* to Western reason to defamiliarize and disrupt its cultural hegemony. In so doing, he carves out a place for alternative practices of reading and storying, hence new sites of articulation.

*Benang* is alive with struggles. Scott avows the heteroglossia of languages and the social world. He rejects the racist ideology that dominates representations of and

cross-cultural engagement with Indigenous people. *Benang* is both a political critique and a reimagining of contemporary Australia. Scott intervenes in and reconfigures dominant race relations. To do so requires, as Ato Quayson maintains, double vision—a recognising of existing social formations and a decomposing and reaching beyond to alternative visions (95). Scott does this by aligning Harley with ever-present Nyoongar worldviews. When Harley asserts, “Sandy One is no white man. Just as I am no white man, despite the look of me . . .” (494), he identifies with being Nyoongar and locates his struggle to “find the right words” as a continuation of Fanny’s struggle:

Fanny embellished, linked, led him on. Later in the night, Fanny and the fire spoke to all the sleeping, slumped bodies. She mumbled, and sang softly to herself, often with words that they might not know. Sometimes of children she had lost, the father mother that were taken. Her brothers, sisters.

Wondering, always, how to say it softly enough so that they might remember. (245–46)

Harley is deterritorialised from an assimilationist assemblage and is reterritorialised onto a Nyoongar world. He is no longer the “first white man born.” The authoritative language holds no power over him and cannot prescribe his Being in the world. Harley’s style of storytelling speaks of and enables his new values to take shape and form, which gives them a political potency. At both the opening and the close of the novel, this “spiteful tune” has been transformed into a “hum with the resonance of place” (494). Even though some of his own people are made uncomfortable and cynical by his presence, once he begins to sing, “no cynicism remains” (7), as Harley becomes the instrument through which the very potentiality of life sounds. The language that his grandfather deployed to activate the eugenicist world of social Darwinism, which privileges white masculinity, is dispersed and replaced by a writing that gestures toward the vitality and intensity of life.

Scott suggests that language does not reflect but creates the world. The eugenicists created a world in which one engaged with difference through repression, ordered violence and fear. Australia’s race relations were created from the words chosen and silences held. Harley becomes the reader’s tentative guide to creating a new ethics of engagement. He hovers around the campfire where the readers have gathered to watch him perform—to hear him sing. He does not present the reader with the authentic voice of Indigeneity; instead an ambiguous, barely human form rises from the ground, insisting on his otherness, yet demanding dialogue. Scott refuses to appease his readers by offering them a healthy subject, a protagonist who has worked through his pain. Rather, he charges us all with the reciprocal responsibility of recognising the material effects of thinking and writing. He refuses the enforced Western vision of Aboriginality and forms *uncertain*

representations that arise out of Nyoongar traditions, the experience of racial violence and plurality of individual and social life. *Benang* is a novel that commands the reader to understand all utterances are composed, like Harley, from a multiplicity of languages. Yet Harley (like Scott) stories his world to participate in a social dialogue. He chooses his heroes, mentors and guides from outside normalised Australian culture, and his choices indicate the community for whom, and with whom, he speaks. *Benang* is a meeting place—a site in which a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians might begin, and which recognises that on the ground beneath our feet “there are many stories” (495). Scott bids his interlocutors to listen to these stories and begin to create new ways of narrating Australia, thus infusing the country with Indigenous cultural perspectives.

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