2001

Benang: from the heart: 'I found myself among paper'

Lisa Slater
University of Wollongong, lslater@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
end of the poem’s fairytale. An inevitability clicks in, evoking human ‘clocked’ time, so much less simple than the one-to-twelve cycles on an artefactual clockface.

Line eleven, which has the persona still in the fairytale, is contrastive, takes longer to say, its vowels and consonants have a kind of generous swing prolonging the moment; the deliberate position of the comma (it’s the only instance of a comma in a poem punctuationless except for a question mark, and the full stop in the last line) adds to the slowing; there’s a wealth of attitude in that ‘drink deep, darling boys’.

Lisa Slater

Benang: From the Heart: ‘I Found Myself Among Paper’

Kim Scott, Benang: from the Heart (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999, $21.50)

In his first novel True Country, Kim Scott established himself as a writer who is determined to investigate the continued traumatic effects of colonial violence. Harley, the protagonist of Scott’s second novel Benang: from the Heart (the co-winner of the Miles Franklin award), takes up a pen in response to reductionist assimilationist records. He states:

But I found myself among paper, words not formed by an intention corresponding to my own, and I read a world weak in creative spirit. (472)

Harley is describing the white writing (colonial records) that objectified the ‘native’ in an attempted to control and reduce Nyoongar identity. However, it is in these records that Harley ‘discovers’ the Aboriginal heritage that has been denied him. In so doing he commences recreating himself, exploring his Nyoongar identity; a journey in which his identity comes under question and is not resolved. Scott positions Harley as an ambiguous character who ‘discovers’ that identity, like language, is a site of conflict and negotiation: a discursive practice. In reading white writing (that is, white making and remaking of the world), as weak in creative spirit, the gaze is being turned upon the construction of whiteness. It could be argued that Scott is positioning
Harley as a guide (an ambiguous Virgil) for the treacherous journey into the unknown territory of remaking of identity. Not just Nyoongar identity, possibly not even Nyoongar identity but rather white identity.

Harley narrates four generations of the ‘little family history’ that he has recovered from the records that his grandfather Ernest Scat (Ern) has maintained. Arriving from England in the 1920’s, Ern is determined to ‘make something of himself’ in his new country. His (imagined) cousin is A.O. Neville, the then protector of Aboriginais in Western Australia and an advocate of eugenics, and it is with Neville’s ideas that Ern sees the opportunity to make his mark in history. Through a controlled breeding program amongst Nyoongar women Ern is determined to produce ‘the first white man born’. Harley stumbles across his grandfather’s study during his recovery from a serious car accident, and so ‘discovers’ the documentation of Ern’s amateur eugenics project in which he, Harley, is classified as the ‘first white man born’. From this imposed limited identity that his grandfather has bequeathed to him, Harley traces his Nyoongar family from his grandfather’s records, and rewrites and differentiates the people that his grandfather attempted to reduced to the generic categories of half-caste and quadroon. Harley (with his two Nyoongar uncles Jack and Will and Ern, his invalid grandfather) travels through the landscape of his ancestors, mapping the landscape with the stories of those who Ern’s project of assimilation attempted to ‘write over’.

Harley’s unsentimental journey, portrayed with wit, sets Scott’s novel apart from the abundance of prosaic journeys in which the protagonist discovers their ‘true’ identity. Harley does not comfortably settle into an Aboriginal identity, rather Scott playfully critiques the positioning of Aboriginality and whiteness. In desiring to breed the ‘first white man born’ Ern appears to act on the presumption that whiteness is a biologically inherited quality: that the colour of the skin is the colour of the mind. Paradoxically Ern is anxious that Harley should be educated and socialised as white. Ern maintains a study regime for Harley, locking him away in his bedroom to ensure this regime is adhered to. Ern acts as a boundary rider for whiteness, brutally insisting that black does become white and that his grandfather white stock will be recovered and remain unchallenged. He needs to see Aboriginality as a race, and white as transcending race, so that he can repress his fears of miscegenation. Ern names and categorises the ‘other’ so that he can maintain his delusion that scientific discourse offers him what he desires: stability of meaning. White is, as Franken-
burg argues, the ‘undefined definer’. In positioning white as a race—that is, questioning the definition of the ‘undefined definer’—Scott alerts us as readers to Ern’s race anxiety and perhaps our own.

Scott humorously attacks the assimilationist notions of ‘raising the native up’ by representing Harley as having a ‘propensity for elevation’ (12). Harley does not walk across the earth but rather hovers above it. In representing Ern’s anxious desire to uplift the ‘natives’ as Harley’s inability to stay grounded (to the point that it is necessary for him to cling to weighted objects), Scott comically poses the question as to what is it that the ‘native’ is being assimilated to. If whiteness is symbolically represented as transcendence is it also vacuous? What is whiteness then if not only the desire to make something of your self in this land? Harley who is the ‘successful’ end of his grandfather’s project is abused by his grandfather and expected to perform as his grandfather’s unpaid servant. As Harley jokes, he is ‘successfully assimilated to the laundry, washing machine, a used car’ (33). He has become white goods. Whiteness is not only represented as brutalised but also ‘surface only, with no depth, and very little variation’ (11). Ern wants to breed the ‘first white man born’ but does not reflect on what whiteness is. In turning to look upon whiteness, Scott reveals it to be dull and uniform as it does not enter into dialogue to negotiate identity formation. In attempting to arrest Nyoongar identity in a scientific discourse, Harley has been bred to be the first white man born—not into the white fantasy of plenitude, but rather the blankness of elevated whiteness. Ern attempts to repress the ambiguity of his identity, while it is Harley’s retelling of Ern’s life which reintroduces the complexity of whiteness. Scott’s textual politics position identity formation as as complex and multi-voiced as the novel: intersubjective and culturally and historically contingent. In doing so, Scott destabilises the black/white binary.

To justify the extremity of his project Ern utilises the dichotomy of the moral and cultural superiority of whiteness against the uncivilised ‘native’ which has long acted as justification for imperial occupation and exploitation. Ern argues that he is doing the right thing by ‘them’, that he is engaged in the forward notions of biological assimilation rather than genocide; that he is civilising the ‘native’ to the inevitable progressive white rationality. Ern’s discourse is one in which he attempts to deny desire and represent himself as an objective scientist. Yet his discourse reveals itself to be obsessed with the body and his eugenics program acts to sublimate his sexual desires. In attempting to
become a creator of a race of people Ern finds his fleshly existence intruding upon his research:

For some reason the words aroused Ernest; perhaps because he was still struggling to free himself of certain erotic memories and guilt. Indeed, his erection threatened to intrude into his mental note taking...(46)

As Harley suggests, Ern is too late to be a pioneer and not cut out to ‘tame’ the land, therefore his ‘forward’ notions of eugenics were his opportunity to prove himself and go down in history. Harley further questions whether Ern and his fellow eugenicists were ‘writing their desire into policy’ (32). As much as Scott acknowledges Ern’s project as violent and disturbing he also represents it as pathetic: the dangerous project of a repressed man/boy whose all-consuming ambitious desire blinds him to any self-reflexivity. Is Ern attempting to assimilate the ‘native’ to sexual repression and the infantile irresponsibility to one’s history that keeps one blindly ‘advancing’ in fear of memory?

Scott repeatedly undermines Ern’s ‘scientific project’ by revealing Ern and his fellow eugenicists, especially Sergeant Hall, to be opportunists. They desire to be seen as powerful and are seemingly blind to the ‘facts’ of their lives. They subjugate the Nyoongar people so that they might elevate their ruthless, menial lives above that of the ‘native’. Sergeant Hall is the only policeman in a tiny, dusty town in which his police station is a tin shed, and Ern owns the town’s night soil collection and disposal business. Their project is not only violent but also reveals their vulgarity, that there is nothing ‘civilised’ about them:

They spoke of breeding and uplifting. These two hairy angels wished to seize people in their long arms and haul them to their own level...These hairy angels, scratching at their groins. Belching. Drinking beer. (75)

Despite being ‘scientists’ who share their knowledge of their ‘tolerant’ and ‘progressive’ projects with one another, they are both surveying the other for opportunities. Ern desires Sergeant Hall’s Nyoongar house keeper Kathleen and realises that if he marries her he stands to inherit her uncle’s property as all her relatives are Nyoongar and aren’t allowed to own property. The married and ‘upstanding’ Sergeant Hall sees Ern as an opportunity to offload pregnant Kathleen. They are not only portrayed as ruthless in their desires, but their obsession with calculating and reasoning causes them to be blind to other opportunists. Their only ability to adapt to changing situations is to respond with further brutality. Their opportunism and fear of difference prevents them from participating in creatively enriching relationships. In contrast is Harley’s relationship with his Uncle Jack,
who shares his vulnerability with Harley so they might help one another to resist the brutalising force of colonisation, through intimacy and a willingness to feel its residual trauma.

Both Ern and Sergeant Hall obsessively take notes to record the skin colour of the ‘natives’. As Ashcroft et al argue, language is a vital weapon of colonisation as ‘[l]anguage provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be known.’ Ern uses language to name and subjugate the Nyoongar people: to be an authority by naming. However, Ern sees language as just a tool he uses to write up his scientific findings. He does not understand it to be a productive and ambiguous exchange in which the colonised can learn to negotiate and creatively rearticulate:

Unlike them, Ern does not know to be wary, does not need to prepare to flee. He walks toward us, confident, comfortable, awake to an opportunity. (38)

His desire to control and his confidence in his racial superiority blind him to the understanding that his world is in fact being remade by his assimilation project and that his limited scientific discourse relies in part on the notion that language does not change. This limits his ability to make meaning:

There was a lot to keep track of. . . . His mind buzzed, settling into the rhythm of calculations. Half-caste, quadroon, octooon. What word next? One sixteenth. No. It was all too much. . . . His brain ached from the mathematics. (85)

Through Ern’s obsession with the body, his boyish ambition and his disembodied repressive language, Kim Scott positions the coloniser as irrational, inflexible and unable to engage with and represent their changing world. Like other epic Australian novels such as *Voss*, *Capricornia* and *For Love Alone*, Scott suggests that change is inevitable and no discourse can arrest this, therefore negotiation and dialogue are the necessary alternatives to continued colonisation.

Ern’s understanding of language is that ‘it is a fence that keeps you out’. He believes that language is an element that is separate from social reality, rather than constitutive of it. He uses language very sparingly, as he fears it like he fears sexuality: they introduce chaos. He attempts to control by limiting discourse to a scientific-mathematical language. In contrast Scott represents Harley’s relationship to language as one of ambiguity and wariness. Harley says of himself:

But it is far, far easier for me to sing than to write, because this language troubles me, makes me feel as if I am walking across the earth which surrounds salt lakes, that thin-crusted earth upon which it is best to tread warily, skim lightly...(8)
Scott's Nyoongar characters inhabit language and language inhabits them. Scott positions his Nyoongar characters in the English language. They are touched and moved by language, tangled in its snares, and also find comfort in it. Words are both hostile and comforting. To Kathleen 'words are emptied in her head' and Jack as a boy 'took to his books with an appetite, and readily wandered into stories' (259). Harley's relationship with English when he first 'discovers' his grandfather's documentation of his eugenics project, is one of hostility, but he also engages with stories and finds 'how familiar I became with them, their smell, the way words blur and shift, and welcome you among them' (16). Despite Ern's attempt to maintain authority over language, it's shifting terrain does not allow it. Harley is wary of language but he also experiences it as a way to lose himself in Ern's brutal world and make meaning in his world: to creatively participate in remaking the world.

Harley takes the bereft language of his grandfather and begins to question and engage in a dialogue with his grandfather's 'findings':

And it was there, in a dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from the fraction of life which fell. (28)

In the margins of his grandfather's notes, Harley places question marks. His grandfather compiles tables, cursory notes, but it is Harley who takes these skeletons of language and 'adds body to yarns' (244). He writes pages upon pages, narrating a family history, incorporating the stories of many different family members, storying the lives of the people that Ern attempted to reduce to the violent generic categories of half-caste and quadroon. From the fractures that appear in the eugenists' fetish for reduction and naming—'His calculations faltered. He called them all half-caste, and ignored the range of hues' (84)—Harley traces the whispers, echoes and shadows that haunt his grandfather's bereft discourse. Under his Uncle Jack's tuition Harley is encouraged to feel, to allow himself to engage emotionally with his own life and the lives he writes about, to be moved and affected by the events of the past and the present and ensure that the language he deploys does not capture but rather attempts to trace the complexity and surplus of being that the generic language of his grandfather disavows.

Harley is represented as in-between, an identity in transformation and 'something of a curiosity—even for my own people' (495). He has been brutalised by the continued trauma of colonisation, yet it is from
the hostile and sterile environment of Ern’s eugenicist discourse that his ‘little family history’ begins. Kim Scott recognises that it is impossible to go back before colonisation to a lost origin, a pristine past. To represent the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary Australia we must engage with the brutality of colonisation and recognise that identity is ‘caught up in a long and almost unbecoming process’ (493). Otherwise one risks colluding with the coloniser in attempting to arrest identity. It is from the continued trauma of colonial violence that Scott writes and continues to rewrite, despite and because of the violence:

There is no other end, no other destination for all this paper talk but to keep doing it, to keep talking, to remake it. (472)

Like writing, ‘this paper talk’, identity must be continually remade to allow for complex cultural dialogue. In turning the gaze upon whiteness, it seems that Scott might be suggesting that it is time that those who position themselves as white critique their identity as Aborignality so often has and see what they find amongst all this paper talk.