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## FATAL ATTRACTION? A NON-INDIGENOUS FEMINIST’S EXPLORATION OF MASCULINITIES IN INDIGENOUS LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*“Diasporic literature” is a term frequently used to discuss writers who have written about transculturation and disjunction. Hence some literature can be classified as belonging to a sub-class of “Indigenous Diaspora,” where the authors’ work is informed by their people’s histories of transplantation, dispossession and alienation at the hands of colonial regimes. The Murri writer Sam Watson and Nyoongar author Kim Scott both fit into this category. The work of both novelists also shares a focus on shamanism and traditional magic, allowing for an exploration of spirituality and power from two cultural sources—that of the colonised and of the coloniser. It was for these reasons that I chose to link the authors in question when writing my doctoral thesis. In the course of my research, however, yet another intriguing similarity emerged—in Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* and Scott’s *Benang: from the heart*, women are largely absent, or at best play a supporting role. Alternative forms of masculinities are explored, and accepted moral ‘standards’—as enforced by Christian colonisers—are questioned through the presentation of non-monogamous, and indeed, non-heteronormative, relationships. This has further complicated the already-fraught issue of authority—has a non-Indigenous person the right to critically analyse and evaluate the work of an Indigenous writer? And how does a female researcher reconcile working with texts which are, at times, misogynistic? In the end this paper seeks to explore the complex issues raised in the texts of marginalised authors, and the impact that these authors’ decisions have on readers and critics.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous Literature, Masculinity, Sexuality, Marginality

Diasporic literature is fundamentally concerned with notions of home, exile and belonging. In the instance of Indigenous writers the process of transculturation is, if anything, even more complicated, for as Noelene Brasche argues, the forced displacements of Indigenous peoples “infringed traditional boundaries ... Territorial or national groups who previously had little or nothing in common now shared experiences of dispersal and loss of sovereignty, as well as physical displacement from traditional country” (Brasche, 2002:49). Although the authors examined here have not migrated in the traditional sense, the experiences of their people foreground a shared history of transplantation, dispossession and alienation at the hands of colonial regimes. Colonialism has effectively created an Indigenous Diaspora, and the works selected for this paper can be seen to exemplify this notion.

The initial impetus for selecting these literary works was their use of shamanism and traditional spiritualities, and the ways in which these were used to subvert the Christian beliefs that were introduced as an integral part of the colonial enterprise. What gradually became apparent, however, was that they also featured unusual or alternative representations of masculinity, and of relationships between men and women. These construct an intriguing alternative to hegemonic representations of patriarchal heteronormativity. The authors develop literary alternatives to white, Western beliefs about sexuality as something which is

fixed and about which value judgements can be made. Although the misogyny in the texts remains disturbing, as a researcher I found that the attempts to redress patriarchal colonialist discourses were nonetheless worthy of analysis, and came to the conclusion that ignoring or invalidating the texts' strengths would ultimately replicate the silencing strategies of colonial regimes. As David Buchbinder asserts, "Patriarchy affects not only women, but men, too" (Buchbinder, 1998:44), and is inextricably linked with notions of power and maleness (ibid: 45). Scott and Watson challenge and subvert certain dominant ideological "truths" about the nature of Indigenous men in Australian society by seeking to make visible the subject positions of those who, since colonialism, have inhabited the margins.

Buchbinder further argues that

social and cultural discourses ... privilege certain types of subjectivity—for instance, white, male, Christian, heterosexual—while depriving others, so that people in the subordinated category are pressed to acquiesce in their own disempowerment ... dominant discourses of a culture seek to present themselves as inevitable, normal, natural, even universal (25)

This model of the privileged subject—white, male, Christian and heterosexual—typifies the image of the evangelical colonizer from Australian history. Thus in using non-heteronormative representations these Indigenous authors are consciously attempting to illuminate the restrictive nature of this history of privilege.

Social and cultural critic bell hooks argues that males who grow up in patriarchal cultures "learn a role that restricts and confines. When race and class enter the picture ... then black males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity" (hooks, 2004:xii). Although hooks' work deals specifically with the African-American context, the premise on which she bases her work is equally applicable to Indigenous men in colonized nations. The authors examined here similarly seek to resist hegemonic definitions of who men are or how they should behave. In this sense the novels' attempts to critique and interrogate the framework of the patriarchy run parallel to feminism. In both novels, but in Watson's in particular, however, there are moments when the story seems to counter feminism, rather than run parallel to it. These misogynistic moments are what prompted the title of this paper. As the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction* made clear to the movie-going public that the penalties for transgressing borders—especially, and ironically in this context, those borders that upheld the sanctity of the patriarchal nuclear family—were dire for all concerned. As a feminist and researcher, trying to reconcile the absence or marginalisation of female characters in these texts has been a difficult enterprise. This began to make a little more sense, upon reading Alexander Doty's assertion that everyone experiences "queer" moments, that is, moments when the reader finds "oneself reading texts or understanding situations *from a reading position which one would not normally occupy*" (Doty, 1993). It seems appropriate to invoke the basics of queer theory when analyzing novels populated with characters who are homosexual, bisexual, or asexual, and which seek to question notions of lineage, fatherhood and identity. "Queer theory" has been defined by Wendy Pearson as the

various attempts to interrogate and bring into visibility an understanding of the world ... that takes on as its basis the assumption that queer subjects can be represented in culture and, further, that it is possible to recuperate a history of representation of sexual dissidence in culture that has been rendered invisible ... by societal insistence on the primacy of heteronormativity. (Pearson 2001:80)

Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) offers alternative representations of males and their sexualities. Set in and around contemporary Brisbane, the entire history of white colonisation is compressed into four days of the hero's life, a strategy which Watson used in order to counter the arguments of many members of modern white Australian society that they were not personally complicit in colonialism (Dean, 1995). He has also stated that this timeframe represents the shorter life spans of Aboriginal people, who "feel an incredible urgency and threat at growing further and further removed from their land and culture" (Dean, 1995). Throughout the novel, the main character, Tommy Gubba, expresses his growing sense of doom and his belief that he will die before he completes his quest—to find and return a sacred stone which belonged to his father's people, the senior magic men or shamans known as the Kadaitcha. The novel is graphic, violent, and frequently disturbing, leading critic Stephen Muecke to condemn it as being "virtually unreadable" (Muecke, 1992). However, this criticism itself can be read as upholding patriarchal heteronormativity, for as Gelder and Jacobs have pointed out, younger Aboriginal novelists are more "Othered" than traditional Aboriginal elders (Gelder et al, 1998). Katherine Biber has argued elsewhere that Australian cinema has routinely equated Aboriginal manhood with death, but that some elders "who conform to some rustic fantasy of enduring wisdom" are allowed to survive ... For young black men living in the troubled region *between* cultures, however, the outcomes tend to be bleak, dangerous and, more often than not, deadly" (Biber, 1999). This seems to be the case in Watson's novel, too, for although Tommy is successful in his quest, a number of transgressions against his father and the other Kadaitcha—including his decision to pass on the Kadaitcha blood against their wishes—mean that he is ultimately killed. Ironically, the justice is not Aboriginal justice for the crimes he did commit, but rather, the Kadaitcha strip him of his supernatural powers and arrange for him to be arrested, tried, and sentenced to death for one which he did not. Here Watson seems to critique both the fictional elders' insistence on patriarchal traditions, and their complicity in the western legal system, which is presented in the novel as being controlled by privileged white men of power and social standing. Throughout the novel, in their search for an identity and a role in society, the characters question what is "natural" and "right." The legal system is a case in point; Tommy works as an advocate in the legal system, even though, by his own admission, he does not "fully understand" it (61). The man he is asked to support has complied with tribal law and killed a white policeman who had raped and killed his sister. Not only does Tommy question why there needed to be a trial in the first place, it also transpires that he was actively involved in luring the policeman to his death. This was in direct violation of the orders of Biamee, a "greater god" to whom the Kadaitcha are directly accountable. Tommy, after a lifetime of subjugation, is prepared to cross many borders dictated by patriarchal societies, both Indigenous and western.

Perhaps the most notable feature of *The Kadaitcha Sung*, however, is the novel's tendency to place graphic sexual scenes alongside scenes dealing with sacred objects and spiritual tradition. Tommy is often distracted from his quest by his relationships with a series of women. A Poorie princess, or keeper of women's magic, Pinni, is sent to Brisbane by one of Tommy's spirit helpers, to "be at Tommy's command" in his search. As Tommy reflects on his impending death, however, he becomes aware of the "women's smell that Pinni was giving off for him. His mind flamed and his groin tightened" (84). Tommy is concurrently maintaining a sexual relationship with a white woman, Mary, whose mental state is unstable. Once Tommy accompanies her to her mother's graveside and learns from the dead woman's spirit where the Moogi stone can be found, however, he ends their relationship in order to consummate his flirtation with a colleague, Jelda. Only days after impregnating Jelda, he

agrees to some casual sex with an attractive white neighbour, despite his cousin's sage advice that he is "shitting in [his] own nest" (278).

When Tommy finds the Moogi stone, he is momentarily distracted from the import of the moment by the actions of a bearded man nearby, who is having sex with his comatose and vomit-soaked sister-in-law. The man then generously offers Tommy "a go," saying that she "always wanted to try one of you blokes" (214-5). Only the racist slur awakens Tommy to what he is supposed to be doing. He then stores the stone in his scrotal sac, and the narrative jokes that Tommy would have "three balls for a couple of days" (215). As Gelder and Jacobs suggest, here the sacred and the profane are placed quite violently together (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998) in what must surely be one of the most corporal examples of the uncanny juxtaposition of the mythic and the everyday in contemporary Indigenous literature.

Tommy remains a conflicted character throughout the text, and again for reasons to do with his own physicality. Tommy is only a Kadaitcha—and indeed, a Murri—through his father's bloodline. As much as Tommy harbours anger and resentment against the migloo, and curses all "the children of the migloo," he cannot escape the fact that he is, himself, the child of a migloo. Tommy's father, Koobara, had chosen Fleur Peters for his partner. Fleur, the daughter of an influential politician, had decided to teach Aboriginal children as a means of making some amends for her father's past genocidal activities. Fleur's mother's family, however, were "sorcerers from the northern lands" (228), and this power is also inherited by Tommy. Tommy struggles to rationalise his identity "between two camps" (182). Although he largely identifies himself along patriarchal lines, claiming his father's heritage as an Aboriginal man and a Kadaitcha, this insistence on his "birthright" is mitigated by the fact that he was raised by two women: Aunty Darpil, his foster-mother from the Fingal mission, and his birth mother, Fleur. Clearly then, these women were largely responsible for his safety and learning until his initiation at the age of twenty, which also marks the beginning of the novel's action. The reader is also aware that Tommy has learned to trust matriarchal power and maternal love when he chooses to conceive a child with Jelda, knowing that his time on the earth is limited. Once again the sacred kadaitcha bloodline is being entrusted to the care of a mother. This storyline subverts commonplace colonial binaries such as good/evil, black/white, and even life/death, for Tommy seeks to do the bidding of the kadaitcha men, yet ultimately flaunts some of their decrees; Tommy is both black *and* white, and struggles to inhabit this space in-between; and Tommy is rendered immortal for a time, before being stripped of his powers, yet still manages to beat death in the sense that he has left a child who will now wear the mantle of the "last Kadaitcha."

It is the character of Tommy's kinsman, Boonger, however, who best exemplifies the use of non-patriarchal and non-heteronormative behaviour in order to interrogate past colonialist practices in Australia. hooks argues that patriarchal socialisation means that men feel a need to prove their responsibility, and that men who are marginalised through poverty and an absence of job opportunities suffer from depression at being unable to fulfil this role adequately (hooks, 2004). Boonger clearly does not ascribe to this model, for he has a girlfriend who supports him financially. Despite this, when Boonger is released from a jail sentence early in the novel, he almost immediately seeks out a "cat party," "cat" being prison parlance for a homosexual. Although he does not identify as gay or bisexual, he continues to seek out sexual relationships with other men whilst outside of the institution. Tommy discovers Boonger and Stephen, an English academic, in the back of a van, "the big black [with] his penis buried in the hilt of the Englishman's rectum" (207). The scene is obviously designed to shock the reader, but can also be read as a postcolonial metaphor. It is now

commonly accepted that the language of colonisation often drew on the language of the sexual; lands were often encoded as female, with explorers “penetrating” their uncharted territory. Indigenous leaders often refer to their lands as having been raped, because the early colonisers took without consent; indeed, in Tommy’s final words to the court before his sentencing, he argues that the migloo, or whites, have “come into [his] house and ... raped and pillaged” (311). Thus the phallus is inscribed with symbolic power, and, according to Buchbinder, can be seen as “a sign of domination if female by male, or of a powerful male over one less powerful” (Buchbinder, 1998:49). When Boonger penetrates the white, Christian, English academic, this is a reversal of dominant patriarchal discourse wherein the Indigenous male has traditionally been represented as weak and emasculated.

Kim Scott’s award-winning novel *Benang: from the heart* also attempts to redress this idea of indigenous emasculation, and challenges patriarchal heteronormative discourses through presenting alternative depictions of familial life. The narrator of the novel, Harley, is a young Nyoongar man from the coasts of Western Australia, attempting to write—and rewrite—his family’s history. This project is undertaken largely to annoy his Scottish grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, who had made it his life’s work to couple with Aboriginal women in an attempt to sire the “first white-man born.” Although he believes that he has failed with son Tommy, he sees a second chance in Harley. As in *The Kadaitcha Sung*, the sacred and the profane co-exist in this novel. Harley’s talents as a wordsmith and singer, and his supernatural ability to levitate, indicate that he, too, is a shaman or kadaitcha. Interspersed with incidents wherein Harley floats off into the stratosphere are accounts of Ern’s sexual escapades with Aboriginal women, and, horrifically, with his only grandson. Here Ern represents all that is abhorrent about western patriarchy; he is European, white, scientifically-minded, obsessed with “breeding out the natives,” and with recording his progress in this endeavour for the edification of his distant cousin, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, A.O. Neville.

Hooks argues that all boys across all classes are damaged by patriarchal socialisation, but that black males are particularly susceptible to psychological damage because they are aware that historically black males have been represented as “castrated, ineffectual, irresponsible, and not real men” (hooks, 2004: 88). This is certainly true of Harley, who has been raised to believe that he is inadequate, who has begun to torture his frail grandfather out of anger that he must now minister to the needs of his childhood abuser; and who has been rendered impotent after a car accident in which his father was killed. As Jennifer Harding argues in *Sex Acts: Practices of Femininity and Masculinity*, “manhood” is often associated in popular culture with fertility; to be infertile is to be perceived as something other than male (Harding, 1998:85). Harley’s self-hatred and self-deprecatory narration wherein he refers to himself as the “faceless, empty-scrotumed, limp-dicked first white man born” (Scott, 1999: 31) is understandable, then, when read in terms of the back-story of having been raised by a domineering patriarch who is concerned with bloodlines. hooks likens the chronic anger of a young black male to “living in an emotional prison” (hooks, 2004:96), and cites the work of psychologists Gary Zukav and Linda Francis who found that anger can be caused by a lack of self-worth and a sense of powerlessness. It is ironic, then, that anger is viewed as “manly” in a patriarchal culture (hooks, 2004:96), and still more so that Harley has been emasculated as a direct result of his anger against his father and grandfather. As the narrative voice of the text, Harley is able to articulate his anger in the voice of the coloniser, for his grandfather had insisted that the boy embrace white culture at the expense of his Nyoongar heritage:

Nor can I deny that I was very angry. Angry with my grandfather, his rigour, his scientific method, his lust. And so I am reluctant to begin with my grandfather, as if all I can do is react to him and his plans, as if I have nothing else.

But even if that were true, is it such a bad thing, to begin with anger and resistance? (29)

Again, this rage and resistance against white "exploration" and penetration can be read as representative of the wider postcolonial experience. Throughout the novel it is evident that behaviour similar to Ern's was more common than white readers would like to believe. Ern's son Tommy was often housed at Sister Kate's orphanage, where Ern was unusual in that he contributed financially to the institution, "And he contributed more than was necessary for just the one son" (Scott, 1999:383). It seems likely that the contributions are Ern's attempt to assuage his guilt; guilt that a number of the children at the home are his flesh-and-blood, owing to a long history of assaulting—and in some cases, impregnating—his young Aboriginal domestics, and also guilt for paedophilia which he was then able to practise, sanctioned by funding the institution. He would be "among those who arrived at Auntie Kate's to take the lucky children away for the weekend. It was, however, a rare thing for Ernest to take his own son—our Tommy—away with him" (384). Tommy and his half-sister Ellen, learn first-hand the nature of these visits where the children were encouraged to call strangers "uncle. Uncle father doctor lover" (386).

Tommy Scat, and later his son, Harley, are raised in dysfunctional homes by an abusive patriarch. Both are psychologically damaged by this experience, and Tommy is an ineffectual father to Harley as a result. Absent for most of Harley's childhood, Tommy reclaims Harley when he remarries. Here, for a time, Harley is part of a happy family, until a young boy being fostered by the family drowns. Tommy, unable to save both boys, rescues Harley, a decision that is criticised by many members of the local community and one which haunts Tommy. Plagued by self-doubt, he agrees to return Harley to the custody of Ern, which allows the cycle of abuse to resume. Harley and his father have minimal contact for many years, until, as a teenager, Harley takes Ern's car and goes in search of his father. Tommy begins to talk about his upbringing and his decisions, and seems to have some sort of breakdown. Whilst driving him to the hospital, Harley is chased by the police and has the accident which renders him impotent and kills his father. It transpires that the car chase was precipitated by Ern reporting the car as stolen.

The crash becomes emblematic of Harley's frustration with his involvement in his grandfather's story and vice versa. Echoing an earlier scene wherein Tommy has tattooed himself with his mother's and sister's names, Harley tattoos his frail grandfather with the words "END, CRASH, FINISH" (445) Unlike Tommy, who used ink in his wounds, Harley uses the more traditional method of including ash to seal the words. Scott makes the point that words wound; elsewhere in the novel, Harley regrets that he cannot speak Nyoongar, but only English, the language of the coloniser.

The accident seems to mark an ending, but as Harley soon learns, it is also a new beginning. In many ways this represents the death of the patriarchy. Harley is rendered infertile; his father is killed; his overbearing grandfather has a stroke and is no longer able to care for himself, much less harm anyone else. Soon after, Harley comes into contact with his Nyoongar relatives, Uncles Will and Jack. For the first time, he sees models of male adulthood that are loving, caring and forgiving. hooks argues that many fathers in patriarchal society have difficulty parenting, because they have been taught that a father's role is to "exercise authority and provide for material needs" (hooks, 2004:113). Real dads, she argues, have

done the work of growing up, of emotional maturation. Real dads give love, that combination of care, commitment, knowledge responsibility, respect and trust. They are both born and made. (hooks, 2004:114)

It is only after his contact with Will and Jack that Harley is able to let go of some of his rage against Ern, forgive his father Tommy, and learn to harness his supernatural powers. Throughout the convoluted family history, which covers black/white male/female relationships from Harley's great-grandparents to his children, the women are largely absent. Representations of Harley's grandmother Harriette—who raises him during his early childhood—and her mother, Fanny, show them to be wise, loving, nurturing women. It is significant, then, that Will and Jack are both raised by Harriette, too. Yet even the first-person narrator notes that his female forebears are largely "silent women flitting in the background" and he wishes that he was "one of those pioneers with coloured ribbons to pull and bring the girls running," although, as he archly notes, "For different reasons, of course" (398). Yet he elsewhere describes these women as his "true ancestors, those of my blood-and-land-line, the women I must call Harriette and Fanny" (50). In finally embracing his matrilineal Nyoongar heritage, Harley proves himself able to be a father, and his uncles reintroduce him to two former girlfriends from his teen years. The girls have a number of children, whom they are raising together. The first child of each, however, bears an uncanny resemblance to Harley, and it is confirmed that he is their biological father. Significantly, the children's genders are never defined. The women help him

grow from my bitter and isolated self; let me reconcile myself to what it means to be so strangely uplifted; one who hovers, and need only touch the ground lightly. They brought others to hear me sing ... they led me back to my writing, after I had turned away from it because of my struggles with my grandfather's words. (450)

In acknowledging Fanny as the matriarch, Ern's patriarchy is reversed, and this provides the title for the novel, for "Benang," meaning tomorrow, was her Nyoongar name.

The figure of Harley interrogates western ideas of heteronormativity and of sexuality being fixed. The emasculated man embraces his matrilineal Nyoongar heritage and his shamanic powers, and thus earns the right to become a father. He notices that when he walks hand-in-hand with his children, they anchor him to the earth (452). He also discovers that he has a role to play in their lives, "to show them where and who we are," rather than denying them their Aboriginal heritage.

To conclude, I would like to return to the issue of authority—or whether my attraction to texts by marginalised authors writing marginalised characters, is a fatal one. Ultimately, the publication of these novels has brought the ideas of Watson and Scott into the public domain. To choose not to analyse them would be to replicate colonialist ideas that work by Indigenous authors is substandard or unworthy of academic interest. Furthermore, it is clear that these writers were attempting to reach a white readership, and to force them to read queerly; that is, from a different reading position to that which would normally be occupied. It is clear, to me, then, that both Watson and Scott have attained this goal, for this reader, at least, has been led to an unfamiliar space, and thus questioned not only the accepted version of colonial history, but also the patriarchal heteronormative standards that are still omnipresent in our society. Although the females in these novels are not proactive characters, this does not necessarily mean that the authors are misogynistic or anti-feminist, but rather, that they provide a counterpoint to the often reprehensible and violent actions of the males. These attempts to interrogate patriarchal norms, it seems to me, must be acknowledged.

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