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#### Bibliographic citation

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# Ice Dreaming

Reading Whiteness in Kim Scott's

Benang: from the heart

Kristyn Evelyn Harman

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for admission to the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Aboriginal Studies and English at the University of Tasmania.

This work is dedicated to D.M.

Also for Eleanor and Zoë,

my light and my life.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

Kris Harman 28 may 2004

#### **Abstract**

Through a close reading of Kim Scott's *Benang: from the heart*, this thesis interrogates what whiteness in an Australian colonial context looks like from an Aboriginal perspective. Its central proposition is that Scott's narrator, Harley, discovers whiteness as a consequence of discovering his Aboriginality. It suggests whiteness is imbued with a power that arises through its invisibility and its ability to racialise and circumscribe non-white others. When this process is reversed, and whiteness is made visible, its power is diminished. Harley (re)places whiteness into an Aboriginal paradigm from within which he imagines a syncretic future for Australia.

## Acknowledgements

The preparation of this Honours thesis has been greatly assisted through the professional input of my supervisors, Dr. Mitchell Rolls and Dr. Anna Johnston. Thanks must also go to past and present academic staff from Riawunna and the School of English whose teaching and mentoring have contributed in so many ways to this work. My gratitude is also extended to the administrative staff and librarians who have been generous with their assistance throughout the course of this project. Special acknowledgement is due to Riawunna for the provision of an office space and generous assistance with photocopying and binding.

Acknowledgement is also due to the School of English for kindly assisting with photocopying during the course of this thesis.

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#### Introduction

This project had its inception in a series of statements made by Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Writing in a post-Wik political climate, Moreton-Robinson asserted that

Whiteness is both the measure and the marker of normality in Australian society, yet it remains invisible for most white women and men, and they do not associate it with conferring dominance and privilege. However, many Indigenous women and men do not suffer from such blindness; whiteness is highly visible and imbued with power. (66)

In Western societies, white people and white institutions have exercised power over those designated as other through embedding whiteness as the universal norm to which everyone is expected to conform. Enquiring into this phenomenon has recently emerged as a specific field of studies in the Western academy, critical whiteness studies. Its central project is to make whiteness, as a racialised identity, visible. Through outing whiteness, theorists aim to expose and decentre white race privilege. Foundational texts in whiteness studies include David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* (1991), Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), Richard Dyer's *White* (1997), and Mike Hill's *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (1997). This list of canonical texts is by no means exhaustive, but serves to make the point that whiteness studies tends to be dominated by white theorists. This is a point that has not escaped theorists such as Dyer, who express concerns that the scholarly attention given to whiteness could unintentionally result in its being reinscribed as

being of central importance (10). Within white academic circles in Australia, calls have been made for more attention to be paid to non-white perceptions of whiteness and race (Ferrier 76). This study responds to these calls. Its aim, through privileging an Aboriginal perspective, is to unsettle what has mostly been a whites-on-whiteness monologue. It takes as its point of departure Moreton-Robinson's claim that whiteness is highly visible to Aborigines. Its most pressing concern is to ask what, then, might whiteness look like from an Aboriginal viewpoint?

As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin demonstrated in *The Empire Writes Back*, literature provides one of the most important vehicles through which colonised people can express their perceptions of the daily realities of life in a settler colony. It therefore seems apt to turn to a contemporary literary work in undertaking this study. Since its publication in 1999, Kim Scott's *Benang: from the heart* has been widely acclaimed. It was the recipient of the Western Australian Premier's Book Award in 1999. The following year, *Benang* was joint winner of the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award. This was followed by the Kate Challis RAKA Prize in 2001. Reviewed in the *Weekend Australian*, *Benang* was hailed as "the crucial literary sequel to Sally Morgan's *My Place*" and was described as being "not unlike Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (Laurie 15). Unlike *My Place* and *Beloved*, however, *Benang*, to date, has received only sparse scholarly attention. Its outstanding achievements in the literary field, and the current dearth of scholarly work to date, combine to suggest that this is a text that merits further interrogation. This study is therefore organised

around a close reading of *Benang*. The central question it seeks to address is "how is whiteness made visible in Kim Scott's *Benang*?"

Set in twentieth-century Western Australia, *Benang* is a fictionalised family history that nevertheless draws extensively on Kim Scott's own experiences and on his family's background. The narrator, Harley, is a man of Nyoongar ancestry who is the apparently successful end product of his white grandfather's attempts to breed "the first white man born". Harley describes his situation:

Raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn.

And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself. (Scott 19)

This is ostensibly the story of a young man of Aboriginal and white descent seeking to overcome the impact of eugenicist policies on his life through reconnecting to an Aboriginal identity. Aboriginality has been described by Marcia Langton as having meaning only when it is understood in terms of intersubjectivity (118). According to Langton, Aboriginality is "remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation" intra-culturally and through inter-cultural interactions, particularly with the dominant white culture (119). A dialectical relationship between understandings of whiteness and Aboriginality is manifestly evident throughout Benang. The material in this thesis is therefore organised around the notion that in the process of (re)discovering his Aboriginality, the narrator, Harley, also discovers whiteness.

To date, three scholarly articles have been published critiquing *Benang*. Madeline Byrne, in her article "How Australian Is It? (Reading *Benang*)", finds *Benang* to be important as it makes manifest Australia's shared cultural history. For Byrne, *Benang* symbolises opportunities that have been lost. In her article "Making Strange Men: Resistance and Reconciliation in Kim Scott's *Benang*", Lisa Slater explores Scott's deployment of the colonial records as a device through which to investigate Australia's history. Anthony Uhlmann reads *Benang* alongside the *Bringing Them Home* report. In his article "Law Translating Life and Life Translating Law Through Stories: *Bringing Them Home* and *Benang* by Kim Scott" he discusses some of the ways white law is involved in processes that have shifted people between cultural groups in Australia. In parts of this thesis specific reference will be made to Slater's article as she traverses similar territory, but with a different emphasis. This thesis departs from the respective works of Byrne, Slater, and Uhlmann in that it is more specifically oriented towards reading whiteness in its various manifestations in *Benang*.

The specific understandings of whiteness that inform this analysis are drawn from two complementary sources, Richard Dyer and Alastair Bonnett.

Dyer, in his project interrogating the representations of white people within white Western culture, delineates what he terms "the cultural register of whiteness".

This has three constituent elements: Christianity, "race", and enterprise/imperialism (14). Christianity, states Dyer, is founded on the idea of incarnation, "of being that is in the body yet not of it" (14). He points out that concepts of race emerging in the eighteenth century were concepts of bodies.

These racial concepts eventually had to be reconciled with Western notions of

embodiment and incarnation. Dyer concludes that it is the concept of incarnation, of being something apart from the body, that distinguished white people from those racialised as others. It set them apart, and above, those others who were reduced, in Western culture, to their bodies, and thus to race (14). Dyer describes the mobilisation of this notion of superiority in the context of imperialism:

The deployment of the concept of white racial purity cannot be isolated from its inscription in the western imperialist project, which constructed non-white human beings as degenerative in order to justify their conquest and subjection by European powers.

(21)

He describes the white body as being "the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, of white power and possession" (Dyer 207). While this is manifestly evident in the principal white character Ernest Solomon Scat in *Benang*, the conceptualisation of the bleached Aborigine in text demonstrates that there is a point at which this construction breaks down.

In his recent study of white identities, Bonnett traces the emergence of an exclusionary and highly racialised interpretation of whiteness along various intersecting paths in European history. Focusing on shared themes between the forms of white identity developed in Western Europe and in European settler societies, Bonnett points out that whiteness and non-whiteness came to be associated with specific moral lineages. According to Bonnett, the first usage of "white" as an ethnic type occurred in a distinction drawn in 1680 by the English cleric C. Nesse between "The White Line (the Posterity of Seth) and 'the black line the Cursed brood of Cain" (16). Bonnett describes an intellectual fusion of

the concept of "Europe" and the category "Christianity". He states that "a triple conflation of White = Europe = Christian arose that imparted moral, cultural and territorial content to whiteness" (Bonnett 17). This newly forged understanding of whiteness was transformed into a concept of race towards the end of the sixteenth century.

Bonnett claims "the central imperative behind the West's racialisation of the world was to legitimise Europeans as part of a superior race" (19). The earliest widespread usage of the term "white" to describe Europeans is to be found in colonial settings. This reflects the pivotal role played by the deployment of whiteness in allowing Europeans to form distinctions between themselves and other people whose territories they were intent on claiming (Bonnett 17). Claims of white superiority were used by the British to justify the colonisation of Australia. Bonnett explains that such claims made "enormous demands" on both the British and on their non-white others (21). British subjects were under intense pressure to live up to the ideals of whiteness. They were required to be "the epitome of civilisation, of purity, of morality and of virulent strength" (Bonnett 21). Ironically, the class system in British society denied to most British subjects the very qualities of whiteness that they were now required to uphold (Bonnett 21). This inherent contradiction is mobilised in Benang through the character Scat and is shown to have had far-reaching ramifications. The racialisation of whiteness placed a variety of demands on non-white people. Pertinent to this study is the way in which it set in motion a series of "moral panics' around interracial sex" (Bonnett 21). In Western Australia, such concerns led to increased

surveillance of Aborigines and a corresponding increase in the documentation of Aboriginal lives.

This thesis is premised on the notion that the narrator, Harley, goes through three distinctive phases in (re)discovering his Aboriginality and concomitantly re-placing whiteness into an Indigenous paradigm. This translates into a distinctive ethos underlying each of the three chapters. The first chapter of this thesis draws on material related to Harley's initial discovery of his grandfather's archival documents. At this stage, Harley is almost completely immersed in a white world yet its whiteness is scarcely visible to him. Through accessing Scat's records, Harley becomes cognisant with his grandfather's investment in, and deployment of, ideological whiteness. After discussing Scat in these terms, this chapter explores the way in which, in Harley's imagination, his grandfather's white skin becomes synonymous with the white parchment of the old man's archival documents. Understanding himself as having been written "white" by his grandfather, Harley turns to his grandfather and literally writes into his skin.

The second chapter of this thesis relates to a transitional phase that Harley goes through during which his insights into both whiteness and his Aboriginality deepen. It focuses on the ways in which whiteness is made visible through a writing project undertaken by the narrator in which he is expressly writing back against representations of his ancestors enshrined in his grandfather's archives. It hypothesises that the colonial archives might usefully be considered in the context of what Michel Foucault has described as disciplinary writing. Following Foucault, it then posits that Harley deploys a genealogical model to abrogate the

classifications imposed on himself and his ancestor, Sandy One Mason, in Scat's archival documents. This chapter goes on to explore the significance that Harley attaches to Sandy One's transition into muteness. Drawing on the work of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, it will be posited that Sandy One's muteness functions as an abrogation of English and a reclamation of Aboriginality.

The third, and final, chapter of this thesis draws on material related to Harley's finally proving his grandfather's biological and social experimentation with him to have been a failure. Consolidating material introduced in the first chapter, it explores the ways in which Scat's desire to uplift his grandson manifests as an obsession with blood and skin colour. It posits that the whiteness that Scat apparently achieved in Harley's case was a surface appearance only, lacking in depth and meaning. It then examines the way in which Harley appropriates the colonial concept of upliftment to (re)place whiteness, and himself, into an Indigenous paradigm from within which he imagines a syncretic future for Australia. Integral to this chapter is a discussion of Harley's conceptualisation of the Ice Dreaming and bleached Aborigines, concepts that are unique to this text.

#### 1 White Parchment, White Skin: Writing on Ernest Solomon Scat

One of the defining moments in Kim Scott's *Benang* occurs when the narrator, Harley, finally understands himself to be the "product of a long and considered process" orchestrated and overseen by his white grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat (Scott 13). A man inspired by eugenicist theories, Scat dedicates himself to breeding the so-called "first white man born" from a mixture of Aboriginal and white ancestry. Through accessing his grandfather's archival records, Harley identifies himself as the end product of his grandfather's biological and social experimentation.

This chapter is premised on the notion that Harley discovers more about whiteness in his grandfather's archives than he does about his own Aboriginality. It examines his elucidation of Scat's investment in, and deployment of, ideological whiteness. It touches on the ways in which Scat's project makes visible the ascriptive power of whiteness. It will then be argued that, in Harley's imagination, Scat's white skin becomes synonymous with the white parchment on which the old man's eugenicist writings are recorded. Conflating Scat's white skin with the ideological whiteness underpinning his archives results in his being marked as complicit in the colonial enterprise of endeavouring to whiten Aboriginal Australia.

The narrative in *Benang* is characterised by a high degree of self-reflexivity. Harley wryly describes his narrative as arising from an intention to write "nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories" (Scott 10). It is apparent from the outset, however, that this family history is neither simple nor localised. The topics traversed are of much broader

significance. As Pamela Dunbar has pointed out, the family is often employed as an emblem in narratives that map the transition from colonial to post-colonial society (Zach and Goodwin 103). In this wider context, Harley's version of his grandfather's arrival in Australia represents the incursion of whiteness into an Aboriginal world:

I like to think of Mr Ernest Solomon Scat stepping off the boat; that initial moment when his leather-clad foot touched the dock. A small sound, but it set up resonances, and those resonances, admittedly diminishing all the time, were picked up by the railway and ran all the way to where a very last vibration rolled into the sand. It was, and is, a long way from that railway's end to the tiny town of Gebalup, but the land holds all things – even such trivial events as my grandfather's first footfall – from which we may later select, amplify, and consider the resonances. (Scott 43)

Harley trivialises his grandfather's first footfall on Western Australian soil.

However, he narrates the resonances flowing from Scat's arrival as having far reaching consequences. Throughout his narrative, he writes Scat as an active participant in the process of colonising Australia. Scat is heavily invested in the colonial enterprise of "breeding out the colour" in Aboriginal Australia; his own claim to whiteness is at stake.

European racial whiteness, according to Alastair Bonnett, functioned both as "the ultimate symbol of superiority and as the legitimising authority and mobilising ideology for national imperial and colonial enterprises" (21). Bonnett, however, identifies an inherent contradiction in modern European constructs of

racialised whiteness. While whiteness must be made available to all Europeans, it is simultaneously denied to those who are deemed unfit to "carry its burden". Demanding its European progenitors to be "the epitome of civilisation, of purity, of morality, and of virulent strength", such constructions of whiteness are excessive in nature. The resultant exclusionary zeal brings about an impossible situation; most whites are not deserving of whiteness (Bonnett 22). Scat, a Scotsman with just enough trade and education to pass himself off as a clerk, is situated at the margins of whiteness (Scott 44). Lisa Slater suggests that Scat is not the stereotypical English bourgeois subject that the imperial centre wants to see replicated out in the colonies (363). As a clerk, Scat inhabits the lower echelons of the middle class. His position as the youngest son in his family exacerbates his desire to make something of himself in Australia. Slater discusses Scat's urge to be an ideal pioneer. She states that Scat wants to remake himself into "the 'healthiest' of colonial subjects" (Slater 363). According to Slater, Scat seeks a position of power that was not available to him back home. He upholds the British class system with a view to positioning himself further up the social ladder. Scat aims to fulfil his class aspirations through adhering to modernity's "prophets of progressiveness" (Slater 363). Given the intrinsic relationship between modernity and whiteness, Scat's participation in modernity's drive for progress signifies his desire to shore up his tenuous claim to whiteness (Bonnett 1).

Richard Dyer describes white identities as being "forged from the roles and functions of white people in imperialism and the qualities of character that performing them is held to require and call forth" (184). White men engaged in

processes of colonisation are required to exhibit qualities of enterprise, courage, and control both over the self and others (Dyer 184). Scat arrives in Australia in the 1920s, too late to be a pioneer (Scott 32). Instead, he seeks to realise his yearning for whiteness through actively participating in the subjugation of Aboriginal people. Scat's sexual colonisation of women of colour begins in the brothels of South Africa while he is travelling out to the colonies. It resumes on his first night in Australia when he is "initiated" through participating in a spree at an Aboriginal camp. His sexual conquest of an Aboriginal woman leaves him feeling very powerful (Scott 44, 79).

Dyer asserts that dark peoples perform a symbolic function in relation to white identity. Projecting sexuality onto dark races allows white people to represent, yet dissociate themselves from, their own sexual desires (Dyer 28). Drawing a correlation between white men and the bible story, Dyer suggests that one of the ways in which white men exhibit the potential to fall is through having "dark desires against which to struggle" (28). Dyer sees the whiteness of white men as residing in "the tragic quality of their giving way to darkness and the heroism of their channelling or resisting it" (28). Scat is apparently incapable of the heroism required to resist the alleged allure of dark women. He must therefore seek to rationalise his desires. His opportunity to do so arises when he becomes familiar with the policies of his distant relative, Auber Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines and Fisheries in Western Australia. Scat seizes the chance to be seen to be engaged in "breeding out the colour" in Aboriginal people as expounded by Neville. His commitment to this project allows him both to rationalise, and aim to fulfil, his lust for Aboriginal women. However, there is another pressing reason

why Scat is "relieved to become an accomplice" (Scott 39). His participation in Neville's scheme enables him to be seen to be shouldering his fair share of the white man's burden. Through participating in the "progressive" project of whitening Aboriginal Australia, he is, at the same time, whitening himself.

Following Neville's example, Scat maps the progress of his eugenicist project through generating a multitude of files. These files contain the material residue of Aboriginal lives in the form of photographs, diagrams, cemetery records, birth certificates, death certificates, letters, police reports, parish records, and newspaper clippings. These documents are all carefully indexed and labelled (Scott 25). Together, these files form part of the colonial archive. Jacques Derrida traces the origins of the word "archive", and therefore its meaning, to the Greek arkheion. Historically, the arkheion housed the archon who held power. In keeping with their public position of authority, the archon held official documents within their place of residence. As well as being the keeper of these documents, the archon held the power to interpret them (Derrida 2).

In *Benang*, the power of interpretation is made visible in some of the many extracts from letters written by public servants within the Aborigines Department. Drawing on, and interpreting, material held in its extensive archives, Aborigines Department employees handed down rulings as to who may be granted an exemption from the Aborigines Act and thus be considered to be white (Scott 62-67). Such interpretations also stand as a testament to the ascriptive power of whiteness. Dyer describes whiteness as being a matter of ascription. Simply put, "white people are who white people say are white" (Dyer 48). This has a remarkably controlling effect on the lives of the people over whom such power is

exercised in that those who are determined to be non-white are excluded from a site of social privilege.

The individuals whose lives are enmeshed in Scat's meticulous compilation of documents are treated as objects. Their individual subjectivities denied, they are written as unwitting participants in, and the outcomes of, a socially engineered breeding project. Scat obsessively calculates each person's supposed percentages of Aboriginal and white blood. Captured and framed by the lens of the colonial camera, their countenances are meticulously examined for evidence of a lightening of hue. Dyer has attested to the importance of black and white photography within what he terms the aspirational structure of whiteness. Photographic subjects can be differentiated according to varying contrasts of light and dark (Dyer 113). Photography's translucence, according to Dyer, "could differentiate between races and within the white race, and even show degrees of translucence within the individual white (usually male) subject" (115). Photographic evidence was indispensable to a pseudo-science that conflated skin hued white with moral whiteness. The variations in skin hue revealed in photographs taken of his Scottish/Aboriginal family over several generations help to persuade Scat of the apparent success of his breeding project. As Slater has highlighted, however, despite this visible success, Scat is plagued by fears that his grandson, Harley, might display signs of being other than white (364). The old man's constant monitoring of Harley takes the perverse form of incursions into his bodily orifices:

"Looking for traces of colour," he'd mutter... He would begin this way, clinical, but – soon enough – was shouting, urgent with

power.... At least he accepted that I could not look directly at him on such an occasion, and so I stared at the wall as he thrust, in his stilted way, trying to get deeper within me, and if that was not violation enough; wanting to remain there even as he shrivelled. (Scott 77)

While Scat rationalises himself and his methods as being scientific, Harley describes his grandfather as lecherous (Scott 23).

The criteria for success in "breeding out the colour" included "the selective separation from antecedents" (Scott 28). The success of Scat's project is therefore jeopardised when Harley gains access to his patriarch's extensive library. Scat's files provide a pathway through which Harley can reconnect with his Aboriginal past. Surrounded by Scat's papers, Harley has all the evidence he needs to confirm his fears that he is "the end of the line" in his grandfather's biological and social experimentation (Scott 26). He sights his father's photograph, captioned not with Tommy Scat's name, but according to a category derived from racial science: "Octoroon grandson (mother quarter caste [No. 2], father Scottish). Freckles on face are the only trace of colour apparent" (Scott 26). Racist language such as this is italicised throughout Benang. Setting such language apart from the rest of the text highlights the offensiveness of racist language today. It also draws attention to the racism inherent in some of the thinking that underpinned the archival documents in which this language was used. When Scat finds Harley in his library, he realises that his carefully documented scheme has been discovered. In shock, he falls to his knees in his study doorway, clutching at his chest with one hand and waving feebly at his grandson with the other (Scott 27). Harley's

reaction to his discovery is quite different. He explains, "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 that fraction of life which fell" (Scott 28). Harley's discovery of Scat's archives has implications that include a reconstitution of the grandfather/grandson relationship, a transformation in Harley's identity, and the ultimate failure of Scat's eugenicist project.

Like the *arkheion* of old, Scat's house is represented in the text as a site of power. It is, however, a site that comes under contestation. Harley describes the stone house he shares with Scat as a hostile environment. The house takes on a metaphorical significance in the text. Recounting his narrative with the benefit of hindsight, Harley situates his authorial self as having been "scratching and tapping away from within the virtual prison of my grandfather's words" (Scott 495). The stone house stands in for the textual prison in which Harley feels encased:

Tap tap. I began chipping the render from the stone walls of the old house. I hesitate to mention it; in the context of this story it may seem so dreadfully *symbolic*. But what can I do? It is the truth. Tap tap. There were so many walls to do, and I was doing only a very little at a time. I was very listless, but the task, the tools I was using, and the fragments of render I stuffed in my pockets kept my feet on the ground. (Scott 24)

Architecture, according to Foucault, carries the effects of power to individuals and works to transform them. Stones, he states, can make people "docile and knowable" (*Discipline* 172). For Harley, the heavy stones of the house function as.

one of many layers of grids that circumscribe him. Through picking out the mortar, he begins to remove the impediments to accessing his Aboriginal identity (Scott 108). The tap tap of the tools against the mortar is transformed into the tap tap of the typewriter keys. Harley takes on the task of completing Scat's writing project, a project he considers to be unfinished (Scott 25).

Harley does not limit his writing project to his typewriter and paper.

Throughout Benang, Scott continually plays with a slippage between parchment and flesh as surfaces of inscription. Bereft of living Aboriginal relatives in the earlier part of the narrative, Harley contemplates the family history he is writing. As he rubs at the words he has written, he notices that the pale parchment feels damp and cold. He draws a correlation between the paper and his and his grandfather's white skin, calling the pieces of paper "my only kin" (Scott 108). On a later occasion, when he is able to travel back through time to observe his Aboriginal ancestors, Harley finds that the fire causes their skin to "look old, like parchment" (Scott 245). In Harley's imagination, he begins to conflate the white parchment of Scat's archival documents with the old man's white skin.

In the early days following his discovery of Scat's files, Harley contemplates whether to slash and cut words into his own skin (Scott 37). This inspiration is possibly derived from an action taken in childhood by Harley's father, Tommy. Left at Sister Kate's orphanage by Scat, Tommy cut the words "Mum, Love, Ellen" into his skin and poured ink into the incisions (Scott 394). By branding his body in this way, Tommy created memories of his mother, his sister, and what it was like to be surrounded by familial love (Grosz 147).

Abandoned, Tommy was of no more use to Scat until he provided him with a grandson who could be passed as white.

Harley transforms his desire for self-mutilation into an urge to cut words into his grandfather's flesh:

At one stage, full of frustration and anger at my place in Grandad's story, I wrote END, CRASH, FINISH into his skin. I poured black ink and ash into the wounds, and tended them carefully so that the skin would heal and seal the letters stark and proud...."Here," I would poke and prod him, "quite white where the skin does not touch. This soft skin." And I sliced my words... to scar and tattoo him. Thinking again of his plans, his words, I added the lines of ink. How the dirty tributary joins the great river. (Scott 445)

This desire to mark his grandfather grows out of Harley's anger at the role that he has been forced to play in Scat's experimentation. He wears his white skin as a mark of his grandfather's success. As a white man, Scat has deployed the power available to him to ascribe whiteness to his grandson. Where there is power, there is also resistance. Foucault states that while there is the occasional radical rupture, one is more often dealing with "mobile and transitory points of resistance". Such resistance has the capacity to furrow across individuals, "cutting them up and remolding them" (Sexuality 96). Recognising that Scat's motivation derived from a desire to "make a mark" in Australia, to "leave something of himself", Harley, in turn, makes his mark on the old man (Scott 115). In doing so, he marks Scat as having been complicit in the colonial processes that have left Harley orphaned, sexually abused, and removed from his Aboriginal heritage.

Flesh, like parchment, is an unstable medium. Harley finds that the words he cuts into Scat's skin are instantly lost in gushing blood. The letters alter in unpredictable ways, changing the shape of the words (Scott 286). The way in which these words morph indicates the unpredictable and out-of-control trajectories that can flow from discourses like those on selective breeding. It also indicates the way that the meanings derived from such discourses can change and disintegrate over time. The text that has written Harley's life up until this point does not necessarily prescribe his future or that of his children.

As his identity and experience has been embedded in whiteness, Harley, of necessity, commences the search for his Aboriginality within the archives of the white world that has sought to circumscribe him. In the process, the knowledge of whiteness he gleans from Scat's archive enables Harley to begin to resist his grandfather's totalising narrative. Naming whiteness and attributing personal responsibility to Scat for its deployment is his first step in subverting its power to contain him.

#### 2 A Power of Writing: Undermining the Archives

This chapter explores Harley's writing project. It commences with the proposition that the colonial archives can usefully be interpreted as arising from what Michel Foucault has termed disciplinary writing. It then posits that Harley writes back to the colonial archives through reverting to an earlier tradition that privileged the deeds of one's ancestors. Through rewriting the life of his ancestor, Sandy One Mason, it will be suggested that Harley is in effect rewriting himself. Harley has no choice other than to use English, the language of the colonial archives, to undertake his writing project. In this chapter, it will also be posited that Harley's description of Sandy One's transition to muteness signifies an abrogation of English and reclamation of Aboriginality.

The narrative in *Benang* is based on the period in the early twentieth century during which A. O. Neville was Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia. Under Neville's direction, an extraordinary amount of data was collected, recording virtually every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives. People of Aboriginal descent were allocated an identification number and a personal file. These files were cross-referenced with other files held within the Aborigines Department, the Health Department, and the Crown Law Office. The centrality of individual lives to these files contrasts markedly with the textual treatment of Aborigines during the early stages of colonisation. Paul Carter asserts that in most of the "Narratives" written during the first century of European settlement, "any more than passing mention of the Aborigines (sic) is relegated to the back of the book, usually to an appendix" (335). Classified along with the country's flora and fauna, Carter suggests that Aborigines were forced to inhabit "the realm of the

etc." (335). This textual marginality can be read as contiguous with the "doomed race" theory that prophesied the inevitable extinction of Aboriginal Australians (McGregor 13). Once it became apparent that Aborigines were not dying out, state surveillance and control of Aboriginal lives greatly intensified. This later reflected a high level of white anxiety surrounding miscegenation, a process Robert Young states was equated with "decivilisation" (175). The changing textual emphasis in recording Aboriginal lives can also be read in the context of Foucault's theory of a transition, culminating in nineteenth-century, from a sovereign model of power to the disciplinary society.

One of the essential mechanisms of Foucault's disciplinary society is a "power of writing" (*Discipline* 189). The advent of disciplinary writing brought an unprecedented degree of describability to the common individual:

For a long time ordinary individuality – the everyday individuality of everybody – remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege. The chronicle of a man, the account of his life, his historiography, written as he lived out his life formed part of the rituals of his power. The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination. (*Discipline* 191)

Situating the archival records within the field of disciplinary writing facilitates their being read as a tool of white domination. White settlers demanded that Aboriginal people be "pushed further down" and "controlled" (Scott 118). The

apparatus of the Aborigines Department with its inter-departmentally linked files was designed to facilitate the desired level of white control over Aboriginal lives.

Foucault states that disciplinary writing supplanted earlier traditions in which genealogies had been privileged. Previously, ancestors provided the points of reference for contemporary peoples. Deeds provided the measure of a person, rather than gaps between the individual and the norm as determined by the dominant society (*Discipline* 193). When Harley seeks to rewrite himself as Nyoongar, to prove himself to be his grandfather's failed experiment, he turns to this earlier tradition, seeking to repopulate his family tree.

As introduced in the previous chapter, Scat's archival documents detailed the belief that an important facet in ensuring that children of mixed descent were absorbed into the white community was the "selective separation from antecedents" (Scott 28). He clearly thinks that he has managed to achieve this separation in Harley's case. This notion is reinforced when, on regaining consciousness after a car accident, Harley plays up to Scat by pretending to accept the old man as his Dad (Scott 14). Scat's blunder is made apparent through the use of an indigenous tree, the gum, as an extended metaphor for the family tree with which Harley aims to reconnect:

It towers over the house, and Grandad believed its roots threatened the foundations. ... Grandad wrote: Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots. He might also have written: Displace, disperse, dismiss...My friends, you recognise the language. (Scott 108)

Harley ingeniously trims only those branches that are framed by the window through which Scat looks out into the yard. As Scat gazes out upon the world, his

vision restricted to the little that he can see through the window, he is grateful to see no hint of the tree that he found so threatening. He is soon disabused of this, however, when Harley takes him outside and shows him that only those limbs that were visible to Scat have been removed. The tree itself is still intact, and will grow again. Similarly, Harley's Aboriginal family, while depleted and diminished, is intact and holds the potential for new life to spring forth from those who remain (Scott 108).

Contrasting with Scat's extensive yet sterile compilation of indexed and cross-referenced notes and photographs, Harley produces detailed and colourful accounts of his ancestors. Some of his writings are derived from supernatural experiences that will be discussed in the next chapter. However, he also draws inspiration from the stories passed onto him by his Aboriginal uncles, Will and Jack. As the narrative unfolds, there is a shift in the sources that Harley utilises:

Jack was so quiet. However once he recognised me, he began to speak, and the words flowed as if they had been dammed-up too long. It was a deluge of words which drowned my grandfather's own, flooding them so that Grandad's filed notes and pages seemed like nothing so much as debris and flotsam remaining after some watery cataclysm. It was rubbish, for sure, but I clung to it for so long because it was all I knew. (Scott 59)

Harley's white education and upbringing leave him facing a conundrum. He feels burdened with having to provide paper proof to back up his version of the family history, yet at the same time he believes that "you can meet a death, just knowing the paper talk" (Scott 426). This worry gradually resolves as the narrative

Aboriginal uncles' stories and his own sense of his family's past. This underlines his increasing distance from his white upbringing, and his transition towards adopting an Aboriginal identity.

Through his research, Harley discovers that his family tree is populated by a series of white men who were, for their times, exceptional. These men married Nyoongar women and claimed at least some of their children as their own (Scott 97). The first of these men, the farthest back that Harley can reach, is Sandy One Mason. Under the professional gaze of the local policeman, Sergeant Hall, Sandy One is noted, categorised, and mentally filed away as being "an Englishman" (Scott 83). Sandy One's initial construction as a white man is reinforced through his being described as joining in with other white men stalking a group of Nyoongar women. At this point in the narrative, Sandy One stands out, and is noticed by Fanny Benang, because of his blond hair. Harley's Uncle Jack later implies that Sandy One was some kind of a "blond ancestral hero" (Scott 464). This emphasis on Sandy One's blondness and heroism aligns him with the Christian elements informing modern European constructs of whiteness. Marina Warner dates the association of blondness with lightness well back in Christian tradition:

Blondness belongs within the richly layered symbolism of lightness... [Identified with heavenly effulgence] it appears to reflect solar radiance, the totality of the spectrum, the flooding wholeness of light which Dante finds grows more and more dazzling as he rises in Paradise. (Warner 366)

Locating Sandy One Mason within the Christian tradition endows him with saviour-like qualities. However, Harley suggests that Sandy One and his Aboriginal wife Fanny Benang probably saved each other (Scott 463).

When Fanny Benang claims Sandy One as her partner she exercises agency in a way that writes back against colonial constructions of Aboriginal women as licentious (Scott 463). Rather than demonstrating the "seductive lures of immorality" attributed to Aboriginal women by writers such as Daisy Bates, Fanny's decision to ally herself with Sandy One is strategic (McGregor 55). Harley narrates Fanny's move as being based on limiting the potential for violence; the men accompanying Sandy One are intent on engaging in a spree (Scott 463). Much later in their lives together, Sandy One has an accident. Fanny, while she holds him, is said to have "regarded him almost as a hostage. There was a law and this man meant that they might escape it. Their almost-a-white-man" (Scott 319). Fanny strategically deploys Sandy One's white-hued skin as a device to help the family stay together and avoid incarceration during troubled times. This highlights the visibility of white skin to Aborigines, as well as demonstrating an awareness of the power and privilege associated with being considered to be white.

Fanny is the name bestowed upon his wife by Sandy One Mason. She accepts this name as she has knowledge of his mother, also known as Fanny.

There were, however, various other versions of her name that were preserved on paper, such as Winnery, Wonyin, Pinyan, and Benang (Scott 103, 464). As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins have pointed out, the renaming of people and places in English exacerbated the disempowerment of Indigenous peoples. Such

renaming replaced earlier constructions of identity and established partial control over geography and subjectivity:

Interpellation, or ascribing a subjectivity to – here – the colonised subject, equally denies the existence of a previous subjectivity or selfhood. The interpellative process of European languages frequently resulted in a reductive and simplistic construction of colonised subjectivity as 'other', ignoring the necessary cultural and personal individuation that selfhood generally presumes. (165)

However, Fanny's adoption of an English name can also be read as a strategic move designed to appease the white pastoralists for whom she and Sandy One work. Using a name that sounds familiar to these men makes her seem knowable and consequently less of a threat.

Despite his blondness and apparent Englishness and whiteness, Sandy One is a curiously enigmatic figure. His arrival on the shores of Western Australia is simultaneously conventional and mythical. Initially he arrives in European style as part of the crew on a whaleboat having a lark before returning to port. However, following a mishap, Sandy One is towed out to sea by a whale. In a seemingly supernatural fashion, he survives an epic journey and is escorted by dolphins to a beach where Aborigines are singing around a fire (Scott 459, 493). This doubled arrival suggests a doubling in his identity that is not elucidated until near the end of Harley's narrative.

Harley demonstrates an intuitive ability to recount episodes in Sandy One Mason's life that astounds both of his uncles and his grandfather (Scott 187). This ability will be further explored in the following chapter. Harley utilises his

intuitive powers to read beneath Sandy One's white surface and rewrite him as Aboriginal. Sandy One's transition from apparently being a white man to becoming thought of as "the blackest of all of them" is represented in the text through his loss of English. This, in turn, is attributed to his deepening intimacy with Fanny Benang and her country, over which they travel together (Scott 463, 252).

As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin theorise in *The Empire Writes Back*, language fulfils a crucial function as a medium of power. Post-colonial discourse therefore calls for a rejection of the language emanating from the Imperial centre, in this case English. Ashcroft *et al* state that there are two distinct processes that may be employed through which English might be adapted to the colonised place: appropriation and abrogation. Abrogation, they state, "involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 38). The moment of abrogation is normally accompanied by the appropriation of English, "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 38). However, in *Benang*, the abrogation of English manifests as Sandy One Mason's transition to muteness. This process parallels his becoming increasingly Aboriginal through the subtle intercession of Fanny Benang.

Harley describes Sandy One as developing a growing awareness, an increasing intimacy with the land, as his relationship with Fanny deepens (Scott 351). His white contemporaries regard him as knowing the coast well. He has worked along it for years, but those who know him also speculate that he has

"some deeper knowledge, some more intimate acquaintance" through his marriage to Fanny (Scott 342). Set against the warmth of Sandy One's and Fanny's relationship is the contemporaneous depiction of Aborigines by white settlers who "had words; darkness, shadow, savage... and they made sharper ones, harmless to their own ears. Boong. Coon. Nigger" (Scott 312). This is explained within the text as stemming from a belief entertained by white settlers that they best understood the land's potential. To shore up this belief, they found it necessary to believe in the inferiority of Aborigines (Scott 312). Harley suggests that this type of thinking is embedded in the English language itself: "Once you shared this tongue, you could taste it. Evolution. Light out of darkness. Pyramids and pinnacles. With such a language, it is not hard to accept such concepts" (Scott 312). Harley also critiques English as being a "strange and sibilant tongue" (Scott 492). The recurring motif of the tongue takes on added significance as it is literally a disease of the tongue that causes Sandy One's muteness.

While Sandy One experiences a longing to sing, he has no songs left (Scott 251). His English songs have withered and died in this new place. Indeed, Sandy One's words are described as leaving him "faster than he had ever acquired them" (Scott 251). The erasure of Sandy One's words and stories is reflected in the growing inability of his tongue to function (Scott 272). His tongue is literally "turning black" (Scott 251). This has interesting correspondences with an earlier remark attributed to Scat, who describes the Nyoongar language as "a black tongue" (Scott 36). Bereft of his English words, stories, and speech, Sandy One's awareness of the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants grows. He weeps as he remembers corpses, scattered bones, and Aboriginal flesh made into purses and

ornaments. Remarkably, Sandy One is also said to have memories of his own absence (Scott 282). This implies that Sandy One is reconnecting with the Dreaming. As he remembers and mourns for those who have gone before him, the earlier Aboriginal inhabitants of the area, Sandy One makes new songs. Because his tongue has hardened, literally blackened, he can produce only "strange clicking sounds" (Scott 340). His inspiration is drawn from natural features of the landscape such as clouds, birds, and the changing light over the course of a day (Scott 341). Writing Sandy One into the natural landscape reinforces the motif of his reconnection to the land and the Dreaming.

As Harley's understanding of his ancestors deepens, he is bemused by how Sandy One Mason came to belong to the land (Scott 457). Ultimately, he discovers and reveals that Sandy One's grandmother was an Aboriginal woman, and his grandfather, a sealer who raped her (Scott 467, 483). One of Sandy One's white contemporaries claims to "know who Sandy One Mason is". He states that Sandy One is "a nigger, really" (Scott 483). As discussed, it is implied in the text that it is Sandy One's Aboriginal descent and his relationship with Fanny Benang that facilitates his reconnection with the land and the Dreaming. Through using this as his basis on which to reconstitute Sandy One Mason as Aboriginal, Harley is in effect rewriting himself. The transition of Sandy One Mason from white man to Aborigine has set a family precedent. Harley is also descended from Fanny Benang. He describes how Fanny "saw me looking for her, and came to save me, too" (Scott 464). Harley's close identification with Sandy One Mason is summed up in the statement that "Sandy One was no white man. Just as I am no white man" (Scott 494).

Harley's writing project enables him to undermine what Scat has set out to achieve. It marks a transitional phase in his exploration of whiteness and Aboriginality. Through this project, he abrogates the language and classificatory system embedded in his grandfather's archival documents. Yet, as Harley so succinctly states, "it was still his [Scat's] story, his language, his notes and rough drafts, his clear diagrams and slippery fractions which had uplifted and diminished me. I wanted more" (Scott 37). Harley abandons his writing project; it has served its purpose. As a last gesture towards Scat's archives, he appropriates the notion of "upliftment". Ultimately, this enables Harley to project himself above the white world that sought to contain and reduce him.

## 3 (Re)Placing Whiteness: Bleached Aborigines & the Ice Dreaming

The imperative to "uplift a despised race" was a cornerstone of the colonial project of "breeding out the colour" in Aboriginal Australia (Scott 27). This chapter explores the doubled meaning of upliftment as it is deployed in Benang. It examines the way in which Ernest Solomon Scat's desire to uplift his grandson manifests as an obsession with blood and skin colour, a concept introduced earlier. It posits that the apparent whiteness Scat achieves in Harley's case is a surface appearance only, lacking in depth. This chapter then examines Harley's appropriation of the concept of being uplifted. It will be argued that this allows Harley to adopt the position of a universal signifier for humanity. It will be posited that he deploys this position to conceptualise the Ice Dreaming, re-placing whiteness into an Indigenous paradigm.

Like Chinese and Middle Eastern peoples, the people of Western Europe have enjoyed a lengthy tradition of valourising the colour white as a symbol of purity, religious devotion, and nobility (Bonnett 16). The pale complexion of aristocrats was read as a physical marker demonstrating their noble descent. Paler skin dissociated noble people from the toils of labour undertaken outdoors by those of a lower social status (Dyer 57). In pre-modern Europe, it was commonly believed that people of noble descent had such translucent skin that their veins readily could be discerned. This belief gave rise to the expression "blue blood" (Bonnett 16). This fetishisation of the palest hues of skin and notions of blueness as an ultimate expression of whiteness is played on in *Benang*. The narrator, Harley, exhibits an unusual propensity to turn blue:

Perhaps it was hearing of this trace of blue which aroused my grandfather's interest in me... His curiousity about colour, about the remnants of it, the dilution of it. His interest in genetics.

Perhaps it was this sort of detached interest; that of the scientist with his trained mind and keen desire... He may have wondered if this blueness of mine was, to use his language, a throwback to an ancestor. ... All I know is that it certainly aroused his...curiousity.

While I was ill and listless he investigated me most rigorously.

(Scott 413)

Scat's obsession with the boy's blood arouses his sexual lust, which in turn correlates with a lust for power. The convergence between blood, sexuality, and power demonstrated by Michel Foucault elucidates this point. Foucault theorises a shift beginning in the seventeenth century in the procedures of power exercised over the populace by the state. This transformation is characterised by a move from what he terms a "right of death" which was the prerogative of the sovereign power, to a "power over life" (Sexuality 135). The "symbolics of blood" associated with the honour of war, the sovereign, the executioner, and torturers gradually gave way to "an analytics of sexuality". Sexuality came to be the measure of a society's strengths and biological vigour. The prestige of blood was, however, also carried over into this revitalized system of power. At times, its historical weight was called on to bolster the type of political power exercised through the regulation of sexuality. Foucault reads Nazism as having been "the most cunning... combination of the fantasies of blood and the paroxysms of a disciplinary power" (Sexuality 149). Scat is characterised as being sympathetic to,

but not quite as extreme as, the Nazis (Scott 154). In Foucault's "society with a sexuality", the new importance attached to sexuality derives from "its insidious presence". Sexuality became "an object of fear and excitement at the same time. Power delineated it, aroused it" (Sexuality 148). As the end product of a lifetime's experimentation, Harley is an object of both fear and excitement to Scat. He is frightened by the possibility of failure; Harley might contained hidden traces of colour. Yet Scat is also excited by what he imagines himself to have created, the first white man born. The resultant feeling of power incites him to commit numerous acts of incestuous sodomy.

The asymmetrical power relationship between Harley and his grandfather alters as the child grows up and the adult grows old. Other factors also come into play. As a young adult, Harley, while recovering from a car accident, finds himself again at the mercy of his sodomising grandfather (Scott 13). However, he does not remain vulnerable to Scat as shortly thereafter the old man has a series of strokes (Scot 22). These events are contemporaneous with Harley's discovering the old man's archive. This impels Harley to reconstitute the power relationship between them. One of the strategies he employs is literally to let himself drift, to appropriate "the uplifted state provided by my grandfather" and utilise it to his own ends (Scott 458). The way in which Harley hovers through the air terrifies and angers his grandfather. In the early stages of reconnecting to his Aboriginal identity, Harley deliberately stages performances for Scat and is gratified by his grandfather's response (Scott 162).

Harley's drifting performs several inter-related functions in the text.

Initially it indicates his loss of connection to country; he is literally unable to keep

his feet on the ground. Eventually it is reinterpreted as being an Aboriginal spiritual gift bestowed only on the select few. Through utilising this gift, Harley familiarises himself with his ancestors and country. He discovers his propensity to drift on waking up from the coma resulting from his car accident:

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, as though I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except – right in front of my eyes – a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation. (Scott 11)

Harley realises that he has in fact drifted up to the ceiling. He is confronted with its flat white surface. By extension, this metaphor comments on Harley's relationship to the mantle of whiteness with which Scat has endeavoured to clothe him. It is a whiteness that is surface only, lacking in depth and variation. The one-dimensional nature of Harley's whiteness is suggested through the glimpses that he catches of himself in a mirror. In this refracted surface, he sees many different selves. The first, a stranger with dark blue veins running beneath his creamy skin, foreshadows Scat's fascination with Harley's propensity to turn blue. The other selves revealed are stereotypical images of Aborigines as formulated in the white imagination. These include a motionless figure with fine features and a noble brow standing before the setting sun, a bottle-toting furrow-browed man slumped on the ground, a footballer, and a figure sprawled, dying, in the desert (Scott 12).

Reflecting its prominence as an item of exchange in the early days of settlement, the mirror is used repeatedly throughout *Benang*. It functions as a

device through which to critique the emptiness of the images that white Australians attempted to impose on people of Aboriginal descent. Various Aboriginal characters contemplate themselves in mirrors, deconstructing their physical features. They mull over racist assertions made by white Australians, such as the suggestion that Aborigines have a smaller brain capacity than white people. In a kind of doubling the mirrors work to reflect back to white readers the inadequacies of the colonial images bequeathed to Aborigines. Scat's Aboriginal partner, Kathleen, peers into his mirror. Emulating this behaviour, Scat's second Aboriginal "wife", Topsy, later does likewise. Both seek to understand how other people, white people, seem to see them (Scott 160, 369). All that looks back at them, however, is a distorted view of their own faces. As the mirror is damaged and incomplete, pieces of their reflected selves are missing. This implies that when white settlers focussed their gaze on Aborigines, their visions were distorted by the ideologies that underpinned and justified their imperial endeavours. The settlers were able to discern only their own perceptions of blackness being reflected back to them. The substance of the people they were looking at was invisible to them. The dangers of trying to see yourself as white others might perceive you is summed up by Harley's Uncle Jack. Jack walks in on Harley as he searches in the mirror for physical resemblances to his ancestors, and warns him to throw it away:

You know, a mirror – or even if it's water – a mamari, a little devil man, he sees himself in it, that'll stop him. Make him think too much, dance around, not know what to do. It's not that different for some of us. (Scott 161)

Trinh Minh-ha considers the mirror to have "a magical character that has always transcended its functional nature" (22). She states that the power of identification between the self and the image in the mirror is so strong that reality and appearance merge. In this process, the mirror as a tool becomes invisible. Trinh explains that people can spend a lifetime pursuing a fleeting image of something or someone that does not exist outside of the mirror (22). Eventually Harley asks rhetorically whether he can trust any mirror (Scott 158). Its dangers have become apparent to him. He perceives that the surface appearances reflected back at him do not adequately reflect the person that he is, or is in the process of becoming. Harley's spiritual gifts are, however, readily apparent to Jack who insists that he has "something special coming out". Jack urges urges him to reach back to reconnect with the Dreaming (Scott 164).

While Harley's floating begins as a game to taunt his grandfather, he ultimately recognises himself as being "djanak, or djangha", one who "floated among the clouds, and even with a bleached skin, and an addled memory... nevertheless saw the imprint of the wind on the turquoise ocean". He describes himself as "one of the very few" (Scott 163). As an Aborigine embodied in what he terms a bleached skin, yet apparently endowed with rare spiritual gifts, Harley occupies a unique place in the narrative. His positioning lends itself to a literal interpretation of Richard Dyer's statement that "the presence of the dark within the white man... enables him to assume the position as the universal signifier for humanity. He encompasses all the possibilities for human existence, the darkness and the light" (28). Harley is positioned in the text as being a kind of archetypal father of both black and white Australians. He has just one sexual liaison, with a

white woman and her adopted Aboriginal sister. Harley fathers children to both of them. Uncle Jack describes this process as "white seed in black ground. Black seed in white ground", emphasising the convergence of whiteness and blackness inherent in Harley's identity (Scott 449). Harley is seen to be the active participant in these unions. The women are passive receptacles of his seed. Associating the women's wombs with the ground indicates a correlation between these women and the earth mother revered in Aboriginal cultures. Harley is therefore planting his seed in Aboriginal and white Australian country, from which a new generation of children of blended ancestry will be called forth.

Symbolically, Harley takes the two children from his only sexual union(s) with him on a visit to Dolphin Cove, the place where their ancestor Sandy One Mason was brought ashore by dolphins (Scott 452). Harley describes this place as being very powerful (Scott 492). While they are there, Harley is suddenly, and literally, uplifted to fly among the birds, the spirits of the land. It is at this point in the narrative that Harley experiences a revelation; it is his destiny to show his people where and who they are (Scott 454). This has resonances with an earlier experience in Harley's childhood. While out fishing with his father, Tommy, a huge white bird appeared "creating itself out of shreds of mist, fine ribbons of cloud, the so slow falling rain" (Scott 415). The bird imparted to Harley the thought of "all of us made of water and ice, drying in the sun's flame" (Scott 415). Frequently throughout the narrative, fire and flames are associated with Aboriginality, and water and ice with whiteness. The bird's revelation implies a common origin of all people. It also contests the European model in which white people were situated as being more advanced than Aborigines.

Deborah Bird Rose has emphasised the centrality of fire in Aboriginal life (69). This centrality is conveyed in the text in numerous ways. Harley's narrative opens and closes with Aboriginal people gathered in a circle around a fire. The narrative plays out in a circular motion, framed by the fires over which Harley hovers and sings. Harley's significant role is also indicated through his assuming a central position within these circles (Scott 7, 495). Describing his earlier feelings of disconnection from country and family, Harley speaks of an absence of fire (Scott 108). He uses fire to burn the archival documents that represent the ideological whiteness that has sought to classify and explain him in a language that causes him discomfort (Scott 349). An anecdote provides an account of an old Aboriginal man who blows "to keep the flames alive". His name is the same as the Nyoongar language word for fire. The man, who is dying, "was the sound of the flame burning low, burning backwards along a piece of wood" (Scott 247). The strong association of fire with Aboriginality is also made apparent on the cover of the text (see Appendix). The muted tones of red, yellow, and black evoke the Aboriginal flag. Shadowy figures are gathered, naked, around a fire. Black text fills the white pages that are bound between these covers. Whiteness is contained within, bounded by an Indigenous paradigm.

The human forms on the cover of *Benang* are not the stereotypical figures fetished by the dominant culture as representing traditional Aborigines. They are people of the Ice Dreaming. Sandy One Mason's mythical arrival at Dolphin Cove is associated with the first and only snowfall recorded along that coast. The snow represents the incursion of whiteness, both as an ideology and as a corporeal signifier, into an Aboriginal world. Harley likens this to Ice Dreaming (Scott 458).

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins describe the Dreaming as positing "the existence of a continual present which also includes past and future, so that memory can consist of historical recall *plus* a psychic transmission of oneself into a spiritual time and place" (137). Locating whiteness in the Ice Dreaming situates it within a continuity of Aboriginal existence. Constituting Harley's upliftment as an Indigenous phenomenon deriving from the Dreaming accounts for his ability to transmit himself psychically through time and space. At the same time, it also makes visible and discredits colonial notions of an inherent relationship between a person's characteristics and the hue of their skin.

In *Benang*, two distinctive types of people are associated with the Ice
Dreaming. One type is the white descendants of the British settlers whose arrival
heralded the Ice Dreaming. The coldness in their attitudes towards Aborigines is
couched in terms of their still having ice in their veins. When Scat's Aboriginal
wife Topsy takes her son, Tommy, to school and tries to engage with white
mothers in polite conversation, they "all seemed so very cold, as if ice still ran in
their veins" (Scott 370). Living in the city, away from her country and family,
Topsy becomes ill. Away from the fire, she is described as being enveloped by the
cold. While warmth radiates from within her, death is not far away. When Scat
takes Topsy to the doctor, the receptionist advises admitting her to the natives'
section at the hospital. The white receptionist is also described as having ice in her
blood (Scott 371).

The advent of the Ice Dreaming is accompanied by a perceptible lightening in Aboriginal skin tones. This is discussed in the narrative through the figure of the bleached Aborigine. There is a doubling apparent in this signifier.

Bleached Aborigines are written as being a naturally occurring consequence over time of Aboriginal people having relations with descendants of the British settlers. However, the figure of the bleached Aborigine is also deployed to highlight the impact of ideological whiteness on Aboriginal people and communities. This is particularly evident in an episode involving Scat and his wife, Topsy. Using his ability to travel through time, Harley looks on as his father, Tommy, watches his Aboriginal mother, Topsy, literally being bleached by Scat:

I think she remembered a thousand previous baths, and Ern saying,

'Lie deeper in it, love, lie deep in it'. She knew how it stung, and

how – after the bleach – it was true, her skin did seem fairer. ...

Her skin had been penetrated, and must have now been dead. Dead to some depth. The bones gone. She couldn't stand up. (Scott 372)

As Dyer points out, the motif of washing is closely associated with whiteness (60). He states that "to be white is to have expunged all dirt, faecal or otherwise, from oneself: to look white is to look clean" (Dyer 76). White, as a skin colour, is inherently unstable. This is one of its strengths. Dyer states that this enables whiteness to be presented as apparently attainable. However, it also sets up a movable criterion of inclusion (57). No matter to what lengths Scat encourages his wife to go, Topsy will never be accepted and acknowledged as white by the white community in which they live. Under Scat's ministrations, Topsy's skin apparently becomes lighter. However, this is achieved at the expense of the substance of the woman. The process literally dissolves her skin and bones.

Ultimately, Scat's urge to bleach his wife, both literally in the bathtub and

figuratively through her removal to the white world of the city, results in her death.

The lightening of Aboriginal skins and bleaching of bones is also associated with death at other points in the narrative. On one of the journeys that Harley takes with his Aboriginal uncles and Scat, they visit a sorry place, a massacre site. Looking back in time Harley recounts how

Once again, Fanny came singing, Sandy One trailing behind her...

Collect them all, and stack them, place them rest them together.

Bones, white like the skin of the young ones will be, the children flowing on, becoming paler and paler and just as dead. (Scott 269)

The lightening of the hue of the skin in the coming generations of Aboriginal children clearly, in this instance, portends death. Metaphorically, this death implies a living death resulting from a disconnection from country and culture. This correlation is reinforced by Harley's observation that, through rounding up and training Aboriginal children of mixed descent, a new workforce was being built (Scott 341). Stephen Kinnane has noted that the removal of many Aboriginal children led to the creation of a cheap labour force (170). Many of these children were sent to live on missions where they could be trained in servitude:

It was a place of planned repetition designed to breed well-mannered, hard-working, obedient children who would take their place – and that was never expected to be too high a place – in white society. They did learn, but not beyond what they had to know to be good workers. (Kinnane 83)

Kinnane states that the missionaries endeavoured to replace the knowledge these children had of their skin and their sense of country with Christian notions of belonging to Jesus and the Church (81). In *Benang*, Harley asserts that these pale children belong to "a new skin". In doing so, he re-places the whiteness of these children into an Indigenous cultural paradigm. Recognising their whiteness as a new skin in an Aboriginal sense gives these children a place from which they can be linked to country and claimed by their communities (Kinnane 17). It retrieves them from a situation in which they would otherwise be the "living dead".

On first discovering his Aboriginality, Harley contemplated himself as being "a solitary full stop". He later states "I now know there are many of us, rising. Like seeds, we move across and dot the daytime sky. More and more of us, like stars we make the night sky complete" (Scott 109). While Harley may be one of the few to exhibit exceptional spiritual gifts, he nevertheless acknowledges that there are many people like him. Many contemporary Aborigines have skin hued white. Writing such people as seeds signifies them to be the start of something new, a transformation. These people of the Ice Dreaming have the inherent potential to blend into the white world signified by the daytime sky, and to complete the Aboriginal world signified by the night sky. Their existence contests the binary opposition between night and day, read here as black and white. It also collapses the colonial hierarchy predicated on discrete categories of race. Harley, the archetypal father figure, writes a syncretic future for Australia.

## Conclusion

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The ways in which whiteness is represented and made visible throughout *Benang* alter in accordance with Harley's changing relationship to it. As Harley negotiates the liminal space between whiteness and Aboriginality in terms of his identity, he is engaged in what Stuart Hall describes as a process of becoming (222-37). Initially immersed within a white world, whiteness is invisible to Harley. Within white culture, he occupies a subject position considered normal rather than racialised as white. As Richard Dyer points out, from within white cultural paradigms it is generally only the non-white subject who is viewed as being truly raced (14). Harley begins to understand himself as a racialised being when he becomes aware of his Aboriginality. From his emerging standpoint as an Aborigine, he identifies racial whiteness as a subject position associated with a specific set of practices. He also identifies himself as the intended product of white practices embedded in the colonial project of "breeding out the colour" in Aboriginal Australia. Through naming whiteness and delineating its functions, Harley diminishes its power to circumscribe his identity.

Some of the power with which whiteness is imbued is embedded in its invisibility. Its aspirational structure and ascriptive practices work to ensure that whiteness retains its exclusivity. From self-proclaimed positions of authority, white colonisers constructed themselves as belonging to a superior race. Over time, whiteness became the universal norm, making race a province of non-white others. One of the outcomes of this process has involved these others being subjected to intense scrutiny. Described and circumscribed, the other is relegated to the margins of what is taken to be normal, that is, white. The narrative of

whiteness in Benang suggests that when this process is reversed, and the other identifies, marks, and critiques whiteness, its power diminishes. It indicates that through being named and racialised, whiteness itself may be transcended.

Whiteness is initially made visible in Benang as a colonial construct. What might be termed a postcolonial notion of whiteness emerges during the course of the narrative. Wresting back from the archive the authority to write himself and his ancestors allows Harley to reinscribe himself as djanak. Deploying this identity enables him to resituate whiteness into an Aboriginal paradigm, specifically locating it in the Ice Dreaming. Resituating whiteness in this way does not imply a straightforward inversion of the sets of identities based on binary oppositions: black and white; uncivilised and civilised; colonised and coloniser. Whiteness deployed in a colonial context tends to display a strong imperative towards eradicating difference. Its aim is to absorb or eliminate that which is not white so that only whiteness remains. Harley's postcolonial interpretation of whiteness contests colonial notions of whiteness having a biological basis in "race" and points instead to its being a cultural construction with movable criteria. Through the Ice Dreaming and the figure of the bleached Aborigine, Harley takes account of the intrusion of whiteness into an Aboriginal world. He indicates that both whiteness and Aboriginality are transformed through this colonial encounter. Blending black with white, and white with black, he suggests a syncretic future for Australia.

This study arose out of a concern to ascertain what whiteness might look like from an Aboriginal perspective. Within the constraints of a study of this length, an approach has been adopted that has favoured an in-depth reading of an

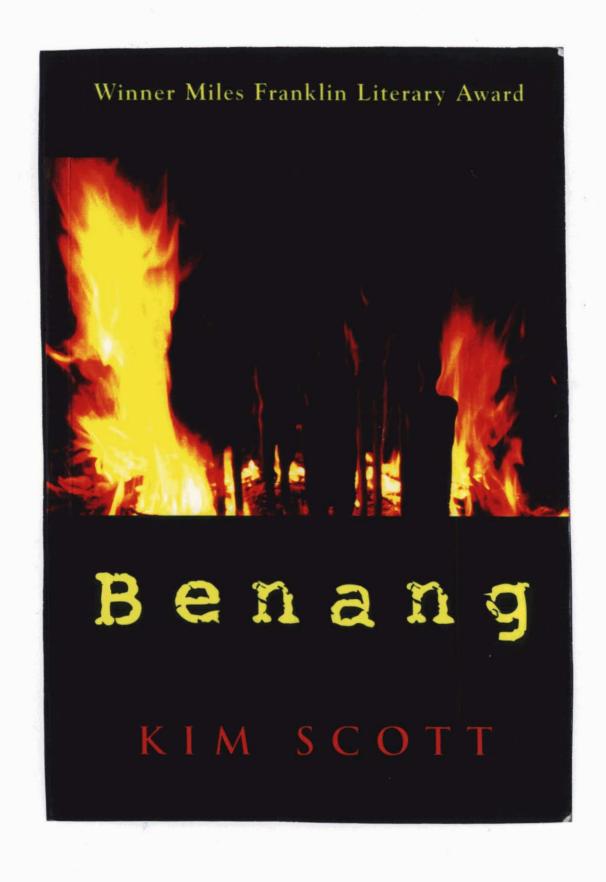
Aboriginal text that gives extensive treatment to the matter of whiteness. The elucidation of whiteness in *Benang* indicates the potential for further scholarly work to be carried out in related areas. As this reading makes apparent, *Benang* is a substantial text imbued with many complex layers of meaning. To date, the published scholarly work focusing on *Benang* is limited to only a handful of articles. Scope remains for this text to receive further critical attention.

This study also points to the potential for a broader thematic analysis to be conducted reading for whiteness across a wide range of Aboriginal texts. Further studies usefully might consider, for example, points at which representations of whiteness cohere and diverge, whether these representations vary according to geographical regions, the extent to which gender impacts on interpretations of whiteness, and the ways in which such representations have changed over time. Such studies would have the potential to add a valuable further dimension to the emerging field of whiteness studies in Australia.

While whiteness is clearly a contemporary concern, Alastair Bonnett has nevertheless suggested that "whiteness can, and ... one day will be superseded, made to appear as archaic an identity as Tuton or Gaul" (4). Reading whiteness in *Benang* indicates the potential for whiteness eventually to become a phenomenon belonging to a bygone age. Ultimately, the colonial whiteness that circumscribed Harley is de-emphasised to the point where he asks rhetorically "how necessary, then, is it to acknowledge, let alone discuss, some very-first-white-man?" (Scott 456). Within an Australian context, whiteness has been made visible in *Benang* as representing a fragment in a much older story, an Aboriginal story that continues on into tomorrow.

**Appendix** 

Front Cover, Kim Scott's Benang: from the heart.



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