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Reading Closely: Writing (and) Family History in Kim Scott's *Benang*

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Indigenous literary criticism has been feeling historical of late.[1] In recent years, scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with literary historical narratives that assume the novelty of indigenous literary production as a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century. A growing body of work draws attention to the (chronological) depth and (generic) breadth of indigenous writing traditions while reading literacy as complexly involved in rather than incompatible with the putative orality of pre-contact cultures. In the United States, Hilary Wyss and Phillip Round have charted "the richness and variety of [early] American Indian interactions with alphabetic literacy, manuscripts, and print" (Round 1), while scholars like Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Lisa Brooks have deepened our understanding of a "vast, vastly understudied, written tradition" through delineating histories of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century native literary and intellectual production (Womack 2). Noenoe Silva has recovered a rich nineteenth-century history of indigenous-language publication in Hawai'i. And in Australia, Penny van Toorn has developed a beautifully nuanced account of Aboriginal cultures of reading and writing through the first hundred and fifty years of British colonization. As a consequence, we now possess more inclusive canons of indigenous writing as well as a richer, more textured sense of the intellectual genealogies on which indigenous writers draw in the present.

This essay reflects on the stakes and implications of such genealogical projects through a reading of the Aboriginal writer Kim Scott's 1999 novel *Benang*.[2] Striving to reconstruct the experiences of one Nyoongar family over the course of the twentieth century, *Benang* is a "Historical Fiction" (Scott 323) in which the work of writing history, entailing a reckoning with (family) histories of writing, is as much foregrounded as the content of the history itself. *Benang* appeared two years after the publication of *Bringing Them Home*, the 1997 report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into the Forced Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. From 1910 to 1970, the report calculates, "between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities," to be fostered or adopted out, often

to non-indigenous families, or to be institutionalized (*Bringing Them Home* n. pag.). In the 1920s and 30s, removal co-existed with another less well-known government program, sometimes called "breeding out the colour," which also had as its goal the eradication of Aboriginality.[3] Where removal aimed—ostensibly—at socio-cultural assimilation, training indigenous children to take their place in white Australian society, "breeding out the colour" was premised on the promise of biological absorption. Through encouraging marriages between white men and women of mixed indigenous-white descent, the colour, some Australians argued, could simply be "bred out." Among those who committed openly to the project of "breeding out the colour" was Auber Octavius (A. O.) Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia between 1915 and 1940. In *Benang*, Scott provides Neville with a cousin, an English-born settler named Ernest Solomon Scat. Inspired by Auber's work and words, Ern takes up the task of "breeding out the colour," impregnating a series of Aboriginal women in his quest to produce "the first white man born" (10). In practice, Ern discovers, absorption must be accompanied by assimilation and segregation: according to Harley Scat, Ern's grandson and the latest target of Ern's assimilative efforts, "it was *the selective separation from antecedents* which seemed most important, and with which Grandfather was a little lax" (28).[4] Ern's laxness allows Harley, "raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another," to attempt "to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn" (19). *Benang* is the result.

The narrative Harley taps out in attempting to enact that reversal draws to a striking degree on the colonial state archive. Early in the novel, Harley describes attending his father's funeral in police custody. As Harley is being driven back to the remand centre, a sudden dip in the road "where there had once been a creek" makes his stomach lurch:

> At the time there was only that gut feeling, but now, initially, I might explain it by way of dusty archives. The Inspector for Aborigines and Fisheries' diary describes the pool where that creek once joined the river: *Acres and acres of mullet,* he said, *their tails sticking out of the water*. . . . The inspector also wrote that he was after *a gin* [that is, in the racist parlance of the time, an Aboriginal woman] who, with a bunch of *very fair children*, had been reported as camping and hunting along the river. It was the nineteen twenties, long decades before I was born. It may well have been my family, generations back, out of their territory, running to escape. (21)

There is much one could say about this passage. I want to highlight, however, the way in which Harley, a compulsive citer of texts, incorporates material from the documentary archive into his narrative, supplementing "gut feeling" with explanations culled from "dusty archives," identifying (with) family in (if also despite) the brutal asides of a minor colonial functionary.

Most critics read Scott's turn to the archive in relation to the textual forms through which the settler state has historically administered Aboriginal sexual and family life. Lisa Slater suggests that "Scott deploys

archival material" to highlight and contest the rigidity of "the ideology that fuelled the government's policy-making" ("*Benang*, This 'Most Local of Histories'" 52). The dialogism of his method undercuts the colonizers' insistence that they alone possess the "sole authority to constitute meaning" (56). Moreover, as Michael R. Griffiths argues, Scott's "deconstructive repetition" of colonial biopolitical discourse has the effect of reanimating "the specters of Aboriginal kinship buried between the lines of such archival marks" (159-160). Similar arguments can be advanced about other Aboriginal-authored texts that make extensive use of the government archive to document policies of removal and absorption, including Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara's auto/biographical fiction *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). What this scholarship assumes, however, is that the writing contained in and by the government archive is the work of state actors alone. In other words, it passes over the untidiness of the government archive as a register of diverse voices and interests, even if one ultimately "signed" by the state. That Harley integrates into his narrative archived *Aboriginal* writing, including two letters his relation Uncle Jack Chatalong once sent to Auber Neville, tends to go unremarked (62).

In this essay, I foreground the story *Benang* tells about Aboriginal literacy, legible not just in Harley's own struggles with writing, but in references to the letter-writing campaigns inaugurated by his ancestors Sandy One Mason and Fanny; to Jack and his sister Kathleen's appetite for the written word, stoked by school; to Jack's cousin Will Coolman's love of westerns; and to the early date at which Harley's Nyoongar family learned to read and write. To thus attend to Aboriginal habits of reading and writing is not to deny writing's centrality to colonial governance projects. In the essay's first two sections, I show how, in Ann Laura Stoler's words, colonial archives function as at once "transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves" (20). Despite Harley's verbal virtuosity, Scott's novel expresses skepticism about whether literacy alone can "save" (425) Harley and his family, given that colonial ideas about writing and ways of using writing have proven so damaging and difficult to undo. Urging Harley to throw away the "mirror" of his grandfather's words, Uncle Jack instructs him to "just relax, feel it. You gotta go right back, ask your spirits for help (161; 109). This "go[ing] right back" takes Harley out of his grandfather's house and into Nyoongar country, with which he reacquaints himself through listening to Uncle Will and Uncle Jack's yarn. Still, if Harley's narrative is an attempt to "repopulate his family history," Harley must come to terms with the fact that "my family, at the end of which line I dangled, learnt to read and write very early on" (425). In *Benang*, writing is a medium through which to reconnect with family, to reunite community; indeed, this orientation to writing is a significant part of the inheritance Harley's family bequeaths him. *Benang* invites readers to consider not just what indigenous literary and intellectual history is good for, but what it feels like to do indigenous literary and intellectual history.

It suggests, in fact, that the *process* of recovering indigenous literary and intellectual history is a critical element of the work indigenous literary and intellectual history does in the world. According to Osage scholar Robert Warrior, when indigenous scholars take seriously "the examples of Native writers and scholars who have confronted similar situations [. . .] we empower our work," because "critically reading our own [intellectual] tradition allows us to see some of the mistakes of the past as we analyze the problems of the present" (*Tribal Secrets* 2). What is left unspecified here is the nature of the critical stance that is required of, let alone possible for, indigenous readers when attending to indigenous writing traditions. If the disciplinary norms of literary studies equate "critical reading" with distanciation, *Benang* points to the difficulties such norms pose for indigenous readers of indigenous writing, not because, as Warrior worries, of the imperative to read hagiographically, but because, for Harley, reading engenders a closeness that is not always pleasant, and often overwhelming. This is not to suggest that indigenous reading practices must therefore lack criticality. I conclude the essay by asking what besides distanciation critical reading might entail, investigating how the experience of closeness that is so much a feature of the reading projects in *Benang* might reanimate that very foundational methodology of postwar Anglo-American literary criticism: close reading.

First Things First

Literary histories are often structured as compendia of firsts: the first Aboriginal to write a piece of imaginative literature; the first Aboriginal to publish a poem, a collection of poems, a novel, a play; the first Aboriginal to run a publishing house, a theatre, a newspaper, a literary journal; the first Aboriginal to win the Commonwealth Book Prize, the Man Booker, a Nobel.[5] Accordingly, most histories of Aboriginal literary production begin in 1929, with the publication of David Unaipon's *Native Legends*, the first book-length work by an Aboriginal writer to appear in print (even if it was initially attributed to white anthropologist William Ramsay Smith). It is then conventional to fast-forward to the 1960s and '70s, and the publication of major work by Aboriginal writers like Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Jack Davis. Although this narrative describes an important shift in publishing patterns, it is also flawed.[6] An emphasis on publishing history works to equate Aboriginal writing with Aboriginal publishing. In addition, too exclusive a focus on fiction and poetry can obscure the more occasional kinds of writing which indigenous people, as a consequence of their more charged relationship with the state, often are or feel compelled to produce, including petitions and manifestoes. Consider, for example, Anne Brewster's claim that "[a]boriginal memory preserves an unwritten black history of colonisation, which has been emerging into the public arena in the form of life stories of

Aboriginal women" (4). If this history is not always available in published form, as *Benang* reminds us, this is not to say it has not been written. One might begin with the correspondence housed in the government archive or with the periodical press[7]: in 1882, as Penny van Toorn explains, a letter written by ten disgruntled residents of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve in Victoria was published in the *Argus*, a noteworthy but by no means unique occurrence. In investigating what "the history of Aboriginal reading and writing would look like if we moved beyond the genres of fiction and poetry," the aim is not to diminish the cultural and political significance of "pioneers" like Noonuccal and Davis (van Toorn 2). Nor is it (only) to push back the date of Aboriginal literary emergence, to celebrate a new series of firsts (the first Nyoongar to use alphabetic script, to write on paper, to be published in a newspaper). Rather, the exercise should encourage us to relinquish narratives of singular emergence as inadequate to the complex history of indigenous literacy and literary production.

Benang develops a multi-pronged critique of what Robert Warrior terms the "rhetoric of ancientness and novelty" through Harley's canny take on the genre of the family history ("William Apess" 189). Harley repeatedly describes his project as "nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories" (10). In colonial contexts, as Jean O'Brien has demonstrated in her work on nineteenth-century southern New England, local and family histories helped to promulgate the "twinned story of non-Indian modernity and Indian extinction" crucial to settler projects of de- and re-territorialization (xiv). Not surprisingly, Harley's grandfather, the genocidal Ern, is also a keen reader of "local and family histories," and would have liked to write one with Harley (17; 22). To be sure, Ern's interest in local and family histories is only one of the targets the novel pursues in investigating the way in which, as Elleke Boehmer among others has observed, the work of empire is conducted in and through writing. What this attention to the genres of the local and family history in particular renders visible, however, is the colonial logic of emergence narratives, or what O'Brien might call "firsting."

In the hundreds of local and family histories published in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island between 1820 and 1880, O'Brien discerns a compulsion to "first" settlers by highlighting the labour involved in establishing European-style institutions of social order. Harley's Uncle Will Coolman makes a similar observation when he criticizes the authors of "a little booklet, a feeble local history" for "trying to put the arrival of their parents in the new field before many others, for the sake of being known as descendants of the first pioneers" (165-166). Firsting anchors the story of settlement in institutional development rather than the violence of dispossession. At the same time, it removes indigenous people from the picture, producing settler modernity through purifying the landscape of Indians (O'Brien xx). In this way, firsting doubles as a form of "lasting." Even Uncle Will gets so caught up in the game of firsting, beginning a "little history of this region, and of his

family" that names "his father [the Irishman Daniel Coolman] as among the very first to 'settle' at Gebalup," that he "scarcely wrote of his [Nyoongar] mother [Harriette]," who gives him the right to claim to be "of the 'first'" (165-166). He also neglects to mention the massacres that have left the country around Gebalup a veritable Nyoongar graveyard, turning it into "a place for ghosts, not for living people" (Eades and Roberts qtd. in Scott n. pag.).[8] Considered in this context, "breeding out the colour" appears as only a more complicated mode of firsting. Hence Ern's obsessive quest for the "first white man born" (10). As I've argued elsewhere,[9] the (il)logic of "breeding out the colour" equates whiteness with firstness, insofar as it assumes the supremacy of white norms of physiognomy and behavior; configures the white body as a body "without history" (Scott 27); and strives to last Aboriginality by "dilut[ing]" it (Scott 29). Men like Ern conceive of literacy as a technology of firsting that transforms black into white, in part through promoting divisions within indigenous communities. If policies designed to separate "full-bloods" from "half-castes" did often have the effect of separating what van Toorn calls the "*speaking* generation" (those elders with the authority to speak for the community) from "the *writing* generation" (those young people with "the technical ability to transform their elders' speech into writing"), it seems all the more important to insist, where appropriate, on trans-generational continuity by eschewing the search for first readers and writers (150). Ern's conviction that he has, at last, produced "the first white man born" is in any case serially undone, and not only by what he sees as Aboriginal recalcitrance: Ern's eldest son Tommy is born just following the passage of legislation that disqualifies even so-called quarter-castes like Tommy from claiming the legal status of white men. Aboriginality persists. Consequently, it makes sense to read Harley's fascination with familial practices of reading and writing as expressive of a genealogical rather than a firsting impulse, one that focuses not on lasting Aboriginals but on their lasting.

Men of Letters

Writing is not, of course, easily claimed for Aboriginality, especially given the close relationship Scott adduces between writing, colonization, and the project of absorption. "You can meet a death," Harley reflects, "just knowing the paper talk" (425). Among Harley's more unsettling habits is his practice of cutting into Ern's skin: "it used to please me," he writes, "when my grandfather and I lived in a crumbling house, to carve words into [Ern's] skin. . . . I wanted to scar and shape him with my words because his had so disfigured me" (287). As Harley makes clear in such moments, the disfigurement which words perpetrate is not only, well, figural. Certainly, words "disfigure" insofar as, codified into law, they determine whether individuals may move freely about the country, drink,

or raise their children without interference. And yet, the crude insults the Gebalup children hurl at Jack, Kathleen, and Will, even the decorous euphemisms their elders prefer, do actual violence to the Aboriginal body. In a surreal scene set in the Gebalup hotel bar, drunk townsfolk take up "like a chorus" the "official styl[ings]" of the local protector, which Harley renders in the form of a song: "*They were drinking, men and women both/the women were prostituting themselves. . .* [. . .]*/It was a serious and growing evil./Many of these native women. . .* [. . .]*/are suffering from syphilis./A serious and growing evil*" (214). On this occasion, the townsfolk are inspired only (!) to communicate their complaints to the authorities. At other times, however, they pursue more direct action, raping and massacring Harley's kin. Aboriginal men and women too take up such words as weapons, turning them against themselves. Trying to understand why his grandmother Topsy might have acquiesced in the stinging bleach baths Ern prescribed for her, Harley concludes, she "had little choice but to be like a white woman," because "on her own, living in the city, how could she think any other way? The only way was to be them, and then more" (372-373; 368). He describes the mirror Topsy employs as "patchy," with "increasing areas of blackness, more pieces missing [that make] her invisible," suggesting that "reading about ourselves can be just like looking in such a mirror" (160; 158).

Harley implies that it is what one reads about oneself that is disfiguring. In a sense, however, the problem is equally that his relations have been made legible, available for reading, through being "sentenced . . . to the page" (484). In Western Australia, the exigencies of administering "Aboriginal affairs" generated an extraordinary amount of information about indigenous subjects and their histories. Anna Haebich explains that

> the [Aborigines] Department came to focus on surveillance and control of individuals and families. The instrument of rule became the personal dossier. From 1915 the Department developed a file and card system based on individuals and families, recording details on relief, blankets and clothing issued, any crimes and breaches of the Aborigines Act, family histories and department decisions relating to the subject's life. (222-223)

When, in *Benang*, Auber Neville is asked whether Sandy One Mason's son Sandy Two Mason is "a *native* in law," his vaunted files fail him, and he is forced to confess that he "do[es] not know [Sandy Two Mason] under that name" (40). The upset this causes Neville underscores the archive's centrality to colonial projects of governance. The textualization of governance is especially critical to programs of reproductive control like "breeding out the colour," which work through capturing intimate acts and relationships in language, in numbers and diagrams and bureaucratese. Thus, Ernest Scat plots out his experiment in "breeding out the colour" on paper: in Ern's study, Harley discovers photographs of "various people, all classifiable as *Aboriginal*," "a page of various fractions, possible

permutations growing more and more convoluted," and a "couple of family trees . . . All leading to me" (25-27). "Breeding out the colour" depends upon, and in a sense takes place in, registers like Ern's, which, modeled on the diagrams and photographs that appear in Neville's *magnum opus*, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, render people into type(s), collections of categories, statistics, and other data that can be compared, moved around, and manipulated. "White, right?" asks one of the chapters in *Benang*, hinting at the close relationship between *writing* and *whiting* out the colour in settler efforts to *right* Australia.

From these examples, it would be possible to conclude that the violence of writing consists in its being done to rather than by indigenous people. Aboriginal literacy terrifies the white men and women of Gebalup: recruited to help Constable Hall distribute the mail, Sandy Two Mason becomes the target of indignation as the townsfolk express incredulity that "the boy can read" and disgust that "that boy [is] touching [their] mail" (208); later, they successfully agitate to bar Sandy's nieces and nephews, Kathleen, Jack, and the Coolman children, from attending the local school. John Frow notes that letters to, from, and inquiring about children forced into state care "tended to go nowhere" (357). Given such tactics, indigenous people have had to work hard to ensure that their concerns get aired, using "the medium of writing not to preserve words over time, but rather to carry voices over the heads of [unsympathetic or hostile] local officials so they could be heard by higher authorities to whom the locals were accountable" (van Toorn 125). In such instances, settler fears that Aboriginals might use writing in the service of resistance, to reknit community in the aftermath of removal, for example, prove prescient.

Scholars often herald indigenous authorship as a critical form of self-determination. Writing has long served, to quote Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks, as "an instrumental tool for the reconstruction of 'Native space' and for resistance to colonization" (xxvii).[10] In writing their own stories and histories, moreover, indigenous people continue the process of wresting control of the means of representation away from settlers. But we have also seen how the capacity to read and write could be taken to mark, could even come to mark, the alienation of some indigenous people from others. Commenting on the advocacy work of a "unique deputation of Western Australian aboriginals, well spoken and in some cases well educated and well read men, [who] waited on the Premier," Scott's fictional A. O. Neville dismisses one of their number as having been "reared as a white man! He does not speak for the *natives*!" (38-39).[11] Here, the act of speaking "for the *natives*" actually disqualifies the man from doing so, the facility with words that might be assumed to advance his lobbying on behalf of Aboriginals being conveniently a sign that he is himself no longer one. Even when indigenous people are speaking—they aren't.

The state doesn't only suppress Aboriginal writing, of course. As Stephen Muecke and Penny van Toorn have demonstrated, the state "was also malignantly productive," requiring "Aboriginal people to produce

written texts and to exercise individual agency"—to become, that is, "authors in the European sense" (van Toorn 21).[12] The bind into which this demand propels indigenous people is evident in the letter Jack Chatalong writes to Neville requesting release from the wardship to which the Aborigines Act has confined him. Writing is critical to this demand, both in that Jack must write the letter to request exemption, and in that his literacy—"I can Read and Write"—is among the qualifications he cites for exemption (62). But that Jack must apply to have his capacity for citizenship recognized compromises the authority to which he lays claim thereby. Elizabeth Povinelli calls this "the cunning of recognition." And in any case, their correspondence fails to persuade Neville that Jack should be allowed to slip the authority of the state. Indeed, writing to the state in this way could sometimes bring Aboriginals more squarely within its sights. Parents desperate to regain custody of their children sometimes fleshed out their applications for exemption with genealogical information that, they believed, showed them to be "clean from the blood of an aboriginal" (Bennett no page).[13] However, as scientist Norman Tindale pointed out in 1941,

> some folk who have aboriginal blood in their veins could not be proved to be of aboriginal descent within the meaning of the Act, while others with less amounts of aboriginal blood, by reason of their accidental preservation of a more complete genealogical history, might be compelled to admit their liability and be forced to seek exemption from the provisions of the Act before being able legally to regain the status they enjoy at present as "white" citizens. (131)

Neville employs the information Jack provides in his correspondence—that "my mother was a black woman and my father was a white man," that Jack considers himself "a half-caste"—to justify his continued subjection to the Act (62; 66). Writing to the Chief Protector of Aborigines constitutes its own kind of "sentencing" to the page, which may account for why Scott elsewhere translates such writing into speech. In one instance, Scott attributes the actually existing statement of a man called David Nannup, who "always tried to keep away from Aboriginals because I knew the people would try to bring me under the Aborigines Act . . . and they took your children, hunted you down, moved you for no reason," to Will Coolman.[14] Rather than address these words to the state, however, Will speaks them to Harley in order to explain why he did *not* write to the Department to contest its plans for his uncle's funeral. A telegram, he knows, might "provide a target for the Aborigines Department to aim at" (144). The point is not that indigenous writing is not a critical form of self-determination. Such letters as Jack's should not, I think, be taken as evidence of the impossibility of indigenous authorship. But if the act of writing is not only a form of self- (or collective) betrayal, neither does it express a limitless agency. The letters are thus productively read as examples of what Ojibwe scholar Scott Lyons, invoking the x's American Indian treaty signatories were encouraged to make as "signifiers of presence and agreement," calls "x-marks," that is, "contaminated, coerced

signs of consent made under conditions not of our making but with hopes of a better future" (1; 40).[15]

Benang is most explicit about the challenges historical cultures of literacy have presented the (would-be) Aboriginal writers in Harley's family. It should be remembered, however, that *Benang* itself constitutes an "x-mark": the terms of recognition may have changed between 1934 and 1999, but they have not necessarily become more nurturing of Aboriginal authorship. Here, I want to reflect briefly on the intervention imaginative literary texts like *Benang* may make in the state of knowledge about Australia's history of colonialism. In recent years, as anyone interested in Australian politics, indigenous issues, or the academic discipline of history will know, debates about the character of settler-indigenous relations in Australia have played out in debates about the claims of Australian historical scholarship and the place of writing and archival research therein. In an essay published in 2008, the Australian historian Bain Attwood suggests that the consolidation and circulation of what he calls "the stolen generations narrative" through popular cultural media (such as film) and advocacy groups (such as Link-Up) reflects the ascendancy of oral testimony over traditional—that is to say, text-based—forms of historical research and documentation in the field more generally.[16] Whereas "the historian's authority and power [once] rested on the triumph of literacy in the institutions that dominated public life in the West in the nineteenth century and through much of the twentieth," since the middle of the last century, he argues, "the oral and the visual have acquired a new or, more strictly speaking, renewed influence, such that historical knowledge and historical sensibility increasingly bear some resemblance to those of premodern times" (77-78). Attwood recognizes that this turn to memory is animated by affective and political needs and not just the pragmatic exigencies of making evidentiary claims in courts of law. At the same time, he claims that the emergence of the "stolen generations narrative" in "narrative contexts that were not historiographical or historicist in nature" rendered it vulnerable, so that "when it finally encountered scrutiny, in the form of positivist history and the law, much of its account of the past was discredited and its influence diminished" (89).

Attwood's contention that significant elements of "the stolen generations narrative" have failed to hold up to the "scrutiny" of professional historians and the courts is troubling in that it implies that the oral testimony in question has not been substantiated by the documentary record, and is even at odds with it. The use which imaginative literary works like *Benang* make of the government archive might be seen to answer such critiques by grounding testimony in text, transforming memory into history(ography). It is not clear, however, how much yielding to the archival imperative ultimately benefits indigenous history-telling, given how tightly bound is the "triumph of literacy" with the institutionalization of European dominance. Attwood's suggestion that memory be tested in "the courts, where it can be subjected to rigorous

scrutiny in order to verify its account of historical events" (91), continues to prioritize the textual over the oral. The archive has a critical role to play in the decolonization of settler colonial memory. At the same time, there is a sense in which Attwood's essay actually exposes the limits of historiography, insofar as it passes over Aboriginal engagements with and mobilizations of the written word, including the documentary archive. (Even when indigenous people are writing—they aren't.) Is it clear that more such work will have the transformative effect Attwood claims for it? Harley describes the resentment he feels whenever, by writing "like this—of railways, and fences, and of extensive pages of notes," he effectively "give[s] a nod to . . . the demands of Historical Fiction. Nod nod nod" (323). Whatever intervention *Benang* makes in the history wars, this cannot be, and isn't, the end of its reckoning with textuality and the archive, which takes shape, rather, as a reckoning with the bonds of kinship.

"A simple family history"

The members of Harley's "blood-and-land-line" share an appetite for the written word (49). Sandy Two is "a reader" (248); so too is "literate Will" a "keen reader" who immerses himself in "westerns, those cowboy novels and the country and western music" (119; 356; 192).[17] As a child, Jack's sister Kathleen loves the "regularity, the patterns of their [school] writing exercises"; following the end of her marriage to Ern and her subsequent departure from Gebalup, Kathleen thirsts for reading material, consuming whatever is available, including "the labels on bottles, tins, old magazines" (260; 138). Jack, with whom she lives, reads newspapers "he had collected, and—in the very act of doing so—dispelled and disproved what those very same papers said about him and his people" (137). Finally, Ern is drawn to Harley because his grandson "was clever at school (I was), he liked reading (ditto), drawing all the time (I do)" (432). The family is brought the "strange gift" of reading and writing by Harley's (ostensibly) white great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason and Nyoongar great-great-grandmother Fanny. Sandy One instills in the family the habit of registering births, deaths, and marriages with the state. According to Sandy One, such a practice means that "it would be murder when they took, used, killed like they did. Because . . . it'd be written down, there'd be words saying who there was" (178). For Ern, in contrast, who registers only two of the children he fathers, certification is a necessary step in the process of firsting insofar as the whiteness of "the first white man born" must be accorded, is indeed a product of, state recognition. It functions in this way as a form of murder. And yet, he thereby ensures that Kathleen's "beautiful handwriting" appears in the archive, when so little else of her remains that Harley wonders "how we can continue" (113; 139). Even if the state proliferates documentation of

genealogy and, indirectly, of individuals' allegiance to country only in order to dismantle indigenous kinship networks and disperse indigenous geographies of home; even if Nyoongar writing is sometimes made to service this end; it is important to recognize the extent to which writing may also enable indigenous people to reaffirm or rekindle kinship bonds.[18] Reconstructing his family's first encounter with the state via the diary of a Travelling Inspector of Aborigines, Harley imagines Fanny, her son, and grandson "glancing down another dusty corridor, one walled with the words of flour bags, metal containers pressed flat, and the many labels," "looking for me, between even such walls of words as these" (485). Elsewhere, words are a wall that advance at Jack, "pushing him farther and farther away," but they also create, as here, spaces where connection can be transmitted or felt across generations (137). In another striking passage, Harley imagines an encounter between Fanny and an Aboriginal man bearing an envelope "wedged in the fork of a stick," a so-called message-stick (356). Harley laments his family's too-close attention to the language contained therein, saying that he sometimes feels "as if I have been sealed within such an envelope" (357). And yet his dissemination, or translation, via the message-stick also occasions a reunion conducted in an "age-old language" (356). Mining his familiarity with paper and the state's obsession with textualizing genealogy, Harley finds kin in the archive, including elusive figures like Jack and Kathleen's mother Dinah and the Cuddles cousins.[19] But it is not only *through* texts that kinship is realized. That is, texts are not only (to adapt Ann Stoler) "transparencies" on which genealogy is inscribed, made legible. In *Benang*, acts of reading and writing are also manifestations of connection, literacy a key component of the family legacy with which Harley must come to terms. This has implications for Harley's own habits of reading and writing.

Kim Scott describes *Benang* as "in part about reclamation from the printed page" (499), an ambiguous statement. Does Scott mean that the novel is dedicated to the task of reclaiming people, places, experiences, and knowledges from the prison of the printed page? Or does he mean that *Benang*'s reclamation project is launched from the printed page? Certainly, as Harley repeatedly acknowledges, writing can arrest the work of knowing, remembering, and resisting. It can be disabling, leading Harley to imagine that he must begin "with where the paper starts, where the white man comes," rather than "pick up a rhythm begun deeper and long before those named Fanny and Sandy One Mason" (32); it is inadequate, naming much but telling little (346). What, after all, do "dusty archives" tell Harley that "gut feeling" hasn't already? Jack and Will push Harley "to give away that reading and all those papers for a while," wanting to "show me places" (164-165). As they follow the family's "traditional runs" with Harley and Ern, the uncles share stories of births and deaths, rapes and massacres, school and work, inspired by the country through which they move (165). This seems a different kind of knowledge than that found in the government archive, a knowledge of (family) history that emerges from the interactions of the three men with each other

and with country, as if encoded in the land itself. Arguably, then, the novel charts a turn away from the archive of texts and towards forms of knowing that are embodied, intersubjective, and place-based, such as the uncles' yarning or Harley's singing. "Dusty archives" might be how "now, *initially*," Harley would explain the lurch he experiences where the road dips; it is not clear that dusty archives are how he will always do so (21 emphasis mine).

But although Harley burns "Grandad's so carefully collected and meticulously filed documents" before heading out on the road with Jack and Will, these do not disappear from the text of *Benang* (349). For one thing, the novel resists aligning the knowledges and epistemologies proper to the inhabitation of country exclusively with orality. Reflecting on his ancestors' movement through country, Harley insists that "it was never random, it was never just wandering, it was never wilderness," but comparable, in fact, with

> my own wondering, even as I made my way through my grandfather's papers, looking for traces, for essences, for some feeling of what happened, for what had shaped it this way. Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognized the trace of her own ancestors, and looked for her people. She brought them back. I would like to think that I do a similar thing. (471-472)

If relearning country involves recognizing the traces of one's people and bringing them back, then finding those traces, even in the archive, might, conversely, comprise a form of place-making.[20] *Benang* troubles the "oppositional thinking that separates orality and literacy wherein the oral constitutes authentic culture and the written contaminated culture" in other ways as well (Womack 15). Take, for example, the bar scene in which Harley's father Tommy performs the Slim Dusty song "Trumby." "Trumby" tells the story of an illiterate Aboriginal man who dies because he is unable to read the sign posted before a poisoned waterhole. Mid-song, Tommy substitutes his name for Trumby's, relishing the verbal facility he's able to display through "changing [the words] even as he sang" (424). But although we are told that Tommy "could let songs fill him, and nevertheless transform them so they came out new, as if they were his," in this instance, the lyrics prove entrapping, and he ends by singing—before a largely white audience—about a man called black Tommy who "met his death/Cause he couldn't read or write" (424-425). Is it Tommy's literacy, which leads to his hubris in imagining he can rewrite a white Australian country singer-songwriter like Slim Dusty, or the contingency of oral performance, which makes it important that Tommy consider who he is sharing knowledge with, that trips him up here?

Ultimately, Harley is "led . . . back to writing, after I had turned away from it because of the struggles with my grandfather's words" (448); "we thought it strange, but possible," he says, "that we might reach more of you this way, from practiced isolation, and by scratching and tapping from within the virtual prison of my grandfather's words" (495). One might assume—probably rightly—that Harley's goal is to read and write

differently. As Lisa Slater asks, "given that writing has been a crucial weapon deployed in the interests of colonial violence, in what style should Harley write" ("Kim Scott's *Benang*" 147)? Harley's attentiveness to place in reconstructing the events of the past might be understood to constitute an innovation in a form—narrative—that is conventionally organized around unfolding in time. Perhaps perversely, however, I want to focus on the centrality of citation and repetition to Harley's style, its iterativeness. Admittedly, part of Harley's achievement in *Benang* is to, as he puts it, "reproduce much more than words" (349). And yet, throughout *Benang*, Harley repeatedly reproduces archival documents verbatim, down to the way they are arranged on the page; the pet phrases of writers like Auber Neville and Ern Scat infiltrate Harley's own prose, typically italicized or otherwise set off from the run of the narrative. In thus trying on the "prose style" of colonial officials, Harley turns out to be following family precedent, itself, perhaps, a form of citation (71). When the policemen for whom he is working arrest "a Chinaman" called Ah Ling "for being idle," Sandy Two Mason suggests the additional rationale, derived from the police reports in which he has recently been immersed, that Ah Ling is "without visible means of support" (233). That colonial police work has a verbal style, one that proliferates violence through obscuring its effects, becomes clear in the next paragraph. The episode concludes with Sandy's employers deciding it would be wrong to, as the narrative puts it, "deny the [Aboriginal] women [with whom Ah Ling had been camping] their primitive, but nonetheless gratifying, expressions of gratitude," a shift into free indirect discourse that conceals at best sexual exploitation, at worst rape (233).

To be sure, Harley's habit of trying on the verbal styles of colonial governance draws attention to their artificiality and violence, making them available for critique. The novel's second chapter opens with a sentence from *Australia's Coloured Minority*: "As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane" (Neville 57; Scott 11). We then discover Harley "pressed hard against a ceiling": uplifted, Harley has a "*propensity* for elevation," rising into the air "when I was relaxed, let my mind go blank" (12). On the one hand, Scott's (Harley's?) literal-mindedness estranges us from the estranging effects of (dead) metaphors like "uplift," at once exposing and interrupting the genocidal commitment to abstraction encapsulated in the use of fractions to denote persons. On the other hand, Scott's literal-mindedness moves the text into the register of the fantastic insofar as it forces readers to account for a flying protagonist. Read thus, Harley's frequent recourse to citation, while appropriate to the kind of "Historical Fiction" he is writing, may actually signal his defiance of the requirements of the genre, offering escape from the "prison of my grandfather's words." Still, this is not always the case. As Judith Butler acknowledges in a related context, sometimes denaturalizing a norm through iteration works to consolidate and not destroy it (129). There is mockery in Sandy Two Mason's mimicry of

Constables Hall and Stewart, but Ah Ling is arrested nonetheless. Approving Sandy's suggestion, the policemen remark, "good man" (233).

Reflecting on scholarly practices of citation, the American theorist Jonathan Culler notes that critics feel most "securely outside and in control . . . when [our] discourse prolongs and develops a discourse authorized by the text, a pocket of externality folded in, whose external authority derives from its place inside" (199). We might then ask who (or what) is author(iz)ing whom. In citing a text, does the critic exert control over it, forcing the text to, as it were, betray itself, or does she relinquish authority to the text, allowing it to speak for her? Each time he quotes Neville or Ern or Constable Hall, Harley risks their voices overwhelming his, a problem if his goal is to contest the claim that indigenous people can only be the subjects of writing and never writing subjects. That Harley is willing to take such a risk hints at an alternative vision of writing as precisely an exercise in openness rather than the performance of mastery Auber Neville and Ernest Scat so evidently understand it to be. But I also want to ask what it signifies, this risk, when the texts in question are Aboriginal-authored. If indigenous authorship constitutes a form of self-determination, does citing this writing constitute an exercise in intellectual sovereignty?

A scene of ghostwriting recurs in *Benang*. In the chapter entitled "white, right?" Harley tells the story "of how Sandy One—paralysed and probably imbecilic—wrote Fanny's letters for her" (303). Fanny, believing their crusade to get the children into school "needed letters demanding justice, and—if possible—a white *citizen* writing them," but unable to rely on her incapacitated husband to act, recruits her grandson Jack Chatalong to write the letters in—literally—Sandy One Mason's hand: with Fanny holding Sandy still, Jack wraps the old man's right hand around a pen, and "together they formed the words" (304). The use Fanny and Jack make of Sandy reminds Harley "of my own actions, with Sandy One in my grandfather's place and Jack Chatalong in mine," except that "there was nothing noble or dignified in what I wrote, in my grandfather's hand, as it were" (303-304). Harley goes on to describe an incident in which he "squeezed Ern's [stroke-debilitated] hand around the pen I had placed within it, and formed various words" (304). He is surely also referring, however, to *Benang* itself, that family history Ern wanted but could not find a way to write. These two scenes of ghostwriting, which, read together, comprise a third scene of ghostwriting, tell us something about how Harley understands and experiences writing more generally. Both stories speak to the uneven distribution of textual authority amongst racially hierarchized populations. Aboriginal authors have regularly been charged with drawing on the services of ghostwriters. (Even when indigenous people are writing—they aren't.) Of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, for example, critics insisted that "someone [must have] ghosted the work," going so far as to claim that it was "the white blood . . . writing" (Collins 79).[21] The attention *Benang* accords Aboriginal acts of ghostwriting foregrounds both the extent to which Aboriginal authorship haunts the

white textual record and the circumstances of its ghosting. In addition, however, the confusion in Harley's narrative about who is writing for whom—Harley writes in his grandfather's hand, while Sandy One Mason writes for Fanny—makes plain the extent to which each act of writing is haunted by and haunts other acts of writing. A citational practice, writing is always also a form of reading.

Through foregrounding the ways in which readers encounter texts, *Benang* suggests that the political charge of indigenous writing doesn't only inhere in the text, but manifests via the labour of reading. The pursuit of intellectual sovereignty, Warrior writes, demands a reading practice that is critical in nature, since "critically reading our own [intellectual] tradition allows us to see some of the mistakes of the past as we analyze the problems of the present" (*Tribal Secrets* 2). What reading critically actually entails, however, Warrior does not specify. Indeed, as the American literary and cultural critic Michael Warner observes, scholars "seldom feel the need to explain [critical reading]," which might be considered "the folk ideology of a learned profession" (14). In "Uncritical Reading," Warner seeks to make up for this silence, insisting that we recognize critical reading as a far from neutral or universal practice, one bound up with the cultivation of a certain kind of subject-citizen. According to Warner,

> the mental image of critical reading seems to require at minimum a clear opposition between the text object and the reading subject—indeed, critical reading could be thought of as an ideal for maximizing that polarity, defining the reader's freedom and agency as an expression of distance from a text that must be objectified as a benchmark of distanciation. (20)

For Bain Attwood, as well, "'distanciation'—here, the process of putting the past at a distance from the present—has been the hallmark of historical work in modernity" (76). Importantly, as Warner argues, such "techniques of distanciating knowledge" do not only shape scholarly work but are tied to the "subjectivity-forming ascesis toward freedom" that has "come to define agency in modern [Euro-American] culture" (23-24).[22] It is doubtful that this is the kind of reading practice Warrior has in mind. Still, there is a need to flesh out just what kind of critical reading practice might further the project of indigenous (intellectual) sovereignty. If, as Warner suggests, our ideas about reading inform and are informed by our ideas about subject-formation, agency, and even sovereignty, it is imperative that indigenous and indigenous studies scholars continue to articulate what Chickasaw scholar Amanda J. Cobb describes as "our own hermeneutic or theories of criticism by which to read and understand our own cultural production" (128).

In asking how and even whether one can or should read family critically, *Benang* unsettles assumptions about what constitutes a critical reading practice.[23] Ern, with whose words Harley becomes only too familiar, is family, to whom, moreover, Harley is bound (or binds himself) in a relationship of care. He accedes in his uncles' insistence that the

stroke-disabled Ern travel with them even as he wonders, "how could they be so, so . . . So kind to Ern. So kind" (145, ellipsis in original). But Harley is also unsure how to relate to his uncles, Will, "who had kept right away from even his own mother" (145) and Jack, who once declared—in writing—that he doesn't "mix up with the Blacks" (62). Will now understands himself to have "been wrong": gripped by guilt, he tells Harley, "I hate myself, know that? . . . I hate myself. I should have been like that more often, more angry" (108; 143). Still, Harley finds Will, the only one of his Nyoongar relatives to have attempted a written narrative, a difficult model, feeling more at home with Jack's "circumspect tales" and even Constable Hall's Occurrence Book (192-193). Acknowledging his relations' willingness to suppress "photographs of ancestors . . . because evidence of a too-dark baby has embarrassed some descendant or other," Harley reflects, "it is hard to think what I share with them, how we have conspired in our own eradication" (97). Jack may not be telling the truth when he writes to Neville, "I don't mix up with the Blacks," his compliance with the requirements of Neville's whitening project only a performance put on in the name of survival.[24] The inadequacies of one's relations are not always recuperable as closeted acts of resistance. Certainly, Harley resists the temptation to cast the uncles as invariably "innovative and adaptable, brave and proud" (119). And yet Harley also cannot distance himself from these relations, given that distanciation—keeping right away from them, refusing to mix up with them—is how Nyoongars were invited to participate in their own eradication in the first place. They're family, "even if, sometimes, it hurts to have them" (167).

Thus, reading involves Harley in intimacies that at once answer his yearning for connection and menace his sense of self. But rather than something Harley needs to get over through distancing himself from his writing kin, for Harley, this closeness, and the sense of unsettlement it produces, *is* reading, just as all writing is ghostwriting. It would be possible to think of ghostwriting, in which writing is produced by one subject but attributed to another, as only exemplifying what, post-post-structuralism, we understand to be the peculiarly disjointed character of all writing situations. Aren't we always in a sense at a remove from our own writing? In *Benang*, however, the scene of ghostwriting is also a scene of extraordinary intimacy, in which agency is muddled, contested, fused, and shared as the self joins with other writing others. The ghosts that animate and are animated by acts of writing throughout *Benang* anounce not the death of the author but her continued vitality, manifesting the persistence of the past. By materializing indigenous continuity (Freeman 225), indigenous ghosts articulate indigenous claims to land, but they also make demands of those people, indigenous and non-indigenous, whom they (differently) haunt.[25] A ghost is haunting me, we say; I am haunted by ghosts. It is as if "*being-with* specters" entailed no work (Derrida xviii emphasis in original). And yet, as Jacques Derrida suggests, the "liv[ing] *with* ghosts" that is necessary if one is to live more justly requires living "in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in

the commerce without commerce of ghosts" (xvii–xviii emphasis in original). In framing reading as a "*being-with* specters," *Benang* invites us to reimagine the project of critical reading—and the ideas about agency with which it is articulated—in terms of closeness with rather than distanciation from (writing) others. Close reading, that familiar tool of the literary critic, takes on a new dimension in *Benang*, with Harley attending so closely to the texts that he reads as to in a sense become them. The close readings Harley performs in *Benang* do not, I want to insist, add up to a failed critical project bespeaking his inability to master the texts in question. On the contrary. Harley's project is possessed of its own critical logic, one which acknowledges those differences of temperament, upbringing, and historical situation that render Jack and Will dissatisfactory authorial models for Harley precisely so that Harley may hold them close. Rather than moving Harley "toward freedom" (Warner 23), or, at least, toward a freedom conceived in terms of autonomy and disengagement, a critical reading practice keyed to closeness embeds Harley in a transgenerational network of relations. If, by reading and writing in this way, Harley risks being spoken through by men like Ern, we also hear "through [him] . . . the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating," the "much older story" of which Harley is only a part (7; 495).

"It was never wilderness"

I first read *Benang* in 2004, just after having spent two months in Canberra conducting archival research, which likely explains why I have always found Scott's use of the archive so striking. That year, I returned over and over again to the question of how to read and write about the archive of "breeding out the colour." Into what intimacies did this archive pitch me, a settler Canadian scholar of mixed racial descent? How did I feel, reading these documents? Did it matter what I felt? Should I reproduce, through citation, the archive in my work? Should I even be reading these documents? Should anybody? Are such photographs and records too readily accessible, over-exposed, or is the problem that they are not, in fact, accessible to the individuals whom they most concern? The difficulties faced by the victims of removal in gleaning information from government agencies about their birth families are documented in *Bringing Them Home*, which recommends loosening privacy regulations and developing measures to help indigenous people negotiate the archival maze. Restitution may require, conversely, that artifacts be brought home, literally (as in the case of human remains) or (more) figuratively (as when interventions are staged in archival space itself). Here, as Christopher Pinney writes, recuperation takes the form of particularization, the "enclosing in a new space of domesticity and affection of [artifacts] formerly lost in the public wilderness of the archive" (4). This is not quite

Benang's project, whose narrator finds such artifacts and the care they require discomfiting—not altogether comfortable objects to display on the family mantelpiece. But if it does not feel right to speak of its project in terms of domestication, *Benang* does suggest, in "br[inging] them back," that the archive might be more than, or other than, a public wilderness.

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge a (rhetorical) debt to work in queer studies, which has, it seems to me, been experiencing a similar "feeling historical" in recent years. See, for example, the work of Ann Cvetkovich and Heather Love.

2. Much of the scholarship cited above also argues for the importance of locating indigenous writing within particular tribal or national contexts. If, in this essay, I situate *Benang* in relation to scholarship by and about Māori and American Indians, it is in recognition of what I see as these works' shared commitment to elaborating indigenous genealogies of (and via) writing. Even as this essay reflects, then, on the novel's efforts to pick up what its narrator calls the "rhythm" of Nyoongar-ness, it also speaks (I hope) to the productive conversations that may be opened up by the careful comparatism of a critical indigenous studies (Scott 32). See the work of Alice Te Punga Somerville and Chadwick Allen for discussions and demonstrations of what such a comparative approach might look like.

3. For a stunningly comprehensive account of Australian state intervention into Aboriginal family and reproductive life, see Anna Haebich's *Broken Circles*.

4. Scott so often makes use of italics in *Benang* (for reasons I discuss below) that I will indicate only where I have added italics for emphasis, and not where they occur in the regular run of the text.

5. In fact, Kim Scott was the first indigenous writer to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award, bestowed upon the "novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases," for *Benang* (www.milesfranklin.com.au). Scott again won the Miles Franklin in 2011, for *That Deadman Dance*.

6. Why this narrative persists is an interesting question, but not one I take up here directly.

7. Thus, for example, between 1933 and 1936, a woman named Christine Odegaard waged a fierce battle with the Northern Territory Administration for custody of her teenaged daughter Florence, applying,

finally (and unsuccessfully) for a writ of *habeas corpus* to regain custody of the child. Letters and telegrams from Christine Odegaard documenting her daughter's ill-treatment, and from Florence Odegaard expressing her wish that she should "go home," can be found in a file held by the National Archives of Australia (A1/15 1936/3096), framed by the commentary of officials like Cecil Cook, then the Northern Territory's Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

8. This description caps the first of *Benang*'s three epigraphs.

9. See the second chapter of my *Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the Afterlife of Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming) for more on the ideas about whiteness, indigeneity, reproduction, national identity, governance, futurity, and the archive that underwrote "breeding out the colour."

10. See also Maureen Konkle's *Writing Indian Nations* for more on the role of writing in nineteenth-century American Indian articulations of sovereignty and nationhood.

11. As Scott explains in the Acknowledgements, in re-enacting this conversation, Harley is citing from a 1928 article in the *West Australian* (499).

12. See also Stephen Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis."

13. In Mary Montgomerie Bennett's letter on behalf of Emily and David Nannup, in the Charles Duguid Papers (National Library of Australia, MS 5068 Series 11, Box 10, Folder 11/2).

14. Nannup's statement can be found in the Charles Duguid Papers. It is also quoted in Scott 144-145.

15. It seems telling, in fact, that Lyons uses the x-mark to describe what Indian agency looks like in a world "not of our making but with hopes of a better future," since the x-mark signals not just assent *per se*, but (partial) accession to the communicative medium of alphabetic writing.

16. Attwood, it should be clear, is not among the denialists who have set out to demonstrate that Australian (academic) historians have routinely exaggerated and even invented the evidence of settler colonial violence, sparking the so-called "history wars." Attwood's position is more nuanced than, say, Keith Windschuttle's, and as such far more interesting. See Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark's *The History Wars* for an account of these controversies.

17. For a thoughtful examination of Māori engagements with the western form and cowboy culture that helps to illuminate Will's fascination with the genre, see Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Maori Cowboys, Maori Indians." See Kathryn M. Hunter's "Rough Riding: Aboriginal Participation in Rodeos and Travelling Shows to the 1950s" for more on Aboriginal participation in and contribution to Australian iterations of "Western" culture.

18. See Hilary Emmett's "Rhizomatic Kinship in Kim Scott's *Benang*" for a discussion of the kind of familial imaginary Scott develops in the novel.

19. It should be noted that most of the Aboriginal writers archived in *Benang*—and, for that matter, in the work of scholars like Brooks and van Toorn—are men. Women, as Harley himself acknowledges, "[exit] this story too quickly" (139). We should not conclude that indigenous women did not write, nor even that they did not correspond with the state (the government archive contains evidence to the contrary). But it is worth thinking about the gendered ways in which the technologies of literacy and literary production were taken up by and interacted with Aboriginal cultures of communication and education. What stories do and do not get told when the search for kin becomes identical with the search for writing kin?

20. See the introduction to Lisa Brooks' *The Common Pot* for an expanded take on the relationship between writing and place-making (xxii-xxv) inspired by the work of Keith Basso.

21. It is not clear from the article (an obituary) whether John Collins is quoting directly from reviews of Oodgeroo's work, or paraphrasing.

22. If the ideal of distanciation has come under attack in recent decades for its collusion with the fetish of objectivity and general impracticability, it is not clear that this has much affected our practices of (or assumptions about) critical reading, especially as we communicate these to our students.

23. In this way, the novel might be read as participating in "the recent spirited conversations about sovereignty" to which such thinkers as Vine Deloria, Joanne Barker, and Taiaiake Alfred have been especially notable contributors. Amanda J. Cobb's "Understanding Tribal Sovereignty" carefully maps these debates through 2005.

24. See the seventh chapter of Penny van Toorn's *Writing Never Arrives Naked* (about writing produced at the Lake Condah Mission Station in Victoria) for a more developed version of this argument.

25. See the essays in *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture & History*, ed. Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush, including Victoria Freeman's discussion of the ghost stories through which indigenous people map Toronto as an indigenous place in "Indigenous Hauntings in Settler-Colonial Spaces."

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