

# Orbits, Mobilities, Scales: Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* as Transcultural Remembrance

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That great America on the other side of the sphere, Australia, was given to the enlightened world by the whaleman... The whale-ship is the true mother of that now mighty colony.

Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick*

The story is not over yet—we're coming back through story again.

Kim Scott

**W**RITING IN THE WAKE OF *MOBY DICK*, WHICH HAUNTS ALL LATER FICTIONS ON whaling, Kim Scott brings an Indigenous imaginary to reflect on the 'enlightened world' that was brought to the 'pestiferously barbarous' shores of Australia by whale-ships (Melville 120). His novel *That Deadman Dance* spans the two decades from 1826 to 1844, a period during which pelagic and shore whaling brought substantial income to the fledging settler colony (Gibbs). In the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the whaling industry lit the world and played a significant role in the great movement and intermingling of populations (see Quayson).<sup>1</sup> In 1844, the peak of colonial whaling in Australia,

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<sup>1</sup> Whaling is recognised as the first global industry, and a precursor to today's globalisation (Quayson).

there were over three hundred whaling ships in the Southern Ocean. Foreign whaling ships brought settlers, convicts and explorers, and left with a cargo of whale oil—an exchange that contributed to the dispossession of Indigenous people and the depletion of the whale population. In his collaborative family memoir *Kayang and Me* Scott notes that during the bay-whaling boom of the 1840s ‘some Noongars joined the whaling parties’ (37). *That Deadman Dance* was, Scott states, ‘inspired by the history of early contact between Aboriginal people—the Noongar—and Europeans’ on the remote south coast of Western Australia, near his hometown of Albany, described by some historians as the ‘friendly frontier’ (*That Deadman Dance* 397; see also Shellam, *Shaking Hands*). While the novel remediates archives, material traces and histories of early contact, the past it remembers is imaginatively refigured in and for the present. This orientation signifies it as an act of cultural remembrance and a contribution to the transcultural memory of contact on the maritime frontier.

In Australian fiction in recent years, many non-Indigenous writers—including Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, David Malouf, Alex Miller and Tim Winton—have written powerful fictions imagining the effects of early contact on settler and Indigenous peoples. As Thomas Keneally has observed, *That Deadman Dance* differs: it gives a ‘sense of the experience of intrusion not from a descendant of intruders but from a child of the true possessors’ (see Keneally). Acknowledging that there would have been ‘violent conflict between Noongars and the new arrivals’, Scott speculates that ‘there must always have been another dimension too, and the possibility of alliances beyond those of skin colour or race’ (Scott and Brown 38). For instance, the sophisticated and cosmopolitan Noongar ancestor Mokare, who inspires characters such as Wunyeran and Bobby, ‘had both British and French friends’ (38). Scott values the novel as a form that, in contrast to ‘a lecture’ or a political tract, allows for the exploration and representation of ambivalences and complexity (Brewster 229). *That Deadman Dance* narrates the story of Noongar openness and generosity to the ‘pale men from beyond the horizon’, and how and why those friendly relations turned sour. Immersing the reader in a ‘wash of different voices and consciousnesses’, it conveys something of the strangeness the Noongar and the newcomers might have felt when confronted with each other’s cultural practices for the first time (Scott, ‘Discussing’).

To date, *That Deadman Dance* has been productively discussed within the registers of the national and the regional. Philip Mead suggests that with its ‘regional chronotope’ the novel belongs to the cultural project of ‘subnational regionalism.... It is a meditation on the past but not as an archaeological layer of a national present’ (147). While *That Deadman Dance* may appear to be ‘a historical novel of frontier contact’, he contends that it ‘resists appropriation to that nationalist form: primarily via its poetic narrative mode... and its thematics

of a 'global' shore-based whaling industry' (147). Other critics have argued for its significance to the ongoing national debate about relations between Indigenous people and settlers in the period of early contact. Elaborating on Scott's description of the novel as a 'recovery narrative', Sue Kossew identifies the personal, regional and national dimensions of recovery. For Scott, returning to the past 'is closely tied to re-connecting with an endangered language like Noongar that forms an integral part of his novels and his own personal heritage and identity' (Kossew 170). The novel also, she contends, offers the possibility of participating 'in a process of national recovery that can be read (however optimistically) as a pathway to potential healing' and as such 'is a national project... for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (172). Philip Morrissey praises Scott's works as offering a 'renewed vision of Australia' that 'intertwines both settler and Aboriginal' (see Morrissey). Scott has himself considered the possibilities of using story 'to anchor a shimmering nation-state to its continent' (see Brewster). While the chronotope of the novel's diegesis is regional, I argue that the figure of the whale-ship opens the novel out to cosmopolitan, transcultural and environmental readings. I draw on concepts and approaches from transcultural and transnational scholarship, including but not limited to memory studies, to explore the novel's multi-scalar imaginary.

The metaphor of roots and routes provides a productive analytic for exploring the novel's border-crossing work. I suggest that the re-envisioning of Indigenous identity in *That Deadman Dance*, inspired by pre-contact stories, challenges the presumed dichotomy between indigeneity and diaspora, in which indigeneity is associated with rootedness to place and diaspora with migratory routes and transnational mobility. The novel imaginatively figures an Indigenous metaphor of mobility—'orbiting'—in which return to country is a crucial feature of travel. It thereby claims both deep ties to country (roots) and mobility (routes) as forces shaping a cosmopolitan Noongar identity in an era of early contact. The lens of roots and routes also illuminates dimensions of settler experience. For instance, the 'pale men' become visible as figures in the British imperial diaspora, who engage in the modern project of travel, exploration, invasion and colonisation. This lens also throws into sharp relief the settler colonial project of rooting itself in place through the production of a material culture of remembrance and commemoration.

The novel's multi-scalar imaginary includes crossing temporal scales—from the 'social history' of the maritime frontier to the 'deep time' of the continent and the sea (see Griffiths). The novel presents an Indigenous cosmology in which whales are kin, and the ocean is not only a transnational space of human passage, but of travel for sea creatures. As such, it introduces a temporal scale of 'deep time' associated with the sea and with the long Indigenous habitation of the continent, thereby evoking the 'longue durée' of environmental and human history

(Griffiths). These features especially distinguish Scott's novel from non-Indigenous contact stories. Although I do not develop this reading here, the multivalent figure of the whale, represented both as commodity and creature, invites an approach informed by postcolonial environmental humanities (see Kennedy). Here I consider the significance of the novel's figurative imagining of Indigenous roots and routes by considering it in the context of the transnational turn in humanities scholarship.

### **Orbits: Travelling Memory and Indigenous Mobilities**

By now, it is widely recognised that literature, especially when it is remediated in film and other cultural forms, is a powerful medium and carrier of cultural memory. Cultural memory is ceaselessly in motion—contested and revised as individuals and groups tell new stories about the past through various media. Rather than critically evaluating the past from the perspective of its own era, cultural memory's orientation to the present distinguishes it from history. Given the presentism of memory, Ann Rigney proposes that remembrance is a more apt term than memory since it suggests 'an activity, a performance' taking place in the present ('Dynamics of Remembrance' 345). Cultural remembrance involves the 'continual production, remediation, and sharing of stories about a past that changes in relation to the new possibilities for interpreting it within shifting social frames operating at different scales and across different territories' (Erll and Rigney, 'Mediation' 8). New possibilities include, for instance, the availability of new archives or the reframing of existing archives in a changed cultural or political environment. As an imaginative figuration of the past, oriented towards the present and with potential to re-fashion Indigenous and settler identities, *That Deadman Dance* constitutes an act of cultural remembrance.

The transnational turn in memory studies encompasses both transnational and transcultural approaches (for analysis of these terms, see Bond and Rapson 9-15; De Cesari and Rigney 3-7; Moses and Rothberg 31-33). Transnational and transcultural approaches both emerged from a critique of the nation-state as a 'container' for culture and of the dominance of 'methodological nationalism' (Levy and Sznieder). A transnational or transcultural frame challenges the presumed relationship between collective memory and national identity, and the assumption that the nation is the self-evident scale on which to analyse memory formations. Astrid Erll, for instance, argues that 'an old-fashioned container culture' approach 'imagines that cultures can be demarcated along territorial, racial and ethnic lines' and risks generating racism and other forms of exclusion (8). In response to the limitations of the nation-state, researchers have cultivated an analytic optic that seeks to capture flows and interactions at a level below or beyond the national, and to examine 'the boundaries and borders that emerge at

particular historical moments' (De Cesari and Rigney 5). Memory scholars have pioneered methodologies that study connections, networks, and entanglements, as well as the travels of memory across borders. In an influential article, Erll proposes that memory scholars should shift their focus from 'sites of memory', which are often bounded by territorial frameworks such as regions or nation-states, to the 'travels of memory', interrogating the ways in which memory is produced through circulation, migration and movement. Rather than simply accepting 'what social groups may claim as their roots: the alleged origins of a cultural memory', she advocates that researchers should study memory 'through the reconstruction of its routes: the paths which certain stories, rituals and images have taken' (Erll 11). Attention to the travels of memory has been welcomed as pioneering new directions for memory studies appropriate to an era of globalisation, mass migration and new media. As I argue below, it also has value for rethinking or conveying the routes of Indigenous story in the region, the nation and offshore.

To the extent that the transnational turn privileges the travels of memory over its roots in specific places and locations, however, it has tended to occlude the role of Indigenous people as carriers of mnemonic symbols and as agents of transcultural memory. Whereas a transnational perspective is characterised by an interest in travel, mobility and hybridity, Indigenous people have been viewed, until recently, as 'intensely local and bounded' (Carey and Lydon, 1). They have been conceived as rooted, in opposition to diasporic peoples, for whom mobility, resulting from forced displacement, migration and exile is regarded as fundamental to diasporic memory and identity. James Clifford, for example, distinguishes Indigenous people from migrants on the grounds that the former have a 'sense of rootedness in the land' that diasporic peoples have lost ('Diasporas' 308). He regards connection to land as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous identity and experience, which differentiates it from migrant communities. It should be noted, however, that Indigenous peoples often represent themselves, for compelling legal and political as well as affective reasons, as rooted to place and tradition. Scott, for instance, stresses the importance for Noongar people of having 'strong Indigenous roots in a regional basis' (Brewster 239). In his words, 'If you haven't got the root stuff happening... you're playing someone else's game' (242).

In recent years, historians, anthropologists and novelists have been challenging the notion of Indigenous boundedness by recovering the routes Indigenous people travelled on land and sea and the range of cultures with which they mixed (see for example Clifford, *Returns*).<sup>2</sup> The maritime frontier industries of sealing

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<sup>2</sup> As Carey and Lydon observe, 'Indigenous cultures were already mobile, connected and adaptive prior to their confrontation with colonizing powers.' Thus, the 'networks they created in the

and whaling have proven to be particularly rich sites for tracking the transcultural exchanges and entanglements of traditions and languages, as well as for identifying cultural practices that were not intelligible across cultural divides (Gibbs; Russell). Shore-whaling stations such as the one at King George Sound (the name designated by the British) were often the site of first contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, and because they had a sustained presence, they offered the opportunity for continuing interaction (Gibbs 27). Kossew contends that writers and historians have returned to the brief period of colonial whaling and sealing in order to tell a 'largely untold story' of Indigenous agency, resilience and initiative (Kossew quoting Russell 176). This return, she suggests, 'seems to have been generated by a present-moment discourse of agency' and a desire to escape from 'unremittingly victim-oriented history' (Kossew 177). Another reason for returning to the era of colonial whaling, I suggest, is to narrate stories of Indigenous mobility. In *Roving Mariners*, Lynette Russell contends that working in maritime industries required Aboriginal people to move 'often great distances, from their homelands. This movement facilitated engagement with new colonial formations, languages, customs and social structures' (5-6; see also Shellam, 'Manyat's "Sole Delight"'). *That Deadman Dance* builds on and contributes to these broader historiographical and cultural trends by positioning figures like Bobby Wabalanginy, imagined as a whaling man, as vital players in new networks, while showing the ways in which they articulated with, and expanded, existing routes.

*That Deadman Dance* can be read for both its imaginative and conceptual contribution to the literature on roots and routes. Noel Pearson's concept of 'orbiting' provides Scott with a trope for imagining a specifically Indigenous style of mobility, which recognises the significance of both routes and roots in Indigenous cultures ('Language and Nation'). Orbiting describes the travels and routes of a protagonist who moves away from his home community, takes considerable risks, and returns home with new knowledge and skills to enrich the natal community. Scott contends that a story in which a hero orbits back to his home community to make connections there, as does Bobby Wabalanginy, is 'a story for modern times; trust your heritage; be everything you can be' ('Language and Nation'; see also 'From Drill to Dance'). The metaphor of 'orbiting', I suggest, is useful for understanding the particular shape of Bobby's travels—leaving his community and returning with new networks, languages, skills and gifts. Additionally, the metaphor of orbiting provides a fruitful innovation on Erll's concept of 'travelling memory', an issue I return to later. But first I consider Scott's collaborative project of revitalising Noongar heritage

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context of European and American imperialism should... be understood as an extension of pre-existing mobility and exchanges' (2).

through recovering language and story, and its significance for Noongar collective memory and identity today.

### **Heritage, Memory and Identity**

The novel's imaginary of roots and routes is seeded in Scott's project of recovering and sharing Noongar heritage—primarily language and story—as a means of remembering the past differently and re-imagining Noongar identity in the present. Scott is passionate about bringing the heritage of the Noongar people into contemporary cultural remembrance through language renewal and storytelling. He recalls that his father told him, when he was a boy, to be 'proud' he was 'of Aboriginal descent'. He reflects: 'perhaps my father's words resonated so strangely simply because, in 1960s south-western Australia, it was hard to articulate pride in Aboriginality... he... didn't have the right stories at hand. It's a continuing problem... this struggle to articulate the significance and energy of a specific Indigenous heritage' (Scott and Brown 13). His project of revitalising Noongar heritage provides the stories that enable people to articulate the significance of an Indigenous heritage today.

Skeptical of placing political expectations on a novel, and recognising that his novels are mainly read by non-Indigenous people, Scott complements his work as a novelist with community work that aims to regenerate and pass on Noongar language, story and culture. While his novels allow for an exploration of 'ambivalence, nuance and interiority', his work with community members aims to 'facilitate the consolidation and enhancement of a story-telling heritage' through 'controlled sharing', which has to 'come through the people, the descendants' ('Language and Nation'; see also Brewster 229). This heritage work, carried out in school and community workshops, brings Indigenous elders and children into the spotlight to share in the changed power-dynamics that come from being the one to pass on the story ('Language and Nation'; 'From Drill to Dance'). There are two aspects of this heritage project—place and identity—that are relevant to an analysis of the novel's memory work. Firstly, Scott regards 'continuity of place as fundamental' to Indigenous identity; it provides a 'connection to the long continuities' (Brewster 241). He contends that it is crucial to 'connect story to landscape' and to learn about places from the elders. Story conveys the 'emotional, spiritual, psychic intensity of place' and shapes how a place is inhabited, and I would add, how it is affectively remembered ('Language and Nation'). Secondly, by connecting people to place, story grounds a shared or collective memory of people, places and events. Collective memory, as sociologist Maurice Halbwachs long ago argued, establishes a link between the memory of a group and the group's identity; both 'cultural heritage and collective memory are closely linked to the notion of identity' (Gunders 284).

Scott regards pre-contact stories as a potential resource for contemporary Indigenous identity that is not based on the defeat and victimisation of colonial oppression. Indigenous identity today, he contends, is arguably 'reactive and trapped within parameters established by colonization' ('From Drill to Dance' 10) While recognising that colonisation was cataclysmic, he worries that telling stories only of resistance and conflict gives Noongar people little to build upon (Scott, 'Interview'). Seeking an alternative tradition, he turns to the deep cultural heritage of Noongar language and story to imagine the ways in which young men such as Bobby Wabalanginy, the novel's hero, might have grasped the opportunities that the arrival of foreign ships offered—to earn income; acquire new skills, knowledge, languages and friends; travel to near and distant places; and bring new knowledge and perspectives back to the home community. In 2011, in collaboration with Noongar community groups, Scott published two bilingual books that are based on oral story. As 'a link to a pre-colonial heritage', these 'pre-colonial narratives are directly relevant to the contemporary world' ('From Drill to Dance' 18). What makes them relevant today? They have protagonists who 'trust their heritage, take risks, travel alone and far from their communities; return to their home communities enriched and better able to contribute' ('From Drill to Dance' 18)—much like Bobby Wabalanginy. While these pre-contact stories have particular significance within the Noongar community, in imagining a cosmopolitan Indigenous identity grounded in an Indigenous form of mobility, they also have value for conceptions of Indigenous roots and routes.

### **The Routes of Memory: The Ship, the Whale, the Song**

The ship and the whale figure prominently in the novel's oceanic imaginary. Since the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, ships have been recognised as 'micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity' that link far-flung places and cultures (12). Ships enabled travel, mobility and transcultural encounters, and contributed to the creolisation of languages, the 'inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas' and the formation of identities that are 'always being remade' (xi). They also facilitated the slave trade, colonisation and commercial whaling. Whereas Gilroy tracks the role of ships in producing a black Atlantic diaspora, Scott imagines the cultural entanglements and possibilities that ships bring to the Noongar people on the south west Australian coast. Noongar people saw ships as 'vehicles for significantly extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country' (Shellham, as quoted in Scott 398). The tension between these two poles—the ship as an agent of cross-cultural contact and of colonisation—is captured in *That Deadman Dance*. The whale-ship, a 'machine of empire' and an 'engine of commerce' (Russell 19), provides a vehicle for exploring the gains and losses brought to Indigenous cultures and lives by colonial whaling.



The arrival of ships, including whale-ships, enabled cross-cultural encounters, new ways of seeing one's home country, linguistic and cultural hybridity, and access to a new economy. Book One (1833-1835) opens with a scene of arrival by ship: for Bobby this is a return home, but for the 'pale men' it is a new land. The child Bobby, high up in the rigging of the ship, is 'returning on a rope' from the colony of Cygnet River, where he has been with his Uncles Menak and Wunyeran (*That Deadman Dance* 9). They accompanied Dr Cross, who asked them to model the 'friendly relations' between themselves and the British for Indigenous tribes at Cygnet River. The novel begins, then, with a scene of Noongar travelling by sea to new regions outside their traditional country. For Bobby the ship affords the opportunity, for the first time, to see his home country from the perspective of the sea rather than the shore. The same ship brings the British settler Geordie Chaine and his family to the tiny settlement at King George Town, the name the British give to the area.<sup>3</sup> In an ironic voice the narrator employs the iconic British figure of 'the captain with a telescope to his eye' and imagines the perspective and feelings of the new arrivals' as 'they looked around nervously' trying to make sense of the ecology of this alien land (10, 11).

The whale-ship enables Bobby to orbit into new worlds, travel on new routes, form new affiliations, and learn new skills and languages. Gilroy is critical of the idea of tradition as invariant repetition rather than a stimulus toward innovation and change (x); he suggests that the diaspora concept should be 'cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a changing same' (xi). We can see this 'changing same' in Bobby's openness to new languages and experiences that result from his travels—even if only offshore—with the whaleship. As indicated by his name, Bobby Wabalanginy is a hybrid figure who is possessed of a double consciousness and who translates between two cultures. The novel opens with the word 'Kaya'—the Noongar word for 'hello'—and sees Bobby joyously reflecting on the acts of writing and translation and the new worlds they open: 'Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn't help but smile. Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!' (1). On the lookout for whales, he is 'moving between languages' as he writes with chalk on a stone: '*Roze a wail*' (3). This phrase brings into play the double meaning of whale/wail, and anticipates the mourning for the losses that would result from colonisation, dispossession and the slaughter of whales.

This new language is enabled by the whale-ship. Gilroy observes that key figures in the black diaspora 'talk sailor like an old salt' (13) and Bobby, who sees

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<sup>3</sup> See Leane (3) on the colonial overwriting of Indigenous place names.

himself as a 'sailor' (*That Deadman Dance* 28), delights in whaling vernacular. When he joins a whaling crew, his 'language grew and his thinking shifted the longer he was at sea. Gunnels and galley. Thwarts and midships. Tiller and keel; shrouds, mast, sail' (28). The language of whaling opens a new world of practical and aesthetic possibilities. In a chapter entitled 'What's Not in a Whale Song', he lies on the deck of an American whale-ship and amuses himself by making up a song which 'captured the experience of the whale hunt':

The words of whaling: harpoon and land, sleigh-ride and bucket, blankets and book-pieces and skimmers and spoons. Galleyed almost made him laugh out loud... as he remembered the frustration and fury of other hunters as the schooner slipped between them and the whale (*That Deadman Dance* 313).

Bobby's whale song is described in performative rather than constative terms; it does something—it gets the whalers through the bloody business of the whale hunt. In the activity of singing together, differences of identity (racial and national) recede and a solidarity grounded in a common language and purpose emerges:

black and white and a Chinaman, too... all joined voices with Bobby as the melody grabbed them, held them, hauled them along behind. For some it was recognising the words—their whaling language in the midst of all the blackfella talk—and they called out, putting their voice beside the singer, trusting him and themselves to get to the end (317-18).

Bobby's whale song effectively joins the whalers into a collective we, a community of whalers who temporarily share the 'home' of the whale-ship, and collaborate in the business of whaling. In the process of singing the creolised whale song, identities and cultural differences recede as new affiliations, based on a shared enterprise rather than a homeland, emerge.

### **An Indigenous Cosmology: The Whale as Kin**

Scott brings an oceanic imaginary grounded in an Indigenous cosmology to Gilroy's concept of the ocean as a site of transcultural travel, hybridity and diaspora. Whereas Gilroy envisions the Atlantic as a space of human passage from one culture to another, Scott imagines the ocean as teeming with creatures that have unique capabilities. This cosmology is rooted in an Indigenous conception of country, which differs from a Western understanding of land, soil or landscape. Indigenous historian Steven Kinnane observes that 'in an Indigenous cosmology, the concept of country does not allow for a separation of

people, land and waters. In an Indigenous vision of country, economy, spirituality, knowledge and kin are all interrelated' (Kinnane 25). Country extends to the land, the sea, and all the inhabitants of these spaces. For instance, Bobby is associated with whales from the novel's opening page: 'He was not much more than a baby when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands, a very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily' (*That Deadman Dance* 1). The relationship between Noongar and whale is represented not simply as a matter of spatial proximity but also of kinship bonds. Bobby and his mob are described as 'brothers' with the whale, and Bobby, who has 'so much family out there in the sea... knows there's life under the sea still, like there was at the cold, frozen time... Outside and inside, ocean and blood; almost the same salty fluid' (293-4).

Indigenous narratives invite and enable non-Indigenous readers to understand something of the cosmology of an Indigenous worldview (Langton 109). Through the meanings attached to the figure of the whale the novel goes some way towards transmitting an Indigenous cosmology, and a deep memory of the long habitation of Australia, to non-Indigenous readers. Bobby's elder, Menak, tells the young boy a whale story that explains the kinship connection:

Two steps more and you are sliding, sliding deep into a dark and breathing cave that resonates with whale song. Beside you beats a blood-filled heart so warm it could be fire. Plunge your hands into that whale heart, lean into it and squeeze and let your voice join the whale's roar. Sign that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep. (2-3)

This story is a mediation of an oral memory, relayed to Scott by his Aunty Hazel: 'Well one old Noongar, he jumped onto one, and... slipped inside it like... Jonah in the Bible *musta done*'. In Aunty Hazel's version, however, the Noongar is in control: 'But the Noongar he knew what he was doing, he *wanted* to be there, see. It wasn't an accident', whereas in the Bible story God dictates Jonah's fate (Scott and Brown 31). While Scott views this as a story about 'a spiritual affiliation with the ocean, pre ice age, and creatures in the water with whom Noongar are strongly affiliated, spiritually', he also imagines this as a story 'about a Noongar man entering a whale and making it, through song and controlled violence, take him... somewhere... (Brewster 229). The whale story is an example of the ambivalence and complexity that Scott values in fiction; it illustrates both a spiritual Noongar connection with the whale as kin, in which the human and whale are merged in song, but also, a desire to master the whale and use it for human purposes such as travel. Scott's act of mediating Aunty Hazel's oral memory of the Noongar whale story demonstrates how literature, as a medium of cultural remembrance, depends not simply upon remembering the past but

also upon 'rewriting earlier stories', and I would add, transmitting them to wider publics (Erll and Rigney 112).

The whale story, as it is remediated in the novel, can also be read as a caution about the dangers of cultural appropriation, of perhaps too eagerly learning the ways of the foreigners. While Bobby is 'imagining, remembering' Menak's tale of the whale, he reflects that 'it wasn't true, it was just an old story, and he couldn't even remember the proper song' (*That Deadman Dance* 3). Menak's story is already fading from Bobby's memory, signifying that his connection to his heritage is weakening. The oral tradition that connects Indigenous people inter-generationally is diminished as Bobby is lured by the offerings of British culture, such as the technology of writing and English dance, song and instrumental music.

In a conception of country as inclusive of all living things, the ocean is a site of creaturely travel as well as of human passage. Whales, like human creatures, follow ancient routes that they have been travelling long before modern ships:

Bobby saw giants [whales] each side of the ship ... this was a path they followed, year after year. A watery path that was ... that of their ancestors and his own, too, since he came from ocean and whale. That was why Menak gave him the story and the song that took the whale east from King George Town along the coast to its very shore (33-4).

Exemplifying an expansive oceanic imaginary, this scene reconfigures and extends the concept of travellers and routes to include non-human creatures as well as humans, and engages readers in imagining the *longue durée* of the dreamtime and the time of the whale. Like the ship, the whale is figured as a vehicle for travel, which transports the Noongar along oceanic routes. The novel's cosmological imagining of human and non-human animal kinship is, however, in tension with a materialist worldview shaped by imperialism, nationalism and capitalism, in which whales are viewed as a commodity and resource to be harvested for human gain (Matteson 170-2). Whereas in Menak's story, Bobby imagines himself sliding down the whale's spout, in the chapter that immediately follows, Bobby slides around on the deck of a ship that is sailing into shore. Bobby's life and future are shaped by these two economies: kinship with the whale and commercial whaling. In these economies, he has differing obligations and attachments—commercial relations govern his role as a crew member on a whaleship while he has spiritual responsibility to the whale through kinship systems.

While whaling brings opportunities to travel on new routes and learn new skills and languages, the material reality of commercial whaling conflicts with a view

in which whales are regarded as kin. Witnessing a gruesome scene in which a mother and calf are slaughtered, Bobby observes that 'the young whale, the mother: each had a flag flying from its spout, and the boat which killed them was already after another pod' (251). In leading Chaine and his crew to the whales, Bobby is implicated in the slaughter of the whales, which are hunted nearly to extinction. 'Once he [Bobby] was a whale and men from all points of the ocean horizon lured him close and chased and speared and would not let him rest until... Bobby led them to the ones he loved, and soon he was the only one swimming' (160). The fate of the whale as a result of commercial hunting can be read as an allegory of Indigenous dispossession. The Noongar, like the whale, are 'hunted'—starved, pushed off their land, killed, die of diseases brought by settlers. Bobby, the very figure of optimism, remains attached to the 'pale men' until it is too late, and he realises that his friendships are destroying his culture and people, rather than bringing benefits. As such, the novel engages in what I have elsewhere described as 'multidirectional eco-memory' (Kennedy).

*That Deadman Dance* tracks a change in Bobby's subjectivity as he is transformed from a child who feels secure in his world, to an optimistic youth, and finally, in the newly founded settler colony, to a lonely and marginalised old man. Bobby's subjectivity can be described as both rooted and 'diasporic'. Critical of approaches that define diaspora in terms of migration and mobility, Lily Choi proposes that diaspora should be understood fundamentally as 'a subjective condition' which is 'marked by loss' and by 'the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession' rather than in terms for mobility (19). The narrator reflects: 'It hurt to be Bobby... the old man, remembering [friendships that have been betrayed and a failure of reciprocity], but it never hurt to be Bobby.... the child or Bobby the young' (74). As an old man, either ignored or an item of curiosity in King George Town, he recalls: 'I was raised to be proud and to be friendly... My family thought we could share what we had' (159). The theme of loss and mourning, signalled in the prologue through Bobby's phrase 'roze a wail', is developed through the novel's representation of the declining status of Indigenous people in the settler colonial economy. These newly imposed hierarchies of race are legitimated and consolidated by the emerging settler colonial memory economy.

### **The Colonial Memory Economy: Floating Remains, Memory Claims**

As well as being a medium of cultural remembrance, literature is also a medium for observing the production of cultural memory. By representing processes of remembrance and commemoration, literary works may contribute to knowledge about how cultural memory is produced (Erll and Rigney, 'Literature' 112). *That Deadman Dance* self-reflexively represents and invites reflection on the emergence of a settler colonial memory economy and its implications for

Indigenous identity, sovereignty and land claims. The novel imaginatively figures the emerging memory economy in relation to the treatment of human remains. One of the signs of 'friendly relations' was Dr Cross's request to be buried in the same grave as his 'great friend' Wunyeran, 'spirits fusing in the earth' (*That Deadman Dance* 350). The Noongar believed that 'floods would carry away the bones of Wunyeran and Cross' and they would be 'tumbled together to the sea. All those bones of ocean' (351). Bobby first notices differences in the treatment of settler and Noongar remains when Chaine introduces the new Governor to the settlement. Chaine proudly points out Dr Cross's recent burial site, which is surrounded by a timber rail and marked with a 'freshly whitewashed' cross, inscribed with the words 'Dr Cross. A founding father. Passed away 1837'. Chaine does not tell the Governor that it is a shared grave, and Bobby wonders why his Uncle 'Wunyeran's name was not on the cross' (176). Years later, the settlers move Cross's remains to the new town cemetery. When Bobby sees a gravedigger 'poking right into their shared grave' (353), he reflects that unlike 'the passion of flood, or a persistent wind lifting the soil to expose bones at the core of country' this human interference 'was deliberate and careless all at once' (353). Whereas the gravedigger's spade 'broke and chipped Wunyeran's bones' and the exposed skeleton was left to be gnawed by animals, Dr. Cross' grave was set behind railings and marked with a headstone commemorating him as 'Surgeon, Pioneer and Land Owner 1826-1833 King George Town Western Australia' (353, 354).

In making visible the differential treatment of remains, the novel reflects on the consolidation of the colour line and the racialisation of memory. The headstone and railing are material signifiers of the conceptual 'boundaries and borders' that emerged during the consolidation of settler colonialism, when the openness and friendly exchange of early years were replaced by monolithic racial categories (see also Leane). When there was 'one grave for a black man and a white man... the difference in their skin colour had seemed just one among so many other things—but... no one said Noongar no more; [now] it was blackfellas and whitefellas' (353). The disrespectful treatment of Wunyeran's remains is, to Bobby, a sign 'of all that was happening in their lives and the terrible change of it. That they were spiralling downwards, like leaves from a tree' (356). In addition to representing the differential treatment of human remains, the grave scene registers cultural differences in Indigenous and settler practices of commemoration.

The novel represents two different forms of heritage: a tangible, material heritage through which the settlers assert their presence and claim to belonging and 'ownership', and an intangible Indigenous heritage grounded in the spirit of place and oral story. The settlers exemplify a monumental practice of remembrance, in which human remains are stabilised in cemeteries and

commemorated with a headstone. The headstone is a 'technology of memory' through which memories of individuals 'are shared, produced and given meaning' (Sturken 9). In Noongar tradition, by contrast, human remains are regarded as part of country, and as such, join with non-human matter to nourish future generations. Bobby ruminates: 'Always been this way. Bones from riverbanks washed down toward the sea, and only a kindred spirit... can find them, maybe bring alive again' (357). The mobility and elemental nature of remains, exposed as they are to climatic forces, is signified through the image of floating 'bones of ocean' (351). The narrator self-reflexively observes that 'long after Bobby Wabalanginy and the span of this story' the site of Wunyeran's burial might be called 'a *significant* site, a *sacred* place' (350) for future Noongar generations. In other words, Wunyeran will live on in communicative memory, which will be handed down orally through the generations. Without a visible public marker, however, only those with insider knowledge will appreciate the significance of this site.

The notion of a 'significant site' would seem to be in tension with the image of 'floating bones'—the former suggests roots while the latter suggests travels. Conceived of through the lens of orbiting, however, the floating bones return to country and as such, may come to life again 'even if in some other shape' (357). The floating bones are imagined as part of a cycle of life, and as such, are a figure of deep time, subject to climatic forces. When Bobby sees the aftermath of a flood carrying matter downsteam, he reflects: 'No trouble at all then, taking bones to the ocean... did all those bones reach the sea and join a path of whalebones across the ocean floor?' (357). In contrast to this potential to nourish future life, Bobby imagines that human bones buried in a shallow grave might form the foundation of the new colonial town hall and will be alienated from the bones of their kin.

The significance of the novel's representation of the settler colonial memory economy stems from what it reveals about the link between memory, heritage and belonging. In the settler colonial memory economy, material acts or objects of commemoration are a means of 'territorial self-fashioning' (Anheier and Isar 3) —of laying superficial foundations in place as a means of bestowing value and legitimacy on people and events. In the colonial legal system imposed by force on Indigenous people in the new colony, a culture of material heritage provides the conditions for collective memory and claims to land and belonging. For instance, in signifying Dr Cross as a 'land owner' in King George Town, the headstone can be likened to the national flags that were placed on the harpooned whales: it functions, like the flags, to legitimate a claim to ownership. In this sense, memory

can be regarded as a 'valuable resource' (Lurhmann and Tomsky).<sup>4</sup> In laying the foundations for settler claims to belonging, this colonial heritage economy can be seen as a precursor to later efforts by archaeologists to appropriate Indigenous artefacts as a means for the settler colonial nation to connect itself to the 'deep time' represented by Indigenous habitation of the continent and thereby create a sense of 'deep nation' (see Byrne).

This superficial settler colonial memory economy contrasts with the deep roots of the Noongar. As an old man 'beckoning his listeners closer' Bobby tells the tourists 'this is my country, really. This is my home...You welcome here' (*That Deadman Dance* 78). He grounds his claim to country in the 'deep time' of Noongar habitation on the continent: 'my country is here, and belonged to my father, and his father, and his father before him, too. But to look at me now you wouldn't think that...' (106). Bobby's claim to a deep connection to country falls into an echo chamber as tourists drift away. In this new economy, without the tangible markers of fences, houses and headstones, his claim to ownership is considered invalid and ignored. Through these scenes, the novel registers the way in which a settler colonial memory economy challenges Noongar roots grounded in a long habitation of and deeply felt spiritual connection to country that is intangible and inaccessible to outsiders. Through such reflection on the memory economy, the novel illustrates how commemoration 'provides the basis for both collective and individual identity' as well as 'the content and impetus of political and moral claims' (Ball). In making visible and reflecting on the relationship between the production of collective memory and claims to belonging and land ownership, the novel can be regarded as a 'mimesis of a memory' (Erll and Rigney, 'Literature' 113).

To the extent that, in the settler colony, a culture of material heritage is taken as a legitimate ground for moral, political and economic claims to land ownership, sovereignty and belonging, it becomes imperative for the Noongar to join the memory economy as a prerequisite for recognition. Whereas the novel begins as a story of routes and travels—of the 'pale men' arriving in a new land, of the Noongar travelling by land and sea to new regions outside their traditional country—it ends with Bobby anticipating a claim for a share in public sites and signifiers of memory. With characteristic foresight, he recognises the need to join the emerging memory economy. Noticing that a monument has been erected to Cross honouring him as a founder of the colony, he anticipates a future in which his uncle Wunyeran, who 'welcomed the first white people that sailed here' will also be remembered... [w]ith 'a statue...in the main street of this town' (78). The statue will be a fixed 'lieu de mémoire' that publicly acknowledges the role of the

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<sup>4</sup> My thinking about the colonial memory economy is indebted to the 'Memory Economies' workshop run by Susanne Lurhmann and Terri Tomsky at University of Alberta in May 2016. I would like to thank them and the participants in this event.



Noongar in establishing the new colony and the aid they gave to settlers.<sup>5</sup> Bobby's desire to achieve recognition of Noongar contributions on the terms imposed by the settler colonial memory economy—by erecting tangible material objects such as statues and headstones—should perhaps be read as an example of the novel's negotiation of ambivalence and complexity. On the one hand, the desire for material recognition is politically astute in a context in which colonial law requires visible evidence of a sustained connection to country. At the same time, it is a sign of Noongar recognition of colonial law and its failure to recognise Indigenous sovereignty, which is not based upon a tangible memorial culture.

In representing the treatment of Indigenous remains as a matter of respect, the novel echoes an issue of contemporary concern: the treatment of Indigenous objects and human remains in foreign museums, universities and other institutions, and the complexities of returning them to Indigenous communities (see for example Sculthorpe et al.). For instance, the treatment of human remains became a contested issue in the aftermath of the removal, by archaeologists, of Mungo Lady's remains from the Lake Mungo region. As the film *Message from Mungo* documents, the remains of Mungo Lady were packed into a suitcase and carted away from their resting place with little consideration for local feeling, like the disrespectful treatment of Wuneyran's remains in the novel. Archaeologists valued Mungo Lady's remains in terms of a Western scientific epistemology rather than with regard to Indigenous connectivity, heritage and tradition. Local Aboriginal groups, who claimed Mungo Lady as their ancestor, were dismayed and angered by this disrespectful treatment (see 'Roundtable', this collection). Similarly, the documentary *Yagan* tells the story of the efforts to have Noongar man Yagan's severed head, kept in a museum in Britain since the late nineteenth century, returned to country in the Perth region (see *Yagan*). By drawing attention to the differences in the treatment of remains and practices of commemoration, the novel reflects on and engages with the ethics and politics of commemoration not only in the past but also in the present.

### ***That Deadman Dance on the Move: Local Memory, Transnational Connections***

What is the significance of the novel's meditation on the past and its multi-scalar imaginary, in Australia and elsewhere? The novel holds significance for the Noongar community through its contribution to a cultural remembrance of early contact in the region that considers both Noongar and British experiences and perspectives. By remediating historical archives in which he finds traces of

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<sup>5</sup> Today there is a statue of Mokare—a historical figure who inspired some of the characters in the novel—in Albany.

Noongar ancestors, Scott imagines an alternative to the familiar narrative of colonisation and despair as the horizon for Indigenous identity. The novel's imagining of how the Noongar at the time might have reacted to newcomers—with confidence, openness and generosity—has potential implications for Indigenous identity today.

Although place and region are vital to the novel's imaginary, it also holds considerable national significance as a contribution to the cultural memory of early contact on the maritime frontier. While Scott is skeptical of the term 'reconciliation', he sees the generosity of 'sharing a heritage', modeled by Bobby in the novel, as vital for healing 'the nation state and this Australian identity crisis' (Brewster 239). The ending of the novel signals the importance of listening; when Bobby performs, the settlers lose interest and drift away, with tragic consequences for the Noongar and the future nation. Scott contends that 'to have non-Indigenous people interested in Noongars [today], and in what we are speaking about concerning our heritage, is a really powerful position to be in' (Brewster 239). These examples illustrate the novel's border-crossing work as its regional imaginary resonates on a national scale.

Additionally, the novel's explicit and implicit intertextuality invites transnational and transcultural connections. Gilroy points out that ships play a role in the transnational circulation of cultural products, including books. In *That Deadman Dance*, ships not only bring settlers; they also bring foreign goods and ideas that shape thinking in the new colony. The novel includes a mise en abyme of the book as travelling culture, which suggests the cultural work that literature can do in transnational contexts. When Bobby visits his childhood friend Christine, Chaine's daughter, he sees that she is reading 'a new book', *The Last of the Mohicans*. Christine thinks the novel 'must've arrived on a recent ship and been passed around the community' (*That Deadman Dance* 321). By citing Cooper's novel—a tale of an allegedly dying Indigenous tribe caught up in frontier violence—as a proximate text (Gelder), Scott implicitly references the racialised discourse of the Indigenous 'other' as transnational. The reference to *The Last of the Mohicans* echoes an earlier scene in which Wunyeran mimics Dr Cross's description of him as having a 'most intelligent curiosity' (*That Deadman Dance* 8787), and draws a link between discourses of settler colonialism in Australia and North America that 'reinforce colonial hierarchies and European hubris towards Aboriginal people' (Leane 11). The connection between these settler colonial nations suggests another way in which the nation-state is a container for memory that excludes those figured as 'others' in the dominant discourse. *The Last of Mohicans* might be seen an example of a settler literature that, like the Australian examples Jeanine Leane considers, seeks to 'contain' Aboriginal experience in the continuing settler quest 'to write a nation' as a means of asserting belonging (2). Through the figure of the whale, however, *That*

*Deadman Dance* also facilitates transnational connections with a range of dominant and minor literatures—for instance, with *Moby Dick* and with *Whale Rider*—and invites a variety of transnational and comparative readings, including post-colonial environmental readings.

Earlier I suggested that the metaphor of orbiting provides a fruitful innovation on Erll's concept of 'travelling memory'. Following Scott, we might consider not only how objects and acts of cultural remembrance, such as the novel, cross cultural and national borders as they travel, but also how cultural memory orbits—that is, how acts of remembrance enter into other orbits and return home transformed.<sup>6</sup> On this conception, travelling memory involves not only circulation, but also return and transformation. The novel's intertextuality not only opens up possibilities for transnational readings as the novel orbits into other literary spheres. It also suggests that those transnational readings might have a transformative potential when they return to Australia, and may introduce new frameworks and approaches for reading the novel. But this remains to be seen.

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of how another one of Scott's novels, *Benang*, has travelled offshore, see Whitlock and Osborne.

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