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# Dissident Laughter: Historiographic metafiction as parodic intervention in *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance*

Abstract:

*Benang: From the Heart* and *That Deadman Dance* are both seminal examples of postcolonial historical novels by Kim Scott that consider 'how much speaking' and 'what sort of speaking' can occur in relation to portrayals of Indigenous subjects and traumatic histories of dispossession. Both Scott's novels differently recruit a range of parodic narrative techniques to critique the monologistic language of colonialism. This essay examines how Scott recruits historiographic metafiction in *Benan: From the Heart* and *That Deadman Dance* to generate new metaphors of colonial power relations within the novel as heteroglossic text.

Biographical Note:

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## Introduction

Metafictional techniques are understood as forms of writing about writing that allude to histories of writerly process, thereby drawing attention to the fact that 'history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time' (Hutcheon 1990: 105, discussing Seamon 1983: 212–16). Or, as Hutcheon otherwise puts it: 'Both history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained' (1990: 112) Metafiction draws attention to the written text as artifice, undercutting the drive to mimetic representations of the surface of reality, and the streamlined appearance of the novel. Thus, it unseams the cultural artefact, drawing attention to the novel as a provisional cultural invention *in* and *of* its time. The metafictional work clearly has some dependence on the 'straight' or originating text, which it reworks, comments upon and re-seams with other texts. Thus, it is essentially citational, intertextual in its operation. In its modern and postmodern variations, metafiction as cultural intervention has drawn strength from writers such as Borges, Grass, Nabokov and Pynchon (Scholes 1979: 4). As Robert Scholes has asserted, these writers paved the way for more recent novelistic experimentations that reveal the 'fabulator behind the fable' (1979: 3).

Despite the heightened exploration of parodic metafiction in recent literary historical fiction, it is not a form that is historically confined to the hothouse of postmodern narrative techniques. Neither can it be confused or interchanged with intertextuality per se. Margaret Rose makes the useful distinction:

> While meta-fiction can be defined as a work of fiction which comments or reflects upon another text, its 'intertextual' element can be described as the presence in its text of the words, passages, or messages of others (1993: 99).[1]

Not all metafiction is parodic in the traditional, comic sense of parody, just as not all parody may be metafictional, or concerned with the imitation and transformation of other (fictional) works. Rose's particular insight is that modern theories of parody reduced it to the burlesque, and that while its use in meta-fiction continued, it was largely unrecognised as parody there (1993: 271–72). Late modern theories of the parodic also separate the comic from the intertextual and the metafictional, failing to understand that they could be all three at the same time (Rose 1993: 272). Bakhtin's theories of parody were multi-stranded and complex, but Rose argues convincingly that Kristevan interpretations have tended to divest the role of the comic in Bakhtin. Relievedly for Rose and Hutcheon, as for writers such as Malcolm Bradbury, Martin Amis, David Lodge, Christa Wolf, Umberto Eco, and Charles Jencks, postmodern theories of parody 'return to it, at the very least, both its humour and its meta-fictional complexity, in contrast to the modern separation of the meta-fictional parody from the comic' (Rose 1993: 272). Postmodern parody is therefore an act of reclamation of complex parodic modes, not necessarily [always] an insurgent invention, despite its hyperbolic usages of metafictional modes. For Rose, postmodern parody, despite its citational nods to Sterne, Cervantes, and

early modern works, is always more properly 'double-coded' with a broader ancient understanding of parodic works such as Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which was comic, metafictional, and ambivalent towards its subject.

Therefore, some metafiction may be comic without being parodic, by virtue of the presence in it of forms of comedy other than parody, such as irony. Parody has always been a subtle changeling of cultural history, and particular temporal definitions must apply (Rose 1993: 271–72). As we shall see, the novels of Kim Scott accommodate both parodic and ironical forms of metafiction. These are applied to the intertexts assembled in the novel so that these are often comically re-framed. Metafictional devices in Scott's postcolonial historical novels also achieve productive interruptions to narrative flow, puncturing the seamlessness of colonial sign systems. As Rose believes, historically, such:

> parodic 'meta-fictional' interpolations and the ensuing foregrounding of the author's construction of the narrative and its component parts, have not only been of interest to classical and postmodern experimenters but of particular interest to twentieth-century critics such as the Russian formalists (1993: 93).

Bakhtin, of course, wrote adjacent to the Russian formalist circle. Hutcheon's analysis of parodic historiographic metafiction in contemporary historical fiction owes much to Bakhtin's notion of 'parodic and travestying' laughter destroying the 'epic distance' where the individual (character) is represented upon a distanced plane to the zone of contact with the inconclusive events of the present, and consequently of the future' (1981 [originally published 1941]). The rich historical legacies of parodic interpellation 'have constituted one reason for their [the Russian formalists'] selection of meta-fictional parody texts as paradigms of the literary work in general' (Rose 1993: 93).

Meta-reflexive Bakhtinian techniques have particular ramifications for postcolonial historical novels. Most historical novelists accept as a starting point a broad-brush pattern of general events that proceed teleologically as we chart the passage of a protagonist hero/heroine across key stages of life. This is, as it were, the factual and temporal base of such novels. But in relation to conventional stylistic rendering, standard plotting, and illusionistic consistency of realist voice, as may be found in the classic historical novel (and its cousinly genres the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstleroman)*, the genre conventions deployed by contemporary postcolonial novels are often shown as periodically unstable and discontinuous, variously subject to narrative displacement, parodic intervention, distortion and inversion. These artistic 'deformations' gainfully deconstruct the generic 'purity' of the historical novel on its way to becoming a postcolonial novel. One key form of parodic intervention is historiographic metafiction.

The production of literary parody via applied metafictional techniques enables a dissident laughter to be directed towards the coloniser and colonial history. In the first instance, the hieratic, realist illusion of the historical colonial novel as with the overarching colonial 'story' is destabilised. Such techniques therefore enable the new story to challenge the habitual ways in which power relations between coloniser and colonised subject are read.

This essay's scope does not permit a detailed survey of the complex evolution of parodic metafictional forms since Aristophanes; its focus is upon the role of metafiction in the postcolonial novel, in particular the historical postcolonial novels of Kim Scott. Many postcolonial novels can be seen to invert the masculinist larrikin bush humour celebrated in early Australian culture, identifying with the parodic inflections of contemporary postmodernism, especially techniques of mimicry and historiographic metafiction. Rose notes that in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984) also refers to Leo Spitzer's point that the words of another always sound strange and can even sound mocking in our own mouths' (Rose 1993: 128). Here, Bakhtin prefigures the postcolonial language theories of Fanon and Bhabha in a fascinating way in relation to modern theorisations of mimicry, that crucial postcolonial parodic language tool that has been identified as enabling the colonised to speak back to the coloniser as a form of cultural, economic and political performance – that is, in life as much as in the written text.

To reprise Bakhtin:

> One can parody another person's style as a style; one can parody another's socially typical or individually characterological manner of seeing, thinking and speaking. The depth of the parody may also vary: one can parody merely superficial verbal forms, but one can also parody *the very deepest principles governing another's discourse* (B1984 [originally published 1963]: 194, my italics).

Mimicry used alone, as literal mimesis of another's voice, offers possibilities for comic metafictional inflection, but it may not always involve the muscular, foregrounded attacks on language and writerly process that are achieved in Sterne and Fielding right up to postmodern novelistic equivalents such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. The latter citationally savvy novel riffs endlessly upon its own text, upon the 'text' of the writer, and upon the authorial figure and character-narrator of Calvino himself, conflating the layered sense of the 'presence of others' as versions of the character-narrator's own selves in time (Calvino 1982).

Another postmodern example is Christa Wolf's feminist multi-text revision of the Cassandra myth and *The Oresteia*, *Cassandra* (1983). Wolf's novel may not be overtly comic, but its polyphonic, metafictional interchange parallels the metafictional story framing and volleyed archival quotation that Scott pursues in *Benang*: *From the Heart* (thereafter, *Benang*). In *Cassandra*, the first-person historical tale is spliced with the author's own first-person reports, diary entries and letters exploring contemporary and ancient themes. In the middle of the 'archaic' Cassandra's account, the novel seemingly gives way to a touristic, then academic, 'Travel Report about the Accidental Surfacing and Gradual Fabrication of Literary Personage'. In fact this *Tristram Shandy*-esque insert is the author's story of going to Greece and undertaking her own forms of re-enactment research for her historical novel.

Metafiction does have an extraordinary formal vitality and broad scope of application. It can, for instance, be applied to genres outside the postcolonial historical novel and thereby effect a general narratorial élan (to wit the example of Calvino), but one that may have no

particular political undertow or agenda. Another example closer to home is Murray Bail's fable-like *Eucalyptus*, which demonstrates shifts in space and time, moving from a mythologized version of an Australian past to a contemporary setting at the behest of a wittily self-reflexive metafictional narration (1998). 'It is trees which compose a landscape,' the narrator notes in a voice that is full-bodied in its sense of Europeanist art-historical and landscape connoisseurship (1998: 15) Yet thankfully, in the chapter titled 'Australiana,' that same narrator also informs us wryly that: 'Some description of landscape is necessary. At the same time (be assured) strenuous efforts will be made to avoid the rusty traps set by the idea of a National Landscape' (Bail 1998: 23). Here, the charmingly versed, omniscient narrator does not ever recruit his evident parodic vocal skills and references to discourses of 'National Landscape' to refer to Indigenous peoples' long occupation of and subsequent dispossession from their land. In the end, the writer signifies a past, a present and a future from which Indigenous histories and voices have been neatly excised. So while Bail is a beguiling stylist, often metafitcionally so, this novel may be considered as an example of metafiction not desiring to reach or even failing, as it were, its parodic political potential.

While I concur with Hutcheon's emphasis on the certain political potentials of metafiction, I nonetheless contest her elevation of historiographic metafiction as a genre category. Hutcheon talks overtly about 'the fourth way of narrating the past: historiographic metafiction – and not historical fiction – with its intense self-consciousness about the way in which all this is done' (1990: 113). For me, historiographic metafiction is both a conceptual political approach *and* a literary technique that can be applied to any genre of novel. The political approach and the metafictional technique may not necessarily be found together, as the examples of Calvino and Bail attest. Yet the coupling of political approach and metafictional technique is of acute importance to the postcolonial historical novel. Additionally, within novels exploring historiographic metafiction, the generic presence of the historical novel is *retained*, I feel, though Hutcheon's arguments see it *exchanged* for a new generic type that discards the 'historical novel' as an impotent, old-fashioned progenitor.

Walter Scott's nineteenth-century historical novel *Waverley* (1819) can then be considered as a key originary intertext for both of Kim Scott's novels. The latter Scott draws upon and subverts genre codes from the historical novel, especially conventional tropes of masculinity, race and the teleological time of imperial quest. *Benang* (1999*)* and *That Deadman Dance* (Scott 2010) can therefore be considered as drawing specifically (in an allusive, intertextual sense) upon *Waverley*, as well as on recent postmodern, postcolonial historical novels such as J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (Coetzee 1986). *Benang*, *That Deadman Dance* and *Foe* are novels that successfully critique the genre codes of progenitor novels like *Waverley* in order to articulate for their novels that which Kristeva names as 'the new system with its new [postcolonial] representability' (Kristeva 1980: 60).

*Benang* shifts beyond the self-reflexive metafiction of writers like Calvino and Bail to fulfil, as Wolf does, a whole discursive range of parodistic discourse for distinctly political ends. We see how Scott recruits a range of parodic metafictional techniques to serve his

overarching parodic intention of exposing 'the very deepest principles governing another's discourse' – that is, the racist discourse of colonial power. Scott's dispersed narrative (shifting voice and tense, bold montage of space/time) is consistent to the point that most scenes contain disjunctive plays of archival 'signage' and parodic metafictional framing. Such a radical narrative approach contrasts hugely with the elegantly illusionistic storytelling registers of writers like Kate Grenville and Peter Carey. In *Benang,* Scott surpasses the political register and bold techniques of Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo Narogin's) *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and *Long Live Sandawara* (Johnson/Narogin 1983*,* 1979). Scott pushes a far greater experimental range. Witness this example from the chapter in Benang titled 'a writer', in which the Indigenous character Sandy Two manipulates a dour white constable into a disastrous handwriting test.

> Constable Hall was a writer.
>
> Sandy Two was a reader, and in the newspaper he read:
>
> > *Your character, as told from your handwriting, is the truest index of your future. The tail of your J may betray a meanness, whilst the forming of a T may show your generosity.*
>
> …
>
> Sandy Two showed the advertisement to Constable Hall several weeks later and told him he'd taken the liberty of sending some scraps of the constable's handwriting to the good professor. It was mail day, and Sandy Two – indicating an envelope on Hall's desk – said, 'You've got your reply, by the look of it.'
>
> Constable Hall was ever alert. It was his training, see.
>
> 'Oh yeah, I got my own results back,' said Sandy. '"Creative, and confident",' he quoted at Hall, grinning, '"Destined for great things".'
>
> 'Oh yeah?' said Hall. 'You heading out of town yet?' (Scott 1999: 250–51).

Every small moment in *Benang* is jam-packed with metafictional devices that permit a rereading of the ways in which language has enmeshed and determined historical colonial power structures. Here irony and metafiction collide and collude to brilliant effect. Scott deconstructs the language of the colonial archive and exposes the ways in which this language pemeates the simplest encounters with the signs and syntax of dispossession. When we learn that Sandy Two 'was a reader' we are given to understand that the character, Sandy Two, as I have argued elsewhere, 'can only be cast as the passive recipient of the white man's legal, journalistic, and bureaucratic and literary letters – never one who inscribes or dictates the textual terms, and never becoming a subject who might have their own different inscriptions read willingly, legibly, and capably by the white man' (Johnson 2012: 12). The white man, Constable Hall, historically, is no 'reader' of the Nyoongar man – he does not even bother to individualise him by name. As a result he can neither 'write' nor *right* him (my emphases).

Here the omniscient narration is instantly attuned to parodic metafictional inflection. The simple italicisation and dialectical placement of 'reader' and 'writer' are an ironic performance of colonial cultural apartheid; the white man writes, the black man reads, but only because he has been subjugated, forced to learn the language of the coloniser, even though his gift in doing so is not rewarded or ascribed value as linguistic talent by a largely tin-eared coloniser. Sandy Two remains subjugated as a 'reader.' Yet as a further irony, Constable Hall, is almost confidentially described to the reader as 'ever alert. It was his training, see' (Scott 1999: 251). Here Scott uses an inviting vernacular argot for the voice of the omniscient narrator. But Constable Hall's thoughts are not known until the end of the scene. Hall may have the last mildly threatening word ('You heading out of town yet?') but he has no words to rebut the startling news that his black tracker has received superior results for the white man's handwriting test; in effect, he turns a blind eye (and his habitually blind ear) to the racist realities underpinning the social and professional hierarchies in which both men encounter one another (Scott 1999: 251).

In this text we see examples of what Bakhtin has called in relation to the novels of Dostoevsky: 'sharp and unexpected transitions from parody to internal polemic, from polemic to hidden dialogue, from hidden dialogue to stylization […] then back again to parodistic narration and finally to an extremely intense open dialogue' (1884: 203). Bakhtin concludes that 'What is important here, of course, is not only the diversity and abrupt shift of discursive types, nor the predominance among them of double-voiced, internally dialogized discourses' (1984: 203). Dostoevsky's distinct gift, he says, 'lies in his special distribution of these discursive types and varieties among the basic compositional elements of a given work' (203). Sandy Two and Constable Hall then, may be considered as examples of 'discursive types' expressed and critiqued through the metafictional compositional elements of the scene. This is also where Bakhtin discusses 'double-voiced' discourse, or *dvugolosoye*, almost certainly an important cultural grandparent of postmodern ambiguity and poststructuralist unfinalisability. For in this scene of great metafictional power, colonial power relations are ultimately evoked as ambiguous, unresolved.

These Dostoevskyian techniques are emblematic in Scott's prose in the aforementioned scene, and at various other points throughout the novel; in this scenic instance, Scott's narrator is not the only one to allude to the narrative writerly process as a form of 'narcissistic' textual awareness. The handwriting test comes about because Scott's Indigenous character Sandy Two, supposedly the disempowered reader, has read in the newspaper of a free handwriting test. He duly tells Constable Hall that he has taken the liberty of sending 'some scraps of the constable's handwriting to the good professor' (Scott 1999: 250–51).

The dialogue between Constable Hall and his tracker Sandy Two reads quite differently from the distanced observations of the omnipotent narrator who sets up the scene and distinguishes between reader and writer at the scene's commencement in telling us that 'Constable Hall was a writer'. But that narrator is swiftly abandoned as Sandy Two takes over; he continues to actively test the limit, driving home how and what language reveals or

betrays regarding moral character, race-based labels and personal potential. The omnipotent narrator is forced out of the scene, as is Constable Hall, so that it quickly becomes Sandy's stage.

This scene exploits metafiction as both political theme and narrative technique; Constable Hall's perfunctory replies, divested of any reference to the writing test, to the act of writing, render him the straight man, the foil who remains mostly un-attuned to the power plays of language, colonial language in particular, though the test results produce in him a blushing humiliation. By the end of the scene, stereotypical ideas of what a reader and writer are (and how these roles have been assigned within a colonial context on the basis of race) are called into question and shown as absurd. In this important scene, Scott finally positions Sandy Two as both reader and symbolic *re*-writer. As the metafictional ironies build, Sandy Two is recast in a position of power within the overarching colonial story/discourse.

Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novelistic modes is critically relevant to reflections on the ways in which historiographic metafiction continues to promulgate postcolonial redress. As Hutcheon has noted, historiographic metafiction 'works to situate itself in history and in discourse, as well as to insist on its autonomous fictional and linguistic nature' (1984: xiv). For Hutcheon, as with her mentor Wolfgang Iser, the reader is therefore forced to take an active rather than a passive role in their engagement with the metafictional text:

> In self-conscious parodic literature, the reader–character identification circuit is often broken. It is sacrificed in order to engage the reader in an active dialogue with the generic models of his time, an exercise that is usually only that of the writer's. By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of fiction (1984: 139).

Hutcheon's time-honoured analysis is solely confined to Western postmodern metafiction, but her radical emphasis on metafiction's automatically activated reader, male and female, surely parallels the potentially political role of the reader of postcolonial historical novels.

Scott is a writer who breaks the reader-narrator-character circuit continuously, and not simply in displays of metafictional virtuosity. His metafictional interruptions engage the reader in an active dialogue with literary generic models. If Scott, unlike Carey and Grenville, draws attention to the way in which historical novels, administrative colonial texts, posters, images, and other texts have enshrined technologies of genocide in relation to the distorted presence or telling absence of Indigenous peoples, then metafiction surely offers a specific set of techniques which draw attention to textual histories of Aboriginality, to the social, economic and political depredations of colonialism. Hutcheon goes on to say:

> To read is to act; to act is to both interpret and to create anew – to be revolutionary, perhaps in political as well as literary terms. There is much freedom-inducing potential in metafiction generally, not when seen as a degenerate version of a moribund genre, but when recognised as a significant 'vital' mimetic form of literature (1984: 161–62).

In *That Deadman Dance*, writing and translation are partly rescued from the racist ethnographic fictions of the official archives, but are still shown as tools that oppress and subjugate Aboriginal people. Scott nonetheless demonstrates how English language and writing can be 'written back to' parodically, but also in positive ways.

Reharnessing/revisioning the archives of the coloniser is also a theme differently explored by Richard Flanagan in *Gould's Book of Fish* (Flanagan 2001). In that novel, artist-forger-convict William Buelow Gould attempts to create a book of fish as a fragmented memoir, rescuing his original *Sketchbook of Fishes* from its fate as a positivist scientific colonial manuscript and imbuing it with alternative narratives of colonial experience. For Xavier Pons, Flanagan's novel's rich ambiguity is built from metfictional disjunctures between fact and fiction that 'subvert historical discourse itself,' and which subsequently enable a specific critique of hegemonies of power underpinning tropes of colonial culture (Pons 2005: 64–76). Scott is doing something similar again in *That Deadman Dance*. As demonstrated in *Benang*, Scott uses the novel as an insurgent postcolonial cultural form, critiquing modes of writing that are used to oppress and displace Nyoongar people, but in this more recent novel he nonetheless finds positives in many kinds of cross-cultural linguistic performance that are intimately connected to Nyoongar writing and intercultural influences of settler languages.

Thus, *That Deadman Dance* seeks to unpack the monological language of the colonizer. But via the intellectually curious, tender-hearted eyes of the young Bobby, first-contact encounters swiftly become normative, culturally and socially complex events that are not without value and excitement. Bobby's optimism is in part a corollary of his youth, warmth and intellect. He has also spent long periods away from Nyoongar elder Menak and the rest of his kin while working as a whaler and also as a sailor on goods transportation boats servicing coastal settler communities. During his periods away, he has been supported by his kindly white mentor and friend Dr Cross, who maintains good relations with the local Nyoongar communities. Bobby Wabalanginy's demeanour and will to engage is also in keeping with histories of Albany, in Western Australia, a place, Scott observes, that is 'known by some historians as the friendly frontier' (Scott 2010 ['Author's Note']: 397):

> I say the novel is 'inspired' by history because, rather than write an account of historical events or Noongar individuals with whom I was particularly intrigued, I wanted to build a story from their confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms – language and songs, guns and boats – as soon as they became available. Believing themselves manifestations of a spirit of place impossible to conquer, they appreciated reciprocity and the nuances of cross-cultural exchange (Scott 2010 ['Author's note']: 398).

The Nyoongar experience of first contact was therefore one of profound intercultural engagement and Scott seeks to evoke this and show how the intertextual, citational tissue of many different kinds of writing and language underpinned such early encounters. Thus, the citational tissue of the novel is consistently dependent upon modes of historiographic metafiction which signal or comment upon the linguistic and intercultural riches of first

contact encounters at the same time as they seek to parody the meld of linguistic registers. In the character of Bobby, we are shown a Nyoongar youth's studious, imaginative exploration of an idiosyncratic modernity fashioned by guns and boats, and by language and mobility. For Bobby, 'having seen ships arrive and sail away again over his whole lifetime, had now sailed away and returned' (Scott 2010: 13).

Introduced on the opening page to the character of Bobby, scribbling words upon a slate, the reader is placed under productive polyphonic siege early on:

> *Kaya.*
>
> 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!
>
> *Roze a wail …*
>
> Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages, Bobby wrote on stone.
>
> With a name like Bobby Wabalanginy he knew the difficulty of spelling.
>
> Boby Wablngn wrote *roze a wail*.
>
> But there was no whale. Bobby was imagining, remembering …
>
> *Rite wail* (Scott 2010: 1).

Here, Bobby congratulates himself that 'nobody ever done writ that before'; the language conceits in this passage enable the illusion that he is speaking to himself in Nyoongar language. This language, though, appears on the page as a creolised English.

Where, in the darker story of *Benang*, Harley can only obtain redemption 'from the heart,' that is to say, beyond the strictures of the colonial archives, beyond writing, Bobby is somewhat freed by writing English words on stone, a material on which his ancestors drew and painted and continue to communicate (and thus signifying a chain of ancestral citation). He enjoys testing out his multilingual gifts, drawing delighted attention to the representational artifice of reportage, to the fictionalisation of past time: '*Roze a wail*. But there was no whale.'

Across the novel, unexplained Nyoongar words contrast with fragments of learnt English which are often changed by the writer Bobby, or lost in phonetic translation. Scott doesn't bother with scholarly footnotes for fragments of Nyoongar language; such inclusions of Nyoongar words and phrases often therefore stand as ambiguous signifiers or provocations, though it is Nyoongar language, in particular the soft-sounding word 'Kaya,' or 'hello,' that opens the novel. This word signifies as inviting authorial address, yet it simultaneously appears as a word inscribed/uttered by Bobby as he regales his own successful transcription of 'Kaya' into the Roman alphabet: 'Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!'[2]

Longer instances of Nyoongar language in the novel show Scott using direct, informal translations on the page. For example, when the elder Menak, who has been gifted 'a little white dog' named Jock by his friend Dr Cross, gestures to the animal, it:

> leapt into his arms and fixed its attention on the ship as if the sight stirred some memory of scurrying after rats below its deck.
>
> Menak stroked the dog. *Alidja, Jock. Noonak kornt maaman ngaangk moort*.
>
> Look, Jock, your house father mother family. (Scott 2010: 13)

Notwithstanding the irony of the elder walking the headland holding 'a little white dog,' Menak becomes a masterful, even mythic presence in this scene, accommodating the white creature as stand-in for the coloniser, as mere pet. Menak articulates to Jock the things that are is important to both his people and to the colonial newcomers alike, running together the unpunctuated chant: 'house father mother family.' Menak, like Bobby, believes himself a manifestation of a 'spirit of place impossible to conquer (Scott 2010: 11). With his little dog he too appreciates reciprocity and the nuances of cross-cultural exchange, speaking as he does in several languages at once as part of his own linguistic gift. And yet he also perceives and articulates in this scene that any mode of exchange with the other is undergirded by a fundamental humanness and an acknowledgement of basic human needs and the provision of social structures. As Levinas might say, the shared encounter is always the very *condition* of time and therefore, by implication, of history: 'The condition of time lies in the relationship *between* humans, or *in history*' (1987: 79, my italics). Menak and Dr Cross duly understand this important point, that the condition of time locates *between* people:

> He [Menak] washed his hands, continuing the ceremony – their ceremony – for greeting people when they came from beyond the horizon. He looked forward to greeting his nephew and Dr Cross, and all the other people Cross wished him to know (Scott 2010: 13).

Yet Menak is also a realist. He opines that so many of his people were dying and, 'although Cross was a friend, Menak did not think they needed more of his people here. Yet here they were. True, they had things to offer, and few stayed long' (Scott 2010: 13).

The novel's complex citational tissue is dependent upon Bobby's and Menak's acts of writing, translating and speaking, which are always set in dialogical relationship with past and future. That is to say, these characters' narrations usually refer back to inherited Indigenous inscriptions and stories even as they forecast a new way of 'moving between languages' that enables them to incorporate or parody references to newcomer culture, to its sundry phrases, fables, and songs.

Bobby's enthusiastic use of the white man's slate comes down to the fact that this tool of nineteenth and early twentieth century white pedagogy can nonetheless be wiped away or erased at whim; it is a surface open to endless chalked inscriptions of story and history. Bobby delights in the fact that such stories, written in chalk, can be endlessly changed, are ephemeral notations. Upon that slate, a panoply of voices and phrases is melded by Bobby's fascinating accounting of his own language against that of the white newcomers. Bobby demonstrates his perception of the differences between inner monologue and the representation of narrative on stone and now slate. In monologue, inscription and dialogue he shifts seamlessly between European, literary and biblical tropes and Nyoongar language.

For example, when Bobby wants to swim out to the whales, shortly after writing out his *roze a wail* text (as if to complete his story with a lived version of life imitating art that has already imitated life), he isn't frightened because 'Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn't frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped around the memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart' (Scott 2010: 2). Bobby knows to instruct himself via Menak's gifted story; he tells the reader, as he tells himself, to 'Plunge your hands into that whale heart, lean into it and squeeze and let your voice join the whale's roar. Sing that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep' (Scott 2010: 2).

Though it is observed with interest, the biblical fable of Jonah and the Whale is not indigenised here; it is simply replaced/overridden with Menak's fabulist story in which country and creature, Nyoongar man and boy, are entwined without fear: 'But you see the hole in its back, the breath going in and out, and you think of all the blowholes along this coast; how a clever man can slip into them, fly inland one moment, back to the ocean the next' (Scott 2010: 2). But intertextual asides and memories of Menak's story are broken as Bobby returns to the plain fact that he is 'only writing', thus signalling certain limitations in representation, in the code of writing:

> But there was none of that. Bobby was only imagining, only writing. Held in the sky on a rocky headland, Bobby drew chalk circles on slate, drew bubbles.
>
> *Bubelz.*
>
> *Roze a wail* (Scott 2010: 3).

The black slate can contain all kinds of ephemeral texts, including pictorial and Romanized phonetic phrases. The slate is held within the story just as Christian fables and references to Menak's story are held, in fragmented citational counterpoint. The novel's intercultural heteroglossic texture is often enacted in such complex writing and/or translation scenes across the novel. While Bobby relishes the clashing and fusion of language and story across cultures, he does not, however, necessarily idealise the writing act, awake to the limitations and ironies of his instruction. Authorial postcolonial ironies interweave Bobby's earliest, guileless mimicries:

> Bobby could soon make out words even in Cross's journal, but put them differently in his own hand. From trying to write his own language he used phonics.
>
> *A most intelajint kuriositee.*
>
> *We haf taked ther land.*
>
> *Deseez and depredashen make them few* (Scott 2010: 157).

In the following passage, taken from Part III of the novel, Scott returns the reader to the motif of the slate:

> B for Bobby. The name given to him.

> Bobby had taken to his letters easily with Dr Cross, liked the feel of chalk on the slate and made patterns, drew small footprints of animals and birds and the shape of different skeletons. Some sounds had a shape on the page, too, he learned. The alphabet might be tracks, trails and traces of what was said. He copied things from books, from Dr Cross's journals and letters, even. That helped him improve his spelling, though not the words of his first language (Scott 2010: 165).

Thus, Scott deploys a situational metafictional template that draws attention to the way colonial experience might be (re)told as a different kind of colonial *Bildungsroman,* one that centralises Aboriginal as opposed to white experience of the frontier. And yet the slate and the alphabet are shown as the whiteman's pedagogical tools, ones that do not allow Bobby to improve 'the words of his first language'. Bobby's English name has also been imposed upon him; the colonizer is depicted as lacking in linguistic gifts or even the will to explore rudimentary translations of Nyoongar words. The encounter between cultures may be depicted by Scott as positive in many ways, but the colonizer is finally shown/exposed as tin-eared. This has serious repercussions for both cultures later in the novel, when the stakes of economic and physical survival are raised.

*That Deadman Dance* surveys two decades of colonial incursion from the 1820s to the 1840s. It is only much later in the novel that Bobby's resilience and his belief in the possibilities of cross-cultural relationships are sorely tested by white sanctimony and greed, and by the sexual and environmental depredations visited by the colonizers, who exhibit ever more forcefully a determination to enslave and displace rather than share resources. It is then that the actual, physical, ritual 'Dead Man Dance' comes to supplant books and paper and slates. The mapping of these transitions are foregrounded, intrinsic to that which Scott promulgates as the postcolonial story. Bobby's dance is performed as a symbolic return to country and as an assertion of the importance of Nyoongar lore and customary laws. Thus it is also a political protest marking Bobby's coming of age. Indigenous dance and performance images become a critical part of the citational tissue of the second half of the book, used to evoke worlds and words under impossible pressure. Painfully, the reader travels with Bobby as he comes, fitfully, almost against his will, to realize that for all the gift of his 'Dead Man Dance', the destruction of his familial, social and cultural bonds may not be preventable.

As Scott's *Benang* attests, irony and mimicry, cannot on their own deconstruct the violent genocidal assumptions of older colonial administrations. Scott's intertextual task, then, for a still colonial present, is to vigorously unveil the archive and bring into dramatic metafictional alignment different kinds of texts, especially where those texts have participated in the creation of epistemic violence against colonized peoples. *Benang* is a novel that works hard to show the ways in which language, in Pam Morris's Bakhtinian phrase, is 'stratified' into 'multiple social discourses' so that unitary monologic discourse is relativised by its dialogic contact with another social discourse, another view of the world (1984: 73).

Sandy's parodic manipulations of Constable Hall, Fanny's sung lamentations, the riven doubt and despair voiced by the scholar Harley retrieving his Nyoongar past through confrontation with the colonial archives, are composed of and represent particular enunciative signs, disjunctively forced together. Within the characters' distinct speaking styles or enunciative modes, Scott endlessly transposes other sign systems or fragments – racist slogans, letters and instructions from the administrative colonial archive, fragments of Nyoongar language and music – all of which enable proliferations and confusions of semiotic meaning. As these sign systems rise and fall against one another in a metafictional melee, the 'abandonment' of former (colonial) sign systems occurs, namely those forming racist and/or romanticizing discourses of Aboriginality. The protagonist–narrator Harley comments:

> And it was there, in a dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from that fraction of life which fell (Scott 1999: 30).

Set ninety years earlier, the first-contact novel *That Deadman Dance* works in a similar but different way to *Benang*. The novel's vibrant dialogism is similarly built from many different languages and voices, and draws upon many literary sources across two cultures; it also references conventions drawn from the historical novel and the *Bildungsroman*.

The rise of colonial economic expansion in the 1830s and beyond neatly maps the concomitant decline in intercultural exchange and a series of tragic losses for the Aboriginal inhabitants of King George Town. But while Bobby and his white friend, the strangely literate white shepherd Jak Tar, are 'special brothers now, ever since Jak got Binyan [Bobby's now happily married sister]' (Scott 2010: 291), Bobby is unable to press his romantic suit for Christine Chaine, daughter of successful squatter and Bobby's sometime protector and boss, Geordie Chaine.

Christine sanctimoniously ruminates that 'Papa said Bobby had to be taught respect for the rule of law. He was a good boy' (Scott 2010: 368). The rule of white law with its mythologies of universality is one more textual discourse that oppresses Bobby and his people. Parodic intertexts are also referenced when Bobby comes across Jak Tar by surprise and finds him reading James Fenimore Cooper's proleptic, novelised vision of Mohican Indigene society, *The Last of the Mohicans*. Tragically, we see how Bobby, who has had his consciousness raised by a recent confrontation at the whalers' hut, repudiates the elder Menak, as if the truth of settler occupation has become too difficult to countenance:

> Bobby lifted the book from Jak's hand, read its title.
> *The Last of the ... the ...*
> Mohicans.
> Jak said, Err … about the other day, Chaine's temper and all that …
> But Bobby laughed it off. Menak was always too bossy, wasn't he, like that dog of his (Scott 2010: 345).

As power relations shift, Bobby's once guileless communications and enthusiastic translations, as symbols of a multilingual economy of exchange and of his participation in an emergent global modernity, ramp up. Writing and inscription are replaced by dancing, by performance of the most complex, layered kind. In his last performance for the Governor and the Chaine family, Bobby performs the ultimate 'Dead Man Dance'. Stripped down to his stylish red undershorts and fur and feathers, Bobby executes a carnivalesque striptease as a kind of powerful, distressing agitprop built from a poetic montage of Nyoongar and English words/stories:

> Bobby Walabinginy knew that he could sing and dance the spirit of this place, had shown he could sing and dance the spirit of any gathering of people, show them what we gathered together here really are. He reminded them he was a dancer and a singer, what Dr Cross called a *gifted artiste*, and by those means and by his spirit he would show them how people must live here, together.
>
> Afterwards, he'd sign their paper. We will sign a paper with them about how we might live. There will be no more gaol. We show our talent and good grace, and Wooral and them no longer need use fire and spears and fight them and their guns.
>
> The old people shrugged. Let them try it his way. (Scott 2010: 390)

The assembled white members of the audience turn away, embarrassed and confronted by his raw dance of history, enacted up close in the sitting room of the present: 'They could hear one another breathing. Be sincere, Bobby told himself. Speak straight like a spear' (Scott 2010: 391). The tragic impact of this dance inheres in the fact that even as his culture and the resources of his country are taken from him, he continues to believe and assert that 'you here are all my friends, *blackfellas* and *whitefellas* I hear people saying, but we are not just our colour' (Scott 2010: 391). Thus Bobby dances his way to a kind of courageous assertion of self and self in country. This is admixed with a tempered special pleading for his white audience, as the ghosts of his uncle Wunyeran and white mentor Dr Cross watch from the windows, spurring him on alongside living elders Manit and Menak, the latter always accompanied by his little Jack Russell dog. In one of the most moving scenes to be found in any postcolonial novel, Bobby dances and recites and reflects to create a polyphonic performance of great incantatory and poetic power:

> *Boodawan, nyoondokat nyinyang moort, moortapinyang yongar, wetj, wilo ... Nitja boodja ngalak boodja Noonga boodjar, kwop nyoondok yoowarl koorl yey, yang ngaalang* ... Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time?
>
> Bobby saw a scene spread before him like a sandplain, and he on lookout: guns and horses and flour and boats and people shimmering plants animals birds insects fish, all our songs and dances mixing together because here in this place we are like family: friends, becoming family. Binyan and Jack Tar doing that already [given Bobby's sister Binyan has married Jack Tar] (Scott 2010: 394).

Scott strips out all grammatical nicety and formal translation here, in order to make Bobby's voice sing across the staves of the novel. In Bobby's polyvocal, lyrically epiphanic rendering of country and Nyoongar identity, always cast in positive relation to others, the *arriviste* colonials, Scott shows Bobby's capacity for statesmanship, a way to a sure future that the elders have begun to doubt is possible. Bobby is carried away with his own brilliantly complex rhetoric; Scott finally paints a deft portrait of his humorous youthful confidence, his delicate, parodic intervention into the theatrical text of 'audience sensibility':

> Bobby Wabalanginy believed he'd won them over with his dance, his speech, and of course with his dance, his speech, and of course his usual tricks of performance-and-costume stuff. He was particularly pleased with the red underpants, worn as a concession to his audience's sensibility (Scott 2010: 395).

But when faces turn away, Bobby feels as if he 'had surfaced in some other world' (Scott 2010: 395). At the novel's end, despite so much dramatised evidence of vibrant, intercultural first contact relations between Cross and Bobby, Jak Tar and Binyan, Wunyeran and others, Bobby's artful, spirited performance, as living demonstration of a people 'who have been here for all time' (Scott 2010: 394) and as manifesto for a shared way forward, is repudiated and the room dissolves into anxiety and fear.

Scott's second postcolonial historical novel thus creates an intertextual mesh that builds an alternative intercultural story of King George Town in which Indigenous experience under colonialism is made central. *That Deadman Dance*, as with *Benang* before it, is a novel which, in Kristevan terms: 'implies the abandonment of a former sign system, the passage to a second [sign system] via an instinctual intermediary common to the two systems, and the articulation of the new system with its new representability' (1980: 60). Scott's use of metafictional techniques signals a 'new representability', which demonstrates the clash of old and new ways of writing and speaking, the rapprochements, exchanges and contestations of intercultural engagement. There are negatives and positives evoked here.

For Hutcheon, Rose, Bakhtin and others, historiographic metafiction retains distinct political potentials, drawing attention to the written text as artifice, undercutting mimetic representations of the surface of reality and dissolving the seamless façade of the novel. Without these parodic techniques, the novelist cannot easily draw attention to the fact that history and literature (his or her own novel and its arrayed intertexts and quotations included) are ephemeral historical artefacts. Neither can the novelist cannot easily assert that monological history's claims to singular truth are false. Metafictional framing enables the postcolonial novelist to convey multiple historical truths, to critique literary extinction discourse and to expose hegemonies of colonial power used to oppress Aboriginal people and other figures marginalised through the seamless storying of colonial foundation myths.

As Rose asserts, metafiction 'comments or reflects' upon another text, and by implication, upon the voices of others. Bearing in mind Barthes's insistence that intertextual citations are simply cultural traces that are *already read*, rather than literal filial sources or influences, both *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance* are postcolonial historical novels

replete with such intertextual traces or 'quotations without inverted commas' (Barthes 1977: 160). Metafictional framing allows the writer to politicise and historicise these quotations and critique their content, often with great parodic verve.

The recuperation of the vanished voices of history is at the core of postcolonial cultural intention. Additionally, if parodic metafictional interpolations are able to parody 'the very deepest principles governing another's discourse' as Bakhtin (1984: 194) believes, then the authorities of white colonial discourse can be met by dissident laughter, practised across all spheres of postcolonial writing and culture.

## Endnotes

1. Rose affirms: 'The use of parody by ancient authors such as Aristophanes as well as by more modern authors from Cervantes onwards has shown it to have been used in ancient as well as modern times to reflect in both 'meta-fictional' and comic fashion on other authors as well as on the composition and audience of the parody work itself' (1993: 91).
2. Translations of Nyoongar language from the south-west region of Western Australia can be found at http://www.noongarculture.org.au/language (accessed 27 January 2015).

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