

*Whiteness and Indigenous Sovereignty in Kim Scott's That Deadman
Dance*

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Abstract: This paper examines the intersubjectivity of Noongar and the white settlers in *That Deadman Dance*. It borrows from social contract theory to develop the idea of a cross-racial contract and discusses whiteness and indigenous sovereignty in this context.

Keywords: Social contract, Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, Aboriginal, whiteness

Introduction

The early frontier, as a site where indigenous and non-indigenous people first made contact, has long been a subject of fascination for Australian novelists. Rolf Boldrewood's *The sphinx of Eaglehawk; a tale of old Bendigo*, Eleonore Dark's *That Timeless Land*, Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes* and *Coonardoo*, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, Patrick White's *Voss*, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant* are classics in the corpus of non-indigenous Australian literature.¹ Indigenous novels which focus on first contact include Eric Willmot's *Pemulwuy*, Richard Wilkes' *Bulmurn*, Bruce Pascoe's *Earth and Ocean* and Kim Scott's second novel *Benang*.² A number of life stories and fictionalised life stories by Aboriginal women such as Monica Clare's *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* and Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Caprice: A Stockman's Daughter* and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* also include first-contact episodes. Kim Scott's third novel, *That Deadman Dance* (2010), winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize (South East Asian and the Pacific) Regional Award and the 2011 Miles Franklin Award, mounts a new fictive expedition into what is known as the 'friendly frontier' in the south west of Western Australia in the early 1800s. Scott sees in this descriptor an opportunity to speculate imaginatively about the nature of cross-racial relationality in the early days of settler/Noongar contact. His novel suggests that if the frontier was friendly for a time it was so largely because of Noongar hospitality, diplomacy and generosity in offering assistance and labour to the settlers, a diplomacy the settlers did not by and large reciprocate.

White men

That Deadman Dance recreates the scene of the Noongar's first contact with the British settlers from 1826 onwards. The novel portrays the Noongar as not simply reactive to the arrival of the settlers; they actively establish parameters of cross-cultural intercourse by incorporating the settlers, for example, into their traditions of kinship and ceremonial practice. However, the novel depicts a world in which there is a fundamental disjunction between the ways in which the settlers generally relate to the Noongar and the ways in which the Noongar react to the presence of the settlers. The novel is peopled with a spectrum of white men (it is very much a story about men) who play out a range of aspirations and anxieties within the young colony. They dramatise the history and psychical logics of class and the colonial economy. There is Skelly, the ticket-of-leave man; Dr Cross the ex-military surgeon; Alexander Killam, the retired soldier; Jak Tar, the American seaman who jumps ship; and Geordie Chaine, the wealthy settler who was keen to create his own small empire unencumbered by the restrictions of class privilege. These men represent a range of different interests. Generally they are driven by a sense of 'opportunity' and 'enterprise' and endowed with 'initiative' - those barely disguised euphemisms for imperial expansion. This tableau of white men point to the ways in which *That Deadman Dance* continues *Benang's* sharp scrutiny and analysis of whiteness. Scott's prose draws liberally on the irony that fuelled *Benang* and, like the earlier novel, *That Deadman Dance* borrows from and reworks the register and lexicon of the colonial discourses which inform the ways in which 'settlement' has historically been understood by white and other non-indigenous Australians.

Like *Benang*, *That Deadman Dance* is centrally concerned with the psychical nature of whiteness. The white men, from the Noongar point of view, are 'dead' in several senses. The trope derives from accounts that, on first contact, Aboriginal people conceived of white people as people returning from the dead.³ Scott develops this concept of returning dead white men and endows it with complex and multivalent inflections. He links the image with the resurrection of Christ (34), pointing to the white men's belief in their quasi-divine right to occupy 'unsettled' land and to introduce civilisation to the uncivilised. The figure of dead white men is most strikingly elaborated in the image of the dance that gives the book its title. The Dead Man Dance links the idea of the returning dead white men to the Noongar's observation of the bodily movements in the British soldiers' military drill. In the drill, 'it was as if dead men had come back to life and, having lost everything once, were more serious and intent and all of one will' (68). This description portrays the soldiers as synecdochic of the white diaspora: they are 'dead' because they had left behind their previous lives and homes (they had 'lost everything'). The novel's white characters decide not to return home but to make a new life and a new world in the antipodes.

Yet, as the description of the military drill implies, these dead white men have come to life again in the far reaches of empire. Bobby Wabalanginy refers to them as 'new old m[e]n' (4). This resurrection takes several forms. For Sergeant Killam and Convict Skelly it is signified by the promise of upward social mobility. Both are keen to make the transition to civilian life, to adopt the title 'Mr' (148); the ex-convict Skelly 'swelled with pride when addressed as such' (178). For many of the white men the difficult transition has indeed made them 'more serious and intent and all of one will' (68) in their ambition to acquire land and make a new world for themselves. Indeed this

ambition - this 'fierce, strategic intention' (376) - is informed by military power. The soldiers' drill which the Noongar imitate in their Dead Man Dance constitutes quintessentially the 'display of a gun' (376). The white people's relationship with the Noongar becomes increasingly distanced and militarised throughout the course of the novel as the Noongar are denied access to their land, stripped of their weapons, subject to various prohibitions and to intimidation, violence and incarceration. The novel maps the 'progress' of colonisation as a process in which the Noongar become enmeshed in a system of acculturative violence. Even when they are fully disabused of the notion that white men have literally returned from the dead, the term remains cogent as a descriptor of white aggression: the white men are 'like dead men, cruel brutal men' (72).

Achille Mbembe draws on Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* to define imperial sovereignty as 'the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2003: 11). He uses the term 'necropolitics' to describe 'forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 39). *That Deadman Dance* positions the reader in the cross-racial space of interaction and exchange; in the liminal zone of intersubjective and intercorporeal response and responsiveness. It explores both the positive and productive potential of cross-racial entanglements and engagements, and also the impact of white people's withdrawal from these productive engagements. While the novel overtly suggests that the 'friendly frontier' was indeed, in some measure, typified by courteous relations I'd suggest that this courtesy constituted a small window of opportunity and one that was, within a short space of time, squandered by the white settlers. *That Deadman Dance* imaginatively documents the subsequent subjection of the Noongar to the structuring sovereign violence of the colonial settler regime. In its narration of white subjectivity and point of view the novel demonstrates the logics according to which the Noongar's status as human beings is compromised; in the same moment the white men compromise their own standing as worthy visitors and as cross-cultural diplomats or emissaries. The fantasy of white mastery is played out in a variety of dehumanising strategies, for example the assignation of the Noongar to the category of the animal (Chaine notes their brimming 'animal health' [44]), and the subhuman (they are routinely referred to as 'savages'). The Noongar's racialised exclusion from the category of the human facilitates 'the denial of any common bond' between the coloniser and the colonised (Mbembe, 24). The idea of a 'common bond' is central to the novel which returns the contemporary white nation to the originary scene of embodied cross-racial encounter, reminding us of the foundational and ongoing relationality of settler and indigenous people and calling the white postcolonial nation to account for its breach of ethics in the realm of what Gail Weiss calls 'bodily imperatives' (Weiss, 1999).

The discursive worlding strategies of the novel provide a rich site for an exploration of how the social contract is played out in its intersubjective dimensions. The social contract is a useful trope for thinking further about the ethics of embodied cross-racial relations figured in the novel because it accentuates the participatory role of the contractors. Even though they may be positioned within asymmetrical power relations, the contractors (both individually and collectively) are nonetheless conjoined in a *relationship*. As in many relationships the exchanges between the two contractors are not entirely governable in their intersubjective or intercorporeal dimensions, even though the white intruders seek to legislate in the juridico-political realm. Contracts, I'd suggest, can give rise to alternative forms of agency.

Charles W. Mills and Carole Pateman deploy social contract theory to theorise how relations of domination which privilege white people come to be entrenched within the institutions, practices and rules of a social system. They develop the terms 'expropriation contract' and 'settler contract' to describe the instantiation of structures of domination and subordination in settler colonial regimes. The former contract is founded on 'the denial that a society already existed' prior to white occupancy and settlement (qtd Pateman and Mills 38). Following Mbembe we can see that because the militarised violence of occupation was not acknowledged as such, there was no onus on the colonisers to seek peace or agreement with the Noongar through a formal process of negotiation, and to include them as contracting subjects with the colonial polis (and later, within the postcolonial nation). The doctrine of *terra nullius*, which was deployed by the British from 1620s onwards (Pateman and Mills 2007, 46), provided the settlers with the alibi that in colonising Australia they were transforming the 'empty' country - which existed prior to their arrival in 'a state of nature' - into a civil society.⁴ Pateman argues that this transformation was based on the legal understanding that to occupy and maintain possession of land (for example through the establishment of fences and boundaries) was to convert it into private property (Pateman and Mills 2007, 49). According to this legal logic settler sovereignty derives from ownership of land; concomitantly, one of the main reasons for the establishment of political government was precisely the ratification and protection of private property (Pateman and Mills 2007, 54).

However, while the fictive worlding of *That Deadman Dance* elaborates the necropolitical ramifications of settler whiteness and the effects of the doctrine of *terra nullius* and the 'expropriation contract', the novel eschews the conventional postcolonial narrative of indigenous defeat in its creation of a countervailing narrative of the enduring sovereignty of the Noongar. This provides the geopolitical base of indigenous people's status within the social contract. I deploy the trope of Noongar sovereignty here to signify the Noongar's continuing status as autonomous political collectivities⁵ with multiple forms of agency and mobility which cannot, by definition, be assimilated to the settler state. Populist, literary and scholarly characterisations of the colonial encounter between indigenous people and British settlers often represent Aboriginal people as the passive recipients of European culture. Aboriginality is understood as something that can only deliquesce under the weight and complexity of European civilisation with its superior military and cultural resources. This loss paradigm is challenged in the worlding of *That Deadman Dance* which enables us to bear witness, I suggest, to (1) Noongar sovereignty and (2) another kind of intercultural intersubjectivity - a zone of mutual respect, curiosity, improvisation and exchange - which attests to the continuing connectivity of indigenous and non-indigenous people. This alternative intersubjectivity, epitomised by the relationship between Dr Cross and Bobby Wabalanginy (and Wunyeran, to a lesser degree), is subtended, I argue, by a rudimentary white recognition of indigenous sovereignty and its embeddedness in country by white characters within the novel. The novel's vision of Noongar sovereignty, I propose, incorporates (within the fictional events of the story) the adjunct vision of the possibility of an alternative intercultural social contract (during the period of early contact depicted in the novel) which accommodated non-indigenous people on Noongar land in relations of indigenous hospitality and exchange. Non-indigenous visitors were contracted within these diplomatic relations of exchange through the

bodily imperatives of responsiveness and responsibility. The question as to whether this alternative is still available in contemporary Australia, is left open by the novel but inflected with pessimism, I will argue, by the novel's ending.

The two key figures who challenge the loss paradigm of Aboriginality that I outline in the paragraph above are Bobby Wabalanginy and Dr Cross. In the following discussion I examine how Noongar sociality and Bobby and Wunyeran's relationship with Dr Cross proffer an alternative to the expropriative and necropolitical settler contract. I investigate how, in the worlding of the novel and its drama of bodily encounter and contact, Dr Cross and Bobby function narratologically as textual agents which facilitate readerly recognition of embodied intercultural relations. Dr Cross's relations with the Noongar are contracted under the sign of 'a new world' of cultural exchange (129), one which retrieves an understanding of Noongar and British politics - as they are indexed in the arena of the day-to-day embodied sociality of individuals - as coeval. If, prompted by Mills, we think of the contract as a 'set of intersubjective agreements' (446), this trope provides a useful framework for considering the different ways in which an alternative embodied intercultural diplomacy is conceived and performed by Dr Cross and the Noongar.

The bodily contact zone

Scott recreates the intimate zone of encounter by emplacing Noongar and white people in bodily proximity to each other in everyday spaces that are unfamiliar to either or both of them, for example in the rooms of newly designed and constructed huts which comprise a mixture of Aboriginal and European design and materials. He shows us the bodily reactions of surprise, discomfort, curiosity, embarrassment and relief, as Noongar and settlers adjust to their unfamiliar surrounds and each other's company. The worlding aspects of the novel allow Scott (and his readers) to imaginatively enter into the bodily realm of encounter and to explore the bodily interface of cross-racial social intercourse. However, most of the white men repudiate this bodily connection; Menak complains to Wooral and Bobby that the white people 'keep us at a distance, are so cold and stand away' (22). Physical distance is an index of estrangement and, eventually, the settler's denial of the Noongar's humanity and sovereignty. Later this distanciation was to become systemic and institutionalised in subsequent colonial and postcolonial governmental policies from the Protection Acts onwards.

Nonetheless, there are episodes in the novel, in which white men and the Noongar achieve mutually productive social relations. This cooperation is epitomised by the relationship between Dr Cross and Wunyeran. Cross, as his name suggests, exemplifies the chiasmatic intertwining of settler and Noongar psychical, somatic and cultural habits and practices. Like the other white men he becomes absorbed into Noongar kinship structures; Bobby is apprenticed to him in his capacity as a *babin* ('uncle-friend' [157]). Chaine is similarly referred to as *papa*, by Bobby and more generally by the honorific *Kongk* ('uncle' [216]). Cross is sensitive to issues of reciprocity, of 'give and take' (62) and comes to experience a sense of shame at the 'grabbing and selling of land' (63) and at the 'betrayal' of the Noongar's 'generosity and friendliness' (62). Cross embodies the ambivalence of whiteness at this crossroads of generosity and rapacity. He discovers the incompatibility of the two *modus operandi*, that is, the recognition of the subjecthood of the Noongar and the seizing of their lands. Narratively there is no way to resolve this contradiction and in a sense Scott has no option but to kill off this character. Psychically

paralysed, Cross passes away, a conflicted and tortured man. Even in death his final wish to be buried with his Noongar friend Wunyeran is betrayed with the passing of time.

Bobby Wabalanginy

If the friendship between Cross and Wunyeran elaborates a social topography of exchange and diplomacy, then Bobby Wabalanginy is another key figure who mediates the two worlds. From his own point of view he is 'important to the way everyone – black and white – had got on so well' (124). Bobby Wabalanginy, as his Noongar name - 'all of us playing together' (39) – suggests, is one of the novel's key exemplars of white/Noongar relationality. His mobility in both worlds endows him with an almost magical quality – akin to that associated with the trickster figure (common to New Zealand and North American indigenous storytelling and fiction). Such figures conventionally live along the edge; they are survivors and transformers who embody new imaginative ways of being. We are told that Bobby 'was born, reborn, took on new shapes' (158). Like the white men discussed above, Bobby rises from the dead, however his resurrection is the outcome of the mutual grief of black and white men, not the monotheistic vision of Christian paternalistic authority. Bobby is resuscitated by the joint tears of Cross and Wunyeran. He rises from their linked arms as Cross attempts to broker a *détente* between the angry Noongar and the white soldiers (126). The cross-racial friendship of these two men in effect revives Bobby and sends him on his narrative way as an important figure who, I suggest, articulates Noongar sovereignty and believes, for a time, that he also has the capacity to promote a syncretic 'new world'.

Bobby Wabalanginy is a significant figure in his Noongar community; as a dancer his performances work to integrate the various events that were happening around the Noongar into their ceremonial practices. The dancing he leads 'gathered together all their different selves' and shows the Noongar 'their very selves, inside their heads' (376). His ability to mimic white people in particular is central to his power and he mimics drunken sailors, ballroom dancing, the walk of various white men, their reading, and playing the fiddle. He appears to be endowed with the abilities of a *maban* (a 'clever man') like his uncle, Wunyeran, and his dancing could perhaps be seen as a performance of Noongar sovereignty, for example in the way that it (along with their singing) connects the Noongar dancers' bodies to the land: the dancers 'releas[e] all their strength into it' (59). Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes indigenous sovereignty as 'grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land' (2). I am speculating that, according to Moreton-Robinson's description, the conjunction between stories, bodies and voice, and land, animals, birds and fish, might be seen to constitute a dimension of Noongar cosmology or world view and, as such, as aspect of Noongar sovereignty. Sovereignty, in this formulation, is a property of Noongar people that encapsulates their unique relationship to country. Bobby Wabalanginy's bodily connection to the sea and the whales, for example, could be seen as an element of the cosmological world which subtends indigenous sovereignty, as I perceive it. Cross appears to have some understanding of the significance of indigenous protocols and cosmological beliefs, an understanding which, I suggest, points to a recognition, however rudimentary, of the centrality of inter-relations between people and the world around them to Noongar sovereignty. He explains to Chaine, for example, that among the Noongar, 'almost

everyone seems related, in one way or another. Even to birds and animals, and plants and things in the sea' (39). He is also aware of the importance of welcoming people to country (56-7).

For the Noongar portrayed in the novel, the giving and receiving of gifts is a vital aspect of social relations. It consolidates community. Exchange is an essential part of their gift economy, one in which giving incurs the obligation to reciprocate. We see not only Bobby and Wunyeran adopting the white men's bodily practices, but Cross doing the inverse. He adopts the Noongar practice of greasing himself against the cold and we also see that he has learned tracking skills from the Noongar and is able to identify footprints. However, although Bobby demonstrates the productive hybridity of appropriation, the adoption of British cultural forms is not always categorically beneficial for the Noongar. The book's title refers to the Noongar's adaptation of a British military drill which is seen as a 'gift' from the white men. In Bobby Wabalanginy's words, 'it was a dance from way past the ocean's horizon, and those people give it to our old people' (67). Given that the drill symbolises British sovereign violence, this gift is in fact a poisoned chalice that has a devastating impact on the Noongar and their way of life.

As a trickster-entertainer Bobby signals his political agenda as a storyteller and chronicler. He is more specific about the political nature of the unfinished business at this specific site: 'One day a statue of Wunyeran gunna be in the main street of this town,' he tells his audience, 'but I say shame on King George Town that it's not there right now' (78). In this way Old Bobby avoids commodification as an entertaining clown and storyteller – the role to which the tourists are anxious to confine him. They 'wanted a real old-time Aborigine, but not completely' (78) because a 'real ... Aborigine' might display the unsavoury truths about violent dispossession. However, Old Bobby exceeds the role allotted to him and delivers the truths they disavow. His storytelling reminds us that the recording and narration of first contact events and the early history of the colony are not confined to European commentators; that Aboriginal people's oral accounts provide a necessary corrective to this discourse.

In his political role as entertainer-storyteller, Bobby Wabalanginy facilitates non-indigenous witnessing of this destruction, and is thus a powerful trickster figure, reminding us of his uncle Wunyeran's reputed powers as a *maban* or clever man. He disrupts normative ways of seeing and disturb white amnesia and complacency. Bobby's speeches, stories and tricks are carefully and deliberately executed; dressed up as tomfoolery and entertainment they are nonetheless pedagogic and polemical – strategic statements and performances of Noongar sovereignty (for example, his performance of a formal welcome to country). Where they are styled as comic, the comedy is often satirical. The flaming boomerang which, on its return, knocks the policeman's hat from Bobby's head, for example, is a carnivalesque performance which makes a clear political statement (158). If the name 'Bobby' signifies a British policeman, Bobby Wabalanginy deftly divests British law of its geopolitical authority over him as a sovereign Noongar.⁶ Laughter inspired by the 'light-hearted, laughing' Bobby (159) seems innocuous and safe but the irony undercuts the stereotype of the indigenous buffoon. While apparently a figure of foolery, Bobby is perhaps rather a *serious* fool with the power to hold his audience's attention and manipulate it affectively: he was 'a fool perhaps, but all eyes were on him, and he was in command'

(159). Like the clever man in the Noongar stories who descends into the whale and directs the whale by squeezing its heart, Bobby squeezes his tourist audience's hearts (even as his own heart is 'clotting' with blood' [160]): he is able to 'take his audience and turn their mouths down, furrow their brows and squeeze their hearts until tears welled' (159). In effect, Bobby Wabalanginy reconfigures the parameters of black/white intersubjectivity in visceral and psychical ways.

Noongar sovereignty and literature

The novel's devastating final scene attests to the ultimate failure of Bobby Wabalanginy's efforts, through his dance, to forge an equitable cross-cultural kinship by demonstrating to his white audience 'the spirit of this place' (390) in an attempt to bring them together as 'friends, becoming family' (394). It could be said, then, of the two promissory visions of the novel that I outlined in the beginning of this article – namely the visions of Noongar sovereignty and the alternative contract of cross-cultural relationality that Cross and Bobby (and to a lesser extent, Wunyeran) exemplify – that the second is at odds with the tragic mood of the novel's ending. However, I'd argue that the first of these promissory visions survives the spectacle of Bobby Wabalanginy's final narrated humiliation. His performance of undressing can be seen as an assertion of Noongar sovereign relationship to country and is foreshadowed by several other instances of Noongar removing their *wadjela* clothes, such as the scene of little Bobby's death where Wunyeran rips his shirt from his body (126), and the later scene following Wunyeran's death where the Noongar shed their clothes and depart, severing relations with the white people in King George Town (140). In divesting himself of white accoutrements, Bobby demonstrates that his sovereign relationship to country persists, and that it is unmediated by white culture and law.

The deep vein of melancholy and loss that weaves its way through *That Deadman Dance* does not, therefore, undermine the imaginative act of empowerment that the novel constitutes. In fact it throws into relief the novel's productive yearning for a reclamation of the past and for cultural continuance. This yearning is, in effect, a performance and an affirmation of cultural restitution and regeneration. *That Deadman Dance* narrates the Noongar's continuing repudiation of the settler state's assumption of metapolitical authority over Noongar politics and land, and its attempt to incorporate Noongar people into the administrative structure and discourse of the state, as what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life', that is, a form of life apparently stripped of every right and exposed to the unconditional threat of death (Agamben). I say 'apparently' as I would argue that, in contradistinction to Agamben's *homo sacer*, Bobby Wabalanginy retains a dimension of agency that the postcolonial state cannot strip from him, and that is his indigenous sovereignty. In spite of its melancholy, therefore, the novel constitutes a powerful expression of indigenous vitality. While it attests - in its bleak thematics, character development and narrative dénouement – to the structuring violence of the settler state, the novel asserts a competing claim to place and collectivity in its depiction of Noongar bodies, language, storytelling, everyday life, cosmology, kinship ties and determinative relationality to country. It reclaims an indigenous political subjectivity and articulates a counter jurisdictional imaginary which I have defined, in the context of this article, as indigenous sovereignty.

I have argued that the worlding of *That Deadman Dance* puts the Wirlomin Noongar at the centre of that world and draws on the specificities of Noongar culture, history, land

and people. In its overall project the novel could be seen as a discursive form of Noongar self determination and agency. The novel's generic hybridity and its intertwining of historical and oral records is directly linked to the theme of Noongar people and culture's survival and continuance. For example, the novel's key motif of Cross and Wunyeran's joint burial is based upon a real life incident.⁷ The character Binyan is also based on a real Noongar woman and both she and Wunyeran are Scott's ancestors. The fact that Scott maintains both her and Wunyeran's original names in the novel could be read as a formal gesture of respect for and commemoration of his Noongar ancestors and an affirmation of their continuing kinship.

'The story is not over yet'

Old Bobby's stories transport him (and us, as readers) into the distant future, a future which moves through the Protection and Assimilation eras and through Reconciliation and the post-Mabo era (127). Bobby sees into the graves of Cross and Wunyeran, Binyan and Jak Tar, and into 'future graves' (127). The implication is that Bobby's gaze and voice (and those of the real-life figure, Mokare, whom he was partly modelled on)⁸ are still with us; that their story is the story of contemporary Australia. Despite the apparent failure of the alternative cross-cultural contract brokered by Dr Cross, Bobby and Wunyeran, another couple, Binyan and Jak Tar, point to its survival. The visits of their children to Bobby, like the persisting presence of Old Bobby himself in King George Town, point to the continuance of the Noongar population within the (disavowed) cross-racial kinship structures of the white nation and the ongoing connection of that population with the past. Binyan and Jak Tar's relationship is evidence of the 'new world' of cross-racial connectivity that Cross anticipates, a world we also see in the image of Cross's intertwining with Wunyeran. Both Binyan and Jak Tar, and Cross and Wunyeran exemplify Bobby's alternative cross-cultural contract of 'friends, becoming family' (394). These models of 'mixing together' are an antidote to the destruction wrought by the settler contract and the atomising effects of capitalism and dispossession. They carry the trace of Bobby's and Cross's visions of an ethical cross-racial contract.

As well as functioning as an antidote to the destruction wrought indigenous communities, the trope of mixing together and that of the alternative social contract indexes white Australian hybridity. I have argued that the worlding of *That Deadman Dance* perspectively puts the Noongar – cosmologically, affectively and bodily - at the centre of the imagined world. If the interiority of the novel allows readers to share the Noongar point of view, then the non-indigenous act of reading this novel constitutes a cross-cultural event (located in a contact zone homologous to the frontier represented in the novel). It reminds non-indigenous people of the history they share with indigenous people. (This is not to suggest that 'sharing' occurs on a level playing field; it patently does not.) In this article I focus largely on the connectivity between non-indigenous and indigenous people that the storytelling of the novel re-establishes, a connectivity pervasively and trenchantly disavowed and denied throughout white Australia. The worlding of the novel returns us to the scene of cross-racial encounter and exchange, a scene non-indigenous readers experience bodily, psychically, affectively. It imaginatively recreates the disavowed psychical proximity of indigenous and white people, and the 'common bond' (Mbembe 24) at the core of Australia's colonial history which has been the source of so much discomfort for white Australians in particular. For non-indigenous people to 'remember' what has been called 'the black history' of

Australia is precisely for them to conceive of history as an event of encounter and exchange in which they have participated.

In its depiction of the imaginative failure of an alternative social contract, a contract which is grounded in a recognition of indigenous sovereignty which promulgates intercultural exchange and reciprocity, *That Deadman Dance* shifts the loss paradigm - which is so often used to characterise Aboriginal polities and communities - onto the white Australian constituency. The melancholy of the novel has a specific inflection for non-indigenous readers witnessing the failure of white cross-racial civility and the spectacle of settler violence. Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice describes Cherokee cultural recovery as 'a return of self to community through remembrance and integration into the web of kinship' (Justice 218). Without wanting to hijack or erase the specificity of cultural recovery for indigenous communities, I'd like to suggest that, in the Australian context, cultural recovery can also function to (re)connect white and other non-indigenous people to the bodily history of colonisation and (re)establish and (re)configure cross-cultural relations with the indigenous owners of this country. Recognising cross-racial kinship - that is, cross-cultural intersubjectivity and intercorporeality - entails a recognition of indigenous prior occupancy and geopolitical autonomy; of indigenous sovereignty. It also entails an acknowledgment of the founding role that indigenous people played as 'pioneers' (159) in the establishment of modern Australia, that is, in the pastoral industry and other industries such as whaling and pearling. Reading, as a zone of cross-racial intersubjectivity and indigenous literature, can enhance the process of non-indigenous reconnection by bringing indigenous people's accounts of the nation's formation to mainstream audiences, thus broadening their awareness of indigenous people's role in that history and the continuance of indigenous sovereignty. To think differently about the past is to open up the ways in which we conceive of the future. At the 2011 Sydney Writers Festival Kim Scott said that 'thinking about' the bones of Wunyeran and Dr Cross, buried and forgotten under the weight of the flag atop the town hall in King George Town, was 'difficult' (and I understand this remark as being addressed to the largely non-indigenous audience). 'The story,' he added, 'is not over yet'.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Bernadette Brennan for suggestions for this list.

² Black writer Mudrooroo has also been drawn strongly to the historical novel.

³ See a Noongar recounting of this oral history by Len Collard (in Collard and Palmer 2008: 182, 184, 190).

⁴ It is difficult to establish the extent and the uptake of the doctrine of *terra nullius* in the early colonial period in Australia (and Noongar country). Heather Goodall argues that in 1889 the British Privy Council declared that Australia had been a *terra nullius* in 1788 and had therefore been 'peacefully annexed to the British dominions' at that time (Heather Goodall 1996, 106). RHW Reece and B. Hocking, on the other hand, suggest the doctrine was in currency much earlier. They report that 'James Stephen, the Colonial Office's chief legal advisor, observed in 1822 that Britain had annexed NSW "neither by conquest nor cession, but by the mere occupation of a desert or uninhabited land"' (Reece and Hocking 1994, 1064). Pateman's argument that the doctrine of *terra nullius* had been deployed by the British from 1620s onwards (Pateman and Mills 2007, 46) supports the view that it was provided legal and philosophical justification for

British annexation of land from Captain Cook's journeys to Australia onwards and was generally and widely understood and deployed throughout the Australian colonies. (I am grateful to Chiara Gamboz for the Goodall reference. It is drawn from the draft of her PhD theses on Aboriginal Petitions, currently being undertaken at UNSW).

⁵ I use the plural 'collectivities' here to acknowledge the various different dialect groups within the larger Noongar nation.

⁶ At the 2011 Sydney writers Festival Kim Scott talked about how painful it was for him to come across so many Noongar men recorded only as 'Bobby' in various historical documents. He aimed to counter this historical 'mean spirited[ness]' and the 'disrespect' for Noongar men who had played a pioneering role in early cross-racial relations in Western Australia, by attaching a Noongar name to the first name 'Bobby' in *That Deadman Dance*. In bringing the two names together he aimed to dignify the memory of these men, to 'rewrite history' and heal some of the 'hurt' it brought to indigenous people (Sydney 19th May 2011) [the quoted words are from his address on that occasion].

⁷ Wunyeran is modelled in part on Mokare, a Noongar from the Albany/King George Sound region and Dr Cross on Alexander Collie, a naval surgeon who became Government Resident at King George's Sound in March 1831. In 1834, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal* published a long article by Collie, *Anecdotes and Remarks-Relative to the Aborigines of King George's Sound*. This document is reproduced in Neville Green 1979.

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