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Remaking Contact in *That Deadman Dance*: Australian Reconciliation Politics, Noongar Welcoming Protocol, and Makarrata

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Abstract: In this article, I make the case for Noongar novelist Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) to be seen as an exemplar of Aboriginal-centered literary imaginings of reconciliation based primarily on adherence to traditional Laws rather than the state's limited recognition of native title. The novel decenters settler contact narratives through its depiction of Noongar welcoming protocols, thus affirming pre-colonial Aboriginal sovereignty. Furthermore, I contend that, through the novel's culminating scene in which settlers fail to understand protagonist Bobby Wabalanginy's ceremonial dance, which calls for justice through truth-telling and peace-making, Scott narrativizes the settler nation's inability to understand or accept terms of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation derived from Indigenous cultural and political beliefs. Recognizing *That Deadman Dance* is not merely historical fiction but a novel about remaking contact draws attention to the all-too-frequently superficial performativity of settler-centric reconciliation politics and calls for narratives that do more than just meditate on settler guilt and complicity.

Keywords: Australian literature, Aboriginal literature, settler colonialism, reconciliation, contact narratives

Since the 1980s, settlers' attempts at reconciliation with Australia's First Nations have largely fallen short of fully accounting for Aboriginal agency. It has been more than a decade since Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologized to members of the Stolen Generations,

the victims of state-sanctioned Aboriginal child-removal programs that operated for much of the twentieth century. During his inauguration, Rudd also endorsed the practice of acknowledging First Nations at the opening of formal gatherings, either with an Indigenous-led "Welcome to Country" or a non-Indigenous-led "Acknowledgement of Country." Seen at the time as a paradigm-shift in the already decades-long federal reconciliation platform that had stalled under John Howard's tenure as prime minister from 1996 to 2007, Rudd's *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples* (2008) and the lesser remarked-upon land acknowledgments have arguably had little positive effect on Aboriginal Australians' lived experiences. The controversial Northern Territory National Emergency Response (2007)—more commonly known as "the intervention"—received bi-partisan support from Labour and Liberal leaders alike following an inquiry into reports of Aboriginal child abuse by community members.[1] Irene Watson ("Northern Territory" 52–55), as well as Elizabeth Strakosch and Alissa Macoun (60), contend that the intervention is yet another iteration of colonizing land grabs and hyper-policing of Indigenous communities dressed up in the language of neoliberalism.

The latest major disappointment in settler-Aboriginal politics saw successive prime ministers, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison, reject or ignore the *Final Report of the Referendum Council* (2017) and the related *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (2017). The council's report recommended a constitutional referendum to establish an Aboriginal Voice in Parliament and parliamentary declarations recognizing Aboriginal, settler, and immigrant cultures in Australia. The report included an additional statement of support for future legislation establishing a Makarrata Council to oversee truth and reconciliation practices, an idea initially put forward in the *Uluru Statement*.[2] Gabrielle Appleby and Megan Davis note that Referendum Council delegates involved with the *Uluru Statement* "were speaking of a truth-telling that would inform a renegotiation of the political relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the rest of the nation" (503) because, rather than a single, curative event, "Makarrata is a process" (504). Adrian Little interprets the call for a Makarrata Commission as a "way of taking

account of the painful history of a problematic relationship and finding a process not only to ensure that historical wrongdoings do not happen again but also to *reconstitute the relationship* between the Australian state and Indigenous peoples on an ongoing basis" (46; emphasis in original). Makarrata is, in other words, an opportunity to remake contact in the present in order to co-construct a more equitable future that does not depend on Aboriginal peoples' assimilation. Yet Turnbull rejected the first recommendation on the grounds that it would be unfair for all non-Aboriginal groups if Indigenous Australians were to have what he erroneously categorized as their own chamber of parliament. He also ignored the report's second recommendation, as well as its support for the Makarrata Council (Maddison 21–23). With the exception of a handful of initiatives like the Close the Gap Campaign, which addresses Aboriginal health outcomes—a program that is not without its own shortcomings and controversies—it would seem that Australia has entered into a post-reconciliation era.[3]

"Reconciliation" refers here to an official political agenda that shaped Australian policy and influenced mainstream Australian culture from the late 1980s through the 2010s—Rudd's *Apology* and land acknowledgments are but two examples. Reconciliation demands that the contemporary settler nation revisit the colonial past in an attempt to address historical wrongs against First Nations peoples. As much as it is an opportunity to make amends, reconciliation is also an attempt for settlers to imagine new ways of relating to the nation, the landscape, and the land's original inhabitants. But reconciliation has done little to fundamentally change settler-Indigenous relations in Australia, and settlers' sense of belonging remains bound to Aboriginal peoples' ongoing dispossession.

Literature continues to play a crucial role in the effort to reimagine settler Australia's social and political power dynamics and, as Emily Potter (6), Michael R. Griffiths (229–30), and Ashley Barnwell and Joseph Cummins (6–8) have recently demonstrated, this is especially true of works produced within the context of Australia's reconciliation era. In the build-up to and aftermath of major political developments, Australian storytellers (the majority of them non-Indigenous) responded

with what have been referred to as "novels of reconciliation" (Zavaglia 21), "fictions of reconciliation" (Clarke and Nolan 122–23), and "post-Apology narratives" (Collins 65–66).[4] Indeed, the characteristics of reconciliation politics have become central themes in some of Australia's most popular cultural productions. Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005), Gail Jones' novel *Sorry* (2007), and Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* (2008) have received sustained critical attention, often for the ways they—like the government's broader reconciliation agenda—focus on settler anxieties of belonging to such an extent that they risk reiterating the colonizing logics that negatively impact Aboriginal Australians and other minoritized groups.[5]

Australian literature and its scholarly interlocuters must heed those calls made by Appleby, Davis, and Little to reconstitute relationships between settler and Aboriginal subjects. Reflecting on the federal government's repudiation of the *Uluru Statement*, Emily Potter contends that, for non-Indigenous storytellers, "new imaginaries are needed that break from the hermetic, colonial vision, . . . imaginaries informed by a reorientation of thought around time, place and the questions of origins" (147). Such a reorientation will also necessitate new engagements with Aboriginal storytelling. As Griffiths suggests, "Indigenous literary texts call upon their readers for alternative forms of recognition"; therefore, we must "better read the aspirations and refusals that were there all along" (230). Because, as Mary Louise Pratt demonstrates, the contact narrative—which documents initial encounters between different cultural groups—has played a crucial role in establishing colonizers' imagined cultural dominance vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples (7–8), I contend that it is an ideal literary form to revisit. But to reorient readers in the ways Potter and Griffiths suggest are necessary to progress beyond the morass of reconciliation, the settler-centric contact narrative must also be remade.

Noongar novelist Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) exemplifies Aboriginal-centered literary imaginings of remaking contact, which are based primarily on adherence to customary Laws rather than recognition of Aboriginal peoples' political rights within systems of settler

governance. But first let me define some terms. "Recognition" is a process of reconciliation that manifests in different ways depending on the specific settler-Indigenous relationship in question. In the United States, recognition generally refers to state and federal acknowledgement of tribes' legal status.[6] In Australia, recognition is generally associated with amending the Australian Constitution, which does not mention Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to extend and secure civil rights protections to Indigenous Australians as members of Australia's pre-colonial First Nations.[7] As will be evident throughout this article, recognition of this nature has been steadily critiqued and contested by Aboriginal peoples and their supporters. Tanganekald and Meintangk legal scholar Irene Watson writes that

> [t]he illusion of recognition works its power so as to conceal the ongoing character and intent of the colonial project—that is, to maintain hegemony and do nothing about returning balance and power to the colonized. First Nations Peoples' experience of colonial recognition is the recognition of our sovereignty only when that recognition enables the 'native' to transfer our sovereignty, our territories and natural resources. Recognition only falls to First Nations at the moment we become dispossessed. (*Aboriginal Peoples* 2)

Kahnawake Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson refers to this transfer of sovereignty as "the ruse of consent" and denounces recognition as "legal tricks of consent and citizenship" that denote "the inherent impossibility of . . . freedom after dispossession" (20). By contrast, "adherence" refers to living in good standing with what Watson terms "Raw Law," a legal system that connects kinship networks of human and non-human beings. She explains that "ancient laws were not written down; knowledge of law came through living, singing and storytelling. Law is lived, sung, danced, painted, eaten in the walking of ruwe [one's Indigenous territory or Country]" (Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples* 12). Adherence rests on the premise that, even as other legal systems have been imposed in the wake of colonization, Raw Law has not been extinguished.

I claim *That Deadman Dance* decenters settler contact narratives through its depiction of Noongar (or Nyungar) welcoming protocols and thus affirms pre-colonial Aboriginal sovereignty. Furthermore, I contend that, through the novel's culminating scene in which settlers fail to understand protagonist Bobby Wabalanginy's ceremonial dance calling for truth-telling and peace-making, Scott narrativizes the settler nation's continuing struggle to understand or accept terms of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation that adhere to Aboriginal cultural and political beliefs. Thinking of *That Deadman Dance* as a novel about remaking contact draws attention to the superficial performativity of settler-centric reconciliation politics and calls for more than meditations on settler guilt and complicity.

I. *That Deadman Dance*

Most of the novel takes place in what comes to be known as King George Town between 1826 and 1844, though this period is divided into a prologue and four other non-consecutive "parts." Scenes from Bobby's later life are inserted into every part of the text, so that the novel develops events in a given year—say, 1836—but also in elder Bobby's present time, the exact year of which is never stated. Bobby is a storyteller, and *That Deadman Dance* is his story insomuch as it is the continuing story of the Country and Laws that formed him and the story of how colonization gradually (but drastically) changed his home. As a contact narrative, the novel is unique in that Noongar and British settlers peacefully cohabitate for much of the story, with some characters even forming intimate bonds of friend- and kinship. Wunyeran, a prominent figure among the Noongar, and Dr. Cross, perhaps the most open-minded of the original settlers, form the strongest of these cross-cultural relationships; however, both men succumb to untimely deaths because of an illness that significantly reduces the Noongar population. The two men are buried together, a symbolic representation of the novel's central arguments: that Aboriginal and white populations could have lived together in harmony and that settler colonization was not an inevitability but a deliberate process.

Bobby embodies the possibility of cross-cultural exchange through his syncretic use of Noongar and English languages and customs. Alas, other forces are at work, and King George Town's expansion from temporary military garrison to permanent settlement hastens the deterioration of the promising bonds between the Noongar people and English settlers. Prominent settler Geordie Chaine and his employees play central roles in the town's so-called progress, as the unscrupulous Chaine amasses more and more capital through smuggling, overharvesting the whale population, and arranging his daughter's marriage to a politically powerful suitor. He is aided in these endeavors by men like Skelly, a former convict and master craftsman who harbors deep resentment toward the Noongar people and increasingly exploits the power he derives under Chaine's employ to enact a litany of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses upon Noongar people. Bobby remains hopeful throughout the novel that the settlers will honor Noongar sovereignty and their cultural protocols for reciprocity, particularly the sharing of resources once settler capitalism has disrupted whale migration patterns and Noongar foodways. Bobby makes a final plea to Chaine and company in one of his trademark performances involving song and dance, only to be shunned by those whom he assumed to be his friends and extended family. His despair over having failed as a powerful storyteller compounds when, at the novel's close, the narrative implies that armed officials shoot two of the remaining Noongar Elders, Menak and Manit.

I argue that *That Deadman Dance* should be read and understood in the political and cultural contexts during which it was produced—the first decade of twenty-first century Australia—and not only those in which it is set—the era of initial settlement in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. My reading is thus distinct from those that treat the text primarily as a historical novel or, as Tony Hughes-d'Aeth does, as a postcolonial contact novel (23–25). By focusing on how *That Deadman Dance* remakes contact, my analysis supports Kieran Dolin's assertion that the novel is "as much an imagining for the future as a new perspective on the past" (423–24). In order to locate the novel within discourses

on reconciliation politics, I must first provide an abbreviated overview of Australia's contemporary Aboriginal-settler relations.

II. The Politics of Australian Reconciliation

Reconciliation initiatives have occurred to varying degrees and with varied outcomes in a number of settler nations in recent decades.[8] As in Canada and the US, Australian reconciliation follows previous campaigns of attempted extermination and assimilation of Indigenous populations by white settlers. Australia's particular reconciliation agenda is unique from others in that its federal government has recognized a number of native title land claims, offered an official apology for child-removal policies, and contemplated constitutional reform to recognize and secure legal rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Reconciliation politics in Australia are also distinct because, as Penelope Edmonds points out, they have not yet incorporated truth commissions, official treaties, or substantial reparations for Indigenous peoples (13–15). Often framed in official discourses as progressive developments that celebrate Australia's cultural diversity and commitment to a "fair go" for everyone, the state's (re)conciliatory gestures have also come under criticism as examples of liberal multiculturalism that subvert claims to Indigenous sovereignty and legitimize settler state dominance.[9]

Prime Minister Paul Keating's "Redfern Speech" (1992) is perhaps the most notable call for reconciliation to have been made by a non-Indigenous Australian politician. Keating argued that reconciliation could begin only with an act of recognition—not solely of innate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights but of the atrocities committed by settlers and their descendants. That is, settlers must reconcile truths about themselves before they can recognize truths about Indigenous belonging. "We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life," Keating acknowledges. "We brought the diseases and the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. . . . As a consequence, we've failed to see that what we were doing degraded us all." Keating goes on to express a measured optimism about Australia's future, but he insists that the nation will continually fail to live up to its democratic ideals so

long as it denies past injustices and refuses to make practical, substantive changes to settler governance and society.

Rudd's 2008 *Apology* is, by contrast, future-oriented, celebratory, and overtly nationalistic; it employs the optimistic logic of neoliberal social policy to imagine a definitive, conclusive moment of reconciliation so that the unified nation might fully focus on its promising future rather than its shameful past.[10] As he transitions from offering apologies to depicting Australia as a utopia of enterprise and colorblind liberal multiculturalism, Rudd declares: "We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and *laying claim to a future* that embraces all Australians" (emphasis added). For Rudd, the apology is necessary so that a "new page in the history of our great continent can now be written." In hindsight, it seems painfully evident that the new page was to be written in the familiar language of conquest and continued colonization. Reconciliation of this kind is about healing the settler nation, not adhering to the sovereignty of First Nations. Potter argues, for example, that not only have settler-national fantasies not abated since Rudd's speech but that "structural harms . . . persist despite gestures of acknowledgement and apology" (145).

This was the milieu in which two ceremonial land acknowledgements, "Welcome to Country" and the closely related "Acknowledgment of Country," became common features of Australian settler society. The primary distinction between the Welcome and the Acknowledgement involves the speaker: Welcomes can be performed only by recognized Elders of the peoples upon whose Country an event is taking place, while Acknowledgements can be performed by any non-Indigenous person or by an Indigenous person not descended from that particular Country. These related customary practices gained widespread acceptance as part of Rudd's reconciliation agenda and are today commonplace at both public events and private gatherings. Palyku writer and legal scholar Ambelin Kwaymullina contends, however, that "the larger point of such an acknowledgement is often overlooked" because "it is not merely a sign of respect but a recognition that we are subject to the laws of that Country as interpreted and applied by the relevant legal experts (generally Elders)" (13). Though Kwaymullina uses the term recognition, I

interpret her meaning to be more akin to what I earlier referred to as adherence, especially as it relates to obeying customary Laws.

As they do with Rudd's *Apology* speech, scholars working in Australian Studies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (ATSIS) debate the degree to which Welcome and Acknowledgement ceremonies engender tokenistic representations of Aboriginality under the guise of liberal multiculturalism. Anthropologist Kristina Everett chronicles one of the more outrageous instances of superficial inclusivity through Welcome to Country: Darug Elders in western Sydney have routinely been invited to deliver Welcome speeches even after their native title claims have been dismissed by the courts (56–57). Without directly stating as much, such invitations imply that Indigenous sovereignty is permitted to exist—symbolically—within the structures of state rule. Such is the limited purview of recognition in a supposedly post-colonial context.

Despite their disagreements about the usefulness of land recognition ceremonies, scholars agree that Elders deliver Welcome speeches as a means of formally stating opposition to the state's claim to Indigenous lands (Everett 56; McKenna 478–79; Pelizzon and Kennedy 62–63; Roman 113–14; Merlan 298–99). Larrakia man Curtis Roman states that he very rarely agrees to deliver Welcome speeches because of their conciliatory nature, though he adds that "Welcome to Country should be seen as an opportunity to take some leadership and say something that can make a positive difference, something that educates and initiates reflection" (113). Such speech acts recall Kevin Bruyneel's concept of "the third space of sovereignty," which "acknowledges the colonial imposition of boundaries on indigenous political subjects while also showing how this location on the boundaries is . . . the site of practices that challenge colonial rule" (25). In theory, reconciliation politics represent a third space of sovereignty where the boundaries placed on Indigenous political agency are being renegotiated, though not abolished. This is precisely the type of reconciliation Aboriginal delegates of the Referendum Council call for in the *Uluru Statement* (Davis 129–35).

Nonetheless, the outcomes of official reconciliation initiatives suggest that the settler state maintains an imbalance of power over Indigenous peoples even as it purports to recognize and reconcile the legacies of

colonial domination.[11] Legal scholar Natsu Taylor Saito argues that "when the wrong is foundational—an intrinsic, indeed organic, part of the establishment of a state—the redress that state will be willing to provide is necessarily limited to that which will not fundamentally disrupt the status quo" (19–20). For instance, the landmark *Native Title Act 1993* effectively places the onus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide credible (read written) proof that they are associated with a specific Country. In a subsequent native title case involving the Yorta Yorta, the High Court upheld an earlier determination that claims to native title could extinguish over time if the Aboriginal claimants failed to maintain consistent observance of their Laws and customs in that Country (Moreton-Robinson 69; Behrendt, "Asserting" 196–97). This is settler colonialism's "primary motive" (Wolfe 388), of course—to unsettle the connections between Indigenous peoples and their traditional lands in order to make settlement possible. Not surprisingly, the state of Victoria lists the Yorta Yorta as one of the traditional owners who should be included in an Acknowledgement speech ("Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners").

III. Postcolonial Literature in the Era of Reconciliation

The advent of Australia's formal reconciliation agenda in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincides with what has been termed "the history wars," a set of related debates about national culture and politics not unlike the so-called culture wars that occurred in the US during the same period. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark depict the Australian history wars as a wave of neoconservative backlash against multiculturalism and the political left's growing tendency to speak openly about the nation's violent colonial origins and the continuous mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (94–107). By and large, the debates have been dominated by non-Aboriginal men—historians, politicians, and pundits such as Geoffrey Blainey, John Howard, Henry Reynolds, Robert Manne, Keith Windschuttle, and Andrew Bolt—the most notable exception, of course, being Pauline Hanson. Writers and filmmakers soon began taking up the question of whether contemporary white Australians should mourn or celebrate their country's past. Between the

mid-1990s and the early 2000s, enough creative works were published to constitute a new reconciliation-themed literary movement amongst Australian writers (Probyn-Rapsey 66–67; Herrero 286).

That Deadman Dance, like much of Australia's national literature, is often discussed in relation to postcolonial literary studies (Carter 114–16; Nolan 3–5). Because the novel's structure "jumps around chronologically, shifts narrative perspectives, and moves between different states of consciousness," Maggie Nolan contends that "at least aesthetically, we might call it an archetypal postcolonial novel" (1). Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues more specifically that "the novel exemplifies the pattern of deferred action that characterizes the postcolonial treatment of the scene of contact" (23). In other words, the profoundly traumatic effects of colonial invasion are not immediately felt in the initial moments of contact between Aboriginal and settler peoples. Furthermore, Hughes-d'Aeth contends, "this temporal structure . . . is an inherent, constitutive feature of the postcolonial; indeed this deferred action is the precise content of the prefix 'post' which has caused so much vexation over the years" (25). Of course, as Jodi Byrd points out, the "post" in "post-colonial" seems ill-fitted for nation-states formed through settler colonialism because Indigenous lands are still being colonized ("Still Waiting" 79–82). Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson address the ongoing nature of settler colonialism in "Settler Post-Colonialism and Australian Literary Culture" (2010) by distinguishing "*settler postcolonialism* as a subset of postcolonial theory, because it provides a key mechanism by which to understand the historically dominant majority white population of Australia and its literary culture" (28; emphasis added). This work has proved invaluable, particularly when pushing beyond merely understanding settler dominance and working to unsettle it. But what tools can Australian postcolonial literary theory, thusly configured, provide for understanding non-white, minoritized, and marginalized populations and their literary cultures within—and in relation to—the specific power dynamics of settler colonialism?

To be sure, postcolonial theory provides indispensable resources for analyzing settler nations, as evinced in pivotal works by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Glen Coulthard, and Byrd. Moreton-Robinson

nonetheless points to a lack of theorization concerning Indigenous belonging in relation to settler conquest and migrant diaspora. She argues that in postcolonizing nations like Australia, Indigenous relationships to Country constitute a unique positionality incommensurate with other identities produced by colonial and post-colonial conditions (10–11). Indigeneity is not postcolonial, in other words, but pre- and extracolonial—a mode of being and belonging that exists prior to, simultaneously with, and inside and outside of the imposed boundaries of settler colonialism.

How we understand the politics of reconciliation depends on whether we consider the settler nation to be postcolonial or postcolonizing. Australian reconciliation is based primarily on the former—the idea that, post-*Apology*, a united Australia might embark on a prosperous future having atoned for its original sin and, in Rudd's words, "resolving that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again." Such a resolution, no matter how good the intentions behind it, does not itself resolve inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Reconciliation in postcolonizing Australia would not merely recognize Aboriginal alterity but work to realign dominant systems of power via cross-cultural exchange that includes adherence to Law. If, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write, "decolonization is not a metaphor" (1), neither is true reconciliation symbolic. *That Deadman Dance* is unique in Australia's reconciliation literature in that it narrativizes the nation's failure to imagine a future in postcolonizing terms, while also reiterating the preeminence of Noongar belonging.

IV. Adhering to Noongar Hospitality and Reciprocity Protocols in *That Deadman Dance*

Questions of sovereignty manifest in various aspects of literary study, particularly when discussing contact narratives or moments of initial encounter. Contact in settler literature often normalizes colonization and nation-building as an originating moment.[12] As Byrd observes when discussing the before-and-after binary that undergirds contact stories, "the language of 'encounter' and 'contact' . . . depends upon the colonizing narratives of the New World discovery moment that suddenly

bring indigenous peoples into consideration" ("Arriving" 176). Uneven power dynamics are often established in such encounters (Pratt 7). Anita Heiss notes that "diaries and journals of the First Fleeters [members of Britain's initial settlement in Australia] provide descriptions of the locals as 'natives', 'primitive', barbaric', and even 'stupid'" despite the complexity and diversity of Indigenous cultures in what came to be known as Australia.

Scott's novel uses a well-known and oftentimes problematic colonial form of storytelling by insisting that Noongar hospitality protocols are a framework through which readers can imagine Europeans' arrival as outsiders to Country where already-existing Laws have been in place long before the onset of settler colonization. Dolin's reading of *That Deadman Dance* similarly concludes that, by "[placing] Indigenous knowledge at the centre of a novel of colonial foundation," *That Deadman Dance* functions as a "replacement [of settler worldviews] . . . likely to offer a different image of place and community" (425). This is what it means to remake contact: to rewrite (and to potentially right) the primary conditions of interaction and belonging on colonized Indigenous lands.

Scott unsettles the primacy of British arrival and first contact from the very beginning of the novel. The prologue is set in the most recent time during which the novel takes place, with Bobby already advanced in age and living alone on the beach in a meager dwelling. The passage opens with Bobby speaking a single word—"*Kaya*" (Scott 1)—which readers quickly learn translates to "hello" and "yes" in his traditional language. The scene immediately disrupts the linear chronology and settler centrality that typify contact narratives, since the "first contact" to take place in the novel occurs in the contemporary moment between the reader and Bobby, who greets us directly in his traditional language. Natalie Quinlivan reads Bobby's greeting as "imbued with generosity, strength and innovation," as well as "the possibility of continuity through creating something new" (9). The word encapsulates the hospitality and potentiality inherent to Noongar welcoming customs because each new reader will be similarly greeted. And, by extension, Bobby's making readers welcome in this first encounter will repeatedly affirm his right to do so.

The first contact between the novel's Noongar and non-Indigenous characters also takes place in the prologue, though it too subverts the "collision of cultures" motif generally associated with such moments. Basic elements of this scene might not initially seem too dissimilar from the conventions of a typical contact narrative: a Noongar character and a white character meet on a beach, the "first frontier" that existed between Indigenous and settler peoples. Furthermore, there are certainly elements of intrusion and potential violence that underlie the exchange. Bobby has been sitting alone on the beach, writing short phrases to himself on a piece of slate. Chaine arrives unannounced but for the "heavy tread" of his steps and "[thrusts] himself into the little hut" uninvited (Scott 3). Bobby immediately notices that there is "[h]ardly room for the two of them beneath this roof" and that "if Kongk [literally "uncle," but also a respectful term for older men] breathes deep, stands up straight, this shelter'll explode" (3). Bobby is being dispossessed within mere paragraphs of readers having been welcomed into his world.

This perilous moment draws into relief a number of marked differences between the men, just as one might expect to occur in an initial moment of contact. Chaine embodies excess, in wealth, habits—he exudes the smell of rum and cigars—and sheer physicality. Bobby notes not merely that Chaine has overcrowded the small space with his size but that he "[steams] with rain and body heat and ruddy health" to the point that he is seemingly overrun in bodily surplus: "water [cascades] over the brim of his hat and [gushes] from his bristling beard" (3). Bobby, on the other hand, can "[feel] the cold seeping into his bones," which lie under "loose and wrinkled skin" (3). Bobby appears physically diminished compared to his counterpart; he is bereft of basic comforts and his body is breaking down, whereas Chaine's exudes vitality. The stark difference between the two men's bodies foreshadows Chaine's capitalist accumulation and Bobby's loss of traditional culture. In this moment, Bobby and Chaine merely seem to share a slightly uncomfortable intimacy.

It would be tempting to read the contrasts between Chaine and Bobby as evidence of *That Deadman Dance* having fallen into one of the traps of the contact form, the binary of what Roy Pearce calls "savagism and civilization" (48). But even as Chaine disrupts Bobby's world, this

is not a collision between men who consider themselves enemies; nor is it their first meeting. Readers learn in a later chapter that the title *kongk* refers to a "special uncle" (Scott 72), meaning that, even though Chaine is a wealthy white settler, Bobby regards him with a certain degree of familial respect and perhaps even affection.

Bobby is not the vanishing Indigene popularized by other contact narratives.[13] "Life tingled in his very fingertips" (4), the narrator tells us. In fact, Bobby has an incredible generative power that manifests through his use of language. Bobby keeps watch on the horizon while Chaine blusters about, a quintessentially bad guest—farting, grumbling about the cramped conditions, and admonishing his host for not having built a fire. Thankfully, Chaine soon leaves on account of not having seen any whales spouting, and Bobby takes note of his departure by writing on the piece of slate he has been holding: "*Kongk gon wailz cum*" (4). No sooner does he write these words than they come to fruition. His inexorable strength as a storyteller is on full display as he rewrites the line multiple times and, with each new telling, recreates the moment anew:

> Bobby wrote and made it happen again and again in seasons to come, starting just here, now.
> *Kaya*. (5)

Here, the use of the word "kaya" can be read in multiple ways, with Bobby perhaps greeting the returning whales in the same way that he greeted readers, but also affirming that, yes, he has recorded an event that could be encountered by readers for generations to come.

Scott incorporates elements of Noongar protocol throughout *That Deadman Dance*, a technique especially evident in passages in which non-Noongar characters are welcomed to Country. The charismatic Wunyeran routinely mediates between Noongar and British arrivants, acting as both diplomat and negotiator. For example, he performs these duties when training his new friend, Dr. Cross, to first meet Menak, an occasion to be conducted properly given the Noongar man's status. The narration describes Wunyeran playfully maneuvering Cross toward Menak, who

> held out a hand across the shrinking space between them. Cross grasped it and Menak immediately pulled him into an embrace. He then lifted him from the ground and with his arms around Cross's waist turned a full circle. Eyeball to eyeball: one man in a cloak of an animal skin, a hair belt, and with mud and grease smeared over his skin; the other with only the flesh of his face and hands exposed.
>
> Menak released him and stepped back. A beaming Wunyeran gestured for Cross to remove his jacket, then he unclasped Menak's cloak and slid it from his shoulders. He handed each man the other's attire. (82–83)

The novel has previously established that this particular form of embrace and ceremonial exchange of clothing are customary practices amongst Noongar people. In this instance, readers experience the ritual from the Englishman's point of view: "The surprisingly soft and pliable kangaroo skin hung easily from Cross's shoulders, enclosing him in the smell of another man, a very different man, of course, but a man for all of that. *Noongar*, he remembered. The scent was not so much that of a body but of sap and earth, the oils and ochres and who knew what else of this land" (83). Wunyeran and Cross demonstrate the potential for cross-cultural understanding, both in how Wunyeran facilitates the meeting and how Cross' participation in the intimate ritual reminds him of their shared humanity and Menak's bodily connection to Country.

What readers experience in this scene is not merely contact between two different cultures but the observance of proper welcoming protocol through a Noongar custom involving interpersonal reciprocity. Wunyeran's role in the formal introductions affirms his standing amongst the Noongar; only certain members are qualified to carry out a mediator's obligations. Together, Wunyeran and Menak also affirm their claim to belonging, because the welcome is meant not only to introduce Cross to an important member of the Noongar people but also to mediate a relationship between the stranger Cross and the sentient Country. The exchange of clothing, in particular, suggests that Wunyeran and Menak are extending hospitality to Cross by offering him protection from the

Country to which they closely belong. Anthropologist Francesca Merlan explains that

> from a local indigenous point of view, such introductions are protective, not simply 'welcoming' in the ordinary understanding of that word as 'kindly reception or greeting.' There is a pervasive indigenous sensibility that the living country may present dangers to people unknown to it and whose being is not intimately involved with it. Therefore, practices [like garment exchange], as well as a local's address to ancestral beings announcing who has come to visit, are understood to reduce that element of foreignness that might attract harm. (300)

Merlan notes that "people who perform these kinds of acts assume that the country and its living forces are sensitive to smell, that locals and nonlocals can be distinguished, and the olfactory difference between them can be reduced by these small acts" (300). Cross first notices the feel of the kangaroo cloak, but the smells associated with it are even more important—a scent richly layered with elements of the land. Thus Wunyeran and Menak extend hospitality and protection to their guest and, in the process, affirm their inherent right to do so as Noongar men. However, much of the cross-cultural goodwill established between Wunyeran and Cross is undone by the novel's tragic conclusion. Both men succumb to tuberculosis, and while their shared burial site initially signifies the bond they established during their lives, the grave's desecration symbolizes the breaking of those bonds when the greed of men like Chaine spurs the settlement's continued expansion.

Cross' increasing intimacy with Wunyeran causes an identity crisis that stems from the fact that the social mores of heteronormativity that come with being the head of his settler household are incongruous with the homosocial nature of his life in his hut on Noongar Country. Nearing death, Cross despairs over his role in the settlement of King George Town and the directions this continued colonization will take without arbitrators like himself and Wunyeran. He also despairs at the thought that his death will leave his wife and children bereft, unable to

further develop his parcel of land. These warring concerns illustrate the liminal space between British and Noongar cultures that he occupies:

> Yes he had land—good land—and sheep arriving by ship. His friendships with the natives would help enormously, but there must be give and take, not all benefit going one way. But his strength was going and so, too, his interest, motivation. . . .
>
> What had possessed him? Now men bragged of the land they'd been granted, and never thought that it was seized, was stolen. Why must it matter so much to him that the lives of the natives would be altered forever and their generosity and friendship betrayed? He could not change that; what made him think he could do anything, or show another way to go about it when he would not even be able to make an independent life for himself and provide for his own loved ones? He had friends among the natives. (Scott 57)

Cross intuits the obligation of reciprocity that undergirds Noongar culture and clearly sees settlement as land theft, yet he is deeply invested in Western ideals of individualism, patriarchy, and ownership. The incongruity of these two worldviews leaves Cross feeling complicit, helpless, and confused, particularly as he attempts to distinguish between "his own loved ones" and his "friends among the natives." Wunyeran—Cross's closest friend, Native or otherwise—has already succumbed to illness by this point, which no doubt adds to Cross' despair and self-doubt.

Cross' liminality is most legible in the intimacy he shares with Wunyeran. The novel hints at a potentially queer relationship between the two, with Cross' hut functioning as an important site of contact. Noongar people routinely visit and sleep in the hut, though Wunyeran is a more frequent visitor as he and Cross attempt to share in one another's languages, cultural practices, and personal beliefs. In one scene, Cross dreams of standing at the entrance of the dwelling, watching Wunyeran sleep in his bed; when he wakes, he sees Wunyeran standing in that very spot, watching him sleep instead. Cross' reaction in this moment is

telling: "Come in, he said, and sat up in his rough bed. He was so very pleased to see a native, he realised. A Noongar. He wondered where he was. Who?" (101–02). Cross immediately corrects himself after thinking of Wunyeran in the abstract—not "native" but Noongar. Careful readers will recall the similar self-correction that occurs when Cross exchanges garments with Menak. In this moment in the hut, however, Cross' recognition and affirmation of Noongar identity causes him to question his own identity, which seems to be in flux. In another scene, Cross and Wunyeran sit across a fire from one another, just outside of the hut:

> We are two men of such different backgrounds, thought Cross and, attempting to fuse them, we are preparing for the birth of a new world.
>
> Without a woman? He would turn in his sleep, restless.
>
> They sang to one another. Wunyeran initiated it, Cross accepting. It was a way to communicate, to say more of oneself than was possible with their limited shared vocabulary. (115)

How are we to interpret Cross' restlessness over a woman's absence at the birth of this "new world" he and Wunyeran are bringing into being through their verbal (and potentially physical) exchanges? In that restless sleep, might Cross be dreaming again of a shared home—and perhaps a shared bed—with Wunyeran? If so, these feelings no doubt only add to Cross' anxiety when imagining his wife and children coming to live with him in King George Town. Because Wunyeran and Cross both die prematurely, readers are left wondering what might have been—the central question Scott asks by remaking the contact narrative.

Perhaps Cross could not quite fully imagine a life with Wunyeran, but he could imagine an afterlife together. Having accepted that he is soon to follow Wunyeran in death, Cross insists that he be interred in the same grave. It may be tempting to interpret their deaths—both of which occur in the hut—and shared burial site to mean that their cross-cultural relationship was always predestined for tragedy. Jeanine Leane notes, for instance, that some of the most recognized works in Australia's literary tradition invoke the motif of tragic "mixing" between white settlers and

Aboriginal peoples following initial contact (3). *That Deadman Dance* is different because, even as we mourn the loss of visionary characters like Wunyeran and Cross—just as we mourn the effects colonization has wrought on the present—Scott reminds readers that the potential for cross-cultural syncretism persists after their deaths. Bobby embodies this potential, but Country, more than any individual person, possesses a richness and versatility that makes inclusion and adaptation possible. "Bobby's family knew one story of this place, and as deep as it is, it can accept such variations" (Scott 65), the narrator states. The shared burial site can be read as one example of Country being able to encompass Wunyeran and Cross' overlapping stories. In fact, Bobby actually translates the site as such later in life: "[W]hen Dr Cross died[,] . . . they laid him down in the same grave as his good old friend, Wunyeran. A lot of bad things been done here—we won't speak of them now, my friends—but that was a good beginning" (71). Readers learn, too, that the modern town hall was later built on the same site. Wunyeran's and Cross' deaths do not mark the end of what could have been between Noongar and non-Indigenous groups; rather, their shared burial should represent a continuing reciprocal bond others might still emulate—including those involved in settler governance.

Instead, the town hall's location reifies settler belonging and the erasure of Noongar presence. Prior to the building's construction, Cross' remains are exhumed and reburied in a prominent location within the expanding settlement's new cemetery, while Wunyeran's remains are desecrated and destroyed. Bobby witnesses the exhumation taking place but is unable to stop it: "The gravedigger's spade, working its way around Cross's coffin, broke and chipped Wunyeran's bones, exposed and disordered the skeleton" (312). Bobby notes the indifference in the act: it was "not like the passion of flood, or a persistent wind lifting the soil to expose bones at the core of the country. It was deliberate and careless all at once" (312). Later, Bobby watches as "[t]he original, still raw grave was hastily filled. A town dog scurried away with something in its jaws; a cat, hunching its back and showing its teeth, would not be moved. Small bones were left to grey in the sun, be trodden in horseshit and piss and vomit as the town grew" (313). Meanwhile, Cross'

new grave has been adorned with a protective railing and an engraved headstone, upon which Chaine and Governor Spender agree to inscribe the words "SURGEON PIONEER AND LAND OWNER" beneath Cross' name (312). Tracey Banivuana Mar writes that settler colonialism exhibits an ability to normalize narratives of dominance spatially, particularly through acts that simultaneously memorialize an official narrative of progress while erasing Indigenous presence (176). It is worth noting that Chaine is instrumental in the memorialization and erasure process surrounding Wunyeran's and Cross' shared grave and figures prominently in a number of situations that increasingly drive a wedge between the Noongar and the British.

The colonizers' unwillingness to honor Noongar protocols for reciprocity furthers unrest. Chaine institutionalizes whale hunting in the settlement, introducing market capitalism through resource exhaustion and labor exploitation. Foodways are soon disrupted by overpopulation and overhunting, and when Bobby, Menak, and their countrymen are denied the share of the settlers' sheep and imported goods to which they are entitled by traditional protocol, the Noongar begin taking food without Chaine's consent. Bobby is eventually jailed for these supposed offenses, but during an informal trial he reveals that he witnessed Chaine murder two Aboriginal servants indentured to the colony's governor. In exchange for a signed testimony that, unbeknownst to him, exonerates Chaine of any wrongdoing, Bobby is granted an audience with a group of settlers, including Chaine and the Governor, for whom he performs one of his trademark dances.

Bobby's performance does the work of Makarrata in that he affirms Noongar sovereignty, insists on truth-telling, and offers a peaceful resolution in order to restore harmony moving forward. Bobby is confident in his abilities and in the power of performance, referring to the settler legal system as "[c]hild's play" and asking, "What was that against dance and song?" (Scott 346). While such confidence may seem misplaced from a settler perspective, Anna Haebich notes that "[p]erformance was deeply embedded in the processes of Nyungar [or Noongar] governance. Along with language, law, country, ceremonies and family, it was woven into an all-encompassing, elaborate mesh of relationships of coexistence

between human, non-humans and country" (18). Intending to "show them how people must live here, together" (Scott 347), Bobby scolds the settlers for their unwillingness to adapt to Noongar Law. He observes that "some people come to live here, and wanna stay like they never moved away from their own place" (347). Alternating between the Noongar language and English, Bobby reminds his listeners, who are increasingly coming to see the land as their property, of the "need to be inside the sound and spirit of it to live here properly" (349) "And how can that be," he asks these settlers, "without we people who have been here for all time?" (349). In his final address to the audience, Bobby simultaneously reasserts his authority as an initiated Noongar man and the reciprocal nature of his peoples' hospitality: "This is my land," he states, "given me by *Kongk* Menak. We will share it with you, and share what you bring" (349). Invoking Menak's name at this point in the performance suggests a connection between this scene and the moment in which the Noongar Elder properly welcomes Dr. Cross by exchanging clothing with him. Bobby has, in fact, shed layers of clothing during the performance until he is wearing "little more than a thin belt made of human hair" (348). Underneath the belt, however, he also wears a pair of "red underpants, worn as a concession to his audience's sensibility" (350). The combination of belt and underpants signals Bobby's willingness to accommodate and even incorporate elements of British culture into Noongar culture, but his performance makes it clear that the newcomers must adhere to Laws already in place.

Bobby's performance proves unsuccessful because the audience for whom it was crafted is either incapable of understanding or unwilling to acknowledge and act upon its truths, a metaphorical representation of the incommensurability at the heart of settler-Indigenous relations. According to Kwaymullina,

> [n]arratives—whether in the form of song, dance, art or ceremony—also form evidence of sovereignty, although it is evidence that has often been poorly understood in the legal systems of the colonisers, which are accustomed to a different form of literacy. And from an Indigenous perspective, it is dif-

> ficult to conceive of how it is possible to claim ownership of a land if you do not know its stories and hence cannot accurately place yourself within the network of relationships that is country itself. (10)

Bobby's performance exemplifies this perspective: to be, as he says, "inside the sound and spirit" of Country in order "to live here properly" is to adhere to the narratives that govern one's sense of belonging. The fact that most of Bobby's audience members leave the meeting place without any comment, confused by or uninterested in what they have just seen and heard, substantiates Kwaymullina's claim that settler legal institutions struggle to comprehend Indigenous perspectives and how they are traditionally articulated. As the audience departs, Bobby overhears gunfire, which suggests not only that Elders Menak and Manit have been shot but that the future of King George Town will be shaped by increasingly violent colonization rather than cohabitation based on reciprocity. While I do not necessarily interpret these fictional events as Scott's suggestion that fatal, physical violence will always result from such misunderstandings, I agree with Griffiths' claim that "the instincts that repudiate a more robust recognition" of Aboriginal sovereignty are "everyday forms of elimination and erasure" (228), which is to say violence.

Yet the novel's disconcerting ending does not foreclose the possibility of past wrongs being atoned for in order to bring a more just future into being. Bobby lives to old age and continues recording and retelling the otherwise obfuscated history of Noongar Country. He does so through a number of storytelling modes, both oral and written, and Scott suggests that perhaps one of these will resonate with his white Australian audiences. Responding to an interviewer's question about Bobby's seeming failure at the novel's conclusion, Scott suggests: "He's not quite the dancer he thought he was; or perhaps the dance as a form is not necessarily the form that's going to powerfully speak to this mob—the ones that get up at the end of the novel, dismissively; he hasn't got them. But just possibly, writing is [the form]" (qtd. in Brewster 232). In the world of the novel, that written form could be Bobby's journal; in ours, it could be *That Deadman Dance*.

V. Conclusion

Publication of *That Deadman Dance* predates *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* and the Referendum Council's final report by seven years. The novel can nonetheless be read as a vision of things to come precisely because it is informed by prior disappointments in the longue durée of Australia's settler-Indigenous relations. Contact narratives, like reconciliation politics, are sites of exchange and negotiation between Indigenous and arrivant populations. They are domains wherein power dynamics are established and contested and, also like reconciliation politics, they are sites from which we attempt to imagine—or reimagine—relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. We must engage settler-authored contact narratives with a critical skepticism similar to that with which we approach state-sponsored reconciliation agendas, paying particular attention to their inherent tendency to reify the logics of settler colonialism. Indigenous-led calls for reconciliation, like Indigenous-authored contact narratives, articulate a necessary alternative to official, settler-centric imaginaries. *That Deadman Dance* and the *Uluru Statement* offer their audiences the opportunity to, in the words of Daniel Heath Justice, "imagine otherwise" (*Why Indigenous* 156).

Notes

1 The *Northern Territory National Emergency Act 2007* was the Australian federal government's official response to the 2007 report *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*.

2 *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* was first issued by Aboriginal delegates of the Referendum Council on 26 May 2017, at the conclusion of the First Nations Constitutional Convention. The Referendum Council, made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, was appointed in 2015 to advise Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull and Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten on a constitutional referendum to recognize the rights of Australia's Indigenous peoples. For specific details on the First Nations Constitutional Convention, the Referendum Council, and the Statement, see Appleby and Davis, pp. 501–09.

According to Pearson, a Gamilaroi writer and activist, *makarrata* is a Yolngu word with layered meanings. Literally, it refers to a typically non-fatal spearing as punishment for having harmed another; more broadly, the term refers to a

philosophy of seeking justice through truth-telling, negotiation, and long-term conflict resolution.

3 This does not suggest that Aboriginal peoples are not continuing in their struggles for decolonization.

4 A number of monographs also exist on this subject. See, for instance, Rodoreda and Gelder and Salzman.

5 Leane criticizes *Secret River* for emphasizing settler values at the expense of Aboriginal peoples' experiences. Kelada and Hogan analyze settler nationalism in *Australia*'s depiction of gender and race. However, such critiques are not universal. Clarke and Nolan defend Grenville's *Secret River* against such readings, and Herrero does the same for Jones' *Sorry*.

6 See Justice's "Rhetorics of Recognition."

7 For a thorough explanation of recognition in the Australian experience, see Australian Human Rights Commission.

8 See Coulthard for a critique of Canada's reconciliation platform and its attempts to bring First Nations' sovereignties even more under the purview of the federal government. See Lightfoot for a critique of settler-state apologies to Indigenous peoples as well as recommendations for making them more meaningful.

9 Povinelli views recognition as an attempt to incorporate acceptable forms of social and cultural difference into a new sense of national pride. Balaton-Chrimes and Stead respond to Coulthard's and Simpson's work on recognition in the North American context and suggest that such scholarship can be applied on a much broader geographical scale. Moreton-Robinson and Behrendt criticize John Howard's defanging of native title legislation. McGonegal tries to imagine paths to justice via reconciliation in so-called postcolonial societies. Barta criticizes Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations for its failure to properly acknowledge the nation's history of genocide, while Kowal argues that "Welcome to Country" and "Acknowledgment of Country" speeches do more to assuage settler anxieties over belonging than to respect native title. Whyte criticizes settler governances in the US, New Zealand, and Australia for their symbolic rather than transformative embrace of reconciliation, pointing to the rejection of the *Uluru Statement* as a prime example. Maddison references the *Uluru Statement* as a sign of the Australian government's unwillingness to negotiate treaties with Aboriginal peoples, further evidence (as Povinelli demonstrates) of the limitations of so-called recognition of the inherent rights of First Nations.

10 For critiques of Rudd's *Apology*, see Strakosch and Macoun and Maddison.

11 Coulthard refuses the Canadian government's authority to recognize the inherent rights of First Nations. Alfred questions whether sovereignty can adequately encompass the spectrum of Indigenous peoples' rights. Justice's "Rhetorics of Recognition" scrutinizes the federal government's authority to recognize or deny the existence of Tribal Nations within the US.

12 See Behrendt's *Finding Eliza* for a discussion of the Eliza Fraser narrative as a quintessential Australian narrative. See O'Brien for examples of Indigenous peoples being written out of the histories of colonial New England soon after contact.

13 For example, Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. In this context, it is worth noting that Christine Chaine, Bobby's adolescent playmate and potential love interest, adopts racist colonial attitudes toward Noongar people as she ages. Part of her maturation process just happens to involve reading *The Last of the Mohicans* (Scott 283).

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