HONOURS THESIS IN ENGLISH AND
CREATIVE WRITING

A GROUNDED EXISTENCE:
Weightlessness and Weightiness in Kim Scott’s
Benang: from the heart

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English and Creative Writing at Murdoch University, 2015.
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Holly Guise
October 2015
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that, in Indigenous Australian Kim Scott’s novel *Benang: from the heart* (1999), images of weightlessness and weightiness contrast and coalesce in myriad ways. Spanning the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the South-West region of Western Australia, Scott constructs a polyphonic, subversive and inclusive narrative that represents various Nyoongar identities struggling for identity and place. Current criticism predominantly focuses on weightlessness in relation to Indigenous protagonist Harley Scat’s fragile grasp on identity, history and culture. They have overlooked the more pervasive aspects of weightiness and the way that each concept serves multiple purposes in relation to different characters throughout the narrative. In particular, the images illuminate the disquiet of white colonising culture and satirise the egalitarian rationale driving Australian eugenicist policies. The concepts also serve to illustrate the profound consciousness of mixed-race characters who endeavour to consolidate and preserve a meaningful presence in places and bodies tainted by the residual effects of colonisation. Overall, through their implicit critique of Eurocentric values, the images articulate the resilience and sovereignty of Nyoongar culture. The related concept of groundlessness, propounded by cultural historian, philosopher and writer Paul Carter in *The Lie of the Land* (1996a) informs my reading of weightlessness and weightiness with regard to the novel’s representations.
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INTRODUCTION

Images of weightlessness and weightiness inform Kim Scott’s historical narrative *Benang: from the heart* (1999). To date, the complexities of these concepts have not garnered critical attention. Most critical interpretations of *Benang* read weightlessness with reference to the protagonist and narrator Harley Scat, an Australian of European and Nyoongar descent, who has the capacity to rise into the air like a weightless being (7). Harley’s levitating ability is interpreted as a literal representation of his lacking in substance and his estrangement from family and culture. Implicit in this assumption is a sense that if weightlessness equals insubstantiality, then weight, and therefore substance and status, is its antidote. However, this dichotomous grasp of weightlessness and weightiness elides the fluid connotations to both concepts that emerge throughout the novel. The prevalence and complexities of these images therefore warrants critical attention. I argue that the images illustrate the intergenerational trauma and sovereignty of mixed-race characters negotiating their personal and cultural identities, and articulate the absurd colonial logic underlying Australia’s assimilation policies. Ultimately, through complex manifestations of weightlessness and weightiness, the resilience of Nyoongar culture is prized and the colonial apparatus that circumscribes Indigenous identity in *Benang* is inverted.

*Benang* is a sweeping historical novel that traverses the timeline of Australia’s brutal history including the Aboriginal Protection Acts, absorption policies, stolen children legislation and corruption and abuse by white institutions. Narrated by Harley Scat, the polyphonic and nonsynchronous structure of the novel allows Harley’s story, alongside a plurality of past marginalised voices, to unfold across several generations. The novel interlaces real historical material, such as excerpts from legislation and letters, with Harley’s narration of family stories in a meandering, disjointed and metafictional manner. For example, Harley often interrupts the narrative to point to the status of the text as a fictional and historical artefact (31) and as a “tangled” (434) family history. He also addresses his failures as a storyteller and narrator (22) and ironically

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1 For example, see *Benang* (62–67) for the correspondence letters between Jack Chatalong and Auber O. Neville (the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1915-1940) and an excerpt from the Aboriginal Act (1905). In the novel’s Acknowledgements (497–500), Kim Scott includes a detailed list of the resources quoted and used throughout *Benang*. 

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calls upon the reader to celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit of the pioneers and pastoralists that displaced his family (207).

As a result of the novel’s avoidance of a chronological structure, its ruptures in grammar and its confusion of pronouns and changing subjects, the reader often revisits the same characters and places at different times in their lives, with familiar scenes replayed from different perspectives. For instance, the rotund and sickly Irishman Daniel Coolman passes away early in the text (83), but then features in other chapters (270–271, 337–354). These conventions suggest the continuity of the past and the present. Reflecting the effects of the policies that estranged and displaced Indigenous families, blood relations are also skewed and confused.\(^2\) The novel demonstrates that one of the tools of estrangement is the obtuse, generic and mathematic language used in official reports to identify, categorise or exclude Aborigines. These narrative strategies involve the reader through Harley’s task of assembling his family history one obscure and intricate piece at a time.

This is an immensely challenging task for Harley as the ostensibly successful product of his paternal grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat’s\(^3\) amateur eugenicist project. Harley is inscribed as “the first white man born” (10) because he has fair skin and enough diluted blood to legally pass as white, and his psychological, physical and cultural development cripples and separates him from heritage and country. Harley resolves to recover the local stories of his Nyoongar family and to learn about his living relatives whose displacement in the past continues to impinge on their present situations. His journey is an acutely personal endeavour and, as a self-described “bleached skin” (163) “lightweight” (31), his task is to reconcile his denied Indigeneity with the white culture his Scottish-born grandfather celebrates, and forge a sense of identity in the process.

While \textit{Benang} does not possess a traditional realist plot structure, and Harley recounts the story after many characters have passed away, the narrative follows Harley’s journey across the country as historical records and physical paper trails, to uncover the forgotten stories of his family. With the help of his Indigenous uncles’ Jack

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\(^2\) This could also indicate the complex Aboriginal social kinship systems where every person is perceived as being family or a kin relation. Terms such as ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ can denote people who are not biologically related. Kin relations, therefore, might be genealogical or classificatory (Sharifian, 2011, 47–60).

\(^3\) Ernest’s surname can be seen as a corruption of Scott (Scat) and a link to faecal matter. He is a nightsoil remover and deals with faeces on a daily basis (Scott, 81). His name could be seen as a nod to the reader; not only does Ernest think of himself as some pseudo-scientific god, but he is quite literally at the ‘bottom’ of the rung. Public sanitation and nightsoil removing is Ernest’s (scatological) business (118). Correlations could be drawn between his duties as cleaning the soiled garments and his quest to sire a white son through the cleansing and dilution of Aboriginal blood.
Chatalong and Will Coolman, who exchange countless anecdotes with him, he is reunited with surviving relatives and sacred places. While I have introduced Harley in some detail, for the sake of clarity, I have included a concise overview of Harley’s family tree and relevant characters I address in this thesis (see Appendix). Harley embeds himself in his family’s stories so readers have a strong sense of proximity and immediacy to their situations. The concepts of weightlessness and weightiness signify differently for these characters but, overall, the interplay between the two has the effect of exposing the paradoxes and hypocrisies of white culture during the twentieth century.

Chapter One provides a contextual overview of the field of Australian Indigenous fiction and a review of current criticism that addresses or alludes to weightlessness and weightiness in *Benang*. I demonstrate that current criticism tends to interpret the issue of weightlessness in a twofold manner: as a symbol of alienation and rootlessness with specific reference to Harley’s levitation and as a parody of white assimilationist rhetoric that sought to “raise the native up” (Scott, 11) and “uplift a despised race” (27). This rhetoric is propounded in the novel and in history by the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines, Auber Octavius Neville⁴ during the early decades of the twentieth century. As I will discuss, some critics identify the transformative potential of Harley’s ability, but my reading emphasises the fluidity of weightlessness and weightiness in the representation of various characters.

Chapter Two and Three explores *Benang* in relation to both dominant and more obscure representations of weightlessness and weightiness. For example, I link weightlessness and weightiness to Will Coolman’s shifting gait and Ernest Scat’s seizure of land and bodies. I also draw on Paul Carter’s notion of groundlessness as reflecting the coloniser’s sense of vertiginous anxiety and insecurity over their tenure of the Australian cultural and physical landscape. In particular, I examine Carter’s notion of groundlessness, which refers to the ways in which “Westerners have lost their dreaming” (1996a, 363–364). As the early settlers detached themselves from the British peculiarities of nature, they continued to desire connectivity with the land that they devalued while upholding an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality between themselves and the Indigenous people. The result, according to Carter, was insensitivity to place or the “ungroundedness” of modern civilisation (1996a, 19). My reading stresses that

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⁴ Auber Octavius Neville was the Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1915 to 1940 in Western Australia and was a major proponent of assimilationist policies. See A.O. Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (1947).
weightlessness and weightiness work in different ways to articulate the anxiety and disorientation of the Indigenous and white characters; an aspect that has been hitherto overlooked. Chapter Three provides a reading of fluid and hopeful representations of weightlessness and weightiness. I initially return to the Harley, and then examine the images with reference to Indigenous embedded relationships to land and place. Through motifs of seeds, dots, birds and footprints, the images represent an assertion of presence and continuance.

The manifold and subtle ways these images inform Benang have the potential to pose a series of questions for the reader. For Harley, what does it mean to be weightless? By extension, is being grounded or anchored synonymous with having one’s feet on the ground? Is weightiness a desirable alternative? What do these different significations of weightlessness and weightiness in the novel denote, when considered in connection to particular characters, as well as when considered together? It is my objective to show that weightlessness is not just an undesirable physical and spiritual sickness that plagues the protagonist, but it is a metaphysical and transcendental representation of escape from an oppressive colonial apparatus. The trope also represents a disconnect between mind, body, soul and place for certain white characters who lack spiritual connection to the land. Weightiness too has fluid associations, able to represent facets of oppressive white culture, but also able to represent a (re)assertion of Indigenous presence. Through their various overlapping manifestations, weightlessness and weightiness are therefore complementary. The significance of these concepts is that their use illuminates the disquiet of non-Indigenous peoples through showing Indigenous characters as precariously raised “in a climate of denial and shame” (Scott, 97). The images closely link to the levity and tragedy that punctuates the narrative by confronting the reader with the brutality of Indigenous dispossession, whilst concurrently evoking themes of recovery and renewal. Furthermore, the concepts articulate the consciousness and sovereignty of Indigenous culture that still contends with the legacies of European colonisation.
CHAPTER ONE

The Critical Field

Australian Indigenous Fiction

Weightlessness and weightiness perform complex roles in the implicit critique of Eurocentric values as well as in the articulation of anomalous identities in *Benang*. Before I address the critical readings of *Benang* in relation to my argument, I will provide a concise overview of the rise, reception and key issues of Australian Indigenous fiction. While the field is heterogeneous, it is principally concerned with questions of identity, representation, power and language, and Indigenous writers face many challenges in the writing and dissemination of their work. *Benang* has provoked literary and political commentary since its publication, and continues to elicit discussions in critical and popular circles. On this basis, what follows is a consideration of the complexities of Australian Indigenous fiction as contextualisation for my reading of the novel.

Since early modern Dutch voyagers marvelled at the Indigene in their journals and illustrations, Aboriginality has been written on and over by outside parties (Sutton, 2008, 35–55). While Aboriginal fiction is a broad and somewhat monolithic inscription for a range of literary works from Indigenous groups and individuals, it rose to prominence in the 1970s and encompassed a complex body of narratives from Indigenous perspectives. Aboriginal writers were certainly present on the literary scene in the early decades of the twentieth century, but their voices were more marginalised (Wheeler, 2013, 1–2). Since the Australian Bicentenary (1988), Indigenous writers have been addressing dominant European narratives of colonialism, imperialism and progress, by representing history as resistance and survival, and through emphasising Indigenous agency and spirituality. While varied and complex,

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5 The 1967 Federal referendum amended the Australian constitution by recognising Aboriginal peoples in the census and allowed the Commonwealth to make laws for all Australians, including Aboriginal peoples. Prior to this referendum, Indigenous texts were not given credence as ‘literature’ and were not seen to merit scholarly, political or popular attention.

6 David Unaipon (1872-1967) was the first Australian Aborigine published in the 1920s and he has also written and published various articles, poetry and legends throughout his life. He attracted controversy when his collection of traditional Aboriginal stories titled *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aboriginals* (1930) failed to recognise his authorship.

7 See the works of Australian Aboriginal writers: Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (previously known as Kath Walker), Sally Morgan, Noel Beddoe, Alexis Wright, Tara June Winch and Larissa Behrendt.
many works of Indigenous fiction have offered personal and intimate portrayals of daily Aboriginal experiences in urban settings and environments. In short, this group of writings focus on how Indigenous people see themselves and each other, rather than how Europeans perceive and represent them.

Australian academic Adam Shoemaker directly aligns Aboriginal literature with Indigenous political issues (2004, 265). However, while the trauma of European colonisation and its aftermath inform Indigenous narratives, these works are not all political, confrontational or polemical. The assumption that Indigenous literary texts are inherently and inescapably political may limit authorial intentions or aesthetic imperatives. For example, an Indigenous writer’s style, form and content may be judged as fitting an expected ‘Aboriginal’ mould and could be understood as detracting from significant political concerns facing Indigenous Australians. Mary Ann Hughes argues that some Indigenous writers appear to anticipate such criticism and defensively “present their work as though answering an unasked question about the authenticity of their Aboriginality” (1998, 1). The assumptions about Indigenous literature indicate that these texts are only valued insofar as they represent the desires of white culture, are political in nature and express a monolithic and ‘authentic’ Indigenous voice that conveys a ‘truth’ about Aboriginal culture. While a salient feature of Aboriginal literature is that portrayed Aboriginal experiences often serve to confirm the continuity and sovereignty of Aboriginal culture and people, the actual content, stylistics and structure of Aboriginal fiction is diverse, as are their modes of expression (Grossman, 2013, 1–41).

Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton emphasises such pluralities and challenges the naïve belief that “all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender [and] sexual preference. . .” (1993, 27). In other words, portraying a singular ‘authentic’ Indigenous experience is impossible as, in addition to Langton’s listed differences, there are hundreds of Aboriginal groups,

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8 Alongside her work across various genres, Wiradjuri woman Anita Heiss writes commercial ‘choc lit’ fiction. See also Terri Janke’s Butterfly Song (2005), Melissa Lucashenko’s Mullumbimby (2013) and Jared Thomas’s Calypso Summer (2013).
9 Foundational postcolonial texts of the 1970s and 1980s – across various schools of thought – provided a vast array of decolonising fictions, and Australia was no exception. Nations across the world were coming to terms with their violent colonial pasts and, through literary texts, the voices of the previously silenced ‘Others’ reached a wide range of audiences.
10 It is worth noting that the pressure to conform to certain standards or to fulfil a particular image of what Aboriginal literature should and should not consist of, does not always stem from white, European cultures. Indigenous writers may feel constrained by the pressure of Indigenous communities to respectfully represent authentic Aboriginal experiences to the white hegemonic culture (Kurtzer, 2003, 181).
kinship systems, languages and dialects spread across the continent. For Indigenous people, a traditional language speaking elder from a remote community would not have the same story to share as an Indigenous urban-raised youth. As Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge observe:

[W]hat is crucially different between what Aborigines want and what they are offered is their right to be discursive agents, able to declare in their own forms and terms which option it is that they want, and when and how they want it to be available (1991, 74–75).

One direct consequence of European settlement was that Australian Aboriginals were dispossessed of their languages and oral traditions (Amery and Bourke, 1998, 122–138). The use of English, or blends of Aboriginal English and sprinklings of traditional phrases and words, have been used by many Indigenous writers (Ashcroft, 2009, 4–15). The ongoing debate surrounding these linguistic approaches has centred on questions of legitimacy and authenticity which connects to practical problems of translation and transmission and, by extension, issues of editing and publishing (Ashcroft, 95–112, 180–182). As a result, editors and publishers often seek to understand but also to contain Indigenous stories in the context of ‘otherness’ (as implicitly do the expectations of readers). Such editorial strategies can diminish the scope of Indigenous fiction and the work of the Indigenous author (Grossman, 2013, 139). Writers have argued that editorial input by white collaborators filters and packages the literature for popular consumption, thus making the Indigenous work less authentic (Grossman, 2013, 176). Such editorial intervention and, effectively, co-authorship remains problematic in the growing body of Indigenous literature. The writing of Aboriginal fiction can be therefore the site of various complex restraints, especially when Indigenous writers use European tools, methodologies and literary devices to convey their stories.

Overall, the key debates and contentions about Aboriginal literature connect to representation and power. Who has the right to speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians in the literary arena and what are the expectations for such writers in terms of content, styilistics and structure? Ethnographic writer Stephen Muecke recognises the tendency for readers and critics “to succumb to the Eurocentric temptation of evaluating the works solely according to Western literary standards.. .”
The challenge for Indigenous writers relates to how they assert and manage their own textual agency without disavowing their integrity. As I will demonstrate, such tensions like authenticity and expression are central themes for the Indigenous mixed-race characters in *Benang*.

**Criticism: Weightlessness and Weightiness in *Benang***

This section provides an overview of the critical readings of *Benang* that reference weightlessness and weightiness. The critics predominantly link weightlessness to Harley’s levitating ability and fractured identity, or read weightlessness as a parody of eugenic upliftment rhetoric. Conversely, the critics allude to weightiness in their fleeting references to anchoring and grounding; undefined concepts that require further explication. Overall, images of weightlessness and weightiness are prevalent in *Benang*, but the nuances and complexities of the concepts are overlooked and underrepresented in current criticism.

**The Burden of Weightlessness**

In a newspaper article published in March 1999, Kim Scott calls the key protagonist and narrator Harley Scat “a spirit searching for meaning, held by a fragile tether” (23). While Harley’s propensity for elevation initially shows him to be vulnerable, this propensity does not always denote immateriality and displacement. There is an undercurrent of hope beneath the layers of his mutable contempt and rage at the situation that the white colonising culture, and his grandfather, have forced upon him. I argue that it is in Harley’s weightless state that this hope is at first glimpsed and eventually realised by him. Weightlessness and weightiness also interconnect in positive and negative ways for other characters. While many critics recognise these

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11 This was the case for Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal when her first collection of poetry was published in 1964. Initial reception of her work called her style unsophisticated because it did not conform to accepted forms of verse. Critic Andrew Taylor, for instance, said that Noonuccal was “no poet, and her verse was not poetry in any true sense” (1967, 44). It was also argued that her voice stemmed from European, rather than Aboriginal oral traditions, thus rendering it inauthentic (Shoemaker, 2004, 184–187).

12 The doctrine of racial uplift and related terminology had its antecedents in America during the era of the ‘Negro problem’ (late nineteenth and early twentieth century). The black elite of African American movements espoused an attitude of self-help, social advancement and liberation theology which engendered class differentiation as the basis for race progress and also led to divisions along class, gender, colour and racial lines (Gaines, 1993, 433–455).
potentialities and flickers of hope in their respective analyses, not all identify weightlessness with hope.

Lisa Slater (2005a), in her discussion of the fluid and dialogic construction of subjectivity in _Benang_, acknowledges that Scott creates a space for Harley to critique his own identity and history. However, she characterises Harley’s weightlessness narrowly; that is, as symptomatic of his lack of control and inability to focus on constructing a counter-narrative. In this view, floating endows Harley with new perspectives and vision, but his helplessness and incapacity to articulate his story – or be at home with or in his language – prevent him from “creatively remaking the world” (152). Slater identifies writing and speech as precarious and problematic tools and abilities for Harley because of their white, Anglo, colonial origins, but which ultimately help the protagonist to “ground” (148) himself. His pen and voice are instruments that anchor his drifting body and mind, but the implication is that his weightlessness is negative, and that he can only regenerate an identity and story for himself when he is on the ground.

In another article (2005b), Slater concedes that “readers witness Harley’s transformation from being a floating, disembodied, ‘first white man born’ (Scott, 10), with a poor memory, to becoming Marban – a highly heterogeneous, self-differentiating trickster character, who has the ability to shape-change” (Slater, 71). In this statement, Slater is more optimistic that Harley can regenerate a Nyoongar identity, but his weightlessness remains negative. She argues that Harley’s language will always be a site of struggle for him, as will his skin colour, identity and propensity for elevation. While I concur with this argument, I do not perceive Harley’s weightlessness as a hindrance to his regeneration or reconnection, but part of his search “for traces, for essences [and] for some feeling of what had happened” (Scott, 471) in the past.

Victor Oost (2007) interprets _Benang_ as a political critique and revision of Australian history and white racist discourse, describing it as a novel that can assist in the complicated reconciliation process in Australia. It is a reading that aligns with Collete Selles (2007), who describes the novel as “a move toward reconciliation and healing” (155). Oost’s chapter titled “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being” refers to Milan Kundera’s novel _The Unbearable Lightness of Being_ (1984) and does not posit any intertextual links besides the ironic use of his title and the metaphoric correlation of lightness. However, the title itself presupposes negativity in his reading of _Benang_,
and before his interrogation of selected passages, he states that lightness “is a trope that evokes rootlessness, or inauthenticity” (108). Lightness is then taken as a given, as an established state of being which denotes, with reference to Harley, the “inconsequential nature of . . . existence” (107). Oost’s definition is constrained, as lightness is considered synonymous with inconsequentiality and therefore has the effect of painting Harley’s weightlessness in a pessimistic light. As a result, his equation of lightness to insubstantiality limits his scope by eliding alternative and complex meanings.

Maria Takolander (2015) reads weightlessness as signifying Harley’s irresponsibility towards history in that he calls himself “unsettled, not belonging – the first white man born – I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted. . . .” (Scott, 109). Additionally, she views his capacity for floating as “symptomatic of death” (Takolander, 7), as embodying how Indigenous people have been “literally up-rooted” from their homes and, in satirical terms, as signifying the “marvellously ‘uplifted’ man of colonial policy” (7). In comparison, Takolander indicates that weight and substantiality, embodied by coming back down to earth, represents Harley taking responsibility for history. Weightlessness and weightiness are ultimately considered in dichotomous terms.

Like Slater, Oost and Takolander, Cathryne Sanders (2008) and Victoria Reeve (2012) interpret weightlessness in Benang in relation to Harley’s rootlessness. In her analysis of how dwelling places ground characters in contemporary Australian fiction, Sanders examines the house Harley destroys and rebuilds, and the writing project he commences under its roof, as enabling him to “anchor himself to the earth and symbolically counter his grandfather’s attempts to “uplift” him” (114). In her reasoning, weightlessness is a negative state and it is anchoring that is the desirable, weighty, alternative that prevents Harley from being set adrift. Reeve also uses the term ‘anchoring’ to indicate the antidote to his free-floating; Harley is “anchored by storytelling and song” (2). It is the act of writing, Reeve argues, that provides such an anchor and it is when Harley “comes closest to earth (and closest to becoming grounded)” (2). In his weightless condition, Reeve describes Harley as uncanny, artificial and emasculated, positioned in a framework of repression that makes him vulnerable to his grandfather’s sexual abuse and “incestuous yet mock miscegenation” (3). I agree with Sanders’ and Reeve’s positions on writing as an anchor for Harley, but do not regard anchoring in opposition to his weightlessness. I support Reeve’s argument that Harley is an uncanny and emasculated figure, but only during his
adolescence, and not because of his weightlessness. As I will show, Harley’s subject position allows Scott to turn the monstrous alienating eugenic strategies back on itself to destabilise the cultural narrative that situates Aboriginality as regressive.

Overall, these critics identify weightlessness in relation to Harley’s propensity for elevation and disconnection from culture and history. While Slater identifies Harley’s transformation from a culturally disconnected boy to a Nyoongar man anchoring himself through writing and song, his weightlessness remains negative. Takolander views the weightless trope as a metaphor that showcases Indigenous dispossession but, like Slater, her interpretation of weightlessness is fundamentally negative. Oost aligns Harley’s lightness with rootlessness, and Sanders and Reeve discuss “anchoring” as an antidote to Harley’s floating. The recurring idea of anchors evokes an impression of positive weightiness; weightlessness is thus positioned as an undesirable alternative. Chapter Two and Three challenge these rigid representations and expand on the negative associations of weightlessness and weightiness in relation to other characters, and the fluid and hopeful representations of the concepts in relation to Indigenous subjectivity.

The Positive Potential of Weightlessness and Weightiness

Kristyn Harman (2004) reads Benang as an interrogation and reversal of whiteness from an Aboriginal perspective. Her key proposition is that, in the novel, whiteness is imbued with power in an insidious and invisible manner which racialises and demarcates non-white peoples; through Harley’s transformation of whiteness into an Indigenous paradigm, whiteness is reversed and colonial power is diminished. A similar argument is reflected in Graham Huggan’s revision of Australian literature (2007), and in Katherine Russo’s study of the appropriation of English in Australian literature in which Benang is construed as “a critique of the deadening effects of invisible white desire” (2010, 131). As a significant novel in Scott’s oeuvre, Anne Brewster describes Benang as a “sharp scrutiny and analysis of whiteness” (2011, 61). It is through this lens of countering white authority that Harman considers weightlessness and Harley’s ability to levitate.

Initially, Harman considers Harley’s floating as representing his severed connection from country, heritage and history, though she concedes that weightlessness can be reinterpreted as an “Aboriginal spiritual gift bestowed on the select few” (29) and a reference to ancestors and heartland. This reference in Harman’s interpretation
accords with my own argument that Harley’s propensity for elevation is not exclusively symptomatic of a fragile state of being and a permanent burden to bear, but may also reflect a fluctuating and fluid identity. Harman’s link goes on describe Harley reconciling his whiteness with his Aboriginality. In this respect it is my contention that it is weightlessness itself that allows Harley at first a reprieve, and eventually flight, from the weight of the white world that would categorise and contain him.

In a similar vein to Harman, Joanne Jones (2012) initially regards Harley’s weightlessness as an expression of his failure to articulate his story, or to connect to his identity. In her analysis of the Australian historical novel during the History Wars and, in particular, the relationship between history, place, culture and continuity in Benang, she argues that when Harley descends from his elevated position and reaches the ground he is able to resume “a functioning subjectivity” (109). Her observation implies that he is incapable and powerless when he is floating. Jones goes on to note that as the story progresses, from his elevated vantage point, a range of other feelings (other than desolation) and opportunities are enabled. She describes the dynamic nature of Harley’s weightlessness as “at various stages, emotionally numb, meditative, playful and insightful . . . (109). This turning point in Jones’ argument is a departure from a rigid understanding of weightlessness that typically aligns the condition with airiness, instability and a flimsy grasp on reality. In contrast, Jones suggests Harley’s condition as potentially producing, not prohibiting, a constitution of a counter-narrative to challenge assimilationist discourse. Additionally, she touches on the possibilities of envisaging weightlessness as a transformative and enriching experience; that is, understanding floating as the process by which he reconnects with his culture and is therefore able to face “grounded life” (122.) While her focus on weightlessness is limited because she only considers the concept in relation to Harley, Jones is one of the few critics who recognises that weightlessness may be positive, and thus weightlessness and weightiness are not in complete opposition.

Tina Dahlberg (2013) argues that Benang dismantles colonial narratives and enables multiple possibilities for the excavation, reclamation and sustainment of old and new

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13 Although the term did not develop until the 1990s, the Australian ‘History Wars’ began in the 1980s after new strands of Australian historiography posited alternative ways of understanding and researching Australian colonial history and Indigenous dispossession. Spawning from the American ‘culture wars’, the Australian ‘wars’ have profoundly impacted on the nature of historical investigation, stimulating reflection on how and why particular events are remembered and, by extension, why others are forgotten or silenced. The debates continue to polarise the nation’s perceptions of foundational history and generate questions about how social memory functions and forges collective understandings of the past (Macintyre and Clark, 2003).
Indigenous stories of identity. In this context, weightlessness, as in Harman’s discussion, is conceived by Dahlberg as “gift and curse” (100). Dahlberg ultimately perceives Harley’s weightlessness as something that must be harnessed and understood by the protagonist for it to be mastered. In this sense, weightlessness is a negative insofar as it must be managed. As such, Dahlberg sees Harley as an “in-between, insubstantial figure” (100), alluding to his hybrid and liminal status.

Dahlberg presents Harley’s Indigenous Uncle Jack as a grounding influence. Jack recognises Harley’s ability to levitate as both a unique gift and a “manifestation of sickness” (79), and he propels Harley through long journeys across the countryside to reconnect with family and place. According to Harman, when Harley is lost and floating aimlessly, it is Jack who is “weighty” (Scott, 147) and who brings his nephew back to earth. Dahlberg describes Jack as having enough substance, cultural strength and “physical and metaphorical weight” (100), to ground Harley. In this sense weight, in Dahlberg’s lexicon, denotes connection to community, country and Harley’s responsibility as a Nyoongar man.

Dahlberg’s prizing of Jack’s firm-footedness also suggests that being grounded is a more desirable state than Harley’s weightlessness. However, it is not clear in her work what is meant by grounding. Is it analogous with weight or, conversely, is it the antithesis to weightlessness? A broad definition of being grounded might signify an emotionally secure, balanced, self-aware and connected state of mind, but does one need to be on the physical ground to experience grounding? The novel shows that Harley is a troubled subject who wrestles with his plurality and otherness, and reveals an ambivalence and exasperation toward his floating at different stages (Scott, 28, 37).

It is Dahlberg’s conclusion overall that Harley learns to harness his ability to float by becoming grounded. Through this grounding, Harley transforms himself and resists assimilation, representing survival in the face of cultural domination.

Unlike Harman and Dahlberg, Dorothy Guest (2005) takes a broader look at weightlessness in Benang through her interrogation of complex mythological systems that underpin Indigeneity in both Latin American and Australian literary landscapes. On this basis, she explores Harley’s floating. In his weightless state, Guest argues that Harley “cannot cope with his fragmentation between black and white cultures” (131).14

14 Images of convergence are powerfully articulated in Benang, and I regard Scott’s novel as proposing and alluding to a potential equilibrium and understanding between fundamentally different cosmological and epistemological systems and cultures. However, the image of convergence must be approached with caution, as it implies a subsuming and absorption of difference which would be somewhat tasteless in the

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Guest uses the language of “anchored” and “unanchored” (130) to discuss Harley’s weightlessness, and describes how his elevation is illustrative of his straddling of the disparate cultures and his incapacity to be “grounded in either” (131). Guest also considers Harley unanchored because of his “skewed knowledge” (130) of both sides of his family history, which renders him weightless.

Anchoring, which in Guest’s vocabulary denotes rootedness, stability and being grounded, is her key reference to the concept of weight in the novel. In Guest’s application of the word, Harley’s desire is to be anchored to his Indigenous culture and in his present white culture and community, but I challenge whether Harley having his feet on the ground is the requisite for the realisation of this desire. As I will demonstrate, when Harley is hovering in the air, moored to the ground only by sheets or rope, his physical situation does not always mirror his inner frame of mind. Although Guest concedes that Harley succeeds in reconnecting with his family and culture (131), like Dahlberg’s positive reading of Jack’s weightiness, Guest implicitly prizes weightiness and associates Harley’s elevation with rootlessness.

That being said, Guest notes that Harley’s floating highlights the devastating effects of the eugenic project of upliftment (132). In addition, she recognises that his children and family are able to “anchor him to his place in his culture and in his future” (131). This implies that the retention of his floating ability may not represent disconnection, but may potentially bond Harley as the decentred subject to his Aboriginality. In this vein, like Harman’s suggestion of weightlessness as a spiritual gift, Guest implies that weightlessness and anchoring may not be in total opposition.

The unique critical perspectives in this section recognised Harley’s weightlessness as signifying more than just a fragile identity. I argue that, as Harley retains his ability to levitate throughout his recovery process, weightlessness is not in opposition to anchoring, but a significant facet of anchoring. As an example, Harley’s uncles want him to appreciate his gift and use it wisely (Scott, 148, 167, 455) implying that his weightlessness may link him to his ancestral roots. Harley’s father, Tommy, once shared a similar gift in terms of his ability to captivate crowds with his songs and words (424), but turns his back on his family and later dies in a car accident. The implication is that Tommy missed his opportunity to reconnect with family and culture. In contrast, because Harley eventually embraces his ability, he is “the one to show them where and who we are” (454).

context of a novel that describes the pain caused by white society’s twin promise of equality and cultural death through absorptionist methods.
Weightlessness as Elevation and Upliftment

The dominant imagery of weightlessness in *Benang* relates to Scott’s satirisation of the racial uplift doctrine propounded by A.O. Neville across the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Chapter Two of *Benang* begins with an epigraph from Neville’s treatise *Australia’s Coloured Minority* (1947) where he states: “As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people onto our own plane” (cited in Scott, 11). Elevation and upliftment rhetoric informed Native Welfare and had an egalitarian premise, but were also euphemisms of governmentalism and biological absorption through concerted miscegenation. In brutal terms, this “insidious genocide” (Campbell, 2015, 221) entailed diluting Aboriginal blood, one person and generation at a time, to erase all traces of Aboriginality. Under the guise of social improvement, these eugenic practices had dislocating effects on Aboriginal people. It is in this sense that Rosanne Kennedy (2011) likens upliftment to being uprooted like a tree (100), a powerful image connoting death rather than revival or survival. Critical commentary on *Benang* links the Harley’s weightlessness to an enactment and parody of eugenics through levitation.

Scott’s appropriation and reversal of the eugenic concept is a focal point in Michael Griffiths’ (2012) account of biopolitics and postcolonial iterability in *Benang*. Griffiths comments on the ironic nature of upliftment, suggesting that Scott constructs a palimpsest which rhetoricises “a spatial metaphor in order to flesh out a groundless taxonomy” (285). This “groundless taxonomy” is the identification and regulatory practices through which the white Australian government defined, categorised and contained Aboriginality. For example, amongst his grandfather’s documents, Harley discovers reports and images of mixed-blood Aborigines assigned mathematical and pseudo-scientific labels as though they were a different species of human: “full-blood”, “half-caste”, “quadroon”, “octoroon” (Scott, 25–26).

Griffiths uses the term “deanchoring” (289) to express how Harley’s weightlessness positively and productively disentangles him from the weight and shackles of the colonial system. “Deanchoring” is evocative of weightlessness in a liberating sense, and represents Harley’s escape from his status and positioning in the British colonial regime. Griffiths does not broaden his scope to examine other possible

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15 In 1937, A.O. Neville asked: “Are we going to have 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were Aborigines in Australia . . . I see no objection to the ultimate absorption into our own race of the whole of the Australian native race” (cited in Broome, 2010, 211).
representations or manifestations of weightlessness. However, his argument is in consonance with mine in that the literalisation of Neville’s upliftment rhetoric in Harley’s rising highlights the pressure, barbarity and weight of the white world on Aboriginal identity, thereby invalidating and denouncing eugenicist discourse.

Griffiths’ reading accords with Natalie Quinlivan (2014) in her evaluation of Scott’s writing and community language projects. She stresses that Neville’s ideology “is immediately undercut by Scott’s literal enactment of Neville’s instructions” (3), that is, through Harley’s elevation. Quinlivan reads the weightlessness in the novel in a predominantly bleak sense, representing “a dislocation from . . . culture, language and family history” (3). Her focus is on the interplay between Scott’s wordplay, the use of archival material and the manifestation of these concepts through Harley’s floating, which underscores the savagery and absurdity of Neville’s beliefs. This accords with my reading insofar as I view Harley’s weightlessness as a mockery of Neville’s doctrine. However, where Quinlivan views weightlessness as a symbol of “placelessness” (3) for Harley, I read it as representing manifold possibilities for the protagonist, as well as a complex symbol with reference to other characters.

In her paper on the role of the law in the construction of the Australian nation and its implication in the practice of injustice, Jennifer Coralie (2008) comments on Benang in the context of the destruction and degradation of the Australian land in relation to the violence against Aboriginal people. Coralie alludes to weightlessness in relation to ‘flight’ and ‘freedom’, terms which in her work evoke lightness, ascension and escape (70). For example, she discusses the violence perpetrated by the white authorities in the novel, and describes how Scott does not depict violence or anger in return, but uses language techniques that reflect: “a kind of flight, of freedom almost, a refusal of these structures . . . a different kind of seeing . . .” (70).

Her description evokes a positive impression of weightlessness and highlights the notion of flight as a capacity to exceed borders which is, in many senses, a positive reading of Scott’s use of floating. Coralie’s imagery suggests a wider range of readings of weightlessness than has been evident in criticism to date. In particular, the sense in which ‘floating’ suggests an exceeding of borders in relation to delimiting European concepts and practices, ranging from individualism, progress, to the fencing of land. Above all, flight is deemed something denied to those who identify with oppressive white culture. In the novel, for example, Scott conjures images of birds in flight,
indicating a positive weightlessness; a lightness that separates the troubled Indigenous characters from their bondage.

Whilst current criticism narrowly addresses the positive potential of weightlessness in *Benang*, mainly as a device to exemplify the absurdity of Neville’s ‘White Australia’ ideologies, the dominant consensus is that weightlessness is indicative of an insubstantial, alienated and fractured Indigenous self that, under a colonial regime, needs anchoring and grounding. I will illustrate that with reference to characters such as Will Coolman and Ernest Scat, it does represent fragile identities, but Harley’s weightlessness ultimately emerges in a positive light. In this sense, my reading of weightiness as positive and negative in connection to different characters underscores the intricacies of the concepts. Jones, Coralie and Griffiths appreciate the complexity of weightlessness as transcending a dichotomous positive/negative condition, but generally, the critics refer to notions of ‘grounding’ or ‘anchoring’ as though they have universal applicability, and are the opposite of weightlessness. Weightlessness in this novel, I argue, is not tantamount to rootlessness and neither is weightiness only associated with substance or status. What the critics overlook is the interplay of weightlessness and weightiness in relation to different characters, and the function this relationship serves in *Benang*. 
CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF WEIGHTLESSNESS IN \textit{Benang} HAVE FOCUSED ON HARLEY, BUT THIS CHAPTER DELVES INTO THE REPRESENTATIONS OF WEIGHTLESSNESS AND WEIGHTINESS WITH REFERENCE TO HARLEY’S UNCLE WILL COOLMAN, HARLEY’S GRANDFATHER ERNEST SCAT AND THE REPRESENTED WHITE COLONISING CULTURE. I WILL BEGIN WITH WILL’S WEIGHTLESSNESS AND WEIGHTINESS OF GAIT AND SPIRIT, BEFORE MOVING ON TO A DISCUSSION OF ERNEST SCAT IN RELATION TO PAUL CARTER’S THEORY OF GROUNDLESSNESS. THE IMAGERY SURFACES IN PREDOMINANTLY NEGATIVE WAYS FOR BOTH WILL AND ERNEST. HOWEVER, WHERE WILL’S WEIGHTLESSNESS AND WEIGHTINESS SIGNIFIES HIS PERSONAL AND CULTURAL STRUGGLE FOR BELONGING AND IDENTITY, FOR ERNEST THEY EXEMPLIFY BOTH HIS POTENT NEED FOR POSSESSION AND HIS DISCONNECTION FROM COUNTRY, LAND AND PEOPLE. FINALLY, IN EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF THE WEIGHT AND WEIGHTLESSNESS OF WHITE CULTURE, I TURN TO SOME OF HARLEY’S INDIGENOUS RELATIVES INCLUDING: FANNY, SANDY TWO, KATHLEEN AND TOPSY. IMAGES OF WEIGHTLESSNESS AND WEIGHTINESS SIGNIFY DIFFERENTLY, BUT DECISIVELY NEGATIVELY, FOR THESE CHARACTERS. OVERALL, THESE IMPRESSIONS OFFER A CRITIQUE OF EUROCENTRIC IDEOLOGIES AND COLONISING PRACTICES BY SHOWCASING THE BURDEN THAT IS WHITE CULTURE.

\textbf{Will Coolman’s Peculiar Gait}

Harley’s Uncle Will Coolman is a fair-skinned “quadroon” (Scott, 26) who is given a Western education and raised separately from Nyoongar relatives. His disposition and complexion impresses Ernest: “You wouldn’t hardly know. Not when you saw him dressed up, at places where you would not expect any native to be. He spoke like a young gentleman, almost” (116). As his upbringing, complexion and behaviour attests, Will is outwardly an example of racial upliftment, but he still does not qualify as white and, under the pressure of white culture, he resents his Nyoongar identity. He is content at school until his darker-skinned Nyoongar cousins attend and associate him with his black identity, sparking contempt in the local white community (286-300). As a child, Will does not understand why he is being treated differently by his peers and runs out of the class, “retching” (289). The following week, the school withdraws white children until the issue of darker skinned Aboriginal children was resolved (294). Will is
so uneasy that he wets himself and, for weeks, is nauseous and is “taken ill” (299). He only recovers when the local parliament and various “civic bodies” reassert their control and removed the black children (300). In contrast to Harley who strives to discard the imposed white identity through a reawakening of his Aboriginal identity, for much of his life Will shuns his Indigenous identity. As I will now discuss, Will is a quintessential hybrid figure; he is at once weightless and weighed down in spirit and this is shown in his peculiar gait.

Will’s dilemma is represented in part through the trope of his gait, and his troubles are further embellished through reference to the image of the curlew. For example, the weightiness of his heart is shown when (with his Aboriginal mother as a young boy) he hears the haunting, mournful cry of the curlew:

Harriette said to her child, “Listen? Hear that?”

Listen.

“What?”

“Someone been dragging their toes in the ground. Not lifting their feet proper; not putting them straight in front.”

“How, Mum,” said Will.

“Well, they’re crying. They’re crying for some silly people not walking properly; not walking proud. They feel sorry for them – they always walk so nice and proper themselves” (282–283).

Will’s mother, Harriette, uses the curlew to teach her son to walk proud. While the curlew’s cry clearly represents a lamentation for dispirited Nyoongars, such as Will, Harriette also notes the bird’s upright, “proud” (282) stance. Curlews, like all wildlife, occupy an important place in Aboriginal culture and Dreaming stories. Mark Harvey and Katrin Althans both claim that, for many Aboriginal people, the curlew is a sign of foreboding and a “harbinger of death”, often representing the warning cries of Dreaming spirits (1997, 26; 2010, 110). Earlier in Scott’s narrative, before Harley sets out to unearth his forgotten people, the characters hear the call of the ‘death bird’ (8–9).17

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16 Curlews are ground-dwelling birds with long, stalk-like legs, mottled brown feathers, slender downcurved beaks and a haunting, shrill cry. There are several curlew species scattered across Australia, including in the southern parts of Western Australia, where the characters in Benang reside.

17 In Kayang & Me (2005), Scott’s joint venture with his Nyoongar Aunt Hazel Brown, his Aunt details the special connections between her people and the curlew. ‘Wilo’ means curlew and ‘Wilomin’ Nyoongar,
The theme of weightiness occurs in this passage as Will drags his toes; it is an image of shame, complacency, heaviness and resistance. In contrast, Will’s mother wants her son to embrace and protect his Aboriginal identity like the alert curlews that camouflaged themselves from predators. The young Will denies dragging his feet – a physical expression of self-doubt and shame – but carries the weight of his heritage like a burden.

At various stages, Will is described as self-conscious and chagrined by his black heritage, and defends his Irishman father Daniel Coolman’s methods of segregation and eugenic zeal: “What could he [Daniel] do? He had to look out for us, his children” (339). When Will is a boy and documents a local history of the Gebalup settlement, his perspective is in line with the colonisers who viewed the land as a *terra nullius*. In sympathy with his white father as a pioneering figure, he enshrines western models and policies of progress, and justifies practices and ways of thinking that have displaced Aboriginal people. In doing so, he ignores his mother’s history and the line of ancestors that predate his European father’s history (165–166).

Will’s struggle for self-definition is most palpably demonstrated through the implied weightiness of his shifting gait. Unlike Harley, who floats and struggles to keep his feet on the ground, young Will is so burdened that his toes drag on the ground. His heavy-footedness reflects his leaden spirit. His mother’s observation that the curlew cries because somebody is not placing their feet “straight in front” (282) also suggests Will’s lack of direction. When Will ceases to drag his toes as he ages, his weightiness subtly transforms into weightlessness, but only partly in the sense his mother had hoped. Harley observes his uncle and notes: “I watched him walk away; his tall, thin body held so very straight, and each foot lifted and placed so very precisely. He walked like some kind of bird” (25). The heavy dragging of Will’s toes has morphed into a weightlessness that is stilted. As such, Harley recalls later “how Uncle Will walked. Proudly, cautiously; like one provisionally uplifted, whose toes barely gripped the earth” (166). Harley is

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18 Gebalup is a fictional town situated somewhere in the South-West of Western Australia where many characters once lived or currently reside.
19 *Terra nullius* is a Latin term translating to “nobody’s land”.
20 In *Kayang & Me* (2005), Scott’s collaboration with his Aunt Hazel Brown, an Elder of the Wilomin Nyoongar people. Brown recounts to Scott the story of a mother and son listening to a curlew’s cries as they sit by a campfire. The mother advises her son to take a leaf out of the curlew’s book by adopting its disposition: “don’t slouch like the defeated or the dead, but have the poise of those surrounded by risk” (Brown and Scott, 25).
noting of the “provisional” nature of Will’s upliftment that he is only temporarily, conditionally and half-heartedly aligned with A. O. Neville’s upliftment ideology.

In Neville’s vision, Will’s complexion is almost fair enough to pass as white; Will marries a white woman and speaks, moves and exudes an eloquence that accords with Neville’s notions of the importance of biological absorption and upliftment. This notion is exemplified in Ernest’s belief that with “the right kind of help and encouragement” (402) the Aboriginal person could be cured of their inherent deficiencies and, importantly, their blackness. However, while Will is ashamed of his black heritage, he resents this feeling of shame. Additionally, he begrudges the privileges and entitlements non-Indigenous white Australians possess by default (143).

Will’s early weightiness and later provisional weightlessness represents the precarious, unstable position of the mixed-race Aborigine. The novel’s imagery, in relation to how Will carries himself, refers to how Indigenous Australians have been burdened by racist policies, attitudes and emotional and physical abuse. In this sense, Will is aware that associating with Aboriginal relatives is a problem. Addressing Harley and Jack, he says:

I knew the people would try to bring me under the Aboriginal Act [11]. And they took your children, hunted you down, moved you for no reason . . . I didn’t want any “assistance” from them. All I wanted was for them to leave me alone, and to be free of them . . . It has made me very lonely, all my life (144–145).

Will’s speech to Harley and Jack highlights the absurdity of the policies and the personal, isolating, toll it takes on him. It is through Will’s weightlessness and weightiness (of body and spirit) that the reader bears witness to the complex effects of the various Protection acts and genocidal policies that were often masked as egalitarian projects (Bourke, 1998, 40).21 Over the course of the twentieth century, discourses about difference evolved from the “doomed race” ideology and blatant racism that came from a position of biological egalitarianism (Shoemaker, 2004, 22) and posited that Aborigines were trapped within a genetically predetermined destiny (Haebich, 2008, 77). However, Enlightenment values and the legacy of Social

21 Beginning in 1869 in Australia, Acts were legislated to ensure the protection and survival of Indigenous Australians. These Protection Acts, premised on the superiority of the colonisers, excluded designated Indigenous people from aspects of Australian life (employment, education, public establishments), in effect prescribing human rights and identities based on race and pedigree (Armitage, 1995, 14-40).
Darwinism maintained cultural imperialism under the guise of social improvement, assimilation and equality. The implementation of government reserves, missions, stations and various policies judged a person’s indigeneity by blood quantum and skin colour, effected in the name of protecting and elevating Indigenous Australians.

When Will tries to improve himself and become a landholding citizen, he is referred to the Aborigines Department (Scott, 119). Even though he is a model citizen, one whose skin pigment, refined manners and behaviour all meet non-Indigenous standards, he is ultimately unable to be seen apart from his Aboriginality and rejected the rights afforded to white Australians. This suggests that, irrespective of how they looked or behaved, the Anglo-Australians believed mixed-race Australians still had “a bit of tar” (Van den Berg, 2002, 146) in them. Will is in an indeterminate position between white and black worlds with his gait and movement symbolising his rootlessness and loneliness. As an adult, he confesses to Harley: “I hate myself, know that?” (143). Later, when he reminisces with Jack about their childhood, he repeats: “I hate myself . . . I turned my back” (294).

Will is analogous to eminent postcolonial writer Frantz Fanon’s mimic man. The mimic man is the black subject who mimics the oppressor and dons a white mask, mastering the coloniser’s language and habits, but renouncing their own blackness, culture and identity (Fanon, 1984, 18). The subject who mimics their oppressor is also complicit in the ideological machinery that silences them. Perceived in this light, mimicry highlights the displacement and dislocation of the Aborigine who doubles the white man’s image and loses their sense of identity in the process. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha asserts that the coloniser always desires resemblance, not absolute replication (1984, 126–130). For the sake of maintaining white superiority, a distinction must exist between the coloniser and subject. Power structures and ideologies justifying and sustaining colonial rule would break down if there was total equivalence. Bhabha describes how, in colonial and postcolonial situations, the presence of Anglicised colonised peoples – who are “almost the same but not white” (130) – can disturb colonial discourses by reflecting back a grotesquely distorted image of the coloniser’s world. These mimic figures or “figures of farce” (126) have the

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22 Post-colonialism is a problematic term for Indigenous Australians and many Aboriginal writers distance themselves from the concept. Anita Heiss (2003), Stephen Muecke (1992) and Anne Brewster (1995) respectively recognise its potential for certain Pacific Nations and countries such as America where independence has been achieved historically or through war, but it is mostly an irrelevant and inappropriate term for Aboriginals because they generally feel that colonialism is not of the long-distant past. Heiss states that “colonisation, as Aboriginals interpret it, is alive” (2).
potential to destabilise the colonising project. By refusing Will the rights afforded to biologically white Australians, the oppressor thus maintains the oppositional distinctions propounded by Orientalist structures of knowledge and ensures that the power remains in their hands.

Notwithstanding this grim picture of Indigenous sovereignty, Will is not portrayed as weak or despicable, but flawed. Scott presents a forthright and sympathetic depiction of Will as an Indigenous person of mixed parentage desperately trying to negotiate and overcome the contradictory legislative prescription of his life. As an example, Will sees his half-caste Uncle Sandy (Sandy Two) die in the street and witnesses the white authorities assume responsibility for the body and the funeral. Will desperately wants to intervene and to inform Kathleen (Sandy Two’s sister) of his death, but does not, fearing that he will only provide the Aborigines Department with more ‘targets’ (Scott, 143–144). Will’s cowardice haunts him and he feels he must come to terms with his role as victim and perpetrator (294). Even though Will had snubbed his darker-skinned cousin Jack when they were children, Jack supports Will: “we were all like that, I reckon,” he reassures Will. “Had to be. I would’ve done the same. You’re a bit fair . . . Don’t worry about it” (294).

As Richard Broome notes, across the early to middle of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people were controlled in two ways; formally, by Aboriginal Boards, and by “unofficial customary discrimination” (2010, 172). Such laws and attitudes were inherently contradictory. In Will’s case, the weightlessness and weightiness associated with his shifting gait and with the curlew exemplify his identity crisis. It is the transformation of the ashamed little boy dragging his toes to an adult walking like an elegant bird on precarious ground, that the weightlessness and weightiness images provide glimpses into Will’s troubled spirit.

More broadly, the images highlight the overarching problem: what was the Indigenous person to do when society was both assimilationist and segregationist, rendering the goal of assimilation unattainable? Lisa Slater (2005a) and Victoria Reeve (2012) read weightlessness in Benang as embodying this impossible situation, but only with reference to Harley. Slater, for instance, recognises the burden of Harley’s weightlessness as it represents a “lack of control” (4) for the protagonist who grapples with belonging and identity. Reeve discusses Harley’s “emasculated condition” and whiteness that renders him “artificial and metaphorically inhuman . . . suggested by his acts of levitation” (3). However, these critics overlook the fact that both
weightlessness and weightiness function on a broader level in *Benang* and represent the burden and anomalous status of the mixed-race Aboriginal – including, but not limited to, Harley – who does not comfortably belong in white or Indigenous culture.

A striking feature of Scott’s writing is that he powerfully depicts his characters as they respond to, or create, impossible situations which induce cycles of poverty, material deprivation, dependency on the white authorities and crises in personal and cultural identity. Showing the effects of white society’s regulatory and classificatory systems on Will’s psyche, through images of weightlessness and weightiness, serves the purpose of holding the logic and ideological imperatives of colonial culture up to scrutiny. In the following section, I will discuss the images of weightlessness and weightiness as interrogating white culture in an entirely different way.

**Ernest Scat’s Groundlessness: Possession and Disconnection**

Impressions of weightlessness and weightiness coalesce and contrast in Scott’s representation of the European characters, particularly the lecherous Ernest Solomon Scat. Ernest’s depiction, I argue, is close to Paul Carter’s ungrounded, paranoid colonist. In *The Lie of the Land* (1996a) Carter declares that the coloniser makes the land a manifestation of their “fears and hopes” (10). Carter goes on to say that for the colonisers, the southern continent was a source of exuberance that reflected the European cartographic compulsion to name and possess. On this basis, it was a cause for colonial anxiety. The “paranoia of the colonist”, Carter elaborates, was “that his claim to belong to a higher destiny might prove to be empty...” (1996a, 7). The fear that one’s hopes, dreams and ambitions would not come to fruition resulted in what Francis Maravillas calls the “vertigo [that was] constitutive of Australia’s settler-colonial and ‘postcolonial’ culture and identity” (2012, 17). Vertigo here represents a deeply entrenched discomfiture informed by the precarious sense of identity related to a nation founded on the eradication of difference and the possession of land that was neither *terra nullius* or *tabula rasa*. Vertigo also refers to Carter’s concept of “groundlessness” where the colonisers endeavour to consolidate a presence and impart meaning to their experiences, but are haunted by the possibility that they will be confronted by the tenuous grounds of their possession, thus becoming “ungrounded” (1996a, 20).

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23 Ernest is not only a devotee, but the fictional cousin of A.O. Neville.
24 *Tabula rasa* is Latin for “blank slate”.
Carter’s work proposes that groundlessness for the coloniser and pioneer translates to groundlessness for later generations who are haunted by the knowledge that the land they walk on is not theirs to take. Underlying the theme of groundlessness is the introduced concept of ownership of land and all property. The concept of ownership was foreign to Indigenous people who had a symbiotic conception of, and relationships with, land and place (Swain, 1993, 38-39). Carter states that groundlessness is to “lose touch with one’s human and physical surroundings . . . to become an echoing shell, an antenna eye” (cited in Main, 2005, 222) and his conception is invaluable for understanding the character of Ernest. Ernest’s son, Tommy, regards his father as “pressing down on people like us” (422). As a weight on future generations, Ernest complements Carter’s notion that early settler anxiety is passed on to later generations. In this sense, Ernest is both groundless and bears weight; his weightlessness aligns with his weightiness. Both associations are symptomatic of his estrangement from the land and the people he controls.

Through Harley’s memories and his Indigenous uncles’ vivid personal recollections, Ernest is represented as dominating and overzealous. These representations inform how on his first night in Australia during the 1920s, Ernest visits a government reserve and rapes an Indigenous woman (45). “[N]ow you’re initiated” (48), his white companions inform him. His initial guilt is not for his sexual violation, but for defiling somebody he deems subhuman. This is assuaged when he realises that he can play an integral role in the upliftment and elevation of an otherwise doomed population. The young, impressionable Ernest is soon introduced to absorptionist ideas by the Travelling Inspector of Aborigines, James Segal (44). Ernest’s intellectual and sexual interest is aroused as Segal utters the words “absorption” and “assimilation” (44–46). Indeed, Ernest’s “erection threatened to intrude into his mental note-making” (46), foreshadowing the perverse nature of his personal eugenicist project that would span several decades. Before Ernest understands the science, or the nuances of Neville’s brand of eugenics, the seed was sown. Over the coming years, he witnesses the potential in Aboriginals for change and improvement through the relationship Irishman Daniel Coolman has with his Nyoongar wife Harriette, and through local protector Sergeant Hall’s relationship with his half-caste domestic and daughter-figure, Kathleen. Kathleen subsequently becomes Ernest’s first Nyoongar wife and test subject. With the

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25 James Segal is a fictional figure who tells Ernest he worked with the A.O. Neville in the early 1920s as a Superintendent (Scott, 44).
added assurance from Segal that, statistically, “throwbacks”\(^\text{26}\) were unlikely, the stage was set for Ernest’s miscegenation plans or “dreams”, which he emphasises “sounded more innocent than ‘plans’” (80).

Ernest’s desire to succeed, to own and to make a name for himself is rendered by Scott as weightlessness in a different sense to his grandson, Harley. Ernest’s weightlessness is associated with his lack of substance and heart and is therefore of the figurative kind, pointing to the fragility of his identity which is centred on success and subjugation. Ernest is up on a roof, dreaming of power and possession, and looks out over expanses of land as a king would his empire. This endows him with a sense of self-importance and power that amplifies as he proceeds with his eugenics project.

The height, and the solid wall beneath, gave him confidence. He felt important; up in the sky, and with a gentle breeze caressing his resolute jaw, he again thought of possessing land in this place, right here. . . (51).

In the passage, Ernest is given confidence from his elevated position by the solid wall that supports his weight. He considers himself divine, but without the man-made structure of the wall, he would fall to his death. Here, Scott highlights Ernest’s reliance on the concrete, European structure, implying that while Ernest considers himself godlike and invincible, his delusions blind him to the fact that he is not a self-made man, and is at the mercy of gravity. With broad reference to the process of clearing the land in order to shape it into a familiar place, Carter claims that Europeans construct “places off the ground . . . [and] idolize the picturesqueness of places because [they] sense [their] ungroundedness. . .” (1996a, 2). For example, Ernest experiences a moment of agoraphobia when he fails to repair a wheel and is trapped on a road in the middle of nowhere “surrounded” by land (25). His dependence therefore on the physical and artificial suggests the shallow nature of his thinking and relationship to the country, and stands in direct contrast to the deep connections and embedded experiences the Indigenous characters have, where the interconnectedness of the human and non-human world is encapsulated in the Dreaming (Cowan, 1992, 23–30). As an example, this connection to country is palpable when Harley camps with his uncles and exchanges stories with them. The land is personified as they “went among

\(^\text{26}\) Throwbacks are reminders or reversions to the past. In this scene, they are discussing how the dilution of Aboriginal blood would also reduce the likelihood of recurring Aboriginal characteristics (throwbacks) in future generations.
the trees . . . [and] listened to the waves, and the leaves, whispering” (188). In contrast to this sense of embeddedness, Harley notes of his grandfather:

Ernest Solomon Scat was up in the air, back then, and looking around. He had touched jetty, railway, electrical and telegraphic wires, sealed road. He had rarely touched the land. Ernest Solomon Scat floated all his life, in a different way to myself, and never even realised it (52–53).

Harley’s observation of Ernest’s weightlessness points to the egotism of the colonisers and the insubstantiality of their claims over land. Scott illustrates Ernest’s superficial involvement in different projects, empty relationship to the land and his ignorance to their folly. Ernest’s conquests and achievements again represent his disconnection from ‘country’ (53) and his inability to appreciate the land as a metaphysical or living entity, foregrounded by the security he finds in manmade structures.27 On this basis, he is “up in the air” (52).

In a scene where Harley admires the ocean and surrounding wildlife, flora and fauna, he notes how “Grandad’s historic homestead – as if shunned – clung to the road which was sealed. . . .” (163). The image is of a house sealed off from the land. The quote is reminiscent of Carter’s view that European societies live off the land and mould it to suit practical and picturesque needs, but are therefore removed from its “inclines, folds and pockets [and thus] linearize it, conceptualizing the ground, indeed the civilized world, as an ideally flat space” (1996a, 2). The notion of linearising and flattening is also indicative of Western models of thinking, progressing and moving (Le Guellec-Minel, 2010, 35–37). Ernest espouses this Cartesian thinking but, alienated from ‘country’, he is removed from the centre of the story. In effect, Ernest is rendered weighty in his subjugation of land and people, but weightless in his alienation from them.

Ernest is also detached from the various people he encounters; he has no conception of the history, culture or code of life and Law of Indigenous peoples. He uses them as sexual objects and expendable test subjects for his chauvinistic and scientific purposes (77–80, 158), and is not aware of the spiritual and kinetic

27Harley notes at one point that his grandfather’s “brow corrugated” (32). The term, rather than ‘furrowed brow’, is often used with reference to roads, metals and scrap material; in short, man-made things. It is intriguing also that corrugation of dirt and gravel tracks, for instance, occurs when they are subjected to constant vehicular traffic and human interference. This aligns with Ernest’s artificiality, but also with Paul Carter’s discussion of the way in which colonists flattened and shaped the ground to create spaces to make them familiar and amenable to possession (1996a, 2–10).
relationships between humans and animals, or animate and inanimate things, that intricately informed one another in the Aboriginal cosmology (Berndt and Berndt, 1999, 137). With his evolutionary belief that white humans are at the top of a great chain of being, he fails to recognise the complexities and nuances of the Aboriginal culture and community. He consequently forfeits a meaningful connection to the land and ruins any chances of amiable, mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous people. Carter recognises that the European relationship to the land is appreciated “in so far as it bows down to our will” (1996a, 2). Carter’s point is that one cannot mark lines in the ground and call it home. If one is emotionally and psychologically divorced from local, unique particularities of their environment, as Ernest is, then one is an ungrounded stranger (2–10). This sentiment encapsulates Ernest’s ingratitude to land and people. As such, Ernest cares for his mixed-race wives, mistresses and offspring only when they prove that they are rising above their blackness and only when they obey him (Scott, 132, 154–156). Ethically adrift, he is weightless in his disconnection from the land and in ecological and spiritual ways; he is incapable of forging relationships unless he can gain something in return.

Ernest’s tragedy is that he is not cognisant of his depravity or groundlessness and is indifferent to the far-reaching consequences of his sensibility. At the same time, his sexual desires and ambitions, under the pretext of social elevation and his desire to leave a lasting legacy, points to a suppressed fear of becoming a nonentity. In other words he fears (and is paranoid of) failure. For example, he fears that Indigenous people will inherit land and property when Daniel Coolman passes away (80). On his personal eugenistic project, he questions his ambition (114) and finds “himself needing advice, reassurance [and] further security” (118). The anxiety described by Carter (1996a) and Maravillas (2012) that underlies Australia’s settler colonialism is evident in Ernest who, as Harley describes, was: “a little too late to be a pioneer” but “could still play a role in taming people into submission” (32). While Ernest’s desire to sire a white son and for a white Australia remains intact, his vision of success “shimmered and shifted” (117), suggesting its lightness and unstable nature. Ernest consequently lives like a lost soul who is spiritually adrift, and his apathy towards the people and land renders him the most ungrounded, weightless person of all in Benang.

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28 From first settlement, Eurocentric values necessitated practices which regulated the country to replicate familiar homelands. The establishment of crops and agriculture ran counter to Indigenous land management practices, as did the assemblage of fences, boundary lines and roads. These worked as symbolic markers of prestige and possession and, importantly, demarcated who did and did not belong. The colonists built houses and settlements, erected signs, statues, and planted roses; these actions did not create place, however, but only signified a geographical locality, a point on a map.
White Culture: Restless and Unsettled

Images of weightlessness and weightlessness challenge the authority of the colonial apparatus through the portrayal of white characters in *Benang* as restless rather than settled. In particular, Scott destabilises the superiority and control of Ernest and Sergeant Hall, by representing them as aimless wanderers. Paul Carter uses the term “drift lanes” (1996a, 360) to signify the active way Indigenous people moved across the land compared to the white settlers. Indigenous practices were predicated on movement and dynamic engagement with the land rather than on the subjugation of it, but colonists pejoratively characterised their movement as nomadic (Curthoys and Docker, 2010, 27-28). To the colonists, nomadism denoted mobility, instability, rootlessness and primitiveness; the antithesis to all that settled Anglo-Australians believed they embodied (Delrez, 2010, 51). However, they neglected to hold a mirror up to their own colonising activity. Carter states that, “perhaps it is inevitable for a culture that is ungrounded, movement, however integral to its survival, must always constitute a threat” (1996a, 2–3). In *Benang*, weightlessness as a kind of restlessness and instability is associated with the white characters. In this sense, it inverts the idea of stable, ‘settled’ colonists and expands on the colonial discomfiture and anxiety put forward by Carter and Maravillas.

In a collection of essays and stories by Australian Indigenous activists, academics and writers, Palkyu elder Gladys Idjirrimoonya Milroy and her daughter Jil Milroy note that the “real nomads . . . were the people who gave us that name: the British never stayed home, they have wandered into our world” (2008, 29, italics in original). In *Benang*, Ernest’s voyage leads him first to South Africa, where he discovers “young and coloured women” (Scott, 44, italics in original), and then he wanders onto Australian shores. Sergeant Hall’s wandering is more literal; he wanders throughout town on his ‘patrols’, which are nothing more than aimless rides on his stallion so he can bark orders at the Indigenous populations to feed his sense of self-importance (192). The Australian nation, among various colonised countries over the centuries, was founded on the influx of Europeans who left their homelands, crossed oceans and roamed into other people’s homes. These “perpetual travellers” (Milroy and Milroy, 29) are

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29 Across the continent in the formative years of European settlement, Indigenous peoples lived hunter-gatherer lifestyles, moving seasonally and purposefully across particular pockets of land, within particular zones and territories. Their semi-nomadic routines were incomprehensible to early settlers whose pastoral land-management, cultivation and living conditions and lifestyles were modelled on an entirely different system (Cowan, 1992).
analogous to Carter’s description of “rootless” colonising Europeans: “had the Spaniards, the British, the Dutch been at home in the lands of their birth, they would have no motive for seeking out and invading other countries” (1996a, 363).30

The Milroys also characterise Europeans as “story nomads” (29) who wander, not just into the physical spaces of the land, but insert themselves into, or write over, Indigenous stories and spaces (29). There is not only an impression of weightlessness in restless white culture, but a potent impression of weightiness in the sense that these “story nomads” colonise the landscape and existing narratives, thus dominating history. For example, Ernest’s research, detailed annotations and records can be seen as his attempt to insert himself into a dominant narrative and make his mark (Scott, 23–28). Similarly, Sergeant Hall crafts his own narrative and dehumanises Nyoongar people in his ‘Police Occurrence Book’ (71, 213), selectively including or excluding certain details because there was “such a lot to keep track of” (84). Referring to his family and, more broadly, to the regulation of Indigenous culture by the Europeans throughout history, Harley states: “We got caught that way, on paper” (426). Through this narrative reversal of white authorities as restless wanderers, they are shown to be “people without a dreaming” (Carter, 1996a, 364). The novel thus destabilises the authority of the colonising culture.

Weightlessness comes to the fore through their wandering and intrusion into Aboriginal culture, whereas weight is attributed to their desire for possession and control of land, people and written records (193). Ernest was a Frankenstein “creator” (32) to Harley, but to reverse Ernest’s narrative that would see Aboriginal culture erased, Harley immerses himself in Nyoongar stories and, through his own writing, challenges colonialist discourse. Through Harley’s uncles’ different storytelling styles – Will’s Westerns and Jack’s more “circumspect tales” (192) – and Harley’s personal project that recovers his forgotten, omitted and misrepresented culture, the reader is exposed to the depravity of the white characters and, eventually, to the unique voices and perspectives from Harley’s family.

30 Carter goes on to stress: “we are replete with histories which show European greed and brutalization in unholy symbiosis with the historical forces of capitalism and industrialisation. Around the time the canon was invented – or it may have been the Printing Press, or linear perspective – Europeans shuffled off the last vestiges of spiritualism; they became rootless nationalists” (1996a, 363).
The Residual Effects: Harley’s Family

Before I discuss positive and fluid representations of weightlessness and weightiness in the next chapter, I will examine the effects of white culture’s weightlessness and weightiness on some of Harley’s relatives. Overall, this section explores the complex ways Indigenous Australians were touched by the immediate and residual effects of colonisation in Benang. I will begin with Nyoongar Fanny Benang, Harley’s great-great-grandmother.

The weight of the assimilationist policies and forced removal practices is foregrounded in Fanny’s visits to Native Camps in the early years of the twentieth century. Fanny seeks to belong with her people at the Reserve and wants to “place herself among the living” (246), but her experiences illustrate that this is a misplaced desire. The colonial apparatus that produces Fanny’s alienation among the few loved ones she has left at the stations is juxtaposed with their weightlessness, expressed in the image of the dead returned. Fanny observes:

Those who had been closest to her were gone. She felt surrounded, almost, by the dead. They circled her, and there were more and more of them . . . At times she still wondered if it were true, that the white ones were the dead returned; brains askew, memories warped, their very spirit set adrift (246).

This representation of Fanny’s experience alludes to early encounters between Europeans and local Indigenous groups where the settlers were believed to be returned ancestral spirits or human ghosts with “their rotting skin peeled off and underlying white flesh exposed” (Clarke, 2007, 143). A similar reference is made to weightless Europeans when Harley begins to indulge in his “propensity to drift” (Scott, 162). He then imagines himself as “djanak” or “djanga” (163), Nyoongar terms which denote the aforementioned returned spirits and Europeans (Clarke, 143). Frontier perceptions of Europeans as the dead returned were not always negative; Harley experiences coming “back from the dead” (Scott, 162) as a renewal or a rebirth. In contrast, Fanny feels suffocated by the “white ones” (246), with their warped ideologies and indifference to the brutality of the assimilationist laws and policies. Fanny implies that a psychologically sound person would not think and behave in such a depraved manner. In this sense, characterising the white Australians as “dead” (246)
also suggests their spiritual and moral aimlessness. Fanny later thinks to herself: “Whether they were the dead returned, or not, they brought death with them” (493).

Fanny’s isolation at the stations is assuaged when she recognises some of her own children (246), but the bittersweet moment alludes to another dark episode in Australia’s history: the forcible removal and institutionalisation of Indigenous children, now known as the ‘Stolen Generations’ (Cassidy, 2006, 111–152). Fanny’s experience at the stations showcases the effects of the colonial system that not only regulates Indigenous lives, but severs Indigenous links to culture and divides Indigenous families. It is to Fanny’s credit that she maintains her “dignity” (Scott, 463) over the ensuing decades and has a rich relationship with husband Sandy One Mason, “an Englishman” (83), who is later revealed to be part-Indigenous (483–484). Kristyn Harman argues that Sandy One shares an “intimacy with Fanny Benang and her country” (2004, 27), but notes that Fanny’s marriage to him is initially indicative of her “awareness of the power and privilege associated with being considered to be white” (25). In other words, Fanny is cognisant of the alienating effects of the colonial apparatus on her culture, and strategically aligns herself with a perceived white man to try and protect her family from violence and incarceration by white authorities (Scott, 177, 462–463).

The negative effects of Australian assimilationist culture is shown to continue into the next generation, where Fanny’s son Sandy Two is subjected to, and participates in, Indigenous discrimination and suffers a crisis in personal and cultural identity as a result. As an exceptional horse rider and tracker, the half-caste Indigenous character Sandy Two is hired to be a tracker for Sergeant Hall. Initially, his ability is questioned because his skin pigmentation is lighter than the full-blood Aborigines who, Hall believes, have natural tracking skills (192). Problems arise when his position as a native tracker working against his own people puts Sandy Two in a precarious position. For example, when he leads Hall to some Aborigines camping on the edge of town, he anxiously observes Hall clearing them away. Later, Sandy Two reassures himself: “he had not taken part in any of this. It was just that he was there” (199). Sandy Two returns to town and witnesses a pair of shoplifting Nyoongar children fleeing from a local shopkeeper. The children recognise Sandy Two and regard him with scorn. Although Sandy Two refers to them as “same people” (200) he captures them nonetheless and hands them over to be punished. Afterwards, Sandy cannot “close his ears” (201) to the sound of the strappings, or to the magnitude of what he has done.
The weightiness of the white authorities becomes apparent later through Sandy’s complicity in the events that dispossess his people.

Sandy’s shame and guilt is indicative of the pressures on the Indigenous people during the assimilationist decades of 1940-1960 (Broome, 187) and Harley grapples with a similar problem decades later. “My family, my people,” he begins, “we have done such things, shown such shame and self-hatred. It is hard to think what I share with them, how we have conspired in our own eradication” (97). Even as Indigenous Australians participated in or emulated white Australia, the expectations of colonialism were hypocritical and seemingly impossible to navigate.

White society’s attitudes, distasteful taxonomies and laws on Indigenous Australians continues to affect Harley’s family. Such pressures are an implicit weight in the novel and, as I have indicated, affects various characters in different ways. The experiences of Ernest’s first wife Kathleen, for example, epitomises the double standards of white Australia. Kathleen dresses like a white woman and maintains her household accordingly, but is unable to satisfy Ernest’s desire for a fair-skinned son. He tires of her and sends her away to a reserve. Like Fanny, who feels lost among the ghostly white people, Kathleen, more accustomed to white ways, is a stranger amongst the Indigenous people in the reserve. She wants to be a white woman if only to “have rights, and respect”, but the white people disregard her and the Indigenous people in the reserve are unwelcoming and consider her “toffee-nosed” and “uppity” (137).

After Kathleen is raped by a policeman, she suddenly disappears from the story (139), in accord with the problem of incomplete historical records investigated by Harley. Kathleen’s disappearance illustrates the dislocating effects of coerced and forced relocation, of Aboriginal suffering at the hands of white authorities, pastoralists and policy-makers, and demonstrates how Aborigines were silenced in the history books, and discarded in reality.

The stories of tragedy continue in the life of Kathleen’s fair-skinned daughter, Topsy, whom Ernest rapes and takes as his new wife. Like her mother, Topsy must avoid the sun to evade a tan, powder herself when she ventures outside and adopt a

31 There may be an inherent irony in the name of ‘Topsy’ as it recalls the archetypal ‘pickaninny’ character of the same name in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852). In Stowe’s novel, Topsy is a black orphaned slave girl – a wild, messy-haired, heathen – who is the foil to her master’s fair-skinned, angelic daughter Evangeline St. Clare. Topsy admits to Evangeline that she does not know what love is and, when asked why she would not behave, responds: “If I could be skinned, and come white, I’d try then” (Stowe, 1982, 330). In *Benang*, the irony lies in the fact that this outwardly ‘white’ character has been named after a classic black slave-girl figure. Whether the novel’s vocabulary deliberately links Scott’s and Stowe’s characters, it is undeniable that both ‘Topsy’ figures are property to a white master.
white woman’s disposition at all times. Topsy’s academic achievements at school are attributed to the white blood in her (114). She bears Ernest two children; a girl, Ellen, who is legally considered white and passes away young, and Tommy, the hazel-eyed, fair skinned boy Ernest desires. But there is a problem in that changes in legislation do not allow Tommy to be classified as white (149). Under Ernest’s gaze, Topsy becomes another character living precariously, walking as though she is not anchored to the ground, that is, walking with “the precise steps of a bird” (155). The reappearance of the bird metaphor links both to Neville’s upliftment policies and to Topsy living between Indigenous and European worlds. Topsy is part-weightless therefore in a similar sense to Will – as a fragile and confused person – and she despondently sees her incomplete face in a patchy mirror. Scott reveals that this fragmented, almost imperceptible, reflection is what Topsy believes the rest of the world sees as well: “There were increasing areas of blackness, more pieces missing and making her invisible” (161). Topsy is disappearing, that is, becoming weightless in a physical and figurative sense, and the disturbing image of her disappearing reflection portends her erasure. The narrative returns to Topsy several years later: her reflection remains “incomplete” (369); there were “pieces where there was no her” (369).

The motif of diluting the strains of Aboriginality continues with Ernest’s attempt to scrub off Topsy’s blackness by immersing her in a bathtub of bleach (158). The vivid image of Topsy’s raw body dissolving, fizzing and boiling (372) showcases the destructive weight of the policies of assimilation instigated by Neville and executed by Ernest. When Topsy is older and is suffering from an unknown illness, Ernest bathes her to reduce her fever, but this evokes a torrent of mixed memories for Topsy regarding her cleansings. Ernest’s harsh control and concerted abuse is underscored in her penultimate bathing scene where Ernest’s success is aligned with Topsy’s demise. “Her skin had been penetrated . . . and must now have been dead. Dead to some depth. The bones gone. She couldn’t stand up. . . .” (372). A moment later, an ambiguous voice that could belong to her son, Ernest or Harley as the narrator announces: “She’s dying” (373); weightlessness and invisibility implicitly merge in the terrible scene.

Topsy’s final bathing scene occurs on a beach as Ernest hauls her back and forth between a hot bath and the open icy sea to revive her. Topsy is gravely ill and had

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32 Alison Ravenscroft notes that Aboriginal women in Australia were often named after American house slaves. Topsy was a popular name commonly given to the older generation of Indigenous women who mustered livestock and worked as servants and nannies (2012, 141).
been refused entry into a doctor’s surgery because it was inside a hotel that lawfully prohibited Indigenous people. She is referred to the Aborigines Department, then Native Welfare, until her life is finally represented as inconsequential to the doctor who examines her (372). Although Ernest tries to reduce Topsy’s fever, he does not understand that he has been a cog in the white hegemonic machine that failed her. His implication is represented in the similarity between the popping bubbles and white foam of the sea and Topsy’s bleach baths. The idea of rising and falling is suggested here as Topsy ‘rose and fell from the water’ (374). She is flung about like a ragdoll, described as ‘being cooked’ and floating ‘upon the surface, as if her body had already dissolved’ (374). This shocking scene underscores how the assimilationist policies – carried out by Ernest – induced Topsy’s insubstantiality, weightlessness and death.

As we have observed in the experiences of Fanny, Sandy Two, Kathleen and Topsy, the novel ties the weightlessness and weightiness of assimilationist Australian society to Indigenous struggles and identity crises. As Harley pieces together the stories of his relatives, he witnesses how the offspring of interracial couples were raised in a climate that “made it difficult for even a strong spirit to express itself” (97). Fanny’s journey to the stations opened her eyes to the effects of the removal policies that divided and destroyed families. Sandy Two found that he was complicit in the colonial system that dispossessed his Nyoongar culture. As Will witnessed, it was this system that failed Sandy Two when he passed away (143–144). The trauma of white culture is especially distressing in Kathleen’s case. Kathleen, who endeavoured to behave and look like a white woman, lost a daughter, a husband and her self-worth when Ernest sent her away. She faced her “gloomy” and “distorted” reflection and considered her “lesser brain capacity” (138), only to be violated by a police officer and was left wondering if she had brought it on herself (139). Her daughter, Topsy, spent her years with Ernest being expunged of her blackness at the expense of her substance, identity and life. The effect of the assimilation strategies is made manifest in Topsy’s gradual erasure through bleaching. In the macrocosm, these scenes represent the corrosion of Indigenous identity as a result of assimilation strategies; these measures did not provide salvation for the Aborigines, but threatened a living and actual death for those affected immediately and in the generations to come.

Though these representations, manifestations and consequences of weightlessness and weightiness in *Benang* are unsettling for the characters, and confronting for the reader, they have strikingly different connotations to other characters, scenes and
motifs. In the next chapter, I will detail how these images signify more positively in the novel. The images still offer a critique of the colonial apparatus, but perform this in a markedly different way. In the next chapter, I argue that *Benang’s* vocabulary of weightiness and weightiness also subtly articulates a sense of hope for the future and a compelling refusal of personal and cultural erasure.
CHAPTER THREE

Weightlessness and Weightiness: Fluid and Hopeful Representations

To begin, I will explore the concepts of weightlessness and weightiness that signify negatively for Harley, because these experiences are vital to a reading of his transformation from an uncertain, angry and spiritually adrift boy to a Nyoongar man with purpose, direction and vision. While I agree with critical readings that emphasise Harley’s levitation as signalling his fragmented identity and alienation from culture, there are further complexities. After demonstrating the negative associations, I will explore how weightiness and weightlessness inform the hopeful motifs of seeds, dots, birds and footprints. Overall, these scenes continue to interrogate European ideologies in their rejection of Indigenous erasure and impermanence.

The Heavy Burden of Harley Scat’s Weightlessness

As a teenager, Harley’s levitation is represented as a burdensome condition. As narrator, Harley’s adult voice often reflects on key moments of his adolescence, including his light-footedness and inability to keep a firm footing on the ground (for example, 13 and 33). As the successful white product of a line of failures, his weightlessness as a teenager is linked to his difficulty in finding balance (13), his loneliness (20), his anger (29), and his self-hatred (37). His rising into the air is therefore a literal and symbolic expression of his uncertainty as to where he belongs, and who he is.

At this early stage, Harley’s rising also synchronously highlights an implicit heaviness of spirit. “Hovering before a mirror, I saw a stranger . . . he was thin, and wore some kind of napkin around his loins. Dark blue veins ran beneath creamy skin, and his nipples and lips were sharply defined” (12). Here, as Harley vacantly stares at his reflection, he sees his Indigenous tradition and holds his white European body in contempt, including refusing to use of the personal pronoun ‘I’.33 His disengaged, third-}

33 It is worth noting that the distinctions between singular and plural nouns and the usage of personal and collective pronouns, are invariably complex across Indigenous language groups. The complexity relates to the sense of embeddedness within kinship systems (the use of the collective ‘we’ rather than the personal ‘I’), as well as the different kin relations with their corresponding referents (Koch, 2007, 33).
person perception of himself reflects the crippling effects of his grandfather’s eugenicist project. The loincloth nods to a traditional Aboriginal past that is incompatible with his creamy skin and sharply defined facial features. When Harley later reflects on missed opportunities and people he never knew, he admits “I fear that once we were we, and now there is only I” (90). His detached stance conveys his confused identity and reveals how, even when he does use a personal pronoun, he is lonely, burdened and uncertain.

This representation of uncertainty includes Harley’s discomfort in the English language as the language of the oppressor. His concern with the only language he knows connects to his hesitant and wary gait, as he states:

> It is far, far easier for me to sing than write, because this language troubles me, makes me feel as if I am walking across the earth which surrounds salt lakes, that thin-crusted earth upon which it is best to tread warily, skim lightly . . . (8).

Harley’s light-footedness here refers to his painful sense of estrangement from both sides of his identity. His preference for singing reflects his reluctance to use English, a representation that refers to a broader concern of Indigenous and postcolonial writers. That is, the linguistic dilemma of English for native and ethnic Anglophone writers who are often criticised for interiorising European colonialist prejudices and reinforcing the orthodoxies of the colonial apparatus (Ashcroft, 2009, 103–105). Speaking of liberation and Indigenous experiences using the discourses invented by the Europeans has been identified as problematic by critics (Mishra and Hodge, 1991, 109). While forms of Aboriginal English are often spoken and written as first languages with their own complex grammatical and syntactical structures, the Indigenous writer’s use of a non-traditional language is often seen as a cultural loss. This is in spite of the fact that, as Michéle Grossman observes, “Indigenous and settler languages have interpenetrated each other lexically and morphologically in enduringly robust ways. . .” (2013, 185). Such issues are given powerful expression through Harley’s analogy of using English as being analogous to walking cautiously across the earth. His primary language is English, but the sense of guilt that accompanies this inheritance is evident in his weightlessness; he does not yet have an identity that encompasses both sides of his identity.
Harley’s alienation is represented as skimming the earth lightly, as though its folds, grooves and undulations are foreign to him, rather than part his Indigenous beliefs and cosmology (Hume, 2002, 26–27). Critics suggest that Aboriginal spirituality is ‘geosophical’ in that it is earth-centred, as opposed to deity-centred, and through linking spirituality, wisdom and knowledge to places (Swain, cited in Charlesworth, 1998, xx). Paul Carter argues that colonists are “people without a dreaming” (1996a, 364) and, on this basis, Harley seems to subsist as one “vulnerable to the agoraphobia all must feel who have no place they can call their own” (Carter, 1996a, 363–64.) Distressed by his unwitting complicity in the white world, Harley resents the fact that sacred Indigenous knowledge is closed to him. This resentment introduces a heaviness into Harley’s character, previously represented as weightlessness:

I wanted to be bold, but walking felt very peculiar. Had I ever known how? . . . I mastered a way of walking, and my light tread – despite being little more than a series of soft touchdowns – sounded the floorboards like a drum (Scott, 13).

Harley feels the weight of responsibility to undo his grandfather’s eugenic scheme which has induced his identity and cultural crisis. The ease in which he can express his emotions through song provides a flicker of hope in contrast to the pain of his heavy spirit. In this sense, Harley’s gait is affected by his peculiar light-footedness, as well as by his heavy responsibility.

Walking is uneasy for Harley, rendering him momentarily clumsy and childlike. His subsequent levitation, although it represents a flimsy grasp on identity, weighs down his spirit and weakens his resolve. Harley feels “so weak” (12) when he rises into the air, precisely because of his burdens. As discussed, Will Coolman’s identity crisis is similarly exemplified in his walk and movement, and the curlew’s gait is variously associated with pride, shame and caution (282–283, 452, 465–466).

My early reading of weightlessness and weightiness and their negative associations underscores Harley’s divided identity and deprecatory view of himself. This is in agreement with the critical readings of Benang by Cathryne Sanders (2008), Victoria Reeve (2012) and Maria Takolander (2015). However, while these critics associate weightlessness with varying degrees of estrangement, they do not recognise the equally negative images of weight that inform Harley’s rootlessness and heavy spirit as a teenager. The interplay of weightlessness and weightiness during Harley’s youth has
the effect of showcasing his desperation to connect the branches of his family tree, or else remain burdened by his weightless body and heavy spirit. In the next section I show that the gloom associated with these images begins to shift as they surface in scenes that ridicule the colonial apparatus.

**Weightlessness: Irony and Humour**

Harley’s weightlessness emerges as a symbolic mockery of the rhetoric associated with A.O. Neville’s upliftment doctrine (Griffiths, 2012). This has the effect of combining both heartening and melancholic atmospheres in the narrative. The irony associated with Harley’s weightlessness reveals that this condition is not solely negative, and points towards a reclamation of his identity.

Harley’s elevation is sometimes presented as comedic and amusing, such as when he wakes pressed against the ceiling (Scott, 11–12), or secures himself to a washing line, and observes: “I was successfully assimilated to the laundry, washing machine, a used car” (33). Harley’s sardonic tone and the idea that he is ‘assimilated’ to consumer white goods is lampooned in relation to the upliftment of a ‘despised race’ rhetoric. On these terms, Harley’s upward motion becomes a mockery of the eugenicist doctrine. The fact that this rising occurs in relation washing or cleansing highlights the recurring references to the dilution of Aboriginal blood (11, 26–29, 46–48, 75, 93, 150, 365, 368–376, 387). Harley’s derisive and frustrated tone occurs throughout *Benang* and is juxtaposed with references that suggest a possibility of a future. This detail is captured in the title of the novel; *Benang,* which means ‘tomorrow’ (464) in the Nyoongar language of South Western Australia. This future and its correlate hope is presaged many times in the novel, for example, when Harley considers “the many heartbeats among the rippling grasses, the many whispering voices, and your own is somewhere among them” (140).

Harley’s weightlessness is also represented as comedic and bittersweet when he hovers above Ernest’s research and disrupts and dismantles the neatness of Ernest’s project by kicking (313) and burning (349) the inspectors’ records. Ironically, it is in rearranging these Western records that Harley discovers his previously silenced family history. Just as the European and white Australian records had erased, that is, written

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34 *Benang* translates to ‘tomorrow’ and the term also refers to Harley’s great-grandmother Fanny Mason (493). Harley finds letters and welfare files that assign ‘Benang’ to other people as well; however, there is confusion as his family is variously named and classified throughout the departmental papers.
over Aboriginal society, so Harley kicks and writes over European methodologies and ways. His singing above campfires (7, 87, 261, 495) and his project to write his own story (323) is how he eventually comes to write Nyoongar people back into history.

Harley alludes to this transformation from an insubstantial subject to a substantial, discursive agent early on in the narrative: “And it was there, in a dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial” (28). The use of the word “settle”, as in the European sense of obtaining a particular plot of land, is now realigned with Harley finding purpose and place.

I argue that Harley’s weightlessness is not simply, as Natalie Quinlivan argues, a symbol of “placelessness” (2014, 3) in terms of representing his dislocation from family and culture, but is a means for Harley to find his place. Kristyn Harman (2004), Dorothy Guest (2005), Joanne Jones (2012) and Tina Dahlberg (2013) initially perceive weightlessness as a physical manifestation of Harley’s disconnection, but concede that the transformative possibilities of his ability, in terms of gaining new vision and insights, are the means through which he can reconnect with his culture and identity. As I outline below, Harley’s creation of a substantial self develops through his creative acts: singing, writing and storytelling, which together enable the representation of an inclusive history.

**Rising Seeds: Symbols of Presence and Preservation**

Unlike his grandfather Ernest, whose gaze seeks something to possess and own (Scott, 52–53), the floating Harley at first sees as European grammar then shifts to the implicitly hopeful representations of seeds, stars and dot paintings:

> As for the joists. I hooked my toes beneath one, and stayed. I thought I was the only one. I thought it was just me – a solitary full stop.

> Or a seed. I know now there are many of us, rising. Like seeds, we move across and dot the daytime sky. More and more of us, like stars we make the night sky complete.

> But back then I only felt the silence... (109).

The language of ‘rising’ and its impression of weightlessness is itself hopeful as it reconfigures the earlier weightlessness represented as aimless and isolating. The
image also invokes lightness and escape. Like the ripened ovules of plants that germinate new plant life, the seed metaphor is another marker of emergent potential.

The seeds, stars and the “solitary full stop” (109) suggest both convergence and permanence. That is, Harley’s “full stop” denotes the Western written word and the ways in which Aboriginality was prescribed, fractionalised and silenced in the history books. The image is in turn linked to the nature metaphors of the land (seeds and stars) associated with his Aboriginality. The description of seeds and stars as dotting the canvas of the “daytime” and “night sky” visually evokes Indigenous dot-painting patterns. Dot-painting as traditional Indigenous art includes sand, body, rock-painting and other artistic processes – all done over time – and blending with conventionally Western modes of expression (Myers, 2002, 67–68). On this basis, the scene conveys a sense of cross-cultural interaction and the crossing of paths. The dots that might form circular and linear marks and lines are much like footprints, leaving traces like a form of writing, for others to read and follow. There is a weightiness in this notion of leaving traces; not in a possessive or colonising sense, but in the way that Harley wants to make a mark so that that his ancestors’ stories will not be forgotten.

The rising seeds and stars, the morning and the night, join together, suggesting circularity and cyclicality with neither beginning nor end, only continuance. Tina Dahlberg says of this scene, “Can any reader think of seeds and stars without considering endless potential, infinite numbers, light, connection to the wider universe and the enduring mystery of the heavens?” (2013, 101). A whole universe is implied in this small fragment that not only suggests continual movement between the realms above and below, but also between the two cultures that comprise Harley’s identity. Because of the inexorable way that Harley is bound up in both cultures, he must learn to reconcile these grappling parts. Of this passage, Dahlberg notes that the seeds Harley envisions have the potential to “blend into the white world signified by the

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35 This might seem like a simplistic dichotomy, but I am not linking an indigenous person’s relationship to nature in some arcane or exotic way. Embodied relationships with land and place are as important to indigenous people today as they were before first settlement; these relationships have evolved and expanded to include urban spaces and modern experiences. In a novel that contrasts the Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships between land, people and place, I interpret in this scene a fusion of two vastly different ideological systems and cultures represented respectively in the full-stop and the seed.

36 Although Aboriginal dot-painting is sometimes mistakenly considered a traditional Indigenous technique and actually had its antecedents in the Papunya art movement in the 1970s, it is recognised as a distinctive Aboriginal style.

37 Sometimes dot-paintings are used to conceal the sacred messages within the paintings, whilst other times they are used for stylistic purposes to fill in the empty spaces and considered secondary to “cursive designs” (Myers, 67). Paul Carter describes the dots not as standing or representing something, but marking the bounds and forms of patterns (1996a, 362).

38 I will stress that this convergence does not imply the subsumption of one culture, or the erasure of differences, but an interaction between these different cosmological and cultural systems.
daytime sky, and to complete the Aboriginal world signified by the night sky” (42). Using this figurative imagery of seeds and stars, in conjunction with Harley’s physical rising into the air, the scene gives a glimpse of the latent possibilities and opportunities open to him.

Scott uses another seed metaphor to illustrate the cultures that constitute Harley’s identity and which impart a sense of gravitas to Harley’s life. Harley’s Uncle Jack talks of “white seed in black ground. Black seed in white ground” (Scott, 449), a mixed-race reference that, in this case, explicitly refers to Harley’s impregnation of a non-Indigenous and an Aboriginal woman before a car crash renders him impotent.39 By thinking of people of mixed ancestry like himself as seeds, and by planting his own in Aboriginal and white women, Harley embeds himself in Aboriginal and white Australian country. When Harley’s path intersects with these women years later, he sees their children as “Doors opening” and as “Me” and “Us” (448, 449). The mothers help him to reconcile himself “to what it means to be so strangely uplifted; one who hovers, and need only touch the ground lightly” (459). In this manner, Harley anchors himself to both past and future, even as his body continues to hover.

A number of critics have aligned Harley’s floating with an incapacity or hindrance to becoming grounded or anchored (Sanders 2008; Reeve 2012). Though these critics offer no definition, they imply that being anchored and grounded denotes a sense of connection, belonging and stability. I agree with this definition; however, while they argue that Harley is eventually anchored through his writing project, singing and storytelling, they separate this achievement from his weightlessness. Cathryne Sanders also notes how Harley uses the “structural elements of the house” (115) to help himself become anchored, which suggests that Harley cannot be anchored unless his feet are securely on the ground. Other critics have been more optimistic that such anchoring is represented as possible in the novel in spite of Harley’s floating ability, and that his ability helps him face “grounded life” (Jones, 122, 2012). As Harley retains his levitating ability, my reading of Harley’s experience is that his weightlessness is necessary to his grounded and anchored existence.

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39 Jack’s comment can be interpreted as signalling the wider, complicated nature of race relations instigated at first contact.
Embodied Experiences: Becoming Substantial

As a teenager, Harley has a chip on his shoulder that induces reckless behaviour and self-contempt. At this time, he tells himself: “If I am to be so light, well, so be it. But let me at learn how to adopt a certain weightiness of manner, and not always approach things with levity” (148). Considering weight as gravitas, the reader can perceive Harley’s weightiness in a positive manner. There is a noticeable shift in his outlook as he comprehends the weight of his bigger project: “it was not purely mindless, this floating on the breeze. It required concentration, and I chose it not just for the fun. . . .” (163). Harley’s weightiness is akin then to accepting responsibility compared to his earlier admission that, when floating, he “let his mind go blank” (12).

Harley’s uncles often serve as his guides along to their history and the places of their pasts (110–112, 160–165, 322–324, 350–384, 422–448). As the floating Harley can view the land from a logistically ‘higher’ aerial perspective, he can also view the land, sea and contours of the earth in a way that connects them. It is then that he begins to experience a connection to place through his body; a sense of substantiality achieved not simply through rising, but through his union with the sky, presented to the reader as symbolic of the positive loss of Western individualism. As Harley describes, “sometimes the sky lightened so suddenly as the sun appeared out there that I felt as if my skull had opened, been peeled back, and I was gone, merged with that sky” (190). This scene is reminiscent of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodiment which entails the awareness of one’s bodily being in relation to the world: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. . . .” (2002, 162). According to Merleau-Ponty, an individual’s perception and experience of external reality is bound up in their bodily experiences of the physical world (Turner, 2001, 14).

The Cartesian philosophy of the cogito positions the mind as distinct from the body, but Merleau-Ponty grounds perception in the “experienced and experiencing body” (Lyon and Barbalet, 1994, 60), and this is relevant to reading Benang. Merleau-Ponty locates the mutual engagement of mind, body and world as the ground of experience

I would like to stress that this discussion of Indigenous Australians living in a non-interventionist affinity with land and nature does not assume some archaic and exotic understanding of Indigenous relationships with land, but stresses the importance of ‘country’ and place. Harley’s upbringing deprived him of Dreaming stories, customs, law and understandings which expressed the oneness of concepts like mind, body, spirit, nature, country, name and totem. Without these foundations, this deprivation fostered a fragmented sense of self and unbelonging in his urban and natural environments. It was only as his uncles recounted stories and introduced Harley to places, friends and relatives that he gains new insights into his Indigenous culture and heritage.
In other words, it is embodiment realised through the interaction between the immanent, corporeal body and the transcendent consciousness, that one engages with and appreciates the world (Mearleau-Ponty, 2002, 87). Following Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodiment, Franca Tamisari discusses the Australian Yolngu Indigenous people’s knowledge and vision, describing their vision as “the intertwining of body and world through which meanings are created and negotiated” (1992, 245). In this sense, vision is not just about seeing, but concerns the “ontological nature of perception” (252), the engagement with self and world, and becoming knowledgeable. As Harley merges with the environment, this is his vision as he gains and absorbs the environment through mind, body and consciousness. Indigenous Australian relationships to land, and every animate and inanimate feature of the land, has such an embodied dimension as people, past and present, are envisaged as immersed in the living system of the cosmos and the natural world (Hume, 2002, 26).

The sense of place as experienced through the body, and the body as experienced through place, is reminiscent of Paul Cezanne’s epigraph: “The landscape thinks itself in me . . . and I am its consciousness” (cited in Tamisari, 1992, 252). This is Harley’s experience as his weightlessness changes his way of being in the world.

Harley learns that being grounded is an embodied experience that changes his sense of self and of being in the world; it is a psychological, physical and spiritual experience. While Harley may have initially believed that his physical weightlessness marked his rootlessness, being grounded transcends his corporeal reality. As Harley’s weightlessness shows him connecting with country, it is an ultimately positive gift that enables him to pass on knowledge from an uplifted position (454).

**Light Like a Bird: Vision and Responsibility**

After Harley recognises that his capacity to levitate grants him vision – Indigenous knowledge, aerial and embodied perspectives – and a means to communicate to his Nyoongar community, his realisation is juxtaposed with a hovering bird. The lightness in the scene not only highlights Harley’s embodied experience of the world, but shows his flight and transcendence from colonial culture. As a father, Harley traces the tracks

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41 The idea of Indigenous embodiment is captured throughout Kakadu elder Bill Neidjie’s story: “Listen carefully this,” he says, “you can hear me. I’m telling you because earth just like mother and father or brother of you. That tree same thing. Your body, my body I suppose, I’m same as you . . . anyone” (1989, 3).
of his ancestors to show his children the renamed Dolphin Cove, a special place near Dubitj Creek. At the cove, they observe the hovering bird:

A grey and brown bird, mottled and immature, it hung in the air, intent on something below it and, constantly adjusting itself, remained in position despite the blustering, shifting and buckling air which it rode (453–454).

The image suggests that Harley’s newfound traits are represented by this juvenile bird; focused, deep in purposeful concentration, strong, even as the wind threatens to weaken its resolve. The bird’s refusal to surrender to the forces of the wind is reflective of Harley’s conviction that he is a Nyoongar man with responsibility and purpose to his children, family and community. The choice of words Scott employs to describe the bird’s movements “dipping, rising, remaining” (454) echoes Benang’s theme of continuation and survival. The dipping represents the wounded spirits and cultural genocide of Indigenous characters who fall victim to colonisation. The rising and remaining signifies the fortitude of Indigenous people who continue to resist the whitewashing of their culture. This scene is reminiscent of French poet Paul Valery’s comment that: “One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather” (cited in Calvino, 1988, 16). In other words, feathers are a symbol for lightness, but the bird is a more appropriate metaphor as feathers are slaves to the wind, and only parts of a whole. In comparison, birds read and use the wind, and soar through the air with purpose.

Shortly after Harley observes the hovering sea-bird, he finds himself airborne, light like a bird, and looking down over his family (454). He releases a haunting cry that comes deep from his soul, much like the curlew cry that occurs throughout the novel (282, 285, 382). The poignant scene depicts his weightlessness as painful, but vital; a process which enables him to sing out the grief and joy of his oppressed people and their continuing struggle. It is a scene that is in consonance with Australian Indigenous lawyer and writer Terri Janke’s observation that “Indigenous stories . . . are a cultural code, a passport, an inheritance and treasures for people who have faced near devastation” (2009, 3). Prior to visiting Dolphin Cove, the mothers of Harley’s children remind him that his story must centre on “place, and what has grown from it” (452). The power of their words, and of place, becomes manifest. Harley is not only cognisant of how the hovering bird listened and observed, but his airborne experience and gift of elevation endows him with an acute awareness of his environment. “That was the
spirit in the land talking to you,” Jack tells Harley. “That is what Aboriginal People see” (455).

Footprints: Permanence, Connection and Continuance

In contrast to the oppressive weightiness associated with white characters and their conquest of land and bodies, there is a positive weightiness in scenes where Indigenous characters leave footprints in the sand or traces of themselves in the environment. Footprints are evidence of existence as well as of journeys taken on the ground, a tell-tale sign of where something or someone has been and where they are going. In this sense, there are parallels between the footprints and the seeds and dots discussed earlier. The image of the footprint has particular import in a story about retracing steps and forging new paths. It is particularly fitting that footprints occur in several scenes as symbols of Indigenous characters overcoming impermanence. I will discuss the interplay between the weight of their footsteps and the lightness in their contact with the ground as a symbol of survival and continuance.

Throughout Benang, several Indigenous characters mark and then retrace their tracks “to renew footprints” (243). This behaviour is a (re)assertion of Indigenous presence in terms of connection to place and world. As such, Jack is “elated” to see the indents of his footprints and their absence: he “liked to judge how far the tide and waves would come during the day, and then see, in the afternoon, the evidence of where he must’ve flown for a while before the marks in the sand resumed” (259). Jack’s spirituality and Indigenous identity is affirmed as he reads the smooth sand marking his flight before he recommences his journey on the ground. In this tranquil scene, Jack tramps backwards through his tracks “concentrating on getting his weight right so that the marks would still read of forward movement” (260). The emphasis on weight, backtracking and achieving the right weight distribution is suggestive of his

42 Though it has no bearing on this discussion, it is worth noting that the footprint is also a reference to the iconic moment in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) where the shipwrecked protagonist discovers a single footprint on his deserted island. The footprint breaches Crusoe’s private oasis and completely alters his mentality. The footprint is a signature of presence (friend, foe, the devil?) but, unable to explain what the impression means without another print, Crusoe is filled with apprehension and projects his fears onto the single marking on the ground. While the scene has been interpreted in various ways for three centuries, it is also seen as a symbol of an ecological and colonial footprint on the wild, untouched environment (Carter, 1996a, 10–12).
trawling the archives and family history with Harley to re-establish a link to country. The notion of forward movement also supports the theme of continuance.43

It is imperative to note that Jack’s literal backtracking might also imply that he is trying to obscure the direction of his path. The technique of backtracking can refer to covering up one’s traces, as seen in Richard Wilke’s novel *Bulmurn: A Swan River Nyoongar* (1995), where the Nyoongar character Bulmurn evades white authorities and Aboriginal trackers by retracing “his tracks in reverse” (147). In *Benang*, as Indigenous people are burdened by white society, Jack’s act can be read as a measure to protect himself. In this sense, his footprints can be read as a marker of absence as well as permanence.

In the mornings and afternoons, Jack’s sister Kathleen walks along the same soft sand so “that each footprint was surrounded, before and after, by its companions going the opposite way” (259). The weightiness associated with Jack’s and Kathleen’s footsteps are inclusive and indicative of connection; this is suggested in the way that Kathleen takes the same path “so carefully” (259) and Jack’s deep concentration as he embosses the sand (260). The weight of their movements are in stark contrast to the weightiness of white characters who leave marks and imprints of different, and generally egocentric, kinds.44 As Paul Carter remarks, “but what is the object of the colonists’ ‘first step’? It is to mark a line in the ground, to open a clearing, to remove obstacles” (1996b, 24). Indigenous footprints represent what Francesca Veronesi calls a “performative” (2008, 17) approach to place-making and what Deborah Rose refers to as “a signature of ecological coherence, human care and mutual life-giving” (2004, 177). In this sense, there is a gentle lightness in the Indigenous characters’ tread. These representations are in contrast to Rose’s definition of a European footprint that signifies a “quantifiable measure of impact” (177). Rather than signifying occupancy and ownership, therefore, the Nyoongar footprints infuse the sand with the rhythms and resonances of their personal stories, and are illustrative of a continuance that does not require them to mark the land by their presence, yet which also refuses cultural erasure. The novel’s representation of Indigenous characters’ footprints associated with connection accords with Carter’s understanding of footprints as “maintaining a balanced rhythm with the ground” (1996a, 359). In this sense, there is a gentle, harmonious weightlessness in the Indigenous characters’ tread. For Carter, there is

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43 Jack’s preoccupation with leaving a trace is also captured in his dream of chalk moving across a black board and his observation that chalk always leaves a trail of powder, however small or insignificant (260).

44 I refer here to ecological footprints, conquests of people and places through the implementation of laws and boundaries, naming, classification and cartographic systems and general imperialistic impulses.
something organic and natural about surfaces retaining traces of the foot as they are less like the artificial names and symbols on maps (1996a, 360). In modern societies, the ground is levelled to accommodate bitumen roads and sidewalks, essentially smothering the ground in tar and cement. In contrast, footprints reflect “impressions” rather than “stamps” (Ingold and Vergunst cited in Nicolás Salazar Sutil, 2015, 129) and, from this perspective, there is a certain lightness to the footprint in its reflection of an ecological consciousness. On a more profound level, in Carter’s lexicon, they are symbiotic with the land insofar as they illustrate a dialogue between foot and ground and, by extension, between the person and place. The operative words here are ‘dialogue’ and ‘place’, denoting a dynamic relationship which is indicative of Indigenous relations with country “as a space manifold whose history is composed of vibrating tracks, crossing through and over each other” (Carter, 1996a, 360). These intersecting tracks allude to the innumerable stories, histories and journeys of Indigenous people. Franca Tamisari’s view is that the “image of the footprint [is] a synthesis of living body, vision and movement, perception and intentionality” (1992, 249). In other words, footprints represent embodied experiences which are, as mentioned, a hallmark of Australian Indigenous cosmological conceptions of the world.

In Yolngu Dreaming mythology, the moment Ancestral Beings walked across the landscape, the earth was imbued with life and meaning as they left various visible marks and imprints in their wake (Magowan, 2005, 67). In Yolngu languages the terms djalkiri and luku, translating to ‘foot’ and, by extension, ‘footprint’ and ‘step’ (Tamisari, 250), denote visible and invisible manifestations of Ancestral knowledge. Yolngu law and knowledge derives from such ancestral steps and the profundity of the footprint rests on its “(re)embodiment of ancestral presence” (262). Djalkiri and luku therefore are not only markers of Ancestral steps, Dreaming tracks and songlines, but also represent Aboriginal systems of spatial knowledge, the fusion of place and body through movement, the connections between people and place and the ways in which one navigates life. In Benang, the footprints of the Indigenous characters signify both “bodily participation in the world” (Tamisari and Wallace, 2006, 219) as well as an embodied consciousness that transcends visibility.

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45 See Fiona Magowan, 2005, ‘Dancing into Film: Exploring Yolngu motion, ritual and cosmology in the Yirrkala film project’, in Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, Song and Dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land, Fiona Magowan & Karl Neuenfeldt (eds.), Canberra ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press. Magowan asserts that footprints include the “traces and resonances of distinctive personalities visible in the design, colour, shape and form of the country” (65).
At the end of the novel, the notion of following in the footsteps of the ancestors re-emerges as Harley walks hand in hand with his children over lichen-coated granite outcrops. He follows a section where the lichen wears thin because he knows that this is where his ancestors have walked before, their footsteps wearing the lichen thin and marking a path for them to follow to the bay that is sacred to his family. Harley’s fear as a child was that his status as the first white man at the end of a long line of people represented cultural genocide (446). However, as he observes the footprints left by his own children, and notes that his own are nearly as deep as theirs, he recognises his substantiability and appreciates, in metaphoric reference to the English language, that he is not a lonely period at the end of a sentence (452). The implication is that his story and his culture will endure and his children’s descendants might one day walk along this historical path. Even Harley’s grandmother Topsy, whose life and death was marked by tragedy “left her clear footprints in the sand” (375) before passing away. The novel that commenced with Harley hovering above the smoke of a fire “leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash” and hearing “the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating” (7) ends with Harley hovering above the same fire, alluding to the other stories that have yet to be told and to the future of his culture: “We are still here, Benang” (495).

In this chapter I have demonstrated how images of weightlessness and weightiness convey a sense hope and possibility for Australian Indigenous culture. In consonance with the themes of renewal and continuance of Indigenous sovereignty, subjectivity and culture, the images manifest through and in association with the motifs of nature, Indigenous art and song through Harley’s embodied connection to his environment. This reading contrasts to the previous chapter’s focus on the alienating associations between the concepts and the characters’ experiences. In essence, the images of weightlessness and weightiness work to articulate a holistic way of being in the world and link the characters to place. Compared to previous interpretations of Benang, my reading prizes the complexities of weightlessness and weightiness as they infuse various scenes and connect to different characters, offering the reader a fresh position to examine Harley’s family history and personal transformation.
CONCLUSION

While *Benang* has garnered much critical attention since its publication, my analysis through the prism of weightlessness and weightiness offers a fresh perspective. This thesis arose out of a desire to illustrate that weightlessness was not exclusively related to Harley’s ability to levitate. From these foundations, I discovered that the prevalent images of weightlessness and weightiness and their unique significations, introduced a new level of complexity to a reading of *Benang*. The critics were right to align inauthenticity with weightlessness and substantiality with weight, however, this dichotomous analysis did not allow for the full range of complex representations and associations to be properly understood. Through a close reading, I have found that these two concepts help articulate the novel’s representation of the complexities of Indigenous identities in relation to place and spirituality. Moreover, the images interrogate and invert the Eurocentric rationale underlying pejorative eugenicist discourses and policies of twentieth century Australia.

As discussed in Chapter One, the limitations inherent in the critical responses to *Benang* engendered my discussion of the complexities of weightlessness and weightiness in the novel. Chapter Two revealed the negative configurations of weightlessness and weightiness. Unlike the critics who perceived weightlessness as only communicating Harley’s lack of substance, my reading unpacked the images with regard to several characters. In relation to Will’s light and heavy gait, for instance, the interplay of weightlessness and weightiness illuminated his problems of mixed parentage and subsequent identity crisis. Will’s odd gait – his light-footedness and heavy-footedness – effectively reference the double-standards of a society that was assimilationist, segregationist and blind to the consequences of its ideology.

From an alternative perspective, Ernest’s weightlessness and weightiness resonate with ideas informing Paul Carter’s theory of groundlessness which underpins Western civilisation’s attitude toward the mapping and ownership of land and place. The weightlessness and weightiness attached to Ernest produce an oppressiveness associated with the white authorities and pioneers who traversed and exploited the land, displaced its resources and original inhabitants, stamped names onto places, passed contradictory laws, wrote themselves into founding narratives and histories, and projected their fears and fantasies onto the people and places they subdued. Coupled with the nomadic weightlessness inherent in their restless movement over
the earth, the images in *Benang* capture the colonists’ attempts to ground themselves by controlling land, bodies and discourses. The bleak representations of weightlessness and weightiness discussed in this chapter stress the inherent contradictions of white culture’s desire and disavowal for proximity with Aboriginal people, and how this affected each generation of Indigenous characters.

Chapter Three examines the work of positive and fluid representations and instances of weightlessness and weightiness. These hopeful images have not been attributed to *Benang* by critics, and I demonstrate their importance and complexity in relation to representing Indigenous subjectivity. Broadly, the images signify an Indigenous embodied connection to place and history, stemming from various Indigenous characters’ sensitivity to the holistic interconnectedness of the world. The positive motifs of rising seeds, dots, the hovering bird and footprints in the sand together express the promise of cultural continuation and a rejection of cultural erasure.

Similar hopeful impressions are evoked in Harley’s transformation from an aimlessly drifting adolescent wrestling with his identity, to a Nyoongar man who perceives his ability to float as a gift enabling him to experience the inextricable connectedness of people and place. In overcoming the practical problems of his uplifted status, Harley’s elevation grants him vision, responsibility and ultimately engenders his connection to his Indigenous culture. The weight associated with his responsibility to sing to and connect with his people endows him with purpose. Ultimately, in turning his gaze to the future, his weightlessness becomes a flight from the oppressive weight of the white world. Harley once believed that he represented cultural genocide, but admits he had it wrong: “It is a continuation. It is a survival” (178).

This thesis has examined critical readings of Kim Scott’s *Benang*, challenging dichotomous understandings of weightlessness and weightiness and, by association, notions of anchoring and grounding. As I have shown, the protagonist eventually experiences connection to place through his body and spirit even as he is suspended in mid-air, and he is therefore able to anchor himself through his increasing sensitivity and openness to Nyoongar culture. White colonising culture, on the other hand, is represented as groundless and unanchored. Within the constraints of thesis length, my close-reading allowed for an in-depth analysis of particular characters and scenes. The
dissertation shows that Benang, as a complex metafictional, historical Indigenous novel, continues to be both rich and relevant. My thesis focus on interpretations, issues and representations of weightlessness and weightiness potentially adds a different dimension to the reading of Indigenous literature. The implication is that there is further scope for critical work to be undertaken on the novel, and that it will continue to confront readers with its complex portrayal of Indigenous experiences in Australian history.
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APPENDIX

Supporting Characters

Coolman, Daniel
Daniel is the Irish-born husband of Harriette and a pioneering founder of Gebalup, a fictional town located in the South-west region of Western Australia. He is an obese, lazy man who “provided the appearance of working” (Scott, 56) while Harriette supported the family.

Coolman, Harriette
Harriette is the daughter of Fanny Benang and Sandy One Mason and the Nyoongar wife to pioneering Irishman Daniel Coolman. (Her sister, Dinah, marries Daniel's twin, Patrick Coolman.) Harriette is portrayed as a strong woman connected to her Indigenous roots who endeavours to instil a sense of cultural pride in her son, Will Coolman.

Coolman, Will
Will is the ‘quadroon’ (26) son of Irishman Daniel Coolman and Nyoongar Harriette, and Harley’s uncle. As a fair-skinned Nyoongar, he shuns his Aboriginality as a child; however, as an adult he tries to reconcile the conflicting halves of his identity. As he helps Harley discover his heritage, he finds himself learning about and reconnecting with his Nyoongar culture.

Hall (referred to as Constable and, later, Sergeant Hall)
Hall is a local policeman in Gebalup and a father-figure to his Nyoongar domestic, Kathleen. He is a by-the-book officer, who struggles to think of Indigenous people beyond their skin hues or assigned fractional labels. While always referring to Kathleen in fatherly terms (72), it is insinuated that he father’s Kathleen’s daughter, Topsy (133).

Jack (also known as Jack Chatalong or simply Chatalong)
Jack is the biological son of Dinah but is raised by his adoptive grandparents, Sandy One Mason and Fanny Benang. Jack is the darker-skinned cousin of Will and Harley’s talkative uncle, hence the name ‘Chatalong’. Alongside Will, he guides Harley along many journeys so that his nephew can reunite with family, and learn about their shared Indigenous culture. He never forgoes his Nyoongar identity, but nonetheless experiences injustices and double-standards because of it.

Mason, Fanny Benang
Fanny is the Nyoongar wife of Sandy One Mason and Harley’s great-great grandmother. She is referred to variously as Pinyan, Benang, Wonyin and Winnery in the various records examined by Harley (493).

Mason, Kathleen
Kathleen is possibly the daughter of Dinah (335) and sister to Jack, who is also taken in by Sandy One and Fanny. Originally a domestic and daughter-figure to local police officer Sergeant Hall, she later becomes Ernest’s first Nyoongar wife. She is Harley’s great-grandmother.
Mason, Sandy One
Sandy One Mason is the white husband of Fanny Benang and one of the few non-Indigenous men in Benang who marries a Nyoongar woman for love rather than opportunity. Sandy One is the father of Sandy Two and Harley’s great-great grandfather. Towards the end of the narrative it is intimated that Sandy One is part-Indigenous (483-484), which implies that Ernest did not create the “first white man born” (10) after all.

Mason, Sandy Two
Sandy Two Mason is the half-caste son of Fanny and Sandy One. He works for Hall as a native tracker when he is a boy, but when he passes away as an old man is denied the rights afforded to white Australians. He is the uncle of Will Coolman.

Scat, Ernest Solomon
Ernest is Harley’s paternal grandfather; a Scottish born nightsoil worker who immigrates to Australia in the 1920s. His lust for and disavowal of ‘coloured’ flesh begins with his ‘sprees’ (98-99) – a euphemism for rape – on local Indigenous missions. His focus soon shifts to a personal pseudo-scientific project to sire a white son, inspired by the eugenic and assimilation discourses propounded by Australia’s historical Chief Protector of Aborigines, Auber Octavius Neville. Ernest is not only a devotee but the fictional cousin of Neville in Benang and methodically documents the details of his project and conquests. After decades of exploiting, abusing and discarding Nyoongar people (97), he suffers a stroke that renders him voiceless, partially-paralysed and dependent on Harley.

Scat, Tommy
Tommy is the son of Topsy and Ernest, and Harley’s father. He relinquishes young Harley to Ernest to raise and, as a result, Harley harbours much pent up resentment and rage toward his father (367). Tommy would have been considered legally white had it not been for a change in legislation before he was born. Ernest’s abuse takes its toll on Tommy, leading him to forfeit his gift with words and song and with his Nyoongar culture. He is, as Jack describes, “a split man” (422). After Tommy reunites with Harley decades later, the pair are involved in a car crash and Tommy does not survive.

Topsy
Topsy is the daughter of Kathleen, possibly fathered by Sergeant Hall. When Ernest tires of Kathleen, he takes Topsy as his second wife. She is given bleach baths to maintain her whiteness and purity and bears Ernest a son, Tommy, Harley’s father. She is Harley’s grandmother.