

## **Sea, Salt, Sand: The Billowing of *Benang* in Kim Scott's Country**

*Samuel J. Cox*

I tell you that I am part of a much older story, one of a perpetual billowing from  
the sea, with its rhythm of return, return, and remain.

Kim Scott, *Benang*.

The Barrens. Named barren by Eyre, these 'mountains' now ironically lie in a National Park internationally recognised for its biodiversity: the Fitzgerald Biosphere. The Australian landscape is full of these absurdities, the result of unseeing European eyes, and yet the name carries a heft, which defies its intended meaning. Perhaps it is the vocal interplay with barons, and the slippage in between. Both words arrived across the seas, but the reality of these hills pushes back. Although the size of hills, they are named mountains for how they govern over the surrounding country. They are remnants of a continental ancien regime: Gondwanaland. Once these mountains were sand, then sandstone, before the crushing power of Antarctica and Australia colliding turned sandstone into the tough quartzite of the barrens, which have endured nigh on a billion years. Barons indeed. They are the aristocrats of this landscape, the elders. This is Noongar Country, Wirlomin Country, and for readers of his writing, Kim Scott's Country.

The sea is the lifeblood of this region, at the intermixing of the southern waters and the Leeuwin current which flows down the West Coast of Western Australia, the only southern flowing current in the Southern Hemisphere. While other currents in the south flow up from southern waters to bring nutrient rich cold water to warm, here the warm water flows south. Not as rich, but it is rich enough for the sea life it sustains down the West Australian coast, and viewing it comparatively is perhaps part of the deficit thinking which defines the settler-colonial view onto Australia; both land and sea; J.M. McArthur's *The Default Country* which is defined by 'discrepancies' and 'absences' (26). The dust flowing out across North West Australia must be an important source for this current from drier regions, carrying some of those sediments south. Along the southern coast of Australia there is the mixing of northern and southern; icy and vitalising Antarctic upwellings meet the warm waters driven

by the Leeuwin. You would struggle to find a more diverse stretch of coastline on earth, a feature marked by the large number of National Parks: from Cape Arid on the edge of the Nullarbor and Cape La Grand National Park near Esperance, to Stokes and Fitzgerald River National Parks, to the far-reaching bays of Albany and the tall forests of Walpole-Nornalup in the west.

Climbing up the windswept East Mount Barren, the gusts coming off the coast are cool and powerful; the day is overcast but the rain holds off. The vegetation is dense, low lying - no trees, but banksia abound. In his journal entry near Mount Barren, Eyre pondered if a 'more wretched looking country never existed.' The soils are old and would geologically be classified as poor and infertile, but it is precisely that infertility and the age of this land which has led to the proliferation of the region's internationally recognised biodiversity. This is the problem with deficit thinking; it judges not what is here but what is missing and by a set of criteria largely incompatible with the land.

Towards the top the stone comes out at an oblique, almost vertical, angle. In one place a shard of stone has broken off and fallen flat to lie horizontal in front of another near vertical section forming what resembles a stone throne. Near the peak where the smoothly jagged quartzite exposes itself roughly in many places, I touch grey stone: it is lightly cool to the touch and has an unexpected smoothness and a feeling of indescribable depth. Jung once wrote of stone being comparable to that timeless other within himself: what he defined as the collective unconscious, or what Tyson Yunkaporta understands in *Sand Talk*, through the prism of Indigenous ontology, as the ancestor mind.



Reaching the peak of East Mount Barren, the view back across the coast is spectacular. This is the coastline which Kim Scott's *Benang* is undoubtedly centred on and emerges out of. Travelling this country, abstractions of coast and sand out of his writing form and reform into reality. I can see much of it now from this vantage point. Hopetoun, the seaside town corresponds to Wirlup Haven, having the failed railway to Ravensthorpe or in *Benang*, Gedalup, but that is out of sight from here. Beyond Hopetoun are the sandy bays, dunes, and beaches which Scott evokes so vividly, stretching down the coast to Mason Bay and if we went far enough, Fanny Cove in Stokes National Park. These places appear to correspond to the names and stories of Sandy Mason and his partner, the matriarch who ties the spiralling novel together, Fanny Benang. In more ways than one, *Benang* has surfaced out of this sea and land country.

After descending, I drive a little further into the park, down to the inlet into which the Hammersley River feeds. Like so many rivers in Australia it is ephemeral. Walking out onto the bed of the inlet, it is salt encrusted, the water heavily saline. To the west Whoogarup Range dominate the view, as the sun breaches the clouds. In the water, little islands of salt look like snow, mirroring the mounds of the Range in the distance.



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Hopetoun is a little windswept place. One of the roads is called Scott Street. In *Benang*, Scott's narrator Harley has a grandfather, the aptly named Ernest Scat, who retires to Wirlup Haven. Ern's house has a eucalyptus whose 'roots threatened the foundations...[b]urn it, dig out its roots' (107).

Surrounding Hopetoun to the east and inland are sand dunes, mallee and a number of small lakes, creeks and inlets. Driving down a track which lies upon the old railway track to Ravensthorpe, the mallee is 'brazenly red' (179), and coming to a lake there is an old, ruined shepherd's hut surrounded by paper bark trees.

In a linear retelling I continue down the coast, but echoing *Benang's* circling, billowing narrative we do not follow that path yet; our road takes us along the old railway line to Ravensthorpe, which was torn up long ago.

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Ravensthorpe is where Scott's Ernest Scat buys land, in the expectation that the railway will be extended. At the Ravensthorpe visitor centre, I buy two little books on the history of the long since gone railway line and jetty of Hopetoun, and another on *Birds of Western Australia*. In both smaller books and the modest community museum there are no overt signs of the dark history *Benang* draws upon, but it feels less like an all-powerful colonial history than a slightly sad little town clinging on what they can amidst a sense of precarity.

Dry winds, sun, no water. Ern rattled across a land rapidly becoming desert. Cleared of trees, its skin blew away... fluids rose to the raw surface, and they were thick and salty... The farms and farmers; receding. The railway line; shrivelling back to some centre. He was surrounded by cleared land, by sand; but there was always, somewhere, some tight and curling bush, and still-secret waterholes. (116)

Salty fluids rising in defiance, still-secret waterholes, water and wild places offer sites of resistance and survival in *Benang*, a connection Scott goes on to make even more explicit on the following page:

These people of the land, said citizens everywhere, they are like the land, they are treacherous. Something to be tamed, subdued, harnessed, made to work.  
(117)

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth has identified how the Western Australian wheatbelt is visible from space, stretching from Geraldton to Esperance. This also marks the approximate extent of Noongar lands.

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Along the road to Bremer Bay and Albany, not far out of Ravensthorpe lies Kukenarup memorial, a memorial for the massacre of Noongar people by the Dunn brothers, on Cocanarup homestead. In *Benang* this massacre is committed by the Done family and witnessed by Fanny (Benang) and Sandy Mason. I walk around the short trail reading the words of descendants of those killed. There is an eerie quietness, and it is overcast until the clouds open dramatically above as I circle back to the start. Unexpectedly, some of Kim Scott's words, in both Noongar and English, are inscribed on one of the two eagle wings which frame the entrance. They end with:

*Now you are here.*

*Listen. Breathe.*

\* \* \*

Bremer Bay is a coastal town on the opposite side of Fitzgerald River from Hopetoun. Migratory water birds such as oystercatchers, plovers and egrets frequent the inlet. Climbing a hill to watch the sunset, I am suddenly looking back across the inlet and the beach, towards the West Barrens and down the coast towards Hopetoun, far out of sight. Bremer Bay might correspond to the *Benang*'s Kylie Bay, though it may be further east. Once again, I am mystified at how anyone could ever think this region barren.

One bird I do not see or hear the uncanny calls of is the curlew. The bird book I picked up in Ravensthorpe tells me the Bush Stone-curlew has disappeared from much of the wheatbelt. From the opening page of *Benang* the curlew is a recurring presence: at times haunting, the 'death bird' (2), at others inspiring, 'walking proud' (283), and always with an element of mystery, its story intertwined intimately with Fanny's family and people.



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Albany. Recollections of *That Deadman Dance*. I have read that the characters of Binyan and Jak Tar are iterations of Fanny Benang, and Sandy Mason in his whaling days, intertwining the two works. I enter a local second-hand bookshop, and find Kim Scott's most recent novel, *Taboo* (2017), which I tried to source in Adelaide before leaving. I explain this to the bookseller, explaining my primary impulse for travelling this region is Kim Scott's writing. She tells me that this is the first copy of *Taboo* they have had, and it only came in the day before, elaborating that I was clearly meant to have it.

At the Museum of the Great Southern I find another book, *Albany: an antipodean Arcadia* and, to my surprise, the final chapter is penned by Kim Scott: "King George Sounds." This short chapter has some ideas which swirl in my head.

But to go forward, I must cycle back; recentre.

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Driving along down the coast from Hopetoun, it feels wild country, 'the dunes and the tossing sea' Scott describes (242) still dominate and nature reserves remain, the windswept coast

seemingly hardest to tame. Campsites lie along the road and, I find, in the dunes as I walk down to the beach, but they are empty. Scott describes Fanny's grandson Jack Chatalong walking along these sands to reach Wirlup Haven. Further along a black snake slithers across the road, disappearing back into the dunes.

Standing on Mason Bay, I am confronted by, as Scott describes, 'glare and salt haze' (242) of the blowing sea, which blurs my vision. Heavy weather has blown in seaweed, and I find a seahorse on the sand. Salt flecks, part of this haze, are picked up off the ocean, as dust and carried inland. We do not think oceanic dust, but Hannah Holmes explains in *The Secret Life of Dust* that worldwide billions of tonnes of these flecks become dust. The prevailing weather systems form a dust pathway which moves inland and then eastward and across the Nullarbor, somewhat mirroring my own journey in reverse. Pull down the tough trees and plants and this salt becomes a problem.

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In the first half of last century, the English-born Professor Cowling somewhat famously gave his grim outlook on "The Future of Australian Literature" because the place lacked the ruins and castles of Europe. The ruins and history were there, in fact, though in the case of Aboriginal culture they were destroyed, ignored or overlooked. The greatest of these ruins are the land itself, the fragments of which are not dead or inert but constantly regathering and reforming: the ancient becoming young again. The great irony was, the land, the people and the stories which intertwined both, were of an age and a lineage which make Cowling's ruins appear frivolous and temporaneous, having all the permanency of a mayfly.

In his chapter "King George Sounds", Scott quotes Noel Pearson's response to Rachel Perkin's work on the songlines of the women of central Australia, in which he declares the culture and mythic stories of Aboriginal people to be the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and Australia's the Book of Genesis (in Scott 188; 36). These songlines, and what Pearson terms the shards of a classical culture, are also the heritage of 'non-Aboriginal Australians...and... of the world more generally' (188; 72). Ideas such as these are driving the efforts to nourish the Noongar language, exemplified by the Wirlomin Language project Kim Scott is heavily involved in. Scott relates Pearson's use of the word 'shards' to the cultural renaissance which 'followed the northern hemisphere's discovery of the shards of ancient pottery, of buried

statues and ancient language' (188). Scott proposes that here the 'stimuli are not shards of pottery or statues, but topographical features pulsing with story, song and language' (188).

In *Benang*'s spiralling epical narrative, Sandy Mason is washed upon the shore, and ultimately saved by Fanny Benang (her true name meaning tomorrow). *Benang*'s stimuli, crucial to this tomorrow spiralling out of the past, are not only the topographical; they are to be found in the call of the curlew on the wind, and the sea; the salt; the sand.

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Although I make contact with Scott, our paths do not cross this time, circling apart rather than together for now. Through *Benang* and walking this coast, I have read some of his country. I may be here guilty of a gross oversimplification when comparing the reading of the land to the reading of a book: it is a book of unfathomable complexity, in which the text itself could also be characterised as an author. And rather than one monolithic book, it is more like a library of incomprehensible age and size, with labyrinths of obscure subterranean caverns and inaccessible vaulting chambers.

This is an idea which resonates with Alexis Wright's description of the oral stories of Aboriginal people as the 'Ancient Library' and Kim Scott and Noel Pearson's idea of the shards and stimuli of a potential cultural renaissance being within the land itself. In some ways I have begun to know the country of *Benang*, in other ways I have only begun to understand my unknowing. And yet, the permeable coastline between land and text, story and country has the potential to open enriching viewpoints which have never been more important, as long as we understand the process is less like the relationship between a subject and object in a closed experiment, and rather, something less tangible yet far more open and dynamic, akin to the relationship between the billowing winds and crashing waves of this great southern coast and the shifting sands beneath.



**Samuel J. Cox** is a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide, researching representations of land in Australian Literature. Something a wanderer, in both his writing and his travels, Australian landscapes and environments have developed into a healthy/unhealthy obsession for him. He is also an avid, albeit amateur, photographer.

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