

University of Wollongong

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Teaching writing, teaching whiteness with Fiona Nicoll and Kim Scott

Abstract:

What to do as a white middle class writer attempting to write with anti-racist and decolonialist intent? Who to use as models in the classroom and how to teach the complexity of ethics and responsibility of telling stories that challenge and undermine the accepted narratives of this nation to a predominantly white middle class cohort? This paper argues that the examples exist, authors such as Kim Scott, Bruce Pascoe, Melissa Lucaschenko, Alexis Wright and Natalie Harkin amongst many others. It is a challenging process though, ethically and creatively, to use Indigenous writers as models of approaches to story when I am not Indigenous. How to discuss these challenges in a classroom? Through an examination of my semester long subject 'Writing across borders', a subject with Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* set as the spine of the course, this paper will highlight that one of the significant challenges lies in presenting this material as already in relationship to non-Indigenous students, who up until this class had seen a division between themselves and the literature they read, and Indigenous Australian writing, declaring: 'They aren't writing for me' and 'Their stories are not mine – I can't relate.' With the focus on Scott's novel came the focus on race and on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Australia and the stories told of these relationships. To support me, I drew on Fiona Nicoll's 2004 essay 'Are you calling me racist' throughout the semester as guide, mentor and backstop.

Biography:

Dr Pip Newling is a Honorary Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Wollongong where she received her Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) in 2015. She has taught into the creative writing and professional writing programs at RMIT Melbourne, University of Wollongong and Open Universities Australia. She is a published author, her publications include a memoir *Knockabout Girl* (HCA 2007), and creative nonfiction essays in *Meanjin*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Fish Anthology* (Ireland) and *Mascara Literary Review*. Her research interests centre on the significance of place to writing and the possibility of writing as an act of anti-racism.

Keywords:

Critical whiteness theory – creative writing – teaching – Kim Scott – Fiona Nicoll

Introduction

In creative writing the modeling of technique and style is commonplace. Emulate Hemingway for spare realism. Re-write Shakespeare to discover the joy of metre and cadence and humour. Dig deep for thematic parallels with Plath. But what to do as a white middle class writer attempting to write with anti-racist and decolonialist intent? Who to use as models in the classroom and how to teach the complexity of ethics and responsibility of telling stories that challenge and undermine the accepted narratives of this nation to a predominantly white middle class cohort? This paper argues that the examples exist, authors such as Kim Scott, Bruce Pascoe, Alexis Wright and Natalie Harkin amongst many others. It is a challenging process though, ethically and creatively, to use Indigenous writers as models of approaches to story when I am not Indigenous. How to discuss these challenges in a classroom?

Through an examination of my semester long subject 'Writing across borders', a subject with Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* set as the spine of the course, this paper will highlight that one of the significant challenges lies in presenting this material as already in relationship to non-Indigenous students, who up until this class had seen a division between themselves and the literature they read, and Indigenous Australian writing, declaring: 'They aren't writing for me' and 'Their stories are not mine – I can't relate.' With the focus on Scott's novel came the focus on race and on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Australia and the stories told of these relationships.

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The Backstory

Writing across borders is a core third year creative writing subject at the University of Wollongong. Dr Merlinda Bobis had designed and run the course for over five years and I was given the task of reworking it to my interests. It is a course that:

focuses on writing across borders...[and] facilitates story production that crosses different cultures and worldviews, and creative and critical approaches informed by writing techniques involving image, structure, voice, style, theme, and the fact-to-fiction transition. (UOW, Subject outline, February 2016)

To do this students attempt the following border-crossing approaches: 'cross-cultural writing, magical realism, metafiction, creative non-fiction, cross-platform writing.' Throughout the course students are prodded to 'critically reflect on the aesthetic, ethical, political implications/underpinnings of the creative process: how the self-negotiates borders to write' (UOW, 2016).

This subject appealed to me as this is what I have been attempting in my research and creative writing for some time now: writing self-consciously as a white middle class Australian woman within contemporary Australian culture about place, race and whiteness, proactively seeking forms of anti-racist and decolonialist writing.

As Fiona Nicoll posited, ‘critical whiteness theory investigates the historical rise of ‘whiteness’ as a cultural and symbolic value and basis of subject-formation’ and while the course was an attempt at bringing students to utilise and think about more complex ways of telling their stories – a creative writing course – it also provided an opportunity to bring into discussion issues of privilege, race, class and the ethics of storytelling (Nicoll, 2004).

In my revisioning of the subject, I kept many of Merlinda’s set texts, including Sujata Bhatt’s rich and layered poem ‘Search for my tongue’ (2008), Guni Kamani’s astonishing short story ‘Tears of Kamala’ (1995), Maggie Bowers on magic realism (2004), Deleuze and Guattari’s famous rhizome essay (1987) and Susan Sontag’s essay ‘A Poet’s Prose’ (2001). But what I added was an overarching text, a spine for the course, as I thought of it, Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010)

That Deadman Dance was published in 2010 and has received an array of awards. It is a retelling of first contact in the south west coastal pocket of Australia, between Noongar people and the various foreigners who washed ashore, English military and settlers, whalers from the US, France and elsewhere and of course convicts.

Anne Brewster sums up the novel, and Scott’s achievement within it in this way:

That Deadman Dance narrates the Noongar’s continuing repudiation of the settler state’s assumption of metapolitical authority over Noongar polities and land, and its attempt to incorporate Noongar people into the administrative structure and discourse of the state... the novel constitutes a powerful expression of indigenous vitality. While it attests... to the structuring violence of the settler state, the novel asserts a competing claim to place and collectivity in its depiction of Noongar bodies, language, storytelling, everyday life, cosmology, kinship ties and determinative relationality to country. (Brewster 2011: 67)

Lesson One: Familiar and unfamiliar are always in relationship

That Deadman Dance makes a particularly compelling text in the classroom as it was immediately accessible for students interested in a wide range of literature. They easily recognised many of the literary devices Scott employs and gained a sense of security, a grasp of the work quickly. This is one of Scott’s many tricks in the novel. He allows the reader to relax with the recognition of the form so as to continually usurp this comfort. As an example, chapter one opens with a well-worn line:

Once upon a time there was a captain on a wide sea, a rough windswept sea, and his good barque was pitched and tossed something cruel. (Scott 2010:9)

A number of students understood and could briefly articulate what they believed Scott was trying to convey: a moment on the frontier where there was cultural exchange, perhaps still not equal, but curious and involving real engagement, a teaching of the foreigners as much as an Anglocising of the Noongar people. They could also see that this was a different story to the accepted narrative of white invasion and settling of

this country. They could read the nuance and interstitial push and pull of the cultural negotiation Scott has embedded in every paragraph.

But many of the students viewed the work as separate to them, not being about or from their world and so not relevant to them contemporaneously. The novel existed as yet another piece of historical fiction narrating a slightly different version of colonisation. The class, for these students, became an intellectual exercise in literary experimentation and try as I might, I could not bring them back to my underlying point of the course: that these devices, meta fiction, rhizome, magic realism, cross-cultural writing, creative nonfiction, drawing from personal experience, serve to make our stories richer and more resonant and, I argue, more universal.

This division in the class expectations emerged between students who engaged with the material fully and took risks on the page, and students who wanted to know exactly what I was looking for in their assessment tasks to ensure good marks. It dawned on me (again) that uncertainty is the only constant in these discussions and I said as much. Students who were primarily desirous of good marks felt growingly dissatisfied with the experiment while the risk-takers in the class found my approach creatively rewarding and thought provoking.

Navigating this division was difficult and I don't believe I was successful. I do though take heart from Nicoll's discussion of white 'retrospective consciousness', a state where 'white subjects are often not aware at the time of what they are doing and saying in relation to Indigenous Australians and their interests' and we only reach an understanding of the effect of our words and/or actions when the hurt is called out, demonstrated by an Indigenous person. If these students never met or worked with or became acquainted with an Indigenous person, I wondered, would this course have any lasting effect? Would they ever appreciate their always-already relationship to Indigenous Australia and Indigenous writing?

The class was on tenterhooks, unfamiliar territory, for the whole 13 weeks.

Lesson two: The classroom is also the society

The students numbered thirty-six, ten young men and twenty-six women. Of them about ten were from families of cultures other than what might be defined as 'Anglo', with Eastern Europe featuring. One student was from Kenya and another had Indigenous ancestry. There was a range of experience of race and 'othering' and some students who were much more comfortable discussing and writing about their experience of 'others' than their classmates. This imbalance formed a curious tension, those who felt comfortable spoke up, on the whole the Anglo or Eastern European heritage students, and those that didn't, including one who might have had significant contributions to make, were reticent. I wondered if, by introducing whiteness into the class whether I had given students from a white privileged background licence to talk about themselves. I remembered Ruth Frankenberg's warning question, 'Why talk about whiteness, given the risk that by undertaking intellectual work on whiteness one might contribute to processes of recentering rather than decentering it, as well as reifying the term and its "inhabitants"?' (Frankenberg 1997:1), the study of whiteness

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can quickly become a reinforcement of whiteness rather than an examination.

Nicoll has something to say on this too:

... whiteness theory helps us to better understand the mechanisms of subject formation and reproduction, which consistently redirect resources in Australia (including land, employment and material culture such as fine arts) from Indigenous economies to non-Indigenous ones... (2004)

That Deadman Dance shows this process clearly and profoundly, jumping time, perspectives, using elements of magic realism, metafiction and cross-cultural writing to create the character of Bobby Wabalanginy, a character we feel empathy for, for his abilities and his floundering, his short sightedness and his trusting qualities that we know, the reader knows, are terribly misplaced. If I could just keep the book in the students heads, I thought, they may come to appreciate the ripple effect down the generations of cross cultural engagement as the weeks progressed and place themselves and their writing within a broader context than the university classroom.

I knew I was in trouble when in week three one of the students asked, 'Is this whole course going to be about race?' with a disparaging and despairing tone. I asked what else the student wanted to write about, noting that gender, sexuality, age, religion and ethnicity had all been mentioned in the lectures prior and that similar strategies need to be used when crossing any border in our writing. The responsibility we bring to bear in the telling of our stories remains the same regardless of our 'topic' and that the extrapolation it takes to address any story that means we might be 'border crossing' is one of idea not approach.

In a later tutorial, a few weeks after this discussion, I suggested that we are always writing about race, and class, and gender, even when we don't think we are. The characters we choose, the activities we get them to undertake, the way we write the power in each scene, where we find our drama, can all be distilled to the overt presence or absence of these three elements on the page. 'But they aren't my stories to tell, I don't have any stories of race,' said one white student.

Many of these students found the relationship between Indigenous stories and themselves difficult to conceptualise or appreciate. They didn't know any Aboriginal or Torres Straits people and so they couldn't relate. I asked if any of them knew any boy wizards who went to a school called Hogwart's. They rolled their eyes. Perhaps, I suggested, the resistance to engaging with Indigenous stories comes from a different emotion other than empathy or 'relatableness'. We attempted to write that emotion.

Lesson three: Non-Indigenous writers' imaginations are limited

As the course began Bruce Pascoe, the award winning Aboriginal writer, was giving a keynote speech at a writers' festival in Melbourne called Blak & Bright. He was interviewed widely in the media. In the first tutorial we read and discussed *The Guardian's* interview with him where he argued that Indigenous writers such as Melissa Lucaschenko, Samuel Wagan Watson, Alexis Wright and Kim Scott need to be read by non-Indigenous Australians because their writing challenges 'Australia's

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idea of itself.’ (Tan 2016)

In the second week we read Alison Ravenscroft’s essay ‘The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott’ (Ravenscroft 2013). Ravenscroft argues that:

relying on our capacity to uncover new historical facts, new archival records or even new memories will not be enough to tell a different story... an emphasis on facts ... but equally an emphasis on white imaginative powers risks repeating the same old story, with all the reiterations of colonial impulses that this implies.

There were only two students who understood that this doesn’t just apply to the writing of Australian historical fiction. They could appreciate that writing richer stories meant they had to reach for complexity, that colonialism, and privilege too, operates in many contexts and manifests in multiple ways.

Bruce Pascoe explained his assessment of non-Indigenous writing as lacking the vision to see the country. He said:

That’s what we have to learn to do in Australia. We have to learn to reflect the country not white colony. (Tan 2016)

This simple statement is a profound reflection on how colonisation is an ongoing process, or as Deborah Bird Rose has said, ‘Invasion is a sustained process with no end in sight’ (Rose 2000:2) Resistance to the force of colonialism isn’t merely holding a sign up and saying ‘it stops with me’ (Australian Human Rights Commission, June 2012). De-colonising our writing involves fundamentally rethinking our subjects, our heroes, our representations of others, and our writing of (this) place. Resistance is, for writers, generating new possibilities on the page.

bell hooks, African American academic and writer might agree. She argues, in her book *Feminism is for Everybody*, that:

To critique sexist images without offering alternatives is an incomplete intervention. Critique in and of itself does not lead to change.

Agreeing with Nicoll’s approach that ‘it was my responsibility as a teacher of critical whiteness theory to honestly relate the difficulties as well as the delights that any white Australian experience in trying to improve the quality of our relationship with Indigenous Australians’, I began mentioning my most recent and clearly related experience of attempting to write across the borders of culture and race (Nicoll 2004).

My doctoral project included a memoir of my home town, Taree on the NSW Mid North Coast, and included interviews I conducted with a range of people including local Biripi people. In writing a new narrative of the town’s development that incorporated Aboriginal people’s memories as well as non-Aboriginal people’s memories, I struck difficulty in areas of confidentiality, of weighting of information, of potential negative consequences for people who went on the record, both Aboriginal and non, amongst many other creatively based challenges. At intervals throughout the course, I referred to some of the ethical and personal questions I faced as a white middle class woman writing into this space.

Feedback from a number of students raised this personalising of the course material as ‘self-indulgent’ and unrelated to the subject. Clearly, I need to re-imagine the usefulness and presentation of personal material, even when focused on the writing challenges of this type of material, in future courses.

Lesson four: It is all about *place*

As Brewster wrote in relation to *That Deadman Dance*, one place where Indigenous and non-Indigenous can/might meet and re-meet is on the page and in our collectively imagined futures:

... in the Australian context, cultural recovery can also function to (re)connect white and other non-indigenous people to the bodily history of colonisation and (re)establish and (re)configure cross-cultural relations with the indigenous owners of this country... To think differently about the past is to open up the ways in which we conceive of the future. (Brewster 2011:69)

Place became a touchstone for us throughout the course. Especially as colonialism is a global force but dispossession always happens locally, in a specific place.

I asked the students if any of them had written from their own *place*, Wollongong or their home town or suburb. Only a handful said they had. Many couldn’t see the possible interest, that their own landscapes were not generative of stories.

The first assessment was due in week six of the semester. Most were still in some kind of engagement with the course and they all worked hard and most wrote, surprisingly, from their own lives. Not that all the submissions were nonfiction but there was both place and heart, they had ‘skin in the game’ and risk on the page. Their work was wondrous to read: encounters in Beijing bars, grasping, broken relationships, difficult mothers and nuanced tellings of multi-racial families.

Scott finishes his essay ‘Covered up with sand’ with this:

It seems to me that any ‘global discourse’ has strong homogenising tendencies, and therefore we need to strengthen regional voices so they remain true to their own imperatives at the same time as being empowered to enter into exchange and dialogue. That means being willing to change, but also to cause change, and that seems our best hope for a transformation that increases, rather than reduces, the possibilities available to us—particularly for expressing who we are and what we might be. (Scott 2007:124)

Scott is referring here directly to Indigenous regional voices but he is also opening the door wide for non-Indigenous engagement with people, place and story, ‘exchange and dialogue.’ Many students experimented with writing from their place and found it a rich and exciting terrain. They realised that story from *place* has power.

Lesson five: The time is now

Time is a central concern of *That Deadman Dance*. The time of Noongar is explicitly

written as manifestly different to that of European time. Characters can be both old and young at the same instant, the ones who have gone before aren't ever far away and the future is visible, an almost known, quantifiable thing. Now is also then.

We see Wabalanginy as a baby:

... yes that baby is me, Bobby told them, and made his audience think of how long ago but how recent it was. He offered himself as a fine image of the passing of time. (2010:80)

Told from Bobby's perspective, we see the baby through the eyes of the grown man. We know his life, have experienced the (magic realism) moment of his re-birth or re-breathing as a young boy, have watched him grow into a sophisticated cultural operator; future, past, present, Bobby as old man, as eager child, as dancer and shape shifter, appear seamlessly throughout the novel.

Students found Scott's structural decisions regarding time and his masterful ability to show aspects of time through character and dialogue elements of a creative model that they could experiment with in their own work.

The narration is also overtly interested in story, the formation of self through story, and of literature:

Old Bobby Wabalanginy, telling this true story of before he was born but of what gave birth to him, wanted his listeners to appreciate how it was for his uncle Wunyeran to experience, for the first time, things most of his listeners had grown used to... (2010:83-84)

The reader is told the story of colonisation many times over in the novel. The power of song and story are shown again and again by Noongar people, to the English, to the whalers, to the reader:

When Bobby Wabalanginy told the story, perhaps more than his own lifetime later, nearly all his listeners knew of books and of the language in them. But not, as we do, that you can dive deep into a book and not know just how deep until you return gasping to the surface, and are surprised at yourself, your new and so very sensitive skin. As if you're someone else altogether, some new self trying on the words. (2010:85-86)

The reveal is sustained and gathers force: there is no singular narrative of colonisation. Scott also makes clear, as Brewster noted, that Indigenous sovereignty is here and has never gone away.

The students and I discussed Scott's writerly editorialising, his metafictional inclusions that are woven throughout the novel:

Bobby never knew himself then as do we, rapidly moving backwards away from one another, falling back into ourselves from that moment when we were together, inseparable in our story and strong. (Scott 2010:158)

When I pulled this quote out of the novel to discuss, I asked who the 'we' was referring to. They sat quietly, as often happened, and then one rushed to fill the silence. 'The reader. Us. It's us.'

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Another quote I excerpted for discussion also made them quiet:

In later years... But all that is for the future (71)

The author speaking directly to them and their future in this nation stopped them and we all felt the power of fiction, of writing. They all understood then that metafiction is about time.

One student, in providing feedback in the final lecture, said that she had wished we had read more contemporary Aboriginal work. I was a little mystified as to what she meant and had to ask her to explain her comment further. As she explained that she had hoped to read Aboriginal writing about our current times, I realised again that a number of students had only intellectually engaged with the ideas offered by the course.

I reminded her, and the students in the lecture, that we looked at Natalie Harkin's 2015 work *Dirty Words* in an early tutorial and that while Harkin was engaging with the same issues (if we want to approach writing in this way) as Scott, her approach on the page was one of idiosyncrasy and experiment. Just as Harkin was writing back to contemporary Australia, so was Scott.

Final lesson: There are always surprises

The surprises came on the edges of the group. One student revealing to me that he now realised how unconsciously prejudiced he was against Aboriginal people, 'I bring "bad Aboriginal" to any drunk man I see on the edge of the road.'

Another, bravely, said in a tutorial, 'I never thought what it might be like for minorities, what it might always be viewed in a certain way, or even just to feel that you are.'

One student said that she now felt much more confident in her failures, in her experimentation. That writing can have specific limitations seemed to be a revelation to them. 'Choose your constraint' is one way of thinking about the course: a word limit of 300 words, or write in the form of a reply, or the piece must include a literary device, or it must play with time. The freedom that both experimentation and constraint brought to their work inspired and excited many.

Scott gave hope to Wabalanginy. Through his cross-cultural ability, learning to speak and write English, translating, mediating, growing into a masterful dancer and using it to communicate with the foreigners, using dance as the mechanism for negotiation and for stating a sovereign claim, were all acts of hope. But Wabalanginy wasn't successful in the final negotiation; his dance failed. Scott has described this turn of events in his novel like this:

He's not quite the dancer he thought he was; or perhaps the dance as a form is not necessarily the form that's going to powerfully speak to this mob—the ones that get up at the end of the novel, dismissively; he hasn't got them. But, just possibly, writing is [the form]... (Scott & Brewster 2012)

Scott is giving us all hope with this novel, re-telling the past to re-imagine the future.

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I came to understand that I was teaching possibility – broadening reading habits, encouraging risk-taking in students’ choices of form, gradually seeing them realise the power of carefully curated words on the page. But it wasn’t just possibility of creative choices, it was also possibility of who they could be, how they could tell, or narrate perhaps, their worlds.

I was also teaching myself that it is a useful exercise to sit with discomfort. As Fiona Nicoll described, we ‘can’t resolve discomfort’ and shouldn’t try (Nicoll, 2004). The entire 13 weeks was a discomfort for both the students and me, a push and pull about meaning, devices, reluctantly expanding their literary horizons for some, for others never having enough time for discussion. And we did come up with models, drawing on the writing of writers, some Indigenous to Australia, others from South America, India, Jamaica, Nigeria and the diaspora of all these cultures. The models exist and while it is a complex exercise to address them in the classroom as a white woman, it is a necessary one. It can only make our writing and our students writing more timely, complex and resonant.

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