
Towards Settler Auto-Ethnography
Nicholas Jose's *Black Sheep*

Marc Delrez

A FASCINATING CONSEQUENCE of the Reconciliation years in Australia is that even the most progressive among settler writers now seem compelled to restructure their sense of national subjectivity, in a way that will resonate with new sensitivities about the issue of coexistence in this country. One would expect the current difficulties of belonging in Australia to be best circumscribed in the work of those writers who always acknowledged the dark side of the dream, as these are more finely attuned to the complexities of living on land that was legally stolen from its traditional owners. However, it seems that no amount of moral speculation or historical investigation will ever suffice to provide an exemption from the trauma of collective bad conscience which is today afflicting all of the nation. In other words, even the most liberal thinkers on issues of race and ownership find themselves cornered in “a painful intellectual and emotional impasse”¹ – an impasse that is interestingly explored in contemporary literature, but one that is also sometimes bypassed at the price of a political lapse. Some restructuring of the political spectrum thus seems to be taking place, in confirmation of Haydie Gooder’s and Jane Jacobs’s insight that “the reconciliation process, precisely because it is trying to move beyond colonialism, consolidates a particular colonially constituted social configuration, with the Anglo-Celtic settler as the assumed normative subject and indigenous

¹ Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 3.

Australians as its necessary other.² By this token, some writers who used to occupy a marginal position by virtue of their enlightened stance in the land-rights debate now appear to be brought back into an all-encompassing norm, where they have to rub shoulders with the most obstreperous rednecks. Also, as an aspect of this blunt dichotomy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, certain thematic symmetries are beginning to emerge, including new definitions of the native or, indeed, of the community, which appropriate elements from Aboriginal models.

It would be tempting to dub this state of affairs the 'disgrace' syndrome, in recognition of the way in which similar parameters were examined by somebody else in a different context. In Australia, an interesting manifestation of this sort of political disgrace can be observed in the trope of the white native as it occurs in Nicholas Jose's interesting travel narrative *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (2002). This is a curious little book of non-fiction – rather in the tradition of Bruce Chatwin's *Songs* – in which Jose sets out to find out the truth about a mystery relative called Roger Jose, who used to live "blackfella" in the Far North until the moment of his death in 1963. The reasons for the author's interest in this putative ancestor are quite tangled. The first is a very personal desire to relate to a character whom he first heard about as a child, for Roger played a part in the Jose folklore in his capacity as "an embarrassment to the family."³ Any connection with him had always been vehemently denied, notably on the strength of genealogy, as "there was nowhere on the family tree he could have fallen off" (3). Nevertheless Jose seems keen to contemplate the possibility that some link may have existed, which is perhaps in keeping with today's tendency to fill in the gaps in an historical record considered as no more than a discursive legitimization of the dominant outlook. Seen in this light, the earlier dismissal of the family's black sheep is somehow made to reinforce the adverse claim that another narrative could be written, one that would give more centrality to alternative patterns of experience, by virtue of which new connections can be sensed and affirmed.

José, then, seems prepared to go out of his way – indeed, quite literally so in this travel narrative – to make the point that "many whites had family histories that were closely entwined with Aborigines" (45). Clearly, the fascination exerted by Roger has to do in part with the fact that he consorted with Aboriginal women – two of whom he considered as his regular wives, in overt defiance of colonial conventions – and that he lived in this company in a water-tank house in Borroloola, in the state of relative destitution that was then the lot of Aboriginal communities in the north of Australia. The significance of this odd character is therefore more than just personal, as Jose duly points out:

Roger Jose, my putative kin, a labourer who lived "blackfella," in the policeman's disapproving words, might turn out to be the most exemplary of forebears, a neglected visionary. I wanted the connection because I wanted to join myself to someone who had earned his belonging in this country. (38)

Not only is Jose perfectly outspoken about the importance of the stakes, since the right to belong is here identified as the objective in sight, but his rhetoric is remarkably like that deployed by David Malouf in his novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993), where the character of Gemmy Fairley, also a white man who lived with the blacks, is similarly hailed as an "exemplum" and a "forerunner."⁴ Thus, no less than Malouf, Jose turns to the past with an eye peeled for alternative ontologies that might back up his blueprint for a post-Reconciliation future.

The analogy with David Malouf should, of course, alert us to the difficulties potentially contained in Jose's position. We should not forget that, at the time of its publication in 1993, *Remembering Babylon* had been the focus of a bitter controversy, as some critics deplored the writer's knack for subordinating the whole cross-cultural issue to his own aesthetic of change, through the privileging of Ovidian animal metaphors that allowed him to avoid "the anxieties of miscegenation at any level, more threatening than the apartheid."⁵ Such solipsism on Malouf's part only confirmed the

² Haydie Gooder & Jane M. Jacobs, "On the Border of the Unsayable": The Apology in Postcolonizing Australia," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (2000): 232.

³ Nicholas Jose, *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (London: Profile, 2002): 1. Further page references are in the main text.

⁴ David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993): 132; Malouf's italics.

⁵ Suwendrini Perera, "Unspeaking Bodies: Representing the Aboriginal in Australian Critical Discourse," *Meridian* 13.1 (1994): 19.

impression already made⁶ by a novel like *Fly Away Peter* (1982), the first section of which presents an idyllic picture of prelapsarian Australia before the outbreak of World War I. The character of Jim Saddler is here endowed with a capacity for bonding with the land which ostensibly borrows from identifiable stereotypes of Aboriginal spirituality. Indeed, the authenticity of Jim's link to the place is apparently vindicated by his gift for nomenclature, by his having "names for things, and in that way possessing them," in full enjoyment of a familiarity with the land said to be "ancient and deep."⁷ Because no rival claim is acknowledged in *Fly Away Peter*, this presumption of belonging is never at any stage seriously contested. This makes Malouf's work colonial rather than postcolonial in expression, as tends to be recognized by those among his critics who object to a discourse found to be "complicitous with the invisible exercise of imperial power."⁸

Jose, then, emulates David Malouf in that he, too, invokes the trope of the white native as a strategy of empowerment in the embattled context of Australian cultural politics. By contrast, the younger writer resists the temptation to trump the cards by erasing the Aborigines from the picture. Rather, Jose consistently acknowledges the Aboriginality of the models of identity at which he gestures. Thus, it is significant that his investigation into the life of Roger Jose relies not only on the settler archive, such as the "leather-bound worn-eaten journals from the Borroloola police station" (34) filed in the Northern Territory Library in Darwin, but also on the oral tradition kept alive by Aboriginal witnesses such as the Gangalidda elder Roy Hammer. His reconstruction of the Roger Jose narrative thus aims at a sort of referential equilibrium, informed as it is by both white and black sources. Such 'bothness' is in keeping with Jose's sympathetic stance towards the Aborigines in *The Castaways* (1997), a novel where he thematizes the Stolen Generations as well as the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody – all of which is perceived as the flip-side of white settler equanimity. In *Black Sheep*, not only are the Aborigines again represented, but the view offered is one that is at some remove from the static picture

usually on show in the settler archive. This liberation from stereotype provides an indication of the ground that must be covered, apparently, if one is to 'earn' the right to belong in Australia.

More particularly, Jose sets out to "challenge the view that Aboriginal Australia was primordialistically isolated from the outside world until advanced Europeans broke into its static, frozen culture" (54). This is something he achieves at the price of some acrobatics worth describing in detail. Borroloola, the object of the quest, is first presented as an extreme of geographical isolation, which owes its symbolic value and appeal to its being, "on [the] national remoteness index," a kind of record-breaker – "as far as you can go in Australia without a passport" (6). The many physical obstacles on the way to Borroloola are therefore dwelt upon, but only as a prelude to the discovery that this backwater, instead of being the country's last frontier, actually opens out on new horizons. Thus Borroloola, despite its reputation as "a gathering place for scum" (93) and by all accounts "the end of the line" (77), is unexpectedly revealed as a spot where the line can be crossed in all kinds of creative ways. In this context, the Aborigines' cross-cultural connections with Asia are documented – with a particular emphasis on their trading transactions with the Macassans who used to sail to the northern coasts of Australia from what is now Ujung Pandang (in Sulawesi, Indonesia) in search of the sea-cucumber, a delicacy reputed to be aphrodisiac and greatly valued on the Chinese market. Jose is, then, in a position to present Aboriginal culture as dynamic and open to foreign influences, perceptible, for example, in the dugout canoes which they adopted from the Asian visitors, "as an improvement on the local model" (50), in exchange for their permission to exploit the coastal waters.

There is little doubt that an ethical surplus characterizes this approach to the narrative of cultural negotiation in Australia, if only because it presents a picture that falls "outside dominant theorizations of Australian history," traditionally modelled as "a drama of binary black/white relations."⁹ By contrast, the recognition of ancient cultural links between China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the peoples of Arnhem Land represents at least an implicit challenge to the principle of *terra nullius*

⁶ See Marc Delrez, "David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*: A European View," in *Missions of Interdependence: A Literary Directory*, ed. Gerhard Stitz (Cross/Cultures 58; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002): 275–84.

⁷ David Malouf, *Fly Away Peter* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1983): 7.

⁸ Amanda Nettelbeck, "Languages of War, Class and National History: David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*," *Kunapipi* 18.2–3 (1996): 255.

⁹ Suwendini Perera, "Futures Imperfect," in *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law & Mandy Thomas (Sydney: Pluto, 2000): 11.

and attendant assumptions concerning the 'history/lessness' of pre-contact Australia. Jose simultaneously achieves a reconfiguration of cultural space, in view of his sensitivity to the porosity of boundaries; and a new conceptualization of the pre-European past, seen not as an empty stretch of time but as a significantly archived realm of experience. Arguably, this bid to redeem an eclipsed past is encoded in *Black Sheep* in the reference to the continuing relevance of fossils as part of a "landscape of concerted time" (224). Thus the writer includes a passage on the fossil site at Riversleigh which forms an important aspect of "the zone of exchange in which the Gulf Country sits" (227). The beckoning fascination of fossils has to do with their ability to bridge temporal chasms and connect the beholder to the more accommodating dimensions intuited beyond the "fanatically exclusive" (225) arguments of contemporary history. A sense of connection, then, becomes available, feebly embodied in the Gulf snapping turtle recently found swimming "in the gorge at Indarri Falls" yet identical "to the 50,000-year-old fossil found at Riversleigh and thought to be extinct" (228). Above all, and beyond this sort of literal anachronism, the contemplation of fossils allows one to embrace a temporal scale in which it is necessary to acknowledge "that someone else was here before me"; but also that "this is the case everywhere on earth" (224-25). The main effect, then, is perhaps one of relativizing the most strident of territorial claims, in keeping with the feeling that "in responding to these sought-after things we elaborate systems in which we have a place too, a connection with the archaeology of our own psyche, as individuals and as kinds" (221).

This should perhaps alert us to the paradoxical possibility that Jose is indeed attempting, through the rehearsal of this progressive rhetoric, to elaborate precisely such a "system," one that will serve as existential justification for the fact of his own presence in Australia. On the one hand, the awareness of the diversity of the continent's history represents progress over the tendency, again revealed in somebody like Malouf, to recognize only the settlers' monuments, from a magnified perspective in which these will be seen as "going back centuries rather than a mere score of years."¹⁰ On the other hand, an enlargement of perspective to place cultural studies within a cosmic scale somehow amounts to a nimble side-stepping of the whole political debate. A similar move can be observed in Alex Miller's

novel *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), which gives prominence to the theme of artefact-hunting in the high ranges of the Bowen Basin, in northern Queensland. The perception that the bush is neither pristine nor dormant but, rather, alive with the glowing remains of a complex past interestingly displaces received histories sedimented around any kind of eurocentric foundational principle. However, the objects uncovered turn out to exert a magical hold on Aborigines and settlers alike; moreover, the search for Aboriginal artefacts is conducted in parallel with an examination of pastoralist vestiges in the same area. In consequence, the novel appears to renege on its own postcolonial agenda, which is 'disgraced' as the book gestures towards a nativist position which fails to discriminate between the beneficiaries and the victims of colonial history.

In like manner, Jose in *Black Sheep* negotiates a complex discursive terrain fraught with potential ambiguities that need to be unpicked very carefully. By pointing to an Aboriginal-Asian pre-contact history, he appears to challenge, very usefully, what cultural historians would call "the monothematic narrative of settlement history"¹¹ in Australia. On the face of it, he is redressing a European misconception about the Aborigines having been non-existent on the map of international relations, commercial or otherwise. However, in case this looks like an instance of disinterested historical revisionism, it should be pointed out that the qualities of adaptability and diplomatic expertise now ascribed to the Aborigines are further declared to be particularly welcome "in the no less difficult negotiations of today's world" (55). The suspicion therefore arises that revision of history is here primarily strategic, aiming as it does to create the discursive conditions in which the Aborigines will be recognized as seasoned mediators ready for yet another bargain – one that is called for in the present-day context of Reconciliation.

A similar tension can be perceived in the chapter devoted to Matthew Flinders' survey of the coastline of the Gulf of Carpentaria, on board his *Investigator* at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. By presenting the Aborigines of the Borroloola area as a sea-going people, who "had been navigating that complex shore for centuries after all" (78), Jose contributes to dispelling the myth of Flinders' firstness. This, again, looks like a useful deconstruction of an official record which enshrines European

¹⁰ Malouf, *Fly Away Peter*, 12.

¹¹ Lars Jensen, *Unsettling Australia: Readings in Australian Cultural History* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005): 61.

experience at the expense of native claims to history. Even so, Flinders remains enlorgized in *Black Sheep* as a "secular visionary" – indeed, exactly like Roger Jose, because he similarly "crossed over into a world that belonged to others" (77). The colonial narrative is, then, not so much dismissed as transformed into a self-serving search for cross-cultural correspondences which are found to validate it. By this token, what makes Flinders' life heroic is perhaps not his pioneering attitude so much as the fact that he was willing and able to cross imaginative boundaries in his quest for knowledge that would match the findings of Aboriginal cartography.

This, in turn, leads one to interrogate Jose's cross-culturalism as it is manifest in some of his previous books. Jose, of course, has a long-standing connection with China, since he taught English literature and Australian studies in Beijing and Shanghai, and then worked as cultural counselor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing from 1987 to 1990. His interest in Australia's relations with China informs his *Chinese Whispers* (1995), a collection of essays, as well as novels like *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (1989), *The Rose Crossing* (1994), and, more recently, *The Red Thread* (2000). It has been pointed out that Jose's formidable familiarity with Chinese culture allowed him to "sidestep the pitfalls of navel-gazing identity politics"¹² in favour of a more egalitarian cultural negotiation, one that gestures towards the utopian ideal of Sino-Australian symbiosis. In other words, Jose's engagement with China can be seen as an attempt to curb the tendency to view Asia as a distant playground or "territory of the Australian psyche,"¹³ or to consider Asians as just one more minority on Australian soil. This is, after all, the usual drift of cross-cultural studies: towards redressing the balance when it tips onto the side of eurocentric narcissism or imperialist hubris. In this framework, White-Australia policies are seen to discriminate equally against all coloured races, quite in keeping with "the habitual mindset of imperialism,"¹⁴ so that the Chinese

¹² Marc Delrez, "Cross-Cultural Connections in the Work of Nicholas Jose," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36.1 (2001): 47.

¹³ Helen Tiffin, "Asia and the Contemporary Australian Novel," *Australian Literary Studies* 11.4 (1984): 468.

¹⁴ Alison Broinowski, "Chinese Remonstrances," in *Bastard Moon: Essays on Chinese-Australian Writing*, ed. Wenche Ommundsen (Kingsbury: Ohterland, 2001; special issue of *Ohterland Literary Journal*): 7.

and the Aborigines are almost interchangeable in their roles as the settlers' repressed Other.

It can be argued, however, that a different sort of rationale may also lie behind the construction of the link to China, to the effect that Chinese migrants to Australia will appear not as another wronged minority but, rather, as the settlers' eclipsed predecessor and alter ego. Thus Jose refers in *Black Sheep* to "porcelain shards and other archaeological finds," suggesting that trade had been "carried out between prosperous China and Aboriginal Australia for some centuries" (53). Furthermore, the writer invokes rumours about the existence of "remains of a stone Ming-dynasty house [...] hidden deep in an off-limits part of Arnhem Land" (53) that would provide evidence that Chinese colonizers managed to gain a foothold on the Australian continent as early as the fifteenth century, presumably with the assent of native populations. Ironically, then, the point is once again that the historical gap-filling which is encouraged by Reconciliation turns out to yield, among various insights gained into indigenous lore, the proposition that Aboriginal cultures were always amenable to foreign influence anyway. Since the narrative of the past is now open to revision, in ways that might integrate so far neglected dimensions of experience, it would seem that no harm can be done in taking advantage of this process to construct Aboriginal traditions as essentially non-exclusionary.

Cultural or collective self-invention, namely, is definitely the order of the day. It is only fair that this should be so for the Aborigines, whose identities have to be created anew in view of the destructive impact of European invasion. In this context, it is significant that, as Sheila Collingwood-Whitlick has shown, contemporary Aboriginal autobiographies amount to a form of autoethnography, in that they recount "the generic life history of the author's ethnic group"¹⁵ rather than his or her individual existence. As defined by Mary Louise Pratt, "autoethnographic expression is a very widespread phenomenon of the contact zone,"¹⁶ which constitutes a discursive response to the misrepresentations of European ethno-

¹⁵ Sheila Collingwood-Whitlick, "Re-Presenting the Australian Aborigine: Challenging Colonialist Discourse through Autoethnography," *World Literature Written in English* 38.2 (2000): 112.

¹⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 9.

graphy as an oppressed group seeks to gain a "point of entry into metropolitan literate culture"¹⁷ by appropriating the forms of that culture. It is therefore a paradox, or at least something in the nature of a counter-discursive move, that the settlers themselves should resort to autoethnographic strategies of their own. Of course, *Black Sheep* could be read traditionally as just another instance of ethnographic expression, since the author here ostensibly chooses to represent Aborigines in the way that best fits his own political agenda; but my point is that Jose also inscribes himself within a variety of autoethnographic settler writing, for he clearly speaks on behalf of a community of settlers defined at variance with accepted patterns of European identity.

Perhaps Jose's autoethnographic impulse is nowhere more apparent than in his longing for a mode of writing that would qualify as "an authentically Australian magic realism" (206). Interestingly, such writing would be characterized by 'bothness', too, thus providing an apt aesthetic medium in an age of Reconciliation, as exemplified in Alexis Wright's historical novel *Plains of Promise* (1997), which is found to exist in two domains: "One temporal, epic and European, the other magical, poetic and linked to Aboriginal lore" (203). By this token, magical realism is outlined as a shared fictional terrain, the meeting-ground of originally discrete sensibilities ostensibly fated to coalesce in some new mode of perception and representation. That Jose himself feels drawn to this aesthetic model is evident from his repeated references to *The Lost Steps* (1953), the "great jungle odyssey by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier" (5), which supplies a title for the "Prologue" of *Black Sheep* as well as a pattern for Jose's own "wandering life, [his] lost steps to come" (207). Carpentier, the man who is customarily credited with the invention of magical realism, or at least with giving the phrase its critical currency, is then hailed as a companion and a guide, a privileged predecessor, who daringly innovated with narrative forms, preferring "not a straight line or a circle but an elliptical curve." Jose resolutely places himself in the Cuban's footsteps when he declares:

Here in the Gulf country his book whispers in my ear. I am no longer on a fixed journey around one centre, my end in my beginning. I am pulled

¹⁷ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 9.

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by another centre, away from Roger Jose and into the present, my trajectory an ellipse. (208)

Anusiraj, Jose goes so far in *Black Sheep* as to speculate whether the name of Carpentier bears any connection to Carpentaria, the topographical designation for the Gulf area which is his field of investigation and his destination in this travel narrative.

While it would be absurd for the literary critic to become too prescriptive about the endeavours of creative writers, or indeed to condemn their aesthetic choices, it may still be useful to remember that magical realism was recently problematized, as a critical category, for the "hermeneutics of vagueness" that it fosters when it is defined primarily in formalist terms. Indeed, any approach identifying the formal requirements of magical realism as a conjunction of contraries, like the homely and the uncanny, would run the risk of glossing over the "disjunctions just below the continuous surface presumed by the category."¹⁸ In particular, it seems imperative to circumscribe the "cultural and historical specificities"¹⁹ which constitute an outlying referent for the 'magical' element found to disrupt the fabric of ordinariness within the texts. In an Australian context, two related difficulties of method are bound to present themselves. The first has to do with the temptation – not to say cliché – of considering all magical occurrences as codified translations, into some universally readable script, of spiritual apprehensions infused with a sense of 'authentic' Aboriginality; while the second revolves around the danger that these emergences of the sacred – albeit a manufactured brand thereof – may then be recuperated by the settler writer in what would amount to yet another colonialist confiscation of culture. Hence the need for a differentiated typology of Australian magical realism that will be orientated "towards the culturally constructed boundary between what is considered real and what is not,"²⁰ if one is to avoid the sort of assimilationist rhetorical strategies sometimes perceptible in Jose's *Black Sheep*.

In the last analysis, then, it is not only that Roger Jose chose to go "combo" in the North – to use the local slang for those settlers who adopted an indigenous life-style in Australia. The further significance of

¹⁸ Christopher Warnes, "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness: Magical Realism in Current Literary Critical Discourse," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2009): 8.

¹⁹ Warnes, "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness," 10.

²⁰ "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness," 8.

this cranky character lies in his setting-up of a role model, derived from Aboriginal customs, for other settlers wishing to identify with him. In this respect, it is revealing that Jose fails to establish the exact nature of his family ties to this mystery relative. What matters more is that a deeper kinship is felt to unite them, evident in their common taste for pushing against borders. We have seen that a similar quality of 'borderlessness' is also recognized in Matthew Flinders, who is admitted into the family. In a sense, it is a whole system of extended kinship, again inspired by Aboriginal structures, that is delineated in *Black Sheep* as the book pays homage to all those independent-minded individuals at the Top End who, "conscious that their community was an experiment" (136), managed to achieve "a degree of harmonious [...] co-existence that was impossible elsewhere" (137).

Quite amusingly, Jose goes so far as to suggest that this settler continuity actually relied on some sort of oral tradition. This is the consequence of a quirk of history – one of those moments when colonial history flirts with surrealism: a lending library boasting a collection of more than 3,000 volumes was actually set up in Borroloola in the late nineteenth century, for the benefit of Roger Jose and his kind. Nicholas Jose records in detail the tribulations to which these books were subjected in the outback; but, more importantly for our present purposes, he underlines the way in which the books gradually vanished through a succession of wet seasons – and through the determination of termites. However, before this happened, the hermits of Borroloola had time to absorb the content of the works, so that the "decomposing library [was] turned into oral form and conveyed to passers-by." Indeed, one could "hear them arguing out 'Thuky-dides' and 'Thernis-tockles' by the Billabong" (146). Interestingly, Jose pits this against the fate reserved for the oral traditions of the Aborigines:

The preoccupation with preserving relics of book culture stands in fetishistic contrast to the destruction of the oral, non-book culture of Aboriginal people that was running on apace. Artefacts inscribed with knowledge were freely pillaged, elders were dying without passing on stories, languages themselves were becoming extinct. (111–12)

In this context, the Borroloola experiment acquires compensating redemptive virtues, as Jose claims that "the disintegrating library stands for the resilience of the oral, or its revenge" (114).

This passage epitomizes the tension that lies at the heart of *Black Sheep*. On the one hand, Jose here endorses a version of Australian history which recognizes the discrimination and inhumanity that characterized the settlers' treatment of Aborigines ever since the moment of European arrival in 1770. In this connection, he strikes an elegiac note which is no doubt sincere. On the other hand, he takes this opportunity to reveal and explore alternatives to standard settler behaviour, with a view to staking out a mutual ground of shared experiences. It is not easy, at the close of this essay, to come up with any definitive judgement about Jose's discursive stance in this book. There is certainly something self-defeating to a reading that would castigate the well-meaning efforts of such a progressive and engaging writer as Nicholas Jose; and we have no reason to decide that the "no-hopers" of Borroloola may not indeed represent some sort of potential hope for a reconciled Australia, as they symbolize the possibility that "things [may] work out somewhat differently" (25). However, it must be said in conclusion that the search for redemptive affinities between the settlers and the Aborigines tends to mask the ongoing inequalities and injustices that continue to be an aspect of cultural relations in contemporary Australia. Therefore, despite our sympathy with Nicholas Jose and with the plight of the settlers more generally, it is difficult not to feel "suspicious of the missionary motives" that non-Aboriginal people bring to Aboriginal communities, whom they study out of a genuine interest but also because they are "looking for something for themselves" (37).

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5

Australia Re-Mapped and Con-Texted in Kim Scott's *Benang*

Pablo Armellino

BENANG, *FROM THE HEART* is the second novel by Kim Scott — born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1957 — a young author who defines himself as a descendant of the people who have always lived along the coast of south-western Australia, the Nyoongar. Scott's first novel, *True Country*, published in 1993, marked an impressive debut that foreshadowed the astonishing accomplishment and success obtained in 1999 with *Benang*.

As the novel has been appropriately defined, *Benang* is a "sweeping historical novel" that will surprise its readers "for the originality of the voice that speaks [there]";¹ this consideration rightly draws attention to two very important aspects of this amazing novel: the author, on the basis of his own family history, has managed to create an imposing meta-historiographic fictional work that recounts Australian history without ever becoming an historical narrative in the traditional sense. The voice — or, better, the voices — emerging from history are what Gayatri Spivak would call the subalterns of Australia;² ordinary Aboriginal people narrate their life stories in all their simplicity and crudeness, giving the non-Aboriginal reader a chance to witness what has been silenced for so long.

¹ Gerry Turcotte, "Review of Kim Scott's *Benang*: From the Heart," *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 June 1999), <http://www.fap.jineline.net.au/benangreviews.htm#smh>

² Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988).