**Floating with Kim Scott’s *Benang*: vertigo, settler-colonial mobilities and levitation’s geographies**

**A Introduction**

Levitation rather than weightlessness has remained something of a floaty and superfluous matter of geographical and social concern. Lacking empirical weight and substance beyond myth and metaphor, levitations have tended to remain in the domain of mystical curiosa. This paper seeks to assert an attention to floatation and levitation within not only more sustained scholarly inquiry, but in the advancement of our understanding of expressions of (aero)mobility and relations of affectivity within settler-colonial mobilities and postcolonial literature.

The paper looks beyond some of the aeromobilities writings which have tended to approach flight from a semi-realist attention to bodies transported by aeroplanes and through technological infrastructures in order to sustain and (re)configure social relations and intimate ties (Cwerner et al., 2009) and embodied relations (Adey, 2010; Budd, 2011; Lin, 2015). Even while aeromobile bodies may sit passively, or be subjected to intrusive and active forms of observation and attention or scrutiny, we might contend that an aerial geography has so far been configured towards relatively forceful, directed, and active movement and subjects, and we have only begun to expand our attention to only just lighter forms of aerial inhabitation, aesthetic experimentation, and more fragile subjectivities (Engelmann, 2015; Engelmann and McCormack, 2018). Although studies of the air have been understood within the technophilic fantasies of military elite, or we see seductions and desires of sexual fantasies expressed in advertising, dress, atmospheres (Lin, 2015; Millward, 2008), expressions of aviation in literature (see especially Durante, 2020; MacArthur, 2012; and on afrodiasporic fiction see Toivanen, 2020), and the collision of the early technologies of balloon flight with adventurism, science, fantasy and religious ecstasy (Holmes, 2013; Kaplan, 2017), perhaps we have taken less seriously other forms of flight and floatings.

In contrast, levitations offer more detached, passive sometimes (Bissell, 2007), less deliberate and submissive, vulnerable states of being above the ground floating, sometimes just about – and they are implicitly contradictory and ambiguous. Which means that other forms of flight or mobility can be perceived to have levitation-like qualities. As opposed to powered air-travel, levitations are uplifted by otherworldy forces, emotions and affects (Adey 2017). More regular kinds of flight or mobility, can be compared to or, indeed, feel-like, a kind of levitation. Levitations may even be power-*under*, as a manner of submission, diminishment and lessening of capacity. Levitation is depleting. Naming these qualities is perhaps to be too precise, because they are inherently ambiguous, which is possibly why the very idea has given rise to so many explorations, investigations and experiments within the histories of science and paranormal investigation to prove and disprove the possibility of levitation (Schuster, 2009).

I’m going to spend most time exploring what levitation might offer as a way of thinking *floating lives* through indigenous Australian writer Kim Scott in a vast historical but somehow intimate novel: *Benang* (1999). *Benang* is an account of Harley Benang, a Noongar child (an Aboriginal or First Nations people located in the south west of Western Australia (WA)), who is adopted by a settler Ernest Scat in order to ‘uplift’ him to a white settler-colonial community.[[1]](#footnote-1) This became common practice following the 1874 Industrial Schools Act and the Aborigines Act of 1905, that saw children from Aboriginal parents taken under the legal guardianship in Western Australia of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, often known as the *Stolen Generation*. *Benang* is told through a disparate series of stories, voices and writings as Harley collects and recounts biographical stories and traces his Grandfather’s records, who was a eugenicist and admirer of the actual Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville. Neville was responsible for the ‘sharp’ increase in Noongar children taken into white families, missions or schools, and acts as a kind of ‘perverse inspiration’ for Scott’s writing and his character. Scott quotes liberally from Neville’s policies and administrative language, and from testimony, histories and narratives from the Noongar people. As a seeming consequence of his racial-biological ‘uplifting’ and other traumas, Scott’s character Harley frequently levitates. The narration of his family and their encounters constantly evokes sensations and circumstances of floating and treading water in what we could call different elemental and colonial media (see Jue, 2020) comparable to what Christina Sharpe has called the ‘weather’ in the anti-black afterlives of slavery (Sharpe, 2016). Harley’s levitations are not deliberate. As Ravenscroft puts it, ‘He doesn’t fly or sail, his levitation has not this kind of wilfulness to it’ (Ravenscroft, 2016: 148). Published in 1999, the book was jointly awarded the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Of the many extraordinary things about Scott’s book, including its flowing, stream of consciousness writing, is its expressivity *and* its technicality of moving and floating in the air, just about. The levitator, as capacity, as power, as disorder, as embarrassment, indeed, floating as detachment, as suspension, as being cast ‘adrift’, is worked through the mobilities, circulations, and material infrastructures of settler-colonialism and its machines, with white superiority, racial violence and the assumption of the cultural and biological death of Noongar and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or First Nations people. It is this scientific world-view that structures Harley’s grandfathers’ obsessive interest in AO Neville’s policy of seeking to ‘breed out colour’- ‘to uplift and elevate these people to our plane’.

In this paper *Benang* is examined as a way of writing levitation within the expressive mobilities of settler-colonial experience in the imaginations of literature. It flits as its characters do, between surficial skimming and grounded, sensual rootedness, as much as the narrator – frequently occupying a place overhead - moves between his ancestors and their stories and movements in an indifferent but vulnerable position. To levitate, and to feel what it is to float *ungrounded* in *Benang*, might be to see what Georgine Clarsen has called a kind of performance of the ‘worlding’ of ‘settler colonial mobilities’ operating through ‘stridently mobile formations’, ‘*ongoing* processes of material, social and cultural transformations […] predicated on, expressed through, and measured by, settler motility and mobility […] across the territories they claim as their own and, conversely, to deny, circumscribe and control the mobilities of Indigenous populations’ (Clarsen, 2017: 521). It is moreover, to apprehend and be caught up in far less certain but ambiguous and to some extent contradictory affects (Wilson and Anderson, 2020). Levitation reaches out to a peculiar kind of expressivity of the mobile-affective body, and the mobile voice of an author and a character very much worth floating with.

**B Lighter Than Air: Settler-colonial mobilities, Flight, and Verticality**

Despite levitation’s lack of concerted empirical or conceptual focus (although see Adey 2017), in this section I seek to bring, in a relatively short amount of space, together several bodies of literature from which we might make sense of *Benang* but also develop the levitator as an enigmatic object of enquiry and conceptual thought. This enigma should not instil a sense of superfluousness or lack of weight in the levitator as a throwaway curiosa. On the contrary, how we might come to know it is indebted to a heavy tethering of bodies from within power structures, deep cultural anxieties and alienations.

This work is also positioned within a growing body of literature which Georgine Clarsen (2015b) has dubbed ‘settler-colonial mobilities’ and its relationship to a strong and to some extent revitalised recognition of the relationship between mobilities research and the humanities (Merriman and Pearce, 2017), especially around literature (Aguiar et al., 2019; Pearce, 2020; Rymhs, 2018). *Benang* is an expressive story of characters and other objects and elements that float, but it is simultaneously a story of mobility and immobility within the tidal movements of colonial settlements and displacements, resource extractions and transportations, communications and messages, vehicles and infrastructures, as they inch across Western Australia.

**Aerial Geographies**

The paper works with and against a sustained but diverse body of research from within not only human geography but the wider social sciences and humanities which has sought to examine flight in the human imagination. These literatures have positioned and understood the human body within the air through wider technological and cultural transformations, and as agents of geopolitics as well as subjected to biopolitical orderings and forms of governmental control and violence (Adey, 2010). For the most part, the body as it is understood within this vein of research is accelerated through a technological assemblage , even if that body is shown to be vulnerable and susceptible (Adey et al., 2012; Anderson, 2015; Bissell et al., 2012). As these accounts have sought to explore the phenomenological body as a sensing, feeling subject, they privilege a modernistic notion of flight as mechanically aided (Schnapp, 1994) and have tended to resort to an almost realist sensibility of flight.

Thinking flight differently, or as floating, this project moves as a way to explore parallel or counter-histories of being aeromobile and aloft (Lamont, 2005; Whittington-Egan, 2015), outside of the technological aid of powered flight. It also shares more in-tune with research sensitive to magical realism, partial and ghostly presences (Holloway and Kneale, 2008). It is not about whether the floatings and levitations imagined in a fictional novel could happen or not, but that they have been imagined. Moreover, it may deliberately work with and against realist and scientific epistemologies which have been closely entangled within the colonial project.

One notable area of Geography that has made some not dissimilar moves in relation to floating has been the work of Derek McCormack and Sasha Engelmann, who in different writings, have explored the sensations, percepts and aesthetics of lighter-than air travel in the form of ballooning and artistic balloon experimentations and sculptures (Engelmann and McCormack, 2018). McCormack (2008) explores the material meteorological and affective understanding of atmosphere in this context. His approach has been to pull together scientific and technologically mediated perceptions and understanding of air with its inhabitation and affective, sensual qualities of apprehending flight. Similarly, in her history of balloon experimentation and aerostatic vision, Caren Kaplan notices the collision of scientific practice and method with appreciations of religious inspired ecstasy and rapture in sensations of uplift and ascension (Kaplan, 2013).

Others have pursued this further into research exploring the engineering of particular affects and atmospheres in air travel (Lin, 2015), or the coincidence of balloon exploration and scientific practice with burgeoning aerial military technologies (Kaplan, 2013, 2017). Whilst Bissell, Hynes et al. (Bissell et al., 2012) are also careful to understand this ‘engineering’ of affect as provisional, incomplete and conflictual, McCormack has also situated his understanding of ballooning in relation to the way stories are told about them, and about other things (2017). We will return to this point a little bit later, but these remotely felt, dissonant, spectral and technologically imbued - rather than avoided - attentions to floating are most close to this investigation.

Lin’s concern for a decentering of empirical contexts and concepts from the ‘West’ within an aerial geography (see also Caprotti, 2011; Lin, 2016), calls for greater empirical specificity, and against a universalising of terms and conceptual understandings. Whilst these literatures provide us with useful conceptual and empirical resource with which to historicise and understand experiences of flight and settler-colonial mobilities, we might look elsewhere for more figurative approaches to flight.

**The Vertiginous**

Perhaps one more obvious way the flight of *Benang* might be interrogated is where a feeling of being aloft, and in some cases being ungrounded, might provide a fuller sense of the sensations and experiences of being uplifted. This is particularly expressed in *Benang* but also other forms of writing which have explored the experience of vertigo as a metaphor with which to examine settler-colonial violences, exclusions and anxieties, in Australia and elsewhere. There are several related debts to these debates which might inform an approach to levitation, and are not only associated with interpretations of literature but also film, architecture, and popular representation.

The notion of vertigo challenges a more dominant conceit around the vertical in human geography, and more recently the humanities and social sciences around a vertical or volumetric turn (Elden, 2013; Hewitt and Graham, 2015), in how we think about human experience and the projection of power from the city to the battlefield (Graham, 2016). The vertical has had a tendency to be associated with, although it has been subjected to serious critique and elaboration (Harris, 2015; Kaplan, 2017), power, omniscient vision and legibility (Scott, 1999). As will become even more relevant later in relation to the eugenicist notions running within *Benang* and Western Australian settler-colonial policies towards the Noongar, Adnan Morshed’s exploration of the notion of ascension in modern American planning and architecture even sees forms of biological superiority circulating vertical perspectives (Morshed, 2015). Such approaches have been usefully characterised by Paula Amad as “interdisciplinary revisions of the myth of aerial vision as “weightless, ungrounded and light” (Amad, 2020).

In quite a different way, others express and experience weightlessness and sensations of being groundedless when circumstances undercut their reality. In what way to express the precipitous position when the ground is taken from under one’s feet - where an excess, perhaps of height, makes this sensation even worse? W.G. Sebald’s (2001) *Austerlitz* provides a good example of this. The character of his book’s namesake, sees him, in an encounter with the technical history of the Theresienstadt ghetto at Terezin in the Czech Republic, leading to a moment of panic through the overwhelming vertiginous excess of words within the technical jargon and physical processes of the Nazi administrative machine. Artistic explorations of Jewish homelessness, characterised by the figure of the wandering Jew, have been as equally enamoured with floatation as a way to express antisemitic displacement and sensations of unbelonging (Adey, 2013; Berg, 2014).

Even if the above are certainly useful ways that we might approach the vertiginous in *Benang,* a related concept of ‘colonial vertigo’ is particular prescient. Colonial vertigo has become a potent concept with which to understand the anxieties expressed by settler-colonial societies. For Paul Carter (1996), sensations of vertigo perfectly capture the anxieties associated with the colonial experience. In part Carter evokes the anxieties colonialism produces through a kind of ‘imaginative transference’, wherein the colonisers appropriate land and cultures, and transform them in their own image. But by so doing, ‘in dissolving the ground of difference” the colonial settlers unseat their own position, and realise that “they had nowhere to stand’ (Carter, 1996: 28). Moreover, it is a tendency to forget that the ground settler-colonialism may have appropriated may have been already inhabited – to be ‘haunted by the very ground upon which it performs its appropriative acts of dispossession’ (Maravillas, 2012: 20).

**C Writing** (**with) *Benang***

This paper is not extensively trained in the wider histories, styles and tropes of indigenous storytelling and writing which might provide a fuller and contextualised reading of Scott’s work (although see the points regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s narratives and fiction mentioned already (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998), and other detailed commentaries on Scott’s corpus of work (especially Slater, 2005, 2016)), even if does engage with these studies at length (Ravenscroft, 2016). This paper is attentive, however, to the ways in which stories about levitations and the floating life of a fictionalised Noongar man, Harley, and the more grounded protagonists that share Scott’s book, are also inflected by the properties, forces, and atmospheres common not only to imaginations of levitation but also indigenous writing and myth. In this way, it is comparable and certainly observes, Derek McCormack’s (2018) exploration of the ‘circumstantial stories’ of balloons and ballooning in his own ‘parallel’ and transversal stories to those of ballooning history and geography that become, ’inflected by the properties of those things, and by their capacities to move and be moved in different ways’ (2018: 607).

Perhaps it is even possible to consider Harley’s narration as both foregrounding, but also constitutive of, a kind of elemental media. In this sense, the elemental materialities described in *Benang* of water, air, dust, land, plant life through Harley’s expression of Noongar culture, evoke qualities Jue (2020) has described as ‘recording’, ‘storage’ and ‘transmission’ through a very living milieu. Harley’s expressive affects and allusions of Noongar culture, knowledges, beliefs and practices of land, *country* and storytelling, which transmit encounters, experiences, resistances and assimilation, become a kind of media too, put into contrast with settler-colonial practices of writing, mobility, bureaucracy, knowing, transformation and violence.

In *Benang* we can see circumspect and ambiguous writing, expressed through a magical, impartial and fragile memory of the book’s protagonist and narrator. We see it in the ways the writing itself performs a kind of mimesis of wider cultural practices of oral storytelling through song, familial and kinship structures. This must be placed within the wider circumstances of settler-colonial mobilities and infrastructures which conditioned, eluded but which were also assimilated by Aboriginal and specifically Noongar people’s culture (Clarsen, 2017). In *Benang’s* prose, different economic and elemental violence seem to play out through the shape of the way words form a stylistic tenor. *Benang* deals with violence through a kind of literal and affective levity, a writing that sends up racial tension, dispossession, subjugation, sexual violence and abuse, just as things and characters negotiate the precarity of floating. A similar tension of seriousness and whimsy can be found in Kei Miller’s (2017) *Augustown* which weaves post-colonial critique around a story of a Preacher Alexander Bedward, a real figure and father of Bedwardism who proclaimed that he and his followers would ascend to heaven from Kingston, Jamaica in 1920.

As McCormack (2014) explains further on his approach to the circumstantial:

‘Circumstances lead writing and thinking ‘astray’. Because of this, circumstantial writing, like circumstantial evidence, is often understood to be inferior to writing possessed of a strong sense of direction’ (2014: 609.

Possessed of this style, *Benang* simultaneously observes and rejects tendencies within wider histories of levitation which have been bound up within the epistemologies, practices and technologies of paranormal investigation, and have often sought to mimic not only the rigour and methodology of scientific investigation, but lock down the levitational stories and narratives it did not trust through rational observation and recording (Leroy, 1928). *Benang* seems to contemplate and repel a colonial-enlightenment world view (see this in wider works of Scott, Wheeler, 2016) as Harley sets out to write his own autobiographical and family history, even if it assimilates and, in other ways, resists the eugenicist thinking of his grandfather that depended upon the mapping of blood ties and lines into a family tree. Although Harley realises his grandfather would have enjoyed his family project, how Harley goes about it is very different. The recording of Harley’s main encounters with his grandfather, Ernst Scat, consist of reading and trying to make sense of diaries contemplating the racialised and scientific rationality that underpinned the ambiguity of his grandfather’s actions – so often monstrous even in the name of care.

Harley, the narrator, frequently teases out words and concepts from AO Neville who acted as Harley’s grandfather’s idol,encountering its strange and alienating logic through the incomprehensible colonial policies of racial categorisation. Fictional letters between Harley’s grandfather to Neville, and correspondence between Neville and Constable PC Blake surrounding the adoption of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, some of them Noongar people, surface in the book. Racial and eugenicist epistemologies form the basis for Harley’s grandfather’s documents, his carefully made and ‘rigorous’ documentation of his ‘social engineering’ (106), as they do the racial bureaucratic language and structures which sought to regulate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life.

Harley’s Uncle Sandy Mason is described in one scene seeking to extricate himself from being subordinated by the Act, encountering the superficial double logic of the Chief Protector’s racial codes, as ‘Family trees, and odd diagrams of genealogy’ seem to magically appear, ‘as if floating in some dark sea’ - awash but tethered to an unfathomable reasoning and alien to the people it sought to govern. Sandy’s fate under the law therefore depends on writing, on the Chief Protector’s words and ‘ink’. His ‘pen’. Harley compares it to a hovering bird of prey, akin to a ‘hawk, watching, waiting, to fall, to take away’ (121). Sandy sees himself in the diagrammatic structure, which he equates not to a scaffold but a family tree - as if a ‘precarious fruit’, ‘hanging from an upturned branch’ and ‘about to fall’ (122).

Harley’s relationship with his grandfather is therefore partly mediated by Ernst Scat’s writing, in notes and instructions Scat has left behind for Harley to do, in one instance, to cut down a tree, ‘He might also have written: *Displace, disperse, dismiss… My friends you recognise the language’* (107). There are ambivalent metaphorical allegiances between the tree to be cut, the family tree Scat constructs with the weight of his eugenicist reason, and weightiness Harley gives him as he lifts his wheelchair-bound grandfather into the fork of a tree in almost an act of malevolent metaphorical lynching (Sharpe 2016) as he makes Scat airborne - if only for a moment.

‘I lifted him from the ground, […] and let him feel the burden of his own weight. It was still a tree you could hang from, or hang some other from’ (107).

The way Scott writes Harley’s narrative is in oscillatory motions that are similar to McCormack’s description of the enclosures of episodic writing. These are open not only to the ‘fluctuations and deviations that fringe their ‘membrane or skin or frontier or wall’, opening and enclosing time and space, objective reasoning, and magical attribute, subjective trauma, impersonal and animalised pain, but to what Lisa Slater (2005) calls the ‘radically open’ bodies that constitute *Benang’s* world. The result is perhaps more kaleidoscopic, as those enclosures and openings serve as curves that warp and deform time and space through the contours of memory, bewildering the reader of location within Harley’s story through a drifting that exceeds the colonial and scientific world-views it is struggling to resist *and* assimilate.

*Benang* reflects further on Harley’s experience of writing, of noting down his family’s experience and history in the way his grandfather had done, and as his grandfather watches him, ‘as I drifted – scribbling, rising and falling – around and around that paper-lined and littered room’ (31). The more he learns, Harley realises he cannot strike his grandfather to avenge his many sins, as much as he wants to, because he knew his ‘uplifting’ had diminished his ‘substance’, his ‘own weightlessness’: ‘It was still his story, his language, his notes and rough drafts, his clear diagrams and slippery fractions which had uplifted and diminished me’ (39). For Harley, writing while floating is not the same kind of capture his grandfather performs. He acknowledges at the end that he has only been ‘scratching and tapping from within the virtual prison of my grandfather's words’ (495). In-fact the more he writes, the more he fears he is losing something, how ‘even in writing that, as I hovered over the keyboard, my fingers tap-tapping and my heels in the air. I feared I was losing my people […] Even when family welcomed me back, they did so warily’. Writing levitation is an extension of alienation.

When compared to the more traditional modes of storytelling in the mode of song – which Harley does as he levitates - narration becomes something Harley is embarrassed by, ‘my body rising and falling with my voice’. A cousin cries out, ‘“Relax, loosen up, you be singing like a wadjela [white man] next”, and stomped away […] my singing still makes people uncomfortable. It is embarrassing I suppose, someone looking like me singing as I do’ (85-86). Trying to tell stories becomes the alienating act as Harley realises he is forcibly detached from the community he has been stolen and ‘uplifted’ from. It is tortuous how in another scene it is his Grandfather’s writing that makes him somehow ‘substantial’. The book itself being ‘grandfather’s idea’ (27), while it was when he discovered his Grandfather’s motives and research ‘in that littler of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from that fraction of life which fell’ (26). Harley’s accounts vibrate between his feelings of betwixtness and alienation, and the strange eugenicist racial categories that placed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into ‘fractional’ determinations based on skin colour and parental heritage.

Harley‘s narrator is highly self aware. The weight and value of his narrative are determined to account for not only his own story but that it should be not be over-written by settler-colonial and eugenicist discourse, even as he realises the multiple and intimate violences he and others were subjected to on account of his grandfather’s scientific beliefs and sexual lust. Harley describes himself as this ‘fuck-me-white and first one born. This drifting lightweight who so wanted to be his grandfather’s failure’. In stark contrast to the vertical levities commonly associated with the ecstasies of sex (Warner, 2011), Harley’s rape at his grandfather’s hands is constituted for Lisa Slater as another kind of writing, connecting the ‘(literal) insemination of Harleys body to the dissemination and internalisation of eugenicist discourse which shape Harley ’s perception of himself’ (Slater, 2005: 67).

Such a textual and sexual internalisation becomes a means of resistance when Harley describes giving birth to a new story beyond his grandfather’s imagining,

‘I had repeatedly taken him inside me, in different ways... My births took longer, were different; not something he could discard and forget. I gave birth to all these words; these boasts. Grandfather, they spew you out.’ (68)

Harley’s rape continues an opening out of his and other’s bodies throughout the book as bodily openings become another way to be ‘uplifted’ or infiltrated by white bodies and words. In one scene Harley almost becomes a windsock, as his trousers are caught on some guttering, and he loses all capacity:

‘and there I was; uplifted and spread out to the wind, which whistled through me, and in and out of orifices, singing some spiteful tune. I could not concentrate on any sort of story, no narrative’.

In one memory of Ellen, who was ‘aunty, mother, stranger’, he recognises his experience of sexual violence in the Noongar woman whom his grandfather had also ‘‘uplifted’ into his home and bedroom’. Her body opens and turns away from Harley’s sympathetic recognition in a moment of ‘astonishment’. Ellen’s mouth is ‘wide open’ at the sight of Harley, ‘drifting billowing like a leaf in the wind away from her front door, across her front fence’ (390). Harley takes revenge and a sadomasochist pleasure in writing back onto his grandfather’s body, cutting words into his skin, ‘to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me’ (31).

**D Detachment**

In common to *Benang* are the way different articulations of floating through levitation, feeling uplifted, forms of suspension, sensations of drifting, express a kind of *detachment* from Noongar people’s culture, habits and customs, and perhaps share something in common with the very different but racialised detachments of colonial aeromobilities such as in the use of British air policing in colonial Iraq or Italian aviation in Ethiopia (Caprotti, 2011; Satia, 2013). *Benang’s* floatations share the ungrounding anxieties Paul Carter (1996) discusses, and the embarrassment and awkwardness Harley and other uplifted and employed Aboriginals felt. Vertiginous anxieties populate the book. They occupy the position of not only the colonisers, but the colonised as well. The rendering of the vertical – of being above and apart - continues an ambiguous and sometimes contradictory meaning. In some moments it provides reassurance in the mode of a colonial surveyor currying wider associations with a vertical possessive gaze (Morshed, 2015). Harley describes his grandfather’s appreciation of a view from a rooftop over a town. This time a more solid and immobile sensation of aboveness, 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. . .’ (53).

Harley feels something completely apart from this possessive vertical gaze. He is possessed from the white capture of himself, detached by his assimilation *and* his levitations from Noongar language. Rejected. He thinks ‘of all the things I did not have. Unsettled, not belonging’. Detachment from the Noongar people becomes a moment of unpleasurable submission to levity taking on some of the negative associations with drifting as a kind of passive and cut off mobility (Peters, 2015), ‘I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted…’, Harley laments. This is a common theme in Scott’s wider work where aerial drifting signals a crisis of identity of belonging to Harley’s Noongar heritage, or the white colonial society he finds himself in (Brewster, 2015). Levity becomes about being trapped, suspended between air and ground, colonial and indigenous worlds. From Harley’s perspective this drifting is ‘appalling’, but he cannot fight it (85).

There is a sense that words surrounding Harley’s uplifted status, and the wider project of colonial assimilation, are even detached from meaning, as euphemistic as much as metaphorically inept. He describes the ritualised humiliation of an Aboriginal child tarred and covered with chicken feathers, for making some slight, perhaps for being where he shouldn’t, ‘Something about being uplifted’ (99). Equally the settler-colonial practices and mobilities in *Benang* echo and share a quality of not quite reaching the surface, not quite touching down on the ground, but ‘skimming’ the surface of indigenous worlds and pre-settler *country* in a more surficial aeromobility. Harley’s levitations parallel other mobilities in the book. For example, a travelling inspector for Aborigines is met by Harley’s grandfather on a train journey, and later in the book another travels by bicycle. These mobilities appear redolent of the masculine colonial mobilities of ‘overlanding’, that Clarsen and others have explored. What Clarsen and Veracini call ‘settler colonial automobilities’ saw the Australian outback as a place to be conquered by rugged travel, ‘with battered and overloaded vehicles laboriously inching across terrain they had not been designed for’ (Clarsen and Veracini, 2012: 896). ‘Overlanding’ articulated an emerging ‘settler subjectivity’, whose, ‘‘conquest’ of remote spaces through their bush skills and mechanical ingenuity legitimized their replacement of Aborigines as a new (and superior) indigene’ (Clarsen and Veracini, 2012: 896).

The inspector, takes this to another modality of settler-colonial mobilities by ‘leaving his horse’ and ‘cart’, as Scott explains, but also ‘*native* boy’ to a bicycle - reflecting the colonial assemblages which mediated travel in Western Australia, comparable to other bonded labour relations of colonial master, indentured labourer or slave, and animal mobilities (Lambert, 2015). What we might call settler-colonial velomobilities, however, were also bound up in ‘overlanding’, and shared the connotations of what Clarsen evokes again as ‘a relation of being *over* land, rather than dwelling in it or being immobilised by it’ (Clarsen, 2015a: 710 my emphasis ). The inspector’s bicycle travel is a mobility that is not quite there, following the disdain with which the railway journey was made comparable to a pedestrian walk (Schivelbusch, 1986). His mobility follows the abstraction of his epistemological gaze, by taking to his bicycle, ‘and not quite touching the ground and with the wind at his back skimmed along the camel pads’, evoking the smooth ‘glass-like surface’ hardened by the long camel trains of the gold rush (Clarsen, 2015a) that acted as bicycle paths. The inspector’s gaze is a tall, mobile and fleeting one, ‘He ascertained things at a glance, swooping into a succession of towns, settlements, stations, camps (479). And in another section, ‘the inspector came gliding by them; quiet, fast, and just a little above the ground’ (480). The summation of this movement, Harley narrates, in that the inspector’s colonial trajectories and journeys become entries into the officialise of his office’s bureaucracy, so that the traces of his mobility is distilled into writing: ‘Each evening he dutifully condensed it all into long looping lines of ink’ (479).

Harley narrates these not-quite touching perspectives of the colonial world-view as powerful, even if something is always withdrawn from them. The settler infrastructures of mobility and possession enable but simultaneously limit the colonial haptic sensorium. “Ernest Solomon Scat was up in the air” Harley narrates ‘and looking around’. ‘He had touched jetty, railway, electrical and telegraphic wires, sealed road’, he writes, but 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 makes out a similar critique of the expansive but nonetheless limited resolution of the synoptic vertical vision that is often levelled at aerial mobility (Saint-Amour, 2011; Satia, 2013; Scott, 1999) and colonial world-views - perhaps mediated by seeing – but that never fully touch the ground.

Scott’s character’s narration might set about expressing what Deb Cowen has recently articulated as ‘settler colonial infrastructure’ (Cowen, 2019; LaDuke and Cowen, 2020), and particularly in the way ‘“national infrastructure” holds together seemingly disparate archives of Indigenous dispossession and genocide’ (Cowen 2019: 3). In *Benang* the infrastructures of colonial mobility become a signal of these distancing and detaching moves summed up in different forms of floating, that are present but do not quite touch the earth. Colonial mobilities seem at once buffered and insulated by technological mediation – by car or bike tyre rubber and the asphalt of the roads. They also lack rooting within Aboriginal cultural and spiritual values of land or country as a sacred ‘terrain’ or geography ‘lived in and with’ (Rose, 1996).

Skimming along the road also becomes a way of seeing decline ‘on either side of us trees, dying turning white. […] their roots shrivelled in saltwater and – thus betrayed – they raised bare and brittle limbs to the sky’ (33). Seeing from these infrastructures becomes a window into settler violence and transformation, as Harley narrates:

‘A world gone? Changed. The telegraph line, railway line, wheel tracks everywhere. Rubbish and bad smells. Trees gone, grass grazed to the ground, the earth cut, shifting not healed, and not yet sealed; vegetation left too long with […] regeneration. Dust coated the leaves’ (481).

The practice of ‘sealing’ the roads in this passage is a destructive one but additionally one that could close the gashes in the landscape made by these processes. Without it, things are sent into in a suspension of not quite vertical but processual material mobilities, a transformation by combustion – dust, pollution, a vibration, disappearance and evaporation. Harley describes the teamsters clearing away, leaving rubbish and detritus, reforming mounds that ‘floated’, as if, ‘remains of some strange wreck’ (339).

In *Benang* Noongar experience is to be cast adrift by the material transformations of settler economies, laws and opportunities – both immobilised and set into a more passive state of drifting mobility (Peters, 2015). Stranded even in motion and afloat. Harley begins to reflect on his elevated, uplifted racial state, finding himself easing into the air and hovering, his elevation becomes a source of vertigo, he fears his state of being ‘let adrift, and that it came so naturally to me’. He recognizes settler-colonial structures as an oceanic-like power, even his Uncle Les, ‘another Nyoongar man’, he suggests is ‘stranded like my father; washed up, as it were’. Indigeneity means to be moved and immobilised by colonial assemblage and infrastructures, from permits, out of town settlements, rights to trade or sell furs and pelts.

In a tragic scene at the end of the book Harley almost drowns. This time he can’t keep afloat and drops a small boy Kenny, who is being fostered by his family, into the sea. Neither can swim. Harley is suspended only by the air bubbles in his shorts, but not before he had seen ‘Kenny, limbs flailing, bubbles growing in a long line from his mouth to the surface’ (423).

**E Theft**

*Benang’s* account of floatings and levitations is not a simple story of Noongar people cast adrift on the elemental transformations of settler-colonialism, nor a story of the assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or First Nations people. It is a complex negotiation of those geographies. Georgine Clarsen (2017) evokes the multiple violences that produce automobility and its infrastructures upon Aboriginal people, depending upon their ‘power over Aboriginal bodies’:

Some of the very tracks motorists used were ancient walking paths, smoothed for pneumatic tires by un-free Aboriginal labor under the command of police officers and government [..] Station managers, missionaries and police compelled gangs of ‘their natives’ to haul stranded motorists across rivers and sandy patches. […] Government cars swept into settlements and took children from their families (Clarsen, 2017: 525).

*Benang’s* prose is in part a playful account of Harley’s technological grounding/’uplifting’ by setter lifestyles, consumer technologies and mobilities. It could be thought as not a removal of Indigenous agencies but rather a kind of ‘seizure’ (Clarsen 2017) of settler technologies. On washing days, Harley describes the absent minded ‘pleasure’ of flying in the wind while hooked to a washing line, ‘only my fingers gripping tight. I was successfully assimilated to the laundry, washing machine, a used car’ (32). His *assimilation* would continue in the pushing of his grandfather’s wheelchair. With a firm grip and ‘Weighed down’, ‘I could relax and not have to concentrate on remaining earthbound’ (32). Similarly driving ‘required no concentration […] ‘humming’ along the black top’. The pleasures of his levitation being slightly tethered by mobile Westernised technologies and practices, even driving, are presented as acts of pleasurable appropriation, rather than a negation or diminution. A moment of driving, seeing vast ‘squares of yellow, or sometimes rippling green, stretched way from the roadside. The sun shone through the glass, our air was stale, and when we opened the windows the wind roared and tore at our hair’ (33). *Benang* subverts the more overdetermining narratives associated with colonial automobilities. Weightlessness and indigenous mobilities seem already escaping colonial control before being yoked back by the strictures of colonial ordering. Theft articulates this quite well in *Benang*, as the vehicles that set the inspectors ‘skimming’ become technologies of contention as a bicycle is taken from a store owner. Two Aboriginal young men in the town are accused as the only possible culprits.

As Clarsen goes on to show and acknowledge, ’both settlers and Aboriginal people stood in the contemporary world and encountered automobiles together, at much the same time’ (Clarsen, 2017: 525). Harley describes ‘humming and rattling along’ in a Landrover, ‘shrouded within a rushing wind just above the surface of the sealed earth’. While the Landover is just about floating in its smooth cushioned and suspension-sprung automobility, the vehicle a historically classic symbol of white imperialism and colonial exploration (Van Eeden, 2006), it affords something more: exhilaration of an elemental transition. The kids are lying in the back on the hard seats, on canvas and blankets, ‘We turned off the bitumen, and bounced and lurched in dust. All the windows were opened; dust in, dust straight out’ (411). And later, in different circumstances, they drive so fast they were lurching about, ‘We were inside the wind, and bitumen rubber just touching’ (424).

Travelling in *Benang* is a way of escaping what Lisa Slater (2005) calls an ‘assimilationist social assemblage’, and to contest ‘colonial spatiality’. Slater sees parallels between writing in *Benang* and mobility, between colonial texts, storytelling and the lines of movement Harley explores that *run* with, but that also, course underneath settler mobilities as the modern track and roads across Western Australia follow traditional Aboriginal ‘runs’. The settler-colonial automobilities in *Benang* are both an alternative to the existing indigenous systems of communication and knowledges of their existence, a form of forgetting and overwriting. They are not destroyed. By ‘skimming’ on the roads Harley’s mobility allows him to discover more about his heritage and ways of knowing (Slater, 2016: 45).

Perhaps the most direct moment of confrontation in the book is entangled with automobility. Harley ends up stealing his grandfather’s car in clear act of defiance after an argument which sees his grandfather throwing punches at him. The moment is deflated by ‘embarrassment’ once more as the car’s engine stalls. It is another act of partial mirth or levity that undermines the violent acceleration Harley attempts to perform:

‘The car started and I let it purr.

Granddad’s pale and haggard face was pressed against the glass beside me. I winked at him each time I touched the accelerator, curled my lip and made the engine roar.

[..] I wanted to make the tires smoke and squeal, and it was with embarrassment that I kangaroo-hopped away’ (439).

In another scene, Scott uses flight and technology to describe the settler anxiety that the technologies of mobility may fail them, casting in one moment the landowner Campbell Mustle into the air. It is the mobility of a part wagon crash, tipping over when a wheel jumps violently over a fallen tree. Harley describes the crash in slow-motion, as Mustle, who was considering ejecting a stowaway from the wagon in a previous thought, was flown skywards. In this final moment of temporary flight we could see prefigured the ruptures of the car-crash in contemporary Australian popular culture, and a gesture that unseats Mustle from his landed possession. The car crash has been interpreted as the ultimate anxiety of antipodean *immobility* in which being stranded in the outback ruptures the forgetting of settler violence, ‘confronting "unsettled settlement" in a hostile, alien landscape’ (Simpson, 2006). On falling headfirst from this moment of slow-motion suspension (Veal, 2021), Mustle is insensible and rushed in an arduous and convoluted journey to the nearest medical aid.

**F Conclusion:**

The floating lives, objects and media of *Benang* are wracked with an ambivalence in a peculiar aerial geography taken place very close to the ground. They are expressed in multiple floating mobilities through a fraught landscape of colonial and Noongar peoples’ materials, natures, racial, sexual and gender politics. *Benang* is clearly a unique and dramatic way of writing a kind of fictional floating life. If we are to take floating and levitation more seriously, as this paper seeks to achieve, these levitations require grounding and understanding within particular expressive and historical contexts, such as the violent disturbances of racial policies upon the ways the Noongar people, and those extracted from them, negotiated and adjusted to settler-colonial life, mobilities and material disturbances of their elemental and cultural milieu, media or worlds (Engelmann and McCormack, 2021).

The floatings of *Benang* upset any potential superfluous sense of levity or lightness in a very different and almost parallel geography of the air and manner of aeromobility. Most often the book explicates different sort of forcefulness between states - what McCormack might call a ‘circumstantial tensing of relations’ (2014). So that even within a work where so much flies there are ‘always a combination of hardness and softness’. Levitation and floatation is a tension, a balance. But it is also a balance in Scott’s writing, between a playful, funny, haunting expressivity, and equally a heavy, rooted narrative in the midst of lives lived, colonial bureaucracy, racial theories of miscegenation and absorption, gender based and sexual violences, child removal policies, and more. What is perhaps so powerful about *Benang* is its ability to hold together these completely different and seemingly opposite qualities and give floating such ambivalence.

It is less easy then to describe or categorise the kinds of feelings and affects discussed within this paper. They are ‘***strong*** feelings’, haunting, powerful, disgusting, passionate, but they are also wracked with their own self-doubt, as much as Harley doubts his own position to White settlers and his Noongar culture and ancestry, in what we have characterised as another manner of colonial vertigo. Perhaps one way through this, somewhat in-common with the ambiguity and ambivalence of the levitator between levity and gravity (Adey, 2017; Connor, 2009), is that floating lives might express contradictory affects that co-exist, that rub against each other, that threaten the other’s fulfilment, and pull each other in different directions. Attuning to these difficult, mixed feelings, might mean, as Wilson and Anderson (2020) suggest recently, to adopt much wider vocabularies as well as attending to moments when feelings that felt clear and assertive begin to fall apart, fray or wear away, or become tentatively suspended between one feeling and another.

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1. Throughout the paper I will use the terms ‘Noongar people’ as a way to refer to the novel’s exploration of the lives, experiences and imaginations of Noongar people (alternative spellings are also found, such as: Nyungar/Nyoongar/Nyoongah/Nyungah/Nyugah and Yunga) of south west Western Australia, and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' or 'First Nations' peoples to refer to the wider cultural block of indigenous communities in Australia. The Noongar people are recognised as the traditional owners of south west Western Australia, more about their culture and history can be found here at the Kaartdijin Noongar website (https://www.noongarculture.org.au/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)