

BENANG: A WORLDLY BOOK

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This article draws on recent trends in Australian literary criticism to scan new horizons for readings of Kim Scott's novel *Benang* and, more generally, to consider what this indicates about the networks that shape various scenes of reading and interpretive communities for the production and reception of Australian Indigenous writing. Kim Scott is the most 'local' of writers, and devoted to the language and country of the Noongar people and this inspires the generic and linguistic innovation of his fictions, *Benang* and, more recently, *That Deadman Dance*, as well as the innovative collaborative life writing of *Kayang and Me*. *Benang* and its author travel out of country and offshore on the currents of international book festivals and prizes, and the transnational scholarly networks of Australian literary studies, postcolonialism and Indigenous literature. This case study is, in part, a history of the book—we are interested in overseas publications and translations, and pursuing this book and its author in an international literary space beyond the horizon of the nation. It also explores some transnational scenes of reading that produce different communities of interpretation for *Benang* in venues such as conferences, classrooms and online sites where the novel has a distinctive career, and the history of the Noongar people speaks to other histories, and 'memoriscapes' of dispossession, dispersal and genocide (Philips and Reyes 14). Transnational associations raise issues of the ethics and politics of reading and translation that follow in the wake of these transits of *Benang*, and these are germane to thinking about Australian literature in a transnational frame using concepts of 'scenes of reading' and 'out of country' as they circulate in Australian literary criticism now (Dixon and Rooney).

The first of the trends in Australian criticism that enable an expanded book history of *Benang* is digital humanities. This field of study has been energised by the development of the AustLit and Blackwords databases that provide access to copious bibliographical information on Australian literature and criticism. Digital humanities in Australian literature has been localised as the practice of a 'resourceful reading'¹ that opens the way for projects such as this, particularly in a growing interest in information-driven histories of books, print cultures and reading, and questions such as who is reading what books, and how did this kind of reading become available? These questions require attention to print runs and reprints, educational settings and pedagogy, and the networks, fields and communities that come into play at local, national and international levels. Our work on *Benang* is an example of the kind of micro-history that explores the contingencies of a single case: the details of publication, 're-printability', encounters of individual readers and reading communities (Carter 50).

The second trend is 'the transnational turn', which is now well established, and features in criticism produced both locally and offshore. In his argument about Australian literature in 'the world republic of letters' Robert Dixon makes a distinction: while Australian literature itself is now and has always been influenced by international contexts, the study of Australian literature, especially by Australians, has tended to take a national perspective only (Dixon 2013 3). This work on *Benang* follows on from this interest in 'scenes of reading' beyond the nation, and our focus on Indigenous literature responds to the strong interest in this writing in

particular as it moves ‘out of country’ and overseas (Whitlock 2013). Offshore there has been a growing sense of the significance and distinctiveness of Australian Studies and Australian literary studies in the northern hemisphere. Firstly, for example, in the Afterword to his *Australian Literature, Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*, Graham Huggan sets out the gains for Australian literary studies going beyond the nation (145). Secondly, in his address to the European Association for Australian Studies in 2009, Lars Jensen rejected the idea that European critics and readers are an extension of Australian networks, rather they are an independent and critical interpretive community: ‘We need to develop our own platforms for a discussion of Australian Studies, instead of waiting for the agenda to fly in from down-under. Otherwise, European Australian studies remains a secondary, and a belated discussion platform’ (6). These recent trends in criticism work together: transnational frameworks explore new ways of reading, and digital humanities allows access to new strata of information about the publication, interpretation and teaching of Australian literature internationally. The Black Words database establishes a platform for eResearch on Indigenous literature offshore, as it provides a significant amount of data on international production and reception; however tracking this data across a world republic of letters and through seminars, conferences, curricula and translations is challenging because of the dispersed networks transits and exchange.

Australian Indigenous literature and Australian literature sometimes travel together internationally, however sometimes their itineraries diverge. One example of different destinations is the publication history of the *Anthology of Indigenous Literature*, edited by Anita Heiss and Peter Minter. This was first published domestically in 2008, prior to its incorporation in the Nicholas Jose edition of the *PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* in the following year. The absence of the nation in the title of this Indigenous Anthology is significant: this appeals to a transnational reading public for Indigenous writing. Overseas the Heiss and Minter edition is published by McGill Queen’s Press, and the iconic boomerang on the cover suggests the complex departures and returns of national anthologies such as this. As Robert Lecker suggests, anthologies ‘construct a narrative that depicts an evolving but often tension-ridden national ethos’; they are focal points in debates about literary canons and cultural literacy, debates that are actually displaced arguments about national identity’ (92). By promoting a deliberate textual construction of the country that readers are invited to join, anthologies are, Lecker argues, deeply conflicted books. The fact that the PEN Anthology is preceded by the independent Heiss and Minter edition indicates how this conflict is managed domestically, and it also suggests a recognition of a transnational markets for Indigenous literature in particular. This is confirmed recently by the publication of *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, edited by Belinda Wheeler, which indicates the establishment of offshore communities of reading for Australian Indigenous writing: the editor and publisher are located in the USA, and many of the contributors are located in North America and Europe. In her ‘Introduction’ Wheeler’s reference to the publication of the Heiss and Minter anthology as well as Nicholas Jose’s edition of *The Literature of Australia* ‘in both the Oceania and North American markets’ (2) displaces the nation entirely, and contextualises Australian Aboriginal literature in relation to other indigenous cultures: African, North American and First Nations. In the *Companion* the nation falls away as the necessary horizon of interpretation. Like the *Companion*, a special Indigenous issue of the online journal *Comparative Literature and Culture* also indicates the associations that occur beyond the nation. In this issue the publication of autobiographical narratives by Kim Scott and Eden Robinson, the Canadian Haisla/Heiltsuk author, on a page divided vertically to figure their writing in parallel, produces a proximity of Indigenous and

First Nations literatures. This is editorial innovation produced for the special Indigenous issue rather than authorial initiative, but it signals a graphic association of Indigenous voices transnationally.

Although the idea of a ‘fourth world’ literature, a transnational body of Indigenous writing and criticism, is not new, it is increasingly influential in shaping reading publics for Australian Indigenous writing overseas. Hsinya Huang, for example, argues for transnational studies as a way of examining the formation of Indigenous identity/ies within shifting geographical, political and cultural frameworks, and she imagines expansive trans-Pacific networks in particular (as does Elizabeth de Loughrey in her writing on routes and roots). The idea that Indigenous literature in particular might flourish ‘in transit’, existing relationally and multiplying transnationally, is an emerging story (Byrd xvii). Wheeler’s reference to ‘markets’ is important to this story, a reminder that in the global flows of cultural goods Indigenous literature has accrued particular value in the markets for the postcolonial exotic (Huggan, Brouillette). It has also become available to expansive conceptual and transnational interpretive frameworks—invoked here by Wheeler, Huang and de Loughrey—that gesture to oceanic imaginaries, that ‘world’ Australian Indigenous texts in terms of large-scale paradigms and memoryscapes, such as global histories of slavery, genocide and dispossession. These conceptual and technological developments draw attention to wider networks in the dissemination of Indigenous writing, and this case study of *Benang* pursues some of them by drawing on the transits of the book, and most particularly its European Anglophone excursions.

The travelling book

The canonisation of *Benang* in the national literature was immediate: it was awarded the Miles Franklin Award, the pre-eminent national award for fiction, in 2000 (shared with Thea Astley’s *Drylands*). In 2011 Scott’s most recent novel, *That Deadman Dance*, also received the Franklin Award. In 2012 Scott used his Franklin oration, a recent innovation that introduces an annual lecture presented by the Franklin award-winning author, to reflect on the usefulness of fictions like *Benang*, and the solitary act of writing more generally, for the Noongar community. Novels written in the colonisers’ language are of questionable value for the project of regenerating Noongar language and country, Scott suggests, and for the work of creating a genuinely *regional* literature. *Kayang and Me*, a family history of the Wilomin Noongar people authored with his Indigenous elder Hazel Brown speaks to this issue directly, but Scott has accepted that the predominant audience for his novels will, for some time, be white, middle-class readers. This takes up an Indigenous questioning of English that suggests how issues of the translation zone arise both below and above the horizon of the nation, although this rarely is engaged *within* the context of nation and narration. The recognition of *Benang* as a significant novel in a contemporary national canon has been consistent and ongoing (although Scott points out in his Franklin oration it is frequently marketed in bookshops as ‘Australiana’ rather than ‘literature’).

Benang rapidly established and sustained a strong position in many overseas reading cultures, and its success in literary awards accelerated this. The long- or short-listing in the Dublin Impac Literary Award was an early sign of the offshore transits of the novel, and the Miles Franklin Award generated significant interest from overseas publishers wishing to produce translations, for example. These translations were also supported by grants from the Australia

Council. The French publisher Actes Sud, the Dutch publisher De Geus, and the Chinese publisher Chongqing chu ban she all received funding from the Australia Council for their translations (Australia Council). The French translation was instigated by Marc de Gouvenain, director of the Actes Sud Antipodes series, which has been devoted to translations of significant works from the Pacific region since the 1980s. In addition, Penguin India published a special issue of *Benang* to coincide with Kim Scott's Indian tour and his attendance at the Kolkata Book Fair (colloquially known as the 'KBF') in 2006. Of course, English language copies of the Fremantle Press edition have been exported to individuals, libraries and bookshops in many overseas countries, and so the original English version provides an alternative to the Dutch and French translations for readers of English in those countries. *Benang*, therefore, has maintained a strong position among a variety of interpretative communities due to the assistance of the Australia Council, and the enthusiasm of advocates for Australian literature in publishing houses and bookshops overseas.

Our notions of 'translation' need to be expansive and attentive to various ways that texts become available to wider publics through offshore publication, that includes the production of more readily available and affordable English language versions as well as in translation. For example Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay has written on the changing currents of Australian cultural and strategic diplomacy that carry Australian books to events like the KBF. Participation began in 2002 in concert with a new diplomatic vision that included a growing interest in India and the region mediated by Asialink (founded in 1990 as a tool of 'soft diplomacy' to promote regional understanding). Kim Scott's appearance at the KBF in 2003 along with Peter Carey and Peter Goldsworthy, was part of this new initiative, and Carey in particular drew large audiences. The significance of the Indian publication of *Benang*, that could be purchased at a price within reach of Indian students/teachers/researchers immediately became apparent: 'I remember that just after this event, one of my students began to write his M.Phil dissertation with Kim Scott's *Benang* as its central focus' (26). Scott returned to the KBF in 2006, one of seven Australian authors in this year when Australia was featured at the KBF as the 'Guest-of-Honour' Country, and they presented readings, workshops, and master-classes across the country. Following this, readings of Scott's fictions began to be published in India (see Benigno; Datta; Sareen; Sarwal). Whereas in Europe we see *Benang* appear in undergraduate curricula, in India there is a marked preference for more accessible Indigenous texts such as *My Place*, which can be used to promote English language learning in undergraduate programs. *Benang*, a demanding read even close to home, remains confined to publications by an academic elite, and those who aspire to belong to the Indian literary intelligentsia.

We begin to see different trajectories as *Benang* travels from its place of origin and its publication in Perth and subsequent translations to readers across the world. How does this leave its mark on the book? What does *Benang* look like and how does it address these different audiences? By focussing on the European receptions of the novel here, we see sharply differentiated reading communities in proximity, and these are inscribed on paratexts. For example the most obvious sign of the metamorphoses of *Benang* in transit is its livery, and the cover image. In the original Fremantle Press edition, the cover includes an image of Yamatji man Terrence Shiosaki's installation, 'European Subjugation' (Figure 1). Scott and Shiosaki first worked together in an Indigenous arts course, giving this cover a local and personal meaning with its blending of the creative work of two Indigenous Western Australians and its polemical reference to colonisation and Indigenous dispossession. This

contrasts with the benign and generic cover images selected for the French and Dutch translations which both use a National Geographic stock image from the work of American photographer, Sam Abell (Figure 1). Taken in 1995 during one of Abell's photographic missions to the Cape York Peninsula for National Geographic, 'Trumaine' has a much more impersonal association to the text it draws attention to, and it uses the iconography of the face to appeal to the reader, a trope of cross-cultural representation of the 'other'.

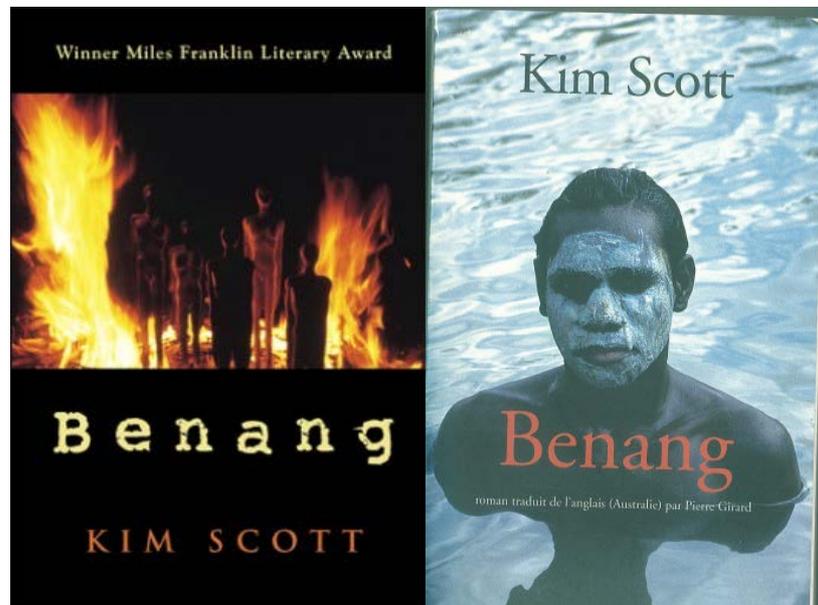


Figure 1. Cover Images of the Australian and French Editions of *Benang*

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to look closely at the French and Dutch translations, it is important to note that the cultural contexts that are important in the Fremantle Press source text are lost in the preparation of a text for French and Dutch readers. It has been shown (Salavert, Formica, Gerber, Haag, Čerče & Haag) that translations of Australian literature into Spanish, Italian, Slovenian and German often discard important cultural meanings. This might be due to carelessness, a lack of skill, limited knowledge of Indigenous and Australian culture, or an attitude that attributes greater authority to the readers of the 'target' text (the translation) than to the author and the 'source' text. For example, Estelle Castro has shown how such editorial intervention had a significant effect on the way *Benang* was presented to readers of the French translation. The removal of the "Acknowledgements" section and the decision not to follow Scott's use of italics to signal the ideological formations of archival knowledge are just two examples that show what was lost in the French translation. The translator also chose not to include decontextualized quotations from historical sources, most notably the three long quotes that open the novel. (Castro) As Castro argues, the removal of these quotes greatly reduces the emotional and intellectual impact of the original Fremantle Press version. This example suggests that the movement of *Benang* from 'source' text, in its language of origin, to 'target' text, in translation, leads to a loss of meaning, ostensibly to make the work more comprehensible to the foreign language readers.

The evidence of loss of significant meanings and literary value in the translation of

Australian Indigenous literature occurs elsewhere. A detailed examination of this has been done by Oliver Haag in his various studies of the German reception of Indigenous writing and culture. Haag concludes his article on the reception of Ruby Langford Ginibi, ‘For the most part, (Indigenous) Australian cultures are foreign territory to German-speaking readers, who need to find their own connections with Ginibi’s books so as to make sense of them’ (Haag 2012). Haag discusses not only the reception of translations, but also the original English language versions, film adaptations, and publishing strategies. He traces different modes of reception across national borders, demonstrating that German readers are more interested in the cultural value of Indigenous narratives, disregarding literary value. This contrasts with Dutch reception, that he finds to be the complete opposite (Haag 2011 60). Haag has also pointed to competing discourses in German reception: the romantic or exotic discourse that ‘generates a naïve view of Indigenous cultures and panders to New Age interests’; and a politicized discourse that is becoming increasingly important to German publishers and their prospective audiences (Haag 2009 7). While such evidence cannot be generalized across all European readerships, the evidence uncovered and described by Haag clearly demonstrates that translation, publication and reception all have an effect on a work as it travels from its point of origin to be positioned in alternative cultural fields, and that within the Eurozone there are proximate yet different reading communities and ‘cultural fields’. The influence of New Age thinking on the reception of Indigenous texts endures, most notably and notoriously in the prominence of the discredited American author Marlo Morgan’s *Mutant Message Down Under* (1994) and *Message from Forever* (1998) as ‘authentic’ Indigenous stories within the German cultural field (Haag 2009 8). As these physical metamorphoses of *Benang* suggest, distinctive markets, readerships and communities of interpretation are mapped onto the text, peritext and epitext of the travelling literary text itself.

These changes and excisions that occur in transit from ‘source’ to ‘target’ text raise difficult questions about what becomes ‘lost’ in translation. Clearly this question of ‘loss’ is urgent and political in relation to Indigenous texts that engage, Scott reminds us, in the coloniser’s language. We have identified a series of shifts here: in paratexts to European editions that turn to more generic images, in excisions in the French edition that mute some of the discursive complexities of the original edition, and in readerships where politicised and romantic/New Age discourses contest. What is at risk in thinking on ‘loss’ is Kim Scott’s radical assertion of Indigeneity born of Noongar country in *Benang*, that insists on the incommensurability of Indigenous and settler epistemologies and ontologies. Indigenous literature moves out of country and into a translation zone long before it moves offshore and out of English, as its conflicted relations with anthologies of the national literature and their narration of nation remind us. As Scott insists in his Miles Franklin oration, *Benang* is a ‘travelling book’ from its very beginnings, as it leaves Noongar country and engages with white middle-class readers and the coloniser’s language. Issues of ‘loss’ and ‘translation’ can be drawn *into* the national literature itself, where Indigenous literature asserts its distinctive presence and its claims to prior occupation.

Dissemination

Although we can read the physical metamorphoses of the travelling book from changes in livery and paratexts, is difficult to gain an understanding of the reception of Indigenous writing in Europe without quantitative and qualitative studies like those conducted by Oliver

Haag and also Russell West Pavlov, who argues that foreign-language translations of Australian literature are an integral part of the domestic literary heritage (v). Although the total movement of books is impossible to track quantitatively, eResearch strategies are available to provide a hint of the broader 'interpretative communities' that are served by the publication or distribution of Indigenous writing, and these are not always literary. The algorithms used by Amazon to track purchasing habits have been exploited to produce a variety of visualisations, but the network visualisations accessible at Yasiv.com are by far the most useful. The 'customers who bought this item also bought' feature of Amazon clearly suggests the position taken by a particular book among a particular set of Amazon customers, but determining any broader cultural meaning requires an interpretation of the larger network based on what we know about the books included in that network. What is interesting about this strategy is it tracks the books as a commodity, and readers as 'customers' in a commercial transaction that shapes networks of consumption. These are 'assemblages' or 'sets of readers' that are accessed through 'portals', they are not the more coherent 'communities of interpretation' shaped by specific practices of criticism or pedagogy.

From a search for a particular author or title, Yasiv.com visualises the relationships between books based on Amazon's 'customers who bought this item also bought' facility, rendering the results as a network visualization. The specified title is centred in the results and related books are arranged according to direct and indirect relationships radiating from the central result. The network is limited to books that are positioned no more than three degrees away from the central search term, but secondary relationships are also rendered, producing distinct clusters of books, positioned according to the strength of the ties to the central node. And so with one query, a network visualisation suggests a strong relationship between a particular set of books and, by extension, suggests something about the 'uses and gratifications' that customers satisfy with their purchases.

To augment Oliver Haag's quantitative and qualitative surveys of German readers, we can attempt to identify categories that can be arranged on political, New Age, travel, and literary lines. By analysing clusters according to these categories we see how specific characteristics of each novel were attractive to particular sets of readers. In turn, this can be used to indicate how particular Indigenous books have been positioned as contributions to global Indigenous literature.

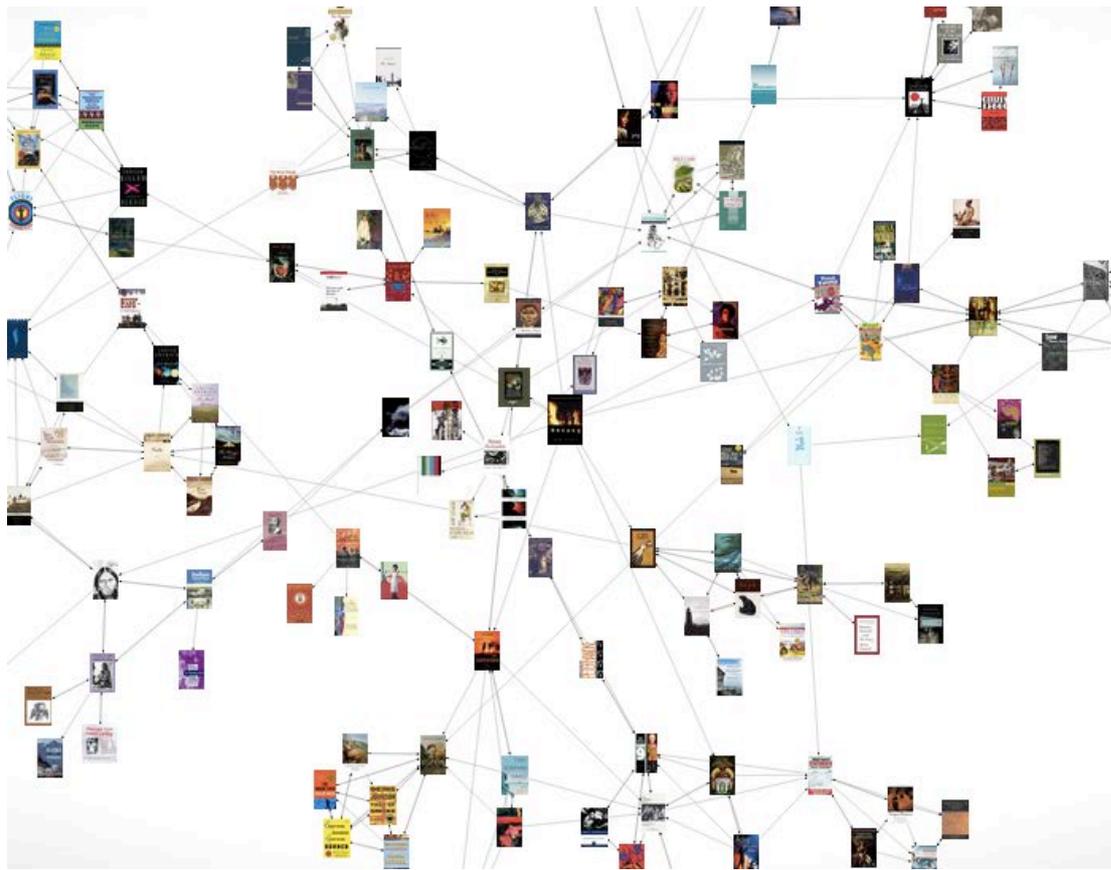


Figure. 2 The cluster of books that surround *Benang* in Amazon (USA)
<http://www.yasiv.com/#/Search?q=Benang&category=Books&lang=US>
 Accessed 10 October 2013.

Kim Scott's *Benang* can be purchased through the Amazon portals of the USA, UK and France. In the USA, the distribution of the novel through Amazon trading indicates proximities to the works of several Native American and First Nations writers, and most particularly Canadian texts, including Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move Kapuskasing*. Works from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands balance the association with these Native American works, and indicate the Pacific networks that are the focus of De Loughrey's approach to literatures of the Pacific. Associations suggested by the Yasiv.com visualisation include Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged*, and Epeli Hau'ofa's *Tales of the Tikongs*. In France, *Benang* is associated with Native American N. Scott Momaday's *The House Made of Dawn* and the African American novelist Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. In the UK, *Benang* is most closely associated with Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*.

These associations with Native American, Maori and Pacific Island writing indicate readers with an interest in the issues faced by Indigenous people in the oceanic networks suggested by Huang and Wheeler. Here national associations with Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* are weak. The association with *Invisible Man* amplifies the global context and, even though Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines* is set in Australia and addresses Indigenous issues, it is probably more correctly categorized as one of Bruce Chatwin's travel narratives rather than Australian literature, and certainly not Indigenous literature.

Such visualisations and the assemblages they produce are suggestive of the tensions produced when one considers the cultural field in which a book is positioned. As Oliver Haag has shown, Indigenous works of literature are located on shifting ground in which different readers view the works as ‘political’, ‘exotic’, or ‘literary’ artefacts. The Yasiv.com assemblages confirm the tension between political and exotic associations in the consumption of Indigenous texts. It demonstrates the strong relationships with the work of Native American, First Nations, Maori and others, stressing the political. But the work of Bruce Chatwin (and Marlo Morgan’s infamous *Mutant Message from Down Under*) are never too far away in the network, suggesting some readers continue to position works of Indigenous Australian writers in ‘New Age’, ‘exotic’, or ‘travel’ categories.

The distribution of Indigenous works of literature in overseas markets and reading communities occurs within a broader cultural field. In France, Germany, UK and the USA, this field is influenced by the distribution of artwork, music, and film (in both cinema and television) – Wheeler’s *Companion* recognises this with specific chapters on popular Indigenous music and feature film. Inevitably, the presence of these images and sounds will have an effect on the reception of literary works. Consumers of culture are seeking to satisfy a variety of ‘uses’ and ‘gratifications’ that exist in their everyday lives: political, spiritual, aesthetic, philosophical, and so on. While the network visualizations of Amazon buying habits produced by Yasiv cannot provide an absolute image of the foreign reception of Aboriginal writing, it does suggest the ways in which the books are installed in the everyday lives of book buyers and that this draws Australian Indigenous literature into a dispersed transnational public sphere.

Teaching *Benang*: the Hungarian Experience

Finally we want to turn to one last context in the life of the travelling book, and the European excursions of *Benang* most particularly. The classroom is a powerful site for the dissemination of Indigenous writing, both home and away. Australian literature is taught at many European universities, and it is promoted through professional networks such as the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA). Seeking to promote the teaching and research in Australian Studies at European tertiary institutions, as well as to increase an awareness of Australian culture throughout Europe, the Association is a dominant group of teachers and researchers outside of Australia. Most teaching and research is conducted in Germany, France, Italy and the UK, but the network extends to other countries such as Norway, Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain. In 2001, EASA reported a membership of about 150 people working at 113 different institutions in 27 countries. Through professional networks and connections with Australian institutions, members in the EASA community have an acute sense of the challenges of teaching Indigenous literature in an Australian context and many first-hand teaching experiences in a European context. But, apart from the geographical separation and subsequent barriers to cultural exchange, non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous literature in Australia and elsewhere face similar challenges in the classroom setting. *Benang* is, after all, a challenging novel to read in the Australian literary curriculum, where it makes big demands on the interpretive skills of undergraduates for whom English is a first language. As our earlier remarks on ‘lost in translation’ suggest, the questions raised by the transits of Indigenous literature are not only linguistic, they are epistemological and ethical. *Benang* is a demanding book in every

respect, and here too we can think in terms of convergence rather than difference between Australian and European contexts.

This is, then, not a simple matter of pedagogy ‘offshore’ as a secondary practice. The knowledge of Indigenous literature and culture claimed by non-Indigenous researchers and teachers has been destabilized by the critique of Indigenous scholars and others working in fields such as critical whiteness studies and postcolonial studies. In the Australian context, Alice Healy has described the significant challenges of managing the classroom setting without the authority usually ascribed to the university teacher. In developing a space that aims to foster a ‘dynamic and challenging interpretative community,’ Healy recommends that any tertiary unit on Indigenous literature should encourage,

a combination of theoretical positions ... starting from situating Indigenous writing in socio-historical contexts and proceeding with analyzing textual practices alongside texts themselves. Building relationships with Indigenous communities, especially at the local level, is important for non-Indigenous teachers to ‘keep it real’, and for making themselves accountable to the people who have the most at stake through ethical pedagogies (Healy 91).

Encouraging and fostering an ‘ethics of voice’ in the classroom, Healy draws on the experience of teachers in a European setting such as Susan Ballyn who has described the challenges of introducing their students to Indigenous writing. Susan Ballyn’s Catalonian students come to class with a ‘surprisingly Eurocentric’ outlook and with knowledge of Australia based on television documentaries that influence attitudes that easily lead to ‘an exoticisation of the Aboriginal, a ‘recolonising’ from a European reading/seeing perspective and on rare occasions to a deeply worrying paternalistic attitude’ (Ballyn). As Oliver Haag and others have shown more broadly, Austrian and German students come to class with similar perceptions based on TV documentaries and travel narratives (Wildburger; West-Pavlov).

The Australian edition of *Benang* has been a set text in a number of European, English language courses. But the experience of the teachers and students remains elusive. Here we turn to the exceptions where we can gain access to these classrooms in Europe: the Australian Studies Programme within the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the Australian Studies Centre in the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen. For these programs, Australian Studies provides a useful alternative to concentrations on British and American subjects (and it produces provocative metaphorical associations):

Australia is a unique brewery of creative and practical people(s) and ideas, who have created their own space beyond the British vs. American binary. Sensitive global issues may be tackled differently there, and with the benefit and insight of the outsider we can produce mutually rewarding dialogues if—via academic and public outreach—we keep on running programs and training future generations. (Espak and Forintos 59)

Introduced into this setting, *Benang* becomes a multi-faceted tool for contemplation of the culture from which it sprang and the culture in which it is read and discussed.

At Eötvös Loránd University, the Australian Studies Programme is a component of the degree structure offered to those studying to be foreign language professionals. This is a recent shift towards a model of ‘tolerance education’ that aims to produce ‘critically thinking open-minded and tolerant graduates, who are able to cope with cultural differences in their work’ (Hollo, 61). For teachers in the Australian Studies Programme in this context, Australia is used as an experiment in multiculturalism, providing examples for study that help students to better ‘understand cultural differences, and to be able to deal appropriately with misunderstandings and conflicts emanating from those’ (Hollo, 62). In classes at Debrecen and Budapest, cross-cultural associations challenge familiar ways of reading Indigenous literature in Australia. For example the plight of the Romani people is frequently a point of comparison for discussions of the conditions under which Indigenous Australians are living, and Haag has drawn attention to this in his discussion of ‘ego-histoire’ as a motivation for reading Australian literature in Europe. Romany and Indigenous peoples have similar health, education, and social problems, and this can lead to tense moments in the classroom because ‘hate speech and discrimination are tolerated and accepted in public discourse in Hungary’ (Hollo 63). This association of Romany and Indigenous histories is an example of how Indigenous literature can enter very different ‘memoryscapes’ offshore, and engage with forms of settler colonialism internal to Europe, ‘such as those imposed on the Irish, Basque or Sami peoples’ (Wolfe, 314).

At the University of Debrecen, Gabriella T. Espak has reported on her experience teaching *Benang*, stressing the need to concentrate on the ‘interpretative fallacies’ associated with anachronism, emotional appeal, authenticity, politicization, and othering (Espak 116). The parallels with the Romani minority also emerge in Espak’s classroom, but she is careful to point out the differences to students: ‘As legal issues, due to lack of jurisprudential guidance, have become targets of party politics and government negotiations, political rhetoric in the media might distract their attention from objective interpretations’ (Espak 121). Nevertheless, the distance and exoticism of the Australian context can work in the teacher’s favour. As Hollo points out, the acceptance of the foreign situation and context as a point of discussion within the classroom setting ‘creates a good opportunity to point out the hopeless situation of ethnic groups in our society and to examine our own attitudes towards minorities in the two countries’ (70). In Australian classrooms the distinction between ethnicity and Indigeneity is fundamental to recognising the specific prior claims of Indigenous peoples, and here again the question of what gets lost in translation recurs. Is this convergence an appropriation—understood in postcolonial criticism as an inappropriate identification? Recent work on ‘memoryscapes’ and ‘multidirectional memory’ suggests that ‘worldly’ books travel far from their places of origin and enable other affiliations. Michael Rothberg argues that histories of colonization, racism, slavery and genocide co-exist in a rich and complex field of historical memory that ‘serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities’ (11) and new ‘lines of sight’. These questions return to what is an enduring issue in the transits of *Benang*: what is ‘lost’ and ‘gained’ in translation, and how Indigenous literature accrues value beyond the imaginary of the nation and its readerships.

‘Worlding’ Benang

Like all cultural products, *Benang* is many things to many people. Following the trajectory of *Benang* and books like it will help us to identify and better understand not what we know about Indigenous texts, but what we don’t know, or what we don’t see because we are *too close*. The transits of *Benang* lead us to rethink the translation zone of Indigenous writing, and our understandings of ‘source’ and ‘target’ texts. We have listened to Kim Scott speaking on the occasion of Australia’s pre-eminent national literary award to foreground his first, Indigenous language, its ‘regional’ literature and the ‘coloniser’s language’ of English from the perspective of a Noongar writer. This inserts Indigenous country prior to the imaginative geographies of the national literature, and it raises questions about what is lost in translation at this first border crossing, between Indigenous and Anglophone Australian literatures. In *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, Belinda Wheeler notes,

Many nonindigenous and indigenous communities from around the world are increasingly noticing the work of Australian Aboriginal writers and artists, and it is the continued conversation between these groups and an acknowledgement of the past that will continue to promote reconciliation and continue to strengthen this significant canon. (13)

Postcolonial reconciliation may well be one readily available ideoscape for the transits of Indigenous Australian literature, at home and abroad, and one of the ‘worldly conditions’ of *Benang*’s existence—as we see in the incorporation of Australian Indigenous experience in the memoryscapes of dispossession and colonisation within Europe. The networks of production, distribution and reception that construct the routes of transfer for Indigenous texts like *Benang* are amorphous, contradictory and (on occasion) unfamiliar and confronting. The transits and translations of *Benang* begin close to home. As a worldly book, *Benang* is a foreigner that resists conscription and promotion in singular causes, citizenships and itineraries, and productively so. Perhaps, James Wood argues, postcolonial literature hasn’t only morphed into a ‘bloated World Lit’, ‘smoothly global’ and translatable; perhaps, he suggests, one of its new branches may be a significant contemporary literature that powerfully treats questions of ‘postcolonial movement’ (2014). Wood is thinking of the ‘movement’ as the complex, amorphous and widespread migrations of people. We are thinking of the ‘worlding’ of Indigenous literary texts, and in particular the history of *Benang*, a novel that remains embedded in the language and imaginative geographies of Noongar country that resist translation and dispossession.

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¹ This phrase is the title of a study of eResearch in Australian literary studies. See Bode and Dixon, 2009.