

Archives of the Third Space: An Indigenous Exploration of Noongar Titling in Kim Scott's Autofictions

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Abstract

This study explores the paratextual significance of titling in Kim Scott's autofictions *True Country* (1993), *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), *That Deadman Dance* (2010), and *Taboo* (2017), treating each title as a potent micro-archive of Indigenous memory, trauma, and resistance. The primary aim of this research is to investigate how Scott's titles function as compressed archival narratives that articulate Noongar worldviews, bear witness to historical trauma, and enact decolonial agency. Drawing on Gérard Genette's notion of the 'paratext' as a threshold, the study uses Bhabha's 'Third Space' to frame titling as cultural negotiation, where Indigenous and settler narratives meet and change. The analysis is further grounded in Indigenous methodologies proposed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, centring Noongar perspectives and protocols of knowledge transmission. Through close paratextual reading and thematic analysis, the research demonstrates that Scott's titles are not merely framing devices but performative sites of narrative sovereignty mediating between settler and Indigenous epistemologies. These titles serve as dialogic thresholds, encoding cultural memory, ethical accountability, and resistance within the smallest textual unit. Ultimately, the study advances Indigenous literary scholarship by repositioning titling as a foundational decolonial strategy and a critical site for activating cultural memory and narrative agency in postcolonial critique.

Keywords: indigenous literature, paratextuality, third space, archival narrative, decolonial autofiction, noongar titling

1. Introduction

Kim Scott stands at the forefront of contemporary Australian literature as one of its most influential Indigenous voices. His autofictions, including *True Country* (1993), *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), *That Deadman Dance* (2010), and *Taboo* (2017), are celebrated for their exploration of Noongar identity, intergenerational trauma, and cultural renewal. Scott's work is deeply rooted in the lived histories of the Noongar people of south-western Australia, whose enduring connection to Country constitutes one of the world's oldest continuous cultural traditions, maintained for at least 48,000 years despite the devastating impacts of colonization (Lullfitz et al., 2021; Scott & Brown, 2005). This cultural resilience is evident in the ongoing revitalization of Noongar language and heritage through community-driven initiatives (Bracknell, 2020). As Scott and Hazel Brown note, "an old spirit rests in the land and we, its people, are the catalyst of its awakening... a potential, a possibility, that still excites me" (p. 17). This ethos of cultural endurance frames Scott's literary practice as an active process of presence and renewal. While his autofictions are widely studied, the role of titles as sites of meaning and cultural intervention remains understudied. This study contends that Scott's titles operate as micro-archives, condensed and potent sites where Noongar worldviews, historical trauma, and decolonial resistance are encoded and enacted. By repositioning literary titles as agents of narrative sovereignty, this research foregrounds their central role in activating cultural memory and contesting colonial legacies. Synthesizing Genette's theory of the paratext with Indigenous methodologies and Noongar-centric knowledge practices, this analysis undertakes close paratextual readings of Scott's titles in dialogue with archival sources and oral histories. The central question guiding this inquiry is: How do the titles of Kim Scott's autofictions operate as compressed archival narratives that articulate Noongar worldviews, bear witness to historical trauma, and enact decolonial resistance? By treating titles as micro-archives, the study underscores their pivotal role in Indigenous memory work and narrative sovereignty.

2. Literature Review

In the past two decades, critical studies on Kim Scott's autofictions have expanded significantly, especially around themes of Indigenous identity, memory, and archival reclamation (White, 2018). Much of this research foregrounds Scott's narrative experimentation, his engagement with intergenerational trauma, and the recovery of suppressed histories. In addition, literary studies by Hodge and Mishra (2005) and Kennedy (2016) have explored Scott's negotiation of communal memory, ethical storytelling, and transcultural remembrance.

Heiss (2003, 2018) emphasizes that Indigenous writers strategically mobilize narrative and paratextual elements to contest settler-colonial frameworks and assert self-representation. Yet, despite this rich body of research, the paratextual function of titling, particularly as a locus of Indigenous memory, agency, and resistance, remains markedly under-theorized in studies of Scott's work. Foundational to the current analysis is Gérard Genette's theory of the "paratext," which defines titles, epigraphs, and other threshold elements as active zones mediating between authorial intent and reader reception (Genette, 1997). Genette argues that the paratext operates as a site of both transition and transaction, framing the negotiation of meaning at the textual threshold. In postcolonial and Indigenous literary contexts, the politics of titling take on added urgency. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asserts that naming is an act of world-making and epistemic sovereignty for Indigenous peoples. Naming thus serves as a means of reclaiming authority over meaning and representation. Derrida (1980) interrogates the instability and violence of colonial naming. In addition, Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space" positions the paratext as a liminal zone where competing narratives and identities are negotiated and transformed. Recent research highlights the use of naming, language revival, and storytelling by Noongar and other Indigenous communities as strategies for cultural survival and resistance (Bracknell, 2020; Lullfitz et al., 2021). For Noongar people, the reclamation of narrative sovereignty is central to cultural continuity (Simpson, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). However, a comprehensive theorization of the Indigenous paratext remains emergent. This study addresses a significant gap by analyzing Scott's titling practices through the lenses of paratextual analysis, Indigenous methodologies, and Third Space theory. It ultimately foregrounds the title as a micro-archive in which meaning, memory, and resistance converge.

3. Method

3.1 Indigenous-Centred Orientation

Indigenous naming is tied to knowledge transmission and communal renewal. The paratext is a key site of survivance. However, literary analysis has largely neglected titles as autonomous sites of archival and epistemic significance in Scott's works. Globally, paratextual studies in Indigenous literature are only beginning to receive attention. Recent research on Māori, First Nations Canadian, and Native American literatures identifies the power of titles and naming protocols in asserting cultural identity and sovereignty. This study adopts a decolonizing, Indigenous-centered methodology following the foundational interventions of Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Smith (1999) argues that "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise" (p. 5), foregrounding its entanglement with colonial histories and structures of knowledge suppression. In response, this study attends to naming practices not only as textual features but as culturally embedded actions shaped by relational accountability and the ethical transmission of knowledge. Rather than treating literature as an isolated or apolitical object, the methodology insists that critical reading is itself a site of relational accountability, community benefit, and cultural resurgence. This orientation informs decisions about inclusion, interpretive emphasis, and the avoidance of extractive readings that disregard Indigenous epistemologies.

3.2 Analytical Approach and Unit of Examination

Departing from conventional close reading, which often isolates literary texts from their sociocultural contexts and prioritizes aesthetic form, this approach treats Scott's autofiction titles and paratexts as micro-archives: living sites where Noongar memory, trauma, and resistance are actively encoded and performed. The unit of examination includes the title, publisher's blurb, chapter headings where relevant, and key narrative invocations of titular terms. Analysis moves past theme-spotting and asks how titling enacts world-making and epistemic sovereignty, within and beyond the text. Each title is coded across three procedural dimensions:

- (1) temporal orientation (memory, futurity),
- (2) cultural work (protocols, kinship, survivance),
- (3) narrative authority (voice, jurisdiction, interpretive control).

In reading *Benang*, for example, the focus is not merely on its translation as "tomorrow," but on how its invocation in both narrative and community practice resists colonial erasure and affirms collective futurity. Similarly, the act of naming throughout Scott's titles is examined for how it disrupts settler expectations, mobilizes Indigenous protocols, and reclaims interpretive authority as an ongoing, communal practice. Attention is also given to negative cases, in which the title's promise is strained, inverted, or deferred, to avoid circular validation.

3.3 Theoretical and Procedural Framework

The theoretical framework is anchored in Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," understood as a liminal threshold where Indigenous and settler narratives, identities, and epistemologies encounter, disrupt, and mutually transform each other (Bhabha, 1994). The paratext, and especially the literary title, is reconceived as a "zone of cultural negotiation," where meaning is unsettled and new forms of agency can emerge. Methodologically, the study draws on Gérard Genette's theory of the paratext, who describes it as a "vestibule that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (Genette, 1997, p. 2). Moreover, in contexts shaped by oral transmission, paratextual elements can inherit ceremonial or protocol-based significance, further complicating colonial assumptions of textual thresholds. This definition establishes the procedural framework of the study: titles are treated as interpretive gates that condition reader expectations before narrative immersion. Through close paratextual reading and thematic synthesis, the analysis traces how Scott's titling practices enact the politics of memory, relationality, and decolonial agency. The procedure unfolds in four stages:

- (1) Paratextual extraction (isolating title-based cues),
- (2) Relational coding (assessing cultural protocols and kinship stakes),
- (3) Archival triangulation (comparing with narrated histories within the text)
- (4) Interpretive synthesis (articulating how the title modulates narrative)

This approach ultimately demonstrates that every act of naming in his autofictions marks a living threshold for Indigenous resurgence and ethical interpretation. By making the procedural steps explicit, the study ensures transparency, replicability, and theoretical rigour without reducing culturally situated meaning to purely formalist analysis.

4. Results

Across Scott's autofictions, the title functions as an active micro-archive and a 'space of enunciation' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 55), where Indigenous identity, historical trauma, and cultural sovereignty are continually renegotiated. In this study, the titles of *True Country*, *Benang: From the Heart*, *That Deadman Dance*, and *Taboo*, are examined, demonstrating that each title operates as a threshold: it shapes authorial intent, frames reader expectations, and encodes cultural memory. Rather than providing surface description, Scott's titles condense and activate the autofictions' central themes, including questions of naming, belonging, and narrative reclamation. By focusing on these paratextual elements, Scott's autofictions challenge fixed meanings and position titling as a foundational architecture for narrative sovereignty.

4.1 *True Country: Displacement and the Search for Belonging*

In *True Country*, the title itself becomes the principal site through which questions of ownership, legitimacy, and belonging are contested. "True Country" functions not simply as a name, but as an interpretive threshold: it frames the narrative's central tension between settler and Indigenous claims to land and identity. Scott uses this ambiguity to destabilize colonial definitions, transforming "country" from a geographical location into an ongoing archive of memory, loss, and ethical renewal. The title thus shapes the entire autofiction as a debate over who belongs, whose histories are recognized, and how the meaning of "truth" is constructed and perpetually re-examined.

4.1.1 Ambiguity of Ownership: The Title *True Country* as a Site of Contestation

The ambiguity at the heart of *True Country* is established even before the narrative begins, in the publisher's blurb. This paratext frames the setting as "home to the Aboriginal community for thousands of years, it is also an eighty-year-old mission... the desperate frontier between cultures" (Scott, 1993, publisher's blurb) and describes the protagonist's journey as "Finally the exile enters the true country." Such language prompts the reader to consider what is "true" about country and whose perspective is being centred. Genette (1997, p. 23) explains that elements like the cover and blurb are not simply marketing devices; rather, they form the publisher's peritext, which shapes the initial encounter between the book and its reader and often blends authorial and publisher intentions. In *True Country*, the blurb's rhetorical questions and focus on cultural contestation do not merely summarize the plot. Instead, they foreground the autofiction's central question of ownership and legitimacy and present the story as an ongoing negotiation rather than a settled claim. This sense of ambiguity continues in the narrative, which opens with the lines: "'Ts this real?... Oh, it need not be real. It is not this reality we are homesick for'" (Scott, 1993, p. 3). In this narrative arc, the protagonist's perspective shifts between the physical, colonially defined landscape and a deeper Indigenous sense of place rooted in memory, longing, and relational ties. Rather than asserting "country" as mapped territory, Scott constructs it as a relational space. This is what Genette (1997) describes as a "zone of transaction," where meanings remain open and subject to continual negotiation (p. 2).

As the story develops, Billy's increasing integration with his life becomes "absorbed into that of the community," which demonstrates that belonging is not inherited but enacted through ethical relationships and communal participation. Scott's own commentary, describing his literary work as "the chasm between the affirmation of those lyrics and the title's sorry tale of loss. True country indeed" (Scott & Brown, 2005, p. 17), underscores the ongoing tension between loss and the quest for belonging. In this way, *True Country*, through its blurb, title, and opening chapters, functions as what Bhabha (2004) calls the "Third Space," which serves as a threshold where meaning is continually made and unmade. As Bhabha writes,

"It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationless, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2).

Rather than offering closure, the autofiction positions the reader at a threshold where settler and Indigenous perspectives, as well as the experience of exile and home, are reworked. The title itself thus acts as an agent of narrative sovereignty, inviting readers to sustain engagement with the complex question of what and whose country can be called "true."

4.1.2 Metaphorical Use of "Truth": Beyond Geography

The word "true" in the title *True Country* functions as a metaphor for moral, spiritual, and cultural authenticity, rather than as a claim to geographical or legal fact. Throughout the autofiction, Scott disrupts colonial notions of "reality" as mapped territory or documented ownership, and instead foregrounds an Indigenous cosmology in which truth is relational and ethical. For instance, the repeated lines "It is not this reality we are homesick for" (Scott, 1993, p. 222) and "It is not reality we are homesick for. And not just us Aborigine ones either" (p. 224) articulate a longing for a spiritual and communal homeland sustained through memory and narrative. In Scott's hands, "reality" becomes a contested term. While settler society equates reality with legal ownership or administrative control, the autofiction exposes the

inadequacy of this worldview by presenting “country” as an emotional space of kinship, memory, and responsibility. “Homesick” thus signifies more than displacement; it becomes a form of resistance, a refusal to accept colonial erasure and a commitment to the ongoing search for belonging beyond physical or administrative boundaries. (Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2015)

The autofiction also frames “truth” as a process rather than a settled fact. Early in the text, the line “We’re gonna make a Story, true story. You might find it’s here you belong. A place like this” (Scott, 1993, p. 13) positions truth as something made and shared through storytelling. In Genette’s terms, the title as paratext exercises illocutionary power: it guides the reader’s approach to the narrative, inviting them to engage with questions of memory, identity, and renewal (Genette, 1997, p. 2). This processual notion of truth resonates strongly with Bhabha’s (2004) concept of the “beyond.” As Bhabha writes, “The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past.... there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement... here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth” (p. 1). He further notes that “beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 1). Here, Scott’s titles do not mirror hybridity; they actively script the terms upon which cultural difference is interpreted, demonstrating authorial jurisdiction over narrative meaning. Translating, Bhabha’s “third space” thus names a creative zone of ongoing negotiation and hybridity, where belonging and truth are continually made and remade through collective memory and cultural practice. In *True Country*, this “restless movement” means that the search for truth is not about reclaiming a singular, lost homeland but about sustaining a living community through ethical participation, story, and the negotiation of difference.

4.1.3 Closure and the Ethics of Renewal: Decoding the Ending

The final passage of *True Country* affirms that belonging and cultural survival are not achieved once, but are continuously enacted through communal practices of memory, movement, and storytelling. Scott writes:

“See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time. We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you” (Scott, 1993, p. 255).

In this concluding passage, “true country” emerges as a process of collective and ongoing renewal rather than a fixed destination. The call to “move, remember, sing our place... all the time” underscores that cultural identity is continually remade through active participation and creativity. The phrase “We are serious. We are grinning” (p. 255) expresses the duality of Indigenous survivance: acknowledging historical pain while affirming joy, humor, and resilience. Most notably, the invitation “Welcome to you” shifts the narrative from an individual journey to an open, communal ethic, suggesting that identity is sustained through shared responsibility and relationality. This conclusion exemplifies Bhabha’s theory (2004) that the “Third Space” is always unfinished and open: “The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress” (p. 3). In Scott’s autofiction, the title functions as a living question, a paratextual anchor that resists closure and demands ongoing ethical renewal. Thus, “true country” does not simply mark an endpoint, but instead models a participatory vision of memory, belonging, and care, foregrounding the unfinished and collective work of cultural resurgence.

4.2 *Benang: From the Heart: Genetic Erasure and Emotional Sovereignty*

In *Benang: From the Heart*, the title operates on both literal and metaphorical levels to expose the ongoing struggle for Indigenous futurity and emotional inheritance under colonial biopolitics. “Benang,” meaning “tomorrow” in Noongar, encapsulates the idea of a threatened future, a horizon of possibility repeatedly endangered by assimilationist policies. As a micro-archive, the title foregrounds the labour of naming, remembering, and reconstructing kinship in the aftermath of attempted erasure. By combining “benang” (tomorrow) with “from the heart,” Scott highlights the novel’s focus on reclaiming agency over both history and culture through collective memory and relational practice. The title thus frames the narrative’s polyphonic structure as an act of resistance, affirming the endurance of Indigenous presence in opposition to the logic of disappearance.

4.2.1 “Benang” as Tomorrow: The Reclamation of Emotional Layering

At the core of *Benang from the Heart* is archival reclamation. The title’s Noongar meaning, *benang* or “tomorrow,” marks a threatened but persistent horizon. Antoinette Burton (2005) argues that archives are never neutral repositories; they are constructed and refigured in relation to contemporary power dynamics and the exclusions of the past (pp. 8–10). In *Benang*, Scott uses the title as a site of contestation. He transforms both the colonial archive and the practice of genealogy into active forms of resistance and endurance. Harley’s repeated affirmation, “Benang is tomorrow” (Scott, 1999, p. 466), directly challenges the eugenic fantasy of erasure by insisting on the persistence of Indigenous memory and belonging.

This archival work extends beyond the mere recovery of facts. It involves the labor of creating what Kathryn J. Oberdeck (2005) describes as “counter-archives,” which are alternative spaces of memory and kinship existing in tension with official records (p. 256). Scott’s polyphonic narrative structure, moving between family documents, oral histories, and embodied recollection, highlights the impossibility of a single, state-authored future. Instead, “benang” becomes a micro-archive of memory and hope, together with refusal. The declaration “We are still here, Benang” (Scott, 1999, p. 497) serves as a performative assertion of survivance. Furthermore, as Bhabha reminds us,

“These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2)

This in-between zone does not resolve meaning; it renegotiates futurity through memory, improvisation, and relational transmission. The future, much like the archive, is neither automatically inherited nor entirely foreclosed. Rather, it is collectively authored in the spaces between memory work, narrative improvisation, and relational transmission. In this way, Scott’s titling and narrative structure resist the closure imposed by colonial history, opening possibilities for ongoing acts of renewal and hybrid subjectivity. “Benang” as tomorrow is thus not a destination. It is instead an ever-unfinished project and a call to remember, imagine, and create futures beyond the limits of state control and archival violence.

4.2.2 The Biopolitics of Naming in Benang

In *Benang: From the Heart*, the politics of naming and record-keeping form the core of the novel’s critique of colonial power. Harley’s identity is shaped and constrained by state documents and scientific records, which were intended to erase Noongar ancestry and force assimilation. The novel exposes how government policies and pseudo-scientific discourse turn naming into a tool for social engineering, as illustrated by the chilling logic in official language: “Breeding Up. In the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin is apparent... The need for both biological and social absorption. Dilute the strain” (Scott, 1999, pp. 28). Through such practices, the colonial project operates biopolitically: it manages identity through land dispossession and the classification of names in state records. As Burton (2006) notes, ‘the administrative apparatus of archives can limit the stories that are told’ (p. 11). In *Benang*, the archive renders Indigenous presence visible only within the constraints of colonial categories and surveillance. Fanny Benang’s presence in official lists, as in “The woman I am informed is at present at fifty miles from Wirlup Haven... Fanny Benang, who wanders about the country between Wirlup Haven and Dubitj Creek” (Scott, 1999, p. 106), demonstrates how colonial naming practices attempt to fix and control Aboriginal identity.

Scott’s narrative refuses the closure and finality of the colonial archive. The meaning of “benang,” which is “tomorrow” in Noongar, holds the possibility of survival, hope, and a future beyond the archive’s limits. Harley’s journey is not simply submission to a state-defined genealogy. Instead, it is an act of resistance and a search for belonging and kinship that exceeds the labels imposed on him. The novel foregrounds, in Bhabha’s (2004) words, “the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent” (p. 53). In *Benang*, names and records do not merely reflect identity; they become sites of struggle over what is remembered, who gets to speak, and how new meanings can emerge from the margins. In this light, naming in Scott’s autofiction shifts from a tool of erasure to a practice of survival and future-making. By reclaiming names and telling stories outside the confines of the colonial archive, Scott creates space for Indigenous agency, memory, and community. In *Benang*, the politics of naming becomes the ongoing work of renewal and the assertion of the right to define one’s own story, for both today and tomorrow.

4.2.3 Whose Future, Whose Heart

From the very outset, the title *Benang From the Heart* signals that the struggle over futurity and emotional inheritance is not simply a narrative concern but is inscribed in the text’s paratextual architecture. The use of “benang,” Noongar for “tomorrow,” foregrounds the novel’s preoccupation with survival and collective becoming, while “from the heart” asserts the emotional and relational basis of Indigenous resurgence. The title thus operates as a threshold that invites the reader to contemplate whose tomorrows are at stake, whose voices are authorized to speak from the heart, and how the work of memory and kinship exceeds colonial contexts. As the narrative unfolds, the significance of the title becomes ever more layered and contested. Harley’s attempt to reverse the legacy of assimilation, described as being “raised to carry on one heritage and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself” (Scott, 1999, p. 21), is framed not merely as a personal journey but as a response to the open question inscribed in the title. Harley’s longing for tomorrow is continually troubled by the violence of erasure, as state and scientific records seek to fix identity and foreclose possible futures. Yet the “from the heart” dimension signals the ongoing work of emotional and ethical repair, enacted by Noongar women such as Harriette, who “smuggled children to the bush and back each day, wanting them to learn what she knew, and hunted and gathered most of their nourishment” (Scott, 1999, p. 58). Through these nurturing and resistant acts, women ensure the continuity of kinship ties and cultural memory.

The structure of *Benang* is polyphonic, nonlinear, and archival, mirroring the title’s dual invitation to imagine a future, “benang,” that is neither guaranteed nor singular, and to recognize that this future must be authored “from the heart,” through relational and emotional labor. When Harley observes, “Like seeds we move across and dot the daytime sky. More and more of us, like stars we make the night sky complete” (Scott, 1999, p. 111), he invokes a vision of Indigenous futurity that resists closure or erasure, in direct conversation with the temporal openness the title promises. Crucially, the unresolved question “whose future, whose heart” is not answered by the narrative, but is instead kept in perpetual negotiation at the threshold marked by the title. Here, Scott enacts what Bhabha (2004) terms the Third Space, a site where identity, belonging, and memory are not stabilized but continually rearticulated and contested. The title is more than a frame; it is an active micro-archive that accumulates the reader’s expectations, the text’s ethical demands, and the community’s struggles over survival and recognition. By refusing to close the loop on its titular questions, *Benang From the Heart* foregrounds the work of titling

itself as a decolonial act. The title both names the violence of attempted erasure and asserts the possibility of renewal through storytelling, kinship, and memory. Each encounter with the phrase “benang” or “from the heart” within the text activates the paratext anew, turning the title into a living site of resistance and hope. In this way, Scott’s titling practice not only thematizes but also enacts the very resilience, openness, and inner agency that underpin the novel’s vision of Indigenous survivance.

4.3 *That Deadman Dance: Reanimation, Performance, and Cultural Diplomacy*

The title *That Deadman Dance* emerges not only as a provocative phrase but as the linchpin of the autofiction’s exploration of colonial encounter, cultural transformation, and the resilience of Indigenous agency. Rather than simply naming an event or ritual, the title serves as a paratextual device that frames the narrative’s central irony, foregrounding the persistent refusal of Indigenous disappearance and the reanimation of presence where absence was presumed. Scott positions the title as an index of cultural negotiation, where the motif of “dance” reanimates histories presumed lost and reconfigures death itself as a space of ongoing improvisation and communal vitality. In this way, the title becomes a micro-archive of performative survivance, inviting the reader to witness how language, ritual, and embodiment continually remake the boundaries between mourning and celebration, loss and resistance.

4.3.1 Title as Irony and Defiance

The title *That Deadman Dance* immediately performs a complex irony. Rather than confirming colonial fantasies of Indigenous extinction, the title reanimates the so-called “deadman” and insists on his dancing, recoding death as both survival and agency. Scott’s paratext does not simply label the autofictions but frames the reader’s expectation of absence and loss, only to subvert it through the text itself. Early on, the autofictions reveals that the “dead men” are not simply objects of mourning:

“By the time he was a grown man everyone knew it had never been dead men dancing in the first place anyway, but real live men from over the ocean’s horizon, with a different way about them” (p. 69).

Thus, the “deadman” is both a settler and a figure of threatened Aboriginality, but in either case, the act of dancing undoes the finality of death and, instead, signals creative endurance.

The title’s performative irony is enacted within the narrative through Bobby Wabalanginy, whose performances of the “Dead Man Dance,” described as “stiff movements, those jerking limbs” (Scott, 2010, p. 67), transform the ritual from a colonial spectacle to a vibrant act of communal play and improvisation. Rather than reinforcing the spectacle of Indigenous death anticipated by settlers, Bobby’s dance reclaims the moment as one of shared vitality and cultural assertion. “With him it was a dance of life, a lively dance for people to do together, each man dancing same as his brothers except for the one man on his own, leading them” (Scott, 2010, p. 67). In this way, Bobby functions as the embodiment of the title’s subversive energy, making the paratextual invocation of death yield instead to joy, collectivity, and leadership. The ironic defiance inscribed in the title is thus continually enacted and reinterpreted by Bobby’s presence.

4.3.2 The Dance as Third Space: Performance, Memory, and Contestation

The *Deadman Dance*, as performed and continually reinvented by Bobby, becomes a quintessential Third Space, a threshold where meanings are negotiated, hybridized, and contested. Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space, as “the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture,” is enacted when Bobby improvises upon the dance: “He made the dance his own...people loved the experience of it. To have had no will of their own but only Bobby’s, briefly” (Scott, 2010, p. 69). The dance becomes a performative negotiation between Indigenous memory and settler expectations, between communal mourning and new forms of collectivity. This liminality is deepened by Bobby’s movement between languages and cultural forms. In the prologue, he is “moving between languages...writing on stone,” marking him as a figure who both transmits and re-signifies tradition within the colonial encounter. The *Deadman Dance*, thus, is never static: “

Bobby changed all that...he made everyone laugh, but there was something about the way he danced that made them all move back and give him space so that he ended up like the Elder, the only one on his own, the only one standing against everybody else, commanding them” (2010, p. 68-69).

Through Bobby’s performance, the dance and thus the title become a Third Space in itself, a living site of memory, transformation, and contestation, where both violence and creative potential are held in tension.

4.3.3 Title as Micro-Archive: Memory Work and Narrative Sovereignty

By persistently foregrounding Bobby’s improvisational agency, the narrative continually returns the reader to the meaning-work of the title. *That Deadman Dance* operates as a micro-archive, not simply referencing a single event or ritual, but encapsulating a history of violence, irony, adaptation, and communal memory. Every time Bobby dances, he “makes the dance his own,” and in so doing, he transforms the paratextual threshold of the title into a dynamic site of memory work and narrative sovereignty. Scott’s choice to centre the autofiction’s paratext around the “deadman” who dances foregrounds the refusal of closure and the power of embodied, performative survivance. The dance, animated by Bobby’s unique agency, is not a static tradition but a re-living and re-signifying of the past as a refusal to “resolve” and “disappear” himself. In this way, the title itself becomes a performative archive, continually re-inscribed in the narrative each time Bobby leads, transforms, or subverts the dance. Bobby Wabalanginy’s role is not simply that of a character but of a paratextual agent: through his performance, the autofiction’s title is continually activated as a Third Space, an evolving threshold where the contest over meaning, memory, and belonging is re-articulated and reshaped. This recursive movement between the title and Bobby’s

performance is at the heart of Scott's project: the paratext is not just an entry point but the very site of Indigenous memory work, irony, and decolonial agency.

4.4 *Taboo: Sacred Spaces and the Politics of Silence*

The title "Taboo" is not simply a label for Kim Scott's autofictions but a paratextual threshold that signals the convergence of cultural, historical, and narrative prohibitions. It immediately frames the autofiction's engagement with the colonial repression of Aboriginal sacredness, the risks and responsibilities of naming, and the possibility of communal transformation within the Third Space.

4.4.1 The Title as Paratextual Threshold: Naming Sacred and Forbidden Space

From the outset, the title *Taboo* is not simply descriptive; it operates as a paratextual threshold that frames the entire narrative as an encounter with both danger and possibility. In the context of Scott's autofictions, "taboo" refers both to the social and spiritual prohibitions enforced by colonization and to the Indigenous recognition of sacred, powerful, or dangerous places, domains that require caution, ritual, and respect. As a Noongar character remarks: "Massacre country, they say; lotta people reckon it's taboo; bad spirits everywhere... but we can bring back the language and the old stories, here, to the massacre town." (Scott, 2017, p. 93). This statement reveals that "taboo" functions doubly in the autofiction: as a marker of colonial silencing "bad spirits everywhere" (Scott, 2017, p. 93) and as a site where healing and cultural resurgence are possible through the reclamation of language and story. The narrative itself foregrounds this threshold, opening with the line:

"Our hometown was a massacre place. People called it taboo. They said it is haunted and you will get sick if you go there. Others just bragged: we shot you and poisoned the waterholes so you never come back. ... But we were never hungry for human flesh or revenge of any kind. Our people gave up on that Payback stuff a long time ago, because we always knew death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning..." (Scott, 2017, p. 3)

In this opening sequence, taboo names both the violence inflicted and the collective silencing that follows. It marks the Kepalup massacre site as a place of spiritual danger, colonial erasure, and repressed memory. The paratextual force of the title positions the site, and the story, as liminal: the autofiction invites the reader to cross a threshold into a world where stories and histories, long made unspeakable, demand renewed attention.

4.4.2 Naming, Transgression, and the Work of Return

To speak the 'taboo' and return to the tabooed place is an act of both transgression and reclamation. This is most clearly enacted in the autofiction's arc as Tilly and the Noongar families physically return to the massacre site for the Peace Park gathering. Their journey is not only a confrontation with trauma, but also a ritual of communal reanimation, where naming the past becomes the first step toward transformation. As the narrative insists: "'You know most blackfellas never even stop near Kepalup 'cause of what happened... Taboo,' said the other twin. 'But you been here and nothing happened.'" (Scott, 2017, p. 39). Tilly's willingness to stay at the homestead, despite fear and superstition, signals the breaking of silence and the enactment of agency: "'Let's stay there tonight. I'm not scared.' Tilly smiled at Dan... 'So let's stay then,' said Tilly, insisting." (Scott, 2017, p. 36). And as the group participates in language reclamation and ceremony, the autofiction marks: "It's a chance to reconnect, to face up to and heal the history, the massacre..." (Scott, 2017, p. 56). This articulation frames the act of return as both an acknowledgment of trauma and an act of communal agency. Later, as the Noongar group confronts the spiritual and historical weight of the place, another character reasserts the dual nature of "taboo" as both threat and opportunity: "'Massacre country, they say; lotta people reckon it's taboo; bad spirits everywhere... but we can bring back the language and the old stories, here, to the massacre town.'" (Scott, 2017, p. 96). Here, the shift from fear and avoidance "bad spirits everywhere" (Scott, 2017, p. 93) to reclamation and renewal "bring back the language and the old stories" (Scott, 2017, p. 93) encapsulates the autofiction's central dynamic: the forbidden is not simply to be avoided, but through storytelling and ceremony, recast as a site of cultural healing and narrative sovereignty.

Through these acts, the forbidden is re-entered, the "taboo" named, and communal responsibility reactivated. The narrative arc becomes a journey through the paratextual threshold of the title, moving from prohibition and fear toward the possibility of healing and reconstitution. In enacting this return, Scott demonstrates that confronting taboo is not merely about crossing a line, but about fundamentally transforming the meanings attached to land, memory, and kinship. What was once a site of danger and avoidance becomes, through collective courage and ritual, a generative ground for new relationships and shared futures. By the autofiction's close, the former "taboo" space stands as evidence that storytelling and ceremony can re-inscribe sites of trauma as sources of communal strength and continuity. In this way, the autofiction affirms that the work of return is ongoing, and each act of speaking, gathering, and remembering reclaims narrative sovereignty and opens new beginnings within the Third Space of cultural negotiation.

4.4.3 Taboo as Third Space: Transformation, Communal Responsibility, and Narrative Sovereignty

By orchestrating a return across the forbidden threshold, *Taboo* becomes a literary embodiment of what Homi Bhabha conceptualizes in *The Location of Culture* as the "Third Space," a liminal site in which entrenched binaries dissolve and cultural meanings are continually renegotiated (Bhabha, 1994). The title, initially laden with the weight of prohibition and silencing, is gradually reinterpreted as the narrative unfolds. The communal journey back to Kepalup, enacted through storytelling, ritual, and the revitalization of language, transforms the "taboo" space into a vibrant locus of cultural negotiation and collective becoming. This transformation is articulated both through communal ceremonies and direct narrative reflection. As Scott notes:

“A peculiarly Western Australian word for spear — gidgee — is derived from Noongar. Such usage shows the pervasive connection of land and language, and hints at what such a heritage — an ancient tongue, its narratives of a unique environment and community — might contribute to a sense of regional ‘belonging’ and identity” (*Taboo*, p. 286).

Here, the narrative acknowledges the enduring burdens of history and trauma, yet simultaneously foregrounds the countervailing inheritance of language, memory, and communal joy. The “taboo” is not effaced; rather, it is reconstituted as a space of shared responsibility and ongoing negotiation. In paratextual terms, the title’s function as threshold is reimagined, from a purely prohibitive boundary to an invitation into a space of storytelling, renewal, and accountability. As Gérard Genette observes, the paratext acts as a “vestibule that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (*Paratexts*, p. 2).

Scott’s narrative further amplifies this collective transformation through its intergenerational address:

“‘You’re special, Tilly. We’ve got thousands of generations before us, living in the same country,’ he said. ‘First People, we are. Ancestral country, but it’s massacre country too... But you been there, Tilly. You lived there when you were a baby. ...Spirits of our old people looked after you I reckon.’” (*Taboo*, p. 173).

The motif of narrative return culminates in the refrain: “Death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning...” (*Taboo*, p. 3). Through these acts of communal return and narrative reclamation, the tabooed space, once defined by trauma and silence, is re-positioned as the site of future-making and narrative sovereignty. The title, in performing its ultimate paratextual function, names not only what is forbidden but also that which must be continually re-entered, retold, and re-imagined if justice, healing, and renewal are to be possible.

5. Discussion

5.1 Synthesis of Title Functions

Across Kim Scott’s autofictions, the title is never a neutral descriptor but a potent site of archival labor, cultural mediation, and epistemological struggle. Titles like *True Country*, *Benang: From the Heart*, *That Deadman Dance*, and *Taboo* act as concentrated micro-archives, each registering the dynamics of Noongar identity, trauma, and survivance. Rather than pointing to fixed or singular meanings, Scott’s titles operate as dialogic zones, inviting readers into a field of unsettled negotiation, ambiguity, and contestation. They continually mediate between settler and Indigenous knowledge systems, foregrounding the instability and generativity of meaning at the threshold of the paratext (Genette, 1997). In this sense, the title is not a decorative appendage but a performative act, initiating and framing the struggle for narrative sovereignty before the first line of the story even begins. Crucially, this analysis reveals that titles in Scott’s work serve as compressed sites of memory work, negotiating both personal and collective histories. They index the central thematic and ethical tensions, including land, kinship, survival, loss, and hope, while functioning as performative acts of Indigenous world-making. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s insight that “naming is about power and the contestation of meaning” (Smith, 1999, p. 157) is confirmed throughout Scott’s oeuvre: the title’s function as an act of naming resists colonial erasure, reclaims epistemic authority, and encodes intergenerational knowledge in the smallest textual unit. At the same time, titles cannot be read apart from narrative context. They pose questions the text may only partly answer, rather than resolving cultural identity. This productive incompleteness underscores the limits of paratextual determinism and highlights reader responsibility in meaning-making.

Moreover, drawing on the work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, it is possible to see Scott’s titles not only as archives of historical trauma and survivance but as sites of relational accountability and cultural pedagogy. Simpson (2017) describes Indigenous stories and names as “pedagogical acts,” which create and maintain reciprocal responsibilities between individuals, ancestors, land, and community. Similarly, Moreton-Robinson’s theory of “relationality” in Indigenous epistemology demonstrates that titles themselves can function as protocols, signposting how readers are to enter into respectful, ethical engagement with the text and its histories. Thus, in Scott’s autofictions, the act of titling is inseparable from the ongoing labor of maintaining kinship ties, ethical responsibilities, and communal memory across generations. The titles not only encode loss and resurgence but also serve as invitations for relational engagement and shared cultural work. Yet this pedagogical promise is contingent on reader willingness to interpret through Indigenous ethical frameworks; without such responsiveness, the title’s cultural labour risks being flattened into metaphor or exoticism.

5.2 Literary and Cultural Implications

Scott’s titles fundamentally redefine the paratext in Indigenous literary contexts: they are not just framing devices but miniature epistemological containers, repositories of lived experience and resistance. The act of reading titles as archives or “micro-archives” compels a shift in interpretive authority away from universalist or settler models and toward an Indigenous-centered hermeneutic. This paratextual approach shows that titles encode narrative intent and the core tensions of the postcolonial encounter: the ongoing negotiation of memory, power, and agency. However, foregrounding the paratext risks overshadowing the material realities represented within the narrative itself. Titles can signal contestation, but they cannot exhaust the political and emotional complexities that unfold in plot, voice, and character. Recognizing this limitation prevents theoretical inflation and maintains critical balance.

The analysis reveals that titles operate as “thresholds of interpretation,” activating, before any narrative event, the contest between cultural loss and resurgence. In *True Country*, the title opens a Third Space where belonging is always in flux and always under negotiation. In *Benang*, the future is not a closed horizon but a continual process of becoming, foregrounded in the title’s temporal and emotional resonance. *That Deadman Dance* uses performative irony to invert colonial scripts, while *Taboo* transforms a site of silencing into a generative space for communal return and narrative sovereignty. More broadly, this methodological approach challenges literary scholars

to treat paratextual reading as an essential critical practice, especially in contexts shaped by settler-colonial histories where acts of naming are sites of both historical violence and cultural resurgence. As Bhabha asserts, the “Third Space” is not a zone of synthesis or reconciliation but a terrain of ongoing contestation and translation in which new meanings, alliances, and identities are negotiated (Bhabha, 1994). The paratext thus becomes a critical site for the analysis of both literary form and cultural politics, foregrounding how Indigenous writers like Scott anticipate, disrupt, and reconfigure colonial narratives of authority, memory, and identity, sometimes before a story even begins. Nevertheless, not all interpretive possibilities originate in the paratext; some emerge only through narrative embodiment, character interiority, and localized linguistic texture. A balanced view must therefore hold paratext and text in complementary tension rather than hierarchical relation.

5.3 Relevance to Indigenous Literary Studies

This study reinforces the foundational argument that Indigenous writing enacts resistance and resurgence not just in narrative content, but in the act of naming itself. The focus on the title as a primary archival site demonstrates that decolonial work occurs even before the first sentence, within the smallest, most liminal spaces of the text. In foregrounding titles as active, performative agents, this research contributes to ongoing debates in Indigenous literary studies, paratextual theory, and decolonizing methodologies. Furthermore, the integrative framework of Genette, Smith, and Bhabha makes clear that Indigenous literary sovereignty is enacted through every textual threshold, from the title outward. This insight has significant ramifications for both criticism and pedagogy: it encourages scholars to attend to the micro-archives of titling, to recognize the ethical and political weight of naming, and to resist marginalizing paratext as secondary or decorative. In this sense, the detailed analysis of Scott’s titles has demonstrated their vital function as micro-archives of Indigenous memory, agency, and resistance. By treating titles as both narrative and epistemological sites, this study positions the act of naming as central to the project of Indigenous survivance and cultural renewal. However, an exclusive focus on the title could risk reducing Indigenous literatures to symbolic thresholds rather than lived worlds. Sustained engagement with narrative texture, Indigenous language use, and community-grounded knowledge is necessary to prevent the paratext from becoming a substitute for deeper cultural literacy. Such inquiry must proceed in dialogue with communities to avoid re-inscribing extractive research practices.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that titling in Scott’s autofictions is a sustained decolonial intervention. By foregrounding the titles of *True Country*, *Benang: From the Heart*, *That Deadman Dance*, and *Taboo* as dynamic micro-archives, the research has illuminated how these textual thresholds recover silenced histories, foreground Noongar ontologies, and assert Indigenous futurity within the ongoing context of colonial disruption. The research problem addressed here centres on the critically overlooked role of titles within Indigenous literary scholarship, showing how Scott’s paratextual practices perform narrative sovereignty and cultural resurgence before the narrative proper unfolds. Through a methodological framework that synthesizes Genette’s concept of the paratext, Bhabha’s theory of the Third Space, and Smith’s Indigenous methodologies, this analysis affirms that Scott’s titles serve as active sites of resistance, remembrance, and epistemological negotiation. The study has shown that these titles are not merely introductory labels but performative zones of contestation, encoding layers of trauma, identity, and communal agency. In doing so, this work demonstrates that paratextual analysis is indispensable for interpreting Indigenous texts, as it reveals how acts of naming function as critical strategies for resisting erasure and reclaiming narrative authority.

The implications of these findings extend to both literary theory and Indigenous studies. By repositioning the literary title as a locus of interpretive and political power, this research calls for a reassessment of textual boundaries and a greater recognition of the ethical stakes involved in reading Indigenous literature. Titles in Indigenous autofiction can be read as acts of survivance, mobilizing cultural memory and signaling continuing resistance. Building on this foundation, future research should undertake comparative analyses of titling practices across other Indigenous and postcolonial narratives, with particular attention to the ways paratextual strategies function globally as sites of reclamation and cultural continuity. There is further scope for methodological innovation through collaborative research with Indigenous communities, ensuring that the interpretation and preservation of these micro-archives are grounded in lived knowledge. Further work might also examine how digital publication, translation, and multimodal paratexts reshape the politics of naming in contemporary Indigenous writing. Ultimately, this study repositions literary titling as a foundational site of decolonial praxis and narrative agency, emphasizing that every act of naming within Indigenous autofiction carries political and epistemological significance. By centring the title as a critical threshold, the research urges scholars and educators to approach Indigenous texts with renewed attentiveness to the power of naming, and to integrate paratextual awareness more deliberately into decolonizing literary pedagogy.

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