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Excavating Planetary Memory: Species Extinction in Kim Scott's *That Deadman's Dance*

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Abstract

Australian Indigenous literature is a reservoir of age-old narratives: on the one hand, such narratives manifest the symbiotic interconnection between human and non-human agents and on the other hand, excavates the ongoing ecodisaster since the colonial invasion with their anthropogenic agenda in the name of Enlightenment and Liberal humanism. This proposed article intends to analyse this environmental catastrophe in the novel *That Deadman's Dance* written by Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott, two times winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Drawing the concept of Planetary memory, a new phenomenon of reading Anthropocene in relation to memory inscribed on geology based on the object-oriented ontology and deterritorialization of the anthropocentric binary between nature- culture, body- mind and local- global. In the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, it is aptly identified as "species history". According to Rob Nixon, it is "socioenvironmental memory", something unrepresentable as to him Anthropocene is a "violence" but slow and beyond the circumference of immediate human sensory perception. The novel *That Deadman's Dance,* a historical account of early contact between Aboriginal and early settlers in south coast of Western Australia, records cultural hybridization, identity crisis, dislocation and the violent extinction of whales, a significant container of Noongar community's cultural memory. This paper argues how the coastal bioregion in the novel works as a site of planetary memory by archiving local species extinction on a planetary scale.

Keywords: planetary memory, species extinction, Anthropocene, Indigenous literature.

Introduction

> Earth is an evolutionary mystic writing pad, or a deep time palimpsest, into which memories are inscribed to be read … climatological and geological memory, and perhaps cosmological memory, which dwarfs the individual, embodied memory that is part of anthropocentric thinking.
>
> — Sebastian Groes (141)

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Claire Colebrook in *Time That is Intolerant* asserts that climate change is neither a new phenomenon nor like *Paradise Lost* the world was once upon a time a timeless Edenic space, full of abundance. She further clarifies by saying, "Nature is produced, *as stable, abundant, cyclic and eternal*" by applying different "techniques of appropriation, expropriation, kleptocracy and a violent division of labour and extraction of surplus;" hence, climate change is not a "return" but a "reminder" that we have long before forgotten in order to have production by using nature "as immemorial" (Colebrook 157). Therefore, since the Great Acceleration of the Second World war the world has been witnessing crisis of water, rise of sea levels, species extinction, melting of polar ice, devastating natural calamity in the form of draught, flood and storm. In effect, now we are on the verge of the sixth great extinction which interrogates the ontology of human supremacy as human beings too will face the extinction. In this context, two queries demand our attention: is in any way memory influenced by the threats of climate change and extinction? If so, what role does memory play to vex our inertia in order to cultivate multispecies kinship in our collective (un)consciousness? Focusing on the role of memory regarding climate change Sebastian Groes rightly announces that the Earth, is "an evolutionary mystic writing pad" whose geological strata works as a reminder or as an archive of "climatological" and "geological" remembrances on the surface of the planet inscribed by human beings who have become a geological force and whose combined activity transformed the planet from the age of Holocene to the age of Anthropocene, a term conceptualized and coined by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen in 2002 (141). This article is an investigation of geological or planetary memory[1] and its function at various scales due to whale extinction in the novel *That Deadman Dance* written by Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott, two times winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Australian Indigenous literature is a reservoir of age-old narratives: on the one hand, such narratives manifest the symbiotic interconnection between human and non-human agents and on the other hand, excavates the ongoing ecodisaster since the colonial invasion with their anthropogenic agenda in the name of Enlightenment and Liberal humanism. The novel *That Deadman Dance,* a historical account of early contact between Aboriginal and early settlers in south coast of Western Australia, records cultural hybridization, identity crisis, dislocation and the violent extinction of whales, a significant container of Noongar community's cultural memory. The novel, written in four parts and narrated by an Aboriginal boy named Bobby, archives the time from 1826 to 1844, the time when the whaling business was at its peak in the Southern Ocean. Today Australia is the champion in species extinction in the whole world. Since the arrival of Britishers in 1788 more than seventy species have disappeared and more than one hundred and twenty species are in endangered condition. Drawing on the concept of Dipesh Chakrabarty's "species history," Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and Timothy Clark's "scale effect" this article argues how the local coastal bioregion in the novel works as a site of planetary memory by archiving species extinction and its effect on a planetary scale. More clearly speaking, this article suggests a new methodical interpretation of mnemonic practice focusing on

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extinction which is, in the words of Rose et al. not a "singular phenomenon" rather a "biocultural phenomenon," that can be "experienced, resisted, measured, enunciated, performed, and narrated in a variety of ways" (*Extinction Studies* 2- 5).

Planet, species and memory

History is the fight over the phenomenon called subjectivity and its presence, dominance and proliferation in the archaeology of Western epistemology. Descartes's mind-body dualism, enlightenment born reason, colonialism as a project to civilize Indigenous people, and Indigenous ecodisaster in the name of a new methodology called research[2] set forth human beings as an active agent with historical subjectivity in the formation of the world. However, this world formation process, on the one hand, gives birth to the concept called culture and on the other hand, sets this culture in complete binary opposition with nature, an inanimate and nonhuman object used only as a raw material for capitalist production. Therefore, any kind of historical importance is denied to nature. Nature is just a backdrop of human occurrences. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his seminal text *The Climate of History: Four Theses,* deconstructs this age-old narrative on history and introduces more critical aspects of history. In his words, there are two types of history. One is "global" or "recorded history," history which records four-thousand-year-old events only based on human existence and occurrences. And the second one is "the planetary" or "deep history", history "that goes beyond these years of written records" (Chakrabarty 212, 213). The recorded history begins and ends with human existence, but deep history begins long before human presence and continues or will continue even after the apocalypse of human and human-born capitalistic global market. Hence, the planetary or deep history is the history of species in which human being is one of the species, equally dependent on other species for survival.

This concept of "planetary history" or "deep time" carries epistemological similarity with the newly emerged concept called "planetary memory." Planetary memory is a new theoretical framework that examines multiple ways "in which historical violence might be geologically inscribed" (Lucy Bond et al 859). Critically speaking, unlike the traditional concept of memory studies which focuses on tangible memory sites (archives, memorials, architectures), planetary memory studies other signs of human history, such as the levels of different gasses in the atmosphere and the function and effects of different types of chemical composition of oceans and soils. To be precise, planetary memory assures that the earth records and contains the changes that occur in the past and continue its presence in the future due to different natural and man-made activities. So, it is not only the continuation of the present but an anticipation of the possible future. These changes include different chemical, geological and climatological issues that fix their mark on geophysical elements like rocks, plants, soil, waterbody, weather patterns etc. Thereby, planetary perspective of memory study puts the traditional hegemonic concept of history, memory and archive into question and contradiction. Significantly, in case of planetary memory study, the geological properties act as a

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potential intangible archive that gives a counter-narrative of variegated historical and testimonial facts.

However, Rob Nixon claims that it is "socioenvironmental memory," something unrepresentable as to him Anthropocene or climate change is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). According to Timothy Clark, we need a macroscopic or planetary approach to understand the "slow violence" of fossil-fuel-oriented human life based on the "scale effect." As any ecological disequilibrium even a simple deforestation or draught on a local scale may look controllable but that same issue on a large global scale becomes not only unmanageable but also permanently ecodisastrous. In his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* Timothy Clark asserts that even human psyche is not free from scale effects of environmental and socio-political turmoil. Our psychology is deeply associated at various scales which Clark theorized as ecopsychology. In this context, Ursula K. Heise announces the solution to this problem in her book *Sense of Place and sense of Planet.* According to Ursula K. Heise, we should focus on our local place as "a miniature version of the globe and indeed the cosmos" (38). She further suggests that we must learn "to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated … on ties to local places … to encompass the planet as a whole" (10). So, to register oneself as a planetary citizen, the first and foremost duty is to be aware of one's bioregion or local geography.

Coastal bioregion, hydrocolonialism and whale extinction

The setting of Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* is a coastal area of the early nineteenth century, presently known as Albany. At first sight, this coastal area to Dr. Cross and Geordie Chaine, colonial representatives, seems a land of enormous possibility. On his first arrival, Dr. Cross makes friendship with the natives, begins a land expedition with the help of Indigenous people, Wyunyeran and Menak, builds his own abode, and runs a cattle business. Unlike Dr. Cross, Georgie Chaine, an extremely ambitious colonial master and hoister of the flag called capitalism, thinks of the coastal area as "empty" and "trackless. Waiting for him" just immediately looking at "the immense grey-green land beyond the shore" (Scott17). The terms like "empty" and "trackless" deny any sort of agency and identity to the coastal bioregion along with its native dwellers. Hence, the coastal land is considered as a virgin lady, inviting him or "waiting for him" to be penetrated in order to be productive. Theoretically speaking, coastal area and ocean or seascape are always potential site of possibility, transgression, development, freedom and fluidity. Paul Gilroy, in his 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, theorized colonization and enslavement as the "counterculture of modernity" (5). The Black Atlantic is the backbone of the genesis of Western modernity as the ocean worked not just as a medium of slave and raw material transportation network but also as a potential medium for (trans)cultural exchange.

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Hence, the water functions as a powerful medium that colonizers used to control and militarize native people and their land, to continue extraction and appropriation of natural properties. So, water is used as one of the weapons of hydrocolonialism (Morana 1). In the novel, water is used, on the one hand, as a weapon of colonization and on the other hand, water is being colonized to enslave the Indigenous people, grab their ancestral land and extract natural resources. Through the eyes of Menak, an Aboriginal, we get a vivid picture of the metaphoric representation of how water is being colonized:

> The Ship seemed to skim the ocean surface and even after all this time Menak was reminded of a pelican Swooping from the air, landing in water. But of curse a ship's canvas wings hold the wind, and keep that wave tumbling and frothing at its sharp breast as it slices and pushes the sea aside. Such power and grace, and there is that milky scar as the sea closes again, healing. The ship settled, its sail furled (Scott 13).

This vivid imagery echoes the rape scene of Leda by a swan illustrated in the poem *Leda and the Swan* by W. B Yeats: A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast (Lines 1-4).

As the swan molests Leda, here the "pelican," a symbolic representation of colonizers, molests the sea. The sea is brutally raped by the ferocious British fleet of ships. Sentences like "Ship's canvas wings hold the wind" personify the protestant hands of the sea and "keeps the wave tumbling" illustrates the jostling and finally "frothing at its sharp breast as it slices and pushes the sea" is a symbolic representation of forceful penetration. "Power and grace" is an ironic

presentation of colonial attack. In the end, the oxymoron "milky scar" is enough to visualize the sea as a raped woman.

In the words of Rosanne Kennedy, the ocean in the novel *That Deadman Dance* operates as "a transnational space of human passage." Rosanne Kennedy further associates the ship with a site of exposure and an agent of "cross-cultural encounters" as well as "linguistic and cultural hybridity, and access to a new economy" (116, 122). However, on a micro level the ship may provide a transcultural space to Bobby as he gets the chance to educate himself first under the supervision of Dr. Cross and later under Mrs. Chaine, but on a macro level the ship works as an agent of environmental destruction, Indigenous dispossession, harbinger of fatal diseases and above all accelerator of cultural genocide. During 1820s and 1830s, British ships first arrive at the southern coast of Western Australia and names this area as King George Sound, later becomes Albany. This early settlement builds contact between the white settlers and Noongar community, known as the friendly frontier. But very soon the arrival of the American whale industry started their brutal pelagic or open sea whaling, the "most expensive, but

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most lucrative form" of the whaling industry, where 150–400-ton whaleships were employed to chase and kill the sperm whales with a massive harpoon for its carcass in order to run oil trade in 19th century (Gibbs 4)**.** The novel *That Dead Man Dance* minutely records the very excruciating process of whale killing: "a hook inserted into the whale's blubber, a cable running from it into the mast, a pulley, a winch on deck. As the cable tightened the whale began to lift, the ship heeled over until -suddenly—the blubber peeled away like rind from an orange" (Scott 247). During the early 1930s and 1940s every year per station the whaling company collected two hundred fifty to three hundred tunes oil.

Bobby observes how the whale has become only a commodity to the whalers. To Bobby whale is not only a sea animal but an identifier of his community. Unlike Jonah, a biblical figure who, Bobby learns, was afraid of whales, Bobby feels a deep connection as Bobby possesses an ancestral story of whales, a cultural memory orally transmitted from generation to generation: "walking a long arm of rock beside a calm ocean, … the whale is underfoot. Two steps more and you are sliding, sliding deep into a dark and breathing cave that resonates with whale song … sing that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep" (Scott 2). Hence, the whale is an inseparable part of the noongar community's ontological and epistemological presence. Even the Aboriginal dancing steps and the song, specifically composed following the movements of whale, as we see when Bobby watches a cluster of whales coming around the ship "Bobby felt his own soldiers begin to rise and curve, his own form merging with that of the whale" (Scott 34). Unlike Western tradition where non-human beings are just an object, in the case of Aboriginal people whales or any non-human being possesses a spiritual relationship with their sense of being. Therefore, this object-oriented ontology puts Bobby in an utter dilemma when he notices the ruthless slaying and the fighting spirit of the mother whale for her cuff:

> Harpooned, dragging a great weight of pain, the mother was returning to her calf. The silver spear of the bow of the boat stabbed again and again … The mother whale's tail repeatedly rose and struck the water close to her dead calf. The men worked the oars to evade her blows, and each blow was less … The man at the bow drove and twisted his steel spear into the whale (Scott 257).

Within a few years, Bobby sees no whale in the sea as if "a strange stillness" left the sea a desolate and hollow space like the Spring, Rachel Carson observes, without a bird, hence, silent spring (Carson). This mass whale extinction provokes Bobby to question the ideology of his beyond-the-horizon friends whose presence and language his community embraced with open arm.

In Western thinking death originates a sense of uncertainty, anxiety, existential crisis and impermanence; hence, to transfer this uncertain condition into a state of permanence, as Deborah Rose Gibson argues in her book *Wild Dog Dreaming; Love and Extinction* (2011), the white masters give birth to a new

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phenomenon called modernity which transformed the planet from Holocene to Anthropocene. However, the definition of death gets changed when the concept of death is associated with large-scale mass death. Concerning mass death, in Western epistemology, there lies a significant distinction between extinction and genocide. Extinction relates to the sense of the mere disappearance of animals because drawing on Heidegger's concept of animals and the death of animals Deborah Bird Rose mentions, "an animal's life is "mere life," its death a "mere death" so, they "can be killed with impunity" (*Wild Dog* 22). In contradiction, in some cases, the death of a human being too becomes a mere death. For instance, the death of Jews, Indigenous and Aboriginal people is not a death at all, but rather ethnic cleansing or initiation to activate social Darwinism. To Indigenous people, every death matters whether it is the death of a human being or a more-than-human body. Therefore, human genocide or species extinction carries the same meaning to them. Unlike the Western tradition of thinking, there is no distinction or binary between genocide and extinction.

Noticeably, the death and the disappearance of the whales puts a rupture and sets an existential crisis in Bobby's psyche. In the book *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, death and Generations*(2017), Deborah Bird Rose et al. philosophize that extinction or mass death is not just the disappearance of a particular species but "the irreparable disruption and destruction of the generativity of such generations", because "every species is the unique "achievement" of long lineages of life in which countless generations have each brought forth the next, gifting them, through complex processes of biocultural inheritance, both a material form and a form of life"(Extinction Studies 9). To say critically, on the one hand, death puts a break in temporalities, a breach in the linear structure of time as it remains as a spectral presence in the life of the living one and; therefore, on the other hand, this discontinuity alters the epistemic frame of the existing culture. In consequence, the process of becoming or the formation of the sense of being becomes entangled with the presence and absence of the non-human object.

Contextualizing "scalar effects" of planetary mnemonics

This brutal whale extinction though occurred on the local scale of the South coast but creates an indecisive disintegration in the country on a planetary scale. This Australian Indigenous concept of "Country" is "a spatial unit, large enough to support a group of people, small enough to be intimately known in every detail" (Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming* 17). This conceptual framework echoes an epistemological similarity with Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of planetary, "cosmic and grounded at the same time, indicating a place and time that can be both expansive and local" (8). Deborah Bird Rose, in her book *Nourishing Terrains*, philosophizes Aboriginal concept of country as a complicated interpersonal relationship with different sorts of people, animals, plants and places. Precisely speaking, 'Country' is a "living entity" embedded in "a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (Rose, *Nourishing Terrain* 7). However, might it be an overtly mono-spatiotemporal topography, but

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possesses a poly narrative of different countries — sea country, land country and sky country with their own law. Unlike the European Christianized concept of landscape which locates a certain amount of distance between human and non-human communities, the Aboriginal concept of country amalgamates poly versions of country with spiritual tie in which the human being is just one of the parts. Hence, Deborah Bird Rose asserts that European's gaze on Australian land as *terra nullis* is "the egocentric view of landscape" (*Nourishing Terrain*18). All these are parts of Aboriginal cosmological concept called "Dreamtime," a spiritual belief rooted in the age-old story of their distant past ancestors who created the world and many of them transformed into animals and diseases and still present in the form of spirit.

However, this country may seem a collage of different countries but operates as an undifferentiated and inseparable planetary whole. Though the coastal area of this sea country in the novel *That Dead Man Dance* is considered as the representation of a friendly frontier but a planetary perspective instigates to investigate "the scale effect" of the extinction and its aftermath. Now the question is do this "scale effect" of whale extinction and its "delayed effect" only change the ecological proportion or do they have any mnemonic function on local, cultural and planetary scale? Gradually, the "delayed effect" of this "slow violence" having no spectacular presence "exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems" and transforms the coastal area into an utterly uninhabitable and unsustainable space (Nixon 8,4). Thus, no option is left for the Noongar people but to migrate from their ancestral country.

Mike Hulme theorizes climate as an "unstructured assemblage of remembered weather" (160). In effect, this mnemonic function in climatological disproportion is narrativized "in modes of preliminary mourning," hence, works "as a part of a broader tradition of counter-memory" (Colebrook 147, 150). In the novel *That Deadman Dance* whale is the totem of Nyoongar Aborigins with which they have a spiritual totemic relationship; thus, "their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species" (Rose, *Nourishing Terrain* 28). Therefore, Bobby groans while a whale groans, and Menak too becomes horrified seeing the whale carcass after the brutal slaughter. This collective mourning for the extinction of the non-human whale community is rooted in their multispecies consciousness and kinship. Menak's Dreamtime story informs Booy that the sea and its "watery path" is not only the whale's ontological source but Bobby too shares that same path, "a watery path that hard to follow yet was that of their ancestors and his own, too, since he came from ocean and whales" (Scott 34). That is why, the extinction and subsequent climate change dislocates them from their past memory, creates disorientation in their present selves and builds a sense of unsettlement in relation to their future. In consequence, this large "scale effect" and a disjunction in their cultural epistemology forces Bobby and his community to imagine the disappearance of their own ontological presence as "a specific mode of inscription" on the surface of earth in the form of "future

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memory" (Colebrook 151,148). *That Deadman Dance* maps the sea country on a planetary scale as the source of creation, preservation and destruction. This non-human spatial unit is not just a passive recipient but an active reciprocator that archives the past injustice and puts forth the reflection in both the present and the future. It has its own agency; thus, blurs the distinction between human and non-human, nature and culture. In the novel the geological and climatological remembrances due to extinction in the form of ecological disproportion unearth the suppressed history of colonialism and archive a counter-narrative of Australia's identity as a developed nation.

Conclusion

Extinction is the concrete expression of the Western sense of "existential despair" and "hyperseparation"[3]. Planetary memory is the abstract extension of the spectral presence of the absence caused by this extinction. Now the question is what role does Indigenous epistemology play in relation to this sense of impermanence? Indigenous literature is, on the one hand, "a portable monument" (Rigney 9) for recording such geological and climatological remembrances on various scales as an acknowledgment of the ontology of human other and, on the other hand, an epistemological approach to counter western sense of existential crisis in relation to death and decay. To Aboriginal people, the death of either human or other-than-human beings is a cyclical process following "ecological domains," a philosophical approach conceptualized by Deborah Rose as ecocritical existentialism (*Wild Dog Dreaming* 20). In this approach, human being is just a "work-in-progress" with no "predetermined presence of humanity" but rather "enmeshed within the connectivities of Earth life" (Rose, Wild Dog *Dreaming* 43, 44). Thereby, no sense of loss and dejection rather a sense of multispecies kinship strengthens their different ontological narratives as well as mnemonic functions.

Notes

1. In the writing *Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction* Lucy Bond, Ben De Bruyn and Jessica Rapson developed this concept of planetary memory, in their language, a young subfield of ecocriticism and memory studies.
2. Linda Tuhi-wai Smith, an Indigenous epistemologist, in her 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, shows that what is called research methodology in Western convention is a plagiarised version of Indigenous age-old knowledge about their interrelationship with the environment.
3. Drawing on Val Plumwood's concept of "Hyperseparation", the strong difference that causes binary opposition like men are rational, active and hard whereas women are emotional, passive and soft, Deborah Bird Rose shows Western existential crisis and despair originates from the nature/culture opposition, that results climate change and extinction.

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